

Luring the Enchantress

by *Southern_Witch_69*

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Prologue

Chapter 1 of 42

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A big thanks goes out to my brilliant beta, Charmed_Nay.

"I don't understand, Headmaster, why we must include *Potter*," said Severus Snape, clearly annoyed. "He's going to go tell all of his little followers, and they'll be interfering."

"I will not," Harry said defiantly. "I think that I've learned my lesson with involving the D.A. members."

"Yes, since one of them was killed," Severus said quietly, glaring at the insolent brat.

"Harry," Albus said, "Severus has a point. You cannot tell anyone."

"I won't," he said through clenched teeth.

"And, Severus," Albus said, "we have to include Harry just in case something happens to me...or you. Someone credible will have to know that Draco is now working for us."

"I need to get out of here," Severus said darkly.

"You agreed to meet with me after we filled Harry in," Albus reminded him.

"Yes, fine. I'll have a walk if you *don't* mind," he said shortly. Just what he needed. Harry Bloody Potter meddling with his affairs, thinking he's doing something truly substantial when all he's doing is hiding behind Dumbledore's robes and wreaking havoc at Hogwarts. *He makes things harder for us.*

Severus knew that Albus had a point. Potter needed to know about Draco's new position. A smirk broke out over his face. Potter had been shocked to find out that the boy would go against his father. What Potter didn't know was that Draco was well trained in the ways of deception just as Severus himself was. All pureblood families,

Slytherins anyway, taught their children how to take care of themselves early on. Lucius had trained Draco well before he was carted off to Azkaban the previous year. Severus sighed. "One more year of Potter and his groupies. Just one." After that, they would graduate and be out in the real world for once. What would Boy Wonder do without Dumbledore's protection? Just as Severus neared the small brook on the back of the property, he heard a branch break. *What the fuck?*

He moved silently to the location with his wand drawn. The Dark Lord wouldn't dare send someone without warning him, would he? His eyebrows raised as the clouds parted above, revealing the moon. One partially naked body covered another near the edge of the brook. Severus moved over to the bushes nearby, casting a Silencing Charm around his person.

"Come on, Mione," Weasley grumbled. "Can't we do more than kiss?"

"You said we were only coming for a swim," she said uncertainly. "I'm just not ready yet, Ron."

"Fuck," he swore. "Look what you do." He took her hand and placed it against his trunks. "He wants to slide into you and make you scream out my name."

"That sounds totally barbaric!" she scoffed.

"You would think so," he said, moving away from her. "We've dated most of our sixth year and all of this summer holiday. You lay next to me all of the time. Don't you feel...*something?*"

"Well, I love you. Isn't that enough for now? I'm just a little scared, and your big hands fumbling all over the place bruising me doesn't help."

"I've never put bruises on you!"

"You know what I mean," she replied. "I want to, but I want it to be right. This isn't right. It feels wrong."

"Well, let me tell you this, Mione. If this," he pointed between them, "feels wrong. I think we should break things off. I want you so badly that it hurts to have you around."

"Fine," she said, trying to get up. The boy put a hand on her arm and pulled her down.

"I didn't mean that. I'm just frustrated. I mean everybody is doing it. Neville's got a girl even! Feels like I'm missing out, it does," he said sulkily. "Can you just think on it? We start school again next week. I don't want to be the only seventh year who hasn't been with his girl." He leaned over to kiss her neck softly. "Please, Mione."

She nodded. "I'll think on it."

"Right then. I'm going to go up to the house and have a wank. You going to come up in a bit?"

"Yes. I really did want to swim tonight. Don't you want to get in?"

"Not now. I've something to attend to," he said with a laugh, looking down at his crotch. "I'll see you in a little while."

"All right," she said, watching him go.

Once the boy was gone, Severus concentrated on the girl before him. *Good Lord!* She'd pulled off her top and bottoms, preparing to wade into the water. The moon gave her skin a slightly blue hue. He wondered if her skin was as smooth as it appeared. From what he could see, she had a nice arse and plump thighs. *Turn around.* He shook the thoughts away from his mind. What the fuck? With one last look at the girl standing in waist deep water, he made his way back inside. He went straight for the study to fix a drink.

"Are you all right?" Albus asked, entering the room.

"Fine."

"Severus, about Harry, he real-"

"I know, Headmaster. Don't worry. I just wish that children would stop trying to involve themselves," Severus said before downing his drink. A sharp pain shot through his arm as the Mark burned darkly. "I'm being summoned," he said, holding his arm slightly. "We shall have to continue this later."

He quickly made his way to the back door again and began walking towards the brook. He wasn't quite sure why he'd chosen to go there to Apparate, but it's where he headed. Just as he rounded the last corner, someone bumped into him. Hermione. "Excuse me, Miss Granger," he said, holding her up by her arms. She seemed mortified. Her wet hair hung limply about her face, giving it a sensual look. Her blouse was completely unbuttoned, giving him a clear view of her lovely cleavage and a small portion of each breast. Severus pulled his eyes away.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, quickly brushing past him. He looked down at his hands almost expecting to still see them grasping her arms. Her skin was as soft as he'd thought it to be.

"Damn," he muttered. He quickly touched the Dark Mark on his arm and Apparated near his Lord. He kneeled momentarily and rose. "My Lord."

"Severusss," he hissed. "I trust all went well."

"Perfectly," he said. "I've worked Draco in easily enough, and Dumbledore hurried to include Potter." Severus chuckled. "I tried to talk him out of it of course, but he knows best."

Voldemort cackled. "You will guide our young Malfoy of course?"

"I shall," Severus replied.

"Is there nothing that you would like as a reward, Severusss? You've always done my bidding and asked for little in return." Ruby slitted eyes pierced dark eyes. "My most faithful servant! You want a woman."

"Not exactly. I've just had a run in with Potter's female companion, Granger. It appears that Weasley was trying to persuade her to lose her virginity, but he was rebuffed." Severus chuckled. "You should have heard the imbecile. After Weasley left, she stripped and went for a swim."

The Dark Lord smiled appreciatively. "I can see where that may have gotten you...excited, Severusss. This is interesting. Potter's two best friends are involved, but one wants a little more than the other does. Wouldn't it be so hard for Potter to concentrate on anything if his two best mates were at odds?" He cackled lightly. "We shall be sure that she has other interests, Severusss. See to it. Be sure they are broken apart."

"I shall let Draco know right away," Severus said.

A cold hand found his shoulder. "No, my son, you will not let Draco know anything. This is a job for a man, not a boy. *That* is why Weasley failed. Does she know of your *spying* for the Order?"

Severus was shocked. "Yes," he managed.

"Severus," the Dark Lord said, clearly amused, "you deserve this. Do what you will with her. When we kill off Potter and all of the Order members, you can keep her if you'd like. You've earned it."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"We have much time this year before I plan to meet Potter and Dumbledore. Take your time. Destroy the little trio's friendship."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall be in touch in a couple of weeks," his Lord said. "I'll expect to know how Draco is doing, and I'll want to know how this is progressing. Make me proud."

"I shall. Good evening," Severus said with a nod. He Disapparated to his manor home with many thoughts on his mind. What would the headmaster offer him as a reward? Would he be so quick to reward him with innocent flesh to do with as he pleased? Of course not. Dumbledore would want to reward him with higher pay, medals, and titles. The question was, though, how to approach the headmaster with this? Should he mention it to him to be sure there would be no interference? *Interference*? What the hell was he going to do? She would *only* be a seventh year.

He sighed. The Dark Lord was right. He needed a woman. *A damn child would not do.* Soon he'd have to visit one of his *friends* for release. It'd been a long time. He'd been very busy the last couple of years, what with the double spying starting up again. He undressed and slid into his bed. His hand found its way to his groin and began caressing his testicles and partial erection. "Hermione Granger," he said aloud. Severus closed his eyes and thought of her rounded arse and womanly legs. He thought of her breasts and the feel of her skin. He imagined wading into the water after her, lifting her up to straddle his waist, and sliding into her heat. With each imagined thrust, he stroked himself until he came with a loud groan. After he cleaned himself, it was decided. He would have her, with or without Dumbledore's approval. The Dark Lord had a point. Seduction was a man's job. He would do it so perfectly, so gradually that she'd never know what hit her as she eventually begged him to take her. And, take her he would.

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Hermione worked the shampoo through her hair and idly thought about Ron. That bastard! She wanted to be with him, but she always worried about so many things. What if she did something wrong? What if he didn't like how she felt? She knew it was just nervousness, but he did nothing to ease her. The night before proved that he was running out of patience with her. *If he loved me, truly, he would wait until I was ready.* He'd told her that he wanted to have a quick swim in the brook while Harry was meeting with Dumbledore and Snape.

*Professor Snape!* Hermione shuddered slightly. She'd been in a hurry to get back in last night, and she hadn't seen him until she'd run into him. The way he'd looked at her had kept her up for a couple of hours longer than she should have been. When her eyes had lifted to meet his, she'd expected to find annoyance there, which was mostly what they held for her. Instead, his eyes seemed to appreciate what they'd seen. His gaze had dipped down to her body for a moment, and his hands had seemed to burn into the bare skin of her arms. His thumbs had been ever so lightly caressing her. He hadn't been rude either. She sighed. He'd obviously had something else on his mind.

Why couldn't Ron look at her that way? She loved him. He mostly looked at her the same way he always had, only they cuddled and kissed more. He was just a bit rough. If it had been him that she'd run into the previous night, he would have gripped her arms tightly, tried to shove his tongue into her ear or mouth, and grope painfully at her breasts. "Maybe I should just tell him that he's too rough," she mused aloud. She closed her eyes to rinse her hair and body. She tried to imagine Ron softly caressing her arms, and his head lowering to softly kiss her breasts as they should be kissed. Ron's face wouldn't come to her. It was Professor Snape's expression that she saw. "Blast!" This would not do. She dried herself and went down for breakfast.

"Eat up," Mrs. Weasley said placing a plate in front of her. "I want to be sure you've all eaten before Tonks and I go off to get your school things from Diagon Alley. Make sure you have your lists ready."

Hermione glanced up to see Harry moving his food around on his plate with his fork. Something must be troubling him. Ginny looked half-asleep, and Ron was shoveling food into his mouth jovially. She nibbled on a bit of toast and some eggs. "Mione," Ron whispered after his mum walked out of the room. "We need to talk."

She nodded and wondered what he was about. Did he want to break things off? The thought brought tears to her eyes. She didn't want to lose him. He was her first true love. How could she face everyone once they found out that she'd failed in her relationship?

"All right, you lot, I'm off now. Are these all the lists?" Murmurs of yes were heard. The tired Weasley matron smiled and hugged each before leaving. "Don't leave the house for any reason. Someone will be by shortly to keep watch. I can't wait for them because I've an appointment to keep."

"Bye," Ginny called. As soon as her mum left, she jumped up from the table. "Harry, come on before she gets back. You promised you'd show me some Occlumency."

He yawned. "Yeah, all right." He allowed her to lead him away.

Hermione looked over to Ron. "What do you want to talk about?"

He reached across the table. "Look, love. Last night, I might have been a little harsh. I just want you to know that I love you, and I'm sorry. I was a bit frustrated is all. Forgive me?"

She smiled brightly. "Yes. I'm sorry too. I just... well, you know. I'm nervous."

"Not a problem. I'll try to take my time, and you'll be able to relax for a bit."

"I'll try harder," she said softly, squeezing his hand lightly.

"How touching," a silky voice said from the doorway.

Hermione's cheeks reddened when she saw that Professor Snape had entered. She snatched her hand away from Ron's quickly. "Good morning, Professor," she said, not meeting his eyes. Harry always said that it looked like he could see into your thoughts without using his Legilimency. It wouldn't do for anything she'd thought about him to surface.

"What are you doing here?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"I am here to baby-sit," he said casually, walking over to the counter to help himself to some coffee that Molly had made. He went to have a seat at the head of the table between Hermione and Ron. "I'm not interrupting anything important, am I?" His voice had taken on a tone of sarcasm.

"Would it matter?" Ron shot out disrespectfully.

"No," the professor said curtly. He looked to Hermione. "Miss Granger, would you be so kind as to hand me that copy of the *Daily Prophet*?"

"Sure," she said, moving to grab the paper. An insert slipped out just as she was going to hand it to him, she leaned over to get the parchment from the floor. When she looked up, she flushed slightly. He was watching her intently. "Here you are."

"Thank you," he said, taking the slip from her. He perused it for a moment before placing it onto the table.

She watched him from the corners of her eyes as she ate her breakfast. He seemed so comfortable sitting there with his coffee and his paper. He likely wasn't oblivious to

Ron's angry stare, but he didn't let it bother him, not for the moment anyway. There was something different about him, but she couldn't place it. The faint scent that she'd inhaled against him last night wafted towards her. "Yes, Miss Granger?" he asked suddenly.

It was only then that she realized that she'd been staring. "I...er...I mean to say...how is it that you were assigned to come here with us?"

He folded his paper and leaned forward slightly. "Everyone else seemed to have more important things to do. So, because I was daft enough to mention that I'd no plans, I was volunteered to come here. I trust you realize that I take no pleasure in being for-" BAM! "What the...?"

Ron started laughing. "Ginny...she must have slammed a door on Harry. I guess something didn't go right. Girls, you know how they are!"

"Girls? I assure you, Mister Weasley, that I do not associate with girls on a personal level. I suggest you go instruct ~~that~~girl to keep her temper down today."

"Yes, sir," Ron said bitingly. "Come on, Mione."

Hermione wanted to finish her breakfast, but she didn't know how much longer she could last under his penetrating gaze. "All right," she agreed, taking his outstretched hand. She felt as if he was watching until she left the room. What was it with her? She was acting like an idiot! Why did she feel the need to blush around him? This was something completely new. If only he hadn't touched her arms the way he had! Ron never touched her that way, and that was what she longed for. Softness. A slight caress. Even following Ron to warn Ginny to cease her fit proved a point. Her hand was held prisoner in his. She could feel his sweaty palm burning into her skin tightly. It wasn't the same soft, burning sensations she'd gotten from Professor Snape's caressing thumbs. Ron's hold was hurting her. She wrenched her hand free to inspect it for damage as Ron opened the door to Harry's room.

"Bloody sleeping again," he whispered. She followed him to Ginny's door. It was locked. They could hear her whimpering from within. "I'll talk to her."

Hermione nodded. Ginny had been slowly recuperating from the last attack that they'd gone through, thanks to Voldemort. Her boyfriend, Dean, had been killed. Harry had found out about a supposed attack in Hogsmeade. Most of the D.A. members had gone with him to help, but it had been false information. On the way back to the castle, they were waylaid as a large band of Death Eaters tried to take Harry. Dean lost his life that day while Padma Patil was taken. No one had seen her again. They'd overheard that Snape insisted that the Dark Lord knew nothing of a missing witch. That brought on speculation that she had been in on the entire thing, and she'd run off with one of the younger Death Eaters of her own free will. Well, that was what Harry, Ron, and she thought anyway. The rest of the Wizarding world assumed she'd been taken.

She made her way back down to the library. Hermione knew she could pass her time reading, if doing nothing else. After about thirty minutes of reading, the door creaked, signifying Ron's entrance. "She's in a right fit, that one. Going mental, I'd wager," he said in an annoyed tone. "They've had us locked up here all summer. I think it's getting to us all. Hell, I'm even looking forward to school."

Hermione giggled. "Have a seat. I'm almost finished with this chapter." Ron sat down next to her, and she felt a hand gliding up her leg immediately. "Ronald, stop."

"Why?"

"Professor Snape is here."

"He's in the kitchen still. I've just seen him there. I just want to touch. Please," he begged.

It was the tone of his voice that made her shift slightly, allowing him to move his fingers beneath the seam of her shorts. She kept her face hidden from view by burying it in her book. Ron's other hand made its way to her breast. "Ouch, Ron!"

"Sorry," he said, releasing the firm hold his fingers had on her hardened nipple. His other hand was still poised down low, and one finger slid past the line of her knickers and explored her thatch of hair.

"Ron," she breathed. "Maybe we shouldn't do this."

"I'm not doing anything. Just let me put one in, Mione. Just one, and I promise I won't move. I just want to see what it feels like. Please," he urged, sliding the finger in without waiting for an answer.

"Ronald, stop," she hissed, trying to move away. The hand on her breast flattened to hold her down.

"Lay still. I'm not going to move it around. You don't want Snape to hear, do you?" he questioned. "God, Mione," he breathed. "It's hot." With trembling fingers, she brought her book to rest upon her face. What had she gotten herself into? She said nothing as his finger pulled out a little and pushed back in slightly. It repulsed and excited her at the same time. She was extremely uncomfortable, yet she wanted more.

Her legs parted slightly of their own accord. Emboldened, Ron thrust his finger roughly into her. She cried out and tried to move away. "No," she squeaked, her book falling away. "It hurts!" It felt as if he had a long fingernail and was clawing away at her inner flesh.

Ron pulled away angrily. "If one ruddy finger hurts, how the hell do you expect to take on this?" He pointed to his crotch.

"Maybe if you would know what the hell you were doing-"

"WHAT?"

"Keep your voice down, Mister Weasley," Professor Snape said from the doorway.

To Hermione's horror, he was leaning against the doorjamb as if he'd been there for a while and had gotten comfortable. He had a look of anger mixed with disgust upon his face. She moved, sat up quickly, and grabbed her fallen book.

"Er...Pro...see, we were-" Ron began.

"Hold your tongue, Mister Weasley." The tall man moved away from the door and came to stand directly in front of Hermione.

Hermione was looking at his shoes, too horrified to meet his eyes. What had he seen? What must he think of her? A pale, graceful hand came into her line of vision, and its fingers moved to lift her chin. She had no choice but to bring up her teary eyes to meet his. "Are you all right, Miss Granger?" She nodded, biting her lip. "Very well. I think it would be wise that you go to your room until Mrs. Weasley gets home. I shall have to have a talk with her." She nodded and sprinted away. The last thing she heard was his angry words directed to Ron. "I find this lewd behavior disgusting. Clearly, she wanted no part of what you were coaxing her to do. Have you no decency?" She quickly slammed into the bedroom that she shared with Ginny and flung herself onto her bed. Ginny was no longer in the room. Hermione could only hope that she hadn't witnessed anything either.

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Severus left Grimmauld Place without seeing her again, but he didn't care. Things were progressing nicely. He could have throttled Weasley for touching her as he had, but it was for the best really. This would all be later used for his advantage. He'd witnessed on two occasions that the girl was slightly adverse to sexual acts. He chuckled to himself. That would be easy enough to remedy. She simply needed to be seduced, not pawed over.

Molly would see to it that the pair stayed apart for the rest of the holiday. Once she was back at the castle, he would set his plans in motion. His plans were simple enough.

He would slowly befriend her, slowly get closer to her, slowly start to show her his intentions, and slowly begin to make love to her. "Make love," he said aloud with another chuckle. "Interesting choice of words."

There was Ronald Weasley to deal with. As far as he could see, the boy was well on his way to losing her already. That wouldn't be a problem any longer. He could see that she cared for the little blighter though. She would likely be devastated, and as the Dark Lord predicted, it would leave the trio parted for a while. He would use that moment to be there to help her pick up the pieces.

With a smirk, Severus walked towards the headmaster's office. He supposed that Dumbledore should be aware of his plans, but he wasn't ready to confide this to him. Not yet. There were other issues that needed to be discussed.

Southern's Notes: I've decided to write a story that makes us wonder which side Severus is truly on. Of course, to make that work even better, I have to include a sneaky plot involving a bit of illicit (only to some) courtship.

On another note, I want to warn you that Hermione will be portrayed as I perceive her--close to her age. If you are looking for Super!Hermione (18 going on 30, emotionally balanced, perfectly manicured, so clever that a super spy snape wouldn't fool her, all knowing and Wizarding world savior), then you may as well go no farther. You'll understand why later on, but keep in mind that it's a story about growing into one's self and learning how to love the right way--eventually.

Taking Advantage of the Situation

Chapter 2 of 42

A tragedy occurs and enables Severus to get closer to Hermione. What's Ron up to?

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Hermione knelt between Harry's legs in front of the couch as she cradled his head against her chest. It was the first time he'd had a real cry. She knew it was only a matter of time before he broke. The news that they'd heard earlier had hit them all hard, but it'd hit Harry the hardest. "Sshh," she soothed. "It will be all right, Harry. Somehow. I promise." Harry's arms closed around her, and he began rocking back and forth with her.

"Mione, he's gone. I can't believe it," Harry choked out through sobs. Hearing the desperation in Harry's voice brought reality slamming back upon her. She allowed her tears to mingle with his. Another pair of arms encircled them, and more tears of loss were shed. "Ron, he's gone," Harry mumbled hoarsely.

"I know, mate. I know," came Ron's soft reply. "The Order is here now. We'll have to be going."

"Why him?"

"Because he," purred a low voice, "happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Snape," Harry said angrily. "Were you there?"

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow and shook his head in annoyance. "Ever the brat, aren't we, Potter?"

"Now is not the time, Harry," Dumbledore said softly. "Your things will be delivered by the others later. Ron, you will go with your father and Bill. Harry, you will come with me. Hermione, you will go with Severus. Ginny is going with Molly and Moody. Everyone else will have decoys. We are going to start leaving immediately, and we will meet at Hogwarts tomorrow before the train gets in with the rest of the students. Take only what you will need overnight."

Hermione gaped in shock. She was to go someplace overnight with only Professor Snape! Why? Everyone else seemed to be paired off with two people. Feeling lightheaded, she took the eloquent hand offered to her and rose quickly, releasing Harry and Ron. "I trust you will be able to gather only what you need for tonight, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked, looking at her worriedly.

She nodded and moved to her room as quickly as she could. Ginny was there putting a few things into an overnight bag as well. "Why can't I just go with you?" Hermione asked as she pulled a few things into her bag, not really noticing what they were.

"They pulled names. Mum said she was coming with me no matter what, so when Moody pulled my name, she announced her intentions. When Bill pulled Ron's name, Dad insisted that he go as well. Harry got Dumbledore of course. Imagine that," she said bitterly. "Who'd you get?"

"Professor Snape," she said in a whisper.

"Better to be off with him than Tonks," Ginny said sourly. "She's a ruddy menace."

Hermione knew that Ginny suddenly disliked Tonks since the beginning of the summer holiday. She wondered if it had anything to do with Tonks and Remus becoming a couple. It seemed that Ginny had developed a kinship with the Werewolf after the loss of her lover the previous year. The man never stepped over bounds with her, but she'd been jealous of Tonks all the same, likely hoping that he'd still be single when she became of age.

"Too right," she said, not bothering to argue. "I'm done. Be careful."

"We will. Same to you."

Hermione left the room and found that Professor Snape was waiting for her right outside the door. "We are going to exit through the rear of the house, walk quickly down to the brook, and I will Disapparate us where we need to go. No talking. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," he said, pulling her by the forearm. "Come along." She'd no choice but to follow him. As they passed by the others, she could see them preparing to leave. She

also noticed that Tonks had fashioned her hair and body to resemble her own. "Decoy," the professor said when he noticed her stare.

A million things went through Hermione's mind at once. Where was he taking her? Why did they have to leave in pairs and have decoys? Was headquarters breached? Just as they reached the backdoor, she heard, "Mione!" She turned around to see Ron running to her. She broke away from the professor's grip to hug him tightly. "Be safe. I love you," he said emotionally.

"I shall. I love you," she whispered.

"That'll do," Professor Snape said, pulling her back against him and moving towards the door. "Say farewell."

She waved to Ron before turning to go with the dark man. As soon as the night air hit her body, she shivered. It wasn't exactly cold. Something in the air just felt sinister, wrong. When they stopped, her Potions master pulled her arms about his body. "Hold me tightly," he commanded. She did as bidden. Moments later they appeared in a dark alley. "Keep still," he said sternly. She didn't dare to move a muscle. Her face was buried into the front of his robes against his chest. The fragrant scent of cologne mesmerized her. With no warning, they Disapparated again. This time they were in a small room no bigger than the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. There was no couch or bed in sight. She wondered if they intended to sleep here, or if they were just stopping here until they were sure that nobody was following. "One more time, Miss Granger," he said softly. *Crack!* They were inside another room, but this one had a mattress on the floor near a fireplace and a loo partially hidden by a curtain.

Her professor moved away from her and looked around in disgust. "Surely this isn't where he meant for us to come," he murmured incredulously. "Good Lord." He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Get ready for bed, Miss Granger."

Hermione's eyes widened for a moment. Where would she change? Her eyes drifted towards the small, makeshift loo. "All right," she mumbled. Once there, she maneuvered the curtain to hide things entirely. She repaired one large hole in the material before washing her face, brushing her teeth, and braiding her hair. She decided to simply wash herself with a cloth instead of taking a complete bath. She'd had one during the day anyway. Besides, she didn't feel comfortable being so vulnerable with Professor Snape in the next room, not that she didn't trust him, mind, but it was just a bit odd, is all. She discarded her clothes entirely and kicked them into a pile near the bathtub. Quickly lathering and rinsing, she was able to complete her toilette in record time. She slipped into her knickers and her unfortunately short nightgown. She wished that she'd paid more attention to what she'd packed, but she was emotionally drained and didn't have time to whinge about such things. She made her way out and padded over to the mattress.

Professor Snape was leaning against the mantle; his head in one hand while the other held a tumbler of some amber liquid. Hermione squealed as a rather large spider scuttled across the floor. She'd drawn the attention of the man across from her. "Spider," she said by way of explanation. Suddenly, she began crying, silent tears as she lay down onto the mattress, sliding under the fresh sheets that he must have put on it. "Miss Granger, I didn't know you suffered from arachnophobia."

"I don't," she said softly, wiping a few tears away, turning on her side to face him. "That's Ron." She giggled slightly. "I was just thinking that...that Hagrid would have tried to be its mate." These words brought out fresh tears. Looking completely uncomfortable, the man moved forward to sit next to her on the floor. He didn't touch her, but he looked at her intently.

"He died for the cause, he and his brother both. It was his choice. Hagrid would have done anything to protect the headmaster, and by giving his life, he did so."

She smiled and nodded, wiping the last of her tears away. "This is going to break Harry. Vol-"

"Do not speak his name," he said sternly.

"The Dark Lord probably knew this would happen. He probably wanted it to happen," she said sadly.

Severus looked away from her for a moment. She didn't know how right she was. His Lord had called upon them just after Hagrid and his brother had been killed. He had wanted to share the news with his followers personally. He'd boasted what a blow to Potter and Dumbledore it would be. He was right. The headmaster was almost as nearly shaken as Potter was, but Severus wondered to himself if he'd only made things worse. Severus did feel badly about the loss. Hagrid had always been kind to him, even when he was a student at Hogwarts. The great man had always tried to make him feel welcome. He sighed slightly. Would the Dark Lord's impulsive move backfire? The past day had seen a fiery change in Dumbledore, and Severus was sure that Potter would be even more determined to win this war. "Try to rest," he said, looking at the girl lying next to him. Her nervous glance did not go unnoticed. "You are quite safe with me, Miss Granger. I shall remain awake this night. Sleep."

"Sir, this mattress is quite large. I trust that you could sleep on the other side without m-my disturbing you," she offered shyly.

He smirked slightly. "I shall consider it." He turned away from her to stare into the fire whilst spreading his legs out and leaning more into the thick mattress. Severus didn't trust himself to lay with her, not just yet. When she'd gone behind the curtains to change, the light from the candle there had cast her silhouette onto the curtains. He'd seen her shadowy profile as she stripped down to nothing before hurriedly washing and slipping into her nightclothes. Surely she hadn't imagined that she would be sleeping next to him when she had quickly packed, not wearing such an inappropriate thing. It reached mid thigh, and the dainty yellow fabric was very sheer. He'd shamelessly watched her dress and knew that she was wearing no bra beneath the gown. It was all he could do to keep his eyes on her face, but he imagined that if he looked close enough he could see the outline and a faint hint of the color of her nipples.

Yes, I'll be sleeping in my trousers and shirt tonight. It wouldn't do to strip down to what I normally sleep in. She would certainly not be safe with me. This is the time I need to build her trust in me. It had been easy enough to rig the name pulling earlier. He certainly didn't want to get stuck with one of the Weasleys or anyone pretending to be one of the brats. Her even breathing signaled that it was safe to venture into the makeshift bathroom to relieve his bladder. It wouldn't do for her to see his silhouette on the curtains. He made his way to the toilet, quickly relieved himself, rinsed out his mouth, and turned to leave. A small bit of lace caught his attention. Severus squatted down to inspect the pile of clothes. *Damn it.* Sure enough, atop the pile of clothing were her discarded knickers. He reached out to snatch them and looked at them longingly. His witch had worn these. He wouldn't dare keep them. It would undo him. He placed them back just as he'd found them and stood to leave.

"Fuck this," he muttered darkly, bending to retrieve them. He brought the small bit of fabric to his nostrils and inhaled heavily. "Yes," he hissed to himself, as her lovely scent was embedded into his soul. His cock tried to jut to attention, but the fabric of his trousers was restricting it painfully. He wanted her. Inhaling once more, he shoved the fabric into a secret pocket on his trousers. Nobody, save him, would be able to find them there. He moved towards the mattress where she lay sleeping. He threw his robes to the side, kicked off his boots, and began to unbutton his frock coat. Once that was discarded with the others, he allowed himself to look at the sleeping witch. One knee was bent upwards slightly while the other leg was sprawled sideways. The gown had ridden up, and he could just make out her peach-colored knickers. Frantically, he began to unbutton his shirt. He could have her. No one need know. It would be simple enough to Obliviate her.

No. He could not do that with her. Hermione was too smart. She would know that something wasn't right, and any trust he might have gained from this night would be lost, jeopardizing his plans. "Control yourself," he whispered, pushing aside his darker tendencies. He wouldn't be that way with her. No matter what side won this war, she would be safe. He'd see to it personally, and then she would be his. This one night would begin building a foundation of companionship between them. He'd slowly begin to lure her in. Once she was completely taken with him, she'd follow him to the ends of the earth. That included being at the Dark Lord's side if he so chose. Taking care to touch no part of her, he lay on the edge of the mattress and simply watched her sleep. He hadn't lied. He would stay awake through the night, most of it anyway. And, it wasn't due to worrying that fellow Death Eaters would come upon them in a frenzy to find Potter's friend.

He knew that they were not even looking for Potter at the moment. The Dark Lord had plans for Potter, but those plans wouldn't be ready until near the end of the year. This was something that he'd mentioned to the headmaster, but the man still insisted on taking precautions. Who was he to judge? He'd landed himself a night with Hermione Granger. After nearly two hours of watching her even breathing contribute to the rising and falling of her chest, he succumbed to sleep.

Hermione's eyes opened widely to see that the fire had gone out. The room was completely dark. She shook her head slightly to help orient herself. She wasn't in her bed at Grimmauld Place. She was... Damn! Everything came back to her: Hagrid and Grawp's deaths, the splitting up to keep everyone safe, and Professor Snape. It was then that she realized something was wrong. A hand was cupping her sex possessively. Her knickers had been pulled down, and a finger was delving inside of her in painful exploration. "Oh," she gasped, trying to pull away. A hand came over her mouth to silence her cries. The moment she felt teeth sink into her shoulder, she sat up right and

screamed slightly.

The fire was still lit. Professor Snape, fully clothed, was at the far end of the mattress. It had been a dream. Her scream had him sitting up, however, with a drawn wand. "What is it? A spider?" he asked sleepily.

"Nightmare," she panted. "Sorry, sir." He mumbled and lay back down. She noted that he inched a bit closer though, and she followed suit, inching a little closer. She wanted to feel safe. The stress of war and worry was taking its toll. Professor Snape would never do something like that to her. She could trust him. "Sir?"

"Hmmm?"

"I'm afraid."

"Don't be. If we've not been found yet, they won't find us. Go to sleep, Hermione," he grumbled.

She stared at his still form until he began snoring lightly. He'd called her by her given name. She'd always been Miss Granger or Granger. Hermione smiled faintly. It sounded nice. If he'd done it to soothe her, it worked. She knew instantly that *this* was the very man that risked everything to protect them and to spy for them. He'd never harm any of them.

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"What a ruddy way to start our last year," Ron said, slinging a large rock into the lake. "I mean, Hagrid is gone. This can't be good. It's like an omen or something."

"You've been paying too much attention in Trelawney's class, mate," Harry said solemnly. "I do agree though. Things could be a hell of a lot better. What the hell were Hagrid and Grawp doing together out in that open field? Why won't they tell us anything?"

Ron nodded. "I tried to get dad and Bill to talk, but they won't say a word." He hugged Hermione close. "What of Snape? Did the bat have anything to say on it?"

"Only that Hagrid died for something he believed in. It sort of sounded as if he died to protect Dumbledore," she said softly. "Did Ginny not hear anything?"

"No, she tried listening in behind a closed door, but she said that Moody saw her with his ruddy eye."

"Oh," Hermione said. "I suppose we should be glad that everything is all right for now. I mean...everyone else is safe."

"But, for how long?" Harry said bitterly. "I wish I knew what to expect." A loud howl pierced the air, sending birds scattering. "Fang!" He pointed across the grounds at the form of a limping dog, making its way to them. The trio took off at a sprint to get to him. "You're alive! You've made your way home!"

"Just barely! Come on. Let's get him to Grubbly-Plank," Ron said urgently.

"I'll go. Stay with him," Hermione said quickly, sprinting for the castle. She headed to the staff room as quickly as she could. It was the only place that she could think to locate the woman. She pounded on the door for only a few moments before it opened. "Professor Snape. I need to know if Professor Grubbly-Plank is here. Fang has come back, and he's had better days."

He moved aside and gestured for her to enter. The witch she'd been searching for was smoking a pipe and talking to Madame Hooch. "Wilhemina? Miss Granger requires your assistance. It seems that Hagrid's dog has found his way home, but he needs treatment."

The witch nodded, put down her pipe, and said, "Show me." Hermione quickly led her to the spot where she'd left the boys. Fang was still howling slightly. The professor pulled her wand to examine Fang magically. "Right, then. I'll need to bring him with me for a bit, but he'll be as good as new soon."

"Where are you staying?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Never you mind," she said crisply. "I think you should get up to the castle and change. It's nearly time for the students to arrive. I'll keep you posted."

They watched as the woman walked away with Fang hovering behind her. "What the bloody hell was that all about?" Ron asked incredulously. "I'll bet she's been given Hagrid's quarters. He's barely cold, and she's here taking over everything."

"Ron, someone had to take over his classes. It's not her fault," Hermione said softly.

"Seems right smug about it though, doesn't she? The slag!" he said hotly. "I'll see you two later."

After he'd gone, Harry reached over and took her hand. "He'll come around."

"I hope so." She squeezed his hand tightly, and they made their way back to the castle.

Severus watched the exchange from a distance. What did Potter feel for her? It was the second time in two days that the boy sought her out for reassurance. The Dark Lord would find that very interesting, wouldn't he? At this stage, it wouldn't be prudent to let him know, or he might have other things planned for Hermione Granger. No, for now, he would keep quiet. It wasn't that he believed Potter to be in love with her, but they shared a bond; of that, he was certain. It would indeed break him to lose her. A smug smile tugged at Severus' lips. "Too late, Potter."

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Hermione settled into her new dormitory and relished in the fact that she now, being Head Girl, had a private room for herself. One door opened into a corridor while the other opened into the Gryffindor common room. If she didn't feel like putting up with the boys or any chattering nonsense from the girls, she could just slip in and out through her other door. She loved it. Hearing that Ernie Macmillan had been elected Head Boy had put her at ease. She had feared that it would be Draco Malfoy. Doing weekly duties with him wasn't something that she was up to. She and Ernie had become good friends, so working with him was at least one thing to look forward to. Harry had a lot on his mind, and Ron seemed to be increasingly distant.

Ever since his mum had warned them about behaving inappropriately, his attitude had changed. He'd truly taken her seriously. They'd had a few minutes alone together after they'd arrived, and he'd only held her. There were no attempts at touching or fondling. He hadn't even kissed her. This left her feeling slighted. On one hand, she was pleased that there had been no pawing, but on the other hand, she'd been offended. Didn't he want her anymore? She didn't want to lose him, not now with all that was happening. She needed him. Maybe she could ask Ernie for some advice. He and Hannah seemed to get on well. Pushing her thoughts away, she snuggled into her bed. She sure could use Ron's arms around her. It was a little disconcerting to sleep alone. Anything would do, even Professor Snape.

"Severus Snape," she said with a giggle. Now there was a gentleman. He'd not made her feel uncomfortable at all the evening before. The man was certainly different when he was away from Hogwarts. Ron could definitely take a page from his book. Would Ron have lain so still all night? Of course not! He would have been all over her and trying to get into her knickers, but then again, Professor Snape wasn't interested in her that way. What would it feel like to be wanted by a man, a real man? This disconcerted her for a moment. He'd told Ron that he never had any dealings with *girls* that day at Grimmauld Place. Was that how he thought of her? She supposed it was, and it was just as well. It wasn't like anything would ever really happen between them. She was in love with Ron anyway. Things would be better. Before she drifted off to sleep, she idly wondered what happened to her knickers. She imagined that she'd kicked them under the tub, but she heard some odd noises under there and wasn't about to go searching for them. "Let whatever creature that lives there keep them!"

The next couple of weeks saw everyone settling into their routines. Professors Snape and Flitwick had worked out schedules for all patrolling the castle. It was the night

before her eighteenth birthday that she'd been patrolling the lower levels of the castle. Professor Snape, Ron, Pansy, and she had duty this night. She'd made her rounds earlier, but since she couldn't sleep, she'd decided to give things a once over again. As she neared a turn to an adjacent corridor, she stopped. There was someone moaning slightly. She pulled out her wand and crept forward. A hand came from behind and covered her mouth.

"Sshh," someone breathed into her ear, and she stilled completely. It was Professor Snape. He must have noticed or heard something as well, and he wanted to be the one to put an end to whatever it was. She nodded indicating that she would keep quiet and allowed him to walk ahead of her. The reaction on his face when he saw the scene before him had puzzled her. He seemed shocked and horrified at the same time. "What is the meaning of this?" he barked loudly. She heard two sets of voices panicking. His eyes met Hermione's for a moment, and she saw that he seemed disappointed. "You may leave."

"But, what is it?" she asked softly.

That's when she heard it. "Oh, no." Ron. It was his voice. She brushed around Professor Snape and saw that her boyfriend of just a few months shy of a year was trying to pull up his trousers. Pansy was there as well, buttoning her blouse hurriedly.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked softly.

"Mione, it's not what it looks like."

"Indeed," Professor Snape growled. "Parkinson, thirty points from Slytherin, detention for a week with Filch, and I will be writing to your parents. Also, I will suggest to the headmaster that your stint as a prefect be ended. Get out of my sight." Crying slightly, the girl ran past them to go to her dormitory. "Weasley, I am beginning to wonder about you. This is the third time that I have caught you in a situation such as this. Fifty points from Gryffindor since I have warned you about this already, detention with Filch for two weeks, and I will certainly let your mother know that this has happened. As with Parkinson, I will suggest that your stint as prefect be ended."

"Three times?" Hermione asked numbly. Her Ron had been doing something with Pansy. She wasn't quite sure if they'd had sex, but it seemed they were on their way there. *How could you do this to me, Ron? I thought you loved me.*

"Not that I have to answer your question, Miss Granger, but out of concern, I shall. A few nights ago I found Mister Weasley in a similar compromising position. I warned him and took away points. This is completely unacceptable," Professor Snape said.

"But, that's only two," Hermione said softly.

"Well, the third was at headquarters of course," he said firmly. "I know that you two have much to talk about, but I would ask for you to come with me, Miss Granger." She nodded. "Weasley, get back to your common room. I shall summon both you and Parkinson in the morning."

Ron nodded. "Mione, look, I don't know what-"

"That is enough, Weasley. Save your pitiful excuses for later," Professor Snape said curtly. Ron hurried off giving Hermione one last sorrowful glance. "Come along, Miss Granger."

She followed her Potions master down the corridor a little ways to his office. Once inside, he closed the door and directed her to a chair in front of his desk. He busied himself in a small room before returning to her and handing her a cup of tea. He sat in a chair next to her with his own cup. Hermione shakily took a sip of her tea. What was he playing at? Why had he brought her here? "Sir, I do appreciate this, but..." What could she say that wouldn't offend him?

"What you have just witnessed is likely a shock to you, and I'm certain that it's not quite sunk in as of yet. Your lover, Miss Granger, was in the process of having his way with another. That cannot be too easy for you to face. I simply thought you might like someone to talk to, and you might like to have a little space and time between the two of you before you speak about what happened." He smirked lightly. "A clear mind never hurts. I think it wise to wait until tomorrow after you've had time to think things through."

"I just didn't know that you cared," she murmured.

"To be honest, I don't," he said, leaning forward. "I've found myself in a similar situation before and handled things badly, if you must know. I also know that your only other close friend is Potter. We all know that he is preoccupied at times. Miss Weasley is your lover's sister. That would not do, and I don't know if you'd feel comfortable talking to Minerva about this. I thought that since I have already, and unfortunately, witnessed intimate things betwixt the two of you that you might feel comfortable talking to me."

That made sense to her, and for some reason, a burden was lifted from her shoulders. "I really appreciate that, Professor. I wouldn't know where to turn. I thought he loved me," she said in a whisper. "I suppose not."

"Sex isn't always about love, Miss Granger. May I call you Hermione?"

"Of course, Professor."

"Hermione, sometimes there are other things that drive men to women. One of those things could be lust. It is perfectly understandable that Mister Weasley would love you and would choose you above all others for a serious relationship, yet still be tempted by Miss Parkinson. It's not very honorable, but it has happened to many men before...and women as well." He took a sip of tea. "Why he would want another woman when he has such a bright, sensible, and appealing girl such as yourself is beyond me."

She was shocked. He'd just paid her a compliment. Did that mean that if he had her he wouldn't want any other woman? She felt the need to clarify something. "Sir, Ron and I, we haven't ever...what you saw that day..." She couldn't voice it.

"Was that as far as the two of you have taken things?" She nodded, relieved that he'd said it for her. "I see."

"You see?"

"Well, that explains it. *Boys* his age are very antsy. They tend to see straying as gaining experience. I do not know what excuse he'll give you, but I would think that you should think hard before accepting it. I'm afraid that he hasn't shown you much respect by doing this." He took another sip of tea and watched her intently.

Her eyes dropped away, and she studied her cup. "You said you'd warned him about this already. What did you mean? Were they...?"

"He was alone. It was late, and I caught him with...his pants down." Severus took a long sip. "I do not know if they'd seen each other before that, and it prompted him to take matters into his own hands." He smirked as she blushed. "Please, Hermione, do not be offended. I'm only answering your question honestly."

"No, sir. I'm not offended. Really. I'm just shocked and very disappointed. Maybe I should have done what he asked. This probably wouldn't have happened."

Professor Snape put his cup aside and took hers away as well. He then took both hands into his and made her look at him. "Hermione, never sell yourself short. If you weren't ready, as you clearly voiced that day, then he should have had the decency to wait you out. There are more important things to a relationship than sex." He squeezed her hands. "I've taken the liberty of putting a Calming Draught in your tea. I'm sure it's the only reason you've so easily spoken to me. I am always here for you should you need someone to talk to, but I would prefer if you kept that betwixt us only. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor." She smiled as he released her hands. "Sir, what would you do?"

He seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Could you trust him again?"

"I don't know."

"If you are uncertain now, it may take a long time to build your relationship back up. Examine why you weren't ready to be with him sexually. Perhaps your mind and body were telling you something that your heart did not want to hear." He patted her shoulder slightly. "I would end things." Hermione looked down as tears gathered in her eyes. She'd failed. She couldn't keep him happy. "It's nothing that you've done wrong, Hermione. I would say that the blame lay with Mister Weasley."

She wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. "The last time Ron was angry with me, he turned Harry against me too. I ended up spending most of my time with Hagrid and Fang because I haven't many other friends. He listened to me and didn't mind my tears. What will I do now if the same thing happens again? I have no one."

"I told you already. I shall be here for you, as long as you keep that to yourself."

"But, why, sir? You don't even like me."

"I like you, Hermione, but I can't show it whilst the Dark Lord is still alive. He might not like that I favor a Gryffindor that is friendly with Potter. Do you understand me?" She nodded. "You remind me of me," he said simply. "I, too, went to Hagrid when I was lonely in my days here. He was always good to me, even after I turned to the Dark Lord. I regret his demise as well."

Poor Professor Snape! He needs my friendship as much as I need his. No wonder he's extending an olive branch. We truly do have much in common! Thank you, sir. I will come to talk to you again soon if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Come; I shall accompany you to your dorm." He stood and offered a hand to her. They walked in silence until they were standing outside of her portrait. It was of a young witch reading a book. "Will you be all right?" he asked silkily.

"Now. I've a lot to think about," she said. "Sir? I...thanks."

"Not a problem." He stood there as she murmured her password, *Lord Byron*, and made her way inside. "Interesting." A smug smile played upon his lips as he made his way back down to his chambers. That went extremely well. He'd hoped that she would find her way to the pair. It had actually been the fourth time that he'd seen them together. Tonight, they seemed to be taking things a bit farther. It was pure luck that Hermione sensed the need to have another patrol. When he saw her nearing, he knew that victory was at hand. Soon enough, Ronald Weasley would be out of the way, and she would turn to him.

She already seemed pleased and honored that he'd divulged personal information and adult advice to her. The act of kindness would not go unanswered, and he knew that she would keep her vow of secrecy. He would slowly help her forget about her love for the Weasley berk, and he would slowly show her all that Weasley had done wrong. The picture he would paint of a real man's actions in a relationship would keep her curious. Hermione was as good as his already. "So it begins." He decided to look into this Lord Byron. Just who was he? Why would she have that name as her password?

Southern's Notes: I'm thinking that Severus is very smooth with her. Hopefully, nobody is put off by his kindness to her. It's all part of his plan. He uses everything to his advantage. Our little Gryffindor should watch out, I'd say. I hope nobody minds my using Lord Byron as her password. I simply adore all of his works, and a Byronic hero (defiant, melancholy, brooding, mysterious, something unforgivable in his past) is always appealing to me. That screams Snape sometimes. Cheers, mates. More up soon.

I hope that any Ron fans are not offended. I'm simply trying to portray him as an eager teen that would like some experience. He does love Hermione, but he's also curious. I'll have their talk in the next chapter. xoxoxo

Subtle Strategy

Chapter 3 of 42

Ron and Hermione come to a decision. Snape reveals how he can lure her to him. His plan begins falling into place.

Disclaimer: Alas, it's not for me. No money is coming my way. It's all for fun.

A big thanks to my beta, Charmed_Nay. :)

Hermione opened the door and sighed. "It's too early for this, Ronald." She looked past him into the common room and could see that it was deserted.

"No, it's not. I really want to talk to you, Hermione. Please, let me come in," he said hopefully.

She moved back into her room, going to lie on her bed. "It seems like I've just gone to bed. I really need some sleep."

"If it makes you feel better, I've been up all night thinking about what I would say to you," he said softly, sitting next to her curled up form. "Now I'm here, and I still don't know where to start."

"The beginning maybe?" she said sarcastically.

"Right then," he murmured. "May I?" He pointed to her bed. She simply nodded and scooted over. Like they'd done so many times before, he lay next to her for a long talk, looking at the canopy. "I love you, Hermione. Really I do. I've no excuse for what I've done. I've been thinking about good reasons all night, but I couldn't come up with any. There is nothing that I can say that will make you or me feel better."

"I was shocked when I realized what you'd been doing. I was also very hurt. That's when I started wondering what I could have done to change things, to keep you loving only me," she whispered.

"Mione, I do love only you. Pansy, well, it happened not long after we got our rounds. She and I were paired together. We got to talking, and she seemed interested in what I had to say. She kissed me first, Mione, and I know that's unacceptable."

"Yes, very," she said, turning away from him. "Why?"

"I turned her away at first, but then she was saying how she'd like to have someone like me. She thinks I'm great because I don't care about appearances or family names. I'm just me, and I accept people as they are, mind I didn't really like her before. I told her that too," he said with a sad chuckle. "She said that made her want me even

more. She said a lot of things: said I kissed great, said I knew just how to hold her. It made me feel good."

Hermione sniffed slightly. "And, I only complained about you being rough and not knowing what you were doing. So, you mean to say, a few snogs are worth more than anything we've shared?"

"Never, Mione. I told her that I would never leave you. I only wanted to see what it was like. I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say. I wish I'd never done it." He turned to put his arm around her. "I just thought that she could show me what to do, and then you would want me. I don't love her. I swear."

"How would you feel if you had come upon some guy and me in a corridor barely dressed?" Her tears were flowing slowly, and her heart was hurting. The love of her life had betrayed her.

"Honestly? I would have probably killed the bloke, yelled at you, and stormed away. Truth is, Mione, that I wish you'd have done just that. I would rather you had had a go at me, kicking and screaming, than what you did. You simply looked so...broken. It hurt knowing that I'd done that to you." He kissed her head. She pulled away slightly. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Mione, I'll do anything."

"Well, I wanted to slap you, after I'd come back here of course and had time to think on it. I wanted to tell you how much I hate you for what you and that cow have done behind my back, but..." She sniffed loudly. "I still love you."

"We can work this out," he said quickly.

She shook her head. "When did you first start *this* with Pansy? Tell me everything."

"The first Saturday that we were here. It was when she and I had to patrol the North Tower that night. I was a little down because of Hagrid, and that is when she tried. After a bit, I gave in, remembering what me mum had said."

"Ronald, we had time alone since Professor Snape told your mum what he saw. You've never even tried anything. I would have still liked a few kisses," she said bitterly. "Why did you start slipping away?"

"Well, she was on about how I should respect you for being what she calls *a good girl*, she said you were marriage material, and she said that if I knew that you were the one, it wouldn't matter how long we waited before making love." He kissed her shoulder. "Mione, I still want you. I want this. You are the one."

"I'm the one, but you saw fit to test out Pansy."

Ron pulled away to lie on his back again. "It was a mistake, a few mistakes. My dad told me that he'd been with others before he and mum went at it. He said that a wise man inspected many cauldrons before settling on the first one he saw. I never meant for you to know. I just...I don't know."

"This is just too much right now," Hermione said honestly. "I want to go down and scratch Pansy's eyes out. I want to tell you that I never want to see you again. I want to thank Professor Snape for actually being nice for the first time in seven years."

"Strange isn't it? When he found me...er...when I was..." Ron turned red. "Last time, he took points away and gave me a lecture about controlling myself and trying to be more respectable. I ought to have listened to him, but the temptation was there. I just wasn't thinking clearly. Now I've likely lost my prefect position, and my mum is going to kill me." He turned to face her. "Have I lost you?"

"I don't know."

"What can we do?"

"How do you feel about me? Please, Ron, be honest."

"I love you," he said immediately.

"Are you in love with me? Does your stomach flop about when I'm near? Can you see yourself waiting for me until I am ready? Do you think that you could be with me and only me for all our lives?" she questioned.

"Yes, I mean, it's different than it used to be, but mum says that's because people grow comfortable with each other. Things change, but they get better." He took her hand in his. "What about you?"

"Honestly? You excite me. I love you. I could imagine only being with *you* forever, but as of right now, something has changed. Even before, there was something off. I became apprehensive when I knew we'd be alone because you'd become so pushy. I wanted to do those things, and at the same time, I didn't."

"I'm so sorry, Mione."

"Me too," she said wistfully. "I think we should break things off for now. Maybe you should check out a few other cauldrons, Ron, before deciding to have a brew with me."

"Mione...no, I don't want to lose you. Please," he begged. "I can make up for this, I can. I'll be a better bloke."

"You won't lose me," she said softly, squeezing his hand. "My mum told me that when you love someone that isn't ready to be loved, well, you set him free."

"I've heard it before. If we're meant to be, I'll be back," he said glumly. "Mione, I couldn't stand by to see you with someone else."

"Don't worry. I've no designs on anyone. I know how you feel anyway. I'm going to hate seeing you with *her*."

"I'm not going to be with her. It was never about trying to have anything more than a shag. We were just two people looking for comfort. Her mum being killed and Hagrid being killed just sort of gave us something in common. I guess the Slytherins aren't very supportive," he said bitterly. "Must be hard to be a Slytherin. Some of them probably want to care and would like to have friends, but they can't because of ruddy Voldemort."

Hermione nodded in agreement, thinking of Professor Snape. *He, at least, seems to want and need my friendship. Even though I can never tell anyone, I will give that to him. I'm going to start by visiting him today.* "Let's make a deal. Anything that you do should be kept to yourself. Same for me. That way we can taste the tea without actually having to fix an entire pot. Neither of us will be hurt that way. If one of us should decide that we are ready to come back, then I think it only right that it be said. If one of us should decide that they don't ever want to come back, then I think that should be said as well."

"Can't we just stay together?"

"If we are meant to be, we will be. We'll simply break things off, try to go on as if nothing has changed, and show everyone that we aren't failures," she said.

"Mione, is that what you think is happening? Do you think that we are failing? That you have failed?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"You've not failed," he said miserably. "I have. I'm scared that I'll lose you."

"We'll still be mates like before. Things will stay the same for the most part. We'll just not be doing any snogging," she said with a bitter laugh. "I guess I'm getting my wish, eh?"

He murmured a noncommittal sound and sat up. "Harry's probably wondering where I've gone off to, so I'll go. I'll let him know about our decision. I do love you, you know."

"I love you," she said, sitting up to hug him closely. He kissed her suddenly, and their tears mingled as their faces pressed together. "This hurts."

"Yeah," he said, voice full of emotion. "It feels like someone else has died."

"It does," she agreed. "If we don't do this, we'll always wonder if we should have."

"Sure," he said sarcastically. "Leave it to you to try to make things seem for the best. Something tells me that we'll never be together again. Is this your way of letting me down easy?"

Is it? No, I just want us to both be sure. "This isn't easy," she said honestly.

"Right then. I'm off," he said, not looking back as he left her room.

She noticed that he'd turned bitter near the end of their talk. Would things change? Be awkward? What would Harry say? What would the Weasleys say? What would Professor Snape say? "Bloody hell," she muttered. "When did he become so important?" She shook her head. He wasn't, not really. She'd just seen him in a different light. At that moment, a scratching at her window got her attention. She walked there quickly, opened it, and stepped aside as a large school owl flew in. It dropped something onto her bed and flew away again before she had time to thank it. She moved to her bed and found a single parchment next to a single, lavender rose. She gasped. That symbolized enchantment. "Who could have sent this?"

Hermione picked up the parchment, broke the seal, and began reading. She was uncertain about the handwriting. It was likely to have been written with a quill enchanted to disguise the scribbling.

Hermione,

I know that this may be deemed inappropriate by some, but I thought that you deserved something different for your birthday. There is something about you that is most enchanting. I find myself wondering what witchery you've cast upon yourself to make you seem completely alluring. Your unpracticed smile and bright eyes seep into my thoughts continuously.

I eagerly await the darkness, as your likeness seems to be paying me a nightly visit. I wondered, to be honest, if I'd started receiving visits from a Succubus. Perhaps these dreams will one day be reality, but I know that is highly unlikely. You have a lover, and he'll not likely let go of you anytime soon. I shall just be content in knowing that since the start of term came upon us again I am able to watch my enchantress from afar and appreciate her exquisiteness. I hope your birthday wishes come true and not be unrequited as mine most likely shall be.

Always,

Someone You've Enchanted

Her heart melted. Who was responsible for this? The words touched her more deeply than anything. "Inappropriate?" Why would it be considered improper to write to her of his feelings? Or, her feelings, if it were a witch? "Professor Snape?" she gasped. "No, he knows that Ron and I aren't together. Well, he had an idea that we wouldn't be anyway. It must be someone that I don't see much during summer term. I saw the professor often." She reread the letter again. "Definitely not Harry. Who though? He sounds well spoken." She gasped. "Malfoy? No, it can't be."

Confusion set in. She mentally listed possible Gryffindor students: Neville, Seamus, and Colin. Neville wouldn't be so articulate. Seamus seemed the type that would pull her aside to say what he had to say, but he didn't seem the type to covet a mate's girl. Colin would likely be afraid that Ron would find out.

She mentally listed possible Ravenclaw students: Terry, Michael, and Anthony. Terry was in a serious relationship with Lisa Turpin. Anthony seemed to favor blokes, and Michael was always hopping from one girl to the next. It was unlikely that he would take the time to write something such as this for her.

Mentally listing the unlikely Hufflepuff males, she sighed. Ernie was dating Hannah. Justin knew that she would never feel anything for him in that way. That left a load of younger students and the Slytherin gang, consisting of Zabini, Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, and Malfoy. She really couldn't see any of them sending it.

Hermione smiled to herself. Maybe the puzzle would soon be solved. Word would get around fast enough about her and Ron deciding to end things. Maybe they would be emboldened to approach her. She wasn't ready for a relationship, but just knowing that someone at school found her *enchanting* did much to mollify her. She lifted the lavender rose to inhale its scent. It was nothing spectacular, just a normal rose fragrance. It was beautiful nonetheless. Someone had charmed it to stay in its current form for always. It had been a long time since she'd seen one. Her mother had always been fascinated with the meaning of things, such as flowers, colors, and the like. She'd once told Hermione that this flower should be sent when someone enchanted you or you felt love at first sight.

Suddenly the thought of losing Ron and failing in her relationship didn't seem so horrifying. There was hope for her. She took comfort in knowing that someone wanted her. Someone appreciated her enough to send her an anonymous note on her birthday. No pressures added, only a gesture of good faith had been intended. She remembered Ron's exact words when she'd told him that what they'd been doing had felt wrong. *Well, let me tell you this, Mione. If this feels wrong, I think we should break things off. I want you so badly that it hurts to have you around.*

Would having her around after they'd broken things off still hurt? What would she do? What would Harry say? "Harry," she said softly. He'd been happy when they'd finally made things official. Whose side would he choose if it did come down to it? "At least I have my own chambers to hide out in." She thought back to their third year when they'd both turned against her for a while. She had no one, and it was hard for her. Before Halloween during her first year, she'd had nobody. They'd taken her in, and when she'd no place else to go, Hagrid had been there for her. Now she'd be alone. No. Not alone. Professor Snape, of all people, would be there for her. He needed her friendship as well. He was probably lonely. Ruddy Voldemort likely had spies all over. "Malfoy," she said distastefully. Maybe he would want some company later.

She quickly dressed and made her way out into the common room. The first person she ran into was Neville. "Hi, Mione," he said shyly. "Harry's just told us, Ginny and me, about you and Ron breaking up. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks, Neville. It will be all right. It was a mutual thing," she said, trying to sound positive.

"Oh, was it? Well, I don't think Ginny's taking it well. Harry went after her to try to calm her down. I don't know where Ron ran off to." Neville smiled. "I'll be around if you need something. I promised to let Parvati read my palm and tea leaves as part of her Divination assignment."

"All right. See you."

"See you," he said, quickly leaving.

Nobody else seemed to be looking at her oddly, but she went back into her dormitory all the same. What would Ginny be upset about? How was it her business? What exactly had Ron told them? Neville seemed surprised that it was a mutual agreement. She'd have to find out sooner or later. Skipping breakfast, she decided to have a walk. Something didn't feel right with the situation. She made her way out into the corridor with a feeling of foreboding settling in. She hadn't gone ten feet when she met up with Harry. They simply stared at each other for a long moment before he opened his arms to her.

"Oh, Harry," she whimpered, running to him. He hugged her tightly to him. "It's all messed up, Harry. I've made a right mess of things."

"You only did what was right, Mione. Come. Tell me everything," he said, pulling her towards a small, empty room.

As Hermione began telling him everything, except for the things that she talked to Professor Snape about after catching Ron with Pansy, she felt a sense of relief. Harry wasn't angry. He seemed to have expected it. He seemed almost glad. *Oh, no! It's Harry that sent the letter and the lavender rose to me.*

As if confirming her thoughts, he said, "Happy birthday, Hermione." The smile froze on her face, but she accepted his strong embrace. "I'm sorry you've had such a rotten day so far. I only just remembered. I've a gift for you in my trunk. We'll have to fetch it later."

She pulled away to look at him uncertainly. Maybe he hadn't been the one to send it. "All right," she said. "Neville says that Ginny was upset. What's that all about?"

"Says Ron should have treated you better. Says she hates men that leave their women. I think she aimed to have a go at Pansy."

"Ginny isn't angry at me then?" she asked hopefully.

"No."

Hermione cried. "I thought I would be alone. I thought that maybe he'd told everyone that I'd done something wrong, and you would all turn against me."

"Never. There might be times when I try to take time to myself, but I'll not be upset with you for doing what you need to do to better your life. Mind, I don't think I could stand continuous arguing between you two, but I wouldn't ever choose sides. I learned a long time ago that you're the only one that has stood by me no matter what. I'd like to do the same."

"Thanks, Harry," she said, sighing with relief.

"Anytime."

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Severus looked at his schedule once more. She would be doing the late patrol near midnight. He'd be sure to run into her. It was always easy to find her location and to lure her to where he needed her to be if necessary. He'd taken the liberty of fashioning a special parchment. A bit of Dark Magic, a hair from her head that he'd found upon her pillow the morning after they'd slept alone, and a bit of his own hair bound together with a single parchment was like a telepathic link from his subconscious to hers. All he had to do was use a sneaky little potion that would substitute for ink. He'd write a message on the parchment to send a subliminal message to her. She'd never be consciously aware of him, but she'd still respond to his messages all the same.

When he'd seen Weasley and Parkinson sneaking about the corridor, getting too cozy, he'd known that they were going to take things a bit farther than they had before. He would have stopped the blighters, but he wanted to do something first. It was *he* that lured his destined lover down to the dungeons. He needed her to witness what was happening first hand if she was to make the break from the boy on her own without persuasion. It was simple. He'd first written take another patrol on the parchment. Next, he'd written a couple of turning directions. It brought her right to his location. He eyed the parchment next to him. Besides enabling him to lure her when he desired, it also told him exactly where she was positioned, no matter where in the Wizarding world she may be. He placed his palm over the parchment. "*Locus Hermione,*" he said softly.

Almost at once, writing appeared before him. *7th floor corridor of Gryffindor Tower with Harry Potter* He smirked. Earlier she had been in her room with Weasley. He'd wondered what had become of the talk they'd shared. Had his plan worked? Were things called off? Was that why Potter was with her? Was he trying to talk to her about reconciling? He put the parchment down to think of the rose and letter he'd sent her earlier. He'd taken extra care in choosing the right rose. If she didn't know what the color symbolized, he knew that she was an inquisitive type and would find out. She was his enchantress and ever so slowly he planned to lure her to his side.

When he'd written the letter, he'd wanted to think of the right words that would touch her heart. One day when she'd find out that he had been the author, she would believe that he'd been fancying her for a long time. By the time that she realized it was he that sent her the letter, she would fancy him in return. She wouldn't see anything amiss with her older, male professor being in *love* with her. He'd purposely written it to confuse her slightly and make her wonder about the author. The only thing that bothered him was that after he'd read over what he'd written, he'd realized that it was mostly true. She had enchanted him, hadn't she? He did close his eyes each night and fantasize about her. It wasn't always sexual. Sometimes it was just of her laughing with him or talking to him about something interesting, which, of course, led to sexual fantasies. He chuckled to himself, putting the parchment aside.

Severus vowed to himself to never use the parchment to project feelings or opinions for him into her mind. That was not how he wanted her. If...no, when...she came to him, it would be of her own volition. He would, however, use his parchment to his advantage if he had to. One day, he would give her the second parchment that he'd created. That would only be when he knew she was his for certain. An additional charm would enable them to correspond with each other consciously. Turnabout was fair play, was it not? He took the special ink from his drawer, leant over the parchment with his quill, and scribbled a small suggestion. *Go near the Astronomy Tower around midnight. Maybe some students will be sneaking about.* He sat back smugly, watching the words seep into the parchment. "She'll be there," he said aloud.

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Hermione had a productive day. Harry had assured her that nobody held anything against her for the split with Ron. She'd tried to find Ginny to talk to her, but the redhead had been elusive all day. All of her assignments had been completed, and she'd received some gifts for her birthday. The feeling of complete aloneness had set in only when she found herself to be idle for too long. It was then that she'd think of Ron and wonder if she was doing the right thing. The rose and the letter that she'd received from her mysterious admirer helped to lure her thoughts away from Ron and what might have been. "And, what still might be," she whispered. She readied herself to make her rounds. Being a Saturday night, there would likely be students sneaking around the Astronomy Tower for a snog. She'd be sure to check near there.

Easily she made her way through the corridors and out onto the rooftop. The beauty of the night sky took her breath away. There was only a crescent shaped moon out, and it mostly hid behind the stormy looking clouds. Clear patches of sky could be seen every so often, and to her, it nearly looked as if the stars were twinkling brighter. "*Lumos,*" she muttered. There was nobody out at this time of night. A creak behind her turned her around quickly. Someone had come through the door. "Who's there?" she asked, pointing her wand in the direction.

A dark figure came to her from the shadows, slowly taking the shape of Professor Snape. "Good evening, Hermione," he said cordially. "Lower your wand, if you don't mind."

"Sorry, sir," she said. "*Nox.*" Damn! Why had she turned the light out completely? Her eyes took a moment to get used to the darkness again, and she realized that he'd come to stand next to her.

"How did you fare today after last night's excitement?" he asked.

She immediately felt comfortable and had no idea why. This man before this past summer had always been an arse to her and her mates. Why now? What had made him want to befriend her? *Does it really matter, Hermione? You've lost Ron. You need someone to talk to. Hagrid isn't about any longer.* "We broke things off for now. We decided that we should take a bit of time before committing to something permanent, especially since neither of us has ever really dated anyone else." Her voice cracked

slightly.

"How does that make you feel, Hermione? Will you be all right?"

His quietly smooth voice seemed to slither through her veins and calmed her emotions. "I think I'll just need some time."

"You shall have it," he whispered, closing the distance between them. "Take this. You're shivering." He offered her his cloak. "The breeze is a little cool tonight."

Hermione was completely taken aback by this encounter. He was so sensitive and seemed to care even though he'd told her that he didn't. This respectable yet snide man truly did have a soft side and seemed to be reaching out...to her of all people! What was the war costing this man? "Would you like some company tomorrow, sir?" She felt her cheeks flush suddenly. "I mean to say...if you aren't busy, I would like to come by for a talk."

"We're talking now, Miss-Hermione. I apologize. It's a habit to refer to you respectfully," he said.

"Thanks," she said softly. "It's all right if you don't want me to come. I understand, sir," she said, heart dropping.

"I suppose I would not turn away someone willing to have tea with me if she felt the need to talk about things. Would it make you more comfortable to talk to me then instead of here?" he asked. Before she could answer, he said, "Alone in the dark."

"Yes. I mean, no." She paused to catch her breath. "I'm comfortable with you, sir. Really. It's just late, and I don't want to keep you."

"Near three then?" he asked politely.

"That sounds nice."

"Where will you claim to be if someone should ask?"

"Reading in the library?" she offered.

"Excellent," he said. "I bid you good night."

"You also," she said, watching his silhouette disappear into the darkness. The closing of the door signaled his departure. She smiled to herself. What had just taken place between them? She hadn't been shivering from the cold.

Blast! She still had his cloak. Well, she could always return it to him the next day, couldn't she? No. He might need it. She quickly followed his path towards the dungeons. "Professor?" she called as quietly as she could. There was no reply. Once she neared his class and office, she caught sight of a black robe billowing ahead of her in the dim candlelight. "Sir?" she called softly.

"Yes?" came the reply a moment later.

"Your cloak," she said, nearing him. "I'm afraid that I forgot to give it to you."

"It could have waited until tomorrow," he said blandly.

"Sorry, sir." She took off the cloak and handed it to him. "Good night."

Hermione turned to walk away. "Whilst you are here, would you like to come in for a moment? I found something that you might find interesting."

"All right," she agreed, following him inside. She sat in the same chair she'd sat in the night before as he went about fumbling in his desk, with tea, and lighting a fire. He placed a cup of tea in her hands and sat across from her holding a small book. "What is that?"

"I went to Hogsmeade today and had a look at the used bookshop. There is a Muggle section there. Something about your password intrigued me, so when I saw this, I thought I would purchase it. I've read through it and would like to give this to you."

"Professor! A collection of essays written on Lord Byron's poems! This book is very old," she said, eyeing it fondly. "Brilliant!"

"I suppose we could call this a birthday gift. We've still got a few minutes left before it's no longer your birthday." She quickly hugged the book to her, setting aside her untouched tea, and smiled at him with shiny eyes. "Had I known that you'd be upset-"

"No, I'm happy! I've always loved literature from the Romantic period. And, he," she nodded to her book, "has always been my favorite. I love his themes and the characters."

"His characters?"

"Oh, honestly, Professor! I thought you've read through this."

"I have."

"Well, then surely someone has commented on the Byronic hero?"

He smirked slightly. "I did see that, yes. Why is it that you like this type of character?"

She laughed lightly, hair bouncing as her shoulders shook. "He's not the normal type of hero that most stories try to portray. He usually enjoys solitude and tries to be alone even with a group of people about. He's arrogant, confident, prideful, intellectually brilliant, and slightly sensitive about certain things. There's usually something dark in his past that keeps him from forgiving himself. More often than not it's a sexual crime. He's mostly a rebel and does what is right by him, sometimes accidentally helping people along the way." She smiled. "Sorry, I tend to get lost when I think of him. Most people think of this hero as repulsive, by certain standards, yet fascinating. I was drawn in quickly with the first poem of his that I read, *Solitude*. When I first heard of Time-Turners, I wanted to go back in time and save him from death." She blushed. "I suppose you think me silly."

"If this is the type of man that you are drawn to, what, may I ask, were you doing with Weasley?"

"Oh," she said, pausing to think. "I guess...well, I guess he was the only one who would have me. We sort of just grew on each other."

"You do realize that this Byronic hero that you've described sounds a bit like me? Right down to the repulsive bit."

"Oh...you are right! Professor, I am sorry! Have I offended you?" she asked worriedly. "I mean to say, I don't find you repulsive...fascinating yes, but never repulsive. I...oh, my." What had happened to her tongue? It was betraying her with jumbled words. Why was he moving closer? *Oh, my God. He's going to touch me. His hand is nearing my cheek. He's going to kiss me.*

Severus gently moved a lock of hair from her face, allowing his palm to linger on her cheek. "I am far from offended, Hermione." He was pleased that her eyes darkened, and she leant closer to him, as if preparing for a kiss. With an internal smirk, he moved closer, nearly brushing his lips against hers. The moment her eyes fluttered closed, he pulled away quickly. "Miss Granger! I apologize. I don't know what's come over me!" He stood and moved behind his chair, as if placing something between them. "I

forgot myself."

He could see the look of disappointment mixing with surprise. "Sir, it's all right. We're just apparently two people that have connected on some level. If anything, I should apologize to you. I...didn't mean to carry on. I'll just go now."

"Wait. Miss Gran-Hermione, please. If I have frightened you," he began, "I can promise that it won't happen again. As I said before, I don't know what happened just now. I thought that you meant that I was fascinating. It felt like someone finally understood and saw me in a different light, an appealing one."

"Maybe I have and just didn't know it," she whispered. "I really have to go." Clutching the book to her, she sprinted to his door.

"Will you still come round for tea tomorrow afternoon?"

"Am I still welcome?" she asked in polite disbelief.

"You are most welcome here," he said. "Pleasant dreams."

He chuckled as she fled, slamming the door in her wake. "Well that worked out better than expected. She's extremely naïve." He smiled to himself as he remembered her thoughts about the Byronic hero. Nearly everything that she'd said had touched him in one form or another. He pulled the parchment from his desk, placed his hand over it, and said, "*Locus Hermione*."

Currently climbing a flight of stairs that lead to Gryffindor Tower, alone.

Severus chuckled again. He would have to let the Dark Lord know about this. They had a small meeting planned for the next evening. The next part of his plan would be put into action whilst they had afternoon tea together. The seed had been planted. She'd be thinking of him until they met again. He continuously checked the parchment until she was safely in her dormitory, and then he went to have a cold shower.

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Hermione threw herself onto her bed, still holding her book, breathing heavily. "I tried to kiss a teacher! No! He tried to kiss me!" She shook her head. "That's not true. He nearly did and thought better of it. My God!" She couldn't believe it. Professor Severus Snape had been drawn to her words and nearly kissed her.

There was no pressure, no fumbling fingers and rough hands, no begging for fulfillment, and no disappointment that she couldn't comply. Well, he seemed aghast that things had gone that far, but luckily, he hadn't held their lapse against her.

"I'll need to watch what I say, or I might find myself longing for his kiss." That much was true. She'd been disappointed that his lips hadn't pressed against her own. The look in his dark eyes had been one of gentle adoration, one of promises. His touch on her face had been so soft that she wondered if it had been real. "I wanted him to kiss me," she gasped, horrified. She and Ron had only been apart for the day, yet she was already trying to have a snog with someone. *A very much older, authoritative someone*. "I did and didn't want it to happen," she decided, grateful that it hadn't. Things would have been too awkward, and she'd have felt as if she'd betrayed Ron.

*To hell with Ron! Betrayed him? How? He's the one off snogging and trying to shag Pansy Bloody Parkinson!*

She held her book closely, as she allowed herself to drift off to sleep. Her last thoughts were of Lord Byron and his Byronic hero. The faceless hero now took the form of her Potions master.

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**A/N:** Well, I hope the Ron/Hermione bit wasn't too boring, but I wanted to show that they do love each other. I'm thinking that it will be a little harder for her to fall prey to Severus, as she still has feelings for her ex.

Up Next: We'll see Ron's feelings, Ginny's feelings, the pair having tea, Voldemort's suggestions, and another part of our Potions master's seduction falling into place.

## Getting Comfortable

*Chapter 4 of 42*

We see a little Dark!Severus in this chapter. Hermione is impressed with her Potions master, Ginny has a tale of her own, and Ron is disgruntled.

**Disclaimer:** J.K.R.'s stuff. I'm just having a bit of fun.

**A big thanks to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay, and my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

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"Lord Byron," he intoned darkly, pulling his cloak about his body more tightly. The sleepy witch in the portrait granted him access easily enough, never noticing exactly whom she had admitted into Hermione's chambers. Ever so slowly, he crept towards her bed. The duvet had been thrown off whilst the sheet tangled over one leg, leaving the other pleasingly bare. It seemed that she was merely wearing knickers and a chemise to sleep in. He leered at her young, soft flesh and felt his loins tighten. His cloak slid away from his body in one smooth motion.

He'd already prepared himself before he'd come. He wore only his robes beneath his cloak, nothing more. Only a moment passed before his robes pooled around his feet with his cloak. Lifting the wand he'd been carrying in his hand, he cast an extra ward on both of her exits, a Silencing Charm on her, and a single enchantment had her eyes blindfolded with a thick scarf. Severus would have her. One hand drifted down to the tip of his erection, a single droplet of excitement was already formulating there. *God, I am nearly coming, and I've not touched her yet.*

Slowly, he crawled onto the bed near her feet, wand placed next to body as his head lowered to the juncture betwixt her thighs. Her lovely scent, a mixture of some alluring perfume and her womanly essence, called to him. He propped himself on his elbows on either side of her, allowing his hands to creep up beneath her chemise whilst his mouth lowered to lick along the hem of her knickers where the fabric met the flesh of her inner thigh. He felt her move slightly and knew that she was still asleep. One hand withdrew and grasped his wand. He was able to magic away her knickers, and he made sure to banish them to his quarters to keep as a souvenir. His hand slid back beneath her chemise and found its way to her full breast as his head lowered.

Her plump legs were parted just enough that he needn't use his fingers to peel away her layers for a taste. His tongue expertly found her enticing slit, and he gently moved his tongue along it before forcing it into her. A growl sounded in his throat, and he felt her stirring. The lapping of his tongue and the caressing of his fingers had finally woke her. Severus knew that Hermione would be disoriented for a moment, wondering where the delectable sensations were coming from, and then she would panic, not knowing who was tasting and touching her in such an intimate way.

Sure enough, she began struggling against him moments later, and he knew from the heaving of her chest that she was trying to scream for help. *Good thing I put that Silencing Charm on her.* The movements were causing her body to buck against his mouth and arch into his hands. His body weight applied enough pressure to hold her down. She couldn't get up unless he gave her leave. It was far too late for that now. He'd have her. The moving against him only incensed him further, and he could feel the resistance leaving her with each lap of his tongue or fondle of his fingers. When she began to thrash about in ecstasy, he stopped.

Without caring to wait another moment, he moved over her to place himself at her entrance. He looked down at the body below him. Her chest was heaving with a likely mix of excitement, fear, and disgust flowing through her. He pushed in roughly, tearing away any barrier that she'd had. Her face contorted in pain, and her mouth took on the shape of one screaming. He thrust into her over and over until her nails no longer clawed at him to harm him but to relieve tension. When she came forcefully, with her welcomed wetness washing over him, he grasped his wand and removed her blindfold, as his own climax peaked. The surprise, hurt, and shame in her eyes accosted him immediately. He'd betrayed her. How could he have done this to her? He began to thrust erratically in climax, shouting syllables with each. "O...bliv...i...ate!"

Severus bolted upright, sprung out of bed, and looked about wildly. "A dream. I didn't harm her. It wasn't real," he said, panting. In one hand, he was clutching his wand. In the other, he held the knickers he'd taken from her the night they went into hiding. Apparently, he'd fallen asleep whilst holding them and thinking of her, causing himself to have a most delicious yet horrifying dream about she and he coupling. He wanted the dream to come true, but he would never force her. He never wanted to see that look in her eyes.

He hurried to his desk to take out the parchment he'd created, waving a hand and casting his charm. *Currently sleeping in her bed in the Head Girl's dorm, alone.* "Good girl," he said, feeling oddly guilty. Her hurt eyes tormented him so greatly that he couldn't go back to sleep. He decided that he might as well get up and head to the Leaky Cauldron before he was needed about the castle. There was something that he needed in order to prepare for his visit with his witch later in the afternoon.

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"Good morning, Gin," Hermione said brightly. "You're up early."

"Well, I wanted a chance to have a talk with you before the berks started piling round."

"Come in," she offered. The redhead quickly stepped inside and plopped down in a chair near Hermione's fire. "I want to talk about Ron."

Hermione sighed. Harry had told her that Ginny had understood about the breakup. Had she changed her mind? "All right." She took a seat across from her friend.

"I think what Ronald did was wrong, only Harry and I know the truth, mind. I may tell mum as well," she said with a sneer. "Serve him right, it would."

"There is no need for that. Really. I don't want her to hate him."

"No? Rather her think its all your fault then, eh?"

"She wouldn't..." Hermione knew instantly that she would. Mrs. Weasley had thought ill of her in the past and had treated her coldly when she thought that Hermione had jilted Harry. If Ron said the wrong thing, she would blame her again. "Maybe just tell her it was mutual without causing a rift between the two of them."

"Hermione! How could you worry about his life now that he's messed up yours?" Ginny asked vehemently. "He's lucky that I didn't find him yesterday, the cheating wanker!"

"What's really the problem behind all of this?" Hermione asked quietly. "Has this to do with Dean somehow?"

"I still miss him, you know." She smiled and tears welled in her eyes. "But, since he's gone, I've found another with whom I would want to be with. I really think he wants me, but that bitch is poisoning him!"

Hermione swallowed uneasily. "Who might that be?" Ginny had long since been over Harry, but she had a terrible feeling that it was someone close to Harry that Ginny fancied.

Ginny looked around as if checking for eavesdroppers. "Remus," she whispered conspiratorially.

She knew it. "He and Tonks-"

"Tonks is a tart! A scarlet woman! I know all about her. Remus deserves someone that loves him. I've been thinking on this a long time, and I've decided that I am going to tell him what I know about that bitch!"

"Ginny!" Hermione chided.

"It's true. I was in the library, laying behind the couch looking at old photos when Tonks came in...with Harry!" Hermione gasped. "That's right. She was all over him, saying how she wanted to kiss the Boy Who Lived. Harry finally had to threaten to tell Remus if she didn't sod off."

"Why didn't Harry tell him?" Hermione asked in disbelief. That didn't sound like Tonks. Besides, Harry would have told her about that if it were true. Ginny must have forgotten or misunderstood something.

"He tried! He went straight to the grate and Flooed Remus wherever he was at the time. I heard his voice as clear as I hear yours now. Harry got all nervous and changed his mind. Said he was just having a Floo to see how things were going. After he disconnected, he was berating himself for not having the bollocks to tell Remus about his witch," Ginny said in a rush.

"Good grief."

"Exactly," the fiery redhead said. "I wanted to tell Harry that I'd witnessed it, but I hated to hurt Remus. I'd rather him happy than hurting, but now it's just too much. It's eating me up inside, Mione. He's the only one since Dean that makes me feel anything. I need that. I need to feel."

Bloody hell! When had Ginny grown up? "What is so good about Remus anyway?" Hermione asked, trying to calm the teary witch down.

"Lord, Mione! Everything," she said, taking on a dreamy tone much like Luna Lovegood's. "I like how his hair flips back just here above his eye," she said, pointing to her forehead. "I love the way his voice gets low, almost menacing, as he talks about something that surprises him. His hands, so strong, they are. I could get lost in his eyes. Just everything. The way I feel when he looks at me. It's what I need." She smirked and cocked an eyebrow. "He has a very nice arse."

Hermione giggled. "He does." Ginny harrumphed, but it didn't have any bite behind it. "How does he feel for you?"

"I think if everyone would leave us be, he'd really give me a chance. You have no idea how incredible it feels to be held by him. It's different than it was with Dean. He's so sure of himself that it makes me feel confident." She smiled softly. "I don't know if it's because he's older or what."

"You don't think the age difference is too much?"

Ginny laughed loudly. "He's a wizard, Hermione. Maybe that means something in the Muggle world, but here, our men age slowly." She wriggled her eyebrows. "So, what do you think? An anonymous owl?"

"Sorry?"

"For Remus. Should I owl him without saying who I am?"

"Ginny, I don't know if that's wise. I mean, if Harry didn't say anything..." She put her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Let it go for now. Maybe she's gotten more serious since they've come out in the open."

"I'll have to do something," said Ginny sourly. "What's that?"

"What?"

"That flower?"

"Oh." Hermione blushed. "Well...that's...er...someone sent that to me yesterday."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Ginny asked in disbelief. "Was there no note? What guy sends a gift without a note? I'm sure it wasn't my brother. He lacks...what's that?"

"What?"

"That parchment. Just there."

Hermione blushed deeper. "It's the letter."

Ginny smirked. "So you do know who it is. Someone is trying to take Ron's place already? Tell me?" Hermione sighed and handed her the parchment. The younger witch read over it quickly. "Oh, my God! Hermione! This is beautiful!"

"I thought so as well. I have no idea exactly. Who would have sent this? They obviously didn't know that Ron and I had broken up."

"Maybe this is just what you need. Perhaps I should get Ron to have a date with Tonks. They'd go right well together," Ginny said darkly.

"Oi! I don't know if I'm ready to be replaced that easily," Hermione admitted.

Laughter met her ears. "Mione, you wouldn't care if you had someone to replace him with." Ginny sighed. "Look, just don't take him back right away. Make him work for it. You don't deserve to be treated like rubbish, just as Remus doesn't."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said softly, watching the confused girl leave her room. What would she do if Ron flouted some twit in front of her? Fleur's sister was supposed to be coming to live in Britain with Fleur and Bill since Fleur was awarded guardianship after their parents were killed. *Death has been around us for nearly the past three years. When will this end?* Maybe Ron would take an interest in young Gabrielle. "Pansy was bad enough, but at least I knew that sex was the only thing she could offer him that I couldn't. Gabrielle is beautiful," she said sourly. *One man thinks that I am beautiful. Well, appealing. Those were his words. Severus Snape.* "He was likely only being nice," she said, biting back a sense of uneasiness.

Hermione made her way to her trunk to pull out some things and head to the bathroom. She didn't wear student robes on the weekends. What should she wear to tea? Was he the type that hated Muggle clothes? If she dressed nicely, would he think she'd done it for him? "Why am I so nervous about tea with a professor? It's ridiculous." *Think of him as Hagrid. Think of him as Hagrid. Think of him as Hagrid.* "Yeah, right."

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Severus read through the poem once more whilst he still had time. It didn't exactly fit what he was feeling, but some of the lines seemed appropriate for certain situations. He was certain he could spew a few lines here and there during their conversation. She would be impressed that he'd taken the initiative to go out of his way to read poems by one of her favorite writers. He checked the parchment and read that she was nearly at his office door. He gazed into the mirror and noted that charcoal gray was not a bad color at all. He'd chosen a linen shirt in that color to go with his black trousers. He frowned. "Something is amiss." Smirking, he unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. "There we are. I look casual and comfortable."

He strode to the door and opened it just as she lifted her hand to knock. Eyeing her quickly, he nodded in approval. She was dressed casually in Muggle jeans and a loose fitting blouse. *Damn! I won't be able to see the outline of her breasts.* "Come in."

Closing the door, Severus followed her to the chairs near his grate, and his eyebrows rose appreciatively. It appeared that the clinging fabric encased her arse quite nicely. He had to refrain from reaching out to trace the curve of one of her lovely cheeks. "Is this fine?" she asked before turning to meet his gaze.

"Yes. I've taken the liberty of making the tea already." He waited until she seated herself before he took his seat. "So, tell me, Miss Granger—"

"Hermione."

He smirked. "It seems that I am still forgetting to address you casually. *Hermione*," he said deeply, making sure to elongate each syllable of her name. "What made you want to join me for tea today? Do you want to discuss your talk with Mister Weasley?" He made sure to use a polite, conversational tone.

"I just thought that we could both use someone to talk to," she said innocently.

"Indeed?" he asked sharply, handing a cup to her. When she didn't answer, he said, "You insinuate that I may have the need to fraternize with a student and discuss my adult life outside of the classroom?" His expression was politely incredulous.

She looked away, face flushing. "I'd really like for us to be friends, Professor, and besides, I am eighteen as of yesterday. That's a year past being of age in the Wizarding world."

*Perfect. Just the opening I was counting on, my dear. You are too easy to manipulate!* "I suppose I could think of you as a friend. You certainly seem astute, and of course, you are an adult, as you've pointed out. We already discussed the secrecy of our meetings. Have you kept your word?"

"Of course, sir. I told Harry that I had a couple of books that I needed to get at the library."

"You understand that once we are outside of these walls I immediately assume my role as a professor, and you become the pupil again."

"I'll *tell* no one," she said honestly. "I understand that you have to do what you must to keep up appearances."



"Excellent," he murmured, watching her drink the tea. She seemed quite pleased to have established *friendship* with him. His seduction seemed all the more acceptable. He could always claim that she had been the one to suggest that he see her as an adult and that she should become his friend. "What of Weasley? You mentioned last night that things have ended?" He casually sipped his tea, noting the flush on her cheeks as he mentioned their previous encounter. *Been thinking of it, eh?*

"We've decided to take some time apart for now. It's hard knowing that he would...you know." Her flushed deepened. "It's a lot to think on, for the both of us. I-I'm sure things will be fine eventually."

"I'm sure they will as well," he said, quirking his lips in false agreement. *You will be mine, not Weasley's. He doesn't deserve you. I do though. You are my reward.*

"Professor, if I may, what about you? Haven't you any," she swallowed, "love interests?"

He pretended to be thoughtful for a moment. "Currently? No. I've had a fair few in the past, but those associations are gone at the present, as are most of my friends. Times change," he shrugged.

"That sounds so sad. Aren't you lonely?"

"How cheerless feels the heart alone, when all its former hopes are dead!" he recited a line of the poem from memory.

"Is that...? Have you read a *Muggle* poet?" she asked in disbelief. "You actually went out and bought his book of poems to read?"

"Well, I thought that we'd maybe need something to talk about. We've already established that I was intrigued about your password's origin, and as I told you last night," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, "I was impressed."

"I am the one that's impressed. That line is from Byron's poem, 'I Would I Were a Careless Child,' isn't it?" She grinned broadly before taking a sip of her tea.

"Yes, I confess to reading it earlier." He could see that she had visibly relaxed. Gone were the stiff posture and the nervous lip biting. The only thing left was Hermione. "I've read many stories and poems, Hermione, Wizard and Muggle alike. I'm not prejudiced."

Her cup clashed to the ground. "Sorry," she said meekly, reaching forward to pick it up.

Severus sucked in a sharp breath as the loose neckline of her blouse opened to reveal a view of ample cleavage. He leant back in his chair, watching her closely. Had she planned that? The hint of embarrassment in her voice over her fallen cup led him to believe that she had no idea that he'd just seen most of her breasts and could tell her that she wore a cream-colored bra.

"I'm clumsy when I'm nervous," she said, putting the cup on the stand next to her. "I mean to say, I'm not really nervous because of you...I just...bloody hell." She knocked the cup down again as she pulled her hand away. With this fall, it shattered.

Smirking, Severus pulled out his wand, aimed it at the cup to repair it, and then he used it to clean the spill. "Are you sure, Hermione?" he asked in what he hoped was a seductive voice, arching an eyebrow slightly.

"Sorry?"

"Nonsense. It's quite all right." He leant closer. "I can understand why you would be nervous."

"Y-you do?" she stammered slightly.

"It's because I nearly crossed the line, isn't it?" He let that sink in for a moment before adding, in a near whisper, "It's because I wanted to kiss you." She swallowed deeply and bit her lip, eyes darting everywhere but at him. "I'll not do that again, Hermione. You are safe with me. We've shared a bed, haven't we? I behaved honorably. That should have allotted me *some* trust at least."

"Sir, you do have my trust. I know you won't do anything like that. It's just...I don't know what to say. I like this...new...Professor Snape, and I'm afraid that the moment I say the wrong thing, you'll go back to being as you were before this past summer."

He respected her all the more for having the courage to honestly say what was troubling her. "I admire your candidness. I am afraid, however, that I shall be the same man that I always am in public where you're concerned. So, in a sense, your fears will come to pass."

"But, you'll be pretending. There is a difference. When I thought that you hated me, well, it hurt because I knew that I hadn't done anything to deserve such treatment aside from being sorted into the wrong House and having the wrong parents."

Severus thought for a moment and decided that another line from the poem would be in order. "And woman, lovely woman! Thou, my hope, my comforter, my all!" He squeezed the hand poised atop her knee for a moment. "How horrible you must think me, Hermione."

"I did," she said honestly.

He nodded. "Why is it that you would agree to come here if you've viewed me in such a way?"

"Well, I suppose that I am curious about things, and maybe I'm a little flattered that you would allow me to come." She smiled ruefully. "It's not only that I've no place else to go, especially now, but it's as if you may be the only one that understands what it's like to be me."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know, sir. I am suddenly confused."

"About?"

"This. Why now? Why me?"

"I don't quite get your meaning. I thought we'd already established that I do not dislike you."

She shook her head. "Forget it." Composing herself, she smiled and deftly changed the subject. "What did you think of the poem then?"

Severus shrugged his shoulders and began talking. He ended up reciting the short poem to her in its entirety, reveling in the fact that she seemed to respond to the tone of his voice. Nearly two hours had passed when he felt the Dark Mark burn on his arm. He automatically clutched the burden with his hand and met her eyes. Hermione surprised him by saying, "Be careful. Thanks for having me." The witch quickly squeezed his hand and sped off.

*This has been a most productive afternoon. With Weasley out of the way and my large base of literary knowledge, this shall be easier than I thought.*

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Hermione was humming as she walked towards the library, thinking of her changed professor. She had to get a book or two to make her story look believable when she went into the common room to talk to her mates. The thing that continuously played over in her mind was that her hard Potions master had recited a poem to her, discussed

Muggle poems with her, and had made her feel like an equal instead of someone inferior. They'd not made arrangements to have tea again, but she would truly enjoy it. He'd seemed so relaxed, so handsome. *Handsome?* Well, the gray shirt had suited him. The gray, partially unbuttoned shirt that allowed a small patch of dark hair to show had suited him. No robes about his person had made a large difference.

She had known instantly when he was summoned. There had been a certain look in his eyes, and his hand had immediately gone to his forearm. It was then that she'd wondered if he'd truly taken a liking to that poem because he could relate to some of what Byron was saying.

"Oi! Where've you been?" Ron asked accusingly, stepping in front of her path.

Thinking quickly, she realized that he must have gone to the library in search of her. "I've had a walk, trying to think about things. I'm just on my way to the library though."

"I've been looking for you, and I think we should talk." She sighed but allowed him to pull her into an empty corridor. He cast a Silencing Charm about them before talking. "I can't do this. I want you back. I need to know that you're there for me."

"But, we decided-"

"Actually, it was you that decided, Hermione. I wanted to try to work through things. I bloody well know I was wrong, but a bloke can learn his lesson, can't he? Come on. What say you?" His pleading voice and hopeful eyes twisted at her heart. He was all she'd known for so long and all she thought she'd know.

"I don't know," she said softly. "Can't I just have a bit of time to think on it? I would like to get the image of that cow and you out of my mind before attempting to reconcile. Ron, I just think that if you love me, truly love me, you wouldn't want anyone else."

"Do you truly love me?"

"Of course."

"That so, is it? What's another bloke doing sending you flowers and love letters then?" His eyes narrowed. "Who is it?"

"W-what?"

"Thought I wouldn't find out, eh? I've never sent or received any love letters," he said sulkily.

Hermione's anger burst suddenly. "I've not sent any either, Ronald, and I have no idea who sent the ~~one~~ flower and the *one* letter. You make it sound as if I've been keeping something from you. It's not my fault that someone sent a birthday gift to me." She sighed in exasperation. "I think I have a bit more to be upset about. You didn't find me with my knickers about my ankles with another man, did you?"

Ron's face turned as red as his hair. "I just think that whoever this is sounds like a dirty, rotten prat for trying to move in on my girl."

"Then you know how I feel towards Pansy right now...and you."

"Just don't stop loving me. I'll give you time, but don't start going off with this bloke."

"Hang on," she said huffily. "You only came to me because you heard, from Ginny no doubt, that someone said some nice things to me. You're afraid that once you're done prowling about that I won't be available any longer. I should have known."

"It's not like that! It's-"

"How is it then, Ron?"

"Maybe that is partly true, but I never intended on marrying anyone but you, Mione."

"Nor have I," she whispered as he pulled her close. The deep, melodious voice of her Potions master suddenly filled her thoughts, causing her to shiver *it's because I wanted to kiss you*. Hermione bit her lip, glad that Ron could not see her expression. She'd wanted him to kiss her, and after their meeting today, she found herself wanting to hear him recite poetry and treat her as a woman should be treated. *A woman? Am I a woman to him, no longer a silly girl? He'd told Ron that he had nothing to do with girls that day at Grimmauld Place.*

"What is it?" he asked when she pulled away.

"I'm not ready."

"Why not?"

"Just give me some time and some space," she pleaded. "It's all I ask. I need to clear my mind and get my priorities straight."

The cold look he gave her made her heart drop. "Sure, I'll give you some time. Just don't take too long, Mione."

"Is that a threat?"

"The longer you take, the harder it will be to sort things out is all I'm saying," he said, trying to kiss her lips. She moved her face at the last moment, and his lips brushed her cheek. "It's like that now, is it?"

"Ron, stop acting like this. Don't be angry. Just look at this from my-"

"Right then. 'S always about you, isn't it?" He shook his head in disgust. "I'm the one that's going to have to explain to mum about us, about Pansy. Do you know what she's going to say and do? I'll be getting howlers for weeks, I will!"

Hermione simply turned and walked away. She would not let him see her cry. He called after her, and she hurried into the nearest girls' lavatory, warding the door behind her before her tears fell. He only wanted her back because he was worried about what his mum would say and do. He thought that *she* was being selfish when she hadn't been unfaithful. *But, you wanted to allow a professor to kiss you.* She shook her head. *Only after Ron had done what he had. Otherwise, I would never have felt that way.*

"Ron only wants to make amends because someone else is interested in me. Well, he'll just have to wait for me. If he loves me, then he'll be there when I am ready," she said determinedly, wiping away the few tears remaining.

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The Dark Lord cackled wickedly upon hearing Severus' conversation with his young interest. "I know of your talents, Severuss. It won't be long before she is asking to have tea with your fellow associates here." He nodded to three new members. "They don't make them like they used to. Do you remember the first time around?" He asked. "Everyone had such passion. These youngsters seem to be joining only for the prestige and not for the cause."

"Perhaps you should explain about the cause then, my Lord," Severus said, eyes glinting darkly.

"Indeed," his master replied. He turned back to his most faithful servant. "Tell me what news you have found."

"There isn't much going on as of late. Albus has gathered even more students to follow *Potter* into training for what they affectionately call Dumbledore's Army."

"Ah, yes, the band of children that want to fight for the old fool." He sneered in thought for a moment. "Let them train. When the time comes, we shall see which ones want to join us. It will make for less training that we have to endure."

"What of Hermione, my Lord? Can I be guaranteed that she shall not be harmed?"

"She is your reward, Severus. I've told the others that you've chosen her as a concubine and are attempting to lure her to sympathize with us. She shall not be harmed or ridiculed for heritage. She, like I, cannot be blamed for being born to unworthy parents. I am a half-blood, yet I am the strongest wizard alive. Your young Hermione Granger will learn to leave her Muggle past behind as I did."

"Oi! I remember that filthy little bitch from school," Terrence Higgs, a new recruit, said impulsively. He was obviously trying to enter their private conversation and make a name for himself.

What he didn't count on was the hand of Severus Snape grasping his throat and crushing his windpipe tightly. "You will never speak her name again," he said in a dangerously low voice. The boy's eyes were bulging with fear and panic.

"Severus," the Dark Lord said, "release him."

Throwing the boy down with all the strength he could muster, he towered over him, placing a foot on his chest. "Do you understand?"

Higgs nodded profusely. "Yes."

Cackling with amusement, the Dark Lord clapped Severus on the back. "I see my message wasn't extended to the newer recruits. As you said, I think that I should explain about the cause and give an example. Don't you agree?"

Severus nodded. "I do, my Lord." He removed his foot from the boy's chest and moved to his place in the circle to stand by Lucius. "Bastard," he mumbled.

Lucius chuckled with amusement. "I take it he insulted your little lover?"

Severus didn't reply. He listened and watched as the Dark Lord gathered everyone around. He hoped this wouldn't take too long. He longed to be back at the castle near his witch. A series of yelps drew his attention to his old student, Higgs. *Never was bright, that one.*

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Hermione gasped loudly, reached over, and grasped Harry's hand. "Look," she said, shoving her edition of the *Daily Prophet* into his hand. She watched as Harry's face dropped in shock. Even Ron, whom she'd not spoken to since their talk the evening prior, dropped his sulky expression to gape.

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "We just saw the bloke a few weeks back."

Harry lowered his voice and read the small paragraph to them. "The body of Terrence Higgs, graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the year of 1992, was found this morning just outside of Hogsmeade. The infamous Dark Mark was of course lighting the sky in its eerie greenish sparks. There are no witnesses, but it appears as if he is another tragic victim contributed to the rampant savagery of the followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Poor guy," Hermione said.

"Look at that bastard," Ron said darkly, nodding towards the Slytherin table. Hermione followed his gaze to find Draco and his cronies looking at the paper and laughing. "Bet they think it's right funny."

Hermione shook her head sadly, eyes moving across the long table and landing on the staff. Professor Snape was watching her. She smiled slightly, but he simply looked back down at his plate, picking at his food. *I wonder if he saw what happened to Higgs. He was summoned to join them. If the article was correct, then he knew what happened.* It was a question that she doubted she would ever ask him. In fact, she didn't truly want to know the answer.

Southern's Notes: Any of you ever hear that NIN (Nine Inch Nails) song, "Something I Could Never Have"? I listened to that the entire time I wrote this chapter. The tone of the music just seemed so right somehow.

Hermione is still a little confused about Ron, but I think she has good reason to want to wait. Nobody wants their man to be trying to shag others in the corridors. What of Ginny? Interesting little bit there. I'll have more about the situation soon. Severus is moving right along, pretending to be the 'friend' of her dreams. I'm thinking they'll really start enjoying each other's company. Oh, psst! Do you think Snape did it? The murder, I mean.

Falling Into Place

Chapter 5 of 42

The Higgs murder is explained, Ginny is confronted, and things progress. Ron/Hermione are definitely over while Severus/Hermione are just beginning.

Disclaimer: Not mine unfortunately. Just playing with them.

A big thanks to the lovely Meredith for being my beta for this chapter. Charmed_Nay is on a vacation, and I didn't trust myself to upload this without a beta. Thanks to all of my friends over at Potter_Place.

Hermione smiled at Harry. "Shouldn't be too hard." He seemed to be lost while taking notes in their Potions class. She wondered what might be on his mind.

"Quiet," Professor Snape said, staring at the pair.

She made sure not to meet his eyes. In fact, she'd not once met his eyes since he'd come into the room. She couldn't help but wonder if he'd been involved with that boy's murder somehow. Harry made an annoyed noise as quietly as possible. They'd been in class listening to Professor Snape's lecture about the Oblivious Unction. They were to try to make some on their next class meeting. "So," the professor said, "in recap, who can tell me the best time to use such an ointment?"

Hermione raised her hand, as was habit. She nearly fell over when he actually called on her.

"Fine. Go on, Miss Granger. Let's see if you've been paying attention whilst whispering to *Potter*."

"It should be used to ease bad thoughts and dull certain horrid memories," she said promptly, adding a quick, "sir." He stared at her for a moment. "You'll feel calmer, less tense."

"That is acceptable. Furthermore," he continued, recapping the day's lecture.

Hermione didn't listen to what he'd said next. He'd called on her. He'd been...nice. Sort of. She thought they'd agreed not to show any difference in public even though they'd been on friendly terms in private. Her head suddenly snapped up.

"Miss Granger is the only one to turn in a tentative proposal for her seventh year Potions project. If you all do not turn in something by the end of the week, I shall choose for you." He crossed his arms in front of his chest and glared at everyone. "You will stay after class to discuss your project, Miss Granger."

Finally looking into his eyes, she said, "Yes, sir." He simply nodded and went about issuing their assignment.

"Dismissed," he hissed a few minutes later.

Hermione began packing away her things. Harry patted her shoulder. "We'll be in the common room when you're done. Don't hide away from us on Ron's account."

"I won't. He seemed all right this morning," she said, shrugging.

"Right then. See you."

"Bye."

After all of the students left, the Potions master eyed her. "I think we can talk in my office. Come along," he said.

She followed him and sat in the chair she'd grown accustomed to sitting in. Surprisingly, he didn't sit with her, opting instead to sit behind his desk. She had a sinking feeling that he was going to tell her that their newfound association would have to end. "Sir?" she asked uncertainly after a long moment of silence.

"I was thinking about your suggestion for this year's project. Are you certain that you would want to take on such a task? Others have tried and failed. Your final mark will suffer if you do not successfully create what you've suggested," he said, darting his eyes from her face to a parchment on his desk.

"To be honest, Professor Snape, I've been looking into this for a few months now, what with that epidemic breaking out in Romania. I think that creating a paste that limits the severity of the Dragon Pox will save most people from scarring and having to travel to the local hospitals. I know it's too much to hope for a faster cure, but I think something to lessen its effects could be a breakthrough in itself." She hoped that she didn't sound too presumptuous or arrogant.

"Very well. I've noted that you have chosen this. With such an important project, I would suggest that you use my private laboratory. You'll have the privacy you need, and my expertise will be readily available should you need assistance. I have Wednesday evenings open for this. Do you accept?" he asked, quill at the ready to write something on his parchment.

"I do. Thank you, Professor," she said, taken aback by his offer. She watched as he wrote something on the parchment with a flourish. It rolled up, sealed itself, and vanished from sight.

"I'm just letting the headmaster know that I will be occupied on Wednesday evenings as will the Head Girl, being that we shall both be working through your seventh year project." He stood and made his way around the desk. "Consider yourself fortunate, Miss Granger. I only work with those that I feel may actually accomplish something and not waste my time."

She smiled softly and nodded. "I appreciate your time, sir. I'll try to do my best."

Severus sat across from her and loosened his demeanor. He had been glad that she hadn't changed the way she acted in class in front of the others. The only difference was that she now barely met his gaze. He wasn't sure if he liked that. Some eye contact would be appreciated. "How are you this day, Hermione?" he asked conversationally. He could see that she had relaxed some since he'd lost his professional mien.

"The day has gone by quickly. That's always good," she said, laughing nervously.

He could only guess what conclusions her mind had drawn. She was not a fool. "I trust you have read the *Daily Prophet* today?"

"Yes."

"And, what do you think about the body that was found in Hogsmeade?" He eyed her carefully to be sure he'd not gone too far. She gave him a slight shrug, and he continued. "I'm sure that you have something that you'd like to ask me. I'll allow a bit of questioning if you feel the need to be put at ease."

Hermione lowered her eyes. "I wondered about it some. Knowing where you went last night, then reading the article made me wonder if you know more about what happened. I know the *Prophet* tends to err at times. More often than not, truth be known."

"Wisely chosen words, Hermione. Subtle hinting yet to the point." He smirked in appreciation. "If you must know, I've told Dumbledore most that I know." She nodded only, still not looking at him. "No questions?"

"Did you see?" she blurted.

"I did not," he answered immediately. Severus noted how relieved she seemed. It was time to let her know though that he would see her protected at all costs. "I do know why he was killed."

She sucked in a deep breath. "R-really?"

"Indeed." He leant forward, letting his elbows rest on his thighs. "What I am about to tell you is something that I've not brought to the headmaster's attention. I wonder if I can continue to trust that you'll keep my confidence?"

Her eyes lit up slightly. "Of course, Professor."

"Perhaps I should allow you to call me Severus. Would you mind?"

"Not at all."

"Excellent. Now, back to last evening. I went to the meeting and found that we have been exposed." He pointed a finger back and forth between them.

"We? Exposed? What?"

"It seems that our friendship has caught the eye of a spy that even I am unaware of. This makes my job especially hard. The Dark Lord was very interested in our *friendship*."

"Oh, no. A spy?" she asked, looking around uneasily, as if one might jump out at her.

"That's correct. He knew that we spoke at the Astronomy Tower and that you followed me here after. He also knew that you were with me as I was summoned."

"But, Dumbledore should know..."

Severus held up a hand. "I think he would be most displeased with what I am about to say. Care you to hear it?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry."

"Severus. Whilst we are alone, you may use my given name."

"Severus," she said softly.

He felt a slight tremor run through his body. How would she sound calling out his name in the throes of passion? *shall find out, shan't I?* "The Dark Lord approves of our friendship."

"But, I'm a Muggle-born."

"He has more important things to worry on than someone's bloodlines, Hermione. You know that he isn't a pureblood either. He is more interested in power, followers, and things being done his way."

"And, killing innocent babies," she bit out.

"Yes, and killing Potter," he agreed.

"Why would he approve of us then? I am Harry's best friend, along with Ron."

"That's exactly why. He feels that to have you sympathizing with his cause would be a significant blow to the Order and Potter. He has instructed me to become *very* friendly with you." He saw the nervous biting of her lip. "This is why I have decided to not tell the headmaster yet. Though he knows that I would never betray his trust, he wouldn't like the idea of using you for such a ploy. I, for one, think you are mature enough to handle it, but perhaps he knows you better than I do."

"You think that I am mature?"

"When compared to brats such as Potter and Weasley? I most certainly do. You've such a cool use of intellect, Hermione, that I think would do well for this type of situation," he said matter-of-factly. "I feel that I can trust you with this privileged information. Over the past few weeks, I've found myself coming to respect you on an entirely different level." That was the truth after all. He'd found himself thinking of her as a woman, not a student. He saw her smile broadly at his series of compliments and began congratulating himself.

"What do I have to do, sir? Er...Severus," she said eagerly.

"I believe that you should spend time with me on Saturday evenings as well. This will bring you to me on two different occasions. Whoever is actually spying will undoubtedly see you coming here and let the Dark Lord know. When I am summoned to meet with him, I shall let him know that we are growing closer with each week." He pointed to a smaller desk in the corner. "You can attend to your studies there whilst I mark papers here at my desk."

Hermione's eyes lit up when she saw the small desk. "I think that works well. I normally slip away to the library to have a bit of peace when I do my work," she said. "I accept." She suddenly looked puzzled. "Why was this person following us around?"

Severus made a show of looking disconcerted for a moment. "I believe that they were thinking of harming you as a gift for the Dark Lord to hurt Potter in some way. He likely thought to make a name for himself by alerting him to our *relationship*."

"Sh-should I be more careful?" she asked, looking worried.

"No, I have seen to your protection." He sat back and waited for the question that would come. He knew exactly how to word his answer.

"How?"

"By giving the Dark Lord the impression that I was interested in you in ways other than a professor should be interested in a student." He shook his head. "It seems you are to be my reward for loyalty." He chuckled incredulously. "Interesting, is it not?"

"You mean that he wants me to be your slave!" she said heatedly. "That ruddy-"

"My wife," he said quietly, causing her to sputter. *That ought to quell her little outburst. I'll allow her to dwell on a much more respectable title.*

"Wife? What? But, I...what?"

"It's the only way that I know of to keep you safe," he whispered, pretending to shyly avoid her eyes. "Don't worry. I can create my own images to project to him if need be. I just thought you ought to know." His witch was speechless. He had to finally meet her gaze to see if she hadn't fainted. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm just shocked. It's a little hard to believe that he would just...accept me."

"Not only that, but did you not forget the initial question?" he asked silkily.

"Oh, no."

"That's right. It seems that Terence Higgs had a couple of things to say about you once he heard your name. The fool didn't know that our Lord had agreed that you would be a wise choice. The boy was a new member. An example was made of his blunder. The Dark Lord wanted to be sure that everyone got the message that you were not to be harmed or disrespected, as you would likely one day be joining us as my wife. Higgs was given to the Lestranges. I only found out this morning by reading the article that he'd been killed." He watched her closely, gauging her reactions. He was pleased to see that she accepted his explanation without question or accusation.

The truth of the matter was that Higgs had been alive when he'd finally left the meeting, but he had known that it wasn't likely that he'd live to see dawn. Once the spectacle started, the Dark Lord had pulled him aside to advise him to try a new tactic with Hermione. He felt that luring her at a slow pace was admirable, but a little help in

provoking that Gryffindor valor would move things along nicely. It seemed that the idea had merit.

"I'll do what must be done. If this will keep us safe, me from some unknown spy and you from Voldemort, then..."

"Please, do not speak his name," he interrupted.

"Sorry. I understand why Harry should not know and also why the headmaster should not know. Just knowing that I am helping a little makes me feel as if I am doing something for the cause." She leant forward and took his hand in hers. "I am astonished yet pleased that you would confide in me, that you would become my friend. I'll help you."

Severus squeezed her hand and clasped his other over hers. "I'll not let anything happen to you," he purred, searching her eyes. He decided it best to add more. "Nor your friends." He enjoyed the feel of her soft hand within both of his. He vaguely wondered if all of her flesh would feel as delicate beneath his hands. He longed to pull her closer for a kiss, and it appeared that she would not object. However, he would be certain that he would stand no objection before he attempted to move things forward.

He would allow enough time to pass for her to feel comfortable with him. He'd have many chance meetings with her, purposely gaining her trust, and in a week or so, his seduction would begin again. He would begin sitting closer to her, touching her, and even giving her a smile here and there. When the moment was right, he would kiss her. Her voice broke into his planning.

"I'll go on now, sir." She laughed uncomfortably. "Sorry. Severus, I meant."

"Have a good evening. I shall see you in two nights' time for your first project meeting."

"You'll see me before that," she said, awkwardly pulling her hand away and standing.

He moved to tower over her. "Will I?" he asked, eyebrow raised.

"Oh," she said, realizing what she'd said. "Meals, class, corridors...maybe I'll stop by." Her face flushed, and she stepped away from him. He didn't follow. He simply nodded and moved to sit behind his desk, dismissing her. After a moment, she quickly left the room.

Hermione nearly ran to the stairwell, before slowing down. So much had just happened in such a short amount of time. Higgs was dead because of her! He'd said something about her, and the Dark...er...Voldemort had had him killed! *And, I felt sorry for the ruddy prat. What am I saying?* She was suddenly appalled. It was as if she thought that it was a just punishment. A sickening feeling possessed her suddenly. She was actually flattered that Voldemort had readily accepted her, that he would allow her to join them as Snape's...er...Severus' wife. A feeling of self-worth enveloped her, making her proud and sick at the same time. "How horrible is that?" she asked aloud.

"Talking to yourself, Granger?" a drawling voice asked.

She turned to face Malfoy. "What's it to you?"

"What are you doing down here?" he asked menacingly. "Visiting with Snape again, are you?"

"That's none of your business," she said, moving up the stairs. She then realized that he was likely the culprit that had spied on her and Severus before. "Stop following me," she said without turning around.

"Just doing my job," he said slyly, moving into the shadows. By the time she turned to face him, he had seemingly disappeared.

As quickly as she could, she made her way to the corridor leading to her common room. It had to have been Draco that had told Voldemort about her meeting Severus, but wouldn't he be suspected? Severus seemed to not know who had reported them. He would know if Draco were a Death Eater. She paused at the portrait. "Maybe the blighter told his dad." Why hadn't he called her a Mudblood? Was he afraid of Voldemort's warning as well? That had to be it. It all fit together.

"No password, no entrance," the Fat Lady said.

"Gillyweed."

The portrait swung open, and Hermione quickly found her friends near the fire in their favorite chairs. "Hi," she said, sitting quickly. Neville, Harry, Lavender, and Seamus all said hello. She noticed that Ron and Ginny were missing. It was just as well. She didn't care to see Ron sulking, and she would likely only row with Ginny. She still didn't appreciate the way she'd run off to tell Ron the news of her private birthday gift.

"Snape kept you all this time?"

She nodded. "He's accepted my project though. The only bad thing is that I will have to spend each week in his laboratory to work on it."

"Why?" Lavender asked incredulously.

"Horrible," Neville commented.

"It's a bit complicated. I'm making a go at a salve for the Dragon Pox. He'll need to be around in case I get in a tight spot."

"Aren't there salves already?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yes, but most people end up in the hospital after they've realized what they've got. The current treatment takes four days to heal the spots. I would like to have a salve that can be applied right away, taking away the chance of it spreading to others and lessening the amount of time one would have to spend away from their work or studies. It would be something that people could keep on hand in their homes," she said, an excited gleam in her eyes. "I'm actually honored that Professor Snape would willingly devote some of his spare time for this."

"Ha! Probably hopes you do break through with something, wanting to claim it for himself," Seamus piped up. "I'd sign something to say that it's yours."

"I wouldn't want to spend time with him," Neville said, grimacing. He gave Hermione a reassuring smile nonetheless. "I'm sure you can handle it though."

Harry laughed. "Help me find something simple for my project, Mione. I don't want to be stuck with the git any longer than I have to."

Hermione tried to look disappointed but began giggling. She noticed that Neville was sitting closer than before and froze when he leaned in to whisper in her ear. "Can I come have a talk with you tonight in your room? It's a private thing."

"All right," she agreed. *Perhaps it was Neville that had sent that note.* Truth be known, he'd always been hovering about protectively after the Department of Mysteries fiasco at the end of their fifth year. He seemed to think that he was designated, along with Harry and Ron, to be sure that no other jinxes found their way to her. How would she feel if Neville did fancy her? That thought made her uneasy. She'd never thought of Neville in that way. He'd always been someone whom she pitied, someone whom she considered one of her friends, and someone she'd never truly feel anything more for. It would be hard to let him down. No matter how delicately she would handle it, he'd still be hurt. She remembered the first time that she'd met his grandmother. She'd known immediately who Hermione was, saying that Neville had been talking a lot about her and how she always helped him. Maybe he'd grown attached.

I will just have to be honest with him and say that I still love Ron. There was something about her own thoughts that left her unsettled. If she loved Ron, what was she doing

staying away from him? Why not try to work things out? Normally, she would try, but there was just something that wouldn't allow it. When her thoughts would move to missing him or wondering if she was doing the right thing, she would think of Pansy. She'd yet to run into the tart, but she'd have a word with her as soon as she did. When it wasn't thoughts of Pansy keeping her from going to Ron, it was memories of her professor. The talk they'd had that night in his office when he'd leaned in to kiss her. The softness of his eyes for that brief moment, those thin yet kissable lips, and his cologne had her wondering what it would be like for a man such as he to be the one that she bestowed her affections on.

"Mione?"

"Sorry?"

She looked into Harry's eyes and saw the amusement there. "I asked if you were coming down to the Great Hall for the evening meal. We'll be leaving in about twenty minutes. Will that be enough time?"

"Time for what?"

He nodded towards the door. "For that." She followed his gaze and saw Ginny standing a few feet away wringing her hands. It was clear that she wanted to talk to them.

"Don't wait for me. I'll come down when I can," she said, rising quickly. "Ginny, a word please." She didn't wait to see if the younger girl would follow her. She simply picked up her book bag and quickly went to her room. Sure enough, the redhead entered just after she did.

"Look, I know what you are going to say, and I feel terrible about..."

"Why?" Hermione demanded. "Why did you have to run and tell Ron about my gift. My *private* gift!"

"It slipped out. I was mad at him, and we were having a row. All I said was that I was glad that someone else realized your worth and that I hoped you'd move on without him," she said, regret evident. "I'm really sorry."

"You know, Ginny, no matter how angry I was at Ron, I wouldn't blurt out about your feelings on Remus. Where is Ron anyway? I've not seen him since the noon meal."

"Dumbledore asked him for a word just before he came up here," Ginny said. "I don't know what that's all about." The girl smiled apologetically. "Am I forgiven? I'll really try to be a better friend."

"Yes, but I don't feel as if I could truly trust you with a secret," Hermione said honestly. "I mean, if I ever find out who sent those things, how do I know that you wouldn't blurt that out as well?"

"I don't blame you," Ginny agreed. "I'll try to make it up to you somehow."

"Have you talked to Harry about Tonks?"

"No," she said crisply. "I'm still debating what I need to do."

"Really, I think that maybe you should talk to Harry. You don't know that he hasn't already told Remus since that day."

"That's enough. I don't want to talk about it. I'm going to get ready to go down to the Great Hall. Coming?"

"I'll be along later," she said. In truth, she wanted to take the long way down, passing near Dumbledore's office. Had the headmaster decided to take Ron and Pansy to task for what they'd done? She hated to see Ron lose his status as a prefect. His mum had been so proud of him. Hermione waited until she was confident that everyone had gone before slipping out of her private exit into her corridor.

As luck would have it, when she neared the corridor that led towards Dumbledore's office, she heard Ron's voice. Just as she was about to call out to him, she heard the familiar voice of Pansy as well.

"I can't believe he's done this to us. Why would Professor Snape care about us dallying enough to request that we not be prefects any longer?"

"Don't know. Ruddy git, if you ask me," Ron said glumly. "He's probably just been waiting for a chance to punish me. You just got pulled in with me. Sorry 'bout that. He just hates me. Hates Harry and Mione, too."

"Well, until recently, I have too," she said. "Look, can we talk privately? We need to get a few things straight about what's been going on."

"Sure."

"Follow me," she said.

It was then that they noticed Hermione. Both looked surprised. Pansy seemed to smirk while Ron looked guilty. Hermione just shook her head. *This is why I cannot take you back, Ronald. I'll never trust you, and it seems I have good reason. Have a great talk,*" she said, turning and fleeing, not wanting them to see her tears.

"Mione! Wait," Ron called after her.

"Let her go, Ron."

Hermione didn't stop. She continued to run into the dark recesses of the castle until she realized that she was in a part of the castle's dungeons that she'd never been in before. She leaned against the wall to catch her breath, think of what she saw, allowed a few more tears to pass, and to finally say farewell to any thoughts of rekindling a relationship with Ronald Weasley.

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"*Locus Hermione,*" Severus said softly. The parchment quickly revealed its answer.

*Running along the crooked corridor near the rear of the dungeons, extremely upset and alone.*

"What the fuck is she doing down here?" he asked aloud. He quickly retrieved a quill and his special ink. A moment later he watched as his words seeped into the parchment.

*Stop running. Think things over. Relax.*

He knew that she would stop as instructed. One normally didn't defy their own subconscious thoughts.

As quickly as he could, he put on his outer robes and checked for her whereabouts once again.

*Near the apex of the crooked corridor at the rear of the dungeons, extremely upset and being approached from the main entryway.*

Severus' eyes narrowed. Who would be approaching? The Bloody Baron? Another ghost perhaps? Would a specter even show up on the parchment? Why wasn't a name given? Who would dare to follow his witch? It couldn't be someone on the Dark Lord's orders. Weasley? Potter? "Maybe they are too far away for it to have registered a name yet," he murmured. Flinging the parchment down, he quickly sped to the location of his witch. He wasn't that far away, and he decided to take a path that would bring him to her in the opposite direction from which this *someone* was approaching.

Severus slipped through a dark crevice in a wall that opened onto a narrow path, and a minute later, he found himself coming out into the other corridor on Hermione's right. The moment she looked up, he slipped a hand over her mouth and extinguished the light from their wands. "Sssh, someone is coming. I am curious as to who would be down here following you," he whispered, pulling her with him into the crevice that he'd just exited. To her credit, she allowed him to guide her. He cast a Disillusionment Spell on the both of them and a Silencing Charm before realizing the situation he found himself in.

Hermione was backed against the wall with his body pressed tightly against hers. Her hands had found their way to his waist beneath his robes, and her head was resting on his chest. It was then that he knew she was crying. *She's taking comfort in having me near. She's wanting to be held.* One of his hands found its way behind her head, and after sheathing his wand, the other hand found its way around her back, holding her close. Her pitiful yet nearly silent whimpering tore at his soul. Something had happened. Someone had hurt her. He felt his thoughts darken as he imagined hexing the one that had put her in such a state.

While holding his witch to him tightly and allowing her to weep quietly, his eyes watched the corridor for whoever had been following her. After a few minutes, nobody passed by, and her tears had halted. He began stroking her hair. "They've turned around," he said softly. "What has brought on this emotional outburst?"

"Ron," she said.

"What did the boy do?"

"I found him with Pansy, talking. I'll never be able to trust him again. It's over...for good," she said firmly, loosening her grip on him.

Severus wished that it weren't so dark; however, he wondered if it wasn't better to be in complete darkness for what he was about to do. All of his planning would be for naught if his next action ruined all that he'd carefully built between the two of them. His hand slid from behind her head, found her chin, and lifted it. Delicately, he cradled her face in his hand as he lowered his head slowly, first finding her dampened cheeks. He placed a couple of light kisses on them before he found her lips. He dared not deepen the kiss. Instead, he simply placed three consecutive, lingering chaste kisses on her lips. Her lower lip received his attention first, then her top lip, and when he pressed against her for the last kiss, he felt her kiss him back. It was at that moment that her lips parted in invitation. He groaned slightly as he moved his lips back over hers for only a lingering second.

Before she or he could invade the other's mouth with a tongue, he tore his mouth away, resting his forehead against the side of her face. "We can't," he whispered into her ear. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"I won't take advantage of you," he said determinedly. "You're upset. I only meant to comfort you. I apologize."

"Sir, please don't feel that way. It's not your fault. I've practically thrown myself against you. You felt sorry for me. I apologize," she said, sounding a little shaky.

Severus decided to not say another word. He wanted to savor what had just taken place. Her lush little lips were soft and inviting. He'd never forget the taste or the feel of her tears. It would have been so easy to simply devour her, and when she began to respond by opening up to him, pulling him closer, and pressing her body against his, his resolve to have her after a long seduction was crumbling. If he hadn't pulled away, it was possible that he'd be touching her in highly inappropriate places that very moment. He moved to pull her back through the narrow passageway, hoping that she wasn't angry or uncomfortable.

Hermione allowed her professor to pull her through the passageway and back to his office where he warded the door behind him before taking off their charms. She watched his face and took in his distraught countenance. *Oh, no, he's disappointed in himself for what happened. I have to fix this.* "Profess...er...Severus, you said that when we were alone that I was not to be seen as a student but a friend. I think what happened back there is all right. You were just trying to make me feel better. There was no taking advantage of me. I wanted it. I needed it. I needed you, and then suddenly, there you were."

His black eyes pierced hers as if searching for honesty. "Are you not," he paused slightly, "afraid of me?"

"Never," she said.

"Very well," he said stiffly. "Sit and explain exactly what you were doing where you were. I want to hear everything."

She breathed in relief, as he seemed to relax after he sat across from her in what she'd started dubbing as his chair. Hermione told him everything that had happened since she left his office earlier. She even included her argument with Ginny and told him about the conversation with Ron the night before. She touched upon her fears that it had been Neville to send the gift.

"Good Lord! That's all you need is for *Longbottom* to be pestering you now that you're finally clear of Weasley," he said sourly. "Tell me you don't plan to..."

"Definitely not," she interrupted. "He's only a friend. Besides, it's just a theory." She thought about what he'd said when he first approached her. "How did you know where I was? Why did you think that someone was following me?"

She watched his surprised gaze turn into a calculating one. "I have my ways, Hermione. That is all I shall say for the moment."

The young witch nodded knowingly. "You've got all of the corridors down here charmed to let you know when someone is about, don't you? No wonder you always know where to find students!"

"Something like that, yes," he admitted. "Won't your friends be wondering where you are?"

She raised her chin defiantly. "Let's hope that Ron can explain to them."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've chosen to skip my meal, but you were forced into it." Guilt washed over her. It had been time for the evening meal when he'd found her. They'd been talking for a long while since then. Surely it was over.

"I could always summon something for us. Would you like that?"

"I would," she agreed.

Several hours later, she made her way back to her chambers. She lay upon her bed and looked at the canopy, silently saying one thing repeatedly. *kissed Severus Snape.* They'd talked about Lord Byron's poems some more, about a paper he'd been writing that would be published soon, and about her ideas for the future. It had been pleasant. They'd eaten lightly, and he'd allowed her to have some wine, though it wasn't really enough to do anything but relax her. She couldn't help but hug him quickly before leaving his office.

Hermione was deeply relieved that he'd not held the kiss against her. Technically, she knew that she'd initiated the kiss by holding him and making him feel sorry for her with her tears, but *he* had still kissed her. Did this mean that someone such as he could actually see her as a woman of interest? He seemed to enjoy the things that they



talked about. She found herself eagerly awaiting Wednesday, which would bring a double Potions class and the first meeting for her project. There was something that she kept wondering about. *I just don't understand why I seem to lose all sense when in close proximity to that man. It's not like when I was alone with Ron. I could just blurt out anything and be comfortable with it.* It wasn't that she was uncomfortable. She was afraid that he would think her a silly girl if she questioned things too much. He might even get irritated with her if he thought her immature. She wouldn't want him reassessing things and ending their newly found kinship. It was just all so flattering that Severus Snape would give her any of his free time and care to really get to know her.

A knock at her door from the common room jarred her. "Damn!" she mumbled. She'd forgotten about Neville. She quickly went to the door and opened it. "Sorry, Neville, I forgo..."

"Neville?" Ron asked, eyeing her suspiciously. "What the bloody hell would he be doing here? And at this time?"

"He needed some advice and was supposed to come. I must have missed his visit. What do you want?" She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Finished talking with Pansy, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Can I come in?" he asked, brushing past her.

"I am about to go to bed, Ron." Sighing in exasperation, she closed her door. "Go on then," she said, completely irritated. It was obvious that he wouldn't leave.

"Are things really over between us?" he asked quietly, leaning against the bedpost.

"Yes."

He slid down to sit on her bed. "It's sort of hard to believe."

She swallowed deeply. "It is."

"Sort of sad about it," he said. "Sort of relieved as well." Hermione bit her lip as she listened to all he had to say. "Dating you was about love. You're the first girl I ever loved, but I think we just grew in opposite directions, each wanting something different. I'd try to make things work if you wanted me to. Honestly, I would. Seeing as you don't, I'm thinking this might be for the best. Our friends and families will have to accept that." Hermione looked up and saw that his eyes were suspiciously bright. "I do love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she said, truly meaning it. "When did it change?"

"Don't know," he said.

"I imagine it will be awkward for us," she ventured.

"Yeah. A bit of getting used to, I'd wager. I just don't want to lose you," he said honestly. "Can we still be friends even though we've almost...you know?"

"With just a bit of work, I'm sure. We'll just have to tell everyone to mind their own affairs." She smiled for a moment, thinking of their first kiss. A vision of him kissing Pansy came to mind. "Ron, are you accepting this because you have Pansy to think of? Is that making it easier?"

"She's interested in being friends and maybe something more, so I guess that does make it easier. But, knowing that you have a friend, well, aside from making me jealous, I suppose it puts my mind at ease. I know that you'll be all right," he said quietly. "Did that make sense?"

"Yes." An awkward silence followed. "Maybe you'd better go."

He didn't move. "I would have married you," he said quietly. In response, Hermione stood before him and gathered him close. They stayed that way for a long while before Ron extracted himself from her hold. "G' night."

"Night," she said, not watching him leave.

A large burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Is that what she truly wanted? Severus' soft kisses came back to her. "Yes," she said firmly. "It would never have worked. I couldn't have trusted him." She thought a moment before adding, "I couldn't have trusted myself." It wasn't Ron's hurt expression or haunted eyes that she saw as she drifted off to unconsciousness that night. It was the dark eyes and smirking face of her Potions master that helped her to greet sleep.

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Severus lay back on his bed whilst one of his hands steadily worked to bring pleasure to himself. His eyes were closed, and he was imagining his witch beneath him, begging for him to enter her. He could still feel her body arching into his, her fingers firmly pulling him even closer, and her lips inviting him to ravage her innocence. What excited him most were the words she spoke after they'd come back.

I wanted it. I needed it. I needed you, and then suddenly, there you were.

"Yes," he hissed, feeling the burning sensation begin in his bollocks. It felt like the heat of a thousand fires was coming to take him into the oblivion of hell.

I wanted it. I needed it. I needed you, and then suddenly, there you were.

"Hermione," he grunted loudly as his seed shot forth. Ever so slowly, his strokes decreased as did his climax.

I wanted it. I needed it. I needed you, and then suddenly, there you were.

Her words were now burnt into his soul. He would have her. He would show her exactly what it meant to be had by a real man. There would be no fumbling Weasley or nervous Longbottom. There would only be Severus Snape. "I intend to give you everything you need."

It was then that he decided to test a little theory. Wednesday night would be another quiet night of talking and working, but Saturday night would be different. He would slightly touch her, look abashed about it, and she'd be the one trying to console him. Yes, she would kiss him first the next time. It seemed that she adored a contrite Severus. He chuckled to himself. "Contrite indeed."

Southern's Notes: I should have let them 'really' kiss, but I wanted to wait just a bit for that. Slow seduction and all that.

Up Next: Dumbledore appears; just what does he know? Things get a little interesting during their 'meetings' together. Exactly what did Neville want anyway? Also, why is Draco following Hermione? Was it he that was following her in the dungeons? More up soon.

A Little Privacy

Chapter 6 of 42

We find out Ginny's plans, we learn more about Draco, and there is a chat with Harry. Meanwhile, Severus and Hermione grow even closer, thanks to a little book.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

"Ginny, what is going on with Draco? That's the second time I've seen you two talking...intimately!" Hermione exclaimed. "I don't trust him."

"Oh, Hermione. You are so dramatic at times. We've only come to an understanding. He's not that arse that I thought he was before, not to me anyway," Ginny said. She eyed Hermione for a moment as if debating on telling her something. "Look," she said, taking her hand. "I know you don't trust him, but he seems concerned for you. He said that you don't seem the same since you decided to break things off with Ron. In fact, I thought he fancied you for a moment."

"As if that would happen," Hermione spat, scowling. "I'll never be more than a Mudblood to him." She wished that she could tell Ginny that she shouldn't trust him because he'd Obliviated her, but she knew that she'd have to explain why. She couldn't risk anyone finding out that she fancied Snape. *Even if I don't like Draco, I can't chance him running his big mouth!* "I just don't know if Harry or Ron would understand."

"They need not know. He's only talking to me about things and giving me a bit of advice on things," she said mysteriously.

"What of Lupin?"

Ginny's eyes darted to the side. She muttered, "He'll listen to reason. I don't think Tonks is as innocent as you believe her to be. In fact, he's going to find out soon enough that she tried to snog Harry."

"Is Malfoy helping you with that? You shouldn't tell him much about Grimmauld Place or any of the Order members!" Hermione admonished angrily. "How dare you jeopardize us?"

Her friend simply shook her head in exasperation. "I thought that you would be willing to give him a chance at least. He needs a mate right now just as much as I do. Don't you think that he's tired of being his father's errand boy?" She fled the common room quickly, leaving Hermione alone at the table.

Did Draco want to change? Was he truly trying to reach out to someone for help? Hermione's eyes narrowed. "That's very unlikely." He acted too suspiciously. He was up to something, and she could bet that it was not good. *Ginny is going to jeopardize the Order. I have to tell Severus. Maybe he'll know what to do.*

She hadn't talked to him privately since the previous Saturday evening when they'd shared those kisses. On Wednesday evening, Professor Dumbledore had been there the entire time. He and Snape were whispering and talking while she worked. She'd only had to interrupt twice to question him about certain things, but when she was finished, she had no choice but to leave. She didn't want the headmaster to suspect anything else. Severus hadn't tried to keep her after class for the entire week. The one time she'd tried to sneak down to see him, she'd run into Pansy Parkinson.

The witch had the nerve to try to speak to her! She'd turned around quickly, telling her to bugger off before she had a go at her. So, a week had passed since she'd kissed him, talked to him on a personal level, and been held by him. What if things had changed? What if he hadn't tried to contact her or asked Dumbledore to go down on Wednesday purposely because he'd had a change of heart? Had she scared him off? Unlikely! Who could scare Severus Snape? He faced the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore often enough. A young witch of eighteen was nothing that he couldn't handle. To pass the hours, she decided to have a bath and a long read from one of her books. Then, she would make her way down to see him and find out if he'd decided to end their talks. If so, she had nobody to blame but herself. She'd been the one to push things along. She'd been the one to kiss him and ask him to just pretend for the night that she was not a student, only a woman.

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"Enter," he called darkly. He knew that it was Hermione that had come to see him. Severus was not angry with her, but he did have an increasing annoyance with Dumbledore's meddling. The man had come unannounced on Wednesday to discuss things that could have waited. At the evening meal, he mentioned that he might come round for a drink. *He's only trying to interfere with my supervision of Hermione.* He couldn't blame the man, he supposed, but he could resent him.

"Did you...did you still want me to come?"

He saw the way she looked over to her desk, strategically placed next to his. "Yes," he nodded towards it. As an afterthought, he pulled his wand to add a few security precautions to his door in case the headmaster decided to pop in. He hadn't much planned for the night, not in the way of his seduction. Since the previous Saturday, he'd been doing some thinking, and he knew that it would be easy enough to talk her into things. However, he knew that she was not mentally ready, not truly ready. He wanted her to be addicted to him, to never want him to leave, and to believe in all that he said or did. "I see you've brought some reading material with you."

"I've already finished my assignments, so I figured a little light reading wouldn't be amiss. It's *Don Juan* by Lord Byron."

"Anything interesting?"

"Definitely," she said, face flushing slightly. "The character is portrayed as an innocent where women try to seduce him. It's not completed, but for the most part, it is a satire on life as he sees it. Would you care to have a read?" she asked.

"The women attempt to *seduce* him?" he asked slyly.

"Yes."

He lowered his voice seductively. "You wouldn't be reading that to gain ideas on how to go about it, would you?"

"Oh!" she squeaked out. "No, it's just...I didn't realize it would appear that way!" Her cheeks were now burning brightly. "It's been a long time since I've read it."

"You don't seem to be that far along."

"No, I am only at the end of the fourth canto. If you'd like," she looked away shyly, "I could summarize what's happened so far, and we could continue on through the next portion together."

"Very well. I've marked most of my essays already." He listened intently as Hermione quickly explained all that had happened to Don Juan up until his lover willed herself to

death by refusing to eat, taking her unborn child to the grave with her. The man was about to be sold into slavery. "What a foolish thing to do," he commented.

"I know. I suppose she saw no other way, and she couldn't imagine being without him," Hermione replied, flipping through a couple of pages. "This one is not so long."

"There is always a way to be with the one you want." Severus pretended to be uncomfortable after he maneuvered his chair next to hers. She leant over to try to share the book, but he simply sighed. "Perhaps," he began quietly, "you would like to sit with me?"

"All right," she agreed, uncertainty littering her eyes. Once she stood, she waited for him to make a move.

He knew that she was unsure as to where they would sit. He simply slouched down a little and patted his knee in invitation. When Hermione's eyes grew as wide as Galleons, he had to hold back a chuckle. "I won't bite, Hermione," he said softly, patting his knee once more. The moment she bit her lip and turned to sit on his lap, he added, "Not tonight." His arm snaked around her waist to pull her back against him, just enough to the side so that his face was near her ear. "You may put your feet upon my desk for comfort."

To his delight, she kicked off her trainers and propped her tiny, socked feet upon his desk. "Thanks." After clearing her throat, she asked, "Should we read silently?"

"I see no reason that we can't take turns reading." He moved to speak directly into her ear. "Would you like that?"

"Yes."

"Go first," he whispered. She began reading immediately. He could hear the slight tremor of nervousness in her voice and feel it rolling through her body. She was afraid. That wouldn't do. He'd be sure to not touch her inappropriately or kiss her. He needed to gain her trust. Steadying the book with one hand when it was his turn to read, he took his turn. Back and forth, they read, and he realized that he truly was enjoying the closeness and the sharing of literature with her.

"What did you think?" she asked tentatively when they'd finished.

"Well, I can certainly understand the sultana's reaction when he refused her. She hated being rejected, and as such, she wanted to seek revenge by inflicting pain or killing him. He's lucky she didn't follow through with her initial threats. I've had the displeasure of knowing many people that acted out revenge without thinking, only to find out later that their judgement had been wrong," he said honestly.

"Have...have you ever done that?"

"I've learnt my lesson, and now, I always think things through before I do anything," he said softly. "I am afraid that I still don't like being rejected or outmaneuvered. Old habits are hard to be rid of, I suppose."

She nodded. "I guess I should go."

"All right," he agreed, not moving.

For the first time since she'd sat with him, she looked him in the eyes. "I had a nice time reading with you."

"I am free tomorrow afternoon," he offered.

A beatific smile was his reward. "I'll come down near three then?"

"Two," he said softly. "Don't forget the book."

"I won't," she said, sliding off of him. To his surprise, she pulled one of his hands into hers for a squeeze. "I've nearly forgotten to tell you something important. I've no idea where my mind has been."

He had a pretty good idea of what she'd been dwelling on, but he didn't mention it. "What is it?"

"Draco. I would bet that he is the spy. Last Saturday night, when I left here, he was following me. Ginny came out of nowhere, accusing me of having relations with you. She saw us on the grounds, you see. Well, Draco Obliviated her, and he claimed that he was simply doing his job."

The little bastard hadn't mentioned that. This was certainly not what he'd imagined she'd been thinking of. "I shall look into this," he said brusquely, hoping she'd not pry into it further. "If anything else happens, let me know. If you notice anything else that is suspicious, I need to know that as well."

"He thinks that you and I are...well, he knows that I come here. I'd say it's him, and I don't like that he's always hovering about with Ginny lately. I can't exactly tell her what he did; he's more or less blackmailed me to keep quiet."

"Hermione, I promise to find out exactly what he's playing at, and I will certainly address his hexing of Miss Weasley."

"All right," she said softly, placing a hand upon his chest to keep him seated. "Stay. I'll see myself out."

"Good night," he said, flicking his wand at his door to release his wards. The moment she opened the door, she gasped.

"You've startled me!" she said loudly.

Severus looked up to see Dumbledore hovering near his door with a bottle of whisky. "I apologize, dear girl. I was about to knock when you opened the door. What's that you have there?"

"It's one of Lord Byron's stories. I brought it along for a bit of reading. Good night, sir," she said, hurrying away.

Shaking his head in dissatisfaction, Severus said, "Well, you might as well come in. There is no longer a need to hover in my doorway. She's gone now." He sneered momentarily. "Tell me, Headmaster, how long have you been standing there?"

"Ah, it's nice of you to put her desk near yours. How quaint," the man said, purposely avoiding his question.

"Indeed," Severus said dryly, magically moving the desk to where it belonged and summoning a comfortable chair for his uninvited guest. "What brings you here?"

"Harry."

"Oh, of course. Harry Bloody Potter. What drama is he playing at now?" he asked irritably. Without waiting for an invite, he summoned tumblers and poured a few shots in each. "Here."

"Thank you." Dumbledore took a sip. "It seems that Harry was making use of his Invisibility Cloak earlier to sneak down to Hagrid's old hut. He wanted to check on Fang and see if the new professor was residing there. Mister Weasley was also with him."

Severus' heart dropped. Had they seen Hermione entering his office? "And?"

"Along the way, they saw an interesting sight."

"Well?" he prodded, hoping the headmaster would get on with it.

"It seems that Draco is taking his assignment seriously. The one where he's been instructed to be friendly with Miss Weasley to find out why she is questioning Tonks' loyalties. Harry said they were out near the rear of the castle and were very close. He had to hex Mister Weasley to keep him from giving their location away." The headmaster shook his head. "I want to know what is going on between the two, and I expect you to find out. I've instructed both boys to keep quiet about this. I've told them exactly why Draco has tried to befriend her, and I had to bring Weasley in on the fact that your young Slytherin is now working for us."

"Good Lord! Weasley will tell everyone. Draco's life is as good as over," Severus said angrily, standing to pace.

"He'll not speak of it to anyone, Severus. I've taken a wand oath. They will remain quiet and not betray Draco's true loyalties," Dumbledore said. "I wonder if the lad hasn't truly taken to her. It's been just over a week, and I've seen them together on more than one occasion. He must have some idea. Find him now, talk to him, and let me know."

"I will." He dared not mention that Draco had used a Memory Charm on a fellow student. That wouldn't sit well with the headmaster.

"Very well. Thanks for the drink."

Severus smirked. "I do believe *you* are the one to bring the liquor down. Are you sure that you weren't trying to spy on my evening with Hermione?"

Dumbledore hummed some odd tune and left his Potions master standing there with a look of loathing upon his face. "Just bloody great." He quickly made his way to the Slytherin common room to find Draco. Once they were back in the privacy of his office, he spoke again. "I'll have everything you know about Ginevra Weasley's meddling, and I'll have it right now. Dumbledore has been in. It seems that the dream team, Potter and Weasley, have spied upon the two of you in what I imagine to be a close situation."

"I thought I heard some grunting and rustling about! I didn't see anyone! Ruddy Invisibility Cloak!" Draco said, clearly annoyed. "Can't have a private word without everyone knowing, can you?"

"Enough," Severus said, leaning forward. "What are her motives behind the questioning?"

Draco laughed. "She thinks that my dear cousin, Nymphadora Tonks, tried to have a snog with Potter this past summer. It seems that our littlest Weasley has a thing for that ruddy werewolf! She said that Potter told her to shove off, but he never had the bollocks to tell Lupin about it. Apparently, according to Ginny, that places Tonks in the ranks with Death Eaters. She wants more dirt on her to bring all the information to Lupin in hopes he'll think of her with affection."

"Ridiculous!"

"However, there is nothing that I can tell her. The woman has never associated with us, nor has she tried," Draco said in disgust. "Anyway, I did remember something that my mother said about her mother once. She said that she was a right tart in her younger days. Said that her daughter seemed to be following in her footsteps from what she heard."

"I've never noticed such a thing," Severus said, rubbing his chin. "What is Miss Weasley's plan?"

"She's going to send an anonymous letter to Lupin telling him what happened. In her mind, he'll have a row with Tonks, the truth will come out when Harry has to admit it, and he'll break things off. She fancies him."

"What of you? Do *you* fancy her?"

"No," Draco said immediately, pale face flushing guiltily. "She's nice to talk to, but I would never stoop so low as to date a Weasley. Father did teach me some things, you know."

Severus smirked. "I can see why the Dark Lord trusts you. Very well. I shall bring this to Dumbledore's attention. I still can't believe that the girl is interested in Lupin in such a way."

"Well, she says that since her Mudblood boyfriend died, he's been there to comfort her. She's frustrated because he never made a move to further things, and she was outraged when it came out that he'd been seeing Tonks privately." Draco shrugged. "Er...do you need me to take her mind off of him?"

Severus could see the glint of hope in the boy's eye, and he knew that he was hoping to be assigned ~~to~~ate her. He was absolutely attracted to the girl, but he would never admit it. His family and peers had always been prejudiced to anyone differing from them. "I shall see what Dumbledore can make of this. I'm sure he'll want to interrogate Potter. The boy has never mentioned this, as far as I know."

"Thank you, sir."

"One more thing, boy," he said, allowing a scowl to move over his face. "I appreciate that you look after Hermione, but you might want to be a little more discreet about it. She's seen you more than once, and she claims that you altered Miss Weasley's memories."

"Yes, I did," he said promptly. "She was being loud, accusing Granger of having sex with you and saying other things. I thought it best to take matters into my own hands. As you can see, it all worked out in the end."

Severus nodded. "I can see your point. Try not to make Hermione too suspicious of you. I don't think that she likes you being cozy with her little friend."

Draco smirked. "Understood."

"Good evening then, Draco. Shall I pass anything on to your father when I see him?" Severus asked politely.

"Tell him that I feel that I am finally learning to do all that he taught me," Draco said, eyes darkening, pointed chin jutting out defiantly. "Good night, sir."

Feeling slightly relieved, he made his way to Dumbledore's office. Hopefully, he would have nothing more to do with the woes of Potter and Weasley. As long as they didn't go about talking on Draco's activities, he didn't care what they whinged about. The door opened as soon as he neared the top of the stairs. The old man must have been expecting him.

"Headmaster," he said politely, inclining his head.

"Have a seat," he instructed. "Have you spoken to him?"

"I have," Severus said. He told Dumbledore all that he'd learnt from Draco and waited patiently as the man thought over the information before finally speaking.

"Well, that does put a new light on things. Thank you, Severus, I shall speak with Harry. I would like to hear his take on this supposed seduction."

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Hermione made her way back to his office the next day at precisely two in the afternoon. He opened the door for her immediately and moved towards his desk. She was surprised to find him comfortably dressed again. It was still odd to see him in such a state. Her eyes darted around the room, and she saw that the little desk was back in

its corner. She wondered briefly if he would suggest that they sit in their normal chairs, but she saw that he moved back to the chair behind his desk. *He must mean for me to sit with him again.*

It wasn't that she minded. However, she'd barely been able to sleep the night before, what with remembering the sound of his voice in her ear, the feel of his arm around her, the whispering of his breath against her, and the tingling sensations that she had to struggle with during the entire story. She nervously awaited instructions.

"Come," he beckoned, face inscrutable.

She blindly made her way to him and sat on his lap as she had the night before. Without waiting for instruction, she opened the book to the next section and began reading. To her horror, her voice cracked a few times, and she could feel her body trembling.

"Are you cold?" he asked in a low voice.

She could feel the heat of his breath on her skin. "No," she said. "It's pleasant."

"It certainly is," he said, tightening his arm around her.

Hermione instinctively burrowed more closely against him, facing him a little more. His other hand came around to rest in her lap, gripping one thigh tightly as if to keep her from sliding off. *Oh, God.* She didn't mind in the least, but her heartbeat had quickened. "Er...where was I? Oh, right. Here we are," she said nervously. She hurried to the end of the page, not meeting his eyes as she handed the book to him.

Severus' rich voice seemed to vibrate through her. She loved to hear him speak, but no words had ever sounded so good as the words he was reading about Don Juan and his troubles. A thought came to her. What if she was to try to seduce him? She'd been slightly successful in getting him to kiss her the week before, but he'd not made any efforts to repeat what had happened. If she would come down to him in the middle of the night scantily dressed, would he turn her away or bid her welcome?

"Hermione?"

"Sorry?" she asked, embarrassed to have been caught daydreaming.

"It's your go," he said, handing the book back to her. "What were you thinking about?"

"Oh," she said, thinking quickly. "I was imagining the character dressed as a woman. It seems as though they could have easily seen that he was a male."

"Perhaps he used magic to tamper with his appearance," Severus suggested.

"No, these are Muggles. Remember?"

"It's hard to think of a world without magic," he said simply.

She smiled and began to read her portion. While reading his hand had returned to her thigh and gripped her tightly. The hand around her waist moved to idly rub her back. Hermione read through the end of the section and simply sat there holding the book when she was done. Ever so slowly, the hand on her back moved up to her head to guide it to his shoulder. "Stay," he murmured.

Her book dropped, unnoticed by either, as she brought one hand up to his chest and the other behind his back. She curled around him easily and had never felt more secure in her life. His woody scent invaded her nostrils. She had trouble discerning between her beating heart and his. It seemed that she could feel his thumping against her breast, but for all she knew, it could have been her own vibrating throughout her body. The more she wriggled against him to get comfortable, the more she noticed something bulging against her bum. She froze when she realized that it was his...erection that she was feeling. *My goodness! He's as randy as Ron, only has to press against me to rise to the occasion. No, that's not fair. I was squirming against him. I hope he doesn't think that I did that on purpose.* For a moment, she thought she could feel it thumping against her rear. She pulled away to look at him.

"Severus..."

"Do you remember," he interrupted, "that I said I would not kiss you again."

"Yes," she replied breathlessly, noting that his eyes were darting from her eyes to her lips. Was he planning to kiss her? How did she feel about that? *want him to kiss me.*

"It seems," he lowered his head, "that I lied." His lips caught hers in a chaste yet pleasant kiss. When he pulled away, he said, "I apologize, but you are too near. Maybe sitting like this was not one of my better decisions."

She lifted her hand from his chest and guided his face back to hers. "I think it's brilliant." This time their lips parted, and they explored each other's mouths completely. Hermione relished the feel of his tongue tangling with hers and licking her lips. There was a sudden tightening in her stomach and a tingle shot through her body. She could feel heat pooling in her...private area and resisted the urge to squirm. A whimper escaped, and he answered with a slight groan and a tightening of his hold on her.

His lips left hers and frantically moved across her throat, stopping only to mark her along the way. She could feel his nose pressing against the niche below her ear, and thought, *God, even his nose is erotic.* One of his hands captured a breast in a light caress, and she moaned aloud, feeling his thumb glide over her fabric-covered nipple. *Why did I wear such a thick blouse?*

Once again, she'd ruined everything by being vocal. He pulled away in shock that things had progressed so much. "Hermione..." He seemed to be at a loss for words, knowing what he wanted to say but not how to voice them. She slowly slid off of him, hoping she'd remember the feel of his firm erection as she did so.

"I need to go to the library for a bit. Thanks for spending this time with me. Reading has never been so...exciting," she said in what she hoped was an adult tone. She stooped to pick up her book from the floor. *When had it fallen?*

"Wednesday," he said with a small smile.

"Tomorrow," she said cheekily, knowing that he had meant that Wednesday would be the next time that they'd be alone together. Alone if Dumbledore didn't show up again, that is.

As quickly as she could, she escaped his office and refrained from actually giggling happily until she was alone at a table in the corner of the library. "Good Lord! Professor Snape...just wow," she said to herself. She felt excited, naughty, and happy all at once. For the first time in her life, arousal had dampened her knickers. Ron had never even accomplished that. Deciding to forgo the research she'd planned, she hurried to her dormitory, owing to the need of a bath. After she bathed, she made her way out into the Gryffindor common room. She found Harry sitting alone by the fire.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

He looked around uneasily. "Can we talk?"

"Yes," she said, sitting next to him. He made a slightly annoyed face. "Oh! You mean in my room? Privately?"

"Exactly."

"Come on then." Harry looked completely serious. She felt a little uneasy. Had he seen her going to Snape's office? She shook the thoughts away. It couldn't be. She was simply being paranoid. "What's going on?" she asked immediately.

"I'm not supposed to talk to anyone about this except Ron, but it wouldn't seem right if you didn't know. Before Hagrid died this past summer, do you remember when Snape came to talk to Dumbledore? They called me in to have a word?" She nodded. "Right," he continued. "Well, they told me that Draco Malfoy had gone to Snape begging him to help him get away. He didn't want to dishonor his father by joining Dumbledore, but he didn't want to be a Death Eater either."

Hermione bit her lip. *So! Dumbledore must have him spying on Severus and me. I'll have to tell Severus what Harry is saying. Damn! Who is Voldemort's spy if not Draco?* "And?"

"And, he's pulling a Snape, pretending to be a spy for Voldemort but really working for us. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone because they wanted us to be sure to not show him any courtesy. They believe that people would notice." He shrugged. "I agree, but Ron and I saw him with Ginny yesterday evening. We were both angry, and I had to hex Ron to keep him from having a go at him. The only reason I did, mind, was because I knew he was on our side."

"I've seen them talking," she admitted. "I've confronted Ginny on it. Says they are only talking of friendly things."

"You should have said something," he chided.

"Oh? I'd say you should have said something!" she retorted heatedly.

"Too right, you are," he said. "Ron insisted that we go to Dumbledore about it. He had Snape check into things. Can you believe that Ginny thinks that Tonks has a thing for me?" His voice had suddenly taken on an outraged tone, and his face scrunched up in annoyance.

"Yes," Hermione said, looking away.

"Mione! You knew?"

"Harry, stop yelling. She mentioned that she saw Tonks try to snog you, but you turned her down. I told her to talk to you about it." She looked back at him. "She told me in confidence. I couldn't betray that." And, she still wouldn't tell him the other things that Ginny had said. She only hoped that he wouldn't question too much. "I'm sorry."

"S all right," he said. "I've just got to find a way to talk to her about it without her thinking that Malfoy told me or that he told someone else. Dumbledore supports her friendship with him. Either that or I wait until Dumbledore calls me in to his office to talk to her about it. They found out that she is going to send Lupin an anonymous owl about it. Dumbledore thinks it will be a good idea that Lupin explains to her exactly how he feels."

"Does Lupin know?" she asked incredulously.

Harry grinned. "The day that Tonks tried to have a snog with me? Well, the twins were at Grimmauld Place. The berks gave her a Snogger's Delight. It's an invention they are working on. It makes you want to snog the first person you see. I was going to tell Lupin, but I couldn't." He laughed. "It was a surprise when he came up to my room and told me he knew about it. He said that she'd hexed the twins for it and had run off embarrassed. I guess Ginny never saw that part."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think she did. I agree with Dumbledore. Maybe Lupin should tell her. She only cares for him because he was there with us since Dean was killed. It's one of those rebound things."

"Whatever the case, if I end up blurring it out, it might compromise Malfoy, not that I care. I still don't like or trust the little arsehole."

"I don't trust him either."

"Speaking of trust," Harry said, eyeing her oddly, "is there anything that you might want to tell me."

"Eh?"

"I checked the map today to see where Ginny had gone to. I looked over the dungeons, and who did I see sitting in Severus Snape's office?"

"Me."

"That's right. What's going on?"

She felt her face flush. "I can't really say."

"I thought as much. Dumbledore has you in on something. He sort of hinted that it would be all right to trust you with the Malfoy information. It made me wonder if you knew things that I didn't," Harry said. "What's he got you working on with Snape?" His expression soured, causing her to giggle.

"Well, I really can't say. I was sworn to secrecy, but just know that it is for a good cause." She hoped that would satisfy his curiosity. If he knew that she actually wanted to spend time with Snape, she didn't think that he'd take it very well. She also didn't think he'd appreciate it if he knew that Voldemort thought she and Severus were shagging. She'd never thought about the blasted map! However, this did work to her advantage. She could always get Harry to help her escape if she needed to go down to Severus. "Harry, even though you know about my working with Snape on the potion...whoops," she said, covering her mouth, pretending to have let something slip. It was partially true. On Wednesday nights, she was working on a potion for a salve. She simply twisted that to make it sound like it was for something more important. Something for the Order. *Quite Slytherin. He might be impressed.*

Harry took the bait. "Excellent. I knew it was something important. Don't worry. I'll not tell Ron about it. That's the last thing you need."

"How is Ron? Have he and Pansy...?"

"They are only talking still, but yes, they are getting closer. They are meeting in secret." He shook his head in disbelief. "I just don't get it. Why Pansy? Why her? Who would trust a Slytherin?"

"Well, I trust Snape. Apparently Malfoy is trustworthy, though I wouldn't recommend it. Maybe she is as well," she blurted. Why would she defend Pansy after she'd tried to shag Ron? It was the Slytherin comment that had done it. Not all of them were bad. Why had she always assumed so? She supposed it was because Hagrid had said more than once that most wizards that had gone dark had been in Slytherin.

"To be blunt," Harry said uneasily, "I think it's more to do with her interest in shagging. I really think that Ron's thinking with the wrong...er...you know." He pointed down towards his crotch.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I suppose waiting for someone you supposedly loved is unheard of these days." She knew one man that respected and wanted her enough to wait until she was no longer a student.

"Sorry, Hermione, I didn't mean to bring up that. I only meant to..."

"No," she said, interrupting his apology. "Don't worry on it, Harry. It's not your fault. And, to be honest, Ron and I are truly better off as being mates only. It's a little awkward right now, but that will pass."

"Let's go down to the Great Hall," Harry said. "I could use some food. Ron's going to meet us there."

"All right," she said, rising and pulling him up with her. Together, along with Neville and Lavender, they made their way down to the evening meal. A few minutes after they'd began to eat, she saw Pansy slide in at the Slytherin table. Not long after that, Ron appeared.

"Budge up," he told Harry. Harry moved, but he didn't say anything, as his mouth was full. "I'm starved." To break the ice between them, Hermione handed him the plate of mashed potatoes near her. "Er...thanks, Hermione."

"You're welcome," she said, trying to smile. She wanted him to realize that they could get through this. He sort of had Pansy now, and she sort of had Snape. It wasn't a real relationship, but it was something to keep her mind off of her failed attempt at one with Ron. Her eyes slid down the table to Ginny; she was in a heated debate with Colin about Quidditch. Hermione realized how easy it must have been for Ginny to fall for Lupin even though she loved Dean. Lupin was older, exuded security, knew the right words, and was attractive in some ways. It was the same with Severus.

With that thought, her eyes drifted to where he sat. At the same moment, his head turned and their eyes locked momentarily. Her stomach tingled as she remembered his hands and mouth upon her, as she thought of his erection against her arse. Looking away before she blushed, she began to eat as quickly as she could. On the way back to the common room, Ron pulled her to the side.

"Mione, I just wanted to say that I'm glad that you aren't still upset with me about Pansy. Ginny told me I was an insensitive prat."

"Ron, stop," Hermione said. "I think we should just learn to accept things, the both of us. Some things do bother me, but I'll have to learn to deal with them. Fair enough?"

"Sure," he said. "Come on then. I'm going to have a go at Harry with a game or two. Care to watch?"

"Not tonight. I'm a bit tired. I think I'll go have a read and then get some sleep." She smiled gratefully. "Thanks."

"Any time."

She slipped away and entered her room through her personal entrance, not wanting to go through the common room. Having bathed already, she simply changed into her nightclothes and grabbed a book. She couldn't concentrate on her book, so she put out the lamps. Sleep wouldn't come to her either. The kisses she'd shared with Severus kept coming to mind. Suddenly, an idea occurred to her. She could touch herself as she had before while thinking of him.

I've been snogging my teacher! Her fingers traced over her lips lightly.

He marked me with his kisses. Her hand slid down to her collarbone where she knew the small yet dark passion mark had been embedded into her skin. She'd seen it earlier as she'd dressed after her bath. She wouldn't have to charm it away, as it was just below her collar and not easily seen. She wondered if he'd noticed that she'd changed her clothes. Would he guess as to her reasons why?

His hand touched my breast again. His thumb caressed my nipple. She cupped both breasts with her hands, and she allowed her thumbs to circle her nipples, making them harden. It didn't have the same effect that his ministrations had, but she felt the need to move lower. Remembering the motions she'd applied last time, she began pleasuring herself as she thought of Severus Snape. His hard erection pressing into her arse had left her longing for something more. She wanted to touch it with her hand. Would he like the way she touched him? She turned over to muffle her cries into her pillow as her orgasm came up to wash over her.

Southern's Notes It's still trotting along slowly. I love the anticipation, yet I want to scream for them to get a move on. At least they interact though. :-) I've plans to take them a little closer in the next chapter. A little more time will pass, and we'll find out a little more about Pansy's plans.

I'm working on Vengeance is Sweet! for those ineterested. It should be up in a few days. Thanks for following. If you'd like to chat, please come find us at the yahoo!group Potter_Place. Cheers!

The Heat Is On

Chapter 7 of 42

Severus and Hermione heat things up. There is a visit to the Dark Lord, and we find out interesting things. Hermione dares give Severus a sudden ultimatum.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

"Shall I continue on to the next chapter? You seem comfortable," Severus' silky voice whispered into her ear. Hermione couldn't take it any longer. She could feel his hardness pressing against her arse. He wanted her. All she had to do was let him know that she wanted him as well.

She turned around as easily as she could and straddled him awkwardly, as the chair arms left her slightly restricted. "I think that we've had enough reading, Severus," she said huskily, hoping to sound seductive. She pried the book from his hands and tossed it behind her. Leaning in, she placed a kiss upon his lips, hoping to ease his obvious shock.

Severus pulled away. "Hermione, if you continue moving against me like that..." He left his next words unspoken, but his eyes drifted down to her moving hips...hips that were grinding against him.

"I want you," she whispered. There was a smug look that settled over his face suddenly. He pulled her closer, and the chair suddenly transformed into a bed. "Ah." She was able to straddle him easily, no restraints. "There is still a problem." A simple snap of his fingers saw both of their clothing removed.

His hands cupped her breasts, and his erection began to throb beneath her. She took it within her two hands and tried to guide it within her. "Easy," he said quietly. Without thinking, she impaled herself with his hard shaft.

"Oh!" she screeched. Hermione sat up, panting, in her own bed, alone. "A ruddy dream!" It had felt so real, yet it did have that dreamlike quality to it...false yet inviting,

scenes that changed seemingly by themselves. She'd been having dreams of him over the past few nights. Each one had been more erotic than the previous.

Dumbledore had ruined their Wednesday night meeting...once again. He'd showed up just as she had, asking for a favor. It seemed that he needed Professor McGonagall's assistance, but she'd scheduled a detention. He'd requested that Severus take the detention off her hands since he'd only be supervising a student for the evening anyway. Of course, Severus hadn't denied the headmaster.

He'd not been paying much attention to her, not that she noticed anyway, in classes, corridors, or the Great Hall. The next evening would be her Saturday visit. What would occur? Would he ask her to sit on his lap again? Would he try to talk to her to tell her that things had to end. *What had to end? Snogging?* She snorted. *What does he feel for me? I know he wants to do that with me, but what else does he want? Would he want to try a relationship?*

For some reason, an unsettling feeling fell over her. *A relationship with Snape.* A few scenarios flashed through her mind. First, she saw herself trying to talk to Harry and Ron while Snape was pulling her away. Next, she saw herself locked away in the dungeons with no friends allowed to visit. Then, she saw him smirking at her as if he'd won a trophy. She shook the thoughts away and shuddered. She would not want a life like that. Is that how he would treat her? Her stomach fluttered and a small set of chills swept across her flesh as she imagined how they could pass a great deal of time. She imagined him above her, leaning down to kiss her, naked bodies pressing together.

Would having him, all of him, inside of her hurt the way Ron's finger had? It was likely that Ron's inexperience had caused her displeasure. She'd been uneasy about it from the start. She'd seen books on the subject, but she'd been too shy to check them out, not wanting Madam Pince to think she was trying to learn how to be some scarlet woman. She wasn't naïve, as she'd read many of the romance novels that her mum had bought. She'd also heard a few of the girls talking about their experiences.

According to Parvati, it really didn't hurt. It simply felt like some pressure was being applied. She'd said that once her partner had started moving about, the pressure had eased up, and she'd had fun. That didn't sound like any of the maidens in the novels she'd read, but Hermione supposed that those books had to add all that extra pausing after entering and such to make things more interesting and prolong the actual act. Parvati had also said that it didn't really last all that long.

"I really need to talk to Severus," she said with a soft sigh. She was an eighteen-year-old woman. She could make her own decisions. Surely, it wouldn't be seen as lewd or inappropriate if she made the decision herself, and it held no effect on her grade. What was it that he'd said about being with her in that way?

Don't you understand that we can't go any farther? You are still my student.

She'd rebutted with the fact that she wouldn't always be his student. He'd then wondered if she would *waste* her first couple of months out of school in a sexual relationship with him. To Hermione, it wouldn't be a waste. They could work things out easily and make arrangements for their perspective futures. Nobody would have to know the truth until Voldemort was finally defeated. Then, if they chose to further their relationship, they would do so. It would be nearly nine months before she graduated. How could she or he hold out that long? It was clear that things could get a little heated. She remembered something else he'd said when they were talking about Don Juan's first love.

There is always a way to be with the one you want.

Would there be a way to move things along now without changing things between them? Without anyone finding out? Without causing him any unwanted guilt? He wanted her in that way, but he would not be able to follow through with it while she was still his student. She would find the nerve to talk to him. She still had to tell him all that Harry had confided to her. It would be easy enough to slip into a conversation about their relationship. *What if he laughs and says there is no relationship?* No, there was something between them. It was time to find out exactly what it was.

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Severus glared at the students scurrying through the corridor. Hermione was due at any moment. It wouldn't be prudent to let too many students see her near his office on a Saturday evening. "Find your way to your common rooms," he hissed. "Five points from Ravenclaw. What are you doing wandering about the dungeons?" He held up a hand to stave the excuse. "Are you looking for me?" The student shook his head. "Off with you."

He walked through his office door and closed it. He'd only taken three steps when a knock sounded behind him. Whirling around, he barked, "Enter. *It had better not be any of those imbeciles.*

"Hi."

It was she. "Hermione," he greeted with a nod. A flick of his wand saw the door closed and locked. The moment he put away his wand, he moved close to her, backing her against the wall. She placed her hands on his chest, as if in defense of her person. No matter. He pressed himself against her firmly, planting both hands on either side of her head. Severus brought his mouth down to brush his lips against hers softly. He searched her eyes for acceptance. Finding it, he pressed his lips to hers more firmly, using his tongue to open her lips and explore her mouth. He'd not planned on kissing her, not this early on anyway, but for some reason, when he'd turned to see her there with her provocative Muggle clothes, he'd had no choice. The past week of not being alone with her had taken its toll. His body needed her touch...a little reassurance that his desire was near and wanting as much as he. Ending their kiss with a final chaste kiss, he pulled back slightly to look at her.

Hermione's eyes were half-lidded with desire. "Missed me?" she asked cheekily.

He blinked and thought for a moment. He supposed he had. "So it would seem."

"I've missed you, too. There," kiss, "are so many," kiss, "things that I want to tell you." She kissed him again, opening her mouth in invitation to deepen their kiss again. He accepted and tangled his tongue with hers, first in her mouth and then in his. A slight whimper escaped her lips.

It would be so easy to have her. She was wearing a blouse and skirt. He needed only to lift the skirt and press her into the wall to position her. What would she do? How far would she go? He eased away from her and quirked his lips upward while his index finger traced the outline of her face. "What do you want to tell me?"

"Harry," she said between breaths. "He's told me some things. I think the headmaster is the one that is having Malfoy follow me around."

Severus' mind cleared immediately. "Come," he said, holding her hand and leading her to their two chairs near his desk. "Explain."

"Well, first of all, Harry told me that he and Ron saw Malfoy and Ginny talking, and they went to Dumbledore. They found out that he has apparently switched to our side and is now spying for us with Voldemort. Harry has known since the summer, but Ron's just found out. He's not too pleased. I am sure that you know all of this already." At his nod, she continued, telling him all that had been said about Tonks. She even mentioned that Ron and Pansy are seeing each other privately. Once he'd digested all of that, she blurted, "Harry knows that I come here."

"How so?"

"The map of course. He saw me here when he was looking for Ginny." She grinned smugly. "I told him that I wasn't at liberty to say what I was doing here, but it was for a good cause. I even pretended to let information slip about us working on a potion together. He took that to mean that we're working on something for the Order."

"That was good thinking on your part. We wouldn't want Boy Wonder to try to thwart things. The Dark Lord's spy would enjoy reporting back to my master that our plans are being interfered with,"

"I thought Draco was V...er...the Dark Lord's spy, but I think he's following me on Dumbledore's behalf. Maybe he's trying to find out if something truly is going on here between us. You know, to be sure we're only pretending."



"While I wouldn't put it past the headmaster, I wouldn't put it past the Dark Lord either." What could he tell her? He wanted her to trust in Draco to a certain extent, but he didn't even completely trust in the boy. There would be no reason to put her off her guard. "I think of Draco as the son of a friend. On one hand, I believe him to truly want to make a fresh start and be away from his father's plans. On the other hand, I believe he would strive very hard to make his father proud." He scooted to the edge of his seat. "I need you to never appear anything less than friendly to Draco when you are in private. Even if you do not trust him, you must pretend that you do."

Her brow furrowed slightly. "Do you think he would betray you?"

"If he had to."

"Would you betray him?"

"If I had to."

"Would you betray us?"

He could see the fear in her eyes. "Never you," he said firmly. That seemed to appease her momentarily, but then he saw the worry return to her eyes.

"What of Harry? Dumbledore?"

Bypassing her question, he said, "I think it's safe to say that Dumbledore has schooled Harry Potter well enough. He will likely defeat the Dark Lord the next time they meet. Your loyalty lies with him." He cocked an eyebrow. "Therefore, I think we can safely say that your friend has nothing to fear from me." *Unless he interferes with my plans.*

She smiled then. "I trust in you," she said easily, reaching out to cup his cheek with one of her small hands. As her hand slid down, thumb grazing his lips, he opened his mouth to nibble on her thumb. Slowly, his tongue circled around her nail and sucked the digit into his mouth. She gasped in surprise but seemed to like his ministrations. Her flesh tasted of soap, bitter yet pleasant. There was a slightly feminine scent invading his senses.

His Hermione trusted him. He'd never allow her to see harm whilst he could help it. But, her trust was misplaced on a certain level. He had a plan, a mission. She would be his in every way possible. If he had to be manipulative about it and deceive her in some things, then he would do so. In the long run, it would be worth it...for the both of them.

Severus released her thumb and placed a small kiss on her palm before pulling her towards him until their faces met. The kiss was unlike the other. His need and passion took over, his lips and tongue melding with hers. Abruptly leaving her lips, he trailed down to her neck to lick, suck, and nibble at her sensitive flesh. Her hands wove into his hair as she tilted her head back to offer more of her neck to him. His hands found their way beneath her blouse and glided along her spine, finding the clasp to her bra. In only two attempts, the clasp was unfastened, and his hands slid around to her chest to slide beneath the loosened garment and caress both breasts.

"Oh," she gasped, arching further into his hold.

He wished that they'd be anywhere other than sitting in two chairs facing each other. Nevertheless, he couldn't stop himself. He pulled back from her completely and lifted her blouse slightly to place kisses upon her stomach. She grasped the shirt from his clutches and pulled it over her head and off, tossing it next to them. "Yes," he whispered. This was what he wanted...a responsive Hermione. Pulling back from her, his eyes met hers. He saw acceptance, desire, and approval. Severus quickly pulled her onto his lap so that she could straddle him. After kissing her deeply, his lips moved down to replace his hands, which were fondling her breasts. For the first time, he looked upon her bare flesh, naked from the waist up. Her flesh still held the unblemished look of youth, not yet marred by scars or time. Each breast was slightly more than a handful, and her rosy-colored nipples were hardened, waiting for his touch. "Lovely."

His eyes met hers briefly, and he noticed that she was biting her lower lip, an uncertain expression on her face. Did she think that he wouldn't approve? Was she nervous? He lifted his hand and to enable a finger to pull her lip free from her teeth. She lifted both hands, entrapping his index finger. What she did next ignited a fire in his groin. She mimicked what he'd done earlier by licking and suckling his finger. He left her to it and sought out the nearest breast, using one hand to position it just so, enabling his mouth to work its magic upon her. "Oh, God," she muttered, arching into him slightly before resuming her task.

Hermione's weak spots were easy to find. While his mouth familiarized itself with her tender flesh, he'd sensed that she squirmed and wiggled more when he kissed the underneath of her breast than any other spot, save a few quick circles of his tongue around the nipple itself. As he moved over to give her other breast the same attention, he noticed that she was arched completely into him, her bum wriggling against his erection, legs dangling over the arms of the chairs. He need only unfasten his trousers, move her panties aside, and impale himself within her.

She'd lost the heart to continue suckling his finger, so he moved that free hand down beneath her skirt to rest on her inner thigh for a moment. *Good Lord! I can feel the heat radiating from her even now. What will her inner flesh feel like to the touch?* He could resist no longer. His hand slid up further while his mouth never stopped pleasuring her. As his hand found the crotch of her knickers, he sucked in a breath. They were slightly dampened, meaning she was wet for him. Her desire was peaking, preparing her body for him. All senses left. *Fuck the slow seduction. I will have her, here and now.* His face was resting against her chest, and he could feel her heart beating quickly. *Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you.*

Arms encircled him as his other hand left her breast and joined the one at her crux. One index finger on each side slid beneath the hem of her knickers, coming in contact with smooth, heated, flesh and a small patch of trimmed hair. He longed to see her...needed to see her. However, he first needed to feel her. Remembering her reaction to the fumbling Weasley, he knew better than to insert his finger completely. It would remind her of that experience and perhaps put a damper on things for them. He wouldn't begin to stimulate her clitoris either, knowing that the over-sensitization might be a bit much for her. He simply and slowly rubbed both fingers only along the patch of hair artfully lining her labia. When he began to feel her slight wetness seeping out, he nearly groaned and had to restrain himself from thrusting a finger into her. She began to breathe heavily and moved with him slightly, as if mesmerized.

A loud banging against his office door startled them both, one finger slightly entered her when she moved the wrong way. "I will kill that meddling old fool," he whispered fiercely, pulling back from her all together. "Get dressed."

Hermione swallowed deeply, blushed furiously, and scampered off of him, quickly pulling on her shirt. When she looked at him again, he held her gaze as he placed the finger that had been able to penetrate her slightly into his mouth as he sucked away the minute evidence of where it had been. "Oh! You just...! Was that...? Oh, my!"

"Do not be ashamed, Hermione," he said smoothly, rising to stand before her. More banging on the outer door drew his gaze away momentarily. He looked back at her, smirking slightly. "You are delicious." He lowered his head and pulled her to him for one last kiss, hoping her lips wouldn't appear plumped when their visitor entered. He wondered if she tasted herself upon his lips, but he doubted it, as she hardly held a taste. "Pick up a book from my desk, open it to the center, and start to read."

She nodded and quickly sat down with the first book she could grab. He watched as she tried to smooth down her hair and slightly ruffled blouse. Severus quickly made his way to the door and opened it with a loud bang as it slammed against the back wall. "What is it?" he asked, clearly annoyed. To his surprise, it was not the pesky headmaster. It was Draco.

"It's done," the boy said quietly. "I've got the..." He'd obviously seen Hermione sitting in the chair. His eyes traveled between the pair a couple of times, realization settling in. "I'll come back later, sir."

"You might as well come in now," he said coldly, allowing the boy to know that he'd displeased him. He led the way to his desk. He motioned for Draco to sit down, and he turned to Hermione. "I suppose we are finished here for tonight, but we shall pick up where we left off next time." He hoped she got his meaning. He had every intention of having her. Slow seduction be damned. She was ready. Wasn't she?

"Al-all right," she agreed, placing the book back upon his desk. "Th-thanks for your time, sir." She quickly left without looking back. He would have had to be blind to not see that she was shaking like a leaf. Had he scared her? Was it too much? He'd have to think about it later. He needed to deal with his intruder first.

"Well?"

"I truly didn't mean to interrupt."

"No matter. What is it?"

"The mallowsweet. I have it, sir. It was exactly where you said it would be, and nobody saw me leave or re-enter the grounds. My father gave me a small trinket to use as a Portkey when I secured it. What should I do?" he asked, eyes moving to where Hermione had been sitting.

"Well, you need to go to him of course. Did he give you the activation word?"

"He did, sir. I've shrunk the ingredients and put them in my pocket. I'll give you a full report upon my return...er...that is, if you will be alone. Should I wait?" he asked, again eyeing the chair Hermione had vacated.

"Hermione is gone for the evening. I will await your return." Severus stood to walk the boy to the door leading to his personal study. "You can activate it in here."

"Thanks."

In only a few moments, the boy was gone. Severus could have throttled the youth for interrupting his evening with Hermione, but he supposed it might have been for the best. If he hadn't come along, he and Hermione would not likely have been able to stop. How did she feel about what had transpired between them? Was she afraid? Had the fear of someone possibly realizing what was truly going on too much for her to handle?

"*Accio parchment*," he called. His magical parchment made its way to him. He waved a hand over it, and said, *Locus Hermione*." Immediately, he was given her location, and he longed to be with her. *Bathing in the Head Girl's bath, alone*. Dare he ever visit her Head Girl dorm as he had in his dream? Would she want to continue where they'd left off? Before he waved his hand to erase the parchment, he noticed another word pop up at the end. *Upset*.

What the hell? Why would she be upset? "Fuck! I did go too far." Disappointed with his lack of control, he fixed a tumbler of brandy and sat down to think things through. He'd pounced on her the moment she'd come through the door. It wasn't as if she'd tried to push him away. She'd responded just as any needy woman would have. She'd wanted him. It had been her reactions that had spurred him on. He'd have to talk to her and explain things to her. He couldn't scare her off now, not after all of his planning. She was nearly begging for him to take her, and it had only been a month since school had started. "Damn it." He would just have to restrain himself, give them a small break, and let her know that even though he *treasured* what happened, it couldn't happen again until she was no longer *this* student. That would put her at ease, and he'd even be keeping his word to the headmaster.

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Hermione dipped under the water to rinse the suds from her hair. The few tears that had leaked onto her face had been washed away. She stood and began drying herself. After that, she brushed her teeth and slipped into bed. She was deeply frustrated and disappointed. It wasn't because he had touched her in such an intimate way. No, it was because she wanted more. Ruddy Malfoy showed up just as she'd begun to ache for something more...anything more. The way his fingers glided along her opening had felt oddly exciting, and she'd nearly passed out with the anticipation. In fact, she'd become slightly frustrated and had started moving with his fingers, hoping he'd take the hint and *really* touch her.

When the knock had come at his door, she'd hoped to disappear. She was sure that it had been the headmaster waiting for entrance. She'd been so afraid that he'd realize what had been going on between the two of them. When she saw that it was Draco, she'd nearly cried with relief. In fact, she'd been fighting an emotional bout of tears when she'd been dismissed. They hadn't come until she'd nearly completed her bath.

Ron had never done anything like that. It was sensual, sexy, and left her feeling needy instead of dirty. Hermione's hand flew to her mouth, and she sat up in realization as to what she'd just done. It wasn't exactly Hermione and Severus that had done that. It was a student and a teacher. He was still Professor Snape to her most of the time and to all of her friends. They were blindly playing right into Voldemort's hand. She'd lied to Harry, to Ron, and to her other friends, and if they ever found out the truth, they would definitely be upset. It would bother Harry deeply. He still hated Snape, mostly. "But I want him," she whispered aloud. "When we're alone, we're only Severus and Hermione. There is no Hogwarts, no student and teacher relationship, and no friends just waiting to interfere."

She lay back down and nearly giggled with glee in remembrance of his lips and hands upon her breasts *I was nearly naked in front of him!* Something sounding like a *squee* made its way from her lips. After a few moments of giddiness, she became somber. She hadn't asked if they were in a relationship. That had been a priority *Damn it! I lost all sense the moment I stepped into his office*. It was hard not to, what with the way he'd waylaid her at the door. Smirking, she snuggled further into the duvet. She couldn't wait until they had time alone again. She would definitely talk to him. Surely he saw their relationship as something more than friendly.

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The Dark Mark made its presence known just as Severus expected. He quickly made his way to a safe location, and he Apparated to his Lord. The moment he was before the man, he knelt in a show of respect.

"Rise," the Dark Lord hissed. "What news have you?"

Severus stood and began reciting all that he'd stowed away for his Lord. "I trust that you were pleased with the mallowsweet that Draco brought to his father."

The ruby-colored slitted eyes narrowed. "When was the exchange?"

"My Lord?" Severus questioned, suddenly alarmed. "Is something amiss?"

"Explain, Severus."

"Lucius instructed Draco to bring him a large amount of mallowsweet, and he gave him a Portkey. The boy delivered it last night. He said that he was with his father for only a moment before he was Portkeyed back to Hogwarts." Severus wondered what he'd revealed. "Was this not your doing?"

"Did the young Malfoy know why his father wanted this?" His eyes were trained on Severus', and he could feel his mind being probed slightly.

"No, Master, he did not. That was what he told me anyway, but I believed him. I thought it odd, as we have no centaur allies amongst us. Their prophesizing is the only thing I can think of that would need mallowsweet."

The Dark Lord nodded. "I know better than to try to persuade the filthy, arrogant beasts to join us. They believe themselves to be superior to us," he spat bitterly. "Filthy half-breeds!"

"Shall I interrogate Draco?"

"I think I shall interrogate Lucius." The calculating wizard seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. "You have done well to bring this to my attention."

"Master, I must explain my part in this," he said suddenly, bowing his head as if in shame. He made sure to sound repentant. "I mapped out the location of the mallowsweet

for Draco and aided him with a path that would less likely draw attention to his departure from the grounds. I fear that I am at fault as well." There! If that didn't sound like a loyal follower disappointed that he'd let his Lord down, nothing would.

"You assumed you were following my orders, and you've openly given the information to me. There will be no punishment for that. If the young Malfoy thought he was doing my bidding, there will be no punishment for him either, but you will tell him to listen to no orders from anyone aside from me unless they come from you."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus nodded. "There is something else. Dumbledore has instructed him to befriend Ginevra Weasley to find out why she is questioning Nymphadora Tonks' loyalties."

"I saw a glimpse of the girl's face on our last meeting. I was biding my time before questioning him. It seemed that he wanted to shield that from me."

"Likely he is embarrassed to have to mingle with her. They have always seen the Weasleys are being beneath them, as poor wizards." He hoped that would be enough to save Draco from further suspicion. It seemed the young wizard had some explaining to do. If he was trying to shield away his relationship with the girl, it was likely that he was truly interested and didn't want to bring her under his Lord's scrutiny. *Quite interesting, that.*

The Dark Lord shook his head in disgust. "Some of the most loyal followers come from the poorest and darkest places. It would bode well for our Lucius to remember that." The wizard's expression changed to a calculating one. "Is this the same girl that Lucius planted my diary with?"

"She is."

"Interesting." His long white fingers tapped against his mouth, his flat nose flaring. "Tell the boy to continue this friendship and even bring it one step further. This will not bother Potter since he believes the boy to be on his side, but I want him to gain the girl's trust. I would like for her to be brought before me at some point in the future."

"If I may ask, my Lord, what interests you about her?"

"I want to see her memories of her times with the diary, of course. I want to see how Potter was able to get past my Basilisk and me that time. I want to see how the girl took to my orders and to me."

"I shall let him know, my Lord."

"Do not tell him of my plans to see her. I shall let that be a surprise."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, on to more pleasant things. What of your concubine?"

"Ah," Severus said, pasting a wicked smile upon his face. "She is coming around most easily. I nearly had things completely as I wanted them last night. Draco interrupted us. I am quite certain that she is taken with me. I believe that false words of love would ensconce her firmly on my side."

"Excellent. I am pleased for you, Severus. Once you have her complete loyalty, we shall decide when to leak the news to Potter." The Dark Lord cackled. "You have pleased Lord Voldemort with your choice. We both get something out of the deal. That little bastard will be so disappointed, he'll not see our final attack coming." The ruby eyes glittered evilly. "Nor will that interfering Dumbledore!"

"Thank you, my Lord."

"There is one other request, my son."

"You've only to name it, Master."

"I want you to spy on Parkinson. Have young Malfoy do it as well. I am curious as to why her father *truly* wants her to couple with that Weasley." The Dark Lord shook his head. "During his questioning, he told me that he thought to drive a wedge between Weasley and Potter eventually with Weasley choosing his daughter over the boy. That is a good plan, as good as yours, but I felt that he was lying to me. He may have come up with that excuse after he realized that I supported your idea. I pretended to believe him." He cackled. "For now. Find out what the reasoning truly is, and let me know. I shall summon you soon."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Go."

Severus didn't need to be told twice. He Disapparated and made his way back down to his dungeons. What the hell was Malfoy playing at? The Dark Lord didn't know anything about it. Oh, how he'd love to be there when the truth came out. It wasn't that he wanted to see harm befall Lucius. The man truly was his friend, after all. No, he was just curious as to what he wanted with the mallowsweet. It was obvious that he didn't include Draco in his scheming. Well, either that or Draco was becoming adept at hiding things...some things. Speaking of which, he needed to get the boy to meet with him. It seemed they had some talking to do about Pansy Parkinson and the youngest Weasley. They would find out exactly what Parkinson's father was up to and make plans to become even more friendly with Ginevra Weasley.

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Hermione was only half listening to Ron's chatter about the upcoming Hogsmeade visit and was surprised to find Harry and he staring at her. "What?"

"Are you going to come with us?" Ron asked.

"Is, uh, is Pansy going to go with you?" she asked uncertainly.

"If you don't want her to, she won't. She and I could just meet up for lunch while you lot has lunch," he said, hoping she'd accept.

"Ron," Hermione began softly, "it's not fair of me to ruin your outing. If I decide to go, then I'll just have to put up with her being there."

"Er...all right," he agreed, eyeing Harry incredulously.

"What of you, Harry? Any dates?"

"Yes," he said. "She'll meet us for lunch."

"Who?" Ron asked quickly.

"Not telling," he replied mysteriously.

"If it's Ginny..."

"I've told you that Ginny and I will never be involved," Harry said hotly. "Stop trying to get me to talk to her."

"He wants you to talk to Ginny?"

"Yeah. Seems he'd rather fancy me than Malfoy, which I don't think she fancies him," Harry said, clearly annoyed.

"I don't think so either," Hermione agreed. She knew that the girl fancied Lupin.

"Well, Ginny says she doesn't want to come with us. I've asked already. Thought it was odd, so I thought they might have wanted to surprise me." Ron shrugged. "Hoped, rather. I just don't like that bastard being around her."

"Lavender and I are pairing off," Neville piped up. Lavender giggled and snuggled closer to him. They'd officially started a relationship.

"I'm undecided," Parvati said, eyes straying to the group across the room. Hermione wondered if she was interested in one of the boys. Seamus maybe? They'd been an item before, lovers even, but they had drifted apart the previous year. Perhaps it was time for them to get back together.

After realizing that Neville hadn't sent the lavender rose or the letter to her, she'd thought that maybe it was Seamus, but part of her wouldn't believe it. Severus' face flashed before her. Was it he? She would ask. Why not? *Ha! Gonna have to add that to the long list of things that I've been needing to ask* She sourly thought of the past week. He'd been a bit harsh with her on two different occasions...both in class. He'd allowed her to do her work on Wednesday, but it was Professor Dumbledore that was overseeing her. Supposedly the Potions master was busy in the village. On Saturday, she'd received an owl saying that he had other obligations and couldn't meet with her.

What was it that she'd done wrong? He'd seemed fine when she'd left that evening. Was he having second thoughts? How much longer would he ignore her? She'd been spying on him in the Great Hall, and he hadn't looked her way one single time. She'd decided that two could play at his little game, so she'd sent a note to him saying that she wasn't feeling well and couldn't make their Wednesday meeting. She'd even gone to Madame Pomfrey for a potion to soothe her *sore throat* in case he checked. It was an incredibly immature thing to do, and if she could change it, she would. However, if he asked, she'd simply maintain that she wasn't well. The upcoming Saturday was the Hogsmeade visit, she'd just say she was too tired to attend their friendly session. He would have to make the first move...if they would be moving forward at all.

"Hermione! Bloody hell. What are you thinking about?" Ron asked, waving a hand in front of her face.

"Suppose I'm just wondering if I'll be an extra wheel on the car. Everyone seems to have a date," she said quickly, hoping they'd buy it. She noticed that Ron looked away guiltily.

"Course not, Mione," Harry said.

"Well, I'll go with you, Hermione," Seamus said, joining them at that moment. He sat down next to her. "I just hope you don't mind stopping by Gladrag's for a few minutes. I've got to pick up a new cloak. Mine has been ruined."

Not wanting to appear rude, she nodded and smiled. "All right. Thanks. Makes me feel a little better." She did note that Parvati was glaring at her for a moment.

"I suppose I'll have to ask someone," the girl said. "See you all later." With that, she got up and flounced off toward the stairs leading to the girls' dormitories.

"Been right mental since her sister disappeared, she has," Seamus said.

"Well, I'd say it's understandable," Hermione said. "Must be a lot to take in, losing her sister that way, never knowing what's happened."

Everyone became solemn after that. She thought of the others that had been lost to them: Hagrid, Dean, Sirius, and Cedric for starters. Who would vanish or be killed next? What other ill would befall them? She looked around at her mates, especially Harry and Ron. Which of them, if any, would be killed the next time Voldemort came around? She couldn't handle losing Harry or Ron. They were like family. It must be hard for Parvati to be without Padma, seeing her face each time she looked in the mirror yet knowing she'd never look upon her again.

"I think I'll have a walk and tend to my patrol," Hermione said. She quickly made her way out to the lake without anyone seeing. Darkness had fallen nearly an hour before. She suddenly wished that she hadn't cancelled her meeting with Severus. That had been ridiculous. He would likely see through her lie and know exactly why she'd missed. Just as she sat down, she heard footsteps behind her. She turned and saw Pansy walking towards her. *Good grief. What the hell does she want?*

"Don't bother to get up, Granger," Pansy said in a hushed voice. "I've never liked you, and I won't pretend to now. I do think that we will have to try to get along, what with me being Ron's girl and all."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "What do you want with Ron suddenly? You've not liked him much either from what I can remember. I think you have some sort of plan, myself."

"He understands things," Pansy reiterated. "I don't have to explain my motives to you. I am simply hoping that we can learn to get along."

"I've already told Ron that I'll put up with your presence. Other than that, I have nothing to say to you," Hermione said firmly. "If you don't mind, I would like to be alone."

Pansy smirked. "I think you're just smarting from his choosing me over you."

"Excuse me?" she asked indignantly. "He would have stayed with me if I had wanted him to do so. I think you're a cow! Couldn't find your own man, so you had to try to take advantage of someone else's?"

"Take advantage!" Pansy laughed. "If you were any kind of girl..."

"That will do, Miss Parkinson." Severus had come upon them. He barely glanced at Hermione as he spoke to Pansy. "I'm sure you have better things to do than to goad this *Gryffindor* into an argument. Off to the castle with you."

Once Pansy was nearly back at the castle, he turned his cold eyes upon her again. She shivered under his gaze. "Feeling better, are we?"

"Yes." She pulled her gaze away from his and looked out over the calm lake. The sliver of moonlight played upon the water's small ripples. It was mostly the castle lighting that reflected upon the surface.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Lie?" She looked back at him and saw how angry he was. "I did not lie. I truly didn't feel well."

"Another *lie!*" he spat angrily, moving closer.

She took in his deep scowl, his angry stance, and the thin, angry line of his lips. How did he know? "You can check with Madame Pomfrey."

"I did," he admitted roughly. "I did find it interesting that you could entertain friends in your dormitory and play games though. If you were well enough to do that, then you should have been well enough to attend your weekly meeting." He smirked. "I do believe that I may cancel your assignment. You're lucky that I do not automatically fail you, Miss Granger."

"Well, Professor, as for my friends visiting, they were just trying to cheer me up. I began to feel the effects of Madame Pomfrey's medicine shortly after their arrival and was able to join in a few games." She folded her arms over her chest and looked back out to the lake. "It's not like you haven't been avoiding me anyway. I'm surprised you noticed."

"I've not been avoiding you," he said heatedly. "There are things that I had to do."

"Right. You just didn't want to see me because of last week. Was I so repulsive? Too inexperienced for you, *sir*?" she asked angrily, jumping up from her position. She tried to brush past him, but he pulled her to him roughly.

"Don't you dare take that tone with me," he warned. "I know you are inexperienced, but that can easily be changed." His voice lowered dangerously. "Repulsive never passed through my mind." A lone finger moved to stroke her cheek, and then it trailed down her throat to her chest. "I admit to thinking things were moving too quickly, and I have decided that what occurred cannot happen again. However, I would not purposely avoid you."

She pulled away. "Why? Why can't it happen again?"

"You are my student. I will not completely cross that line," he said firmly.

"If I wasn't? Would you cross it then?"

"Yes."

"Oh," she gasped as he pulled her close.

"Hell, yes." He nipped her ear lightly. "We will not repeat that again, but I still want to see you."

"It's unfair," she said lightly. "I'm an adult. I know what I want. I might not have been ready to be with Ron, but I am ready for you. I didn't feel this way about him."

She saw the look of surprise pass over his face, and she wanted to simply blow away with the small breeze. She'd said too much. What if he thought her to be some lovesick little girl?

"It can't happen again regardless how you...we feel about each other," he said softly. "Never think that I don't want you."

"Can we no longer kiss?"

"It would not be wise. You've seen how far a kiss can take us," he said, moving to graze her lips with his. "Even now it's too dangerous."

She moved closer for a moment and pulled away abruptly. "How did you know that I had my friends in my dorm last night?"

"I shall not disclose my source."

"You're spying on me?"

"Perhaps."

In a burst of courage, Hermione decided to make a demand. "I want it all or nothing. I can't spend the next nine months with you and not touch you." She backed away from him. "I'm sorry. Let me know."

Severus watched her race back to the castle. *What the fuck was she playing at?* "Nobody gives me an ultimatum, *my Hermione*." As quickly as he could, he made his way to his chambers. He bathed, changed, checked to be sure she was alone in her chambers, and he made his way to her. He muttered her password darkly and entered her room in a flurry of swirling robes.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in disbelief.

He smirked as she scooted back to sit against her headboard. He simply raised an eyebrow and began casting charms. Nobody would be able to hear anything. Nor would they be able to enter.

"I think we should have a talk about your attitude. You need to realize right now that I do not enter *relationships* with foot stamping, spoilt witches. I see you as a woman, Hermione. Do not change the way I view you." He pulled off his robes slowly. "It appears that you are using the same tactic with me that Mister Weasley used with you. I will tell you once, and only this once, that you will never manipulate me to do anything that I don't want to do." Her mouth gaped open, and he congratulated himself. *She hadn't realized that she'd tried Weasley's tactic.* "We also need to discuss the fact that you don't think I want you." He kicked off his boots.

"H-how do you want to discuss that?"

He gave her a wicked grin. "I think words are not needed for that lesson. Actions work so much better, don't you think?" He swooped down upon her and gave her no chance to rebuff him. His lips roughly claimed hers.

Southern's Notes: Muahahaha! Sorry about the cliffhanger, but I thought it'd be a nice place to end. I have to leave part of Hermione's lesson for the next chapter after all. I hope you've enjoyed this one. As I read over their interaction, I find myself unable to wait for the next bit. It's getting heated, isn't it?

Heated Visit

Chapter 8 of 42

In the Head Girl's dorm, Severus and Hermione become a little intimate, but the newly found closeness won't last long.
A misunderstanding angers both.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Severus' lips ravished hers forcefully. Then suddenly, he was gone, pulling away from her. She saw he was kneeling in her bed, unfastening his shirt. Alarmed that she was getting exactly what she'd asked for...no, demanded...she tried to buy some time. "What do you m-mean? L-lesson?" she asked, stammering slightly. He couldn't truly mean to...have her, could he? She'd been annoyed with Pansy's accusations and frustrated that Ron had been able to move on with someone while she hadn't. Thus, she'd taken it out on him by demanding that they be together.

It simply amounted to her being no better to Severus than Ron had been to her. Was that Ron's problem then? Had he been *this* frustrated? *You know he was. He wanted you terribly.* Why couldn't she have just appreciated what she had? She and Ron could have learned together. Things likely wouldn't have worked out in the long run, but at least she'd be all the wiser about relationships. Now, however, she'd landed an experienced man. An experienced man that happened to be in the midst of disrobing...no...crawling back towards her on *her* bed with intentions of making love to her.

Would it be making love? The desire in his eyes and the hardness in his voice told her otherwise. His shirt was halfway unbuttoned. He seemed to be purposely taking his time, eyeing her intently, and hoping to portray his intentions to her. She was suddenly afraid and tried to scoot further back, but her headboard was halting her flight. If she couldn't please Ron, how could she ever please someone like Severus? Memories haunted her suddenly.

Ron's voice came first. *Come on, Mione. I know you want to. Just let me touch it. I just want to feel it!* His disappointed expression flickered through her mind. Had he been disappointed because of the way she'd felt? Was it her lack of arousal? Of course, she hadn't actually allowed him to go too far that time. That had to be it. Severus seemed quite pleased with her.

"What we shared last week was only a slight sample of what we will have together, Hermione." She noted that his voice was dark and dangerous. "Since you are so eager, there is no time like the present. Regardless of my true feelings on the matter, I'll not let you slip away from me on a mere technicality." His hands grasped her ankles, and he pulled her down on the bed, causing her nightgown to ride up and revealing her ivory knickers. She immediately scrambled to sit up. He placed a hand upon her chest to keep her down. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure you should be in here." She looked around wildly, placing a hand upon his bare chest. She enjoyed the firm feel of his chest, but it was only a brief appreciation. She vaguely noticed the pale flesh and smattering of dark hair near the top that thickened as it trailed down to his trousers.

"Changed your mind, have you?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." She was confused. She wanted him. She'd been so sure that it was what she wanted when she'd issued her demands.

He sighed in exasperation, touched the bridge of his nose while shaking his head momentarily before looking at her, but when their gazes locked, she saw that his eyes glinted with lust. "I shall help you make up your mind." The tone of his voice left nothing to the imagination as to what direction he would push her. His face lowered, and he brushed his lips over hers lightly. Drawing back, his eyes met hers again. Some of the softness he reserved for their private meetings had returned to his gaze.

Hermione felt at ease. This was the Severus she knew and wanted. This was the patient Severus...not the frantically disrobing and menacing man that had entered her room. One of her hands raised to cup his face. "Kiss me."

"I just did," he said in amusement, one corner of his mouth quirking up slightly.

She smiled uncertainly. "Really kiss me."

"Here?" he asked cheekily, grazing her lips with his fingers.

"Yes," she answered breathlessly, raising her other hand to cup his face as well. She pulled him to her, arching to meet his kiss.

Instead of pursing his lips to initiate the kiss, he opened his mouth and suckled on her lower lip, starting at the left and ending on the right. Once there, he moved to her upper lip, starting on the right and ending on the left. Hermione could actually feel her lips plumping from his affectionate assault. He trailed quick, small chaste kisses around her mouth before finally kissing her soundly. Severus' tongue glided out to demand entrance to her mouth, probing gently and exploring languidly. The kiss was unhurried and continued on for what felt like eons. When he finally ended the kiss, she could feel that one of his hands was cupping her face. Her own hands had fallen from his face and dropped to the bed. When had that happened?

"Did that classify as a *real* kiss?" he asked smugly.

"Uh-huh," she managed.

"Would you like for me to kiss you here?" His fingers moved from her face to her throat and trailed down to the visible cleavage of her nightgown. She simply nodded, anticipation coursing through her. All she had to do was let things build up, and let him have his way with her. She could do it. Hell, she would enjoy doing it. His kisses left her breathless. They made her feel cherished, special even. That alone made her want to make love with him.

"I do want this," she blurted suddenly. She saw his eyes darken and slit to a near close.

His face lowered again and his tongue laved a path from the base of her throat to the lobe of her ear where he nibbled gently. When he spoke into her ear, she could feel his voice vibrating within even though he was only speaking in a low, seductive tone. "You want me to penetrate you?"

She shivered at the thought of him sliding into her depths. "Yes," she whimpered. He moved over her, and parted her legs with his knees. Only her knickers and his trousers separated their bare flesh. She wondered what would it feel like to have his penis rubbing lightly against her as his fingers had the previous week and nearly asked him to do so. His hips rotated slightly, causing him to grind against her, breaking her concentration. Hermione's breath caught in realization. "Oh." Even though they were clothed, she could still feel his bulge rubbing against her provocatively, arousing her.

"You want to feel me thrusting, grinding, and sliding in and out of you?" To accentuate his meaning, he began moving against her in earnest. His mouth was still near her ear, and his voice was wreaking havoc on her body, causing her to moan lightly and arch into him. Taking that as an affirmative, he asked, "Want to hear me breathing your name heavily against your ear as I reach culmination?"

"Oh, God," she mumbled. Hermione's mind was whirling. She was dazed. The tension his rotating groin was creating against hers was almost unbearable. "Severus, I feel...oh!" She could practically feel the head of his penis sliding back and forth along her crevice before grinding firmly against her clitoris.

His torturing movements continued. "What do you feel?" he asked, barely a whisper.

She could feel the tension building, and that glorious feeling that something was coming to overtake her. "It's coming for me," she whispered, closing her eyes. She lost all thought and concentrated on the feeling of him moving against her. Her legs tensed and stiffened in anticipation, heels of her feet digging down into the mattress, toes pointing straight.

"Let it," he growled. "Let me hear you."

Hermione was uncertain of what he wanted to hear exactly, but she knew she could find no other words to explain how she felt to him. "It's...oh...here it is. Oh, my Lord...Severus!" The need to feel him pressing more firmly against her and rubbing against her more quickly had her holding onto his shoulders, arching and moving against him. He emitted low guttural grunts that completely aroused her and helped the waves crash over her. "Ah! Yes," she hissed, sounding like a serpent intent on tempting its prey to move closer. Then, suddenly and loudly, she exclaimed, "Severus!" With hands clutching the duvet, she began moaning and chanting his name. Her entire body trembled as the feelings overcame her, like a large wave that finally reaches the shore, and then the feelings subsided, reminding her of receding water after it breaks on the beach. With one last shudder, her legs...when had they wrapped around him...fell limply back to the bed, as did her hands. Her eyes remained closed; the

only sound was the noise of her heart beating in her ears.

She could feel small kisses being delivered to her face, but she couldn't move to reciprocate, nor did she want to. Mortification and excitement that she'd just had an orgasm with him witnessing it filled her. Slowly, she peeked at him through slitted eyes. His eyes were not on hers. He was currently nibbling on her fingers. When had he started that? What was wrong with her? Would pleasure by his hand...er, body...always be so mind boggling? She could feel the dampness of her knickers and inner flesh. Feeling as though she needed to wash herself, she longed to go to the loo. Instead, she squeaked out one word.

"Hi." He smirked and moved to the side. She was uncertain as to what to say to him. She wondered if he'd also had an orgasm. Surely those groans had signaled that. "Did...uh...you...?"

Severus shook his head. "No. It's all right." He released her hand and moved to cup her face. "I didn't expect you to, but I, for one, am certainly glad that you did." The pad of his thumb traced her lower lip.

"Should I not have?" she asked innocently.

"Anytime you are able to find release, you take it."

Guilt washed over her. He'd not found his release, though it was apparent that he would like nothing more. His lips were nearly upon hers when she asked, "May I touch you?" The startled expression that came over his face was priceless. She'd seen it once before, back in her first year, when she'd lied to the professors and said that she'd gone after the escaped troll herself.

He sucked in a deep breath, lay back against her pillows, murmuring, "As you wish."

Not having to be told twice, she sat up. What should she do? Not wanting to touch him *there* first, she reached out to touch his lips. Her fingers traced them before moving to his throat and chest. Once she'd acquainted herself with both pectoral areas, her hand moved slowly down the path to his groin. She could see the bulge and knew exactly where to place her hand. As she neared, she heard the slight intake of his breath and took that to indicate that she was doing the right thing. Lightly, her hand cupped his hardness, giving him gentle squeezes.

It was then that she lost herself in her exploration. This was something new, and she had the need to learn all that she could. Moving to kneel next to him, her other hand joined the first, one on either side of the bulge, both rubbing and tracing the outline. When he groaned, she paused. "All right?"

"Fine," he said tightly, nudging her hands with his midsection.

She supposed that he meant for her to carry on. He was bigger than Ron could ever hope to be. Was this better or worse? *It's better, of course...even I know that.* The only thing was that it would likely hurt more. She thought of Parvati's words. No pain, really. Shrugging, she concentrated at the task before her. The urge to unfasten his trousers and actually *see* what she was touching was overwhelming.

Severus smirked as the mixed expressions passed over her face. Hermione's face held a mixture of awe, trepidation, and yearning. Her hands were shaking, though he doubted that she noticed. Inch by inch, they slid up to the clasp of his trousers. When he'd first entered, he'd been intent on showing and giving her exactly what she'd asked of him, but then he realized that if he did that, he would have been playing into her hands. Hadn't she *demande*d that of him? He'd seen the shock and even terror on her face when he began disrobing. The way she'd tried to buy some extra time to ready herself or change his mind had been amusing.

It had been the fear in her eyes and in her voice that changed his mind. He knew that things wouldn't carry on any farther than he wanted it to. It was hard to keep himself from ripping her clothes away and slamming into her. When she'd admitted that she wanted it, he'd nearly taken her then, but he'd had other plans. He'd wanted to make her writhe and beg. It had been a surprise when she'd responded so eagerly to his simple movements when he'd begun to press his erection against her. No woman had ever been utterly turned on by foreplay of that type before. *Hell, I've never tried that before. I normally just slide on in.* He mentally shrugged and paid attention to the trembling witch kneeling before him, unfastening his trousers.

Dare he allow her to continue? He supposed he should. Hadn't he just told her to take release anytime she could? Why couldn't he accept what she was eagerly trying to give him? *I should make a show of trying to stop her.* "Hermione," he said, voice taking on a concerned tone. "You don't have to do that."

As he hoped, she replied, "I want to touch you."

If he allowed her to continue with the unfastening of his trousers, she would know him far more intimately than anyone at the castle. Was he ready to bare himself to her? *It would give her a feeling of power to be able to touch me and have me climax under her ministrations.* It would appeal to her womanly senses. It would prove to her that she could please him, even through simple touches. It wouldn't hurt to momentarily give her control of the situation...of him. It would serve his purpose and ensnare her further.

Her shy digits slowly unfastened his trousers and innocently tugged them down. He lifted his hips slightly, allowing her to pull them down to his thighs. Once there, she abandoned them and moved to lower his underpants. When he showed no signs of hesitation, her eyes lifted to meet his. "C-can I?" He simply nodded and raised his hips.

The smirk reappeared as her eyes widened when she finally eyed his hardened flesh jutting out proudly. *Bit more than Weasley has, eh?* One of her hands tentatively touched his tip. He exhaled a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. She jerked her hand away and looked at him. "Go on."

"It twitched."

He tried to keep his expression blank, but when she broke into peals of giggles, the corners of his mouth quirked up in amusement. "That's not all it does." Her cheeks burned brightly, and he realized that she was trying to work through embarrassment. Taking pity on her, he took one of her hands in his and guided it down to his erection. He positioned it as it should be, and he showed her how to move and the correct amount of pressure to grip him with. He smiled in earnest as she bit her lip and began to work as he'd shown her. He took her other hand and placed it on his scrotum. He moved her fingers beneath and around until she began exploring on her own.

Proudly, he lay back to watch her. She'd only faltered her movements momentarily when he'd added to her task. He wondered what else she could do. She did have a knack for multitasking. He'd witnessed that on many occasions in his class. Easily, Severus placed his fingers on her cheek to make her look at him. "Kiss me," he demanded in a silky whisper. When she leant forward, she began to move her hands. He quickly steadied her, raising an eyebrow in challenge. It seemed that she understood that she was to continue stroking and fondling him whilst they kissed. She shifted to lie beside him, and he turned to accommodate her. The kiss was heated, tongues entwining fervently, twirling in time with her frantic hand movements.

The heat began to pool in his testicles, and he could feel himself tightening in anticipation. Her jerky, unpracticed movements were turning him on. He broke the kiss and pushed her head gently to his chest, hoping she would get the hint. Her lips, tongue, and teeth began assaulting his flesh anew. "Yes," he hissed in approval. "Very good." Both hands moved quickly, one abandoning his scrotum to join the other working his shaft. It teased his head and rolled the light dampness there about, causing him to groan loudly. "Do not stop." He wished privately that her lips would be upon him, but this would do...for now. Grunting and arching up into her hands, his release found him. For her benefit, he growled out her name a few times.

Severus closed his eyes and enjoyed the satisfying peace that flowed through his body. It took him a few moments to realize that she wasn't lying next to him any longer. He cracked open his eyes and saw her sitting up, looking at her hands. When she noticed he was looking, she said, "It's hot."

Some of his semen had landed on her hands. "*Accio wand!*" he called. His wand flew into his hand. "*Scourgify!*" All traces of his released excitement vanished from his flesh and hers. After pulling up his clothing, his free hand pulled her down to lie next to him. Before placing his wand on the nightstand, he pointed it towards her knickers and muttered another Cleansing Charm. He held her without speaking for a long time. Finally, he whispered, "Thank you."

"Thank you," came the shy reply. "Severus, earlier, you said that you had feelings on the matter. What are those?"

He wondered when she would question that. "I do not think we should consummate our...relationship. It goes against school policy, and I would tarnish the trust the headmaster has in me." *Not that I really care. However, she will appreciate my false concern...even respect me for it.*

"Do we truly have a relationship?"

Damn! What was the answer to her question? In all actuality, it had only been about two months since he'd taken an interest in her and began taking measures to ensure she'd be his. What did she want to hear? Did she want promises? Her voice had taken on a hopeful tone. *I might as well let her know what I want. It would likely lure her in even more.* "So it would seem. Hermione, I don't give affection lightly. Do you not feel *something* more than lust?"

"I do," she admitted eagerly. "You?"

He smirked inwardly, but he schooled his expression to remain thoughtful. "I do feel something, yes." He kissed her brow. "You belong to me, now and always. I would not have allowed myself to pursue our interest had I not *felt* something."

"Do you belong to me?" she asked, pulling back to look into his eyes.

What the hell? He hadn't expected that, but he was glad that she'd asked. "Yes. I want no other." The broad smile she flashed warmed him. She was as good as his when he chose to have her. Now, he only had to keep from ravaging her in order to solidify her trust in him and their newfound relationship. Feeling devious, he lowered his voice seductively, saying, "I would like nothing more than to make love to you, but as long as you are *my* student, it's impossible."

"Severus, about what I said earlier, I was only angry because Pansy..."

He placed a finger on her lips. "I know." He figured that he might as well discuss a few things. "I cannot have you talking to me as you did earlier. When I first came here, I was intent on giving you exactly what you'd asked for." He grinned wickedly for a moment, thinking of the plans he'd had. If he had followed through with them, he'd have been playing into her manipulation. Thankfully, he was able to halt when needed. "It would have been *my* way, and I'm quite certain you would not have liked what I had in mind, not at first anyway." He delighted in her sudden shiver. "Make no mistake. I am no boy to be bossed around." He kissed her with ferocious intensity to further prove that he was not merely a boy.

Breathless, she said, "Definitely not."

Wanting his ego boosted, he asked, "Weasley ever kiss you that way? Krum?"

"Never."

"Do you realize why?"

"They are both boys?" she asked, voice taking on a hopeful tone.

"Mostly." He kissed her again impulsively, trying to show her how he felt, show her that she belonged to him, show her he would kill to keep her. As he thought along those lines, he felt himself hardening, ready to have contact with her again. He wouldn't though, not yet...but soon. "You're my woman, Hermione," he whispered.

"Yes," she agreed, seemingly dazed. "Always."

"I shall hold you to that." Severus pulled her to him tightly. Without thinking, he said, "I shall take care of you no matter what happens in this war."

Hermione's head jerked back. "What?"

Fuck! I need to have a care with my words. "If Boy Wonder doesn't win, have you thought of that?" He raised an eyebrow when she didn't answer. "Oh, come now, Hermione. You can never tell me that you've not had your doubts at one point or another."

"I haven't," she said, almost defiantly. "Harry will defeat him. He always does."

The loyalty she held for Potter was endearing, but he'd have to change all of that. There was only one place that her loyalties should lie...that was with him, not bloody Harry Potter. "And, do tell me, dear. What would you do if he doesn't?"

"If he fails, then so do I," she said firmly, eyeing him for a reaction.

Her words didn't sit well with him. "If he fails, it means he's met his death."

"As will I."

Severus abruptly pushed away from her and left the bed. She sat up quickly and reached for him, but he evaded her touch. He narrowed his eyes, feeling betrayed. "You dare tell me that you care for me, want a relationship with me, and all the while you are thinking of nothing but *Potter*?"

"That's not true," she said heatedly. "I think of you always, even more so lately...especially when I can't go to you. The entire reasoning behind our being on friendly terms is because you needed me to trick Voldemort's spy. We just..."

"Enough!" He bellowed suddenly. The witch dared to lecture him? "Never speak my Master's name! I will listen to your excuses no more." As quickly as he could, he began fastening his shirt. He felt her hands on his shoulders and shrugged away. When he felt them upon him again, he couldn't control his rage. He turned around and pushed her back down upon the bed, pinning her beneath him with his weight. His voice was a deadly whisper when he finally spoke. "I've worked too hard and too long to secure my survival in this world to allow the one woman I have chosen as a mate to follow Potter to his death."

"You speak as if Harry has lost already," she bit out.

He knew that his weight was making breathing difficult, but he felt that she deserved it. "I only speak theoretically. Would you not live for me? Fight for me?"

"Yes," she answered instantly.

Severus shifted so that his weight wasn't entirely upon her, but he was only slightly mollified by her answer. "No matter what happens, Hermione, I want you to promise that you will not put yourself in harm's way needlessly." A vision of her taking a hex meant for Potter flashed through his mind. "Live for me."

Tears formed in Hermione's eyes as he spoke. She maneuvered to touch his cheek. "Will you live for me...no matter what?"

"I shall survive, and I have ensured that we will have a place in this world no matter the victor." He saw recognition in her eyes. "If your friend...the Wizarding world's savior...loses against the Dark Lord, we shall continue on. It can be just as I've allowed him to think."

She nodded. "Until we could find a way to kill the bastard," she said, a new light shining in her eyes.

Bloody fucking hell. If the Dark Lord wins, dear, we shall learn to accept it and do his bidding."Yes," he said, allowing her to believe that would be the plan. If that was the case, there was plenty of time to gain her complete confidence...and obedience. She would understand that it was in their best interest to simply do what they must for themselves.

"However," she continued, "we know that Harry always comes out on top when they meet. There is no need for us to think this way." She moved to kiss his lips, but he turned his face, giving her his cheek. "Please don't be that way. I just have faith in things, Severus. We will be happy...together."

At those words, he turned back to face her, letting her see the raw emotion in his gaze. "I guarantee it. *I shall prepare for all possibilities. Over time you'll do the same, Hermione. You'll learn to trust my judgement and not question it.* He claimed her lips once again and moved away from her. "If I do not leave now, I fear that you will have an overnight guest." As much as he wanted that, he knew she was not truly ready for him. She still had too many innocent responses to his advances and wasn't thinking about the future clearly. One should always prepare for all outcomes.

"Oh, wait," she said suddenly, sounding guilty. "I suppose there is something you should know about the Hogsmeade visit."

He didn't like the sound of that. Why would her cheeks be flushing if it were anything good? "Well?" he asked finally.

"I'm going with my friends, and we were all talking about everyone being part of a couple. Well, Seamus...you see...he offered to come with me...a friendly gesture only!" She moved closer. "I just wanted you to hear it from me and not think any..."

"How could I not think anything of it?" he asked angrily. "I'll not EVER approve of you cavorting about with another man." He smiled nastily. "In this case, with another boy." He peeled her fingers from his forearms and backed up even further. "You will break off this *date*"

She blinked in astonishment. "I can't, Severus. I would much rather it be you that comes, but seeing as we have to keep a secret, I didn't think it would be bad to have a strictly friendly date with someone. Besides, all the others will be there as well."

He nodded once. "You've made your decision then."

"W-what?" she asked incredulously.

"First, you show me where your heart truly belongs...Potter! Now, you show me that you will defy my wishes and seek out the company of another." He shook his head in disgust. "What will the Dark Lord think? You could very well be putting that boy...and us...in danger," he said warningly. He held up a hand to silence her. "I will take my leave now."

Without a backward glance, he left her alone, kneeling in her bed. She hadn't thought about how it would look to anyone that saw her with Seamus, but how could she break the date? It had been made, and it was only friendly. In fact, to most others, it would just look like a group of mates going to Hogsmeade together. She began mumbling to herself angrily. "How dare he? Comes here, nearly makes love to me, lectures me about things, and demands I rearrange my plans to suit him?"

She fell back to her bed and thought of the night's events. First, she'd had to deal with Pansy, and then he'd come along. She didn't regret what happened between them. A prideful smile graced her face as she thought of him arching into her hands and calling out her name as his orgasm came to him. *I did that. I made him happy.* He was much bigger than Ron in that section. She wondered if maybe Ron was still growing. No matter. She'd leave Pansy to it. She had her own lover to worry about.

"Oh, no," she breathed. They'd just established that they did have a relationship between them. They'd even gone as far as to say they had a future together, after she graduated of course. It was more than sexual, more than a trick for the Dark Lord. Severus Snape wanted her for all time. Did she ruin it with the ruddy Hogsmeade weekend? She supposed she could always cry off, claiming to be sick. Parvati wouldn't mind sliding into her spot, would she?

It wasn't that she truly wanted to go. If the truth be known, she would rather stay at the castle with Severus. It would be the perfect time for them to get cozy. Hermione frowned slightly. They could never make love while she was still a student...he'd not allow it...but they could snog a bit. She shook the thoughts away. The point of the matter is that he'd demanded that she not go! He'd given her some silent ultimatum clearly believing that she would change her plans because he wished it to be so. She certainly didn't appreciate that, and she would follow through with her plans...just to prove a point if nothing else.

Hermione Granger was capable of making her own decisions. *I simply hope I am making the correct decision about this weekend.* An unsettling feeling overcame her. What if something happened to Seamus? What if something happened to Severus? Maybe the spy would see her with her friends and tell Voldemort that she'd not taken the opportunity to be with her *lover*, and instead, she'd gone off with another date and her mates. Part of her wanted to go to him and tell him that she would not be going after all, but the other part of her demanded that she go. She could not lose her opinions or her identity in their relationship. "Hogsmeade, here I come."

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Severus watched her through narrowed eyes as she made her way out of the castle with her group of friends. Finnegan was lucky. It appeared that he didn't truly fancy Hermione. The boy couldn't keep his eyes off of Patil...though that wasn't saying much. Most of the others were eyeing her as well. She was flouncing about, wearing a very low cut blouse. If the boy had appeared *eager* to be his witch's date, he'd have answered to him in some way. Hermione's shoulders were hunched, and she wasn't talkative. This caused him to smirk. It served her right to feel guilty. He'd not spoken to her since she'd told him of her plans. She tried to stay after class the previous day, but he'd thwarted her impromptu meeting by forcing another student to remain as well. She'd have to learn her lesson.

In truth, he didn't care if someone saw her with Finnegan. He knew that she held no true interest for the dunderhead. The Dark Lord would think nothing of it. They had appearances to keep up with the other students, after all. His Lord was anything but stupid...never that. At times, he never thought things out properly, but no one could call him a fool.

"Are you sure you don't want to come, Severus?" McGonagall asked sharply. "A couple of drinks wouldn't be amiss, what with all he stress lately."

"No, thank you. I've some research to be doing today." He nodded brusquely and left her in the entrance hall, taking the stairwell that led down to his office in the dungeons. He paused on the last step. Draco was leaning against the wall, looking angry, and muttering curses to himself. "Something wrong?"

The boy jumped. "Nothing, sir. Off to Hogsmeade." He began striding forward.

"Why do you look as if you've been caught doing something?" Severus asked suspiciously.

"Because, sir, Dumbledore was just here. I thought he'd come back again and would ask why I hadn't moved."

"Why haven't you?"

"I'm waiting for G...Goyle."

"Very well." Severus swept past the boy, wondering what he was lying about. It was likely that he'd made plans with Miss Weasley, not Goyle, and he didn't want to be caught by anyone else. Why did he look so guilty? *Perhaps I should go to Hogsmeade...just to be sure nothing is amiss. I could always go under the guise that I decided to take Minerva up on the drink offer.* He sighed at the sight before him. "Headmaster." Dumbledore was leaning casually on his doorjamb.

"Lovely day to be hidden away in the dungeons, Severus. I was just telling the young Malfoy that," he said jovially.

"Dare I ask if you'd like to enter?" He muttered the passwords and led the way.

"I wanted to talk to you about our Miss Granger." Here his voice took a stern tone. "It seems that she missed her rounds last night and this morning. Filius says that she seems detached lately. Have *you* noticed anything?"

Though the man was smiling, Severus could hear the seriousness in his tone and see it in his eyes. He remembered the man's warning weeks prior. "Yes, she has a lot on her mind as of late, but I've not seen a decline in her class work, Headmaster. Why, just the other day she missed our weekly meeting. It seems she wasn't feeling well. Madame Pomfrey can account for it. Maybe her missed rounds have something to do with that."

"Indeed." The one word held accusation and suspicion, but nothing else was said. "I saw that she and Mr. Finnegan made plans for today. Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

It seemed that the man was hoping that he'd called things off, that he'd changed his mind about getting *close* to her. "Nothing has changed." Things had changed. He'd not been speaking to her and was angry with her, but the meddlesome man need not know that. Well, it was likely that he did know already, but he need not know the exact details.

Abruptly changing the subject, Dumbledore said, "I wonder what Draco was truly doing down here. Most of the Slytherin students have already left for Hogsmeade. I don't believe he is waiting for one of them. I'm sure it's Miss Weasley that he is planning to meet, if anyone. I do wonder why she would go on to the village without meeting him." He smiled lightly. "I saw her leave earlier."

"Interesting," Severus commented, glad to have his personal business out of the conversation. "I believe Minerva offered to have drinks with me. Research can wait." If the headmaster had also noticed Draco's fidgeting and seen through his suspicious manner, then he needed to be watched. Something wasn't right.

"Excellent," he said. He walked towards the door. "And, Severus?"

*Damn! Here it comes!* "Yes?"

"You did not forget to let me know if things progressed with our Head Girl, did you?"

"I will not have sex with her whilst she is still my student," he said, bypassing the other things they'd done together. "As she is still my student, I think that we can safely assume that hasn't happened yet."

Dumbledore nodded and left. *Sometimes the old man goes too far.* In a dark mood, Severus made his way through the dungeons and out of the castle. The closer he got to the village, the more foreboding he felt. It was as if something was going to go wrong. He snorted as a vision of him pouncing on Finnegan passed through his mind. No, it wasn't anything as trivial as that. It was something else. Something wasn't right. He suddenly felt the need to protect what was his and Apparated to Hogsmeade. He needed to find her and be sure that she was all right.

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**Southern's Notes:** I would like for you to take a moment to read my story, *Where Your Loyalties Lie*, if you haven't done so. I don't think many of you had the chance to read it yet. It's my take on Snape if he'd truly be a Death Eater. The ending is not horrid, so don't worry about that. You can click on my name to find it under my list of stories. Please let me know what you think. I might do more of my Snape characters that way, though I'm uncertain.

Up Next: I feel compelled to warn you that something will happen in Hogsmeade. I've many plans for this story and a handful of characters in it. The visit to town will be very eventful. Hehe...It must be done, and yes, there will be character death. Fear not, as it isn't a main character. Just a friendly warning all the same.

## Hogsmeade: Part 1

*Chapter 9 of 42*

Hermione and her friends visit Hogsmeade. Can Severus save her from the fate that awaits her at the Shrieking Shack?

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks to my beta, Charmed\_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

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Hermione laughed wildly as Ron and Neville pretended to be Fred and George by finishing each other's sentences and making jokes. Things hadn't been all that bad. Pansy remained quiet, ignoring her...well, most of them actually...and only speaking quietly with Ron. She continued to look around though, as if she were worried that someone would catch her consorting with the wrong group of people. They'd all decided to visit Zonko's first where the boys had bought a few things before making their way to the pub.

"This is..." Ron said.

"...great," Neville finished. "Would you..."

"...like to join us?"

Their questions were directed to two Hufflepuff students, fourth years if she remembered correctly. She was uncertain as to their names, but she smiled in welcome all the same. The pub was crowded, and there were no vacant tables. "We can make room," she added.

The girl looked to the boy and grinned broadly. "All right. I'm Laura Madley. This is Kevin Whitby, my date," she finished proudly, taking a seat next to Neville.

"Hi," the boy said.

Conversation resumed right away, laughter at Ron and Neville continued, and Hermione quietly watched them all. Harry seemed to be watching the door; his mystery date still hadn't arrived. Lavender was glued to Neville, clearly enamored with him. That made her smile. Neville deserved it. He'd come such a long way from being that shy, round-faced, little boy she'd first met on the train to Hogwarts. Ginny had taken to conversing with the two newcomers, seeming to know them. Parvati was trying to flirt with Seamus, but he was pretending to be interested in Ron and Neville's tale.

"Finally," Harry said, getting up to move towards the door. He met a tall, blonde there. Hermione recognized her immediately. His *friend* was Gabrielle Delacour. She

wondered how long Harry had been talking to her and how they had had time to become so friendly.

"That tosser! He didn't tell me he was seeing *her*. How'd he land her?" Ron said in disbelief. He eyed Ginny. "Did you know that Bill and Fleur had them talking?"

Ginny shrugged. "I didn't know about it." She seemed unconcerned momentarily, but then she gasped, causing everyone to look up. Others had come with Gabrielle. Tonks and Lupin were waving and making their way forward.

Hermione knew that this didn't bode well. Ginny would likely be upset. Seeing the man she loved going about with another woman must be horrible *it would be no different for me. How would I feel if Snape had another lover? Would I be jealous?* She knew that she would. *Hang on! Love? There is that word again!* Pushing the thoughts away, she concentrated on Ginny. Hermione wondered how nobody else could see the pain in her eyes.

"Hello, all," Lupin greeted.

"Wotcher," Tonks said.

Even Hermione felt like joining Ginny with rolling her eyes. Did Tonks not know any other greeting? She was so predictable. "Hi," she returned, along with everyone else.

"Hope you don't mind. Bill asked us to bring Gabrielle over." He whispered a bit of magic, expanding the table and conjuring two extra chairs. Unfortunately, he sat next to Ginny. This brightened the girl up considerably. "Hello, Ginny," he said quietly. "Having a nice time?"

"Yes," she said, beaming at him. "Now that you've come."

"Everybody this is Gabrielle, my...er...date," Harry said nervously.

Before anyone could say anything, Draco Malfoy walked up. His normal cronies accompanied him. "Bit young for you, isn't she, Potter?"

"Shove off, Malfoy."

Draco looked at his mates and said, "Hit a sore spot, didn't I?" The pair grunted in agreement. "She looked about eight last time I saw her. Doesn't look much older now."

"I was almost twelve zee last time I was 'ere," Gabrielle said indignantly. "Who is 'e?" She looked to Harry and then back to Malfoy. "I 'ope you don't zink you can bozzer me..."

"Get out of here, *Malfoy!*" Ron yelled, cutting off her reply and reaching to grab Harry.

Malfoy sneered at everyone individually. He spoke when he saw Pansy. "Still can't believe you'd rather spend your time with this lot. Your father will hear about this." His eyes moved to Tonks and Lupin. He promptly began to howl like a wolf, earning laughter from his mates. "Wouldn't sit too close there, little Weaslette."

To Hermione's eyes, Ginny seemed torn. *Does she and Draco have something else going on? Why isn't he attacking her? He looks jealous* Trying to break the tension, Hermione said, "Sit down with us, Gabrielle. Come on, Harry. Don't let him bother you." She nodded to Ron. "Pull him down."

Pansy shot her a dark gaze. "He doesn't need to be taking orders from you."

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Look, Pansy..."

"Address me as Parkinson, Granger," the girl bit out.

"Now, see here," Ron began.

"See what?" she asked briskly, daring him to take Hermione's side.

"Don't worry about it, Ron," Hermione said, standing up. "I'm sorry. I really tried. If I stay here one minute longer..." She allowed her voice to trail off in a threat.

"Come on, Mione. Don't leave," Harry said. "I want you here."

"Oooohoo," Draco said. "Looks like Potter's little group is breaking apart. I suppose that's not a bad thing."

"Shove off, Malfoy," Ginny said hotly, moving back. "I'm coming with you, Hermione."

Lupin spoke. "I thought we might have a word, Ginevra." His hand pulled at her arm. She looked between Lupin and Malfoy and seemed to be on the verge of sitting down when Tonks spoke.

"Yes, have a seat. Don't leave just yet."

That made Ginny's decision for her. Hermione shook her head in exasperation. If the clumsy witch had been quiet, Ginny would have stayed, and things could have been worked out. Maybe the entire misunderstanding Ginny had with Tonks and Harry could have been laid to rest.

"No, thanks," Ginny said icily. "Come on, Hermione."

"I'm going to stay here. Is that all right?" Seamus asked quickly.

Hermione nodded, and to her surprise, the two Hufflepuff students rose. "We'll, uh, be going as well," Laura said.

Draco and his two thugs had disappeared before they even left the building. She wondered if he hadn't gotten what he wanted...Ginny away from Lupin. Hermione vowed to find out what he was playing at as soon as she could. Out on the street, she saw no sign of them. Where had they scurried off to so quickly? The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. It felt as if someone was watching them. Who? She knew that Severus stayed at the castle. It couldn't be him.

"Where would you like to go?" Kevin asked as he took Laura's hand in his.

"Let's go into here for a moment. I've an owl to rent," Ginny said quickly. "It won't take long."

"I'll just wait out here," Hermione said impulsively.

"We'll go in with her. There are some scented scroll seals we can purchase!" Laura said, pulling her date forward.

Hermione simply nodded and looked around. It still felt as if someone were watching her. She backed towards the wall of the building to keep a look out of all in front of her without the worry of being taken from behind. As her back pressed against the wall, she realized that something wasn't right. Just as she turned around, realizing it was a person she'd backed into, a hand clamped over her mouth. Without anyone noticing, she was pulled into the small, dark alley between the buildings and pushed roughly against the wall. She scrambled for her wand, but her captor pulled her arms up and over her head, holding them firmly against the wall.

She realized who it was. "Severus," she breathed in relief. "What are you doing here?"

His lips crushed over hers roughly, possessively. Not waiting for acceptance, his tongue plied her lips open and ravished her mouth, causing her tongue to mimic his assault. She could feel his arousal grinding against her as he continued to pin her body to the wall with his. Sense began to leave her. Day turned to night. Up could have been down for all she knew. His kiss was powerful and mesmerizing. When he finally ended the kiss with a faint brushing of his lips, she whimpered, wanting him to kiss her again.

"Where is your date?" he growled.

"Who?" she asked dazedly.

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Don't play coy with me. Where is Finnegan?"

Hermione came to her senses and scoffed. "It wasn't *areal* date! I told you that already." His hand moved down to slide beneath her skirt. "Severus!" she hissed. "Someone will see us."

"No, I've cast the proper charms," he said, dark eyes penetrating hers, daring her to object.

She moved forward to place a kiss upon his lips and made to pull him closer. As she did so, she froze. "Stop!"

"What?" he asked incredulously. The hand at the hem of her knickers stopped, but it held on tightly.

"You have been an arse to me," she said, raising her chin defiantly. "You can't think that you can just come to me now without so much as a talk. I tried to talk to you..." His lips silenced her, causing her resistance to weaken. When she felt his fingers slip into her knickers, she came to her senses and pulled away. "Please stop." Severus pulled his hand away from her and stepped back hastily. It was evident that he was angry. She regretted the loss immediately. When he turned to stalk away, she reached out to grab his arm. "Wait."

"I will not be turned down like some fumbling school boy," he said in a low voice. "Adults, Hermione, do not let a minor argument stand in the way of pleasure." He pounced on her again, pushing her back into the wall. "In fact," he said silkily, "sex is one way of working through things without all those needless words and apologies."

"You mean to say...do you want that? *Now?* I thought..."

He lifted a finger to her lips. "I did not mean actual penetration."

Hermione's cheeks reddened. *Why should it matter? He's talking to me again. He's not angry any longer. I want him.* "Can I come to you later?" she asked suddenly, surprising herself. The smug smile was all the answer she needed. She hugged him tightly and willed her frustrated tears away. She'd missed him. She would go to him, they would work through things his way, and then, after that was done, they would have a talk. He seemed to be right talkative in the afterglow of his last climax. It would be no different after his next. She'd be sure to get things straight.

"I shall await your visit," he said, nodding slightly. In a sweep of his robes, he disappeared through the other end of the alleyway.

Hermione quickly went back to wait on her friends. Almost immediately the trio came out. Kevin and Laura began talking about the different scents they'd purchased as they began to walk. Ginny shrugged and stifled a giggle when Hermione shot her a questioning look.

"I want to see the Shrieking Shack," Kevin said suddenly.

"Really? I thought you said you didn't want..." Laura said, voice trailing off. "I want to see the Shrieking Shack."

"Why don't we wait for the others," Hermione said. She knew that they shouldn't venture off alone. She looked to Ginny for agreement.

Ginny looked off in the distance. "I want to visit the Shrieking Shack."

"What?" Hermione asked, confused. Almost immediately, the most pleasant feeling passed through Hermione's body. She felt so relaxed. It was as if there was not a care in the world...Wizarding or Muggle. *Go to the Shrieking Shack. See if you are courageous enough to brave the ghouls there.* She smiled. "Let's go to the Shrieking Shack." The four started their trek towards the desolate part of Hogsmeade.

Something seemed so wrong, but she it felt too good to fight it. *Hang on! There aren't any ghouls at the Shrieking Shack! That was Lupin that made those noises long ago!* She shook her head. *Don't think I'm going to go, thanks.* "Let's get Harry," she said suddenly. Her mates ignored her. She tried to turn back, but her legs continued to move forward. "NO!" In an instant, it became apparent as to what was taking place. Someone had placed the Imperius Curse upon the four. This did not bode well. Using nearly all of her physical and mental strength, she fought to turn back. Just when she was able to move a few feet, the pleasant feeling hit her again full force. *Follow your friends. Be sure all is well.*

Yes. She had to be sure all was well. Her friends were heading into trouble *Why would there be trouble?* She became internally confused and simply stopped questioning things. The Shrieking Shack came into view finally. They stopped near a fence amidst some trees.

"*Finite Incantatem,*" a cold voice said from behind them.

The pleasant feeling abruptly ended. Hermione turned around slowly and faced four Death Eaters. "What do you want?" she asked quickly, moving to stand in front of the others.

"Stand aside," said one. "You'll not interfere here today."

She looked into the eyes of the one closest. Cold grey eyes seemed to be boring into her *Oh, God, no! It's Draco!* She took in the man's arrogant stance and height. *Bloody hell! Not Draco! It's Lucius Malfoy!*

"Why did you summon her?" he asked one of his mates, pointing at Hermione.

"She would have alerted someone," the man replied. "She came to her senses and tried to go back."

Hermione tried to place his voice, but she was uncertain as to whom it could be. It was then that she realized that someone else was happening upon them. It was a black centaur. She'd seen him before. "Bane?" she asked cautiously. He distrusted humans...even what he considered human foals. She knew better than to ask for assistance, but she hoped that he would say something to them. Surely he would not allow any grown humans to harm their young.

The black centaur came near her and pierced her with a disgusted gaze. "I am known. She will have to come with us or be removed."

A Death Eater lifted his wand, but Lucius stopped him. "Severus will kill you. This is his concubine."

"She's a Mudblood! It's that Potter boy's friend," the man said incredulously. "Severus would never choose her."

"Do you not remember what he did to Higgs? She won't be touched," Lucius said, turning a feral grin her way. "Yet."

Hermione swallowed and stepped back. What did Malfoy mean by that? Had Severus lied? Was he the one to kill Higgs? She didn't know what to do. Bane was conspiring with Death Eaters. Something was terribly wrong. *Why didn't I stay with Severus? Is he following me?* Hope sprang up. All would not be lost if he were following them. They would be saved. *He will come for me.*

"What do you want?" she asked bravely, wondering if she should go for her wand. She knew she was outnumbered, but maybe their reluctance to hex her would help them. She knew that Ginny would be with her in defense, but what of the two younger students? Would they be too afraid to fend for themselves or to fight? Common sense told her to not go for her wand.

The Death Eater to her left that had remained quiet moved forward and grasped her arm, jerking her away. "Where is your wand?" he asked. Hermione remained silent. One of his beefy hands began touching her body in search of her wand. She squirmed to get away from his grip, but he wouldn't release her. She heard Bane speaking.

"It's her. The one with the flaming hair."

Lucius nodded. "Seize her."

"What?" Ginny asked in shock. "Me? What do you want with me?"

Hermione twisted around in an attempt to reach for her, but she was pulled back against the bulky body of her assailant, whose hands were still searching for her wand. "Leave her alone!"

Ginny, Laura, and Kevin pulled their wands as if to defend themselves. At that moment, many things happened. Lucius chuckled. Her assailant found her wand and threw it aside, but he continued to hold her close to his body, as if she were a shield. Bane pulled an arrow out of his quiver and placed it upon his bow threateningly. Hexes began flying. Hermione noticed that her wand was nearby, so she began struggling with all her might against her captor...kicking, hitting, and even attempting to bite him.

"Settle down," he bellowed, slapping her soundly and tossing her roughly to the ground. Though her face stung from where he'd struck her, she realized that her wand was in reach. A loud scream from behind pulled her gaze away from her wand.

Kevin had been hit with something powerful. There was blood near his shoulder, and he was slouching back against a fence post. His girlfriend, Laura, was screaming madly, all else forgotten. Ginny landed one of the Death Eaters with a hex only to be knocked off her feet in the next moment.

"Shut that loud brat up," Lucius commanded, moving towards Ginny.

A jet of green light hit Laura squarely in the back, and she crumbled in a heap atop her boyfriend. "No!" Hermione screamed. In an instant, she reached her wand only to have a heavy foot stomping down upon her hand.

"I don't think so, girl," he said menacingly. "What of this one?" His gaze was directed to Lucius. Hermione looked to him as well. He was pulling an unconscious Ginny up into a sitting position. He seemed undecided when his gaze met her assailant's. As he opened his mouth to speak, he suddenly seemed startled. In the next instant, he was up and running to Bane. They were gone an instant later with a loud *Crack!*

The remaining three Death Eaters all looked to each other. The one that seemed to be injured was Disapparated away by the one nearest him. The Death Eater with Hermione looked down at her, raising his foot from her hand. "Seems to be your lucky day," he said.

"But, not yours," a voice said from behind them.

"*Snake,*" he gasped in surprise. "What are you...?" His words trailed away as he eyed the wand pointed levelly at his face.

Severus' eyes traveled down to Hermione. She seemed all right. There were red marks on her arms, a smudge of dirt on her face, a bright splotch upon her face, and her clothes were filthy. However, nothing seemed terribly wrong. "Are you all right?" She nodded and sat up shakily, clutching the leg of his trousers. He turned his gaze back to the man before him. It was Goyle. He could tell by his stance. Besides, no other would be so slow to escape or to hex. His filthy hands had been upon Hermione. He'd touched what was his. "I will kill you," Severus told him menacingly. He cast a succession of hexes upon him. The man would not be able to escape by means of Apparition, nor would he be able to move. Severus pocketed the bastard's fallen wand. Turning a twig into a Portkey, he placed it into the man's stiff hand. He was sending him to a special room in the castle down in the dungeons near his own quarters. He would find out what he could before terminating him.

Once the man was whisked away, he knelt down, forcing Hermione to remove her hold on him. "Sev...er...us," she said between sobs. "They're dead."

He pulled her to him, placing her head upon his chest. He rocked her back and forth, whispering soothing words and gently stroking her hair and back. *will kill him. He harmed my Hermione.* What would have happened if he hadn't followed her? He could have lost her, or she could have been harmed worse. Why did they not heed his Lord's warning about leaving her unscathed throughout the war? Who sent them?

He'd been about to enter a shop in the village when he saw the four of them trekking off. He'd allowed them a long enough head start, but he'd been deterred as he'd noticed Draco following as well. That hadn't been very suspicious, as the boy was supposed to keep an eye on Ginevra Weasley, but the boy had seemed jittery. His friends had been left behind. Midway, Draco had seemed to be having second thoughts, as he'd stopped and ran his fingers through his hair whilst thinking. That had made Severus suspicious. It had been blatantly obvious that the boy was having an internal battle of what to do about something. The earlier foreboding that he'd felt hit him full force. Something wasn't right. Draco hadn't met his eyes directly. He'd sent a Stunning Spell at the boy to be sure he remained where he was, and Severus had run forward to find his witch.

He'd heard the sounds of one Disapparation and witnessed another. The site of the three students had given him pause, but he'd known that he'd not help things by seeing to them first. Hermione had been his main concern when he approached her and Goyle. Her sobs tapered off, leaving an eerie silence. He pulled back to look at her. "All right?" His thumbs wiped the streaks from her face.

"Y-yes."

"Stay here," he said firmly, moving to rise.

"I knew you would c-come for me."

He paused to look at her, chest swelling with emotion. "I will always come for you," he said honestly *No one will come between us. You are my reward, my chosen mate.* As softly as possible, he kissed her lips. He'd never seen her so distraught. It tore at his heart.

Severus reluctantly went to the others. A flick of his wand told him that Weasley had only been knocked unconscious. She'd be fine once he took her back to Hogwarts. Madley was dead. There was nothing that could be done for her. The Killing Curse had claimed her life. Whitby was also gone. A gaping hole in his shoulder had caused him to bleed to death, nearly instantly. *So young. Never had a chance.* Severus felt anger wash over him immediately. He'd not been told of any attacks. What had brought Goyle here? Who had been with him? Why had they come? He would have his answers soon enough. He needed to handle things here first. He pointed his wand in the air and let off a series of sparks...red, green, purple, and black.

He dared not approach Hermione as he waited for others to come. It wouldn't do to have them happen upon them in an awkward position. Lupin and Tonks Apparated to them minutes later. To his surprise, Lupin cried out as if wounded when he saw Weasley and went to hold her whilst Tonks conjured coverings to place over the other two students. Following their arrival was McGonagall's. The normally stern-faced Minerva broke down immediately upon seeing the students and pulled a whimpering Hermione to her.

"Severus?" she asked. "What's happened?"

Severus kept his distance from Hermione, but he continued to glance at her whilst he told the story to the others. "I saw them venturing off, so I came to see what they were doing, as they aren't supposed to leave the village limits. When I came I must have startled the offenders. They all Apparated away. I was able to see one before he disappeared. Death Eaters did this. I do not know why. I summoned the nearest Order members immediately."

His eyes met the startled eyes of Hermione. He hadn't time to tell her what he'd decided the story should be, but he inclined his head slightly to signal she should not contradict him. Her uncertain eyes left his, and she clutched her Head of House more tightly, crying anew. It wouldn't do to let people know that he'd caught one. Not now at any rate. When the man would end up dead, there would be questions and accusations.

"The others are in town with the remaining students," Tonks said. "When we saw the call, we gave word that we'd come." She nodded to Hermione. "I think she needs a Calming Draught."

"She's seen two people murdered, one assaulted, and was assaulted as well. I'd say so," Severus said curtly.

"Someone should alert Pomona," Minerva said, trying to regain her composure.

Severus saw that Tonks was frowning. He followed her gaze and saw that Lupin was cradling Weasley and making small howling sounds. *Good Lord. Has the man no pride?* It was easy to wonder if the girl's ill placed feelings might have been returned on some level. Had he given her the wrong impression by his actions? To any outsider, even his own lover, it seemed as if he loved the girl. Even as Severus watched, the man whispered her name continuously.

Lupin looked up to see everyone watching him. "She won't wake." Tonks moved forward, but he held up a hand. "Stay there. She'll be upset if she wakes to see you near us."

"Right then. I'll go to Hogwarts to get help," she said.

Severus said, "Bring Pomona, Albus, and Poppy." With a simple nod, Tonks Disapparated. To his dismay, others were arriving. "Potter, Weasley, Parkinson!" he bellowed, striding forward. "What are you doing here?" He eyed the Delacour girl. He really had no say over where she ventured, but he sneered at her all the same.

Potter spoke, moving past him. "We saw the sparks. Tonks and Lupin took off. Something must...Hermione! Ginny!" The boy ran to the others.

Weasley's eyes grew wide, and he pulled away from Parkinson's clutches. "Gin? Mione?"

"Severus," Minerva said. "Molly Weasley is keeping watch at the railroad station with Hestia Jones. Would you please bring her here?"

"Of course," he said brusquely, feeling dismissed. He didn't want to leave Hermione, but he had no choice. *Her ruddy friends are in the way now. Might as well make myself useful.* Minerva released Hermione, and the trio...Potter, Weasley, and Hermione...automatically moved to hold each other tightly. The last thing he noticed before he Disapparated were the narrowed eyes of Parkinson. Apparently, the friends' closeness didn't sit well with her either.

After a quick walk through the station, he found the witches. "Molly, I need you to come with me."

"What is it about? Minerva said we should stay here." Her eyes suddenly misted over. "My children?"

"Ginevra," he said. The witch Disapparated away. He looked to Jones. "I trust you will be well enough here alone?"

"I'll be fine. Nothing to it," she said solemnly. "Her girl all right?"

"So it would seem." He looked around. "Two younger students were killed, and another was attacked."

The witch gasped. "Oh, no. Death Eaters?"

Severus nodded. "Why wasn't anyone posted there?" he asked absently. "Had I known that there weren't enough volunteers I would have done so. We were told that between the Order members and the Aurors provided by the Ministry it would be safe enough to allow the visit."

"Far as I know, it was Dung's place to be back at the last of Hogsmeade out towards the Shack. Did you not see him?"

"I did not. I shall return." He nodded and Disapparated. Tonks had arrived back with the others. Dumbledore was having a time keeping Molly quiet while Poppy looked over her daughter. Hermione was still being held by her two friends, the bastards. A twinge of jealousy hit him as he watched their closeness. Would he share that type of relationship with her? Lupin was now kneeling next to the girl, watching Poppy's ministrations while Tonks and Minerva were trying to console a weeping Pomona Sprout.

"So young. Just children," she said through sobs.

"Albus, just let me go to my daughter," Molly screeched.

"Calm down, Molly. Poppy needs to finish," Dumbledore said calmly.

Severus decided to send away Delacour and Parkinson. "You two need to get back into the village."

"I am wiz zem," the blonde said, nodding over to the huddled group.

Severus nodded. "Go sit over there on the side." He looked to Parkinson. "I know you have your Apparition License. I want you to go back to Hogwarts immediately. You know where the Apparition point is. I shall come to address everyone in the common room when we all return to the castle."

"Yes, sir," she said, glancing once more to Weasley.

"Go on," Severus said. When she disappeared, it was then that he noticed Draco and Crabbe making their way to the crowd. "What are you doing here?"

Draco looked beyond him to the groups. "Where is she?" he asked quietly.

"Found him back there. Someone Stunned him," Crabbe said.

"No!" Draco yelled suddenly, attempting to run forward.

"Remember yourself," Severus said, catching the boy by his arm.

"Someone hit me from behind with a Stunning Spell, and when Crabbe and Goyle came to see where I'd gone off to, they found me sprawled on the ground." He nodded to Crabbe. "Sir, a Death Eater Apparated nearby and took Goyle with him."

"Are you certain?" Severus eyed both boys. *Bloody fucking hell! What now?*

"Yes," both answered in unison.

Severus turned around and headed for the headmaster. He had finally released Molly and was conferring with Poppy. "She has to go to the infirmary, but she'll be fine," the mediwitch was saying.

"Headmaster, another student is missing," Severus hissed. This got everyone's attention. "Gregory Goyle was snatched by a Death Eater. Crabbe and he happened upon young Malfoy, who had been Stunned. Once he woke, they both witnessed Goyle's abduction."

"We could do nothing," Malfoy said angrily, kicking at a large stick. His cold eyes landed on Lupin, and he sneered hatefully.

Crabbe nodded vigorously. "It happened so fast."

Dumbledore nodded. "We shall find out what happened to your friend. For now, get back to the castle. We'll be sending all the students back." He patted Crabbe on the shoulder. The boy seemed truly befuddled. "Try to remember anything you can about what happened. I'll call you up to my office for statements."

With one last lingering glance at Ginevra, Draco led Crabbe away. Severus whispered, "I don't like this, Headmaster."

"Nor do I. I trust there are other things that you have to tell me that isn't suitable for mixed company?"

"Indeed."

"Very well. Let's clear this up."

"Potter," Severus called. "You will escort your *girlfriend* and Weasley back to the castle. She can stay with you in your common room until her guardians are free to escort her back home."

"What about Hermione?" Weasley blurted. "Can she come with us?"

Severus seethed inwardly. He didn't want her to go with them, to be close to them, to have Weasley's hands upon her. "We may need to..."

"Of course," Minerva said, coming to them. She soothed Hermione's ruffled hair. "She's exhausted. Can't even stand on her own. Madame Pomfrey has given her a bit of some Calming Draught. She'll need your assistance."

It was true. She was sagging against both boys, mostly Weasley. *He'd better not use this as an excuse to take advantage of her.* "Very well. Off to the castle."

Potter spoke, "We've got to get the others...Neville and our mates."

Severus bit his tongue as their Head of Gryffindor answered. "Of course, but please, hurry on to the castle. I'll address everyone as soon as I can." He watched as his witch was led away by her friends. While they were still in sight, a loud bang was heard. Not a moment after, the Dark Mark littered the sky over Hogsmeade, its green sparks glittering ominously.

"What the hell?" Severus barked. He turned to face the others.

"Poppy and I will see to Laura and Kevin," Sprout said sadly.

"I will bring Ginevra," Lupin said.

"The hell you will," Molly said. "I will bring her. The rest of you lot should go on and see what's happening." Severus nearly smiled, as Lupin looked reprimanded.

The headmaster said, "Severus, see to the students there. Walk them in to Hogsmeade." Severus nodded. "Minerva, Tonks, Remus...you'll Apparate in with me?"

They all nodded in affirmation and with a series of *Cracks*, they all disappeared from sight. Severus turned to Pomona, Poppy, and Molly. "I would like to see you ladies Disapparate safely before I leave." After only a couple of moments, they each held a student and Disapparated. Satisfied that nobody would be left behind, he made his way to his witch and her mates where they stood huddled together.

"Zis is 'orrible. Please 'old me," Delacour said to Potter as he walked up. The boy did so, leaving Weasley to hold Hermione alone.

Severus wanted to hex the brat. He was holding her possessively, caressing her hair gently, and murmuring soothing words *All things I should be doing.* "Come on," he said bitingly. "I have to escort you to the village." He pulled his wand. Though he itched to hex the brat that held his oblivious witch, he moved forward. Many thoughts littered his mind. Why had he not been told of any attack? Was the Dark Lord behind this? His thoughts darkened as he imagined choking the life from Goyle. He would make the bastard talk before he took pleasure in killing him. *Nobody harms my witch.* He hoped that Hermione would not contradict his story. She seemed to be in shock. Having witnessed death on numerous occasions, it always amazed him how differently he dealt with it when compared to the way others dealt with it. He'd learnt long before to take it in stride. What was the reasoning behind these deaths though?

All of his questions would have to wait to be answered. From the look of the screaming crowds and running patrons as they neared the main path of the village, it would be a long day. The Dark Mark appeared to be hovering over the local Apothecary.

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**Southern's Notes:** I am stopping it here because it would end up being too long. The next chapter will have everything else that happens in Hogsmeade and back at the castle after everyone returns. There will be another character death in the next chapter, but it's not any of our main characters.

## The Plot Thickens

Chapter 10 of 42

Our couple grows closer. What's wrong with a couple of stolen kisses? Someone has spied on them! We'll find out more about Draco, Ginny, Pansy, and Neville in this chapter.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

## A big thanks to my betas, Charmed\_Nay and Meredith, and to my friends over at Potter\_Place.

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Severus stifled a yawn. This was the longest damned staff meeting that he'd been to since the previous year. He supposed it was in order. The headmaster did need to get everyone on the same parchment after all. Since the new term began, they'd only had a few rushed meetings. *Why does the headmaster keep looking at me oddly?* He looked down to his robes to be sure no evidence of the evening meal lingered there. Brushing away nonexistent crumbs, his head jerked up upon hearing Hermione's name.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Macmillan should be included in the new patrols of the grounds. We have to be on the lookout to be sure that nothing is amiss and things remain secure. I also believe that the seventh year prefects should be included. Speaking of which," Dumbledore said, eyeing Severus again, "we'll need to replace Miss Parkinson and Mr. Weasley."

Severus nodded in agreement, hearing snide remarks from some of the others. Rolanda Hooch was one of the loudest. "Imagine! Having a go right there in the corridor. Never heard of Silencing Charms or Disillusionment Charms, I'd wager. In my day, we chose better places if we were feeling randy."

He knew what would happen next. He could practically feel Minerva's ire. "Think it's funny, do you?" she asked crisply. "Why not give lessons in lewd behavior? You could teach them to break the rules without getting caught!"

"Oho! Someone's knickers are in a bunch," Hooch goaded. "Angry because one of your ruddy little Gryffindors happens to be in the wrong? Doesn't sit well that a Weasley would take up with a Slytherin, does it?"

"Why, you..."

"Enough!" Severus said, pulling Minerva's arm back as she reached for her wand. He turned to Rolanda. "While I appreciate your seeming sympathy for Slytherin, perhaps this is not the place to discuss rivalries. Save it for a staff outing to Hogsmeade."

Rolanda laughed heartily. "Embarrassed one of your own has been caught, eh? Trying to appear nonchalant? Good show."

"If everyone is finished, I've more to say," Dumbledore commented with laughter in his eyes, though his voice was stern. "I expect you all to vote on two new prefects, one male and one female. Turn your votes in by Friday. Filius and Severus will be in charge of making a schedule again, as they did a superb job already. Our patrols will increase until their positions are filled." He stretched slightly. "Well, if no one has anything else?" He looked around. "Excellent. A word, Severus."

*Damn! Never a moment's peace.* "Yes, Headmaster?" he questioned respectfully.

"This way," he replied evasively.

Severus followed Dumbledore to his office and sat before being asked. He was sure that it would take a while. "Have you any news?" the older man queried.

"Only a minute amount," he replied. "Draco came to me just before our staff meeting. It seems that his father wants him to sneak into the Forbidden Forest to steal any mallowsweet that he might find there."

"Mallowsweet?"

"Yes," Severus nodded. "I find that odd as well. As far as I know, there are no Centaurs allied with the Dark Lord. Only they use that."

"I shall talk to Firenze to see if there is any other use besides burning it to gaze into the flame and fumes to polish their insight. He's not told you of this at any meetings?"

"Of course not," Severus answered quickly. "I haven't stayed at the meetings long as of late, which is a good thing. Lucius can't go out into public much now that he's marked as a Death Eater, so I don't talk to him as often as I used to."

He felt a little uneasy with the way the headmaster was gazing at him. "What else does Draco have to say?"

"Not that this should interest you, but he says that Ginevra Weasley has now accosted him twice, questioning about his cousin, Nymphadora Tonks."

"Curious."

"Indeed. He's told her to leave off both times, but he admits to being intrigued."

"What sort of questions? With Tonks being in the Order, she could simply ask her or her family anything. Why Draco?" Dumbledore began pacing.

"It appears that she believes Tonks to be working with the Malfoys to aid the Dark Lord. Should I have him to follow up on this?" Severus asked slyly.

"Yes. Tell him to find out what she is about. I'd like to know her reasoning behind those questions."

"There is one other thing. I was not sure if I should mention it, but it now seems prudent," Severus said, sensing the other man was waiting for more. "About Parkinson and Weasley, Draco says that Pansy's father is behind the girl's sudden interest in the boy. It seems that he wants the girl to find a respectable...*associate*. I wonder what his plans are."

It seemed that Dumbledore was not surprised with his statement. "Has Tom not told you of this?"

"No, he hasn't," Severus admitted. "I believe that Parkinson has some ulterior motive. I shall find out what it is."

"Very well. Keep me informed."

"That is all that I have, Headmaster, if you would excuse me, I would like to go down to my chambers. I have to draw up a map for Draco, which will enable him to slip into the forest and get some mallowsweet in a timely manner." He stood to leave, but Dumbledore motioned for him to sit again.

"What of *your* motives, Severus? Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

*Damn! He knows. Somehow he knows.* "I've no ulterior motives, Headmaster. I am only doing what needs to be done to keep *both* of my masters happy," he spat acridly. "Are you implying something?"

"Not implying, Severus." The headmaster moved around his desk and sat next to him. "Yesterday, after I talked to our two unruly prefects, I decided to follow them to hear their thoughts on the situation. What did I see? Miss Granger came upon them, had a say, and ran off in tears." He searched Severus' face momentarily. "Naturally, I followed her, wanting to be sure she was all right. She seemed very distraught."

"And, so, you followed her down into the bowels of the castle, down to me," Severus said in a carefully bland voice. "What are you trying to say, Headmaster?"

"I'm saying that I found it interesting that you seemed to know she was there and being followed. I'm also saying that I found it interesting that you and she seemed rather...*friendly*." Dumbledore's eyes flashed dangerously, and he seemed slightly disappointed.



"Sir, you know then that I apologized for any inappropriate behavior that occurred. As far as my knowing she was there and being followed, I have those corridors enchanted, as they are out of bounds."

"Oh, yes, I know you apologized, having witnessed it."

"I didn't see you."

"Severus, you know as well as the next person that I don't always have to be visible when I walk about this castle. You should also know that I've learnt to see through Disillusionment Charms and can easily dismantle any *simple* Silencing Spell. You have some explaining to do, and you'd better do it now," the headmaster said, moving to pull a candy from the silver dish on his desk. "Of course, I couldn't follow you into your closed office, but I did follow and wait. In fact, I got tired of waiting for her to exit. Had I not finally decided to have a listen, I would have likely been there for hours. Interesting choice of wards. I had a hard time breaking *that* particular Silencing Charm."

With an arrogant smirk, Severus snatched a candy from the dish on the desk and popped it in to his mouth. "Yes, I pride myself with brilliant warding. What do you want to know?" he asked finally.

"What has been going on? Why? What are your intentions?" The questions fired out as if they'd been practiced.

"All right, Headmaster, I'll tell you everything," Severus said, trying to sound contrite. "The Dark Lord believes that Granger being friendly with me would upset Potter. He has ordered me to become close to her. Hence our lab time together on Wednesday evenings and additional meetings that we've agreed upon for Saturday evenings as well. If Draco's mind is probed, he can say that he sees us together. Any other spies that may be about will confirm it as well."

"Why not tell *me*?" Dumbledore asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Because I knew that you would never approve," he said bitterly. "I have talked to her about it, and I've explained most of it to her. She knows that someone is watching and has agreed to help."

"She is *not* an Order member. She is a student here. This should have been discussed with me," the older wizard said firmly.

"Hermione is of age. She could have been an Order member last year, according to your age requirements. This was *her* decision," Severus said heatedly.

"Severus, I don't like it. You, sir, are her professor. What would you say if Minerva was seen kissing young Malfoy in the corridors?"

"That's different, and you know it. I don't know what..."

"Yes, I heard your excuses yesterday, and I must say that I found it honorable of you to realize that you were taking advantage of the situation." Dumbledore reached for another candy. "However, it appeared that she didn't mind. I believe that this project may lead to other things on a more inappropriate level. I'm not blaming you or saying you planned this, Severus. I am just stat..."

Severus stood up in anger. "What do you suggest that I do, *Albus*? Do you want me to tell the Dark Lord that I have failed on my orders because I had to tell you that I intended to behave inappropriately with Miss Granger? I am certain that he will not be pleased."

A resigned sigh was his only answer at first. "Do you intend to be inappropriate with her?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "School coding states that should a staff member and a student become involved *that* student may not be taught by said staff member, and the student has to be of age by Wizarding law." He sat down once again. "Therefore, if something should develop from our *innocent* friendship, I would simply ask that she be removed from my classes."

"So you have looked into this. I daresay, Severus, that makes you appear to have already thought of things heading in that direction," Dumbledore said incredulously. "What exactly happened on the night that the two of you were alone?"

"Not a damn thing," Severus roared indignantly. "I have never touched her other than what you witnessed yesterday! It was her response to me yesterday that prompted me to look into Hogwarts' Codes of Conduct. I resent the fact that you would think otherwise. I may be a professor here, a spy, and an Order member, but it would bode well for you to remember that I am still a man. Who wouldn't be curious after *that* unplanned exchange?" That much was true at least. He hadn't planned to meet her or kiss her. Not that day anyway. He smiled inwardly as he saw his mentor's resolve crumbling.

"Very well, Severus. I shall not stop your association, but please, she is only eighteen. She has studies and duties to attend to. Try to keep things professional only." He removed his glasses to wipe at his eyes. "If things do progress, I wish to be informed immediately so that I may remove Miss Granger from your class."

"Certainly," he quickly agreed.

"I am *not* pleased by this and am very disappointed. I should have been informed straightaway. I shall not interfere, Severus, but I shall be watching. If I see any signs of distress in her or skiving off her duties as Head Girl, I shall bring this matter up again." He nodded to the door. "Leave."

Without a backward glance, Severus exited the office and made his way down to his chambers. He dared not look too smug, as he was unsure if the headmaster had decided to follow him. Once inside his chambers, he sat down to think of all that had transpired. The old man didn't like his Potions master getting *friendly* with his Head Girl, eh? Didn't like being lied to by his trusted spy? Didn't like having decisions made without his approval? "Reasonable worries, the lot of them, Headmaster," Severus said with a smirk.

A thought crossed his mind suddenly. *The old fool had better not anger me, or I might have to take matters into my own hands. Perhaps I should see this bloody war ending sooner than later. It would be easy enough to snatch Potter and bring him to the Dark Lord and let the two arsens have it out. May the best wizard win.* He chuckled to himself. "At least if the Dark Lord wins, I'll still have my concubine." Yes, it would do well for dear old Albus to tread carefully. Severus knew he could make or break the Order's cause.

He opened his desk drawer and took out his parchment. '*Locus Hermione*,' he said. He had his answer in a matter of seconds.

*Head Girl's chambers with Neville Longbottom.*

"Longbottom," he said with disgust. "The pesky blighter had better not attempt anything with her." He shrugged. "I'll find out tomorrow evening." Although he didn't like having been caught being dishonest to the headmaster, he felt as if a burden had been lifted. At least he didn't have to worry about hiding things from him now. That had been his main concern in the beginning.

He pulled out his special ink and dipped his quill into it. In a spiky scrawl, he wrote two sentences on his parchment, wanting to send Hermione a subliminal message *at a bit late. Time for some rest.* Yes, she would be telling Longbottom to leave soon enough. He'd only seen her during meals that day, although he did try to spot her along the corridors. She'd done well. Her eyes had only strayed to him a couple of times. He wondered if maybe he'd been the one looking too often. He snorted. "That's about right. I look to be sure she isn't looking, and Dumbledore sees the exchange, adding to his suspicions." It didn't matter about the headmaster now, but he still didn't want any others to know. Such as Hooch. She would never let him live this down. No. Nobody would know until he was ready for them to know. Nobody else anyway.

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Hermione had been relieved when Neville explained his reasons for needing to talk to her. Although Ron looked at them suspiciously, he hadn't objected to their private conversation. It seemed that Neville was interested in Lavender, but the girl never paid attention to him. He figured that she fancied Harry since that was usually the only time she would talk to him. If he happened to be near Harry, Lavender would come by for a chat, staring after Harry.

"So, it's almost as if she uses me to be around him. I don't mind that much, but I suppose it hurts all the same. What do you think?" he asked, round face lit with hope that she would have the answer.

"Maybe you should ask her to be your date for the first Hogsmeade weekend," she said quietly. "You can find out her motives that way. If she seems genuinely pleased, then maybe it's just your imagination. It could be that she only feels secure talking to you with others around. Maybe she's afraid that you won't talk to her otherwise."

"But I would," he protested.

"Well, how will she know that unless you tell her?" Hermione smiled kindly at her friend. "I'm sure she'd be honored that someone such as you had an interest in her. Give her a few compliments about how lovely she looks, make a point to talk to her while she is with her friends..."

"Yeah," he said sarcastically. "What if *she* is too embarrassed to talk to just me? I might ruin her image."

"Nev, we're all friends. She'd only be with Parvati and the others. No problems there. We're practically family," she said reassuringly. "Just give it a go."

"You're right. I mean, I haven't really seen her with Harry all that much, and I know that he fancies someone else anyway. I just don't want to be rejected," he said. "Part of life, I guess."

"Harry fancies someone? Who does he fancy?" she asked curiously.

"Well, I heard him talking to Ron about it. He doesn't know that I heard, mind, but at least I know Lavender is not spoken for. She's not a student here," he admitted. "Can't give you a name though."

Hermione immediately thought of Ginny's insinuations about Tonks. "I guess he'll let us know when he's ready. I wonder why he never told me about it?" she pondered aloud. With a sigh, she stretched. "I'm just a tad knackered, and I've a long day ahead of me tomorrow. I think I'll turn in now. Will you try to talk to her?"

"Are you sure you've not heard of her fancying someone else?" he asked uncertainly. "I don't want to make an arse of myself."

"I swear," she said, holding up her wand.

He nodded. "Thanks, Mione. Night."

She saw him to the door, warded it, and made her way to her bathroom. Quickly stripping after she'd turned on the faucets, she slid into the tub. "Ah," she sighed, leaning back against the cool porcelain. She soaped a cloth and began washing herself. As she passed the cloth over her breasts, she found herself wondering how it would feel to have them fondled properly by someone who actually knew what he was doing. A brief glimpse of strong, long fingers expertly dicing Potions ingredients flashed through her mind. She shrugged the thought away as she explored her body.

Hermione's index finger circled the nipple of her left breast, her eyes closed. After a minute of fondling herself, she said aloud, "Well, what's so good about that anyway?" Shrugging away the curiosity, she finished washing. It didn't take long for her fingers to slide down to the juncture between her thighs. Determinedly, she inserted one finger and moved it about. She giggled, thinking, *It certainly feels better than when Ron did it. No fingernail digging into me here.* As her finger slid out, it accidentally rubbed against a protruding bit of skin near the top of her labia, causing her to jump.

"Bloody hell," she said in disbelief. Purposely, she rubbed herself again, and the strangest feelings came to her. The gentle, circular caresses became firm, erratic caresses as she felt something building up inside of her. She warred with stopping, unsure if she could take the feeling any longer, but she carried on for a couple of minutes anyway. Finally, she exploded with an intense peaking feeling as her body trembled. "My goodness!" She panted while regaining her senses. *I've just had an orgasm. Holy shite!* Hermione quickly left the tub, dried, and slipped into bed feeling oddly guilty yet smug. "Had I known that I could do that myself, I would have done so before now. Brilliant," she mumbled aloud before drifting off to sleep.

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"Well, someone has something wrong!" Hermione argued. "It says in *Quidditch Through the Ages* that Gunhilda Keen had to sit out of a Quidditch match due to a case of the Dragon Pox!"

"Be that as it may, it is stated in our history books that Chauncey Oldridge was the first victim of Dragon Pox. In fact, he has his very own Wizarding Trading Card, which clearly states as much," Severus said smugly.

"But, you agree about Keen sitting out of the Quidditch match?"

"Well, of course! It's an event in Quidditch history that was worthy of being noted. Not that it's of any interest in me. I do believe, however, that if you want to get proper credit on your project's accompanying essay," he said, overriding her comments, "then you'll need to get your information straight."

"Pardon me, *Professor*, but I think that you might want to take a look at this," she said in a bossy tone, thrusting a book into his hands. She moved closer to point out the paragraph for him.

"I know this already," he said snidely. "Keen had to sit out of his ruddy Quidditch match. What's are you getting at?"

"The date."

"In the 1100s, no exact date known. And?"

Hermione raised her hands in exasperation. "It's inconsistent! Oldridge was born in 1342, thanks. Therefore, he is not truly the first person to get this inflection."

"Insufferable, little know-it-all," Severus chided. "I shall be writing to the author of this book. Let's see. Whisp, is it? He must be mistaken. Keen was not..."

"He got the information from a personal letter that was found from Keen's cousin, Goodwin. Honestly! Didn't you read this?" she asked tartly.

Severus smirked for a moment. "Five points to Gryffindor for finding a discrepancy." Hermione beamed. "Three points from Gryffindor for your snide tone."

She opened her mouth to argue the point, but she decided against it. He was always so unfair about things. Just as she thought she'd gained points, he'd taken most of them away. She moved to snatch her book away, but he turned at the wrong moment with his hand out to grasp something from his desk. It never reached his desk. Instead, it neatly cupped her breast, causing them both to gasp and step back.

"Hermione, I..." He turned away from her. "I apologize. I didn't intend to...touch you."

"I moved at the wrong time. It...er...was an accident. No harm done," she said quietly, completely embarrassed. For one horrified moment, she thought that maybe she'd

appalled him, but before he turned around, she saw something flicker in his eyes. Had he liked what he'd felt? She'd certainly felt an odd tingle in her stomach the moment his hand pressed and lingered against her breast. He was still facing away from her. "Severus?"

"Here," he said, turning to hand her the book. His eyes didn't meet hers as he moved around to sit behind his desk. "It's late."

She began picking up her things, watching him discreetly as she did so. She could see that he was embarrassed by what happened. He also seemed disappointed. Was it because nothing more could happen? Did he find her lacking? Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She moved to his desk. "I didn't mean to do that. I swear. I only meant to get my book, not throw myself at you." She wasn't so thick as to truly believe it was her fault, but she knew that saying so would make him talk. He would need to explain to her that it wasn't her fault, and she would ease him back into conversation. It was simple enough.

"Hermione, all I've done here is make us *both* feel uncomfortable. First, I made advances on you on Monday night, and now, I have inappropriately fondled you."

She slung her book bag over her shoulder. "I think that your hand accidentally lingering on my br-breast doesn't constitute fondling, Severus. If I felt uncomfortable, you would know it."

"Would I?"

"Yes," she said crisply. "I would tell you if I didn't like something. I've told Ron before when he did things I didn't like."

"I am no *Weasley*," he bit out indignantly. "Furthermore, I am not your lover. I am your professor here at Hogwarts, and I am trying to befriend you. Never confuse me with that *boy* again."

Hermione bit her lip for a moment and mustered enough courage to ask a question. "Sorry, sir. If I were not your student, would you want me?"

"Want you?" He raised an eyebrow. "Explain."

She felt immediately ridiculous. She had to have misread things. Her voice cracked as she said, "If I wasn't a girl to you any longer, would you want...something with me." For a long minute, she watched him as he looked her over appraisingly and thought over his reply.

Just as she nearly gave up on his answer, he said softly, "You are no longer just a girl in my eyes. Yes, I do want you, but unfortunately, you are a student. I think it would be for the best if you'd leave right now."

Hermione blinked a few times. *He thinks of me as a woman. He wants me now, but I'm a ruddy student.* She looked down at her body and imagined what it would feel like to have his hands caressing her, to have him do to her what she did to herself the previous night. How did she truly feel about that? Would *Professor Snape*, of all people at Hogwarts, be her future? Could she see herself lying with him? Kissing him? Loving him? A shiver ran up her spine. Her eyes moved up to meet his. "Yes, I will leave," she agreed finally. "Part of me wishes that I weren't your student." With that admittance, she quickly made her way out of his office.

Severus congratulated himself. He'd done everything perfectly. He'd heard the rustle of her robes and made sure that his hand landed where it had. He'd had to turn away from her for a few moments to school his features and will his erection to cease. And, the fact that she believed he meant no harm? That was most satisfactory. He looked to his hand and smirked. She would be thinking about it. She would also be thinking about his words. As her words would replay in his mind. *Part of me wishes that I weren't your student.*

Simply stated, that meant that part of her wanted him as well. Yes, things were progressing nicely. He was anxious for Saturday evening to see what would occur between them. The Quaffle was on her side of the pitch. All she had to do was grasp it and move.

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The next few days passed quickly for Hermione, and it was nearing the time that she would be going down to the Great Hall for the evening meal. After that, she'd spend time with her professor. In class, he'd acted as if nothing had occurred, which was fine by her. It helped to ease her nervousness about seeing him again while alone. He was so unlike Ron.

Ron had wanted her, but he'd seemed to only be thinking of himself. If it had been Ron with her that day in the corridor instead of Professor Snape, he would have kissed her fully, touched her, invaded her, and tried to have her. The restraint that her newly found friend had when it came to her was really appealing. It was almost as if he wanted her to set the pace, her to make the first move. He'd pulled away even though he'd freely admitted that he did see her as a woman and wanted to have her in the most adult way.

She thought back to her interactions with him as of late. During the summer, he'd been pleasant when they'd meet at Grimmauld Place. They'd spent the night together, and he'd made no advances of any kind. He'd tried to console her and advise her about her situation with Ron. He'd made her feel like an equal, nearly anyway. He'd leaned in to kiss her one night and immediately apologized, saying he'd not do it again. Only, he did do it again, but he'd again restrained himself for her sake. Clearly the poor man was warring with his desire to do the right thing and his desire to reach out to her as a man would a woman. *A man wants me. This is no inexperienced boy. This is a man who has undoubtedly had his share of experiences. He wants to show me how it feels to be a woman.*

Hermione's stomach tingled slightly as she tried to imagine snogging Snape. His thin lips had been surprisingly kissable. The way he'd sucked on her lower lip, then her top lip before chastely kissing her fully on the lips continuously came to mind, even when she least expected it. She'd been in Charms the day before, practicing her wand movements when she thought about the kiss. It had caused her to flick incorrectly and shoot sparks at Bulstrode. His long, graceful hands were also appealing. She closed her eyes for a moment to reminisce. He'd accidentally cupped her breast, sending a jolt through her. It had been such a soft yet firm touch. There had been no harsh groping like with Ron. That deep baritone speaking softly near her ear was most enjoyable as well. Shamelessly, she thought of his hands on her breasts and her feminine parts as hers had been a few nights before. Would she want that with him? *Yes, I honestly do want to be with him. I want him to be my first* As soon as she was no longer his student, she would tell him how she felt about him. Perhaps they could take this time to get to know each other better.

Hermione eyed the mirror curiously. What was it about her that had attracted him? She supposed it was the mutual enjoyment of poetry and reading. He was likely to be lonely and hadn't many people to talk to. Severus had made an effort to learn a Muggle poem by one of her favorite poets. That proved that his interest had started out on a friendly level, and he'd tried to impress her. Had he fancied her for a while, and since she'd only had eyes for Ron, she'd not noticed? *No, I would have known.* She shrugged the thoughts away and debated on venturing out into the common room. She went to her door and peeked out. Neville was there. "Good job," she whispered proudly, seeing him talking to Lavender and Parvati. She smiled, as it seemed that Lavender was flirting with him.

She didn't see Ron, so she exited from her room. She waved to a few people and made her way out into the corridor. She saw Ginny down to the far left turning down another corridor out of the way. It was one that was rarely used. Curious, Hermione went in the direction that her friend had taken. Once she made the turn, however, Ginny was not in sight. Deciding to walk through anyway, she began walking forward quickly, knowing a set of stairs waited at the end. When she neared the end, she heard Ginny giggle, but the corridor was empty. All of the doors appeared to be locked with standard Hogwarts warding. If someone were within, they'd try to add more wards. She went on without calling out, uncertain as to why she kept quiet. It seemed that Ginny was up to something. She'd have to find out exactly what it was. Halfway through the meal, Ginny came into the Great Hall and seemed a bit angry.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked quietly, trying to keep her question low enough so that only the pair heard it.

"Nothing," Ginny clipped. "I'll tell you later." She widened her eyes and nodded towards Ron to let Hermione know they were being listened to.

She looked over to where Ron sat. To her surprise, his eyes weren't on them but past them. Hermione turned slightly to see where his gaze had been. Her eyes settled on

Pansy. She was laughing with Bulstrode about something and making room for Draco whom appeared to be just coming to the hall. *Smug, pug-faced, Bitch*, Hermione thought darkly. Having lost her appetite, she stood quickly. Ron's eyes moved back to hers, and she noticed remorse in his eyes. Not trusting her voice, she stalked out of the hall and moved towards the entryway, needing fresh air. The moment she reached the newly rising moonlight, a tear slid down her cheek.

What the hell was wrong with her? She'd fantasized and even gone as far as deciding that she'd make love to her Potions master one day, and here she was letting Ron's attentions to Pansy bother her. Instead of venturing towards the lake, she made her way towards Hagrid's hut, meaning to have a talk with him. The light was on in the window, like a beacon calling her home. She heard Fang's whimper. Halfway there, she stopped suddenly. *Hagrid is dead. He was murdered.* Grief for her lost friend overwhelmed her, and she fell to her knees as tears wracked her body. "Poor Hagrid," she mumbled. "Poor Grawp."

Strong arms came around her. "I'm sure they are in a more pleasant world now. A less discriminating one," purred a deep voice.

It was Severus of course. He'd followed her out onto the grounds. She leaned into him, snaking her arms around him. To her surprise, he rocked her slightly, saying, "Sshh."

When she could speak without an overly emotional voice, she said, "I miss him, the big lug. He was a good friend, an odd professor, but a good man. Always trying to find something good in everyone."

"He was." A hand lifted to wipe one of her cheeks. "Why were you going to see him?"

"I was upset. Harry isn't in the hall. Ron, well, I can't talk to him, as it's about him. Ginny, I don't know if she'll keep my secret," she admitted. "It was habit to come here. I expected him to be there to usher me in, make some horrible tea, and give me something horrible to eat that he'd cooked while he listened to my stupid, childish problems."

"Come," he said, pulling her up. "Let's go down to my quarters. Someone could happen upon us here."

She nodded and followed him back up to the castle. He slipped in through one of the side entrances and quickly went to a stairway that led to the dungeons. They didn't meet up with anyone for their entire walk. Severus' office had been changed around to accommodate them for the night. Her desk had been pulled next to his. It had been in the corner previously.

He shrugged. "I thought that you might like to sit closer and talk now and again."

She nodded and plopped down in her chair, putting her head in her hands. "I don't have my books," she whined. "What an idiot!" She gasped suddenly as he pulled her up against him.

"I think for tonight, we can retire to my study," he said, looking into her eyes to gauge her reaction. Seeing no objection, he lifted his wand and warded the door. Taking care to guide her out of his other door that led to his chambers, they quickly left the office. He led her to his large settee before the dying fire, instructed her to lie down, and proceeded to take off her shoes.

Once done, he poured a glass of water and handed it to her. Hermione sipped the water quickly, touched that he was being so nice. "Thanks."

"I've the spare time if you'd like to talk to me," he offered, slowly unfastening his teaching robes.

Her eyes moved from his face to watch his hands as they effortlessly freed him of his extra clothing. "I...uh...well, see...Ron and I haven't talked much lately. It's been a little uncomfortable. I thought that I was fine about things." It had been easy to not think of Ron when she avoided him and thought of Severus instead. "But, when I saw him staring at Pansy earlier with such...longing, it hurt me. I mean, it wasn't that long ago that he looked at me that way." She sat up suddenly and scooted closer to him. "What if nobody ever looks at me that way again? What if I've passed up the only chance that I had for something more?"

"Someone will, Hermione," he replied, looking away from her, sounding wistful.

"Oh, right," she said sarcastically. "I imagine..." Words left her as Severus turned back to look at her. It was there. The longing. The look. *Someone will, Hermione*, she heard his voice echo. Slowly, she leaned in to press her lips against his for a soft chaste kiss.

He pulled away immediately and moved to stand. She placed a hand on his arm. "Hermione," he pleaded, "we can't."

She placed a finger over his lips. "I just want one kiss. Just for tonight. I'll go back to being a...student after. Please." She watched his brow furrow as he thought things through. She knew that he had an internal debate going on. Hermione swallowed and licked her lips nervously. Regardless of how friendly they were, he was still her professor. What she'd just done could have been a mistake! His eyes pierced hers momentarily, and she saw the resignation there. He was going to do it. He was really going to kiss her.

Ever so slowly, his head lowered as his lips sought hers. As with their previous kiss, he suckled her lower lip for a moment, and then did the same to her top lip before slightly nipping it. He then ventured to lick her lower lip. Impatiently, she parted her lips, and her tongue darted out to meet his. She tried to speed up his tongue's movements once it finally delved into her mouth, but the languid movements had her slowing down, enjoying the sensations, the taste of him, the feel of his hand on her cheek... She moaned slightly and felt herself being lowered onto the settee.

Her hands reached up to tangle in his hair. She dared not open her eyes, afraid she was dreaming. A slight tremor passed through her as his lips left hers to trail kisses along the exposed skin of her neck and then up to her earlobe. Gooseflesh rose up along her neck and arm. Tightening her hold on his hair, she whimpered, "Severus."

It was a mistake. He pulled away from her as if he'd been burned. Her eyes popped open, and she watched him collect himself. "Hermione..." he said. "Don't you understand that we can't go any farther? You are still my student."

"I won't be one day," she whispered.

"And, what of that day, Hermione? Are you going to want to waste your first couple of months of freedom with me?" he asked sarcastically.

She sat up. "I wouldn't see it as a waste. I have been thinking about..." She looked away.

"What have you been thinking about?" he asked, voice purring seductively.

"You. Me. Doing things."

He groaned and pulled her to him. His voice lowered to a whisper. "Don't say such things to me, Hermione. I am not unbreakable. Your words and actions," he looked down to her hand on his chest, "could easily break my resolve."

"I don't mean to. It frightens me and excites me at the same time. Does that make sense?" she asked, sounding confused.

Severus claimed her lips again, making sure to exert the right amount of pressure and speed. It wouldn't do to scare off his witch after such a large step had been taken. He was internally proud at the way he'd manipulated things thus far. She had been the one to make the move to kiss him. She had been eager, trying to rush their kiss, but he'd slowed her down. He wanted to be sure that he'd give her something to remember when she went back to her chambers.

You. Me. Doing things.

Her words had been so honest, so innocent. They'd brought many images to his mind, causing him to nearly throw her back down onto the settee and have his way with

her. But, he couldn't. He had to take his time with her. If he pressed things, seduced her too early, she would regret it before long. He needed her to burn for him, to want to be devoured by him, before he would take her. He also needed time to find a reason for her to drop his class. She'd no longer be *his* student that way. Dumbledore had brought that to mind. *Thanks, Albus*, he thought snidely.

Bringing his attention back to the witch beneath him, he pulled away, breaking off the kiss, instead placing soft kisses on the corners of her mouth and cheeks. Her hungry little mouth opened for more, but he ignored it by running the pad of his thumb along her lower lip. When her eyes slitted open, she gave him a beatific smile. He felt his world shift and knew at that moment that he would never let her go no matter what. If he had to kill the Dark Lord or Potter himself, he would have her...for always. One corner of his mouth quirked up slightly, giving her a partial grin.

"Make no mistake, Hermione Granger. There is another who will always look upon you and desire you to be his own."

She hugged him closely for a few long moments before finding her voice. Her mouth was buried into his shirt, but he could make out her muffled words. "I've never felt that way before."

"You've never let a man kiss you," he said.

"That day...at Grimmauld Place," she began, voice shaky, "did you think badly of me? Or, is that why you've...seen me differently?"

"I assure you, Hermione, that at that particular moment, I had already thought you special. I hated that you would waste yourself to a life with Weasley, but it was not my place to say anything." He pretended to sigh as he pulled her to him more tightly. "It's still not my place. This one night cannot be repeated. If the students learnt of this, it would be the end of our...*friendship*."

She nodded and continued to hold him. "I really needed this...and you."

He tried to lighten the mood. "You didn't dare kiss Hagrid, did you?"

Hermione began giggling. "Of course not." She sighed. "I wonder if Madame Maxine regrets losing touch with him. They did love each other."

"I would imagine that she does miss him and wishes that things could have turned out differently for them. Sometimes people let good things slip right by," he mused. *I'm glad that I took notice of you when I did, or you may have slipped by me.* "I think you should go back to your chambers, Hermione. I wouldn't want things to get out of hand."

"They wouldn't," she said naively.

"You have too much faith in me." She shrugged and laughed but remained silent. "Come on." He stood, pulling her up with him.

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Is this so wrong?" she asked, embracing him tightly.

"I am sure on some level it is, and from certain perspectives, it would be." He smoothed back her hair gently. "We are only supposed to be friends, Hermione. Don't take my loneliness to mean anything more than it is. We are doing this, as friends, to make the Dark Lord believe that I am following orders."

"But, won't these real memories help a little? You won't have to build fake memories if you have these," she said hopefully.

"There are other memories that he will eventually want to see, and I want to be sure that those are all fake. Doing this," he said firmly, squeezing her for effect, "may lead us to a place we are not ready to venture to. May never be ready to venture to. Do you understand?"

"I suppose," she said disappointedly. "Though, you *are* contradicting yourself. You said you wanted me. You said you'd always desire me. Now you are saying that you may never be ready. I mean wha..."

His lips cut her words short, momentarily stunning her. He ground his lower half into her stomach. "Feel that, do you?" he asked, eyebrow raised. ~~Do~~ want you. I fear that *you* may never be ready for *me*, and I choose not to dare to hope for something more. You've your entire life ahead of you. I shan't influence you in any way."

"I...I do feel it," she said, eyes wide. She mumbled to herself, "You'll find that I can influence myself, thanks."

He chuckled slightly. "Time to go, Hermione. You've no books. There will be questions if you are gone too long." Severus walked her through his office and out to the corridor. He nodded his head. "Good evening, Miss Granger," he intoned cordially.

"Good night, Professor," she said, starting back to Gryffindor Tower. As she climbed the stairs, she heard something behind her. She turned and found herself staring at an angry Ginny.

"You lied to me!" the redhead said hotly. "It was him. He sent the flower and the parchment! Inappropriate! I'll say."

"What are you going on about?" Hermione asked, her insides bursting with sudden fear. Did Ginny know that she'd just been with Snape? Did she truly believe him to be the sender?

"I followed you when you left the Great Hall earlier. I thought you'd need a friend. Looks like you've got one already! Snape!"

"Lower your voice, Ginny. It's not what you think," Hermione warned.

"I'll bloody well talk as loud as I want," she said, face turning as red as her hair. "This started the night you two were paired off together? You've been playing the hurt party in the relationship, but you're no better than Ron! You're just like Tonks!"

"What?"

"You're just like..."

"*Obliviate!*" Draco Malfoy said from behind her.

Hermione pulled her wand. "Back off, Malfoy!"

He shook his head in amusement and put his wand away, smirking at her attempt to hold her wand steady while trying to hold up Ginny. Ginny's blank eyes stared at them, and she swayed slightly. "It's for your own good, Granger. Can't let her blab about your relationship with Snape, now can I? He's got a reputation to uphold and all of that."

"You just modified the memory of a student! That is grounds for expulsion."

"So is fucking a professor."

"We are not!" she said desperately.

Ginny spoke. "Mione?"

Before Hermione could speak, Draco stepped forward. "Are you all right, Ginny? You took a little tumble on the last few stairs. Granger here patched up your bruises, but you seem a bit disoriented."

"Draco? Nothing hurts. It was just blurry for a minute there," she said, looking around.

"What's the last thing you remember?" he asked kindly.

Hermione couldn't believe her ears or eyes. They were on a first name basis? What the hell was going on here? Malfoy had his hand on Ginny's shoulder and was looking into her eyes. Ginny was smiling at him shyly.

"I was in the Great Hall eating. Ron had upset Hermione, so I went to follow her out. Before that, you and I were talking in the corridor near the library. It's all fuzzy," she said.

"Good thing that Granger came upon you during her rounds. I'd say you've lost a good hour. Pardon us, Granger. I'll walk her to see Madame Pomfrey." He winked at her and smirked arrogantly.

"What are you playing at, Malfoy?" she asked, not hiding her mistrust.

"Just following orders," he drawled, raising an eyebrow.

"What orders would those be?" she asked immediately.

"Oh, you know, the ones that say we should all try to get along, especially since we have common interests. That'll do, Granger," he added warningly when she opened her mouth again. "I'll take Ginny over to the Infirmary now."

Ginny smiled. "I'll see you later, Mione, and thanks. Glad you are feeling better."

Hermione simply nodded, unsure of what to do. She knew that she should follow them, but to what purpose? It was clear that Draco had been told by his father or perhaps even Voldemort about Severus' plan to befriend her. The threat of exposure was there, but would he actually say something? She doubted it, but would take no chances. He'd been protecting her, sort of. Well, no, protecting his Head of House and fellow Dark Lord follower. She was confused. It was something that she'd have to talk to Severus about the next time they were alone.

Southern's Notes Well, this is a little long, but I had a couple of things I wanted to bring up and hopefully answer. I think that Dumbledore had every right to be upset about the goings on. Being lied to, not being consulted with, and a student fraternizing with a professor are just a few things to peeve someone in his position. Severus' plan is moving right along, and now Hermione is interested in joining in the fun. She's confused and a bit needy, but she's not all that naïve. Not like he thinks anyway. More up on that later.

Hogsmeade: Part 2

Chapter 11 of 42

We find out what happened at the apothecary, how everyone involved fares, what Voldemort thinks, and Severus makes a decision concerning Hermione's safety.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

"Potter!" Severus yelled as the boy began to spring forward. "Get back here!" When he didn't turn back, Severus looked to Weasley. "Get both of them back to Hogwarts, Weasley."

"But, sir, Harry..."

"Now!"

"Fine, Professor," Weasley bit out. "Gabrielle, you have to come with me."

Severus watched as a half-dazed Hermione allowed Weasley to hold her close. The moment the other girl was holding onto Weasley, Hermione's eyes met his. He could read the shock, the sadness, and even a hint of accusation there. "All will be explained," he said to her, knowing that the others would simply think he was *reassuring* them all. They were gone an instant later, and Severus moved forward to the building upon which the Dark Mark hovered.

Even with the crowd that had gathered, Severus could see Potter running into the building, everyone moving aside to allow him to pass. Striding forward, he followed him inside. The first thing he saw was Dumbledore kneeling beside a crouched, sobbing witch. Potter was kneeling on the other side. Snape's stomach lurched. *How dare the boy assume he has the right to be there with Dumbledore? He must feel so fucking important. I hate that boy. He's just like his filthy father.* Taking a few steps forward, he paused upon hearing Minerva's shaky voice. To Snape's horror, he saw the limp body of what appeared to be a student...a Slytherin student. Quickly, he brushed aside McGonagall and Lupin. Tonks was talking to a wizard in the corner.

With a quick pull, he was able to see the face that went with the lumpy body. It belonged to the young Goyle. "How? Why?" He intended to kill the boy's father, but he wouldn't have truly wanted anything to happen to his son. His son had just been misguided. "Who would do this?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Lupin said sharply, though in a low voice.

"How dare you insinuate..."

"Enough for now," McGonagall said, voice strained with emotion. "This is horrible enough without it becoming personal. We have to take him back to Hogwarts. His parents must be notified. You are Head of Slytherin, Severus. We shall do as you decide in this. What should we do?"

Severus' eyes met those of the headmaster momentarily. He could see the questions in the man's eyes, and unfortunately, he had no answers for this. In fact, he only had speculations. There was much to be done. "I will see him back to the castle," he bit out, lifting the boy in his arms partially. "I will also fetch his mother." He Disapparated quickly with him, reappearing at the gates of Hogwarts. He Disillusioned the boy and cast a spell to bring him to the infirmary. Many thoughts were going through his mind. He wanted to see to Hermione to find out what the bloody hell had happened. He wanted to have a go at the older Goyle for his part in the day's events. He wanted a glass of whisky. First, however, he'd have to speak to Dumbledore. *If he can bear to leave Potter's side*, he thought snidely. The two were getting closer with each passing day it seemed. What were they up to behind closed doors?

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Hermione lay in her bed thinking of the day's events. Ron was snoring lightly behind her, hand firmly planted on her waist. If she moved away, he might awaken. She wasn't ready to face his questions. He'd badgered her about different things from the moment they were in her rooms until the moment she'd fallen asleep. Her head lifted up slightly. She could see Gabrielle was still asleep on the couch. From the darkened skies outside, she could tell that it was now night. The fire in the grate was nearly out, but she hadn't the energy to move. She was emotionally drained. Had the day's events truly happened? She knew they had, but it was too horrible to think of.

Why hadn't Harry come? Where was Ginny? What about those poor students? She nearly sat up when the next question came to mind. What about Severus? There were so many things she needed to talk to him about. Lucius had said that he'd done something to that Higgs boy. Surely he would never murder someone. Would he? At once, she remembered that he'd lied to Dumbledore and the others. Goyle Sr. had not gotten away. What was he planning to do to him? Horrid scenarios and visions began plaguing her. As of late, how often had she wondered if he was honest with her about everything? Her questions began melding together, and her visions darkened. Unable to remain awake any longer, she drifted back off to sleep.

Lips upon her neck, and a hand gently kneading at her breast woke her some time later. "I've missed you," she murmured sleepily. A groan was her reply before his lips found hers. He suddenly crushed her beneath him, lips against hers, hips against hers. The hand upon her breast began applying a little too much pressure. "Mmmm," she mustered, trying to push him off of her. She was trying to tell him to move off, but he took it as approval, grinding more intimately against her. What she heard next chilled her.

"I've missed you, too, Mione. Want this. Need you."

*Ron!* With all of her might, she pushed against his chest, and their kiss broke. "No, stop," she hissed.

He sat back on his heels, still straddling her. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't realize... I thought..." She swallowed deeply. "No, Ron."

"But... you said you missed me, and then you kissed me."

"*Lumos!*" she said. Her wand next to the bed lit, casting an eerie light upon them. She snatched it up and began lighting the lamps in the room. Gabrielle was no longer with them. When had she gone? Hermione couldn't believe that she never heard her leave. "I didn't know it was you!"

"Is that right? Got some other bloke visiting, have you?" he asked angrily, moving to stand next to the bed. "Forget it happened!"

"How could you want to do that with me? What of Pansy?"

"Pansy isn't you," he blurted, running his fingers through his messy hair.

"We've been through this before, Ron!" Hermione screamed. "You can't just think that..."

"Shut it, Hermione," he said, pulling on his trainers. "*I know*, all right? You were there, and I needed you. That's all."

"*That's all?* How dare you?" she asked angrily. She gasped as she suddenly realized they were no longer alone *Oh, God, no.*

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Severus Apparated to the Goyle residence to personally accompany Madame Goyle to Hogwarts to retrieve her son's body. When the woman collapsed, he simply assisted her to a bed and had Pomfrey look after her. The woman was worried that something had happened to her husband as well. She said that he'd not been home for over a day. He knew that it was likely that he'd been with the others for that long in an attempt to plan things, but he couldn't tell her that he'd seen her husband. She would simply have to add that to her list of worries. As she grieved, Severus found his way over to Molly. "How is she?" he asked, looking down on her daughter's sleeping form.

"Some sort of spell to keep her asleep for awhile. Poppy says she'll be good as new, she will," Molly said faithfully. "Arthur's on his way in. I told him to tell the others." She swallowed thickly. "Severus, Dung's gone. They can't contact him. Something very wrong was happening there today, and for some reason, our little girl was a part of it. Three children are dead. Dead, I say." She began crying and embraced him suddenly.

Severus had been caught unawares and stood there in momentary shock. *What the...?* "Mrs. Weasley!" he exclaimed, placing two hands on her shoulders and pushing her back. "You must get yourself together. Tears will do nothing for your daughter and the others. We need to have our minds clear." *And, you, dear Madame, need to keep your hands off of me.*

"You're right, you know," she whispered, wiping her eyes. "I get a little emotional sometimes."

"Understandable," he said sharply. He made his way back over to the safety of Madame Goyle's nearly silent weeping. At least she wouldn't accost him. When he was certain that nobody was looking, he brushed off his robes as if to erase the incident completely. Pomfrey, who had disappeared whilst he spoke to Mrs. Weasley, came in through the doors and walked over to him.

"Argus is getting all of the students to their common rooms now." She wiped a few tears away. "I had to have some fresh air for a moment. You'll be interested to know that I've just seen that the others are coming."

"Thank you," he said. As an after thought, he asked, "Where are the other students, Whitby and Madley?"

"Pomona preferred to have them out in her private gardens. Rolanda is with her. Their parents are on the way. Killing Curse on one and a Severing Hex on the other. Cleaned the boy up as well as I could. No cause for his mum to see all that." With a curt nod, she brushed past him to give Madame Goyle a dose from a phial that she took from her pockets.

From the light scent on her breath, Severus suspected that it was her own brew of liquor, and she felt the woman needed a shot *Who wouldn't need it at a time like this?* He debated on going to Hermione and getting her story, but he knew it would be best to wait. Once the headmaster and the others came back, he pulled Dumbledore to the side. "You must come with me."

Dumbledore simply nodded. Before leaving, he turned to McGonagall. "Have Harry stay here with Molly until I return."

Severus sneered slightly as the boy eyed him triumphantly as if to gloat that he was getting away with more than the other students. Potter had no business meddling around with *their* business, and he resented that Dumbledore seemed to be spending more time with him than usual. It was just as well, however, because the boy would only come back on his own in that damned Invisibility Cloak. Silently, leading the man to his office where he closed the door and warded them against any intruders, he sat behind his desk and sighed deeply.

"Tell me, Severus."

"I was able to capture Goyle and send him here to my personal...interrogation chambers. He awaits me now." Severus looked at the headmaster in the eyes. "He *hiter*. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"I'm afraid not. Explain."

"He will have to answer to me for harming what is mine," Severus said quietly. "There will be no Azkaban for him."

"Do you hear yourself, Severus? Harming what is yours?" Dumbledore shook his head, and Severus knew what was coming next. "I am removing her from this school, Severus. She and the others will go into protective custody."

Severus leapt to his feet in a rage. "You will NOT take HER from me," he said, raising his voice only to accentuate two words. "If she needs protective custody, I shall see to it, Headmaster. The Dark Lord..."

"Would think it was suspicious that I allowed her to be handed over to you for protection," Dumbledore said firmly. "Harry, Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley, and Miss Granger will all be taken from school."

"To the same place?" he asked incredulously. "If there was a plan, Headmaster, which there isn't, that would be erroneous!"

"There may be something planned, Severus. You don't know. You have no idea what went on today, do you?" Dumbledore said wisely. "It could be that he knows where your true loyalties lie."

"Impossible," Severus said darkly. *I am not even certain.*

His headmaster studied him for a long moment. "I shall not keep them all together. I think that Miss Weasley would do well under Molly's watchful eye at headquarters. Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley..."

"Absolutely not," Severus blurted suddenly, moving to sit down. "I can't allow that, Headmaster. Whether you think it prudent or not, the Dark Lord will not be accepting of her being spirited off with Weasley...alone." *Nor will I.* He picked up and slammed down a stack of parchment on his desk in frustration. "He will expect me to remain close to her."

"Tell me everything, Severus, and I shall make my decision."

Severus recounted all the events of the day, aside from those of him and Hermione in the small alleyway. He told him that he'd found Draco's actions odd and ended up Stupefying him. He had no idea what Death Eater had snatched young Goyle or what they would want in the apothecary.

"It appears that he was after lovage. When the witch told him that she hadn't any, he cast the Dark Mark into the sky, and he turned his wand on himself." Dumbledore sighed. "We believe he was under the Imperius Curse naturally."

"Lovage? What would *he* want with lovage? Better yet, what would a Death Eater want with it?"

"To be honest, I'd hoped you could tell me, but it seems that you aren't as close to Tom as you'd thought," Dumbledore said, apparently trying to get a rise out of him. "We both know it's used in a Confusing and Befuddlement Draught. I wonder what Tom is up to."

"This was *not* the Dark Lord's doing," said Severus adamantly. "He'd never consent to harming Hermione. Goyle and some others were working on this on their own. I almost fear that Lucius is involved. That doesn't bode well." Severus wondered what Draco knew. "Hermione will have the answers we seek. Shall I go fetch her?"

"I think it would be wise to speak to our prisoner first, Severus."

Severus' face remained blank as he asked, "Is there some reason that you are trying to purposely rile me?"

Smiling, Dumbledore said, "Of course not, Severus." He placed a hand upon Snape's shoulder affectionately. "I think you are taking your relationship with Miss Granger more seriously than you once thought. You should think about that. Is it more than what you let on in the beginning? Are you obsessed? That's not healthy...for either of you." He took his hand away and gestured towards the door. "Shall we see what he has to say to us?"

Shaking his head, Severus replied, "I cannot promise to control..."

"You will," Dumbledore said confidently.

Annoyed, Severus led the headmaster to the secret chamber that held his prisoner. When he opened the door, he saw the man huddled in the corner. He moved forward and pushed him roughly with his foot. "Wake up, bastard." He swished his wand at him. Nothing happened. The headmaster crouched down.

"He's dead."

"What? I didn't..."

"Do you smell that?" Dumbledore asked. "Magic killed him. Binding magic. His life was bound to his son's." Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Whomever forced the boy to go into the apothecary knew this would happen. I'd say they didn't want Goyle to talk to us. When they realized that he'd been caught, they probably went after his son to be certain. I suppose they tried to have him do a little of their dirty work first, such as getting the lovage, but when that failed, he was instructed to end things. Miss Granger and Miss Weasley will be in more danger than we thought as survivors in this. I am sorry, Severus, but she will have to leave Hogwarts. You will have to remain."

"He never mentioned that he'd bound himself." Severus brought his hand to his mouth in thought. Why? Who? When? The more he thought about it, the more he wondered if Lucius truly was involved. Neither Crabbe nor Goyle ever had much of an inclination to do things unless Malfoy directed them. Their sons were the same. If so, what was he playing at? Severus picked up the twig near Goyle, and in moments, the man was Portkeyed to his property. It was unfortunate his poor wife would find him that way, but he couldn't risk being seen with the body. "They'll not be able to trace it to us here," he said. "They will realize that the deaths are linked as well." Part of him was disappointed that he hadn't been able to inflict any pain or be a part of his death. *Nobody shall harm my witch.* "Albus, you have to let me protect her. No one else need know where she is." He didn't use the headmaster's name often, but he felt that using it in this instance would prove his intentions sincere.

"Go find Hermione, Severus. Bring her up to my office discreetly. I have to contact the Minister and go over new safety procedures. There are many letters pouring in already from concerned parents. They began to bombard us the moment we came onto the school grounds. Minerva is handling them momentarily. I suspect, however, that she will delegate that task to Filius. Also, I wouldn't be surprised if some students are pulled from school."

Just as Severus nodded and began to stalk away, the Mark on his arm began burning. "Headmaster, I must go to him." Dumbledore nodded. Severus quickly made his way to the Apparition point and went to his Master. Orienting himself immediately, he moved forward, knelt down before his Lord, and was bidden to rise.

The Dark Lord was not pleased. "Severusss," he hissed, "I have heard some disturbing news this evening. Is there anything that you know?"

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said quickly, not wanting to anger the man. "I found Goyle today. He struck my witch and was attempting to leave when I happened upon him. He did not act alone, Master. Two children were slain, and Ginevra Weasley was knocked unconscious. Not appreciating that Goyle broke *your* law, my Lord, of not harming my concubine, I apprehended him and sent him to a personal chamber in order to question him and seek retribution." Voldemort nodded. Severus continued. "I thought that our young Malfoy was acting strangely, and he was in pursuit of Miss Weasley. I Stunned him and moved on. Whilst I was dealing with things, one of *us*, as I am told by Draco and Crabbe's son, Apparated next to them and snatched young Goyle away."

"Interesting," the Dark Lord hissed. "Go on."

"We found him in Hogsmeade at the apothecary. He'd gone in to seek lovenge. When the witch said there was none, he cast our Mark in the air and gave himself the Killing Curse. When I returned to the castle and sought out Goyle to interrogate him, I found that he'd died the instant his son had. I suspect some sort of binding magic, my Lord." Severus met his Master's eyes to grant him access to whatever he might need there.

"What says your lover?"

"I've yet to speak to her privately. I was to fetch her for Dumbledore just as you summoned me." Severus let his voice fill with disgust. "The old man is now going to send Potter and his friends away...Miss Weasley included. I've already asked to be allowed to keep an eye on my witch, but I do not know if he will allow it. He thinks that you are behind this and that you might harm her to spite Potter."

His Lord cackled. "You may tell him it wasn't I. I am certain he'll be disappointed that his assumption was incorrect. Let him believe that there is dissention amongst my followers. You say Lucius' son was acting strangely. How so?"

"Fidgeting. Talking to himself aloud. Sneaking about."

The Dark Lord nodded. "I knew you would come forward with the truth, Severusss." He thought for a moment. "If you can get your witch away from Hogwarts, do so. That will worry Potter, and she will still be an eventual link to Potter when the time is right for me to defeat him. You will also need to keep an eye on our young Malfoy and also the Weasley girl." He moved forward to place his hand on Severus' shoulder just as Dumbledore had. "Leave Lucius to me, and if your concubine knows something else, send word to me."

"I shall," Severus vowed. "I do not know if this is important, but Mundungus Fletcher has gone missing from his post. I suspect that he was overtaken or left his post to thiefe."

"We shall know soon enough. Go back before you are missed," his Master said, dismissing him. He quickly made his way back to the castle. McGonagall met him at the front entrance.

"Severus, come quickly. It's Remus," she said excitedly. "He and your Mister Malfoy are in a serious row. I was going to fetch Filch if I couldn't find you. I don't think it prudent to hex them with all the others about. We'll need to remove them manually."

"All students were instructed to return to their dormitories," said Severus in an annoyed voice. "Why would Malfoy be out? What the hell is going on ~~with~~ those two?"

"They are in the infirmary. Poppy is beside herself as it is without those two going at it," she said tartly. "Albus is still with the Minister, so I didn't want to bother him."

The moment they opened the doors to the infirmary, Severus heard Lupin yelling. "I wouldn't be surprised if you know something about this!"

Tonks said, "Stop it, Remus."

"He knows something! Look at him! He's not here out of concern," Lupin bellowed.

Madame Pomfrey was between the pair. Tonks was pulling on Lupin's arm and had wrestled his wand away from him. Draco was being held back by Potter. The Weasleys were huddled in the corner around their daughter. He could see the shadows of Madame Goyle and some of her family members huddling around Goyle's body at the end of the room. Poppy had draped the curtains around the bed to keep them hidden, but Severus could hear them all. *Likely her sisters and their husbands.* He saw no reason not to use his wand on Lupin and Malfoy.

"Control yourself, Lupin," Severus ordered loudly, pulling his wand. "You shall not assault *any* student on these grounds." A flick on his wand had Lupin falling back against the nearest wall. He smirked nastily. "Look at you. You're acting like a student, bellowing and arguing." Another flick had Potter's hands away from Draco. "Settle down, Mister Malfoy." The boy nodded respectfully. "What are you doing out of your common room?"

"I wanted to check on the other students, sir. We heard that Goyle was here." He glanced around. "Nobody will confirm if he is or not. I saw Weasley over there and out of concern, sought to check on her."

"Very well," Snape said. "I shall be down to give a statement in just a few minutes. Return *Now*." Draco nodded and left the infirmary.

Pomfrey said, "Glad you came round, Severus. We didn't want to hex either of them, but they both clearly needed it."

Severus turned to Tonks and nodded to where Lupin was still struggling silently against the wall. "See to him." He sneered hatefully. The weak lovers were made for each other. The girl would never amount to much of an Auror. She couldn't even control Lupin! "Dumbledore shall hear of this." His gaze turned to Potter. "What are you still doing here, Potter?"

"I've allowed it. He helped with Mister Malfoy, and I was glad for it. If it hadn't been for him..." McGonagall interjected. Severus could tell from the way she was clutching her wand that she'd wanted to hex both parties but had refrained out of respect for the families.

"Very well," he said. "I must see to my House. Excuse me." Severus quickly made his way to the Slytherin common room. He broke the news about losing Goyle and was surprised that everyone...especially Draco...looked upset. He tried to get the boy to speak to him privately, but he refused, heading to his dormitory instead.

Feeling the need, Severus went to his quarters to bathe and change. A knock at his door sounded as soon as he was dressed. He opened it and found the headmaster standing there again. "Come in," he said, stepping aside.

"What have you learned?"

"The Dark Lord feels it was Lucius, but he is uncertain as to who might have been with him. I sensed that he suspects Crabbe. He said that he would deal with that. I am to protect my witch in the interest of one day using her to lead him to Potter. He wants me to keep an eye on Draco as well as Miss Weasley."

"Does he know that we plan to relocate them?"

"Yes," Severus said, voice low. When Dumbledore's expression changed for the worse, he added, "He had to know."

Dumbledore nodded. "They will be taken from classes for now until you are able to find out more. The Minister has agreed that the students be taken to somewhere safe. They shall still be able to do their schoolwork, of course." Dumbledore sighed when Severus tried to interrupt. "Where would you bring her, Severus? There is no place that you could go with her that is not known by your friends."

"My home," he said immediately. "I have secret rooms that cannot be found. *He wishes it.*"

"He wishes it, or do you wish it?"

"Both," said Severus honestly.

"Should something happen to you?"

"I shall leave instructions for you should that be the case." Severus was suddenly bursting with adrenaline and excitement. He'd have his witch in his home each night, just the two of them. "She will be protected during the day. My wards are rarely breached. The only one that can is you."

"You will bring someone with the pair of you. Someone female." Dumbledore smiled slightly. "I could not in good conscience allow a female student to stay with a male professor. Not at this point and in this situation."

Severus' face paled, and his lips thinned. "I cannot allow someone else into my home, Headmaster. I will not jeopardize my sanctuary in any way. Very few know of its whereabouts."

"What other alternative is there?" Dumbledore asked exasperatedly.

"I could keep her here, in my chambers. Nobody would be the wiser," he said quickly.

"We shall talk on this tomorrow, Severus. For now, I must make arrangements with the Weasleys."

"What about Potter?"

"Harry's place will be known only to me," he said mysteriously.

"Of course," he said sarcastically.

"Go to Miss Granger, Severus, and meet me in my office shortly," Dumbledore instructed.

"Very well." Severus strode forward and opened the door. "I have something to attend to before I go." Once Dumbledore departed, Severus took out his parchment to be sure that Hermione was in her room. What he saw made his blood boil as if hexed.

Currently in bed in the Head Girl's dormitory with Ronald Weasley.

Severus dropped the parchment and stared at it where it settled in disbelief. "That bastard is trying to take advantage of her. Why is she allowing it?" In a dark mood, he pulled on his robes and stalked to her room. He whispered the password and entered in time to see his angry witch, still in bed, arguing with Weasley who was putting on his shoes. The bedcovers and sheets were strewn about. Their clothing and hair had definitely been tousled from sleep. From what he'd heard, the boy had tried to rekindle their association, and she had rebuffed him. He saw the moment she noticed him and noted the fear in her eyes.

"What is going on in here?" he asked, voice dangerously low. He strode forward menacingly.

"Nothing. I was making sure she was all right, sir," Weasley said quickly.

"You've slept in here. You were in her bed," he accused, nodding at the bed, voice nearly inaudible. "Get. Out. Of. Here. Now. Boy."

"But, sir..." Weasley began.

Severus grabbed him by the collar and roughly threw him to the floor. Hermione reached out to grab his arm in panic. He shrugged her away and glared at Weasley. "Your mother is in the infirmary. Go there now, or I shall bodily remove you. Is that clear, *Weasley?*"

"Yes, Professor," he said reluctantly, getting to his feet. He looked at Hermione remorsefully before he fled.

When they were alone, Severus warded both entrances. "We shall not be interrupted or heard," he said icily. She immediately moved away from him and closer to the headboard.

"Nothing happened," she said, clearly afraid.

"Yet."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"You had another man in your bed," he said, moving closer, wand still drawn. "You allowed him to touch you, to take liberties that are mine alone!"

"No, it wasn't like that. Gabrielle was here. They brought me here after, and when I woke up, she was gone. He wasn't." She flushed guiltily.

"What are you hiding?" He placed a hand on her arm and forcefully pulled her closer to kneel near the edge of the bed.

"All right," she said quickly. "I woke up once. They were both here, asleep. He was with me. Gabrielle was there. I... I didn't make him leave. I hadn't the energy."

He could see the truth in her eyes, but he was still angry. "Why would you not tell him to get out of your bed?"

"I fell asleep. W-when I woke again, she was gone. He was..." She swallowed. "He was kissing me and on me. I thought he was you. I swear it. The moment I knew it wasn't, I told him to stop, and you saw the rest. That's the truth."

Severus' grip on her arm tightened until he saw her wince. He let go, never intending to hurt her, not really, but he was angry. Weasley would pay for trying to bed his witch. "Get your things together. We leave tonight."

This startled Hermione. "Wait. What? Leave? What are you..."

"Do it *now*," he snarled angrily. "The Headmaster has decided that the two Weasleys, Potter, and you will need to leave school for your own protection. You have been assigned to me." He smiled nastily. "Prepare yourself accordingly. Once we are on our own, you will not be my student any longer." His eyebrows raised when she blanched. "That's right. You will be having correspondence classes of sorts, not to be graded by me." He enjoyed the fear and excitement he saw mixed in her gaze. He could almost feel her body trembling, if not see it.

"W-where will we go?"

"Leave that to me." He didn't care what the headmaster said. He was going to bring her to his home, and no other would accompany them. He would certainly not allow Weasley around her. He'd already proven that he couldn't be trusted. Parkinson or no, he *still* wanted Hermione. That much was evident. He would lie to the headmaster if he had to. He could always say that he could find someone to accompany them.

After her things were packed in her trunk, she turned to face him. "Severus, I swear I didn't..."

"Enough for now," he commanded. Her trunk was shrunk easily and placed in his pocket. "We have an interview with the headmaster. We need you to tell us what happened today. After that, we shall take our leave."

"But, Severus, your classes..."

"I shall still appear to stay here and carry on with them," he said, some of his anger receding. "Silence now."

"There are things that I need answers to. I don't really know if I can..."

"If you can what?" he asked, daring her to say that she didn't trust him. She flinched as he moved closer. Realizing that he might be pushing her away with his harsh actions, he tried a different approach. "Hermione, I will protect you no matter what. The safest place for you to be is with me. Come quickly now." He released a breath he didn't realize he was holding once she moved to his side and allowed him to guide her into the corridor.

Together they made their way to Dumbledore's tower. Severus couldn't believe that all he wanted was finally within his grasp. He would have her to himself, she would not be his student, and they could finally consummate their relationship. Not much time had passed, but it was time to know her completely. She seemed frightened, though, and he had no desire to bed a nervous witch. No, he wouldn't pounce on her immediately as he'd threatened. No, he would take it slowly over the next few days and allow her to get used to being with him. Each night, they'd resume their reading together. Slowly but surely, he would have her seduced, and eventually, she would plead with him to take her. He was glad that his senses had kicked in, and he was able to control his anger. He had wanted nothing more than to tear the boy to shreds or to slam into Hermione to show her what a real man could make her feel like.

As they approached the gargoyle, he looked around to be certain that nobody was watching. He smoothed down her disheveled hair. "I apologize for my actions earlier," he lied. "I should have known you wouldn't have allowed him into your bed. You must forgive my anger. Just the thought..." He let his voice trail off.

Her eyes and expression softened. "I understand. Apology accepted."

"Hermione," he began, touching her chin momentarily, "I won't ever let you go. You do know that, right? You are a part of me now."

Tears in her eyes accompanied the smile that lit her face. "Will you not tire of me? Get bored? Seek more... willing company?"

He knew that she was referring to what Weasley had done. Deciding to put her at ease, he said, "You are all I need." To his surprise, the words were true. He'd never want any other so long as he had her. "Come along," he said, gesturing for her to follow him. "The headmaster awaits." All he had to do now was convince Dumbledore of his plans, find out what Draco knew, and think of ways to destroy Ronald Weasley.

The door to the office opened immediately. A harried Dumbledore was coming out just as they were trying to enter. "Severus, I was just coming to get you."

"What is it?" He didn't like the look on the man's face. Inside the office, he could hear and see Molly Weasley crying as her husband tried to comfort her. Had something happened to the girl?

"Ginevra woke up finally and was fine. Molly went to Poppy's office to let Arthur and Poppy know, and when they rounded the corner to tend to her, they saw their daughter hurrying out with...*Draco Malfoy*."

Southern's Notes: More up soon. We'll find out more about what's going on with Lucius, Draco, and Ginny! Severus gets his witch alone.

Looking for Clues

Chapter 12 of 42

We find out a little more about what is going on with everyone. Hermione and the others are taken from Hogwarts to safe locations. Severus and Hermione have a row.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

"What?" Severus asked incredulously. *What the fuck was the boy thinking?* "Well, where are they now? Surely they've not left the grounds, not after what's happened."

"I am afraid so, Severus. They are not here," Dumbledore said. His eyes dropped to Hermione's, and he studied her momentarily. "Would you know anything, Miss Granger?"

"No, sir," she said. "Not about that."

"Why don't you tell us all what happened?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

Hermione nodded and recanted everything that happened after the others came out of the post office. She knew that they'd been under the Imperius Curse. What had shocked almost all of them was that a centaur had been in on the activities. She told them that there was Lucius, who seemed to be leading the three other Death Eaters, and that they were all gone once her professor had arrived. Severus was glad that she'd not told the true story in front of the others. Under no circumstances could they know the full truth. Not yet. She finished up by saying, "It was clear that Lucius and Bane were interested in Ginny. They didn't seem to want her harmed."

"What's he got planned for my little girl?" Molly asked, weeping. "I thought everything was going to be all right. He was just waiting there, waiting to snatch her away!"

"Calm down, dear," Arthur said. "We don't know that..."

"But don't we?" Lupin interrupted. "The boy was obviously up to something. Why, he left the pub just as she and the others did earlier. I wouldn't doubt it if he had something to do with the entire thing."

Tonks nodded. "For all we know, it could be."

"Ridiculous," Severus hissed. "You've got some bloody nerve, Lupin! And, you, Tonks, are no better! The boy isn't that stupid. Furthermore..." his voice trailed off as Dumbledore held up his hand.

"Severus, I need for you to go to have a talk with our Mister Crabbe. He and Draco are rather close. It is likely that he'll know something. Find out any way that you can," the headmaster said, meeting his eyes levelly.

"I shall," Severus agreed. "Did Goyle's family not see or hear anything?"

"No, they had since departed."

"Very well, sir, I shall return." He looked to Hermione. "Stay here." She nodded. His eyes drifted back to Dumbledore's. He waited for him to say anything, but he remained quiet. With a curt nod to the others, he swept away, allowing his robes to billow out behind him.

If Draco was planning something, he doubted seriously that he'd let Crabbe know anything. That would be the first person that Dumbledore or the Dark Lord would have questioned. There might be some subtle clue, however, that someone of only Severus' expertise could find. Some subtle hint or clue as to what he was thinking. The damn idiot! He should know better than to do this. Why would the girl go willingly with him? Was she still not enamored with Lupin? Had things progressed between them unbeknownst to all around? That was unlikely. He had either forced the girl to go with him, or she trusted him enough to believe that he was helping her somehow. The question was now quite simple. Where do Draco's loyalties lie?

To have his loyalties with his father would be disastrous, as it was quite unknown what Lucius was about. Why kill those two meaningless Hufflepuff students? Who was helping Lucius? Goyle, seeing as he was caught and killed, was a given. Who else? Crabbe was likely part of the plotting, but that didn't make Severus feel any better. Lucius was not a fool. He'd never defy the Dark Lord without more support. Crabbe and Goyle were always loyal to Lucius, but they weren't the bravest or smartest of fellows. There had to be someone else. *Think, Severus. Lovage. Mallowsweet. Ginevra Weasley. Centaur.* He shook his head. "Damn it!" he grouched aloud.

Without incident, he went into the common room and found Crabbe sitting in the corner, alone. "A word, if I might?" Severus inquired, but his tone left no chance for refusal. The lumpy boy nodded. Taking a seat across from him, Severus asked, "Where is Draco?"

"Don't know."

"What do you know?" He made eye contact with him and mentally chanted the spell that would open the boy's mind. Even as the boy mumbled something about thinking Draco was going off for a walk, a mental picture assaulted him. In the flash, Crabbe was pulling on Draco's robes, trying to get him to stay. Draco pushed him off and exited without looking back. Severus felt the boy's grief and knew that Crabbe didn't want to lose a second friend that day. Before he could break contact with the boy's mind, however, he saw another flash come to life. It was of Crabbe and Goyle as they were helping Draco up, clearly after he'd been Stunned. A Death Eater appeared before them, grabbing Goyle, and then disappeared without missing a beat. So, the boys hadn't been lying.

Severus broke eye contact and leant back to ponder the image in his mind. It wasn't Lucius. That Death Eater didn't have the proud stance of his friend. No, it was someone else. But whom? He'd have to think on it at another time. He focused on Crabbe again. "I am very disappointed, boy, that you are refusing to speak the truth. Tell me now, and I shall not tell the headmaster or *anyone* else of your refusal to assist me in this matter."

That got the boy's attention. "Sir, I swear. I told him not to go. He said he was going to go someplace that had no magic, someplace nobody could find him, and he said...he said he was taking her with him." The boy nodded vigorously. "I swear it."

Leaning forward, Severus asked, "Has your father asked you to bind with him in some spell as of late?"

"Y-yes. He said to say nothing. H-how do you know?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "There are many things that I know. You are not to leave this school under any circumstance. Do I make myself clear?" The boy nodded. "If your father should come to call upon you and ask you to leave, I want you to come straight to me. If I am not present, seek out the headmaster."

"Yes."

"You forget yourself. You will always address me appropriately."

"Yes, sir. I'll come to you."

"Very well. Try to get some rest." In a shocking display of affection, Severus placed one hand upon the boy's shoulder. "Things will work out in time." Feeling uneasy about the gesture, he quickly made his way back to the headmaster's office.

He didn't stop until he was standing before Dumbledore's desk. "What have you found out?"

Aware of the others listening, he said, "He tried to stop Draco from leaving. All our young Malfoy told him was that he planned on going to a place without magic where it would be safe and that he was taking Miss Weasley with him."

Molly said, "But why? Why would he want to bring her? They aren't friends!"

"I feel that he wants to protect her from something," Severus said defensively.

"Codswallop if you ask me!" Lupin bellowed. "He's clearly trying to bring her to his father or someone else."

"I wouldn't be so certain of that!"

Arthur said, "Now, see here, Lupin. We appreciate your concern, but you've no need to be saying things like that in front of Molly."

"I apologize," the man said abruptly. "You know why I am upset."

"We don't all know," Severus said sarcastically. "Why don't you enlighten us? Or is it, ah, that you prefer we draw our own conclusions? Hmmm?"

Tonks stood in front of Lupin, as if afraid he'd try to attack him. "Look, Snape, we don't have time to get into this right now. It's not anything bad. Trust me, know."

Severus simply smirked and ignored her. He turned to Dumbledore to speak when Hermione interrupted. "Just so you all know, Ginny and Draco are friends. She told me so."

Stunned, he looked at her. Why would she give away such information in mixed company? Nobody was to know that Draco was *working* for Dumbledore. He hoped his widened eyes would convey that.

"Meaning they talk in the corridors?" Dumbledore asked, apparently hoping to guide her to safe conversation.

"Yes, exactly right," Hermione said, cheeks reddening as she looked at Molly. "She fancied Lupin, and for some reason, she felt compelled to talk to Draco about it. She thought Tonks to be a dishonest girlfriend, and I think Draco was just trying to...help."

"She still believes that? I had hoped she would see how much I care for him and realize that it was a misunderstanding on her own," Tonks said in disbelief. She looked to her lover. "I told you to come sooner, Remus. It would never have gone this far." She looked to Molly. "Do you know she sent him a letter earlier before all this went on? It was anonymous, of course, but it was filled with filthy things about me. This has gone too far!" She tried to move past Lupin but tripped over his feet, landing on her hands and knees. "Sorry," she said, before getting up and leaving.

Molly sniffed. "I just thought she shouldn't know until he could come in person. I thought it would have been easier on her to hear it from him, face to face."

"No one is blaming you," Arthur soothed.

Severus made a tsking noise and turned back to the headmaster. "Shall I go to Malfoy Manor?"

"Yes, straightaway."

"Very well," he said, eyes drifting to Hermione. "Headmaster, on the matter we discussed earlier..."

"Miss Granger will be safe enough at headquarters with the Weasleys and Harry for tonight, Severus. After Minerva finishes interrogating her students on anything Ginevra might have said, "We'll send them off."

Without looking at anyone, he glided out of the headmaster's office. He immediately went to the Apparition point past the school's gates. An instant later, he was on Malfoy property and moving towards the front door of the manor house. As usual, an elf opened the door and led him inside. He waited only moments before Narcissa met him. She was only wearing her silky dressing gown, and her hair was down and tousled. She'd apparently been sleeping.

"Severus," she said, moving to hug him closely. "Is something wrong?"

He could hear the tremble in her voice. "Not yet," he admitted. "However, Draco has gone missing. We believe he left school of his own free will."

"Oh, no," she moaned. "Not my boy. What is going on? I heard about Gregory. Does this have something to do with that?"

"Narcissa, I am going to ask you something, but I'll only ask it this once. I need you to tell me the absolute truth." His eyes bore into hers. "What is Lucius up to? Is he planning something?"

"I've not seen him for two weeks and only then it was a brief visit," she said bitterly. "Aurors are always about. I'm followed, you know." She shook her head. "If Lucius is doing something, I have no idea what it is, Severus. Really. Perhaps the Dark Lord..." Her voice trailed off. "Dear God. Is our Lord displeased? Is that where Draco is? Are we to be punished because of something Lucius has done?"

"I fear that Draco has gone off on his own. Our Lord shall not be pleased about this. As you well know, he had his own agenda this year. His leaving will not look favorable."

Tears filled Narcissa's eyes. "Sometimes I wish..."

"Have a care with your words, Narcissa," Severus warned. He looked around the room. "When is the last time you heard from Draco?"

"Well, there was an owl that came by earlier. Would you like to read it?" she asked. He nodded, and she left the room to retrieve the parchment. Upon her return, Severus quickly took it from her and opened it.

Mum,

I just wanted you to know that I am thinking of you, and I miss you. Thanks for the sweets that you sent. Vince and Greg helped me eat them. I think they appreciate them more than I do. This year at Hogwarts has to be one of the most confusing that I've ever had to endure. There is so much to do, so much pressure. Sometimes the things that we must do are the things that we can't. I hope you'll always be proud of me no matter what, mum.

Love Always,

Draco

Severus shook his head. It was just a simple letter. Simple for someone that didn't know how to read between the lines, that is. Draco was telling his mother goodbye in this letter whether she realized it or not. He'd obviously sent the letter before he trekked out to find the Weasley girl. *Sometimes the things we must do are the things we can't.* He'd changed his mind. Whatever his father had wanted him to do, he had decided to not do it. Severus brought his finger up to his mouth to trace his lips whilst thinking and staring blankly at the words on the parchment. If this was the case, he could plead to the Dark Lord and say that he was simply keeping the girl safe until the Dark Lord was ready for her and hadn't the time to warn anyone. Their Master would likely not be pleased, but it would be better than admitting to blatant refusal of duties. Either way, this didn't bode well for Lucius.

"Thank you, Narcissa," he said, handing her the letter. "Your son cares very much for you." He made to leave, but a dainty hand on his arm stopped him. His eyes trailed down to the hand and back up to her face.

"Won't you stay awhile?" she asked hopefully. "Usually only Bella comes by. I'm a little lonely, and you've always been here for us...for me. Would you stay...the night?"

He removed her hand. "Narcissa, you know that I can and *will not* stay. Lucius has been a good friend to me for far too long."

She nodded. "Forgive me. I don't know what's come over me."

Severus smirked. "Lucius is a lucky man." *Lucky that only one witch could ask and be able to have me stay an entire night with her.*

"Be safe," she said, cheeks flushed. "Please let me know if you find out anything about my boy."

"I shall." Feeling as if he'd failed, Severus made his way back to Hogwarts to let the headmaster know all that he'd learnt at Malfoy Manor. Once he was able to explain what he'd found out, they'd decided the best action would be to call in a favor to Ollivander. If either of their wands were used, they'd be alerted with a location immediately. It was the only way to track them at the present time. They might try to live without magic, but it would be hard. One of them would slip up at some point. Bill Weasley was on the lookout for either of them to try to withdraw funds at Gringotts. Dumbledore took it upon himself to speak to Firenze and the other centaurs in the forest. They'd come to the conclusion that Bane was acting alone, for they claimed he hadn't been seen in two weeks. The others had made peace with Dumbledore when he went in to retrieve Umbridge a couple years prior. It had apparently never sat well with Bane since.

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Ron was nodding vigorously. "I'd say it was all a big plan for starters. Draco has probably really been doing some dirty work for his ruddy dad all along."

"I don't think so," Hermione said, looking more at Harry than Ron.

"I have no idea what to think," Harry said.

"Think you can keep ignoring me, eh?" Ron asked cheekily. "Fine. See if I care. You're not the one that's been given bloody detention for every Saturday until Christmas!"

"From the looks of it, we won't even be at school, so who cares?"

"Yeah, so much for the Quidditch cup this year," Ron said angrily.

"There are more important things happening here than petty House rivalries, Ron, and I think that Draco is trying to help Ginny. Think about it. Ginny isn't some feeble witch. She knows how to take charge if need be."

"Easy for you to say. She's not *your* sister!" he said. "Why didn't McGonagall reprimand you for having me in your room?"

"Because Snape set my punishment," she blurted quickly.

"Is that right? What's the git done then? Take some points?" Ron kicked the table in front of his chair. "That's the second time he's come in on us like that. Bloody hell! I bet he gets some sort of sick thrill of it!"

"Shut it," Hermione yelled. "You had no right in the first place. You knew I was sleeping, and I thought..." Her voice trailed off.

"Oh, that's right. You thought it was your *mystery* lover, eh?" He looked to Harry. "Hear that, do you? Some bloke goes in there while she's sleeping and gets into bed with her." He kicked at the table again. "Probably lets him do everything that she wouldn't let me do."

"Ron, that's enough," Harry said.

However, Ron wasn't finished. "That effing Snape! Did you see the gleam in his eye? He was probably laughing about those two Hufflepuffs until one of his own students bit it!" He kicked the table again. "We just talked to those two today, and now, they are dead! Bet Snape thinks that's funny. Less students prowling the corridors at night."

"Ron," Harry urged. Too late.

Hermione drew her wand, and Harry pounced on her just in time to make her miss her target. The table that Ron had been abusing was now blasted into two pieces.

"Fucking hell," Ron exclaimed. "You were trying to *dothat* to me?"

"ENOUGH!" Harry bellowed. He pulled Hermione out of the room and marched down the flight of stairs and into her room. "Sit," he ordered, pointing to the first bed. Once she'd done so, he sat on the unoccupied bed. "Want to talk about what's *really* bothering you?" he asked softly.

"I'm just worried about her. I saw two young students die today, Harry. It happened right there." She sniffed, trying not to cry. "Though I didn't like Goyle much, I hate that he died as well. Lucius is up to something, and he needs Ginny to do it. I just don't understand why Bane was there. What's he to do with all this?"

"Wish I knew. Hermione, I want to ask you something."

"All right."

"Did they not try to...kill you?"

She appreciated that Harry's eyes glistened as he asked the question. She knew he cared. "No," she whispered. "Told me to stand aside and shut up." She shrugged. "I don't know that Lucius...rotten arse that he is...meant for those two to get killed. One of the others hexed Kevin. That's when..." She swallowed. "That's when Laura started screaming. He said that someone needed to shut her up. One of the others did it. He was trying to take Ginny without confrontation, so I think that maybe whatever he needs with her, he needs her alive."

Harry nodded. "I'm glad they didn't hurt you."

"I was hit, pushed around, and disarmed, but that's all," she admitted guiltily. "If Se...er...Professor Snape hadn't shown up when he did, it might have been worse for us. His presence scared them off."

"Snape knows more than he's letting on," Harry said suddenly. "I can tell. I wonder what it is."

Hermione gaped for a moment. "I think he's just as upset by this as we are. You should have seen him as he went to their...bodies. He hated it."

"I'm going up to bed. We'll talk in the morning. Get some sleep. It's late."

"All right," she said, uncertain if she'd be able to fall asleep again. The moment her head hit the pillow, however, she fell into a deep sleep; apparently, she was more tired than she'd realized. She awoke later and found that an arm was wrapped about her waist and a warm body was pressed closely to her back. She quickly moved away, shouting, "Get the hell out of my room!" How dare Ron try to come in here while she was sleeping?

"Hermione, it is I," said Severus, pulling her back towards him.

It was too dark in the room to see his face, but his voice was soothing. The moment she allowed him to pull her back into his embrace she began crying. "I thought..."

"I know," he said when she didn't finish the sentence. "Shh."

The security she felt emitting from him gave her leave to cry. She didn't care what he thought of her. It felt good to be held. So much had happened. Why? When would things ever change? Would they ever have a normal life? When would it all be over?

Severus soothed and comforted his weeping witch, allowing her the time she needed to cry. She'd witnessed and experienced much all in the space of one day. "It will be all right. Things will work out," he whispered. As her sobbing and trembling continued, he found himself wondering what he'd gotten himself into. He hated to see women cry. He especially hated for women to seek him out for comfort when they cried. It didn't really matter so much with Hermione, but hearing her sobs made him realize that she wasn't like him. He could witness a murder and not bat an eye. This only showed him that she wasn't as strong as him. *She'll learn. Things won't always be this way.*

The thoughts weren't very reassuring, and he began to seriously think about where their association was going. Part of him felt like a perverse old man for "taking advantage" of such a young girl. Hell, hearing and feeling how distraught she was made him think of her as a child, not a woman. Certainly not the young woman he'd been attracted to. *What the fuck am I doing? Have I been hit with some sort of potion?* No. That was not the case. Regardless of their ages, he knew the truth. He wanted her. It wasn't just sexually, although it mostly was. There was just something about her that called to him. She might not be experienced in the ways of the world, but some of her better qualities reminded him of his own. With her in his life, no matter what side won, he'd never be alone or lonely. That was what was important.

Noting that her sniffles had ended, he kissed the top of her head. "Are you all right?"

"Now."

He nodded even though he knew she couldn't see it. There were so many things he wanted to say and so many mixed emotions he was feeling. How could he say or sort through them all? "One day, we'll not have to worry about venturing into town and seeing others' lives ending."

"Severus, I need to know some things. Will you answer honestly for me?"

"I shall try."

She snorted but still asked her question. "Have you ever lied to me about anything?"

"Yes."

He heard her suck a breath in. "Did you know what would happen today?"

"No."

"Did *you* kill Higgs?"

"No."

"Indirectly?"

"Yes."

She sucked in another breath. "Did you want him killed?"

Severus paused. "When he spoke of you in such a way, I wanted to choke the life from him."

"Do you love me?"

It was his turn to suck in a breath. What the hell was she playing at? "Hermione," he began, uncertain about what to say.

"You don't have to answer that. I'm sorry. I know it's too soon." She sniffed. "It's just that when I realized it was you that was here...well, I felt safe. A warm feeling overcame me, and I thought it might be love. I just wanted to know if you felt that way."

"To be quite honest, I do feel a number of things for you. I am uncertain as to the extent, but I know that with each passing day, it's growing." It felt odd to him to realize that was mostly true. "Kiss me," he said when she began to ask him other questions. Being in the darkness, their noses bumped before he was able to slant his lips across hers and feel the yearning for her once again take hold of him. All thoughts of her being too young melted away. She was a woman. Her hands explored his back and hair as her body pressed into his. He could feel her breasts against his chest, could feel the thudding of her heart, and could feel the tremors of nervousness or joy passing through her body.

When he broke the kiss, she placed one last chaste kiss upon his lips and asked, "Where do your loyalties truly lie?"

He pulled away abruptly. "How could you ask such a thing?"

"Can't you answer?"

"I shall not dignify that question with an answer. Go to sleep," he said, clearly annoyed. The silence between them stretched on until he heard her breathing deepen and even out. He knew that she'd gone back to sleep. *Some questions should never be answered*, he thought glumly. He kissed her once and eased out of her embrace. He'd only meant to come to check on her, but he hadn't been able to resist lying with her, holding her. He might have allowed things to progress further if she hadn't begun asking him disturbing questions. Her words were tugging at his heart.

*A warm feeling overcame me, and I thought it might be love.*

That certainly couldn't be what he felt, but it felt good to be loved. In fact, it made a big difference with a lot of things. He could not fail because failing would mean that he'd failed her. He needed time to think over the revelation. It was what he'd wanted. He'd wanted her to fall for him. In fact, he'd planned on it. Enamored women were easier to manipulate.

Hermione awoke to bright sunshine and an empty bed. Had she imagined that her wizard had come for her? No. He had to have been there. A lone dark hair upon the pillow was proof that she'd not dreamt his presence. Their conversation came back to her. She felt her face flush as she remembered her nearly telling him that she loved him. It wasn't as if she truly did. She was just emotional about everything that had gone on. Hell, she'd cried on his shoulder for nearly half an hour. Of course she'd felt *something*.

The pang of loss that he wasn't with her at the moment hit her hard. She'd wanted to wake up in his arms. The kiss that they'd shared the night before had said much to her. No matter what he said, he felt the same thing for her that she felt for him. It was in his kiss, in his soft caresses, and in his gentle embrace. The only thing that bothered her was that he would not tell her where his loyalties truly were. Dumbledore and the Order? Voldemort and the Death Eaters? Himself? They couldn't go any further until she knew the truth. She steeled herself to ask him once again when he came back to see her. He would most assuredly turn up at some point during the day.

The highlights of her day weren't much. Bill and Fleur had decided to stay at Grimmauld Place to help boost Molly's spirits. Bill and Arthur would carry on with work while the women stayed with them. Harry was glad to see that Gabrielle had come with them. That meant that he'd get to spend time with his loved one. They curled up before the fire in the living area and barely paid attention to anyone else. Hermione was a little jealous. She wanted to be able to spend time like that with Severus. Ron seemed to be thinking the same thing...at least along those lines. He'd taken to staying in his own corner and was pretending to read. In truth, she saw him watching Harry or her each time she glanced in his direction. When Dumbledore showed up after sunset, Hermione felt a small sense of satisfaction that Harry wouldn't be staying with them after all. Gabrielle would be left behind to remain with the Weasleys. Hermione wanted him to stay there, but she was glad that she wasn't the only one that would be *alone*.

She was punished for her spiteful way of thinking when Dumbledore announced that it was prudent to send Pansy Parkinson into hiding with them. She had her bags packed and was eagerly welcomed by Ron, although Molly seemed put out. Dumbledore explained that her father had sent him an owl instructing that he entrusted her care to him. Shortly after that, he disappeared from his office. No one knew what had happened to him. Hermione could see the worry on the girl's face and felt badly for thinking such ill thoughts about her and her family. In times such as these, the last thing anyone needed was more violence. When Hermione told her that she hoped that her father would be found, Pansy accepted her words and even smiled slightly. Ron even seemed pleased with the exchange. After a heartfelt goodbye, Harry and Dumbledore left. She wondered how long it would be before she'd see her friend again.

The real question that had been plaguing her since after dinner was where her man had gone. She'd heard Dumbledore telling the Weasleys that he'd sent Snape directly after classes to check a few places nearby, and he'd not returned. She wondered if he was doing anything dangerous. She fretfully fell asleep, worried about him, and she was again woken in the middle of the night with the feel of an arm about her waist and a warm body at her back.

"Severus?" she asked sleepily.

"I'm here," he said.

"I was worried," she said, turning over to snuggle into his chest. "I didn't know if you were all right."

He sighed. "I'm a little tired, but all is well. I had some errands to run, and then Professor McGonagall needed my assistance."

"Where did you go?"

"I cannot say."

"About all those questions I asked last night..."

"I still cannot say."

"Are there always going to be things that you cannot say?"

"Yes."

"Severus, before I can fully commit to *this*, I need to know that you are not going to leave me out of everything. I am capable of handling the truth," she said earnestly.

"When, Hermione, did I ask for your hand in marriage? Hmmm?" he asked in irritation. "What? No reply?"

Hermione stiffened and immediately felt foolish. He had never truly said that he wanted something that serious with her, only that he was interested in shagging her. Well, that wasn't fair. He had alluded to many things, and a real relationship had been one of them. Angry for being so open with him and for his attitude, she bit out, "Fine! Forget it. I'm just a silly girl and not good enough to be *trusted*, not good enough to be *loved*! Why do you even bother?"

He pulled away from her completely. "I wonder that as well, more lately than ever."

She watched as he lit a lamp and began pulling on his robes and cloak. "Wait. Don't leave. I'm just..."

"It matters not."

"Severus, please, I just want to know things. I just want to feel involved."

"You are involved. Do you know how tired I was this night? I had to come to you, just to see, just to be certain, and how do you repay me? You begin acting like a nagging wife."

"Now, you're being childish!"

"There is only one child in this room."

Stung, Hermione turned away from him and closed her eyes against the tears welling there. *This will never work*. She could feel his eyes upon her and part of her hoped that he'd feel sorry for her and scoop her up to cuddle. That never happened. She heard the click of the door. When she opened her eyes, the lamp was off, and she was alone.

The next day was spent mostly in the living area. The roles had been reversed. Gabrielle had taken Ron's corner while Ron and Pansy took over the spot that Harry and Gabrielle had frequented. Eventually, both Hermione and Gabrielle left the room, feeling as if they were intruding. They took the time to talk and to try to get to know each other. Apparently, Gabrielle had been a little jealous of her since she always spent so much time with Harry. This made Hermione feel a little better. She'd felt horrible all day for the way she'd pushed Severus the night before. She should have simply kept quiet. She wondered if he would still be the one that took her off to whatever protective home she was supposed to be in. Dumbledore had said that he wanted the three of them to be separated. She'd not been given any reason to think she'd be staying at any place other than Grimmauld Place.

She hoped that while she was sleeping he would come to her as he had the two previous evenings. Most of the night, she was tossing, turning, and waking in hopes of catching him with her. He hadn't come. The next night, he hadn't come either. The only word that could describe what she felt was lost. She felt as though she'd lost something important, and she wanted to grieve knowing that it would never come back. When he didn't come the night after that either, her sadness turned to anger.

What had she asked or said that was so wrong? He had been the one to get angry and accuse her of things, hadn't he? He'd had the nerve to call her a child! She should be glad to be rid of him. When she heard Molly talking, she moved to the landing to see who had come. It was then that she heard his voice. He'd come. Their words drifted up to her. She caught only a few...can't find, been searching, and safe location. Disappointed, she went back to her room. It was still light outside, so it was apparent that he hadn't come to see her. Just as she slung herself onto her bed, there was a light knock at her door.

Her face fell when Mrs. Weasley walked in. "Hi."

"Hermione, dear, Professor Snape is waiting below. I need you to pack your things." The woman smiled softly. "As much as I would love for you to stay here, the headmaster feels that you should be secreted off to a safe place that is away from both Ron and Harry." When Hermione didn't move, she said, "Come on. He's a busy man and hasn't got all day."

She hadn't taken much out of her trunks, so packing was easy enough. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, they were both waiting for her. He barely glanced at her, appearing cold and indifferent. "Are you quite ready, Miss Granger?" he asked acridly.

"Yes," she replied sharply. She wondered where he was taking her. If he was still this angry after the amount of time that had passed, she knew that he wouldn't want the responsibility of looking after her.

"Mrs. Weasley, give my regards to the others," he said. It was then that he looked and held Hermione's gaze. "Come along."

She obediently followed him out and allowed him to wrap one arm around her. Surprised that he pulled her closely to him, she asked, "Where are we going?"

Looking into her eyes and smirking, he said, "My home." A moment later, they Disapparated away.

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**Southern's Notes:** I hope this was a quick enough update for you. I couldn't contain this chapter. I know it's a bit of a bummer near the end, but they needed to have a bit of a row. Things were going too smoothly and emotions were running high. It will get better in the next bit. She'll be at our master's mercy though. I'm thinking she's still gonna give him a piece (or two) of her mind.

I know I was supposed to have more on Draco, Ginny, and Lupin's odd actions, but this came pouring out instead. I'll have another update on Monday. Cheers.



# Home Sweet Home

Chapter 13 of 42

Severus and Hermione settle into their new location and try to adjust to each other. Lucius makes an appearance.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed\_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

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Hermione held him as tightly as she could without him realizing that she'd missed him. His scent and the feel of him were welcome. All the anger that had been building threatened to fade away, but she had to keep her wits about her. She had to show him that he couldn't treat her like a child. How dare he *punish* her by not coming to see her? The moment they were settled into their new location, he moved away from her as if a lingering touch would harm him. On many levels this disappointed her, however, it made what she had to do much easier.

She opened her mouth to give some scathing remark when she noticed their surroundings. They were in a small room, void of all furniture, slats lining the walls. It could be an airing cupboard. She wasn't certain. The smell was of stale air and dust. She immediately recognized it from that first night that he'd taken her from Grimmauld Place when Dumbledore had ordered them to flee. They'd Apparated to an alley first, then to this room, and then to the dreadful place they'd slept at. Curiosity kept her silent. She could see that the room was supposed to be used as a storage place or to do the wash in. Her parents had a room such as this back home.

Following him into a small kitchen, she watched as he lit the lamp hanging from the ceiling. The dark paint upon the walls was peeling and chipping. The refrigerator was slightly rusted about the handles, and the stove had seen better days. She thought the bar that separated the kitchen from the tiny dining area was quaint. She imagined sitting there with her books scattered about as she did her schoolwork. Both rooms had two large windows, but they were heavily draped with mismatched curtains. There was a door that he passed by, not bothering to explain where it led, and he stopped in front of another. "This is one loo."

She nodded and followed him out of the dining area. They were in a small foyer where the front entrance to the home must be. It lacked any charming features, giving visitors the impression that company was not welcome or expected. Across from them was a small room, a sitting room, where he quickly lit a lamp of candles that hung from the ceiling. The walls were completely filled with shelves of books, only a curtained window and a grate remained untouched by books. The furniture...an old couch, armchair, and table...was old yet not uninviting. She would definitely make use of the room. "Read any of these books that you'd like," he said quietly. "Though I suggest you take extra care with those on the top shelves."

"Thanks," she replied, hoping he'd elaborate. He didn't though, and she found herself following him past a darkened room to another room further down the hall.

"This is the bedroom," he said, opening the door and charming the candles to light. She walked in before him and gasped. There were more shelves of books here, a desk, a medium-sized bed flanked by two nightstands, and a couple of old wardrobes. "You can place your trunk at the foot of the bed and stow your clothing in the wardrobe near the window." He turned around to point to the closed door across the hall. That is the second loo, and it's the one I would recommend you use, as it is the only one that will give you hot water for bathing."

"Is this your house?" Hermione asked incredulously, shock evident in her voice. She regretted the question immediately when she took note of his narrowed eyes and stiff posture.

"Yes," he answered curtly. "Is there a problem with it? Not good enough for you?"

"Of course it is. Don't be silly," she said in irritation. "I only meant that I didn't imagine you to live in a place so..." Her voice trailed away.

"Unattractive? Unkempt? Ugly?" he asked angrily. "You should be glad to have a safe place to stay until the danger passes."

"That's not what I meant!" she yelled hotly. "I was going to say that I didn't expect you to live in a place *sdMuggle!*" She gestured around. "Yes, it's a little dirty, but I'm not an idiot. I know you live at Hogwarts for ten months each year and have for about sixteen years or so. It's just more humble than I would have imagined."

He gave her a mocking smile. "Pray tell, Hermione, what type of home did you picture me in?"

She swallowed. "I suppose I imagined you in a quaint manor house with house-elves running about. A house that was completely magic...not partially Muggle!"

He snorted. "Ah, to be so lucky. Not everyone was born with their pockets laden with Galleons."

"But you're so arrogant! I only assumed from your demeanor that you were..."

"Like the Malfoys?"

"Yes," she answered honestly. "Exactly right."

"Well, I assure you, my dear, that my childhood was nothing like Lucius' was." A smirk played upon his lips. "I'll bet you thought me to be a pure-blood wizard. Did you not?"

Hermione nodded. "I did." She opened her mouth to say something else, but she shut it. What could she say? Was he not a pureblood? She'd never been more wrong about anything in her life. "I never knew about *this*." She indicated her surroundings.

"Why would I *want* people to know?" he asked in annoyance. "That's a part of my life that I care not to remember. I've worked hard to change the way people see me." He unfastened his cloak and placed it on the chair in front of the desk. "You think that I am proud that my father was a *Muggle?*" He spat the word as if saying it dirtied his mouth.

"There is nothing wrong with Muggles," Hermione hollered suddenly, face contorting with anger. "My parents are Muggles, and they are good people. How dare you think that they are worthless? It's not their fault that they weren't born into magic!"

"They are still inferior to wizards. Admit it!" he said, moving forward until he stood in front of her.

"I will not!" she bit out. When he placed a hand upon her shoulder, she stepped back. "Don't touch me! My Muggle filth might taint you!"

His eyes narrowed again. "We really must talk about this childish behavior of yours."

"Childish! *Childish?*" She stormed past him to get her things in order, trying to ignore his presence! *m not bloody childish. I'll show him. I'll just not talk to him.*

He finally spoke after a long moment. His voice was quiet. "Some may be better than others. I wouldn't know." She heard his retreat, and with a snap of the closing door, he was gone.

Hermione felt guilty suddenly. What had he experienced at the hands of his father? Were there no other family members that he'd known? Were they all horrible? Horrible was the only conclusion she could come to. Something occurred to her suddenly. He hadn't spoken of his mother. Was she a Muggle also? Was Severus Snape not so very different from her? No, his mother must have been a witch, or he'd have shown contempt for her, too. She shook her head, disappointed in herself. That row was not the one she wanted to have. She wanted to talk about the horrible way he'd treated her over the last few days. "That will have to wait until later," she said aloud.

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Severus went to the only retreat he'd ever had. In the sitting area, hidden on the wall behind the couch, there was a secret door. He moved through there quickly, not wanting her to find it. Up the stairs, he crept into the waiting darkness. He didn't need any light to find his way across the large room to the closed window. He'd always remember the room as if it were part of him. Once there, he opened the heavy curtains and looked out. The sky was darkening quickly. His property was only slightly larger than the others on his street, being at the end of the street and having a vast valley behind it. Looming above him slightly to the right in all its greatness was the large mill chimney. To the left, he could make out the cobbled street and one of the other dilapidated houses that mirrored his own. Straight-ahead, though, was the expanse of wilderness that he'd taken to frequenting when he was a child. Not wanting to be lost in unwanted memories, he spun around and flicked his wand to light the lamps.

This had been the most horrifying place to be when he was a small child. There used to be nothing but darkness, fear, and fantasies here. When he was older and could wield his magic, he'd learnt to make the most of things. Now, he had a private laboratory and a personal stock of ingredients to use as he wished. This was also where he kept his more personal items...dark books, things from his mother's family, and other items. Severus sat in his chair to think about things.

Many questions were coming to mind. Why did he bring her to his home? What must she think of him knowing about his lineage? When would she start acting more like a woman? Women wouldn't give in to the urge to yell. She was eighteen. It wasn't that long since women were already running houses at that age. He could not deny that things had changed in recent years. He supposed he could point out that Narcissa Malfoy was married off at sixteen to Lucius. His parents wanted to ensure that the Blacks wouldn't align with another family. It had been hard to find other families in the country with unmixed blood. She did her duty to her family and her husband whilst still attending school. Now, she was a fine, proud woman that ran their household and looked over the family business since Lucius could no longer do so.

Of course to point this out to Hermione would be to point out that he admires one of her enemies. Would she ever accept the fact that he truly did like the Malfoys? Lucius was one of the first people to make him feel accepted in the Wizarding world. It had been one of his proudest moments when a seventh year student had asked him to sit with him at the Slytherin table. They'd been friends since. Shaking those thoughts away, he allowed the other feeling to come back to him. It was embarrassment. She'd looked at his house with her nose crinkled in distaste. He'd simply been thinking of getting her alone and hadn't thought about what she might think of his home. *Damn! Why did I bring her here? I should have fought to keep her hidden away at Hogwarts!*

"I was being selfish," he murmured. It wasn't as if he didn't have money. He had a good bit saved and waiting for him in his vault. He hadn't needed all that much over the years, aside from fine clothing and personal things. Things that allowed him to exude an air of superiority. It never occurred to him that he might want to restore his home. The neighborhood had once been fine and thriving when the mill was working, but once it was shut down, most of the people moved away, leaving their unaffordable and unsold homes to waste away. Others remained and just simply let their homes age, not caring how they looked. It wasn't like he had many guests anyway. He'd not try to improve the place to impress her. If she didn't like it, so be it.

Smirking, he wondered how she'd feel when he joined her in bed? He hadn't told her, but the room he'd directed her to had always been his room since childhood. That wasn't about to change either. The other bedroom was sealed. He didn't care to enter it, and he'd not allow her to either. That had been his parents' room.

Molly had said that she'd already eaten, so he didn't have to worry about fixing dinner. He'd come earlier in the day to place the appropriate spells on the appliances so that they would work. He hoped she would approve of the supplies that he'd purchased. He was uncertain as to what her favorites were. He'd also made sure that the temperature spells and bathroom spells still worked. The bedcovers and sheets were clean. He'd thought to see to them. *Just shows where my mind is.*

The last few days had been torture for him. He'd wanted so badly to slip over to Grimmauld Place, but he wanted to give her time to get over her little tantrum. It appeared that he hadn't stayed away long enough. She was still quite petulant. He'd hoped that she'd be so glad to see him that she'd not pester him with those questions again. She'd have to learn to just accept things without explanation. To explain all of his actions would be dangerous for the both of them. When he'd seen her coming down the stairs, he'd nearly smiled, but he was able to look away from her. That had been hard for him. He'd missed her. The classes had gone on like before; of course there was whispering about the removal of certain students and the deaths, but aside from that, things were normal. "Normal. Ha!" he said to himself. He found that he missed her incessant hand raising and questioning. It looked odd to not see her or her friends at the Gryffindor table.

After he'd gotten his thoughts together, he made his way back downstairs. Extinguishing the candles as he checked that the wards were in place, he finally made his way to his room. The door was closed and locked, but he was able to unlock it easy enough. She was lying in the bed under the bedcover reading one of his books.

"Oh," she exclaimed. "What are you doing in here?"

"I hope you don't mind if I have a little sleep tonight? I've had a long day."

"H-here?" she asked uncertainly, looking from the bed to him and back.

He knew what she was thinking. The bed wasn't all that large, and they'd likely touch at some point during the night *That's right. Be afraid.* "This is my room," he said blandly. Without looking at her again, though he could hear her stuttering behind him, he went to his wardrobe and pulled out a long nightshirt. Without a care for modesty, he disrobed and pulled on his sleeping attire. As if nothing was amiss, he placed his wand on the nightstand, slipped into bed, and turned on his side, not facing her. "Extinguish that light when you are done," he said casually.

"But you are sleeping with me!"

"I will be soon enough if you keep your mouth shut," he said forcefully. "Goodnight now."

He heard the book slam shut and placed on the nightstand on her side. The room was shrouded in darkness in the next instant. It wasn't long before she spoke. "I can't believe you are sharing a bed with me."

"Not in every sense, Hermione. Go to sleep," he said, trying to sound annoyed. He was truly amused. She'd not moved to get comfortable. "You might need to lie down in order to do so." The bed shifted slightly, and he could tell that she was as far away from him as she could be.

"Surely there must be another bedroom. What of the couch?"

"You will be here where I can protect you should someone happen to come for you," he said.

"*This is inappropriate!*" she huffed.

After all they'd done together, she was worried about something being inappropriate? That made him turn over quickly. He pulled her closer to him and climbed atop her, pinning her body to the bed with his, lips finding hers. The kiss was short, harsh, and forceful, but she accepted it nonetheless. In fact, she was breathless and moaned in

frustration as he pulled away and moved to lie beside her. To his surprise, she turned to him and placed her lips back against his, opening her mouth in invitation. He accepted and kissed her thoroughly, desire building. She pulled his hand down to slide beneath her knickers, pressing his fingers against her sex.

He tried to pull back, but she kept his hand there firmly. The eager breathing and moaning that was escaping into his mouth were turning him on *What the fuck has come over her? I only meant to scare her.* She pressed against the palm of his hand, and he knew what she was silently asking. She wanted him to stroke her there. She wanted release. When she realized that she needn't fear his hand abandoning her, she removed her hand and tried to touch him. He brushed her hand away by shifting his body to lie partially over hers for easier access. His tongue moved against hers in the same firm, quick rhythm of his fingers. She crushed her face against his, clawed at his shoulders, and ground into his hand. Finally, her muffled cries and pants came to a peak. Knowing she'd been fulfilled, he ended their kiss and turned away from her in disgust. *Fucking hell!*

"That was inappropriate," he said, furious that he'd lost control, for letting her use him. "Go to sleep." He wanted more, but he'd not allow it *Not yet.* To his surprise, she remained silent. He turned on his back to see if she'd say anything, but she didn't. Severus eventually fell asleep still waiting for her to say something, but no words ever came.

The next morning dawned, and Severus was pleased that she was holding him. He'd turned away from her at some point during the night, and she'd thrown an arm about his waist and slipped a leg between his. Although he hated to move from her embrace, he moved away from her after only a moment's enjoyment. He pulled some fresh clothes out and went to have a quick bath before starting his day. He couldn't resist bringing a hand down to soothe his morning erection. Thoughts of her, as always, guided him to climax. This time, however, he was remembering her jerky movements and cries from the night before. Feeling much more relaxed, he left the room and was assaulted with the smell of cooking breakfast. Had he been in the bath for that long?

Gliding into the kitchen, he found Hermione sitting at the bar, two plates and glasses set out in front of her. She was reading a book whilst the sausages cooked and the toast buttered itself. A flick of her wand had the juice container filling the two glasses. Her hair was pulled up into an elastic so that only one long tail hung down her back. She had changed into some comfortable clothing.

"Don't you have any eggs?" she asked, nose still in her book. He hadn't realized that she'd noticed him.

"I forgot to get some," he murmured, realizing he'd never thought to get any eggs or coffee. *Damn.* She simply nodded and continued to ignore him. He turned and left the room to get his cloak. When he went back to the kitchen, he said, "I shan't be long."

"What?" she asked incredulously, pointing to his plate, now filled with toast and sausages. "You didn't even eat!"

"I am going to get some eggs."

"That can wait," she said, pushing the plate forward. "Sit with me."

He took his cloak off and sat with her, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why are you being so nice today? What do you want?" A tsking noise was his only reply. She began eating, so he followed suit. Interestingly enough, he enjoyed the feel of eating breakfast with her. Alone. Just the two of them. Like a couple.

"Just trying to get things back to good," she said thickly. "Eat."

They ate in comfortable silence. When he finished, he placed his dishes in the sink and sat back down, shamelessly watching her as she ate. She chewed her food and drank her juice, reading all the while. Finally, she was finished and sent her dishes to the sink to join his. When she looked at him questioningly, he asked, "Are things back to good?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"On you answering a couple of things."

"Such as?"

"What do you want with me? Is there something more for us?"

He blinked. *Here we go again.* Thinking carefully first, he asked, "Do you plan on it?"

"Well, I'd hoped that we could be something more. I have feelings for you. It's not just what you do to me. It's how I feel when I'm around you and even more how I feel when I'm not around you." She bit her lip as she thought for a moment. "I don't like how it feels when you are mad at me."

He nodded. "I told you before that I will not let you go, so I suppose that means that my intentions are for something long-term."

"When I graduate, you'll allow me to live with you?"

"You mean to say that you would want to live here in *my* dirty house?"

"Oh, come off it, Severus," she said icily. "Your house doesn't matter to me. There is nothing wrong with it that time, magic, and money can't fix." She waved her hand through the room. "Why, only a few simple swishes and flicks of my wand saw the kitchen cleaned spotless. Did you not even notice?"

He looked around suddenly. He hadn't noticed. It was true, however, that the layer of dust lining the cabinets and counters were gone. The rusty spots on the refrigerator had been restored. The curtains above the sink were parted, and he could see that the glass had been cleaned. "It looks nice." It was nearly true. There were a lot of things that could be changed. He'd do that whenever he could.

"Thanks," she said, smiling again. "Now, for the other question..." She paused uncertainly. "Will you answer it?"

"I would want you to live in no other place," he said simply.

"Are we going to see *only* each other from this time forward?" she asked, looking away.

"There is no other that I want," he replied evenly, thinking of Narcissa's offer. It was true. As tempting as that had been, he'd known that there was only one witch for him.

"I don't want Ron or anyone else...only you," she said. "I just wanted to be certain. I wouldn't want anyone to be unfaithful to me... not again."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, you know that I do." That said, she reached over to squeeze his hand. "Just because I ask questions, doesn't mean I don't trust you. I just want to know things. I want to know everything...anything. What have you been doing these last few days?"

He continued to hold her hand as he said, "I've been looking for Lucius and Draco. The Dark Lord isn't pleased with either of them. For his own reasons, he has plans for Miss Weasley. Draco was supposed to befriend her and keep her out of things until his Master called for her. I feel that he has become enamored with her or developed a conscience."

"Why didn't you tell Dumbledore about this? About everything?" she asked angrily.

"He knows. There isn't much that he doesn't know."

"Oh," she said, losing her fervor. She'd pretty much known what he'd said, but to her, it likely seemed that Dumbledore would have tried to stop it.

"I do not know what Lucius wants, but in my opinion, I think Draco knows. He likely fought between loyalty to his father and to the Dark Lord. In the end, he decided to take his own path."

Hermione nodded. "As will you?"

Taken aback, Severus withdrew his hand from hers. "I would ask that you stop questioning my loyalty. Just know that no matter what happens, you shall be safe, as will I."

"What is Pansy doing at Grimmauld Place?" she asked bluntly.

Severus snorted. "The Dark Lord has taken her father hostage. It seems he was to be a part of Lucius' plan."

"How? He was never proven to be a Death Eater or to have taken part in activities."

"Some people help us without showing public support...money and connections go a long way. You will learn that one day. Parkinson had those, and for as long as I could remember, he and Lucius had an arrangement that their heirs would wed. When Parkinson refused to help Lucius without the Dark Lord's consent, Lucius broke the agreement and threatened Parkinson's wife and daughter, Pansy." He could see the shock on her face. "That's right. When his wife met a most unfortunate *accident*, we assumed it was Lucius' doing. We thought they'd had a falling out over something trivial. We didn't know, not until now, that Parkinson had refused Lucius' request."

"What request?"

"He won't say...or can't. The Dark Lord is... working with him to learn what we need to know."

"Is he going to kill him after?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "It is likely. When Parkinson entrusted his daughter and belongings to Dumbledore's care, he sealed his fate. I believe it is he that has been pushing Pansy to try to land Weasley. Weasley is so close to Potter, he would be a safe choice to keep her alive." He held up a hand. "I don't want you fretting over her feelings for your *friend*. That is their problem to work out."

"I wonder where Ginny is and what she is thinking," Hermione said, changing the subject completely. "For her to not accept Lupin's invitation to chat that day... It means her feelings were changing already, even though she sent that letter to him. I could almost feel that she was torn between Malfoy and Lupin. She chose to leave that day. I thought it was because Tonks was there. I think she made her decision."

"As do I."

"What happened to the Death Eater you captured?"

"Goyle's father. He's dead." He shook his head. "I didn't do it. Don't look at me that way."

Sheepishly, she looked away. "Sorry."

"But I would have," he intoned darkly. "For you." That was added after a moment's silence.

"You really are possessive, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, so am I then!" He chuckled in amusement. "I wouldn't kill someone for looking at you, but I might want to scratch her eyes out!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Understandable." It would be amusing to see her attempt to scratch Narcissa's eyes out. He had to hide his amused smirk before she noticed.

"Don't you see? If you feel that strongly about me and wanting me in your life, you might love me." Her voice had dropped to a whisper.

He decided to allow her to have her delusions. "Perhaps. For now, let us simply assume that's what it is and not mention it for awhile. Agreed?"

"Fair enough."

"Has Lupin and Miss Weasley ever been intimate? Be honest."

"Not that I know of. She said he used to hold her after Dean was killed and listen to all she said, but she was frustrated that he never really did anything else. She would have."

Severus shook his head in disgust. "*Lupin*," he spat. "A Malfoy is a much more worthy partner. She should be glad that he would even..." His voice trailed away as her eyes narrowed. "Is there anything else that you want to discuss?"

"Do you really not know anything about why Goyle was killed? About those others with Lucius?"

"No."

"Why were you angry last night? After... that?"

He enjoyed her flush. It served her right. She had acted like a regular wanton. "I don't want our relationship to go that far just yet. I was shocked at your behavior, and I was disappointed that I allowed it." He looked at her firmly. "It won't be repeated."

"I don't know why I did it. When you kissed me, just everything I'd been feeling had built up, and I needed it. It's almost as if I thought it would help."

"That is an acceptable answer. I've felt that way before." He enjoyed the jealous glint in her eyes.

"What made you tell me all of this?"

Startled, Severus wondered. He had told her a lot more than he'd intended. "I simply wanted to establish a new level in our relationship *There. That ought to please her. She doesn't miss much though. I told her much more than I'd intended.*

She stood up and moved around to stand by him. He didn't move as she leant forward to kiss his temple. "How about we clean this house up together? There is quite a lot of dust." She nodded to one of the doors in the dining area. "I cleaned the loo already. You were taking too long in the other, so I washed up in there."

"Cold water?"

"Extremely."

For the remainder of the day, they worked together to put the house in order. She threw out many bags of trash and expired items. When they were finished, it looked like a completely different home. The furnishings could do with replacing or reinforcing, but other than that, everything was clean. They'd even opened some windows to air out the place. When she'd asked about the locked door, he told her it had been sealed for years and would remain that way. She didn't question him, which he appreciated greatly.

They'd only had sandwiches and crisps for lunch, so when evening came upon them, they decided to have something solid. Together they prepared the meal, having only one slight incident of miscommunication, which resulted in flour being blown about the room. The mess was easily cleaned, and their meal was eaten quickly. They each bathed and decided to read passages from her book together in bed.

Severus put the book aside, extinguished the candlelight, and slid further beneath the bedcovers to wrap himself around Hermione. He could feel her shaking slightly and knew she was probably worried that something more would happen. Even after her bold move the night before, she was still an innocent beneath the action. He placed a kiss upon her head, then her cheek. This caused her to turn slightly. He found her lips and chastely kissed them.

"Sleep well, my dear," he whispered.

"You also."

He noted that she stopped trembling after that, apparently comfortable with the situation. He would have another full day with her the next day, but after that, he'd be away from her most of the time. She'd have to stay either here at the house alone all day, warded for safety of course, or she'd have to sneak to the castle with him. He decided to talk to her to see what she preferred. He supposed that he could have the Floo opened, accessible only from his quarters there to his sitting room.

It was amazing that only the night before, they'd been having a row. Much had changed over the course of the day. Hermione, away from school and her friends, was quite the woman he'd thought her to be. She knew much of running a home and of companionship. In that instant, Severus knew that he'd made the right decision of choosing her. She'd be his for always.

Sleep was welcome, but he didn't get much of it. There was a light tapping at his window. Cautiously, wand at the ready, Severus crept forward to see who was there. A quick peek through the curtain showed him the form of Lucius Malfoy. From the wards he had on the windows, he could see out, but nobody could see anything inside, aside from light. He tapped on the window once to let Lucius know he had seen him and would go to the backdoor. It's what they'd done for years. Severus looked to Hermione's sleeping form and was glad that she hadn't awakened. Pulling a bathrobe over his nightshirt, he left the room, locking it from the outside so that she couldn't venture out. He wondered how Lucius had known he was home. "Only one way to find out," he muttered as he moved through his house to the back entrance.

Southern's Notes: Finally, Lucius appears again. We will find out exactly what he's been up to in the next chapter. Hermione and Severus made up quickly enough, but there was really no need to draw out the anger. I think, though he won't admit it, that she won this round. He ended up telling her most of what he didn't want to say. He did leave some things out, but by working with her, things are much more productive and easier for them both. I'm going to have a section in the next chapter from Draco's POV. That should prove interesting. I should update again on Thursday.

Revelations

Chapter 14 of 42

Settling in seems to be harder than Severus thought. It's only been one day. Can he truly keep his hands off of Hermione? Lucius makes an appearance in this chapter, and we find out where Draco and Ginny have been.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Severus opened the door, and his friend scrambled in. "Lucius?" he asked uneasily, quickly locking the door. "What is it? Where the hell have you been?"

Lucius' hair wasn't as tamed as he normally kept it. Strands were out of order and a few leaves seemed to have found a home within. "I need a place to stay, Severus. Things have gone from bad to worse."

Severus' senses prickled. Something wasn't right. "Lucius, have you ingested anything within the last couple of hours?"

"No," said Lucius, sounding irritated. "Will you not give me a place to stay? Keep me safe from our Lord? From Dumbledore?"

"Sit," Severus directed. When his friend did so, he moved around to get them each a glass and filled them with some light-colored liquor that he had stowed in the cabinet. "Drink."

"Very well," Lucius said.

Severus smirked as the man gulped down some of the liquor. "Tell me, *friend*, how did you know that I was here?"

Lucius paled slightly and took a long drink from his glass. "I've been spying," he said finally. "The Dark Lord said that you'd be alternating residence between here and Hogwarts for some time. I simply took the chance that you'd be here."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Severus checked the window and saw an owl flapping its wings, seeking entrance. He quickly opened the window and took the scroll tied to its foot. "Thanks," he mumbled. He opened it and quickly read its contents. It told him nothing that he hadn't already known. Shrugging, he slipped the scroll into his pocket, and shoed the owl out. Once he'd locked the window, he turned back to his friend.

"Who was that letter from?" Lucius asked suspiciously.

"My concubine. She can't wait for my return," Severus said darkly.

"Oh," the man said, accepting his tale.

"So, Lucius, can you tell me why you would come here of all places? To me for help? What makes you so certain that I wouldn't turn you in to our Lord or to Dumbledore?"

The man blanched. "Severus, we've been friends for far too long. You would never betray me to either of them."

Severus pulled his wand from his robe in a flash. *"Incarcerous! Silencio!"* he said loudly. "You traitorous filth!" Severus said coldly. "Don't ever think you could come to me and ask me to betray our Lord. My loyalty is with him, not you. Yes, we are good friends, but I'll not put that above my duty."

He left Lucius there and went to his bedroom. Dressing quickly, he woke Hermione with a rough shake. "I must be away for an hour or so. Please do not leave this room. I shall ward it from the outside. The lamp on the desk is a Portkey to the headmaster should I not return or if anything happens."

"Severus? What is going on?"

"I can't explain. Please do as I say in this matter." He kissed her brow. "I shall return within the hour. Nobody has ever broken my wards, aside from Dumbledore," he said to reassure her. He slipped on his Death Eater mask and pulled his hood up over his head. He heard her gasp. "I have to go."

He left her there and secured the room. He went to the kitchen and retrieved Lucius. After warding his home, he Disapparated with his burden to his Lord's current location. Severus found his Lord sitting in a chair, as if he was already waiting for him. Other members were present. All eagerly expecting something.

"My Lord," Severus said, dropping to kneel.

"Rise, Severus," the Dark Lord hissed. "What have you there?"

"Lucius Malfoy," Severus said. "He came to my home tonight seeking protection. I felt it to be my duty to bring him to you, as I know you are wanting to speak with him about his activities as of late."

"Yesss," came the reply. Suddenly, a loud cackle emitted from his slanted mouth. "You have done well to bring him to me." His head turned. "Bella!"

"Here," she said, stepping forward uncertainly.

"Never question my judgement again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lord. I am sorry, Master. Please forgive me," she said, dropping to her knees. "But...could it not be that Snape already knows where he is. I mean, he could..."

"Enough," the Dark Lord said, high-pitched voice raised.

Severus pretended to be confused. "My Lord? May I speak freely?"

"Yes."

"I am afraid that I do not understand." He turned to face Bella. "What is it you are accusing me of?"

"Bella," his Master began, "felt that you were withholding information from me and working with her brother-in-law, Lucius. She feels you might betray us to Dumbledore one of these days." Severus pulled his wand in anger and pointed it at Bella. "Wait," the Dark Lord said, holding up a pale hand. "I shall see to her punishment."

"This," Severus kicked Lucius, "isn't really Lucius, is it?"

"No, I am afraid that it is Rabastan. It seems that Bella, her husband, and his brother felt the need to have a bit of fun with some Polyjuice." The Dark Lord's eyes glowed eerily. "It seems that we were overheard on our last visit. Rabastan found out that you would be going home for a few days. These two," he nodded towards Bellatrix and then to her husband, "have only just come here to let me know that they figured out a way to prove that you are disloyal to me. I am glad that they have failed to prove so. Seek no retribution, Severus. I shall deal with them."

Bowing his head, Severus said, "Thank you, Master."

"You may leave."

Severus nodded and noted that Rabastan was shifting back to his true form. He smiled nastily at the man's surprised expression and left. Once home, he unlocked the door. Turning around and facing the darkness, he said quietly, "Come."

The real Lucius Malfoy stepped away from the shadows. "I've not much longer," he said, following Severus indoors.

"We needn't much time."

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Draco smiled at the sleeping girl next to him. What was it about her? Why had he done this? His father was likely furious with him, his mother was probably disappointed in him, and the Dark Lord had likely already given orders for his death. Why couldn't he have just gone to Dumbledore? *Oh, right*, he thought glumly. *Snape is in Dumbledore's circle. He'd find out about my request for protection and drag me back to the Dark Lord where I'd be killed. Ginny would be, too. I can't allow that.* What Dumbledore didn't know was that Snape was truly the Dark Lord's man. If he ousted Snape, it wouldn't only be he that would perish. His mother would be killed as well. It seemed likely that Snape had already found out and informed on his father to the Dark Lord, so his father already had a warrant of his own. However, there was no reason to anger the Dark Lord enough to cause him to harm his mother.

His lip curled hatefully as he looked back at Ginevra's sleeping form. This was all her fault. If she hadn't made him feel sorry for her, he would have turned the other way as his father took her off to test his theories...whatever those were! For some reason, this girl was the key to all things. The Dark Lord wanted her, which had honestly intrigued him. What would she have that someone so powerful would want? He doubted it was anything sexual, but he'd wanted to know nonetheless and had eagerly accepted the task of following her. That was his mistake. She cried to him about that lousy bloke, Lupin, and he'd sympathized with her.

Pansy and he had always known that they would be together eventually, but then, after years of planning, his father had broken their betrothal. This had been a shock for him. At times, he'd hated that his family had decided for him, but sometimes it was all right. He wouldn't have to choose, and he'd become accustomed to the thought of her in his life. That had been the first row he'd had with his father. The second row had been about Ginevra. It seemed that when it came to the witches in his life, his father was very opinionated. He'd told his father that he was supposed to watch over her and take interest in her, but he hadn't expected the man's reaction.

There was so much more than he'd told him, and he'd been angered that his father wouldn't confide in him. Draco slid down on the makeshift bed and put an arm around Ginny protectively. He'd chosen his path, and he'd stick with his decision. She would be cared for. The Dark Lord, Lupin, and his father could all just forget about him and her. He'd find a way to make things right. It had been hard for them, not being able to use magic, but so far, things were working. Earlier, he'd been tempted to kiss her, but he hadn't. It wasn't that he was afraid; he was just uncertain about things.

Was she truly over Lupin? If so, why did she talk about him so much? Draco had found out that Lupin had once kissed Ginevra. She said she'd never told anyone. It was

late one night, and Lupin was in the library at a home they frequented. He'd been well into his cups, and he'd talked to her about death, as they'd started doing since her boyfriend had been killed. They'd ended up sharing a kiss right before the older man had passed out. He'd left before she saw him the next morning, and she didn't see him for a week after that. When he'd come back, he'd brought Tonks with him, and they'd told everyone that they'd been seeing each other privately. Ginny had been devastated, according to what she'd told him. She said it'd felt like she'd lost two lovers, not one. Draco also learned that Lupin never acknowledged that they'd kissed, so he probably had no clue, being intoxicated and all.

He supposed that would be a blow to his ego if someone did that to him. He'd brought her to a cave quite near Hogwarts. He'd slipped around in the dead of night to gather supplies. They would be comfortable for awhile, and it wasn't likely that anyone could find them. They simply needed time to think. Once everyone wasn't quite on the lookout for them, they would slip out of the country. He silently wished that he could have gone to Dumbledore or anyone else that was strong enough to protect them, but with Snape at Hogwarts, they wouldn't be safe.

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Severus invited Lucius to sit with him. "I appreciate the note saying that it was Rabastan that was here and not you. I'd suspected something wasn't right, and when he eagerly drank some white rum, I knew it wasn't you. I wonder, though, how did you come to know that he would do that? How did you know that he would be here?"

"I've someone still within the circle that has been helping me. I shall not say who," Lucius said quickly, holding up a hand. "He's become friendly with Rabastan and alerted me of the plan. Severus, I need your help."

"You cannot stay here," he said, thinking of Hermione.

"I have a place to stay already," Lucius said, becoming annoyed. "I need a spot of loyage, and I need it quickly."

"Lucius, what have you to say of those students' deaths? Goyle's son? Goyle?"

"I had nothing to do with Goyle's son's death. That is on another's hands. The other two kids were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They perished, but it wasn't by my hand. I had only one purpose, and that, my friend, was to get Ginevra Weasley."

"Why?" Severus asked through narrowed eyes.

"Bane and I have come to an understanding. He is angry that the centaurs have once again befriended Dumbledore. He feels that the forest should be for them alone. We struck a deal," Lucius said.

"I have loyage, but you'll have to give me more than that," Severus said firmly.

"He told me that in six months there will be some odd alignment in the sky, which means that an era will come to an end, and a new one shall begin." Lucius looked around as if expecting their Lord to appear. "He'd overheard me talking with Crabbe, Goyle, and..." He straightened up and waved his hand. "He overheard me talking with some of the others, and he decided to make a bargain with me. He heard us wondering if we were supporting a lost cause."

"Lucius! Our Lord..."

"Our Lord may lose this war!" the man said anxiously. "You've nearly given him as much of your life as I have. Have you not had enough?"

Severus swallowed. "I admit that at times life is cumbersome."

"I am tired of fruitless demands, the need for Galleons, no explanations as to why we are doing things," Lucius said exasperatedly. "Bane knows a way to see exactly what might happen on the night of the alignment. The only thing that he knows for now is an old saying that has been passed on that says a seventh child, a daughter, of an old line will be upon the victorious side and help things begin anew."

"Ginevra Weasley."

"Yes," Lucius said. "Imagine my surprise when Draco informed me that he had orders from the Dark Lord to keep her occupied and that he'd eventually want to see her. It was as if a ghost passed through my body. For some reason, she has something to do with it all." He loosened his top button. "Imagine, Severus, being able to gift either side with the winning token. If we were granted immunity, we could go over to Dumbledore's side if we so chose and never fear that the Ministry will raid our homes or take what is ours. If we could once again rally with our Lord and believe in our cause, we could ensure she went to him."

Severus nodded. Lucius' way of thinking did make sense. "What of this loyage?"

"I told you. Bane knows of a way to mix certain ingredients. When he burns them together, he can more clearly see what is going to happen. I wanted to see what was destined before I made my decision. If that impudent Potter boy truly can defeat our Lord, who is to say someone else won't come along and do it in a few years?"

"So you have all of our interests at heart," Severus said dryly.

"Only a few of us, to be honest," Lucius said. "I've not much faith in some of the recruits we have now. I just want things to be as they were. Those years after Potter's first triumph were a little rough at first, but I had respect and could go about in public without fear of being jailed. I am tired of this running."

"And you trust me?"

"I admit that it's hard for me to come here, Severus. I know our Lord seems to dote on you, but we've been friends for so long. I thought I could try, and just in case you were truly loyal to Dumbledore, to yourself, or could be reasoned with, I felt you needed to be warned about Rabastan. Seeing as you didn't oust me to the Dark Lord, I thought we could talk."

"Come," Severus said. He and Lucius went to his private room above, and he rummaged through some things. He handed Lucius a pouch. "Loyage. Use it well."

"You don't know how grateful I am," Lucius drawled.

"My price is information. I, too, would like to know what you see. You can send an owl to me here or at Hogwarts."

"Severus, why are you here? My connection seemed to not know why."

"That is my business, Lucius. Suffice it to say that I find myself in need of distancing myself from Hogwarts. Dumbledore agrees, feeling that I'm disturbed about the loss of the students and finally requesting much needed time away." He snorted. "Unfortunately, I still have to teach my damn classes, but at least I'm out from under his thumb for a few nights each week."

"You've never liked this house," Lucius said, looking around distastefully. "Why don't you go off to stay at the manor with Narcissa?"

"No, my friend, I don't think that would bode well with the Ministry. In fact, I believe we'd have a scandal on our hands."

"Too right." Lucius shook the pouch. "Thanks again. I must depart."

"Very well. I shall remain silent. For now," Severus warned. "Stay safe."

"I shall."

Severus sat alone for a long time and was uncertain with what to do with his information. Six months was not a long time to prepare. Although he knew that the Dark Lord had something planned near the end of term at Hogwarts, he'd not really thought that things would be ending. It seemed that the Dark Lord was always thwarted, but he always remained. Would things finally be over? Would life finally move on? In either direction? He did trust what Lucius said. He could read the truth in his eyes and hear it in his voice. He was torn and wanted to share this information with both the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. He decided to think on it the next day. The current one had been most trying.

The moment he unwarded the bedroom door, walked in, and shut it behind him, something hit him in the chest. He looked down at his feet. A pillow! "Hermione? What the hell do you mean by this?" He reached down to pick it up. When he looked at her again, he was hit with another pillow, this time in the face.

"You could have at least told me what was going on! It's been longer than an hour! I've been worried."

He threw both back onto the bed. "Calm yourself," he said as he began disrobing. "I did what I had to do. You could at least allow me to get in bed before you start your nattering and questions."

"Oh!" she exclaimed furiously. "That's it? No apology?" She snatched a pillow, put it behind her on the bed, and turned over in a huff. The duvet had slipped down, revealing her plump thighs and shapely arse. He longed to caress her, but he knew he had to quell that desire. No matter what she believed, she was not emotionally ready for that final step in their relationship.

Keeping only his underpants on, he moved next to her, careful not to touch her. He decided to let her remain angry. She had to understand that there would be times when he had to leave suddenly and would be unable to give her an explanation. Sleep found him quickly.

The next morning found, same as the day before, Hermione made breakfast. She wasn't as warm as she had been, but he could see that she was trying to let her anger go. After he finished eating, he moved to his sitting room, wondering what he should do for the day. He supposed he could read. Choosing a book from the shelf, he settled into the couch and lost himself within the text. At some point, Hermione had come in with him and sat on the opposite end.

Finally, she found her voice. "About last night, Severus, I'm sorry. I was afraid that something was wrong. I suppose I took my frustration out on you."

"Fair enough," he said, not looking up from his book.

"Could you at least look at me? I hate this silent treatment and ignoring that you've been doing!"

Severus placed a bookmark in his book and put the book on the table before them. He turned to face her. "Hermione, I've not been any more quiet than you have. I have simply been reading this book."

"You know what I mean. I sat here, and you could have talked to me."

Sighing, he said, "When I've nothing to say, it doesn't mean I'm angry." He slid closer until their thighs touched. The image of her bare thighs plagued him momentarily before he spoke. "You did disappoint me last night."

Her face dropped. "I couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I'm going to try harder."

"Sometimes I will have to leave at a moment's notice. I am not doing this to purposely exclude you; it's because I have to. By obeying my commands, I know you will be safe, and knowing that you are safe will enable me to do my job without worry for you. Do you understand?"

"I do," she said, tilting her head to rest on his shoulder. "I missed you." With that, she moved to straddle his waist as she'd once done in a dream. "Severus, I think I would like to make love to you."

She only thinks, doesn't know. Sucking in a ragged breath, he quietly said, "You are only feeling that we should do that to bring the peace back between us. There is no need." He tried to smile. "I would like to kiss you."

Her lips found his for a chaste kiss. She pulled back and looked at him. "I want this."

Severus could feel the trembling in her thighs and hands, but her lips were confident as they met his again. He brought his hands up to grasp her waist. He nibbled on her lips, and in turn, she did the same. As their kiss intensified, he slid one hand around to fondle one of her breasts, causing her to moan into his mouth and grind against him. He could feel the heat from her center and needed to touch it with his fingers, no restrictions. The hand at her breast moved down and found the waistband of her shorts. Without hesitation, it moved beneath and began stimulating her through her knickers.

"Ohhh," she breathed, "yes."

Her head fell back and gave him access to the hollow of her throat. His mouth eagerly sought out its new territory and began exploring. His witch began hissing and moving in response to the firm, circling movements of his fingers. "Hermione," he said suddenly, "I want to taste you."

"Wha...? All right. Anything," she murmured.

Easily, he maneuvered her onto her back and began sliding her shorts and knickers down. His mouth slanted across hers for one last passionate kiss before trailing its way down to her center.

"What are you doing?" she asked, voice husky.

"This," he said, moving to place small kisses along the trimmed hairline that covered her opening. Using his fingers to open her further, his tongue darted out to taste her. It was his turn to groan. Everything about her called to him. She belonged to him. His arousal had reached a dangerous level, and he was uncertain if he would be able to withstand the urge to have her.

"Oh, shite," she said breathlessly. "I didn't think..."

Together, tongue and fingers began touching and laving her until she was squirming wildly. One of her hands was moving in his hair, urging his head even lower, and the other hand was clawing at the old material of the couch. His fingers worked to stretch and prepare her until he could handle it no more. Tongue still laving, his hand quickly went to his trousers and released his hardened cock. He shifted himself and began stroking himself firmly, intent on moving up to slide into her.

She began chanting, "Ah, ah, yes, Severus!" At that moment, he'd not ever heard anything more welcoming, anything that made him prouder. He had reduced her to a near incoherent state, and only he could guide her to climax. In that moment, he realized that she was nearly there. He began stroking himself hard and fast, tongue mimicking its movement. In an instant of triumph, he heard and felt her reach her destination.

The utterly enticing sound of Hermione having an orgasm had him spilling his seed over his own hand and onto her thighs. Had he only fantasized about caressing her thighs the night before? Minutes before? He'd never look at them without remembering how they looked at that moment. She was marked. His. Her hand that had been tangled in his hair fell limply beside him. He rested his face on her stomach, catching his breath as she caught hers. It had been close. He'd nearly taken her, nearly let himself lose control. Though he was satiated for the moment, he knew it wouldn't be long before only her depths could fully satisfy him.

As uncomfortable as his position was, he nearly fell asleep. The rise and fall of her body and the sound of her even breathing had lulled him into a state of relaxation. When

he felt her hand move back up to smooth his hair softly, he dared to look up at her face.

Hermione was smiling at her lover. "I can't describe what I feel at this moment."

"Shh," he whispered. "There is no need."

She welcomed him as he moved over her to kiss her. She could taste herself on his lips and tongue, and though it was a different taste, she quite liked it and felt more comfortable about the situation. She truly hadn't expected him to kiss her there. It was a wonder that they'd shared that. Ron had never come close to making her feel the way she did at that moment, physically or mentally. She wanted Severus Snape to possess her. She wanted to belong to him. She wanted to return the favor.

"Should I do that to you, too? I want to," she offered. She saw the slight reddening of his cheeks before he replied.

"It appears that I have already taken care of that."

Hermione then realized that he'd also enjoyed what they'd done...completely. "So it would seem," she said, giggling lightly, feeling sticky. "I think I will have a bath. Er...since we've missed lunch, would you like an early dinner?"

"That would work. It seems that I've worked up an appetite," he said, almost sheepishly.

She darted her eyes away as he moved to tuck himself back into his trousers. She quickly pulled up her knickers and shorts. There was a brief awkward moment before she threw caution to the wind and leaned over to kiss his lips quickly. "I won't be long. You can jump into the tub after me."

"All right. We need to discuss things further." He stood up suddenly. "Not about this," he waved his hand towards the couch, "but about what we will do with you whilst I teach."

"Sure." She took his hand in hers and squeezed. She saw that his expression had changed, but she couldn't read it, which made her a little nervous. "Thanks," she said before scurrying off to gather her clothes and slipping into the bathroom. Once the door closed behind her, she nearly let out an excited squeal. For some reason, she felt that they'd just shared something far more intimate than sex, and she loved it. Loved him. *I truly do love him*, she thought suddenly. She had loved Ron, too, but it certainly wasn't like this. The feeling she felt overwhelmed her and threatened to make her weep. Smiling, she turned on the faucets, wanting to quickly get back to him. Once she began foaming the shampoo through her hair, her mind drifted back to the expression on his face. Did he regret what they'd done?

Southern's Notes: Well, there we are. Not everyone is on Snape's side, as we saw with the Lestranges' nasty trick. I almost feel sorry for Lucius, but he's mainly trying to save his own arse. So...Severus and Hermione moved closer. I admit that I am satisfied with this chapter, and the next one will speed things up some (into the future). Any requests? Lupin? Draco? Ginny? Lucius?

Domesticity

Chapter 15 of 42

Severus thinks about his feelings and makes a decision. Hermione decides that the house needs a little restoration. Lupin's thoughts are made known to us, as are Ginny's. Trouble is brewing at Hogwarts, and it's not one of Snape's potions.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Severus didn't feel quite comfortable with what had happened with Hermione. Yes, he'd wanted it, needed it, but there was something that was bothering him. To him, it seemed like they had just shared something on a more intimate level than he had ever shared with anyone before. It wasn't the fact that he'd lost control like some overly hormonal schoolboy. There was much more to it than that. Even though he didn't enter her, it felt as though he'd given more of himself to her than he had intended.

He didn't like it. She would always have his loyalty, his desire, and his protection, but he didn't want to lose any more than that to her. Not now. Many things suddenly worried him at once. What if something happened to him? Who would protect her? Who would have her? His eyes narrowed. What if Potter defeated his Master and Dumbledore tried to interfere with his relationship with her? She'd already said that she would like to stay with him once her schooling was completed, but what if something happened to change that? What if his Master became displeased with him and harmed her by way of punishment? Severus' mood darkened even more. What if someone that didn't like him sought her out purposely? He would hate to see what Rabastan or Bellatrix would do with her. He would, of course, destroy any of those that would try to come between them. He was most anxious as to what Lucius' centaur would see.

I can't describe what I feel at this moment.

Severus repeated her words in his mind. He had felt what she'd spoken of, but he told her to remain silent. If she had said the words, he might have repeated them to her. But did he mean them truly? Love was something that changed a man. He couldn't afford to change. He needed his wits about him. There would be time for that later. Love was dangerous. Both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord would have a hold over him. The Dark Lord would respect his lust and desire to see his line carried on, but he didn't want him to know that he felt anything more than possessiveness and companionship. Dumbledore would likely dangle Hermione in front of him to make certain things went his way. "He's practically doing that now," Severus groused aloud. To consummate their relationship at this point would be disastrous. He wouldn't be able to hide or deny his feelings.

After their quick interlude, he'd briefly been at a loss for words. Anything that he could have told her may have been used against him later. She would never know how grateful he was when she leant forward to kiss him and pretended that nothing was amiss after they'd hastily righted their clothing. He'd actually been a little nervous and embarrassed. It wasn't every day that he did something such as that. He'd relieved himself in front of her...not that she truly noticed. That was simply private, yet he hadn't a care. Control. He had truly planned on taking her right there on that old couch. *I lost control. Lost it and just didn't care. It was meant to be.* He schooled his features as he heard the door open, signaling that her bath was complete. The small smile that had found its way to his lips disappeared. They would have to have a talk about things.

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Remus shook his head in annoyance. "Will you not just let up?"

"I want to know why this is so important to you. I know you feel guilty because she fancies you, and her being upset with seeing us together made her leave the pub that day. I just don't understand why you are acting as you are! It's like you're in love with her," Tonks said hotly.

"She's a child."

"Not so much of a child that she wouldn't be attractive to you. The age difference doesn't matter much!" She threw herself down onto the couch. "I'm going to ask you something, and I don't want you to take this the wrong way. Has something happened between the two of you in the past to cause her to fancy you so deeply?"

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Nymphadora, in my good conscience, I would never allow anything to happen with her. I admit to being flattered. My heart is with you."

Mollified, Tonks said, "I hope she's all right."

"As do I," he admitted. "I just feel responsible for this. If I could have talked her into staying, she wouldn't be off with that damn Malfoy boy, those kids would still be alive, and we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Here," she said, patting the floor in front of her. "Sit. Looks like you need a massage."

Remus was no fool. He needed to allow this in order to change the subject. There were things he had never told her. He'd never told anyone about that fateful night he'd spent with the young witch at Grimmauld Place when he'd kissed her. He was the only one that treated her like an adult after her young lover had been killed. There was a lot of mollycoddling, and she'd resented it. So, in short, she was drawn to him for the way he handled her. She'd confided things to him...things of her intimate actions with her lover, her dreams, and her feelings. He had been surprised to find out that they'd had a lot more in common than he had realized.

At the time, he'd been talking with Nymphadora, but they weren't officially a couple. She had been trying to get him to see her as a potential mate, but he had felt that by allowing himself to love her would only burden her and bring discrimination upon her. She was never one to give up easily. In all honesty, he'd been fighting inappropriate feelings for Arthur and Molly's daughter. That had been hard to deal with, but he couldn't stop talking to Ginny. He hadn't wanted to let her down or make her think that he'd abandoned her. Therefore, they'd continued talking up until the kiss. Once he'd kissed her, he'd held her tightly and pretended to fall asleep. When she'd left the room, he'd fled as quickly as possible.

He hadn't known what to do. He'd been frightened and appalled about what had happened. He'd lose the trust of everyone he cared for if it got out. His only hope was that Ginny would never tell anyone. He knew that she'd fallen for him. He truly was flattered, but he'd made the mistake of never discouraging it. It was then that he'd decided to develop his relationship with Nymphadora. He'd thought that the girl would forget about him, realizing he'd taken a lover, and think he didn't remember the kiss. This, taking a lover, was a decision that he did not regret.

He and Nymphadora got along well, and he'd been able to put a halt to the feelings for the young witch. It wasn't until he'd found out that she'd still been having a rough time of it that he'd felt horrible about how he'd handled things. Instead of talking to her like a man, he'd run off and was unable to face his actions. She wouldn't be in such a predicament if he'd faced up to what he'd done. She would have understood that they could never be and moved on.

When he'd asked to speak with her that day in the pub, he'd intended to tell her about the prank played on Tonks by the twins, to tell her that his lover had not tried to betray him with Harry, and to make her understand that he was truly happy. He'd been a coward that day. He'd not wanted to discuss the kiss or their past. He'd simply meant to dissuade her from wanting him. The moment he'd gotten that letter with the horrid things about Tonks he knew he'd have to talk to her about everything. When he'd gone in answer to Snape's summons that day near the Shrieking Shack, guilt over the situation began to eat away at his soul. He needed to find her. He needed to explain things. He needed to clear his conscience. When the full moon came upon them, he'd be certain to take his Wolfsbane and talk Dumbledore into allowing him onto Hogwarts grounds to try to track her and the young Malfoy. He'd know her scent any place. *And if Malfoy has taken advantage of her in any way, nothing will stop me from seeking revenge.*

"How's that, love?" Tonks asked, breaking into his chain of thoughts.

"Much better," he said, turning to smile at her.

"I love you," she whispered, lowering her face to his.

"I love you," he answered honestly, moving to kiss her.

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Hermione set their places at the dinner table while Severus finished up in the kitchen. "I saw that you had wine in the refrigerator," she commented.

"Yes, I do," he said, pausing to look at her. "Is that your way of asking to have some?"

"Do I really have to ask?" she blurted, suddenly annoyed. "Last time I checked I was *awoman* of legal age."

Severus strode towards her, pulled her by the arm, and sat her down at the table. "I might as well do this now," he said casually, taking a seat next to her. "You need to learn to stop reading things into what I say. I only meant that you were asking if we could have that with dinner, not that you were asking for permission." He shook his head in annoyance. "I find your outbursts to be annoying."

She couldn't believe he'd handled her that way, but she knew better than to push her luck. "I'm just feeling a little uncomfortable right now. We had the most amazing sex earlier, and everything was great. When I came out of the bath, you started ignoring me again! I hate being ignored. When someone is...disappointed in someone else, they should just tell them so that they can fix it."

Her eyes shifted away from his. She didn't want him to know what she was thinking. To Hermione, it seemed that he'd enjoyed their interlude, but when she'd finished having her bath, he seemed indifferent, not wanting to talk. It was only natural to worry that he'd found her lacking.

Sighing, he said, "Hermione, we did not have sex."

"Well, it might as well have been. I don't understand why you are acting this way. Everything was fine before. What did I do wrong? Is this about last night? My outburst?"

"Nothing is wrong. I was just getting our dinner ready. Sometimes I prefer to work in silence if you don't mind." He glared at her. "We did not have sex. Sex is so much different. Something I shall show you when you are ready."

"I am ready," she said, glaring back at him. "How could you think that I'm not?"

"Emotionally," he said softly. "That next step would change everything, and I admit to not being prepared for it."

"Oh," she said, looking away. What man turned down an offering such as this? They were alone, and she was at his disposal. What more could he ask for? She wanted him, wanted him badly. He'd made her feel things that she hadn't felt before, and she was anxious to know what else there was, anxious to know the feeling of completeness that he could give her.

He placed a finger on her chin and lifted her face so that she had to look into his eyes. He stayed that way for a few minutes, and she felt uncertain under such piercing scrutiny. "Severus?"

Leaning forward slightly, he kissed her chastely. "Don't ever think that I don't want you," he said quietly, taking her hand and placing it against his groin.

She gasped in surprise. He was aroused, and all she'd done was sit next to him. Perhaps her insecurities were childish. There had to be more to his decision to deny her, and she would find out what it was.

"I always want you," he continued. "When I take you, and I shall take you, Hermione, it will be on my terms."

"W-what might those terms be?" she asked, swallowing thickly.

"For one, I would like to be certain that you are emotionally ready to have that type of relationship, especially with me." He smirked. "Not everyone will approve of our union."

"But we don't have to tell anyone until..."

"Once I have you, I'll not be wanting to let you go. Therefore, if Dumbledore came here and ordered me to allow you to go to Hogwarts, I would want to rebel, knowing that I couldn't be without you."

"I'm of age. He can't tell me what to do."

"Spoken like a defiant woman that is not thinking clearly. We cannot afford to cause trouble with him at a time such as this. Don't you think Potter would be disturbed? Sometimes you have to put what you want to the side momentarily." *Only momentarily.* He pulled her into his lap. "I didn't want to bed you whilst you were still my student because of a promise to the headmaster. I suppose I must have some honor. Although you are not my student at the moment, there is a chance that things could pass, and you could be again. Would you be willing to stop our couplings until classes were completed?"

"No," she breathed, snuggling closer. "I would drop Potions. Seek an independent credit. Anything."

"Really?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, I read that a student can drop a class at any point during their final year and seek an independent class to receive credit for it. I could still sit for my N.E.W.T. in Potions. You wouldn't be administering that."

"Tempting," he said, mouth lowering to nibble on her neck.

"I-it is," she said distractedly. "I want to give myself to you. All of me. I want you to possess me and do what you will. It only seems right." She didn't realize that she'd said those words aloud until he made some sort of growling noise and began ravishing her neck in earnest. Dinner completely forgotten about, he stood up, taking her with him and quickly made his way to their bedroom.

Hermione's eyes widened. She must have said something that had struck a nerve. It appeared that he would throw caution to the wind and have her anyway. She was suddenly nervous. Would she know what to do? What if he didn't find her up to his usual standards? "Severus? Are we going to...?"

"Yes," he hissed between passionate bites on her shoulder.

"That feels good," she commented.

He stopped and placed her on her feet just before the bed. He pulled away her shirt, and his head moved immediately to capture one of her nipples with his mouth. He suckled and bit his way around it, flicking his tongue quickly.

"Oh, God, yes," she said. "I don't care about Dumbledore or any of them. I just need you."

He gently pushed her back onto the bed, her legs still dangling over the side. His mouth halted its ministrations once she was on her back. "Damn it." He moved away from her completely, plopping down beside her, leaving her partially undressed. "We must wait. Don't you see that? Once I have you, there will be no denying things. It can be used against me. I never realized that before today."

It dawned on Hermione that he was referring to his feelings for her. If he made love to her, there would be no denying that he loved her. That had to be it. If he loved her, he wouldn't be able to hide it, and it would be used against him by either of his *masters*. She knew what must be done.

"Let's set our boundaries. What is going too far?" she asked, lying on her side to face him.

He moved to face her, extending a hand to stroke her hair and push it from her face. "I can think of a number of things that we could do that would be acceptable, but those might well lead us into the wrong territory."

"Kissing is all right?"

"Yes."

"Earlier...the couch...is that all right?"

He shook his head. "I nearly lost control. That's why I exposed myself in that way. I was intent on taking things further."

She hadn't been aware of all that much. The feelings of his mouth and hands had been distracting. "I would have liked to have returned the favor," she said softly. Deciding to be mature about the situation, she said, "Look, I know you care about me, and I understand that you'd like to wait until things are more settled. I am ready when you are." She smiled. "I just want you to know that."

Severus nodded. "Agreed."

"I want to kiss. I want you to hold me. If we happen to go a little farther, I won't deny you, and I will be ready." She kissed the hand that was stroking her face. "I'm going to try to not act so impulsively and blur things...like with the wine earlier and the pillows last night."

"Excellent," he said. "You must try not to tempt me, Hermione. I am but a man."

Hermione giggled. "Now, let's go eat our dinner and have that talk."

"Very well," he said, getting up and holding a hand out to her. Once he pulled her up, he said cheekily, "I suppose you might want to dress." Even as he spoke the words, he reached out to cup and fondle her right breast, passing his thumb over her hardened nipple and causing her to shiver. Realizing what he was doing, he dropped his hand and stepped away. "I apologize. It seems this will be harder than I imagined."

She shrugged and pulled on her blouse. "Come on." She held out her hand and pulled him towards the kitchen.

During their meal, he explained to her about his desire to connect their grate to his at Hogwarts. "It would be easier for me. You could come over to my quarters there if you'd like, or I could Floo here to check on you during the day."

"That sounds good, but why do you not look interested in that?"

"Dumbledore will then have access to us," he said blandly. "I don't know that I want him showing up in the middle of the night and finding us alone and in bed." He nodded

to himself. "I'll just ward the Floo."

"Alone? Does he think someone is here with us?" She noticed that he looked guilty. "Severus? Does he?"

"I told him we would stay in separate rooms, and I would borrow a female house-elf to stay with us." He shrugged. "I will not have you in another room, and I don't want some elf wandering about either."

"Isn't he going to know you didn't bring one?"

Sighing, Severus nodded. "Probably."

Hermione took a long sip of her wine thinking about what the headmaster had requested. A house-elf wouldn't have stopped them from doing anything inappropriate *But she would have definitely answered any questions he would ask.* She supposed just knowing would make a difference. He would be able to confront Severus about their arrangements. Severus' next words and his cool expression made her shiver involuntarily.

"It would be wise for him to not push me. I might be forced to retaliate."

She was certain he hadn't meant to say that aloud, but then he looked at her squarely.

"Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," she said, nodding.

"Is that so?" he asked darkly, leaning closer. "What if I could somehow see that Potter would lose the war when he faced the Dark Lord? What if I decided to cut my losses now and fully support the Death Eaters? Would you still be so willing? Would you still want me?"

"But...but you wouldn't. Dumbledore trusts you. You've been helping us all this time. You wouldn't."

"He would do well not to push me," he said, eyes glinting wickedly.

Just as quickly as it had begun, the moment ended. Her lover smirked and shook his head as if he'd been toying with her. He went back to eating as if nothing had happened. Hermione wasn't certain that he wasn't telling the truth just now. She shivered again. Would she be so willing? Would she still want him? Harry's face came to mind, and she had no choice but to put the entire situation out of her mind. She would not be forced to choose. Severus was just joking. He had to be.

"I don't mind going to Hogwarts with you or staying here. In fact, if I stayed here, I could do some work about the house. Would you mind if I painted or used a magic to change things a little?" she asked hopefully. She was afraid that he would take this the wrong way.

He looked around and took in the walls and ceiling. "It does need some work, but I couldn't allow you to do that. I suppose I should do that."

"Severus, I want to do it. You said that we could be housemates after the term ended, and if this is going to be my home, then I'd like to do some things around here." She smiled. "It'd be no different than the work I've done at my own house. Well, the painting anyway." She took a sip of her wine and thought for a moment. "Could you bring home a book that gives a witch tips about things they can do to magically improve their home?"

"I suppose I could." He seemed uncertain. "Why would you want to do this?"

Hermione stopped herself from giving him a scathing retort. "I would like to live in a comfortable home. A home that gives the impression of being cared for, a home that says the people inhabiting it are happy and proud of it. It would give me something extra to do while you are teaching. The meager amount of schoolwork that they've sent isn't enough to truly keep me busy."

"Very well," he said, a hint of a smile playing upon his lips. He nodded to the door that led to the mysterious sealed room. "Any room but that one. Understood?"

"I promise. I'll not redecorate your private room," she said cheekily. "Do you care to tell me where you went to last night?"

"No."

"All right," she said, feeling a little put out. She supposed she had been pushing things. "Care to read a bit of Byron tonight?"

He nodded. "Certainly."

"What is it?" she asked, noticing his frown.

"I suppose I am anxious about meeting with the headmaster tomorrow. I can hide anything from him, but I am certain that you couldn't. Then, if he realizes that I've been lying to him, it might make my job a little harder."

"So bring home a house-elf. I don't care. We'll just do as you said anyway and not let things go any farther sexually."

"But it may report that we share a bed. I admit that I've grown accustomed to having you with me at night."

Hermione smiled. "Same here."

"You never did answer me. What career are you going to pursue after you complete your studies?"

"Harry, Ron, and I talked about being Aurors, but I don't know that I will enjoy that. I'm thinking that maybe I could apply at the Ministry for a job. I'll likely have all of my N.E.W.T.s when I take my tests. At least, I hope I have them all. Therefore, I don't have to decide right now. Professor McGonagall says that some people are sought after for their scores alone. I thought maybe someone would make an offer for me." She smiled. "I supposed I never thought farther than that because I wanted to see what the boys would do."

"Interesting. Might I make some suggestions?"

"Of course," Hermione said, pleased that they were speaking about their future. She would think about things later. There was no reason why her night should be ruined over what he'd probably meant as a joke.

They talked late into the night, and when they went to bed, they simply kissed and held each other. There was no pressure on either of them to do anything more. The first week passed by quickly. Dumbledore didn't question him on anything other than Hermione's well being. Severus had established a Floo connection, which only recognized him or her. It seemed that he had some sort of pull with Madame Edgecombe at the Ministry, and she was able to connect his grates together without it being on public record. His own spells ensured that only he or she could use it. They'd developed a routine. In the morning, he would get breakfast together for the both of them. She would Floo to his quarters to share lunch with him, and he would forego the evening meal at the school to eat with her at home. She always had something prepared for him. After that, they spent the evening together either reading or working. It was a lovely arrangement. She had the rest of the time to herself.

He'd brought home some books for her to read dealing with home improvements. In the week, she'd made progress, and the home already looked different. The walls were painted, the ceilings were painted, the tiles and wood on the floors were repaired and waxed, and all of the furniture had been refurbished. That had been the hardest and most draining job, but the result was worth it. With each improvement, she could feel Severus warming up to the idea of fixing up his home.

When the weekend came, he'd decided to take an active part in his house's restoration. Each loo worked properly, and he'd fixed the Muggle appliances, enabling her to wash and dry their clothes. She hated sending their laundry to Hogwarts, and she didn't feel comfortable just cleaning them with magic. Everything seemed to be going perfectly. He'd only had to leave during the night twice, but he'd returned quickly enough, saying Dumbledore had had a lead on Draco's whereabouts. Both times, he'd gone out for naught.

Near the end of the second week, he came home in a foul mood. "What is it?" she asked, not certain she wanted to know. "The students give you a hard time?"

"Dumbledore," he said angrily, "knows about *this*!" He pointed from her to his chest. "He isn't happy, but he knows that I will not budge. He wants us to start staying at the castle. There are unused staff quarters that could be available for you. It's where he's keeping *Potter*!"

"Oh, no, but I really like it here. I don't want to go to Hogwarts. This feels like my home. I don't want to leave," she said in annoyance.

"Does it?"

"Yes."

The small smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. "Hermione, it's either that or Potter comes here while we are here alone. That means that the headmaster would be here during his spare time. I won't have that boy here acting as my chaperone, and I certainly don't need Dumbledore here to watch over me. Fucking hell," he groused.

"No, I don't think Harry should come here either." She smiled. "Look, we can go back to the castle. I am certain that we can still sleep together at night. If that's what it takes to restore Dumbledore's faith in you and in me, then we'll do it." She moved into his open arms. "I couldn't sleep without you holding me."

Severus sighed. "I think he wants you and Potter to share quarters. Each of you would have a private bedchamber, but you'd share a common room." He nearly growled the next sentence. "He dared to say that he could put a ward on your room to ensure no male could enter if it would make me feel better about you sharing quarters with Boy Fucking Wonder. I imagine it's to keep me out!" He pushed away from her. "I need to be alone."

She watched in wonder as he moved to the bookshelf behind the couch. A flick of his wand saw it open, and she watched him ascend some stairs before it closed again. Had that room been there all along? What was in there? Why had he kept it a secret? She sat down on the couch, shocked. There was so much about this man that she truly didn't know. The dark conversation they'd shared over dinner weeks prior came back to her. Would he truly turn against Dumbledore if he was pushed too far? She thought about the way he crept out of bed the night before to wait in the kitchen for an owl to appear. He'd done that a couple of times, but she'd not let on that she'd watched him. She'd heard him mumble Lucius' name. She was uncertain if the letters were about him or from him. He always destroyed them after, and there was no way of knowing what his replies were. She couldn't say anything because he'd think she'd been spying on him. Now, she wished she'd confronted him. Quickly, she made her way to their bedroom. She had her own thinking to do.

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Ginny threw her hands up in exasperation. "Draco, how much longer do we have to stay here? I am going nuts! All we've had to eat over the past couple of days is a load of sweets."

"Well, I'm certainly not used to living like this either. If you'll remember, I'm doing this for you. You need to appreciate me a little more!" he retorted hotly.

"I think we should go to Dumbledore. Either that or we need to leave. You said it yourself. You were almost caught the last two times that you went into town. Snape isn't going to give up. Neither is the headmaster. They want to protect us," she pleaded.

"Don't speak about things that you don't know about! Snape..." Draco looked away, voice trailing off. "I say we try to get out of Scotland. We'll come back when the bloody war is over!"

"We haven't any money!"

"I have a private account. I can make a withdrawal. My father doesn't even know I have it." He nodded. "That's what we'll do."

"I am certain that they'll be looking for you to turn up. My brother happens to work there!"

"Yeah? How will they know it is I who is doing the withdrawing? It's not under my real name. I made a wager with a Goblin and won. He had to give me a vault under an assumed name. He'll not be telling anyone anytime soon. How would that look to his superiors?" He smirked. "We can do this. Just the two of us."

Ginny smiled and kissed his cheek. "I'm just tired of being here. I want a nice, hot bath."

"You can use that pool of water that we've been using for now," he said cheekily, pulling her so that her head rested on his chest just below his chin. "I know it's cold, but I can't use magic to heat it for you. It'll have to do for now. I'll make it up to you. I promise. We can go to Ollivander, talk to him privately, and get a new wand. He owes my father a favor. I can call him on it."

"That would be nice." She kissed his chest lightly and felt him stiffen. She looked up into his normally cool eyes and saw something warm flickering there. Uncertainty. Need. "I would like to kiss you."

"Is that so?"

She didn't bother answering. She tilted her head up to place a chaste kiss upon his lips. When she moved to pull away, his arms held her tightly, and his mouth descended upon hers again. This time their lips parted. When he ended the kiss, she pulled away. "I'll go wash up." She could feel her cheeks heating as she fled. She'd just kissed Draco Malfoy! They'd been together for nearly three full weeks, and although they'd held each other, they'd never kissed before. It wasn't the same heated type of kiss that she'd shared with Remus, but it was something more. Something promising. If she didn't know better, she'd say that he fancied her. Fancied her enough to wait until she had a clear mind about things before he'd try to push her into doing something she'd regret.

Remus. She hadn't been thinking about him as much. She supposed it never would have worked out. Her parents wouldn't have allowed the union, and he did seem happy with Tonks. Her expression soured. Tonks. She hated that he had been landed with a woman that would try to snog other men. He deserved better. Ginny grinned. It was the first time she'd really thought of things that way. Usually when she thought of Tonks, she listed many reasons why she would make a better lover for him than the other witch would. This time, she simply wished he had someone that loved him completely. She simply wanted him to be happy and not get hurt. Draco's smoldering gaze from after their kiss came to mind. Perhaps things were happening as they were meant to be.

Could it be that she was meant to be with Draco? Earlier in her life, she only dreamed of being married to Harry Potter. Then, she'd had other dates and realized that Harry wouldn't ever feel that way about her. Dean had made her happy while they were together, and he'd been her first lover. When he'd died, she'd felt lost. Remus had been there for her, but she saw her feelings now for what they were. She was on the rebound and simply reaching out to someone that was there. It could have been anyone, and she'd probably have felt the same way. Shrugging, she began pulling away her clothing, picked up the bar of soap they'd placed near the edge, and walked into the cold pool of water to have a quick wash. For the first time in months, things were looking better for her. She missed her friends and family, but for some reason, she felt that being with Draco was exactly what she was supposed to do with her life.

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**Southern's Notes:** Unfortunately, it seems that our couple's closeness is about to be disrupted. I am certain that they will find ways to sneak about, but it won't be the

same, will it? Hmm! Maybe it will be better. I remember those days. However, Severus isn't taking this well, as he's used to having his witch with him, and Hermione is starting to think things over. What if he follows through with that threat during dinner? Would she betray him to help Harry? Or would she betray Harry to help Snape? Those things will be on her mind. I think they should be. I just wonder if she's starting to doubt her wizard.

I hope that Lupin's POV and Ginny's POV answered some questions that you might have had. I wonder, though, if we've heard the end of the kissing bit? Lucius will make an appearance in the next chapter. Dumbledore is really putting a strain on Snape. Heehee... Potter at his house? Yeah, right. I wonder what they will decide. As always, requests welcome. Let me know if you have questions.

## Back to Hogwarts

*Chapter 16 of 42*

Severus and Hermione find ways to deal with disappointment. Harry begins to wonder about things, and Lucius' motives are revealed.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed\_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

I am sorry that I'm a little late, but my lovely beta was out of town. I am happy that she took the time to do it for me this evening. Thanks, all! I am aiming for my next update to be on Tuesday.

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It was sometime during the night when Hermione felt the bed sag, signaling that her lover had finally come to bed. She tried to pretend to be asleep, but she stiffened when she realized that he reeked of liquor. Almost immediately, his lips were upon her, nuzzling her shoulder.

"Hermione," he whispered.

She debated on what to do. She could either continue to feign sleep, or she could face him. One of his hands slid around to cup and knead her uncovered breast through her nightgown, causing her to gasp and making her decision for her. Shrugging away from his hand and pulling the duvet about her more tightly, she groggily asked, "What is it?"

"I want to make love with you," he said lightly, trying to pull her on her back.

"No," she said firmly. "You're drunk." She shrugged away and remained lying on her side. In truth, she was quite shaken, though she tried not to show it. He'd been in his secret room for hours, and she'd been thinking about his words, his actions, his secrets, and his loyalties. She'd also been thinking about hers.

"I've only had a couple of drinks," he slurred. "We have to go back to the castle tomorrow, and I wanted to love you now whilst I still have the chance." He began mumbling to himself. "...Potter... damn wards..."

"Severus, go to sleep. We can talk about it in the morning," she said softly. She could understand his reasoning, but she couldn't shake the feeling that to give in would be dangerous for all involved. Harry's lopsided grin came to mind. He'd always held her loyalties, and unfortunately for her lover, in case he'd follow through with his threats, that was still her decision.

"Want you," he murmured, tugging at her once again.

She relented and turned towards him. "We can't," she whispered. "We've decided on this already. You can't let this change things."

He lunged for her, pulling her flush against his body. Hermione gasped when she realized that he was naked. He'd been sleeping partially dressed so as to keep things safe between them. "Severus, no," she said, pushing against his chest. She could feel his hard length pressing against her stomach.

His lips found her face and began delivering kisses to her cheeks and lips. "I need you," he said, pushing against her, wanting her to feel how aroused he was.

"N-no," she said, nearing panic. "I don't want our first time to be like this. You've been drinking. It's..." She swallowed thickly, as he moved her onto her back to pin her to the bed with his body, one hand lifting up her nightgown. "Please stop."

Severus sighed and rested his head against her shoulder. "I would not force you," he whispered after a minute. "I shall miss you in my bed."

"As will I," she agreed, trembling subsiding as she thanked God. "We'll still find ways to be together. Tonight...we just can't. We've decided already." She kissed the top of his head and moved her arms around his back to hold him. "I'm not ready for this. You were right."

She felt him nod against her skin and mumble something, but she was uncertain what his reply was. Moments later, light snores signaled that he'd fallen asleep. She held him for as long as her body would allow. The pressure of his weight seemed to be taking her breath away. Once she slid to the side, his body instinctively curled around her, but to her relief, he never woke. She could still feel his hardness pressed against her and fought the urge to reach around to touch it. It would be too much of a risk.

It was the first time that she'd been afraid to lie with him. The episode was obviously caused by the liquor, but all the same, she was glad that he'd finally seen reason and stopped his demands. What if he'd not wanted to stop? Would she have allowed him to have his way? Would she have fought him? It wasn't that she didn't want to love him in that way. She did, but for some reason, things had changed. She actually *wanted* to wait. If making love to her would make it too hard to deny his feelings for her, he'd be put in jeopardy.

Hermione never asked much about his relationship with Voldemort, but she had a feeling that she would become a pawn of sorts. Hell, she figured that she already was. The first time the man was disappointed in something that her wizard did, he'd likely threaten to harm her. She reached behind her and pulled his arm around her for extra comfort. What had she agreed to by going along with his game? She'd thought that she was helping to do what Voldemort wanted, but now, she honestly wondered.

Was this all Severus' doing? Had he sought her out purposely and pretended that the Dark Lord wanted him to? She hated doubting him, but her senses told her there was so much more to this. Yes, she could understand that by having her on Snape's side would benefit Voldemort, as she could lead them to Harry, give away plans, or cause him distress by finding out she was in love with a man he hated. Hermione knew that she had much to think about and that much would change for them.

One thing was for certain. She didn't doubt that he had deep feelings for her. She'd only thought that she loved him, and even after all her soul searching, she felt that she

was falling in love with him. It was more than curiosity, lust, the need for possession, or the hope to be desired by such a man. She wanted to spend her life with him, share his home, and maybe have a child with him eventually. In her mind, she'd already planned their future. After school finished, they would live together, no pressure for marriage. She would find a job, and they would just live happily ever after. She snorted. Real life was no fairytale, was it? There would definitely be obstacles, and if his threat to go against Dumbledore would be followed through, her dreams would be shattered. She couldn't betray Harry or all she believed in. She wondered how she could safely project this to him. Surely he knew. Surely he didn't expect anything less.

Shrugging away the thoughts, she willed herself to go to sleep. She didn't want to show up at the castle with dark circles under her eyes. Part of her wished that she had allowed Severus to have his way with her, but she knew that would have been the wrong decision. Had he been thinking clearly, he'd not have tried to seduce her. She pulled on the arm about her waist and brought the hand up to her lips to kiss its palm. Placing it under her breast and over her heart, she finally dozed off.

When Hermione awoke, she was alone. A quick perusal of her room told her that her things were already packed. Severus must have done it for her. Slightly annoyed, she got up to rummage through her chest to find clothes for the day. She went to the bathroom and opened the door. The door was closed and locked before she realized that she was not alone.

"Severus," she exclaimed in surprise. "I am sorry. I didn't know." He was completely naked and about to step into the tub. The room was a bit steamy, as it appeared he'd been running the shower's hot water for awhile. She diverted her gaze, but not before she noticed his body. It was odd to see him so utterly exposed. She turned away and placed her hand on the doorknob. "I'll come back later."

"Hermione, stay," he said. "I'll be in here. You can comfortably go about your business."

She heard the rattling of the shower curtain behind her and peeked around. He'd disappeared from sight. Quickly moving to the sink, she brushed her teeth and splashed water over her face. In truth, she'd come in to have a bath, but she supposed she could wash off at the sink. She glanced back at the shower to be certain he was still within before pulling her nightgown over her head. She wet a cloth and lathered it with soap. Tears sprang to her eyes as she realized that this would be the last time she'd be here for a long while. Severus being in the shower while she began getting ready for her day seemed so right. She would miss the comfort of being near him. Hermione set the cloth on the sink and lowered her knickers.

Before she could lose her nerve, she moved to the tub, parted the shower curtain, and looked at her lover. He was standing with both arms against the wall, head hung low, water from the spray pouring down on his neck and shoulders. She stepped in behind him and quickly placed her arms around his waist and cheek against his back. He shifted and turned around so that he was facing her and the spray was hitting him upon his back. After smoothing back his wet locks, he peered down at her.

"What are you in here for?"

She put her hands on his waist. "I'm going to miss you," she said, voice choked. "I just... I don't know." Although she tried not to look at him, she didn't care that his eyes were raking over her body or that she'd just made things harder for the both of them.

"I know," he said quietly, pulling her to him. "Last night..."

"No," she said. "It's all right. Just hold me."

Severus placed his hands on her face and lowered his lips to hers for a small kiss. He pulled back to look into her eyes questioningly. Finding his answer, he kissed her again, this time parting her lips with his tongue and kissing her with intensity. Once ended, the kiss left them both breathing heavily. "Can I touch you?" he questioned, gazing at her oddly.

"Yes," she said immediately, wanting his touch.

He maneuvered them to where the spray could wet her body while he used a bar of soap to lather his hands, opting to use his bare hands instead of a cloth. Quick, gentle strokes saw her upper body and both legs cleaned. Never taking his eyes from hers, he soaped his hand one last time and lowered it to her waiting, heated center. His hand simply cupped her and rubbed for a moment. Then, he closed his eyes and slid one soapy finger inside of her and flicked his thumb over her clitoris, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from her.

Deciding instantly to return the favor, she reached down to grope his erection, causing his eyes to open. "There is no need," he said.

"Let me," she said calmly. In actuality, her pulse had quickened, and she was nervous. As his fingers moved to please her, she mimicked his pace with the strokes of her hand. At some point, he added another finger, increasing the feeling of fullness and pressure. She purposely clenched her inner muscles against his fingers and found that she enjoyed the odd feeling. The hint of a smile upon his lips showed that he was pleased. The pumping of his fingers increased, as did her strokes. He applied more pressure with his thumb and moved it in quick circles. Suddenly, she cried out as an orgasm hit her. She'd felt it building but had been unprepared. As her whimpers of satisfaction subsided, she realized that she was squeezing his penis tightly.

Although he didn't say a word, only kissed her brow, she could imagine that it was uncomfortable for him. She released the hold she had on him and lowered to her knees. "Hermione?" he asked questioningly. "What are you...?" His voice was lost as her lips closed over the head, tongue moving, sucking slightly. She widened her mouth and tried to take as much of him as she could, but she nearly choked. Instead, she simply licked, stroked, and suckled, keeping her eyes closed so as not to see him. She knew that was silly and that she should take her fill of looking at him. He'd likely not minded looking at her when she was exposed. There would be time later for explorations. She finally found a comfortable rhythm and soon felt his fingers weaving through her wet hair in an attempt to guide her.

"Enough," he whispered sharply, moving her away right before he reached climax. His hand replaced her mouth, stroking throughout his release. "Yesss," he hissed. She stood and opened her arms to him as he slumped against her, sated.

They stood in each other's arms, kissing languidly, until the water became too cool. Hermione got out first and found two towels. She handed him one, and each went about drying and dressing themselves. He finished before she did, and he simply stood and watched her comb through her wet, tangled hair. When she turned to face him, he held out his hand and led her to the kitchen where they ate in silence. All too soon, he said, "It's time to return to Hogwarts."

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"Hermione!" Harry said excitedly. "I am glad you're here! Dumbledore told me yesterday that I had to move into a new set of rooms because he'd decided to allow you to stay with me." Harry looked at Snape and the headmaster to be certain they weren't listening. "He's been treating you all right? Is he being an arse? That's not why you're coming here, is it?"

"No, Harry," she said, hugging him. "Actually, he's quite nice away from school. Different."

Harry made a face. "Come on. I'll show you to your room." He pulled her forward and led her to a door on the right. He nodded to the door opposite them. "My room is just there. We each have our own loo." He opened her door and tried to walk in but was flung backwards. "What the hell?"

Hermione giggled and stepped past him. "I suppose it works the same as our regular dormitories."

"That's not fair," Harry said, rubbing the elbow that had hit the wall. "You can come into my room I'll bet." He shook his head. "I don't see why he put that there. It's not like he can't trust us."

"I put that there," Dumbledore said from behind them, "to make certain that our Miss Granger doesn't entertain too many suitors. I would like for you both to get some sleep."

Though he was joking, Hermione felt his penetrating gaze sweep over her. She tried to smile, and her eyes moved past him to where Severus stood with his arms crossed

over his chest. He had a sour expression upon his face.

"Excuse me, Headmaster," he said in a quiet voice. "I've things to do. I am certain you don't need me to remain here."

"Yes, yes, of course, Severus. I'll see you after the noon meal."

"Very well." Severus nodded to them and quickly departed.

Hermione could tell that he wasn't happy, and she didn't blame him. If he felt anything like she did, it was as if they'd never see each other again. He'd told her that he would find a way to have private time with her and that he didn't want her leaving their rooms. While he assured her that Dumbledore was simply being cautious and there was no real cause to worry, not from the Dark Lord anyway, he'd feel better knowing that she was out of sight. She wondered how it would be possible for them to ever see each other. He didn't want to be around Harry for any reason, and Harry wouldn't understand why he was visiting. She'd have to think of something.

Dumbledore began explaining about their studies, meals, and things they were allowed to do, such as exchanging letters with Ron and their other friends. Harry asked if any visitors would be allowed, but Dumbledore was undecided. When he finally left them alone, Hermione sat before the fire to read a book. She did more staring into the fire than reading. She couldn't stop thinking of Severus and what he was doing. Was he thinking of her? Did he miss her as badly as she missed him? Did he realize that she was having doubts about his loyalties? Would Dumbledore try to find out more about what had happened while she'd been gone?

Harry eyed Hermione oddly. Something was wrong with her. She seemed sad. He held back a snort. She was probably upset because she couldn't go to regular classes and frequent the library. *Well, no, we'll still have our work while here. It has to be something else* He began wondering if Snape had been cruel to her...calling her names, locking her in a room, or treating her roughly. Thinking about them when they entered, they both seemed in a daze. He'd bide his time and ask her if something had truly gone on. It was apparent that she didn't want to talk about it. She'd said that he'd been nice, but nice and Snape didn't seem to go well together in the same sentence.

Something disturbing passed through Harry's mind. What if Snape had made a sexual advance against her? What if they'd had a row over it? Or worse... what if he'd succeeded? No. Harry shook his head. *Hermione would tell someone if that greasy git touched her or said anything like that* Harry vowed to keep his map at the ready to watch all of Snape's comings and goings while he was here. He had his Invisibility Cloak at the ready, should he need it. Hell, he was just glad that Hermione was with him. Now, he'd have something to do, aside from reading, schoolwork, and worrying about his friends.

Snape had nearly found Draco twice, but the arse always disappeared right before Snape could get to him. Harry wished that Ginny wouldn't have gone with him. Of course, he was still uncertain that she went along of her own accord. There were just so many unanswered questions. "Want to try a game? I've got loads of stuff here, but I've not had much company, aside from the headmaster." Hermione didn't even look at him. "Hermione? Did you hear me?"

"Oh, right. Sorry."

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Lucius walked out into the clearing a few moments after Snape Apparated in. "Severus, so glad you could join me, old friend," he drawled, nodding at the man.

"I don't have much time," Snape bit out, looking around. "What is it you needed to see me about? Have you news on your son?"

Eyes narrowed, Lucius said, "I do not. I wondered if you had."

"No." The reply was clipped. "Are you alone?"

"Yes," Lucius assured him. "I'll be quick about this, Severus. Bane has been burning his mixture each night, and with each burning, he has accumulated more information. It's not like anything I have seen before." There was a long pause. "So far it does not bode well for our Lord... or us."

"What do you mean?" Severus asked impatiently. "What have you seen?"

"He cannot burn again until the next increase of the moon." At Severus' impatient look, he continued, "We were able to see it, too. There is murky smoke from the fire, but if you watch closely, you can see flashes of scenes from a particular happening in the future. Some business about knowing the amount of sticks and rocks to place within the circle." Lucius shook his head. "On the first night, we saw the Dark Lord and his followers. I nearly missed it until he pointed it out to us. It was but a flash."

"And?"

"The next night we saw Potter, Dumbledore, and Order members. They were casting hexes."

"You only see one scene per night?" Snape asked incredulously.

"It depends. That same night we saw some Death Eaters falling." Lucius began pacing. "Those that fell could have been any of us. Fucking Potter and his bratty little friends..."

"His friends? I thought you said Dumbledore and Order members?"

"Well, his little friends might as well be Order members if you ask me," Lucius spat angrily. "They don't all survive. We saw some of them fall."

Severus moved forward, grabbed his friend by the shoulders, and looked into Lucius' eyes, silently uttering a spell. He witnessed the scenes in quick succession. In the last one, he saw his young witch trying to help Potter up after having been hit with a curse. In the next instant, there is an array of lights, signaling the onslaught of hexes projected at them. Someone pushed Potter and his witch away only to be struck down in return. He pulled away, eyes wide. It wasn't likely that person would rise again.

"What is she doing there?" Severus growled, releasing the robes from his grasp. "I wouldn't allow her out to take part in it. I have plans to keep her away."

"I wondered that myself," Lucius drawled. "Perhaps she goes of her own volition? Can't stay away from Potter?"

"What else is there?"

"Fear not, Severus, she lives, although that wizard fell to protect her and Potter. I saw a glimpse of her crying over the body. We never could see exactly who it was. I certainly hope that it isn't you, old friend. Wouldn't our Lord be interested to know that you would die to protect her and Potter?" Lucius smirked at Severus' outraged expression. "Yes, *Potter*, Severus. He sees the dead person and the girl's tears, enabling him to make a triumphant comeback. The boy begins ushering a wide array of curses towards our ranks."

"Impossible," Severus said, shaking his head. Would he die for her? For Potter? *Not for Potter, never for Potter.* For Hermione? Yes. He shuddered slightly at the realization. "Can we change this?"

"I am certain," Lucius said. "There is more, Severus. Dumbledore falls."

Severus' mouth gaped open. "Does he?" he asked after he recovered from his shock. "Potter hasn't a chance."

Lucius looked at him. "The last vision that I witnessed was of Potter doing a victory dance." Lucius looked down guiltily. "My son and Ginevra Weasley were at his side."

Severus sat down on a nearby log. "The Dark Lord?"



"I will not know until we can look again. These all came in different orders. I've not seen our Lord fall, only some of us." Lucius shook his head. "I don't know what to think, Severus." He sat next to his friend. "The centaurs believe that the seventh child, a female, of an old line will be upon the victorious side and help things begin anew." Lucius kicked at a nearby twig. "She was cheering with Potter, with my son. Draco has betrayed me."

"Betrayed you or simply did what you are doing now? Making his own path, I'd say." Severus shrugged.

"He should have consulted with me first." A twig breaking in the distance caused them both to stand and look around.

"Who is with you?" Severus asked.

"Who is with you?" Lucius countered.

They pulled their wands and pointed them at each other. "No one," they answered in unison. Another breaking twig sounded in the silence. Both men looked over and saw a large, male, red deer, proudly displaying its branched antlers and thick mane. It noticed them suddenly and made to sprint away, but Severus hit it with a quick spell to be certain it truly was a creature. Nothing happened, and the animal hurried off.

"Not that I doubted you," Lucius said, smirking as he put his wand away.

"Same here," Snape replied. "Keep in touch with me." He walked a few feet away before turning around. "I nearly found Draco in Hogsmeade. Twice. He's still nearby, I would say. He took some items from Honeydukes and the Three Broomsticks. There is still time to find them."

"Is the Dark Lord planning to kill him, Severus? Me?"

"He is not happy with you, but if you would bring him news of what you've been about, perhaps he would be forgiving." Severus shrugged. "As far as Draco, he's not happy with him either, but then, we don't know what Draco has planned. I suppose he'd have to hear his story."

Lucius nodded. "Will you be telling the Dark Lord of this visit?"

"I feel that I must, Lucius. You understand?"

"I do. Would you leave out the part about me wondering which side wins so that I may choose that side?"

Severus looked into Lucius' eyes. He felt that the man was sincere and nodded. "You are only doing what any of the others would do, given the chance. I believe the Dark Lord will not be forgiving if he finds out that you withheld information purposely. I shall not make him aware of it, but I will let him know that you have others working with you. Will you not give me names?"

"I have taken an oath to not reveal them. You know that Goyle is dead, and he was with me. I can speak freely of him. You've also previously surmised that Crabbe is in on it, so I can speak of him. I cannot name the other, but I can say that you should be wary of Rabastan Lestranger. He has confided in my associate that vengeance would be his."

Severus nodded. "I anxiously await the increase of the moon."

"As do I," Lucius said. In the next instant, Snape was gone. It had been a long time since he could breathe freely. Severus wouldn't tell the Dark Lord of his true deception, for now anyway. He had honestly worried when he'd seen the dark robed person take a hex meant for Potter or Granger. He'd feared that his friend would meet his death in the near future. *Surely Severus wouldn't end up caring that much for the girl? I know he truly loathes Potter. Perhaps it isn't Severus that falls. It could be one of the Order members.*

Whatever the case, he'd be certain to pay close attention to whatever visions Bane would procure for them next. If he could give Severus vital information, then he would have him on his side. Severus would be able to talk to the Dark Lord, perhaps put in a word for him and smooth things over. That was, if they decided to remain loyal to him. If Potter could still defeat the Dark Lord without old Dumbledore's assistance, why should they continue to rally around him? If some child would be more powerful, why should he risk death, Azkaban, and the destruction of his family for a weak wizard? It was certainly something to think about. Things looked better all the while. Draco was still protected for the time being. Narcissa was well.

A small smile played upon Lucius' lips. His son would not die in the fight. If Potter were indeed victorious as it so appeared, his son would be there with him. Perhaps there was hope for the Malfoy name after all. He scoffed lightly. "It's most unfortunate that he seems to have taken up with a Weasley." He raised an eyebrow. "At least she's a pureblood." *I believe he's more clever than I ever imagined or gave him credit for. I only hope I shall have the chance to tell him* He chuckled lightly and Disapparated.

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**Southern's Notes:** I apologize for the short chapter. I felt I hadn't anything else that could go here that wouldn't take away from my plans with the next one. Hermione and Severus will try to find ways to see each other. That's a little hard to do with Harry and the headmaster always watching. I wonder if Harry will be suspicious. Draco, Ginny, and Lupin will make appearances in the next chapter. I'm debating on checking on Ron and Pansy, but he may not be written in just yet.

## Life at the Castle

Chapter 17 of 42

Severus and Hermione are unable to get any time alone. Harry gives his opinion on the matter. Ron and Pansy more forward. Draco and Ginny take action.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

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Severus looked down at the parchment as he had been doing periodically over the last couple of weeks. His witch was currently reading as she took a bath. How he longed to be with her. He closed his eyes and imagined sliding in behind her, arms going around her waist to cup her breasts and pull her wet, naked body against his own. He could nearly imagine her sigh of contentedness, hear her gasp of surprise as his fingers fondled her. Another scene flashed before him, causing him to reach down, grasp his erection, and stroke it slowly.

He was now remembering their shower together. When she'd walked in on him that morning, he'd been naked, and he'd been amused with her shocked eyes and quick turning of her head. It was as if she hadn't wanted to see him. He had been uncertain if she'd simply been angry for his horrid, drunken actions the night before or if she'd only been embarrassed. When he'd felt her arms come around him, he knew immediately that his actions had been forgiven. Severus still couldn't believe that he'd handled her in such a way. He'd been well in his cups and simply wanted her. There would be a long period where he'd not be able to hold her, kiss her, or touch her. He'd simply wanted something to tide him over, but she'd had the sense to remind him of why that could not be...not yet anyway.

If he'd taken her that night, they would likely not be back at Hogwarts, and Dumbledore would likely be missing his spy *What do I truly want?* he asked himself. He paused his ministrations to ponder that question, as he'd been doing lately. If what Lucius said was the way of things, the old man would not be around much longer. Potter would be victorious, and his Lord would be defeated. It also appeared that maybe he would not survive the final battle. Why would he be standing with his Lord without her? Why would she be at Potter's side? Does she and he eventually have a falling out?

He stood up suddenly, moving away from his desk and fastening his trousers, self-pleasuring forgotten for the moment *Does she get close to Potter whilst living with him? Will she betray me?* His mood darkened greatly. If she betrayed him, there would be no way that he'd cross sides and try to save her, much less Potter! There had to be more to it than that. Besides, it appeared that Potter grieved for the fallen person as well, enabling him to rally against his foe and win. Severus was certain that his death would bring joy to Potter, not grief or the need for vengeance.

The only thing that bothered him was that his witch had seemed so beside herself with grief. Who else would she mourn so if not he? Fate was cruel to show them a mere few seconds of the scene and showing it in such a way that only Death Eater type robes could be discerned. There was no mask, hood, or flash of hair that would hint at the person's identity. "I can't believe the headmaster dies," he said aloud. "How? Who? Why?" It was unreal to think of a wizard such as Dumbledore being felled by a mere curse.

Severus knew he should tell Dumbledore. He also knew that he should tell his Lord. What to say? How to say it? He knew that he'd purposely withheld information from the headmaster because he was angry with him for forcing him to bring Hermione back to the castle and even worse, for warding her room to keep him out of it. It had been years since they'd had such a large disagreement. Things still hadn't settled between them. He would tell Dumbledore nonetheless. The man had a right to know. The increase of the moon was upon them. In a mere few days, the full moon would shine down. Lucius should be sending word soon.

Lupin had made arrangements with the headmaster to try to find the Weasley girl's scent when he next transformed. Severus hoped that Draco had had enough sense to leave the vicinity. If Lupin felt for the girl as Severus suspected, he might take his anguish out on the boy. He could feel that they were nearby, but he hadn't the time to search thoroughly. When he'd been going home to Hermione each night, he hadn't wanted to spend any more time away from her than he had to. Now that they'd returned to the castle, there were other tasks the headmaster had given to him. He supposed it could be a form of punishment for his actions, and that made him all the more resentful.

He'd been given the task of meeting with Hermione and Potter daily to retrieve their work and see to their needs. Each time he brought their completed lessons to the headmaster, he had to endure long talks about things he cared nothing for. The moments in Hermione's presence were bittersweet. Each time she'd been curled up by the fire with a book and had watched his every move as he pretended to look over their items. Their eyes would meet and unspoken words would pass between them. After, he'd sneer and promptly leave, hoping Potter would never notice the longing his gaze held for the girl.

"Ha," he said aloud. "Cheeky bastard." Earlier in the day when he'd gone to get their work, the boy had dared to try to draw him into conversation. Wanting to remain in the same room with Hermione, he'd allowed it. It seemed the boy was trying to find out additional information on his friends that remained at Grimmauld Place. Severus wondered if there might not be something to Potter's requests. Was the boy trying to be friendly with him in order to use him? Dare Potter think that he'd speak to the headmaster on his behalf?

Severus snorted. "I most certainly will not. He can..." His voice trailed off. If he could arrange for Potter to visit Grimmauld Place or chaperone a trip for the brat and Hermione, then perhaps he could have time alone with her. Severus nodded. Tomorrow he would speak with Dumbledore. He would put a request in for Potter and Hermione to see their other friends, if only for a short amount of time, and if he received a satisfactory answer, he might enlighten the headmaster of Lucius' findings sooner than planned.

"*Locus Hermione.*" He looked down at the parchment and saw that his witch had slipped into bed with her book. "How I wish I could be with you," he said wistfully.

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Pansy reached down to grab Ron's hand to stop its brutal fondling. "Look," she said with a laugh. "You're a bit rough. If you want to please me, you have to be gentle." She smirked. "At least until I say I want it harder." This last part was said in a seductive tone, hoping to ease the blow to his ego. He truly had a lot to learn. He was nothing like Draco.

"All right," Ron replied, hand immediately dropping back beneath her open blouse.

Unsatisfied with his kneading, she pulled back. "Watch," she said, clearly irritated. She unbuttoned the last two buttons of her blouse and took it completely off. He'd already unfastened her bra, so she simply slid it away. Leaning back against the pillows, she placed a hand on each breast, gently kneading. "See how my hands are moving? Soft caresses will get more of a reaction with me." She swirled her index fingers around her hardened nipples. "You move your tongue the same way." She brought one finger to her mouth, flicking her tongue about the fingertip. "Like that. When you suck," she demonstrated, "it'll feel good for me and please you."

"I get overexcited sometimes, but I'm glad you're telling me," he admitted. He reached out and caressed her breast more gently.

"There you go," she whispered appreciatively, lying back more firmly against the bed. She closed her eyes and allowed him to experiment. When his mouth finally descended upon her, she moaned in approval. "Lovely."

Ron was happy that she seemed to be enjoying it... finally! *Boy, she sure doesn't mind making a bloke feel like an arse. I wonder if Hermione had explained what she liked if we'd have been together.* Thinking of Hermione, he suddenly felt guilty. He'd not treated her right. He cared for Pansy and was glad to have her, but Hermione was a hard girl to replace. He should have waited for her, he supposed. They would have had the rest of their lives to get it right. If that ruddy Snape hadn't been following him about, he could have practiced with Pansy and known how to treat Hermione. *It's likely too late now,* he thought glumly. At this moment, he realized that he was being unfair to Pansy by thinking of Hermione.

He pulled back to look at her. When she opened her eyes, he saw a glimmer of uncertainty there. It was as if she expected him to reject her. It made him feel better that she wasn't as confident as she'd let on. He knew she was no virgin. *Thanks to ruddy Malfoy.* However, it didn't really bother him as much as he'd first imagined. He pretended to not notice her fear and allowed her to feel as though she was in charge. "All right?"

"Yes," she said, smiling immediately. "Kiss me."

Lowering his face to hers, he never closed his eyes, wanting to see her expression as his mouth found hers. She'd never be Hermione, but he was satisfied. He cared for her, and one day he'd likely love her. They got on well, though his mum seemed to not trust her. That would all change in time. If he could just get Hermione out of his mind, he could give her all the attention she deserved. Part of him was glad that Hermione hadn't stayed at Grimmauld Place. It would never have worked. He smirked internally at the thought of her being stuck with Snape and whomever else Dumbledore had placed with them. *Serves her right, that does,* he thought snidely.

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Hermione sat in the chair to wait for her wizard to come to them. The day's classes would have ended, and he would likely be along shortly, as was normal. She fluffed her hair lightly, smoothed it back down, and ran her fingers through it, undecided on how she wanted it to appear. In the midst of her preparation, she felt Harry's gaze.

"What?" she asked guiltily. "Ruddy hair won't stay fixed."

He shook his head in amusement. "It's been the same for the past two weeks. Right before Snape comes, you sit there and... primp!" he accused. "I think that you fancy him." He nodded as if affirming his words. "I thought that was funny because I remember that you used to fancy Lockhart, doing the primping before his classes, but then, er, I started watching Snape. I see how he looks at you before he leaves. I wonder if he doesn't fancy you back."

"Oh, honestly, Harry," she said, proud that she didn't sputter. "We are friendly now. That's all. Living in the same place for a few weeks will do that for people, even a professor and his student."

Harry smirked and made a noncommittal noise. To her horror, he came over to her settee and plopped down with her, stretching out to rest his head upon her shoulder and dangle his feet over the arm.

"Harry! What are you doing?"

"Just getting comfortable. I figure you won't mind if I have a look at what you're reading. I'm a bit bored," he said innocently.

"You are doing this on purpose!" She smirked. "Fine. Stay here and read with me," she said, making a decision about something. She'd been going mental thinking of ways to see Severus without Harry around. He'd just helped her out without knowing it. "Thanks, Harry."

"For what?" he asked, moving from his position to sit normally next to her.

"For wanting to read with me," she said, allowing her voice to sound wistful. "I..." She shrugged. "Never mind."

Curiously, Harry asked, "What is it? Talk to me. Something hasn't been right with you since you've been back."

She knew this to be the truth. There were so many things that she thought of continuously each day, and she was still no closer to knowing Severus' mysteries as she had been. She felt as if she loved him, but she wondered if she was in love with him. She supposed that was something different. The distance from him had definitely made her miss him more. She longed to be within his arms so much that she had begun to wonder if her doubts were simply ridiculous. If his heart wasn't with the right side, why would Dumbledore have him around? If he trusted Severus, then she certainly did. Besides, he would never let harm come to her. He loved her. Sort of anyway.

Hermione smiled sadly. "Between the two of us, Harry, I do fancy the professor, but you can't say anything to him or anyone else."

"What?" Harry's eyes widened. "I knew it." He began guffawing and laughing so loudly that his stomach seemed to hurt, as he was clutching it tightly.

"It's not funny." She slammed her book shut. "Why did I even say anything?"

After a few moments, Harry looked at her, smiling broadly. "Why would you fancy *him* of all people?" He snorted. "I can just see it now." He dropped his voice in imitation of Severus' low, annoyed tones. "Miss Granger, you have kept me up with that incessant snoring! I could hear it from my side of the house. You shall serve detention by scrubbing the floors."

"Oh, sod off, Harry," she said, laughing despite herself. "I don't snore anyway."

"Yes, you do," he said.

Hermione scoffed but leaned closer as if she were about to tell him a secret. "Well, he befriended me after Ron cheated with Pansy. He was there when I caught them, if you'll remember." At his nod, she continued. "Well, he apparently doesn't like sniffing women, so he gave me a book. Lord Byron!"

"Say no more," Harry said dryly. "A book. That explains everything."

"Wait," she said, swatting his arm. "At his house, he had shelves and shelves of books. Each evening we'd sit on the couch, much as we are now, and we'd read. We ended up having very interesting discourse over Lord Byron's work. When you sat with me, it reminded me of that." She grinned and sighed dreamily. "I must say, I miss having someone around that likes to read. Reading enabled me to get over Ron. Through my books, I felt like I was escaping."

Harry nodded. "I really wish that I cared about reading for pleasure, Hermione, but you know that I feel like it's too much like an assignment. Er...I can listen to you talk if you need me to," he offered.

"No, it's not the same. I wish he would stay for a read when he comes to see us, but I'd wager that he just doesn't want you to know that he is actually a nice guy away from school."

Harry made a choking noise. "Right."

"I'm serious, Harry. Didn't he actually listen to you ranting about missing Ron and Gabrielle yesterday?"

"I was not ranting."

"Were too."

"And anyway, it's not like..."

Harry's voice was cut off by the sound of their portrait squeaking open. Severus Snape entered slowly, all the while eyeing them oddly as he strode forward. "I've come to collect your day's work. I trust you've completed it," he said in a bored voice, eyes falling on the table where their parchments were stacked.

"Yes, sir," Harry said quickly. He went to the table and began fumbling with their assignments.

Hermione willed Severus to look at her, but he seemed to be pretending interest in Harry. She wondered if he was upset because Harry had been sitting so close to her. Or was it that he'd heard something they were saying? Couldn't be. Harry's voice broke into her thoughts.

"I'm sick of being trapped in here. Seems like Professor Dumbledore could let us have a walk at night if nothing else. Nobody could see us then." He nodded to Hermione. "All she wants to do is read. I've no desire to read. I want to play some wizard's chess, and she doesn't want to. I really don't see why Ron can't stay here with us." He gave the parchments to Snape. "Here. I'm off for a nap before Dobby comes along with our evening meal. If you see the headmaster, could you tell him that we have requests?"

"I am no errand boy to be commanded about," Severus replied evenly. Harry simply shrugged and stormed to his room.

Hermione knew exactly what had taken place. It was just as she'd planned. Well, it wasn't truly what she'd planned, but it was a start. Harry was giving her a bit of time alone with Severus without truly knowing the full extent of their relationship. His dark, penetrating eyes moved to meet hers. She smiled timidly.

"Sir, would you like to have a read with me?" she asked coyly.

Severus debated only momentarily. He glanced from her place near the fire to the door to Harry's room. Placing the parchments back onto the table, he sat down near Hermione, yet he left a respectable distance. "What are you reading?" he asked, nodding towards her book, his voice clipped.

"Only a book of Byron's letters," she said, showing him the cover and scooting closer.

"Do not," he warned, holding up a hand.

"But I miss you," she whispered desperately.

"As do I," he said, reaching out to move a lock of hair behind her ear. "To be too close, Hermione, would be disastrous."

"I'll find a way to come to you," she swore. "I have a plan."

"Plan? What plan?"

"Harry's Invisibility Cloak. I can..."

"No. You cannot risk being seen on school grounds." He shook his head. "I forbid it."

Hermione scooted closer. Harry had purposely left the room. She would have a private moment. "Kiss me," she whispered. "Harry won't be back for some time." She saw an uncertainty in his eyes and knew that she'd won. She leaned into him and boldly brushed her lips against his jaw. Bringing one hand up to clutch his shoulder, her lips moved to lightly graze his mouth. "Please," she begged when he didn't move. "I need this, Severus."

The next instant saw her pushed back against the arm of the settee with him partially lying over her, ravishing her mouth and her book smashed between them. Her free hand went to the back of his head as if to keep his mouth to hers while one leg draped over his body possessively. When she did the latter, he groaned into her mouth and rocked against her slightly. He ended the kiss abruptly and looked at her.

"That night at home... I wish I would have said yes," she admitted.

He shook his head. "No, you did the right thing." He kissed her chastely, not allowing her to deepen the kiss. "I cannot continue this way. I should never have done this." He untangled himself from her, moved away to get the parchment, and left quickly without a backwards glance.

She was stunned. What had he meant that he couldn't continue this way? Had he just turned her down, or had he completely broken things off. The regret in his voice made it hard to distinguish. Tears of frustration and disappointment welled up and spilled over. "Please come back to me," she said between nearly silent sobs.

A hand on her shoulder startled her. Harry. He stood before her and pulled her up into his arms. "Come on," he said, tone sympathizing. He led her towards their rooms, but instead of directing her to the room on the right, he entered his own and led her to his bed. Not particularly caring, she crept into the bed and never moved as he slid in behind her and wrapped an arm about her waist. "I'll hold you until Dobby comes with dinner. Cry if you want to."

"I think he's gone for good," she said brokenly.

"Shh. Just rest. I'm here for you."

She nodded, wailed as quietly as she could, and eventually allowed her misery to lead her to sleep. On the journey to her dreams, she thought about loving him. She must be in love with him. The thought of never kissing him or being with him again was nearly unbearable. She needed him.

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"Very well, Severus," Dumbledore said slowly. "I will allow for a visit to their friends at Grimmauld Place. They can go this Saturday. I shall have Minerva accompany them."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "I shall take them." He'd not let her spend the day away from the castle without him. He wanted...*noinsisted*...to going with her. He'd not give in on this. "Albus," he said, trying a new tactic, "my intentions are honorable. Inappropriate we may have been, but she is an adult and no longer my student. Even so, I've not crossed any lines that I cannot cross back. Shouldn't that account for something? I will spend this day with her or at least near her. I'll not ask again." *If you don't allow this, I shall snatch her and be away from here just to prove that I can.*

For a long moment, the headmaster simply gazed into his eyes. "Is there something else you wish to tell me?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, and tell you, I shall. However, I would clear this matter up first," Severus said firmly. "The visit?" he added when the man said nothing.

"I will allow it. I ask only that you be discreet and that you not behave lewdly at Grimmauld Place." He sat back. "Now, tell me what is truly troubling you, Severus." He smiled kindly. "Leave nothing out."

Severus nodded. "I shall inform Potter and Hermione." Leaning forward to place his elbows on his knees, he looked directly into the headmaster's eyes. "Lucius has been in contact with me and has given me information on the centaur's findings." He noted that Dumbledore didn't seem surprised. "He told me of the visions. It appears that some of us will not be around all that much longer. Draco and Miss Weasley are returned to us. Potter appears to defeat the Dark Lord." He looked away and stood to pace. "I used Legilimency on Lucius to view a few things for myself. Someone will die whilst saving Potter and Hermione. We believe it to be me."

The silence was deafening. He waited patiently for his headmaster to speak, daring not to look at him as moved to stand near the window. He finally looked to the headmaster, and he saw that his eyes were suspiciously bright. "Sir?"

"While I never expected to be of this world much longer, it bothers me to know that *you* may be taken." He leant forward, bringing a hand up to cover his eyes. "Severus, you do realize that this can be changed?"

"I do," he said with a nod. "They could only do this so many times. The increase of the moon is now upon us. He will be contacting me with more information." He sighed. "Why don't I simply put this to Pensieve?"

"Very well," Dumbledore said, moving from his desk to retrieve his Pensieve.

Over the next hour, the man perused the memory and made no comments that would engage Severus in conversation. He simply mumbled to himself and watched the memory over again. In truth, Severus didn't mind. He used the time to think of Hermione and the way she'd clung to him during their kiss. He'd had to leave before he engaged in something inappropriate...with Potter in the next room no less! The longing and need in her voice was enough to bring his blood to boil. He'd had to compose himself before he'd gone to Dumbledore's office. As he told her, he could not continue at that moment. The safest thing for him to do was exactly what he'd done. He'd had to leave. Hell, truth be known, he hadn't even been able to look at her one last time, as he'd have likely thrown caution to the wind.

"Did you hear me?"

"I apologize. It seems my mind was wandering. What did you say?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I said that I should like to think over what I've learned further. I trust you will come forth the moment you hear something else?" Severus nodded. "I shall talk to Firenze and see what he can do for us. We should utilize him since he is on our side." Dumbledore stood and moved around his desk. "After I speak with him, we can decide what choices we want to make."

"Very well, sir."

"You can inform Harry and Hermione of our decision to allow them to visit their friends this weekend. I may make an appearance, but to be honest, I have another engagement." His smile faded slightly. "You know I trust you to do the right thing, Severus. I always have."

Severus nodded. "Thank you, sir." He left quickly, wanting to break the news to the boy and Hermione before the evening meal started. It pleased him that he'd be able to see her again. The headmaster's words trailed through his mind a few times. He didn't know if he should be disappointed in the man for trusting him so much or grateful. He paused as he realized that he'd yet to tell the Dark Lord of his visit with Lucius. He must not have been any wiser, though, as he hadn't summoned him for a meeting. He could only hope that the man wouldn't choose Saturday to call upon him. He wanted to spend the day with Hermione.

He entered their common room and found the fire burning low. Her book was on the settee where she'd been sitting, and her door was closed. She must have gone to her room to bathe or have a nap. He noticed that the boy's door was opened and headed that way. Just as he neared the darkened room's doorway, Potter materialized from the darkness and closed the door behind him.

"Sir," he greeted.

"Potter, I have news." He waited in hopes that his voice would carry and call Hermione from her room. "The headmaster has decided that a day spent at headquarters would not be amiss. We are to go this Saturday."

"We?"

"Yes," Severus said with a slight sneer. "I shall be your chaperone." Realizing that Hermione wouldn't come out, he turned on his heel and strode towards the exit. Be certain to tell your friend."

He angrily made his way down to his private chambers and retrieved his magical parchment from his desk. He whispered the spell that would locate Hermione, and immediately, his eyes darkened and narrowed.

Currently sleeping in Harry Potter's bed with Harry Potter at her side.

How could she? What had been going on? No wonder the boy had closed the door behind him. He hadn't wanted to be caught in the midst of wrongdoing. His witch had much explaining to do, and he'd be damned if he'd sit around and watch their progress through his parchment.

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Harry watched Hermione sleep and wondered what she'd been dreaming about. She'd mumbled a few things in her sleep and twitched a little. He wanted to wake her and tell her about Snape's visit, but he dared not. He was still gobsmacked by what he'd witnessed earlier. When he'd retreated into his room, he had charmed the door to appear closed. Instead, he'd watched and heard all that had gone on.

Hermione and Snape had kissed. She'd wanted more with the man, but he'd pulled away. *Dumbledore will not be happy about this*, he thought grimly. Why was Snape interested in her in such a way? He'd always been hateful to her. In their earlier years, he'd caused her to cry on more than one occasion and had even verbally attacked her. One thing he'd never seen was the way Snape had talked to her, the way he'd looked at her, the way he'd touched her. It was clear to him that Snape wanted nothing more than to stay with Hermione, and it seemed to take a lot out of him to have to reject her.

Harry shook his head in disbelief as he snuggled closer to her. He'd been right. She fancied him, but she'd tried to trick him into thinking Snape didn't return the feelings. He knew the truth. Snape fancied her. To what extent, he didn't know. Each day when the man would come, he'd not part until he exchanged a glance with Hermione. Oh, they likely didn't know that he'd been watching, as he always tried to act indifferent or busy, but he'd noticed that something was going on. He wondered in exactly what way Hermione had been helping their cause. He'd assumed they were making some sort of potion. There was more to it than that.

Just the day before, he'd tested his theory. Snape truly had been cordial. Of course, he always had to get a little sarcasm in, but he was simply trying to hide his feelings for Hermione. From what Harry had gathered with their earlier conversation, they'd nearly... *shagged*, but Hermione had decided that it wasn't a good idea. Even though she'd apparently changed her mind, Snape seemed to realize that the decision had been a good one. This surprised Harry. Why wouldn't he take advantage of her? If Gabrielle had offered herself to him, he'd not have turned her down. What man would turn down such an offer? Harry glanced at Hermione. If *she* would have requested his attentions, he'd likely have agreed to it, though that would never happen. Besides, he was interested in learning more about Gabrielle. In fact, he was trying to figure out a way to be alone with her on their trip. He might have just found his ticket. Snape and Hermione. Surely they would want to be alone as well. He'd be able to give them the slip. Ron would pick up the hint and keep away for a little while. Perfect.

Even though he'd rather for Hermione to date someone else, he could see the usefulness of having Snape in her pocket. If the man were lenient with her, then he'd be so with everyone else. Wouldn't he? His eyes fell to Hermione's sleeping face again. *What do you see in him? How did you two fall into such a cozy friendship? Was it as you told me? The reading?* Harry supposed she'd talk to him when she woke. They would talk about everything, and he'd tell her his true opinions on the matter.

What were his true opinions? He sighed. If Snape made her happy, why not support her? "Can't believe I'm thinking this," he whispered aloud. He'd never be happy about this if he hadn't witnessed the way Snape had been with her. In those brief moments with her, he didn't appear to be a greasy bastard, just a bloke trying to care for his woman. *I hate Snape. Can I ever put aside my feelings to truly accept him around no matter how convenient for us he is? Maybe time alone with Gabrielle isn't worth sacrificing Hermione.* Harry sighed again. "Hermione," he said, shaking her shoulder. "Wake up."

At that moment, the door burst open. Harry jumped, and Hermione woke, sitting up shakily. "Wuzhappening?" she asked, voice groggy.

"Dobby is bringing Harry Potter his meal."

Harry grinned. "Just set it out there, Dobby. We'll come out for it." His heartbeat returned to its normal thumping. For a moment there, he'd expected Snape to come storming back through. He smirked. *There is no way that he'll find out that she had been in my bed when he came!* "Right then. Hungry?"

"No," she murmured. "Harry, about my crying, Professor Snape didn't do anything wrong."

"Look. I'm hungry. Let's talk while we eat." She nodded, and Harry led her to their table. Dobby stood waiting for them, smiling broadly.

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Ginny smiled as Draco crept forward in front of her to check for anyone that might recognize him. He'd found some hooded cloaks for them to wear, and he'd Apparated them to an alleyway off of Diagon Alley near Gringotts. That had been hard on him, nearly draining him of his energy. He said that bringing someone along took more out of him since he hadn't much experience Apparating. He quickly came back after he gave a satisfied look around. "The street seems to be clear this time of the evening. Just a few stragglers." He pulled a chain from beneath his shirt. It had a key attached to it. "I don't want to leave you alone, but together, we might be spotted. I'm going to get the money. We can buy a wand from Ollivander and then get us a broomstick. From there, we'll be set."

"I'm going to hide behind these barrels. Don't worry. I'll be fine. Nobody will be the wiser," she said, rising up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "Be careful."

He nodded towards the barrels. "Go." The moment she was completely hidden from view, he pulled his hood over his face and ventured out into the street.

They'd moved from the first cave that they'd been staying in and went to stay in an abandoned flat in Hogsmeade. It was at the end of an alley near Madam Puddifoot's place. They were able to get food from nearby and use warm water. The entire time that they'd been staying together, he'd not made any attempts to pressure her into anything. Sometimes she'd catch him watching her, deep in thought, eyes narrowed. Sometimes he'd snap at her. During those times, she wondered if he regretted his

decision to live on the run with her.

However, there were other times when he'd actually smile at her or hold her to reassure her that things would be fine, that Voldemort didn't want her, that his father didn't want her. She missed her family, but for some reason, being with Draco felt like the safest thing she could do. Even Hogwarts had lost its appeal for her. Draco didn't trust that they'd be safe there, and she would trust his judgement. She simply hoped that Bill or someone else wouldn't recognize him in the bank. If he was right, he could slip in and out with no one being the wiser.

Their plan was to Apparate back to Hogsmeade and return to the flat for a few days. They would prepare themselves magically with their new wand...altering their hair, eyes, and clothing. After that, Draco wanted to fly together to the coast and find a flat to rent. He said they should keep moving around every week or so and change their appearances often. It sounded like a good plan to her. She only hoped that nobody would find them. Draco wanted to stay away until the war was over. If Voldemort were defeated, they would come back and face their families for their actions. She was certain that her mum and dad would rather her be safely away than to risk something happening to her.

Time passed and the moon came out to shine brightly down into the alley. The full moon would be upon them in a couple of days. She wondered if Remus was about or if he'd taken to staying indoors. Each month before and after, he'd be weak as his body prepared itself for the change. Did he miss her? Did he try to find her? How did he feel now that he knew she wouldn't always be around waiting for him? She shrugged. *To hell with him. I have Draco now.*

Southern's Notes: I'm very sorry this is late. I wasn't able to get this to my beta until Thursday. Lots of things have been going on this week. Sorry about that. I'll be updating Tuesday.

I hope nobody was annoyed with the Ron and Pansy scene. I felt the need to show that. It's a wee bit of foreshadowing... maybe. :-)

Just a note that I do answer all reviews, so if you check off the box after you leave one, an email will be sent to you to notify that I did reply. Someone said that this is a way to keep track of when I update, as lately I've not been answering until I am ready to upload the next chapter again. I can't promise that will always be the case. If I have spare time, I answer them immediately. Either way. Cheers.

Mistakes

Chapter 18 of 42

Severus does something he shouldn't have. We find out one of Tonks' secrets. Can Hermione and Severus work through their latest problem?

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and to my friends over at Potter_Place.

"Thanks for letting me sleep with you, Harry. I need this." She moved over to drape an arm around the boy's chest. "I can't believe he broke things off with me."

"I told you, Hermione," he began, sounding exasperated, "he's probably just needing time to himself."

Her lips found his jaw, causing him to startle. "Let me." She then placed a light kiss upon his lips. When his lips didn't part for her tongue, she pulled away and begged, "Please help me move on. It's the only way."

Suddenly, the boy was in action, throwing her back against the bed and moving over her. His lips never left hers as one hand yanked up her nightgown and delved beneath her knickers. Her hands were pulling at his underpants. Severus couldn't believe what he was witnessing. He'd waited to come down after hours where there would be no chance of Dumbledore interfering with the conversation he wanted to have.

This was too much. *His* witch and Potter. He glided forward and stopped next to the bed. The boy noticed him first, and he quickly fumbled with his underpants to cover himself. After he'd placed his pathetic member inside his pants, he slid away from her, trying to move towards his wand.

"Don't," Severus said, pointing his wand at the boy. Potter froze. Severus looked down to Hermione's horrified face, noting her exposed breasts, nipples hardened and begging to be sucked, knickers half-pulled down. "How could you?" he asked, disgust evident in his voice.

"I... you didn't..."

"Silence," he hissed in a dangerous voice. His eyes moved back to the boy. "I will not lose my woman again." He sneered hatefully. "To another fucking *Potter* at that." Without emotion, he spat out the words, "*Avada Kedavra!*" A jet of green light shot out and hit the boy in the chest, causing him to fall back off the bed onto the floor. Severus didn't look at Hermione as he reached down to place a hand over her screaming mouth. When she bit at his hand, he pulled it away and reached to forcefully drag her from the bed. "We must leave now before the headmaster is upon us. The Dark Lord awaits."

Hermione continued to kick and scream at him as he pulled her towards the door. A cackle resembling that of the Dark Lord made him stop abruptly and pull her behind him, wand drawn. He looked around the darkened room and saw nothing. "Stop moving," he said to her.

"Wh-who is that?" she asked, sounding terrified.

"I don't...Potter! What the fuck...?"

The angry boy stood and brushed off his shirt as if flicking dust. He then grabbed his wand and stalked forward, cackling as he did so. "The Killing Curse, Snape?" He made a tsking noise. "Your boss tried that one on me already. Didn't work, did it?" The boy lifted his wand. "Surprised, eh? Good. Come here, Hermione."

To Severus' horror, Hermione quickly went to the boy and hid behind him. "How dare you go to him? You *are* my witch! It is I that should have your loyalty."

He moved to step forward and a jet of smoky light hit him; there was no pain, only the feeling of his soul floating away from his body and falling down through the stone floor. Falling. Weightlessness. No pain. Falling. Suddenly, Severus grunted with pain. His body had finally hit the bottom. He cracked an eye open and found himself lying on the floor of his office near his desk. It appeared that he'd fallen out of his chair. Sitting up, he rubbed the bump on his head. It had been a dream.

"A damn dream," he grumbled. Upon his desk was the tumbler he'd been drinking from and the empty phial of Calming Draught. He'd forced himself to take some and have a few drinks to regain his control before he could make his way down to destroy Potter and snatch Hermione away from the castle. Of course, the more he drank, the worse things seemed.

Severus last remembered checking Hermione's location, and she'd been fast asleep in her own bed. The only reason he'd paused to try to calm down was because she'd been eating dinner in their common room when he'd checked her location again. It made him wonder if he wasn't jumping to conclusions. No matter what she was doing there, there was no good reason for her to be in another man's...boy's...bed. He would get to the bottom of things. If she wanted to lie with a man, then he would certainly show her how it felt to truly lie with one come Saturday. It was time to put a halt to the waiting. He would have her.

An uneasy feeling settled over him. What if something had happened between the pair already? He thought back to the boy's expression. It hadn't been flushed as if he'd been having sex. He had been fully dressed. Would there have been time for a coupling from the time he'd left and gone back? Yes, there would have been. Would she allow it? That was the question. Would the boy attempt to have her?

If she had to choose between Potter and him, whom would she choose? Would it be as the dream played out? This wondering would never do. He needed to talk to her. He had to know. If he thought otherwise... He sighed. "I will not allow you to choose any other aside from me."

Making a decision, he left his quarters and made his way to the rooms that Hermione shared with Potter. There was one candle lit near their large table. From what he could tell, the room was empty. He made his way to her door. It was shut tight. A pass of his wand told him that Dumbledore's wretched enchantment was still intact. He turned to Potter's door. It was ajar and dark within. He pointed his wand at the entrance and was startled to hear a voice from the corner of the common room.

"What are you doing in here, Snape?"

Potter. "Why are you not in your bed?"

"I can't sleep."

"I can't sleep, *sir*," Severus said, irritated that the boy could never remember to respect him as was his due.

"You couldn't sleep either, eh?" he said cheekily. "What are you doing in here?"

"What, Potter, may I ask, was Hermione doing in your bed earlier?" He smirked as the boy's eyes widened, but they narrowed quickly as the boy had the audacity to shrug.

"She was upset and needed to have a good cry. I can't get in her room, so I brought her to mine." The boy turned his back on him and walked over to the table to sit down.

Severus followed. "What reason would she have to be upset?" he asked despite himself.

"You," Potter said nonchalantly. "She thought you were breaking things off."

"How dare you assume that I am having relations with a..."

"Aren't you?" Potter interrupted. "I saw you kiss her with my own eyes. When you left like you did, she took it to mean you couldn't continue being with her in such a way." He stretched his legs out in front of him lazily. "I told her you probably just didn't want things to carry on any further in here...especially with me in the next room."

Eyes narrowed to menacing slits, Severus said, "And just what do you plan to do with this information, Potter? Going to run off to Dumbledore, are you?"

"Nope."

"Really? How interesting." He smirked and sat opposite of the boy at the table. "Just what are you planning on doing with the information?"

"Nothing."

"What? Why not?" he asked incredulously. Who did this boy think he was fooling?

"Because I figured if Hermione isn't upset about Ron any longer, then why would I hurt her like that?" He nodded to Severus. "Even if it's you that ~~sh~~inks she fancies."

Severus crossed his arms and leant back in his chair. "Thinks? I happen to know that she ~~lo~~es fancy me."

"Yeah," Harry said disrespectfully. "She thinks she does. I suppose you being there for her when Ron did what he did helped. She'll likely come to her senses one day though."

"It would bode well for you, boy, if you would stay out of my business." He sneered hatefully, lips twisted in a horrid smile. "If you choose to go to the headmaster, by all means, do so. I warn you, Potter, that your words will fall upon deaf ears." He leant forward and placed the hand still holding his wand upon the table. "He trusts me completely."

"Snape..."

"Professor Snape to you, boy."

Harry shook his head in annoyance. "Professor Snape, going to Dumbledore is the farthest thing from my mind. I think that even though I don't care much for you, we can be on the same side...at least in this."

Severus bit out coldly, "I *loathe* you. I shall never try to associate with you more than necessary. You are just like your father. The arrogance..."

"Shut up about my dad!" Harry said angrily. "I'm not asking to be your mate. I'm asking you to look the other way if I want to spend time alone with Gabrielle on Saturday. I will do the same for the two of you."

"You dare..." Severus abruptly came to a halt. Though he despised the boy, he had a point. Having him in the know would certainly help his relationship with Hermione. He'd be able to resume reading with her in the evenings and could send the boy off to his room with promises of finding a way to help him see his young girlfriend. "Very well," he agreed suddenly, surprising the boy.

"Right then."

He rose from the table and moved around to stand in front of Potter. "I shall ask this once," he began, fingering his wand lightly. "Have you ever had relations with my... with Hermione?"

"Of course not," he replied immediately. "And if you want to know of Ron, you might want to ask her. I don't know their business."

"I know of him already." He strode to Potter's door and cast a charm of his own.

"What's that for?" Potter asked, moving to his room.

"Forgive me if I won't trust you to keep her out of your chambers," Snape said sarcastically. "I shall come tomorrow evening." He walked a few steps and turned to face the boy, crushing the building respect for the boy that he suddenly felt. "Tell her to not worry about trivial things." With a nod, he made his way out of their rooms and headed up towards the battlements for a late night stroll.

He hated the conversation he'd had with Potter. It was clear that the boy felt he had something over him. This made him want to take his witch and leave. It would serve the brat right. Severus couldn't believe he'd had the nerve to try to use his information against him. If he didn't long for more time with Hermione, he would have dared the boy to do something about his information. Yes, Severus would allow the smug little bastard to believe that he was manipulating him, but it was actually he, not Potter, that was truly taking advantage of the situation.

On Saturday, he would be bringing Potter and Hermione to Grimmauld Place. Once he talked the others into leaving the house for the day to attend to matters, he'd force Potter to keep Parkinson, Weasley, and Delacour occupied while he Disapparated Hermione to his home. By doing this, he'd be keeping his promise to Dumbledore by not committing any lewd acts at Grimmauld Place. It was time they consummated their relationship. He couldn't stand the thought of her being in some other's bed.

Words that she'd spoken the night he'd been intoxicated came to him suddenly.

I'm not ready. You were right.

"Damn," he grouched to himself. If she wasn't ready, he couldn't force her. *However, she seemed desperate to have me about her, and according to Potter, she was devastated when she thought I'd changed my mind about our relationship.* If she would be that eager, he would definitely enjoy her body and make her his own. There had been too many sleepless nights to not take advantage of the situation.

He paused. "Why is it so important?" he asked himself. The answer hit him like a Bludger. He wanted her the same as always, but he truly wanted her to be certain that Potter hadn't had her. While he was inclined to believe the boy, he had to have proof. By taking her, he would know if her hymen were intact or not. If it wasn't, then she'd been committing lewd acts with the boy. It had still been in place before. *Impossible. I've pulled her location numerous times each day. She was never entangled with him as such. The closest was when I saw them earlier in his bed, her fast asleep.*

No. "Control, Severus. You must have control." He couldn't let Potter push him to make any brash moves. He would be able to detect her hymen without consummation. Deciding that he had to know the truth, he formed a plan. He would stay away from her the next day, sending Dumbledore in his stead to pick up their assignments. Potter will tell her of their conversation, and she would know that all was well. However, she would continuously wonder why he hadn't come after he'd told Potter that he would. By the time Saturday morning would be upon them, she would do anything he wanted if he could get her alone. It would be at *that* moment that he'd decide if he would take her or not. Perhaps the time apart had readied her for him.

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Tonks looked up at the nearly full moon. The next evening would be her lover's night to roam as an animal. He was already off to deal with his weakening state on his own. Headmaster Dumbledore had him secreted off someplace. They were to try to locate the girl again. She shook her head sadly. What was it about the young redhead that had her man so captivated? Even before they were truly a couple, he'd often speak of her and say that he felt pity for her, as she'd lost her young lover abruptly. Tonks was no fool. He only commented on her appearance when she changed her hair to a shade of Weasley red and looked upon him with blue eyes.

Of course he thought her beautiful as she was, according to him anyway, but on those occasions when she'd change to resemble the girl, he'd stop whatever he was doing to come to her and initiate coupling or fervent snogging. Part of her hoped they never found the little bitch. Tonks shook her head sadly. *What have I become? I don't hate her, not completely anyway. She's just a girl. I hate that he has a soft spot for her. I should have all of his attention.*

Something that she'd never told anyone...Remus included...was that she'd known where they'd been staying. She'd found them, but she'd chosen to not say anything. Dumbledore had sent her to Apparate after Snape into Hogsmeade and see if she couldn't help out. She'd found the boy, and she'd watched him. He'd gone into town to nick a few things to eat, mostly candy. Just before she was to make herself known to them to bring them in, she'd heard a part of their conversation. The boy seemed to care for her. It was in his voice and in his mannerisms. He'd allowed her to pick through the food first, and he'd even nicked her a couple of flowers. Those gestures and his soft words stopped her. If she'd just let them stay there together in peace for a little longer, then the girl would forget about Remus.

Yes, the girl had been in love with Remus. Tonks wondered how Molly and Arthur never saw it. She was uncertain as to what drove a wedge between Remus and Ginevra's friendship, but it had brought him running to her. And she'd been grateful. She'd not allow his fear and worry for the little chit to bring those feelings, whatever they were, back to him. He'd been beside himself since she'd disappeared, blaming himself. Sometimes he'd even tried to blame her.

*If you hadn't come to Hogsmeade with me, I could have talked to her alone and explained things. She wouldn't have been mixed up in that.*

Those words had hurt each time he'd said them, and she blamed the girl for them. She'd only gone to stake her claim. Why shouldn't she? He was going to talk to another female about her feelings for him. Tonks pushed the memories of that argument away. It would only make her cry. The point was that if Ginevra Weasley had gone with Draco Malfoy to hide and be safe, why not leave them to it? If she stayed with him long enough, she might fall in love with him. Only then could Tonks live in peace without worrying that her lover might leave her the moment the girl finished her schooling.

Well, the only problem with her plan was that she'd ended up feeling guilty. However, when she went back to the cave, they'd vacated it, leaving no clue behind. She wondered if she'd made a mistake. Now, she was uncertain that the boy and Ginevra hadn't been snatched away by his father or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Could she live with the guilt if that was the case? Part of her wished that she'd brought them back to Hogwarts. She would have been a heroine in Remus' eyes maybe.

"My own fears and insecurities may well ruin us," she muttered. She glanced up to the moon. "Take care of my lover tomorrow night. No matter what he might find, see him safe and all those in contact with him," she whispered. She sighed and went inside to try to get some rest. Molly had asked her to spend the day shopping and checking on things at the Burrow. She'd agreed since Remus wouldn't be home anyway, and poor Molly seemed to need a break. She'd been cooped up in London since Dumbledore had pulled the students from the castle. They would likely bring Fleur along with them, but she wasn't so bad now that she'd gotten to know her.

"Time for a day with the girls," she said. "Let that arse Snape handle the brats."

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Hermione couldn't believe that he hadn't come to see her the day before. Harry had told her everything that they'd discussed. Sure enough, when she tried to get into Harry's room, she was repelled. Harry thought it was funny, but she wasn't so amused. How had he known that she'd slept in there for that short amount of time? According to Harry, he'd come to deliver the news of their trip to them, but he'd seemed to think that she was in her own room. Or at least he hadn't barged in on her in Harry's room to check. How had he known? She would certainly talk to him about this. It wasn't as if he had a Marauder's Map, was it? No, something certainly wasn't right. That had happened before. She'd gotten the feeling that he'd always just shown up where she happened to be a little too often. It was as if he had some spell on her, noting all that she did.

That was certainly unfair, as she had no idea of his comings and goings. If things were in the open with Harry, why did he stay away? Why had Dumbledore come to them, claiming that Severus had something else to do? She wondered if he stayed away purposely or if he had an errand for the headmaster? That would be something else that she'd find out.

In a way, she was glad that he hadn't come. She wasn't ready to face him or his questions. Once again, she'd jumped to the wrong conclusions and cried frustrated tears over something needlessly. It was one thing that she knew he detested...her sudden emotional outbursts. She supposed she'd have to answer for that, but he'd be doing some answering as well. Why had he just walked away from her like that without so much as a farewell?

"I trust you and Potter are ready?" a silky voice said from her right.

How long had he been there? She looked up to eye him warily. He seemed distant, cold. "Harry had to run to the loo. He'll be out..."

"I'm done," Harry said, venturing into the room. "Come on, Mione. Get under the Invisibility Cloak with me."

Snappe smirked. "I think not, Potter." He whispered a few words and thrust a small box into her hands. "The pair of you will Portkey. Molly is expecting you. I shall Apparate in shortly." He nodded to the box. "Do grab on, Potter. Three, two, one."

Hermione met his cloudy expression just as she felt the tug behind her navel. He didn't seem happy to see her. Well, she wouldn't let it get her down until she knew the reasoning behind his horrid mood. If they had to have a row, then that's what would happen. In the next moment, they were in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place and Molly Weasley was hugging them tightly. She stuffed the small box into her pocket.

"So glad to have you here. Must be about time to break from wherever you are being kept," she said. "Come. Sit. Have a spot of breakfast."

Harry, who had eaten already, sat down and began serving himself. Hermione smirked. "Where is everyone?" she asked.

"Still abed!" Molly said in annoyance. "I suppose it must be nice to sleep in every morning. I tell you, that Parkinson doesn't like to help much. Why, she even..." Her cheeks reddened. "Don't listen to me. I'm just in a bit of a mood. I will be glad to spend the day out."

"This is like a holiday for us. We can definitely understand the need for a change of scenery," Hermione said, taking a seat next to Harry. He simply grunted in agreement as he ate.

The door opened. "Severus," Molly greeted. "Have a seat. I'll get you a cup of coffee."

Hermione's eyes met his. He looked away after a brief moment. "Thank you," he said, taking a seat across from Hermione and Harry. "How cozy," he commented, looking at the pair.

While Harry ignored him, Hermione glared at him. Why did he have to act that way? Were all men so jealous? She looked away from him and tried to imagine their roles being reversed. What if she had found out about him and Madam Hooch or some other witch at the castle sharing a bed? She supposed she wouldn't like that much, innocent or not. He had a point. She'd just have to make him understand that she didn't feel that way about Harry.

She nibbled her toast while Tonks came in and began talking to Molly. They were chattering about some shopping, stopping in for Fleur, and some things that needed attending to at the Burrow. She picked up on some of the whispering. It appeared that Lupin was on some sort of mission. Whatever the mission happened to be, it brought tears to Mrs. Weasley's eyes. Hermione wondered if maybe it had something to do with Ginny.

Harry disappeared to go search out Ron, and when the two witches left, Hermione and Severus were alone at last. He made no move to talk to her. She sighed and stood up.

"Where do you think you are going?" he asked immediately.

"I'm going to go have a read. It's better than sitting here and having you glare at me," she said softly.

"You will sit back down this instant," he said, moving his cup aside and leaning forward. "I should like a word with you."

She sat down and said, "Why is it that you can demand things and I can't?"

"Because I am..." His voice trailed away. Suddenly, he stood up, knocking his chair back. "I shall be back momentarily." With that, he strode out of the room. He came back in a few minutes later. "Come." He held out a hand to her. Sighing in annoyance, she took his hand and allowed him to escort her out the back exit. Once out towards the wooded area, he pulled her close and Disapparated.

When she looked around again, she saw that they were back at his home. "What are you doing? The headmaster will be angry!"

"I told Potter that you weren't feeling well and that I needed to bring you to retrieve some potions. We have about an hour or two," he said. "I can always say that I had to brew something."

She smiled as she looked around. "I've missed this place. It's good to be home." She squealed suddenly as she was lifted and carried to their bedroom. "Severus? What are you...?"

He kicked the door closed behind them and placed her upon the bed. In the next instant, his robes and boots were cast aside. Hermione nearly scooted back in panic as he crawled onto the bed and slid over her. "I do believe we have some time to make up for," he said silkily. His lips grazed hers for a moment before he pulled away. "Do you agree?"

"Yes." She'd missed this. Needed this. Wanted this. Wanted *him*. The list of questions came to mind, and she pulled away from his lowering mouth. "No."

"Excuse me?" he asked incredulously.

"We need to talk before anything else happens here. There are things that I want to know," she said firmly. "How did you know about... that I'd fallen asleep in Harry's room? Have you been spying on me?"

He sighed and moved to sit next to her, expression thunderous. "I'd say that you should appreciate that I didn't hex the boy."

"For what? He didn't do anything but let me cry and try to talk to me!"

"Why were you in such a state? I thought we had a discussion about your jumping to conclusions. Hmm?" he asked, anger evident in his voice. *That* was very childish, if I might say so. Had I intended to end things, I would have told you."

"But you said you couldn't continue on, shouldn't have done it," she said defiantly. "After that, you just left. No word to me. Not even a goodbye. It had been weeks since I'd been able to touch you, let alone kiss you! I thought maybe the passing time had made you grow forgetful."

"Never," he said, pouncing on her again. They shared an intense kiss, teeth hitting together, tongues tangled, lips moving. She was breathless when he pulled away. "Not having you has made me need you even more." He ground against her, his hardness moving along her thighs and up against her center. "Feel that?" She nodded. "That's what you *still* do to me. If I hadn't left the other day when I did, Potter would have witnessed our frantic coupling."

Her cheeks reddened. "I didn't know he was watching. He figured it out on his own," she admitted. "He's all right with it. He won't say anything."

Severus nodded. "I don't care to speak of him just now. The thought of you lying next to him in bed angers me." Sneering slightly, he added, "No matter how innocent you say it is."

"Nothing has happened." He moved aside and began to pull at her clothing. "What are you doing?" she asked quickly, putting her hands on his to halt his movements.

"I need to have you."

"But wait," she stalled. "My...er...questions need to be answered. Do you have an enchantment on me? One that tells you my whereabouts?"

He sighed in frustration. "I have one of sorts, yes. I told you this long ago...I have my ways to find out where you are at any time."

"That's a little unfair, isn't it?" she asked angrily. "I don't know where you are! Why not show me the same courtesy?"

"Perhaps I shall," he said noncommittally. "Hermione, our time is escaping."

She swallowed nervously. "Wh-what do you want?"

"Whatever you will give me," he said, eyes darkening.

"You said that if we... you know... *did that*," she blushed profusely, "it would cause trouble for us."

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

He moved to resume his actions.

"Yes," she said, placing her hands upon his again. "Both."

"Enough talk," he grumbled, his mouth lowered to hers again. This time, he changed tactics. Instead of fervent, heated kisses, he gave her soft and languid ones. Though she was still trembling, he could feel it subsiding as she succumbed to his tenderness. Trailing open-mouthed kisses along her jaw and down to her throat, he elicited soft whimpers of pleasure from her.

He moved his mouth to her ear, making certain to breathe into it, and felt satisfied as she shuddered. "I want you, Hermione Jane Granger," he whispered seductively. His tongue traced her ear and flicked at her lobe.

"Oh, my God," she said, voice husky. She took in a sharp breath as one hand moved beneath her blouse to cup her breast. "Severus..."

"What do you want?" he asked, whispering in her ear again as he released the breast from her bra and began to lightly circle the nipple with his index finger.

"I don't know," she said in a low voice.

He looked at her face and saw that her eyes were shut tightly. There was still a slight tremble in her body. "Look at me," he commanded. When she opened her eyes, he said, "I will go no further than you will allow. Just tell me to stop when you've had enough. If you don't say stop, I shall take that to mean you want *everything*." He waited for a reply. When one didn't come, he asked, "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Severus nodded and pulled the blouse up and off of her. He unfastened the bra and peeled it away from her as well. Moving back to her chest, he began teasing and fondling her exposed breasts. His witch responded in kind...arching against him, moaning, breathing in gasps. It was she that began pushing down her pants and kicked them away, leaving her clad in only her white knickers. *This is it*, he thought excitedly, as he kneeled back to unbutton his shirt and unfasten his trousers. *We are finally going to consummate our relationship. In a few moments, I will be certain whether or not no other has had her before me or will have her in the future.*

He noted that she was watching him through half-opened eyes. "Relax," he said, throwing his shirt to the floor and maneuvering out of his trousers. He decided to not remove his underpants for the time being. She'd taken to biting her lip, and he took that to mean that she was getting nervous again. Severus moved to lie beside her again, pulling her about to face him. He cupped her face with one hand and kissed her gently. It didn't take long to have her moving against him, body asking him for things that she couldn't quite voice.

Hermione moved to lie on her back again, and he lowered his mouth to suckle one of her nipples as he pulled her knickers down. Once low enough, she kicked them to the side. He ran the back of his hand over the trimmed hair covering her center. Some slightly pricked at his hand, causing him to smile. He moved down to settle himself between her thighs.

"Oh... you... ahhh."

His tongue found her nub and flicked over it forcefully. He enjoyed the feel of her moving against his face, enjoyed her moans and whimpers, and enjoyed the taste and scent of her. This was *his* witch. He would mark her to be his for all her years in only a few moments.

"It's... I feel it," she said as her fingers gripped his hair tightly.

At this moment, he slid a finger partially into her, probing and pumping. He added a second finger. To his amazement, she began to buck and jerk as if having sex.

"Oh, my God. Ohhhh!"

"That's it," he said, willing himself to feel her excitement. He could feel her twitching internally while she arched against him and cried out in bliss. After her trembling faded, he placed gentle kisses along her labia and moved to the side, not retracting his two fingers. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were closed, and her breathing was even. She almost looked as if she were sleeping.

He knew better. A sudden explosion of feeling burst through him. He needed to be between her thighs and buried within her. Slowly, he began pumping the two fingers in and out of her again. This time, though, he pushed them in farther and swept around her insides in a circular movement. When she opened her eyes in surprise and looked down to watch his movements, he quickened the pace, allowing his thumb to graze her nub every few strokes. Severus felt that she was wet enough to add another finger. She gasped and clutched at his shoulder.

"I don't know," she bit out. "It's not... ouch."

The strokes slowed, but he didn't retract the extra finger. He wanted to push them all the way into her, but her tightness appeared to be obstructing him. Realization dawned on him. He was nudging against her hymen. Relief flooded his body. She hadn't had sex with Potter. Happiness, need, and excitement all mixed and seemed to flow through him. He removed one finger to ease her comfort and noted that she breathed in relief. He hadn't meant to hurt her, only stretch her in preparation for his girth.

"That feels good," she said, voice breathy.

Pleasing her was important to him. Without realizing what he was doing and intending to please her further, he pushed his two fingers all the way in, causing her to cry out in pain the exact moment he felt her hymen tear away. Her hands immediately moved down to pull his away from her.

"What did you do?" she asked, tears in her eyes, voice accusing.

"Hermione, I'm sorry," he said, sitting up and trying to pull her to him. "I didn't mean to separate it."

"It felt like you pinched me." She wiped at her eyes. "Hard."

"Your hymen... I'm sorry," he said, apologizing again. He truly hadn't meant to hurt her. He'd simply got carried away. "What is it?" he asked when he noted her pale face and horrified expression.

She said nothing. She pulled out of his embrace and ran from the room. He heard the door to the loo slam behind her. It was then that he noticed the blood upon the duvet. "Damn it," he yelled angrily. "It wasn't supposed to be this way." Why hadn't he tried harder to control himself? He had been selfish and intent on having her. If he'd just done things differently, he could be within her at that moment, and she'd be adjusting to the feel of him within her. "Shite."

He pulled on his underpants, grabbed his wand to clean away the mess on the bed, and picked up her clothes. He made his way to the bathroom. It was locked, and he could hear the shower running. "Hermione," he called, knocking on the door. "I have your clothes." There was no reply. He'd be damned if he'd allow this to come between them. She shouldn't be in the shower dealing with what happened alone. She should be talking to him. "I'm coming in," he said loudly. A flick of his wand saw the door opened. He paused upon hearing her light sobs. *Well, Severus, you got what you wished for. You wanted to be the one to break her hymen. You wanted to be certain that Potter hadn't taken what was yours. You did that purposely,* an inner voice accused.

Placing her clothes on the shelf near the tub, he waited for a sign that he was welcome. When none came, he left the room and pulled the door closed behind him. It would be a long day and an even longer night. This night was the full moon. He was to help Lupin and the headmaster in their search for Draco and Miss Weasley. Bill Weasley had thought he'd seen Draco at Gringotts a couple of days prior, but when he'd tried to speak to the person, they'd Disapparated. When he'd questioned the goblin, it was confirmed that the man's name was not Malfoy. Bill still didn't believe it, thinking it had to have been the young Malfoy. This only incited Lupin more, begging for a chance to have at the boy for taking away Miss Weasley.

Feeling lost, he finished getting dressed and went to his kitchen. Once there, he sat by the counter and tried to think of what he could say to her to make things better. It was apparent that she was disgusted with him and by what he'd done to her. How could he right this? *At least you won't have to worry about this happening once you are finally able to take her,* a snide voice commented.

He growled to himself. "Damn it." Things hadn't worked out as he'd planned them at all. He'd hoped that by staying away the previous day she would have been happier to see him and been nearly begging for some privacy. Instead, he found an angry witch, one that had many more questions to ask. Thankfully, he'd been able to curb them. He envisioned them finally coupling, and in his vision, there was no pain or crying, only two sated bodies sharing afterglow. This was likely his worst experience with a willing witch. He was no better than a fumbling, inexperienced boy who allowed his emotions to guide him. This would not do. He had to make things right. He couldn't have *her* thinking of him as being no better than... Weasley. As he stood, he looked up and realized that she was there with him, watching him intently.

"Hermione?" he asked uncertainly. She was completely dressed again and had an unreadable expression.

"I think we need to talk," she said quietly.

Southern's Notes: I know it's not nice to stop here, but to add the next bit in, would have made it too long. There are a few questions that Hermione needs answered, and Severus decides to ask a few of his own.

Next chapter, we'll see what they talk about, what happens back at Grimmauld Place, and we'll finally see Lupin in action. I wonder if Draco stands a chance. Also, I don't know that Tonks was exactly bright about not mentioning their whereabouts. Seems to me that Lupin might recognize her scent at the abandoned cave as well. I guess we shall see. * smirk *

Note: My beta didn't like that when Severus cast the Killing Curse on Harry that I'd not given him an expression of hatred. My feeling is that if you have enough hate inside, you don't have to show it in your expression when you use Unforgivable Curses. Some of those Death Eaters laugh while doing so. I was trying to project to the reader that it didn't bother him to kill Harry, sort of like he was a cold killer or something. I promised her I'd put a note that this is my view and not hers though. Cheers.

Full Moon Rising: Part One

Chapter 19 of 42

Severus and Hermione talk about things. Lucius and Bane talk. Lupin discovers something unpleasant.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Severus followed Hermione into the sitting room, feeling as if he were about to be lectured. Many thoughts were running through his mind. He could hear her out and take into consideration the things she said. If things didn't work out, he could always Oblivate her. *I can't do that. We'll simply have to work through this together.* He would make her understand that he hadn't intended to hurt her. When she sat on the couch, he indicated to the space next to her and asked, "May I?"

She nodded. "Well, of course."

He noted that she was wringing her hands slightly. "Hermione, if you'll just let me explain, I could..."

"Let me talk first," she said, holding up a hand. "Severus, I need to know if you... what happened in there... do you think worse of me?"

"Worse?" he asked, puzzled.

"The crying," she said softly, looking away. "And the storming off to shower."

"No."

"I know you don't like me to act like a child, but it just felt as though something was lost that I could never have back." She sighed. "It did hurt and brought tears to my eyes, but it wasn't the physical pain. I was a bit shocked. When I saw..." Her voice trailed away.

"When you saw the extent of the damage?" he offered.

"Yes, I was overcome with a feeling of disappointment in myself." She shrugged. "I know my mum and dad wouldn't be too proud of me. It feels odd to no longer be innocent."

Severus sucked in a sharp breath. So she felt tainted. *Damn. This does not bode well.* "Hermione, listen to me. I didn't intend to hurt you. You were saying that it felt good, and I wanted to please you further. There is a certain method that allows a woman to have a longer, more pleasing climax. I sought to give you that, honestly not thinking about separating your hymen. I felt it was there and still didn't think to halt my ministrations."

Hermione smiled lightly. "I don't hate that I'm not exactly a virgin any longer. If this had to happen with anyone, I'm glad it's with you. I just needed a few minutes to get a handle on things." She pulled one of his hands into both of hers. "I was afraid you'd think me childish, yet again, and you'd begin to tire of me."

"I'll not ever tire of you," he admitted, bringing his free hand up to cup her cheek for a moment. He swallowed back emotion. "In a way, I am glad that I found it still intact. Do you understand?"

"You were still uncertain about Harry and me," she stated knowingly. Voice rising, she added, "Why can't you trust in me?"

"Do you trust in me?" he countered. He hated to see that she avoided his eyes. "You don't, do you? You think I'm using you." He pulled his hand from hers and scooted away. "To what end, Hermione? Why?"

"I don't know," she said, still not meeting his gaze.

"Well, we can safely say it's not for the sex," he said coldly, causing her to gasp.

"You horrible git!" she yelled and jumped up. "Take me back to Grimmauld Place. *Now!*"

"I will not," he said, standing and pulling her back down to the couch with him. She struggled to move away from him. "Stop fighting me and listen."

"You will not talk to me that way."

"What way? It's the truth," he said smoothly, trying to repair his mistake. "If I wanted sex, I would be with other women, Hermione. That is a good thing. Is it not? It must mean that I truly care for you."

Her struggling stopped, and she turned to look at him. "I don't completely trust you. I want to, but sometimes I wonder about things."

His eyes narrowed. "What things?"

"Did the Dark Lord really want you to be with me, or was *our relationship* truly your doing? Did you just use his name to convince Dumbledore to allow us to be alone together?" It was then that she met his gaze in hopes of discerning the truth.

Damn. He had to stall or try to change the subject. "I shall answer your questions if you answer mine."

"Fair enough."

"If you were in a position where you had to choose between Potter and me, what would you decide?"

"What do you mean? Choose how?"

"For instance, if Potter told you to stop seeing me, what would you do?"

"I would tell him that I can make my own decisions."

"And if I told you to stop associating with Potter?"

"But why?"

"For any reason." He raised an eyebrow when she didn't reply. "You would choose Potter," he stated flatly, loosening his hold on her.

"It would depend, Severus. You'd have to give me a pretty good reason why I shouldn't associate with Harry any longer. He and Ron were the first to befriend me in the Wizarding world. That's not something you can just turn your back on," she said firmly. "It would be the same if I told you to stop going to see the Dark Lord."

"Now, that is not the same thing, and you know it. Dumbledore, the Order, and even your wretched little Potter depend upon *what* can tell them about him."

"Everything Vol...er...the Dark Lord does has to do with Harry. Isn't it nearly the same thing? It's their war, and we're just here. My loyalty is not to him but to Harry, as is yours." She frowned. "Even though you don't like Harry, he is the one you want to win. Right?"

Severus thought for a long moment. "Near the end of the summer holiday, I went to Grimmauld Place to meet with the headmaster to talk to him about Draco. I was annoyed at something he'd told me and ventured outside. When I went out near the stream, I heard voices...yours and Weasley's...and I was surprised to find the pair of you in a most compromising position." He looked away from her. "Weasley was trying to have his way with you, yet you refused. He went back to the house, but you stayed for a swim...naked. I watched you go into the water."

"I remember that night. On my way inside, I ran into you, and you touched my arms. I was embarrassed because my blouse was open."

"Yes, I was on my way to see the Dark Lord." He smirked slightly. "You were still on my mind when I went to him. How could you not be? I'd never seen you in such a way." His eyes dropped to the slight view of cleavage. "You'd not appealed to me sexually before then."

"And then?"

"He used Legilimency on me and noted that I wanted a woman. I told him what I witnessed, and he felt that having someone interfere in your relationship with Potter would work to our advantage." He brought his eyes back up to hers. "I thought he meant for Draco to do it. I was appalled and pleased at the same time when I realized he meant for me to seduce you. It's why I readily befriended you after Weasley became interested in Miss Parkinson."

She swallowed and bit her lip in thought. He remained quiet as she took in the information. Her next question made him feel guilty. "So that's really all it is then? You saw something that aroused you, and the Dark Lord told you to go get it. I'm nothing else."

How could he explain to her how he felt without appearing weak? Only the weak showed their more private emotions. However, he knew from the look in her eyes that to not tell her *something* of his feelings wouldn't bode well for their relationship. "That night, I'd gone to the castle thinking he was mad, but the more I thought of it, the more I wanted it." He leant his forehead against hers. "Now, you're all I think of in my spare time. Whether Dumbledore approves or not, I'll not let you go."

Hermione shivered lightly at the darkly spoken words. It was that instant that she knew without question that he would not betray her by going to any other woman or by harming her. However, he would forsake Harry if either he or Dumbledore tried to tear them apart. Exasperation took hold as she realized that she had no choice in the matter. If she ever became upset with him and wanted to end things, he would turn against Harry and that alone could lose the war for them. Or worse...get Harry killed, get them all killed. She didn't like feeling trapped.

"Severus, I would never want to live under the rule of the Dark Lord. Do you understand that?" she asked. When his eyes narrowed, she said, "It's not about Harry. It's about me. I disagree with so many things the ruddy bastard stands for. I'll not be a hypocrite to stay alive if something were to happen to my friends. I'll disobey and dare him to curse me."

He shook his head. "That is preposterous! You would not live on for me? You would give up your life just because my Lord would win? That is ridiculous."

"It's not *ridiculous*," she said heatedly, pulling back to look at him squarely. "It defines who I am. I made a pact with my friends, and I'll keep it." She swallowed. "I do believe that I love you, and if you feel for me some of what I feel for you, I would ask that you help Harry. By doing so, you'll be helping me. It's the only way I can be happy." She traced his lips with her index finger. "We *can* be together always. It's what I want."

She slowly brought her lips to brush against his. She knew a moment of uncertainty as his dark gaze bore into her. Had she gone too far? She had been honest with him and told him of her feelings. She felt that if he knew how things would be, no matter the victor, that it might trap him as he'd trapped her. It might force him to stand by the right side. All uncertainty left the moment he fiercely took her lips again, placing kiss after brutal kiss upon her mouth, hands digging into her arms as he kept her pulled roughly against him. The only thoughts going through her mind were those of glee. He felt the same. All would be well. She'd done the right thing.

A light moan escaped her as his mouth ravished her neck. "What... oh my... do you do... to me?" she managed between gasps.

With a final vicious suck, he pulled away. "I've marked you. You *are* my witch." He set her beside him and stood. "You will live," he said firmly. With a smirk, he walked towards the door. "If I don't stop now, I'll not be able to. Perhaps we should return?"

Hermione stood and smiled shakily. Even after what had occurred earlier, she would have allowed him to touch her again. In fact, her body seemed to want his touch. "About earlier," she began, "are we all right?"

He nodded and strode back to pull her to him. Tucking her head beneath his chin, he said, "You will never cry in my bed again. I promise you that, Hermione." He cleared his throat. "Earlier... that was an error on my part. You must think me a fumbling fool. Just know that I can do better."

"No, I understand. You didn't mean to do it on purpose, and I might have overreacted a little. We'll just move forward, all right?"

Placing a kiss upon her head, he murmured, "Agreed." In the next instant, there was a loud *crack*, and they were back in the secure wooded-area behind Grimmauld Place. "Come. Let us see what your troublesome friends are up to."

Reluctantly, Hermione moved away from him and followed his quick pace. Once they entered through the back way and went into the kitchen, they were met with the curious glances of her friends.

"Feeling better, Hermione?" Harry asked right away.

"Yes, much. Professor Snape was able to administer a potion to me."

"What's wrong?" Ron asked, placing his half-eaten pasty on the saucer before him.

Hermione shrugged. "Girl stuff," she said nonchalantly.

Ron's cheeks reddened. "Oh, right."

Pansy snorted. "That'll serve you right."

Hermione glanced around. "Where is Gabrielle?"

Harry frowned. "Sleeping," he said bitterly. "Girl stuff."

"Oh," Hermione said, stifling a giggle. Poor Harry looked as if Christmas had been called off. "Well, you could... er... always go read to her." She shrugged. "Had we known, we could have brought her a vial of the potion the professor made."

"Enough banter," Severus said. "Have you all eaten?"

"Just finishing up now, sir," Pansy said, smiling at her Head of House.

"Very well," Severus said. "We've yet to eat. Out so that I might have lunch in silence!"

"I guess I'll go see if Gabby needs anything," Harry said. "You two want to come along? She'll less likely throw me out again if you're with me."

Pansy smirked while Ron nodded. It was then that Ron turned back to Hermione. "You coming?" he asked, causing Pansy's eyes to narrow slightly.

"I was going to have a spot of lunch," she said quickly.

"We'll be up if you want to come," Harry said.

"I might curl up with a book, thanks. It's one of those days," she said noncommittally.

Harry shrugged and led the other two from the kitchen. Hermione looked to Severus nervously. "That went well."

"So it would seem," he agreed. "For now." He stood and began to rummage about to fix them each something to eat. While he did so, he said, "I just have no idea what we can do to occupy the rest of the day. It's likely they'll be pestering us the entire time."

"I will have to *spend* some time with them, I suppose," she said. "Not that I want to," she added quickly when he looked at her. "Don't want Ron or Pansy to think anything, do you?"

Severus scoffed. "I don't think Weasley is as smart as all that, and as far as Parkinson, I'd say she would cheer us on and keep quiet about it, not wanting Weasley to find out."

Hermione giggled. "Too right."

To her pleasure, they passed the rest of the afternoon in relative silence. She pretended to laze about while reading in the study, and Severus remained in the study under the pretense of reading at the desk. Though they weren't sitting together for most of the day, the quiet company suited them and made each miss the privacy of their home all the more. When Mrs. Weasley finally returned, Tonks and Fleur in tow, Severus told Harry and Hermione it was time to return to their safe house.

"Do you have the box still?" he asked.

"Yes." She pulled it from her pocket. She'd forgotten all about it.

"Come on, Potter. I'm going to activate the Portkey." Harry put a finger upon the box, and to Hermione's pleasure, Severus joined them as well. The three of them were

Portkeyed back to their common room. Once there, Severus eyed Harry. "I wonder if I might have a word with Hermione alone."

Harry nodded. "All right. Think I'll have a shower."

The moment he was out of the room, Severus used his wand to make certain that Harry wasn't spying on them. That done, he faced her, saying, "I would like for you to open the box."

"Sorry?"

"It's a gift," he said quickly.

"Oh," she said, completely shocked. She opened the box and smiled broadly. "Severus, I don't know what to say. Thank you." He'd gifted her with a silver triple-crescent-moon pendant attached to a long satin cord. "What is this for?"

He shrugged. "I was searching for something in my mother's room this past week, and it caught my eye." His lips quirked up slightly. "She said that the trio represents a woman's life-cycle...maiden, mother, and crone." He smirked. "I figured that whilst you are still but a maiden that you might enjoy wearing it." I came across some information on it once during research. It said that each of the three fates wore one."

"While controlling birth, life, and death," Hermione said. "I've read it as well." She held the cord out to him. "Would you like to place it upon me? I would like to wear it."

She could see his confusion, as she could have just as easily pulled it over her head herself, but he took the pendant and cord, placing it around her neck. Looking towards Harry's room briefly, he leant in and kissed her. It was nothing more than a brush of lips and a quick tangling of tongues, but it set gooseflesh upon her arms and made her stomach tingle.

"I must take my leave," he said regretfully. "I've a mission for the night."

"Severus," she said suddenly. "About the spell you have on me that shows you where I am at any given time... will you return the courtesy by teaching it to me?"

He looked at her oddly. "It's not exactly a spell. It's a spell and a bit of something else." He touched her face. "Christmas is coming upon us. I shall have it created for you by then, and we shall be on equal footing."

"All right."

His slight smile faltered. "You will be here for the holidays, won't you?"

"Yes, I plan to send an owl to my mum and dad on it."

He nodded. "Until tomorrow."

She watched him leave as she fingered the pendant he'd given her. *He gave me something that had belonged to his mother! He'd decided this before today's mishap.* She nodded to herself. It wasn't just a ploy to make an apology for the disagreement and bad experience they'd shared. *He loves me.* An interesting thought occurred to her. "Oh," she gasped aloud. "He gave it to me while I am still a maiden. The next step is motherhood." She blushed lightly. "After that, it's old age." She grinned. He truly did intend to make a life with her. *He'd told me that I would be happy even after I told him that I would only be happy if Voldemort would be defeated. He'll see it done... for me.*

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Lucius couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. He was uncertain as to what exactly, but something wasn't right. His last conversation with Severus had left him unsettled. The man seemed distracted, and he could only imagine that it was to do with that Mudblood. He snorted lightly. Severus always did take his bedding seriously. Just thinking of sex had *his* cock twitching slightly. He reached down to adjust himself and wondered what Narcissa was wearing.

"Is this what you do when you are alone, human? Fondle yourself?" Bane asked.

"At times, yes," Lucius said in annoyance. He would be glad to be rid of the centaur once their alliance was finished. "What is it?"

"I have traveled to my lands and found my home deserted. No others were present. They've migrated to another part of the forest."

*And I should care because...?* Lucius thought sarcastically. Sometimes it was hard getting things out of the centaur. He wished he would just talk normally and leave the riddles to those interested. "Do go on," Lucius said finally after a long pause.

"It appears that I have been left behind. There was no sign that I would be welcome to find them if I returned," he spat angrily. "I believe someone has carried the news to them before I could. They may believe me to have betrayed our herd by my association with your kind."

There was another long silence. "And?" Lucius asked. "What are you thinking?"

"The rising moon has an orange tinge," the centaur replied cryptically.

"And just what does that mean?" His patience was wearing thin.

"Something will happen tonight that is unintended. Something that will affect our world greatly."

Sneering, Lucius said, "I believe I learnt in Astronomy that the atmosphere is responsible for the moon's coloring as it appears to us."

The centaur gazed at him, apparently angry. "Do not mock me, human. My herd has fled to another place. I believe treachery is involved. One of you has been telling of our association, and it has reached the ears of Magorian. The tale was my own to tell when the time was right. They would have been able to see the good that I had done before making a decision of killing me or allowing me to live."

"Why have you waited so long to go to them and tell them of your findings?"

"My reasons are my own." The centaur stepped closer. "Know that I will seek revenge on the one that has betrayed me."

Shifting uncomfortably, Lucius said sarcastically, "You will find no betrayers amongst you here. Perhaps something in the skies told them that your absence was dishonorable."

Surprisingly, the centaur nodded. "It is a possibility." Without another word, the beast left.

"Good Lord," Lucius groused as he stood. *Good riddance.* There was something he had to do. He had a long night ahead of him. He moved to where Crabbe and Yaxley were and pointed his wand at the blond Death Eater. "Sorry, friend," he said softly before adding, "*Stupefy!*" At Crabbe's shocked expression, he simply shrugged and repeated the spell on him. "It's for your own good, you know." He worked quickly to hide them and reinforce their spells so that he could take his leave. As planned with Severus, he had a meeting with the Dark Lord.

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"So you think it is likely that they've stayed where Black found refuge," Snape said in distaste. "I find it highly unlikely that a Malfoy would stay in such conditions for very long."

"Well, Severus," Remus began in exasperation. "It's a hunch that I have."

Eyes narrowed, Severus asked, "Did you take your potion tonight?"

"I did," he replied shortly, and then added, "You've no reason to fear me tonight."

Sneering, Snape said, "I was simply hoping for the chance to hex you." With that, he stalked forward. "I shall leave it to you to find me. I will start on the cliff just there and work back this way."

"All right," he said, yelling to make his voice carry. To himself, he added, "I wonder why Dumbledore changed his mind about accompanying us." He wandered slowly towards the clearing and once there, waited for the full moon's rays to come down upon him. His transformation began the moment the wafts of light hit him. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears, feel each drop of blood running through the veins within his body, and could feel the pain of his tearing skin and of his bones reforming. Panting for breath and hoping to die while the process continued, he groaned in agony and doubled over momentarily.

The next sound he made was a slight whimper. His head lifted, and his eyes sought the moon. Emitting a loud howl of disapproval, he straightened to stretch and flex his new body. The one good thing about Wolfsbane Potion was that he was able to keep his human mind about him while in his animal form. He began prowling the wooded area and found a faint familiar scent. *Ginevra*, he thought excitedly, running forward and sniffing as he did so. Another scent mingled with hers. *The bastard*.

This was the first occasion upon which he longed to take a page from Fenrir Greyback's book. He longed to maim and bite the boy, subject him to a cursed life such as the one he led. If the boy had harmed her in any way, he would suffer his fate. He didn't care what the consequences would be for him.

As he neared the first cave, he noted their scents deepened. They must have been about for a long while. He paused suddenly. There was another scent. He backed up to sniff a rock. *Nymphadora*. He followed the trail, and it led him to the cave. There were definite signs of recent inhabitation, but nobody was present any longer. What would his lover have been doing with them? Had she come upon the cave after they'd gone? Why hadn't she mentioned it to him? For the first time that night, he wished that Snape had been with him so that he could give his opinion. No matter. It would be easy enough to find the man and lead him back to the cave.

His mood darkened when he found where they'd been sleeping. It was apparent that they'd lain together. However, there was no true scent of arousal or bodily fluids. It appeared that nothing sexual had occurred. The boy didn't deserve her. He was a Malfoy, had bad blood in his veins. She was too pure for the likes of him. He slowly followed a path towards Hogsmeade, and just as he could see the backs of a row of buildings, he heard a branch snap behind him. He spun around.

Snape.

"So you've followed a scent here? I heard you traipsing about and figured that you wouldn't have come into town if you hadn't found where they'd gone."

Lupin wished that he could speak to the man, but as it was, he could only nod or point to convey what he wanted in his current state. At that moment, something alarmed him. There was something clinging about Snape or near them that bothered him. Another scent. Something like the Malfoy boy's, yet it was stronger. It could have possibly been his father. Rising to look around, Lupin realized that he and Snape were not alone.

Stepping from the shadows, Lucius Malfoy moved forward, pointing his wand at him. "Well, well, if it isn't the werewolf," he drawled in an icy tone. "You were right, Severus. He would lead us to Draco."

Lupin's gaze left that of Malfoy's and gazed upon Snape. The man had a smug expression. He had betrayed them. The bastard had been in on it with Malfoy the entire time. Emitting a loud howl, he drew back to hit the man with his paw, hoping to slice through his face and erase his smug smile. Before he could do anything a jet of red light hit him, forcing him to fall over backwards. The last thing he thought of before blacking out was Ginevra's sweet smile. He'd failed her, given her to their enemies.

Lucius moved forward. "He never stood a chance, did he?"

Severus chuckled. "Not at all. Let's get him back in the brush before we go in."

"I'm afraid that won't be happening," a voice from behind them said.

They both spun around and faced Dumbledore. Lucius' wand was drawn still, but he dared not point it at the man. Instead, he pointed it at Severus and said, "You've betrayed me, Severus. It was *you* that alerted the centaurs in the forest of our plans!"

"I did no such thing," Snape said smoothly. He turned to face the headmaster. "You've been following me."

"That I have," the man said.

Lucius was uncertain. Severus seemed angry and looked intent on hexing the old meddling fool. He told the headmaster, "I just want my son, Dumbledore. There is no reason to interfere. You can keep the girl."

"I am afraid that's impossible," Dumbledore said in a calm voice. A quick flick of his wand saw Snape crumpled. Lucius stepped back in horror. He stepped towards his fallen friend and paused, knowing that the man's wand was likely now pointed at him.

"Severus didn't betray me." *Damn. We could have taken Dumbledore down together.* As fast as he could, he rounded on the old man, but he was met with a jet of light.

Southern's Notes: Some say I am a wicked witch. I say indeed. This is only part one of what happens that night. There will be more to come in the next chapter. I do hope the chat that Hermione and Severus had eased your minds... for a little while at least. I shall try to have more on Tuesday, but my lovely beta is out of town. If she has time in the evening on Monday, she'll go through it for me.

Any speculation?

Full Moon Rising: Part Two

Exactly what was Dumbledore up to? Find out here. Hermione and Harry hear something they shouldn't.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Dumbledore looked down into the face of Lucius Malfoy and shook his head sadly. Even Stunned, the man appeared arrogant. "Had you only agreed to come to me for help, Lucius, I would have given it to you. You only needed to ask if you were afraid of Voldemort."

He heard muffled footsteps and looked up, smiling knowingly. "Well, good evening, Draco, Ginevra. I trust you've been comfortable in your stay away from the castle."

The boy looked frightened and was eyeing his father and his ex-Potions master warily. "Sir, we only did what we had to do. We weren't certain who to trust." He nodded to Snape. "If you hadn't taken him down as well, we would never have come out. He truly is the Dark Lord's man."

"Yes, I'm afraid that Severus has decided to go his own way as of late, but I should like to think that he can be reasoned with. Whereas Lucius..." He let the implication hang in the air between them.

Ginevra dropped down to pet Lupin on the face. "Will he be all right?" she asked softly, looking up with frightened eyes. "Lucius hit him with a Stunning Spell, I think."

"He'll be fine," Dumbledore assured her. "As will the both of you." He smiled kindly as she stood and moved back to Draco, taking his hand. "I must admit that I am relieved to have found the two of you. There are many worried about you both."

Draco scoffed. "I'm sure."

"Yes, Draco, people are worried about the both of you, but I must ask something of you before I agree to take you into protective custody."

Looking to Ginny first, the boy swallowed, as if afraid to hear the headmaster's proposal. "I don't remember asking for *your* protection." Ginny elbowed him. "Though I might consider it."

Dumbledore nodded in amusement. "I must have your oath by wand that you will not betray me or any associated with me to Voldemort or your father, given the chance. To do so would result in an... untimely demise."

Draco looked to his father first and then to Ginny. Holding up his wand, never looking away from her, he said, "I swear with my life and honor as a Malfoy that I would not betray anyone associated with you or you by giving information to my father or to the Dark Lord. I seek only protection and to protect at the same time."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said happily. "I don't think it wise to awaken Remus just yet. He is not too happy with you, Draco, and he may act on impulse, especially in light of what your father did to him."

"I understand," he said fearfully, tightening his hold on Ginny's hand. "What do we do?"

"Sir, my mum," Ginny began anxiously, "is she very angry?"

"Worried, I would say." The headmaster pulled a small object from his pocket, tapped it with his wand, and gave it to the girl. "Just so happens, I have this Portkey that will take you to Professor McGonagall's private quarters. I told her that she might have company, so you are expected. She will see that you are fed and kept hidden until I am able to come for you and take you to a safe location."

Draco put a finger upon the Portkey. "Thank you, sir."

"Think nothing of it," he said, waving them off. "Three, two, one." In the next instant, they were gone. He breathed a sigh of relief, glad to have finally caught the pair, but then he looked down with narrowed eyes, wondering how to go about his next task.

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"Hermione! Wake up!" Harry called, pounding on the door to her room. "Look at this!" He heard a light rumbling inside, a muffled curse, and the creaking of the door. "Come here," he said excitedly, moving to the table, pointing at his map.

"What is it?" she asked sleepily, stumbling forward, yawning.

He pointed to McGonagall's office. "Look who is here!"

"Draco and Ginny! Severus said that he had a mission tonight. I'll bet he found them," she said excitedly, searching the map for his name. "Did you see him?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Dumbledore isn't here either." He nodded to the far end of the table. "I've some Extendable Ears and my Invisibility Cloak. What say we go have a listen? No one need know."

"All right," she said excitedly. "I wonder where they found them!"

"Dunno. Come on," he said, grabbing the items. Once the Cloak was securely about them, they slowly made their way out into the corridor. "It's more of a snug fit now, isn't it? All this crouching down while we walk slows us up."

"It's not all that bad. I think it was made a little larger in case its wearer had something with him while he had to hide."

"Shhh! Mrs. Norris!" Harry said, nodding at the shadow of a cat on the wall up ahead. "This way," he whispered. They turned down another corridor and quietly made their way to Professor McGonagall's office. Once there, they settled themselves next to the door and put on their devices to listen in."

"Surely you don't expect me to believe that," McGonagall was saying.

"It's true," Ginny told her. "Draco isn't lying. Professor Snape and Lucius are working together. They followed Lupin to our hideaway. Once there, Lucius Stupefied Lupin before he could turn on Snape. We were going to run off, but then we heard Professor Dumbledore come up."

Harry looked to Hermione and noted her confused expression. Maybe coming to eavesdrop hadn't been the best idea. Draco's voice caused him to turn his attention back to the conversation.

"...and that's when Dumbledore cast a spell on Snape first and my father next. It's the only reason we came out. Snape has truly been on the Dark Lord's side all along. He's only pretending to help Dumbledore to get information on Harry."

"Right," Ginny agreed. "We only showed ourselves after we saw that the headmaster had downed the both of them. He took an oath from Draco and sent us here. I expect he's taking Malfoy and Snape to Azkaban. Lupin has probably been woken and is likely to be in the forest someplace. He told us to come here. That you'd be expecting



us."

"As interesting as your tale may be, I am certain that you will understand that I simply must wait to hear this from the headmaster before I can believe such an outrageous story," McGonagall said sternly. "I've known Severus most of his life, and while he did do some things that I find unacceptable, he's long made amends for them."

"He's still doing those unacceptable things," Draco said offhandedly.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Malfoy."

"Sorry, Professor McGonagall, it's just that so much has happened in the last few weeks."

"Both of you are safe now. That's all that matters," she replied, voice softer. "Miss Weasley, your mother will be so pleased to have you back. She's been beside herself with worry."

"Not being able to trust Professor Snape didn't leave us with many choices," Ginny said firmly. "We had to fend for ourselves. Either we had to leave or risk me being snatched and taken to Voldemort or to Lucius. If it hadn't been for Draco..." Her voice trailed off, and there was silence.

Harry noted that Hermione's cheeks were streaked with tears. He pulled her to him, pulled the devices from their ears, and held her as she cried softly. "There has to be a mistake, Harry," she whispered through muffled sobs.

"Doesn't sound good, Mione. Doesn't sound good at all," he murmured. "Let's go back to our rooms before someone finds us. Quietly, he led his hurt friend back to their quarters without incident. Once inside, he stoked the fire and sat with her on the settee. "What are you thinking?" he asked after a long silence.

"We talked about his loyalties just today. He said that he would make certain that I'd be happy. I told him I couldn't live if Voldemort won in the end, that I wouldn't be a hypocrite, going on after my friends died for what was right," she said numbly, not looking at him. "He told me that things would be all right. I don't understand..."

"You don't think he'd tell *you* if he was planning to betray Dumbledore or the Order, do you? You'd be the last person he'd tell," Harry said heatedly. "He's a snake. Always has been."

"He wouldn't lie to me, Harry! Something isn't right here. It's like McGonagall said. We shouldn't jump to conclusions until we've heard the truth of it from Dumbledore."

"Wouldn't lie to you, eh? I guess he told you all about his plans tonight? Told you he was meeting Lucius and planned to harm Lupin, did he? Knew about that, eh?"

"Well, no..." Her voice trailed away. "That means nothing," she said moments later. "Something could have come up. He could have..."

"Could have what?" Harry asked, hoping she'd see the type of man he was. He hated that she was being hurt, but she needed to hear these things. "Besides, did he tell you in exact words that he'd not betray the Order? Dumbledore? Me? Did he give you an oath?"

"He gave me his word," she said, voice cracking. Harry snorted. "His word is as good as an oath to me. He... he gave me his mother's pendant!"

"So?"

"So, see? He does care."

"What exactly did he tell you, Hermione?"

"He said... when I pointed out that by helping you would help me, and I would die before accepting Voldemort as my leader, he said..."

"Er...well?"

"He kissed me as if he agreed, as if making a pact with me, and he said that I would live."

"And then?" Harry coaxed.

"Then what?" she retorted hotly.

"Where is the vow that he'd not betray us?"

"Well, that was it. He vowed I'd not have to live under Voldemort's thumb."

"Oh, brilliant deduction, Hermione!" Harry laughed and clapped sarcastically. "You've gone mad! For all we know, he could have meant that he'd force you to live. Hello! Imperius Curse for starters! Hell, the list goes on!"

Hermione burst into tears and fled to her room, leaving Harry with his mouth agape. "I was just being honest!" he yelled after the door slammed. "Damn it!" he groused. He'd pushed her too far. It wasn't her fault that she'd fallen for him and believed his lies. She'd been tricked like the rest of them. He went to her door and pounded on it. "Mione! Come on! I'm sorry. Really, I am."

"Go away!" she hollered.

"Blast!" he said, kicking her door. Somehow the git had tricked Hermione into loving him, and he'd pretended to... "No," he whispered to himself. "He's not pretending." He remembered Snape's expression when he didn't know anyone was looking, remembered the words he'd spoken. He *had* given her something of his mother's. Harry shrugged. *So he loves Hermione in his own way. That doesn't mean that he wouldn't betray the Order for her.*

Nodding to himself, he made his way to his own room, slamming the door for good measure. He threw himself onto his bed and thought of what they'd learned. No matter how much he hated Snape in the past, still hated him, he never truly believed he would betray Dumbledore. He hadn't really trusted him all that much, but part of him had. That part of him felt betrayed. There were just too many things that he'd done to prove that he'd been on their side as opposed to Voldemort's side. He'd speak to Dumbledore first thing in the morning and find out what the hell had gone on. Maybe he could comfort Hermione by giving her Dumbledore's version of things. Snape would pay for hurting her. He'd see to it.

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Severus stood up and dusted his robes off. "That went well," he said sourly. "I still can't believe the little ingrate wouldn't come to me for help." Once again, the headmaster had been right. He'd sensed that they wouldn't go to Hogwarts for protection because Draco believed Severus to be the Dark Lord's man. *Am I?* he wondered. If Dumbledore hadn't devised the current plan, he would have had to kill Lucius on the Dark Lord's orders.

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, Severus, you can't blame him. You've been a friend to his family for many years, and your loyalties, in his eyes, have always lain where theirs has." He chuckled. "There is a twig in your hair. I am grateful that Lucius believed me to have silently hexed you."

"Well, I hope my fall didn't appear practiced," Severus said dryly. In truth, he'd hit his head on a rock as he'd fallen. It had taken a lot to not cry out. When the two brats had been talking to Dumbledore, he'd had the sudden urge to scratch his head. "It might have been better if you'd truly Stunned me." He sneered as he smoothed down his hair and made certain all leaves and sticks were out of it.

"I wanted you to be aware of what was going on." Dumbledore shook his head. "You never know who might have been lurking about. I could have needed you."

"I seriously doubt that, Headmaster," Severus said in a bored voice. "Although, if I might say, Lupin's face was priceless." He grinned mischievously. "He'll not be as forgiving. I wouldn't recommend releasing his hex until he is safely back to his weaker form or properly restrained."

Nodding, the headmaster said, "I agree."

"You take hold of Lucius, and I shall take Remus. I fashioned a Portkey to bring us to the Infirmary's back room." He pulled a small metal trinket from his pocket and activated it. "Quickly now."

Severus reached over and touched the object, making certain he had a sturdy grip on his old friend. One day Lucius might appreciate what he'd done for him. A jerk behind his navel alerted him to the Portkey's pull. The room had been prepared for their arrival already.

"Poppy? We are here," Dumbledore called towards the opened doorway.

A moment later, the matron appeared. "I was wondering when you two would return." She opened another door and nodded to Severus. "Put him in here. He'll be quite comfortable."

"Very well." Severus cast a spell to hover the man behind him and led him to the room. It was a quaint little room...connected loo, a bed, a desk with a chair, and an entire shelf of books. "Looks like a vacation spot instead of a prison cell."

Once he'd settled his friend on the bed, he whispered, *Ennervate*."

Sputtering and reaching for the wand that Severus had already taken from him, he looked around wildly. "Severus! Where is that old fool?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but a quiet voice behind him spoke instead. "Ah, Lucius, good of you to join us. I do hope you will enjoy your stay."

Lucius' icy glare met Severus' dark gaze. "So... you did betray me."

Severus shook his head. "I did the only thing I could to keep your family alive, Lucius." He backed away to allow the headmaster to talk.

"When Severus told me of Voldemort's order to have you killed after you'd shown him where Yaxley and Crabbe could be found, I decided to take pity on you."

Lucius looked around as if hoping for an escape. "I don't want your pity."

"Oh, I believe you are mistaken, Lucius. If you didn't have my pity, you would have death or a lifetime of imprisonment. I believe they would probably give you a trial and then have you terminated to make an example of you." Dumbledore smiled kindly. "So you see, Lucius, you do need my pity, although you might not exactly want it."

"The headmaster has decided to keep you here for the duration of the war. After Potter and our Lord meets, your fate will be decided."

"What does that mean?"

Severus kept quiet and allowed Dumbledore to speak. "It means that once Harry kills Voldemort, and make no mistake, he shall defeat him, as I believe you've witnessed thanks to your friend, Bane." He paused, but Lucius said nothing. "As I was saying, after Harry has rid the world of Tom Riddle, you will be at my mercy. I am quite certain you would prefer a lesser sentence in Azkaban, if any, for your deeds? Wouldn't you like to make certain that your home and many Galleons stay in Malfoy hands?"

"What do you want?" Lucius asked distastefully.

"Why, I thought you'd never ask," Dumbledore asked slyly. "I want everything of course. Any information you have on anyone associated with Tom Riddle. I want your version of what you saw with Bane." He nodded to Severus. "He's told me the things that you've said thus far, but I think I should like to hear it from you."

"And you will speak for me *if* Potter wins?"

"Yes, I shall tell the Ministry that you came to me before the war's end with information that helped us," he said firmly. "However, they need not know that it was a forced alliance, and I shall have you take an Unbreakable Vow on a few things."

"Agreed," Lucius said. "My son? My wife?"

"Draco is safe, and that is all you will know for now. Tom has generously allowed Narcissa to live so far. I think he intends to use her as leverage to get Draco back to his side." Dumbledore yawned dramatically. "I wouldn't mind having the rest of our talk tomorrow. It appears that I am tired. Severus and I still have to trek out and retrieve your friends. Oh, I shall let the Ministry know that it was you that captured the pair of them. That should look good for your honor."

"Very well. I shall talk to you on the morrow."

"Excellent. Have a pleasant night." Dumbledore made his way to the exit. "Come, Severus."

Severus smirked and looked to Lucius. "I shall talk with you tomorrow as well."

"I shall be waiting, old *friend*," Lucius said sarcastically.

Once the door closed and locked itself behind him, he moved forward to see Poppy checking over Lupin with her wand. "Something isn't quite right with him. A simple Stunner shouldn't have kept him under this long. I've not had to strengthen it yet, and he won't wake when I try."

"Don't worry, Poppy. I'll handle it for you," Severus said, striding forward. He paused to be certain that Lupin was properly restrained. With a deft slash of his wand and a whispered spell, the werewolf twitched. "Death Eaters know that a normal Stunner won't hold them long, so we devised our own variation. That's what Lucius used tonight." He nodded to the wolf. "He'll have a nasty headache."

"Oh. Well..." Poppy was at a loss for words and instinctively backed away when she heard a low growl.

Dumbledore said jovially, "Yes, I suppose being around the others that run with Greyback could have something to do with it, eh? Completely understandable and smart, if I might say so."

Lupin was on his feet and howling immediately. Seconds later, he fought his restraints to get at Severus. "Oh, do calm down," Severus said in an annoyed voice.

Dumbledore strode forward. "Remus, if you can't calm yourself, I will have to put you back as you were until daybreak. The choice is yours. I cannot explain things to you whilst you are so riled up."

After another attempt to swipe at Severus, the werewolf dropped to all fours and paced back and forth angrily, glaring at Severus all the while. He only stopped when the headmaster began speaking again.

"Ginevra Weasley and Draco Malfoy are here in the castle. Both are safe. You should be happy to know that. Miss Weasley expressed her concern for you. I am certain she would be horrified to know that you are this angry. Things had to play out this way with Severus seemingly betraying you, or they wouldn't have come out. I can explain

to you further tomorrow. Until then, friend, I have to ask that you not give Poppy a hard time."

A slight yelp and whimper was Lupin's reply. He settled back on his haunches and allowed Poppy to place a bowl of fresh water within his reach. As he moved to lap up the water, Severus exited the stuffy room. He was surprised that Dumbledore followed him so quickly.

"Come. Let's go get the other two and put them in their rooms here. Afterwards, you can tell the Dark Lord that your deeds have been done," he said softly. A hand clasped Severus' shoulder for a moment. "I want to thank you for all that you've done for me, Severus. You can never know how grateful I truly am."

"So grateful that you've had Firenze burning the same mixture that Bane was using to be certain that I was telling you the truth," he said bitterly. "I told you all that I knew."

Dumbledore sighed and brought his hands up rub his temples as if soothing a headache. "It was not to test you, my boy."

"Enough, sir," Severus hissed. "I am no fool. You don't completely trust me."

"I do," Dumbledore said adamantly. "I simply wanted to be certain that nothing was kept from you or that Bane did not somehow pull the wool over Lucius' eyes."

"You wanted to be certain that nothing else," he raised an eyebrow, "would tempt me to switch sides."

"Let us keep your relationship with Miss Granger out of this," he said. "I am certain that if anything, our Hermione would keep you on track."

Severus sighed. "I've told you before, Headmaster, that I have chosen her, and if..."

"And if I got in the way, you'd take her off to live away from here whilst serving the Dark Lord, forsaking me and all the work we've done together?" Dumbledore raised an eyebrow and watched his silent Potions master. He shook his head when the man didn't speak. "I did not think so, Severus. You may continue your relationship with her, but I ask that you keep things as they have been... respectful."

Glaring at the headmaster, Severus said, "If we don't get the others soon, they shall be waking without us." His eyes drifted towards the door for a moment as he thought dark things. *Don't be so certain, Headmaster. You always try to see the good in everyone. Some of us have a limited ability to always do things the right way. I am not respectful in most ways, and I wouldn't allow you to take her from me.*

Dumbledore took his Portkey out, fixed it to where they would appear in Lucius' campsite, and activated it. Once there, they quickly pulled the men from the brush, Portkeyed back to Hogwarts, and placed the men into their own rooms, both resembling the one they'd placed Lucius in. Severus walked with the headmaster to McGonagall's office.

Minerva smiled in welcome, but the two students looked upon Severus with fear. "It's about time you both got here. Can you imagine the tale that these two tried to tell me?"

"I wonder if it concerns the capture of Lucius Malfoy, the hexing of a traitorous Professor Snape, and the cursing of Remus Lupin?" Dumbledore asked cheekily, conjuring two plush seats.

"Why, just so happens, it does," Minerva said dryly. "I dared not believe a word of it, but I am certain they would like an explanation." She patted the small box atop her desk. "I've confiscated their wands as you've asked."

"Very good," Dumbledore said, taking his seat. "Sit with us, Severus." Once he was seated, the headmaster began again. "I have a little tale to tell of my own."

"What's he doing here?" Draco nodded towards his Head of House. "I told you already..."

"Yes, dear boy, I know what you've told me, and I must confess to being dishonest with you. I knew that you'd not come forward knowing that Severus was still on staff here. Therefore, Severus and I devised a plan that would lead us to you and give you both a feeling of security. What you saw tonight was planned beforehand."

"The headmaster only pretended to hex me. Lucius did Stun Lupin, and in turn, Headmaster Dumbledore did the same to him."

"My father is in Azkaban?" Draco asked suddenly.

"I have him in a safe place. It appears that he wishes to divulge information that might help us. However, you are not to tell anyone about this. In the wrong hands, this information could destroy all that Severus has been working for. To the world, Lucius Malfoy is simply still at large. To Voldemort, he's met his demise. Even your mother will not know the difference."

"But the Dark Lord wouldn't want..."

"Yes, Draco, he *would* want your father killed. In fact, he wanted me to do it," Severus said quietly.

"And you couldn't?" Draco asked incredulously. "I would have thought..."

Severus smirked and stood. "I trust you don't need me any longer, Headmaster. I feel the need to retire."

"I will bring them to their safe location, Severus. I just want a few more words with them."

"Very well. Good evening." He nodded to Minerva and ignored the two students. He didn't care what they thought of him. In his opinion, the more ill they thought of him, the better off he'd be. He hated that Dumbledore wanted to let the boy and girl know what they'd done, but he'd felt that they'd try to run off again if they didn't know some of the details.

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Sleep would not come for Hermione. She peeked out of her room and saw that Harry was no longer in the common room. His door was shut tightly. She wandered out to get her book from the table. "Might as well read," she said bitterly. She couldn't believe that she'd been so blinded by her lover's words. *How could he do this to me? He's supposed to help Harry not Malfoy!* There had to be more to it than they'd heard. She'd force him to explain why he did it, even after their talk. She had been certain that he'd made a vow of sorts to her to see to it that he remained on Harry's side, not Voldemort's.

Just as she pulled up her book, Harry's Invisibility Cloak and map caught her eye. He'd left them on the table. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," she said quietly. The map came to life, and she began scanning it. Her eyes found Professor McGonagall's office, searching for Ginny and Draco. To her surprise, Severus Snape was leaving the office. The headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Ginny, and Draco were still inside.

A moment of fear clenched her insides. Had he somehow overpowered Dumbledore and McGonagall to get to the two students? "Ridiculous," she muttered. They'd misunderstood things, Draco and Ginny. She felt like a fool for listening to Harry's opinion of things. She should have waited to hear from Severus herself. She watched his path. He paused for a moment at the corridor leading to their hidden chambers, but instead of continuing down to see her, he moved on and made his way down to his own chambers. She wished there was a way to talk to him, to have him hold her, or to see for herself that all was well.

The shimmering fabric of Harry's cloak caught her eye. That was it. She could use it to go down to see him. Nobody need know about it. Hermione took the map and the cloak to her room and freshened up before dressing in warm clothing. She checked the map one last time to be certain that he was still in his private quarters. She left it in her room and closed the door. Harry would not be certain if she'd gone out or not. He might think that she had the map with her to check for Severus.

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Severus wrapped his thick bathrobe about his body the moment he stepped out of his shower and quickly stoked the fire in his bedchamber. He usually welcomed the cold air of winter, but for some reason, he didn't want to tolerate it this night. Everything had gone the way Dumbledore had planned, but something still didn't sit well with him. The captures and trickery went easily enough, but it was the entire meeting with the Dark Lord. He hadn't often felt uneasy when going to see his master, but for some reason, this night, he did. He'd told his Lord that he'd be bringing Lucius in, and the man's eyes had narrowed ever so slightly.

He was uncertain as to what to do. What if his Lord knew somehow that he'd not killed Lucius? What if they had been followed by another? Would they bring news of Dumbledore's plan to him? Of Severus' part in it? He thought of Hermione then. What if his failure would be taken out on her? It was the first time he feared for something in a long time. "Damn it!" he said quietly to the empty room. "This is why I regret becoming involved with her." Not that he regretted having her in his life. No. He would never truly regret it. He simply worried for her now and loathed the fact that he cared for someone else's welfare. If his Lord thought he failed, he might use her to punish him.

Why do I doubt him? Why does it feel as though my master is displeased with me? Surely I am just overreacting to the uncertainty of how Lucius was dealt with? Yes, that had to be it. Draco was right. He couldn't have done it, could he? Kill Lucius. If he was in a duel or a scuffle, he could have easily done it. The thought of turning his wand upon the first person that accepted him...even though he was only a half-blood wizard and his family hadn't the wealth some of the others had. Lucius had been in his seventh year when he'd first met him. It had been an honor to hear his kind words...words of wisdom and advice on dealing with those in the world that didn't appreciate a Slytherin mind.

Pulling his parchment from his desk, he waved a hand over it and whispered the one spell that would bring him closer to his witch without having to step a foot in any direction.

Alone and frightened in the main corridor of the dungeon.

"What the hell is she doing down here?" he asked aloud. He quickly moved through his chambers and into his office where he opened the door and peered out into the darkened hallway. "Come here," he said in a quiet voice, hoping it wouldn't carry.

An intake of air and a few hurried steps signaled that she was on her way to him. He moved back to allow her to pass into the room, but she pounced upon him instead. Sobbing. *What the fuck is it now?* He closed the door, issued the words to reset all warding, and pulled his bundle from him. He reached out slowly and grasped what he hoped was the hood of the cloak and pulled it back. "Hermione..."

"I thought... I thought you were gone for good. I thought you'd left me even after our talk," she blurted, tears staining her cheeks. From the redness of her eyes and the puffiness of the skin surrounding them, he could tell she'd been crying for awhile.

"Never," he whispered, hoping his tone mollified her. "I'll not leave without you." He pulled her back to him and lifted her, carrying her to his bedchamber. What would it hurt to just hold her for a small time? He needed to find out why she'd left her chambers and what had upset her so much. He had no idea what she was on about.

"Where are we going?" she asked, sniffing all the while.

"To bed," he said softly. "You're shivering, and I intend to warm you up."

"We... need to talk."

"Oh, yes, we shall talk... at some point."

Southern's Notes: I apologize for taking so long to get this to you. A large hurricane came through just to the east of where I live, and I've not had Internet connection since. I hope you've not lost interest in my tale with my absence. While I had electricity and my other utilities back on a few days after the storm passed through, I was able to write (details on my live journal) 4 chapters (and they are simply fun...can't wait for you to read them). I'll be posting them every three days, as I was trying to do before I had to take time away...this will give my lovely beta and myself extra time to proofread them and allow everyone to catch up. However, if we can get to them sooner, I certainly shall upload them as soon as possible.

Remember: I answer all reviews, so take a moment to check off the option to be notified when I respond.

Up Next:

- Draco and Ginny's reception at Grimmauld Place is up next. (How will her family treat him?)
- Hermione makes a decision where Severus is concerned.
- The Dark Lord summons Severus.

Full Moon Rising: Part Three

Chapter 21 of 42

The Weasleys talk with Draco and Ginny. Severus and Hermione heat things up. The Dark Lord is displeased.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Draco couldn't believe it. The old man trusted him enough to bring him to his private headquarters. He followed closely behind Ginevra as they entered the front door. Dumbledore motioned for them to move forward, and they made their way into the kitchen.

"Oh! Ginny!" It was plump Mrs. Weasley. She ran to her daughter and pulled her to her in a tight embrace. In that instant, he did something that he hadn't done in years.

He longed for his mother and the comforting feel of her embrace. It had been a trying few weeks, and they'd nearly gotten off. If Bill Weasley hadn't followed him out of Gringotts that day, they'd have gone on to get a new wand and a broom. They'd have been long gone and living on the run. He was uncertain why, but he felt relieved that their stint of living in such a way had ended. If he would find his death for making the decision to go to Dumbledore after he'd supposedly dispatched of Snape and his father, then so be it.

He moved to stand beside Dumbledore as he watched both Weasley parents cry and hold their daughter. He'd always hated the Weasleys. He'd always thought himself to be better than they were because his family had more money, a better home, and better connections. How would it feel to have siblings? Surely his parents cared for him this much, though they weren't as affectionate? He swallowed a lump in his throat as he thought of his mum; long blonde hair and perfect poise were always the first things one noticed about her. She was the complete opposite of Mrs. Weasley, and in that instant, he wished her to be more like the woman before him.

"I'm sorry, Mum. We didn't know whom to trust. Both Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy wanted to get their hands on me. We don't really know why, but Draco didn't allow it," Ginny said in a rush. "We thought Professor Snape couldn't be trusted, so we left Hogwarts."

Draco gulped as the Weasley parents looked up to notice him standing with Dumbledore. Both pairs of eyes were upon him, seemingly summing him up. Dumbledore broke the silence. "Draco has the need for protection as well. I think that his rescuing of Miss Weasley has him marked by Voldemort and his father."

Arthur Weasley nodded. "He can certainly stay here."

To Draco's surprise, Mrs. Weasley left her daughter's side and came to him. "I have to tell you, son, that I have been angry with you for taking my little girl from Hogwarts and forcing us all to worry, but I know how strong-willed she can be." She sniffed lightly, trying to not cry. "I thank you for looking after her."

"I will always look after her," he said quietly.

The next moment saw him crushed against her in a fierce hug. "She's safe," the woman chanted. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to hug her back, but then he patted her shoulder slightly and moved back.

"Thank you for welcoming me," he said, looking between Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"I'm sure the others will be anxious to see you," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling broadly. "Are you hungry?"

Both nodded quickly. It had been a long time since they'd had a real meal. Even though Professor McGonagall had offered, they were too worried about the headmaster's return to eat.

"Excellent. I'll warm the rest of what we ate for dinner. Have a seat." She looked to the headmaster. "You too."

"I am afraid that I must decline, Molly. I have matters I have to attend to at the castle." He bowed slightly. "But I do thank you."

"When will Harry and Hermione be able to come back out?" Mr. Weasley asked before the headmaster could leave. "I didn't get to see either last time."

"They aren't here with Ron and Gabrielle?" Ginny asked, brow furrowed.

"No, I thought it best that they stay in another location for the time being," Dumbledore answered mysteriously.

Mrs. Weasley laughed. "Too many hormones under one roof anyway, if you ask me about it."

"Indeed," he said. "I must away. I shall check on things soon enough." With that, Dumbledore was gone, leaving Draco at the will of the Weasleys.

Beneath the table, he felt a reassuring squeeze upon his thigh. He looked to Ginny and smiled. Her bright, brown eyes were full of hope and... adoration? His smile broadened.

"We'll be all right," she whispered.

He nodded. "I think so."

"So," Mr. Weasley said, coming to sit on the other side of Draco, "been roughing it like Muggles, eh? What's it been like?"

As they ate, they explained everything that they'd done since they'd gone, right down to all the sweets that they'd eaten. Draco was feeling comfortable with the way her parents had accepted them. He wondered if his parents would have done the same with her. He scowled slightly as he thought of his father. He'd wanted to use her to meet some end. But what? No matter. Dumbledore had him locked away someplace.

"What's *he* doing here?" a voice from behind asked. Weasley.

"What a way to greet your sister!" his mother admonished. "Now, we'll have none of that. Get in here if you intend to greet her."

With narrowed eyes, Ron walked closer. "How'd this come about?"

"It's a very long story," Mr. Weasley said. "I am certain they wouldn't mind telling you tomorrow. It's quite late. Just know that young Mr. Malfoy here..."

"Draco, sir," he interrupted quickly, enjoying the pleased look on the Weasley patriarch's face and the outrageous look on the boy's.

"Draco here has been looking out for your sister's best interests, and we've welcomed him here for protection as we did with Miss Parkinson. Now..."

"What's that cow doing here?" Ginny interrupted, standing. "Gonna just let her slide on in after all *she* did to Hermione? No wonder Mione didn't want to stay here!"

"No, hold on, dear," Mrs. Weasley began, "Hermione and Ron parted ways before he took a fancy to Pansy."

"Ha! He was shagging Pansy in the corridors of Hogwarts, and Hermione caught him at it!"

"What?" Mrs. Weasley asked incredulously, shaking her head. All the while her eyes turned to meet those of her youngest son. "Ronald Weasley, you will go to your room immediately. We shall talk about this tomorrow."

For some reason, Ginny's father's face took on a deep shade of red, nearly matching his hair. "Er... that needs to be a more private conversation."

"If Hermione can accept her, why can't you?" Ronald retorted hotly.

"RONALD WEASLEY! OUT! NOW!" Mrs. Weasley bellowed, startling Draco.

He had no idea that the kind woman would have such a fiery temper. Earlier, he'd hoped that Ginny wouldn't keep on the extra stones after she had children, as her mother had, and now, he hoped that she didn't have the woman's temper. *Hang on! Children?* He snorted loudly, causing everyone to look at him. He didn't want the woman turning her anger on him. "If I had known my presence would have disrupted things, I would have insisted that I be taken elsewhere. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"Draco dear, it's all right," Mrs. Weasley said, voice kind as ever. "It's not your fault." She turned sharp eyes on Ginny, and her voice lowered to a threatening level. "You'll

not give your brother or his girlfriend a hard time. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Ginny bit out, moving from the table. "I won't stay in a room with her though!"

"Fair enough," her mother said. "I suppose Ron won't share with Draco either." She shrugged. "You can take the room next to Gabrielle's, Ginny. Draco can have the one across from Ron. Bill and Fleur haven't been by lately. Might as well make use of it. Show him where his room is. Your father and I need to have a word."

Draco was surprised when she took his hand in front of her parents and led him through the kitchen door and up the flight of stairs. Just as they reached the first landing, they caught sight of Weasley sitting on the steps above them.

"I don't like having you here, Malfoy."

"Ron, shush," Ginny whispered.

"I don't care what you think, Weas..."

"BLOOD TRAITORS! CREATURES OF FILTH! YOU DISGRACE THE HOME OF MY FATHERS!"

"What the bloody hell is that?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Ron's gone and woke up Mrs. Black's portrait, he has!" Ginny said in annoyance. She pulled Draco forward, knocking Ron to the side. "Shove off, Ron. Go play with your whore."

"Excuse me?" came another voice. An angry voice. Parkinson.

Ginny faltered only a moment. "You heard me. I called you a whore."

Before Pansy could lash out at her, Draco pulled Ginny behind him. "Slumming, Parkinson?" he asked, voice cold.

"Aren't you?" she bit back.

It was then that he realized what he'd said. *Damn!* In an attempt to recover, he said, "Ginny's a big step up from Weasley there."

"Enough," Ginny said, as Ron tried to push Draco from behind. She moved to the side and pulled Draco with her, facing both Ron and Pansy. "The two of you can go to hell. Leave us alone, and we'll leave you alone." Without waiting for a reply, she pulled him up past them to another floor. "This is your room," she said, opening a door, pulling him in, and closing the door behind them.

"Not too bad," he said conversationally. "Look, Ginny, when I..." His voice trailed away as she turned her hurt eyes towards him.

"Are you just slumming, Draco?"

"No, of course not."

"Why would you think Pansy is then? What's the difference?"

"It's Weasley. I don't like him. Never have, and I doubt that I ever will. I was just trying to hurt him by saying that."

"Well, it hurt me as well. I might not like him much right now, but I love him. He's my brother. I won't ask you to be his mate, but when you disrespect him in such a way, you disrespect *all* of my family." She crossed her arms. "What am I to you? I need to know that right now."

"You're..."

"I see," she said, nodding slowly and opening the door. "I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Wait," Draco said, closing the door before she could leave. "I turned my back on my family and the only life I've ever known for you. I don't know exactly why. Well, I didn't know then, but I just knew that I had to save you." He looked away. "I want you to be a part of my life even after this whole mess gets sorted out."

"I accept."

"Accept?" he asked, puzzled.

"You're officially asking me to be your girl, aren't you?" she asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.

He smirked. "Cheeky little witch. I suppose I am."

She kissed his lips softly, slipped around him, and opened the door. "Good night."

"Night," he said as she closed the door. He wanted to pull her back in to kiss her properly, but he didn't want to make a scene with anyone that might be about.

Smiling, he made his way to the bed to take off his boots. They'd done it...finally put their feelings out there and agreed to become a couple. For the first time in weeks, he could think about his future and see a ray of hope. In all honesty, he hadn't truly wanted to think about it much. At any moment, the Dark Lord, his father, or Snape could have swooped down upon them. The slight resentment he'd been feeling towards her lifted. *He'd* decided to take responsibility for her. She'd never asked for it. She was his choice. Always trusting him, even after all of the horrid things he'd said to her and her family in the past.

His smile faded as a thought occurred to him. She'd loved Dean Thomas, and after he'd died, she'd fallen for Lupin. Was he just another rebound relationship? Was he a step she needed to take to get away from Lupin? It wasn't the first time he'd thought about this, and he hated second-guessing himself. He shook his head. "No," he said aloud. "She loves me." Love was such a strong word, but he supposed that was exactly what he felt towards her. Weasley or Parkinson would have a rough time of it if they meant to break them apart. He'd not allow it.

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"I do not like that you are roaming the castle when you shouldn't be," Severus chastised as he placed her before his bed and began to pull at her clothing.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked nervously as he pulled her robes away from her body, leaving her clad in only her warm pajamas. "I had to see you. No matter what."

"Whilst I warm you, I'd like to actually feel some part of your body," he said softly. Although the fire was now burning low, he made no move to stoke it. "Come," he said, sitting upon the bed and pulling her down with him. Once they situated themselves, he pulled the duvet up over them.

"I thought you'd left me," she whispered, holding him tightly.

"I would never leave this castle permanently without you, Hermione. You should know that. Do you trust me so little as to think otherwise?"

"No, it's not that," she said, suddenly wanting to delay the conversation for a few minutes. Would he feel that she truly didn't trust him when she admitted she'd thought the worst after Harry told her what he thought of things? What he'd said had made sense, yet she knew that she should have waited to talk to Severus before passing judgement.

"What is it then?" he asked silkily.

"Your robe is still on," she pointed out hastily, grasping at anything to change the subject for just a moment while she gathered her thoughts.

"So it is," he said softly. "Do you want it off?"

"Yes," she whispered, heartbeat increasing rapidly.

"Very well," he said, moving away to shrug out of his bathrobe.

When he moved back against her and wrapped an arm about her waist and slid one beneath her head, she gasped slightly. "You're naked," she blurted. "Sorry. I didn't know." *Blast!* This was not the distraction she had in mind. She didn't want to go too far. There were things that they needed to discuss.

He didn't reply with words, but his lips found her neck and teased her slightly. She squirmed and felt her body begin to warm with his touch. She could hear his breathing, as his mouth was close to her ear, and hundreds of tingly sensations erupted in her stomach.

"Severus, wait," she said, as his hand cupped her breast through the fabric of her top. "About earlier, Harry and I overheard something. It's why I am upset."

He paused. "I don't want to talk about Potter just now." Ever so slowly, he pulled her onto her back, moving his body between her thighs and over her. "I'd rather kiss you."

"But I... all right," she agreed, equally excited and nervous. Definitely not the distraction she had planned. "So long as we don't let things get too..."

His mouth slanted across hers immediately, and his tongue demanded entrance. She parted her lips and was lost in his kiss. He had such a way with kissing her. It was as if she could feel his need and hear his pleading with the tangling of his tongue with hers. When his lips tore away from hers, she was surprised to find that her top had been unbuttoned, breasts exposed. The cold air of the dungeon wasn't affecting her in the least. No. Her body was afire. For him.

"Severus, we can't... oh!" She lost her train of thoughts as his mouth found one of her hardened nipples *Maybe just a little bit of heavy snogging wouldn't hurt.*

While he was nibbling on her breast, he was moving his body against hers, grinding his erection against the juncture of her thighs, and making her center hot and wet with need. The movements alone were mesmerizing. It was almost as if she was really having sex. Something was missing though. She needed... him. *To hell with snogging.* She wanted him within her. Wrapping her legs about his frame, she moved against him, causing him to throw back his head and groan. His eyes were closed tightly, and his face was scrunched in concentration as he relished the feel of her body against his. Only the fabric of her pajama bottoms kept him away.

Of her own accord, she moved her hands from his back to her waist. She pulled at her bottoms, glad she'd decided against wearing knickers this night, and he shifted to give her room, eyes now looking down into hers as she pushed down and kicked away the clothing. "No matter what really happened with Dumbledore and Malfoy earlier, I've decided that I do want this. I want to do it. Make love, I mean."

"Do not taunt me when I need you so," he said seductively, sending chills down her spine.

"I want you," she blurted.

"Are you certain?" he hissed, eyes darkening with blatant lust. Even as he spoke the words, one hand slid down to fondle her sex.

"I am," she squeaked. The feel of his body against hers, skin to skin, was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. It was simply erotic, naughty, and arousing. He was going to make her a real woman.

"Your body calls to me," he said softly, lowering his mouth to hers.

She felt him guide the head of his penis to her labia, rubbing it up and down along its entrance for a moment, barely parting her nether lips to allow some of her wetness to partially lubricate it. He then moved it up to rub against her clitoris. A yelp of surprise escaped her as he continued to rub the head of his penis against her nub. His lips left hers, and he simply rested his head on her shoulder, tongue lavng gently against her neck.

Hermione's first instinct was to close herself to him, to force him away, but she couldn't. When she'd moved to do that, she'd ended up opening herself up more to him instead, even arching her pelvis against his groin, needing to apply more pressure. With each move against her, she felt her body heating even more, if possible, and her insides were becoming more wet with need.

"It won't hurt, love," he said, lips moving against her neck. "Not this time."

One of his fingers delved within her for a moment, and she felt him move slightly. He was at her entrance. She stiffened and braced herself for some of the pain she'd felt when he'd accidentally tore away her hymen. No matter what he said, it had to still hurt. How could it not?

"Relax," he said, lifting his head to look at her. "Trust me, Hermione. You won't feel that pain again...only me moving within you."

Then she felt it, the tip of his penis moving slowly, barely inching into her. "Oh..." It didn't hurt. It was odd, really. In fact, she wasn't certain that he was truly inside of her. She felt a little pressure, and then he gasped in pain.

"It's burning."

"What?" she asked uncertainly. "I do feel a bit hot down there, but I don't feel any burning."

"No," he said, suddenly chuckling with amusement and pulling away from her.

She sat up, cheeks pink with embarrassment, clutching the duvet up to cover her bare breasts. "What did I do wrong?" How dare he laugh at her at a time like this? How dare he pull away from her?

"No, Hermione, my Mark is burning. I'm being summoned." He got out of bed. "Of all the fucking times for him to call me."

"Wh-what? You have to leave? *Now?*"

"I shouldn't be too long," he said.

She noticed something akin to uncertainty pass across his face and wondered if he was worried about something. "Should I... stay?"

He shook his head. "Perhaps not. Much as I want you to." He was busying himself with dressing.

Disappointment. Relief. Fear. Worry. All were emotions she felt gnawing at her. "Severus, about tonight with Lucius Malfoy, Harry and I overheard what happened. Well, Draco and Ginny were talking to Professor McGonagall. We saw them in the castle on the map and couldn't resist having a look."

"I shall have to explain to you tomorrow. I cannot keep him waiting. Not tonight," Severus said, expression closed, voice dark.

"Are things all right? With you, I mean? I don't have to worry, do I? He won't hurt you?"

He pulled her up to hold her, duvet falling from her grasp. When he let her go, he kissed her quickly and stared at her body, appreciation alight in his eyes. "I will do what I must to come back. Do not doubt that."

She nodded in understanding. Never before that moment had she truly appreciated what he did for them all. Each time he went to his Dark Lord, he was putting himself at risk. He always seemed so confident before, but something had changed. It was almost as if he feared something might happen. "I love you," she said suddenly. "Please take care of yourself."

Nodding, he pulled on his cloak and stuffed a mask into his pocket. "I shall. Dress yourself, and get back to your rooms. I haven't the time to escort you. I trust you won't dally?"

"I'll go there straightaway."

"Until tomorrow," he said, leaving her to pull on her clothing.

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Angrily, Severus made his way out of the castle and went to his Lord's side. He tried desperately to school his features and mask his feelings. Hermione's dreadful tears, which they needed to talk about, the hurt sound of her voice, and nosy fucking Potter with his ideas...all of it was weighing on him. Kneeling quickly, he rose and awaited the questions that he was certain to ask. For a long moment, the Dark Lord simply looked at him. Severus could feel a gentle probing of his mind, different flashes of memory moving forth.

"How did things go this night, Severus? I trust you did as you were bidden?"

"Master, I went with..."

"You bastard!" Rabastan Lestrangle yelled, coming out from behind the Dark Lord's chair. "What did you do to Yaxley? He didn't meet me tonight. Nobody is at his campsite!"

Raising an eyebrow, Severus glared at the bastard. "So...you are the one that has been feeding him our Lord's secrets. Keeping them on the move so that we can't find them!" He pulled his wand and aimed it at Rabastan. "Allow me to put the traitor away from us, Master."

The Dark Lord raised a long, pale hand to halt his action. "Explain, Severus."

Severus had to think quickly. It was apparent that Rabastan had been filling the Dark Lord with tales in order to turn him against him. He had to do what must be done to see that he remained alive, even if that meant Rabastan's demise.

Not lowering his wand or moving his gaze, he said, "Yaxley told Lucius that Rabastan had a plan that would brand a follower as a traitor. It seemed that he disliked someone intensely for a previous encounter that left him lacking in your eyes, Master. I thought it might be me, but I hadn't any proof and dared not make false accusations against a brother. However, I can clearly see that it is I who Rabastan dislikes." Severus stepped closer. "Still angry over the Polyjuice incident, are we? Upset that your plan went awry?"

"You won't slither out of this one, Snape. You've been conversing with Lucius! You've not divulged all you know to our Lord!" Rabastan accused.

"I beg your pardon, Rabastan, but I have told him *everything*," he said smoothly. "But do enlighten me as to what I've left out."

"You've been meeting with Lucius on the sly. Yaxley has seen the two of you!"

"That is no secret. The Dark Lord is aware of my meetings with Lucius." Severus looked to his Master. "Have I displeased you as of yet?"

"No," he admitted, eyeing them both. "I must admit that I find it interesting that Rabastan has known of this and has only come to me this very evening with the information."

Severus nodded. "I agree." He sneered slightly. "Tell me, Rabastan, was Yaxley your lover? I see you aren't taking his *disappearance* well."

"Why, you bastard!" Rabastan yelled, pulling his wand. "You killed him!" Before either could do anything, their wands were taken magically.

"Enough," the Dark Lord said. He looked from Rabastan to Severus and sighed. "I don't like that it has come to this. Severus, you've been faithful to me for all of your years in my service. I admit that I once doubted you before I came back to power," he looked to Rabastan, "just as I doubted all others that went free." He stood and paced. "However, sometimes I wonder if you aren't too thoroughly entrenched in Dumbledore's camp. I think I will need proof of loyalty. Simply knowing that Lucius and his friends are taken care of is not good enough."

Swallowing his fear, Severus asked, "What do you ask of me, my Lord?"

"I am undecided at this moment, but I do know what you treasure above all other things."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Meaning you will harm her?"

Bringing a long hand up to his face to rub his chin, his Lord looked at him. "Of course not. If you should die, she would still be taken care of... in honor of your loyal service of course. Why, I might even allow her to stay with me, and you do know how I find the presence of another to be vexing most of the time. Yet I would still be certain that no harm be done to her."

"I have your word, my Lord, that she won't be harmed?"

"Yes," he hissed. "You have it. She'll not be harmed so long as you always remain in my service." He moved closer. "Give me no reason to see that she lives her life without you."

Severus nodded. "You always have my service, my Lord. This is no different."

The Dark Lord turned around and pointed his wand to Rabastan. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Jumping back slightly, Severus watched as the smug expression turned to one of shock before Rabastan's body flew back. His heart was beating quickly. That fate could have been his. He would have to tread very carefully.

His Lord said, "I hate that he caused me to doubt you, my faithful servant." He cackled in amusement. "Did you see his face?"

"I did."

"Now that Lucius and the other traitors are gone, we must try to contact the centaurs. Are you quite certain Bane has gone?"

"Yes, my Lord. He said that someone told the other centaurs of the forest what he was about with Lucius and the others. I am certain now that it must have been Yaxley. If he told Rabastan here of their doings, then it is likely he let it slip to some other, be they centaur or a friend of the centaurs."

"I believe that Rabastan has known for a couple of weeks about the workings of Yaxley and the others. *That* sealed his fate. The only reason he seemed eager to tell me earlier was because Yaxley hadn't contacted him." His ruby eyes glinted. "It appears that he was to tell all if something happened to him. I am glad that you thought to gather each meeting with Lucius in a Pensieve for me, Severus. Had I been unaware of your doings, Rabastan's fate would have also been yours."

"Yes, Master," Severus said with a relieved nod. "I am pleased that Yaxley knew not of the arrangement I'd made with Lucius to dispose of them prior to our coming here." Severus smirked. "He always was good for nothing."

"He had his uses. Pity they chose to oppose me. We could have used the extra wands in battle soon enough." The Dark Lord sat back in his chair, kicking Rabastan to the side as he did so. "I suppose I shall have to break the news to Rodolphus and Bellatrix. I will interrogate them of course to see what they knew. I doubt Bella knew of this."

"Very wise, Master, and I agree."

"Well, I'm glad you approve," he said dryly. "I want you to search the forest. See if you can find where the herd of centaurs has gone. Once we have their location, I shall send someone to meet with them."

"I am still disappointed with Bane's findings," Severus said, allowing concern to ease into his voice. "What if it is true? What if the Potter brat lucks up even with Dumbledore's demise?"

"He won't. The plan that I had decided on for the end of term will simply be moved up, thus altering what Bane foresaw. I would like a centaur to do this with me around though, as I want to see for myself."

"Perhaps if I told Dumbledore..." He looked away, trying to appear frustrated. The Dark Lord had no idea that Dumbledore already knew of the visions and had Firenze working on them. "I can't do it. He'll use it to their advantage!"

"You want to tell him of your findings so that he might utilize his personal centaur?"

"I thought of it. Firenze would do anything for the old fool. I thought that maybe I could be present to see what he has to say on the matter. That is one way to ensure that Lucius or Bane didn't deceive us." He need not know that Dumbledore and Firenze had already been working on it.

"Say nothing as of yet. It shall be a last resort. The less old Dumbledore knows, the better. Search the forest." He waved his hand and sent Severus' wand back to him. "Go back to the castle. I shall call you soon."

"Yes, Master," Severus said, bowing low. "Thank you for believing in me."

Before he made his way out the door, he heard the Dark Lord call to him. He turned around. The man said, "I do apologize for calling you to me at this hour, but my need should always come first." He cackled lightly. "It was certainly a case of bad timing, being amidst such a pleasurable encounter."

Severus felt his cheeks redden. "Not at all, Master. I shall... make up for it later," he said slyly. Chuckling, he left his Lord's hideaway and Apparated back to Hogwarts. As he entered the gates and crept back to the castle, he felt slightly guilty that the Dark Lord had seen flashes of what he and Hermione had been about before he'd been summoned. However, seeing as how he'd quickly left her to get to his Lord, not giving in to his own need and putting his Lord's need above his own, had likely been another thing that had proved to his Master that he was his man. Anyone else, including Bellatrix, would have quickly sought release before going to him. Pleased with himself, he walked with a slight skip in step.

Halting outside his doorway, he leant against the wall. *I almost had my witch tonight.* He'd been in such a rush to greet the Dark Lord and to cover his arse whilst there that the fact that *she* had asked *him* to take her had been lost on him. Part of him felt like cheering like some young dolt. The next time that she was in his bed he'd have her. Nothing would stop it. There was no reason to not allow it. Not now. He had her innocence already. Dumbledore had backed off, allowing her to stay near him, and she was no longer his student. He struck out to seduce her and had long done that, even though she'd claimed to not be ready. She was ready, and he was tired of waiting. "I will have you soon, Hermione," he whispered to the darkness and disappeared within his chambers.

Southern's Notes: Well, that concludes all the goings on of this long night. Seemed to go on forever, eh? Severus had a wee bit of a close call there. And good Lord! What's Hermione about? They were so close to finally... you know. Ruddy Voldemort!

Up Next:

- Lupin's thoughts about Tonks, Ginny, and (gasp) Snape and Hermione!
- Harry and Hermione have a difference of opinion.
- Severus and Hermione talk about their recent "decision" to move their relationship along to the next level. Everyone makes plans for Christmas while time passes slightly, bringing them closer to the holidays.

The Truth

Chapter 22 of 42

Lupin finally gets a chance to show us how he feel about things. Severus tells Hermione the truth, mostly. Harry and Hermione make plans for the holidays.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Lupin left the castle as soon as he was able the next day. He went to the home he shared with Tonks and sat in the living area in wait for her to return. The hours ticked by as he sat in shock. So many things had occurred in the previous day and that morning that he couldn't think straight.

First and foremost on his mind was that his lover had been lying to him. This was something that he wouldn't have believed of her had someone told him. He'd detected her scent near and in the cave that Draco and Ginevra had inhabited. She was there at least twice...once some time earlier and once recently. There were signs all through the cave that it had been inhabited. She had reported it to no one. What was she trying to hide? Even worse, if she had gone there before they moved on to the abandoned little flat in Hogsmeade, then she knew where they were. Knew where to find Ginevra. Yes, Nymphadora had much explaining to do. The weeks of agony endured by both the Weasley family and he could have been spared had she spoken up. *Why keep it from me?* He was uncertain if their relationship could withstand such betrayal.

He loved her dearly. That was the truth. He'd decided to get over his fascination with Ginevra and build a life with her. When he'd learnt that the time at school hadn't lessened the young witch's feelings for him and that she was in a bad way over it, it brought out numerous feelings...the guilt, the fascination, and the regret. Her parents would never approve. There was an age difference. He was a fucking werewolf. Why would he be good for her? It had taken enough of Nymphadora's pleading to accept the idea that he and she truly could have a life together with her receiving no ill treatment or being burdened thanks to what he was. He would never have been able to convince himself that he was worthy of someone as young and impressionable as Ginevra. Not that she was more precious than Nymphadora, but his lover had been around and knew the ways of the world. She was an Auror. Of course she could handle herself. No, he would never have been worthy of Ginevra, especially in her family's eyes. No matter how much the Weasleys loved him, they never would have allowed anything more to develop even if he'd waited to voice his feelings until Ginevra was of age.

The second thing troubling him was none other than Dumbledore. He'd been used. Why couldn't he have been told that Snape and he had worked out a plan to trick Lucius Malfoy and the pair of runaways? It wasn't like he couldn't have simply acted angry with Snape. Dumbledore claimed that they'd needed nothing to influence him that night and needed a natural reaction, but it didn't seem like a good excuse to him. If something had gone wrong, he could have truly hurt someone. In fact, Severus had almost been gashed by his claws from what he could remember. If Malfoy hadn't issued that curse at that moment, he would have sliced into the man's face.

"Snape," he whispered bitterly, recalling the conversation they'd had earlier. He'd gone to see him just after Dumbledore had left not long after the sun had risen. The man looked worn and tired, as if he'd stayed up all night, but he'd claimed to want to talk to Lupin to be certain that he'd understood all that had gone on and would harbor no hard feelings. This alone was very odd for Severus. Always weak after a transformation, senses mixed, he hadn't felt like arguing. He'd already been reeling from Dumbledore's admission and minor betrayal...for that is what it felt like...that he cared not what Severus had to say. He simply wanted to get home and think of what his witch had done, think of where Ginevra might be, and wonder if she'd fallen in love with the young Malfoy.

Something about Severus had made him pause. He'd realized something that shocked him. The following conversation had left him gobsmacked. It had started when...

Remus said in a shocked voice, "You've been with Hermione!"

"What are you on about, Lupin?" Snape asked, closing the door he was about to exit and turning back to face him.

"I can smell her on your clothing. You've had a few glasses of whisky, yes, but the scent of Hermione is about you like a misty cloud."

Sneering, Snape stalked closer. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you are talking about. I, unlike you, had two other missions when we came back to the castle the first time."

"And one of them entailed seducing Hermione?" Lupin couldn't believe it.

Eyes narrowed and filled with malice, Snape smirked. "I do remember having an excellent conversation with Miss Granger, so it is likely that you might note that. I've not had the time to go to sleep just yet, coming back to the castle only an hour ago. I wanted to wait for dawn to have a word with you. Therefore, these are the same clothes."

"It was arousal, Severus," Lupin said angrily. "You were aroused by a student! A young girl!"

"Who's to say that I didn't have a bit of entertainment before I came back to the castle? Your accusation proves nothing, Lupin. I would appreciate it if you would stick to your own fantasies circling around an even younger student. One just returned to us."

Wanting to lunge at the man but not having the energy, he retorted, "You keep her out of this, Snape."

"Keep Hermione out of this," Snape said, teeth bared.

"It's not only your arousal I smell upon you. It's hers as well. There is no other scent upon you except the stink of You-Know-Who!" Lupin sighed and shook his head. "I shall speak of this with Dumbledore."

Suddenly, Snape pulled his wand from his pocket. "You will not cause problems for Hermione or me. Do you understand? I will not allow it, Lupin." He poked the wand against his neck. "Do you think I would partake in a relationship with an ex-student if the headmaster did not approve? If I didn't have good reason? Do not meddle in my affairs, and I shall not meddle in yours."

He pocketed his wand and stepped away. Remus couldn't believe it. Severus and Hermione. A couple. Hermione, apparently...most definitely...wanted Snape. "But the age difference. Do you not care?"

"Of course not." The Potions master arched an eyebrow and lowered his voice conspiratorially, saying, "Makes it all the more exciting, doesn't it?"

"But she is only a year or so older than Ginevra."

"Indeed," Snape said softly. "I do believe you may have lost your chance, however, as young Draco has taken a liking to her, and I do believe the feeling is reciprocated."

"If he's touched her..."

"He hasn't. Not just yet." Adjusting his robes, he looked down for a moment. "I suppose I should have yet another shower and change." His glinting eyes lifted and met Remus' for a long moment. "I wouldn't want anyone else to... sniff out where my allegiance truly is, now would I?"

"And where might that be, Snape? With yourself?"

He nodded. "And with Hermione of course." He smirked and bowed formally at Remus' open-mouthed expression. "I trust you will not tell anyone else. I'd hate to have to let slip a few things that I know."

"You know nothing."

"I know of a bit of snogging between you and Miss Weasley at our headquarters. I wonder what Molly would say of that?"

"How could you know?"

"That, dear Lupin, is my business. Do have a good day." Without allowing him to say anything, Snape tread from the room quickly.

Confusion rooted in Remus' mind. Dumbledore approves of Severus and Hermione. Well, Snape did say that she was his ex-student, so he knew there would be no retaliation from any school officials. She was no longer a student in his class. Perhaps that gained the headmaster's approval. He wondered who else knew of this? Would those that didn't know approve after it came out? What did he mean by having a reason to be with her? He knew she wasn't pregnant or hadn't been the last he'd been around her. Something was afoot here. He dared not meddle in it for fear of the man telling the Weasleys about the one time that he'd allowed his guard down with the girl.

He supposed that what was between them was their business, but he hated to see a girl like Hermione getting mixed up with someone like Snape. Dumbledore trusted him and that was good enough for him, but sometimes Snape just seemed to be on the other side by his words, deeds, and mannerisms. When he'd briefly thought him to have betrayed them all to Lucius Malfoy the previous night, it seemed to fit, seemed as though he'd known it all along.

Shaking his head, he looked over to the mantle and saw the picture that he and Tonks had taken at a Ministry party. They were dancing about and kissing, each happily oblivious to all else. "I do love you," he said to the girl in the photograph. Then he thought of the young redhead that had bewitched him, touched his soul, and called to him like no other. Was Snape right? Did Draco Malfoy care for her? How did she feel for him? As far as he could tell, there had been no sexual release of any kind in the cave. If the boy truly cared enough to not take advantage of her and to protect her, even against Snape...at this Remus chuckled...then maybe he should back away gracefully.

If he talked to Ginevra now about his feelings, most of which he didn't understand, it would only confuse her. Why not let her be happy if she could be? Though the Malfoy name wasn't as reputable as it had been, the young boy could change that. He could use his money and name to give her the life she deserved. Lupin knew he could never give her those things. He would only hurt Nymphadora and everyone else if he talked to the girl about his feelings. Part of him wanted to roar with indignation. If Severus Snape could enter a relationship with someone Hermione's age, why couldn't he? Why shouldn't he be allowed to have some happiness too? All of his true friends had died before him, and he'd watched helplessly, unable to save them. Shouldn't he be able to have what he wanted for once?

His eyes were drawn to the mantle again. Their photograph was dancing to some slow rhythm, tightly pressed together. His head was on Nymphadora's shoulder, and she was looking at him with such adoration that he had to actually take a deep breath to calm himself. "I can't hurt her," he said aloud. More confused than ever, he put his head in his hands. He loved her, could see himself with her for as long as he lived, but part of him wanted to talk to the girl. He rose and made his way to his bed, decision made. He would see if Ginevra was happy with the way things were. He would see if her weeks with Malfoy had changed her feelings for him. If she was truly happy, he would concede and never speak of his feelings. It would take time, but he'd right his emotions. In fact, a suspicious part of him wondered if perhaps he was only mistaking his protectiveness of her for something more. Being uncertain, he should just keep quiet.

He would have a word with Nymphadora, however, on her part in things. He needed to know what she'd known and why she hadn't told him. It wasn't just that she hadn't told him of their location. She hadn't told her family or friends either. Molly and Arthur had taken her disappearance especially hard. It was only right that he find out exactly what she knew. He'd wait for the right time, watching her actions, and when he felt the time right, he'd ask her about her visits to the cave.

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"Well, it's about time you woke up," Harry said. "Look about last night..."

"I shouldn't have let your words get to me," Hermione said, shoving his map and his Invisibility Cloak into his hands.

"What were you doing with these in your room?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just making sure you didn't wander off, I suppose," she lied. "I think I'm going to call for lunch. I'm starved."

"You've missed breakfast and lunch since you've been having a lie in," Harry said. "Listen to me, Mione. I didn't mean to hurt you last night, but what I said about Snape makes sense. If I'd had a chance, I would have talked to Dumbledore about it. He hasn't been round just yet."

Hermione faced him. "We misunderstood things."

Shaking his head, he said, "Please don't deny what we heard. It's you that I'm looking out for here."

"Either we misunderstood things or Draco and Ginny did. Whichever case it may be, Severus is loyal to Dumbledore... and to me," she said softly.

Harry snorted. "Yeah?" He opened his map, whispered the spell to enable him to read it, and browsed through its pages. "Where is he then? Why is he not in his rooms?" He shoved the map at her.

"That's because," she began, turning the page, "he's here with Dumbledore."

"What?" Harry asked incredulously. He looked at it twice before asking, "How'd you know last night was a misunderstanding? Been to see him, have you?"

Hermione blushed guiltily. "Yes, if you must know, I did go to see him. I had to know for myself, so when I got up and saw him leaving McGonagall's office... Well, I knew all was well and went to him."

"I really think that you are making a mistake, Hermione. What say we talk to Dumbledore first?"

"No. Severus' word is good enough for me."

"Yeah? What really happened then?"

"Well, I don't know exactly, but he's going to tell me everything today when he has time. He had some other place to be last night, so I didn't get to... er... talk to him long." They hadn't really talked much, so it was true...sort of.

"Mischief managed," Harry said angrily. "You'll not be using *my* stuff to go off and see him! You could have asked. I've been worrying about you all morning, and it was for nothing. You just always have to have the answers."

"You're just jealous!" Hermione shot.

"Jealous?" Harry asked incredulously before laughing. "I don't care about Snape one bit! He can rot for all I care!"

"No, I mean you are jealous that I can see my lover, and you can't see yours," she taunted. "Jealous that Gabrielle is off with Ron and Pansy while you're landed here with me." She strode away and sat down. "It's not fair that you would ruin things for me just because you can't have your way!"

"Lover now, is he?"

"Oh, shut it, Harry. You know what I mean. You just don't want anyone to be able to get away with the things that you normally get away with!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked hotly.

"Well, you know how you get away with everything. You don't want someone else to do the same... unless you're right there with them." Hermione knew she sounded ridiculous, but she couldn't stop herself. She wanted to take out her frustration on Harry since he was the one to get her so worked up in the first place.

"Shove off, Hermione," Harry said, storming off into his room.

"Good grief," Hermione muttered. She felt like a fool. Harry had been her friend for years, and here she was having a go at him for voicing his opinion. If their roles were

reversed, she knew that she'd do the same thing...give her opinion on things. She always had in the past. She sighed in frustration, appetite gone. Truth be known, she'd been up most of the night worrying about Severus and checking the map every few minutes to see if he'd returned. When he finally had, he'd gone to his office for some time and then went off to see Lupin. Only after that did he return to his chambers and settle down. It was then that she'd fallen asleep.

No wonder she'd slept the day away. Not only had she been up worrying about him coming back to her, she'd been wishing that they'd had only a few more minutes and had been able to make love. What if something would have happened, causing him to never return? She would have never known what it was like to make love to him. She very much wanted to experience that. Her mind was whirling. She'd gone from being curious to not being ready to needing him.

Hermione was still embarrassed by what had passed between them the night before. What if he'd thought on it and thought her too naïve? She felt ridiculous for assuming he'd meant that she was burning him from within. Giggling, she summoned a house-elf and ordered tea and biscuits. There was no need for a full meal, as it would soon be time to eat again anyway. No, she needed time to think about how she would approach him in their next meeting. When he'd come to see her, how should she act? She could either act as if nothing had happened, bypassing any conversation of it, or she could simply tell him that she wished things had progressed further and make plans for something more.

She ate quickly and settled herself back to stare at the fire. What did he think of her? She'd seen the appreciation in his eyes when he'd gazed at her naked body. Hermione smiled to herself, feeling a blush grace her cheeks even though she was alone.

"I wonder," a silky voice began, sliding down her spine and causing it to tingle, "what would make you smile and blush in such a way."

Sitting up right quickly, Hermione looked up to see him towering over her. How had he done that? She hadn't heard him enter. "Hi," she said in embarrassment. It felt as if she'd been caught doing something naughty. Biting her lip, she lowered her eyes.

His hands moved down to grasp her arms and pull her up to stand before him. They slid down to her waist. Still she dared not look up at him. Being shy and acting embarrassed hadn't been one of the options she'd thought on. *Damn it! I'm going to ruin everything! Look at him. Look at him. Come on, Hermione. You can do it.*

"Look at me, Hermione."

Cheeks still flushed, her eyes rose to meet his. His eyes were dark and glinting, filled with a predatory gleam that set her heart racing. He'd looked upon her with desire before, but it was never anything like she was seeing in his eyes in that moment. Of their own volition, her hands moved up to clutch his shoulders. Ever so slowly his face lowered towards hers, eyes penetrating hers. He said, "Are you upset about last night?" His voice was a mere whisper, but it vibrated through her body nonetheless.

She swallowed and mustered her courage. "Only that you had to leave before..." She couldn't voice it, but at that moment, his eyes narrowed slightly, as if appraising her. Then his mouth crushed hers in a searing kiss. Teasing her deeply and stealing her breath away, his kiss left her dizzy, and when he gathered her to him, resting his chin atop her head, she said, "I still want to be with you. I regret not doing so."

"No regrets, Hermione. Our time will come." He pulled back to look down into her eyes. "The next time I have you truly alone, I will take you."

"Where to?" she asked curiously. He threw his head back and laughed unlike she'd ever heard him laugh before. It was beautiful. She hadn't imagined he could laugh so richly, so deeply. It was... horrifying. It was then that she realized her folly. "Shite," she muttered, feeling mortified and trying to pull away from him completely. He must think her an idiot.

Severus pulled her back to him, turned, and sat with her on his lap. In a silky seductive voice, he said, "I'm going to take you to my bed, show you pleasure unlike I've given you before, and take you to a place we've never been to together." He kissed her cheek and moved back to whisper in her ear. "Having been so close to having you, you're all I can think of. Just knowing that I was several inches away from being completely buried within you sets my blood to boil." He blew into her ear and then said, "I can still feel your wet heat calling to me, begging me to slowly sink in."

Hermione involuntarily leaned more into him and closed her eyes, imagining the things of which he spoke. She could feel his hard length twitching beneath her arse and knew that he wanted her even then. In return, she realized she wanted him just as much. She could feel her arousal building, body suddenly warming with his nearness. It was as if his presence consumed her or threatened to set her afire.

"Would you like that?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she hissed in answer, boldly rubbing her bottom against his groin and bringing her lips to kiss his neck. "I wish I'd not wasted all that time we had together at your house."

Eyes closed, head resting back, he corrected, "Our house, and that time was not wasted. You weren't ready. Now that you are, it will only be better for us."

"H-Harry won't let me use his cloak again. He was angry I took it without asking," she said. "How will I come to you? We can't be together here. Not like that."

His head popped up, and his eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't want to owe Potter for anything anyway. You stay in these rooms. No wandering about the halls. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, but..."

"No, Hermione, I am serious." He brushed his lips against hers. "We will find a way, and when the time comes for us, I can promise you that you will never regret it."

She blushed slightly. "I don't regret last night or any of the things we've done together."

"I'm glad," he said. "Why were you embarrassed?"

"Well, I thought you'd think that I was too innocent for you, and then just now when I said... well, you get the idea."

He smirked slightly and pushed her hair from her face. "I believe I've taken your innocence already."

"You know what I mean."

"I do," he said with a slight nod. "It's just a new step in our relationship. Soon enough, you'll be comfortable enough with me and with the things we will do together." He lowered his voice. "And make no mistake, Hermione, there are many things we will be doing together. There are so many things that I will teach you and explore with you."

Knowing that if this talk kept up, Harry would walk out and catch them in a snog, she changed the subject. "Now, Severus, would you tell me what went on last night?"

"Certainly," he said, giving her a final kiss before moving her to sit next to him.

A quiet click on Harry's door told them that they were not alone. "You're here, are you?" Harry asked, moving to sit at the table.

"I am certain that you can see for yourself that I am indeed here, Potter," Severus said snidely. "If you don't mind, we were having a private conversation."

"These are my rooms as well, Snape. I've a right to use them as I wish." He opened a book and looked down at it. After a few moments, he looked up. "Look, if it's that private, put a Silencing Charm up. I'll try not to look."

"It's about last night," Hermione offered, hoping Severus would let Harry hear it.

Harry shrugged. "So what."

"So? But you should listen to what he has to say. *You* were so quick to believe Draco about him being a traitor. Why not hear his side?" Hermione retorted hotly.

"I don't remember inviting him to hear my side," Severus interjected.

"What's wrong, Snape? Don't want to give your side while I'm listening in case Dumbledore tells me something contradicting? Something that makes you seem less the hero to Hermione?"

Snarling, Severus said, "Come sit over here, boy, and listen if you will. However, I will not be badgered by your questions. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry nodded. Quickly moving to sit in the chair across from them, Harry listened to Snape's story. It went along with the very little they'd heard from Malfoy, and he had to admit to himself that it had worked well. They'd found the missing pair, captured Death Eaters, and forced Lucius Malfoy to help them.

"Are Draco and Ginny at headquarters or still here?"

"They have been brought to Grimmauld Place," Snape replied sourly. "For how long, I don't know. I suppose there or here would be the best place for them."

"Is Lupin all right?"

"Didn't I say no questions, Potter?"

"Right then," Harry said.

"Not that it's any of your concern, I suppose he'll live to become a werewolf again." Snape stood. "I have to show a presence in the Great Hall this evening, as I've missed the first two meals. The students may wonder why I would miss all three." This was directed to Hermione.

Harry bounced up and went to his room, claiming the need to use the loo in order to give them privacy. As much as he hated to admit it, Snape and Hermione seemed all right together. He shook his head. She was so young though. How did she know she wanted to be landed with his sort for the rest of her life? He looked into the mirror on his wardrobe. "How do I know that I want to be landed with Gabrielle?" he asked himself quietly. He realized that he didn't know for certain, but he'd like to give it a try. That was likely how Hermione felt about Snape. If and when they finally did break apart, he'd be there for her to pick up the pieces. He and Ron would both be there. Always. Although, if they remained together... nah, surely they wouldn't. He shrugged. Time would tell.

After he felt enough time passed, he ventured out of his room to catch Hermione going into hers. "Mione?" he called to stop her. She turned to face him uncertainly. "Look, about earlier, I'm sorry. If you want to use my cloak, you need only let me know." When she smiled, he added, "The map as well."

Surprising him, she padded over to him and threw her arms about him for a fierce hug. "Thank you, Harry. You'll never know what it meant to me that you came out to talk with us even though you were angry and felt him untrustworthy." She kissed his cheek and went to her room. Feeling proud that he'd made her happy, he puffed out his chest and walked back to the table to read the latest book about Quidditch that Professor Dumbledore had brought him. He figured he would be about sometime soon to talk to him, so he might as well get comfortable while waiting.

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Hermione couldn't believe how quickly the days passed. Christmas was right around the corner. The students would be leaving the castle the next day. She hoped that she and Severus would have time alone over the holidays. Not having his classes would enable him to spend more time with her, but with Harry about, it wasn't really any private time. They'd asked to visit their friends, but the headmaster was still undecided.

Even though she'd told Severus that Harry didn't mind if she used his cloak, he wouldn't allow her to come to him. Each night, however, he'd come to her after the evening meal to read and sit with her. Some nights Harry would talk with them, and some nights even Dumbledore would happen by for a visit. The more the headmaster saw them together, the more accepting he seemed of their relationship. There were still things that Severus was keeping from her. She could see it in his eyes or hear it when he nearly slipped and told her things. The whispered exchanges between the headmaster and her wizard did not go unnoticed by her.

"You've got a letter," Harry said, drawing her from her thoughts. "Two." He tossed both to her.

"Thanks," she said, opening the first. "It's from Mum. Oh, blast. She's really disappointed that I won't be able to go home for the holidays."

"What excuse did you give her?"

"Told her I had lots of preparing to do for my N.E.W.T.s. It's sort of true. I do plan on making my outlines and then revising them."

Harry looked at her incredulously. "Well, I'm not doing anything. Not yet. There's still time for that. It's not like we really have homework or classes. If anyone had told me that my seventh year would be so easy, I'd have never believed it."

"I know. I hated giving up Head Girl, but I think this," she gestured around them, "is more important than some school title that won't really make a difference in the real world."

"Thanks, Hermione. I know how much that meant to you," Harry said. "What's that other letter?"

"Oh, good grief! It's from Fleur. It's actually for the both of us. We are cordially invited to a Christmas party at headquarters."

"Well, what did she send that for? Aren't we going to be there anyway?"

"You know how she is. Probably just trying to make it all the more... fun, I suppose. That or trying to take charge," Hermione said, giggling slightly.

"Yeah, real fun. With her and Bill both there watching over Gabrielle, I'll not have a moment alone with her at all," Harry grouched. "The last time I saw her... well, you know how it was. She was in bed sick most of the day."

"*Did* Dumbledore say that we could go? I thought he was undecided on it."

Harry slapped his forehead. "I forgot to tell you. Last night, after you'd gone to bed, he came here and said that we could spend all the holidays there. He is going to go with us, needing to stay near me, but he can't be there all the time. So... well, he's invited Snape to come, but he said that he wasn't given an answer yet."

"Really?" Hermione asked, leaning forward. "Oh, I hope Severus agrees. I could really do with getting out of this room, and even though we wouldn't really be together, we'd still be together. Know what I mean?"

"Uh-huh," Harry said, laughing lightly. "Talk to him. Who knows? Maybe you two can have a bit of privacy."

"I doubt it. Everyone will be sharing rooms!"

Harry grinned. "Maybe you could ask to share with Gabrielle. During the night, I could use my cloak to slip off to your room. You can then use it to slip off to Snape's after I get there. A few hours later, we could switch back. Eh?"

Hermione smiled wickedly. "Harry, you just might be onto something! I will definitely talk to Severus. When are we leaving?"

"Brilliant! Tomorrow after the students at some point, I guess. He never really said."

"Excellent," she replied, scurrying off to her room to pack. Oh, she'd convince him to join them. She'd let him know that they'd finally have a bit of time together. Alone.

Southern's Notes: The next couple of chapters will be all about the Christmas holidays. I'm smiling as I write this. I've some fun stuff planned. We'll catch up with everyone involved and see how things are going. Putting all those people together for the holidays should prove an interesting way to go about it.

So... Lupin...confusing enough for you? Poor guy. He's so confused. He'll be all right though. More on him soon. Harry and Hermione do need to get out of those chambers before they go mental or nag each other to death. I'm the same way and get restless at times (like right now, as I'm writing this while my Internet is still down).

More up in a few days. I need to send the next part to my beta. I had to work through the second part of it, wanting to change our couple's coupling about a little. I decided to push it back to the next one.

Holiday: Part 1

Chapter 23 of 42

Hermione has plans for the holidays, but will Severus agree? Will she find herself alone? Remus speaks with Ginevra.
Pansy has something to say to Hermione.

Severus frowned. "I do not wish to go to headquarters for my holiday break. I enjoy the silence about the castle." He shook his head when her lip pouted. "Hermione, you can stay here. Tell Potter to go on without you." He looked over his shoulder to see if the boy was still in his room and lowered his voice. "I daresay, it would be much more enjoyable for us if you would stay here alone."

"I would love that, Severus, but Harry can't go unless I go with him. We have to remain together. That's what Dumbledore said!" Hermione retorted in annoyance. "If you come under the pretense of chaperoning, at least we'll get to spend *some* time together."

"Yes, lots of time, I'm certain," he said sarcastically. "There will be a dozen Weasleys and no telling who else! We'll not have *any* time alone." Damn Potter always had to ruin things. If she wasn't landed in confinement with the boy, they could have spent the holidays together. He'd tried to convince the headmaster to allow her to go to his home with him, but the man wouldn't hear of it, insisting people would question her whereabouts.

"Er... well, you see..." She didn't know how to put her next suggestion, knowing he'd not like any idea of Harry's.

"Go on," he said, crossing his arms and glaring down at her.

"I was thinking that I could share a room with Gabrielle."

Face contorted in annoyance, he questioned, "And this means what to me?"

"It means that Harry can come see her during the night, and I can borrow his Invisibility Cloak to slip off to your room," she blurted quickly.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Where would you tell this girl you were going whilst Potter visited?"

"To see you," she said without thinking. "Oh... to the library?"

"What if she mentions it to someone else? It's too risky. We'll get caught."

"Why do you have to be so stubborn? I just want you around me at least, even if I can't slip into your room or accidentally bump into you out in the wooded area near the brook."

"It's the thought of being in that house with all of the others and wasting my time for nothing."

"Nothing?" she asked shrilly.

Severus realized his mistake. "You know what I mean, Hermione."

Sniffing, she nodded. "I'm disappointed, but you know what? I'm going. Stay here in the castle and enjoy the holidays alone, Severus. That's your choice. I'll not ruin Harry's holiday."

"I apologize," he said, uncrossing his arms. "I meant that I wouldn't want to go to headquarters for the entire holiday and not be able to have you... alone."

"But you'd still be able to see me. Doesn't that mean anything?"

He sighed. "Yes, it does, but it's not the same."

"Fine," she said irritably.

"Don't be that way."

"Right. I won't." She shrugged. "Happy Christmas then. We leave shortly."

"I don't have to put up with your insufferable, childish attitude," he said. "If you can't see things from my perspective, then you've not matured as much as I'd thought. I am disappointed in you." He turned on his heel and strode away, leaving her there gaping. He nearly turned back to admit that he was being insensitive, but he couldn't. If he gave in to her every whim, she would think that he would always give in. There were some things that would happen at some point, and only he would be making any decisions about them. She would have to accept that.

Severus wondered, though, if perhaps he was being too stubborn with this. He could have spent time with her, albeit not private time. "No," he said bitterly. "I'll not be landed with Potter and his groupies for the holidays."

~~~~~  
Hermione smiled at Gabrielle. "I appreciate you taking me in," she said.

"Ginevra seems upset," she said, shrugging. "Eet doesn't matter to me."

Smirking, Hermione said, "No, I suppose not. Not with Harry coming to visit with you after hours, eh?" It was easy to keep up false cheer with Gabrielle because the girl couldn't read her very well, not being her friend all that long.

"Yes," Gabrielle said simply.

Harry poked his head in and extended a hand to her. "Gabby, want to come watch me have a game with Ron?" The girl quickly agreed and took his hand, not looking back at Hermione until Harry spoke to her. "Want to come, Mione?"

"No, thanks. I'll unpack my things and go down to pick a book to read."

He nodded. "All right. If you change your mind, come on up."

She smiled. "Sure."

After she was alone, she sat on the bed and cried softly. Why couldn't Severus have come? Ron had Pansy. Harry had Gabby. Ginny had Draco. She had no one. It was completely obvious that he didn't care for her as much as she cared for him. She would have been completely satisfied to only see him at meals or whilst reading quietly. In her mind, she would have at least been with him. He refused to come if they wouldn't be able to have a shag. *Arsehole!* she thought bitterly. She could see his point, but what would it have hurt him to come for at least a few days?

She decided to write a letter to him. It was time that she said some things to him without him being able to override her or distract her. If he didn't like it and chose to end things, then so be it, but she would be heard.

*Severus,*

*I've decided to write to you and let you know how I feel about things. I really would have liked for you to come with us here. I think that we have a one-sided relationship, and I don't like it. Honestly! It wouldn't have killed you to spend some time with me. It would have made me happy. I think that should have been motivation enough. I can't always give and never receive. That's not how a relationship works.*

*Maybe we should take a step back and reevaluate things before moving on to anything further. Your excuses for not coming here aren't good enough! We could have made love for the first time. You're simply being stubborn. I trust the holiday break will be long enough for you to think about this. I will be doing the same.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

She quickly read the short note over. "That should make him think things over." She felt guilty about sending him something so wretched before Christmas, but with how his attitude had been, it made them even. She was going to have a miserable Christmas now that he'd rejected her. How dare he say that he was disappointed in her and call her immature simply because she'd wanted him to spend time with her? *I understand his point, but I would have went through a holiday with people that I didn't like to be with him or to have just some time in his presence.*

Before she could change her mind, she went to retrieve Hedwig from the room that Harry was sharing with Ron. "I need you to deliver this letter to Professor Snape at Hogwarts. All right, girl?"

The owl seemed to hoot as if she understood. Hermione turned to leave the room after securing the letter to her leg and bumped into Pansy.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked, eyes narrowed.

"Oh, er... I needed to borrow Harry's owl," she said, nodded to the owl clutching to her finger.

Pansy crossed her arms. "I saw you sneak in here with a parchment. I thought you might have been hiding a letter for Ron, trying to get him back."

"Oh, no, of course not," Hermione said, shocked. "It's for my... boyfriend," she lied. "Nobody else knows that I have one, but I do. So you needn't worry about me trying anything with Ron!"

"Boyfriend?" Pansy asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"You are such a liar, Hermione," Pansy spat hatefully. "You have nobody. Maybe you're in here to send an owl, probably about schoolwork, but it could be that you're hoping to run into Ron."

"I'm not, Pansy," Hermione hissed indignantly. "I really am sending this to my lover. Just because I don't apply loads of make-up or prance around in revealing clothing, doesn't mean that someone hasn't found me attractive enough to date."

"Is that so?" Pansy asked, eyebrow arched, arms crossed.

"Yes."

"Prove to me that you wrote that to your lover."

Hermione panicked. She couldn't show Pansy the entire letter, or she would know to whom it was written. "I can't show you this letter, Pansy. I don't want anyone to know about my boyfriend."

"Because you are lying, and if you are lying, then you must have plans to take Ron back from me," Pansy accused. "We're really happy, Granger. We don't need you coming here and messing things up, trying to get him to go back to you. You should have fought for him!"

"I didn't fight for him because I didn't want him any longer. I wouldn't want a cheater!" Hermione yelled. "You're worried that since he cheated on me, he'll do the same to you, aren't you?"

"Yes," Pansy admitted. "Just leave us alone."

Hermione took the rolled up parchment from Hedwig's leg. She broke the seal and unrolled it slightly. "Look, Pansy," she offered, holding the paper for her to see. Only a few words were revealed.

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

"If I was writing to anyone other than a lover would I sign it like this?" she asked, hoping the girl would be put at ease. The last thing she wanted was Ron. Her holiday was going to be lonely enough without having the house in an uproar over an argument between her and Pansy.

Pansy eyed the letter, then looked to Hedwig, and then, she brought her wide-eyes to Hermione. "You're serious, aren't you? He's your lover." She nodded to the parchment. "The one you're sending this to?"

"He is," Hermione said evenly, hoping her sincerity would show through.

"When I saw you together, I thought it odd that he looked at you with... affection and opted to remain in your company. I never would have imagined that..."

"What are you on about? He's not anyone you know!" Hermione interrupted, hoping that Pansy hadn't truly guessed.

"It's Professor Snape," the girl said, dashing Hermione's hopes. "He's your lover. He's the one that has been keeping watch over you. You've... fallen for him."

"Pansy, no, it's not like that. Really..."

After a brief silence, Pansy asked, "You truly don't want Ron?"

"I don't."

"I heard you tell Hedwig where to bring the letter. That's how I knew it was he that you were owing, and when I saw the way you signed the letter, it all clicked." Pansy sat on the nearest bed, shock evident on her face.

"Please, don't say anything. No one can know," Hermione pleaded.

There was a glint in the other girl's eyes for a moment before she smiled and extended a hand. "I think we can finally move on from what happened with us, Hermione," she said.

Smiling, Hermione took her hand. "Severus did say that you would remain silent if you did find out. I really appreciate it."

"Trust me, Gr...er...Hermione, this is for me as much as it is for you. Knowing that I don't have to worry about you cozying up to Ron makes me feel more secure. I think we can learn to be friends though, honestly," Pansy said, smiling again.

Hermione noticed that for the first time, Pansy's entire expression seemed happy and sincere. She truly wanted to be friends. "Fair enough. I've got to send this off. Hedwig looks irritated." She turned to the owl. "Come along. I've a nice treat for you!"

"Wait," Pansy said. "There is one thing that you can do for me."

"What's that?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Ron's sister, she doesn't like me," she blurted. "I'd like to try to make amends. I think it's in honor of you that she doesn't give in and befriend me. That or my past with Draco. If you could put in a word to her and maybe get Potter to put in a word with Ron to get him talking to Draco, things could finally be better around here. It's been miserable."

Hermione nodded and left the room. Severus did have a point. Being together might queue others in on what was going on between them. Perhaps she shouldn't send the letter. *No, I have to send it. I have to tell him how I feel.*

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Severus looked at the fire and frowned as Hermione's parchment began burning. The little minx had written him a letter the day before to try to guilt him into joining her at headquarters for the holidays. *Well, she'll be sorely disappointed, as I don't intend to go. Her whinging changes nothing* he thought in annoyance. His mood darkened as he thought of her words again.

"She'll not force me into going by pretending to want to rethink our relationship. She'll be fine," he said aloud, reassuring himself.

He moved to his desk to continue working on his classes' papers. Not having anything else to do, he worked well into the night before his back ached and demanded that he get up and move about. He donned his cloak and made his way out into the corridors to happen upon any unsuspecting students that might be about after curfew.

It wasn't long before he found his way up to the Astronomy Tower and was looking out into the distance, wind whipping his hair and clothing wildly. Two students came out and began talking. They didn't notice that he was there with them, not even five feet away. They were both from the Ravenclaw House: Stewart Ackerley and Orla Quirke.

"Look," Ackerley said, pointing to the sky. "I told you the stars wouldn't be out."

"It doesn't matter," Quirke said. "I just wanted to have a walk with you without everyone looking at us."

"We'll be in trouble if Snape catches us," the boy said. "I don't want to get detention, you know!"

The girl crossed her arms and pouted. This stopped Severus from saying anything, as he'd planned. She reminded him of Hermione. Her appearance was nothing like his witch's, but her expression and body language were just like hers. He waited a moment to see what she'd say.

"Wouldn't the detention be worth it, Stew? This might be the last chance we have alone, being that the other three are always trying to tag along." She moved closer. "Happy Christmas."

Just when Severus realized that they were going to kiss, he stepped from the shadows. "How touching," he said in a low voice, looking up to the sky, purposely ignoring them. "Get yourselves back down to your common room. Do not let me catch you out after curfew for the rest of the holiday, or you shall suffer more than a detention."

The two students scurried away, and it was only then that he realized that he'd not even taken points from them. "What the fucking hell is wrong with me?" he asked aloud. He knew precisely what had happened. The girl had said and acted like Hermione. Something of what she said had been more or less what Hermione's letter had said.

Could he live through the holidays with people he hated? For her? Was it important to him to see that she was happy? Yes, he wanted her happy, but he couldn't be with Potter and the others. Why was he being so stubborn about it? He had to put up with Potter's meddling each day already. Was a little privacy too much to ask? With the castle being nearly vacant for the holidays, he could have spirited her off to his chambers for some privacy, but she wouldn't even hear of it. She didn't want to ruin *Potter's* holiday. So be it. No damn letter would force him into changing his mind. She was bluffing. She was simply trying to manipulate him into going to her, thinking he couldn't be without her.

So what if she told me that she loves me? Severus paused mid stride. It wasn't often that he thought of those words. How does she know what love is? She's too young, and they hadn't been in a relationship long enough to feel love. Lust? Most definitely. Caring? Yes. Possessiveness? Damn right. Love? No. Not now. If ever.

Feeling troubled, he made his way back to his personal chambers. "Do I love her?" he asked his reflection in the mirror as he pulled his cloak off. He felt deeply for her, but it couldn't be defined as love. Perhaps one day. "I will NOT be goaded into going to Grimmauld Place!" he yelled at the mirror, flinching at the sight.

"Why would she love me?" he asked suddenly. "What have I to truly offer her? Am I simply a Weasley replacement?" He shook his head, a small smirk playing about his lips. "No, she does want me." It was true that she'd agreed to move in with him after she graduated. They would share a home, and she could work wherever she'd like. There was never any discussion of marriage, nor did she seem to want that. The last time she'd been in his bed, she had been ready to accept him within her body.

If he would go to see her over the holidays, he could... "No!" he said firmly, pulling the rest of his clothing off and moving towards the bed. "I've made my decision."

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Ginny smiled as Hermione left to go back up to the house. For some reason, she'd wanted to talk to her about Pansy Parkinson. Ginny could see Hermione's point, and she understood that she had moved on. It just seemed a pity. Ron and Hermione used to be crazy for each other. If that cow hadn't offered Ron something that Hermione hadn't been ready to give, they'd still be happy together.

Hermione did seem happy without Ron. Or she had. For the last two days, she'd been moping around a little, trying to smile when people were looking. Something was going on. She'd just tried to find out what it was, but her friend wouldn't say a word. For some reason though, it was important to Hermione that they all got along. She'd talked Harry into speaking with Ron about befriending Draco. Both boys had made a friendly gesture this morning. Draco proudly refused of course, until she spoke to him and told him that she wouldn't mind seeing them call a truce. They were inside making plans for an evening of drinking games. She was glad. It had given her time to speak with Hermione. She supposed she should go in and try to make nice with Pansy.

Pansy and Gabrielle had been attached to Ron and Harry like a couple of leeches. It was quite annoying. Ginny giggled suddenly. Hadn't she been the same with Draco? What gave her the right to judge? She wished that Hermione wouldn't be alone though. She'd been reading in the library late each night. Alone. That was about to change. George seemed to have a little interest in her when she mentioned Hermione's name earlier, so while they were having a night of drinks, she'd be certain to try to get those two together.

"You seem happy, Ginevra," a masculine voice said from behind.

She immediately tensed. "Remus," she said, turning to face him. "What are you doing here?" she asked, looking around him to see if Tonks was nearby.

"I stopped by and was told that you were out here. I thought we might have a word." Without invitation, he sat down beside her.

"What is there to talk about?" she asked, looking at him oddly. "You've been avoiding me for so long. What is there to say now?" She was beginning to get angry. How dare he come to her like this and attempt to confuse her? She'd made the decision to forget him. "Shouldn't you have your *girlfriend* tagging along? Keeping you on a leash in case you decide to talk with anyone else?"

Remus sighed. "I'd like a word without her around. Are you up to it?"

"All right, I'll talk to you privately," Ginny said reluctantly. "Although I'd like to point out that it's an option you never gave me. You should have just told me that you didn't want me."

"It was not that," he said softly, touching her shoulder for a moment. "I didn't know what I wanted. I thought I'd make a decision for the both of us. One that would be best for the both of us, our friends, and your family."

"That's wrong, and you know it!" she said heatedly.

"Ginevra, how do you think your parents would have felt, knowing I'd kissed their only daughter? Their young daughter?"

"They would have been angry since I'm still in school, but we could have waited until I was of age. I would have waited." She stood up, brushing off her clothing. "You didn't give me the chance to decide or even let me know how you felt." Her hands began to tremble. "Does this mean that you did feel something?"

Remus stood. "I was confused. I didn't know what to think about anything, so I ran away from it."

"To her."

"Yes, to her."

Ginny shrugged. "Well, you made your decision, and I've made mine."

"Have you?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

"Yes, I have," she said, stepping back. "I'm in a relationship with Draco now, and I don't regret that decision. *He* talked to me. *He* saved me. *He* didn't run from his feelings."

"Are you happy?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

He nodded. "All right. I wish you all the luck in the world." He turned to leave.

Ginny reached out and touched him on the shoulder. "Wait, Remus."

Turning to face her, he asked, "Yes?"

"Do you love her?"

"I do."

"Then, why are you here?"

"Because I love you as well," he admitted. "I was confused, but you've made the decision for the both of us. I'll respect that."

With a loud *pop*, he Disapparated away. "Oh my," she said shakily, gasping and dropping to her knees.

"Are you all right?" Draco asked.

She looked up through teary eyes to see his slightly scowling face and nodded. "Yeah."

He knelt down with her and pulled her into an embrace, voicing softening slightly, as he said, "I know that must have been hard for you."

"Did you hear it all?"

"Mostly," he admitted. "I couldn't just let some man be alone with my girl without finding out what he wanted." He smirked and wiped her dampened cheeks. "I'm glad that I heard."

"How so?"

"Well, I know where I stand, and while I can see that his words are bothering you, I know we can get through this together."

Ginny nodded. "Draco, I don't know what I'd have done with myself if you hadn't come along."

"Me either," he said, pulling her close.

She kissed him deeply and pulled away, eyeing him uncertainly. "I'd like to take a walk." She squeezed his body tightly. "I think our relationship is stronger now than ever, and maybe we should explore that."

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It had been nearly three days since she'd sent the owl to Severus, and he'd not replied to her. It was the night before Christmas, and she was alone. The Weasleys and Dumbledore had graciously allowed them to have a night of games and moderated drinking. The next night would be the true Christmas party that Fleur had sent out invitations to. *I'll be alone for this, for the Christmas meal, and for the real party.*

She looked over to see Ginny whispering to George. She knew what she was about, and she didn't appreciate it one bit. She didn't want George encouraged. She was in love with Severus...even if the wanker didn't respond to her letter. Hermione frowned. What if he was really thinking things over? What if he decided that he didn't want her?

"What's wrong, Granger?" Pansy asked.

"Nothing," she said quietly. "I guess I just don't feel well."

"Not boy problems?" the other asked conspiratorially.

Hermione nodded. "I suppose. He didn't want to come. I wished that he would have though."

Pansy frowned. "I thought it might be something like that." She shrugged. "I guess he feels as though too many people are here." She looked around in disgust. "Look at everyone. It's like a festival or something."

"Damn," Hermione muttered under her breath, noting that George was coming towards them.

"Come on, Hermione. Ginny tells me you've been sad today. Let's get you some Christmas cheer," he said jovially, handing her a glass of something green.

"What is this?" she asked, sniffing it suspiciously.

"Slytherin's Winter, we've dubbed it," he said proudly, pointing back to Draco. "Quite minty, that. You'll like it."

Hermione said, "What the hell," and downed the shot quickly. She immediately clutched her throat. "It's freezing."

"Nothing like a cold Slytherin, eh?" he asked.

Pansy elbowed him. "Watch it."

"Oi!" he said, holding his side.

Hermione's throat finally thawed. "It's good. What have you got that's named for Gryffindor?"

"Gryffindor's Summer," he said proudly, pulling her forward. "If you like cinnamon, you'll enjoy this."

"Hand it over," she said, resolving to get lost in liquor. Why should she mope around because her wizard didn't love her enough to spend time with her?

After a couple of hours of testing their drinks and helping to concoct some of her own, George leaned over and asked in a slurred voice, "Want to go for a walk?"

Hermione was about to speak when Harry said, "No, she doesn't, thanks."

"Since when do you speak for her?" George asked, looking at Harry oddly.

"Since now," he said, pulling Hermione up.

"Hang on," George said, standing as well.

"George!" Pansy said suddenly, winking at Harry. "Come on back here! You didn't take up my challenge!"

"Challenge, eh?" he asked, turning away from Hermione and Harry to see what Pansy had to say.

"Come on," Harry said, pulling her towards the stairway.

"Thanks, Harry," she mumbled. "I think I do need a little sleep. I'm quite pissed."

"Yeah, well, you'd better sober up quick," he said, urging her forward, both ignoring the painting's screams.

Hermione didn't say anything. She wondered why he would lecture her about her drinking when he'd been doing the same thing. Suddenly, they were in the loo. He ran some water and began splashing some on her face.

"Try to sober up," he said firmly. "I'll be right back." He paused. "And brush your teeth."

Before she could retort angrily, he closed the door. "How dare he say something like that to me? As if I don't brush them! My parents are dentists, damn it!"

She splashed her face, brushed her teeth, and pulled her hair up in an elastic. The door opened, and Harry appeared again with his Invisibility Cloak.

"Take this." Harry looked at her oddly. "You still smell like liquor. Take a shower."

"What? Why are you telling me these things?"

He threw his cloak down and shoved her towards the shower. "Hermione, I was trying to sneak upstairs with Gabrielle, and I saw a great black bat ascending the stairs," he said cheekily.

"So?" Oh! Could he mean...?

"So he's in the last room at the end of the hall on the third floor. I thought you might want to know before you made any mistakes."

"S-Severus? Here?" Her heart leapt. "He came!"

"He did," Harry said, nodding. "I don't know how he feels about you having a few drinks and getting pissed. That's why I brought you up here first. Take my cloak. Wear it to your room when you come back down. I'll be there waiting." He moved back to the door. "And, Hermione?"

"Yes?" she asked, still shocked that he'd come for her. In just a few moments, she'd be with him. In private.

"Gabrielle and I will cover for you. Don't worry."

"Thank you, Harry. I appreciate this."

"Anytime," he said, smiling. "Happy Christmas, Hermione."

"You, too, Harry."

When the door closed behind him, she quickly discarded her clothing and stepped into the shower to wash and hoped the spray would help to sober her up. She wanted to remember everything about her first experience of making love with him. She didn't want it to be marred by having had too much to drink. She dried herself, and instead of putting on her clothing again, she simply put her soiled clothes into the basket for the wash, slipped the Invisibility Cloak around her, and made her way to the floor above.

I hope he appreciates this, she thought nervously. She was glad that he hadn't stayed below with the other adults in the kitchen. She was glad that Harry had seen him.

She quietly found her way to the room that had been designated as his. A quick flick of her wand saw the door unlocked, and she pushed it open. He seemed startled for only a moment before raising an eyebrow. He was clad only in his white linen shirt and trousers, obviously preparing himself for bed. She closed the door behind her and locked it magically before pulling the hood of the cloak from her head.

Hermione said the first thing that came to her mind. "You came for me."

Severus walked forward, unbuttoning his shirt as he did so. He stopped right in front of her, lowered his mouth to her ear, and whispered, "Not yet, Hermione, but I shall."

She felt her skin tingle as chills passed through her body. Nothing would keep her from being with him this night. She was willing to let the last few days go if he could. She'd noticed his little play on words, and she thought that it was time she made her own. "You'll not have to come alone," she said, only blushing slightly at her bold words. She allowed Harry's cloak to fall away from her completely to reveal her naked body and was satisfied with his sharp intake of breath.

Southern's Notes: The next chapter will have what we've all been waiting for...well, what most of us have been waiting for anyway. I'm sorry this took so long to get to you. There were just so many things. I had to rework the chapter and push some things back into the next one (avoids thrown objects). Another hurricane caused some damage around here. While I only lost my utilities for a short while, I had a leaky roof, thanks to the rain. And there are many other things I can name. Those are all gone now, and I'm ready to get back to work.

The next chapter is completely written (see my evil beta's note below!). I'll post that as soon as I can. Ready for it? Any other requests aside from smut?

Nay's notes: I held this chapter captive until I got the next one! Teehee. Sorry everyone!

Holiday: Part 2

Chapter 24 of 42

Hermione and Severus finally delve into the next phase of their relationship. Draco reveals his feelings.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Hermione couldn't believe that she'd bared herself to him in such a way. Perhaps the liquor had given her courage. His black eyes gazed at her from top to bottom and back up again before they found her eyes. She could see the appreciation and lust in his eyes.

Slipping the wand from his pocket, he pointed it towards the door, warding it further, keeping anyone from hearing them or being able to unlock the door with a simple charm. Nervously, she stood there as he dropped his wand, pulled away his shirt, and began unfastening his trousers. Unable to resist, she reached out to touch his chest, pale and wiry beneath her fingers. Noticing that he seemed to smile at her boldness, she softly glided her hand over to the smattering of dark hair in the center, nails raking his skin as she moved. Her reward was another sharp intake of breath.

In moments, his trousers and underpants were at his feet and kicked away. He stood there bared to her, wanting her to see him. Her eyes followed the line of hair down his chest and stomach to where it thickened and centered around his partially erected penis. Blushing, she looked away, only to look right back. It seemed to grow beneath her gaze. Emboldened, she moved her hand down to lightly touch it and felt it shift beneath her fingers.

Hermione's eyes lifted to meet his. She wanted to speak, but she was uncertain on what to say in a moment such as this. Severus lifted a hand to cup her cheek and guided her face to meet his, lips brushing against hers softly. Both of her hands moved to his shoulders as his other hand came up to cup her other cheek. Again, he brought his lips to hers, this time he parted his lips, and his tongue probed for entrance. She opened her mouth and eagerly deepened their kiss.

His hands slid down her body and encircled her waist, lifting her up against him. Startled slightly, she wrapped her legs about his waist instinctively and held onto his shoulders more tightly. He didn't allow her to break the kiss. He simply cupped her arse and moved with her back towards his bed. Once there, he placed her down, moved over her, and broke the kiss.

"Are you quite certain that this is what you want, Hermione?"

"It is."

Severus didn't reply. He lowered his head and kissed her neck, marking her lightly before moving down to taste the flesh of her breasts. Uncertain on what to do, Hermione closed her eyes, arched into his touches, and caressed his back and hair with her hands. When his tongue began flicking over one of her hardened nipples, she moaned.

"There you go. Relax. Feel," he said quickly, then returned to her breast. One hand steadied him over her body, but the other hand moved along her flesh, exploring all of her.

"God, Severus..." she said breathlessly after he nibbled and suckled the underneath of her breast.

"Open for me," he said, eyeing her expectantly.

She felt his hand wedging between her thighs and parted her legs. She wanted this. She wanted him to bring her to orgasm as he'd done before. She needed him, wanted him. Wanting to show him how she felt, she reached down to grasp his arse tightly. Hermione loved his arse and often wished that he didn't wear his robes, hiding it from her view.

"I want you," she breathed.

"Hermione," he ground out between clenched teeth. "If you keep that up, it'll be hard for me to resist my need. Let me make you feel good."

"I already do."

He simply raised an eyebrow and inserted a finger into her.

"Oh." That felt good.

"Exactly," he said silkily.

His head lowered to her stomach, and his tongue circled her flesh erotically, teeth occasionally nipping at her. Hermione began trembling. His thumb lightly caressed her clitoris with every few strokes of his fingers, now two inside of her. Stimulation and sensitivity to his touch were making her dizzy.

"Ow," she said when she felt another finger slide into her. Her internal muscles clamped around the digits uncomfortably.

"Don't fight it. Let me in," he whispered. "You're so wet already. Relax."

She mentally concentrated on relaxing her grip and allowed him to move them in and out of her more easily. With each push in, it felt as if he went further. His thumb began circling more often while he applied a little more pressure. It was then that she felt the first tiny wave, indicating that it wouldn't be long before that needed orgasmic feeling would come for her.

"Don't stop, please," she blurted, hands trying to weave their way into his hair.

He maneuvered slightly, and his tongue replaced his thumb. So many things went through her mind at that moment. It had been a couple of days since she'd trimmed and shaved. Was his face being prickled? What did he think of the way she tasted? What made this feel so good?

Stop, Hermione, she told herself firmly. Feel. Don't think. Don't ruin this.

As if in answer, her legs began flexing, and her feet dug into the bed. Nothing could have kept her body from arching into him or her hand from trying to push his face more firmly against her. "It's..." She couldn't speak. Her breaths began coming in pants, gasps, and moans. Finally, she could take no more, and the feeling overwhelmed her. "Severus... yessss!"

As she lay there with a befuddled mind, he began placing chaste kisses up her body, circling her nipples and then finding her mouth. "Kiss me," he ordered when she didn't open her mouth as his lips pressed against hers.

She tasted herself on his lips and realized that he likely enjoyed going low. Opening her eyes as he broke their kiss, she found him staring at *her's time*, his eyes seemed to convey to her. Hermione smiled, bracing herself with one hand on his shoulder, one on his back. She could feel his erection pressing against her for entrance. His hips were nudging against her, as if waiting for something.

Her legs parted a little more and hooked behind his thighs, giving him all the access he'd need. Without a word, he began sliding in easily. There was no barrier to stop him, and she was more than lubricated enough to aid his girth. Her internal muscles began closing against him.

"Shhh," he whispered, as if soothing a crying child. "Relax."

The grip released slightly, and he quickly slammed all the way in. "Ah," she said. He looked at her. She shook her head. "It's all right." He pulled nearly all the way out and pushed in again, hard and fast. "Oh!" she exclaimed this time. "Feels good." It was a different feeling than him having his fingers within her. It was a more solid, more pleasurable feeling...the pressure, the sensation of being filled, the friction when he moved, and so much more. She wanted him to go on.

His head dropped and rested on her shoulder. It was tilted enough so that she could feel and hear his breathing in her ear, enflaming her further. The man really had no idea how much his breathing in her ear turned her on. She brought her mouth to his shoulder and sucked hard, as he'd done to her, allowing her tongue and teeth to give him the same pleasure. Severus' strokes began hard and fast, and she couldn't keep up with him, though she did try. Just as she was feeling that maybe another climax would come for her, he groaned loudly and bit her shoulder roughly.

She yelped from the pain of the bite, barely noticing the spurt of hot fluid within her body. "So good," he was murmuring between quick kisses, obvious attempts to soothe the pain he'd inflicted. While a wave of accomplishment flooded her, she seemed lightly frustrated. Shouldn't she have done something more? Made him call out as she'd done for him? Shouldn't she have climaxed again? Hermione made to wiggle out from beneath him, but his body held her down.

"Don't," he said. He lifted his head to gaze down into her eyes. Her lips searched out his, and their tongues began dueling. His flaccid penis slipped out of her, but it didn't seem to worry him. Pulling away from her slightly, he said, "You belong to me now."

Cheekily, Hermione asked, "And you?"

"I need only you," he said, voice raspy. "Made for me," he said, suddenly fervent. He moved to hurriedly kiss her breasts and mark her flesh. In the next instant, she felt his erection being pushed back into her. It wasn't as firm as before, but with each torrid stroke, she could feel it strengthening, demanding to find release within her again.

Again? she thought dazedly. Hell, she'd thought that once per night was enough.

This time his strokes were less gentle and more frenzied. It was as if he was searching for something. He only stopped for a moment to move her legs, which had collapsed after their first coupling, about his waist. Each time he thrust into her, he nearly lifted her pelvis off the bed. One of his hands accompanied his movements, stimulating her when the grinding of his pelvis against hers would not. She arched and pushed her body against his, trying to meet his strokes.

She could feel that glorious feeling coming back for her again, and she knew that this time she would be allowed to grasp it and follow it into oblivion. Severus couldn't have been too far away, and after an undetermined amount of time passed, she felt his strokes change. Short, choppy, rough strokes that rubbed against her clitoris had her

screaming out his name for the second time that night. This time, however, she was pleased to hear him answer with the triumphant shout of her name.

Covered in sweat, he collapsed onto his elbows. "Mine," he said darkly before crushing his lips to hers. "Always mine."

Hermione reached up to wipe the dampened hairs from his face. "Yes," she agreed. "And you are mine."

Suddenly, he chuckled loudly and moved to lie next to her. "Come," he invited, opening his arms. She scrambled to be enclosed within his arms and allowed sleep to come for her after only a few minutes of listening to his heartbeat. *We finally did it! Twice! God but I love him,* she thought happily before drifting off to sleep.

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Draco couldn't believe his good fortune. He'd been accepted by the people he'd hated the most in previous years. Weasley! Granger! Potter! He knew that his family was still superior to the lot of them of course, but that didn't hinder his newfound happiness. So what if he'd fallen in love with a Weasley? She understood him. She didn't care about his money. She wanted *him!*

His father had always said that witches wanted money and a good name above all things. That was why he'd made a deal with Parkinson's father. She was a pureblood like him, and her family had money. It would have been a perfect match for the families, but Draco was happy to be free of her. She looked as though she belonged with Weasley.

Lip curling in disgust, he thought of Ronald. If that prat wouldn't be Ginevra's brother, Draco wouldn't bother trying to be on good terms with him. It had been a surprise when Scarhead and the Weasel had approached him to extend an olive branch. It was an even greater surprise when he'd found out that the Muddblood had sent them. He'd accepted... reluctantly...after Ginny requested that he befriend them. It felt odd to talk to Potter and not spew obscenities or threats, even after everything that had gone on.

Smirking in amusement, he thought of Ginny's older brothers, the twins. Those two weren't all that bad. He'd had a good time with them fixing drinks and talking about their upcoming items for their store. Her parents and Bill weren't so bad either. *Yeah, I'll do fine. As soon as this war rubbish is over, things will be better. My family name will be restored, and I can show Ginny how people should truly live. Fancy dinners. Parties. Fine clothes. The works. She deserves it all.*

Hoping that she'd enjoy his Christmas gift, jewelry of course, he turned over and tried to fall asleep. It was hard to sleep when his mind wandered to the previous day and the time he'd spent with Ginny.

He'd been furious when that werewolf had dared to show his face and asked to speak with her. Thinking quickly, he'd followed him outside and spied on them. He'd heard nearly every word that they'd said. Part of him had been angry for Ginny even allowing him to even get near her, but when he'd heard her tell Lupin that she had made her decision, he knew that there was no reason to be upset.

That had been the one thing that worried him. Lupin. He felt that if they crossed that hurdle, they could get through anything. After he'd shown himself and hugged her in an attempt to soothe her, he'd been surprised when her soft kisses became eager. He wasn't so thick as to turn down something freely offered to him. They'd gone off even further into the wooded area for more privacy, using a Warming Charm only once, and he'd shown her how he felt about her. He'd told her that he'd never felt that way for anyone else, and she'd admitted to the same. Her words flowed through his mind.

*I thought I'd felt every feeling that there was to feel, Draco, but each day with you brings something new. Thank you for standing by me.*

In a small moment of disappointment, he'd realized that she was not new to the ways of loving, but that had vanished almost immediately. Who was he to judge? He'd had other lovers as well. He didn't know when they'd be able to have time together again, but he'd wait for her. He'd let her decide when it was time again.

He wondered suddenly if Ginny's father was suspicious of the extent of their relationship. He'd been giving him a talk nearly everyday. Their last conversation had been odd. He'd been talking about spark plugs and some other Muggle rubbish. He'd been lost for most of it, but he'd feigned interest. After about an hour, the man had clapped him on the back saying that the moral to the story was something about him being a welcome part of their family and that he approved of their relationship. "I'll take care of her, sir," Draco had said to him. For some reason, everything seemed as if it were meant to be: his relationship with Ginevra, his father's capture, and even his stay with the Weasleys.

For a brief moment, Draco felt guilty. His mother was alone for Christmas. She would wake in the morning and have nobody. She likely thought his father to be dead, and she was likely worried about her son and wondering if he'd been killed as well. "She's strong. She'll survive," he reassured himself. "I'll make it up to her." With that, he fell into a fitful sleep.

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Severus propped himself up on one elbow to look down at his sleeping witch. Finally. He'd had her. She had been worth the wait. He could practically still feel the wet heat surrounding his cock as he pounded within. Breaking the hymen those weeks earlier had proved quite useful.

Hermione sighed in her sleep and mumbled something incoherent. Unable to resist, he lowered his mouth to press his lips against hers for a soft kiss. When she didn't move, he did it again. Her eyes fluttered open. "Good morning," he said silkily. "I trust you slept well?"

"Morning? What time is it?"

"It's not yet daybreak."

She stretched and smiled shyly. "Did... did you sleep well?"

"I did," he said, hand automatically moving to trace the curves of her breasts. "I am afraid we haven't the time for any other pleasurable activities. You'll need to get back to your room."

Grinning broadly, Hermione said, "Happy Christmas."

Severus gifted her with a rare smile. "It is indeed." He shifted to look over his shoulder. "Would you like your gifts now?"

She nodded and sat up, pulling the duvet up to cover her nakedness. Smirking, he stood without caring about his state of undress. "I was uncertain as to what you wanted. I hope these shall suffice."

He gave her a rolled up parchment and a small plainly wrapped box. Intrigued, she opened the parchment first. It was blank. She looked up to him questioningly. "I don't understand."

Turning away from her to retrieve his shirt and underpants, he said, "You wondered how I always know where you are. I told you it was a spell. You asked for me to even the field."

Hermione eyed the parchment suspiciously. "I see nothing."

Clothing on, he returned to her with his wand and hers. "Here," he said, handing the wand to her. "You'll need to activate it. Flick your wand at it like so." He demonstrated with his wand. "And simply state your name."

She flicked her wand and said, "Hermione Granger."

The parchment glowed a yellowish color for a moment and returned to its normal state. "Hold your palm over it and say, *Locus Severus*,' and tell me what you see."

"*Locus Severus*," she said eagerly. In an instant, there was writing on the parchment.

Third floor, bedroom at the end of the hall, number twelve, Grimmauld Place with Hermione Granger.

Eyes wide, she looked at him. "So this is how you always know?"

He nodded. "We're now even," he said quietly, hoping she would appreciate the magnitude of his gift. She could find him at any given moment whilst doing any given thing. "If you are not with me, it will give names of others that are, and sometimes it will even tell you how I feel."

"Severus, this is the best gift that you could have given me. Do you realize that this means you trust me completely? This proves to me that you do love me."

He held up his hand, not wanting to partake in such a conversation. "Hermione..."

"Shush," she said, putting her arms around him and squeezing tightly.

He could feel her soft breasts crushing against the fabric of his shirt. Arousal followed. Pushing her back slightly, he said, "Open your other gift." If he started making love to her at that moment, she'd never get back to her room in time for someone to not notice.

She quickly tore through the plain wrapping on the other gift and squealed in delight. "I love it!"

Severus had found a silver bracelet with moon designs engraved within. "The pendant. It reminded me of it, so I thought maybe..."

"It's perfect," she said, clasping it about her wrist. "I have the pendant in my room. I'll compare them when I go back in."

"Speaking of, you'd better get dressed and make your way back."

"Oh, no!" she said. "I haven't any clothes. I washed up before I came and just threw the cloak on. I can't put Harry's cloak on after... that."

Severus deftly cast a Cleaning Charm on her. "There. All tidied up."

She grinned. "It's going to be awkward still. I wasn't thinking last night when I came."

"Intoxicated then? Just as all the other brats were?"

"No," she said indignantly. "I sobered up!"

He smirked and shook his head in amusement. "I believe, dear Hermione, that you had a bit much to drink, and it gave you the nerve to come to me as you did. Dare you deny it?"

"Well, I might have still felt it slightly, but I would have come regardless. Are you angry that I had drinks with them?" she asked, worrying her lip suddenly.

"Of course not," he said, moving to the wardrobe. He found a gray shirt. "Here. Put this on at least." As she began to button the shirt, he said, "Things went well last night. Don't you think?"

She looked up, smiling. "Perfect. I hadn't imagined it to be like that or to feel so good."

Ego boosted, he said, "I admit that I am quite pleased." He pounced on her without thinking, claiming her mouth with his. Breathing ragged, he pulled away and said, "You'd better go before I haven't any restraint left."

"I have your gifts though! How can I slip them to you?" she asked.

"Bring them to me tonight... after you borrow Potter's Invisibility Cloak," he said, sounding as if it was what they'd planned all along.

"All right. I'll see you for breakfast."

"I'm off for a shower," he said and quickly pulled up his trousers and gathered a fresh set of clothing. When I open the door to go to the loo, you can make your way out. She simply smiled and disappeared beneath Potter's cloak. Severus caught himself before he called out to her. What had he wanted to say? Shrugging away the thought, he opened the door and gave her enough time to exit, pretending to be checking the doorknob over.

He quickly made his way to the bathroom, discarded his clothing, and began his shower. He leant against the wall remembering the night's events. "She's mine," he said aloud. He'd often said that before, but it had never been completely true. Not until he'd had her fully. Not for the first time, he found himself wishing that the feud between Potter and the Dark Lord would be over and done with, no matter who the victor. He wanted to get on with his life...especially now that he had someone to share his life with... and share his bed with of course.

Thinking of all those long nights they'd slept together and not consummated their relationship made him want to kick himself in the arse. She would have been fine had he pushed it, wouldn't she? She responded to his every caress eagerly. Each response the night before had been accepted appreciatively. Though she was not a practiced lover, their sex had far surpassed any that he'd ever had. It wasn't the naïve sway of her hips, her voice calling his name as he pleased her, or any other such triviality. No. He'd been the first to have her. He could teach her to do whatever he liked. Each new time they were together, she would learn new things, things he enjoyed and wanted.

There was something else, but he couldn't quite place it. It was something that also made their experience the best that he'd had. The feelings he held for her perhaps? Of course not. He'd felt that way... Never. Not for anyone. He dismissed these thoughts and began to wash away all evidence of their night together. Not even Lupin would be able to discern what had gone on, the nosy bastard.

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"I want to remind everyone about the gathering Fleur has arranged for this evening. Most of us will be here anyway, but some Order members will show. Hope you all don't mind," Bill said jovially, his wife beaming at his side.

"Dress your best," Fleur said, looking around at everyone.

Ron grimaced and quipped quietly, "Hope she doesn't expect me to put on any dress robes for this rubbish. Not like this is a real party anyway!"

"Ronald Weasley," Molly hissed quietly. "Behave yourself."

Hermione shook her head in amusement and looked around at the other occupants at the table. Severus was at the far corner speaking in hushed tones to the headmaster and occasionally Arthur Weasley. Draco and Ginny seemed to be having a quiet discussion, each blushing. The twins were trying to get Harry to go along with a prank on Gabrielle and Pansy. The two girls in question were in a deep discussion about the gifts they'd received.

Every now and then George would try to drag her into their conversation or have her join in the conspiracy. She refused each time. "Come on, Hermione. Lighten up!"

"It's Christmas," she said. "Don't prank anyone today!"

"Course not," Fred said.

"Honestly! As if we'd do such a thing," George agreed.

"Hmmpf," she said, crossing her arms. "I'll believe that when I see it." George winked and went back to speaking with the others. Hermione's eyes lifted and met Severus' from across the way. She didn't like how they shifted suspiciously between her and George. She hoped that he wouldn't think anything.

Harry and the twins rose. "Er... come on, everyone. Let's leave the old crowd to it."

Hermione didn't want to leave, but it would look strange if she remained behind. Disappointedly, she moved to follow them, still feeling her lover's eyes on her back. After that, the day crept on slowly, only granting her one chance to see Severus before the party.

She had been going up the stairs while he was coming down. "Pardon me, sir," she said, gazing at him with a small smile playing upon her lips.

"Watch where you are going, Miss Granger," he said, raising an eyebrow. "You nearly knocked me over."

"I apologize," she retorted quietly.

He whispered, "I shall consider giving you a detention."

Giggling, she brushed by him and went to the room she shared with Gabrielle. A thought occurred to her. She could slip upstairs and place Severus' gifts upon his bed. When he went up to change for the party, he'd see them and open them. She'd wanted to see his expression as he did so, but something told her that it might be better if she allowed him to be alone when he opened them.

She was able to complete her task with no one being the wiser. Deciding to get ready early, she went to the loo for a shower. Wanting to look good for him, she pulled up part of her hair away from her face, leaving her fringe and a few loose tendrils to hang about, framing it slightly. The rest of her hair flowed down her back in a mass of waves and curls. It wasn't often that she wore her hair in such a way, so she thought that it dressed her up a bit. She hoped he liked it.

Next, she chose the casual, pale blue dress that her mum had sent to her as a Christmas gift. It fit perfectly. She put on the pendant that Severus had given her weeks prior, adorned her wrist with the bracelet, and opted for dangling silver earrings. After feeling confident that she looked her best, she sprayed a light fragrance between her breasts and on her wrists. Ron had given it to her years before, but she'd not worn it often, not really being a perfume-wearing type. As she turned to leave, she remembered the other gift that Severus had given her. She quickly took it from her trunk and chanted the quick spell.

*In the study of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, speaking with Headmaster Dumbledore, feeling bored.*

Hermione giggled. This was the best gift that anyone could have given her, especially him. This had meant more to her than anything. He must truly love her, even though he was still too stubborn to admit it. Smiling, she put the parchment away and made her way below.

The next couple of hours were quite boring, but she was able to make eye contact with her lover now and again. He so easily scowled at her and ignored her that it felt like the night before had not happened.

"Oi! Hermione, up for a game of dares?" Fred asked.

She eyed him suspiciously. "No, I don't think so, thanks."

"Come on! Everyone else is playing. You don't want to be left out here, do you?" He looked around the room, filled with older Order members, and gave a mock shudder. He pulled her forward. "Got her," he told the others. "Let's go."

Helplessly, Hermione went into the next room with them. Ginny conveniently placed George next to her, much to her dismay. This was no good. She didn't want to lead the poor fellow on! "I really must insist on only watching. I don't trust the lot of you, and I won't play."

"Oh, join in, Granger," Draco said. "If I trust them enough to play, you can."

Sticking with her decision, Hermione declined to play and watched. The party wasn't all that bad, but she longed to be able to speak with her wizard. It didn't seem right to be in a house with him and not share a bed or lengthy conversations. A shouting voice broke into her thoughts.

"I dare George to kiss Hermione!" Ginny said brightly.

"What?" she asked incredulously. "I told you that I'm not playing."

George was already moving towards her. "She didn't say what kind, did she? Small one. On the cheek." Before Hermione could protest, he moved to place a small kiss upon her face. She turned to ward him off, causing his lips to collide clumsily with hers.

She backed away. "That's enough!" She rose and stomped from the room, through several others, and out into the winter night. It wasn't long before a hand spun her around. George.

She sighed and said, "Look, I'm sorry, but I don't like this. I don't feel that way. All right?"

"Neither do I. It's Ginny. She's been after me to talk to you and cheer you up. Truth is, I have my eye on someone else." He grinned wickedly. "She just doesn't know it yet!"

"Thanks, George. I'll have a talk with Gin."

"Fair enough. Now, come back in. You'll get ill out here if you stay too long with no cloak." Hermione followed George back inside, never noticing that someone else had followed them outside to watch.

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Severus opened the leather-bound book once more to a random page. Immediately, he heard Hermione's voice. "You've nothing planned for today. Would you like to add something?" it asked politely.

"Yes," he said in amusement.

"What would you like to add?"

"I want to make love to Hermione at noon."

"Noon appointment with Hermione. Topic: making love. Anything else, sir?"

"That will be all," he said and closed the book, placing it upon the nightstand.

She'd bought him a magical appointment book, and she'd then charmed it to have her voice. It was a very pleasing gift. He would simply have to make certain that nobody would be about when he opened it. Her other gifts had been of a more intimate nature, underpants and a warm dressing gown.

As if on cue, the door opened, revealing no one. It closed again with a soft snap. Severus pointed his wand at the door and warded it. She pulled Potter's cloak away from her, revealing her again naked body. He pulled his dressing gown over his head, revealing his nakedness and patted the bed beside him. She walked over to him, crawling towards him when she got to the bed.

"I missed you," she said. "Oh! Did you like your gifts?" she asked, nodding to the book next to the bed.

"I did," he said, pulling her to him for a quick kiss. "However, I've thought of nothing but your first gift all day."

"Which did you open first?"

He slid a hand down her body. "This one."

"What cheek," she said with a giggle.

He began nibbling on her neck and touching her breasts, loving the feel of them against his palms. Hermione's skin was soft to the touch and as smooth as fine silk. He could feast upon her creamy flesh without ever tiring of her. He reached behind her and cupped her arse roughly. "This is the only cheek I want to discuss."

Her hands began exploring his body, and she unflinchingly gripped his arse. "This cheek might also make a great conversation piece."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

Pushing her onto her back, he kissed her passionately, leaving her breathless. "Are you not tender today?"

"Only a little discomfort earlier. It seems all right now," she said honestly. Just as he positioned himself between her thighs, she asked, "Severus, what made you change your mind about coming? If it was my letter, I know it soun..."

"Enough for now," he said firmly. He'd not ever tell her that a conversation between two young Ravenclaw students had ultimately changed his mind about spending some of the holiday with her.

"But... oh!"

He cut her words short as he slid in completely and claimed her body once again.

Southern's Notes: I hope the EVENT wasn't a bummer for anyone. There was so much leading up to it, but I didn't want to make it too unrealistic or too perfect. Anyway, I hope it was worth the wait. If it seems that things will wind down now, that's not the case. I have a couple of other twists, and they'll hopefully keep you intrigued.

Cheers! Also, thanks to all who review. Your words encourage and guide me.

Suggestions? Requests?

Holiday: Part 3

Chapter 25 of 42

Narcissa finds out about Lucius' demise. Severus and Hermione become even closer. Lupin and Tonks have a discussion about Ginevra.

Disclaimer: It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

A big thanks goes to my lovely beta, Charmed_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter_Place.

Narcissa blankly looked from her sister's face to the slumped shoulders of her brother-in-law. "What do you mean? Dead?" No, she'd misheard something. Why was Bella saying such things?

"He was killed for crossing the Dark Lord, Cissy. He's gone." Bellatrix nodded to her husband. "Rabastan was also killed, though by the Dark Lord himself."

"But... no... Lucius is simply hiding away someplace safe. Severus would have told me had Lucius been killed," Narcissa said, hoping her words were correct.

Bellatrix stood, dark eyes glinting. "It was *Snape* that killed him. Yaxley and Crabbe are lost to us as well. We've captured a centaur, but he's only speaking to the Dark Lord."

"What do I care about a centaur?" Narcissa asked angrily, rising to face her sister. "My husband has always followed the Dark Lord. He would never have gone against him! Not unless..." Unless what? Unless he'd been certain he could get away with it?

Bellatrix scoffed. "Our Lord believes that he has, Cissy. It's done, and it was his will. I just thought you should know. Be glad you have not been bidden to join him in death." She turned to her husband. "Rodolphus, tell her."

He looked up, haunted eyes taking in Narcissa. "The Dark Lord told me that Snape killed him after tricking him into telling him some information. My brother and Yaxley were very close. It seemed that Yaxley was working with Lucius and the others on something that amounted to treason. My brother was killed for opposing Snape and not alerting our Lord of what he knew."

"So... Severus..." Narcissa sank back down. *No. He wouldn't have done it.*

"He is the reason for their deaths," Rodolphus said darkly. "Bastard. He shall pay."

"He will not be touched," Bellatrix said firmly. "He is favored and was only doing our Lord's will. You would have done the same. Any of his faithful followers would have." She squatted down and patted Narcissa's hands. "Take care, my sister. I'm sorry, but we cannot stay long. The Ministry may realize that we are here. I shall come again... soon."

Both vanished a moment later, leaving Narcissa alone. Breaking down, her body began to shake as she sobbed loudly. Lucius was gone. Her husband. Dead. Severus had done this to him! He'd always cared for Severus, treated him like family. Could Severus have not given him a chance? Was an order from a deranged leader more important than his friend's life? Draco adored Severus! Looked up to him! She had nearly slept with Severus already. He'd turned her down before they could go as far as she'd have liked, saying that it was respect for Lucius that kept him from having her. She'd even tried to get him to stay with her on his last visit. The visit when he'd assured her that he could help her son and try to help her husband.

He'd betrayed them all, betrayed her. There was nothing that she could do to hurt him. Severus Snape didn't care about much, including himself or his life. Somehow, she would make him pay for his treachery. Lucius would be avenged. She wiped the tears away from her cheeks. "Please let Draco be all right. Don't let Severus find him. He'll kill him if he's commanded to do so," she prayed.

How could Bella take things so casually? She and Lucius had always gotten on well with only a few arguments over things. Shaking her head, she realized that her sister would always be on the Dark Lord's side, no matter what. Perhaps Rodolphus would know of something that could be done that would avenge their lost loved ones. He didn't seem as accepting as Bella, and he'd vowed that Severus would pay. "I am certainly interested in helping," she said, stiffening her spine and raising her chin.

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Thinking about the conversation that she'd had with Severus, Hermione grinned. The man thought of everything. She'd been worried about not having any potion to protect against pregnancy, but he'd told her not to be concerned about it. It seemed that he'd slipped her a dose that lasted up to six months when they were sharing a home together. She'd never noticed anything odd about her drink either. Their conversation came back to her.

*"I thought it prudent to give you the potion and not upset you about it. If you will remember, you were nervous. I didn't want something else on your mind."*

*"But you gave me a potion without my consent! You can't just do things like that! You have to talk to me about them," Hermione said hotly. "Honestly, how would you like it if I slipped you a potion?"*

*"I would detect something in my drink that shouldn't be there," he said conceitedly. "It isn't my fault that you're simply mediocre in Potions."*

*"Mediocre in Potions! I'll have you know..." Her voice trailed away and laughter replaced her words.*

*He raised an eyebrow. "What, pray tell, is so amusing?"*

*"If I'm mediocre in Potions, then yes, I'd say it partially is your fault, having been my Potions professor."*

*Narrowing his eyes, he intoned darkly, "I shall have to punish you for that cheek, my dear."*

*"What can you do? Going to slip me a potion that voids the other without my knowing it just to prove that you can?" she asked archly.*

*"Not unless you actually do want to conceive." He smirked. "Do you?"*

*"Of course not," she exclaimed. "Oh, honestly! There is no winning with you, is there?"*

*"Not unless I allow it," he said arrogantly.*

"You've been happy lately. I thought you were bound to have a horrible stay here," Ginny said, moving to sit next to Hermione and interrupting her thoughts.

"It's turned out to be a nice holiday," she replied, hoping Ginny would change the subject.

"Since the Christmas party, I've been watching you. I thought that maybe George could give you some company and cheer you up." She leaned closer. "That night when you ran off, I followed the two of you. I realized then that I was wrong to try to shove the two of you together, especially with you both fancying other people."

Hermione raised her head. "Yes, George did say that he has his eye on someone else."

"And so do you."

She took in Ginny's knowing smirk and asked, "What?"

"Professor Snape," she said. "I didn't see it before, but when he came to stay here, I noticed the change in you. I even saw him looking at you a few times." She smiled sadly. "Remus used to look at me that way. It's a look that says, 'you're mine, but I cannot let anyone else know,' and your glances towards him say the same."

"We're only friends. Since he's been watching over me..."

"Stop," Ginny interrupted. "Your secret is safe with me. When I told Draco what I thought, he told me everything. I know that you two are a... couple."

"How dare he gossip about my relationship with Severus?" Hermione demanded hotly. "It isn't his business to tell!"

Ginny grinned and shrugged. "So what, Mione. It's just me. I'm glad to know it. Now, I can see why it was easier for you to let Ron go. I don't begrudge that." She sighed and looked around. "You know how Remus came to see me the other day?" Hermione nodded. "Well, he was here to talk to me about his feelings for me."

"Oh?" Hermione asked curiously.

"He was all confused, saying he loves Tonks and me. I told him that I was with Draco now and didn't appreciate his coming round to confuse me."

"Wow," Hermione said, impressed. "Wh-what did he say?"

"He respects my decision and will bother me no longer," she said, though Hermione could see the sadness in her eyes.

"What is it?"

"Well, I suppose I'll always wonder what could have been." She took Hermione's hand. "Your age difference with Snape is nearly the same. Don't ever let that be a factor in your relationship, Hermione. If you love him, don't let your inner fears talk you out of it. If Remus had had the courage to talk to me about his feelings, however unclear they were to him, and if he'd had the courage to face my parents with me, things might have been different."

"What of Draco?"

"I think I love him." She laughed. "I know that I do. I feel at ease with him, and I know where I stand with him. He doesn't treat me the way Remus did, and he's even better with me than Dean was. Now, that is saying something, that is! I think of a dozen new reasons each day as to why I like having him in my life and want him with me always."

"Gin, I'm really happy for you. It wasn't that long ago when I thought maybe you needed a bit of counseling. You didn't seem to be all that stable." Hermione hugged her friend. "I love Snape, too," she whispered suddenly. "Can you believe it?"

"It's odd to think of the two of you in such a way, but you can't really choose the one you're meant to spend forever with," Ginny said, patting her friend on the back. "How does he treat you?"

"Well, he likes to think that he's in charge, and to be honest, he usually is. However," Hermione said, smiling nastily, "I'd like to think it isn't as often as he truly believes. I've learnt ways of getting what I want."

"I just really can't imagine *him* being all that personable. Draco swears that the professor is a great mentor, but... I guess I've just not witnessed him away from Hogwarts or away from here at headquarters." Ginny lowered her voice. "Just please don't let him come between you and Harry."

"Never," Hermione said firmly. "We've been through that already. He knows how I feel on it." She smiled. "Really, things are great! I just have to learn to stand up to him. It's damn hard to do at times. He talks over what I'm saying or distracts me somehow. When he said he wasn't coming here, I was disappointed, and I didn't handle myself as well as I could have. I acted a little silly, but I did stick with my decision on coming here without him if I had to." She giggled. "And he showed up, didn't he?"

Ginny nodded. "Not a minute too soon! I'm happy for you. Just remember my advice."

"Don't worry. I shall." Hermione grinned. Ginny's advice had been good, but if anyone knew how to deal with having Severus Snape as a lover, it was *she*. Besides, it wasn't as if her friend had truly dated Remus. Sure he was an older man like Severus, but there truly was no comparison. Hermione wondered fleetingly if perhaps Ginny and Remus had ever done anything sexual. No. Ginny would have said something.

She watched as Ginny moved to the door and intercepted Draco, kissing him quickly while nobody else was around. Had they shagged? They seemed closer than ever. Hermione's cheeks reddened, and she looked away. *Since when am I so obsessed with other people's sex lives?* She'd found herself wondering about everyone since she and Severus had made love the first time. She hadn't really thought of it much before, but now...

"Miss Granger," Severus said, gliding into the room. "I do believe you're in my chair."

"Sorry, Professor," she said, quickly moving to sit in the chair opposite.

He said nothing, seating himself and summoning a book to him. Pretending to read the book in her lap, she eyed him closely. He was in deep concentration, index finger idly tracing his lips, brow furrowed. She wanted to go to him and straddle him where he sat. She wanted to kiss him, make him breathe heavily in her ear.

"Ha!" he shouted suddenly. Startled, Hermione yelped, dropping her book as she did so.

"What is it?" Arthur Weasley asked.

*Shite! When did he come in the room?* Hermione wondered. She hoped he hadn't seen her eyeing the professor.

"It says right here," Severus said, pointing to a passage.

Mr. Weasley squinted his eyes and readjusted his horn-rimmed glasses to have a better look. "So it does. Let's show Albus." With that, the pair moved off. Severus looked back once over his shoulder as they left.

She wished that she could go after them and hug him tightly. She hated not being able to truly converse with him. "Damn it," she said in annoyance. He would be leaving the next day, and she'd hoped for a walk out in the snow later in the day. It was not meant to be. He'd be holed up with Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley most of the day. They hadn't had much time for conversation.

When she had gone to him each night so far, he'd pounced on her. She didn't mind. She wanted to share herself with him, wanted to please him and to be pleased in return. They would speak quietly after, sometimes making love a second time, sometimes not. Tonight, though, she planned to talk to him. She wanted to know his plans for her, but she was afraid to push him. He would admit his love to her when he was ready, she supposed, although it would be nice to hear it. She simply wanted to know if anything had changed since they'd been forced apart. Did he still want to share his home with her after this year ended? Would he meet her parents? Would he truly not mind if she sought out that job at the Ministry she'd been thinking on? Would he allow her to be her own person without trying to rule over her?

She'd find out soon enough. Placing her book on the stand next to her chair, she stood and made her way out into the hall, running into Arthur Weasley.

"Hermione, sorry," he said, catching her by the arms. "All right there?"

"Yes, sorry, Mr. Weasley. I was just off to go up and have a bath."

He looked at her oddly for a moment and smiled. "Off you go. See you at dinner. Molly is having meatballs."

"Thanks," she said, feeling uncomfortable. Why had he looked at her like that? Was he disappointed that she and George hadn't worked out? Surely he wasn't worried on her situation with Ron? They'd sorted that out already. Pushing the feelings aside, she ascended the stairs.

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"Remus, how am I supposed to know what's wrong if you won't talk to me?" Tonks asked, eyeing him levelly. "You've been moping about, and I'm tired of it. What have I done wrong? What have..."

"YOU LIED TO ME!" he yelled suddenly.

"What? I've not lied to you!"

"You knew where Ginevra and Draco were! You were there at that cave before and after they moved on to Hogsmeade!" He stood and threw his napkin onto his plate.

Tonks paled considerably. "Remus..." What could she say? It was the truth.

"Did you think about her mother when you decided to keep quiet about it? Good Lord, Nymphadora, what would Dumbledore say?"

"I just thought that if..." *Say it.*

"Yes?"

"If she stayed with him for a while... well, it might get her over you."

Remus paled this time, seating himself. "Her mother and father, they deserved to know. It was your job...an order from *Dumbledore*...to find them. You didn't report it. What if Lucius Malfoy had found them? Your reasoning should have had nothing to do with me!"

"Damn it! I thought that if she openly had someone else in her life, you'd stop being so overly concerned about her! I've had enough of it. Perfect Ginevra. Sweet Ginevra. Innocent Ginevra." She looked away from him, and she deepened her voice in imitation of his, saying, "If you hadn't been there, this wouldn't have happened."

"I said no such thing," he said, reaching across to take her hand.

She moved her hand away. "You did, and I resented her for it. Remus, I need to know how you feel about her. Is it more than you've been letting on?"

He swallowed visibly and thought things over. "I went to see her a few days ago."

"I know."

"But you've no idea why."

"Enlighten me."

"Well, I wanted to make certain that she was happy with young Malfoy, wanted to hear it from her lips." He sighed. "She's very happy, and I will respect that."

"My God, Remus, you sound as if you would have tried to date her if she'd told you no." Tonks' horrified expression turned to one of anger. "That's it, isn't it? You would have left me. Just like that."

"No," he said quickly. "I told her that I love you."

"Well, then what? I don't understand. You have to explain this to me."

Remus put his head in his hands. "I told her that I love her, too, but I told her I accepted her decision."

Tonks rose, knocking her chair back as she did so. "That's it. We're over. I can't do this anymore, Remus. I'll not be second best, ranking after an effing child."

"She's not a child, and you don't rank second. I do love you. It's just complicated. I care about her, and I would see her looked after. We can move on now that I know she will be," he pleaded, moving to halt her.

"Let go of me."

"Dora, no," he said, panic evident in his voice. He moved his hands from her as if they burned. "Please..."

"I'm sorry, Remus. I'll not sit around and wait for the next person to catch your fancy." She wiped an errant tear away. There would be time for tears later. "This is not good enough for me any longer."

She moved about their bedroom, pointing her wand at this and that to pack her things. Remus stood in the doorway and watched, expression blank. She was disappointed that he'd decided to let her go. He wasn't even saying a word or attempting to keep her with him. Perhaps he was longing for the girl to leave her new lover one day. *I may have been dishonest, but he's the only person that I love. I won't have it.* Once her things were nearly all packed, she went into the bathroom and began to go through things there. When she saw her toothbrush, she stopped, closed the door, and slid down slowly. Realization hit her. She was leaving him. She'd sleep alone at night. Cold bed. No arms around her. They'd gone from having dinner to arguing to splitting up.

"I love you, Remus," she said softly, crying lightly, knowing he'd come to stand on the other side of the door. She could always feel him when he was near.

On the other side of the door, Remus sat against it and said, "And I love you." Losing her would be the worst mistake of his life. Yes, he cared for and loved Ginevra, but the thought of losing her was nothing like this. "Tonks, I can't be without you. Seeing you pack your things..." His voice cracked. "It's more than what I feel for her. While I was disappointed that she'd gotten over me, I was relieved, too. You are the one that I want. If you left me, I would be nothing."

The door clicked and opened behind him. He turned to look into her eyes. She was also sitting on the floor. "How can I trust that? What if she leaves Draco next week?"

He scooted closer and pulled her into his arms. "Well, it won't pay for her to talk to me because I'll be away on holiday with my wife next week."

"Wife? What?"

"I'll commit. I'll marry you if that will keep you with me," he said firmly.

She shook her head. "I didn't do this to force your hand. If you weren't ready before, you certainly aren't now."

"No, things are very clear to me now. Guilt. Lots of it. I felt that if I hadn't turned away from her, she never would have gone off with that boy and endangered herself. I fear that I have confused protectiveness with love." He cupped her face with his hands. "I admit that I am attracted to her...on some level...but I swear she doesn't make my blood boil the way that you do. You are all that I need. Can we not move on?"

"I won't leave, but I won't marry you either." She kissed his lips reluctantly. "I want to. Truly, I do. Being your wife is my goal, but not like this, Remus. I don't want it this way. We need time."

A sound of emotion escaped his lips as he forcefully kissed her lips, trying to show her the extent of his feelings. He moved to lie on the floor and pulled her atop him, tugging at her blouse as he did so. "Dora," he murmured as her lips found his throat. He ran his fingers through her short, brown hair, loving her all the more when she took on her own form. "Just as I like you."

She paused. "Really? I thought you liked when I changed."

He shook his head. "This is what I like to see. Just you."

"Are you certain that you want a life with me?" she asked quietly.

"I am."

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When Hermione entered Severus' room, she frowned. He was standing near the window, peering out of the curtains. "What's wrong?" she asked, pulling Harry's cloak from her. She placed it over the back of a chair and walked over to him, putting her arms around him from behind, resting her cheek against his back.

"Just thinking," he said nearly inaudibly.

"About anything in particular?" she asked, not liking the sadness in his voice.

He turned around to face her. "Nothing that I'd like to talk about."

She nodded. Usually when he was like this, it was something about his past. Something that he didn't want to share with her for whatever the reason. She never did pry when he retreated in such a way. She felt that everyone had the right to keep certain things private. "Well, if you ever do want to talk about it, I am here for you."

Severus looked down at her and nodded slightly. He raised an eyebrow. "Dressed warmly, are we?"

She grinned. "My parents sent this." Her mum had sent many things for Christmas. This was the first time she'd put on the light blue nightgown that she'd sent. It was long, thick, and extremely soft to the touch.

"It's acceptable," he said, running his hands up and down the sleeves. He leant forward and whispered, "Come to bed with me." Something in the tone of his voice called out to Hermione, made her want to cater to him. He sounded as if he needed her, not just her body...but also her soul.

Hermione took one of his hands in hers and led him to the bed. Once there, she pulled her nightgown up and over her head, leaving her clad in only her knickers and socks. Visibly, he only wore the dressing gown she'd bought him for Christmas. After she tossed it aside, he only had on his underpants. Feeling naughty, she stepped closer to him, pressing her body against his, and stood on her tiptoes to kiss the line of his jaw lightly before moving her lips over his. Not lingering, she moved her mouth down to his throat and then to his chest, leaving open-mouthed kisses along the way. Her hands were upon his back, caressing and exploring his flesh, making their way down as she did. She kissed one flat nipple, satisfied when it swelled beneath her lips, causing her lover to grunt with approval. She flicked her tongue over the other eliciting the same reaction and moved down his stomach, tasting his flesh.

Kneeling before him, her hands came round to either side of his waist and pulled down his underpants slowly, releasing his erection. Pleased, she looked up to see if he was watching her, but his eyes were closed, head tilted back. Comfortable that she could explore without any pressure or an audience, she pressed her lips to the tip of his penis. She didn't take him into her mouth; instead, she used her tongue to trace his length and circle round his width. Wanting to explore further, she moved her tongue down to the base of his shaft and traveled over his scrotum. She could feel his legs shaking slightly and wondered if he was simply tired of standing in the same spot or if that was an effect that she had on him.

Looking up, she found black eyes watching her. Hermione wasn't thick. She could read the message in his eyes. He was ready for her. He wanted to be inside of her. She wanted that, too, but for tonight, it would be on her terms.

She rose to her full height and eased him back onto the bed. Slowly, she pushed down her knickers. Severus scooted back to put his head upon the pillows, and Hermione crawled over to him, straddling his waist. When his hands went to her arse, she didn't move them. She simply lowered her mouth to his for a scorching kiss. She could feel him moving impatiently beneath her and decided it was time.

One of her hands moved between them to help position him while the other was pressed against his chest for balance. Tentatively, she began to lower herself onto him. They'd not tried this position before, but she felt that he would guide her if she needed it. She was comfortable enough to give it a try at least. Nearly reaching the bottom, she paused, enjoying the fullness of him within. She shifted her hips, feeling him slide further inside of her than ever before. He sucked in a breath just as she exhaled heavily.

Her other hand found its way back up his chest and rested near the other *I hope I'm not hurting him*, she thought, feeling as though all of her weight would crush him. From his expression, though, she could tell that he didn't care about anything except joining with her. She watched his facial expression change as she rose up, nearly off of him, and slid back down. The appreciative look combined with the tightening of his hands on her arse and the low growl emitted urged her to continue. She closed her eyes and began to slide up and down. Each uncertain stroke led to another more confident stroke.

Before long, she realized that he was thrusting upward into her, and she barreled down to meet his arching pelvis, grinding hers against him, stimulating her clitoris. Not wanting to lose the feeling, she quickened her pace and applied more pressure, chasing her orgasm. She heard him mumbling, but she couldn't stop or be bothered with trying to decipher his words. "Oh... my... God," she chanted continuously. "Severus, I'm about to lose..." Her words were lost in a succession of gasps and whimpers.

Moments later, she realized that she had slumped down against him, breathing erratically. She could still feel him within her, though he wasn't as hard as he had been. Had she climaxed to soon? Did he have one? Did he think that she did all right? She looked up and found him smiling smugly.

"Did you...?"

"Shortly before you," he admitted.

"Oh, I hadn't noticed," she said, adding, "sorry about that."

"On the contrary, I enjoyed seeing you above me in such a manner." He kissed her temple and moved back a lock of her hair.

Noting that the melancholy had dissipated, she decided it was time to talk to him about their future. "Severus, can we talk for a few minutes?"

"Aren't we already?" he asked dryly.

"You know what I mean," she said, moving to lie beside him.

"One moment," he said, moving from beneath her and reaching over to collect his wand from the nightstand. He waved it over both of their midsections, using magic to take away the evidence of their coupling. He placed his wand back on the stand and pulled the duvet up and over them. "What is it?"

"After this is over, do you still intend to have me at your home?"

His lips curved upward. "Our home, Hermione. I thought we'd discussed this already. I want you with me."

"Well, we've had this time apart, and there have been a few differences of opinion on things. I just wanted some reassurance that our plans remained," she said, relieved.

"If things had changed, I would not be here with you right now. I'm where I want to be for the moment," he said. "Now, is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

"Well, I'm still thinking about trying for a job as an Unspeakable."

Severus nodded. "I will support whatever you decide. I've told you that already."

"I love you." She saw his scowl immediately. "You don't have to say it."

"Why do you insist on saying that to me?" he inquired, brow arched.

"Because it's how I feel."

"Did you also tell Weasley that you loved him?"

"I..." She was stunned. Why would he want to know that? "Well, of course, I did. We were dating, but it wasn't like this."

"Some people are careless with their words," he said, caressing her breast lightly. "I shall never utter those words to you, Hermione, unless I truly mean them."

She bit her lip and nodded, disappointment flooding through her. "Will you ever?"

Sighing in exasperation, he said snidely, "I'm no follower of Divination."

Hermione turned away from him, wishing she'd not said anything. Could she live this way for the rest of her life? How dare he throw her words back and use them against her like that? She knew how the hell she felt about him. It was so much more than what she'd felt for Ronald.

"Don't turn away," he said softly, sliding behind her to put his arm over her and rest his head against hers, lips near her ear. "I didn't say that to hurt you."

"Well, it did," she said bitterly. "I give you all of me, and it's not good enough. I don't know that I can live like that. Not for the rest of my life. You can't just take. You have to be able to give."

He remained quiet for a long time before he spoke again. "No woman can say that I've ever been this way with her. You give me something to look forward to, Hermione. Can my actions not speak for me? Can they not show you that I care and to what extent?"

"Severus, I wasn't asking for a ruddy proclamation of your undying love. It's what I felt at that moment, and I wanted you to know." She pulled his hand up to her chest and held it against her, interlacing her fingers with his. "Who cares if I've told someone that before? I did love him, but it's quite pale in comparison to this. I'm *in* love with you. There. That's a little different. He's never heard me speak those exact words. I want to have a future with you. I want... oh..." He began to suck on her earlobe gently. "Stop."

"Why?"

"I want you to stop. I'm not finished." She turned over suddenly, startling him slightly. "Every time I try to discuss something important to me, you distract me or wave my words away. I don't appreciate feeling dismissed. You even make decisions about birth control for me!"

His eyes narrowed. "That isn't my intention."

"See? You're about to get angry, and then, I'm going to end up spending the rest of my time here tonight trying to make things better. I just want to be able to speak freely and have your full attention when we discuss things." She watched him closely for a reaction. His expression was unfathomable.

"All right. Ask me any question that you'd like, and I shall answer you honestly."

Instead of asking anything about their relationship or his feelings about her, she asked, "What were you thinking of when I came in here tonight?"

He looked away from her. "I was thinking of my mother."

"Oh, Severus, I didn't mean to pry. I'm sorry. You don't have to finish," she said, feeling guilty. He was quite touchy about his childhood and his parents.

"It's fine," he said testily. "I simply wondered if she would have liked you. I'm sure she would have." He shrugged. "I was thinking that maybe we should open their bedchamber at home, go through their things, and use the room as our own. It's quite large, and we'd be more comfortable."

Hermione's heart swelled. He'd been thinking of her and his mother. "I'd like that," she said, wrapping an arm around his waist. "You seemed so sad."

"Yes, I suppose. I try not to think of her...ever...but when I do, it hits me all over again. It's why I will be leaving in the morning and not see the first of the New Year with you."

"I don't understand."

"Tomorrow is the anniversary of her death. Life left her just as an old year died. She never saw the new one come in," he said solemnly. "In tradition, I spend the evening alone with a bottle or two of whisky." He placed a finger over her lips to halt her words. "Trust me, Hermione. I would not be good company. I think that you should at least be satisfied that I've spent this past week with you."

She nodded. "I am." She kissed him, hoping to convey her feelings to him, and was pleased when he seemed to be doing the same. For some reason, she felt as if they'd passed a major hurdle. He respected her enough to listen to her, and he now understood that she wouldn't allow him to manipulate her any longer. Their relationship could only grow stronger.

"There is something else," he said, voice tense. "Arthur Weasley overheard Dumbledore and I speaking about our relationship. He says he'll not tell Molly, but I get the feeling that he disapproves."

"I bumped into him in the hall today. I felt... odd."

"Did he upset you? Say anything?"

"No, but he looked at me strangely before reverting to his normal demeanor. I felt uncomfortable. So... he knows then?"

"Yes, I asked Albus if you could come back with me and stay in my chambers. We were interrupted by Weasley's gasp." He sucked the finger she'd placed near his mouth.

"That feels good," she said, enjoying the tingling sensations his tongue and lips wrought within her stomach.

"I want to have you once more," he said silkily, hand caressing her center possessively.

"No reason we can't celebrate a little early, eh?" she asked playfully, all thoughts of Mr. Weasley disappearing instantly.

"Indeed."

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**Southern's Notes:** This will conclude the holiday! They will be heading back to Hogwarts in the next chapter, and trouble looms in their future.

What in the world is Narcissa planning? Did you notice that more people know about Severus and Hermione? Lupin and Tonks seem to be on the right track, and I think he finally understands his own feelings. Sometimes it takes losing something or nearly losing it to appreciate it.

I should have more up soon. It's going to be a little lively from here on out. I hope you all enjoy what I have planned.

## The Need for Vengeance

Rodolphus and Narcissa make plans to get revenge. Harry, Severus, and Hermione cope with life at the castle once again.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks will always go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter\_Place. (GinnyW and CocoaChristy, thanks for listening to me ponder on things.)**

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Hermione hated the expression on Harry's face. She moved to sit beside him and placed an arm around his shoulders. "It'll be all right, Harry. Nobody will know that she's not at headquarters any longer."

"Fleur aggravates me," he said angrily. "She shouldn't have asked Gabrielle to go back to staying with them. She thinks that since nothing has been going on lately, it's all right to act and live normally. Gabrielle is at risk!"

"She's going to stay inside and not venture out into the open. It's likely that nobody will even know she's there, Harry." She squeezed his shoulder affectionately.

"If Fleur's so bored, why can't she go stay at headquarters with the others?" he asked bitterly. "It's like she only cares about herself, that one."

Grinning, Hermione said, "I think that she likes to be in control, and I think she's learnt that Mrs. Weasley is the big owl of the Owlery wherever she is. That's why she'd rather be off at her own home. I guess since Bill's been working late and helping the Order more, Fleur is alone often. I can understand her point."

Harry nodded and admitted, "I can, too, but I just have this terrible feeling. When I told her goodbye, it felt like I'd never see her again."

"That's just because you know it'll be a long time before we have a break and can go back. We'll just have to ask Dumbledore if she can visit here and stay in my room with me," Hermione said, pulling away and positioning herself more comfortably against the arm.

"Maybe."

"The only bad thing is that we'd have to tell her the truth about my relationship with Severus," Hermione said with a sigh.

"She knows."

"What?"

"Well, you don't think she believed you were going down to the library all those nights, do you? Besides, she saw some of his clothes mixed with yours," Harry said, shrugging as if nothing was wrong.

"Harry! What if she tells Fleur or Bill? They might tell the others!" Hermione hissed.

"Relax. She won't say anything," he said dismissively.

"I hate the way everyone thinks it's all right to discuss my life with whomever they please!" Hermione said reproachfully. "I expected better of you, Harry."

Incredulous, Harry said, "Don't blame me for your problems. I have enough of my own, thanks."

Hermione chose to ignore him, not wanting to argue. If she told Severus that Gabrielle had figured things out, he wouldn't be too happy. She hadn't mentioned that Ginny had found out as well. He didn't seem to mind much that Pansy knew. *Must be a ruddy Slytherin thing, that.*

Grumbling, Harry said, "We've only been back the one night, and I can't stand it already." He looked over at her and smirked. "Care for a little excursion? Snape's not due to come here for a while yet."

Annoyance with him waning, she leaned forward. "Where to?"

"Who cares? Anywhere. The students won't be back until tomorrow. Only a few stayed. We can just walk round the castle," Harry said, trying to convince her. "Let's go down and see Dobby."

"It's too risky, Harry. What if someone else goes down there while we're there? They'll know that we are here." She would have liked to go, but she thought of Severus. He'd be furious that she'd allowed herself to be talked into such a risk. If it wouldn't be for his parchment, she might have gone anyway.

"Suit yourself," he said. "I'm going for a walk."

"No, you're not! You can't risk what Dumbledore's been trying to do for us."

"Going to snitch, are you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Of course not. Just... Harry, hurry back," she relented.

"Right then."

He quickly donned his cloak and left. He returned twenty minutes later, saying that he felt much better and that he wanted her to go with him the next time for a bit of fresh air. She slightly resented that he'd been able to slip out without any problems. He always seemed to get away with things.

After Dobby delivered their dinner, Harry stood and said, "Guess I'll go have a shower and hang about in my room for a bit since Snape's probably going to be stopping by." Stretching, he added, "I'd say about an hour before I come out again."

"All right," Hermione said, pushing her plate aside. "I'll just do some revising until he comes." She couldn't wait to see him. It had been nearly a week since they'd had a real conversation. His two replies to her five owls had been short and direct. She'd just moved to the long table and positioned all of her books and parchments atop it when he came in.

"Hi," she said in a small voice as he strode purposefully to her.

He said nothing, simply lifting her, setting her upon the table, and kissing her passionately. Severus had told her to let his actions speak for his feelings. From the intensity of his kiss, she knew that he was saying that he missed her. His lips pressed against hers so forcefully that she imagined that she'd have bruises when they finished. To her surprise, he laid her back onto the table and reached below her skirt with his hand.

Tearing his lips from hers, he asked quietly, "Where is Potter?"

"Room." She tried to catch breath. "Forty-five more minutes, I think."

To her horror, he straightened, reached within his robes, watching Harry's door all the while, and partially unfastened his trousers. She didn't want to think that maybe Harry had charmed his door and was watching them. That would be too embarrassing. This wasn't exactly the best idea Severus had ever had. "Er... what are you...?"

Before she could finish the sentence, he flicked his wand in the direction of Harry's door, and he was over her again, mouth reclaiming hers as his own. When he moved down to nip at her throat, she tried to speak again.

"But Harry will hear us!"

"Shhh," he said in a whisper. "We'll have to be quiet. I'll know if he nears the door."

His mouth moved back to hers for a long scorching kiss, lips slanting and moving against hers, tongue probing and tangling with hers. She was so mesmerized by his kiss and the way it made her insides tingle that she didn't realize he'd pushed her knickers aside. "Mmmph!" she exclaimed, words muffled by his unrelenting mouth, as he slammed into her body completely.

Severus' tongue competed with the long, deep, rough strokes he made within her body. Hermione was completely shocked. He was having sex with her on a table! It was the very table that she and Harry used daily to study on. It seemed... unnatural. Harry could come out at any minute. It was horribly... naughty. She opened her eyes and saw that he was looking in the direction of Harry's door. This did little to comfort her, and though she was enjoying his kiss, she couldn't relax enough to feel comfortable climaxing. Not here. Not like this. Nonetheless, her hands wove into his hair, making certain his mouth wouldn't escape hers.

She'd not deny him. He seemed to desperately need her. Hadn't she been fantasizing about the next time they would be together? Hadn't she thought it would be too long before she could have him again? This wasn't exactly what she wanted, but it would do. For now.

His body began tensing and flexing, and Hermione knew that he was nearly done. Her mouth muffled his grunts and whatever words that might have slipped from his tongue. In that moment, she wished that she could join him, feeling utterly aroused suddenly. *Blast! Why didn't I try to concentrate on the feel of him?* Severus ended their kiss and laid his head upon her chest for a moment.

He straightened, cast charms on both of them to clean them up, and fixed his clothing. Hermione sat up and hopped off the table only to sit on a chair, looking at the spot where they'd frantically coupled. "I can't believe that happened," she said, clearly gobsmacked.

Severus sat next to her, scooting his chair close to hers and moved his hand between her parted thighs back up to her knickers. "Open."

"But..."

"Shhh," he said sternly, eyes moving back to Harry's door.

She parted her legs and felt his fingers slip beneath her knickers again. This time, they fondled and caressed her gently. Using her own moisture as a lubricant of sorts, he began circling his thumb around her clitoris, eliciting a small whimper and a hissed, "Yes."

His mouth found hers, tongue invading and demanding attention. With each caress, the tension within her built. Letting all thoughts of Harry walking in on them go, she relaxed and tried to simply enjoy his touch. She knew he would stop immediately if Harry came out, and from the way they were seated, it would simply look as if they'd been snogging...nothing more.

With peace and concentration finally came her orgasm. She moved against his fingers as much as she could without grinding against him too much... just in case. When release finally found her, she murmured something sounding like, "Mmmphohmahgopheveruh," into his mouth, causing him to press his lips more firmly against hers in fear she'd cry out and alert Harry. As her climax ebbed, his fingers slowed and stopped, as did his kiss. She watched with wide eyes as he moved back, brought two fingers to his lips and licked them, eyes darkening with lust as he did so.

*Not again. We haven't time.* Although she wished there was time for more, she knew it would not be possible. She simply slumped against him and allowed him to hold her, kissing her atop her head as he did so.

After a few minutes of silence, he said, "This is why I knew it would be dangerous to have you. Once I had you, I figured I'd not be able to go long without you." His voice was deep and rich... menacing even, as if daring her to deny his statements.

"I missed you, too," she said quietly. She still couldn't believe that they'd just shagged in the common room she shared with Harry. It all had happened so fast. Her head was still reeling. She'd definitely not mention it to Harry. Not that he would want to know anyway.

"Lately, I have been very busy. The Dark Lord has been calling me often. Have you been noticing on the parchment?" he inquired.

"To be honest, I've tried to keep from looking at it too much. I want to know where you are, but I feel guilty about invading your privacy." She smiled. "Don't you feel that way?"

"Never," he said honestly. "I *always* want to know what you are doing." He studied her. "I haven't much to hide from you. If you want to look, do so. Show nobody else. Ever."

"I won't."

"I have to go," he said suddenly.

"Wh-what?" she asked incredulously. "You can't just leave!" He'd only come to have sex with her?

"My Mark is burning, Hermione. I told you. He's been calling me often."

Sadly, Hermione nodded. "All right. I had hoped to give you your gift tonight," she said. "Will you come back?"

"Gift?" he asked.

"Your birthday."



She could see the emotions flickering in his eyes. "I... tomorrow will be fine."

Hermione smiled smugly. She had affected him, caused him to be surprised and pleased. "Go. I'll be waiting for you tomorrow."

He leaned over and kissed her again. Brushing his lips against her once more before moving away from her, he stared into her eyes as long as he could before clutching his arm. "Sleep well."

She watched him leave and longed to run after him for another kiss, but she knew he'd not appreciate it, as he'd be even later for his meeting. She hoped that things would go well. Deciding to watch her parchment closely, she stood to collect her things and go to her room.

As she did so, Harry came out of his room. "I wanted to summon something to drink." He looked around, walking towards her. "Snape didn't come yet?"

"He did," she said, inwardly laughing at the double meaning. *So did I.*

Harry paused, looking at the floor. "Hermione, why are all your parchments and books scattered about?" His eyes met hers, and she knew that he likely suspected exactly what happened. "Bit breezy, this time of year." He summoned a pitcher of pumpkin juice and went back to his room without another word to her. She quickly collected all of her things and retreated to her room for the night, feeling only slightly embarrassed. If he didn't say anything, she wouldn't either.

Once ready for bed, she took out the parchment that Severus had given to her. She put her hand over it and said, *Locus Severus.* She gasped and felt slightly uncomfortable upon reading:

*Currently on the Kincardineshire east coast, in the Dunnottar Castle with Lord Voldemort, feeling quite amused.*

"Oh, Severus, I hope you know what you are doing," she said softly, wanting to believe that he was able to act amused on a whim. It was odd that Voldemort would see his amused side when they, Dumbledore included, only saw his scowls and agitation. What did it mean?

Eyes wide, she released the spell and put the parchment away. She had the Dark Lord's current location. She could easily give this to the headmaster and have things end once and for all. "I can't," she whispered. Wouldn't that be betraying Severus? Keeping Voldemort's location from them felt as though she was betraying Harry and the Order. "He told me to show no one," she said aloud, internal debate confusing her. For now, she would remain silent. She owed Severus that much, what with the trust he'd shown her by giving it to her.

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Rodolphus sat quietly in the shadows and listened to Snape talk to his master.

"It seems, Severus, that I've called you at a most inopportune moment. Tell me, are you satisfied with your chosen concubine?" the Dark Lord asked.

Snape grinned nastily. "More than I had ever thought possible. Such firm, pleasing, nubile flesh, you see. Quite satisfying."

That's it, Rodolphus thought excitedly, half listening to what else they were saying. The girl! Potter's friend. Severus seems to truly like, if not care, for her. She could die as payment for Rabastan's death. Yes, that was it. The Dark Lord would still have his favorite, and even though they'd been instructed to not harm the Muddblood in honor of Snape, the Dark Lord need not know he'd had anything to do with it.

When he'd gone to see Narcissa the previous day, she'd told him that she'd be willing to work with him to seek revenge against Severus for his actions. Bella had told them to stop plotting, as she would not allow them to do anything to the Dark Lord's favorite, though she didn't truly trust him either. When Bella had gone to the loo, Narcissa had leant forward and said, "I'll not allow *anyone* to stand in the way. Not even my sister.

Rodolphus decided that it was time to pay another visit to Narcissa. He had a plan forming. Quickly and quietly, he moved from his position and returned to the room that the Dark Lord had directed him to share with his wife. He entered and found the room lit by a solitary candle. His wife was in the middle of the bed, completely naked and touching herself.

"I've been waiting for you," she said, not bothering to open her eyes. "Where have you been?"

"I wanted to seek an audience with the Dark Lord," he said, pulling his robes off and moving towards her. "Snape is here again, and I don't know how long he'll be about. I tried to wait it out, but they're still talking."

"You need to stop obsessing over Snape. Come here. Pleasure me."

"I will always hate Snape. It is his fault that Rabastan was killed," he said, crawling towards her and pausing to rest his head on her stomach while his fingers replaced hers.

Growling, Bellatrix retorted, "Enough talk of Snape and your brother. Do your duty to me."

Rodolphus had had enough. He sat up and turned to lie in the other direction. "Do yours," he ordered and groaned lightly as her hands found his scrotum. He would say no more, but on the morrow, he would pay a private visit to Narcissa. She would be eager to help him.

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"Oh, don't mind me," Harry said sarcastically. "I've just got a bit of reading to do... on the table here." He nodded to the table where his new book of last year's Quidditch statistics was located. "I suppose it's all right to read at the table?"

"What's your problem?" Hermione asked hotly. "Is there something you want to say, Harry?"

He put his head in his hands. "I'm being a prat, aren't I?" He knew he was being hateful to her, but he'd been thinking about what he'd discovered all night long. He'd been nice enough to stay in his room while she and Snape had a talk and maybe a little snog. Instead, when he'd come out, he saw her parchments and books scattered on the table and the floor. Her hair had been disheveled. They'd shagged. Had to have. While he didn't begrudge anyone some privacy, it didn't seem fair that they would have a shag in a place that he had to live in.

"I want to give him his birthday gift and do it while alone. A little privacy isn't all that much to ask for, is it?" she asked again.

"No, I'll go in my room, but I might come out at any minute..." He let the warning hang between them. Her hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"She'll be all right, Harry," Hermione said, wrapping her arms around him. For only a brief moment, he considered pulling away, but he needed comfort, needed the words, and needed Hermione.

He pulled her to him tightly and felt his body tremble as he tried to suppress any tears that might try to escape. "Everybody I love dies. What if I've sealed her fate? Her arrogant sister won't listen. Bill says he'll be on the lookout, but he's never there. Wards only go so far, you know?"

"I know," she mumbled, pulling back to look into his eyes, hers shimmering. "We've got to have faith, Harry."

"Oh, right," he said, voice laced with sarcasm. "Let's leave it to destiny. Guess I should go visit Trelawney and see if she's something to say on the matter." He moved away from her completely and stalked off to his room, leaving the door partially opened. *Ha! Let them try to get a quick shag in now!*

After sulking for a while, he pulled on his Invisibility Cloak and crept to his door, looking out at them. Snape was sitting with Hermione on the settee, actually smiling at something she was saying. Hermione's laughter carried over to him. The man actually grinned as she moved her hands about while she talked. In the next moment, Snape pulled her face to his and kissed her, hooked nose digging into her cheek as his head moved with his kiss.

How could she want that? Harry half expected her to pull away any moment, but she didn't. Instead, she pulled him closer and returned the kiss with fervor. It was Snape that eventually pulled away. It looked as if they'd already shared some of the cake that Hermione had asked Dobby to bake for the man's birthday. He was admiring the Muggle timepiece that Hermione had bought for him. It was one of the old-fashioned types that simply needed winding, so it worked at Hogwarts without any trouble.

They seemed happy. Why did that bother him? *Snape has been nasty to us for all these years, and he suddenly wants Hermione? Dirty old wanker. Probably been preying on the older students for years.* The only problem with his bitter thinking was that Snape did truly seem to care for her. He'd never seen the man so... relaxed. Was he only feeling bitter because he was caged up like an animal? Was it because his girl was off without him and possibly going to be in danger? Was he jealous of Snape and what he had with Hermione, wanting it for himself?

He nodded. That had to be it. He had to learn to trust Snape. If Hermione trusted him and if Dumbledore trusted him, shouldn't he also follow suit? If it came down to a single decision made by Snape that would sway the victory in the war, whose side would the man help? Harry looked back up and saw the man in question touching Hermione's cheek gently. Snape would choose Dumbledore... for her if nothing else.

"Right then," he whispered. "From now on, I'll not try to interfere. I'll trust him."

He kept his word and found that Snape seemed more cordial over the next few weeks. It wasn't hard to feel included in their conversations. Snape had even brought him news of Gabrielle a couple of times. Hermione seemed happy. Harry figured that was a worthwhile payoff. He still didn't give them much time alone, as he didn't want to have to eat, sit, or study where they'd... shagged, but things were going well.

Bellatrix Apparated to her sister's home. Sure enough, her husband was having tea in Lucius' old study. "What the fuck is going on?" she asked, eyeing her sister first and then her husband.

"Now, Bella, really. That's no way to greet your sister," Narcissa said smoothly, bringing her teacup to her lips.

Bella pulled her wand and pointed it at her husband. "Are you fucking my sister, dear husband?" Her words were laced with iciness not unfamiliar to him.

"Of course not," he said immediately, knowing she'd likely hex him if she believed it to be true.

"Explain then," she said, looking between them. "Why have you been coming here so often? Over the past five weeks, ever since you overheard Snape conversing with the Dark Lord, you've been disappearing, coming in late, exchanging owls with Cissy, and other things."

Narcissa cleared her throat. "We've found a way to get a little revenge against Snape."

Bella had thought it might be something like that. She truly didn't think that her husband would dare touch her sister, and she didn't think her sister would actually want to be with her husband. It was her duty as a faithful follower of the Dark Lord to report meetings such as this. Snape was not to be harmed, much as she would like to see it. "It would be treason, Cissy. You cannot plot against him."

"He'll live to fight for our Lord," Rodolphus added.

She sat next to Narcissa and summoned a glass and a bottle of wine for herself. "But how can he pay if you don't harm him?" She poured her glass and began to drink, hoping that they didn't have anything planned that she would feel compelled to tell the Dark Lord. She wouldn't want her sister harmed.

"Rodolphus told me about Severus' future concubine," Narcissa said casually. "Wouldn't it be a pity if she were a casualty of a Death Eater raid or simply disappeared without a trace?"

Smirking, Bella shook her head. "Rodolphus? Do you not remember what happened to Higgs? We have orders to keep her alive. She is for Severus and is to be spared Potter's fate."

"He need not know," her husband rebutted. "We've been watching, and we've not found her." He grinned nastily. "However, I overheard that she was staying with Potter. Potter is sure to come out of hiding if his little girlfriend is attacked, wouldn't he?" He nodded at Bella's shocked face. "Snape's bitch wouldn't let the brat go alone. You've seen that for yourself. She'd be there, and we'd snatch her."

"And we'd bring her here to Lucius' rooms below. Nobody would ever see her again or know her fate," Narcissa added.

Bella downed her drink and poured herself another.

"It's where I've been these last few weeks when I left. Gabrielle Delacour is staying with her sister and her sister's husband. Weasley is never there on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday evenings. Just the two girls." He put his teacup down and leaned forward. "When Potter hears, he'll be sure to come sniffing about, and if we know him, he'll

try to come without the Aurors hanging about. He believes himself above needing protection. The Mudblood will accompany him, knowing he isn't."

"And if Potter hexes you?" Bella asked snidely. "Dumbledore might be teaching..."

"I shall deal with Potter and take the girl," he said darkly.

"You may very well ruin what our Master has planned. I cannot go along with this," Bella said defiantly, putting her glass down and rising quickly. When she turned to Narcissa, she was surprised to see her sister also standing, wand drawn. "Oh, Cissy, really. You..."

"*Obliviate*," Narcissa said easily.

Bellatrix blinked and felt her body heat up for a moment. Dizzily, she looked around. Rodolphus was standing with his mouth agape and eyes wide. Narcissa had her wand drawn.

"How dare you accuse me of sleeping with Rodolphus, Bella? He's been coming here to talk about you and to do something nice for you," Cissy said indignantly. "You're my sister. I would never hurt you by committing adultery with him! I only had to hex you just now because I thought you to be attacking us. Are you all right?"

Bella shook her head and touched it. "It feels like I've a headache." The last thing she remembered was coming in and seeing them having tea. No, then she'd asked if something was going on. Cissy must have jumped up and hexed her. "Well... if nothing is going on, why has he been disappearing so often? This hasn't to do with Snape, does it?"

Rodolphus moved closer and touched her shoulder to steady her. "Narcissa has been helping me with a painting. It's nearly completed, but I suppose I could show you if you insist."

"A painting?" she asked incredulously. "Why would you need help with a painting?"

"She's been describing an early morning flight you two had on your brooms as children. She said you fell in love with the beautiful dawn. I've been getting her to describe it to me. I thought it would be nice for your birthday gift next month."

Touched, Bella smiled genuinely. "Thank you." She hugged him in a rare show of affection. "And you, Cissy."

Narcissa nodded and seated herself. "Wine, Bella?"

"Come on, Hermione. Snape's off with Dumbledore again on that urgent business. Who is going to know? He won't be back for hours. Just come have a walk out on the grounds with me. It's a nice day out," Harry asked.

Hermione bit her lip as she debated on going with him. Finally, she nodded. "Let's do it." She scrambled to get under Harry's Invisibility Cloak. As quickly as they could without calling attention to themselves, they ventured down to the front entrance, intent on exiting the doors as soon as the hall was clear. "Madam Pomfrey," Hermione whispered. "Shhh."

She watched as Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey neared. "If Bill hadn't shown up when he did, there might not be anything left of his wife. I still wish Albus had not insisted that I care for her. St. Mungo's is much better equipped."

Hermione's heart sank. Something had happened to Fleur. What of Gabrielle?

"It's for the Order, Poppy," McGonagall said. "I simply hope that Potter doesn't find out."

The two women moved out of earshot, and Hermione felt Harry trembling. She wrapped her arms around him. "No, Harry, we can't be seen."

"To hell with that," he blurted, voice raised. He threw the cloak from them and stood, sprinting in the direction that the women had gone.

"Harry! NO!" Hermione yelled and gave chase after picking up the discarded cloak.

"What is the meaning of this?" McGonagall asked. "What are you doing here? Away from your location?"

"Tell me about Gabrielle," Harry demanded. "Where is she?"

The women eyed each other. Poppy looked away first. "Potter," McGonagall began, "maybe you should wait for the headmaster."

"When did this happen?" Hermione interjected, unable to help herself.

"In the wee hours of the morning yesterday," came the reply.

"Why weren't we told?" Harry asked angrily. "They are my friends, too. She is my girl! Where is she?"

Pomfrey spoke then. "I'm sorry, Potter, but she's not here. It's just her sister under my care."

"She was gone," McGonagall added. "They didn't find a trace of her. Now, I must insist that you come and wait in the headmaster's office. You might not be safe in the open."

Harry turned and ran towards the door. "Harry! Wait!" Hermione yelled, running after him. He was much faster than she was, but he only made it past the gates a few moments before she did. "Stop!" she yelled, grabbing his shirt.

"I have to find her, Hermione! I knew this shite would happen! I tried to tell them," he yelled.

"Here," Hermione said, handing him the cloak. "They are coming to get us. Put it on." Harry quickly donned the cloak, pulling Hermione beneath it with him and stepping back just as McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey ran by, stopping a few feet away, gasping for breath.

"They've Apparated off," Pomfrey said. "We need to find the headmaster."

McGonagall nodded, and after her breathing eased, she said, "Back to the castle. There is nothing more we can do."

After they were near the castle, Harry spoke to Hermione. "I am going to Bill's. Maybe there is some clue as to what happened."

"No, Harry, there will be Aurors. What if the headmaster or Severus is there? We'll be in trouble." She bit her lip. She wouldn't let Harry go alone, but she was afraid to go.

"Please, let's just wait." She was angry that Severus hadn't mentioned what the urgent business was. Dumbledore hadn't said anything either. This situation could have been avoided had they not tried to keep the news from Harry. Severus had been acting oddly, but she had thought it was because they'd never been able to have any lengthy privacy... not since that day on the table. She wanted to wait until they had complete privacy and weren't rushed anyway, but she could tell that it was truly hard on him to only touch each other and have no penetration. His temper had been worse each day lately it seemed. A shake from Harry brought his contorted face into focus.

"Hold on if you want to come."

She did so, and in moments, Harry Disapparated them away.

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**Southern's Notes:** Sorry this took so long to get out, and I apologize that it's short. I will have another update in three days or so. I had trouble getting time to pass. I had different scenarios written, and nothing seemed to be working. I just hated to add filler that wasn't in my outline or critical to the plot.

As you can imagine, our pair here are falling right into the hands of their plotters.

About Bella's Obliviate, GinnyW and I wondered how someone actually felt when they were Obliviated, so I hope I conveyed her slight confusion and feelings enough. Mighty slick of Narcissa, eh? Hehe

On a good note, Harry has finally opted to trust Snape and stop with his bratty little outbursts. Let's hope his decision is not in vain.

## Taking Care of His Own

*Chapter 27 of 42*

Harry and Hermione have a problem at Bill's place. Severus' map is put to good use, and we see another side of him.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks will always go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

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"Where are we?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded to the small building in front of them. "We're out back. He's got a jinx that won't allow us to Apparate inside." Together, they moved forward and checked on either side of the building for anyone that might be about. "I don't see anyone. Let's take the cloak off."

"No, Harry, we can't. If Snape, Dumbledore, or an Auror see us, we'll be in trouble!"

"There is no one about. Don't you think someone would be back here guarding if anyone were here? Besides, I doubt Bill is home. He's likely out looking for who did this or is at the infirmary with Fleur."

"I thought we were to just look around. It's not so much trouble to keep the cloak on." She elbowed him slightly. "Don't want to be too close to me, eh?"

Harry grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Of course I don't mind being close to you. I just want to find her and be able to move about freely. We can put it back on straightaway if we see or hear anything." He sighed. "You keep the cloak then. I'll get out from under it."

Hermione, completely exasperated, yanked the cloak off. "There. Happy now?"

Harry nodded and took the cloak and her hand. "Come on." He led her to the rear stairway. "It's right up here," he said, letting go of her. Just as he stepped on the first step, two things happened almost simultaneously. A faint *pop* sounded, and there was a shout of, *'Stupefy!'*

Ducking down to avoid a hex, Harry drew his wand and looked around. "Bill!"

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

"What the hell was that? Hex now and ask later?"

Bill Weasley smiled sheepishly. "I just rounded the corner and saw someone. I guess I didn't think." His smile faded. "You've found out, haven't you?"

"Yeah," Harry said quietly. "I'm sorry about Fleur." He moved down to stand near Bill. "Tell me about Gabrielle, Bill. What happened? The truth if you don't mind."

"All of her things are still here," he said, nodding to the building. "There was a big struggle in her room. Fleur was hexed badly and left for... dead. No sign of Gabrielle. Her room is just as she left it. I know she didn't willingly go with them. She must have been with Fleur when they came in." He leaned against the wall. "We know there were two of them. One did some nasty handiwork on Fleur, and the other seemed interested in destroying furniture, decorations, and dishes."

"Does Fleur remember anything? Maybe she saw their faces?"

"All she said was that there were two dressed in black, and she keeps calling out for Gabrielle. Her mind is still addled, but she'll come round," Bill said, trying to be positive.

"It didn't sound like Madame Pomfrey wanted to keep her at Hogwarts."

"Not initially, no," Bill agreed. "But Dumbledore says Poppy is capable of treating her, what with the potions Snape gave her. She'll be back to good soon."

"Hermione and I couldn't stay away," Harry admitted. "Thought we could find some clue as to what happened." He turned around, and his gut clenched. "Hermione?" She was nowhere in sight. A feeling of dread crept up his spine. "Oh, no."

"Hermione was with you?" Bill asked, looking around. "I came around just as you Apparated in."

"What? No, we'd been here before then," Harry said, moving to the other side of the building to look around. "Hermione!" he called. "It's not funny! Come out."

"You were alone when I saw you, Harry." Bill looked worried. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Mione!" Harry yelled, panicking. "Shite!" If something happened to her because he couldn't wait for news, he'd never forgive himself. He should have listened to her when she asked him to stay at Hogwarts or at least when she asked him to keep the cloak on. He would have noticed if something had happened to her that way. How could she have disappeared without a trace with him standing right in front of her? *Why did I not keep holding her hand? This is my fault.*

"Maybe she went on up," Bill offered, looking at the door on top of the stairway.

"No, Bill, she didn't pass. We would have seen or heard her." Harry started up the stairs nonetheless. He had to find her. He couldn't lose her as well. Gabrielle's loss was hard enough, but losing Hermione would be devastating. Aside from that, Snape would kill him. Finding no trace of her, Harry leaned against a wall and slid down, head in his hands. "This just can't be happening."

"Maybe she went back to your secret location or to Hogwarts. *Did* truly hear an Apparition just before I rounded the corner." He squatted down next to Harry. "Check at the castle and talk to the headmaster first."

Harry nodded. "I'm going."

"I'll come, too," Bill said, extending a hand to help Harry up. "We'll find her. Both of them."

Pulling on his Invisibility Cloak, Harry followed Bill back outside where they decided to have one more look around before they had to Apparate to the gates of Hogwarts. "I just don't understand. She was right there. I let her hand go, heard the sound of an Apparition, and you shouted a hex! There was nobody else with us or around."

Bill paused. "Look!" He pointed to the slush. "A footprint! I don't think Hermione wears boots that big. Does she?"

Harry paled and pointed through the opening of his cloak. "Not even close. Look at that little one there. That's Hermione's. Shite! Someone must have... grabbed her."

"We need the headmaster," Bill said. "Someone else was here. Either in a cloak like yours or Disillusioned. Damn." Both Disapparated immediately.

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Hermione struggled against the thick arms that were holding her prisoner. One hand was over her mouth, keeping her from calling for help. "Hold still, girl," the man said angrily, tightening his hold and nearly cutting off her air. "Get her wand! Check her pockets." This order was given to someone else. Another person stepped out from the shadows.

It was Narcissa Malfoy. The woman began checking her pockets. Hermione tried to squirm away, but it was no use. The man holding her wouldn't allow much movement.

"Got it," Narcissa said, putting the wand within her own robes. She shook her head in disgust as she looked at Hermione through narrowed eyes. "What in the world would he see in this?" She grabbed a handful of Hermione's hair and pulled roughly. "I wonder if we should keep her alive. Perhaps Severus would be willing to guarantee Draco's life for hers."

Hermione's eyes widened, and dread filled her body. They intended to kill her. Why? What had she done to them? Harry. This was all about Harry. The man holding her suddenly threw her to the ground. She landed oddly and felt a sharp pain explode in her arm as the bone broke. "Ahhh," she cried out, tears immediately filling her eyes and streaming down her face. She clutched at it only to cry out again. *Nothing humorous about breaking your humerus bone,* she thought sarcastically, as she bit her lip in attempt to calm herself.

Through the blurred wetness, she could see Narcissa grinning. "Serves you right, Mudblood," she said coldly. She looked to the man. "What do you think?"

"I say let me kill her. We don't want to risk him finding out what we've done."

"If there is a chance that I can save Draco his father's fate..."

"Draco is all right," Hermione said, hoping to get Narcissa to talk the man into keeping her alive. Severus would come for her. He would know where to find her. She only needed a few more minutes. Surely Harry would go to him and tell him of her disappearance. She'd known that Narcissa Malfoy was as cold and haughty as her husband, but she prayed that she wasn't also a killer. Maybe something inside of the woman would force her to help Hermione live. If Draco were her weak spot, Hermione would use it.

"Ha! Snape probably killed him, too," the man said. "He's probably looking down with Lucius now and hoping we kill her... and make her scream whilst doing so."

"Rodolphus!" Narcissa snapped. "Don't you dare say it!" She knelt next to Hermione. "What do you know?"

Not wanting to give away that Severus knew where Draco was, she said, "Harry told me that he knows where Ginny and Draco are. I've exchanged owls with Ginny. They are alive and well."

Narcissa looked up to Rodolphus who was shaking his head. "Don't believe her," he said gruffly. "She's just telling you what you want to hear." He pushed Hermione roughly with his foot, eliciting a scream of pain as her broken arm moved about.

"Bloody fucking stop that," she bit out. "Please."

He did it again, laughing with glee. "Scream. It's what I want to hear."

"Oh, enough," Narcissa said in annoyance. "I don't care if she lives or dies, but I would like to be able to sleep tonight. Replaying this in my mind won't be pleasant. Leave her be." She walked over and sat in a chair. "How can I know you are telling the truth?"

Swallowing, Hermione asked, "How do I know Harry is all right? How do I know that someone didn't snatch him as well?"

Rodolphus laughed loudly, moving over to sit with Narcissa. "Potter is for the Dark Lord to kill. We didn't touch him. It's you we're after."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "Harming me will harm Harry."

This time Narcissa laughed. "This, girl, is about Severus and what he did to us!"

Her blood ran cold. *I'm not a target because of Harry. It's because of Severus. I can't say anything, or he may be killed.*"What about him? What did he do?"

"He killed my husband," Narcissa said heatedly. "Lucius, one of his oldest friends, died by his hand! He betrayed us after all we've done for him!"

"And my brother was killed because of him," Rodolphus put in.

Hermione knew that Lucius lived and was simply being hidden away. She couldn't say anything though because if word got back to the Dark Lord, then Severus would be the one that paid the price. All of his work for the Order would be lost, and it might ultimately cause Harry to lose in the end. She'd die before she set things right. She'd made a pact with Harry. Until the end it would be.

"What? Nothing to say in his defense?" Narcissa goaded. Within seconds, Hermione watched her proud, artfully made-up face contort in sorrow as she began to tear up. "No matter what Lucius did, I love him. My son loved him."

"Good man, Lucius," Rodolphus commented. "My brother tried to tell the Dark Lord that Snape was working against us, but our Lord wouldn't have it. Killed Rabastan instead." He pulled a long knife from the table next to his chair. "I have a certain way that I like doing things. Don't always have the time to do it though." He leered at her wickedly. "But today I shall take that time."

"You're going to stab me?" Hermione asked, eyes wide, fear evident. This was not how she expected to meet her end. She'd always thought that they would all grow old together, dying when their bodies tired of life and after they'd accomplished many things. Or... if she had to die young, she imagined a Killing Curse being the tool used against her.

Rodolphus looked at his knife affectionately. "Stab is such a nasty word." He kissed the shiny blade. "I'd like to think of myself as an artist. Carving is a specialty of mine, you see. I think it's time that I created a masterpiece. You can be part of that."

Narcissa began sobbing more loudly. "Stop. Don't."

"Shhh, Cissy," he said. "You don't have to watch or listen to her screams."

"Dr-Draco won't come back if something happens to me," Hermione blurted, seeing an opening. Both looked at her. "He and Ginny are lovers, and she is one of my best friends. He'll know that you did this and not come back." Her words were directed to the crying Narcissa in hopes of swaying her. "Please."

This time, Rodolphus snarled, "Shut your mouth! They'll never know we did this. Do you think we want the Dark Lord to know? He'll have us killed for disobeying his orders."

"How can you prove that he lives and that you are telling the truth?" Narcissa asked. "I just don't believe he would side with a Weasley over his father."

"He took her so that his father wouldn't hurt her and so that the Dark Lord wouldn't find her. They were in a cave near Hogsmeade for a while, and then, they moved to a flat in the village. They tried to get money from Gringotts, but Bill Weasley spotted them. Draco has a fake account there, thanks to a bet he won with a goblin. Bill... er... followed them and brought them someplace where only Harry knows. It's the truth. He is alive. You can check it out."

Looking to her brother-in-law, Narcissa said, "Perhaps we should just ask around. Maybe we can work something out with Snape to find Draco."

"No. We can find him on our own, Cissy. If Snape finds out, he will kill us whether we've touched her or not." He sighed. "Don't tell me you've changed your mind. He KILLED your husband and as good as killed my brother!"

"I don't want to die," Hermione pleaded pitifully, seeing that the woman was undecided. She'd never been more frightened in her life.

"Neither did Lucius!" Rodolphus yelled.

"No," Narcissa began, "he didn't, but I don't think I can go through with it. We can just keep her down here. Nobody will ever know."

"Cissy, I'm going to do what I have to do." He pointed his wand at her. *Stupefy!* The jet of light hit her before she could move. She slumped down and fell from her chair onto the floor.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath and started crying silently. Severus would be too late. Her only ally, if you could call it that, was now gone. Thoughts of her grandparents, her parents, and her childhood filled her mind. They had always worried for her when she became part of the Wizarding world, never understanding it. They would be so disappointed in her. She'd never fully explained how things were going. She'd lied to them about her plans for Christmas, about other things as well. She thought of Ron and how his ears turned as red as his hair when he was angry or embarrassed. She thought of Harry's beautiful green eyes. "Oh, Harry, no," she mumbled. This would be too much for him. Would it keep him from doing what he needed to do? Would Severus guide him? Severus! She began sobbing in earnest. As Rodolphus neared, she shut her eyes, not wanting to see him. Instead, she concentrated on her memories of Severus...those dark eyes gazing at her intently, the feel of becoming one with him, the rare affectionate smile that he would sometimes give her, the silkiness of his voice, the graceful gait he glided about the castle with, and so many other things that she loved.

"Now, be a good girl," Rodolphus whispered excitedly. "Let's hear you scream." She felt a tug at her arm and heard the ripping of fabric. She screamed as loudly as she could. Not that anyone would hear her and be able to help.

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Severus entered the grounds with Dumbledore after another fruitless search for Potter's girlfriend. He looked off in the direction of Hagrid's old hut and saw Grubbly-Plank running about with Fang giving chase. "Really," he said indignantly. "I thought her to be more..." His words trailed away as he saw a tight-lipped McGonagall heading them off. Something was wrong.

"What is it, Minerva?" Dumbledore asked immediately.

"Potter and Granger were here. I don't know where they came from, but as Poppy and I were talking, they came running up. He was demanding that we tell him about Bill Weasley and his family." She looked between the two of them. "They ran out and Disapparated before either of us could catch them," she admitted, looking disappointed. "I tried to get them to wait, but you know how Potter is when he is of the mind to check into something."

"Impudent little bastard," Severus swore, causing McGonagall's brows to rise to her hairline.

"Now, hold on, Severus," Dumbledore said. "Where are you going? You don't know where they are off to. Let me Floo headquarters first."

"Hermione doesn't need to be out of the castle. I don't give a fuck about Potter," Severus said angrily. "I told you to ward them in! He can't be trusted to keep his arse where it belongs!"

McGonagall's mouth was hanging open as she tried to make sense of what he said. The headmaster was about to speak when the stomping of feet from behind them interrupted.

"Weasley! Potter!" Severus said, moving forward. He looked around. "Where is she?"

"Gone! Disappeared from right behind me," Potter said between breaths, dropping his cloak to the ground.

Without waiting to hear the rest, Severus turned and hurried away towards the castle. He could hear them all calling behind him and talking excitedly, but he didn't care. He knew how to find her, and he had to do it quickly before she was harmed. Who would dare do this? Who would dare snatch his witch? He'd deal with Potter later. *Bastard! This is his fault.*

"*Accio parchment!*" he said immediately upon entering his rooms. Zooming to his hand quickly, he intoned, *Locus Hermione!*

*Currently in the second dungeon of Malfoy Manor with Rodolphus Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy... in pain.*

"Bloody fucking hell," he mumbled. He'd only been in there once many years earlier. He hoped that nothing had changed. Otherwise, he'd be Apparating dangerously and could possibly be killed. Who would save Hermione then?

*In pain.* They were hurting her. Why? Realization hit him. She was being punished for things he'd done. Who had ordered this? The Dark Lord seemed anything but displeased. No, this was something personal. He would kill them for it. The both of them.

Rushing back out, he met up with the others near the front entrance. "Out of my way," he said hurriedly.

"We need to find her," Potter said, trying to pull on his arm.

"I am going to get her now," Severus replied, glaring darkly at him and shrugging away.

"Wait! If you know where she is, I want to come! I can help."

"You've helped enough already, Potter! Leading her from the castle for starters," he yelled. "I haven't time for this."

Dumbledore had to restrain Harry to keep him from following. After he passed the main gate, he concentrated and Disapparated to what he hoped would be the right place. After only a moment of disorientation, he heard a bone-chilling scream that could only belong to his Hermione. He ran forward, wand drawn.

She was huddled in the middle of the room on the floor, and Rodolphus Lestrange hovered over her with only his knife drawn. The man noticed him just as he entered, but he wasn't quick enough to get his wand. Severus disarmed him easily and sent a silent spell to slam him against the wall, knocking him momentarily unconscious.

"Hermione," he said, kneeling and trying to pull her up. She began sobbing and yelping in pain. "What has he done to you?"

"M-my arm is broken," she said in a raspy voice.

There was a little blood on her arm where he'd skimmed her skin as he sliced through her sleeve. "You'll be all right," he said. "Bones and abrasions mend."

Her pupils were dilated, her eyes red and puffy, her face streaked with tears and dirt. "It hurts. I was so afraid. He wanted to kill me. Cut... cut me up." She swallowed thickly and added, "Artwork."

Severus was all too familiar with Rodolphus' hobby, having seen it many times before. He looked down at his witch and took in her disheveled state. Her voice and the way she looked pulled at his heart. *He'd intended to kill her. He'd hurt her, and for that, he would pay with his life.* The moment he heard a groan, he raised his head, and something inside of him snapped. "Rodolphus," he snarled. "Time to meet your brother."

He stood, leaving Hermione whimpering behind him, and strode over to his one time friend. "How dare you touch what's mine, you bastard? Did you do this on orders?"

"Snape, wait. Let's make a deal," Rodolphus said, rising and holding his hands up in front of him.

"Were you making a deal with my concubine when you put your blade through her clothing?" Severus asked, pointing his wand menacingly. "Speak now."

"Don't tell the Dark Lord about this Snape. We just wanted you to lose someone the way we have," Rodolphus pleaded. "Wait. Wait."

Severus strode forward, swished his wand violently, and thought, *Sectumsempra!*

A large gash appeared in the man's face, and he instantly grabbed at his face, hollering in pain. Severus repeated the spell, causing another gash to appear. This time it was across his chest. When the man yelled again, Severus laughed and said, "Oh, the irony of it all. Here I have a man that gets aroused from hearing the screams of others and seeing their blood induced by his blade. Does your own turn you on?"

"You bastard! I'll kill you! I'll kill your bit..."

"Wrong answer, dear friend," Snape said, smiling in amusement. Twice more, he lashed out. This time his foe fell and writhed upon the floor. Not to let the man move away and die without goading him, Severus hurried over, pulled the man up by the throat, and said, "Shall I send regards to your dear widow, Rodolphus?"

"Sn-Snape, you fucking bastard, I should have killed you instead."

"You're too slow and not clever enough. I win again," Severus said, tugging at the man's neck in one precise movement. The resounding snap surprised him. It had gone too silent for his liking. What had changed? He spun around to see Hermione, eyes wide with shock, scooting back.

"You killed him!" she blurted.

"I did," he said, wiping his hands on a handkerchief he pulled from his robes and tossing it onto Rodolphus' body when he was done. He made his way back to her and hated the way she cringed when his hand touched her cheek. "What is it?"

"But... you killed him." She moved her face away.

He hadn't meant to kill him in such a way, especially not with her watching. He hadn't been able to control his emotions. "Hermione, I won't hurt you. Never you. He deserved to die. He would have killed you. If I hadn't finished him today, we would have been looking over our shoulders for him to attack us again."

She rocked back and forth, crying silently. He reached out to touch her again, but a gasp from the other side of the room caused him to rise quickly and point his wand. "Don't do it, Narcissa!" He had been uncertain as to what was wrong with her, but he should have been more careful. Now, he had a wand pointed at him.

"You killed Lucius," she accused. "And Rodolphus!"

"Do you think to take on me in a duel, Narcissa?"

"Did you kill Draco?" she asked, wand shaking.

"I did not kill Draco," he said evenly. "Put your wand away."

From behind him, Hermione said, "I tried to tell her that Draco is alive."

"Is it true?" she asked anxiously, looking back and forth between them.

In this moment, Severus neatly disarmed her, surprised that two wands flew to him. He recognized one as Hermione's. "Now that I have your attention," he said in a bored voice, "you might care to know that your son is fine. However, after seeing how you've conspired with your dear sister's husband to harm *my* concubine, he shan't remain so."

Narcissa charged him and tried to beat on him with her fists. "You've taken Lucius from me, and now, you want to harm Draco. Draco who adores you...always has! Lucius has always been here for you. What did we ever do to deserve this treachery? Is the Dark Lord's hate more important than our friendship? You are..."

Severus cut off her words by squeezing her throat slightly. "Enough!"

Hermione stood and made her way to him. "Please stop, Severus. Don't do it!"

He looked at her oddly. "Stay out of this, *girl*." He lessened his grip on Narcissa, but he did not release her. "Lucius... is alive."

"You jest!"

"I do not. I have him in a safe place. I couldn't follow our Lord's orders. I value our friendship too much to kill him without good cause," he said. "That does not make it all right for you to harm what's mine."

"She told him to stop. He Stunned her," Hermione interjected. "Please, Severus, no."

"Enough, Hermione!" he said angrily.

Narcissa collapsed against Severus' chest. "Thank you. Thank you. What will I do? I want to go to him. Help me, Severus. Please."

Severus looked at her distastefully. "Control yourself. I cannot go against the Dark Lord, Narcissa. He would wish you dead for your betrayal, and he shall know of it. I keep no secrets from him." He raised an eyebrow. "Aside from Lucius being alive of course. Our Lord will have to believe that you are dead, too. Can you live all of your days locked away with Lucius?"

She nodded vigorously. "If it will save my son's life and my own, I can. I will do what I have to do."

"Very well," he agreed with a curt nod. "Tell me of the young Delacour girl. What's happened to her?"

Narcissa looked confused. "I Stunned her and smashed a few things to make it look as if someone was searching for a particular item." She looked away. "I had to force Rodolphus to stop his *game* with the older one. The screaming... I hate it. He told me to leave quickly while he set things up to make Potter want to come have a look around. We knew he would, and we knew he would bring your little lover."

"There was no trace of the girl," Severus said.

"I swear I don't know, Severus. She was fine. Rodolphus must have... oh... taken her."

"Well, if that's the case, I doubt she'll ever be found...what's left of her anyway." Rodolphus probably killed her in some secluded spot, leaving her for Muggles to find. "I will bring you to Lucius."

"Should I leave everything as it is upstairs?" Narcissa asked, voice shaking.

He nodded. "I must see to my concubine first. She's hurt."

"All right," she said and looked behind him to Hermione. "My family means everything to me." It was her attempt at an explanation.

Hermione remained silent, so Severus lifted his wand again in Narcissa's direction. "Forgive me. *Stupefy!*"

"What was that for?" Hermione asked, finally finding her voice.

"I can't trust that she won't leave or inform someone of what has transpired here." He placed Narcissa down gently.

"Severus, you're not really on Harry's side. Are you?" Hermione asked suddenly.

He straightened and looked at her, eyes narrowing, as he put away his wand. "What are you playing at? There's no time for that right now. We've had this talk already."

"You killed him," she said, nodding to Rodolphus' body. "You would have killed her."

Severus shook his head. "I wouldn't have killed her unless..." He held a hand out to her. "Come."

After a moment's deliberation, she went to him and allowed him to hold her. "I thought I was going to die, but I didn't say anything. I didn't tell them about your plans."

"I know you didn't," he said in a voice meant to soothe her.

"Ow! It hurts when I touch it... really badly."

"To Poppy then," he said. "Hold onto me with your good arm."

As quickly as he could, he guided her to the infirmary. A few students saw them, but none were thick enough to question him or Hermione. He threw dark gazes at everyone. When Poppy finally came out of her office, she quickly put Hermione in a bed and mended her broken bone before cleaning her person and giving her fresh clothing.

He sat with her until the draught Poppy gave her put her to sleep, kissing her on the lips before he left. He uneasily made his way back to Malfoy Manor to retrieve Narcissa. Something was wrong. He could feel it. Hermione hadn't hardly looked at him or talked to him since they'd been back at the castle. She'd recounted to the headmaster about what happened to her from the moment Rodolphus grabbed her and Disapparated with her until the moment he showed up to help. She'd then allowed him to tell his own rendition of how he'd saved her. He simply said that he'd struggled with Rodolphus, and the man met his unfortunate demise, leaving him free to help both Hermione and Narcissa who had been forced to go along with his plan.

Perhaps it was too much to take in at one time. She simply needed to think things over. Yes, he'd been brutal with Rodolphus, but knowing that the man had hurt her, made her cry and feel pain, he'd wanted to inflict the same pain on him. If he were in the same situation a second time, he would do it again. From the disapproving glares McGonagall sent his way, he knew that she had figured out a few things about his relationship with Hermione. Bill Weasley had also figured it out, and he'd even gone as far as to clap him on the shoulder, saying something about knowing how it felt. Potter had been told of the news concerning his young lover. He hadn't taken it well and was sent to headquarters for the night to be under the watchful eyes of Molly Weasley.

Severus waited until darkness fell before slipping back into the castle with Narcissa. This time he made certain that no one saw him, cloaking her body before leaving her home. He swept through the infirmary and opened Lucius' warded room.

"Severus, what are you doing here?" Lucius asked, placing his book aside and rising.



Pulling the Disillusioned sheet from his bundle, he revealed the man's wife. "You have a guest, old friend."

"What the hell is going on?" Lucius asked, taking her from him.

"She and Rodolphus thought to have a bit of fun with Hermione." Severus watched as realization dawned on Lucius' face. "I didn't hurt her, but she is lucky she still breathes. I cannot say the same for her accomplice."

He turned and made his way to the door. Once there, he pulled out his wand. "Lucius, you do realize that even though we are old friends, there might come a time when I might have to fend for myself and choose another path."

"As would I," Lucius said in understanding.

Severus nodded, pointed his wand at Narcissa to revive her, and left, warding the door behind him. He stopped in to sit at Hermione's bedside for a few moments, wanting her to awaken. He took her hand in his and thought of the day's events once again. She had suffered at his expense. He hated that. He'd done the right thing by avenging her, hadn't he? If this caused trouble between them... Well, he hated to think of what he would do to make certain she remained *his* witch. Again, he kissed her lips and left before an overwhelming emotion forced him to make a fool of himself.

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**Southern's Notes:** Real life bites, I say. Sorry, mates. I know it's been a week. After the last chapter, I hadn't much interest in writing this one. Not simply for any lack of response to the previous one, but I knew most people wouldn't really like this chapter. I hope this chapter is all right. I only wanted the rescue part in here. The next bit will be up soon. I did make Snape a bit dark here, but I firmly believe that he is simply a dark man. Fear and anger will make the best of us do some harsh things.

Unfortunately for Snape, this is a lot for Hermione to take in. I think she is now rethinking her image of him. He'll have to tread carefully if he doesn't want to destroy the relationship they've built.

## Prelude to a War

*Chapter 28 of 42*

Hermione reflects on the things that happened. Severus has a meeting with the Dark Lord. Everything is about to change for them all.

**Disclaimer:** It's not my creation, but I do enjoy manipulating things. No money for me though. Enjoy.

**A big thanks will always go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay, and cheers go to my friends over at Potter\_Place.**

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Madam Pomfrey smiled warmly. "Your arm is completely mended!"

Hermione nodded. "I could tell when I woke." This came out a little more sarcastically than she'd intended.

"Well," the matron said, tone sharp, clearly offended, "you shouldn't have gone there in the first place! We were worried about you and Potter both."

Sighing, Hermione turned away. She didn't need a lecture or for anyone to tell her that what she did was foolish. She knew that already. Harry always did things before thinking, and normally, she went along with it. She had her own reasons. *If he had gone alone, they might have done something to him or worse: brought him to Voldemort. I was right to not allow him to go alone, even though it nearly cost my life. The Wizarding community could have suffered a far worse loss if he'd been killed.*

Having tuned out Madam Pomfrey, she nearly missed when she said that she would be able to leave as soon as Dumbledore fetched her and brought her to wherever she was to be kept. "Will he be by soon?" she asked hopefully. She wasn't ready to speak with Severus and hoped to be gone before he could visit. There was much that she had to think about, and she wanted to be prepared. They would have a talk...a long one.

"He will return shortly," Madam Pomfrey confided. "He left earlier with Professor Snape. They had something important to discuss." She shrugged. "Not that I was eavesdropping, mind."

Before Hermione could reply, a rustling of fabric alerted them to someone's presence. It was the headmaster. "Good to see you awake."

"Good to be awake," she returned evenly.

"I suppose you are ready to get back to your private location?" he asked softly.

"Please."

He nodded to the table next to her bed. "Put on Harry's cloak, and I shall lead you."

As quickly as she could, she put on the cloak and slipped the shoes next to the bed onto her feet, not bothering with socks. She followed behind him quietly, making certain to avoid others when they passed by. In record time, she found herself sitting on the settee in the common room that she shared with Harry.

After the headmaster summoned Dobby to bring her a meal and something to drink, he asked, "Is there anything you wish to talk about or ask?"

She shook her head. "I said all I had to say yesterday."

"Hermione, if you remember anything at all that you may have forgotten yesterday, please feel comfortable in telling me." He sat down across from her. "Perhaps there was something else that happened after Severus got there, and you might have only remembered it today."

The hair on the back of her neck stood up. He was trying to find out information about Severus or to see if he'd been told the truth about what occurred. Why? Why question someone he supposedly trusted? Did that mean...? "It was as he said, sir. Please don't make me talk about it again. The whole situation..." Her voice trailed away as tears came to her eyes. "I just never thought that would happen. I could have died. If he hadn't come for me, I would have."

Dumbledore nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, but Dobby returned with a tray of food and drink. Though Hermione had no appetite, she pretended to be interested in

her food. The headmaster just sat in his chair, humming to himself as she nibbled on a slice of toast. She eyed him warily. What did he really want? She would not betray Severus. Severus had lied to him about some of what had gone on. He didn't elaborate much on how he'd killed Lestrangle, and he'd made Narcissa sound as if she'd barely had anything to do with it. That was unsettling. It was like he was covering for his friends.

"Have you eaten enough, my dear?" he asked kindly.

Hermione nodded. "I suppose so." She put the tray aside. "What do you really want to talk about, sir?"

Dropping all pretenses, he looked at her sternly for a moment before speaking. "I cannot prove it, but I believe that things have gotten out of hand with you and Professor Snape."

"What?" she asked incredulously. "*Severus saved my life!* I would have been killed if he hadn't come for me!" Saying this aloud seemed to make her feel better about what she'd witnessed. She pushed those thoughts aside. "Of course, you aren't talking about yesterday, are you?"

He shook his head. "I'm not." He leaned forward and said, "Hermione, if at any time you would like things to change, you need only to let me know."

She opened her mouth and closed it. Things had already changed, but she didn't feel right speaking to Dumbledore about anything personal. She was not going to say anything to contradict what Severus had said. Not without talking to him first. "Sir, he is not my professor any longer. You told him that if..."

"I know what I told him," he said. He sat back in his chair. "I am wondering if I should send you to Grimmauld Place."

"I want to stay here," she said immediately. "When is Harry coming back?"

"Harry will be back shortly, but I am afraid that I do not trust either of you to stay in these rooms as instructed. I am going to have to lock you in," he said firmly.

"Lock us in?" she asked incredulously. "That's unfair! We've been caged up as it is!"

"And look what happened the first time you left school grounds," he said kindly. "I don't want you to think that I am the only one who thinks that this is a good idea. Severus agrees."

"Oh, yeah, he would," she said bitterly.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "I get the feeling you wish to talk about something. I am prepared to listen to what that might be."

"You're interested in finding out if Severus has been telling you the truth! That's what I think. He's told you all that's gone on, and I'll not sit here and go through that again. I want to forget about it!" she said, nearly yelling.

The headmaster rose and shook his head sadly. "To be honest, I only thought you might like someone aside from Severus or Harry to talk to about the trauma you had to endure." He smoothed down his robes. "I trust Severus enough to not question what he tells me, and I simply wanted to be certain that you were handling your *relationship* with him."

Fearing that she'd offended him, she said, "Sir, I'm sorry. I've just..." She didn't know what to say to explain her harsh words.

"Been through something traumatic," he said, smiling once again. "I will always be willing to listen to you."

"Thanks."

Hermione watched as he strode away, purple robes swaying noiselessly. Was it true? Did he have that much faith in Severus? Guilt washed over her. Had she lost faith in her lover? She'd jumped to that conclusion because it was what she was feeling inside. Dumbledore had only been trying to help. She couldn't condone what Severus had done. Well, that wasn't completely true. She didn't approve of the way he'd done it at any rate.

Since she'd opened her eyes that morning, she'd been playing what had happened over and over again in her mind. She could still see Severus' eyes and expression. Of all the times she'd seen him acting particularly nasty, she'd never seen him look that way or heard him speaking in such a way. She kept hearing the snap of Rodolphus Lestrangle's neck, kept hearing the way he'd talked to her when she feared he was going to do the same to Narcissa Malfoy, and kept hearing the conversation he'd had with the woman. He had been a different person. She'd needed comfort, and though he'd shown her that he cared, he'd sent mixed signals. He'd referred to her as a girl and a concubine. Was that how he and the other Death Eaters truly saw her? It made her feel less respectable.

She wasn't so naïve that she didn't know what Death Eaters did, but she supposed she'd always thought that he was an exception. She'd never imagined him to actually take part in... distasteful activities. The only thing she could admit was to feeling utterly stupid. How had she never thought of him in such a way? Could she love a murderer? He'd killed a man with his bare hands. There was really no struggle at all, and he'd taken pleasure in what he'd done. It was one thing to kill someone while fighting for your life, but to toy with him and kill him so brutally?

"Stop it," she said aloud, moving from the settee to her own room. "That bastard would have killed me if Severus hadn't come to find me." She shivered slightly, remembering the stench of his breath, the way he'd laughed as she'd screamed, and the feel of his blade upon her skin. *He deserved what he got*, she thought bitterly, buried feelings surfacing. The way she felt deep down disappointed her slightly. That was the worst of it, aside from nearly becoming some psychotic man's masterpiece of course. She wasn't a violent person. If she'd been given a choice, she would have requested that he be sent to Azkaban for an unpleasant life spent in prison, but would he have gotten out and come after her again as Severus had said?

It was likely. Besides, if Severus didn't know, who would? *Those* people were his friends. When she'd asked if he was truly not on Harry's side, his eyes...for a moment...had been narrowed and filled with malice, and his voice had been filled with hostility. If she had pressed further, would he have bodily forced her to keep quiet?

*No, he cares about me and likely loves me. He said he'd never hurt me. He said he would see no harm come to me after he'd killed Rodolphus. I've nothing to fear and am ridiculous for questioning his loyalties... again. Everything will be clearer once the shock of it all wears off.*

Hermione heard a sound outside her door. She opened it and saw Harry slumped against the wall. "Oh, Harry," she cried, leaving her room to hold him. His arms came around her as if she were a lifeline. His pain mixed with hers, and she let slip all of the emotions she was feeling, sobbing loudly.

"It's my fault," he said, voice hoarse. "I shouldn't have let you come with me. I should have waited."

"That was my decision, and Severus found me anyway."

"Yes, I did." The silky voice of her lover startled her.

Wide-eyed, she turned to look at him. "Severus, I didn't know you were here."

"I can see that," he said, brow raised.

"Dumbledore sent him to get me," said Harry.

"Yes, he felt the need to allot to me the distasteful task of talking some sense into him," Severus said, nodding to Harry. "It remains to be seen if it has worked or not." He backed away, an odd expression upon his face. "Well, now that he's in good hands, I shall leave you to it. I am pleased to see that you are up and about."

"Wait!" Hermione called, moving out of Harry's arms and following Severus. "That's it? You're just going to leave?"

"I have things to do." He sneered at Harry for a moment. "I'm certain *he* can comfort you."

"Don't you dare be that way!" she yelled, not caring if Harry was in the room with them. "You *have* to talk to me about yesterday! Don't you dare try to turn this around so you can get out of discussing this!"

"There is nothing to discuss, Hermione," he said. "If you will excuse me, I truly must leave."

"If you leave..." She allowed the threat to linger.

He spun around immediately and strode back to her. "If I leave? Go on. Finish it."

"I'll not forgive you," she said determinedly. "I really need you right now."

Growling slightly, he said, "Don't you think that I want to have you right now?"

"I'm *not* talking about sex," she said, stepping back. "I need you to help me through this. I know you only did...*that* because you felt you had to, but I just need to be reassured that it was just the once."

He eyed her oddly. "What are you talking about?"

"The way you killed him." She looked down to his hands, which were currently clenched into fists at his sides, and she pulled them up in front of her. "I'm confused. I mean... I know that you had to do it, but you were so violent. I just need to be reassured that you'll never be that way again."

His hands unclenched and clasped hers. "There will be time for words later, but if I keep the Dark Lord waiting any longer," he eyed Potter warily, "he'll not be pleased with me."

She nodded. "All right, but I want to talk to you. Seriously. Please come back later."

"I shall," he said curtly, releasing her hands. He turned on his heel and left her there.

Hermione didn't realize she was sagging until Harry grabbed her. "Are you all right? What the hell was that about? What really happened yesterday?"

"Nothing, Harry."

"Nothing? It sounded like something!"

She could see the misery in his eyes and hear it in his voice. "I am sorry about Gabrielle," she whispered.

"Maybe she's still alive. Maybe he didn't hurt her," he said hopefully.

Hermione shook her head sadly. "No, Harry, if he took her, he did horrible things to her."

"Don't you say that," he yelled angrily, shaking her slightly. "Don't!"

"He was crazy! He was laughing while I screamed," she admitted, pushing him away. "I've never been so scared in my entire life."

Pulling her to him roughly, Harry said, "He'll never hurt you now. I'll never let anyone hurt you."

*He can't hurt me because Severus was there for me. Severus will always come for me.* She relaxed in his arms, seeking the comfort that she had previously sought from her lover.

"Don't leave me, Hermione," Harry said suddenly. "You're the only one that understands. Always have. When Ron's been an arse, you've been there for me."

"I'll always be here for you, Harry."

"When I thought the worst about what happened to you, I wanted to give up. Losing Gabrielle was hard enough, but to lose you as well would be devastating. I wouldn't know what to do."

"Shhh. Let me just hold you." She wondered if Severus would disapprove and realized she didn't truly care. Not at that moment. Harry needed her.

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"Are you certain?" hissed the Dark Lord.

"I am." Severus had allowed his Lord to see what had happened with Rodolphus up until the point where he grabbed Narcissa by the throat. "If Bella had known, she would have been there. I don't think she would betray you. Not even for her sister and husband. Those were Narcissa's last words before her life left her."

Voldemort nodded, ruby eyes glinting. "I will find out."

Severus stood back and waited as the man left to speak with Bellatrix. In the case that one of them wanted to witness Narcissa's demise, he hoped that the false memory he'd created of him killing Narcissa would be enough to fool them.

"Bastard!" Bellatrix screeched. "My sister! How dare you touch her?"

He pulled his wand before she could get to him. "What would you have done had you seen her disobeying our Lord? Harming what's yours? It's what you tried to do. There is more to it." He'd luckily seen the memory flash through Narcissa's mind when he'd been using Legilimency on her to see if she'd played more of a role in the hurting of his Hermione.

"That will do, Severus."

Slowly putting away his wand, Severus watched as the Dark Lord grabbed Bellatrix by the face roughly and gazed into her eyes. A few moments later, he pulled his wand and hissed a few words. After a while, Bellatrix began to cry silently, and she was released.

"Memory Charm," he said triumphantly. "Luckily, she was weak when casting it, and I found it very easy to break." The Master seemed quite pleased.

Bellatrix, however, was as distraught as he'd ever seen her. "I wasn't going to allow it. She Obliviated me. My own sister."

"There, there, Bella," the Dark Lord said dispassionately. "You'll be fine. Husbands are easy to come by. In time, you'll be over their treachery. You have proved to be a most loyal servant. I hold you in high regards."

Bellatrix nodded numbly, eyeing Severus shrewdly. "Where is her body?"

"I've burned her and placed her ashes with those of Lucius," he said. "Though they ultimately betrayed our cause, I still... appreciated the friendship they'd shown to me whilst alive." He sighed. "Your husband lies in a forest not too far from Malfoy Manor. I took no time with him, as I owed him nothing. I could lead you there of course."

"Yes," she answered immediately. "I would see him buried properly."

"Not now," their Lord interjected. "We've a Potter to kill. This has gone on long enough." He pulled Severus to him and placed his hand upon his Dark Mark, summoning all followers to him. "Today, we attack Hogwarts. I know the boy is there."

Severus allowed a tight smile and a nod, moving away to take his place, but internally, he was horrified. He simply hoped that he had enough time to warn Dumbledore. That gave him pause. Did he want to warn him? *Why not let things end now? It'll keep the Potter brat away from my witch. I saw the way they were holding onto each other, taking comfort whilst in misery.* No, that would not do. Albus deserved fair warning. Then, if the headmaster or Potter were meant to perish, so be it. Hermione would be safe.

Remembering Hermione, Severus spoke again. "May I speak, my Lord?"

"You may."

"My witch is at the castle. I would like a chance to remove her."

"Request denied," the Dark Lord said immediately. "Nobody leaves until we all go together. Dumbledore and Potter will go down. I shall instruct all to not harm your concubine."

"Very well," Severus said, hope for warning the headmaster fading. He schooled his features to pretend indifference and waited obediently as his Lord began greeting those Apparating to them.

A thought occurred to Severus. If Hermione would happen to look at her map, perhaps he could convey a feeling to her through it. Maybe she could warn the headmaster for him. It was a long shot, but he would try to convey the message to her. If he only had his parchment, he could easily get her to do his bidding. His new hope faded as he realized that he'd warded them in.

They were trapped in their room. *Trapped but safe. They won't be found right away. By then, Aurors and other Order members will be about. She will be safe.* On the off chance that the headmaster would be there, he would try to subliminally reach her anyway. He couldn't take the chance that Bella might accidentally hex her in retaliation.

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For some reason, Hermione was compelled to slip away from Harry's side and check Severus' parchment. She felt a little guilty for treating him so harshly...especially when he had to go meet the Dark Lord. He truly needed his wits about him. If she'd ruined anything, she'd never forgive herself. She pulled out the parchment, held her hand over it, and said, "*Locus Severus.*"

*Currently on the Kincardineshire east coast, in the Dunnottar Castle with Lord Voldemort, feeling quite distraught.*

"Well, that's not good," she whispered. Over the next few minutes, she cast the spell to see the several changes in the wording.

*Currently on the Kincardineshire east coast, in the Dunnottar Castle with Lord Voldemort, feeling horrified.*

"Oh, no, Severus," she mumbled, bringing a hand up to her mouth and imagining the worst of scenarios. "Is Voldemort upset over the loss of Lestrage? Over Narcissa?"

*Currently on the Kincardineshire east coast, in the Dunnottar Castle with Lord Voldemort, feeling confused.*

She lifted her hand to erase the words, but she noticed that it was adding another part to the sentence.

*Wishing there was a way to warn the headmaster of an attack on Hogwarts.*

Hermione stood up. "Oh, my God!" It was no wonder he was distraught and horrified. For some reason, Voldemort must have decided to move things forward. She had to tell the headmaster. Shoving the parchment back in her nightstand's drawer, she ran out and shook Harry awake.

"Harry! Wake up! Harry!"

"Wuzamatter?" he asked groggily.

She pulled him up roughly by the front of his shirt. "Voldemort is coming! We have to warn the headmaster!"

He jumped up and away from her, pulling his wand. "What?"

"I've had a message from Severus. We're to warn the headmaster about Voldemort! They are going to attack the school!"

"Shite!"

"I know!"

"Come on," he yelled, pulling her towards the exit. It took them only a moment to realize that they were locked in. "Shite!"

"Oh, think, think," Hermione chanted. "Floo? Do we have powder hidden for emergency?"

"No, we don't!" Harry said. "Are you sure, Hermione? Did he send an owl?"

"An owl! Where is Hedwig?"

"Out! I'll open a window."

"All right. I'll check for Floo powder. Maybe they thought to leave some incase of emergency."

Each went their own way in hopes of finding a way to contact the headmaster. Hermione found no powder near the grate. Harry didn't see Hedwig. Nor did he see any other owls about.

On a whim, Hermione asked the painting of the sleeping man on the wall to wake up. He didn't open his eyes until Harry threatened to slice the canvas. When she had his attention, she said, "Sir, could you please get a message to the headmaster for us? It's important!"

He yawned and stretched dramatically. "No. Sorry." With that, he closed his eyes and pretended to snore.

"What do you mean you won't?" Harry asked hotly. "It's your duty to help the current headmaster round here!"

The painting's face contorted into a vicious sneer. "I don't have to do anything you say. *bnly* answer questions the headmaster asks. If I don't want to step away from my painting, I won't. It's not like I'm a painting in his office or anything."

Harry lifted his wand to blast him, but Hermione stopped him. "Look, we really need your help."

Suddenly, the man's eyebrows wriggled up and down. "Mmmm. You again."

Hermione's spine stiffened. "Pardon?"

He winked and leered at her suggestively. "Be glad I didn't gossip about the extreme liberties you have given away in this common room. It did, however, force me to seek out the portrait of an old lover."

"You loathsome wanker!" Hermione exclaimed indignantly, completely embarrassed by what the painting had revealed in front of Harry.

Harry's face reddened, but he only asked, "You mean paintings shag? Not sure I wanted to know about that."

"Oh, I assure you..."

"We don't care!" Hermione yelled in annoyance, shooting a spark from her wand at the painting, causing him to flee.

"Great! What now?"

"Now, we wait."

"For?"

"Dumbledore will be round to check on you," she said, pulling her hair up and out of her face. She fastened it with an elastic tie that was lying on the table.

"It feels like we're not thinking of something!" Harry said, sitting down.

"I know. Maybe I should try to get through the spell keeping us in."

At that moment, Dobby popped in with a large tray laden with food. Harry and Hermione looked at each other and started laughing.

"Well, it's official. We've gone mad." Harry grinned. "I'm feeling a bit thick right about now. You?"

"I agree," Hermione said. "Dobby, we have an important job for you. We need Professor Dumbledore! It's an emergency."

"Dobby is happy to be getting the headmaster, he is."

"Quickly," Harry urged. The elf nodded and *popped* away. "I don't think we would have ever thought of that. "

"I'll be right back," Hermione said, running to her room. She quickly used the loo and pulled her parchment from her drawer. *Locus Severus*." She gasped.

*Currently on the Kincardineshire east coast, in the Dunnottar Castle with Lord Voldemort and numerous Death Eaters, feeling determined and hoping his witch received her message to keep safe.*

"Oh, no. They're congregating! The lot of them! They'll be here soon."

She heard Harry's excited voice calling to her, and she quickly went to him, noticing he was not alone. "Headmaster! We've news. Severus sent word for me to tell you that the Dark Lord and numerous Death Eaters will attack Hogwarts!"

"Harry's just told me. There is no time to waste. Come with me," he said quickly. To Harry, he added, "Put on your cloak."

"What of Hermione?" Harry asked in confusion.

"She'll not be targeted by those coming here. Not if Severus is with them. Do as I say, Harry. Do it now."

Hermione was afraid. What if something went wrong? How could they possibly prepare for an attack with so little time? She felt an invisible hand on her shoulder and smiled at what she hoped was Harry's face. "We'll be all right." Why wasn't the headmaster questioning her about how she'd been contacted? How could he be so certain that she wouldn't be targeted? Wasn't she just attacked the day before? It seemed... unreasonable to not at least worry a little. Did he know something they didn't?

"I'll protect you," he said.

She shook her head. "You stay alive, Harry. You worry about yourself first. Promise me."

"No," he said defiantly.

"This is your chance to defeat him, to end all of this. If you have that chance, you take it, Harry. It's you we're counting on. The Wizarding community's future is nothing without you. I won't be able to think clearly if I'm worried about you worrying about me."

"All right," he agreed reluctantly.

They remained quiet as Dumbledore instructed the staff to go about with Portkeys and having the students get to immediate safety at different locations previously allotted for that purpose. After that, he sent Fawkes off with a message to Molly Weasley. He finally spoke to them. "It might take a while, but the students will be safe. The house-elves will help to protect the common rooms until they've all gone. Then, they will be able to help us."

"Sir," Harry asked from their left, "can we win? Can I win?"

"We shall," Dumbledore said positively. "I admit that I didn't expect him to come so soon and without proper warning, but if we can hold off until the Order and Aurors get here, we'll be fine. Perhaps today is the day that Tom Riddle is put to rest once and for all."

"I hope so," Hermione said.

At this point, Dumbledore began only addressing Harry and giving him advice. She paid attention, but from the headmaster's tone, she could tell he was worried.

"Remember, Harry," he was saying, "about all the things he's done to you. Your parents' death was his doing. Cedric's death was his bidding. He used Sirius in an attempt to get you to the Ministry, ultimately causing his demise. He ordered Hagrid's death. He ordered Grawp's death. Now, his followers have taken Gabrielle from you. Use these negative emotions when you face him, Harry. Let them guide you and give you the power to smite him down."

She knew that Harry had to feel those emotions to truly be able to cast a curse to end Voldemort's life. It was the way of things, and the prophecy would have it no other way. Hermione decided to try to summon the anger and fear that Rodolphus had caused her to feel just in case she'd need to use an Unforgivable Curse. Her brow creased as she thought, *Does that make us any better than Severus? Maybe he truly only uses a Killing Curse or other means when he has to. He told me that he felt he had to kill Rodolphus in order to make certain that he didn't come back after us one day.*

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"I will not tolerate any disobeying of my orders," the Dark Lord said, eyeing Bellatrix as he did so. "We must strike now while there is no way for them to find out. That old fool won't know what hit him. There are only a couple of Aurors about, and they mostly stay closer to the train station." He shrugged. "They will be easy enough to destroy, and if any are placed near the gates, we'll simply remove them. Severus shall unlock the gate if it's locked."

Severus listened attentively as their Lord reiterated the plan again. The end was near. One way or another, his double duplicity would come to an end. He was actually relieved. He could finally have a normal life. Screaming brought him out of his reverie. The Dark Lord was casting a Cruciatus Curse against some new recruit.

"Never question my judgment again," he said angrily after he released the man. "Remember what I said about Severus's concubine. She'll likely be with Potter. He is mine, and I don't want either to be touched. Take Dumbledore at will."

He bent down to caress Nagini affectionately and hiss something to her. In a daze, he watched as Voldemort pulled up his hood and walked forward to clasp his arm. "We go to victory, Severus."

"It's been a long time coming, my Lord."

"I sense that you are relieved and hopeful that it will be over quickly."

Severus nodded and admitted, "Yes, I grow weary of being Dumbledore's stooge."

"That all ends today." With a cocky arrogance that only the Dark Lord could possess, he turned to face the others. "Give me victory in any way you can get it. Do this, and you will be in Lord Voldemort's favor. Should you fail... Well, I'll not have to remind you of what will happen. Come."

Following his Lord out onto the unkempt grounds of the dilapidated castle, Severus felt his stomach bubbling nervously. Who would win? Who would die? Would his witch be safe? He looked to his right and saw that Bellatrix had a glazed look in her eyes. At that moment, she gazed at him and nodded. Perhaps he needn't worry about Hermione after all. Bella seemed to accept the fates of her loved ones easy enough, blindly following the Dark Lord's orders without questioning them.

Severus paled. If the Dark Lord won this war, he would have to be certain that nobody ever found Lucius and the others. He'd given Lucius a warning on their last meeting, and the man had agreed that it was nothing that he wouldn't do either. He would dwell on that later. His main concern was staying alive and taking care of his witch.

Southern's Notes: Sorry to stop here, but I have special plans for the next chapter. Any ideas as to which characters might bite the dust? Will Harry win? Voldemort? Who are you pulling for?

There are so many things that I could say right now, but I'd hate to give any of it away. We will see most of the story's characters in the next chapter. I am sorry, but there will be character deaths again soon. I just wanted to give a fair warning to you all. I have it outlined somewhat, and as I don't have any beta jobs due at the moment, I should get it out quicker. Thanks!

My beta is having a hard time with work lately. This is a busy time of year for them, so it took a few days before she could read this over for me. Sorry about that, but I don't feel right uploading without having it checked over. On another note, the next chapter is nearly done since I had the extra days. I'll be sending it to her tomorrow evening. I hope you'll enjoy.

We Do What We Must

Chapter 29 of 42

We see what many characters are thinking before the battle. The battle takes place, and we find out the fate of some characters. Whose side is Snape on?

Disclaimer: All characters have been created by J.K. Rowling. I'm just mucking around with them and not making any money for it. Bummer.

I'd like to say thanks to Charmed_Nay. She's overworked as it is, and she is still able to find time to look over my chapters for me.

Ron couldn't believe what he'd just heard. He slunk back into the shadows of the hallway. His mum was now crying loudly and being held by his older brother, Bill, while Remus put his head in his hands. Voldemort was going to Hogwarts for Harry. Dumbledore wanted Bill, Remus, and any other Order members at headquarters to go to the castle immediately.

"I won't let Harry meet him alone," Ron said determinedly. His heart sank. Where there was Harry, there was sure to be Hermione. "No," he whispered. "I'll be there with the both of you."

Resolutely, he made his way to the room that he had been using to change his clothing. He pocketed his wand and looked in the mirror, startling slightly. His reflection showed how pale and frightened he truly looked. He sat on the edge of the bed and brought his shaking hands up before his eyes. "Steady there, mate," he said. "Can't have you showing them that you're afraid!"

He then looked at the rumpled sheets on the bed and thought of the previous night. Pansy was so good to him, and they had a comfortable relationship. He cared for her deeply. She seemed to really love and want him. It was more than he could say for Hermione. She had moved on to some mystery person. *Hermione*. Ron would have married her if she'd stayed with him. *Whoever she is dating now is a lucky bloke. I hope he treats her right. Better than I did* He frowned slightly. *She probably doesn't really have a boyfriend and is just pretending to have one so I won't be hurt. Always thinking about others, feelings, Hermione is.*

Ron stood suddenly. "It's time," he said firmly. There was a battle to join. The Order would prevail. They had to or else all would be lost. Pansy wouldn't be safe if they didn't. Hermione wouldn't be safe if they didn't. His family would be destroyed. Knowing he would do anything to protect his loved ones, he left the room and walked across

the hall to the room that Draco was using. He knocked once, and the door opened quickly.

"Oh, Weasel, I thought Ginny had come up," Draco said, holding the door open. "What's wrong?"

Brushing past him, Ron made his way to a small chair near the bed. "We need to talk, Draco."

Draco's indignant expression turned to one of surprise at the tone of the boy's voice and the use of his given name. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah, Fawkes came with a message for me mum and the others. They don't want us to know about it, but I heard it anyway."

"Well?" Draco asked impatiently.

"Voldemort is going to attack Hogwarts. They are Portkeying students to safe locations and need all the extra wands that can be there," said Ron unsteadily.

Draco's flesh crawled with unease. "You, uh, want me to go with you?" He wasn't afraid of a fight, but he knew these Death Eaters personally. How would it feel to kill a friend or a friend's parent? Still, he owed his safety and the lives of his parents to Dumbledore and Snape. The least he could do was be a man and fight for them. His main fear was of not surviving. What would Ginevra do without him? He had so many plans for them. He never envisioned fighting in any battles. He'd always assumed that others would do that for him.

"No," Ron said quickly. "I need you to stay here. See to it that my family is safe. Ginny would want to go and be in on it. I don't want her to be any place near it. And," he looked down, "I don't want Pansy to be alone. I doubt she'd want to join in the fight anyway, but I would ask you to take care of her."

Draco couldn't believe it. Ronald Weasley was asking him to take care of his family. *He trusts me enough to put his family in my hands. He believes in my ability to make sure they are all right.* Many emotions filled Draco. He was relieved that he wasn't being asked to accompany him, but could he let Weasley go on his own? *If I remain here, I don't have to worry about being killed or facing those I was once loyal to. If something goes wrong, I can always take Ginevra and not look back.* Gratitude at being trusted was something that he was feeling, but he was uncertain as to why that should affect him. The strangest feeling to pervade him seemed to be one of worth, as he realized how much mettle it had taken Weasley to unashamedly ask him for help in the first place. *They need my help. I'd bet Potter never thought a day would come when I would truly help out.*

"I will," Draco said. "Anything you want me to tell Ginevra?" Ron looked at him blankly. "I thought you'd be sneaking away so that she wouldn't try to follow you."

Nodding, Ron said, "Right. It would be better."

"What do you want me to say and to whom?" Draco asked.

"Tell Ginny that it's for the best that she stay here with Mum. If something happens to any of us, Mum will need her. Tell her that I love her, and I'll be back soon." He stood. "Oh, tell her that I'll make Hermione write if we can't come back right away."

Draco rose and nodded. "Weasley...Ron...I just want you to know that I admire your courage." He extended a hand to his lover's brother. "Take care, mate."

"I will," Ron said, placing his sweaty hand in Draco's. "Tell Mum and Dad that I had to do this. They'll understand." He turned and strode to the door. "Let Pansy know that I wish I could have told her and that last night was the best night I've ever had."

Smirking, Draco said, "I doubt I truly want to know the details, Weasel." He grinned. "I will help them in any way that I can. I promise."

"Thanks," the redhead said, quickly exiting.

For an instant, Draco nearly called back to him and wanted to ask him to stay and not risk his life in battle. Ginevra would be disappointed that her brother was leaving, but it was something that he could understand. Weasley felt strongly about his two friends. For Draco, if it would be Ginevra off that needed help, he would go to her no matter what. It was nothing more than what Weasley was doing. Ginny would understand.

He heard some shouting from below and raced down to the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was holding Ginevra while Pansy stood beside them, clearly dumbfounded at what was happening. Ron, Bill, and Lupin were near the doorway. When Ron saw Draco, he pleaded, "Talk to her."

Draco went to her side and said, "Ginny, he has to go."

"I know!" she yelled. "And I want to go with him! They need our help! We can't just sit around here."

"You will be needed here," Draco said. "I'm staying with you. We need to stay here and help any that might come needing healing or a place to stay. We don't know what's going to happen."

"Dumbledore said for you all to stay here, Gin, even Mum," Bill said. "We have no time to argue on this."

"We won't argue! Just let me come," she snapped.

Draco put his arms around her and pulled her from her mother's grasp. He whispered, "Ginny, stay with your mother. She shouldn't be alone at a time like this when most of her family is fighting a battle. Let her have one of her children with her. She needs you." He gazed into her eyes intently. "I need you."

She opened her mouth and closed it. It was then that Draco felt her trembling and noted the fear in her eyes. "I don't want to lose them," she whispered.

He pulled her close and held her tightly. "Things will work out. You'll see."

Pansy cleared her throat and spoke for the first time. "Ginny, you have more reason to stay than any other."

Draco's eyes narrowed. What was that supposed to mean? He watched suspiciously as she moved to Ron and hugged him. He turned away, allotting them some privacy. His eyes met those of the Weasley matriarch. "I'll talk to her," he said quietly, moving his sobbing girlfriend away from the others and into another room.

"S all right," he whispered, rubbing her back. When she quieted, he asked, "What did Pansy mean?"

She sniffed, wiping her eyes as she did so. "I've only just found out."

"Found out what?" he asked.

"I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Ginny shook her head in irritation. "What do you mean *how*?"

"Well... it was only the once that we went all the way, and that was weeks ago." He closed his eyes and nodded though, pulling her back to him. "It's all it takes, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right. It's not just your fault. I hadn't thought of any protection either. We're both to blame." He kissed her softly, more feelings filling him. "I do love you, you know. We'll be fine."

She beamed brightly. "I didn't know for certain, but I do now." She touched his lips with the pad of her thumb. "I love you." They shared a quick kiss, parting when they heard a throat being cleared. It was Lupin.

"Congratulations," he said, extending a hand to Draco. "I trust you will care for her to the best of your ability."

"You can count on it. I have the means to do so," Draco countered arrogantly, grasping the man's hand firmly. "I guess you heard. Been eavesdropping, have you?"

"No, Draco," Ginny said softly. "He's the one that told me. He sensed it. He told me yesterday and only came back today with a test that I could take to know for certain. Pansy was with me. I didn't want to be alone."

"I would like to break the news to her parents if you don't mind," Draco said in annoyance. *The fucking werewolf found out before I did about my own child.*

Lupin smiled. "I wouldn't dream of taking that *pleasure* away from you. I simply meant to wish you well." He paused as if in thought. "That there can be new life in a time of war gives me hope for the future. I hope to see you soon."

"Thanks," Draco grumbled, tightening his hold on Ginny possessively.

"Remus, thank you," she said sweetly. "For everything. Please be safe."

"I shall," he said before leaving, not looking back at them.

Ginny wiped a few fresh tears from her face and looked to Draco. "Are you unhappy about this? I never thought I would have kids until after I had a career and was married."

"I am surprised, but I am not displeased," he said smoothly.

She swallowed. "I'm afraid to tell my mum and dad. I won't be of age for another five months. They'll be so disappointed."

"So we don't tell them right now," Draco said. "We don't know what's going to happen anyway, and we don't need to worry them with this."

"All right," she whispered in agreement.

"Ginny, this means you'll have to marry me. Maybe one day soon," he said quietly. "I planned on it anyway." He gazed at her intently. "You know that, right?"

She bit her lip, opting to say nothing and hugging him. *You bet I did, she thought happily. I've been planning on it, too.*

At the doorway, Pansy turned around and left them in peace. She was happy that Draco had found someone, and she was equally happy that she'd found someone. While she did love Ron and enjoyed the security their relationship provided, she'd been wondering if she would ever fall in love with him. She had known this day was coming for a while. It was always looming before them...the eminent battle between good and evil. She hoped that Harry killed the Dark Lord...for her father if for nothing else.

Her father had been the reason she'd sought out Ron in the beginning. He wanted her to get close to Potter and his mates to stay safe. Potter never gave her a second glance, but she'd seen a chance with Ron and had taken it. The months that she'd been spending with his family had proved to be more pleasing than she'd ever imagined. She liked the Weasleys. Though they hadn't any wealth, they had something more valuable. Being part of their family and being accepted meant a lot to Pansy. Fear for Ron's life made her worry greatly.

"There is nothing to do, aside from praying," she said quietly. When Ron came back, she would make sure to give the relationship everything that she could. She would let him know how much she cared and appreciated him. She *would* fall in love with him.

"I agree. We should pray," Molly Weasley said, pulling Pansy into a hug. "They'll be fine," she whispered reassuringly. "Watch and see. Dumbledore and the others... It will all be well." In truth, Molly had a horrible feeling that some of her family wouldn't be going back home... ever. She'd wanted to force Ron to stay home, but she knew he would simply sneak away. She was proud of him for his honor and for standing up for what he believed in.

She sighed as she thought of Bill. There was still no change in Fleur, and there was no word on Gabrielle. Molly knew that Bill felt guilty about what had happened to both girls. She only hoped that he wouldn't let those feelings cloud his thoughts during the battle. She needed to owl her other children, but she secretly hoped that by doing so wouldn't make them want to join the fight. Perhaps she could wait just a little longer before owling anyone.

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Tonks looked around nervously. Dumbledore had sent a message with his Patronus, telling her that Death Eaters may be on the way. They were to let him know right away. "Hestia, come on. Let's get back near the gate."

"We can just Apparate on over at first sight," the woman replied, bending down to pick up a rock. "Look at this. It's yellow and shaped like a square."

"Aren't you... nervous?"

"Nah, I've been through three false alarms this past week. They just like to keep us guessing. They wouldn't dare to come to Hogwarts." Hestia put the rock in her pocket. "My sister's son collects rocks. I'll bring this to him."

"Come on. Let's start walking a little. I'd feel better about it."

Tonks was relieved when Hestia agreed. They began walking in silence. Each lost in their own thoughts. Where was Remus? Would Dumbledore have called for him to come to Hogwarts? Was this really just a false alarm?

"What's really bothering you? Can't be all because of this supposed attack rubbish or the pending storm, eh?" Hestia asked. "You seemed upset even before this."

"Remus asked me to marry him again," Tonks admitted. "I turned him down."

"Why? You're crazy about the man. I say you should do it. Life is too short, even for us, to prolong what is meant to be," Hestia said wisely. "I've had many regrets in my life until a few years ago. I finally made peace, but if I had the chance to do things differently, I would."

"I love him. I guess I'm just holding out to make certain that I am who he wants."



Hestia stopped and looked at her in confusion. "Has he been seeing someone else? First I hear of it."

Tonks shook her head. "No, not really. There was someone that he thought highly of, and I suppose I was jealous. I told him to go to her and that I was leaving. That's when he proposed the first time."

"I see." Hestia nodded. "He was trying to prove to you that you are what he wants. Understandable." She smiled kindly. "Search your heart, Nymphadora. Do you really think he wants another woman?"

"No," she said honestly. "Maybe I'm trying to punish him." She sighed. "Maybe I should grow up, eh? I think I'll talk to him tonight." She looked around. "This situation just makes it worse, you know? Now, I'm wondering if I'll ever have the chance to tell him that I *do* want to be his wife."

"You will. Mark my words, dear. Why, I'll bet..." Numerous pops of Apparition began sounding around them. "Apparate to the gates!" Hestia yelled.

Tonks looked around in horror. Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort himself were actually there! She quickly Apparated near the gates, and before she could reach it, she heard pops behind her and felt something burning into her back. She dropped down and didn't move.

"She's down," a man's voice said.

"Leave her for now. Let's check on that side. I think I saw three blokes dodging behind that far wall into the shrubbery."

"Come on then!"

She could have sworn that the ground shook as many feet stomped off in the opposite direction. When she felt it safe, she looked up slowly, pain searing through her as she did so. "Hestia?" she whispered. There was no reply. The woman must not have had the chance to Apparate. She began crawling towards the gate and used the wall to help her rise to her feet. She was uncertain as to what they hit her with, but she knew she was bleeding and needed medical attention. But first, she had to warn the castle. Somehow, she'd lost her wand when she'd fallen. Not taking the time to search for it, as a couple of the Death Eaters that had hexed her were now running back towards her, she quickly fumbled with the gate and said the password, letting herself in.

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Harry swallowed thickly. Only a few minutes had passed since Dumbledore had distributed orders to everyone. The majority of the students and some staff members were already gone, but some were still running about and trying to group together. Hermione seemed paler than he'd ever seen her, and her brown eyes were nervously darting at the chaos around them.

Dumbledore had confidence in him, but he wasn't feeling very brave at the moment. In fact, part of him wanted to take Hermione, flee to headquarters to snatch the others, and go off to another bloody country where Voldemort wouldn't feel them to be a threat. Another part of him, a braver part, would never allow that to happen.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, looking off to the side, not exactly at him.

"I'm here," he said. "I was watching Firenze make way to the forest to take Dumbledore's message."

Her eyes moved to the spot where he stood. "I see Tonks running this way. She just locked the gate. They must be on the way to the castle. Wasn't there someone else with her?" She gasped. "There's smoke coming from the direction of the railroad station! Oh, no."

Harry moved to look. Sure enough, wisps of thick, black smoke rose up into the air. Seconds later, Voldemort's Dark Mark appeared in the sky, glittering eerily against the stormy sky. "Shite," he said, stomach bubbling nervously. "What the...? Look! Tonks has fallen!"

"Get back, girl," Moody's gruff voice said from behind them as he pushed Hermione aside. "Stop looking around with your mouth open. Get ready for what's coming!"

He moved by and began talking to the headmaster. "Hermione, get under my cloak with me," Harry said suddenly. "It doesn't feel right to leave you out in the open like that." He could see that she agreed with him, but she shook her head.

"No, I might cause you to trip. We both need to be able to move. Just stay hidden until you can get to that bastard! I'll just... I don't know. Look for Severus? Stun any arseholes that come near me?" She pulled her wand out, holding it within shaky fingers. "I'm afraid."

"I am, too," Harry admitted, pulling his own wand out. He knew he would throw the cloak off sooner or later to be able to fight freely, but he supposed that sneaking hexes in on unsuspecting Death Eaters would be a bonus. If they came for Hermione, they would be in for it. He steeled himself. "I'm ready for this to be over with."

"McGonagall is helping Tonks up. The others are gathering round. Harry, is that blood? Who would have hurt her? Nobody is even at the gates, and she isn't ev..."

BANG!

Harry pulled Hermione to him, not caring who noticed them. They saw more black smoke rising. This time it was just on the other side of the gates. "I think they are here, Hermione," Harry said, sounding calm. A moment later the gate opened easily. One Death Eater walked through. He must have known the password. "Snape is letting them in! What the fuck?"

Hermione's eyes widened as more Death Eaters came pounding through the gates. "How can you be so sure? They all look alike to me!"

"Maybe he's..."

"Doing what he's supposed to do!" she interrupted hotly. "Don't go accusing him of anything yet, Harry! Oh, my God! It's V-Voldemort! He's here!" Something brushed by her suddenly, and she saw Moody pointing at something and hollering at Dumbledore. "HARRY!" she screamed, running forward.

"Get back, Hermione," she heard him yell from her far right. She ran in that direction, wand ready. She could see Dumbledore moving towards his voice as well.

Everything began to happen so quickly. There were so many Death Eaters filing through. All of the help that Dumbledore had called upon hadn't arrived yet. They were greatly outnumbered, even with the house-elves ready to join in at a moment's notice.

BANG!

A powerful spell hit the castle near the main entrance, causing a few stones to drop down. Hermione ran into Harry's invisible body. "Is that you?"

"Yes."

Dumbledore reached them. "Get inside. Both of you! You are supposed to hide until you can get to him, Harry. I don't want him to see you."

"Dumbledore!" shouted a voice. They turned to look over at the Death Eaters and their leader. "Your time has come!"

Hermione was uncertain who had called out, but her heart was pounding. One Death Eater stood a few feet ahead of the rest and was whispering with Voldemort. *Severus*, she thought, hoping for the best. When would he do something to help? Would he trick the Dark Lord into thinking all was well? She looked to the headmaster, who smiled at the group before he replied to them.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Dumbledore said calmly, wand clutched in his hand.

The moment he spoke the words, Death Eaters began marching forward. Hermione panicked and looked around. Most seemed to be ready for the oncoming, cloaked figures. Their faces were set in forbidding stares as if daring their opponents to challenge them. Others seemed afraid and nervous.

"Oh, my God," Hermione whispered.

"I will kill him," Harry said.

Dumbledore spun around. "Remember what I told you, Harry. Remember all that he and his followers have done to you."

"*I will kill him!*" Harry shouted.

"Here they come!" someone shouted.

Suddenly, people were running forward and casting spells. Shouts rang out all over. House-elves were ordered to protect the castle, but Hermione saw some of them shooting jets of light from their hands at the Death Eaters before they could reach the castle. Dark cloaks surrounded them quickly, giving as good as getting.

"*Stupefy!*" Hermione yelled, pointing her wand at a nearby enemy. It seemed they were all coming in her direction. "Do you think they see Harry?" she asked Dumbledore.

"I think they see me," he said quietly, flicking his wand gracefully and moving forward.

Hermione pointed her wand at numerous targets and yelled, "*Incarcerous! Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Stupefy! Incarcerous!*"

One had made it to her side and pulled her back by her hair. "Snape's concubine," he said, pushing her down and trying to move on.

She answered with a neat Stunning Spell. "Yeah, I'm Snape's *concupine*, but I won't let you take my friends down!" She pointed her wand to the next Death Eater, but someone else Stunned him. She looked around and saw that Harry had taken off his cloak and was brandishing his wand all over the place in defense of her and Dumbledore.

It gave her the courage to get up and do the same. More and more Death Eaters were trying to get to the headmaster. None paid any attention to her or Harry. Hermione had a horrible feeling that it had been planned that way. The Dark Lord likely wanted his servants to take out Dumbledore first, thinking Harry would be easy to kill without his help.

Suddenly, Hermione was disarmed, losing her wand and her footing. She flew back a few feet, landing on her arse. It was a woman. LeStrange. "I don't give a fuck whose concubine you are. You'll not be hexing *my* mates," Bellatrix said. "A little Stunning Spell will keep you quiet until Snape can collect you!"

"No!" Hermione yelled, rolling over to avoid the red jet of light. She saw that Harry was too busy helping Dumbledore to be of assistance to her, so she tried to get to her feet. The woman pushed her back down and raised her wand. "I said that you must behave, girl. If you keep this up, you'll be killed." Her eyes glinted darkly. "Not that I care, but I don't want any of us to be blamed for *your* stupidity."

Bellatrix was hit with a hex and flipped over backwards. Hermione looked up and saw Ron running forward. "Ron! What are you doing here?" she called, getting up. "I thought you were at headquarters!"

He hugged her tightly. "I couldn't let you and Harry have all the fun without me!" He released her. "Come on. Let's go help him!"

"I don't have my wand. Bellatrix took it." She turned to go to the woman's body to get her wand, but she was no longer lying on the ground. "Shite! Ron, Bellatrix is gone!"

In the next instant, she saw the angry woman and was horrified to see that her hood had come off. Her dark hair blew about wildly in the breeze as she shouted a hex Hermione had never heard before. A pale jet of light hit Ron a moment later, squarely in the chest. Without a care for her own safety, she turned and ran to him. There was blood on his chest, and it looked as though he'd been shot with a Muggle gun.

"No!" She pulled him into her arms and tried to stop the bleeding with his shirt. "You'll be all right, Ron. I'll get you to Madame Pomfrey. Things will be fine."

"Hermione..." His voice was weak. One of his hands came up to cup her cheek, thumb wiping away a few tears. "I would have married you."

"Tell me later, Ron," she said, crying. "Live. Hold on." She tried to grab for his wand, intending to get him to the infirmary, and raised him up slightly.

"I've always loved you," he said. "Still... even now..."

"Stop sounding as if you are dying, Ron. I can fix this. I can bring you to the infirmary. I need only to reach your wand," she said worriedly, doubting the words even as she said them. His blood was all over, and he looked bad.

"Pansy... Tell her I'm sorry," he whispered weakly. "Love... you." His eyes widened slightly. "Mum...?"

He was gone. Dead.

Hermione sobbed loudly, holding him in her arms. "I'm sorry, Ron! I'm sorry... Don't leave. I swear I can save you." Losing strength in her arms, he began sliding back down to the ground. "Harry..." she called, barely audible. "He's gone, Harry. Harry..."

She looked around her. There was so much noise and chaos. Everything was such a blur. She couldn't see half of what was going on from her spot on the ground, but she hated to leave Ron. Numbness was setting in. Ron was dead. He'd died in her arms professing his love for her. *No, this is a dream. It's not real.* Her eyes met the dark, heavily lidded eyes of Bellatrix LeStrange, who was smiling smugly and had the nerve to laugh.

"Die, you bitch!" shouted Neville before he cast a Killing Curse at Bellatrix. Hermione watched as the woman's laughter died on her lips and was thrown back when the green light hit her.

"He's dead," Hermione said when he squatted down with her. "She did it." She nodded towards Bellatrix's body.

"I saw it," he said. "We came back. We couldn't let them keep us away."

Hermione looked around and saw that a large amount of the older students had apparently come back and were helping. "Harry! He needs us."

Her spine chilled when she heard a cold, high-pitched voice saying, "Now, you are mine, boy!" The Dark Lord had finally made his way over to them and was leisurely standing only a few feet from them as if he hadn't a care in the world.

She watched as Harry spun around to face Voldemort. "Maybe you are mine," he yelled fiercely. "I'm not afraid this time!"

A piercing laughter escaped the Dark Lord's lips. "Good." He flicked his wand at Harry, and they began dueling effortlessly.

If she'd had more time to think of it, she would have been proud of the way Harry was holding himself, but suddenly, Neville was on his feet, wand drawn and pointed at

Voldemort. He had no time to say anything when an approaching Death Eater hit him with a hex. This one seemed to glide over the grounds as he walked. Neville fell back gracelessly and was clearly Stunned. The Death Eater stopped, and his black eyes stared down at her for a long moment.

"He's dead," she said, nodding to Ron, knowing it was Severus who was looking down at her. He nodded and extended a hand to her. "I can't just leave him."

"For now, yes, you will have to." He shook his hand impatiently, wanting her to take it.

She looked from Ron's lifeless, blue eyes and opened mouth to the dark eyes of her lover. She knew she couldn't help Harry by sitting on the ground and holding Ron. Gently, she placed his head down and took Severus' hand.

There were triumphant shouts behind him, and they both turned to look. Dumbledore had already been hit with a hex by one of the many surrounding him. Another hit him from the back, but he was still fighting. Voldemort's laughter drew her attention. Harry had been hit as well. He was folded over on the ground, trying to get back up. "No!" she yelled, trying to run forward. However, Severus kept her against him tightly.

"You will stop this instant," he said in a low, threatening voice. "To interfere is to die."

She couldn't believe it. "Severus, help Harry," she pleaded. "Help the headmaster."

"I will not intervene."

"What?" she asked incredulously. "They need you! Don't you care?"

"The fight seems to be over. I'm sorry," he said, voice cracking slightly. "It is not in our best interest to do anything now." He pointed his wand at her and began whispering something. She felt as if something hot seeped through her skin at her hairline. For a moment, a foggy vision flashed through her mind before disappearing and remaining out of reach to her.

"What was that?" she asked, feeling dazed.

"Shhh, my love. We will be all right. That's all that matters," he said, keeping her against him as he moved towards the Dark Lord and Harry. She saw that Harry had fallen once again. This time he wasn't trying to rise.

In slow motion, Hermione watched as Fawkes appeared over Dumbledore, who had been hit by more hexes. Noting his familiar's presence, the wizened wizard pointed his wand at Harry and silently cast a spell. Before Voldemort's Killing Curse could hit Harry's crumpled form, her friend disappeared with a loud bang. The Dark Lord's curse hit the ground instead. At that same moment, parts of the huge stones near the entrance began falling down, as if hit by another large spell. With a final look in their direction, Dumbledore clutched Fawkes' feathers, and they disappeared in a burst of flames.

"We are victorious!" Voldemort yelled. "Potter has been defeated! I've killed him, and the old man goes off to die alone!" Cheers rang out, but not for long. The extra Aurors had finally shown up and had started helping. "We retreat for now, but we retreat victorious! We can take the castle on any day now that Dumbledore's gone!"

Hermione wanted to laugh and say that he'd missed Harry completely, but her lover's hold tightened on her, keeping her quiet. Allowing Severus to pull her along, they all ran for the gates. Many had fallen from both sides. Some were calling out for help. Everything was even more hazy, especially now that he'd muddled with her mind. Things had happened so quickly mixed with the shock of Ron dying in her arms, seeing Dumbledore nearly hexed to death, and the disappearance of a badly hurt Harry.

Once they were outside of the gates, Voldemort directed everyone to go to their homes until he called upon them later for celebration. He looked to Severus. "Well, done, Severus. I didn't notice little Longbottom at my back until it was nearly too late. The both of you will come with me." His slitty, red eyes appraised her momentarily before he dismissively looked back to Severus. "I want you at my side so that we are able to prepare for the next stages of this war. Their heroes are defeated. It won't take long for them to fall."

Hermione only half listened to their conversation. Ron was dead. Harry was... gone. Dumbledore was dying. Hogwarts had fallen. Many had fallen. She laughed when she heard the hooves of the centaurs finally coming from the forest to help. Like the Aurors, they were too little and too late.

Ignoring her outburst, Severus nodded. "Yes, Master." Holding Hermione close, he Disapparated away from Hogwarts. The last thing she saw was the crumbling entrance and plumes of smoke filling the air.

Southern's Notes: I hadn't initially planned on killing Ron, but my quill decided it was to be this way. Sorry about that. I'm going to start working on the next part as soon as possible. Voldemort is victorious. Snape has some loose ends to tie up, doesn't he? How will Hermione handle this? What exactly did Snape do to her with that bit of magic? What happened to Harry? Where did Dumbledore go? Lots of questions, eh? I shall do my best to answer them as soon as I can.

Just to give some of you hope, I know some of you are wondering if Bane's visions and Ginny's prophecy have changed. Nope. Ginny and Draco shall help to start a new world. I am certain that Voldemort will be trying to find her next.

I don't know if any of you have seen the movie Troy, but I quite liked it. I find myself listening to its soundtrack lately, and the entire time I wrote this chapter I had the song, *The Greek Army and Its Defeat*, playing. Haha! Now, in my mind, Voldemort's "theme" is the Greek Army music.

I didn't answer last chapter's reviews yet because I couldn't trust myself to not give away what would happen here, but I will answer them shortly... as always.

Aftermath: Part 1

Chapter 30 of 42

We see what happens directly after Severus and Hermione Disapparate away from Hogwarts.

Disclaimer: All characters have been created by J.K. Rowling. I'm just mucking around with them and not making any money for it. Bummer.

I'd like to say thanks to Charmed_Nay for finding time to look over my chapters for me.

Severus Apparated outside of the ruined castle with Hermione ensconced in his arms. He felt many things at that moment...freedom, relief, guilt, slight disappointment, and

wariness. What would Hermione say once his spell wore off? How would she handle life without her sidekicks? *I shall make her happy. Those little warnings she gave me were only idle threats. She and I will find a way to make things work.*

"Hermione, we're here," he said softly, noticing that the Dark Lord was already entering.

"Where is here?" she asked, looking around, eyes squinting against the wind.

"Home for now," he said quietly.

"Severus..."

He could see tears welling in her eyes. "It isn't the time for that now. We shall talk about this, but I am certain that my Lord would like to have a word with us."

She shook her head. "I don't want to see that bastard!"

Trying to soothe her, Severus kissed her forehead and pulled her back against him. "We can stay abed as long as we want. We need only go to him when he calls." He squeezed her tightly. "He's quite solitary and doesn't like having others about all the time. *This can work, Hermione.*" He pulled back to look into her eyes. "Do you understand?"

"You betrayed them. You betrayed me."

"I did no such thing," he said in annoyance, though he felt a pang of guilt. "I gave them as much fair warning as I could. I take it you got the message?"

She nodded. "It wasn't enough."

"It was all I had. It's not my fault that Potter wasn't ready," he said snidely. "Now, dry those tears. Come. We shouldn't dally."

Hermione pulled him back and raised her sad, tear-filled eyes up to meet his. "Don't you care that Dumbledore is probably dead? That Harry might be dead? That ~~Rois~~ dead?" She shook her head and released her hold on him. "When you decided to not help them, you decided to not help me. *I loved you. I believed in you.*"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Speaking in the past tense, are we?" Who did she love now? Potter? The lost Weasley boy?

"You're not who I thought you were." She began backing away. "Please let me go."

"I most certainly will not!" he said in a dangerously low voice. "You will come here, and take your place at my side."

He watched as she looked around to gauge her ability to escape. She wouldn't be able to Apparate, not truly knowing where she was. He would see to it that she didn't find out. Not until she realized that he'd done everything for her.

Scowl fading away, he said in what he hoped was a soft voice, "I promise that we shall have a private talk after we see our Lord, Hermione. You've no place to go except to me." He held out his hand and lowered his eyes as if in shame. "Please. I swear to you that all will be explained."

Hermione placed her hand in his, albeit reluctantly. "I will hold you to that."

Her voice was quavering ever so slightly, and he wished that he could reassure her somehow. It wasn't the time or the place for it. As quickly as he could, he led her inside, mindful of a few *poops* of Apparition around them as a chosen few journeyed to meet with the Dark Lord. Most of the others had gone to their homes until the time when they would be called upon.

When they entered the Dark Lord's chambers, he felt her hold on his hand tighten and felt her press herself against him. It was quite impressive. On the outside, the old castle appeared to be nothing more than a ruin, but many years of magic had kept the inside as immaculate as it once had been. It likely appeared to Hermione that Voldemort was a king and was holding court. It was always the first impression he had when he'd enter.

"Do not be afraid," he said quietly. "You are welcome here and recognized as my concubine." She simply nodded numbly. He knew this was trying for her, but he'd warned her that this could very well happen. It wasn't as if he'd planned it. Had Potter found the courage and skill to defeat the Dark Lord, then he would have lived on as if it was what he'd truly wanted all along...just as he would do now.

"Leave us," hissed his Lord to the others.

Severus stood proudly with Hermione at his side. Once the others left, he said, "May I present Hermione Granger, Master."

The man gazed at her for a moment, once again looking her over. Finally, he said, "Tell me. How did Dumbledore know that we were coming? I expected to see students running amok, I expected disorder, and I expected to take them by surprise." He stood and walked over to her, hissing to Nagini to stay back. "I made these plans only yesterday. Very few knew." He nodded towards Severus. "Why, even your lover only found out minutes before. What do you know?"

Severus watched as Hermione looked away from the Dark Lord and trembled. "Speak freely," he coaxed. "When he asks you a direct question, you are allowed to talk to him at will." He shrugged at his Lord. "She will learn."

Defiantly, Hermione lifted her head, opened her mouth, and said angrily, "That man told him!"

Working to keep his face blank, Severus bit back a chuckle at her amazed expression. The words had sprang out so naturally that no one, even his Lord, would know that they were fake. The only reason he could tell was because he alone knew that he'd planted a memory with her when he realized that Potter would not win. He'd also made certain that she could not speak of how she'd truly found out about the attack. These mind manipulations left her slightly addled, but that was only a momentary side effect.

"What man?" questioned the Dark Lord.

She looked down in confusion. "It's muddled. Someone wanted me to forget it."

Extending a long, pale finger to lift her chin, his Master asked, "Try to concentrate, child. There is no rush."

Severus, of course, knew that he was gazing into her unblocked mind. He would see flashes of many things, including their sexual activity, but most importantly, he would see the false memory that would incriminate someone else and keep himself and his young lover safe from the Dark Lord's wrath. There was nothing in Hermione's mind that he hadn't told or shown his Master. Nor was there anything that he couldn't explain away easily. A good spy covered all of his bases at all times.

"A man... yesterday evening..." She licked her lips. "I don't know his name. He said he was an inspector, and he went with the headmaster to his office. After that, Dumbledore told us that we might have to prepare for a battle sooner than he'd anticipated and that he'd know more at a later time."

Voldemort released his grip on her chin and moved smoothly back to his throne. "I know of whom you speak. You have done well to tell me this, although I did see that Potter tried to cover it up with a little jinx." He smirked hatefully. "I suppose he didn't want you to tell Severusss."

"Harry would *not* muddle with my mind!" she said hotly.

Ignoring her, the Dark Lord looked to Severus. "You may take her to your rooms. I am afraid that the best room was previously used by Bellatrix and Rodolphus. It appears that she no longer needs it. Use that one." He nodded. "You did well today. I shall not forget that it was you who guarded my back. Lord Voldemort owes you an extra reward." At this moment, the man looked down to his snake and hissed to her. "She will be safe around Nagini."

"Thank you, Master. You are most gracious," Severus said, bowing slightly.

"After you've settled her in, I would like a word... about a more private mission." He grinned, baring his jagged teeth. "We also have someone to punish later. I knew there was a traitor among us, but he was just too clever. I shall squash him." To accentuate this, he hit the arm of his chair with his fist. "Leave me."

"As you wish." Severus hurriedly guided Hermione to the room that Bellatrix had been using. It was a very large chamber, immaculately furnished. He cast a series of spells about the furnishings, bed coverings, doors, and windows. It was then that he noticed his witch's broken expression. He felt another sudden pang of guilt. "We will be all right," he said quietly as he made his way to the bathroom to run some hot water for the both of them. He felt that they simply needed a long, hot, relaxing bath where they could talk things out. He'd make her see.

Once done, he made his way back into the bedroom to find her standing in the same spot, arms wrapped around her body. "Come, Hermione," he said gently as he guided her towards their bath. She didn't say a word as he undressed her or himself. He stepped into the tub and pulled her in with him, settling her between his legs and bringing her back to rest against his chest. "Talk to me," he said after a long silence.

"I've nothing to say to you," she said, barely audible.

"Things will be different for us for a while, but that doesn't mean that our relationship has to change." He moved some of her hair out of the way and rested his chin on her shoulder. "We still have each other."

"I'm so disappointed," she said sadly.

"Hermione, I would change things if I could, but it happened. We have to adapt and move on. You and I can live and do what we planned on before," he said, hoping to make her see reason.

"Severus, my ex-boyfriend was killed today for trying to save my life. Harry, my best friend, may be dying, and I'm not able to help him. The headmaster, someone who just told me yesterday about how much faith he has in you, was left to defend himself against a large number of Death Eaters." She tried to pull away, but he didn't allow it. "And you hexed Neville! He could have helped Harry!"

"He would have been killed. I would have been killed, and unthinkable things would have happened to you." He kissed her neck. "I did what Dumbledore expected of me. We'd made plans beforehand for worst case scenarios."

"Really?" she asked, turning around to eye him levelly. "Like what? Where were you all the time the fighting was going on?"

"I assisted Minerva," he said conspiratorially, knowing she would appreciate that. He looked away. "I tried to heal Hestia Jones, but there was little I could do with everyone about."

"Hestia Jones?"

"She was with Tonks near the station." He sighed, hoping she'd think that he felt regret. In truth, he never liked Hestia. She was a right bitch on most days. Tonks was annoying as well. "I'm afraid that she died. I also disillusioned Tonks before any of the others took advantage of her state once the battle started."

"Did you kill anyone?"

"No," he lied.

His reward was to have her lean into him. "What are we going to do? I can't live like this. How are we to find out if Harry lives? If Dumbledore lives?"

"I shall do what I can, but for now, Hermione, I want you to promise me that you'll not hurt yourself." She remained silent. He figured he should give her a moment and slowly started soaping a cloth to pass over her body. As he cleansed away the sweat and grime from the day's events, passing his hands over her lush mounds of flesh, he felt himself becoming aroused. He knew it was likely too soon, but it had been so long for them. He needed her. She said nothing as he gave up the pretense of bathing her to openly caress her center. "I want you," he whispered.

"Not tonight," she said, unable to meet his eyes.

Eyes narrowed, he asked, "You would deny me?"

"My friends are... dead. I just don't feel like being with you tonight."

"They will still be dead tomorrow and the next day," he said coldly, moving her away so that he could rise.

She stood. "I know."

"And you'll still not want to be with me?"

"You'll still be the man that allowed them to die," she yelled suddenly, pushing him back against the wall. "You didn't help them! Not when they really needed you!"

She tried to hit him with her fists, but he deftly restrained her wrists with only one of his hands, pulling them above her head and spinning to put her against the wall. "Never hit me again," he said menacingly. "Would you prefer it to have been me?" he asked when she stopped moving. Hermione looked away, biting her lip. "Do you wish I had died today instead of Weasley or Potter? Hmmm?"

"No," she said beginning to sob. "No, I just... I'm so confused!" She struggled to get away from him. "What spells did you put on me? You did something to me! Why did I tell the Dark Lord about that man?"

He ignored her questions. "Do you love me?" Her sobs grew louder. "I thought the question was quite clear. Should I ask again, slowly forming the words?"

"Yes, I love you," she said angrily. "That doesn't mean I have to like what you do and what you are! It doesn't mean that I have to let you touch me as if nothing is wrong!"

"What am I?" he asked furiously, face contorted with rage. "ANSWER ME NOW!"

"You let Harry lose. I thought you'd be there for us." Tears were streaming down her cheeks, mingling with the droplets of water falling from her wet hair.

"I don't want to talk about Potter, Hermione. He lost because he was incompetent," he growled, lowering his voice and loosening his grip on her wrists. His free hand cupped her face and pulled it up to meet his. "I am NOT the man that failed him or you. I am the man that had no choice but to do what he had to do to guarantee the survival of his woman and himself." He placed a forceful kiss against her lips. "Make no mistake, my dear, but we would *all* be dead had I acted on Potter's behalf. Dumbledore knew that I would make no move until the time was right." He released her and stepped back. "Why do you think he Vanished Potter? He knew the time wasn't right. Now, you will stop this nonsense."

Leaving her standing there, he pulled a towel from a nearby rack to dry himself off and made his way to the bed. He threw back the duvet and plopped down after he dropped his towel to the floor. *This is not going well.* He brooded silently for a few minutes, replaying the day's events in his mind. It had been such a long day, yet it all happened so fast. Things could not have been done any differently. He'd been truthful. Potter had allowed worry for Dumbledore to interfere with his dueling. Perhaps he had noticed Weasley's demise. There could be any number of reasons for his inept attempt to defeat the Dark Lord.

He pushed thoughts of Dumbledore away and tried to focus on his current situation. If Hermione continued to be so resentful, his Lord might grow to dislike her and want him to be rid of her. It wouldn't be the first time that a reward was rescinded. Feeling the bed dip behind him, he turned over to see Hermione crawling over to him, naked yet dry. She laid her head upon his chest and silently cried, body shuddering now and then. He eased the duvet up and slowly rubbed her back in what he hoped was soothing motions. He hated her tears. They made him feel... guilty and helpless. He could deal with yelling, anger, and fighting, but these broken emotions were some he didn't want to deal with.

Severus was of the opinion that it was better to stop the tears than to allow them to continue. The best way he knew of was to kiss her. He lowered his lips to hers to press his lips against hers for a light, quick kiss. "Let me help you, Hermione. Let me rid you of the numbness you feel inside."

Hermione said nothing, but her sniffing stopped. He slid one hand down to cup her arse while the other found a breast to knead. His lips located hers again. This time his kiss was more forceful, tongue demanding entrance to her mouth. She obliged by parting her lips and tangling her tongue with his, seemingly urging him to continue. Severus turned her over onto her back; his hands caressed her as his kiss comforted her. It had been too long for him to wait around for foreplay. There would be time for that later. He moved between her thighs and guided his erection to her entrance.

His lips left hers abruptly as he pulled back to study her face. Her eyes were closed, and her cheeks were flushed. When he slid his hardened penis along her labia a few times in search of Hermione's natural lubricant, he felt her squirm beneath him, felt her hold on his shoulders tighten, and saw her top teeth come down to bite down on her bottom lip. It was at this moment that he pushed into her tightness. She wasn't as wet as he would have liked, but that was nothing a few strokes wouldn't take care of.

While he began thrusting slowly within her, he couldn't help but to feel that something was wrong. Yes, she was upset about her friends and the outcome of the battle, but why would she offer herself to him if she didn't want him? He slammed all the way in suddenly and caused her to moan. It was the first sound she'd made. He didn't move, deciding he'd wait until she opened her eyes. The warring of his inner thoughts and indecisions were starting to get the best of him. He felt his erection turning flaccid. This would not do.

Deciding to elicit a response the only way he could, he began forcefully pounding into her, moving their bodies further up the bed with each thrust. Sure enough, she would moan or squeeze her inner muscles each time he ground against her. As he slid a hand between them to stimulate her, she braced her hands on the headboard. Severus enjoyed the pounding of the wood against the stone wall. She finally screamed in orgasm, clawing wildly at the wood with her nails as she did so. The tight grip of her body's convulsions aided him in finding his own release.

He pulled away from her immediately and rolled out of bed, making his way to the loo. *That was not exactly what I wanted,* he groused to himself. Yes, she'd felt good, but she was normally more responsive or at least actively participated. Though she'd given herself to him, it felt as if he'd violated her or taken advantage of her. Hell, what was he supposed to think? She'd come to bed naked and laid against him, encouraging him with her kisses. No, she'd not deny him her body, but she would deny him her response to his touch. *This will not do.*

Severus vowed to not touch her again until she begged for it. He relieved himself, washed up, and freshened the clothing he'd been wearing. "I have to meet with my Lord, and if he sends me out, I do not know how soon I can return." Meeting her gaze as she sat up, he added, "Do not think to wander off, Hermione. Remember that Nagini is about. She'll tell the Dark Lord each place you venture off to."

"I'm to be a prisoner?" she asked shrilly.

"No, of course not. Walk about if you'd like. None will harm you. I simply don't want you to think you can leave without my Master knowing." He strode towards the bed and squatted down beside it. "I'll have your word on that."

She grit out, "I won't try to escape."

"Don't be that way."

"*What* way can I be?" she asked crossly.

"If you loathe me so, why did you give yourself to me?" he asked, stunned that she was so bitter again.

"Well, I'm nothing more than a concubine these days. I just thought I would do my duty," she said snidely.

Severus stood quickly as if burned by her words. "You are to be *my wife*, not my whore. Be certain you adjust your role accordingly by the time I return." He turned on his heel and fled the room. He nearly warded her in, but if she did try to venture out, he didn't want her to find her way blocked. Perhaps she just needed a little time to adjust to everything. It was a lot to throw at someone so suddenly...especially someone who'd never thought things would go other than as planned. *I will make her happy. I swear it,* he vowed to himself.

When he faced the Dark Lord again, the man was instantly aware of his difficulty. "She will come round, Severus. It's all still a shock to her. You said yourself that she wanted Potter to win and believed you to be the boy's savior." He sneered cruelly. "Having her there and having the other one run up only to be killed was exactly what we needed. Potter noticed what had happened. That along with that old fool's plight helped to seal his fate."

Severus nodded in agreement. "I know that she needs time. I only hope that things can quickly be as they were."

"There is nothing one of your potions can't fix," his Master suggested.

"Perhaps," he said noncommittally, "as a last resort." He took the chair near the Dark Lord when offered. "Now, what is your bidding, my Lord?"

"Potter isn't dead," he confided quietly, showing no emotion. "I want you to search for him. Find him before he can heal or before anyone else finds him. Bring him to me. Resume your role as a spy amongst the Order. See if they've heard from Dumbledore. Tell them whatever excuses you'd like. They are all idiots and will believe whatever you say."

Severus nodded. "I don't think this will be a problem."

"Where is the Order of Phoenix's headquarters located?" the man asked suddenly.

"I cannot say," Severus said in disappointment, though he did try.

"Dumbledore still lives; otherwise, I would have sensed something when you tried to speak it. After a Secret-Keeper dies, the magic is still binding, but it's a different sort." He rubbed his chin. "I can only hope that they aren't recuperating together. That would be disastrous for us. I do not believe this to be so, however, as it was a spur of the moment thing to Vanish the boy. That damn songbird of his had to show up and ruin things!"

"I will start at the castle," Severus said, rising. "Would you mind if I took a moment to bring some of my witch's clothing with me. We left with nothing."

"Not at all. You'll likely have to hang about for a while anyway." He smirked. "Stop with the worrying. She will not be harmed here."

Bowing, Severus said, "I warned her to not try to leave. I don't really think she will, but she may explore the castle."

"Lord Voldemort appreciates the job you do, Severus. Your concubine is safe with me." He cackled wickedly for a moment. "I suppose I should be certain that she doesn't witness our traitor's death. She might feel guilty and have further cause to give you grief." He waved his hand away. "Go. I shall take care of things."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus walked out to the Apparition point and hoped that Hermione would do nothing to anger his Master whilst he was gone. For now, he had to concentrate on his mission for the Dark Lord. He also had to think of exterminating the Death Eaters that were still being held in secret at Hogwarts. He'd told the Dark Lord that they were dead. He couldn't risk him finding out otherwise.

Southern's Notes: I felt that I should stop here. I know that you are probably wondering what Hermione is thinking and if she'll try to get away, but that's in the next chapter, which I've already completed and sent to my very busy beta, Nay. I'll post it as soon as she sends it back to me. I've also started on the chapter after that.

Aftermath: Part 2

Chapter 31 of 42

Hermione explores her new home, has a "friendly" chat with its owner, and thinks over her new life.

Disclaimer: All characters have been created by J.K. Rowling. I'm just mucking around with them and not making any money for it. Bummer.

I'd like to say thanks to Charmed_Nay. She's overworked as it is, and she is still able to find time to look over my chapters for me.

Hermione awoke alone sometime later. She wondered when Severus would get back. "Hello?" she called into the darkened room. There was only a lone candle burning next to the bed. All the others had burned out. She truly needed to use the loo, so she pulled the candle from the stand and went to the room. There was a slight tender ache between her legs from her last coupling with Severus.

She'd thought that he might pull away from her for a moment, but then, he'd started pounding into her relentlessly, causing her to cry out in some pain but mostly pleasure. She'd wanted to be silent and not let him know how good he made her feel, but she couldn't help it. She hated herself for wanting him, for wanting more, and for loving him still. Yes, she loved him, even after he'd Stunned Neville and took Harry's last chance of winning away. *Oh, Harry, where are you? Are you all right? Do you feel that I've fled with the enemy?* She remembered Severus' words about why the headmaster had Vanished Harry.

Was it true? Did he and Dumbledore have a plan all along? Depression was already settling in, threatening to suffocate her. Ron had still loved her and thought of her until the end. Flashes of his laughing face and bright blue eyes passed through her mind. There were no tears this time, however, and she was uncertain if that was a good thing or not. If she kept things well up inside, she wouldn't be able to think clearly and make plans.

How did she feel about Ron's declaration? It made her feel guilty, only a little, that she'd not given him another chance. Even though he'd moved on to another relationship, he'd still kept her in his heart. She also felt honored and was glad that it had been *her* that had been with him when he died. She also felt a little smug, though she knew that was wrong. It upset her to know that she'd never again hear his laughter or bicker with him. How was his mum handling this?

Would she do things differently? No. She couldn't imagine being with anyone other than Severus. *Severus, where are you? What are you doing?* She felt ashamed for the way she'd treated him, but she couldn't help it. She'd wanted him to hurt. He was acting as if nothing bad had happened, as if life was brilliant and would only get better. Her words and actions had hurt him, but if he continued to believe that all was well, he'd not even try to change things. Harry could still be alive. There was no guarantee that he'd die from the wounds Voldemort had inflicted. Dumbledore had many hexes leveled at him. His survival was a little unlikely, though she wasn't certain.

Severus didn't kill anyone, Hermione. He tried to help people. He loves you. He wants you to be his wife... not his whore... not his concubine. Hermione quickly used the flame from her candle to light the lanterns in the bathroom after she was finished, and she went about the room lighting the others. She wished she had her wand. It would make things easier. Bellatrix had it the last she'd seen. Sighing, she donned her clothes. She'd be damned if she'd stay locked up in a room.

Creeping towards the door, she was surprised to find it unlocked. She walked down the corridor, shivering slightly. It was quite cold. She neared the room that Voldemort had been in earlier and quickly took another path. Along the way, she met up with a young man with light brown hair. He smiled amiably and nodded his head in greeting. "Good evening, Granger," he said happily.

"H-hello," she replied uncertainly, moving forward quickly. For him to be there, he must be a Death Eater. Why would such a seemingly pleasant person follow Voldemort? Was he only being nice because of Voldemort's orders? Yes. That had to be it. She neared the end of the corridor and was given the choice of two paths. One was dark and led to the left, but there was faint light near the end. The one on the right was well lit, yet she could hear... screaming. It sounded as if someone was in serious pain.

She took the path to the left and hurried towards the soft light near its end. Hermione gasped as she saw that the room was more like a garden surrounding a courtyard. Plants and flowers grew abundantly. There was even a fountain with a few benches in the center. Drawn to it like a moth to flame, Hermione moved forward and sat down. How could something so lovely be in such a horrid place?

A throat cleared behind her. She turned and froze, her smile fading from her face. It was Voldemort himself. "I see you've found my favorite room," he said, walking forward and boldly taking a seat next to her.

"It's... lovely," she managed, trying not to think of his physical features. If he knew that she thought him hideous, he'd likely be angry.

"Not everyone appreciates the beauty here," he said absently, looking around. "You and I should talk."

"All... all right," she said, voice cracking.

"You've nothing to fear from me, girl. I gave my word that you shall be protected. I intend to keep it." His cordial grin faded, and his eyes grew cold. "I know you are angry about the things that happened today. In time, you will learn to appreciate the gift that has been given to you." He stared at her, waiting for a reply. "You do not feel as if you've been given a gift?"

"N-no, I don't," she stammered slightly. "I feel... trapped and betrayed."

"It's the gift of life. Is there nothing more important?" He gave her no time to respond. "Before Severus left here today, I was able to learn that you'd been giving him a hard time in your *bedchamber*." He held up her hand to silence her. "He didn't tell me, but I saw it in his mind. He has become a very important person in my cause. I'll not have that destroyed. Not for anyone."

Hermione swallowed. He'd just said that he would protect her, and now, he sounded as if he would kill her if she mistreated Severus. "It feels like he let Harry die," she said quietly. "I knew he was close to you, but I'd always hoped..."

"That he was truly Dumbledore's man?" She nodded. "Severus is too much like me, my dear." His amicable smile returned. "Our pasts are much alike. He will tell you of it when he is ready. I see myself sitting in Dumbledore's chair at Hogwarts one day...one day very soon. Severus will be at my side. We shall teach all worthy every type of magic available. That includes truly Dark Magic."

"Worthy?" she blurted suddenly.

He smirked eerily. "I know that you feel a Muggle-born child should have equal rights. I agree... to an extent." He stretched out easily. "Are they truly Muggle-born? It seems to me that there was magic at some point in their family's past. Whether a witch, wizard, or Squib, there was *someone* in their past who yielded magic or came from magic." He turned around and hissed something to Nagini. She slithered off to rustle about in the midst of some large plants. "I want to test all students' magic before permitting them to join Hogwarts. Only the strong shall be able to join here. Others can go off to one of the other Wizarding schools on the main continent."

"But that's unfair. What sort of tests?" she asked, becoming curious despite herself and feeling oddly intrigued.

"Just a test of their skills," he said, gazing at her directly through his red slits. "All Muggle-born children would be raised away from the *Muggle* parents. I know some fine people who could run an orphanage of sorts where it would seem like a home and not a prison. There could be some basic teachings there, and I could go in occasionally to evaluate their progress. This would enable me to monitor their skills and worthiness to attend Hogwarts. All magical children need to learn our ways from an early age, not wasting eleven years like now."

"Some of us actually love our parents and want to live with them!"

"And some of us have parents who don't care about us or who won't accept what we are. Why? Because they can't understand us," he said quietly. "Ask Severus about his father. I dare not bore you with the story of my filthy father's life. Don't you know how advanced you would be at this moment had you been under commendable tutelage from your early years?"

Hermione stilled, remembering what Harry had told them about Voldemort's past. He'd grown up in an orphanage, and for years, he'd been confused because he'd known he was different. "What would you do with those that you deemed unworthy?"

"Some may not be strong enough in skill to join my Death Eaters' ranks, but they could be useful in other ways...Herbology, Potions, Magical Creatures, or even desk jobs at the Ministry. Those would be allowed to remain. The others would not."

"You would kill children?"

"I would release them. If a family wanted to take them in, so be it. They simply wouldn't be allowed to remain at my school." He stood and sat on the edge of the fountain. "Imagine the prestige one would have. Imagine the pride. Knowing that Lord Voldemort had accepted and oversaw his or her learning would be a lifetime achievement for some."

"Why do you think it so important to teach them everything?" Hermione asked curiously. "I mean, we learn a good bit already. Couldn't you simply have a university of sorts for those wanting the extra studies?"

"I want Hogwarts," he said. "I want first choice of *all* magical children." He paused for a moment. "Honestly? I think that one day Muggles will find out about us, and we will have to defend ourselves. We're seriously outnumbered. I will teach all of us to fight to win. I will teach all of us to produce heirs and strengthen our numbers. We do not need the weak to lead us. Fudge, for example, was never truly capable of leading our world."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak. She looked away. "I don't know what to say."

"You're impressed, and part of you feels that I'm right, though you hate to admit it because you loathe me."

"Loathe is a strong word," she said quietly. "I hate that you would kill a baby and his family just to ensure that you are stronger." She sniffed, fighting tears as she thought of her fallen friends. "Why couldn't you have... tried something else?"

Voice harsh, he said, "I tried to get a job at Hogwarts teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts under Dumbledore. He wouldn't allow it. I wanted to be at the castle. It was the first place I'd felt at home. My ancestor helped found the school. I feel drawn to it. I want to know its secrets." He glowered at her. "I gave Potter the chance to join me when he thwarted my attempt to get the stone. He refused."

"Of course he wouldn't! You'd killed his parents!" she said, shrinking back as he towered over her suddenly.

"I don't know much about love or family, but I do know about respect and power. I also know that threatening one's weakness, their loved ones for instance, is a very useful tool." He smiled nastily. "If you want your family to remain unharmed, *you* will learn to treat your lover as he so deserves." He leaned down to eye her closely. "You will also show me respect when you speak to me." He waved her away and rose to his full height. "Be gone."

She scrambled to leave, but before she got to the door, she heard him call to her. "Yes... sir?" she asked, turning around, half fearing he'd hex her.

"There may be a place for you at my Hogwarts as something more than Severus's concubine," he said calculatingly. "I know of your love for books. I am certain the library could use you. There are many more books that I would add to its collection. That would be a lot more learning for you as well. Keep that in mind."

With that, he turned his back on her and moved to the section Nagini had entered. Hermione quickly fled back down the dark corridor. When she got to the turn, she noticed that the screaming had stopped. Hurrying along, she made her way back down the first corridor she'd taken. She met up with another man along the way. He had on a crisp Muggle suit and wore his moustache thick and bushy. He knew who she was on sight.

"Hello, Miss Granger," he said, tipping his hat to her.

"Hi," she said, not stopping to chat.

Once back in the room she was sharing with Severus, she flung herself onto the bed and pulled the duvet up over her. She'd just seen a side to Voldemort that she would never have believed him to have. Some of what he said made sense, but she could never truly go along with him and his plans. Could she? He was very smooth with his words and unlike anything she'd expected. What more could she truly learn under his tutelage? Were the Dark Arts truly that bad if reserved to use in self-preservation only?

She'd seen two men here so far, and she knew they were Death Eaters. However, they seemed like normal, nice, proper men. They likely held jobs and had families. Foolishly, she'd always imagined the Death Eaters to be kneeling around a circle with Voldemort in its center. In her vision, she imagined they all had on their ridiculous robes the whole time while they spouted words of hate and talked of the need to murder innocent people. After the talk with the Dark Lord, she was even more confused. He was quite militant in what he wanted. If Dumbledore had given him the damn job, would things have been very different? Would he have hand-picked his followers that way? Would he still be so cruel? Just thinking of the cold look in his eyes made her shiver. She doubted he felt guilty about anything he'd ever done in his life.

Hell, he'd threatened her parents' lives and seemed to think he was quite justified in doing so. She'd have to have a long talk with Severus. She didn't want her lover to be unhappy. Not truly. And it wasn't just because of the Dark Lord's threat either. How could she continue to hate someone that had risked his life to be certain she still had hers? In his mind, he only thought he was doing right by her. While she appreciated that, she didn't approve of his methods.

Even if there were some prior plans with Dumbledore, how could someone just stand there and allow things to happen? She would have died in an attempt to help Harry. *There is still a chance that Harry will recover. I just need to convince Severus to help him... and to allow me to help.* She'd find a way to get through to him. *He helped Professor McGonagall! He tried to help those others! That proves he's not all that bad.* She closed her eyes and was lost in thought. After an unknown amount of time passed, she heard the door open. She sat up and saw that Severus had returned.

He didn't even gaze at the bed as he made his way to a chair to put down a few things he'd been carrying. He pulled his cloak away, toed off his boots, and only then, did he look in her direction.

She took note of his cheerless expression. "Hi," she said, suddenly wanting to comfort him, to make things right.

Severus nodded, pulled his robes, shirt, and trousers off, and made his way to the bed, sliding in beside her. She noticed that he was careful not to touch her. No matter how disappointed she was in him, she needed him. It bothered her that he didn't try to talk to her or get her to be close to him. Normally, he couldn't help but to touch her in some way.

"Hold me," she whispered. He didn't move. "Please." He scooted over and pulled her against him, silently holding her. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied softly.

"In the morning, I think we should have a talk about things."

"There's not much more to say, Hermione. I told you what I expected of you."

She sighed. "I will promise you some things, but I will need you to do the same for me."

"What things?" he asked curiously.

"If there is a chance that Harry is alive, will you help him?"

"I do not know."

"You once said that you would make certain that I am happy," she said calmly. "Living a normal life would do it. I don't know that I can be happy like this, Severus."

He moved to look into her eyes. "It's only the first evening. You can't truly pass judgment so soon."

It seemed that her talk wasn't working. She decided to try a new tactic. "I talked to the Dark Lord this evening. I found my way into his garden. He told me of his plans for Hogwarts, and he threatened my parents' lives if I didn't make certain you were happy."

"So," he said, pushing her away, "you're only attempting to talk to me now because you feel obligated to."

"No, I had planned on talking to you anyway," she said, pulling him back to her forcefully. "I want to live in a world where I will be your wife, not just a concubine. I want to have your children one day. I want to live in our home without worry that our family will be killed, tortured, or arrested at any moment. The plans we've made already would make me happy." She kissed his jaw. "I would do anything you wanted to see that happen."

"And say anything," he said sarcastically. "I'm no fool. The moment you are able, you will flee."

"Would you keep me as a prisoner then if you believe that of me?" she asked incredulously.

"I..." He looked away from her.

"Say it," she demanded.

His dark eyes bore into hers once more. "I cannot be without you, Hermione. You must know that. Your place is at my side, no matter where I stand."

Disappointment filled her. Perhaps it wasn't a good time to talk to him. She would try again the next morning. "Good night."

"Sleep well."

Despite his annoyance with her, a little hope came back as he squeezed her tightly and began lightly caressing her hair and back. Such tenderness proved that he cared. He would see reason. Sooner or later. After many minutes had passed, she couldn't stand the silence any longer. She wanted to feel something more. It bothered her that he didn't seek to have her.

"I cannot sleep," she ventured.

"You've not tried long enough," he said agitatedly.

"I need you," she whispered, deciding to be honest. She moved her hand over his chest and placed a kiss upon his bare flesh.

He stilled as if trying to determine his course of action. When he spoke, his voice held a note of bitterness. "Your duty is not required tonight." He pulled away and turned over. "I had my fill of that earlier."

Stung, Hermione turned over to face the opposite direction. He'd openly rejected her, turned his back on her. Her words had hurt him far more than she could have imagined. He no longer even wanted to have her, obviously fearing that she'd reject him or not willingly react to his touches. She knew now how he'd felt earlier, and having her words thrown back at her was quite unpleasant.

She felt him shift behind her, and suddenly, his arm snaked around her waist. The deep, silky tenor in his voice spoken against her ear made her shiver. "I suppose holding you would not be amiss."

"This morning... I didn't mean what I said," she whispered guiltily.

"Yes, I believe you did."

"I wanted to hurt you... to punish you, but I would never be happy living as a ruddy concubine. I want you to know that," she said.

"Does this mean you will try to accept these changes?"

Turning over to face him, she said, "I'll never truly accept a world where Voldemort reigns...no matter how lovely he tries to make it sound. This is supposed to be Harry's time. He was meant to win. I am certain of it. He didn't dodge him all these years only to fail."

"Hermione..."

"Please, Severus, I'm not asking you for much. I just want you to promise that if there is a chance that Harry survives this that you will help him." She bit her lip while waiting for his response. When there was none, she added, "If you at least try to do this, I swear to you that I'll never leave you, and I'll try to do whatever you'd like."

"And if I don't try?" he asked, raising a brow. "What threat will you make?"

She sighed. "None, Severus. I'll not... I'll not leave you anyway, but I'll be disappointed."

"So," he accused, "you would live as a prisoner as payment for me to give help to Potter!" His lip curled unpleasantly. "I am sick of hearing his name fall from your lips."

"You dolt! I *want* a life with you! What part of that don't you understand? How could I be a prisoner if you're what I want?" She frowned and shook her head. "Severus, how can I completely love a man that betrayed everything I believed in? If you love me, then you should want a full and happy life with me. Be the man that I fell in love with."

His lips pressed against hers, parting and beginning the first of many intense kisses. She moved to get closer to him, swinging one leg over his waist. Torn between finishing their talk and making love to him, she moaned in frustration, pulling away from him. Severus sat up in bed and scooted back against the headboard, opening his arms invitingly.

"Every time I try to talk to you, *this* happens," she said as she moved to straddle him. She gazed into his eyes, willing him to see the truth behind her words.

"I can promise that I will always do what I feel is right by you, Hermione," he said quietly. "Is that enough?"

She knew that it would be all that he would give her. For now. Each day would be new in which she could talk to him. She felt confident that if she were able to show him that she truly wanted a life with him and would not leave him, then he *would* help Harry if he was given the chance. "It is enough," she replied, lowering her mouth near his. "For now, I'd like to make love to you."

Severus ran his hands up and down her arms. He seemed to be deciding if he wanted to oblige her or not. One hand came up behind her head and guided her mouth the rest of the way to his. The kiss was languid, and she felt as if he were trying to say something through it...something he couldn't voice.

He loves me. A feeling of power surged through her veins. If she owned his heart, she could influence him. These thoughts didn't make Hermione feel guilty. Was that not the same thing that he did to her? If her body was what he listened to, there was no reason that she shouldn't wield it. When he ended their kiss and placed his hands upon her cheeks, rubbing lazy circles over her skin with his thumbs, she asked, "Interested?"

"I am," he agreed, smirking slightly. "So long as you don't try to just lie beneath me and bite the insides of your mouth to keep from showing me how good I feel to you."

"Never again," she said, hands traveling down his chest to hook his underpants and begin to pull them down. His hands found the hem of the shirt she wore and pulled it up and away from her.

Once both were divested of their clothing completely, Hermione guided his erection to her center and slid down onto him unhurriedly. His hands found her back and kept her close to him as his mouth leisurely made its way around her breasts. Wanting to prolong their coupling and put all the love she had into it, she kept her strokes even and slow, using her hands to steady herself against the headboard, until he began thrusting upward in a more hurried pace, stimulating her clitoris as he did so. It was he that reached climax first, but the biting on her neck and incoherent mumbling against her skin sent her to join him.

For a long time, she simply remained straddling his lap with her head against his shoulder. "I love this... you," she whispered.

"As do I," came the silky reply.

Southern's Notes: In the next chapter, we'll finally find out how the others fared and where Severus went. What about that Voldemort? Hell, he nearly has me sold. Hehe!

Time to Choose

Chapter 32 of 42

Severus has to finally make a decision as to what side he is truly on.

Disclaimer: All characters have been created by J.K. Rowling. I'm just mucking around with them and not making any money for it. Bummer.

I'd like to say thanks to Charmed_Nay for finding time to look over my chapters for me.

The Dark Lord watched as Severus made his way into the room. The man seemed rather refreshed. *It seems my talk with his young lover has worked. The girl is obviously confused and now wants to buy into my tale.*

"Severusss," he said as pleasantly as possible, "I see you are ready for our discussion."

"I am," his servant said, standing before him proudly.

"Excellent." He looked to the few followers still present. "Leave us." It was enjoyable to see them scurry away with a simple command. No other wizard on earth was more powerful, aside from Dumbledore, but the old fool was now in a weakened state, likely dying. Once the room was cleared of all others, he asked, "What news have you to bring to me?"

"I went to Hogwarts as planned and was met at the gate by a group of Aurors. Many dared to accuse me of being on the wrong side of the battle," Severus said, smirking.

"Sit," Voldemort directed.

"Thank you, sir," Severus said, taking the seat across from his Master. "I, of course, told them that I had gone off in search of Dumbledore and was unable to stay behind to help with the initial cleanup."

Nodding, the Dark Lord gazed into his eyes casually as he spoke. He saw tiny flashes of what had gone on. When he saw McGonagall arguing with a young upstart, he asked, "What of Deputy Headmistress McGonagall? She spoke for you?"

"She did," Snape said, unable to mask his momentarily surprised expression. "Some imbecile dared to think he could detain me for further questioning down at the Ministry. I once taught him, and I think he meant to have some payback." He snickered for a moment. "Well, as I'd figured, she hurried over in my defense, explaining how I'd helped her during the battle when she'd been surrounded."

"I am happy that we thought of that," he said, cackling slightly. "Her word is nearly as good as Dumbledore's. Everyone knows she is quite close to him. Go on."

"A couple of Aurors were told that I had Disillusioned Nymphadora Tonks, who was wounded by the Carrows near the gate. This enabled her survival, so you can guess how that went. They appreciated that I'd saved one of their own," Severus replied, curling his lip in distaste. "I'd hoped that someone would notice and finish her anyway. I've never liked the girl. Quite clumsy, that one."

Voldemort knew that the man was telling him the truth. He could always tell when someone was lying to him. The scenes flashing through his servant's mind backed up everything he reported. Being the most accomplished Legilimens that the world had ever seen enabled him to detect any dishonesty. Another scene flashed before his eyes, this one was of Severus' naked concubine as she rode him with her head thrown back and her bare breasts jiggling. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared. *Damn*, he thought disappointedly. *Nothing like a good show. I wonder where that traitor's wife is. Perhaps I should invite her to join me for the afternoon. She'll do anything to keep her life.*

"...and that is when I exterminated Wormtail, as per your request, my Lord," Severus finished.

"And I am happy to be rid of him," he said at once.

"Lupin was able to vouch that I hadn't a choice, as the vermin was trying to kill him whilst I happened upon them." He shrugged. "I felt it prudent to allow the werewolf to live, and since he's taken to championing me, I'd say it was a good move."

"Agree." The Dark Lord mostly knew all of this. He wanted news of Potter and Dumbledore. "Tell me what I want to know."

"No sign of Dumbledore or Potter. The headmaster's office has sealed itself, and none of us are able to access it." He shifted in his seat. "I did not make my way to headquarters. There was too much to do at the castle...even after the time that passed. We've made repairs, cleared away any rubble and bodies there that had been missed, and placed more wards about the grounds." Smirking, Snape added, "Which I shall easily break for you when it is our time to claim the castle."

"How disappointing," he hissed in annoyance. "The old man must be keeping Potter someplace. This means that Dumbledore must not yet be dead. I am beginning to think that the boy may be," he confided. "I've been attempting to contact him through our link, and I get nothing. I know that he's not that good of an Occlumens to keep me out. Nobody could. He must either be dead or unconscious."

"I shall try to find out, my Lord," Severus said, bowing his head slightly.

"How are you now faring with your concubine?" Voldemort asked.

"She seems to be... reluctantly accepting her future. I believe I have you to thank, for she mentioned that you spoke with her," Severus said.

"Yes, she found her way to my private chambers...well, to the outer rooms anyway. I told her some of my plans and part of my reasoning. She was impressed," he said confidently. "It will not be long before she sees things our way, Severus. If she is so inclined, I shall allow her to be in charge of the library at Hogwarts. I've as much as told her so."

"Thank you, my Lord."

He enjoyed Severus' grateful tone and the appreciation in his servant's eyes. The more he did for the man, the more the man owed him. Snape was one Death Eater that he'd not allow to leave. The man was wicked resourceful and could easily hoodwink nearly anyone. That was easily proven when he was able to get Dumbledore to speak for him. He would do what he had to make certain that Snape was satisfied with the way of things. His first choice was to convert the concubine. If he had to threaten her, however, he would do so. If he had to destroy her family as punishment for disobedience, he would have it done. If he had to kill her and pretend that she met some great accident, he would do so. And... if Severus ever betrayed him because of her, she would be very sorry indeed.

"You may leave now. I want you to seek out those at headquarters or anyone at the castle that might be of some help. Find out what you can," he said dismissively.

"As you wish," Snape said before hurrying off.

Voldemort sat back in his chair, thinking of the things he'd told the Granger girl. Yes, he wanted Hogwarts and first access to all magical children. He hadn't completely been honest with his reasons. Mostly, yes, but he'd left out a few details that she need not know about. He and his followers would be training an army made of strong wizards and witches, but they would be very select. In fact, any student showing exceedingly great magical ability would be destroyed immediately. It wouldn't do to train someone that had the ability to overthrow him, now would it? The lowly students would be turned out, either to the Muggle world, never to know magic, or would be forced to work as the Squibs do. For choice families who would be willing to pay enough to have their unskilled child back in their homes or mildly trained, he would allow it.

He had a chance to make the world great, and he would see it done. The moment he knew that Dumbledore was dead, he would move against the Ministry and take over Hogwarts. Not that he was afraid of the man, mind, but he wanted to have less trouble all the same. The *Daily Prophet* had printed a few stories depicting the battle as the end of all things and was causing a panic. They knew that both Dumbledore and Potter were unaccounted for. They even mentioned the death of Potter's best friend, Weasley, and the disappearance of his other best friend, Granger. That gave the Wizarding community proof that Lord Voldemort would soon be taking over and leading the Wizarding world to greatness. He and his followers were taking down their heroes easily enough. None would stop him, prophecy or no.

"Thinking of the prophecy, I need to have Bane show me more visions. If they are satisfactory, as I believe they might be, then I will commend him and keep him nearby in the event that I need such advice again." He motioned for Nagini to come forward. "*You may do what you will with our traitor*" he hissed to her in Parseltongue. When she slithered off to find her meal, he stood and stretched. Drury, the traitor, would be glad to end his suffering. Since the Granger girl had reluctantly given him away, he'd proclaimed his innocence. However, it all made sense. Nobody else could have sent word to Dumbledore, and if it hadn't been Drury, Potter wouldn't have tried to use a Memory Charm to keep her from telling Severus.

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Hermione snickered as she read a section from a book containing Lord Byron's letters that Severus had given her. In the current letter, he'd written to his mother in indignation over being called a blackguard while off studying. He was clearly outraged and had been hoping to gain his mother's sympathy by telling her of the injustice of it all and seeking her approval so that he might leave the school. Her grin faltered and faded. She wished that she could write to her mum and tell her all of the things that had been going on at her own school.

Tears formed in her eyes, but they did not spill. Would she ever see her mother and father again? If the Dark Lord deemed it necessary, would he truly hurt them just to keep her in line? She knew in her heart that he would. "I can definitely commiserate with Byron here," she whispered, closing the book. "When things are horribly wrong, nobody can make you feel better than your mum can."

She'd spent the entire day in the quarters that she shared with Severus, and she felt as if she were going mad. She'd bathed, slept, read, ate the lunch that a grouchy house-elf had delivered, and she'd bathed again. There was only so much that she could do. Having only the one book that Severus was able to obtain for her, she didn't want to read it all in one go. Having a walk about wasn't something that she wanted to do. Her run-in with Voldemort the day before had left her confused and upset. She

couldn't lose sight of what was important, and that was Harry and the defeat of the Dark Lord.

Her thoughts drifted back to Severus. She'd been trying not to think of him much over the course of the day. It would only make her long for his company all the more. While she did find him comforting, she couldn't help but to feel that he was keeping things from her. "I know he's keeping things from me. I just wish I knew how much and what," she admitted aloud, but she had to hope that she could prove to him that things would not change between them should he help Harry. "He'll help, Harry. I have faith in him."

No matter how she looked at it, though, she loved him. After they'd made love the night before, she'd told him that she loved him and what they did together, and he'd told her that he did as well. She knew that was likely as close to a declaration of love as he could verbally give her, but it was all she needed. His silky voice, whispering, *As do I*, drifted through her mind each time she thought of him, clouding her judgment. Was that his plan, or had he meant what he'd said?

She placed the book on the nightstand next to the bed and slid beneath the duvet. As she did so, she thought of Ron and of Harry. How was Ron's family coping with his death? Who else had died? Was Harry recovering? Was he dying? Would Severus have news upon his return? Perhaps she should request a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Having exhausted herself of tears earlier, she was unsurprised when none came to her eyes for her friends... or herself.

*Oh, Ron, I'm so sorry. So very sorry. I will miss you.* It was easier to try not to think of him as being dead, only away. She would have to truly deal with his death later. It was all just a little surreal at the moment.

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Severus left McGonagall's office and was making his way to the infirmary. He needed to dispose of Lucius and the others. In the event that Dumbledore would return, he would understand that he had to do what needed to be done to ensure survival. Besides, nobody else knew what he and Dumbledore had done, save the house-elves, and they would tell no one. Pomfrey had gone home for a few days until they decided when they would reopen Hogwarts...if at all. He was glad that Poppy only knew of the secret room where they'd held Lupin and not of the other rooms containing the Death Eaters. After Lupin had left, Dumbledore changed the warding, telling only Severus how to enter. No matter what wards had been placed on the room, the Dark Lord, should he take over the castle, would eventually break them and find the prisoners.

As he slipped into the darkened room and warded the door behind him, he felt a moment of trepidation. It would pain him to kill Lucius and Narcissa. He didn't truly care about Crabbe or Yaxley, but the Malfoys had been his friends for a long time. "*Lumos*," he muttered and looked around. *I can do this*, he thought, trying to ready himself for killing his friends. It was then that he noticed the wide eyes of Dobby staring at him, hand raised before him as if he were about to send out a hex.

"Dobby?"

"Professor Snape, I is glad to be seeing you, I is," the house-elf said. "I is having a big job for the headmaster."

"What are you doing in here?" he asked suspiciously. "What of the headmaster?"

"I is taking care of Harry Potter," he said proudly, pressing his thumb to his chest.

Severus' spine stiffened. "Potter. Where is he?"

"The headmaster came to Dobby and gave him a job. He says Dobby is a good and trustworthy house-elf. He says if Harry Potter is harmed, I is to keep him in the secret room and give him to Professor Snape when he is coming for him."

Looking around the room and seeing nothing, Severus said, "Well? Where is he?"

Dobby frowned. "He is not waking, but I is giving him potions." He went near the corner and pulled back part of Potter's Invisibility Cloak. "Harry Potter is safe."

Severus looked down and observed the boy's sleeping face. His glasses were beside him. Potter looked so pale that he could have been dead. It was obvious that he was near there now. "How long has he been like this?" he asked Dobby.

"Since the headmaster placed him here, sir." He took off one of his hats and pulled a parchment from beneath it. "I is to be giving this to you."

Feeling his insides twist, he broke the seal on the parchment, opening it slowly. It was a letter from Dumbledore.

Severus,

I've taken an extra precaution to see to Harry's safety in the event that something has happened to me. Dobby has been instructed to protect him with his life while waiting for you. This is the only place that I knew he would be completely safe, you being the only person to know about these rooms.

My next task for you may be the hardest. If I am correct, you are reading this letter because Tom has somehow come to power. You must do what you have to do to keep Harry alive. Remember what I said of the prophecy, Severus. Remember what the centaurs have told us. It is meant to be Harry's job to face him... and hopefully defeat him.

Fawkes has been instructed to take me to headquarters as soon as it's safe for all involved. Whether I am alive or have passed into the beyond is something I cannot be certain of. I trust you, Severus, to do what is right. Remember our conversations, and think of her when you do. I need you to take Harry to headquarters where he can be helped. If I have passed, make certain that he does not attempt to face Tom again until he is completely ready and healed.

Thank you, Severus, for everything that you've done for me over the years and for what you must do now.

Sincerely,

Albus

"Is Professor Snape ill?" Dobby asked, breaking the silence.

Severus shook his head and sighed. The letter suddenly burst into flames, causing him to drop it to the floor. He peered down at it long after it was nothing but ash. Albus was counting on him to do what was *right*. But right for whom? For Albus? Potter? Himself? He closed his eyes and moved to lean against the wall. The old man truly believed in me and had entrusted Potter's life to him once more, even though he might not do what was requested. No one had ever trusted him so deeply...not even Hermione. *What can I do?* It would be so much easier for all involved if he simply brought Potter to the Dark Lord. The boy could be finished, lives would be spared, and Severus' deceptions could finally come to an end.

Sliding down to sit on the floor, Severus thought over this option. If he brought the boy to his Lord, he would be honored even more than before. Potter would be killed, and Severus would never have to worry on his witch's affections towards the boy again. However, she would know what he'd done and would know that he'd not acquiesced to the one request she'd asked of him. *Help Harry*... He opened his eyes to look at Potter's face once more. He hated him, mostly. In such a state, even without his glasses, he looked so much like James Potter. Oh, how he'd hated the brat's father. And Lily... Well, he'd not hated her...not really. He'd hated choices that she'd made, but he would never have wished her dead.

Taking Potter to Voldemort would cause friction with Hermione, and it would likely bring about the Dark Lord's wrath against her. Severus wasn't so thick as to have not

picked up on that. If the man thought her to be too much trouble and a nuisance, he'd have her killed. He could not risk Hermione's life or lose her. Even if he did so, he was uncertain if Dumbledore still lived or would survive much longer. Could he truly face him with him knowing that he'd delivered Potter to the hands of the enemy even after reading his words of trust? Of this, Severus was uncertain.

Closing his eyes again and drawing his knees up and placing his hands upon them, he thought of bringing Potter to headquarters. He would have to tell his Lord that he couldn't find Potter, and too many would know otherwise when word got out that Potter was alive. It could destroy his position at the Dark Lord's side. This was what Hermione would want him to do, what Dumbledore would want him to do, but he knew that he truly could not. To do so would bring about his demise. And with his death, Hermione would soon find hers.

Minerva said nothing about Fawkes or the headmaster. Last she'd heard, there was still no sign of them *How can I be sure that Dumbledore is out there waiting for Potter to be brought in?* Something that bothered him, though he was loathe to openly admit it, was if he did bring the boy there to recover, would he eventually lose Hermione anyway if Potter ended up defeating the Dark Lord? She'd promised to remain with him always, but could he truly hold her to that promise? The pair seemed too close for his comfort. Yes, he knew they'd not done anything sexual, but he would always be suspicious, especially now that Potter had lost his girl. Hermione's main concern as of late seemed to be Potter. She'd as much as admitted to doing whatever it would take to see that the boy won. Was hoodwinking Severus part of that?

It would be much easier to kill him and plant his body someplace to be discovered later. Hermione would never know that he'd been the one to do it. She would live her life thinking that he'd tried to find and help Potter. He could even make a show of plotting the places he'd searched on a map. The Dark Lord would be disappointed that the boy was not found at first, but when his body would be found, he would be able to take credit for having blasted him with hexes that eventually killed him. If Dumbledore lived on, he would never be able to prove that Severus had not found the boy dead when he'd come to Hogwarts. Only one other being would know better: Dobby. Although, it would be easy to cast the curse on Potter if Dobby was sent off to get some potion or other, thinking it would help him.

He could then say that the boy simply died, having been too weak to hold on. The house-elf wasn't very bright, and he'd not know any better. The more he thought of this plan, the better he liked it. It would save his relationship with Hermione, his life, and many others' lives. After that, he'd eliminate those held in the adjoining rooms and be off to headquarters to see what their latest news happened to be.

"Dobby," he said quietly, opening his eyes once more to peer at the creature. "I need you to go down to my personal laboratory and obtain a few things."

"I is happy to be helping, sir," Dobby said immediately. "I tried to give Harry Potter potions, but Harry Potter is not responding to them."

Severus quickly listed a few phials that he'd need and smirked as the creature popped away. He stood and moved closer to Potter, nearly stepping on the boy's glasses as he did so, not that it would matter in a few moments. He lifted his wand pointed towards the chest area. *Please help Harry, Severus...* Hermione's voice whispered in his mind. He shook his head to clear the vision of her pleading eyes.

When he looked back down to the boy's face, he inhaled sharply. Potter's eyes were now open and staring up at him. They looked so very different when unframed by his glasses. Lily's eyes. Severus' wand trembled. *Please help Harry, Severus...* This time it wasn't Hermione's voice that he heard in his mind. It was Lily's. He swallowed thickly, but his wand hand steadied as it again pointed at the boy's chest.

He tried to reason with himself. *It is the only way. I cannot risk everything to save him. Hermione would understand that.* He knew instantly that would not be the case. She would rather die than betray those she loved. *Love, he thought snidely. Love is not giving your body to someone and spending your life with them. It is sacrificing everything to see that they are protected. It is savoring their body each time it is given. It's making certain that they are happy in life. It's a fierce, vehement feeling that would cause one to kill anyone that harmed them. It's a...* His thoughts stopped as a realization hit him. "I love her," he whispered aloud.

Severus lowered his wand. "Can you hear me, Potter?" A slight grunt was his reply. "Dobby has gone to get a few phials that I need to administer to you. Once that is done, I shall take you to headquarters. If the headmaster is able, he will meet you there." The boy seemed to nod slightly.

He began making plans to move Potter. They would use the cloak and a number of charms to be certain that nobody would see them or be able to follow them. Once there, he would swear the Weasleys to secrecy that Potter would be kept upstairs and only the inhabitants of headquarters would know that he was alive and being nursed back to health. To have the boy's reappearance noted in the newspapers would bring about dire consequences.

The only thing that would be hard, aside from fooling the Dark Lord, would be lying to Hermione. He would not be able to tell her about finding her friend and helping him. He would simply tell her that he was still searching and give her the promises that she'd requested. Hopefully, they would be enough to keep her happy. Dobby came back, and Severus poured a few different healing potions down the boy's throat.

"I need to go down to my quarters to retrieve a few things," he said aloud. "We will leave this place when I am finished. Rest." Potter was already sleeping, but he felt his words would put Dobby at ease. He wanted to retrieve a few more books for Hermione, knowing that she was likely getting bored. When Severus slipped from the room, he felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted from him. It was hard to explain the feeling exactly, but he was certain that he was finally making the correct decision. Whether it was for Hermione or himself, he did not know.

Southern's Notes: Sorry about the delay. I have some excuses, but I am uncertain if they are good enough: holidays, son's birthday, his party, busy beta, and other minor issues that needed attention.

I will cover Harry's reception at Grimmauld Place in the next chapter, and I will do updates on everyone...Dumbledore, the Weasleys, and Pansy. I'm going to give myself a deadline and say that I'll have that up on Sunday or Monday evening.

Snape planted that false memory in Hermione's mind of this Drury going to the school to meet with Dumbledore, and he made it look like Harry tried to erase the memory from her mind, leaving her unable to speak of it correctly unless Snape releases the spell. This ensured that neither he nor Hermione would suffer harm for alerting Dumbledore. I chose this name because in the letter to Lord Byron's mother that Hermione mentioned, the person that insulted Byron was named Henry Drury. This is just a little comeuppance on my Lord Byron's behalf. HaHaHa!

Living With Decisions

Chapter 33 of 42

Subtle Slytherin tactics are used by Severus to lure Hermione to his lair. This will be a story of slow, deliberate seduction. Whose side is Severus on anyway?

Disclaimer: All characters have been created by J.K. Rowling. I'm just mucking around with them and not making any money for it. Bummer.

I'd like to say thanks to Charmed_Nay for finding time to look over my chapters for me.

Severus entered headquarters with Dobby following behind him. "This way," he said quietly, motioning for Dobby to follow him. The house was eerily silent. He supposed it was due to recent events. Upon entering the kitchen, however, he met a grim sight. Nearly the entire Weasley family, Draco, and Pansy were sitting at the table and in conjured chairs, not talking.

It took a moment for anyone to notice that he'd come into the room. Everyone had different reactions. Draco rose and simply gazed at him warily while Parkinson flashed a hopeful smile. Ginevra burst into tears and put her head on Charlie Weasley's shoulder. He nodded slightly to acknowledge Severus. Fleur Weasley never looked up, but Bill also nodded in his direction.

"Snape!" one of the twins shouted, pulling his wand. "Ruddy git!"

"What are you doing here?" the other questioned, also pulling his wand.

"Put those away, *boys*," he said smoothly, striding further into the room, looking to Molly and Arthur. "A private word if you don't mind."

One twin flicked his wand as if he intended to hex him, but Severus was a step ahead, as he flicked his own wand and disarmed both of the twins. "There will be no foolish wand waving here," he said, glaring at them menacingly. "Unless, of course, you are truly prepared to lose."

"Oi! Who said we..."

Arthur Weasley stood. "Boys, enough. You heard what the others said. He had nothing to do with... with what happened to Ronald."

Bill stood and ushered Fleur to the doorway. "Come on, you lot. Let's give them a moment." Bill's solemn expression never left his face as he exited the room.

The twins glowered at Severus and moved forward to pick up their wands from the floor near his feet. They reluctantly put their wands away and followed Bill out of the room. Charlie Weasley helped a teary-eyed Ginevra up. Draco and Pansy simply followed them, both looking stricken and anxious.

"Severus," came Molly Weasley's broken voice, "did you truly not know what she would do?" Her husband moved to steady her.

"I did not, Molly. No one thought he would be at Hogwarts. I wouldn't have allowed it to happen if I'd been able to stop it, and you know that I sent word the moment I found out we were even going to Hogwarts. Had I known sooner, I would have warned Dumbledore sooner."

The woman nodded. "I shouldn't have allowed him to go, but he was so bent on helping Harry and Hermione."

"He did help Hermione, Molly. I saw what happened from afar," he said grimly. "Bellatrix took Hermione's wand, and your son valiantly took her on, seemingly winning for a moment, but then..." He didn't want to get into this, but he knew the questions would always be there. He might as well put her at ease. "Neither of them were paying attention when Bella struck again, and after that, it was Bella that wasn't vigilant, as Longbottom came along and struck her down."

"I'd heard..." She choked back a sob. "I'd heard that he died while Hermione was holding him. I wonder if he... said anything, what he was thinking, or if he was in pain."

Severus didn't know what to say to that. He had never asked Hermione. He supposed that he could, but he'd felt that moment she'd shared with Weasley might have been private. It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he would try to find out for her, but he realized exactly what that would reveal. He remained silent until the woman spoke again.

"Could you not have saved him... if you saw all of that?"

"I was assisting Minerva," he said quietly. "If I could have broken away sooner, I would have. It all happened so fast, and I was on my way over just as Bellatrix hit him with a curse."

"Bloody bitch," she said hatefully. "She's lucky poor Neville got her. I would have made her suffer!"

"Calm down, Molly," her husband said quietly, rubbing her back as he spoke. "What brings you here, Severus? Do you have some news of Dumbledore?"

This caused Severus to look around uncertainly. "Is he not here yet?"

"Who?"

"Dumbledore." Both Weasleys looked at each other uncomfortably. "Now see here," Severus said sharply. "I don't expect you to completely trust me...no matter what anyone might have said to prove that I *am* trustworthy, but I do know that Fawkes was to bring Albus here." He stiffened his spine and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I want to see him immediately."

Arthur shook his head. "He's not here, Severus. We don't know where he is. The last we heard was that he and Harry disappeared. It's unknown if either are alive. There was speculation about your part in things, but then we *did* hear what Lupin and the others had to say. And Hermione..." The man's eyes narrowed. "It seems that *Death Eater* spirited her away just after he hexed Neville."

"Indeed," Severus said, not admitting to anything. He knew that Arthur likely figured that *he* had been the one to snatch Hermione and hex Longbottom. They would discuss that later if need be, but he hadn't the time to do so now...especially not in Molly's presence.

"It's horrible that we've lost Ron, but to lose the other kids as well," Molly said, wailing suddenly. She clutched at her husband's robes and had the audacity to wipe her face with the fabric.

Impatiently, Severus said, "There is something that I must show you, but first, I need to know that you will not allow anyone else know, aside from the headmaster when he gets here." He hoped Molly would end her dramatic display. He understood that she'd lost a son, but there was so much more at hand that was important. There would be time for grieving later.

After a brief inner debate, Arthur said, "All right, Severus. What is it?"

"We'll need a room. Perhaps the attic?" he asked, remembering it used to be large enough to house that hippogriff.

"Why, it's filthy. I've not been up there in ages. Surely Kreacher hasn't been taking care of it," Molly said. "What of the cellar? I know it's clean."

Severus nodded behind him. "Dobby will be in charge of keeping this room closed and clean. Lead the way," he commanded.

For a moment, it appeared that the woman would protest, but she simply nodded and made her way to the stairs, Arthur on her heels.

"Come, Dobby," Severus said quietly, following the Weasleys up to the top floor.

They were all surprised when they opened the door. An unconscious Dumbledore, who was lying on a small bed near the far wall, inhabited the room. Fawkes was perched over him protectively. "Headmaster!" Severus breathed, striding forward and forgetting about Potter and the others. He sat on the edge of the bed and used his wand to check Dumbledore's health. He placed his hands upon a slowly healing wound on his chest and whispered several incantations. He looked over to the Weasleys. "Close the door and conjure a second bed."

He went back to casting healing spells on the headmaster while the Weasleys prepared a second bed. Severus reached into his pockets, pulled out the small trunk he'd shrunk, which held some potions he'd brought for Potter. He quickly righted it to normal size and pulled out a clear phial. He brought it to the headmaster's lips, parted them, and poured it in. The man sputtered slightly, Fawkes sang a slow tune, and the headmaster's eyes opened.

"Is he all right?" Arthur asked.

"It looks like Fawkes must have healed most of his hexes, but the largest was still open. I'd say it's mostly exhaustion that has him down... hopefully," Severus answered.

"Well, that's good," Molly agreed, shuffling forward.

"You're at headquarters," Snape said quietly. "Potter is with me." A faint smile played upon Dumbledore's lips, and his eyes closed again.

"What's this?" Molly asked from behind. "What do you mean?"

Severus looked to Dobby. "Do it."

Dobby blasted the air above him, and Potter's hovering body came into view as his cloak fell away. In the next instant, the house-elf had him lying on the other bed. "Harry Potter is safe. Professor Snape and Dobby is taking care of Harry Potter."

"You've brought Harry to us!" Arthur exclaimed.

Molly was already at the edge of the bed touching his forehead. "All is not lost," she said emotionally. "Ron would have wanted Harry to live and do what must be done. He didn't die in vain." She sniffled slightly and looked at Severus. "He's like my son, too, this one. I am glad he lives and will do what must be done to be certain he stays that way."

"He's had the doses he needs for now. I would suggest that you allow him to rest and give him the potions needed only when it's time for them." He nodded to Dumbledore. "He'll be needing care as well."

"I don't understand," Arthur said. "How did you get Harry?"

Severus was quiet for a moment and said, "Dumbledore left instructions for me. Harry cannot be seen. If the Dark Lord finds out that Potter lives, I am afraid it will be the end for us all." He thought for a moment. "You will need help. I would say that Parkinson could be trusted with this. Any of your children are too close to him, and it might interfere with his recovery in some way. Parkinson will remain quiet about this, and it will give her something to take her mind off of... her loss."

"All right," Molly said, wiping the remains of her tears away. "I only wish Hermione would be here with us."

"She is safe," Severus said impulsively.

"Is that so?" Arthur asked, suspicion showing in his eyes once again.

"It is, and that is all you shall know on the matter." He stood. "I must be going. Dobby has instructions and will give them to you. Potter needs to completely heal before anyone can know he's survived." He nodded in farewell and strode to the door. He looked back and asked, "I trust you will talk to Parkinson?"

"I will," Molly said. "And thank you for the news on Hermione."

"You should let Parkinson know that her father is no longer alive. She should learn the truth. I shall be in touch as soon as I can, but I cannot promise that I will be able to come by often." He looked back to the two sleeping forms. "And remember to keep silent about this."

"You can trust us, Severus," Arthur said.

Without another word, Severus quickly left and began thinking of what he would tell his Lord *I suppose I can wait to see how things are going before paying a visit to the Malfoys and the others. If I can spare Lucius and Narcissa, I would like to see it done.* Steeling himself, he closed away the true events of the day from his mind, altering things to suit his purposes. He would tell the Dark Lord that Dumbledore was hidden away at headquarters, but he would likely not be recovering without help. He would state that Potter hadn't been with the headmaster, only Fawkes. It was the truth after all.

*I hope that Hermione can appreciate this one day. It's only because of her... Well, it's mostly because of her that I'm helping Boy Fucking Wonder*With a loud Crack, Severus Disappeared.

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Hermione heard the click of the door and sat up. It was dark already, and she could barely make out a form across the room as it walked towards her. "Se- Severus?"

"It is I," he said. "Are you not feeling well? It's quite early to be abed."

"There was nothing else to do," she admitted. "I was bored." She slid out from the bed and made her way to the loo. "You were gone a long time," she called, wondering if there was any news. After she finished, she washed her face and brushed her teeth. Feeling refreshed, she went back to their bedchamber. "Sorry. Your reply was muffled."

"I did much today," he said. "Let me shower, and we can eat together after. I've some things to tell you."

"All right," she said, moving to sit in a chair near the fire he'd started. She didn't hear him approach, so she was surprised when he placed a book in her hands.

"I was able to get a few things," he said quietly, leaning down to kiss her upon the cheek.

She turned her face and pressed her lips against his, reaching up to put her arms around his neck. "I've missed you today."

He smirked and pulled her up; the book in her lap slipped to the floor as he did so. He turned them and moved so that he would be the one sitting and pulled her onto his lap. "I admit that I've had a long day."

Hermione snuggled closely as he pulled her against him and rested his chin on top of her head. He would squeeze her tightly and kiss her head now and again. After a long silence, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

"I went to the castle today. Minerva heard nothing that would be helpful to us," he said, rubbing his jaw against her hair. "I was able to get a few things whilst at the castle without being bothered by anyone." He pulled back to look at her. "I looked for Potter in different places. He's not at the castle or on the grounds."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Thank you, Severus," she said, turning her head to face him. "That means a lot to me."

"Being discreet is hard right now. There are Aurors about who are claiming to be there for security." His eyes narrowed. "A few of them are quite insufferable!"

"I can imagine," she said. "Although, I am happy that you aren't getting any trouble from the Order members or the Ministry."

"Well, two members pulled their wands on me today. I had to disarm them," he said, smirking slightly.

"Good grief. What happened?" she asked, touching his chest as if to find a hex wound.

"The Weasley twins weren't too happy to see me when I went to headquarters. I suppose they are curious as to what part I truly played during the attack at Hogwarts." He pulled one of her hands up to his lips, kissing her palm. "Their eldest brothers and parents talked sense into them, and I conversed with the Weasleys after."

Hermione looked down guiltily. "Poor Mrs. Weasley. Is she coping well?"

Severus sighed. "She is still upset, even crying openly in front of me, but I am certain that she is hopeful that things will work out and that her son has not died in vain." He lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "She'd heard that you were with him when he died and wondered if he'd said anything or if he was in pain."

She frowned. What could she say? She didn't really want to tell Severus what Ron had truly said. It seemed that to do so would betray Ron somehow. She supposed there would be no harm in it, but she wasn't quite ready to divulge that. She tucked that away into the part of her that was sort of happy that Ron died without ever knowing it was Severus Snape that she'd fallen in love with. He would have been angry and disappointed. It wasn't that she was embarrassed about her lover, but she felt that it simply caused Ron less grief in his life, especially if he'd still been in love with her.

"Ron's last moments seemed to have been spent in shock. He said a few things. The last of which was Ron calling for his mum. I think that it all happened too quickly for him to have been feeling too much pain," she said, voice low. "Perhaps I should write to Molly, and tell her something, offer my condolences. It would only be right."

"You will not," he said. "Now isn't the time for it." He tilted his head back against the chair and closed his eyes. "She knows that you are safe. I don't want her any more curious about that."

"Fair enough," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder and pressing her lips against his exposed throat. "It's hard to believe that he's gone."

"Regardless of what one might think, I truly can understand the feeling of loss. I simply choose to deal with it in different ways."

"In the battle... were some of your friends killed?" she asked, having never thought of it that way.

"I haven't allowed myself to be close to anyone in a long time," he admitted. "However, there are a few that I am sorry to see lost. Had things been different, I am certain they might have made great friends at some point."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "Is the Dark Lord angry with you... for not finding Harry?"

Severus shook his head. "Not at me... just in general." He surprised her by smiling. "I wanted to tell you that when I went to headquarters, I found Dumbledore there. He needed help with healing and is quite weak, but that is a start, isn't it?"

She smiled brightly. "Oh, yes, it is! Did he say anything about Harry?"

Shaking his head, he said, "No, Hermione, he did not speak of Potter...only Fawkes was with him. He is in no condition to speak at the present time. I am uncertain if he will be able to pull through. He's quite weak... and his age is working against him."

"What does the Dark Lord say about Dumbledore being alive?" she asked, fearing that he'd be ordered to end the headmaster's life somehow.

"I have been instructed to let things lie for now. He's hoping that the headmaster will speak of Potter's whereabouts before he passes."

"Ha! He's not got much faith on his survival, eh? Well, I'm counting on it," she said, firmly believing her words.

Severus frowned. "In the event that he begins to make a full recovery, I am meant to see that he has a relapse."

"Oh."

"Exactly."

"I am proud of you," she said, giggling at his incredulous expression. "For trying to look for Harry, I mean." She hugged him tightly. "I was so afraid that all was lost, but with Dumbledore still around, there has to be hope. Harry will turn up, too. I can just feel it."

"I promise that I *will* find him for you," Severus said softly.

"Thank you," she whispered, feeling elation over his promise. "I love you, you know."

"I know you do," he said.

Hearing the softer tone in his voice, she looked up. "I always will."

"So will I," he said, continuing to gaze at her. "Love you, I mean..." His words trailed away as his lips moved over hers for a soft, chaste kiss.

*He's finally said it aloud! Things can only get better between us now,* she thought happily. When he pulled back, she grabbed him and forced her lips back onto his, parting her own and using her tongue to seek entrance. He growled and tried to meld his body into hers, hands tangling in her hair. She rubbed herself against him wantonly, making certain that he knew what she needed.

Severus tore his lips away from hers. "You little wanton. Whatever will I do with you?"

"Make love to me," she whispered intensely. "I need you."

"I shall," he said before sucking on her throat, marking her as his and causing her to whimper and wriggle against him. "First, I will shower."

"No, that can wait," she said, reaching down to cup the slight bulge in the crotch of his trousers.

Smirking, he arched an eyebrow and asked, "Are you quite certain? I've been out all day, and I m..."

"I don't care about that," she interrupted, bringing her lips to nip his neck. She used her tongue and lips to lave and suck until she was certain that she'd marked him. She pulled away with a loud pop, causing her to giggle. "Whoops."

He chuckled. "Naughty wench." With that, he pulled her close to him, stood, and shakily made his way over to the bed where he dumped her down unceremoniously. "I suppose I shall endeavor to satisfy your needs, my dear." He began pulling away his clothing.

Hermione followed suit, ridding herself of her attire. "Perhaps it is/who shall satisfy you."



"I've no doubt about it," he allowed, pouncing on her, lips and hands immediately exploring her willing body.

She was pleased that they were getting on well and that he was receptive to her advances. Something had definitely changed since she'd attempted to have that initial talk with him. She would not question it but would simply welcome it openly. "Oh, yes," she said with a hiss as his tongue circled one of her hardened nipples, sending a slight jolt through her entire breast. She felt his hand cup her sex, sliding one finger within.

"You're quite wet."

"I want you..." She quivered with delight as his mouth nibbled on her stomach momentarily before kissing a path up to her mouth. Once there, he kissed her fiercely and slammed into her depths, causing a muffled cry to escape her lips. "Mmmph."

He said nothing and continued their fervent kissing as he moved within her. She moved with him, bracing her hands upon the headboard above her for leverage, and when she pulled her legs up around his waist, he stopped, wrenching his lips from hers. She had no time to question him, for he said, "Turn over."

Hoping he wasn't going to attempt to have her in another entrance, she did as commanded. She was relieved when he began caressing her back with his hands and following his movements with his mouth, eventually kneading her arse and thighs.

"Up on your knees."

Severus quickly helped her situate herself, using his hands to guide himself to her entrance, and slid in from behind, groaning as he did so. She moaned as well, enjoying the angle of his penetration. She also liked that she could easily move back against him. Several rapid, deep strokes later had both of them panting, and she could feel her orgasm coming for her, though it didn't seem enough. Hermione nearly moved a hand beneath her for extra stimulation, but she didn't want to lose their rhythm.

"Hermione... can't... wait..." her lover said through heavy exhales. She felt the erratic jerking of his body against hers and knew he'd climaxed, leaving her to feel slightly frustrated.

"Ouch!" she squealed as one of his hands stung her arse with a small slap.

"Turn over," he commanded.

She turned over and grinned as his mouth found her breasts, and his fingers began stimulating her clitoris, causing the wondrous feeling of excitement to come back to her. "That feels good," she whispered as his mouth nibbled the underside of her breast in time with his moving fingers. "Severus... it's... I'm... yesssss." She began bucking against his hands and entwining her fingers in his hair, keeping his mouth close to her body. She arched her head back and moaned loudly, screaming his name and not caring who heard. As she collapsed into the dreamlike world of afterglow, she felt him move to lie next to her, though he kept one of his legs hooked over one of hers.

Moments later, he said, "I shall be back shortly. I'm going to shower and then get some food for us. After that, we can have a bit of reading if you'd like."

"Mmmm hmmm," she murmured, completely sated, not wanting to move. She propped herself up on her elbows to look at him when she felt him hesitate. "All right, Severus?"

"I am," he said, looking down at her body for a moment, reaching out to touch one of her breasts. "About what I said earlier..."

"Right?"

"I meant it."

"I know you did," she said, sitting up to pull his face to hers for a quick kiss. "Go. I'll just loaf about some more." She smirked. "You'll end up with a lazy cow if I don't find something to do while we're stuck here."

"We shall see to that then," he said, shaking his head and biting back a chuckle as he left her side.

Hermione smiled as she watched his pale, naked arse move while he retreated to the loo. Dumbledore had been found! The Weasleys were coping. Surely Harry would turn up...especially since Dumbledore was still alive.

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Pansy wiped Harry's head with the cool, damp cloth once more. She tried to ignore the fact that a slumbering Dumbledore was only ten feet away. She simply concentrated on the sleeping boy before her. "It's been nearly a week since they've brought you here," she said quietly. "Won't you wake, Harry? So much has been happening."

She knew there would be no response. There hadn't been one since Professor Snape had brought him...unless the slightest opening of his eyes counted. Dumbledore mumbled now and then, but when he would wake, it would only be to eye Harry, as if to make certain he was still alive, and after that, he'd be back off to sleep again.

"The funeral was yesterday," she said calmly. "Everyone was saying how it didn't feel right without you or Granger there." She smiled ruefully. "I have to agree on that. I'm sure Ron understands though." She placed the cloth beside the bed and took his hand. "He loved you, Harry. You and Granger... Hermione... were his best mates. Don't you dare feel responsible for what happened. Nothing could have kept him here."

Pansy had been devastated when she'd found out that Ron had been killed. She'd just made the resolve to be good to him and to try to love him the way he deserved. It was as if he was taken right when she wanted him the most. With him went her security, her hope, and her will. The time she spent between hearing that and seeing Harry had been the worst she'd ever experienced. Mrs. Weasley had said it right. *With Harry, there comes hope.*

She'd been honored that Professor Snape trusted her enough to bestow such a task to her. It had also been hard to hear of her father's demise, but she'd long suspected it. Pansy would never forget his kindness and would do what was bidden. He'd only come back twice to check on their two sick guests, but he hadn't had any further instruction for her. She looked back down to Harry again and took his hand. She was quite glad to spend most of her spare time up with them, reading aloud, hoping they'd find comfort in her words.

Draco and Ginny had been arguing over telling the Weasleys about her pregnancy. Draco didn't want to say anything, wanting to allow everyone to grieve without another "burden" to worry about. Ginny felt that her child was not a burden, and that it was as Lupin had said...something about new life in a time of death that gave hope to others. Pansy made certain to keep out of their arguments, not wanting to be accused of taking sides.

"Harry, you might not want to hear this, and I know that I can't replace Ron... I'll try to help you. I swear it, but you need to pull through. All right?" She felt his hand squeeze hers. "Harry? Was that... you?" This time she was rewarded with the opening of his eyes. She smiled and hoped that he was able to focus on her, though he blinked several times. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," he rasped.

"Do you need something? Water?" At his slight nod, she poured some of her cooled water from a pitcher into his glass. She scooted closer, lifted his head, and helped him take a few drinks. When he'd had enough, she placed the glass aside. "All right?"

"Need the loo," he said slowly. "Feel so weak..."

"Oh," Pansy said, at a loss for words. She hadn't counted on that. The nearest bathroom was one floor down. There was no way that he could make it down there, and besides, someone else might spot him. She spotted an oddly shaped pan near the bed. "I'm afraid that it won't be possible for me to help you down without someone seeing you. We have you in hiding here, but I can... I can help you use this." She quickly retrieved the pan.

Pansy watched as his cheeks reddened slightly, but he didn't object. He shifted a little towards his side, trying to pull his duvet away, causing him to grunt.

"Stop, Harry. Let me," she said quietly. She lifted the duvet and placed her hands beneath his dressing gown without pulling it up. Hooking the tops of his briefs with her fingers, she pulled them down gently, just enough to free his... penis. She felt her face redden, and she made certain to not look at him. Awkwardly moving the pan beneath his dressing gown, she looked away as she groped for his penis in an attempt to direct it towards the pan.

Relief filled her when she felt his own hand close over hers, guiding himself. She slipped her hand away and simply held the pan. A few moments later, he said, "Done."

As steadily as possible, she pulled her wand from her sleeve with one of her hands, moved it beneath his dressing gown to point in the pan *Evanesco*." She felt the pan lighten immediately. She pulled it out, confident that his urine was gone. She cast a quick Cleansing Charm on it before placing it next to the bed. She then took the damp cloth from the nightstand and moved it beneath his dressing gown to wipe any remnants away. Once done, he shifted so that she could ease up his briefs again. "Well," she began shakily, finally able to eye him, "that wasn't so bad."

He smiled and nodded. She noticed that his eyes were glimmering. Had they always been so vividly green before? So mesmerizing? *It must only be because his glasses are missing.*

"Tired," he whispered.

"Sleep, Harry. You're on your way to recovery." She grinned and took his hand in hers. "Next time, maybe you'll be able to... do this on your own." She brought his hand to her lips and placed a small kiss on it. When she realized what she'd done, she quickly released his hand and stood. "Do you need anything else?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes. She smoothed back a few locks of hair from his face. "I'll go let Molly know that you've finally broke away from your sleeping. I won't leave you alone long. All right?" The nod of his head told her that he'd heard her. She quickly fled, thankful he'd not questioned her about what had happened or her friends.

Southern's Notes: I hope that nobody truly detests the last bit with Pansy and Harry, but I need them to get closer. Why not start there? Heehee. Anyway, Snape and Hermione are getting along well. He truly needs to keep the fact that he found Harry to himself. If she would know, the Dark Lord might detect it, and it would be game over. And while his declaring his love might be "sentimental," I'm happy that he was able to admit it to her. I suppose he cannot give her much else, so he decided to give her that.

I don't have the next chapter outlined or anything, but I'm certain where I'd like to go. I think Hermione should take another walk about the castle, and I think that maybe I should show a little Draco and Ginny. I'm going to have a little more time passing while Harry recuperates. I'll update by Friday or Saturday this week. Cheers! SW69

Time Marches On

Chapter 34 of 42

Pansy and Harry share their thoughts on life. Severus and Dumbledore make plans for Harry. Hermione makes a friend and thinks of her relationship with Severus, wondering how to salvage it after a slight row.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to J.K.R. I've just borrowed them and am not receiving any Galleons for it!

I just want to say thanks to my lovely and brilliant beta, Charmed_Nay.

"I can't believe he's gone," Harry said quietly, not wanting to wake Dumbledore again. The man had truly been hurt and seemed to need much rest in order to recover completely...if he ever would. When he did wake, he could only talk for so long before tiring out. This worried Harry.

Pansy nodded, putting the book aside and moving to sit back against the pillow next to Harry. "I think of him all the time," she said. "It's only been a month, and I still expect him to come crawling into my bed during the night, hoping to not alert his mum." She smiled and closed her eyes. "I guess I should thank you for letting me stay here so much."

He slid down further under the duvet to get comfortable, being right glad she'd put her book away. He enjoyed her company, but he truly didn't want to read any more about a girl who went back in time to shag her Potions professor. It reminded him of some odd Hermione and Snape romance. She'd started reading it to him the day before. When she'd come in, he'd seen the word Vanity on its cover and nearly groaned. Pansy seemed to adore the warty witch that wrote the story, and she had plans of reading some of her other books to him.

He was thoughtful for a moment. "I don't mind. I think I'd go mad if I didn't have your company." After a few minutes of silence, he added, "Did you love him?"

"I cared about him, and I'd decided that I would make a life with him and hoped to fall in love with him along the way." She moved onto her side to face him, propping her head up on her arm. "I think he felt the same way. So, yes, we loved each other."

"When you and he first got together, I didn't quite trust you," Harry admitted. "I guess I'd always wanted him to be with Hermione. I feared you might just be using him or some other rubbish."

Pansy said, "It's all right and understandable. Harry... Never mind."

"What?"

"No, it's all right."

"No, really," he prodded. "Tell me... anything."

"Did you love Gabrielle very much? Are you still hoping she'll come back?" she blurted.

His face contorted with sadness. Since his plight, he'd not spent much time thinking of his Gabby. Guilt flooded through him, and he nearly felt like crying. "I did," he said. "Still do, and yes, I do hope that she is found." He closed his eyes, not wanting her to see his pain. "I don't think she'll... she'll be found." His tone was low and etched with melancholy.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Pansy said, putting an arm across his chest to hug him, placing her head on his shoulder. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, I should talk about her. I should remember her; it's only right," he said reassuringly, placing an awkward hand on her shoulder.

"What about Hermione? Did you and she ever have feelings for each other?"

He shrugged. "I don't know that you could call it that. We're just very close. It would be hard to live without her in my life... as it will be with Ron gone. Sometimes lately, it feels like if something happened to her, I'd snap, especially with how things are now." He waited for her to comment. When she remained silent, he asked, "Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to know if you would be looking to... date her now that Ron and Gabrielle are gone," she said honestly.

"No, I imagine she's happy with Snape," he said, bitterness evident.

"Why do you say it that way? He's keeping her alive," she defended.

"Yeah, amongst Voldemort and his lot of Death Eaters. I'm sure she's real happy with that situation," he said. "She should be here with us."

"You really don't like her with Snape, do you?" she asked quietly.

He sighed. "I suppose he's all right. I mean, he did save me and bring me here, right?" Shrugging, he added, "I just hate that she has to... live that way. It must be driving her mad."

"Fair enough," she whispered.

Harry wondered why she was concerned about his relationship with Hermione. Did she worry that he would be competition for Snape? She was definitely loyal to Snape. Each time he came to check on things, which wasn't often, she would always obey his instructions as if they were law. Did she fancy Snape? He smirked, knowing that was unlikely. It was probably some old House loyalty.

The silence stretched between them, and he heard a light snore. She'd gone and fallen asleep on him. What would Mrs. Weasley think? *We're both dressed, so she ought to not say anything*, he decided. Enjoying the comforting closeness of another, he turned slightly and gathered her to him completely, eventually drifting off to sleep.

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"Is there still no word?" Hermione asked immediately.

"Could you give me time to get comfortable before you start asking questions?" he asked in annoyance. "No, there is no word."

He was sick of her theories and ponderings about where Potter could be. In fact, if his name slipped from her mouth once more, he might hex her. For the past month, the majority of their conversations were centered on the brat, the Order, or what Dumbledore might have planned. He was sick of it. Part of him wanted to tell her that he was alive and living at headquarters, but the Dark Lord was too good of a Legilimens to not find that in her mind. Hermione didn't seem very adept at Occlumency, so he'd given up on teaching her. She would only alert the Dark Lord that she had something to hide and make him probe further.

They'd decided it was best to just end her lessons. It was likely due to her inability to clear her mind as needed. He could easily get in and see things. What bothered him was that there were many different memories that she seemed to dwell on. He was only in a handful of them. Potter was in many of them, and even Weasley seemed to be on her mind. In all probability, it was he that couldn't continue with the lessons without getting annoyed and wanting her to explain every single scene that came to him, especially when he could feel such affection for them. He was too much of a suspicious person to be able to endure such emotions that she felt for other men.

He'd admitted that he loved her. Was that not enough to claim her loyalty or to make her happy? He supposed he was being slightly irrational and a little insecure about things, but how could he not be? Fucking Potters always seemed to best him. James Potter did it often, albeit he had much help from friends, and his son blatantly disrespected him time and again, only to be coddled by Dumbledore. It was his secret query that if he had not seduced Hermione when he did, would she and Potter have become an item?

All those weeks enclosed in the same living area had brought her even closer to the boy. He'd had to put a charm on Potter's room to be certain that she stayed out of it, and just before all hell had broken loose, he'd caught her in his arms, seeking and giving comfort. He hated it, though he knew it was likely innocent.

"Are you not listening to me? I said I want to get out of these rooms," Hermione said, interrupting his thoughts.

"You are not a prisoner here," he pointed out. "You can leave at anytime for a walk."

"And run into the Dark Lord or Nagini? I don't care to, thanks," she said with a dramatic sigh.

Severus began pulling on the robes he'd just discarded. "Very well. I don't see why we can't have a walk on the grounds, ragged as they are."

Once they'd walked through the deserted and eerily quiet corridors, they found themselves outside in an overgrown courtyard filled with crumbled portions of the battlement and excessive plant growth.

Hermione sat down on a cracked, stone bench. "The weather is lovely. Just being in the sunshine feels so good."

Severus sat next to her and smiled as he watched her enjoy the outdoors. Out of the gloom of the castle, she had that spark in her eyes again, and the smile that he enjoyed so much was plastered onto her face. It was as if the fresh air and cold breeze gave her a feeling of freedom. Did she truly feel that she was a prisoner? Surely not. She was with him, and he cared for her, giving her protection, love, life, and pleasure. A pang of guilt filled him. He knew she was not completely happy, but she could hold on longer... until Potter was ready to face his Lord, couldn't she?

"I'll bet that this place was once beautiful," she commented.

He nodded. "It is a pity that it was allowed to fall into such a state. However, that works as an excellent cover for us."

"I'm going to ask you a question, Severus," she said firmly, not looking at him. "I would like an honest answer...no matter what it is. Agreed?"

"All right," he lied. There were some things that he couldn't tell her, although she'd never believe it was for the best reasons.

"Have you truly not found Harry?"

"No," he said quickly.

"Is he dead, Severus? You've found him, and the Dark Lord has killed him! Is that what you are keeping from me?"

"Hermione, I am..."

"You don't have to lie! You are keeping something from me and have been for a while. I can feel it." She turned her furious eyes towards him. "Do you believe me to be so stupid as to not notice?"

"Of course not," he said, turning towards her. "If Potter were dead, I would tell you."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You wouldn't tell me. You wouldn't want to hurt me, but I must admit that this is worse. The hope and the disappointment... Every lead turns into a dead end. I can't stand it."

"I've brought you copies of the *Daily Prophet*. You've read for yourself that he's still not been found," he pointed out.

"You could have altered the words."

Severus rose quickly and walked away from her, stunned. How could she accuse him of such treachery? He would never... His thoughts trailed away as he realized that he was lying to her, and while she hadn't guessed his true secret, she'd caught on that something wasn't quite right *It's for her own good*, he reasoned internally. *It would be her death...and mine...should my Master find out that I've saved Potter and am trying to prepare him for their next meeting. She cannot know.*

"Severus, I didn't mean to accuse you," she said, coming up behind him and placing a hand on his arm. "I should know better than to think you'd alter the words, but just because the paper doesn't know something... You understand what I'm trying to say? I've just been going a bit mad a little each day." She tugged at his sleeve. "Look at me." He did so. "I know you are hiding something from me."

"I am," he admitted.

"What is it?" she implored.

He shook his head. "I cannot say, Hermione. Just know that I don't mean to hurt you with my secrecy. It's just better for all of those involved if I keep my silence on the matter." He sighed when she looked away in anger. "Can you not understand that?"

"You say you love me."

"I do."

"You use my body whenever you want."

"Use your body?" he asked, pulling away from her hand, eyes narrowing. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Whenever you seek pleasure, I give it to you. I never deny you anything. All I ask is that..."

"I do NOT just seek pleasure. I also give it. Two people in a relationship such as ours do that for and with each other." He stepped back. "Forgive me, my dear. I didn't know that you felt it to be such a taxing duty. I shall not touch you again. Would that make you feel better?"

"Maybe it would!" she yelled suddenly. "Maybe you shouldn't touch me again until you can be completely honest with me! I told you that I wanted to be your equal in every way, sharing everything...even information! I'm not a child." With the last sentence, she stamped her foot.

"You certainly act like one," he bit out. "Some days you are just... perfect, and others, you *are this!*" He gestured to her with his hands. "I am returning to our rooms. It would do well for you to come. There will be others coming here tonight for a gathering. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable." He smirked. "Although, you might think me to have an ulterior motive. Rest assured. You are quite safe in our bed from this moment forward"

She said nothing as she stormed by him angrily. He followed in her wake, thinking of many scathing remarks he'd like to give her, but he would not. Not now. They could be overheard, and he didn't want his Lord to sense that there was trouble between them. He could understand her feelings on the matter, but surely she would see reason. There were simply some things that she needn't know about. That she'd dare act like such a twit angered him. He put his life on the line each day... for her. He snuck away to help Potter and Dumbledore whenever he could... for her. He'd lowered himself to the level of some henpecked husband and said that he loved her... to make her happy. He'd allowed her to see a side of him that no other ever had, giving her leverage to use against him, to make her feel better about her position in his life. And to what end? Part of him was glad that she was hurting and felt as if she deserved it for acting out in such a manner.

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Ginny took the glass that Draco handed to her and took a sip. "Very good."

"I thought so," he said, smiling smugly. "I suppose your twin brothers are good for something."

"Where is Pansy?" she asked suddenly. "She's not been down here all day. I wonder if she's gone out back again."

Draco said, "She's been that way since Ron... since that day."

Molly Weasley dropped her glass, spilling its contents over the table. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"I apologize," Draco said, quickly flicking his wand to clean the mess. "I shouldn't have said anything about it."

Arthur said sternly, "It's fine, Draco. I think it's time that we started accepting what happened. Time is passing by quickly. How long has it been now? Six or seven weeks? And we can't even say his name without worry?" He sighed. "Bill needs our support in helping Fleur through this rough time. She is lucky to be alive and has to deal with her younger sister's demise. We all know how close they were."

Molly glared at her husband. "Now is not the time."

"When will it be time?" asked the normally peaceable man. "We have to get on with the living, Molly, while remembering. We've all our other children to fret over still."

"Yes, but it's..." Her voice trailed away as tears welled in her eyes.

Ginny had had enough. She threw her napkin onto her plate. "Mum, we all miss him, but there is nothing we can do to change things. Some days when the realization hits me anew, I cry all over again and feel as if all the hope is gone, what with Harry and Hermione being gone as well." She looked to Draco, who was shaking his head, pleading with her to keep silent. She nodded evilly. "But then I realize that I have so much to live for, Mum. So much to fight for."

Molly sniffed and looked up at her. "Yes, dear, I understand."

"No," Ginny breathed. "You don't. I will fight for the cause my brother believed in and died for. I will fight for the cause that has forced Harry's life to be hell. I will fight for my family and for the love I've found with Draco." She smiled at Draco and continued to gaze at him as she added, "And I will fight for my baby...the baby that Draco and I created."

Another cup dropped to the table, its contents spilling out. This time, it was Arthur Weasley that lost his grip. "Ginevra, do you mean to say...?"

"Yes," she said, looking back to him. "I'm pregnant."

Her father's face became red as he looked at Draco. "We've accepted you here, trusted you, and *this* is how you repay us?"

"I love her," Draco said unflinchingly. "Trust me. We didn't plan it, but I will marry her and give her everything she's ever wanted and provide for my family."

"You are just a boy! She's not even..."

The scraping of Molly's chair cut Arthur off. Nobody had looked to her for her reaction, what with the sudden argument.

"Mum?" Ginny asked, rising. When the woman just eyed her as if noticing her for the first time, she said, "I didn't mean to disappoint you. It was only the one time. I swear it."

"You're already growing round the middle," Molly said, approaching her quickly. "How far along are you?"

"I'd say about three months, maybe a little more," Ginny said nervously. "It really was only the one time. Draco did say that we should wait. Blame me if you must." She eyed her father. "I love him, Daddy."

Draco stood. "My feelings are genuine."

"Why didn't you say anything before?" Molly asked, pulling her daughter to her in a tight hug. "You need to see a Healer and make certain that all is well."

"I was afraid that you'd be angry or that it would make you more upset. I only found out right before the battle at Hogwarts." She shrugged. "I've been reading up on it, and I've been taking extra care."

"I will marry her now with your permission," Draco cut in.

"She needn't be married just yet," Arthur interjected. "There's no reason to rush. It's done."

"I would like my child to have my name, sir, if it's all the same to you," Draco said, sounding suddenly older and as charismatic as his father had once been. "I would have his mother's last name the same as well."

"Ginevra's not even finished her schooling," her father said, though his smile was returning. "I suppose your intentions are honorable, but we'll not rush. There is time before the... little one will be here."

Suddenly, Molly was full of chatter and even seemed happy. She was making plans of appointments and talking of knitting some outfits for the new arrival. It seemed that with the pending arrival of a new addition to the family, things were looking up for her.

Ginny, Draco, and Arthur all shared relieved glances as the woman, who had slipped into a shell of her former self, came back full force. "And, Draco, you should have talked her into telling us sooner," she said.

He cleared his throat and looked abashed. "She wanted to, but I talked her out of it. I guess I was a little afraid of what you'd say."

"You're part of the family now, too, Draco," she said happily, pulling him to her for a warm hug. "Oh, there is much to do. Just wait until everyone else hears of this. Fleur likes to knit. She and I could have a little project going." Her face paled for a moment. "Perhaps if you have a girl, you could honor our Gabrielle, and if it is a boy, I am sure that Ron wouldn't mind if his name is used."

Ginny giggled. "Perhaps." She smiled happily. It was good to see her mother smile, and it seemed that Lupin was right. Life in a time of death was a miracle in itself and gave hope to the weary. She noticed Draco's thoughtful expression. "Oh, come on," she whispered when her mother moved away. "We don't truly have to name the baby after one of them."

"It's not that," he said quietly, embracing her. "I just wished that I could tell my mother. I think she would be happy."

"Talk to the professor when he comes again," she said. "He may be able to help."

Draco nodded and grimaced. "Of all the rotten luck! The twins are here. I suppose they'll try to pummel me for taking advantage of their sister."

"Not if I threaten them with a Bat-Bogey Hex or two!"

He laughed. "I still owe you for that, you know."

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"I must admit, Potter," Severus began, "you've been doing a good job of clearing your mind and keeping others out. I am surprised you've improved so much in such a short amount of time."

"Maybe because I view you differently now and am not so blinded by my dislike of you," he returned.

"Well, at any rate, you are doing well. Your reflexes are back, and the new spells we've been going over seem to be easy enough for you."

Dumbledore asked, "Do you feel he is ready for Tom?"

Severus shook his head. "I do not, Headmaster."

"Your reasoning?"

"What do you mean I'm not ready?" Harry interrupted indignantly. "I am completely healed and have been practicing like you asked!"

"You still want to go off without being properly prepared, and you are slipping into one of your more emotional stages as we speak." Severus shook his head in annoyance. "After giving you praise, I shall have to rescind it. When you face him, you cannot let your emotions take over and cloud your judgment."

"Harry, listen to Severus," Dumbledore said, rising and walking across the room to join them. "I shall work with you on the days that he cannot come, giving you extra practice."

"But you need your rest," Harry said quickly.

"I shall rest when I can. I am not so weak that I cannot do my part," he replied in a voice that said there would be no arguing. He looked over to his familiar. "Fawkes even deems me well, as Severus has pointed out before."

"No, I said that you..."

"That will do, Severus."

Potter's eyes met Severus' in silent question, and he nodded minutely in answer. The headmaster was not completely well, and practicing would only weaken him even more. He hoped that the boy got his message.

"Sir, if it's all the same, I think that you could oversee my practicing with others. Perhaps Pansy or even Arthur? And if you think it all right, maybe we could finally let Ginny and Draco know that I'm here. I'd really like to see them."

"We shall discuss it," Dumbledore said. "I must use the loo. I shall return."

Once he left them alone, Potter said, "He's never going to be all right, is he?"

Severus shook his head sadly. "I do not believe so. His age and the hexes he took... Just being here now is a miracle. He needs a quiet retirement and rest. Do not let him overwork himself. There is no reason that you can't allow Parkinson or Malfoy to help you. I think it might do some good for them at the same time. I am certain that Draco feels caged as it is."

"All right." A moment later, he added, "How is Hermione, sir?"

"She is fine," Severus replied abruptly. He'd not give the boy any more than that. His problems with Hermione were his business and of no concern to Potter...at least they shouldn't be.

"I wish that I could see her," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I'm sure she wishes the same," he said dryly, moving towards the door. "I must take my leave. Good day."

He quickly left the room. On the stairwell, he met Draco and could tell that the boy wanted a word with him. "What is it?"

"I'd like to see my parents," he said.

"Now?"

"Well, I've been wanting to see them. There is something I'd like to talk to them about, and it doesn't seem right to say it in a letter," he said adamantly. When he noticed the raised eyebrow on his ex-Potions master, he added, "Ginny is pregnant. We told her parents a few days ago, and I'd like to tell mine."

"I see," Severus said, shaking his head in disgust. The boy wasn't even a man yet, and he'd have to be dealing with a family already. However, it was not his concern. "Very well. I think we may be able to get by the Aurors. It seems that as time passes, they grow less vigilant. I'd bet a simple Disillusionment Charm would do." He shook his head. "Perhaps not."

"Too bad we don't have Potter's cloak," Draco muttered.

Severus smirked. "Just so happens, we do have it."

"But how? He had it at the battle, and he's not been found since. Did you notice it on the grounds?" Draco asked, brow furrowed.

"Potter lives," Severus said quietly. "We've had to keep it a secret. If word gets out, my life and all of our work is forfeit." He raised an eyebrow and added, "Your parents' lives would be ended as well."

Shocked, Draco nodded, "I will keep quiet on it."

"Excellent. I think he may like you to help him practice Occlumency and some new jinxes I taught him."

"He's been training, hasn't he?"

"Yes, and I know you do well with Occlumency and hexes."

"I'll help him, sir. You've my word," Draco said, extending a hand.

Feeling odd to be shaking hands with the boy, Severus quickly took it and released it. "I shall return in a moment. Let Molly and the others know that we will be back as quickly as we can."

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Hermione found her way out to the old courtyard and looked up to the clear night sky. It was beautiful and made her feel unbound in many ways. Since Severus had shown her the courtyard two weeks prior, she'd made a trip out to it each day. True to his word, he'd not touched her or attempted any intimacy with her.

This annoyed Hermione. She had been angry and frustrated when she'd said those things, but she hadn't meant that she wanted to stop all intimacy. Things had been strained between them, and she tried not to ask too much about his search for Harry. With each passing day, it seemed unlikely that Harry would ever be found or that he was even alive. For she knew, with all her heart, that if he were alive, he would have found a way to let someone know. It would be in all of the papers. Perhaps she had been pressuring Severus too much. Whatever the case, something had to change. She was miserable and had taken to crying. It seemed that everything she meant to say came out wrong, and she couldn't stop feeling sorry for herself. If it weren't for her books, she might honestly fall into a serious depression.

"It's nice out, isn't it?" a voice from behind stated.

She whipped her head around to see who had joined her. It was a young man, who was holding his mask in his hands, though his Death Eater robes and hood were in place. She wondered if she should leave or remain where she was. "It's quite lovely," she commented, trying to sound as if his presence didn't unnerve her. He looked familiar.

"Do you remember me?" he asked, moving closer. "We attended Hogwarts together. I was two years ahead of you."

"Adrian Pucey," she said, remembering that he'd helped her pick up some books she'd dropped in the library. "But what are you doing here?" He was one of the few Slytherins that didn't act like Malfoy had.

"We had a small meeting, and I decided to come out for a quick smoke," he said, moving to sit on a bench near her. "Snape wasn't there tonight."

Hermione didn't reply. She knew that Severus wouldn't approve of her divulging any information on his whereabouts, and she didn't want to admit that she had no idea where he was. He was supposed to be back hours earlier. "You were a good Chaser," she said suddenly, pretending to have noticed his Quidditch skills. "Did you never follow up on it?"

"No, I only played because my father wanted me to," he admitted. "After school, I married and went to work in the family business... and joined the Dark Lord."

"Married?" Hermione asked incredulously. "So soon out of school?"

"Oh, yes, well, our parents paired us together from an early age, but it suited me fine. I love her. We have a daughter on the way," he said proudly. He pulled a wallet from within his robes and showed her a picture. "This is my wife, Elizabeth. Perhaps you know her sister, Daphne Greengrass?"

"I do," she said, thinking of the quiet girl. "She was one of Pansy Parkinson's friends. Your wife is lovely."

"Thank you," he said.

"Why did you join the Death Eaters? You seem to have all you want in life. What more could the Dark Lord offer you?" she asked quietly.

He seemed startled. "Do you not approve?"

Careful with her wording, she replied, "It's not something that I would have just done on my own. I just wondered how other people came about joining. Family pressure? Forced?"

He laughed. "No, nothing like that. Well, my wife's father is a Death Eater, and he told me of the Dark Lord's noble work."

"Ridding the world of Mudbloods and Muggles," Hermione accused, feeling her temper rise.

"No, of course not. We are only going to harm the Muggles if they endanger our world," he said confidently. "I am a half-blood wizard." He smiled and explained, "My mother is a half-blood witch; her mother was a Muggle-born."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just... Sometimes I get so offended. Malfoy and some of the others used to taunt me, and it just seems like that is the whole point of things, especially after the whole Basilisk business at the school."

"Did Harry Potter truly kill that Basilisk with a sword?" he asked in awe. "Someone said that a painting in Dumbledore's office told him. I've always wondered about it."

Hermione nodded proudly. "He did... luckily."

His smile faded. "I am sorry for your loss. I know you must miss him."

"I do," she said quietly. Suddenly, she asked, "Do you believe him to be dead?"

"I know him to be dead. My father-in-law saw the Dark Lord kill him at Hogwarts," he said apologetically.

Hermione knew to keep quiet about the Dark Lord not truly hitting Harry with his final curse. "I guess I just hoped that he was still out there."

"Understandable, what with the way his body simply vanished after he was hit like that." He shrugged. "The Dark Lord's power is quite strong."

She couldn't believe that this nice guy with a family in the making was a Death Eater. "Were you there that day?" she asked.

"Yes, but I wasn't anywhere near the frontlines. Our Lord only let's the best join him there. I'm quite new and have trouble casting successive jinxes. I'm more adept at blocking spells for myself and others, so that was my job."

"Good luck with everything," she said, intending to get up and leave.

"Granger, how did you come to be so close to Snape? He always seemed so aloof, so cold. You've always struck me as a nice girl." His face paled. "I'm not saying that you're too nice for him. I only mean that you don't seem like a likely couple."

"I had troubles with my boyfriend. Severus caught him in a compromising position with another, and when I saw them together, he took pity on me for some reason. We talked at length and found that we had more in common than we would have thought." She smiled. "He's not so cold all the time."

"I didn't mean to offend you," he said. "Really. I apologize."

"No, it's all right. Trust me. He was my professor for a long time. I know how he can be," she admitted. Shivering with the colder gusts of wind that were now blowing through the ruins, she said, "I need to be getting within. It was nice talking to you. Good luck with your baby. May she be healthy."

"Thank you," he said, standing and nodding in farewell.

Hermione quickly made her way back to her rooms more troubled than she'd ever been. Life would be so much easier if Voldemort appeared to be the monster she'd always thought him to be, if his damn followers would act like the frantic lunatics she'd met before, and if she'd stop meeting some that were basically good...only misguided.

She wanted things to be better with Severus again and hoped that too much damage had not been done. "Of course it hasn't," she said aloud. He still looked at her with the same longing he always had and though he hadn't openly showed her affection recently, she felt him hold her and kiss her during the night when he thought she'd not notice. There was still hope.

The worst thing was that her hope was fading, and it seemed that this would be her destiny. Harry was dead. It was the only explanation for his continued absence. She wondered still if Severus knew the truth of what happened to him and just didn't want to tell her, afraid she'd not accept it and attempt to fade away as she'd once threatened.

Hermione vowed to keep silent as much as possible and to swallow her pride and let him know that she still loved and wanted him, though she'd said such hurtful things to him. She knew he'd never used her body just for his own pleasure. When they made love, he put all of his feelings into it, and it never felt like just a shag. It was always so much more...even their frenzied, quick couplings.

"Something's got to give," she said, heading to the bath.

Southern's Notes: Sorry it took so long to get out. I figured it would be better to simply get the holidays over with and make certain that my beta and I had time. I hope it was worth the wait.

We are nearly done now, and I guess I'm just putting off the end by procrastinating some. I've just been having fun with it. There are only about five chapters left. I'm trying to make it an even 40. (I'm such a dork. Hehe!)

Before anyone asks, Adrian Pucey doesn't have much more of a part. I just wanted someone to talk to Hermione and confuse her a little more about the types of people that are Death Eaters. I want her to really see that most of them are normal people with families of their own, too. As far as the funk she's in, I think being confined to one place and not truly knowing what's going on would get to anyone in this position and bring about a depression or moodiness.

For a bit of fun, I've joined a round robin with Fervesco, Wartcap, and Daya. We're under the penname CrapFic and the story is Mission: Getting Dobby Laid. If you feel like smiling, go give us a read. I've posted chapter 3. Oh, and I'm not one to whinge for reviews, but in that case, please review. I need to catch up with those witches. Grrrr... I'm way behind!

Ashwinder:

Making Rational Decisions

Chapter 35 of 42

Severus and Draco visit the Malfoys, giving them news while Pansy and Harry draw closer. Coming to the conclusion that he knows what's best for his witch, Severus makes a decision.

Disclaimer: J.K.R. created these characters and the cool spells they use. I'm just playing with them and not making any money.

As always, thanks go to my lovely and brilliant beta, Charmed_Nay.

This reminds me of a scene at the end of the chapter. Hope you like, although certain resolutions might make some of the shadings off.

□

Getting into Hogwarts undetected wasn't as easy as Severus had thought it would be. It seemed that there were even more Aurors about, though no students were back at school. Perhaps someone had fed them some information about the Dark Lord's pending plans. But who? He'd have to tell his Lord that he'd attempted to get by unseen and had a challenge. Lately, the man had been speaking of storming the gates a final time to take residence. This would buy Potter a little extra time if the Dark Lord thought there might be extra resistance this time around...not that a castle protected by Dumbledore wasn't forbidding enough, but the headmaster had been unprepared for such a raid.

Severus and Draco slipped into the darkened hospital wing and made their way to the secret room where he'd found Potter. After warding that door behind them, he allowed Draco to take Potter's cloak off. He paused before opening the door to their rooms. "It will be hard to see them cooped up like this, but I fear it must be done."

To his surprise, Draco nodded. "I'll not beg for their release... not yet."

"Very well." Opening the door, he ushered Draco inside and paused to stare at the posh suite before him. "What the hell?" he muttered, flicking his wand to ward them in. Draco caught his eye, an incredulous expression on his face. Severus shrugged. There was a roaring fire in the corner with two chairs and a small table before it. There were many bookshelves aligning the walls near that corner. Thick carpeting lined the floors, and feminine tapestries adorned the walls. A large canopied bed was in the far corner while the opposite corner was made into a dining area, which had a tabletop filled with various dishes of food. The center of the room seemed to be a sitting area. Large flowery plants hung from the ceiling along the walls, and in the very center of the room, hanging from the ceiling, Severus recognized the familiar chandelier normally in the Malfoy dining room.

A door to their left was ajar, and steam was coming out. The spray of water and laughter could be heard. Draco smirked and strode forward, sitting on the overstuffed chair next to the couch. "And here I thought they were living in a small room and sharing a small bed while having meager meals at best."

Severus cleared his throat and called, "Lucius." More laughter was heard, and the spray of water was turned off. Severus took a seat across from Draco, not wanting to be too involved in their family discussion, but wanting to be close enough to intervene if it became too heated.

"Severus, Draco!" Lucius greeted a few minutes later, dressed in casual attire and sounding as if he were greeting guests into his home. "It's been so long, my son. I am happy that Severus has allowed you to come."

Draco rose and shook his father's hand. Lucius pulled him closer for a quick embrace. "You seem to be living the life," Draco commented.

"Ah, you know your mother," he said dismissively, sitting on the couch nearest Draco's chair. "Tell me. What occasion is this? Has the Dark Lord been defeated?" He looked to Severus as he asked this.

"No," the dark man answered. "He's still in hiding... for now."

"Oh, Draco!" Narcissa exclaimed as she entered. Her long, pale hair was down and flowing in her wake as she made her way to her son. She, too, was dressed casually. "What a surprise!"

"Mother," Draco said, rising to meet her. They embraced for a long moment, and Severus felt extremely uncomfortable.

"And, Severus, hello," she said when she released Draco.

He nodded. "Narcissa."

She sat down next to Lucius, bringing Draco to sit next to her and causing Lucius to rise and take Draco's chair. "What has happened?" she asked, eyeing them suspiciously. "Are we to be freed?"

"Draco requested a visit to speak with you on something of importance." Severus shrugged. "I am here mainly to see that all is well and that nobody is discovered."

Both Malfoys looked at their son expectantly. "Mother, Father," he began, "I'm here to speak to you about my future... about my pending marriage."

"I thought you wanted to do away with the alliance to the Parkinson family?" Lucius asked.

"This is not about Pansy, Father."

"Oh, that little Greengrass girl then. Daphne, is it?" Narcissa asked, blue eyes twinkling. "I must say that I am quite happy. She will give you lovely heirs and is much more..."

"I love Ginny Weasley."

"What?" both parents asked.

Severus smirked, enjoying the boy's uneasiness. *Not as easy as you thought, eh?* He wondered idly what Hermione's parents would say about her relationship with one of

her ex-professors, an older one at that! Would they threaten to disown her or welcome him? He pushed the thoughts aside. There would be time to deal with them later if Potter was victorious. If not, well, it didn't really matter what they thought of him. He looked back to the Malfoys. Only Lucius seemed to have deciphered what his son had said, even though he'd quickly repeated it once again. Narcissa still had a confused expression upon her face. Lucius' pale eyes met Severus' for a moment, and Severus nodded in the affirmative. The look of disgust left his friend's face immediately, an expression of calculation taking its place.

"I said," Draco continued again, a tone of defiance now making its way into his voice, "that I love Ginny Weasley, and I plan to marry her. We've told her parents, and I thought it only right to tell you."

Narcissa began laughing. "Oh, honestly, Draco! You jest. A Weasley? Why, they are blood traitors of the worst kind... and poor. You loathe them."

"Those poor, blood traitors have been keeping me safe, feeding me, and accepting me into their lives without question even though I've always been an arse to them," Draco said heatedly, jumping up to pace. "You'll not talk about them in such a way when they are the ones we owe for keeping us alive and not asking anything for it in return!"

"So you mean to repay them by honoring them to become part of *our* family! Ridiculous," Narcissa said. "You needn't go so far as to ruin your life just to find a way to thank them for what they are doing. I am certain we can compensate them for whatever they've given you." She looked to Lucius for his agreement. "Tell him."

Lucius eyed his son for a long moment before asking, "What else is there?"

"She's pregnant," Draco admitted.

Narcissa groaned. "So... trickery it is! She's done this purposely to force you into..."

"Don't you talk about her that way," Draco interrupted, anger reverberating through his body, causing his hands to shake. "You want to know why I started wanting her? Feeling something for her?" He nodded towards his father. "I felt an unexplained need to protect her from *him* after he and the Dark Lord requested that I get to know her better. How could I not feel something for her after truly speaking with her? She's the best... I could NEVER let *anyone* harm her."

Lucius' face flushed guiltily as he stood. "You must know, son, that harming her was never my intention."

"You wanted to use her like a bloody pawn! She was to be your leverage! Don't you know what would have happened to her?" Lucius opened his mouth to speak, but he closed it quickly. "You just didn't care... so long as you were all right."

"I was looking out for the three of us, Draco. It's not always just about me," he returned coolly.

"How can you defend someone like *her* when your father was only trying to do what was right for us all? She's nothing but scum...a Potter follower!" Narcissa interjected.

Severus' eyebrow arched. *This is getting interesting.* "Narcissa, it would do well to curb those words around others, as it happens to be a Potter supporter that is allowing you to live in his castle at the present time. I am uncertain he would appreciate your style of gratitude."

"Times are changing," Draco said, adding, "and if you ever call her something like that again, Mother, you'll lose me."

"You would chose an outsider over family?" his mother asked shrilly, losing her poise.

"She *is* family... so is my baby. I love her," he said firmly, voice lowering. "I thought you'd be happy for me."

"I... am surprised," Narcissa said. She looked to Severus. "How can I ever change the way I've been raised to feel about people like *them*? I don't mean anyone any true harm, but I still can't see myself being any..."

He shrugged. "Do as you've always done. Put on a different face in public. When you are at home or thinking privately, be yourself. *What is so fucking hard about that?*

Lucius put a hand on her shoulder. "Calm yourself, Narcissa." He guided her back to the couch. "Draco, you will have to understand that this will take some getting used to, especially for your mother. She's always envisioned your wedding and children a certain way. I suppose sharing holidays with Weasleys is a bit much...for now."

"I know what you did to her all those years ago," Draco said quietly.

"Pardon?" Lucius asked, straightening and turning to face him.

"The diary."

"And?"

"And she forgives you," Draco said grudgingly. "But if you ever do anything like that again..."

Lucius nodded. "I'll not oppose this union, Draco, and I hope you realize that being a prisoner and being on the run these past few months have humbled me somewhat. I wanted a change before Severus brought me here." He smirked. "I was simply going about it the wrong way."

"Y-you won't object? Why?" Draco asked, expression instantly twisted in surprise.

"Yes, explain," Narcissa demanded, having recovered from her initial shock. "I thought you detested Arthur Weasley and the others!"

"Now is not the time for this, Cissy," Lucius bit out. "It is to our advantage to accept this union and allow our former foes to be on friendlier terms with us."

Severus smirked. He knew where Lucius was coming from. Though the man would have preferred a wealthier, classier wife for his son, the answer to all of his problems could be easily solved with his pending relations with the Weasleys, who rank high at the Ministry and with Dumbledore and Potter, through Draco. "A most noble decision," Severus said dryly.

Lucius made a face at him as if to tell him to be silent, but there was no need. Draco blissfully began chattering on about how much they would simply adore Ginny and how she deserved a better lifestyle after all the hardships she'd endured. For all his good intentions, the boy still had much to learn about life and love. Finally, Narcissa came around.

"Well, how far along is she?" she asked with sudden interest, winking at her husband, who breathed a sigh of relief.

Severus moved off to the side, followed by Lucius, and spoke to him privately about things going on with their Lord and the progression of Potter's new training while mother and son discussed family matters.

"So you think that Potter can do it?" Lucius asked eagerly.

"He's nearly ready, yes, and with the element of surprise, it will be quite simple. Our Lord will never suspect a thing," Severus said confidently.

"How fares the old M... Dumbledore?"

"I believe that he was weakened considerably, but I'd still not suggest anyone go against him in a duel." Severus smirked. "Fawkes took him away from the battle and began healing him through Phoenix tears and brought him to the safety of headquarters. I found him the next night after I'd brought Potter there. I realized the extent of his injuries then when I began my own form of healing with magic and potions."

"While Narcissa has made our prison into something more enjoyable...an extended holiday if you will...I'd very much like to get back to my home." He shook his head in disbelief. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I hope that luck is with the Potter boy."

"As do I," Severus agreed. "There is something that I must know."

"Yes?"

"How was all of this accomplished without magic?"

Lucius chuckled. "My wife always did have a way with Dobby. Where I was quite... rough with the creature, she only needed to whisper something sweetly to see it done. I never approved, of course, but now, I am quite relieved that she did so, as we've been living like royalty...waited on at any time of day or night."

"And what of the young Weasley girl? Are you truly going to allow that to continue?" Severus questioned.

"There comes a time in life, old friend, where we must learn to accept what cannot be changed. I grant my son permission to carry on."

"And her family's connections with the Ministry and the Order have nothing to do with your sudden change of heart?" Severus queried.

"Of course it does," Lucius hissed quietly, eyes glinting mischievously. "Narcissa will behave herself as well. I'll see to it." Suddenly, Lucius looked Severus up and down. "You are looking a bit haggard. What's happening to you? Has our Lord been unmerciful? What of your witch?"

Crossing his arms in front of him, closing his robes as he did so, Severus replied, tightlipped, "I don't see where *my* personal life is your concern, Lucius. Suffice it to say that my witch is right where she should be."

"Is she? I would have thought that the gilded cage wouldn't be so enjoyable," Lucius commented, arching a refined eyebrow.

"How dare you insinuate that she is only there because I've forced her to be!" Severus demanded forcefully, taking a step closer to Lucius, not caring that the other two Malfoys looked up at him with wide-eyed expressions.

Taking a single step back, he said, "I meant *you*, Severus." Lucius looked over to his family and nodded to reassure them that all was well before quietly adding to Severus, "Is there something you need to discuss?"

"Certainly not," Severus said, feeling foolish for his outburst. It seemed that Lucius had pointed out what Severus himself had been thinking earlier in the day, causing him to react in such a manner.

"Well, I've nothing better to do, should you care to stop by for a talk."

Nodding brusquely, Severus turned on his heel and strode towards the door. "Come, Draco."

"Oh? So soon?" Narcissa questioned.

"I've other things that I could be doing, yes."

Draco bid his family farewell and remained quiet as Severus warded their door. Once that was done, he said, "Father and Mother likely see my relationship with Ginevra as a ticket to a life free of Azkaban."

Irritated, Severus said, "Your father will already be skirting Azkaban thanks to the headmaster's false testimony that will say he's been a help to us all along."

"That doesn't mean that her family's *good* standing shouldn't be used to his advantage," Draco pointed out. "I know how my father works. I just wished they'd been more receptive."

Severus sighed. "Does it truly matter how they feel about her right now?"

"It does to me, though I admit that just having their blessing makes me feel better."

"She will grow on them eventually, Draco. She'll be round with child, and they'll forget all about the things that make them feel she's not right for their son, concentrating on their grandchild, who is of Malfoy blood." He strode forward, disillusioning himself as he did so. "Put the cloak on."

"Her parents will be the same," Draco said, donning Potter's cloak.

"The Weasleys have already truly accepted you into their home. You needn't fret about that."

"No, I was talking about Granger's parents and how they might feel towards you at first."

"We'll not speak of my relationship with Hermione again." How dare this young boy bring up something so personal? *I guess he figured it was all right since I was giving out advice. If Hermione's parents do not approve, I won't care, but for Hermione's sake, I hope they will take things in stride as the Malfoys had, having minimal objections.*

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"I must be away for a while. There is someone that I need to see now that I am well enough," Dumbledore announced.

Pansy and Harry looked up from their game of chess. "Are you truly well enough?" Harry asked worriedly.

"Oh, I am indeed," came the kind reply. The wizard stood and stretched.

"But, sir, Snape said you should rest more."

"Any further resting, Harry, and I might as well be dead. I've had enough of lying about." He smiled. "I know that Severus means well, but I am old enough to make decisions for myself."

Smiling, Pansy said, "I think you're much better, but I wouldn't recommend overdoing it just yet. We... need you."

Dumbledore touched her face. "You have been a great help, and I thank you for your assistance." He nodded to Harry. "You should concentrate on him now. He's the one that will have to do a bit of fast-paced maneuvering soon."

"Won't you come with us?" Pansy asked, suddenly frightened. She'd known that Harry would be going for Voldemort and had even planned on going with him, but she'd always imagined Dumbledore at their side.

"Of course, dear girl, but it is Harry's hex that must count." Harry made to rise, but Dumbledore stopped him. "Carry on. I shall return in an hour."

"But, sir, I..."

Dumbledore grabbed Fawkes' tail feathers, and both disappeared with a small burst of flames.

Harry shrugged. "He's right. No other wizard is better than him...even if he is injured."

Biting her lip for a moment, Pansy said, "You will be one day, Harry."

Harry eyed her for a moment and smiled, seeing the adoration and longing in her eyes. Then, something happened. He felt suddenly different; his eyes drifted to view her plump lips and saw her tongue dart out to moisten them. Moving forward slowly, he glanced back at her eyes and found she was moving forward, too, eyes closed. She expected him to kiss her, wanted him to do so. *And I want to kiss you, Pansy*, he thought as his lips pressed against hers chastely. His eyes closed, and he moved closer, bringing his hands up to cup her head and face. Just as he parted his lips, intent on deepening the kiss, there was a loud crash.

He jumped back, startled. In his haste to get closer to her, he knocked the chessboard over and down to the floor. "Er... sorry?" he offered uncertainly. She looked horrified. He had been certain, however, that she'd wanted to kiss him as well.

"No. Really," she said, stooping to pick up the angry, shouting pieces. "I need to go down and see about dinner anyway."

Harry knelt down next to her and grabbed her hands. "Pansy, I don't want anything to change. I just thought that you wanted me to... to do it. I shouldn't have."

"I did," she said in a hushed tone. "I just don't want to be a replacement."

"A replacement? Oh." Harry realized she was thinking of Gabrielle and his feelings for her. His face heated. "I wasn't thinking of her just then. I suppose I should have been, but the way you looked at me with such..." His voice trailed away. "Were you thinking of Ron?"

"Not just then, no," she admitted. "I am now though. Is this wrong?"

"We've been so close lately," he suggested. "It's only natural that we would develop feelings for each other."

"Do you have feelings for me?" she asked hopefully, squeezing his hands.

That was a tough question. He hadn't thought too much of it before, but in that one moment, something had shifted. "I think so. You?"

"I think so, too."

"But you don't know if we should act on them," Harry finished for her, seeing the expression on her face.

"Before we go any further, I think we should make certain that is what we want so that if... if anything changes, neither of us will be hurt," she said, looking away from him.

*What would change?* he wondered. "Are you afraid that I'm going to die and leave you alone the way Ron did?"

"No," she said immediately. "I have faith in your ability."

"More than I," he muttered.

She pulled one of her hands free of his and cupped his cheek with it, forcing him to look at her. "You're a great wizard, Harry, and always have been. Though I was a different person in school and placed importance on the wrong things, I always grudgingly respected you and the way you'd best Draco time and again." She smiled. "... I am afraid that Gabrielle will be found, and that would halt anything we'd start." She closed her eyes as if trying to summon courage. "I don't wish her to be dead, Harry. I swear it. I just don't want to stand in the way if she returns or have my... heart broken when you'd leave me for her again."

Harry didn't know what to say. Who would he pick if that did happen? He wished that Gabrielle would be alive, having simply been held someplace, but Snape said that there was no sign of her at all. He'd lost hope that she'd come back, and he still felt guilty for not forcing Fleur to leave her at headquarters somehow. No matter how he'd felt about Gabby or still felt, something was happening with Pansy, and he wanted to explore it. "I understand," he said.

Seeing the hurt look on her face made him feel guilty for not explaining himself better. "I mean to say that I understand what you mean, but I don't think there is cause to worry about me hurting you...for any reason." When she smiled, he moved closer and kissed her again. This time, their lips parted, tongues meeting and mingling. He could only describe the kiss as soft and pleasing. She pulled away after giving him one final closed-mouth kiss and giggled.

The moment was spoiled when a voice spoke behind them. "Where is Albus?"

*Molly Weasley. Shite*, Harry thought, feeling guilty. He turned to face her and felt Pansy pull away and rise. He stood and said, "He said he had someone to talk to."

She put her hands on her hips. "I just want to know how long this has been going on?"

"Sorry?" Harry asked in what he hoped was an innocent voice.

"Pansy?" she asked, looking past Harry. "Did you have these feelings for Harry when Ron was... alive?"

"It's not like that," Pansy said. "We've become close and have both lost people we loved."

Molly ignored this. "Harry? What about you?"

"It's as she said," he said adamantly.

"Well, let's hope Ron approves...wherever he may be," she said quietly. "I need a little help with dinner, Pansy. Ginny isn't feeling well all of a sudden, and Draco is out with Snape."

"Yes, ma'am," Pansy said, moving to follow Mrs. Weasley out the room.

"Wait," Harry called. Both women turned around. "I meant for Pansy to wait." Molly eyed them both, but she simply nodded and left without speaking again.

"Harry, maybe it isn't such a good idea," Pansy said in resignation. "I never thought about how others might think of it."

"Rubbish," he said. "We needn't rush anything, but I'll not have you staying away just to please her or anyone else. Whatever happens simply does. All right?"

"All right," she agreed. "Chess after dinner then since you purposely knocked over the board while I was winning?"

"Definitely."

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After a lengthy talk with the Dark Lord, Severus made his way into his bedchambers. He noticed Hermione right away. She was over on their bed, sleeping atop the duvet in a white, long-sleeved nightgown. She looked as though she were the epitome of pureness while lying there. How could he have ever thought that someone such as he had the right to taint her? Reaching down, he softly traced her face with his fingers. He hated seeing her in such a state. In the past couple of weeks since their argument out in the courtyard, he'd been quite cold to her, hoping to teach her a lesson, but perhaps he'd gone too far.

With each new day, she grew more resigned to her fate, the spark leaving her as hope fled. He hadn't cared about her feelings in the beginning. Not really. He'd wanted to possess her and simply figured she would meekly go along with whatever he'd decided, forgetting about her loyalty to Potter if need be. That had not happened. She'd remained loyal to the boy even after she'd begun to think he'd died. This bothered Severus more than he'd ever admit to her.

And he'd not counted on falling in love with her, nor worrying about how she felt and if she was happy. He'd not counted on hurting because she did, nor worrying about her feelings and the way she saw him as a man and a lover. Did she truly think him to simply be using her body? He thought he'd always made it clear when he was with her that it wasn't only taking that he desired, but he'd been giving as well. Giving her everything. *I cannot allow you to wither away*, he thought sadly. It would be better to let her go than to force her to live in unhappiness. He'd send her back to where she wanted to be.

When Lucius had made that remark about a gilded cage, he'd felt quite guilty and thought he'd been pointing out that Hermione was caged. He knew it to be true in his heart. He should do the right thing and release her. It would do well to see her happy again... or at least read of her happiness from afar. How often had he looked at his parchment lately only to have it tell him that she was sad, depressed, distraught, frustrated, or crying? This would not do. "Hermione," he said softly, touching her on the shoulder firmly. "Wake up."

"Hmmm?" she asked groggily, sitting up and stretching. "What time is it?"

"It's quite late," he replied, scowling slightly as he noticed her weary expression. "I would appreciate it if you weren't so apathetic. I've much to tell you."

"Severus, I'm sorry about those things that I said to you. I'm really going to try to control myself and be the woman that you want me to be, the woman that I know I am. I can't believe that I've allowed myself to wallow in such despair!" She smiled sadly. "I've just been so upset, and I don't know which way to turn sometimes. My life has taken a turn for the worst, and I have to learn to deal with it."

"Is being here with me so horrible?" he asked, hurt that she'd phrased her words in such a way.

"No, I could live anywhere with you, but being here is something I never imagined. I don't feel comfortable leaving our quarters often, and I hate being left alone so much. Why, I never wan..."

"Enough," he interrupted, scowling slightly. "I accept your apology." He looked away from her as he tried to gather his thoughts.

"I miss you," she whispered.

That got his attention. He turned to face her and arched a questioning eyebrow. "Miss me? I've been here the entire time."

"I hate that you don't touch me," she admitted.

He sighed and sat next to her. "You felt that I was using you, so I thought I'd give you reason to believe otherwise."

"I only said that to hurt you. I was angry."

"Does this mean that you'd like to be with me again...in that way?" he asked quietly, stroking her cheek. He knew it would be their last time together. He'd hoped that she might want to... before he let her go. It was unfair of him to allow it to happen without telling her it would never happen again, but if he told her the truth, there was a chance that the Dark Lord could see it in her mostly unprotected mind. He would not be able to tell her anything until they were out of the castle and away from the grounds.

"Very much." She nuzzled into his touch. "Kiss me, Severus."

He leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers, beginning the foreplay to the last coupling they would ever share. For in the morning, he would take her to London... to Potter... to where she'd be happier. He would tell the Dark Lord that she was distracting him from his work of finding out what happened to Potter and had decided to place a memory charm on her and dump her off in Diagon Alley where she'd be found, possibly flushing Potter out of hiding to get to her. He would claim that he'd collect her again after they had a stronger claim on the Wizarding world and after he had less important duties to attend, such as finding out who was giving the Ministry inside information. His Lord would allow it... hopefully and be, once again, hoodwinked.

In truth, he'd bring her to his home, explain things to her, and then bring her to Diagon Alley where someone could be waiting to "find" her, keeping up the pretense that he'd create for his Master. Ending things were for the best. If he couldn't force her to be happy or make her happy on his own, he'd see to it that she was in a better place and allow her to find it for herself...no matter the cost to him.

Southern's Notes: I'll give the details in the next chapter, have their final talk, and move on from there. Sad, isn't it? I'll bet she never expected him to break things off.

Sorry for the delay. I've just been uninspired. LOL... Actually, it's real life that's been mucking with me. Things seem to be clearing up though. I'll have the next chapter for you this weekend hopefully. Thanks to those who are still sticking with the story. I do appreciate it.

Freeing the Kept

Chapter 36 of 42

Hermione and Severus share an intimate night before he and Voldemort make plans that will change their lives.
Hermione isn't happy with his decisions.

Disclaimer: Same as always. I've snatched some of J.K.R.'s characters and am having a bit of fun with them...making no Galleons at all.

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Severus let his lips linger against hers, although their kiss had ended. He wanted to simply take pleasure in the soft feel of her mouth while he still could and wished that the firewhisky he'd drunk with the Dark Lord wasn't overpowering his sense of taste, rendering him unable to taste her. Slowly rubbing his mouth against hers, he whispered her name quietly.

"What's wrong?" Hermione questioned, pulling back slightly and ruining the moment.

"Nothing," he lied. *Everything is wrong.*

"You sound so desolate," she said, running her knuckles along the sides of his jaws. "I'll make these past couple of weeks up to you. I promise. I know that I wasn't the only one hurting." She leaned forward and kissed his lips chastely once more. "We'll be all right."

No, we won't, he thought ironically. It was quite interesting that she chose to have a change of heart on this night after he'd made the decision to end things with her. He'd have to ask her what had aided in her decision to make amends. He'd made the right choice and would stick by it, no matter what transpired. He'd not let her waste away. Her words sounded good, but he couldn't trust that she wouldn't return to wallowing in misery after only a few days of attempting to be happy. "I love you, Hermione," he said in a hushed voice, clearly surprising her.

"And I love you," she replied, her lips finding his again.

He was pleased that her hands moved up to unfasten his robes. She'd come such a long way since their first times together. Hermione suited him perfectly and knew exactly what he liked. Sliding into her heat was an experience unlike any other. Perhaps it was the fact that he had been her only lover, and no other had had her before him, enabling her to fit around him so perfectly. Knowing that she'd given herself only to him was a potent feeling. No other lover would ever be like her. *How can I think of other lovers? How can I be without her?* Pushing away those thoughts, he shrugged out of his robes for her.

Smiling, she said, "It's been so long it seems."

Severus nodded. "Sixteen days, ten hours, and about five minutes," he replied seriously. Bringing his hands up to the ties on the back of her nightgown, he began unfastening it. Once the ties were unbound, he paused to pull off his shirt, as she'd unbuttoned it for him. After, he placed his hands upon her shoulders and gently pulled down, easing the garment away from her, taking care to memorize the way the candlelight hit her bare skin and the feel of his hands moving down her body. Once the gown reached her waist, he moved his hands up her arms slowly, over her shoulders, across her collarbone, and down to her breasts, caressing them softly. Unable to resist, he leaned forward and placed small kisses on each breast, latching onto one of her nipples for a moment.

When he paused to simply rest his head against her chest, eyes closed, she stroked his hair with one hand and his back with the other. "Are you certain that you are all right, Severus?" she asked hesitantly. "You seem so restrained."

He pulled back to look at her and said honestly, "When you were younger, I used to just look at you and be annoyed." He traced the line of her jaw with a long, pale index finger. "This past summer, I noticed that you'd changed, becoming somewhat attractive. I remembered thinking it was a pity that you had picked Weasley as a mate." He shook his head and closed his eyes. "I saw you with him, you know, and I lusted for you." Opening his eyes to gaze into hers, he added, "I was glad that he and Pansy had taken to each other. I knew what I was doing even the first time I took you from headquarters to protect you. I wanted you."

"The night we slept together on that mattress in that shack?" she asked.

"The very same," he admitted, bringing his finger down to trace her collarbone back and forth. "Each time I was near you, I wanted to have you, but I weaved a tangled little web, luring you in, making you want me, too. I wanted to possess you so badly."

"Are you feeling guilty? Please, Severus, don't. I wanted you, too," Hermione said, smiling and attempting to touch his face.

He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed its palm. "I do not feel guilty. Nor do I regret anything that has transpired between us." He kissed her index finger, circling it with his tongue. "The more time I spent with you, the more I wanted from you. I wanted a life with you just as we were in my home. It became more than just the need to have your body. I wanted all of you."

"Wanted? As in... the past?" she asked, pulling her hand back.

"Want," he said, placing his hands upon her shoulders again, kneading them lightly. "You stopped being attractive to me and became... beautiful."

"Oh, Severus," she said with a sigh of contentment, leaning into him and putting her arms around him. "You needn't say it. I know exactly how you feel. I gradually fell in love with you, and the harsh Snape that I knew faded away as I did so, leaving only the attractive man before me. The past is where it should be... finished."

He nodded, not trusting his voice to say anything. Severus rose from the bed and pushed down his trousers and underpants, revealing his stiff erection. He crawled back onto the bed, finding her lips for a long kiss, slowly lowering her down as he did so. She pushed the gown and her knickers down, kicking them away with her feet. Breaking away from her mouth, he moved to his side and propped himself up on one elbow to look at her, taking in her flushed cheeks, the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed, her soft stomach, the neatly trimmed and partially shaved patch of hair at the junction of her thighs, and her shapely legs.

"Beautiful," he complimented again, reaching out to pull her flush against him. He held her for a moment, slipping a knee between her thighs, inhaling the scent of her shampoo. One of her hands slid around to grab his arse, causing him to mutter his approval. He moved down slightly and took a hardened nipple into his mouth, laving at it with his practiced tongue and giving her cause to moan and press against him in need. Deciding he'd not put things off any longer, he pulled her leg up over him and moved against her, angling himself in a way that enabled him to enter her while they both stayed on their sides, gazing into each other's eyes.

Ever so slowly, he pushed in. With her not being as wet as he'd have liked, he made certain to not shove in completely, pulling back out and moving back in gently a few times, never completely filling her, simply teasing her body into accepting his girth. He was attempting to savor the feel of her, wanting to forever brand her into his mind.

Hermione, however, had other ideas. In frustration, she pulled him roughly against her, causing him to impale her. Both gasped in delight. She ground against him eagerly, trying to pull him over her.

"Patience," he said. "Like this," he demonstrated by thrusting into her easily. He used a steady, unhurried rhythm. When she moved with him, somewhat awkwardly at first, and tightened her leg's grip on his thighs, he began a slow languid kiss, not closing his eyes, afraid to miss something. She opened her eyes the moment their kiss ended, and they simply looked into each other's eyes while they moved.

"Oh," she murmured when he gripped her arse tightly.

Her little exclamation brought his mouth back to hers. Losing himself in her kiss and their bodies' movements, he felt his emotions peak and deepened his strokes, speeding up a little. A sudden orgasm found him, and he grunted with his release.

He continued moving within her, though he was becoming flaccid, not wanting their coupling to end. Even after she ended their kiss and smiled, he didn't stop moving, enjoying the feel of her. Their last coupling would not end with her being unable to reach culmination. He'd not leave her with that disappointment. Pushing her onto her back, he renewed his strokes with vigor, shaft hardening with each arousing thrust.

Soon her legs had wound around his body, one hugging his thigh and the other his waist. Each time he pounded into her with his deep, sharp thrusts, she grunted and mumbled incoherently, fingernails scraping along his back. Before long she was calling for him to not stop and gyrating against him wildly for further stimulation.

"Harder! Faster! God, yes!" With that, she cried out as climax washed over her.

He didn't stop slamming into her, however, until he'd found release a second time. This time his movements ceased nearly immediately, and he rolled off of her onto his back, panting and feeling completely spent. Sometime later, he felt the whisper of magic sweep across his body as she cast a Cleansing Charm on the both of them. Gathering her into his arms, he held his witch for the last time, not looking forward to their parting the next day. While sleeping, she tilted her head up in attempt to snuggle closer to him. When her face was in such a way, looking so vulnerable, he wanted nothing more than to protect her from harm. It bothered him that he would be the one to harm her. She would be hurt that he'd decided to end things, but he was certain she would get over that sooner than he would. *But it's for the best. She will be happy. You may not live anyway.*

And that was the truth, for he didn't plan to join the Order in their fight when the time came. No, he would remain at the Dark Lord's side until the bitter end. It wouldn't be loyalty that would keep him there. It was to make certain that Potter got the job done and that nothing went wrong. If something did go wrong, he couldn't afford to be outed as a spy. Dumbledore and he had talked about that already. He was to keep up his façade as long as necessary. The Order members would likely recognize him, but if they opted to bring Aurors, some of them might only see him as a Death Eater. There was also the chance that a stray hex could find him.

Severus tightened his hold on his sleeping lover. He would write a letter to her, explaining things... just in case. He didn't want to die and have her doubting his loyalties once again. Nothing he did any longer was for him only. It was also for her. Never Dumbledore. Never the Dark Lord. He would make certain that the headmaster didn't allow her to be involved either. He couldn't keep his wits about him while worrying for her. It had been hard to do at the small battle outside of Hogwarts, and the Death Eaters had had a great number on their side that day. They'd been instructed to not harm her, but if she showed up at Potter's side, that would all change.

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"Severusss," the Dark Lord greeted. He pointed to the space on the bench next to him. Once Severus was seated, his Master spoke again. "I have just left a meeting with Bane. The visions will be viewable in five days. We will see if anything has changed." He looked pensive for a moment. "I would like to have the Weasley girl. We shall double our efforts."

"I have looked, my Lord," Severus said ashamedly, mentally digesting the information about Bane. "I shall not stop until either she, young Malfoy, or Potter are found."

Speaking to Nagini, the Dark Lord ignored Severus for a few minutes. He looked to the short, young man that walked in. "I trust you remember your instructions, Montague?" The man nervously nodded. "See to it." When the snake slithered to the man, he placed his hands upon her, jumping nervously when she turned to hiss at him, but he put his hands back and used a Portkey to leave.

"An errand, my Lord?" Severus asked curiously. If he was sending Nagini out to do something, it didn't bode well. He tried to seem unconcerned, but he was truly worried.

The Dark Lord looked to his favorite and continued their previous conversation without answering his question. "I believe that Potter is dead. I reach out to him and feel nothing. However, why does his body elude us? How fares Dumbledore? Do you think him to be hiding the boy? Are you keeping him weak as instructed?"

"I am, Master. Dumbledore doesn't realize that the potion I slip to him each week keeps him in a weakened state. I don't think he's strong enough to Occlude the boy in his position." He thought for a moment. "I wonder if someone else is helping him somehow...if he still lives? Surely nobody supporting the brat, aside from Dumbledore, would be that powerful."

"That is the question on my mind, Severusss," the Dark Lord replied. Suddenly, he turned to face his follower. "What is it? Something is troubling you." He eyed him closely.

Severus shrugged as he felt the familiar mental intrusion. "I fear that I am doing you a disservice, my Lord."

"Interesting. Continue."

"It's as if I am allowing myself to be distracted by my concubine and not doing things to the best of my ability." He hoped that he sounded disturbed. "When I discovered that the castle's protection had been upped, it bothered me. How could I have not heard something about a spy? Who is keeping this from me?"

"What do you propose, Severus?"

He sighed. "Perhaps I should be rid of her... for now only."

"Explain."

"I wonder if we could Obliviate her and place false memories in her mind. I could dump her off in Diagon Alley where many would see her. Surely it would make the papers and flush Potter out of hiding." He waited quietly as his Lord mulled this over.

"I find it noteworthy that you would be rid of her, Severusss." There was suspicion in his words.

"Only temporarily. She is quite satisfying," he added. "And I still choose her."

"She has been on your mind a great deal lately," the Dark Lord commented. "Her unwillingness to obey you completely is lingering and taking its toll on you. I was thinking of having another word with her about it, among other things, but maybe this could work." He stood and moved to sit on the fountain's edge.

"I am finding it a time-consuming task to bend her to my will. She's been more docile of late, and my coldness has taught her that she *must* keep me content if she is to be happy." He smirked. "I firmly believe that once Potter's body is found or that once Potter is truly killed, she will come around to my way of thinking. I can easily snatch her back, remove the Memory Charm, and show her that it was for her own good."

"So we use her as bait." One pale hand came up to rub his chin.

"Yes."

"And if they damage her mind to break the charm...on the assumption that they would notice something that you've hidden?"

"Once they see or hear of her false memories, they will believe her and leave it at that. Nobody would dare harm Potter's friend," Snape said, trying to sound bitter. "Before long, they will all forget about Potter. There will only be the Dark Lord, and she will only be Snape's witch."

Nodding his approval, the Dark Lord said, "Bring her to me for a talk."

"Yes, sir," Snape said. He rose. "I don't want her to know of the Memory Charm, Master. I do not know that I feel up to having an argument. I'm sure her loyalty will have her begging to stay here. I'd just like to do it and be done quickly, saving that argument for a time when our victory is complete."

"I shall keep silent on it," his Master replied thoughtfully. "I just want to speak with her before you leave. You will tell her that you are going visiting?"

"Perhaps I can say that we need to check on things at my home, maybe make a potion. I can take her there to alter her memory. I have an excellent potion that will make her feel intoxicated when I release her. She'll think she escaped those holding her hostage after a drinking binge."

"Who will you blame for snatching her from Hogwarts?"

"Well, they've never found Rodolphus' body. I'll make it look as though he and another had her in retaliation for Bella's demise. The Wizarding world will eagerly eat up the news, as will Potter." Severus chuckled in amusement. "Oh, he'll be wanting to defend her and will come running."

"Very good, Severus. Get her ready. Once you return, we will discuss another way of flushing out our spy."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said, bowing slightly. "I shall return with her shortly."

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Hermione had been ecstatic when Severus had informed her that they needed to spend the day at his home so that he could work on a potion for the Dark Lord in private. Oddly enough, he told her to bring her things. She didn't argue, figuring he would allow her to swap items and gather other things she needed. She hadn't been expecting to have to meet with the Dark Lord first.

"Severus, if you would give us a moment, I would like to speak to her alone."

"Certainly," Severus said, nodding and leaving without even glancing at her.

She swallowed uneasily. What could he possibly want to speak with her about? "Yes, sir?" she asked cautiously.

"Have you been enjoying your stay here?"

"Yes."

"Do not lie to me. Do you not know that I can always tell when someone is lying?"

"All right," she relented. "I've not been overjoyed about staying here, but it's not all been unpleasant. I've met... I've met some nice people."

The Dark Lord nodded. "I am pleased that you think so. Some are quite sociable, but I'm afraid that not all of my followers are very pleasant." He flashed an eerie smile at her. "Do you remember our conversation? What I warned you about? Severus doesn't know of course."

Hermione panicked. "But, sir, you mustn't!"

He raised his brow in surprise. "Indeed?"

"I love my parents and don't want to see them killed." She stilled her trembling. "Severus and I are fine. For a short amount of time, I allowed myself to fall into a pit of despair, but I've worked through that."

"I believe that I also told you to always address me with respect. You don't want Lord Voldemort to get angry with you, girl." He rose and towered over her and thrust a wagging finger in her face. "There are spells I could put on you that would render you helpless to be nothing other than a vessel for... Well, you can imagine. Needless to say, I do always follow through with my warnings."

"No, s-sir, I don't want to anger you, but I wanted to speak freely on behalf of my parents. I meant no real disrespect." She bowed her head in what she hoped was submission, mentally chiding herself for not remembering her place. This was not Severus, whom she could stand up to at will. This man would kill her or those she loved for stating her own opinions.

"You know, I'm not always ruthless. Why, even though your parents are Muggles, I still accept you into my home and allow you to live with my most trusted advisor. Your accomplishments speak for you, not your parentage. Do you know how many women would like to be in your place?"

She shook her head. She'd never thought of that before. She'd always thought of Severus as Professor Snape before and had never imagined him with any women.

"Yes, his position of power in our world is quite intriguing to a large number of witches, and I am certain that they are disappointed that he's chosen *you* as his concubine, bypassing them without so much as a glance." His red eyes glowed as they narrowed. "It would be easy for him to find someone else."

Hermione bit her lip, keeping her retort locked within. She wanted to tell him to shove those witches up his arse, but she feared him and could not. It wasn't truly the punishment she feared, but the thought of the man forcing Severus to be with another witch just to prove a point to her. She knew she would go mad and try to maim any witch that neared her wizard.

Suddenly, Voldemort's high-pitched cackled filled the air. "You are quite spirited, aren't you? Why, it's no wonder Severus is having such a hard time breaking you." He sat down again. "Things will change for us all eventually. You'll have to accept life as it is or suffer the consequences. It would bode well for you to remember that. If you love and care for him as he so believes and justly deserves, prudence is required. Have a care to not anger me again, and make certain to not distract him from his work. Agreed?"

"Yes," she bit out, adding a belated, "sir."

"Excellent. Before Wormtail's demise, he gathered all the books that a few choice followers and I have on certain subjects that not even the restricted section of Hogwarts has. The number is quite extensive. Once you are back here, I will allow you to start getting familiar with them. We will add those to the library once I take over."

She nodded in agreement. She hated that her future might very well be spent as his librarian, but the thought of learning new things and having all of that knowledge at her disposal was intoxicating.

"I am pleased that you approve." He waved her away. "Severus awaits outside the door."

"Thank you, sir," she said, fleeing the room and finding her tense lover waiting. She wrapped her arms around him for a moment before she pulled away, forgetting herself.

"It's all right," he said quietly.

She remained silent as he led her outside along the mountainside until they reached the spot they'd Apparated to the first time. Severus' jaw was clenched, and his body was rigid. "Do you truly not want to go today?" she asked. "We can wait."

He shook his head. "I would like nothing more than to keep you here with me, but we must go. I've already told the Dark Lord of my plans and will stick by them."

"Perhaps while the potion is brewing...?" she hinted, wriggling her eyebrows.

A small, tight smile was her reply before his arms encircled her. In the next instant, they were at his home on Spinner's End. She smiled. "It feels like I've come home." She plopped down on the couch in their small sitting room.

"We will not be here long. There are things that I must tell you," he said, sitting next to her.

She noted the seriousness of his tone. "I knew something was wrong."

"I've been lying to you."

"I know," she said quietly. "You told me that."

"It's about Potter."

Hermione's eyes began to tear up. "He's dead," she said with a nod.

"I found Potter and brought him to headquarters."

She jumped up, squealing loudly. "HARRY'S ALIVE? How long? When?"

"After the battle... the next evening. Dobby was caring for him until I got there. I was instructed to bring him to headquarters and found that Fawkes had already brought the headmaster there," he said, voice low.

"So all this time... I've been doubting you, and you've been keeping *this* from me? But you should have told me!" she said heatedly, tears sliding down her cheeks. "It made me think..." She sobbed, partly because of joy but also because of regret. She'd been miserable most days and had lost hope. She'd doubted the one man that she loved and likely made him miserable in turn. Why, it was no wonder the Dark Lord wanted to seek retribution. He must have sensed Severus' despair.

"I could not tell you," he said listlessly. "You know as well as I that your skills at Occlumency are lacking, and I had too much to hide on my own without having to worry about Occluding you as well."

"Severus... I'm sorry. I should never have doubted you." All of those horrid thoughts she had of him came rushing back. What must he truly think of her? She must have wounded him so deeply by showing that she hadn't the faith in him that he deserved.

"Yes, well, you did." He shook his head. "None of that matters now."

"It does to me." She silently vowed to make it up to him somehow.

"Listen to me, Hermione. You are not coming back to the castle with me."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"I am going to send you to Diagon Alley to be found. We want the papers to alert the public that you are alive and well." He sighed. "I told the Dark Lord that I would Oblivate you so that you couldn't tell anyone our location, where you've been, or what's been going on." He held up his hand to stave her questions. "I will not do so. Your story, however, will be that after seeing his wife's death, Rodolphus snatched you and kept you as prisoner out in the Forbidden Forrest."

"But I truly don't know the location anyway."

He lifted his wand and whispered something she didn't catch. About ten false memories flashed through her mind in quick succession.

"What the hell?"

"If you are asked for evidence, use one of those. I created them."

She nodded. "Won't you be staying with me?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I must go back to the Dark Lord. He thinks that we are using you as bait to draw Potter out of hiding. He knows that Dumbledore is alive, but he thinks I've kept him in a weakened state. He has no idea about your friend's preparations."

Hermione noticed the bitterness in his voice. "But when will we be together? Are you going to come to headquarters often?"

Rubbing his temples with his fingers, he said, "I told him that you distract me and that I'll restore your memory after our complete victory. There will be none of this of course. You are going back to headquarters where you'll stay, even when Potter comes for the Dark Lord. I don't want you there."

"What are you keeping from me now?"

"I am going to propose a surprise attack on the Dark Lord," he said simply. "You will use your parchment to find my location at a specific time in a couple of days, showing the Order precisely where the Dark Lord is located. I'm going to wait until I know there is a meeting where most can be captured... or destroyed, but I can only hope that is before he sees Bane's visions in a few days. I fear he may see a change in the prior predictions Bane has given us." He looked away. "I thought that Potter needed more practice, but if he has the element of surprise and backup, he'll do fine."

"I... I don't have the parchment."

"Yes, I know. I will bring it to you when I go by later to meet with Dumbledore to finalize things. You may tell him, Potter, and the Weasleys everything that has gone on at the castle, but to the Ministry and Aurors, you will stick to the Lestrangle story."

"All right."

He reached out to touch her face, slowly tracing the curve of her cheek. "There will be no changing things, Hermione. When I take you to Diagon Alley today, you will go to headquarters for good. No matter what."

Not realizing what he was saying, she smiled and nodded. "All right. The Dark Lord was saying when I returned he'd give me some books. I wonder why he said that if he thought I was going to Diagon Alley to be bait."

"He meant when you returned to his service... eventually."

"Oh, well, what a surprise he'll have! I'll never be his ruddy librarian!" She giggled happily. "I am so happy, Severus. Everything is finally falling into place. Harry is alive! Dumbledore lives to guide him to victory! We finally have the upper hand thanks to you and the parchment you created for me."

"Yes," he said dryly. "Things are just great."

"You sound so... upset."

"Indeed?" he asked sarcastically.

She swallowed nervously. "You think that something might go wrong."

"It's already gone wrong."

"Severus, you are not making sense." She could have slapped herself in the forehead. *Of course! He's not looking forward to being without me for those couple of days.* "Once this is over, we can fix things between us. I swear that I'll make it up to you. I've no excuse for the accusations I made."

He pulled her hands from his chest and pulled her down to sit on his lap. He quietly held her for a few minutes, stroking her back. Finally, he pulled back to look at her face,

slowly lowering his mouth to capture hers in a final chaste kiss. "I will miss you," he whispered. When she tried to deepen their kiss, he sat her next to him. "One moment." He quickly went to the grate and Flooded Hogwarts. "Minerva? May I come through?"

In the next instant, he was gone with a whoosh of emerald green flames. She sat still and waited for his return *I can't believe I am finally going to see Harry again after all this time! And the Weasleys! Oh, I wonder how Ron's service went?* This last thought made her uncomfortable. Ron's last words to her came back to haunt her. Would Mrs. Weasley be as accepting of her? Did the woman know that he died trying to save Hermione and in her arms? She shuddered slightly.

Another whoosh signaled Severus's return. "That was fast."

"I've got it set up. Minerva will find you and bring you to headquarters. I've given her a quick breakdown of things. Remember to tell Albus I will be by as soon as I can. I want to wait until the *Prophet* prints your return. Then, I can tell the Dark Lord that I am going to nose around and see if Potter has surfaced. I'll bring the parchment to you when I go."

"I love you and will miss you, even though it's for just a short time. I hate leaving so suddenly like this," she said, an odd feeling of unease filling her. Her stomach cramped slightly.

He nodded, not repeating her words of love. "This is for the best," he said.

"You sound like this is the end."

"For us, it is," he said quietly.

She laughed nervously, her stomach constricting. "Only for a couple of days."

He pulled a small, square box from his robes. It resembled the box he'd given her before when he'd given her the gift. "It is time that we redefine the nature of our association."

"Sorry?"

"I am afraid that it's just not working between us. I can see that now," he said firmly, not taking his eyes from hers. Lifting the small box, he dolefully said, "However, I would like you to have..."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?" she asked loudly. "You are trying to end things?"

"Yes."

"But... you love me."

"Yes," he agreed. "That does not mean that I can make you happy, and I want that for you...with or without me."

"You make me happy!" she exclaimed, panicking. His jaw was set, and she knew in her heart that there would be no changing his mind. He'd decided to end things, and she would have no say in the matter. "You can't do this, Severus. I need you."

He shook his head. "You *had* me, and look at how you were," he said hotly. "I will not have you living that way."

"That's unfair, and you know it!" she yelled.

"It may be," he said simply.

"How can you just stand there and be so cold, you bastard? Don't you care that I love you and that you are breaking my heart?" she cried.

"DON'T YOU DARE SAY THAT I DON'T CARE!" he bellowed, face contorted as if in pain, frightening her and causing her to take a step back.

He purposefully stepped forward and thrust the box into her hands, whispering the activation.

"No, Severus, wait," she said.

Shaking his head, he said, "Good bye, my Hermione. You are free."

A sharp tug behind her navel pulled her away from him and sent her through a timeless passageway towards Diagon Alley. Once her feet were on solid ground again, she leaned back against the building and bawled, not caring that people were stopping and gawping. He'd broken things off between them. She'd driven him away by her actions over the past couple of months, and now, just when things were nearly perfect, he felt that he wasn't enough for her.

What happened to never letting me go? He loves me, and he's making me leave him. Thin, firm arms wrapped around her. She looked up into the unreadable expression on McGonagall's face.

"You are safe," the woman whispered.

Hermione held onto her as if her life depended on it. A few flashing lights signaled that pictures were being taken. For some reason, this made her cry harder. He was getting what he wanted. His ruddy plan was working. *What about what I want?* she thought bitterly. Another voice chided, *But how many times have you said that you'd do anything to have Harry found and alive? This is what you want.* "Oh, no," she moaned, not caring that people were trying to ask her where she'd been and if she'd seen Harry Potter. *I didn't mean this. I swear.*

But what did she mean? If Harry's life meant saving the Wizarding world, she should make whatever sacrifice needed to see it done. Of course she wanted Harry alive, but she wanted a life with Severus, too. How could Severus just push her away? *How could you have acted like a child around him? When he first wanted you, Hermione, you and he were discussing adult topics, literature, life... All of your childish blubbery has turned him away, made him think himself not enough to make you happy.*

"Miss Granger, I am going to Disapparate us to another place," McGonagall said, attempting to shield her from those around them.

Hermione nodded.

Rita Skeeter's face flashed in front of her. "A valuable source tells me that you've been away having an extended rendezvous with a follower of..."

Four hexes hit the woman in quick succession, and she turned into a bright, pink parrot. McGonagall, who was normally so composed, snarled, "And if you print such tripe, I'll be back."

Grateful that her Head of House had taken care of the horrible woman, she leaned into her for support and let the horror of reality wash over her. He was gone. For good. Why? Did he fear that he would die? Why could they not rekindle things after the Dark Lord was killed? What was missing? She'd have to find a way to reach him when he came to bring her the parchment. She could explain how she hadn't truly meant all those things she'd said and accused him of.

But you did, and he knows it. You've lost him.

McGonagall Apparated them outside of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, pulling her to the front door. The moment they entered, there was such a ruckus from Mrs. Weasley that the painting began yelling, causing everyone to come down and see what was happening. She was pulled into Mrs. Weasley's embrace nearly immediately.

"I'm so sorry about Ron," she said meekly, finally finding her voice.

"Shhh... later, Hermione. Welcome back," the woman said, holding her tightly.

"Hermione!"

She turned around and saw Harry in the doorway. "I'm back," she said, stating the obvious, voice breaking. He came to her and hugged her tightly, pulling her away from Mrs. Weasley's grasp. "Oh, Harry, there is so much to say."

Southern's Notes: This chapter was very hard for me to write. I felt quite sad for them and was listening to sad music to help me along. Hehe! I'm in the writing mood lately. Thank goodness! I've already started the next chapter and will have it to my beta soon. Thanks, all

Oh. If something sounded familiar about the line "...redefine the nature of our association..." I've wanted to use that forever, and it finally worked out for me. I adore the movie, Tombstone, and that's a line of Doc Holliday's...bows down to the sexy Val Kilmer.

While I am at it, I'd like to say that the story that Pansy was reading a couple of chapters back, "Vanity," will make an appearance again. I mentioned the author was a warty witch. Well, it's a true story right here at Aswhinder by my dear mate, Warty. Give it a read. She's brilliant!

Nearing the End: Part 1

Chapter 37 of 42

Find out where Nagini and Montague were off to and how it will affect all involved. The final confrontation is upon us.
This is the eve of battle.

Disclaimer: J.K.R.'s characters are just being used for a bit of fun.

I'd like to say thanks to my lovely beta, Nay. She's always so good to me, the brilliant witch.

"Remus, you know it will be all right. All I have to do is put up a couple of charms, and no Muggle will see or hear us. It's quite dark anyway." Tonks grinned impishly. "We don't even have to undress all the way."

That was enough to make him give in. "All right." He quickly lifted his robes, unfastened his trousers and lowered them just enough to release his aching erection. His naughty lover had been fondling him and begging for a quick coupling. He smiled as he noticed that her knickers were at her feet and her robes were pushed up to grant him access. "Put a Cushioning Charm down so that my knees won't rub." The moment she did so, he pounced on her, glad that they were behind thick shrubbery. She'd put the right charms up to keep them from being seen or heard, but part of him still felt exposed.

"Just like that," she said, wild locks of her pink hair flying about each time he slammed into her.

Her heavy breathing mingled with his own, and the scent of her arousal urged him on, making him want to howl as the wolf in him would if released. He could hear the thudding, erratic beat of his heart pounding in his ears loudly until she cried out and bucked madly against him. Then, he moaned and lost himself in her body.

"As quick as that was, love, we may have to have another go," she teased. "I told you that you needed me, didn't I?"

"Yes, certainly," he finally replied, moving off of her and flicking his wand to clear away the stickiness on their bodies. His keen sense of hearing picked up something...a faint rustling or sliding sound. "Shhh," he said, bringing a finger to his lips and cocking his head to the side. He didn't hear it again.

"I say we are wasting our time here," Tonks said, righting her robes.

"We have to take all threats seriously. How do you think Hermione would feel if she knew that we didn't at least try to follow up on a threat to her parents' lives?" he asked reasonably. "We owe it to her to look after them... at least for now."

"Well, I know, and at least this is something we can do together."

Remus smiled. "So... you like staying with me, eh? I supposed following me here to their dental practice to keep an eye on Hermione's father had its advantages over staying at the house with Moody to watch over her mum."

"Definitely," she said. "Besides, Moody always makes me feel like he can see my knickers."

"Well, he can."

Tonks shuddered. "Don't remind me."

It was then that he heard the noise again. He'd heard it before, but he couldn't place it. *Snap!* Someone stepped on a branch.

Both Order members pulled their wands and silently moved towards the noise. When they rounded the shrubbery, both paused in shock. What had to be one of the biggest snakes they'd ever seen was slithering in their direction, and a Death Eater was stooping and appeared to be trying to grab it.

"Come on, Nagini," the man said. "We don't have time. The Master can let you feed."

Spotting them, the snake hissed and began quickly winding forward at an alarming rate.

"OH, SHITE!" Tonks yelled, wand flicking and releasing another hex, aiming towards the snake and hitting it on its back but not stopping it.

Remus tried to cast a spell on the Death Eater, but he missed. They were then under fire as the man began flinging hexes back towards them.

"That snake!" she yelled in panic after tripping to the ground as she'd stepped back in retreat. "Get that damn thing." The snake was very close and rising up high, set to strike.

Both released an array of hexes, but it was for naught. Both the man and the snake had disappeared, having Portkeyed away. "Bloody fucking hell," Lupin exclaimed, rubbing his arm, which had a gaping wound. He extended the hand of his good arm and helped Tonks up.

"Granger!" they both said in unison. The snake and man had been coming from the office.

"Good Lord," Remus said in horror, racing forward. "Mr. Granger!" he called upon entering. They didn't have to go very far before they found him. He was slumped against a wall in what appeared to be the waiting area. There were large splatters of blood upon the floor and upon his stomach. Kneeling down to check him over, Remus shook his head. "Nagini... she must have hit him four times."

"Is he dead?"

"Nearly."

Tonks forged an illegal Portkey out of an ink pen, and they quickly brought Hermione's father to St. Mungo's. It was his only hope. Not questioning why an Auror had brought a Muggle man to the hospital, Healers quickly began to try to save him. Tonks put an arm around Remus as they watched. His head was hung low, and she'd never seen him more dejected.

"It's not our fault."

"It damn well is," he said miserably. "If we hadn't been... at it, we might have saved him."

"We still might not have saved him," she replied. He simply nodded. "Should I go warn Moody? Maybe they were on the way to the Granger home and could appear there next."

"No, you hit the snake, and I think I hit that Death Eater. They've done all the damage that they can for tonight," he said, wincing and looking down at his own wounded arm. "Why, with all the rush to aid him, I forgot about this hex wound."

"You must see a Healer, too," she cried worriedly, tears springing to her eyes. "If only I hadn't felt so randy and talked you into that shag..."

"Enough for now. Stay with Granger. I'll be right back."

Tonks nodded. "How will we explain this?" she mumbled to herself. "What will Hermione say?" To her horror, one of the Healers turned to face her, expression grim.

"There was just so much damage. His ribs were splintered, and too many organs were pierced and poisoned. These types of bites are the worst kind. Hell, I never saw poison start working as quickly as that!"

"Oh, no," she moaned as realization set in.

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Harry remained standing next to Hermione's chair, keeping his hand upon her shoulder as Mrs. Weasley pushed a mug in front of her. Something was very wrong, and he had a feeling that she wouldn't talk about it in front of everyone.

Ginny was chattering nonstop. "It's the best day we've had in a long time. I find out Harry's alive, and Hermione comes home in the same day." She sat down next to Hermione. "Where's he been keeping you? Why do you seem so upset? You're home!"

Shaking his head in hopes that Ginny would stop questioning her, Harry caught Pansy's gaze. She'd been quite subdued since Mrs. Weasley had found them snogging, but he could see that Hermione's return was affecting her even more so. Did she honestly think that he had a thing for Hermione? She would just have to understand that Hermione was very much a part of his life as Ron had been, and if she was still around, she would always be in his life. Bottom line. He didn't have the time to explain things to her, but he would as soon as he helped Hermione sort herself out.

"I..." Hermione's voice trailed away, and she wiped at her eyes. "It's over. He's ended things with me."

A hush came over the kitchen. Draco looked as surprised as Harry felt, mouth gaping open. Ginny gasped. Pansy brought a hand up to her mouth, and her eyes softened with sympathy. Molly's brow furrowed, and Arthur seemed to nod in approval while Professor McGonagall strode forward to place her hand on Hermione's other shoulder.

"Who, dear?" Molly asked.

"Sev-Severus," Hermione replied, staring into her tea.

"Sorry. I don't get what you mean. What are you on about? He's ending things with you?" she questioned further.

"That's what I said," Hermione snapped, slamming down her mug and sloshing tea over the table.

"And a wise decision it was," said Dumbledore's quiet voice from the doorway. All heads snapped round to look at him as he walked forward slowly.

"You mean to say... that Severus and Hermione..." Molly's expression was clouded. "That he dared to..."

"That'll do," McGonagall said to Molly sharply, helping Hermione to rise. "Potter take her upstairs. I'll explain to Molly."

Hermione pulled out of Harry's grasp and yelled at the headmaster, "You put him up to this, didn't you?"

"I did not," he said softly.

"But you're glad!" she accused.

"I am," he admitted.

"Well, you'll get your chance to congratulate him on a decision well made! He says he'll be round as soon as he can to let you know about his plans." Hermione stormed by him and ran up the stairs.

"CREATURE OF DIRT! BLOOD TRAITORS!" came the beginnings of the portrait's screams.

Molly plopped down at the table. "How could he? She's just a child!" She shook her head. "If Ron only knew about this..."

"Ron didn't know," Ginny interjected. "So don't fret about what Ron would or wouldn't say. He's gone, Mum, and the only thing that matters now is what we feel about it."

She stood up and took Draco's hand. "If Hermione loves... Snape, then so be it. They deserve to be happy."

"Now, see here, young lady," Arthur began, trying to keep his tone light, "your mother doesn't deserve that kind of talk. She's right. Severus isn't Hermione's match. If he's come to his senses and stopped this... romance, then I'd say it's for the best."

"And meanwhile, Hermione gets to suffer, eh?" Ginny retorted. "Come on, Draco." She pulled an apologetic Draco from the room.

McGonagall began explaining things to Molly while Dumbledore took a seat next to Mr. Weasley.

Harry shook his head in annoyance, noting that Pansy was now at his side. "How can you all be like that?" he asked suddenly. When they turned to face him, he continued, "Hermione's upstairs hurting, and all you can say is that it's for the best? I saw them together... loads of times, and although I'll never be a Snape fan, I can honestly say that he cares about Hermione and was probably bullied into this."

"But Severus is..."

"I know what he is," Harry said in annoyance. He looked to the headmaster. "If he feels as badly about this as she does, I don't expect that it fares well for him, does it? Not with Voldemort always picking at his mind. For all your talk about trusting and caring for Severus Snape, you shouldn't have made him do this."

"Harry," Dumbledore began sadly, "I had nothing to do with this. You were with me when I spoke to him last. If he's decided to do this, then I can only say that it's for the best. We don't know his reasoning behind it. Perhaps Hermione was in danger where she was. We won't know until we speak to him."

He'd not thought of it in those terms. "But why end things and not just..." He shook his head. It didn't make sense.

Arthur cleared his throat. "Tonight, Alastor, Tonks, and Remus are keeping the Grangers under surveillance. We received an anonymous tip that some Death Eaters might pay them a call this evening."

"God," Harry breathed.

"And," McGonagall added, "if Hermione was as safe as we would have hoped, why would her parents be in danger? I have reason to believe that Severus didn't make this choice lightly... Not if the way he spoke and looked when he came to see me earlier is anything to go by."

Molly Weasley, oblivious to the conversation, was shaking her head and grumbling about taking advantage of children. Harry simply nodded and led Pansy to the stairway, not wanting to get into another round of debate.

Once alone, he smiled regretfully. "I have to help her. I hope you can understand that."

"I do," she said. "Go to her." She quickly placed a kiss on his cheek and climbed the stairs to go to her room.

Harry could tell that it bothered her only a little. It was likely she'd realized just how devastated Hermione was and felt she could commiserate with her. He plodded up the stairs and found Hermione in her room. Without bothering to ask if he could enter, he went in and closed the door behind him before moving to sit next to her on the bed.

"All right there, Hermione?" he asked lamely.

"No," she replied softly. "It's not all right."

"He'll come back."

She shook her head. "He was quite adamant." She reached into her robes and pulled out the small box. He was trying to give it to her before she'd interrupted. Not opening it, she looked at Harry. "He made love to me last night so slowly, and he admitted many things to me that I'd only suspected before. He knew last night that it would be over for us today, and he didn't warn me." She chucked the box onto the nightstand. "I don't know how I can go on without him. It's been so long since I've been alone that I don't remember how it feels."

"What was his reason? I mean... why so suddenly?"

"I only found out that you were alive today, you know," she said, voice near a whisper. "He'd been telling me that he couldn't find you but was searching. I was left in the dark all this time."

"Well, that wasn't very bright. Why would he..."

"Because I haven't the knack for Occlumency," she spat bitterly. "The Dark Lord would have easily seen what I knew and ended our lives."

"Oh."

"Yes." She nodded. "I thought he was lying to me about it. I thought maybe he'd found you and turned you over to his ruddy Master or that you were truly dead with him trying to keep it from me." She sighed, but she was no longer crying. "I lost my faith in him and told him so. I acted foolishly just to hurt him, and I let myself wallow in despair." She laid back and stared at the ceiling. "He says he loves me still, but he now feels that he isn't what I need and that I would be happier away from him."

"But after this war is over, you two can start over again."

She propped herself up on her elbows and scowled at Harry. "He's stubborn." A long awkward pause ensued. "Harry, I acted like a child. It seems I wasn't the woman he thought me to be. I think that I've lost the chance to prove to him that I could be... that I'm not some silly girl with inane behaviors at times."

"But you've never been just a silly girl," Harry defended. "And who wouldn't be upset that they were taken to live with that piece of reptilian dung? You had a right to grieve." He smiled. "You and Ron used to have those rows and always tried to make each other jealous. That was a bit silly," he admitted. "But that was long ago. I've never seen you act that way with Snape."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. My misery made him miserable. He's lost even more weight, and to make matters worse, the great and powerful Voldemort took notice." She sat up violently. "He's quite protective of Severus, you know. He threatened me to behave or suffer the consequences."

"You talked with Voldemort?" Harry asked incredulously.

Hermione blushed. "Yes, he... he wants me to be his librarian after he takes over Hogwarts."

"But he hates Muggle-born people! He leads an entire lot of Death Eaters while trying to kill them!"

"No," she said softly. "He doesn't hate them. Not all of them anyway, and you'd be surprised that some of them...the Death Eaters...are just as normal as you and I. However, they've been seriously misled... if you ask me about it." She sighed. "Even tonight after they thought to use me as bait to lure you out of your supposed hiding, he had a talk with me, saying how I'd not treated Severus right and should have obeyed him, but he still wanted to offer me a place at his side during his reign." She shuddered. "Can you imagine?"

"Oh, no," Harry said. "Hermione, Mr. Weasley just told me that they received an anonymous tip earlier that your parents were in danger from a Death Eater attack. They've got the Order watching over them!"

"What?" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "But... no, I talked to him, made him see that I would try harder to be a better concubine." She made her way to the door and threw it open.

Minerva McGonagall stood there, hand extended as if she had been about to knock. "Hermione, you need to come with me," she said quietly.

Harry noticed that her normally stiff posture was stooped, and her eyes were filled with sadness. *Oh, no, her parents*, he thought. He quickly made his way over to Hermione, who had covered her eyes with her hands.

"Come on," he said, guiding her towards the stairway. He noticed that there were no tears in her eyes, only a stormy acceptance of what was to come. Her jaw was set in defiant stiffness, and he felt her physically stiffening, preparing herself for the worst. Harry only hoped that the news wouldn't be bad, but with McGonagall's demeanor, it couldn't be too good.

When they entered the kitchen, they saw Remus Lupin standing near the sink, speaking quietly to Kingsley. His tatty robes had blood smeared all over them, and there was a large hole in the left sleeve's arm. Bandages were visible beneath.

For the second time that night, the room hushed. Molly pulled out a chair and motioned for Harry to bring Hermione over. This was definitely not good.

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Severus felt the castle tremble with great force and jumped up from his chair, empty bottle of elf-made wine tumbling to the floor and shattering. Quickly throwing on his robes, he ran to see what was going on, wand drawn. Surely the idiot Ministry wouldn't have tampered with Hermione's mind and figured out their hiding place. Running to the chair his Master favored in the large hall, he pointed his wand at the writhing figure on the ground.

"What the...?"

"No, Severus, leave him," the Dark Lord hissed from his left.

It was the first time he noticed him. "Master, what's happened? I felt a tremor."

Flicking his wand to cease the hex on the man, his Lord replied by nodding his head to the entrance. Severus moved forward and saw Nagini. Obviously dead.

"My Lord?" he questioned, not liking the calm forlorn look on his master's face...belying the fiery rage in his eyes. He remembered Montague had taken Nagini on an errand earlier. Turning back, he looked at the nearly dead man on the floor. His mask was off, and his face was disproportioned terribly. The man and snake must have failed. "Montague?" he questioned. There was a smattering of blood upon his distorted face, but it looked as if he was swollen or filled with some poison.

"I sent him on a simple errand, and he brings her back to me... nearly dead," the man said emotionally, shaking with rage. "Is doing my bidding too much to ask?" He flicked his wand again, and Montague began writhing and moaning again.

"What's happened to his face?" Severus asked, unable to stop himself.

"Nagini bit him as she thrashed about."

Severus swallowed. He had never felt completely comfortable around the snake, but he knew that his Master was quite fond of her, as she'd been there for him when all else had deserted him. Montague would not be for this world long. It had been a miracle that Arthur Weasley had survived her attack.

"Finish him, Severus," the Dark Lord commanded.

Nodding and raising his wand, he summoned all of the hate and anger he felt and whispered, *Avada Kedavra*. He'd like to think that he'd gave the man some peace. At once, Montague expelled one last breath of air and moved no more.

"Look!" shouted someone entering.

Severus looked up to find Jugson waving a paper in front of him. Bowing first and then handing the Dark Lord his copy, the man took in the scene before him, eyes wide. Severus smirked at the horrified expression upon the man's face.

"Well, at least something has gone right," the Dark Lord said. "Have a look, Severus."

Severus strode forward and took the paper from his Master. An immediate pang of guilt swept through him. On the front page were the forms of Hermione and Minerva. The elder witch was ferociously warning someone...he couldn't make out who it was...away while a broken Hermione sobbed against her shoulder. *Hermione Granger Escapes From Lestrage's Clutches!*

"In time, Severus, she shall return. We must not let our feelings overwhelm us," his Lord said wisely. He looked to Jugson. "Take care of Montague. Make certain he is found. I want all to know what happens to those who do not do my bidding."

Once the man had left with the body, Severus asked, "My Lord, what were Montague and Nagini to do?"

Gazing at him for a long moment, he finally answered, "I felt it was time to teach your young lover a lesson."

"Sir?"

"I warned her when she first came here that she was to keep you satisfied and content. I told her of the consequences if she did not." He sighed. "Did she not tell you what I told her tonight?"

"Nothing like this." Severus shook his head. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her that my warning would be followed through and that I never make threats lightly." He strode over to Nagini and hissed sadly. "I sent Nagini to kill one of her parents."

"And she failed?"

"Oh, no," he said proudly. "She killed the man. He was the first one that Nagini came across." He frowned. "What troubles me is that Order members were there to guard the place. They were too late of course, but they got in a fatal hex on my Nagini."

Severus couldn't believe it. Hermione's father had been killed. His heart sank. Would she believe that he'd known and simply chosen not to say anything? "But how did they know?" he asked suddenly.

"It appears that our spy has struck again. Go to Dumbledore. Find out if Potter has surfaced." He smirked. "I'm sure she'll wonder why her lover has not paid her a visit after her ordeal as a captive."

"Yes, my Lord," he said, still shocked.

"If you can bring back any information about our spy, you would please Lord Voldemort greatly." He turned to face his snake, adding, "I tried to get into Montague's mind, but he couldn't register anything but pain. He must have told someone about his orders. I told no one else. Find out who killed Nagini so that I might crush him with my bare hands."

Nodding, Severus backed away. Before he exited, he asked, "Do you need help with... her?"

"No, I shall handle her myself."

"Very well," Severus said and moved out to the grounds. It was too soon to face her, but he had no choice. Besides, how could he not go to her after learning that her father had died? He'd have to explain that he truly had nothing to do with the man's death. He only hoped that she would believe him. Needing to get some things from Hogwarts first, he Disapparated.

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When Severus entered the kitchen of Grimmauld place, he saw the gloomy expressions on everyone's faces. With a relief, he noted that Hermione was not among them. The Weasleys, Minerva, Dumbledore, and Kingsley were seated at the table.

"I trust you've heard about Mr. Granger," he said, striding forward.

"Yes," Minerva said, nodding.

Severus started to sit down but paused as Molly spoke up. "How dare you come here and act as if nothing has happened!"

"Excuse me?"

"Not now, Molly," Arthur said.

"How can you all not care that he took advantage of Hermione!"

So that was it. She knew of their relationship. He sat down anyway and said, "My personal life does not concern you, Molly, though I do respect your opinions... on some level. There is more going on now that we should be focused on."

"Well, did you at least try to warn them that Death Eaters were going their way?" she accused. "John Granger was a good man." Her voice was tinged with sadness and accusation.

"I did not know about it."

"Someone knew," Kingsley said. "We received a tip."

"Do you not know who it was?" Severus asked curiously.

The black wizard shook his head. "No, and we were uncertain if it was authentic. Remus, Tonks, and Alastor went to watch them. At some point, the man left his home to run down to their private practice. Moody stayed to watch over the woman while Remus and Tonks went to oversee him."

"And yet Nagini was able to get to him?"

Kingsley nodded. "Unfortunately, they didn't notice until it was already too late. They had a confrontation with one Death Eater and the snake, who left by Portkey."

"Both are now dead," Severus said quietly.

"Mr. Granger died at St. Mungo's," Dumbledore said.

"He wasn't as lucky as my Arthur," Molly said, reaching to place her hand over her husband's.

"Hermione's mother is upstairs in a guest room. We had to give her something to help her sleep. This was all... a great shock to her. It seems there is much that Hermione has not mentioned to the woman," Minerva said.

"She said you would be coming here to speak with me about a plan," Dumbledore said.

Severus nodded. "How is she?"

Molly harrumphed but said, "She's up in her room."

He rose, needing to see her. "I will meet with you in the study, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "I shall get Harry."

Severus turned on his heel and headed for the stairs without listening to whatever else was being said.

He found her room unlocked and eased into its darkness. A quick spell lit a candle near her bed. He strode forward and paused to simply look at her. Her face was turned away from him, eyes closed, and he could see the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

Dejectedly, he sat down, keeping his back to her and facing the door he'd just come through. He couldn't face her. She'd likely been lectured by Molly and blamed him for her father's death as she had for Harry's when she thought him dead. Something on the nightstand caught his attention. It was the box he'd given her. He reached for it and opened it.

The ring was still within. He didn't know if she'd seen it or not, but it was likely that she simply didn't want it. He closed his eyes, remembering the last time he'd seen the ring on a finger. It had been his mother's, and he'd refused to allow her to be buried with it. He'd thought that maybe Hermione would wear it... not as a wedding band, but just because it was something of his that he'd treasured.

"It's beautiful," said a groggy voice.

He hadn't noticed that she'd sat up. He snapped the lid closed on the box. "It is." He made to put the box in his pocket, and she placed her hand on his.

"I thought you gave that to me."

"Well, I assume you don't want it," he said, still not looking at her.

"Severus, I hadn't seen it yet." She pried the box from his fingers and took the ring out, sitting up in bed.

Reluctantly, he turned to her and watched as she tried to push it onto her finger. "Allow me," he said calmly, using his wand to enlarge it slightly. After, it slid on perfectly. "It was my mother's."

"I thought it might be," she said, admiring it closely.

"Hermione, I'm sorry. I didn't know..."

"I think he would have liked you... after the shock wore off of course."

The words were meant to be light, but he could hear the pain behind them. "Did you not hear what I said?"

"You said you didn't know," she replied. "Before I left, Vol... the Dark Lord had that talk with me, and he was saying that you didn't know that he'd threatened me." She scooted closer and put her arms around him. "If he hadn't told me that, I would still know that you would have done what you could to save him if you'd known." She kissed his shoulder, wishing his robes weren't in the way. "Nothing you said today matters to me. I still love you, and one day, I will prove myself worthy."

"Hermione," he said quietly, pushing away from her. "You are more than worthy. That is not why I want things to be finished between us." He sighed. "It's apparent to me that you are still young and need to live a little more before you settle down. Perhaps you can be happier without me."

"I am miserable."

"Only for now..."

"For always if I'm to be without you. Can't you see that?" she asked sadly. "What can I do to change your mind?"

"You cannot."

"Kiss me."

"Hermione, one kiss will not change my mind."

"No, Severus, but it will make me feel better. I need you...only you can make me feel safe."

Lowering his head, his lips pressed against hers in a lingering, chaste kiss. He gathered her to him roughly and buried his face within her hair, just holding her. He felt her body trembling and thought it likely that she was crying.

Minutes later, he pulled away and guided her down to the bed, kissing her as he did so. He stood and pulled a parchment from his pocket. "This is yours. Tomorrow night at exactly nine o'clock...if you don't hear from me otherwise...I want you to locate me and make Portkeys for Dumbledore and the Order members. You are not to be a part of this fight."

She took the parchment and stared at it blankly.

"Will you do that? Will you stay away?"

"Yes," she replied. "I don't want you to be hurt, Severus. What if... what if something goes wrong?"

"I think that all will be well. On the chance that something goes wrong, I've... There is a letter for you at home in my bedroom."

She opened her arms and beckoned him to join her.

He shook his head. "I cannot, Hermione." He did, however, reach out to squeeze her hands momentarily before treading towards the door. He looked back for a long moment and slipped out.

There was no way in hell that she was going to stay away from the confrontation...especially after that bastard had her father murdered. The pain of loss stabbed through her anew at the thought of his demise, but she couldn't let that deter her. No, she had to use it as fuel. She would go with Harry and help him, but she would also make certain that nothing happened to Severus. Getting up, she pulled a book from a nearby shelf and started reading. There were some things she wanted to show Harry. She'd have to wait until Severus left to search him out, but they hadn't much time and needed to start their planning.

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Harry ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. "So tomorrow night it is."

Severus nodded. "I feel that with the element of surprise and extra support, you can do this. Hermione will know exactly where to make the Portkeys' destinations. I can only imagine that there will be others there. My place is, as I've told you, at the Dark Lord's side. I will remain there for the duration."

"But why? Don't you want to show that bastard that he's been duped?" Harry asked curiously.

Dumbledore answered when Severus frowned. "He needs to play the part until the end, Harry. If something should go wrong, then he will intervene, but we need to make certain that his position is not compromised."

"What of the hexes? He could get hit by one," Harry pointed out.

"That, Potter, is a chance I am willing to take...not that I have to explain anything to you," Severus bit out. He pointedly ignored the boy's next outburst and looked to Dumbledore. "Make certain that she does not accompany him, Headmaster. It's all I ask. If the Dark Lord sees her there, he'll think that the Ministry or you were able to retract the information. He may take it out on her."

Nodding, Dumbledore said, "I will not offer to let her join us, and I doubt her mother will be willing to allow her to join in the tussle. Kingsley took her statement for the Ministry, so you can relay that to Voldemort. He might rest easier knowing it was one of our allies that did it."

"I shall tell him that she was asking for Harry, unable to remember what had gone on at the battle and that you said you might know where to find him."

Harry nodded. "But what if he tries to come for me sooner?"

"He won't," Severus reassured him. "He wants to wait until Bane is able to give another night of visions. The moon won't be right for a few more days. It's why we have to act quickly. If the vision would show anything differently, it might clue him in as to how we attack."

"What of Firenze?" Harry asked. "Could he not help us? He works at Hogwarts and can easily help us with the visions and the other prophecy."

Dumbledore smiled kindly, shaking his head. Severus sneered and said, "He's not a better or more knowledgeable centaur than Bane, Potter. He's got to wait for the right phase of the moon, too."

"Right," Harry said, cheeks flushing. "I just... I just wish I knew that all would be well."

Snorting, Severus said, "You've always scraped by before, haven't you? I believe luck is on your side." He stood. "Keep your mind closed, Potter, and if you have to, use the nonverbal spells we've been working on. It'll be harder to block you if he doesn't know what's coming. Agreed?"

"Yes," he said, adding, "sir." He stood and extended his hand. "For what it's worth..."

Severus took it and gave it a quick shake. "Good luck." Severus quickly left, wanting to bring tidings back to the Dark Lord before he became too suspicious. He nearly stopped and went back to Hermione's room, but he saw from the crack beneath the door that the candle was still lit. If he went in, he might not be able to leave so easily again. He shook his head, realizing that she needed his support more than ever, and he was once again failing her.

"Oh, excuse me," a woman said. "I was trying to find the loo."

He pointed down the hall. "Just there."

"Are you Severus Snape?" she asked.

"I am," he said. This woman had shiny brown eyes and hair colored the same as Hermione's. It had to be her mother. "Jane Granger, I presume?"

"Yes," she said, nodding sadly and rubbing her temples. "I don't mean to be rude, but if I don't get to the toilet quick, I might be sick here." She smiled regretfully. "Thank you... for everything."

He wanted to ask her what exactly she'd meant, but he remained silent and watched her unsteady gait as she went to the door he'd pointed out. A feeling of disappointment settled over him. If he'd continued on with his relationship with Hermione, the woman would have likely approved of them. She seemed nice enough. Would her husband have been the same as Hermione had said? *I will never know.* A feeling of foreboding washed away his thoughts. It certainly felt as if something could...and would...go wrong. Were they doing the right thing by organizing this surprise attack on the Dark Lord? He could only hope so, and like Lucius, he wished the boy luck and hoped that he'd prevail.

Southern's Notes: This is part one of two chapters. I hope some of you feel a little better about the relationship between Hermione and Severus after their talk. At least they've not parted on bad terms, right? I still found this a little sad, what with the deaths. Anyone have any ideas about the spy? And Tonks/Lupin sure stuffed up that surveillance job. I don't know that they could have done anything else that would have helped though.

Nearing the End: Part 2

Chapter 38 of 42

Part 2 of the night before the final confrontation.

Disclaimer: I've borrowed some of J.K.R.'s characters, but I'll Scourgify them later and send them back.

Thanks go to my lovely, brilliant, reliable beta, Charmed Nay. Without her, I doubt I would have continued writing fanfiction all those months ago.

Severus frowned as he waited for his Lord to look at him. The man seemed terribly distraught. He bit back a sigh, not wanting the man to know of his discontent. He simply wanted to go to his bed, lift Hermione's pillow to his face, and see if he could still smell the scent of her shampoo on it. Leaving her had been one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do, especially after finding out about her father. What sort of man would not try to comfort the one he loved in such a time of needless tragedy?

After another minute of silence, Severus asked, "My Lord, are you ill?"

The Dark Lord lifted his head, and the deadly expression on the man's face sent shivers down Severus' spine. For a brief instant, he feared that the man knew. Quickly masking those thoughts, he gazed boldly into his Master's eyes. He'd learned long ago that the best way to hide something was to present everything openly, to not arouse his suspicions, or to make him want to delve further.

"What of Nagini's killers?"

Surprised, Severus said, "Our traitor sent word to the Order that the Grangers were in danger. Tonks, Lupin, and Moody were dispatched to watch over them. From what I gathered, the father left to go to his office, forcing the members to split up. Tonks and Lupin are the ones responsible for Nagini's death, but I am uncertain which one actually sent the hex that killed her."

"Where are they currently?" came the curt question.

This, he had not expected. "I believe Lupin and she are sharing a flat just outside of London."

"And you've no idea what the location is exactly?" he asked, voice cold and laced with disbelief.

Severus shook his head. "I've never had reason to call on either of them, nor the desire to. Should I inquire?"

"There is no need."

Uncertain as to what his Master was planning, he questioned, "Is there something you request of me?"

"I will tell you when I have decided," the Dark Lord said gravely. "I am thinking that I will need your services to brew a potion for me."

Severus nodded. "As you wish, Master."

The high-pitched, cold cackle echoed throughout the room. "They will pay in the worst way, Severus. After they drink what I have in mind, I will take pleasure in watching them suffer each day." He stood and moved to the doorway. "Tomorrow evening, I will call upon all of my followers. The time of waiting is now over. The time for action is here."

"I am ready, my Lord," Severus said dutifully.

"The traitor, I believe he made a terrible error earlier tonight. We shall find out tomorrow evening." He emitted a low growl, and the room seemed to shudder slightly. "Nagini was very important to me, not only for being part of what nursed me back to health, but she held a portion of me inside of her. With her death, that was destroyed."

So she has quite literally taken part of me with her." He clenched his long, skeleton-white hands into fists. "Slow deaths to all who had a part in it."

He swept out of the room, leaving Severus with a great feeling of foreboding. Their numbers would be great when Potter and the others came. He hoped the element of surprise and Potter's somewhat improved skills would be enough to end things. Making his way to his chambers, he pulled the small, Disillusioned piece of parchment from the inside pocket of his robes. "*Locus Hermione*," he said quietly, holding his hand over the parchment. He sat down heavily on the chair near the cold grate.

Currently lounging in bed with Harry Potter, distraught.

"I suppose the little bastard is comforting her in her time of need," he said acridly, sneering in disgust. "And so it begins." The process of growing apart was upon them. She would turn to Potter for comfort, and eventually, Potter would return her affection. "That is of course... if the boy lives." As quickly as they started, he pushed those thoughts aside. He'd just done everything possible to ensure that the boy got the upper hand. It wouldn't do to sabotage it now just to spite him.

Whatever happened after the final confrontation would simply be part of another day. If he died, then at least he'd done everything possible to make certain that Hermione was safe. He hoped that all his work and years of servitude...to both the Dark Lord and Dumbledore...would not be for naught. If he lived, however, it would be very hard for him to see Hermione with anyone else. That was something that he would be willing to deal with when the time was upon him. He'd gotten through worse things before and couldn't let anything interfere. Again, he waved his hand over the parchment. "*Locus Hermione*."

One of his eyebrows arched.

Currently lounging in bed with Pansy Parkinson and Harry Potter, determined.

"What are you planning, you silly girl?" he wondered aloud.

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"Ouch!" Hermione said, rubbing her head. "The corner of this," she pulled the offending book from beneath Harry's pillow, "just poked me in the head!" She began to snicker lightly. "Harry, what are you doing reading Wartcap's Vanity? I've only known witches to read these!"

Harry took the book from her and narrowed his eyes. "Pansy was reading it to me when I was recovering, thanks."

"And you like it?"

"Well, I sort of want to know what happens, don't I?" He shook his head. "There is usually a new update every week, but the last one has yet to come out yet." He tossed the book onto the nightstand. "Not that I'm constantly checking to see if it has been."

"Right," she said disbelievingly. "About Pansy... What's going on with the two of you, Harry?" She sat up and leaned against the headboard. "I saw the way she was looking at you, and then, when I left mum's room earlier, I saw you touch her cheek."

Immediately, Harry's expression turned dark. "Think it's wrong of me, do you? Well, I'll have you know that nothing has truly happened between us, but if it does, I don't know that it's anyone's business but ours!"

"Whoa," Hermione said, holding up a hand. "What are you on about? I only asked..."

"Aren't you going to say that it's a bit soon for us, as we're disrespecting Ron by being interested in each other?" he asked, shrugging her hand off of his shoulder.

"No," she said quietly. "I was just wondering what I'd missed all these weeks. I would support whatever you decided... as you've done for me with Severus."

He looked at her, and his face reddened. "I'm sorry. I just thought that..."

"Do *you* feel guilty about Ron, Harry? Is that why you jumped to that conclusion?"

Nodding, he replied, "A little. He seemed happy with her."

Hermione remained quiet for a moment, internally debating on telling Harry the truth. She'd never kept much from him. Why start now? "Harry, I have to tell you something, but this stays between us only. Agreed?"

"All right."

"When Ron died," her eyes began tearing up, "I was with him. I don't know if you saw it or not, but I..."

"I saw you with him. I wasn't sure if he was dead, but then I saw your face as you held him. And I knew. I knew he was gone." He ground at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I froze. I was torn between going to his side or fighting with Voldemort."

"Well, you made the right choice, fighting Voldemort."

"I wasn't really fighting him with all I had though. I was worried about you, Dumbledore, and Ron." He smiled sadly. "He got the best of me, and if Dumbledore hadn't whisked me off, I'd have died with Ron that day. I saw Bellatrix die, saw Neville fall, and saw you getting hexed by a Death Eater."

"Harry..."

He put a finger to her mouth. "It seemed like all was lost, and all I'd been fighting for was leaving. You and Ron... You two have always been here for me, and I didn't want to go on. Everyone I love... dies."

Hermione nodded. "It does seem that way, Harry, but trust me. That's not the way it has to be. Tomorrow, when we go to take on Voldemort, I want you to do what you must. If I fall, you fight for me. For Ron. For all the others that we've lost."

"Snape told Dumbledore to make certain that you don't join us."

"I'd like to see either of them... or you try to keep me here," she retorted. "I told Severus I wouldn't go, but it was a lie. I'll be at your side if it kills me." She shrugged. "It's just my part in things. If I can Stun one person that would harm you before you can take on Voldemort and kick his arse, then I want to do it. I want to be there to see that bastard rot! He shouldn't have had my dad killed."

Harry reached over to wipe her tears. "I'm so sorry about your dad. If you hadn't become my friend, none of thi..."

"If I hadn't befriended you or Ron, I would have had nobody. I would have continued to be miserable." She smiled ruefully, pushing his hands away. "Besides, who else would have put up with my bossiness?"

He grinned. "Thank you for always being there for me and Ron."

She nodded. "When Ron died, he told me that he'd always loved me and would have married me." Her voice cracked, and she looked away. "He said to tell Pansy he was sorry, but he still loved me." She sniffed. "He wiped my tears away even as he was dying. The last thing he thought of was his mother. He died before he could tell me

what he wanted to say to her." She swallowed. "I... I am glad he died without knowing about Severus. That would have hurt him."

"Yes, it would have," Harry said sadly. "I didn't know that he still wanted you in that way." He sighed. "Oh, I saw the way he still looked at you when Pansy wasn't watching, but I just thought that maybe it was some old protectiveness or something."

"I don't want Pansy to know. I think that would be rather hateful of me to tell her."

"I agree," Harry said. "Don't tell her that."

"So, Harry, if you were feeling as though you'd be betraying Ron, then please don't. I imagine he'd be happy that you could find happiness with Pansy, especially without Gabrielle."

"When you talked to Voldemort, did he mention her?" he asked, slight hope in his eyes.

She shook her head. "Not ever. No one did."

Harry nodded. "I'd hoped that maybe she was a prisoner there."

"She's dead, Harry. It's time you accepted it."

"I have, but the hope was still there." He pulled off his glasses to rub his eyes. "Maybe this is some sort of sign that Pansy and I should try to make a go of things if I live after tomorrow night."

Hermione hugged him fiercely, causing him to drop his glasses. "You will live, Harry. You fight. Don't look at us and worry about us. Don't let their deaths be in vain. You live and do what you must to kill him. Avenge your parents, Cedric, Sirius, Dean, Hagrid, Gabrielle, Ron, my dad, and all the others lost in this wretched war!"

"But, Hermione, what if something happens to you? Maybe Snape is right. You shouldn't..."

"I'm either accompanying you, or nobody will be given the location. That's the bottom line," she said firmly. "I'm sure Dumbledore will see it my way."

"Sorry," Pansy said from the doorway. "I'll come back later."

"No, come in," Harry said, pulling away from Hermione's embrace. Pansy looked between them uncertainly. "Close the door before Mrs. Weasley sees you."

She did so and moved towards the bed. Harry scooted over and patted the space between Hermione and him. Surprise brightened Pansy's eyes, and she smiled before crawling in between the two friends.

"Hermione was giving me a pep talk," he informed her. "It seems that tomorrow night is going to be a big night for us all."

"That's right," Hermione said. "I told him that he'll not die and that he's going to kick Voldemort's arse." She got up to get the book from the chair next to the bed. "I brought this up. It has loads of defensive jinxes, protective spells, and offensive maneuvers that I thought we could all practice."

"All?" Pansy asked.

"Are you coming with us?" Hermione countered.

Pansy nodded, lips set in a grim line. "I would like to go, yes. I'd hoped to be allowed."

A sharp knock sounded at the door. Hermione quickly hid the book and took her place by Pansy's side after snatching up the copy of Vanity.

"Come in," Harry called.

Molly Weasley entered. "My, what's going on in here?"

"Oh, we're reading the latest update in Wartcap's book," Pansy answered.

"Hmph," Mrs. Weasley said, eyes locking with Hermione's. "I wonder if that book had a bad influence on you, young lady! I've a mind to write this Wartcap and tell her she's influenced a good girl to chase after her Potions master!"

Hermione shook her head and got up. "That's the last time I'll let you talk about my relationship with Severus in such a way. I know you mean well, Mrs. Weasley, but that'll do. If my mother approves, there is no reason that you shouldn't. You're not my mum. You should worry about your own family. Not me."

She brushed by her quickly, leaving the room. Within seconds, she felt the woman's hand on her arm. She spun around, ready to have a row with her, but she stopped upon seeing Mrs. Weasley's expression.

"Hermione, I didn't mean... Sometimes I am a bit blunt with my thinking and words. I'm sorry. I suppose I just hate to see all of you growing up." She smiled and pulled Hermione into her arms. "Ron used to love you so much. I always thought of you as my second daughter. That'll never change. Nor will my worrying and nosing about stop."

"It's just that my relationship is my business. I know some people will never approve, but it's for me to deal with," she said softly, hoping the woman would understand.

"I know that, but I can't help feeling that it was not in the best interest of either of you," Molly said. "It just doesn't seem right for a professor to lust after a student." She held up her hand when Hermione pulled away in a huff. "It's what it boils down to... whether he loves you or not."

Hermione nodded. "I know, but there's just so much more."

"And now it's over."

"For now only."

Molly simply nodded and asked, "Was Ron in very much pain?"

This change in conversation shocked Hermione. "He... no." She shook her head. "He didn't say that he was. I think maybe the shock of it all spared him."

The older woman nodded. "I think about that at night, you know. I wonder what was going through his mind, if he was hurting terribly, if..."

"Yo-you were the last thing he talked about," Hermione said quietly. "He was trying to say something when he died. All I could make out was the word mum."

"So he did speak?" Molly asked, eyes widening. "And he mentioned me."

"Yes," Hermione said, adding a lie. "He said that he loved everyone, that he was sorry, and tried to tell me to tell you something."

Molly smiled slightly. "Thank you, Hermione."

"I held him and tried to get him to hold on, but... there was just too much blood." She took Mrs. Weasley's hand. "I swear that if Neville hadn't killed Bellatrix, I would have."

Smiling, Molly said, "He'll be here for the meeting in the morning, Neville. He's joined the Order now that there's no school." She nodded down the hallway. "You ought to check on your mum. She was in the loo a couple of times earlier. I think that potion isn't working for her."

"All right," Hermione said, striding forward.

She knocked once on her mum's door and opened it to find her mother sitting on the bed and looking at a photo of their family. "Mum? Can I come in?"

"Yes," she said, making room for Hermione.

"Did the potion make you sick? Mrs. Weasley said that you'd been to the loo a few times."

"I imagine that's only one thing that bothers me," she said quietly. After a long pause, she looked at Hermione. "I met your Severus earlier."

"When?" Hermione asked in surprise.

Jane chuckled. "He was the one that pointed out the way to the loo. It was just for a moment, but he's... a good looking man."

Hermione smiled. "Do you really think so?"

Her mother nodded. "Yes, and you were right. That voice of his is quite... enchanting."

"I think Dad would have liked him... after the initial shock of me shagging a professor wore off," she said, smiling ruefully. "But after he heard of everything that Severus has done for us in this war, he would have been proud to welcome him to our family, and he would have approved that Severus refused to... touch me in *that* way until I was no longer his student."

"Yes, I agree," Jane said. "My dear Hermione, when did you grow up? One day you were starting a new school, and now, here we are. You're a woman in your own right."

"Time flies, doesn't it?"

"There never seems to be enough," her mother said wistfully. "I wish that I would have had more time with your father."

"It's my fault, Mum. If I had only..."

"No, it's not your fault. These things happen. Your father died a happy man, although his life was cut entirely too short. I'd wager he hadn't any regrets. He was loved, and he loved." She kissed Hermione on the forehead. "You and your young man will find a way to work things out after all of this is done."

Hermione smiled. "I hope so. He seems so adamant about me going my own way."

"Well, you can make him see that he did make you happy, but he only went about it the wrong way. Once things are put right between the two of you, don't waste time, Hermione. That's my only regret with your father." She sighed. "We didn't have enough time together."

"About tomorrow night, Mum, I want to go."

"I figured you might."

"Are you going to try to stop me? Severus told Harry and Professor Dumbledore that I was not to go, but I feel that I must," Hermione said, hoping her mother would understand.

"It would be a terrible shame for me to lose a daughter the day after I lost my husband," she said quietly.

"You won't, Mum. Things will work out. We'll surprise them, and I can Stun Severus before anyone else can hex him, and... Oh."

"Hermione," Jane chided, "don't you dare go if you plan to interfere in things. What if something goes wrong? He may need to be awake and not... whatever you said." She smiled sadly. "I won't stop you, but you've got to promise to think things through before going. Anything that you do could have an effect on how things turn out."

"I will, Mum. I promise."

After an hour of talking, her mother's eyes finally closed to find sleep. Hermione decided against going back to Harry's room, not wanting to walk in on anything. They could practice their spells in the morning.

She went back to her room and pulled out the parchment that Severus had left with her. *Locus Severus*," she said. Her heart broke when she read the words.

*Currently on the Kincardineshire east coast, in the Dunnottar Castle, in his suite of rooms, feeling dejected and unable to sleep.*

"What are you thinking about, Severus? Are you hurting as much as I am?" she voiced softly. She looked at the small timepiece near the bed. It was almost three in the morning. She needed to sleep, but how could she? Each time she tried, she'd see flashes of her father's smiling face, her mum's heaving shoulders as she cried, Severus' forlorn expression, Harry's tears, Ron's dead yet open eyes gazing at her...

Would everything be all right? Would they be able to get through another encounter with Voldemort? Was her mother right? Should she truly not go and interfere with anything? *You've got to do it, Hermione. Harry needs you, and whether he knows it or not, Severus needs you.*

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The sun had just come up, and she could already hear him rustling about the room. All night long, he'd been tossing and turning, shunning her advances when she'd tried to hold him.

"Remus?" she called. "Please come back to bed for just a few more minutes."

"No," he said sharply. "We have an Order meeting later this morning, and I'd like to prepare."

Tonks sat up quickly and ran her fingers through her hair. They'd have to have it out and soon, or they would be torn apart. "Remus, we can't go back and change what happened. I feel terrible about it. Truly, I do. Do you think I'll ever be able to look at Hermione or her mother in their eyes again?"

"I know we can't change anything," Remus said, sitting down in dejection. "There was likely nothing we could have done from the moment she bit him, but I firmly believe that had we been paying attention, we could have discerned the moment they showed up." He frowned. "I was just so intent on having you that I wasn't truly listening when I should have. Also, in the back of my mind, I felt that Snape himself would have told us if the Grangers were in danger. I just let myself relax when I should have been more..."

"Vigilant," Tonks said when his voice trailed off. Moody had lectured them for over an hour about vigilance and consequences. "So... you're blaming me then, aren't you?"

"No, I am blaming us. We should never have fucked while on Order business," he said bluntly.

Tonks flinched at his choice of words. "And I wouldn't leave you alone about it, so ultimately, though you won't voice it out loud, you blame me."

Remus looked at her for a moment and sighed in exasperation. "This is not something I can fix with a piece of chocolate, a pat on the shoulder, and some kind words. A man is dead, and part of the blame does fall on my shoulders." He looked away. "If you must know, yes, I feel you are also partly to blame, but it isn't only your doing. I could have denied your request. I wanted it, too."

His last words were barely audible. "I am sorry. I don't know what else to say."

"Right now, there is nothing else either of us can say." He stood and moved towards the door. "I'll get breakfast together while you dress. I think we should go early and have a word with Hermione if we can."

"All right," Tonks agreed, not looking forward to facing everyone.

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"Draco," Ginny said, elbowing him slightly. "Mum might catch you in here if you don't go to your room."

"Mmmm," he moaned, tightening his hold on her.

She snuggled into his body as closely as she could. It amazed her at how perfectly they fit together. Her arse wriggled against his crotch, causing his morning erection to twitch against her. For a brief moment, she wished that they hadn't put back on their underclothes after their long awaited second coupling. They'd talked things over, and both had decided that they were going to join Harry. He wanted to prove to the world that the Malfoys could do something right, and she wanted to do what she knew Ron would have done.

It would be a risk, what with the pregnancy, but for some reason, she didn't think that she or the baby would be hurt. She felt that Ron was staring down at her and happily protecting her and his unborn niece... or nephew. If something did happen, well, she didn't want to think about that. However, if this prophecy business was right, she had nothing to worry about. She was supposedly some prophesized seventh child of an old line that would be on the victorious side of a battle, helping things to start anew, helping the world move on past the stage of war. Surely that meant she would bode well. Snape would make certain that nothing happened to Draco.

*Snape will likely be worried about himself and Hermione first. Draco and I will just have to fend for ourselves and help Harry*Afraid that she might be losing him or that he might be hurt, she rubbed against him again, wanting him to awaken, wanting to be with him once more.

"What do you think you are doing?" he asked sleepily, hand traveling down to rub her stomach.

"Trying to wake you," she said with a laugh.

"We don't have time," he said regretfully, obviously knowing what she wanted. "Your mum comes round all the time to make sure we're not... like this."

Ginny sighed. "What do you think about the name Celaena?"

"I think," he drawled, moving to nip her neck with his teeth, "that you might be sorely disappointed when you give birth to a son. All of these girl names will have been chosen for nothing."

"All the same. What of it?"

"Where'd you get this name?" he asked.

"I told you that I want to name our child from something celestial, like your name. No plain or old-fashioned names like in our family. I want something different. Celaena was one of the seven sisters and found in Pleiades, which is in the Taurus constellation." When he smirked, she continued, "The old wizards left behind stories; one said that the great Orion pursued them in life, and they had to seek refuge in the stars to be away from him. Zeus put them there himself, and ironically, when he placed Orion in the stars, he falls behind them, not only warring with Taurus but showing that he's still chasing the seven sisters...even in the afterworld."

"Seventh daughter, seven sisters... What's with the number seven?" he asked playfully. "And since when do you believe in such rubbish?"

"You know as well as I that seven is a powerfully magical number." She turned and propped herself up on one elbow, rounding stomach pressing into his flat body. "Besides, though it may be rubbish, I find the old theories fascinating. There is supposed to be some special alignment tonight where the light from Pleiades' brightest star...Merope... I think anyway...will combine with others to reflect upon some escaped gases from a nearby nebula. For only tonight will we be able to see it. The last time that happened, there was an odd ghostlike face. Quite haunting, that." She grinned. "Haven't you been reading the papers? It's all over!"

"Sorry, but that's just not my forte. I was glad when I was able to drop Astronomy," he said, moving to sit up. "I guess I'd better go."

"Soon we'll not have to sleep apart...ever." She sat up and kissed his bare shoulder.

He turned around and placed a chaste kiss upon her lips. "Maybe Celaena isn't so bad. What was that other one?"

"Maia," she said with a smile. "I did like Electra, but when I mentioned that to Dad, he went into some excited lecture about spark plugs and electricity. So that name is definitely out."

The both laughed. Draco rubbed her stomach once more. "We still have time."

Ginny smiled and nodded, but she thought internally, *I hope you are right, love.* "Oi, look! Someone just shoved a parchment under the door."

Draco went to retrieve it. "It's from Hermione. She wants us to meet in Harry's room in a few minutes."

"I'll bet they want to form some plan for tonight," she said. Her lover simply nodded, and both became lost in their own thoughts.

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**Southern's Notes:** It's only fair that I stop right here. Everything else will be the meeting with Harry and his friends, the Order meeting, and the final battle. I've decided that all needs to be in one chapter alone. So there will be a part 3 to this. And unfortunately, that means everything else gets pushed back one chapter, so instead of ending on 40 chapters, it will likely be 41. Sorry about that. The good news is that I've nearly finished the next chapter, so my beta will have it tomorrow afternoon.

So, who's nervous about Snape's survival? Remember those visions with Bane? The outcome hasn't changed; luckily Voldemort doesn't know about that. Teehee. On a serious note, there will be a character death warning on the next chapter, and there will be a good bit of action. Hope you all don't mind. I like interesting fight scenes and will try to give you one.

Gee, I wonder what image will be revealed in the sky for one night only? Maybe I'll give a prezzie to anyone that can correctly guess.

Here are links that I looked at while gathering my thoughts on what I wanted Draco and Ginny to talk about:

[http://www.naic.edu/~gibson/pleiades/pleiades\\_myth.html](http://www.naic.edu/~gibson/pleiades/pleiades_myth.html)

<http://www.aao.gov.au/images/captions/uks018.html>

<http://spaceflightnow.com/news/n0012/06hubble/>

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/~ggastro/Society.news.Feb98.html>

Seven sisters of Pleiades: Merope, Asterope, Maia, Electra, Taygeta, Alcyone, and Celaena

\*\*All references to Wartcap and her story, "Vanity," were used with permission.

## Nearing the End: Part 3

*Chapter 39 of 42*

This is part three to the long-awaited final confrontation.

**Disclaimer:** I've borrowed some of J.K.R.'s characters, but I'll Scourgify them later and send them back.

**Thanks go to my lovely, brilliant, reliable beta, Charmed Nay. Without her, I doubt I would have continued writing fanfiction all those months ago.**

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"What's the meaning of this?" Molly asked, staring at the group of teenagers who all walked into the kitchen together. She looked over to Arthur. He shrugged uncertainly. "It's a bit early for you lot to be up, isn't it?"

"We've decided to get a spot of breakfast in before practicing," Ginny announced boldly, taking a seat near her father. Draco moved to help her settle her in, and when he moved away, she smiled brightly at her mother. "Something smells delicious!"

"Practice what?" both Weasley parents asked in unison.

"Oh, you know," Pansy added, "spells, enchantments, defensive jinxes..."

"For?" Molly asked, a worried expression settling over her face. "You don't think that any of you will be going tonight?"

"I will go," Draco said firmly.

"As will I," Ginny said.

"You most certainly will not!" Molly exclaimed. "What with a baby on the way and all. You'll be staying right here!"

"Nor do I feel that we should allow you to go, Draco," Arthur said as kindly as he could.

"You forget, sir, that I became of age last June. I am entitled to make my own decisions," Draco said respectfully. "I will redeem the Malfoy name and prove that we have washed our hands of the Dark Lord once and for all."

"Yes, well, even so... I strongly recommend that you stay here with Ginevra, as she's not going to be of age until August," he replied, looking at both of them. "And will be staying here."

"I won't," Ginny said confidently. "I'm going to go and fight alongside Harry like Ron would be doing if he were here. Would you tell him he couldn't go?"

"Well," Molly said, sounding harassed, "he went trailing after him last time and is now dead! I'll not be losing another... Oh, Harry, dear, don't look that way. I didn't mean..."

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry held up his hand, "I didn't ask for them to come. They've decided this on their own."

"I am going with him," Pansy said, stepping forward.

Hermione moved to stand next to Mrs. Weasley. "As am I. My place is with Harry."

"I am not certain," Dumbledore said, entering the room from the back exit with Professor McGonagall, "that Severus would agree."

Nodding politely, Hermione said, "Yes, but he seems to forget that I have been of age for well over a year, and though I don't need it, I have my mother's approval."

"Besides," Harry said cheekily, "Hermione's threatened to not make the Portkeys if she can't go."

Molly gasped. "Your mum is going to allow it after what happened?" She sat down across from her daughter and put her head in her hands.

"Mum," Ginny said, reaching across the table to hold her hand, "are you and Dad going?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"There it is then. We'll all go together." She smiled. "If I don't do this, I'll not be able to forgive myself. You know what the prophecy said."

"But that could be rubbish," Arthur said. He looked to the headmaster. "Don't you agree?"

"Oh, indeed. It could very well be," he said noncommittally.

"But that's not likely," Draco said, stating the unsaid words for him.

"No, young Draco, I don't think it is," Dumbledore said, conjuring extra chairs.

Draco nodded. "The visions showed us alive after Potter wins his duel... from what we were told."

"Yes."

Everyone looked to Molly and Arthur. The parents were gazing into each other's eyes as if holding a silent conversation. Suddenly, Molly sighed and nodded. Arthur turned to everyone. "All right, but we'll only agree to allow it if you carry Portkeys with you and get out of there if things get too... violent."

Busying herself with getting the food she'd prepared to everyone, Molly's expression hardened with determination. Nothing was as it should be any longer. War had hurt her family on more than one occasion. She'd lost her brothers and friends to Voldemort's followers the first time round, and she'd already lost a son and other close family friends this time. *He'll not take any more of my children!*she vowed, though Ginny's point about the prophecy and Draco's point about the visions did make her feel better. Perhaps they would do just fine.

She looked up to glance at Harry. He seemed quite confident about what would happen. What had changed things? Hermione's presence? The centaur visions? He'd been so badly shaken and hurt after the last confrontation, Molly would have wagered that he would have shied away from meeting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named again. His deep green eyes met hers, and the unfaltering smile he gave her melted her heart. This boy... this young man would win. He would rid the world of the man who'd indirectly ruined her family. She smiled back and motioned for him to sit down, scooping a healthy portion of eggs down into his plate first. He needed his strength after all.

"My, what a houseful!" Jane said, entering the room. "I thought I'd overslept, but it seems I'm the last one to wake."

"Have a seat over here," Minerva said, conjuring a comfortable chair for the woman. "Tea? Coffee?"

"Coffee please."

As breakfast progressed, others turned up: the twins, Bill and a fully recovered Fleur, Tonks and Lupin, Moody, Shackbolt, and even Charlie. Hermione and the others went out back and began practicing different evasive enchantments, countercurses, and anti-jinxes. Neville joined them shortly after they'd started. After nearly an hour, Lupin came to them and told them that they'd all been invited to the Order meeting.

When Hermione made to pass him, he reached out and touched her shoulder. "A word please?" he asked politely.

"Of course," she said, not truly wanting to talk to Lupin. She didn't hold a grudge against him, but she didn't want to speak about her father at the moment. That would only lessen her determination and bring on sadness. Grieving could wait. Other things were at hand.

When they were alone, he said, "I just want to express how sorry I am for not doing a better job as an Order member and friend to you. I just..."

Hermione smiled. "I know that you and Tonks did what you could to save him." She patted his arm in hopes of comforting the forlorn man. "It's not like you and Tonks were off shagging while Nagini attacked my dad. The Healer at St. Mungo's said that if he would have been standing with him at the moment of the attack, he likely couldn't have saved him. Please don't blame yourself."

Lupin turned an even paler shade of white and simply nodded. "Th-thank you for your kind words, Hermione. Let us join the others."

For some reason, she didn't think that her words helped to soothe the fellow. She watched as he took his seat near Tonks, shoulders slumping as he whispered something to his lover. She, too, paled and eyed Hermione curiously. Hermione smiled, but received a blank stare in return.

Looking away from the odd pair, she gave her attention to Dumbledore, who was standing at the front center of the room. Nearly everyone quieted down in anticipation of the meeting, but Fleur's voice rang out suddenly.

"It ees what I 'ave decided, Bill. 'E ees the reason my sister is gone, my Gabrielle. I am going, and zat is final."

"We'll talk about it after," Bill said, cheeks reddening as he noticed everyone's stares.

"I theenk you will talk, and I will not listen."

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore began talking, likely hoping to avoid any more confrontations. "Everyone here already knows why I've called this meeting. Tonight we are going on the offensive and will bring the fight to Voldemort for what I hope is the final time." All eyes gazed at Harry. "I have every confidence that Harry is ready to do his part. Now, my friends, it is time that we do ours."

"We didn't have enough warning last time to truly help as we should have," Kingsley said, eyeing Harry. "But that won't be the case this time."

Everyone murmured agreement before Dumbledore continued. "Severus has left something in Miss Granger's possession that will enable us to know the exact location of Voldemort, and since she has been at this location, she can make Portkeys for us."

"How can we fully trust that You-Know-Who will not be waiting for us? What if Portkeys won't work?" Moody asked, eyeing Hermione closely.

"The Apparition site is outside the castle's grounds. I take it that nobody can just Apparate inside...even the Death Eaters. Portkeys do work from inside. I've seen them used before." She looked at all the faces...familiar ones and strange ones...before continuing. "He has no idea that we will be coming. I have faith in that."

"If you wouldn't mind, why don't you come up and draw a diagram of the grounds so that we can begin making plans," Dumbledore said, conjuring a blackboard and chalk.

"Sure," she said, nervously moving up to the front. "There is a great cliff all along the backside." She began drawing and explaining the grounds. The countdown to the battle had finally begun. Within eleven hours, they would be there... in the midst of a battle.

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Neville extended his hand to Harry. "This is it, Harry. We're going to stick by you and do what needs to be done."

Harry took his hand and shook it firmly. "You know, Neville, I never did get a chance to thank you for what you did for me back at Hogwarts. You avenged Ron..."

"And my parents," Neville inserted.

"Yeah, and you tried to help me with Voldemort." Harry smiled. "I'll always be grateful."

"You would have done the same for me," he replied. "In fact, you already have... many times over." Looking to everyone else, confidence and determination shining through his expression, he added, "Some of us might not live through this night, but as long as we win, our lives are worth it. It's time that V-Voldemort is destroyed once and for all."

Draco walked up and extended his hand. Neville looked down at it for a moment and then took it firmly. "Not bad, Longbottom," Draco said with a nod.

"Glad to see you with *us*, Malfoy," came the reply.

Hermione finished making the last of the Portkeys and sighed. "Okay, does everyone remember everything?" Her friends nodded. "Let's do this. Now, the few of us...Harry, Neville, Ginny, Draco, Pansy, and me...will Portkey into my old chambers that I shared with Severus and wait for a couple of minutes before leaving."

"Don't forget the Disillusionment Charms for your walk to the main hall," George said.

"Check," Ginny said.

"And don't forget the protective enchantments," Fred added.

"Done," Pansy said with a smile.

George took the box of Portkeys, saying, "I'll hand these out to the different groups."

"Going in from all different positions should really help with the surprise," Draco said, seemingly to reassure Ginny.

"I know. I just assumed we'd all go running in together. It seemed less... dangerous that way," she admitted. "Not that I'm scared, mind."

"We're all a little frightened," Hermione said, looking at her friends openly. "Even me. We don't know what to expect. Severus' parchment said that he was feeling nervous and apprehensive. There may be many Death Eaters there. We don't really know, so it wouldn't do to all go at them at once, enabling them to see us right away or get off some hexes or escape."

Dumbledore entered the room. "I trust that everyone is ready?" he asked, gazing mostly at Harry.

With a confident nod, Harry answered, "Yes, sir, we are." He pulled his wand out as if he were about to duel at that moment; everyone else quickly did the same...just in case.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, "remember to wait those couple of minutes in the chambers. We want Voldemort to see some of us first for the distraction." His gaze landed on Hermione. "See to it."

"I will," she agreed. She'd have to make certain that Harry didn't go rushing off. "Everyone has memorized every corridor and entrance that I put on our maps. We should be all right."

"Come. I'd like to make one final speech before we all take our positions."

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Severus sneered, nudged the fallen man with his boot heel, and shook his head in disgust. "How dare you think to betray our Lord!"

The young man said nothing, only gazed back defiantly. One of the Death Eaters behind him spoke on his behalf. "Please, my Lord, he is my daughter's husband. Spare his life, and I will do what I can to make up for his treachery."

Noting that his Lord had risen, Severus quickly moved aside to allow him to pass. He hated that young Pucey had been found to be the spy that had tipped off the Order about Hermione's parents, but there was nothing that he could do to help him without jeopardizing his position. He'd spent the day making a very dark potion that his Master planned to use on Tonks and Lupin. He imagined that Pucey would get a goblet of it as well.

The Dark Lord circled Pucey once before making his way to stand before the boy's shaking father-in-law. "Nagini has been killed." He pointed a long skeletal finger towards the shaking boy. "He is at fault for warning them."

"Wh-what proof, my Lord?" the man asked nervously, cowering slightly at the rage in his Master's eyes. "I... fear someone has set him up. Surely he wouldn't have warned anyone about that dirty Mudblood's..."

The man abruptly ceased talking as Severus began to stride forward, wand raised menacingly.

"Snake, I didn't mean..." he stammered.

"Enough, Severus," hissed the Dark Lord. "His punishment for questioning me will be to watch his daughter's husband suffer." He paused for a moment. "And then he will share the memory in a Pensieve with his daughter."

Severus nodded and held his wand at his side. It wasn't that the man had questioned his Master; it was that he dared to speak of Hermione in such a way. He would pay for that later.

"*Crucio*," intoned the Dark Lord darkly. As Pucey began writhing, though keeping relatively quiet, their Master gestured for everyone to kneel. When all were down, he released the hex. "Now, boy, is there anything you would like to say?"

Pucey's eyes met Severus' boldly. "You don't deserve her," he said slowly. "How could you let this happen to her?"

Severus' brow furrowed. Why would this boy care about Hermione or her family? "Explain yourself," he said quietly.

"No," came the impudent reply.

"Curse him," the Dark Lord urged.

Severus lifted his wand, but instead of casting an Unforgivable, he used his Legilimency to try to see why the boy was fond of Hermione and had tried to save her family. After a few flashes of his wife and other memories, he saw the one he wanted. It seemed that Pucey and Hermione had had a long talk, and the boy had been honestly impressed with her, obviously wishing her luck for the future. Quickly, releasing the spell, Severus gazed at him for a moment, aware that everyone was watching them.

He finally managed to regretfully say, "She has to be taught the ways of our Lord in whatever means possible. You should not have interfered."

"Correct," the Dark Lord said before casting another Cruciatus on Pucey. His slitty eyes settled on Severus. "I am satisfied with your assessment of things and glad that you understand."

Bowing his head in acquiescence, Severus closed his eyes and thought of Hermione. The Order members and select Aurors would be upon them within minutes. He hoped that she'd kept her promise and remained behind. He truly needed to keep his wits about him for the confrontation. There were many Death Eaters present, so it wouldn't be as easy as he'd hoped.

"What the...?"

Looking up, Severus noted that his Lord was gazing towards one of the entrances as if expecting someone to enter. *Shite. He's placed Stealth Sensing Spells upon the place. He knows we've been breached.*

"On your feet, everyone, for we are not alone any longer," he said, flicking his wand to end Pucey's curse. Their eyes locked. "Severus," he said, "Dumbledore has come. My sensors have detected him...among others. It appears that your concubine's memory might have been penetrated, and they were able to find us."

"No, my Lord, they did not tamper with her." He nodded to Pucey. "Could it be that he told them where we were located?"

Nodding, his Master said, "That could be." His expression hardened. "If it is the girl's fault, Severus, I will punish her accordingly."

Severus nodded, raising his wand arm. "I will protect you, my Lord."

"It's been coming down to a confrontation with Dumbledore and me for a long time. I've never wanted to do it on his terms, but I fear the time is upon me." His cold smile sent chills down Severus' back. "He's weak because of your potion already, and after the last meeting with us, his confidence has likely faltered. He's old and will be defeated. Even so..." Motioning for the others to pay attention, he said, "Dumbledore has found us and thinks to take us by surprise. Do what you must to take him down and any that walk at his side."

"You can try," said the firm, cool voice of Albus Dumbledore from the entrance behind them. At that moment, several of the doorways filled with Order members and Aurors, all moving in quickly with wands drawn. "But I doubt you will succeed."

In the instant before fighting commenced, Severus noticed the shocked faces of his fellow Death Eaters and the fierce determination of the newcomers. He wondered where Potter was before a few hexes began circulating, nearly hitting him. He quickly began using Shield Charms for himself and his Lord so that it seemed he was still loyal. In the midst of things, he was able to disarm numerous Death Eaters without anyone being the wiser. It seemed that nobody dared to want to face the Dark Lord, aside from the headmaster.

*Where the bloody fuck is Potter?*

Once Dumbledore was finally able to make his way over, Severus noticed a change in his Master's demeanor. It was as if he truly did fear the older man. From the hard expression on Dumbledore's face, Severus could understand the man's fear. He was definitely a force to be reckoned with...no matter his age.

"Stand aside, Severus," Dumbledore said.

"Remain," the Dark Lord countered.

Severus had never been more confused in his life. Was Dumbledore truly wanting him to out himself? They'd spoken beforehand, and they'd mutually decided to keep his treachery a secret until the very end. He hoped that any Aurors would not interfere, but he doubted that they would know that he was doing as instructed only. It wouldn't be long before he was taken down in their attempt to aid Dumbledore... or Potter...wherever he might be.

"I will not stand aside, Headmaster," he said firmly.

"There you have it, Dumbledore. You thought he was your man, didn't you? All this time you'd hoped that you could trust Severus." His cold, high-pitched cackle permeated the air. "He's *my* most trusted servant and most loyal advisor!"

With that said, the pair began to face off. Just as Severus predicted, more hexes were sent in their direction. He was grateful for them, as it kept him from truly interacting with the two men who both wanted his loyalty. Just as he was feeling better about things, the Dark Lord spoke the one word that truly made a difference to the battle's outcome.

"Potter!"

That's when everything changed. He turned to look in the direction his Master had indicated, and the breath was nearly knocked out of him. Hermione was at Potter's side...along with Draco, Pansy, Ginevra, and Longbottom. "Damn it!" he bellowed as a Stinging Hex caught him in the back. "*Finite!*"

The crowded room shifted somewhat as hexes were cast about, leaving an open path for Potter and the others to trek through to reach the Dark Lord. Dumbledore was busy fending off a few Death Eaters that had come round to assist their Master.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Potter taunted as he made his way forward, all of his friends helping to deflect hexes sent their way.

"Hermione!" Severus yelled furiously. "What is the meaning of this?" She wasn't supposed to be there.

The Dark Lord turned away from Dumbledore, confident that his followers could handle him as they'd done during the previous battle. "It appears, Severus, that she's chosen her side. She will pay for that." He used a room-sealing charm to make certain that nobody could enter or leave.

Longbottom, who must have had a protective charm on his person, began dueling with a nearby foe, and another quickly engaged Parkinson, causing Draco and Ginevra to stop and help her. Hermione and Harry found their way to them without any trouble.

"So... still alive then, Potter?" The Dark Lord snorted when Potter nodded impudently. "Not for long, boy. Not for long."

Both Severus and Hermione were thrown back as a magical sphere surrounded the Dark Lord and his nemesis, leaving enough room for the two of them to duel. As Severus stood, an orange jet of light hit him, and his arm felt as if it were on fire. Another light hit him, and his wand flew from his hand.

Eyes wide, he looked up to see Pucey towering over him. Somehow he'd managed to take someone's wand and had decided to use it against the Death Eaters...or against Severus at any rate. He lifted his wand once more, eyes alight with hate. "*Ava...*"

"No!" yelled Hermione frantically, flicking her wand. "*Petrificus Totalis!*"

The jet of light hit Pucey squarely in the chest, knocking him down in the process. Severus scrambled over to get his wand just as an Auror approached and tried to hex him. In self-defense, he sent a Slicing Hex at the inexperienced girl, causing her to drop her wand. "*Stupefy!*" he said as an afterthought.

"You fucking Mudblood!" Pucey's father-in-law bellowed at Hermione. "It was *he* who tried to help your parents!" He began to flick his wand, but the words of his spell never left his mouth as Severus collided with him physically, knocking them both down.

"You will die," Severus said furiously, hitting him and grabbing for the man's throat with his hands.

"Severus, no! Aurors are about! STOP!" Hermione shouted in a panic, trying to pull him away from the man before he snapped his neck as she'd seen him do to Rodolphus.

Severus shrugged her off of him, causing her to fall backwards. Only when she yelped in pain did he realize what he'd done and released his grip. He Stunned his foe and broke the man's wand before turning to assist her.

"Where does it hurt?"

"My ankle."

"A sprain," he said after checking it. He quickly healed it and pulled her up, gathering her close to him with one arm while using the other to defend them against hexes sent their way. "I will keep you safe."

"Not again, Severus, no," she said shakily. "I can't let you get hurt or... help him. Y-you will have to trust me on this."



"What do you mean?" he asked, releasing his hold on her to eye her warily. It was then that he noticed her wand was pointed at him. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Potter being flung backwards by a hex the Dark Lord sent his way, and at that very moment, his Lord noticed their altercation.

Thinking his most trusted servant was about to be captured by his concubine, he sent a Disarming Spell at her, knocking her over and flinging her wand back towards him, though he didn't pick it up.

"She has betrayed us, Severus, betrayed you. Finish her," he urged.

Still shocked that she was about to hex him, Severus stood there staring at her blankly. She scrambled up, and realizing that she was wandless and facing the tip of Voldemort's wand, she called for her wand. It wouldn't leave the Dark Lord's magical sphere.

"No," she moaned.

"Hermione, run!" Potter yelled, shooting a hex at the magical barrier. It flickered, faded, and dissipated completely, but the magical repercussion sent the boy sprawling down on his side.

She ran to help him. "Get up, Harry. Fight him!"

"You remember what I said I would do with you, girl?" the Dark Lord asked. He lifted his wand and slashed the air in sharp jabs, sending a dull, cream-colored jet of light shooting towards Hermione.

Severus had been spurred into action a moment before that, already knowing that her punishment would be immediately meted out. He couldn't allow that to happen. Not to his Hermione. As if in a move practiced many times, he reached her in time to shove her and Potter aside and be hit by his own Lord's hex.

"Severus!" the Dark Lord hissed furiously.

The last things he saw were a determined, angry Potter jumping up with a sequence of hexes from his wand and a crying Hermione, who had crawled over to clutch his body to hers. *And so the centaur's visions have come to pass*, he thought sarcastically.

"No, Severus, no. Don't you dare leave me..." she moaned. "Severus, I love you. I'm sorry."

Oh, how he wished he could return her words of regret and love. He felt her tears touch his cheeks, smelled the tangy scent of her shampoo waft down to his nose, and the world slowly went black.

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"Do you think you can truly defeat me, boy?" Voldemort asked incredulously.

"I don't think I can. I *know* that I can." Harry could hear Hermione's pitiful wailing and knew that he had to fight for her. For Snape. For Ron. For Gabrielle and Hagrid. For everyone that had been lost. "*Accio Hermione's wand!*" he called confidently, having practiced with her wand earlier. The wand near Voldemort's feet zoomed into his outstretched hand, and he positioned his body into a stance fit for a ninja wielding two swords.

A high-pitched cackle came from Voldemort. "You can't face me with one wand. Now, you think two will help you? So be it!"

"*Locomotor Mortis!*" yelled Harry, bravely starting the confrontation.

"*Protego!*" Voldemort said, neatly parrying the hex. "Such child-like hexes. *Crucio!*"

Harry dodged the jet of light and yelled, "*Locomotor Voldemort's throne!*" The chair that the Dark Lord favored slid closer. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" It then rose up and hovered above them for a moment. Harry flicked his wand and sent it zipping towards Voldemort.

Just before it could collide with the surprised wizard, Voldemort yelled, "*Reducto!*" and the chair was blasted to pieces midair.

"*Incarcerous!*" Harry yelled, sending thin, snakelike cords from the tip of his wand to surround his opponent.

Laughing wildly, Voldemort turned the cords into tiny snakes and sent them towards Harry.

"*Syysssethssykaasssss!*" Harry said in Parseltongue, halting the small snakes. "*Engorgio! Engorgio!*" They grew into larger snakes and were directed back towards their maker with a few quick words from Harry.

As if bored, the Dark Lord directed them to attack a nearby Auror. "No snakes for us it is then, Potter." He quickly conjured another thick chair, which ran on its legs at Harry the moment Voldemort whispered, "*Oppugno!*"

Tripping in his haste to back away, Harry rolled to the side just as the chair ran by. "*Incendio!*" he called, quickly realizing his error, for he now had a flaming chair barreling after him. He stood and tried to move away. Hopping around to avoid Voldemort's continuous hexes and the fiery chair, Harry put the chair's fire out with a simple Extinguishing Spell, not realizing that the bottom of his robes had caught fire. He then sent a Tarantallegra to the chair's legs and watched as the smoking, charred chair danced away from him and into the nearby crowd.

After a few exchanges and near misses with Voldemort, he felt the fire of his robes burning against his flesh. He used a Flame Freezing Charm so that the fire would only feel like a warm breeze, giving him time to shrug out of his robes and dodge Voldemort's hexes when he could. With a minor stroke of luck, he hit Voldemort with a hex. Unfortunately, it was only a partial hit with a Severing Charm, putting a gash in Voldemort's face.

"You little bastard!" the man raged furiously.

"You're the bastard if I remember correctly!" Harry yelled, appreciating the extra time it gave him to completely shrug out of his robes and cast a quick Extinguishing Spell to stop the fire. Seconds later, Harry found himself upside down; it was obviously the curse Snape had created years earlier.

He immediately muttered, "*Liberacorpus,*" and was dropped to the ground just as a Killing Curse flew towards the spot he'd been dangling from. Another jet of green light was headed for him, though he was still on the ground in a heap. "*Mobilicorpus!*" he yelled, pointing his wand at a nearby fallen Death Eater. The body moved in front of him just in time to take the Killing Curse. Jumping up, he shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" Unfortunately, Voldemort had been in the midst of his own hex. The brother wands' hexes collided midair as they once had a couple of years prior.

Harry, however, didn't plan on waiting around to see which wizard had more determination, noting that Voldemort was already trying to force his wand's magic back against him. He flicked Hermione's wand and shouted, "*Sectumsempra!*" The powerful Slicing Hex hit Voldemort in the chest, flinging him back and breaking the shared magical hold on their wands. Harry ran forward, flicking both wands, but he was felled by a Tripping Jinx aimed at him from Voldemort's wand.

To his horror, the Dark Lord disappeared, causing him to jump up and turn around in circles anxiously. A sudden burst of pain exploded throughout his back, and his scar felt like it was cracking open. His first thought was that the Dark Lord had once again possessed his body, but then he realized that he was bleeding and had been hit by a

hex. Voldemort was behind him and laughing manically as Harry hit his knees in pain.

Fawkes swooped down from out of nowhere and clawed at Voldemort's smooth, hairless head before vanishing in a burst of flames, evading well-aimed hexes sent by his prey. He reappeared over Dumbledore off to their right and assisted him with his foes, as was normal. The Phoenix was the first one to try to aid Harry in his fight with the Dark Lord during their entire confrontation. It was as if everyone knew to back off...Death Eaters, Aurors, and Order members.

"Fucking bird!" shouted the Dark Lord. "I'll roast you over an open fire!"

Harry spun around and shouted, "*Impedimenta!*" stopping the man before he could get off another curse. This spell hit Voldemort in the chest, and he was clearly surprised at his inability to dodge it. It was Harry who now had the upper hand. "*Incarcerous!*" He quickly stood, whooping for joy.

Voldemort was once again wrapped around with thin cords. However, in eerie sluggish motion, the cords turned from white to red and broke away, releasing the enraged wizard. "*Finite,*" he said slowly, pointing his wand at himself. Both wizards were breathing heavily and bleeding from wounds. "You've been practicing."

"I have," Harry said.

"Why be Dumbledore's lackey? Join me, Potter. Together we could do great things. We'd never be stopped," Voldemort said, attempting to sway Harry. "I could show you ways to obtain an immortal life. We could bring back your parents."

"NO!" Harry yelled, using both wands to conjure imitations of the two Taurus statues that were in the corridor that led from Hermione's rooms to the hall they were in. Once the two white, marble bulls were at his side, he said, "*Oppugno Voldemort,*" and directed them towards his adversary.

The bulls were charging the Dark Lord, but he easily deflected their rampaging with a few flicks of his wand. However, he didn't realize that Harry was moving in for a hex. Just as he banished both bulls from him, he was hit with a strong Blasting Curse, causing him to fly back and slam into the far wall. In a daze, he bewitched a few nearby goblets to pound at Harry's head to gain some time, but it wasn't long before they were thrown aside.

"This is the end for you, Potter. *Crucio!*" Voldemort said quickly, taking advantage of Harry's distraction.

Unfortunately for Harry, the hex met his body and quickly caused him to drop down to his knees in agony. He could hear someone yelling in pain and realized that it was he. "Arrghh!"

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Voldemort asked scornfully, weakly getting to his feet and slowly moving towards Harry. "You should have taken me up on my offer. I'm afraid I shall have to rescind it now that I see how weak you truly are. For a moment there..."

Suddenly, the pain stopped. Harry looked up to see that his foe's narrowed, red eyes were trained on someone else. He quickly realized that Tonks had come round and was nearing him, but she was in the midst of a duel with a short, squat Death Eater.

"*You!*" Voldemort raged suddenly, flat nostrils flaring. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry took his chance and raised his wand. In the space of a few seconds, he saw Ron's head being cradled in Hermione's lap, Hagrid's happy smile as he waved goodbye to Harry for the last time, Gabrielle's shy blush as he kissed her, and Hermione's tear-streaked face as she held her dead lover. He hated Voldemort. Voldemort had killed everyone that meant something to him, and if he wasn't stopped, the killing and tyranny would continue.

"Die, you bastard! *Avada Kedavra!*" Harry shouted loudly, putting all of his hate and emotion behind the curse and watching as the vibrant green light shot out of the tip of his wand as if in slow motion, steadily making its way to its shocked recipient, who had turned around the moment he heard Harry's bellowing voice.

"Potter," Voldemort said just as the spell hit him. Eyes wide, mouth agape, the self-proclaimed greatest wizard of the age met his demise.

Pansy, who was running up to help Harry, paused as the green spray of light hit the man that had ordered the death of her father. In horror, she watched as a white blinding magic bounced back and hit Harry, causing him to fall and shaking the foundation of the castle.

"NO!" she screamed running forward. "Not Harry, too!"

The entire room shuddered with the force of the magic that had been released as both Voldemort and Harry fell. A large portion of the ceiling began crumbling and falling down on those below. Draco pulled her close to him just as a huge chandelier fell to the spot she'd been standing.

"All right?" he asked.

She nodded and smiled as Ginevra hugged her with relief. "Harry!" She pointed to the center of the room, which was being steadily rained with falling stones. In that instant, her heart nearly stopped beating. Harry rose from the wreckage, looking worn, but he was alive.

Harry looked down at the body of Tom Riddle and sighed with relief. It was over. Everyone had been avenged. Those still alive had been saved. Although he had to become a murderer to see it done, the Wizarding world would live peacefully... without the Dark Lord wreaking havoc.

As the dust settled and the building stopped crumbling, Harry looked around. Draco, Ginny, and Pansy had made their way to his side.

"You did it!" Ginny shouted triumphantly, hugging him and then breaking into a little crazy victory dance. "HE DID IT! HE DID IT! I KNEW HE WOULD!"

"All right, Potter?" Draco asked.

"All right," he replied with a small smile.

Draco took Ginny by the hands and joined her in her wild, nonsense dance, laughing happily, knowing that his family now had a chance to begin anew. The prophecy had been right. The seventh daughter of an old family line would be on the right side of the war, and their child would be one of the first born after the war. They would have a hand in changing things. Forging new alliances between families and people who had been enemies not long before.

Harry looked at Pansy expectantly and held out his hand. She took it, pulled it up to her mouth, and kissed it...another unlikely alliance coming to pass.

"You did it," she whispered.

"We all did it," he said, looking around. It seemed that the Order and the Aurors had been able to get most of the Death Eaters bound with magic with minimal losses.

"It worked out better than we imagined."

He pulled her to him roughly, picked her up, and spun her around, laughing happily. They joined Draco and Ginny in their victory dance, feeling the happiest they'd felt in a long time. Harry stopped when he spied Hermione, however, for she was still where he'd left her before he began battling Voldemort in earnest. She was rocking back and forth, holding Snape's head against her chest, crying, mumbling, and kissing his pallid face.

"Hermione," he breathed, releasing Pansy and moving towards his friend in hope of comforting her.

"H-Harry," she said as he neared. "L-look what h-happened... Mum was right..."

He stooped down, not knowing what to say or how to make things right for her. She'd lost nearly as much as he had in this war. The only thing he could offer was the coming years of peace, which he'd made possible by killing Voldemort. He opened his arms to her, but she refused him, shaking her head adamantly, clutching Snape even tighter. This was not going to be easy.

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Unbeknownst to those who had just fought in the battle, there was a new image in the sky, not viewable by the naked eye. Far away in the constellation of Taurus, light shining from the bright star, Merope, and others in the group of stars known as Pleiades...or the seven sisters...was reflecting on some escaped gases of a nearby nebula. The image created was that of a lightning bolt, which looked much like the one on Harry Potter's forehead.

Reporters for the *Daily Prophet*, after conversing with an injured Auror, were already writing up recounts of the final battle and scanning pictures of the ghostly image taken with their powerful Wizarding telescopes. To put an interesting spin on things, they likened the bright star, Merope, to represent Tom Riddle's mother, Merope Gaunt, and decided that she'd made known the true victor...and the greater wizard...by helping to reveal the lightning bolt image in the sky before calling her devil's spawn home to her once he was defeated.

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**Southern's Notes:** Well, there you have it. I hope you saw most of the visions that Bane gave us in here. There will be another chapter to tie up some loose ends and then an epilogue...if all goes well on my end, which it should. I've not started writing the next chapter yet, but I will do so shortly.

I would really like to know what you thought of the duel with Voldemort (I had fun with that!) and of the chapter in general. Though Hermione had good intentions, I think she made things worse by trying to help Severus.

Cheers go to Titania for guessing that the image in the sky would be a lightning bolt, and I'd like to send cheers to JuneW for realizing that Tom Riddle's mum's name was Merope. Pays close attention to plot, that one.

## Consequences

*Chapter 40 of 42*

Hermione and the others learn to live again and beging putting the pieces of their lives back together.

**Disclaimer:** J.K.R. owns these characters. I've borrowed them, but I'll Scourgify them before I send them home.

**As always, I want to thank my lovely beta, Charmed Nay. She's quite brilliant.**

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"And though we are spending this time mourning those we have lost," Scrimgeour was saying, "we can finally look forward to a future of peace." He waved a hand towards the group of people on his right, which consisted of all those who'd gone to Voldemort's castle.

Hermione stifled a yawn as he continued. It had been two weeks since Harry had defeated the Dark Lord, and they were finally getting around to a mass memorial service where they would honor those lost and those that survived.

"Without further ado, I'd like to give out medals to those who helped to aid in Lord Voldemort's destruction."

She noticed that many in the crowd looked frightened at the voicing of Voldemort's name. Shaking her head in annoyance, she trained her eyes on the Minister, waiting for her name to be called. She would collect her medal, and she would also collect Severus' medal. Dumbledore had thought that he should be the one to accept it, but she'd refused to go along with it and didn't care what people made of it.

One by one, the heroes, as they'd been dubbed, made their way up to retrieve their medals. In a daze, Hermione walked up to the dais, collected her Order of Merlin, First Class, and moved back to her seat. She looked down at the polished medal. They'd all given up so much, yet they were to be mollified about their losses with a scant piece of metal.

"Severus Snape is the recipient of two, though he unfortunately isn't with us today..." Scrimgeour looked her way as she stood up and went to the dais again. "Retrieving his medals will be Miss Hermione Granger, who worked closely with him on getting the final location." He shook Hermione's hand and held onto it as a few camera bulbs flashed.

As she made her way back to her seat to listen to him again, she didn't smile. She truly had no reason to. Her life had taken a turn for the worse, and she doubted things would ever get better. *Yes, all will be well eventually, Hermione. You know that.*

Hermione gave a standing ovation, inciting others to follow suit, as the Minister gave Harry his medals and honored him with an honorary key to the Ministry of Magic, showing the public that Harry and the Ministry were on good terms and working together to make the Wizarding world a safer place. Although Harry hated being in the limelight, he seemed to be enjoying the ceremony. Her eyes wondered over to Pansy, who was sitting in the chair next to Harry's empty one. They'd become quite close since the final confrontation, even going so far as to sharing a bedroom at headquarters. When Mrs. Weasley had voiced her disapproval, Harry had pointed out that it was his house, and he'd do as he pleased if she didn't mind.

And that was the end of Mrs. Weasley's reign at Grimmauld Place. The Weasleys had since moved back to the Burrow, forcing Ginny to go with them, though Draco was there nearly all hours of every day to spend time with them...much to the Malfoys' approval. They supported the relationship wholeheartedly, especially since Arthur Weasley was so high up in the Ministry and had a good name in the community...enabling them to be seen as "good people" again.

"An Order of Merlin, Second Class, goes to Lucius Malfoy, who had been secretly working with Headmaster Albus Dumbledore before the war's end and is now working with us in locating all fugitive Death Eaters."

The haughty, blond-haired man made his way to the dais and collected his medal proudly, nodding at the crowd, smiling smugly at his wife and son, and tossing his hair as he made his way back to his seat, medal in one hand, cane in the other. Hermione had seen a calculating glint in his eyes more than once since he had been freed from his prison at Hogwarts, and she wasn't certain that he'd changed all that much. He was simply doing what he must to avoid a stint in Azkaban.

This angered Hermione. Why should Lucius be free and have a new chance at life when Severus was not given one? At that moment, his silver eyes met her narrowed brown eyes, and for a moment, his expression seemed to be mocking her. She sneered slightly when he smirked, but when she noticed Draco looking her way, smile on his face, she smiled at him and turned her attention elsewhere. Draco had proved the Malfoy name worthy of redemption if nothing else. She only hoped that Lucius would never again besmirch it.

The moment the ceremony was over, Hermione quickly made her excuses and left, hoping that nobody would follow her. She wanted to get home as quickly as possible. She Disapparated to the cobbled street, Spinner's End, where she'd taken residence. She paused as she made her way up the front walk. Flowers had been planted on either side of the doorway. She smiled despite her gloomy mood and entered the house.

"Mum?" she called, closing and locking the door behind her. She pulled her cloak off and hung it up behind the door and followed the aroma of beef stew to the kitchen. "Smells good," she said, moving to kiss her mother on the cheek.

"It's nearly done now. I'd hoped to have it done by the time you returned. Why are you home so early?" Jane asked, taking in her daughter's distraught expression.

"I... I couldn't bear to stay, Mum. Is everything all right here?" she asked hopefully.

"The same," her mother said with a sigh, "but I did manage to plant those flowers that nice Sprout woman brought. I followed her directions, and it seems they've taken already. Imagine! After only a couple of hours!"

"She's been developing those for a long time," Hermione said, kicking her shoes off and taking a seat at the table. "They will last for as long as you want them."

"If all things could be that way," her mother said wistfully, taking a seat next to her. "What are you going to do now, Hermione?"

"I don't know." She leaned forward to rest her head on her arms on the table.

"Well, if you want my opinion, I think you should just carry on as normal." At Hermione's incredulous stare, she asked, "Why not? It's what he would want you to do. Do you think he'd like to know that you mope about and refuse to accept things? You had plans before this. Carry them out."

"My plans were with him," Hermione said vehemently.

"Well, he's still a part of your life now, isn't he?" She smiled kindly. "Dear daughter, do you not think that your father isn't with me in all that I do?" She hooked her thumb towards the stove. "I'm making that beef stew, and your father is right there with me. I hear him teasing me about the excessive amount of potatoes and carrots I add in. I can still see him sneaking a peek at the pot and trying to pick a piece of beef out before I shoo him away. He is with me, and although I may loathe doing so, I will move on. It's what he would have wanted."

"It's not the same, Mum. This is different."

Shaking her head, Jane stood and busied herself in the kitchen. Hermione used magic to set the table and thought about what her mother said. She was right. It was time to get out and decide on her future. Severus would be proud of her and be impressed with how maturely she'd handled her grief and life after the double loss she'd suffered.

"I had a letter from the Minister yesterday," she said quietly. "He'd hoped to announce to the crowd today that I'd accepted a job at the Ministry. I told him I needed more time to think about it."

"Oh, Hermione, that's wonderful! What sort of job?"

"It's not like he really wants me. It's my name," she said bitterly. "He's offered jobs to some of the others as well. He isn't even asking that I take my N.E.W.T.s! Can you believe that?" She shook her head. "I will take them anyway of course. Harry still won't tell me what his offer was, though he slipped and said he had a couple of choices." She snorted. "He said he could work things out for me to fit my schedule as I need it."

"Go on. What's the job?"

"Well, it's complicated. I can't really say much, as I don't know much. My title would be an Unspeakable. Nobody could know what I do. All things done in those offices stay in those offices." She shrugged. "He insinuated that if I truly wanted to do some work from home, it would be easy to have a Ministry approved room added here so that it would be as though my office were there, allowing other workers to walk in or out like it is part of the building or allowing me to step out to join meetings and to work on projects."

"Honey, that works out perfectly. You could still be here, yet you can still work, giving you a sense of normalcy." She held up her hand. "Don't look at me like that. You know what I mean."

"But, Mum, if I start working now and get busy, when will I have time to read through books and research? I think that is more important."

"Talk to the Minister. Tell him you wouldn't mind the office he referred to, but let it be known that you have another project going and would like to devote equal time to it. Work out a schedule with him." She smiled and patted her daughter's hand. "I am not going back to work for a long while. I couldn't bear it. Not right now. Not without him."

"I thought you were selling the dentistry?"

Jane nodded. "Definitely. I thought to eventually open again elsewhere."

"Maybe near here?"

"Perhaps."

Hermione thought of what her mum had said. She wouldn't mind helping her with things and would remain living with her as long as she was needed. Something told her that her mother needed the company as much as she did. It could work.

"I'll speak with him tomorrow if he has time. He made it quite clear that he'd work with me just to be able to get me on there." She shook her head. "He thinks it helps his public image, you see, having us under him."

"Likely, that is true," her mother agreed. "Hungry?"

"Yes," Hermione said, realizing that for the first time in two weeks, she truly was. Things were looking a little brighter, and she wouldn't have to worry about depending on her mother or Severus' funds for money. She could earn her own wages and take care of things. *I will still take my N.E.W.T.s*, she vowed silently.

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ONE WEEK LATER

Harry laughed and spun her around. "I'm happy for you," he said. "I'd hoped that you would."

"I just feel as though I'm betraying Severus," she said, biting her lip.

"No, Hermione, do you think he'd want you moping about? Besides, we are going to continue our research each night. Nothing will change that. Between the two of us, we'll find something."

"Thanks."

"You know, you can always stay at Grimmauld Place with us. I know Pansy wouldn't mind the company, and I would..."

"I need to be here near Severus," she interrupted, moving to the door that Severus had always kept closed when she'd stayed with him.

He'd later explained that it was his parents' rooms and that perhaps they should use them one day. So the first thing she'd done was to pack all of his parents' personal items and store them above in the attic. She moved all of her things and Severus' things from his room into the room and had redecorated it to her taste.

She quickly opened a window to let a cool breeze of fresh air filter in. She grinned as she looked outside, the bright light of the sun's rays catching the ring...Severus' mother's ring...that she wore on her hand. "Mum's out there planting more of Professor Sprout's flowers. I think she is enjoying herself, what with not worrying about going to work each day."

"And being close to you," Harry added. He sighed. "Hermione, when I said for you to come, I didn't mean for you to leave him behind," he said quietly, gesturing to the bed where Severus lay.

Hermione quickly moved and sat next to her motionless, deathly pale lover, touching his face and pushing back his hair. "He needs to be here in his home. Mum and I can manage." She kissed his forehead. "I love you," she whispered.

"Did you get more of those books?" Harry asked, changing the subject. "I've finished the last two that I had, and I didn't see anything that matches the hex he was hit with or his symptoms."

"There are so many damn books," Hermione said bitterly. "And Voldemort wanted *me* to go through them and add them to the Hogwarts collection once he took over. There has to be something in one of these books that he used to hex Severus. Well, to try to hex me anyway."

"I've asked this before, but you never really answered. Why not let the others help us? Pansy would really like it. I know that Ginny and..."

"Maybe Pansy," she relented. "I just didn't want too many people involved where they might get bored and skim over something important."

"We'll start including Pansy then. She'll like that, and I'm certain she'll be as careful with the research as we are, and she'll have more time."

"Harry," Hermione said, smirking, "what jobs have you been offered?"

His expression grew serious. "He's trying really hard to get me. I can be an Auror and bypass most of the training, as I've already proven myself. I can also be an Obliviator. Better yet, I would make a great Hit Wizard." There was a tone of bitterness in his voice.

"What?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Yeah, seems I've killed before and all. Might as well set me on hardened criminals, killing them if they try to escape or fight back," he said sarcastically.

"No wonder you've not given him an answer."

"Right," he said, laughing slightly. "I admit that it is appealing...I've always wanted to be an Auror...but I think, for now, I've had enough of fighting or worrying about bad wizards and witches. I'd like to do something... fun."

"Play Quidditch," Hermione said immediately.

"Maybe," he replied. "There is another job offer."

"And?"

"Working for the Department of Magical Games and Sports," he said nonchalantly. "That's the one I like the most, but I don't know if I'd like all the traveling. I'm sure I would, but with Pansy to think of now and our research, I'd feel better finding something around here."

"Harry, don't put your future on hold for me," she said softly, looking down to Severus' still face. "I will find a way to bring him out of this magically induced coma somehow."

Jane Granger walked in, taking her dirty gloves off as she did so. "Oh, good. It's time for his potion. I wasn't sure if you were finished organizing your new office."

"I'll do it, Mum. Thanks."

"All right. Hello, Harry." She kissed Harry on the cheek. "I'll be outside if you need me. It's a lovely day out!"

After she left, Hermione pulled Harry from the room, not wanting to talk in front of Severus. "I wanted to ask you how Lupin is doing? He seemed so sad when I last saw him."

"He's all right. I think he's mostly relieved that the war is over, but he doesn't seem too keen on all the wedding plans that Tonks is making. I guess he feels guilty still about your dad and not being able to save him."

"Quite lucky, that Tonks," Hermione said. "I still can't believe she unknowingly ducked down right when that Killing Curse was about to hit her, killing the Death Eater she was dueling with instead."

"Yeah, she accidentally took Felix Felicis that morning. She thought she was taking a potion for extra endurance. Moody is still angry with her about it," Harry said, smiling.

"Why? He came out of everything all right, and it saved her life," Hermione said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Dunno. You know what he's like though. I'd bet he thinks she's thick for taking a potion without truly knowing what it was."

"Some Auror."

"Too right," Harry agreed. "Lupin said that they are going to let out their flat and move off for a while, do a bit of traveling now that times are better."

"Well, that's good. I think they need it."

"Let's go compile our notes and put away the books we've checked," Harry said. "I'm going to take an extra set home for Pansy, and don't worry, Hermione. I'll show her how to write her notes and what to look for."

As Hermione followed him to the sitting room, her mind played over the last time she'd seen Severus move of his own accord. He'd raced forward and pushed her out of the way just as a cream-colored jet of light had hit him. His eyes had been open for only a few moments, and then they'd closed. She'd thought him to be dead. Nearly everyone had, but she'd soon realized that it was something much worse. He'd been hexed with some unknown curse that enabled him to live, although in a coma-like

state. Nothing had worked to bring him back so far. Dumbledore had tried using Legilimency, but there was nothing there. So, she and her mother took turns administering potions to him as directed by the Healers and seeing to it that he was comfortable while she and Harry researched the Dark Lord's books in hopes of finding a cure or a hint of what type of spell he'd been hit with.

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#### ONE WEEK LATER

Hermione laid the brush on the nightstand after she finished brushing his black locks. "I can't believe it's been a month," she said, wishing that he'd simply been sleeping. She often wondered if he could hear her and hoped for some sign that he could. Was this a hopeless fight? *Never. He would do the same for me.*

She slid down next to him and propped herself up on one elbow to look at him. If her mother thought it strange of her to share her bed with him, though he was in such a condition, she never said anything. Hermione simply didn't want to sleep apart from him. Those nights when she'd had to were terrible. After persuading St. Mungo's to release him into her care...with the help of Dumbledore...she'd remained by his side as much as she could.

"Hogwarts will be opening again next week," she informed him. "I'm told that Dumbledore was able to get your old Head of House out of retirement to teach Potions and Head Slytherin... until you are well enough to return of course." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "What sort of name is Slughorn anyway? I'll bet he's not half as good as you."

Nestling her face against his chest, she placed her hand on his stomach. "Work is interesting," she said. "It's nothing like I thought it would be, but everyone is quite nice. It's like our own little place away from the rest of the Ministry. Nobody from the other departments have access, aside from the Minister himself. Even his access is limited." She placed a small kiss upon his nightdress. "My office is great. I hope you don't mind that I gave them that extra room to use for it. I can walk right in from the house, and there is my office. From there, I can use the other door, and it works like a Floo."

Running her fingers along his arm, she whispered, "I miss you, Severus, touching you, your touches. I love you." She couldn't cry any more tears. She'd shed many of those. "Our research is going a little faster with Pansy helping, but we've still come across nothing concrete. Each time we think we've found something, it's only a disappointment."

She laced her fingers with his, tempted to place his hand upon her breast just to feel his touch again. "I swear I won't give up, Severus." She moved her thigh up to drape over him and felt a twitch in his groin. It took a moment for the realization that his body had moved on its own to dawn on her. She bolted upright and shamelessly moved up his dressing gown to look at his pelvic area. He was nearly entirely hard.

"How is it that you are feeling arousal? I've never noticed that happening when I washed you!" She looked up at his face. His eyes were closed, lips slightly parted, face slack. Reaching down to slightly trace the area with her fingernails, she watched as he hardened even more. "Oh, my God!" she cried excitedly. "That's it!"

She raced from the room to the grate and Flooed Harry. "I know it's late, but please be up!" she called. "Harry? Pansy?"

Pansy walked into the room. "I'm here, but Harry went into town for a moment," she said. "Come through."

"I've figured out what type of spell Voldemort used! As soon as Harry gets home, please come over," Hermione said. She left the grate and began thinking about her last meeting with Voldemort. He'd plainly told her what he planned to do with her should she disappoint Severus or him. When he'd tried to hex her, he'd asked her if she remembered his warning. Why hadn't she thought of it before? All this time, they'd been blindly researching coma-type spells and creamy-colored hexes.

Voldemort's words came back to her.

*I believe that I also told you to always address me with respect. You don't want Lord Voldemort to get angry with you, girl. There are spells I could put on you that would render you helpless to be nothing other than a vessel for... Well, you can imagine. Needless to say, I do always follow through with my warnings.*

"He was going to make me into some sort of living doll that Severus could use for sex...alive but not really. Sick bastard," she said, running her hands through her hair. Tears that she'd thought she'd never cry came to her eyes. They now knew where to research and could make their own countercurse if they had to. It would take a lot of work, time, and research, but Severus would be freed.

"Hermione? What's all the racket? Something wrong?" her mother asked, sleepily rubbing her eyes.

She quickly explained to her mother what she thought about the hex that had hit Severus. In conclusion, she sighed sadly. "Only it was likely designed for a woman. I hope it won't complicate things much more since he's a man."

"Surely there is something that you can do," her mother said confidently. "And don't feel badly for not thinking of it sooner. You've had a lot on your mind as of late."

"But Harry specifically asked me what he'd told me, and I never thought about that once. I should have remembered," she said, feeling guilty. "We've now wasted a month! It's just that everything happened so fast, my mind has been such a blur, and I could only concentrate on the hex's color and the effect it had on Severus."

"It's not all been a waste, and nor will the time be wasted that you will spend finding a cure for him." She touched her daughter's shoulder affectionately. "You've grown so much, done so much with this house, with him, with work... This time apart, although horrible for the both of you, might be what you both needed."

Hearing the grate come to life behind them, Hermione turned around and went to explain her findings to Harry and Pansy.

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TWO WEEKS LATER

Ginny patted Hermione on the back. "We'll find it. Don't worry." She smiled and placed Hermione's hand upon her swollen stomach. "The baby is moving."

Hermione grinned as she felt a small little thump against her palm. A second later, she felt it again. "Life is such a miracle, isn't it?" Hermione said, not really looking for an answer, thinking of her lover, who was alive, yet not.

"We'll find something," Ginny said confidently. "Don't give up hope."

"I won't."

"You should have let us help sooner. You and Potter must have been going mad, what with all these books," Draco said, looking around at the numerous, high stacks of books. "How much have we to go through?"

She was glad that they'd finally asked for more help, but out of all their searching they hadn't found anything that worked. "There are only about ten books left."

"Well, there are five of us. We can each take two and go through them," he said. "After that, we'll go to Hogwarts and make use of the Restricted Section. There has to be something."

Pansy plopped down opposite of them. "Did Dumbledore not say anything?"

"He isn't familiar with it, but he's sent an owl to one of his old alchemist mates. I hope he might know something," she said. She'd thought that the headmaster...of all

people...would be able to help her, but he'd disappointedly told her that he couldn't. From what Harry said, he was doing more than asking a friend; he was pouring over his personal books in hopes of finding something. He felt guilty for allowing her to go against Severus' wishes and held himself responsible for what happened.

Hermione knew that it was nobody's fault but her own. She was learning to live with her past mistakes, however, and looking forward to not making them again in the future. Her job had turned out to be one of the best opportunities ever. At the present, she was working with another team creating new Time-Turners. They were trying to make it so that these would allow for a person to come back to the present at will instead of forcing him or her to live through their past again as their only alternative to getting back. It was all quite fascinating. What bothered her most was that the majority of the work she'd studied in school was for naught. She could have simply taken only the basic classes and had the information she needed to do her job well...Potions, Arithmancy, Charms, and Transfiguration.

The salary she was being paid was quite generous, and she'd been able to pay the bills accrued so far and save a good portion. Severus would like that. She wondered if Severus would like how her mother had transformed the plain, drab yard into a flowery haven and had even started a garden. Out of all the old homes on their street...most were abandoned anyway...they had the loveliest lawn.

"We're going to leave," Harry said, pulling Pansy up and dragging her towards the Floo. "I've got that damn interview in the morning." Everyone laughed at his annoyed expression. "Think that's funny, do you?"

"Yes," Hermione said cheekily. "Off with you."

"We'll be back tomorrow evening," Pansy called as Harry pulled her into the grate.

Draco pulled a Portkey from his pocket. "We'll be off. Mrs. Weasley is probably wondering why we've been gone so long."

"Draco, Ginny," Hermione began, "I really appreciate this. I couldn't have done this alone."

"I hope it pays off," Ginny said, hand on her stomach, caressing it lightly.

After they left, Hermione went to the room she shared with Severus and changed into her nightclothes. She pulled out a book and began reading, wondering when she'd come across the information she needed to free him from his current state. She read aloud, hoping he could hear her and making her feel less alone at the same time. Once she'd read as much as she could and could keep her eyes open no longer, she put the book aside and turned down the lamp next to their bed. As always, she turned to face him, holding him until she drifted off to sleep.

Laughter woke her early the next morning. She pulled on her bathrobe to cover herself and made her way out into the kitchen. She stopped immediately as she saw Lucius Malfoy sitting at their table conversing with her mother over a cup of coffee.

"Oh, indeed," he was saying, "Draco nearly walked before he crawled." His eyes settled upon her. "Ah, Miss Granger, I wondered if I might have a word. I hope you don't mind that I've come to call so early. I've other obligations later this morning." He nodded to Jane. "Your mother was kind enough to give me a tour of your garden and to offer me a cup of coffee."

Hermione smiled at her mother, who was oblivious to the man's mocking smile. "Thanks, Mum." She pointed towards the doorway that led to the small hallway. "Would you like to go to the sitting room?"

"Oh, no," Jane stood. "I'm off for a shower. Stay here and talk. There is fresh coffee."

With that, the woman swept out of the room, leaving them alone. Hermione sat down and summoned a glass and orange juice to her with a couple of lazy flicks of her wand. "Well, Mr. Malfoy," she said, hoping to sound self-assured, "what brings you here?"

He put his cup aside and leaned forward. "I know you don't care for me, Miss Granger. I can see it in the way you look at me."

"Why come for a visit then? I know that you are aware of Severus' condition."

"I am."

They gazed at each other for a long while. Finally, Hermione asked, "Well, why have you come? He truly isn't responsive, so if you wished to speak with him, it wouldn't help you."

"Why do you not care for me? Why, I'm a reformed man to hear Dumbledore and the Ministry tell it. Has my assistance to the Order and Ministry not impressed you?" he asked, voice light and curious.

"I don't trust you," she replied honestly.

"Yes, I know that, but I'd like to know why?" he pressed.

"Well, what sort of man gives a cursed diary to an eleven-year-old child? What sort of man forces his son to do things as you've done with Draco? Who teaches their child to hate and feel prejudice at an early age? Who would use a young woman as a pawn to make certain you come out on the right side of the war?" She paused for only a moment. "You tried to kill me and my friends at the Ministry of Magic! You fought with Mr. Weasley at the bookstore the first day I ever saw you. You also..."

"Good Lord, girl, that is enough," he said, having heard enough.

"You look at me, sir, in such a condescending manner... that I can barely stand to gaze at you." She continued to look at him, even as he smiled nastily in return.

"Do I hold you in very high regards? I admit that the answer would have been a resounding no not long ago, but I am able to change my mind, am I not?" he asked mysteriously. "For you have proved yourself to be quite determined and seem to honestly care about Severus." He gestured to the room around them. "This unattractive place has been transformed into a cozy home, you work, and you take care of Severus without taking even a Knut from his vault at Gringotts, only using your own earnings."

"You've been checking up on me?" she asked incredulously.

He continued on as if she hadn't spoke. "Draco confided to me last night that you've been running yourself ragged, never sleeping at night, trying to read through all of the Dark Lord's books to find a cure or countercurse for Severus. He even explained the circumstances of the curse."

Hermione sighed. "Please, Mr. Malfoy, if you could make your point, I would appreciate it. I have some research to do, and before you ask, of course it's for Severus'want him to be well. I love him, and honestly, I don't give a damn if you approve or not. So, if you've come to ridicule me or to speak ill of Severus, I would ask that you..."

"You misread my intentions, my dear. I've come to help you," he interrupted. "I was uncertain as to what your plans were for Severus, and I was bidding my time before stepping in to do something about it. I do owe him my life, you see. Now that I know what it is you seek, I know exactly what you need."

"What do you mean?" she asked in confusion.

He waved his hand in annoyance. "In my possession, I have a few... er... items that might not have been found by the Dark Lord when he made a sweep through my home for anything he might be able to use."

"You have a book?"

"I do."

Hermione stood. "I'll get changed."

"Excellent," he replied in a bored tone, shaking his head as she exited the room. *Severus, what have you gotten yourself into? That is one irksome little harpy* He chuckled despite himself. He hadn't truly expected her to start listing all the things she loathed about him. Perhaps she wasn't so bad. In fact, she might be just what Severus needed. It was obvious that she loved him, and from the conversation, he'd last had with Severus, he'd discerned that the man felt the same.

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Lucius Malfoy had given Hermione exactly what she needed, and she read over the section pertaining to the spell the Dark Lord had used on Severus. It was just as she'd thought. He'd been intent on making her into some living sexual conduit. The potion she would have to make would take up to six weeks to make, depending on the current position of the moon.

She wasn't so daft as to think she could do it alone and especially needed advice since the spell was created to be used on women. What she truly needed was the advice of a Potions master, but not truly knowing the new professor all that well, she opted for the next best thing: an alchemist.

Tossing a handful of Floo powder in the grate, she said, "Headmaster Dumbledore's office!"

She stuck her head in and felt it spinning amidst the ash and green flames, stopping once she was facing the headmaster's office.

"Headmaster Dumbledore?" she called.

"Miss Granger, what a pleasant surprise," he said.

"I've found a way to get Severus back, but I need *your* help, sir."

"Come right through," he said anxiously.

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**Southern's Notes:** One chapter to go. I can't believe it. LOL... I'm really going to miss these characters and this storyline. It's been great this far. Thanks go to all of you who've been following it faithfully. Cheers.

*And thanks to CocoaChristy for always listening to my ramblings and for allowing me to force her to read clips of things here and there.*

I also have a small PWP going, "Fallacious Tutor," which is posted here. There is only a chapter or two that needs to be added. It's an AU tale of sneaky!Hermione getting her man... hopefully.

## Back to Good: Part 1

Chapter 41 of 42

Hermione continues on with life while trying to brew the potion that will cure her lover.

**Disclaimer:** I've borrowed some characters that J.K.R. created. I promise to Scourgify them and send them home when I'm done. Alas, no Galleons are being made.

**I'd like to thank my dear friend and beta, Charmed Nay, for going through this for me.**

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"I've never been more uncertain about anything in my entire life," Hermione said dejectedly, looking back at her book. "What if we fail?"

"Then," Dumbledore said quietly, "we try again."

"Here is the passage again about the single drop of blood. I'd like your opinion on it."

She never noticed the slight shake of his head or the mirth in his eyes.

"The book says that one drop of blood is needed, but it must be dried on the freshly picked, green leaf of a yew tree." She sighed in exasperation. "I've been thinking about this off and on all day. How can the leaf be all that *freshly picked* if I have to let blood dry on it? I won't be able to use it right away, will I? And... it's not like I can place an enchantment on it. I don't want to use any magic to displace anything. I already lose time by getting the leaf from the yew trees here in the Forbidden Forest...since there are none near home...and then having to Disapparate to the potion."

"I am certain that it allows for the time lapse needed for the blood to dry, which doesn't take very long. So even though it will take a few extra minutes, it will still be what the book considers freshly picked," he said confidently. "If you're worried about saving time, why not bring the drop with you and do it there, Disapparating immediately to your potion after. Then you will have only used time that you'd already been allotted."

Hermione blushed in embarrassment. "I thought about that as well, but I just wanted to make sure. This is too important to mess up." She smiled. "You did say that if I had any uncertainties to let you know." She looked back down again. "Here, one leaf from an oak tree." She nodded. "I saw some of these in the Forbidden Forest. The leaf needs to be dried. I don't have any timeframe with that, so it should be no problem. I wonder which of the trees would have the best leaves? The strength represented by the use of this leaf here is almost as important as the part the yew's resurrection qualities will play. Near the edge are large, thick oaks, but perhaps near the center there are..."

"I would think that those oak trees bordering yours and Severus' home would be sufficient," he said, a small smile playing about his lips.

"Right," she said absently.

"Hermione, we've been going over this every night for the past week. We decided exactly what to use last night after finally narrowing down what exchanges would be



made to compensate for the gender problem." He paused, waiting for her to look up. "What has made you second guess our decisions?"

"Well, I was at work today, and I was thinking that perhaps we should take Severus' weight into consideration. While his frame is definitely larger than a woman's, he doesn't weigh very much...especially not after all these weeks. What if doubling some of this is a mistake? Maybe we should only add a portion more."

"I do not believe that the slight excess will harm him." He took the book from her hands and closed it. He pointed to the parchment with the list of ingredients and directions that they'd been working on each night. "Only read this from now on."

Nodding, she said, "I'm just afraid that I will fail him. Failing has always been one of my greatest fears."

"We'll be successful, Hermione...if not this time, then the next." He eyed her for a moment. "Had I known that you and he would truly come to care for each other this much, I do believe I wouldn't have tried so hard to come between you. Each time I visit him, it's all I think about. I wonder if perhaps I should have just let nature take its course without my interference. I just thought it terribly wrong for him or you to..."

After a long silence, she said, "I can understand that you were trying to do what you thought best. Maybe you shouldn't dwell on it. I think that everything that happened was meant to be. Maybe I was intended by fate to have to live with Harry those months, forcing Severus and he to come to a sort of truce? Maybe he wouldn't have..." *Don't voice that, Hermione*, she chided herself.

Dumbledore seemed to understand what she'd intended to say. "I never doubted that he would end being loyal to me and our cause."

"I'm going to go. Tomorrow I'll start gathering all of the ingredients and getting them ready...well, the ones that I can use at will anyway."

"The new moon will be Wednesday. Do you need any help?" he asked.

"No, sir, thanks anyway."

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ONE WEEK LATER

Hermione quickly jotted down the last of the notes that her department head, Croaker, had lectured.

"And I suppose that marks our dismissal," he ended.

As she put away her things, he leaned over the table and peered down at her. For a moment, he simply stared at her.

"Yes?" she asked uncertainly.

"Do you have it?" he asked.

"Sorry?" She had no idea what he was on about.

"The report on the new chronometer and the plausibility of it being completely accurate." He sighed in apparent annoyance. "You do remember that it's due today?"

"You just told me about that yesterday," she said, looking up at him incredulously. For some reason, she had a feeling that this man was out to get her sacked. Lately, he always seemed to have some scathing remark about her ideas or work. If he did praise her, it was minute and likely because others had put in on the work.

"We have a job to do here, Granger, and *adults* work at faster paces. There are more important things than giving interviews or going out to pubs with your friends each night," he lectured.

"Sir, I do not go..."

"When you do grace us with your presence, you come in here with dark circles under your eyes! I am not so thick as to not know what you are up to. Perhaps you are a bit too juvenile for a job with responsibilities of this magnitude or unable to understand the way of things."

"I was approached for this job by the Minister himself. I took all the required tests even though they'd been waived, and I passed them easily enough," she said. "I am certain I understand things well enough. I'm not some... dunderhead!" She held back a smile, thinking of the word Severus used often when talking about students.

"Just because you are in the Minister's pocket doesn't mean anything to me," Croaker said, smiling nastily. "I'll go straight to him and tell him that you aren't able to hold your own in here. Perhaps if you had to come to work the same way that we all do, you might not think so highly of yourself." He sneered. "Not all of us have an office such as yours, you know. You'd think they would allow longtime employees that benefit!"

"When I accepted this job," Hermione began, rising from her chair, "I explained to him that I was working on another project, which keeps me up very late most nights, explaining the dark circles under my eyes. He agreed that this job would not interfere with it, and we worked out the details of my hours and my office. If you have a problem with that, then yes, go to him." She pushed her chair under the table with a slight bang. "From this moment forward, sir, you are going to stop treating me this way. I really enjoyed this job and the people here until you started trying to make it purposely unpleasant for me."

"We have jobs to do, and no matter what hours you might want to keep, the rest of us have times that we have to be here... and there are deadlines that need to be met!" he bit out snidely. "You have to get your reports to us by deadlines all the same...no matter whose sidekick you are." When her eyes widened in surprise, he went on, "That's right. Some of us aren't all that impressed that you are Harry Potter's mate!"

"Mr. Croaker, you only told me of this report yesterday. If you'd given me a fair warning and a definite deadline date, I would have had it done. You are holding things against me that are not my fault!"

"My working day ends this evening at six o'clock. I'll expect that report on my desk by then, or you..."

"Impossible," she interrupted. "I will have it for you in the morning at the earliest," she said, crossing her arms over her chest to keep from balling her fists. The man was infuriating. "I know I am more than capable to do this job. I've always been a hard worker and took education and duties seriously, no matter my age. It's up to you to recognize that and get past the idea of my office being in my home and the idea that Harry Potter is my best friend. Neither of those influences the quality of my work, which I know is top rate!" She turned to leave the office.

"You can't just walk out of here, Granger!" he called out.

"We're through here, sir. I suggest that the next time you try to sabotage one of my assignments to make me look incompetent you do it a little less obviously!" She moved forward again, only to stop and look back. "And I won't put up with your attitude or the way you talk to me. I'm almost nineteen, not ten. Don't you dare think to try to intimidate me again!"

With that, she quickly left, not wanting her bravado to suddenly waver. She was uncertain if it was wise to speak to him in such a way, but she wouldn't put up with him any longer. Everyone else had readily accepted her. He was the only one who made snide comments about her age and how people so young usually weren't accepted. The worst part was that he was her boss. *Boss or not, I shouldn't be talked down to in such a way or let him bully me!*

Hermione made her way to her office, pulled out a book and some parchments, and then stepped out into her home. The aroma of dinner surrounded her, making her stomach growl. It felt good to be home. She'd just finished her longest day at the office yet, and it was her most trying.

"Hi, Mum," she said as she entered the kitchen. "Smells great."

"Oh, thanks, dear," her mother said happily.

"You know, you don't have to cook all the time."

"I don't mind at all. It gives me something to do and fills up... the emptiness." The smile she gave Hermione belied the sadness in her eyes. The way her mother dealt with life's twists and downfalls was wonderful. Things did bother her, but she never let them get her completely down.

Hermione went to check on Severus. He was the same of course. "Today was long, and can you believe that my boss finally came right out and said what he's so obviously been itching to say?" She began changing into something more comfortable. "He's not impressed that Harry is my friend. Oh, and I'm in the Minister's pocket." She began laughing loudly. It felt nice to laugh. As she sat next to him, her laughter faded. "I suppose his words did hurt some. I mean, he *is* my boss. I'd hoped that he would see me for who I am and the work that I am capable of." She pulled Severus' hand to her mouth, kissed it, and then rested her cheek against it. "Will people never take me seriously?"

She put his hand back at his side and stood, stretching out as she did so. "I hope things change. I really had a go at my boss. If nothing gives now, I doubt it ever will, but that doesn't mean I have to stay in that department." A gust of wind came in through the window and blew her parchments about. "Shite!" She quickly picked them up and went to the windows to close them. "Looks like rain."

After closing the drapes, she said, "I'm going to go eat quickly. After, I'll check on the base to make certain nothing is amiss. As of this morning, the color was still light brown, and it's still quite thick and chunky. That's a good sign, though, as it means we're spot on so far." Sighing, she moved to the door, but she paused before leaving. "I was going to go out near the coast to get that bit of dittany that I'll need in a couple of days, but I won't be able to do that until tomorrow. I've got to finish that arsehole's report for the morning. I'm sorry."

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#### TWO WEEKS LATER

Hermione nervously turned down the lamp in the room, allowing a faint glow to remain. "Severus, really, I wouldn't do this, but I have to." The potion called for a single drop of seminal fluid. The idea of obtaining it from someone unconscious didn't sit well with her. It felt wrong. *But I will do this! I have to do this for the potion.*

Placing the small phial on her pillow, she looked down at his pale face, eerily greenish in color due to the light glow of the lamp and the moon's filtered rays. Deciding against the lamp, she quickly put it out completely, shrouding them in near darkness. She slid in beside him and took a deep breath. *It shouldn't take very long.*

She moved to her side and faced him, moving her hand beneath his dressing gown. Ever so slowly, it traveled up, rubbing against his skin purposefully, and it came to rest on his slight erection. A few caresses and squeezes had him firm enough. She began to move her hand, praying that it wouldn't take long and keeping her phial at the ready.

Nearly an hour later, she was finally able to get what she needed. She hurried to her makeshift lab and added one drop to the potion as directed. Both hands and arms ached from the constant motion of trying to get him to reach culmination. "Who would have thought it would have taken so long?" she mused. But it made sense. He was not in his state for his pleasure. It was for hers, according to the reasoning behind the spell. He would remain stiff and ready for a long time because it was required of him to be in such a state while she sought her own pleasure.

She shook her head in annoyance, trying to imagine having a shag with an unconscious person. She could never do it. What sort of person would create such a spell? Who would want to...? "People like Voldemort and Malfoy of course," she said, wondering if either of them had ever actually used it. Maybe Voldemort had, but from the way Malfoy spoke of his wife, Hermione was uncertain that he would readily go off and take part in such things.

Frustrated, she made her way back to their bed and fell into a fitful sleep. Being that the next day was Saturday, she had a bit of a lie in, needing the extra sleep. Near noon, she Flooed Harry and asked if he'd been able to get the ingredient for her.

"It wasn't very hard," Harry said, stepping through the grate moments later. "The old witch at the apothecary was a right helpful witch."

"Well, she was quite rude to me when I stopped in, telling me it would be a week when I saw some in the case behind her!" Hermione said, scoffing. "I don't see why people are reluctant to part with it. I don't know that it's all that hard to require."

"Have you ever tried to corner a Graphorn?" Harry asked mockingly. "From what I've heard, they're quite fierce. Don't guess they'd want to part with their horns. Would you?"

"Oh, it's already powdered," Hermione said, dumping the contents onto the counter.

"Yes, the nice old witch did it for me herself."

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked, seeing that he was about to laugh.

"Well, she couldn't let the great Harry Potter be bothered with powdering a Graphorn's horn, could she?" He shook his head. "I'll never get over some people and the way they think."

"At least my boss doesn't hold you in high regards."

"Ah, right! Croaker, the man who dares to *not* admire the Boy Who Lived or his...what did he call you? Oh, right...sidekick. Maybe I should..."

"Hermione! There is a man's head floating about in the grate!" her mother called from the sitting room.

Giggling, Hermione and Harry went to the room. "Oh, Mr. Croaker, what can I do for you?" she asked, eyes widening at Harry. *What a coincidence!*

"I just wanted to let you know that I will be out of the office on Monday, so our meeting for that morning has been cancelled. You need not come in unless you choose to," he said with a nod.

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate the notice," she said gratefully.

"Not a problem." The man's head whipped to the side and took in Harry's presence. "Oho! Harry Potter!" he exclaimed. "We've never met! It's a pleasure."

"Oh, I already feel as though I know you," Harry said, nodding at the man. "But I suppose it's good to finally put a face to the man... Hermione speaks so highly of."

"Indeed. Indeed," the man said. "Have a good day, you two!"

Hermione closed her gaping mouth. "That bloody hypocrite! Did you hear that? Not impressed with Harry Potter, is he? Hmph!"

"At least he's not treating you like shite anymore," he pointed out.

She grinned. "Yes, I suppose our little talk that evening took some of the fun out of it for him, knowing he'd not intimidate me."

"Come on. Let's see you add this powdered horn in," Harry said.

"Right."

They made their way back to the cauldron. She added the ingredient in after she'd measured out enough. They both jumped back as a large amount of purple smoke burst from the potion.

"What now?"

"I have to let this brew for five minutes, and then I have to start my stirring," she said.

Harry nodded and sat down. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. I got an owl from Lupin this morning. He and Tonks have eloped."

"I thought she refused to elope?"

"Yeah, I guess he put his foot down. It was that way or no way."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad for them. I hope that Lupin can be happy. He seemed so down the last time I saw him."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Guilt and all that."

"I know," she said. "How do you think Bane is doing?" Hermione wanted to change the subject, not wanting to get into a discussion about her father's death.

"Firenze told Dumbledore that the others have ousted him from the herd, not welcoming him back."

"He deserves it!" Hermione said vehemently.

"They tried to kick him to death first of course," Harry added.

"Oh." She felt a little guilty for her hate of the centaur. "But he lived?"

"No one knows. He's not where they left him. I'd say he's off to his own place and won't be back."

"So we hope," she added. "I've got to stir this fifty times, clockwise."

"Want me to do it for you?" he asked when she grimaced.

"No, it's all right." She began stirring, but she was surprised at how much her wrist was hurting her. *What's wrong with me? It's not like I've been writing any more than normal.* "Ouch. Maybe you should take over. I don't know what's wrong." Both wrists ached with her movements. "I'm on thirteen."

"Not a problem." He took the stirring rod and began stirring. "You should get that looked at. Did you sprain it?"

"No, they both hurt though. I think it's odd. It's not like I've exercised them or anything. In fact, the only thing..." She abruptly stopped as she realized exactly what the problem was. She'd had to tend to Severus the night before to get his seminal fluid. She'd used both hands tirelessly. Heat flooded her cheeks. Harry didn't need to know about that.

"What is it? Remembered what happened?"

"Oh, er, maybe it was when I... er... was pulling on those stalks of weed in the flower bed. I worked my wrists a bit when I did that," she finished lamely.

"Yeah, that will do it." He continued stirring in silence. "Now what? I'm near fifty."

"You need fifty more, but do it anticlockwise instead."

"All right."

Quickly wanting to change the subject, she said, "So you've still decided to stay away from school?"

"Yes, it wouldn't be the same without you or... Ron there with me."

"Ginny said that Draco refuses to go back, too," Hermione added. "She said that her parents are at odds about her return. Mr. Weasley thinks she should go, but Mrs. Weasley thinks she should stay home, what with the pregnancy. She feels that she can help her enough to prepare her for her N.E.W.T.s." She stopped and shook her head in annoyance.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Ginny," Hermione huffed. "She doesn't care about her schooling or finishing her education even though she's got over a year left! Says she's going to be married anyway and raising a family! She feels that she doesn't need to worry about a career or any of that right now."

"Maybe she's right," he offered.

"Of course she's not!"

"Why not?"

"Well, because..."

"Exactly," he said. "It's her life. Mrs. Weasley's job was to work at home with the family. Maybe that's what Ginny wants."

"Long ago, Ginny told me that she would never be that way, that she wanted a career, money, and... Oh."

"See? She's going to have money, and maybe her ideas have changed. I don't think any less of Mrs. Weasley just because she doesn't go to an office each day for work. Do you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I suppose not. I guess my opinion is influenced by my own decisions in life. I do admire and respect Mrs. Weasley for all she does. Her load's not been easy at all."

"I told Pansy that she didn't have to worry about anything right now either, but she insists on finishing. I don't hold that against her," he said. "I do miss that she's not with me every day any longer."

"There's only a few weeks left." Hermione smiled. "My mother has worked all her life, and now, she's enjoying the time away from work. I suppose she doesn't have to worry about working ever again if she doesn't want to. They saved a lot of money and had insurance on dad." Her eyes watered. "I wonder if thinking about him will ever be easier? I try to push him away from my thoughts because it's easier to deal with. It feels wrong, but it helps so much."

"I do the same thing sometimes," Harry admitted. "I'm done. What now?" He placed the stirring rod aside.

"Nothing. I don't have to add anything else for five more days. After that, it will take another couple of weeks before it's ready."

Harry was at her side suddenly and hugging her. "It will be all right, Hermione."

Being hugged so firmly made her want to cry. It had been so long since she'd been held. She sniffled a little, thinking of her father, Ron, Severus, and so many others. When she finally pulled away to wipe her eyes, she saw that Harry was doing the same and hoped that she'd given him the same comfort that he'd given her.

"Mum wants to go to my dad's grave later to put fresh flowers. I think I'll go with her," she said. "I gave her an excuse, putting it off as usual, but I think it's time to go."

Harry nodded. "Come over later?"

"I will."

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TWO WEEKS LATER

Hermione was appalled with her current situation. She'd been invited over for a pleasant family meal at the Weasleys, but it had been anything but pleasant. The Malfoys had also been invited. Narcissa Malfoy had refused to sit down for the first half hour, looking around as if there was a foul odor in the room. Lucius Malfoy had immediately started to offer to "help" them build a more sound home, as theirs appeared to be held together by magic...magic that could falter and harm their grandchild.

Ginny and Draco had been trying to calm their parents down and soothe their tempers the entire time. The twins made snide jokes and seemed to be planning something, as they continually spoke in conspiring tones out of earshot. Harry seemed to be tuning everything out, concentrating on Pansy's presence. She'd been allowed a day away from the castle to spend with Harry.

The current topic of conversation was the worst yet. The Malfoys were trying to coerce the Weasleys into letting Ginny bind with Draco in marriage while the Weasleys maintained that she did not have their permission.

"But, Arthur, surely you don't want your grandchild to be born out of wedlock! What would everyone say?" Lucius said incredulously.

"Times have changed, Lucius. They'll not say..."

"They'll say that the child is a bastard! I won't stand for it!" he said adamantly.

"Don't you dare speak that way about the baby!" Molly said angrily.

"No," Narcissa soothed, "he doesn't mean that is how he feels, but it's how our peers will feel."

"Right," Lucius said, adding, "and we can provide for the best possible care for your daughter and our grandchild."

"Excuse me," Molly said, chest swelling in rage, "I've birthed seven children and think that I know what's best for my daughter and her pregnancy, thanks! How dare you assume that your money and paid nurses are any better than our family's love and support! Why..."

"Mum! He didn't mean that you didn't know what's best. He's only trying to help."

"I can even have her tutored daily so that she won't fall behind in her studies, as Arthur is clearly worried about," Lucius said.

"She's too young to make this sort of decision," Arthur said firmly. "What if she gets married, has the baby, and realizes that she's changed her mind? It'll be a great mess...that's what!"

"Dad, I won't change my mind," Ginny said furiously. "Do you think me so fickle as to not know who I want?"

"Well, you've certainly had a number of crushes in the past. Some lasted longer than this relationship!" Molly interjected, looking pointedly over at Harry.

"I would like my son to have my name," Draco said, drawing all eyes back to him.

"She can give the child the Malfoy name if she chooses," Arthur said.

"I would also like her to have my name, Mr. Weasley."

"You are also young! What if you change your mind?" he asked.

"Never," Draco said, appalled that the man would say such a thing. "I could have had my pick of wives, and I choose Ginevra. Do you think I would put her through all of this with our families otherwise? I love her and will marry her."

"Maybe you are just wanting to do what's right by the baby. This wasn't planned after all," Molly said quietly.

"MUM!" Ginny yelled. "This is ridiculous. I will marry him the moment I come of age in a few months. What does it matter?"

"I am tired of having to go home every night when I could stay in a guest room. I want to be near her and with her," Draco said. He nodded to Hermione. "She used to practically live with Weasley when they were together! I intend on marrying your daughter, and we've obviously already gone quite far. Why try so hard to keep us apart when it's what we both want?"

"If you are allowed to stay here until she is of age and get a real feel of your decision to marry, we can perhaps allow you to stay, provided that you stay in a separate room," Molly said.

"You would do that?" Lucius asked incredulously. "Our manor is clearly more comfortable, and she would be readily seen to at all hours of the day and night."

"Father, if I have to stay in a hovel to prove that I love her and my child and want a life with them, I will do so," Draco said unwaveringly.

The entire room went quiet.

"What is it?" he asked, taking in everyone's shocked expressions.

Ginny's angry voice answered. "A hovel, is it?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, seemingly confused.

"You just said that you would stay in this hovel if you had to! Is that what you think of my family? Of my home?"

"No, you misunderstand what I said. I was just saying that if I had to stay in one, I would. Not that this was one."

"But it is," Narcissa said. "You needn't bite your tongue, son. If she wants to marry the real you, she should know your real feelings."

"Mother!" Draco roared. "That's not what I meant!"

Hermione couldn't believe the turn of events. Everyone was in an uproar, except for her, Pansy, and Harry. The twins had even jumped up in defense of their home and family. Ginny and Draco were arguing the loudest.

Finally, after several minutes of constant bickering, Hermione used the Sonorus Spell to be heard, yelling, "Silence!" Once everyone hushed and looked at her, she removed the spell and said, "You are all acting ridiculous. Look at you!" After they all guiltily glanced at each other, she continued. "Why can't you just be happy with what you have? Some of us would do anything to have what's right in front of you. I think both families should make some arrangement and try to get along better. It's for your future! Their union was foreseen, wasn't it? You can't fight that."

She nodded to the Malfoys. "You come into their home and disrespect them. I doubt that it's on purpose, but I think you should try harder. So what if they aren't your social equals? I'm convinced that the only people who care about status are those with status...or what they think is status. If it weren't for the Weasleys' support...though your family hasn't always got on well with them...you wouldn't have any status and be looked down upon, mostly. People figure if your son is good enough for Arthur Weasley and his family, then he's good enough for them. Like it or not, this family is more credible than yours in the eyes of the public! Remember who took Draco in when the Dark Lord would have punished him! They did and have never asked you for a single Knut.

"And you, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, you needn't take everything they say so seriously. They can never understand your life unless they've lived it. I doubt that will ever happen. Outward appearances and other such things matter to them, and I suppose they find it odd that it doesn't matter to you. Everyone is different. To Mr. Malfoy, a highly paid Healer is the best care that he could provide for a pregnant daughter while in this home, you've always relied on faith, love, and yourselves, managing the best way you could." She shook her head.

"You all need to work together. Look at Draco and Ginny. See what you're doing to them? They are young, in love, and are expecting a baby. Why make it harder on them?" She smiled at Mrs. Weasley. "He was right, you know. Harry and I were always here. What would it hurt to let him sleep over in a spare room? The Malfoys are right, too. Why not compromise? If they promise to keep them in different rooms, what's wrong with her going to stay there a couple of days per week?"

Sighing, she stood and grabbed her bag. "I'm sorry, but I just can't take any more of this. You all have what you want right here and should be happy. I'm going to go home now and appreciate the little that I have of Severus by sitting and reading to him. Think on that."

Nobody said a word, only looked at each other sheepishly.

"She's right, you know," Harry said finally, holding Pansy close to his side.

Hermione smiled in thanks but jumped as a loud bang sounded. "What the...?"

In the place where Narcissa Malfoy had been was a large poodle, perfectly groomed and barking indignantly, a broken teacup on the floor next to her.

"Oh, sorry," Fred said, surprised that she'd been changed into a dog.

George added, "Didn't mean to..."

"Put that in *her* cup," Fred finished.

Molly began hollering. "You change her back this instant! How could you? Will you two never learn?"

Hermione quickly fled through the backdoor, not wanting to witness any more arguing. In only a few more days, she would give Severus the potion, and she would have the chance to talk to him and tell him that she loves him. *Bloody idiots should just be happy with what they have. It could always be worse.*

Southern's Notes: I know that I said there would be one final chapter, but I'm afraid that it would be a bit too much to cram all into one single chapter. I apologize for that. I also think that the next chapter's plot deserves to be alone. All of this build up to it took more time and space than I'd previously intended. I didn't want to bore anyone with much of the actual process of brewing the potion, but I did want to show how Hermione is growing and handling things while it's brewing. Adding anything else here would have given it a rushed feeling, and I would have been working against a maximum word limit anyway.

I'll have something up as soon as I can, as I'm already working on the rest of this. This weekend seems like a good deadline. Lucius pays Hermione a visit and talks to her about things. Then, it's time to give Snape the potion. Will it work? Will she have to alter it and go through it again? If it does work, will he be happy with all that she's done concerning him? We shall see. Cheers.

Luring the Enchantress has won a Multifaceted Award for the Possibility Category, best AU fic. Thanks to any who voted for it and to the person that nominated it. I appreciate that.

Back to Good: Part 2

Chapter 42 of 42

The end is finally here, but will it be a happy one?

Disclaimer: These characters belong to J.K.R. I've borrowed them, but I promise to Scourgify them before sending them home. No Galleons are being sent my way for this.

I'd like to thank my beta, Charmed Nay, for putting up with my crazy tales.

Hermione was watering her mother's flowers when she heard the sound of someone Apparating. She flicked her wand to stop the spray of water and went around to the front of their house. The tall, blond-haired man was making his way to the front door, walking with his back stiff and shoulders straight. He was the epitome of arrogant perfection.

"Mr. Malfoy?" she greeted, putting her wand away. "What are you doing here?"

She wondered if it had anything to do with what she'd said at the Weasleys'. Was he angry with her? Were they able to right Narcissa? She hadn't talked to anyone since the previous night to find out.

"Ah, hello," he greeted, pausing until she reached his side. "I had hoped you would be in on this fine afternoon." The front door opened. "Hello, Mrs. Granger," he said with a nod.

"Oh, Mr. Malfoy. Hello! I thought I heard voices." She smiled kindly. "Hermione, I wanted to go back down by the river to pick more of those berries. I shouldn't be long."

"All right." Hermione watched her go, basket swaying happily. "She loves it here."

"Will she be staying on after Severus wakes?"

Surprised, Hermione said, "You do believe it will work, don't you?"

"Of course." He looked around impatiently. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Oh, right." She didn't say anything but led the way to the small sitting room. Once there, she spun around and blurted, "Why are you so nice to my mother? I remember the way you looked at her back on the day I first met you." At his puzzled look, he added, "When you fought with Mr. Weasley. You looked at us with distaste, and I know how you feel about Muggles."

"I am kind because she is your mother and living in Severus' home." He sat down and casually crossed one leg over the other, cane dangling from the hand resting on the armrest of the couch. "Although, I suppose I do have my selfish reasons. I do know that if I'd be rude to her, you'd not speak with me, and then, where would Severus be?" He flashed her a small mocking smile.

"Well, at least you're an honest, arrogant arsehole then."

His smile faded. "That's exactly why I wanted to speak with you."

"Because you're an arsehole?" she questioned cheekily.

"Because of your words, girl," he said, losing some of his polished patience. He waved her next words away. "After you left yesterday, the Weasleys and I came to a new understanding and have mutually agreed that until she is of age, Draco and Ginevra can live together...in separate rooms...in my home and theirs alternatively. Both Mrs. Weasley and a Healer that I have hired will see to the pregnancy."

"Well, that's good I suppose. What's this got to do with me?" she asked, sitting on the other end of the couch. Despite the awkwardness of visiting with Malfoy, she found that she was intrigued.

"We'll never see eye to eye, Arthur and I. We are complete opposites in nearly everything. While we can come to a truce and try to understand the choices each of us have made, we will never completely approve or like each other." He grinned unapologetically. "That's just the way of things. The gap between my kind and his will be filled and changed with Draco. He will be the Malfoy that is most accepting of their family and will marry into them, ending past hostilities and beginning a new alliance."

Though his tone was kind, she knew he truly believed in what he said about never approving of the Weasleys, and if he didn't approve of them, being purebloods, she had no chance of gaining his acceptance, as she was a Muggle-born witch. "Is this your roundabout way of telling me that you think I'm not good enough for Severus?"

He snorted incredulously. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"You said..."

"Never mind," he interrupted. "I am uncertain if I want to know your process of deduction."

"The Weasleys are good people, and they love each other!"

"Do you think that I do not love my family, Miss Granger, just because I go about things in a different way to protect them and give them a good life? My family is the reason I went to the Dark Lord in the first place, aside from the impressive ability the man had."

Hermione snorted.

"Think what you must. I've never cared much for what... It's never bothered me how others see me," he said indignantly. "It was only recent times when I'd realized that things were not as they'd seemed and never had been, but that is another story. And one, I'm afraid, I will not divulge to you." He sighed. "The reason I am here is because your words made sense to me, but on a completely different level than what you'd intended."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked curiously. She'd never seen him speak so candidly, though his actions still reeked of superciliousness.

"Will you be accepting of me and my family in Severus' life?" he asked suddenly, shocking her.

"You're his friend, aren't you? Of course I will." What sort of stupid question was that?

"There are things that people like Arthur Weasley will never understand. People like Severus and I are different. We have a completely different code that we live by. He and I have a very strong bond of friendship and deep understanding. Your words," he pointed to her, "made me wonder if perhaps you might do one better than Arthur Weasley and actually be able to understand us... and join our way of living."

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said honestly. Hell, it nearly sounded like he was recruiting her to be a Death Eater. He was just as smooth as Voldemort himself! No, she thought sourly, *nobody is that smooth... except maybe Severus.*

"We've always been loyal and have protected what's ours. Severus would never harm my family, and I..."

"But he was angry with Narcissa when she and Rodolphus took me! He killed your brother-in-law with his bare hands!" Hermione said, wanting to point out that Severus was not like Malfoy and would punish those who did wrong...not just cover up for them.

"Yes, I know that he nearly killed her... or at least entertained the idea."

Hermione felt lightheaded suddenly. "And that is all right? You don't care?"

"Oh, I care," he reiterated, "but Narcissa went too far, as did Rodolphus. The line was crossed, and once that is breached, punishment must be meted out." When she simply stared at him, he added, "Did you not hear me? We never hurt our own. Narcissa thought that Severus had killed me, and she believed the same of Draco. She

thought she was getting revenge, though she couldn't go through with it. She thought that he'd crossed the line first. Her actions are very understandable, and his are as well."

"Murder is never understandable," she bit out. She would never be like him or want any part of their bonding and code. He could talk until he was blue in the face, and she'd never accept his words.

"Rodolphus deserved death, did he not?" Lucius asked, sliding his silvery gaze over her face, elegant brow raised while awaiting her response.

"No, not death. Azkaban maybe." She shivered.

"Your eyes tell me that you're lying to me," he said matter-of-factly. "Do you know that Severus would have killed my wife, me, and the others who were imprisoned at Hogwarts had the Dark Lord been victorious?"

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "No, he wouldn't have. Why would he go through all that trouble of saving you only to kill you?"

"He told me that he would, and I expected nothing less, as I would have done the same." He smiled in amusement when she shook her head again. "It's called self preservation, you see. The true reason that he'd have done it is to stay alive, yes, but also to save your life...no matter the cost. I would have done the same in his situation for my own."

"How would murdering his friends save my life?"

"Because he'd reported to the Dark Lord that we were dead, and if our Master would have found him to be lying, he would have done things to Severus and to you that you could never imagine." He looked away.

"You still want to save his life?" Hermione asked suspiciously. If Lucius knew all of this, what did he truly have planned? It was a lot to grasp when stated so bluntly and in such a manner. She'd thought of this before and always chose to ignore her ponderings. They were hard to ignore when spoken of so openly.

He gazed back at her, eyes alight with fierce determination. "I owe him for my life...more than once. He also came through for Cissy and Draco. I would have done the same had the roles been reversed. In fact, when Rabastan and the others tried to out him as someone who would betray our Lord, I sent him an owl in warning. We have always looked out for each other."

"I am not sure what you are talking about."

"That will be for Severus to explain," he said curtly. "I am just saying that people like Weasley will never understand the need to do what we must...whatever we must...to keep our own safe and alive." He gazed at her again and smiled knowingly. "But you understand, don't you?"

"It's wrong," she said again, though she had a feeling that she did understand Lucius. And by understanding him, she had a clearer picture of the type of man that Severus was. The interesting part was that it didn't bother her, not really. If anything, she felt comforted somehow.

"What would you do, Hermione Granger? Would you die for Severus? Would you kill for him? Would you work yourself to death in an attempt to save his life, knowing the type of man that he is and not caring?"

Hermione looked down and was lost in thought. If her death meant his life, would she do it? She thought of the way he'd jumped in front of the curse so that she'd be safe. Yes, she would do the same and not care of the consequences whether they were death or otherwise. Would she kill for him? She'd wanted to kill Voldemort herself when she'd thought Severus to be lost to her. And she had been working herself ragged to bring him back, never giving up on him. He would have done the same for her.

"I do understand," she said. She wondered if Lucius might not be wrong. Surely others felt the same about their loved ones. Wouldn't Mr. Weasley kill Bellatrix himself if he could since she killed Ron? Hermione realized immediately that he wouldn't. He'd see her thrown into Azkaban instead. *What does that say about me and the person I've become?*

"Now, what I want to know is if you will forgive me of the list that you made about my actions on my last visit. Shall we begin anew for Severus? He and I will always be friends. It would be a shame to let *our* past come between us." He seemed wistful for a moment. "I think that Severus is the only man left alive and free who can truly understand me."

"For Severus, will you cease to think of me as a Mudblood and continue to treat my mother with respect even though she's a Muggle?" This was the most important thing to her...that her mother be treated with respect.

"I will consider you as Severus' family, Hermione...if I may call you that...and as one *of our* own and will always extend the same allegiance that Severus gets to you. In the event that he can't, I will see to it that you are protected, as he did with my family." He looked at her expectantly.

She was shocked that *this* man would truly see her as an equal and forget about her bloodlines. *Well, Severus is only a half-blood, and they are obviously close. He didn't hold Severus' Muggle father against him.* Hermione knew she may never completely be able to understand some of their past deeds, but she would never dwell on them. The future was all that mattered.

"I will never be rude to you or your family and will treat you as... as one of our own," she said, feeling a sudden odd bonding and a burst of confidence. "Does your wife feel the same?" she wondered.

"She does." He rose. "And how much longer until my old friend awakens?"

"Friday evening is when I'm set to give him the dose." She grinned and stood. "But I'll ask that no visitors come by. I want him all to myself." She hoped that everything went all right with the potion and that she would indeed have her time with him.

"Good luck."

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Hermione placed the phial on the nightstand and sat next to Severus, eagerly anticipating his awakening. She was afraid that something would go wrong, but everything seemed the same so far. There were so many things that she was bursting to say, and yet she was unsure of what she'd say first.

After minutes passed with no noticeable change, she went to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea. *A watched potion never begins to brew,* she thought ironically. *Perhaps that should be watching for a potion's reaction never happens.* She was glad that her mother was at the Burrow for the night. She wouldn't want her to witness her breakdown if the potion didn't work. Part of her, though, longed for the comfort that her mother gave her.

She looked at the worn parchment that Severus had written his final letter to her on. How many times had she read it? She knew it by heart, yet she still carried it with her in her pockets each day. A line caught her attention.

*You will never know how much of an impact you had on me and my life, Hermione, and I am grateful for the times we had even if they now must end.*

"No," she whispered sadly. "I'm not ready for them to end." Her skin prickled as if being watched. She looked around but saw nothing amiss. The illogical part of her mind

began playing tricks on her. *What if he's gone, Hermione? What if his spirit is here watching you? What if you've read that part of the letter...not by mere chance...and it's a sign to let him go?*

"Stop!" she said aloud. She had to have faith that she would go back into the room and find him sitting up in bed, looking around in puzzlement, not knowing why he was there or what had transpired. Another line of his letter caught her attention.

*I love you enough to let you go because I feel that is what would make you the happiest, and I can only hope that you will understand why I've chosen to end things and forgive me.*

She felt the wetness sliding along her cheeks before she realized that she was crying in disappointment. The potion was not working. "Are we not meant to be?" she asked no one in particular. "Should I let him go?" She knew that she was too selfish and could truly never do this. She would try to bring him back even if it killed her.

*If I should die, which would be why you are reading this, I want you to know that I regret nothing, aside from not appreciating you sooner and only wishing we'd had a little more time. Be strong for me.*

Hermione left her untouched teacup on the counter, pocketed her letter, and made her way back to their bed. He hadn't moved a muscle that she could see. "Severus," she said through tears of disappointment, "I am so sorry. I've failed you this time. I promise that I'll find out what I did wrong, and I will fix things. I swear it."

She went to the bath and undressed, needing to soak in hot water to mull over what she could have possibly done wrong. "Maybe we should have taken his weight into account instead of doubling things like I said," she mumbled. "And I'll get all the ingredients from different sources this time. Maybe that had something to do with it."

One thing she didn't look forward to was telling Dumbledore and the others that the potion had failed...that she'd failed. "I've failed Severus." Those words would likely be what a Boggart would scream at her if she came across one. It was her worst nightmare come true. The worst part was that now she was reading things into his letter and wondering if she was making the right decisions. Surely she was, but there was the little niggling voice of doubt trying to be heard.

After her bath, she pulled on a nightshirt and made her way to bed, kissing Severus and holding him as she always did, whispering promises of love and more attempts to make things right, silently crying herself to sleep, drifting into an uncomfortable dream.

*Hermione was running as quickly as she could, tripping occasionally on a root or branch. Something was after her! She could hear its pounding steps. Finally, she saw a clearing with light and ran to it, stopping in shock. Severus stood in its center in all his glory...dark hair framing his face, black robes billowing about him in the light breeze. His expression was serious as he opened his arms.*

"Come to me," he said.

She went to him directly, hugging him tightly. "Severus, I've found you! I've missed you so much!" When he said nothing, she looked up into his eyes. "Why so solemn?"

"Hermione, you will have to let me go. Nothing will work. If you love me, set me free and let me be at peace."

"No," she whispered, backing away from him. "I can't."

He stepped forward. "I love you, my Hermione." His hand cupped her cheek, and his head lowered slowly until his lips pressed against hers in a warm, soft kiss.

The last kiss we'll ever share, *her mind screamed.*

*She gazed into his eyes when he pulled back, and she could see the open adoration in his eyes, the love and the pride. She lifted up to press her lips back to his for another kiss, this time passionate.*

It was then that she realized that she was no longer dreaming. She was kissing Severus, and he was alive and well and kissing her back. Their kiss continued as he lowered himself back down to lie beside her. When they pulled away for air, she could say nothing. All of her planned greetings were lost to her. She could only hold him and weep with joy, mumbling happy words of love.

Minutes later, he finally spoke. "I'm thirsty."

She quickly summoned a glass of water and helped him sit up to drink it. Some of the liquid dribbled down his chin.

"Too much," he rasped.

"I thought I lost you," Hermione blurted.

"For a while, so did I."

"What do you mean? Were you... aware?" she asked, placing the glass aside and scooting to hold him.

"Of everything. Yes, I was." He smoothed back her ruffled hair as he talked. "One minute I was at the battle with you holding me, and then, I awoke to hear a Healer at St. Mungo's telling you to leave me there. I'd hoped that you wouldn't, but I wouldn't have blamed you if you would have." His lips curved in a small smile. "You didn't leave me."

"Never. I knew that there had to be something that I could do," she replied.

The intensity of his silent gaze surprised her. She'd forgotten that about him, the way his eyes seemed to penetrate hers and projected his passion and power her way, making her feel as if he were a part of her and could read all of her feelings and thoughts.

"So much has happened. I don't know where to start. It's been the longest few months of my life. I can't imagine how long it felt to you." She leaned into the hand on the side of her face. "It feels so good to have you touch me again."

"You are forgetting that you've talked to me each day, never leaving anything out. I don't think there is much that you could tell me that I don't already know," he said reassuringly. "Don't worry about it."

"I hoped that you could hear me and feel me. They thought that you probably couldn't, but I never stopped hoping," she said softly.

"The only true comforts that I had were your voice and your touch. If I hadn't had those, I believe that I would have given up and faded into nothingness." He kissed her again. "Most days while you worked, I would sleep, only waking if your mother visited me, but at night, I would mostly remain awake, enjoying the sound of your breathing as you slept at my side, enjoying the touch of your cold feet against me, enjoying your incoherent sleep talking." He smiled genuinely. "I take it your mother approves."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said immediately. "She's been very supportive and has been helping me. Neither of us really wanted to be alone, so we decided to stay together. It worked out perfectly actually."

"She may stay as long as she'd like," he said, embracing her again, not able to get enough or be close enough.



"Thank you. I am glad to hear you say that. We thought that maybe she could live on this street near us eventually, what with all the empty homes. Someone is bound to want to sell one. It will give us all a bit of privacy, and when she's ready, she'll open a new practice. Someplace near."

He became very still and said nothing.

"Severus?" she asked uneasily. "You do want that, right? Or at least... you do want me?"

"More than anything," he said fervently, pulling her to him for an aggressive kiss. It was as if he was trying to convey his feelings through his lips.

When she felt his hand squeezing her breast, she pulled back to giggle. "Behave. You need to build up your strength before we go any further."

He made no comment about that and continued to touch her breasts and body. "Before the battle, I never thought I'd have the chance to be with you again, and here you are with me once more. I thought I'd be killed by the Dark Lord for my treachery or by some jumped up Auror who didn't realize I was on the right side... for once."

In a hushed voice, Hermione said, "He died and never knew that you'd betrayed him. I expect that he only thought that you'd made a bad judgment to spare me. He probably would have changed you back as soon as he could with some countercurse that we couldn't find." She shrugged. "We only found the potion. I'm so thankful that it worked."

Severus closed his eyes, and his hand fell away from her.

She wondered if he was taking a moment to mourn the loss of his old Master. Would that bother her? No, she supposed that even though the man was bad, they'd been close and that Severus must have felt some pang at his loss, though he helped to bring it on. She didn't have to even think that her lover regretted his decision. She knew better.

His voice broke into her thoughts. "You are more beautiful than I remembered, but you are much thinner." His hand ran down her bare thigh. "Did you not eat?"

"Mum cooks often, so yes, I ate dinner each night." She shrugged. "I didn't have time for much eating or resting. Not when I had work to do" She smiled. "And something much more important to figure out."

"We'll need to fix that," he said with a smirk.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, suddenly hungry herself.

"I could use something light," he said. "Besides, I want to get out of bed. I've been here long enough, I think."

"Well, the leg and arm exercises that I did for you should help," she said, scooting over and off the bed to help him up.

Once he was standing and had taken a few unsteady steps, he was able to walk on his own, though he kept her close to his side. She didn't mind. It was almost as if they were afraid to wake and find their reunion a dream.

After tea had been made and bread had been toasted, they sat at their kitchen table with the window open, enjoying the fresh breeze and the sounds of the night creatures that were out frolicking in the foggy darkness.

"You know," he began, "something else gave me great pleasure."

"Oh?" she asked curiously, but she reddened immediately upon seeing his expression. "How embarrassing! I had to do that for the potion."

Severus laughed for the first time. "I certainly didn't mind, and might I just say that you were certainly dedicated to your duty. Why, I've never known you to continue on for such a long period of time."

She threw her napkin in his direction. "My wrists hurt for two days, thanks!"

"Well, the feeling would come and then go. I do apologize for taking so long," he said. "But I enjoyed it."

Despite herself, she smiled. "If I would have known that you could feel it and liked it, I might have been inclined to seek further pleasure." She laughed loudly as the images came to mind. "No, perhaps not."

"I am glad that your job is working out for you," he said after a silence.

"So am I. I really thought that I would have to find another. My boss, though, has changed his attitude. I just think he needed to see that I can handle myself and what he throws at me." She wriggled her eyebrows. "I would have hexed him next."

"I imagine so," he said. He leaned back and stretched. "So, Slughorn is back at Hogwarts then, is he? I never thought he'd get out of retirement."

"The headmaster had to tempt him, I think, but I don't know with what," she said, reaching over to take his hand in hers. "Did you like him much?"

"He was a good professor, though his priorities were usually in the wrong place," Severus said. "Let's not talk about him. Let's talk about something I've been thinking of. I didn't doubt that you would find a way to right my curse once you put your mind to it, so I've been thinking about my career. I don't detest working at Hogwarts so much that I would never go back. It's been a comfortable job for me these past years."

"So...? You want to teach again?" she asked uncertainly.

"I am thinking about it, but I wondered if maybe I shouldn't try my hand at something else first. An Apothecary shop perhaps? Developing my own potions to market? Slughorn has a few years left in him. I could always go back later," he said, gazing at her thoughtfully. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to be happy and do what you'd like." She scooted her chair closer. "Severus, you've given up much of your adult life to do the work of others. Why not try something that you want to do now? I know you've saved your money, and I have a job making a good salary. We can manage just fine while you get things together."

"Never did I think that life could be this way," he said quietly.

"But it is," she said happily. "We'll be good together, and I will never leave your side. Nor did I ever want to. Surely you must realize that now."

He nodded. "I thought you'd be happier with Potter and the others. You'd... I... You were unhappy with me."

"No, never with you. I just didn't like the situation, but even so, once I thought you'd truly severed ties with me, I would have given anything to be back with you. That's why I went with the others to the battle. I couldn't help it. I'd planned to Stun you and bring you away before anyone could harm you."

"Yes, and I was angry that you were there."

Hermione looked away. "My mum warned me that going might make things worse, and I've been hearing her say that over and over these past few months." She looked up again, eyes shining with tears. "Severus, what if I hadn't gone and what if someone had hexed you, killing you then? I could not have gone on. I know it."

"Perhaps all things worked out for the best." He took another drink from his cup. In words that were so softly spoken she nearly missed them, he said, "You are not the same now. You've changed, and I like the woman you've become."

She nodded and welcomed the feeling of peace that settled over her. He accepted her and would keep her with him always. "What now?" she asked.

"Marriage? Children?" he asked, eyeing her guardedly.

"There is definitely no rush on that. We still have time, and I'm completely happy with you like this." She felt a little relieved when he smiled. "We made plans long ago. Remember? We'd live together, each working at our careers, and just go from there. No need to change that now."

"I agree," he said. "I am content with things as they are, though I imagine one day..."

She smiled. "What now?" she asked again, hoping he'd get the meaning this time.

"I think a bath is in order...a real one. I appreciated your daily washings, but I think the spray of a shower would do me well."

Hermione led him to their chambers and paused. "Severus, this room..."

"It's all right," he said, knowing that she was about to make excuses as to why she'd thought to use the locked room as their chambers. "It's time that the ghosts of the past be released."

"Will you one day share your past with me?" she asked.

After a short deliberation, he nodded. "I will." He quickly added, "In my own time."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," she said, getting him a fresh nightshirt and underpants.

He took her hand and kissed it. "My mother's ring never looked better. It means a lot to me to see you wearing it. At headquarters, when I saw it cast aside and still in the box, I thought maybe you didn't want it at first. I didn't want you to know how disappointed I'd been, but after you'd seen it..." His voice trailed away, sounding a bit choked.

"All right?"

"I am."

She followed him into the bathroom and unconsciously began to help him pull off his nightshirt. "Do you feel any differently?" She gazed at his naked body and looked away. Realizing that there was no reason to, she faced him again. "Physically? Mentally? The potion didn't do anything to you, did it?"

He turned on the water and felt the spray change to the temperature he wanted. "I admit that I feel a little weaker than normal, but that is to be expected. I've been abed for nearly four months." He stepped into the shower. "And mentally? Well, it feels good to be free, I suppose, if that makes sense to you. It makes me appreciate life as I never have before." He quickly ducked his head under the falling water, ending their conversation.

Hermione could tell that he was uncomfortable voicing that, but there would come a time that words would come to him easily. Until then, she'd not push him. He deserved to accept life's changes at his own pace.

She brushed her teeth, washed up, and made her way back to bed, intent on waiting up for him. However, when her head hit the pillow, she drifted off into the most peaceful sleep she'd had in months.

Severus came out of the bathroom to find his witch sleeping soundly and hadn't the heart to wake her. She was more beautiful than he'd remembered, and she belonged to him. "And me to her," he whispered.

For the first time in months, he was able to lie beside her, prop himself up on one elbow, and watch her sleep while holding her. He couldn't express the elation he felt about being given a chance to start a new life. As soon as he could, he would show her. He stayed like this until sleep finally took him.

When he woke again, she was stirring beside him but had not yet roused fully. *The first day of the rest of our lives...* Feeling much stronger than he had the night before, he tossed aside his nightshirt before moving to lower his head to her throat and begin his slow seduction, hoping to stir her from sleep.

"Mmmm," she moaned in a playful, sleepy haze. "What do you think you are doing?"

"I am going to make love to you, my little enchantress," he said decisively.

"Enchantress, eh?"

"Indeed." Their lips met in a single kiss. He pulled back to eye her, seeing things in a different light. "And all this time I thought that I was luring you to me... enticing you to be to mine...."

"Instead, I, being the enchantress, was the one that was doing the luring."

He did not reply, as his lips were traveling down to her breasts, patiently nipping at her skin until each button of her nightshirt was loosened from its imprisoning hole.

She sighed contently. This was what she'd been dreaming of for a long time...having him back and with her. "Or... maybe you did lure me in."

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**Southern's Notes:** And there we have it, the end to my long, twisty tale. I really hope you've all enjoyed it and that this last chapter was not a let down. I just don't feel like they have to rush off into marriage or anything. Taking things slowly will likely be the best course of action. I may add an epilogue in, but I sort of feel good about the ending and may leave it as is. I am thinking of a different type of epilogue and may do that. We'll see.

Thanks go to everyone who left reviews for me and talked me through the story. I really appreciate each and every one that I get, always replying to them. Sometimes we tend to forget about something, and when it's questioned, we are able to tie it in and close it up. It's just encouraging. Thanks!

I'm quite sad to see this end, but I really need to get back to revising the original novel that I wrote. My beta also edits that for me, and she's been wondering when I'm going to get to work. Hehe! Unfortunately for her and me, I've already got other things in the works for the HP world. I've started a post-HBP story that I will be posting soon. The updates will not be fast, though, as I do have to work on what pays before what's free...if you know what I mean. I'll write when I have time left. Anyway, be on the lookout for it. The title is "The Flight of the Prince" and the prologue will be up soon.

I'd like to know your thoughts on the story if you've not let me know before or even if you did.

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And here I will post a few notes about Hermione's character. I've gotten some people saying she's not very in character here or that they'd wanted to slap her a few times. Yes, that was purposely done (the frustrated feelings towards her anyway). As far as in character, this is how I perceive her. Before HBP came out, I enjoyed a different type of Hermione, but once I read that, I realized she's still only a kid and wouldn't be as some portray her. Not while she's still in school and that age. Therefore, I adapted some of that and brought it here in this story. If you disagree, that's fine, but this is my opinion. I'll post here what I told a reviewer just to clarify the reasoning behind her

character.

Response:

Hermione was 17--nearly 18 at the end--in HBP, and she acted much like this one (immature at times, bad decisions, emotional, etc), so that's how I portrayed her. And I do believe that most 18 year olds are still childish in some ways and tend to do things that older adults wouldn't. That's not even factoring in what love does to a person sometimes.

Being too easily manipulated? I think she would be, especially by Snape--a master of hoodwinking. She never stood up to him in canon. She tried to, but the moment he yelled, told her to shut up, or whatever, she stopped, allowing him to go on. Even after all he'd said to her and done to her friends, she respected him and took him at his word.

I'm of the mind that she is already manipulated in canon. Dumbledore has been orchestrating things for a long time, leaving enough clues for Harry to catch on, and Hermione is right there going down the same path.

If I write an older Hermione, then, yes, I do try to give her a bit more "umph" (what's the dang word I'm looking for?) than this. She's quite clever, but she not the savior to the Wizarding world. I don't like a Hermione that has all the answers. After HBP, I realized that. Like her having to work hard in Potions and not being able to figure out the Prince thing and so on.... It just made me rethink things where she's concerned. That's why I had her working so hard at this potion, fearing she would fail (which is what her bogart is: failure). I don't think she would get it perfect the first time without help or really working at it.

Anyway, if I write her as a kid (18, I mean), then she'll likely be just like this--not perfect like I see in many other stories. Snape, on the other hand, is a master manipulator, and if he can't fool/manipulate an 18-year old girl, then he's not very good is he? I'm betting that he could do so very easily. Otherwise, he wouldn't have lasted long with Voldemort or Dumbledore. I think Hermione has a bit more growing to do before she's comparable with either of them--talent, cleverness, experience, and knowledge.