

Foolish Wagers

by devsgma

Madeleine picked my offer of a story for a prize on the exchange_bingo. She wanted a story that involved a wager, the consequences and a happy ending for SS/HG. I hope I've managed to do it justice.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 3

Madeleine picked my offer of a story for a prize on the exchange_bingo. She wanted a story that involved a wager, the consequences and a happy ending for SS/HG. I hope I've managed to do it justice.

AN: Thank you, Lariope, for all your hard work on my behalf.

Our tale begins on what was *not* a dark and stormy night. Actually, it was rather a pleasant evening in the middle of the Scottish highlands, especially considering it was only April. The day had passed like many others at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and it was nearly midnight.

"I shall not survive, so it matters little to me who will be the Minister of Magic after this debacle is finally over," the dark-haired wizard holding the nearly empty brandy snifter advised his companion. He gazed into the depths of the glass before setting it gently on the table beside his chair and folding his hands across his middle.

It was difficult to see the participants in this late evening drinking session, as the private quarters of the headmaster were only illuminated by the smallest of fires, but the sheen from the hair of the man sitting in the opposite chair was legendary. "You're a Slytherin, man; act like one," he replied in turn. "There are *always* options."

"You're correct, as usual, Lucius," Severus stated with a smirk as he relaxed back into the chair and folded one leg over the other. "I have two. The side of Light could give me the Dementor's kiss for murdering Dumbledore, and our Dark Lord could feed me to Nagini for her next supper when he discovers I've been assisting Potter." He tapped his chin while gazing at the shadowed ceiling. "How will I ever choose? They're both so attractive, aren't they?" He paused for a moment before tilting his head to the side and adding, "Actually, Nagini may be the way to go. At least that way there wouldn't be anything left to be spat upon."

Lucius scowled, downed the remaining bit of brandy in his glass and growled, "You *will* survive, Severus."

"Ah, well then, my fate is assured and you may rest easy, my friend. The great and powerful Lucius Malfoy has declared it must be so; therefore, it is so," Severus announced while raising and spreading his arms. "Who would dare defy *him*." He lowered his arms and raised a single digit in the air. "Oh, just a moment, there's the *Dark Lord*, isn't there? His wishes and intent supersede all others. I'm extremely sorry, Lucius, but you've been trumped. Do maintain your dignity and don't pout overly long."

"Your sarcasm does not amuse me," Lucius stated and then pursed his lips. "How can you be so blasé when contemplating your own demise? There *has* to be a way to outwit them all."

"Unfortunately for me, I'm not here for your amusement, Lucius," Severus said with a half-smile. "And I'm not blasé. I'm merely facing facts and refusing to whimper. I've had to dance at the end of my puppet strings for two megalomaniacs, both entirely convinced they're working for the betterment of our world, and they've backed me into the proverbial corner."

"Dig a hole, knock down a wall, don't let them win!" Lucius spat, his beautiful features twisted in anger.

Severus peered with interest into the face of the other man. "Why is it so important to you that I survive, Lucius?"

Malfoy's face instantly smoothed and he raised a brow. "Why shouldn't it be?"

"Very good," Severus said with a nod. "Answering a question with another question is Slytherin one-oh-one at its finest, but I've taken *all* the courses, and I'm not that easily deterred."

Lucius pursed his lips and said, "Draco."

"Ah, I see. How very... Hufflepuff of you."

"Insults will not drive me away."

"What will? I do have a school to run, and appearing at breakfast with bloodshot eyes will draw the Carrows' interest," Severus advised with another sigh.

Lucius snorted and shook his head. "They'd have to actually open *their* eyes and observe something besides each other first. Do you suppose the Dark Lord is actually aware of the extent of their... *devotion* to one another?"

It was Severus' turn to snort before he picked up his snifter and finally drained it. "I'd wager he knows and is using it to his complete advantage, whatever that might be. Perhaps he likes to watch."

"Wager... There's a thought," Lucius mumbled almost to himself before he straightened and glared at his dark haired friend. "I'll wager that you *do* survive, no matter the final *winner*."

"Have we come round to that subject again? Honestly, Lucius, you used to be a much better conversationalist," Snape said with a faint sneer. "It's a foolish bet. When I do win...by losing my life...how could I possibly collect?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes and lifted his chin. "You'll have a grand funeral, and if there *is* a body, a burial spot that's Unplottable so no one will be able to spit on your remains."

Severus slowly nodded his head before one dark brow lifted. "And if, against all odds, *you* win?"

Lucius shrugged and lightly rubbed his chin. "I haven't the slightest, but since you're so certain you're not going to lose, what difference does it make?"

"If I live, I refuse to be chained to yet another master, Lucius, so name your terms."

"Fine," Lucius said while tossing his hands in the air. "You have to follow my advice."

"Concerning *what*?" Severus asked suspiciously. "We both ended up with these damned tattoos on our arms, remember?"

"It's rather difficult to forget," Lucius stated before pouring another measure of brandy into his glass and raising the bottle in Snape's direction.

The other man shook his head. "As dull witted as the Carrows are, I still need a clear head to successfully detour their idiotic bumbling...*and* more than four hours sleep." Severus rose to his feet. "This delightful evening is at an end, Lucius. I am retiring. One of the elves can see you out if you'd like."

"What of our wager?"

"What of it?"

"Are you taking my bet, Severus? Or are you not quite sure that you will, in fact, die?"

"We're all going to die at some point, Lucius. Even the Flamels died," he stated with a gentle laugh. "Nicholas Flamel...as bloody brilliant as he was...was still unable to completely avoid the dark spectre of death on his bloody ghost horse, so what chance do the rest of us have?"

"You're splitting hairs," Lucius advised as he rose from his seat and presented his wand. "Take the bet, old man."

Rolling his eyes, Severus drew his own wand and touched the end of it to Malfoy's. They repeated the terms they'd mentioned earlier, and when a soft red glow emanated from the tips, he sighed and said, "If you allow Lupin to attend the funeral, I'll return and haunt you."

"So noted," the lighter-haired wizard said with a smirk. "No werewolves allowed."

We all know what happened less than a month later, at the beginning of May, 1998...or at least we think we know it all. So many were killed or maimed, but the Dark Lord was in fact truly dead, and the Wizarding and Muggle worlds moved on. The dead were buried and mourned, and the living gradually took up the reins of their ordinary existences and tried to forget. Not all were successful, but to be fair, not all wanted everything forgotten and swept under the nearest carpet only to have it be pulled out and repeated, again and again.

A scant eight years later, Lucius Malfoy was taking his afternoon tea when an unfamiliar owl tapped delicately on the window of his study. Since the wards surrounding the manor had allowed the owl to approach without having its tail feathers singed beyond recognition, Lucius knew it carried nothing malicious.

"Get that, won't you?" he asked his companion.

"Your manners are slipping. Asking a guest in your home to fetch and carry now, are we?"

"It might be for you."

"I'm dead, so how in Hades could it be for me?" Severus asked his host and snagged another shortbread biscuit. He watched with a trace of a smile on his face as Lucius sighed, rose and opened the window. The owl was dispatched, and Lucius returned to his chair with the letter, as yet unopened.

Lucius rolled his eyes and said, "Dear Merlin, the witch is persistent; I'll give her that."

Brushing the crumbs of the biscuit off his lap, Severus leaned forward and asked, "Who might that be?"

"Hermione Granger," Lucius answered before tossing the letter onto the table that held their tea. "At least once a month, I receive a request to submit myself to an interview for her blasted book. Draco finally caved, and now she's relentless."

"The know-it-all is writing a book?" Severus asked in astonishment. "The things you miss while living abroad. I figured she and Weasley would have their own Quidditch

team by now."

"One of them...I can't remember which...threw the other over at some point. He ended up marrying some other Gryffindor, and they have a gaggle of children. At least it seems like there's a red-haired child on every other corner these days," Lucius said. "I've been meaning to ask what moved you to chance discovery with this hasty visit."

"I've had an offer...well, my *estate* has had an offer...for the house at Spinner's End, and while there isn't much there, I did want to take a quick look at some of the books before my executor sold the property," Severus advised.

"How is old Hornworthy these days?" Lucius asked with an almost somber air.

Severus frowned and put his cup down on the table. "I know this is the first time I've seen you in almost eight years, but what the bloody hell is *wrong* with you?"

Lucius tossed his napkin down, stood and strode over to the French doors that looked out on the rose gardens. "Don't you ever miss it?" he asked rather wistfully after leaning one hand against the jamb of the doors and gazing out on the nearest thing to perfection his garden-elves could manage.

"Miss what?"

"Miss living by your wits," he hissed loudly before turning and spreading his arms as if to encompass the whole room. "Miss outfoxing the foxiest foes. Miss being really *alive*, feeling the blood *pound* through your veins, instead of merely existing from one day to the next!"

Severus tilted his head, raised a brow and asked, "Is this somehow related to your becoming a grandfather next month?"

"Of course not!" Lucius growled before starting to pace. "Possibly."

"We've all grown older, Lucius. You hardly appear to be the grandfatherly type if that's what has you worried and fretful," Severus remarked with a smirk. "In any case, it's much preferable to having the Dark Lord as your house guest, isn't it?"

"Don't be ridiculous; of course it is, but I'm only fifty-two years old," Lucius stated with a snarl. "I'm not even *middle-aged*, for Merlin's sake. It's too soon to be this settled, this... bored by life. I'll be damned if I let my legacy end with a small paragraph in Granger's book as if there's nothing more to come!"

Severus' brow rose, and he asked, "Just what kind of book is she writing?"

Lucius sent Snape a withering glance. "Has living in the back of beyond completely dulled your wits?" he asked. "What the bloody hell do think it's about? It's about the Dark Lord and the glorious exploits of the *golden* trio!" Lucius sniffed and raised his chin in the air. "Although how they earned the moniker *golden*, I'll never understand. Weasley's hair is as red as you can get, Potter's is black, and Granger's... is some dishwatery shade of something," he added while waving his hand in the air. "*Motley* trio would have been more descriptive, if you ask me."

"You're jealous," Severus said while tapping a finger against his chin.

"You're mad!"

"You're *frothing* because no one is writing about the trials and tribulations of one Lucius Malfoy," Severus stated with obvious glee. "You could hire someone, you know, to write the varnished truth about your *exploits* during the rise and fall of the Dark Lord."

"I believe the *correct* phrase is *unvarnished* truth," Lucius said with a sneer while apparently thinking over what Snape had suggested. "Definitely not Skeeter," he muttered to himself as he ambled over to his chair and folded himself elegantly back into its depths.

"You could give them that, I suppose, if you didn't mind ending up back in Azkaban after all these years. Myself, I'd settle for the *almost* truth if I were you," Severus advised as he picked up his cup and took a sip. "Unless it would satisfy your craving for outwitting foxy foes and having the blood pound through your veins."

"There is that pesky little problem, isn't there? Unless..." Lucius' voice trailed off as he sent a calculating glance at Severus, who immediately raised a brow.

"No. Whatever notion you have in mind, my answer is *no*. I will *not* assist you in any ludicrous acts that will merely serve to add fame to the Malfoy name," Severus said firmly.

"You wound me, Severus!" Lucius drawled while placing a hand on his heart. "I'll admit to being a tad unwise at times, but *never* ludicrous."

"Unwise?" Severus asked in astonishment. "I question your understanding of that particular word, my friend. You call it *unwise* when you slipped the Weasley girl the Dark Lord's diary? Unwise, was it, when you allowed yourself to be caught at the Department of Mysteries? Unwise when..."

"That's quite enough, Severus," Lucius said with a loud sniff. "You've made your feelings quite clear on the matter. Clear enough that I wonder you bothered visiting at all."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Acting the part of a wounded Hufflepuff will *not* get me to agree to whatever plan you have in mind."

"That's the second time you've insulted me in that manner," Lucius said while leaning forward.

"If the house fits..."

"I am not amused."

"As I've told you before, I'm not here for your amusement."

Lucius opened his mouth, looked thoughtful and then slowly nodded his head. "Yes, you did, didn't you?"

"What are you up to?" Severus asked suspiciously as he set the cup back down on the table.

"Merely remembering," Lucius said with a large smirk. "Remembering a certain wager we made when the Dark Lord still held sway."

Severus sighed and then shrugged. "I was wondering how long it would take you to try and rub my nose in the fact that you were correct. It's taken eight years, and that shows *admirable* restraint, Lucius."

"Compliments at this late stage won't help you, Severus. I was *more* than correct," Lucius said with an almost feral smile. "I won the wager."

"You *won* by cheating," Severus said with a scowl. "If you hadn't assigned one of your house-elves to watch me day and night, I would have won."

"And you're complaining because... you're still alive?" Lucius asked with a raised brow and then smirked before adding, "You have to admit it was bloody brilliant on my part."

"It is not unappreciated," Snape said shortly. "Still, you could have told me. It was *most* disconcerting to awaken in a strange bed...not to mention a foreign country...with no knowledge of how I got there."

"Piffle," Lucius stated with a wave of his hand. "I'm sure your first priority was to grill the elf, wasn't it?"

"That's beside the point," Snape replied evenly.

"What point was that?" Lucius asked with a cheeky grin.

Snape rolled his eyes, sighed and then shook his head. "I'm not going to dignify that remark with an answer."

"I decided that to tell you...or anyone for that matter...wouldn't be prudent," Lucius stated. "It worked, didn't it?"

"It did, and as I said, it is not unappreciated," Snape replied dryly and started to rise.

"You're not thinking of leaving are you?" Lucius asked.

"Since it is *highly* unlikely that Spinner's End will come to me, *I had* planned on going there at some point," the dark-haired wizard replied as he finished standing.

"You can't go yet; I haven't given you the advice you have to follow," Lucius stated while wearing a smug smile.

"Lucius," Snape growled softly while narrowing his eyes.

"Yes, old friend?"

Sitting back down with an almost inaudible sigh, Severus raised a brow and asked, "What has your devious mind come up *with*is time that I'm sure I'm going to live to regret?"

Wearing an almost broad grin, Lucius leaned forward and said, "I do believe it's time you let the Wizarding world know you're still alive."

An astonished snort flew out of Severus' mouth while he shook his head. "And I believe you've lost your mind! Why in bloody blue blazes would I do that?"

"For one thing, there's all that lovely money you could finally claim," Lucius advised while leaning back in his chair and steepling his hands under his chin.

"What money?"

"The money that's been building up for the last eight years for your Order of Merlin, of course."

"I'm dead in their eyes, Lucius. There's no money," Snape replied with a snort.

Lucius nodded his head, "Yes, I am aware of that; however, if you do let them know you're alive, you'd be able to collect it and eight years of monthly allotments, including *compound* interest."

"Compound?"

"Compound."

"That *could* be a tidy sum, couldn't it?" Severus asked with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Considering your Order was first class, the allotments would be quite healthy. It might be enough to pay off the mortgage on that apothecary you purchased," Lucius said with a smirk on his face.

The thoughtful expression on Severus' face shifted and became suspicious. "What's in it for you, my old *friend*?"

Lucius' right hand flew up to his chest, and a very hurt look was sent in Snape's direction. "You wound me again, Severus. I don't plan on asking for a percentage if that's what you're thinking. I have quite enough money of my own."

"The thought never entered my head, Lucius, but there *has* to be..." Snape's words trailed off and his head tilted to the side. "I'll have to explain how I survived, and *that's* what it is, isn't it? You'll get full credit for having saved my life and more than that little paragraph you were fretting about."

Lucius smirked, shrugged his shoulders and gave a world weary sigh. "If the cost of having you receive the money that's due you is to have my secret exposed to the world after all these years, so be it."

Snape's snort became a laugh, and soon the two men were laughing together.

"So how do you propose I go about this? I'm not going to waltz into the Ministry and announce that I'm back," Severus stated after their laughter had died.

"That wouldn't do at all!" Lucius said with a mock shudder. "You'll have to be *discovered*...caught out, as it were...and what better place than Spinner's End?"

"Who will do the catching?" Severus asked with a raised brow, eyeing the letter on the table between them.

Lucius picked up the letter and nodded his head. "The *golden* girl has the honor, of course. No one else will do."

~~~~~

## Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 3

Madeleine picked the prize I'd offered for the 2011 exchange\_bingo, which was a story. She requested a wager, the

consequences and a happy ending for SS/HG. I do hope I've met her expectations.

AN: Lariope, thank you for all your hard work in making this story better.

---

A week later the *golden girl* was frowning at a piece of parchment. She'd received it anonymously the day before, and while anonymous tips had paid off in the past, this one...in her opinion...was not the most promising.

"You keep frowning like that and you'll have tons of wrinkles before your time, Mione," Ron said as he heaved a hip up on the corner of her desk. "At least that's what Padma's always telling Parvati when she's fretting over something one of the kids has done."

"Ron, you know I hate being called Mione; why do you insist on using it?" Hermione asked and added, "Get your arse off my desk; it's not a chair."

Ron flashed a wicked grin and continued to sit on the corner of her desk. "I call you Mione 'cause you are, and I sit on the desk to annoy you, of course. You need some shaking up between the endless research on your book and the day-to-day grind; otherwise you'll end up as dusty as the files in this office," he said with an all-encompassing wave of his arms.

"My files are *not* dusty, Ronald Weasley," Hermione said and then huffed before holding out the parchment for him to see. "What do you think of this?"

Ron took the parchment and read it aloud. "*Strange goings on at Spider's End. Wonder what secrets they intend to buy.*"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not *Spider's End*, it's *Spinner's End* and bury, not buy."

The area of skin between Ron's eyebrows became crinkled as he studied the words on the parchment. "Ah, I see. Say... isn't that Snape's old house?" he asked as he handed it back to Hermione.

"Yes, it is and there's a developer buying up all the property in the area. Supposedly, he wants to *renovate* and renew the *blighted area*," Hermione said and looked at the back side of the parchment again. "I can't find any connection to any witch or wizard. Everything points to it being a Muggle developer with entirely Muggle plans for the area."

"You want Harry and me to check it out for you?" he asked.

"No," Hermione said with a shake of her head. "It would be a waste of time, I'm sure, and I really don't want the Auror department involved with something that's probably the figment of someone's paranoid imagination."

Ron yawned and stretched. "Ya never know, Mione. Snape's whatchamacallit never would let us look the place over."

"His solicitor?" she asked.

"Naw, that person who's appointed by the deceased party to make sure their wishes are carried out."

"Executor," she stated and then asked, "Why not?"

"Some cousin of Snape's inherited and wouldn't allow it."

"Professor Snape had a *cousin*?" Hermione asked with a surprised expression on her face. She stood up and batted Ron on the arm. "And you never thought to *tell* me?"

"Oww! What was that for?" Ron asked while he rubbed at the spot.

"Oh, let me think," Hermione said and placed a finger on her chin. She pretended to gaze off into the distance as if trying to remember something. After giving a theatrical sigh, she dropped her hand and glared at Ron. "You *knew* I've been trying to get any sort of information on Professor Snape about the years before he went to Hogwarts, and you didn't tell me about a *cousin*!"

"Well, it's not like I know the bloke's name or anything, Mione," Ron said before he slid off her desk and headed for the door. "Hell, I don't even know if it's a bloke!"

"Wait!"

"Why, so you can hit the other arm?" Ron asked with his hand on the door.

"No, and I'm really sorry about that, Ron," Hermione said as she came around the side of her desk. "Who is the executor for Snape's estate?"

"Horn-something," Ron answered while opening the door.

"You don't remember?" Hermione asked with a note of exasperation in her voice as her hands flew to rest on her hips.

"That was *years* ago, Mione. You're lucky I remembered the Horn part," Ron sassed back with a cheeky grin. "We'll see you on the fifth for Little Ron's birthday party, right?"

"Yes, you will. Now go away so I can get back to work," Hermione said. She shook her head and headed back toward the business side of the desk as the door closed behind Ron. She didn't pause at the desk, but instead pulled open one of the drawers in a massive filing cabinet that was positioned directly behind her work area. Flipping through the files, she found the one she wanted, snatched it out of the drawer and sat back down in her chair.

"Eileen Prince," she muttered while running a finger down a list of names and then across the page. "No mention of a brother or sister. *She* had a cousin, but he supposedly died without issue. Unless a child was born on the wrong side of the blanket, that's a dead end." Scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment, Hermione sighed and closed the file before rubbing her forehead. "Now, who do I know in the Muggle world that will help me research the Snape line?" she mumbled. Hermione started flipping through an old-fashioned Rolodex, and silence reigned in the office for several minutes while she examined every contact she had. "Damn." The softly muttered expletive broke the stillness, and the Rolodex was shoved back to the edge of her desk.

Hermione's eyes became glazed as she gently chewed on the inside of her lower lip. She remained almost motionless for approximately fifteen minutes when suddenly her eyebrows rose and her eyes widened. Searching thorough the papers on her desk, she picked up the anonymous note, read it again, and nodded her head slowly. This time when she stared off into the distance, her eyes were slightly narrowed and her lip was no longer in danger as her jaw was quite firm. If one of the *boys* had been there, they would have recognized the look immediately. She was plotting and planning how to do something that probably *shouldn't* be done, but would be if the witch in the chair had any say in the matter.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lucius almost hurried into the Manor on the following afternoon. The expression on his face conveyed an intense excitement, and he wasted no time in tossing his

traveling cloak over the head of an elf that had the misfortune to be standing near. The noise his heeled boots made on the marble floors was of a quicker tempo than that which normally echoed off the walls, which explained the concerned looks exchanged by the elves working at various tasks along his route. They could be forgiven for this, as the only other time they had heard their Master's pace increase beyond its normal gentlemanly stroll was when the Dark Lord had taken over the Manor.

Their heads popped out of doorways as he passed, and one older elf sighed and remarked, "Mistress is going to be unhappy that Nasty Snake Person is coming back."

A younger-looking elf nodded its head and added, "We be needing to put the breakables away. Nasty Snake Person made Mistress cry in the before when favorites were used for practice spell making."

Completely oblivious to the hasty plans his elves were making, Lucius continued on the search for his house guest. When Severus wasn't located in the bedroom assigned to him, Lucius turned sharply on his heel and headed for the conservatory, which was in the other wing. By the time he'd located Severus, in the rear study, all of the elves in the Manor were busy packing away the many valuable antiques that belonged to the Malfoys.

"Is we be needing to worry about the books?" A frilled-ear elf asked a stoop-shouldered elf as it carefully packed away the last of the leaded crystal and then shrank the box.

Stoop-shouldered elf shook its head and said, "Master, in the before, is leaving all precious books packed away so Stupids don't find them when they is searching without Master's permission." Stoop-shouldered elf snapped its fingers, and all of the shrunken boxes that had been packed disappeared. After carefully checking all the small nooks and crannies, both elves left the room and headed toward another.

"She's taken the bait," Lucius announced as he walked into the study.

Severus looked up from the book he'd been reading and uncrossed his legs. Leaning forward, he placed a marker in the volume and placed it gently on the side table next to the chair he was sitting in. "Has she now?" he questioned as he removed a pair of reading glasses and slipped them into a vest pocket. "What bait?"

Lucius sent Snape a slightly exasperated look while reaching into the drinks cupboard for a glass. "The anonymous note that I ordered be sent to her, of course." He frowned at the object in his hand and held it up to the light. "Severus, have you been pilfering the crystal and replacing it with *this* rubbish?"

Severus snorted and said, "Hardly. Several of your elves swept through and cleaned the lot out, along with the various dust collectors. I figured it was one of Narcissa's annual or semi-annual cleaning binges."

"Ah," Lucius muttered as he picked up a plain glass decanter and poured a measure of scotch. "Probably is, but I've never seen her replace them with anything this common before. Odd, that."

"Yes, well, as *fascinating* as all this is, might we move on from the housekeeping details?" Severus asked drolly. "I agreed to follow your *advice*, not listen to the day-to-day trials and tribulations of running a household."

A house-elf chose that moment to scurry into the room, bowing and scraping the entire way. "Snicker is begging the Master's pardon, but Mistress is sending Snicker to find Master for Mistress."

After taking a sip of his scotch, Lucius frowned slightly and asked, "What does she want?"

"Snicker is not knowing, Master. Mistress is being very upset," the elf replied, wringing its hands and wilting a trifle more.

Lucius downed the rest of his scotch, pulled some pieces of parchment out of one of his pockets and said, "Here's what's what with our little project. I'll be back shortly. I hope."

Severus took the papers from the outstretched hand of the other wizard. He then watched with no small degree of amusement as Lucius straightened his shoulders and prepared for whatever had upset Narcissa this time. "Where is she?" Lucius asked the elf as they exited the door. The elf's answer, whatever it was, didn't have the power to reach Severus' ears, but Lucius' puzzled response did. "What in Merlin's name could she be doing in *there*? We have no formal dinners planned this week."

Quickly losing interest in the domestic troubles of his oldest friend, Severus unfolded the papers and started to read. "The cheeky little witch," he muttered before a screech of outrage caused his head to jerk toward the open door. It had sounded like a woman's voice, and as far as he knew, Narcissa was the only female in residence, but he had never known her to shriek like a charwoman, let alone raise her voice.

Rising, he moved toward the open door and managed to hear Lucius say, "Narcissa, you're being unreasonable. I am *not* planning on leaving you *nor* am I dumping you on the street! I love you, my darling, and I haven't a blasted clue why the elves are packing everything up!"

"Interesting," Severus muttered as he paused just inside the study door in an effort to hear more. All he heard were Narcissa's sobs and Lucius yelling for Enrique. Enrique, it should be noted, was the Malfoy's head elf who oversaw all that the others did or didn't do. The level of conversation from the formal dining room continued with a buzz, but it wasn't quite loud enough for Severus to hear the details. He shrugged and headed off in the opposite direction, sure that at some point Lucius would enlighten him.

While strolling along the hallway, one of Snape's brows rose at an angle that any of his students would have recognized. Lucius had done a magnificent job of keeping a tail on Miss Granger, and events were proceeding more quickly than either of them had foreseen. He paused, turned, and headed directly for the bedroom he'd been using at the Manor. Once there, he hurriedly packed a small bag with a few necessities and shrank it before slipping it into a pocket. After leaving a short note for Lucius, he quickly left the Malfoy estate. Outside the high fenced-in area, he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself before he twisted and Apparated into the alley behind Spinner's End.

Severus pulled his wand and began checking the various wards still intact upon his childhood home. He found the ones put up by Hornworthy, but he also found a few placed there by the Aurors. Nothing too drastic, and surprisingly enough, nothing keyed to himself. Apparently they'd been convinced, even without a body, that he was actually dead. Moving closer, he walked into the tool shed at the rear of the small yard and accessed a passage hidden underneath the warped flooring. He'd made it a lifetime ago to answer the Dark Lord's call without alerting his parents.

The steps down into the darkness were narrow and steep. Severus cursed lightly when he found he had to turn sideways at one point to avoid knocking his head on the edge of the floor. "Don't remember this being so annoyingly small," he muttered while reaching up to close the door after him. A Lumos revealed a cramped passageway filled with small webs and dust. He paused for a moment, decided to take the chance that spells cast "underground" wouldn't trigger a Ministry ward, and reinforced the ceiling and walls before clearing out the webs.

He soon found himself in his old boyhood bedroom and winced when he saw the disarray. Hornworthy hadn't allowed the Aurors to search the house, but it was obvious that someone had gone through his belongings. A short tour of the house revealed it had been completely tossed, but he could find nothing obviously missing. A few short waves of his wand put objects back in the proper place, and a few layers of dust...to perpetrate the illusion that nothing had been disturbed for eight long years...were added.

Severus, satisfied that it would pass, nodded his head and moved toward the cellar entrance. He walked briskly over to one of the brick walls, counted down and over from the corner, and pressed one of the bricks with his wand. A passage appeared, and from the sill he could see that no one had disturbed this repository of books. A small smirk appeared, and he breathed easier. After closing the passage, he bounded back upstairs, straightened his vest, and chose a small book of verse to read while he waited for the curious Miss Granger to appear.

"Perfect," he muttered as he sat down in a chair and put on his reading glasses.

The Spider and the Fly by Mary Howitt

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the Spider to the Fly,  
'Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy;  
The way into my parlour is up a winding stair,  
And I've a many curious things to shew when you are there."  
"Oh no, no," said the little Fly, "to ask me is in vain,  
For who goes up your winding stair can ne'er come down again."  
"I'm sure you must be weary, dear, with soaring up so high;  
Will you rest upon my little bed?" said the Spider to the Fly.  
"There are pretty curtains drawn around; the sheets are fine and thin,  
And if you like to rest awhile, I'll snugly tuck you in!"  
"Oh no, no," said the little Fly, "for I've often heard it said,  
They never, never wake again, who sleep upon your bed!"  
Said the cunning Spider to the Fly, "Dear friend what can I do,  
To prove the warm affection I've always felt for you?  
I have within my pantry, good store of all that's nice;  
I'm sure you're very welcome...will you please to take a slice?"  
"Oh no, no," said the little Fly, "kind Sir, that cannot be,  
I've heard what's in your pantry, and I do not wish to see!"  
"Sweet creature!" said the Spider, "you're witty and you're wise,  
How handsome are your gauzy wings, how brilliant are your eyes!  
I've a little looking-glass upon my parlour shelf,  
If you'll step in one moment, dear, you shall behold yourself."  
"I thank you, gentle sir," she said, "for what you're pleased to say,  
And bidding you good morning now, I'll call another day."  
The Spider turned him round about, and went into his den,  
For well he knew the silly Fly would soon come back again:  
So he wove a subtle web, in a little corner sly,  
And set his table ready, to dine upon the Fly.  
Then he came out to his door again, and merrily did sing,  
"Come hither, hither, pretty Fly, with the pearl and silver wing;  
Your robes are green and purple...there's a crest upon your head;  
Your eyes are like the diamond bright, but mine are dull as lead!"  
Alas, alas! How very soon this silly little Fly,  
Hearing his wily, flattering words, came slowly flitting by;  
With buzzing wings she hung aloft, then near and nearer drew,  
Thinking only of her brilliant eyes, and green and purple hue...  
Thinking only of her crested head...poor foolish thing! At last,  
Up jumped the cunning Spider, and fiercely held her fast.  
He dragged her up his winding stair, into his dismal den,  
Within his little parlour...but she ne'er came out again!  
And now dear little children, who may this story read,  
To idle, silly flattering words, I pray you ne'er give heed:  
Unto an evil counsellor, close heart and ear and eye,  
And take a lesson from this tale, of the Spider and the Fly.

~~~~~

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 3

Madeleine picked my offer of a story for a prize on the exchange_bingo. She wanted a story that involved a wager, the consequences and a happy ending for SS/HG. I hope I've managed to do it justice.

Thank you, dear Lariope, for all your help. I'll never be able to repay you for all your hard work.

Being an honorary sister of a very successful Curse-Breaker had its advantages, and Hermione...being the intelligent witch that she was...had persuaded Bill to impart to her all of the little tricks and subtle insights that he'd developed over his career. She'd had to promise not to include any of them in her book, and she couldn't blame him, really. Income from the patents on the charms and spells he'd developed would make for a tidy addition to his retirement when he was ready to step down.

Although she'd studied her notes endlessly for two days, Hermione was still a trifle nervous as she stood in front of Snape's house at Spinner's End. She'd taken the precaution of using a Disillusionment Charm before Apparating, but she had waffled between using daylight or darkness in her attempt to breach the building. Each, she had reasoned, had its own advantage. Darkness would have concealed her presence from nosy neighbors, but daylight would allow her to see...assuming she made it into the house...without using a Lumos spell that could give her away. She only hoped that the majority of those few residents that still lived there were off at their jobs.

Using nothing more than an extremely subtle Detection Spell that Bill had taught her, Hermione cautiously approached the house. The different wards on the property glowed with distinct colours, the shades varying with the skill of the castor. Some were so pale as to be almost invisible. She knew those were the trickiest ones...and the hardest to circumvent...as the architect was very skilled, leaving almost no trace behind. She continued to search, almost circling the ratty old house twice before she found what she sought: a spot where the overlapping wards were the thinnest.

An additional hour and a half passed before she was able to manage a narrow path that wound its way around them. She paused to allow her wand hand to relax and to relieve some of the tension in her shoulders, but it also let her take stock of where the delicate shifting of the wards had deposited her. A frown marred Hermione's brow when she noted that almost all the windows...and the doors, of course...were heavily saturated with the lightest colours. The only access to Snape's family home that was within her reach was a narrow window set fairly high off the ground at the rear of the property.

Looking straight up at the window, Hermione was intrigued by the wooden flower box that hung underneath the sill. It looked solid, but...assuming she was able to get that far without the overt use of magic that would trigger the wards...would it hold her weight while she attempted to open the window? Glancing around, she noted with relief that it was hidden from all the neighboring houses by high rows of bushes on either side of the property.

She tried jumping first, but the tips of her fingers barely brushed the underside of the box. On her third attempt Hermione tried a running jump and almost planted her face into the side of the house. "There's *got* to be a way," she muttered while looking around on the ground. "Dirt, dead grass, weeds and more damned...there's no wards on the damned dirt!"

Drawing her wand, gently and ever so slowly, Hermione managed to fashion a slope built from the twice damned dirt. Leaning slightly on the edge of the flower box, she frowned when she was unable to see into the room. Dirt on the exterior, and to some degree on the interior, blocked any hope of being able to see past the shabby looking curtains. Studying them led Hermione to assume that she was attempting to gain entry via the kitchen. "My luck it'll be over the sink," she muttered before pulling gingerly on the window box. It seemed firm, didn't wobble or act as though it would give way, but still she paused before allowing her full weight to settle upon it.

"I hope whoever built this knew what they were doing," Hermione said and reached into a pocket. She withdrew a small nail file and proceeded to slip it between the sashes of the window, aiming to move the simple lock that held her at bay. After several attempts...and a few choice words...she managed to remove the last barrier between her and Snape's residence. The window slid open easily enough, but Hermione didn't immediately scramble through.

During all of her preparations, all of her scheming to get inside the house, the enormity of what Hermione was attempting to do hadn't really sunk in. Not until now. Everything that Professor Snape had done, coupled with the sheer intimidation factor of his basic personality and the respect she'd always had for him, made Hermione suddenly unsure that she should continue. The window box egged her on by starting to sag. Hermione's fevered imagination could *hear* the nails pulling loose as she hastily grabbed the sill and pulled herself through, landing almost headfirst in an old fashioned, large-basined sink.

After adjusting her position so her *derrière* was safely in the bottom of the basin, Hermione said, "Ugh," and brushed away the cobwebs the dusty curtains had decided to give her as a gift. Reaching back through the window, Hermione grabbed the loosened flower box and tried to pull it completely off. It refused to budge. "Fine, stay there," she grumbled and lowered her feet onto the gritty kitchen floor.

"*Finite Incantatem*," came from the shadows to her right, and Hermione felt the Disillusionment Charm dissolve around her. She whipped out her wand and asked, "Who's there? Show yourself!"

"Normally, it's considered good manners to send a note round when one intends to visit an old acquaintance, Miss Granger," Severus announced dryly as he stepped through the doorway. "It spares the host or hostess an inordinate amount of embarrassment when they're unprepared for visitors. I haven't a thing to offer in the way of refreshment, you see."

Hermione's mouth opened and closed several times before she managed to sputter, "But you're dead!" She shook her head and then stated, "Professor *Snape* is dead. Whoever you are, you've got some explaining to do!"

"That's an *extremely* amusing statement coming from someone who just committed burglary to gain admittance to my humble abode," Severus stated as he crossed to the worn kitchen table. After brushing off one of the wooden seats, he sat down and raised a brow.

Her wand hand never wavered as it followed him across the small room. "*Your* humble abode? Are you the cousin who inherited?" she asked with a frown on her brow. "Did you use Polyjuice Potion to make yourself look like him to get inside or open a secret door?"

Hermione received a withering glance before Severus said, "I believe it's rather obvious I have *no* cousin, Miss Granger. Now...if you are *quite* finished trespassing...it's time for you to leave and allow me to get on with collecting my meager possessions before this property is turned over to its new owner."

"I'll give you credit for having researched his mannerisms, but don't think you have me fooled for one minute, you imposter!" Hermione said with narrowed eyes.

"Fine, we'll play it your way, Miss Granger," he said as he stood. "I am Archibald Leach, first cousin to Severus Snape, twice removed. This is *my* property and I'm asking you *nicely* to leave."

"There's no Leach in the Snape family tree," Hermione stated, backing up a step. "But the name is familiar."

Snape walked toward the cellar entrance and rolled his eyes. "I've not got the time to dilly-dally while you solve your little puzzles. If you insist on staying, you'll have to make yourself useful. Come along, Miss Granger, we don't have all day."

Hermione followed *Archibald* down the narrow cellar steps and watched while he opened the concealed room. "Gorgeous," slipped out of her mouth when she saw the collection of books.

"Yes," Snape remarked dryly when he noticed the gleam of interest in her eyes. "Start unshrinking those boxes in the corner, while I begin sorting," he said and picked up two dark covered volumes.

"You can't take those books; they belong to Professor Snape!" Hermione protested.

Snape paused, turned his head and raised a brow in her direction. "Again, I question Lupin's declaration that you are the smartest witch of your generation. If I am *Snape*...the books are mine. If I am his *cousin*...the books are mine. End of deliberation."

"I don't like it," Hermione said and crossed her arms. "And I refuse to help you steal those books no matter who you are or aren't."

"Good gods, woman!" Snape snarled in exasperation. "I can't very well leave them here for the Muggles to find, now can I? When they tear this old monstrosity down, they're bound to find this room."

Hermione frowned, unfolded her arms and crossed to the stack of shrunken boxes. After restoring two to their normal size, she placed one on either side of... whoever he was. "How are you sorting them?"

"The ones I want and the ones I don't," Snape replied as he piled several books into each carton.

Sending him a glance that in no way hid any of the irritation she was feeling, Hermione reached down and lifted out one of the books she'd assumed he didn't want. "What are you doing with the ones you don't?"

Taking the volume out of her hand, Snape placed it back in the box before replying, "They'll be sent as an anonymous donation to Hogwarts."

"Oh."

"Nothing to add?" he questioned as he continued to fill the boxes she'd brought him. "No more questions to ask?"

"Not right now," Hermione said as she took a seat on a spindly looking chair that sat in a corner.

Glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, Snape stated, "You'll want to be careful how you sit on that particular chair. There's a reason it's in the cellar in a hidden room."

Jumping up, Hermione turned and cast a quick Revealing Charm that Bill had taught her. "There's nothing magical about it!" Hermione declared and turned to glare at Snape before sitting back down with a thump. "Admit it, you said that so I wouldn't sit on...Ack!" Hermione's accusation was interrupted when the chair's legs splayed out and left her sitting on the floor.

Fully turning, Snape lifted the corner of his mouth in a smile and then shook his head. "I never indicated there was anything magical about the chair, only that there was a reason it was down here. The braces for the legs are loose."

"You could have *told* me that!" Hermione said. She started to rise, but stopped when a hand was extended by the dark-haired man. She really looked at the hand and then into the face of the man who stood over her. "You *are* him," she stated with a note of awe in her voice. She grasped the hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "You really are alive. How are you alive? We thought you were dead. We all thought you were dead. Why did you let us think you were dead?" Hermione's voice had been rising in volume the entire time she was speaking until she was almost yelling. Her face had become flushed and she threw her hands in the air. "Everything from chapter twenty-two on will need to be revised, as if I'm not behind enough as it is, and the memorial service we had for you...were you skulking in the shadows? Enjoying hearing us pour out our regrets that we thought we'd never be able to express to you in person? Has this all been some giant hoax?"

"Hoax? No, not a hoax, Miss Granger, it was merely an attempt to find some type of a normal life for myself. One that didn't involve Azkaban, tearful regrets, or any further attempts on my life," Snape advised in an acid tone. "As far as your memorial service...I'm afraid I missed it. I was busy fighting for my life, you see. It took close to a year for me to fully heal." He turned round and began sorting the books again.

Hermione's face flushed again, but this time for a different reason, as she took three steps toward the man she now knew was Snape. "I'm sorry," she said and dropped her gaze for a moment. "But... how did you survive? Harry, Ron and I were sure you were dead."

"I was," he stated simply. "If not for the timely intervention of one of the Malfoy house-elves, Loxey, I would indeed be nothing but a pile of dust by now."

"Malfoy? Is that why he's been refusing to grant me an interview?" Hermione asked, drawing closer.

Snape paused in his sorting, looked at her with an arched brow, and...knowing the answer, but using a bit of Slytherin one-oh-one...asked, "Are you working for the Quibbler now?"

"Of course I'm not! I'm writing a book about the war against Voldemort, and his input is crucial," she said and ran one hand through the mass of hair on her head. "I've been attempting to get an interview with him from the beginning of the project."

The brow lowered, and Snape's attention returned to the books in his hands. "Ah, I see."

Hermione moved in front of him, had the audacity to remove the books he was examining, and asked, "What*exactly* do you mean by that?"

When his dark gaze finally met her soft brown one, Hermione fidgeted a bit and then raised her chin slightly. "Well?"

"How many have you *interviewed*, Miss Granger?" Snape asked and folded his arms across his chest.

"As many as I could," she answered quickly.

"Come now, I'm sure the exacting Miss Granger has kept a better tally than that, hasn't she?" he asked with a tilted head.

"I've done sixty-five full interviews, and there are seventeen that still have to be finished or started," Hermione said. "Make that eighteen now, counting you."

"Indeed," Severus stated in a dry tone. "And what makes you assume that I'm going to be willing to subject myself to your inquires, Miss Granger?"

Once again Hermione's mouth opened and closed several times, and her eyes opened wide in astonishment. "But, you...of all people...should understand... It's got to be documented. For history...so it can be studied...so it never happens again."

A small smirk appeared on Snape's mouth before he asked, "Tell me, who was Gellert Grindelwald, Miss Granger?"

Shaking her head wildly, Hermione replied, "That's different! He never used Horcruxes."

"You're quite positive about that, are you?"

"I... I don't know," was her confused answer. "There isn't anything documented that he did."

"So, in true Gryffindor fashion, you're going to plunge ahead, briskly laying out the details of the Dark Lord's rise and fall for the next megalomaniac to learn from and avoid his predecessor's mistakes?" Snape asked.

A look of horror crossed Hermione's face as she shook her head. "No! That's not my intent at all!"

Snape snorted once, unfolded his arms, and took the books back from Hermione. "I'm sure it's not, Miss Granger, but then I'm also sure you know the old saying about the path to Hell and good intentions, don't you?" he asked almost gently.

Hermione nodded her head, turned, and absently repaired the chair before sitting down. "I *can't* not finish it!"

"Are you under *orders* to write it?"

"Well, no...but everyone *knows* I'm writing it," Hermione advised with a slightly stubborn look on her face.

"Are you being *paid* to write it?"

"No, but the Ministry has expressed an interest in seeing it when it's finished," she replied proudly.

"Ah, I see."

"Will you *quit* saying that like that?" Hermione demanded as she rose to her feet and placed herself in front of him again. "What is it you're *seeing*, Professor Snape?"

Another smile quirked the corner of his mouth before he said, "I'm no longer anyone's professor, and since the use of *Mister* Snape always makes me think of my father, you may call me Severus."

"You're changing the subject...answer my question, please," Hermione demanded.

"Normally, when one is invited to use the given name of an acquaintance, one offers the use of their own given name in return," Snape chided her gently.

"Use whatever name you like, *Severus*, just answer me!"

"I can guarantee you're not going to like the answer," he advised with a quirk of his brow.

"I've already gathered *that* much from the tone of your voice when you said it."

A mild look of surprise crossed Snape's face. "Very well, *Hermione*, I shall endeavor to explain what *I see*, and perhaps what Lucius sees as well. I see a young Muggle-born witch...a very talented Muggle-born witch...so very desperate to prove her worth to the Wizarding world that she's taken on the monumental task of trying to make sense of a mad-man's ambition to rule that same world, never realizing that no sense can be made out of anything to do with the man."

Hermione frowned, walked back over to the chair, and sat down. "You're right; I don't like it." She sat there in silence, watching while he continued to examine the books. When he filled a box, she would close it, move it to one side of the room or the other, and ready another one for him to fill. She did all of this seated on the chair with her wand until almost all of the books were sorted. Finally, Hermione rose and stood in front of him again. "You think I'm doing it for the glory of having my name on a book?"

Snape shook his head. "Never glory, merely respect...which you already have...but you don't see it that way, do you?" He placed the final two volumes in one box and closed it before sending it to join its mates on the far side of the cellar. That pile was shrunken and placed in one of his pockets. Severus hesitated slightly before gesturing to the other pile. "Would you care to pick and choose before they're dispatched to Hogwarts?" he asked.

Hermione's eyes brightened and she vigorously nodded her head. "That would be wonderful, thank you!" The light dimmed in her eyes, and she turned a troubled face in his direction. "How would I explain where I got them? They all have your name in them, don't they? And if I'm going to keep your secret, I can't tell anyone."

"I don't recall asking you to keep my existence a secret," Snape advised before shrinking the other pile and motioning for her to collect them.

"But what about finding that normal life? The one without all the teary regrets and Azkaban?" she asked while slipping the rejects into one of her own pockets.

"It's been pointed out to me...quite recently...that it's all become a tad boring," Severus replied with a smirk.

"Boring?"

"Very."

"We can't have that, now can we?" Hermione asked with a large grin on her face. "Would you care to have dinner with me this evening, Severus? Say at the Leaky? I can almost guarantee it won't be boring."

His brows rose to new heights, and Snape actually allowed a chuckle to escape before he briefly bowed his head and said, "I would be honored to have dinner with you this evening, Hermione."

It took close to a year before the furor over Snape's return from the dead settled down. During that time, he collected his medal and all the lovely money Malfoy had promised him...which went to pay off the apothecary he'd purchased in the back of beyond...but Severus found that he'd collected something else along the way. He'd gained a very non-boring life as the husband of a very talented Muggle-born witch, who never did finish writing the book. When asked why, she'd shrug and reply, "I'd rather *make* history than write it. It's much more fun."

~~~~~The End~~~~~