

# Out of the Shadows Came a Rose

*by gingertart*

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## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 16*

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Molly Weasley never did apologise, but as Hermione knew better than to expect her to, she was hardly disappointed.

Molly always saw her as a chit of a girl: a flighty witch with too much power, a high opinion of herself and no respect for tradition. Hermione had suspected for a while that her mother-in-law had become disillusioned with her, but the conversation overheard in the kitchen of the Burrow cemented the suspicion into certainty.

"When's Hermione going to give up work, get rid of that wretched Kneazle and start having babies?"

Hermione stopped just outside the door, the urge to march in and express her indignation tempered by an even stronger need to hear what her husband of five years would say in reply.

"You don't know Hermione very well, do you, Mum?"

The saucepans clattered in the sink.

"Aren't you trying for a baby? I would have thought you would want to start a family, the way you dote on your nieces and nephews."

"Hermione loves her job; she doesn't want to give up work yet."

Molly huffed.

"It isn't right. Any wizard worth his salt would want to support his own wife and family, not live on her earnings like some some pimp!"

Hermione bit down on her knuckle to stifle a growl.

"Yeah, Mum, I know. I'm going for a promotion, though, and then we'll be able to afford for Hermione to give up work."

"That witch," Molly snapped, "could be getting up to all kinds of mischief! A proper wife should be at home looking after her husband and giving him children, not cavorting about with all manner of wizards, dabbling in Dark magic and barely bothering to slap together a sandwich for your dinner! She doesn't even know any darning charms; look at the state of your socks!"

"I'm working on it," Ron said. His voice sounded clipped and confident. "She'll come round as soon as there's a baby on the way."

"You make her hand in her notice the moment you're sure; you can't let her go gallivanting off once she's in the family way."

Hermione backed away, suppressing her urge to hex something. She pretended to be on her way to the Burrow from the orchard. As Ron marched away from the back door, Molly stuck her head out of the open window.

"Don't worry, dear," she called after her youngest son, "I've sorted everything for you, you'll see! It will all be fine. Good old-fashioned ritual magic usually does the trick." She noticed Hermione, gave her a taut little smile and returned to her cooking.

"What was all that about?" Hermione asked, but Ron shook his head.

"She keeps on about wanting grandchildren, that's all."

"She's got four already, five if you count Teddy, and another on the way."

"Yeah, I know."

Hermione took pity on him then. He was understandably loyal to his mother, even if Hermione considered her an overbearing and old-fashioned domestic tyrant. The combined efforts of her entire family could not shift Molly once she made up her mind on something, so Ron could not be expected to stand up to her on his own. Hermione was learning to choose her battles and not waste her energy on lost causes.

"Harry's looking for you; he's picking sides for a garden Quidditch match."

Ron rushed off to claim his usual position as keeper, and Hermione trailed after him, having absolutely no desire to be trapped in the corner of the kitchen by Molly Weasley with a bee in her bonnet.

Ginny was sitting under the apple tree, little James playing with his toy soldiers at her feet. She waved and Hermione went to join her on the old wooden seat.

"What's up, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged, staring up at the sky.

"Nothing, really. Your mum had another go at Ron about us not making Weasley babies fast enough for her."

"Hm." Ginny rubbed her swollen stomach. "I'm not so sure I shouldn't have waited a few years. This one feels like he's going to be another little devil."

"Little debble," James said happily, waving a soldier. The soldier waved back.

"Yes, you, you're a little debble all right," Ginny agreed. "You're still trying, aren't you?"

Hermione nodded.

"Two years now and still no sign."

"Why don't you go and see Healer Strood? She's really nice, and she's supposed to be one of the best for gynaecological problems; she was brilliant when I thought I was going to lose James that time."

Hermione looked into her friend's concerned hazel eyes.

"I think I will, Ginny. Can you let me have her address?"

oooOOOooo

Hermione Weasley sat in the Healer's office, her hands folded in her lap. Ron sat beside her, his freckles emphasising his pallor.

"I'm sorry," Healer Strood said softly. "This is a particularly pernicious curse. Had it been caught within a month or two, we may have been able to reverse the majority of the damage, but you say it was eight years...?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "It must have been at Hogwarts, in the final battle."

"Are you sure there's nothing...?"

"No, Mr Weasley, I'm sorry. There's nothing that we, or for that matter, a Muggle doctor, can do."

"Stone womb," Hermione felt the words roll in her mouth, tasting the shape of them. *Uterus calyx*."

"If by some unlikely chance a foetus became implanted, the uterus would be unable to expand to accommodate it."

"I'd miscarry?"

"Within two months, yes, that is unfortunately inevitable."

oooOOOooo

"I told you, it will be all right," Molly stated.

"Mum, she's been cursed, there's no way she can ever have a baby. She's totally infertile."

"You're not listening to me, Ronald Bilius Weasley. I've ensured that you will have at least one child."

"Not with Hermione, I won't," Ron muttered, so that his mother couldn't hear, but Hermione's eavesdropping charm caught his words.

"There there, dear, you just leave everything to me "

"It's too late, Mum; I'm going to ask her for a divorce."

Hermione grabbed at the wall for support, the breath knocked out of her in a whoosh. She knew Ron had been deeply distressed by the news, but this was unexpected.

"Oh," said Molly. "Oh, I see. Well, then. I'm sure it's for the best. You never were really suited, were you? That little witch was always far more fond of her wretched books and her job than she was of you, working all hours and leaving you at home alone..."

Hermione cancelled the charm and sat down hard on the stairs. Ron found her there. He blushed fiery red as soon as she looked up at him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I," Hermione stood up and gave him a thin, brittle smile, "but at least your mum's happy."

"That's what you get for listening in to other people's private conversations."

"It's what you get for marrying Muggle-born witches who don't measure up to your mum's high standards, Ron."

Molly popped her head out of the kitchen.

"I heard raised voices," she said brightly, "is everything all right?"

"Everything is just fine, Mrs Weasley. You'll be glad to know that Ron's socks are now entirely your responsibility."

Hermione Apparated home before either of them saw the tears in her eyes.

oooOOOooo

"Hermione?"

"In here!"

"Hi, how're you doing, love?"

Hermione pushed the tangled mass of her hair back from her face and managed a tired smile. Green eyes peered anxiously down at her. "You look like shit, did you realise?"

"Thanks, Harry, just what a girl likes to hear from a bloke."

"Don't you ever take a break from work?"

Hermione stared around her living room. The conspicuous gaps, where Ron's favourite armchair, broom, owl cage, Quidditch magazines and outdoor robe had lived, were filled with teetering piles of rolled parchment, books and broken quills. The desk (magically expanded now that Ron was not there to complain) held a pile of dirty dishes, scummy coffee mugs and a stuffed armadillo that she really could not remember bringing home. Crookshanks lay snoring upon a couple of battered grimoires.

"I suppose not," she admitted. "Sorry about the mess."

Harry shrugged.

"I came to see you, not your house. Ginny wants to know whether you'd like to come over to us for dinner, or rather go out somewhere..." He looked uncomfortable and Hermione frowned.

"Go out? Surely not until Albus is a bit older?"

"Didn't know if you wanted to come round while the baby..."

"Oh." Hermione tugged ineffectually at her hair. "I don't have a problem with your new baby; in fact, I'd love to see him again."

"I thought a reminder, you know that you can't um..."

Hermione sighed.

"Harry, don't be daft. I wasn't the one who had the big problem with my infertility."

"Ron?"

"Not quite."

Harry stared at her for a moment with narrowed eyes, and then nodded.

"Yeah, I get it. Molly."

"I know Ron wanted a family very much, the same as you and Ginny did, but that wasn't what put the curse on our marriage. Molly did that for us."

"She forced him to choose," Harry said quietly, and Hermione was reminded yet again that her friend had grown up.

"Yes. No doubt she'll help him to find a suitably subservient, home-making little witch who'll pop out a nice Weasley-sized brood."

"He is sorry, you know."

"Not sorry enough to stand up to his mother when it mattered most."

"Who is?" Harry gave a quirky little smile. "Lucky for me, Ginny takes the brunt of it, and Molly does have the sense not to push her too far otherwise she wouldn't get to see the grandchildren as often as she'd like. Are you coming over for dinner, then? Gin said she'd cook a roast if you want to come round; if not, the kids will go to Molly and I'll book a table at the Raj."

"I'll come over when I've had a shower."

"Fine. Don't be late or I'll send Ginny."

"Ooh, there's a threat. Now I'm really scared."

"She hasn't forgiven Ron, you know. She hexed him, did he tell you?"

"No, he didn't mention it. Too embarrassed, I expect. I hope it was her bat-bogies."

"See you later, then." Harry turned on the spot and vanished with just a faint puff of displaced air the almost silent Apparation of a seasoned Auror.

Hermione showered, used half a bottle of Sleekeazy's and a detangling charm on her hair, discovered that she hadn't done the laundry for three weeks, dressed in hastily Scourgified underwear and her cleanest robes, and Apparated to Harry and Ginny's place in Godric's Hollow.

Ginny looked slim and fit in a robe of vibrant green. She dumped Albus in Hermione's lap and sent Harry to put James to bed while she finished preparing dinner. The baby peered up with the unfocussed dark blue gaze of the very young, blew a bubble and fell back to sleep with his tiny fist curled against his cheek.

"He's gorgeous," Hermione said quietly as Ginny came into the living room, wiping her hands on a towel.

"He is, rather," Ginny agreed. "Just wait till he joins James in the brattish stage. You could have adopted, you know. I could kill Ron. I don't care if he is my brother; he's a fucking git."

Hermione pressed her hands over the baby's ears.

"Such language, Mrs Potter! It was an accumulation of things, and this was the final straw."

"Really? I didn't realise you were having problems, I'm sorry."

Hermione shook her head.

"Not problems as such, just ... We were such good friends, you know? Getting married was the obvious thing to do, so we did it, and we both thought that the rest would sort itself out. Ron had his Quidditch, chess, his job and helping George out at weekends..."

"And you had your work," Harry said, coming back into the room.

"Yes. We just sort of drifted and assumed children would come along to give us a mutual interest."

"Harry and I are lucky," Ginny said. "We both love Quidditch, gardening, flying, cooking and over-indulging our two little boys. You need someone who shares your intellectual curiosity and love of esoteric books, not a Quidditch-crazy plonker like my brother."

"Not yet, I don't! I need to get over the divorce first, thank you!"

"This is getting too heavy," Harry said, "and I need my roast beef and Yorkshire pudding before I faint from hunger. Come on, girls, I've opened a bottle of red."

He lifted Albus and placed him into his cradle. The baby whimpered a little at being disturbed, but settled again when Harry set a charm to gently rock the cradle on its stand.

During dinner, Hermione felt the tension ebbing slowly from her shoulders and back and realised how long it had been since she'd felt so relaxed. Ron had spent the last few years coming up with one hare-brained scheme after another, whether it was inventing exploding crumpets for George's shop, breeding pedigree Kneazles for profit or taking wild flying holidays in Siberia. It felt so good to just chat with her friends without wondering what the next mildly unpleasant surprise would be.

"What's your latest job, Hermione? If you're allowed to tell us, of course."

"Not everything in the Department of Mysteries is a secret. I'm struggling with a collection of interlocking curses, focussed on an ancient text that turned up in the vestry of a Muggle parish church. It very nearly decapitated the verger; he spent three days in St Mungo's and had to be Obliviated before he was sent home with a tale of having been suddenly called away to visit a sick cousin in Donegal."

"Not one of the parchments in your living room, I hope?"

"No, Harry, it's sitting under heavy wards in a bath of dry ice at the Ministry! I'm looking up references to the curses, but they're very old, pretty Dark and very hard to detangle. I was thinking of asking your brother-in-law if he'd take a look."

"Bill and Fleur are in France for the next two weeks, staying with Gabrielle, but I'm sure he'd be happy to help. Bill says you could get a job curse-breaking for your living, you know; you've got the knack for it."

Hermione sighed.

"That's why I get lumbered with every cursed artefact that turns up at the Ministry, I suppose. I enjoy it, actually; I like the challenge, but this one has me stumped. I've never struggled this long on a single curse before, and the damned thing has dozens of them."

"Have you tried the Restricted Section of Hogwarts' library?"

"Madam Pince gave me a copy of her catalogue years ago, and there isn't much there that we haven't already got in the library at the Ministry."

"Hm." Harry frowned and traced a pattern with his fork in the remains of the horseradish sauce on his plate. "I've got a suggestion, although I don't know if you'll like it."

"At this stage, I'd be prepared to try anything vaguely legal. I'm running out of options."

"I know an expert in curses who might help."

"Other than Bill, you mean?"

"Not an expert in curse-breaking; an expert in curses. There's a slight difference. He has a very extensive library and researches old curses as a hobby, and at the moment, he's attempting to get into the Ministry's good books. He helped the MLE a couple of months back you remember, Gin, I told you about poor old Mulvane and the cursed potting shed? Confined to a private room in St Mungo's for a week, turning into John Innes' number one potting compost from the feet up, and they couldn't do a thing? Well, this chap found the root 'scuse the pun of the curse for us, and we managed to break it before it hit his vitals. Mulvane made a complete recovery."

"That sounds hopeful," Hermione agreed. "What's the catch?"

"He's Lucius Malfoy."

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Three years after the end of the war, Narcissa Malfoy had been murdered on her way out of Twilfit and Tattings. The killer had Apparated into Diagon Alley wearing Death Eater robes and mask, screamed "Blood traitor whore! *Avada Kadavra!*" and Apparated away again before anyone could do anything.

Despite Ron's objections, Hermione had sent an owl message to Lucius and Draco Malfoy expressing her sympathy. She'd had nothing against the woman; and after all, Narcissa *had* saved Harry's life. Harry then went one better by solving the case (his first as a fully-fledged Auror), and the murderer, a middle-ranking Death Eater who had escaped after the final battle, was sent to Azkaban for life. Since then, Lucius had kept a low profile, preferring to hide away in his Wiltshire mansion while Draco took over the Malfoy business interests.

An eagle owl delivered a roll of thick, cream-coloured parchment bearing the Malfoy family crest.

*Malfoy Manor,*

*Weston Piercy,*

*Chippenham,*

*Wiltshire.*

*Dear Mrs Weasley,*

*Mr Potter informs me that you are working on a series of Celtic curses. I have a great interest in the use of the Brythonic and Goidelic languages in the casting of charms and spells, and I have accumulated a considerable number of early references and academic texts on these matters. You are welcome to peruse them at your leisure. If you would like to join me for tea at 3 o'clock on Wednesday next, I will introduce you to my library.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Lucius Malfoy.*

Hermione spent so long trying to work out his motives that she confused herself completely, gave up and went to see Kingsley. The Minister laughed and patted her shoulder.

"I wouldn't call him a reformed character, but he learned his lesson the hard way. If he ever wants to get back into Wizarding society, what better way to do it than by befriending at least one of the three heroes?"

"You know *exactly* how much we hate being called that."

Kingsley's teeth gleamed white in a flashing smile.

"He's been very quiet since his wife died, but it doesn't appear that he's up to anything more nefarious than researching the history of magic around the time of the founding of Hogwarts. He had a book published last year, did you know?"

"No, that's way outside my field."

"Besides, I doubt if he would do anything to hinder his son's rehabilitation; Draco is working very hard to re-establish the Malfoy family name."

"Draco's got a son of his own now, hasn't he?"

"So I believe."

Hermione frowned.

"Lucius Malfoy isn't the sort to just sit back and leave everything to his son and grandson, Kingsley. He's what, fifty years old? Far too young to retire to his library."

"Well, if you find out anything interesting about what he's up to, do let us know. He can hardly do anything untoward to you if the entire Auror division and the Department of Mysteries know exactly where you are, can he?"

*Famous last words*, Hermione thought as she Apparated to Wiltshire, having refused Harry's offer to accompany her. She preferred to wrestle her demons alone.

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If there were demons, they came cloaked in cholesterol and washed down with Earl Grey tea. A house-elf led Hermione to a room she had never seen before where Lucius Malfoy awaited her at the tea table with plates of cucumber sandwiches, chocolate éclairs and scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam.

"Ah, Mrs Weasley, do come in and have a seat. Welcome to Malfoy Manor."

He was perhaps a little thinner, with a few more fine lines on his face, but his clothes were as immaculate, his hair as perfectly groomed and his ice-grey eyes as cold as she remembered. Still, if he was prepared to make an effort to be polite, so could she.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy. It's kind of you to allow access to your library; the Department of Mysteries is in your debt."

"Let's see if I can do anything to assist you first, shall we? Do help yourself. Lemon or milk in your tea?"

"Milk, thank you."

Malfoy waved a hand at the elf, who bowed and disappeared.

He took his tea with lemon and nibbled delicately at a cucumber sandwich. Hermione gave in to her chocolate craving and went for the éclairs.

"Your friend Mr Potter seemed to think that you've found an ancient text in a Muggle churchyard," Malfoy remarked, dabbing at his lips with a napkin. "Was he correct?"

"Not quite. It was in among the old parish registers in an ancient strongbox; it's cursed in Cumbric."

"Interesting. You are of course aware that the dialect died out in the 11th or 12th century, although it was closely related to Old Welsh? It is written in runes, I assume?"

"In Futharc," Hermione said, sipping her tea. "But the curses appear to be unrelated to the content of the text, which is Anglo-Saxon."

"The text is Old English but the curse is Brythonic? Fascinating."

"Curses, Mr Malfoy. There are at least twenty of them, cast by a number of different people over decades or possibly centuries."

"I hope you have the thing under lock and key."

"In a vat of dry ice, under heavy-duty wards."

Malfoy tapped his forefinger against his lips, his brow wrinkled in thought.

"I suggest you begin with a treatise on the interactions of magics cast in Brythonic languages with West Germanic ones, at a time when the two systems were basically at war. You may find that you need to extract the Anglo-Saxon content completely before you can dissociate the Cumbric curses. Then you may be able to begin breaking down the Brythonic aspects and linking them to their runic roots."

"So you think that the Anglo-Saxon text isn't inert?"

"The runes could well be influencing the curses. They aren't entirely insensitive to their environment, especially after such a length of time. Do you have a copy of the script?"

"It appears to be nothing more than a translation from the Latin of the life of an obscure saint. I have a transcription here in my briefcase."

"Do finish your tea first," Malfoy said mildly, the skin crinkling for a moment around his eyes. They had lost their cold, torpid appearance during the conversation, and Hermione had to remind herself that this was not a fellow Unspeakable but an ex-Death Eater and an old enemy. "Do you understand any Anglo-Saxon?"

"Hardly. I got someone to identify the dialect as early West Saxon, and they told me it was about a saint's life."

"Then it may be worth looking a little closer into the content of the text. I have some books which may help."

Hermione hurriedly swallowed the remains of her tea and pastries and followed Malfoy out of the small drawing room.

She expected to be assaulted by bad memories of her last visit to the manor, yet she was unable to even identify which rooms she had been in and soon realised that the entire ground floor had been not only redecorated, but extensively remodelled. The entrance hall had never seemed so high and airy, and she had recollections of dark panelling and heavy furniture that clashed with the reality of wide expanses of pastel paint and elegant chairs and tables.

"My wife and I had the place gutted," Malfoy remarked, startling her. "I assure you, we all had uncomfortable associations with the previous decor."

Hermione nodded, unsure what to say. He gave her a brief, terse twitch of the lips that approximated to a smile and opened a door. "The library has changed little, since our previous guests barely spent any time in here and only appreciated the books the Ministry saw fit to remove after the war. You will find books missing from the collection that you will know better than I how to access. Otherwise, please be wary of the last set of shelves on the left, as the oldest books are very fragile and I would appreciate it if you don't touch them. You can merely levitate them if you need to peruse them. There are cotton gloves in the desk drawers; please use them to handle the books, and I prefer that you don't use ink in the library; there are pencils and parchment available."

"Of course," Hermione said, only half-hearing his words in her eagerness to get better acquainted with this largesse.

"The catalogue is contained in the two ledgers upon the main desk: part one is in alphabetical order of author, part two in subject order, indexed at the back. Standard magical notation and cross-referencing applies; please speak your requests clearly in Latin or English. The bell beside the fireplace will summon an elf who can assist you, or she will fetch me if I am required. Her name is Crundy, and she has looked after the library for the last seventy years." Malfoy gave her another brief flicker of a smile. "Do please call for me if I can assist. I confess that the puzzle intrigues me, and I would be happy to help unravel it."

With a short bow, he withdrew, leaving Hermione standing alone in the middle of the dark, mahogany-panelled room. The last time she could remember feeling this level of intellectual excitement was when she first entered Hogwarts' library at the age of eleven.

She spent a little time just wandering, gazing entranced at the rare and precious tomes, before settling herself with the catalogue, parchment and pencil.

oooOOOooo

"Mrs Weasley?" Hermione registered that someone had been repeating her name for a while. She peered past the light of the desk lamp to where a figure with long blond hair and a dark grey robe leaned on a cane and watched her with an air of self-satisfied amusement. "Mrs Weasley, loath as I am to make a guest feel unwelcome, I must point out that I'm equally reluctant to suffer the wrath of a team of Aurors led by your husband and his redoubtable friend. They must assume by now that I have kidnapped you."

Hermione stretched, arching her back.

"Sorry, I lost track of the time. I'd better go." She began gathering her papers together.

"I do hope you found something of some small use."

"Of use?" Hermione grinned and shook her head. "Mr Malfoy, you're well aware that you have a vast and precious resource here. I'm very grateful to be allowed free rein in your library, believe me."

"Splendid," he purred, clearly pleased by her enthusiasm. "Have you decided which books you wish to peruse?"

"All of them?" Hermione was gratified when he smirked at her before recalling that she was supposed to be holding a grudge against him. Ron would have been horrified. "Yes, I have a rather extensive list of cross-references."

"If you would leave it with Crundy, she will have them ready for your next visit. You are welcome to take as long as you desire, as long as you give me advance notice of when you intend to be here."

"Tomorrow morning at nine?"

Malfoy nodded regally and snapped his fingers. An elderly elf appeared before him with a pop. She wore an air of mild irritation and a neatly pressed pillowcase with the Malfoy crest embroidered in the corner.

"Yes, Master?"

"Mrs Weasley has a list of requirements for tomorrow morning. Have them ready for nine."

The elf glanced at Hermione with pursed lips.

"The impure-of-blood is handling Master's books?" she asked dubiously. Malfoy tutted.

"Dear dear, Crundy, such things are not to be said in this bright modern world. Mrs Weasley appreciates our treasures just as much as any pureblood."

"Rather more than many purebloods I've met," Hermione snapped. Malfoy raised a perfectly groomed blond eyebrow.

"Quite so. I do apologise, dear lady, but it has taken me some years to train the elves not to use the more offensive term. I have adjusted the wards to allow you to Apparate to and from the front doorstep. The nearest facilities are along the corridor to the right of the portrait of the sphinx, and I'm sure that I don't need to ask you not to eat or drink near the books. The table in the corner is used for refreshments. Until tomorrow, Mrs Weasley."

He bowed and retreated from the room, leaving Hermione wondering about his motives and whether leopards really could change their spots.

oooOOOooo

Not only had Crundy found every reference that Hermione requested but the table in the corner of the library bore a carafe of water, a bowl of fruit and a dish of chocolates. By five past nine, she was happily immersed in a rare and fascinating book on the relative powers of early runes.

Malfoy didn't put in an appearance all day, and Hermione was alarmed to find she was just a little bit disappointed. He was arrogant and she always felt he was secretly sneering at her, but he had seemed genuinely eager to help. She was almost tempted to take him up on his offer by asking for his advice, had she not been pretty sure that he would be unbearably smug about it.

As soon as she entered her kitchen, the fireplace flared into life and a familiar head of tousled red hair appeared in the hearth.

"Hi, Ron." She knelt down to speak to him, hoping this would dissuade him from stepping through. Her head was filled with an exhausting mix of history, strange runes, esoteric curses and the shadow of a tall, smirking blond man leaning on a cane.

"Hermione, what do you think you're playing at?"

She reared back, taken by surprise.

"What? Didn't my solicitor owl you the forms? I told her..."

"Yes, I got them. What are you doing with Malfoy?"

Hermione sat back on her heels and took a deep, calming breath.

"I'm using his library for my work, although I don't quite see what business it is of yours."

"What was Headingly thinking, sending you there on your own? I'm going to have words with that git in the morning..."

"Excuse me? No-one sent me! Harry suggested I used the Malfoy library for research."

"Then Harry should know better! Why didn't he send an Auror with you?"

"Perhaps, Ronald, because I'm a grown-up witch with a wand, a nifty line in personal shields and enough brain to know when I'm in danger and when I'm not."

"Stand back, I'm coming through."

"Oh, no, you're not. I'm tired, I'm about to have a bath and go to bed, and we don't have anything to discuss."

"Yes, we do. You're still my friend, Hermione, and I'm not happy about you putting yourself in danger like this."

If he was her friend, how come he didn't sense when she was sorely tempted to hex his dick with fire ants?

"Then you know how Ginny and I felt, watching you and Harry go off after Dark wizards after just three years of Auror training."

"That's our job," he said proudly. "Your job isn't anything like that; you're not used to dealing with Dark wizards..."

"Have you *seen* the fucking curses I handle on a daily basis?" Hermione leaped to her feet. "Lucius Malfoy is intelligent enough to know better than to harm someone invited to his home, for Merlin's sake!"

"Oh, intelligent, is he? And handsome and as slimy as a cauldron full of flobberworms..."

"You're bloody jealous!"

"Jealous of that slippery Slytherin bastard? Don't be daft! I'm worried about you and I don't think you should be going into that bed of snakes alone argh!"

Hermione tipped the contents of the washing-up bowl into the fireplace, dousing Ron with cold greasy water, putting out the fire and cutting off the connection. She closed off the Floo before going to run herself a bath.

## Chapter 2

### *Chapter 2 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

By four in the afternoon, Hermione felt she was finally getting somewhere. What she'd been informed was the story of an obscure saint turned out to be the tale of a powerful wizard whose political enemies had cursed his family unto the third generation. The enemies, needless to say, were speakers of Cumbric. They had attached curses to the wizard's name, and Hermione believed she was already in a position to remove half of the curses on the scroll. She was debating whether this was sufficient reason to ask Crundly to fetch Malfoy when the door opened at the far end of the library.

She could hear the brisk tap of boot heels upon the polished wooden floor. Hermione was reaching for the paper containing her conclusions when a man spoke behind her.

She heard a voice out of the past, reaching out through the intervening years and taking her back, effortlessly, to the Potions classroom in the dungeons of Hogwarts. She could almost smell that sharp, herb-and-chemical odour that clung to his robes. Hermione closed her eyes. She had spent eight years reliving the death of the Potions master in her dreams, wishing that she had at least attempted to save him, regretting his death almost more than the others because he had fought so long and so hard; his death had been so unnecessary, and he had never known that Harry had won. She let herself wish, for just a moment, that he had cheated death and was alive, instead of whatever this was: a ghost or a portrait or a Polyjuice potion trick in very bad taste.

"It appears Madam Janvier has accepted my paper on the uses of dragon's saliva at last." The deep, smooth voice was so familiar, yet it bore a slight edge that she did not remember from her youth as if he had a residual sore throat. She turned around, slowly, her hand automatically going to the wand on the desk at her side, and peered around the high ornate back of her chair.

He stood in the middle of the library, his black robes sweeping down to pool around his feet, black hair glossy in the lamplight. His black eyes were fixed upon her face, startled for so brief a moment that she wondered if she had seen the expression at all.

"Mrs Weasley," he said, and then his lips pulled into their habitual smirk.

For a wild instant, she thought that this couldn't be Severus Snape because he didn't know her married name; he had died before Ron had proposed.

They stared at one another, and Hermione just knew he was waiting for her to make a fool of herself. She got to her feet, wand in hand, and when she faced him, she bowed her head.

"Professor Snape." She raised her head again and stared into his impassive eyes. "I am so very, very glad to see you again." She heard his breath emerge in a short huff, perhaps of amusement.

"Hedging our bets, are we?"

"Either it really is you, in which case I can say how glad I am, and how sorry for all the things that went wrong in the past, or else someone's playing a very mean trick on me and I'm probably going to lose my dignity."

"Or your life," he whispered. Hermione's wand twitched in her hand and his lip lifted in a sneer. "Do you really think you could best me in a duel, girl?"

Hermione's heart soared in unexpected joy.

"If you're Snape, no, I couldn't, but then I wouldn't need to. If you were anyone else, yes, I probably could."

He gave his head a little backwards flick, which tossed an errant strand of hair away from his face. The movement was entirely and utterly him, subconscious perhaps, and a grudging acknowledgement that she was correct.

Hermione quashed a sudden and unexpected need to cry and settled instead for a bubble of laughter.

"Oh, god, it really is you, isn't it? The real Snape, alive and kicking." She sobered abruptly. "Damn. Does this mean you're going to have to Oblivate me?"

"Do you believe that I should?" He took a slow step towards her, and she recognised how dangerous he had always been, how that gliding walk signified control and a deep, hard-won self-awareness.

"I don't know. You must have a reason for letting everyone think you're dead everyone except the Malfoys, that is."

"I am hidden under a modified Fidelius charm," he said, "which I have broken by inadvertently speaking to you."

"Then I won't be able to speak to anyone else about you anyway."

"Only to Lucius, Draco and the elves, because they already know about me."

"But why?"

The word 'sardonic' had been invented for the tilt of his black eyebrow.

"Do I need to answer that question, Mrs Weasley?"

"You must know that Harry obtained a posthumous pardon and an Order of Merlin First Class for you."

"And that convinces the remaining Death Eaters that I was *not* a traitor to their cause, does it?"

"Mulciber! Was it you who dumped Mulciber in the atrium of the Ministry with a label round his neck, addressed to Kingsley?"

"Very good, take a house point."

The Hermione who had been a schoolgirl when she last met him would have protested that he shouldn't try to act as a vigilante and take the law into his own hands, but this was a rather older and wiser Hermione.

"Is that what you're doing, chasing down the remaining ... Hang on, were you behind the new Wolfsbane variant? Of course you were; it was published under Daphne Greengrass's name and she never excelled at Potions. She's Draco's sister-in-law so there's the Malfoy connection. I hope you got well paid for it!"

He merely smirked at her. He must have mellowed in the eight years since the war.

"How did you survive, sir?"

"You are the one who has always known everything; how do you think I survived, Miss Know-It-All?"

His voice reawakened in her an old mix of trepidation and grudging respect. Hermione remembered how he had always walked so close to the edge, all the years she had known him. He had goaded Harry, snapped and snarled at Dumbledore, alienated the rest of the Hogwarts staff and the Order and braved Voldemort's lair, wielding his precise and lethal wit as if he really did not care about anyone, least of all himself.

"Your body had gone when we went back the next day, and there was a message scrawled in blood, 'May the half-blood traitor rot in hell!' so we assumed the Death Eaters had taken it. That was just to stop anyone looking for you, of course. Was it a Portkey or a Stasis Charm? Or both? A Portkey to Malfoy Manor and Healers who were either Oblivated afterwards or else you were taken abroad."

"Close enough," an urbane voice remarked from beside her. Lucius Malfoy gave his heavy-lidded half-smile. "Narcissa arranged everything, in repayment for the way Severus protected Draco. Severus, you are getting careless, my friend."

"As are you. You might have warned me you had a guest."

"Ah," said Malfoy, stroking his chin and giving his complacent smile, "had you informed me that you would return a day early, I would have done so."

"A minor problem with the international Portkey booking. It is of little relevance, since I am sure Mrs Weasley is far too much a Gryffindor to attempt to break a Fidelius charm."

"Your assumption isn't entirely correct," Hermione said, for no real reason that she could discern. Looking from one Slytherin to the other, the almost identical pitch of one blond and one black eyebrow, she wondered if Snape realised that he had modelled his expression of supercilious amusement upon that of his older friend. "I'm no longer a Weasley; Ron and I have separated, and we're in the process of getting divorced."

"Why is this of any interest to me?" Snape enquired with delicate contempt. Hermione shrugged.



"I recall your passion for accuracy, Professor."

"Severus does display such passion, doesn't he?" Malfoy's grey eyes glinted in the lamplight as Snape glowered at him. "It was your passion for life that enabled you to survive, so don't knock it, Severus. And yes, Mrs I'm sorry, Miss Granger accuracy is an oft-unappreciated virtue which, as an Unspeakable and a curse breaker, you no doubt have in abundance. Speaking of which, how are you getting on with your project?"

"Brilliantly! I was going to ask Crundy to tell you. I've written out the roots of the curses that are attached to the sorcerer's name."

"Splendid! May I...?"

Hermione thrust a roll of parchment at him, and he spread it out on the desk, one manicured finger following the rows of runes and Arithmancy calculations and his lips moving soundlessly as he read through them. Snape cleared his throat.

"Fascinating though this might be, Lucius, I have just arrived back from Canberra where it is past three in the morning."

"Of course, my dear fellow." He clapped his hands together sharply and an elf, clad in a Malfoy pillowcase, popped into being before him. "Prossy, set out a light repast in the small dining room immediately. Have Severus' luggage taken to his rooms and ensure that the bed is aired. Miss Granger, will you join us? I really would like to know how you disentangled the Cumbric from the Anglo-Saxon aspects of the curses. Was the Malthus-Gainey treatise of use after all?"

"Lucius..." Snape breathed, and when Hermione and Malfoy turned to him, he shook his head. "Really, Lucius, are you working for the Ministry now?"

"The puzzle is intriguing and right in the period that Carstairs so eloquently describes in his new book you won't have read it, Severus *Charms and Curses of the Early Middle Ages, Volume Two*."

"You would no more expect me to read that than I would expect you to peruse a copy of *Esoteric Herbal Potions of the Mesopotamians*."

"I might," Malfoy said with a shrug, "if I was really jaded; however, I have a very gratifying notion that with you and Miss Granger at the dinner table, I shall be far from bored."

"Has Carstairs actually published the second volume?" Hermione asked. "It would be a great help if he has."

"Not exactly, I have a pre-publication copy to review for *The Journal of Applied Charms*. It is beside my bed; a little late-night reading. I shall ensure it is in the library ready for you tomorrow. Now do come along; the elves get agitated if their cooking is allowed to spoil."

He made a graceful chivvying gesture, and Hermione found herself accompanying the two men into a small dining room where a table was set for three. The walls were decorated with a delicate duck-egg green and the paintwork in white, picked out with deep green highlights that were echoed in the velvet curtains and the seats of the chairs. Malfoy didn't appear to be observing her perusal, but he remarked, "I considered that Narcissa excelled herself when she remodelled this room," as he pulled out Hermione's chair.

"It is beautiful, Mr Malfoy." Hermione gently stroked the petals of one of the white roses in the vase in the centre of the table. It purred at her.

"My dear, do please call me Lucius. We are, after all, provisionally comrades in arms against the might of the wily Futharc runes."

He met her incredulous look with a smirk and a click of his fingers. An elf appeared and placed dishes of soup before them. Malfoy flicked out his napkin and placed it across his lap, taking in a breath of the fragrant steam rising from his soup. "Ah, brown Windsor soup, excellent; sustaining but not too heavy."

The elf offered a basket of bread rolls fresh from the oven, crisp on the outside and still hot and fluffy inside, accompanied by a dish of yellow butter. Hermione had long ago decided that Wizards seemed to neither know nor care about dental cavities, hardening of the arteries or cholesterol levels.

"Was the conference as motivating as you had hoped?" Malfoy no, Lucius enquired, spreading butter on his bread.

"Parts of it were acceptable; two lectures and a demonstration were of interest. Fanthorpe's presentation on the properties of the blood of magical creatures lived up to expectations."

Snape glanced at Hermione, and she sensed that he was poised, awaiting her response. She had no reason not to oblige him.

"Fanthorpe seems to be verging on the Dark."

"Fanthorpe is looking at the inherent magical properties of blood versus other more easily collected products such as tears, saliva, hair and sweat, in the hope of substituting blood with ingredients that can be collected less invasively," Snape said. "Which you would know if you had followed the debate in *New Sorcerer* over the last ten months."

"I side with Ptarmigan. I believe that the structure and properties of the blood itself are too important to allow substitution."

"That may be so in some cases; however, using easily obtained blood of non-magical animals combined with the magically-enhancing saliva or hair of rare magical species not only allows one to collect samples without harm to the creature itself but also brings certain potions out from under the umbrella of those we dismiss as 'Dark' and allows their properties to be legally investigated."

"Naturally Severus wouldn't dream of handling any potion that could be construed as Dark," Lucius murmured.

"I hardly want my potions business investigated by the heavy-footed blunderers of the MLE," Snape said with a sniff. "As soon as they discovered that the brewer was protected by a Fidelius, they wouldn't stop until they'd dragged me into the light."

"Which would be devilishly inconvenient for a man whose life revolves between minimal sleep, writing and brewing in a dungeon," Lucius drawled. He met Snape's scowl with an insouciant shrug. "You need to come back into Wizarding society, Severus. Surely you want to be able to walk down Diagon Alley without using Polyjuice or a Glamour?"

"Not particularly, no. I do not desire to be scorned and spat at."

"But you wouldn't be," Hermione said eagerly. "Your name was completely cleared. You're a hero."

"Dead heroes have always been the most popular sort, Miss Granger, as they are much less inconvenient than living double agents."

"There are plenty of people who would be delighted to welcome you back."

"I doubt it." Snape gave her a completely insincere little smile. "I would be an embarrassment to them all."

"Harry would be overjoyed."

"And this matters to me why?"

"You said that you don't want to be scorned and spat at; well, I can assure you that if you were seen in the company of the Minister for Magic, Harry and Ginny Potter and the Headmistress of Hogwarts, there isn't a wizard or witch who would dare scorn you."

"She has you there, Severus, admit it."

"I will do no such thing." Snape tore his bread roll into little pieces with his fingertips and dropped the pieces into his soup. "I have escaped the entire Potter family and have no desire ever to come into contact with any of them ever again."

"Not even for Lily's sake?"

"No."

"If Harry knew that you were alive," Hermione said thoughtfully, "if you asked him, he'd go down on his knees in front of you to apologise to you for the way we misjudged you, and for the way that the Marauders treated you. Ron and I'd be there with him." Hermione crossed her fingers under the table; she suspected that Ron's mistrust of Slytherins extended to even Snape. "James Potter senior would spin in his grave."

She had him there, but he merely sniffed and did not reply. About to press her point, she caught a tiny movement out of the corner of her eye. Lucius gave an infinitesimal shake of his head. When he saw she was watching, his eyelids lowered and he glanced at Snape, then back to her.

Hermione reached for another bread roll and said brightly, "Since I must assume that you're not really Euphonia Bigwife, you must write as Marius Lacoste. I admired the review you wrote about *Twentieth Century Charms*. I don't think I've ever read anything quite so damning without actually approaching libel."

"One of my better efforts," Lucius agreed in a self-satisfied purr. "Have you finished your soup?" He clapped his hands and Prossy appeared with a pop to Banish the dishes and replace them with soufflés and salad. "Yes, that book should be ritually burned along with its pompous windbag of an author."

"Not one of your admirers, then," Snape said dryly.

"Even Flitwick wrote to agree with my review, although had he known who Marius Lacoste really was, he'd probably have put the book onto the recommended reading list at Hogwarts just to spite me."

"Filius doesn't hold grudges," Snape murmured. He broke into his soufflé with his fork and then scooped up what looked like wild mushrooms in cream sauce. Hermione discovered her own soufflé contained a delicious concoction of seafood and Lucius' dish appeared to hold cheese.

"I hadn't realised how much I miss elvish cooking since leaving Hogwarts. This is delicious."

"I was under the impression that the Ministry canteen employed elves," Lucius remarked.

Hermione felt her face heating in a blush. "Yes, but they don't like me much. I made the mistake of trying to negotiate payment for them when I first joined the Ministry, and they've never forgiven me. I know better now," she added quickly in case Prossy was nearby. "The only thing they don't either undercook or burn is beans on toast. I usually get someone else to fetch me a sandwich and mug of tea, but I think they've cottoned that they're for me, because the order has been wrong for the last few weeks."

Lucius made a 'tsk tsk' sound and shook his head.

"Take away the service they render to wizards and you take away their reason for living."

"Witches," Hermione muttered, and when Lucius directed his expressive eyebrow at her, elaborated, "Whenever the cooking and cleaning gets done in a household without elves, it seems to get done by witches, not wizards."

"Ah, a feminist witch," Lucius sighed, "of course."

"Yes, sadly for you, we got the vote years ago, Mr Malfoy."

"And have been bothering your pretty little heads with politics ever since."

His expression was just too arrogant. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"Bastard."

"No, I assure you that my parents had been married for years before my birth; a marriage that had been planned for decades, as was my own. It was Narcissa's fond hope that Draco would be allowed to marry for love, and my pleasure to see it come to pass. My father and I were just as much victims of an archaic tradition as any witch."

Snape gave an irritated snort. "Archaic but comfortable enough, Lucius. You never showed any inclination to run away from your Manor and your money." There was a sharp bite to Snape's words, which Malfoy acknowledged with an inclination of his head that appeared, to Hermione, almost apologetic.

"Had I been free to choose, I would have chosen differently, it's true."

Snape slapped his knife down on the table with some force.

"Easy to say that now, isn't it?" He stood up, drawing his robes around him like a prince's train. "If you will excuse me? Goodnight, Miss Granger, Lucius." He gave a short bow, turned and strode out of the room.

Lucius patted his lips with his napkin.

"Dear Severus, such an intriguingly prickly character, even now. Do take my word for it, Miss Granger, if you push him, he'll push back far harder. You've planted the seeds of the idea. I commend your excellent use of the name of Potter's father, by the way, and we shall winkle him out from his lair in the end. We must make him our next project, once we have mastered the Futharc runes." He sighed. "He'll calm down eventually; he always does. Now, speaking of runes. *Accio* Carstairs volume two." He held up his hand and smiled as a large book sailed in through the door that Snape had left open. "There you are, Miss Granger, you'll find chapters seven through to ten merit close perusal."

"Thank you!" Hermione took the heavy tome and opened it eagerly. "Oh, call me Hermione, for Merlin's sake. Does he continue his argument about the relative strengths of Brythonic and Goidelic charms?"

"Chapter twenty, I believe. You may borrow the book upon one condition." His voice was so serious that Hermione forced herself to look up from the index. Something in his cool, grey gaze made her insides twitch. "You promise me that you'll go home and sleep first, and not spend the entire night reading."

Smiling, Hermione stood up and held out her hand.

"If I must. Thank you very much, Lucius; this'll be a huge help."

To her surprise, rather than shake her hand, he took it in his, raised it to his lips and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. She wished she hadn't chewed her thumbnail quite so obviously.

"My pleasure, Hermione. We shall meet again in the library. Tomorrow, I trust?"

"Of course. Goodnight."

True to her word, she didn't spend the night reading the book; she spent rather a lot of it wondering about the relationship between Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape, and then dreaming that she was watched over by a pair of sharp black eyes and a pair of cold grey ones.

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By teatime the next day, they had worked out a feasible plan for Hermione's first attempt at de-cursing the manuscript.

"It won't clear the lot," Lucius warned her, "but at the very least, you'll strip the first layer and be able to use the Spencer illumination procedure on the root complex."

"I was thinking of asking someone to help me with the Braintree detangling charm."

"My dear witch!" Lucius stared at her. "If the charm slips, the whole thing could explode! No, you would need at least two, preferably four, very well matched and very powerful witches and wizards, who all knew what they were doing."

"One of the other Unspeakables has done it before," she protested.

"Surely not on something as complex and virulent as this? I thought not. Raise your wand." When she hesitated, he made a sharp, impatient gesture at her wand hand. Hermione allowed her wand to slip down her sleeve into her fingers and brought it up to eye level. Lucius brought the tip of his own wand to within an inch of hers and murmured a melodic charm. Her hand tingled, not unpleasantly, and the wand tip glowed faintly yellow. "You won't be able to perform the Braintree charm safely unless your fellow Unspeakable is at least a twelve on the AIM scale."

He smirked and lowered his hand. Hermione reached out and swiftly cast the same charm on Lucius' wand. He began to frown, then realised he could hardly object so put on a show of waiting patiently as Hermione interpreted the subtle magical signals pulsing through her wand hand.

"Your Absolute Intrinsic Magical level is even higher than mine, you're a fourteen."

"It tends to increase by a quarter of a point per decade, up until the age of eighty or a hundred, so I would expect it to be so," Lucius remarked, sheathing his wand. "I would very strongly advise you to avoid depending upon only one other person if you use the Braintree charm. That knot of curses is too unstable for two people to control if it goes awry."

"Will you come with me and help?"

"Only if we have two other people at level twelve or more."

"Harry's something like a sixteen."

"I might have known. What level is your fellow Unspeakable?"

"Twelve, I think, possibly thirteen."

He shook his head.

"Your friend Potter is powerful but inexperienced. I would balance him with you, as you have far more experience with curses and you know each other well, and I prefer not to place my life in the hands of a less powerful wizard or witch who may well bear a grudge."

Hermione felt her lips curve into a smile.

"Severus Snape it is, then."

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"Absolutely not," Snape snapped. "If you think you can blackmail me into going into the bowels of the Ministry of Magic by taking foolish risks with your own lives, you can think again!"

Lucius placed his fingertips together before his face and fixed his cool grey gaze upon his perfectly manicured nails.

"Who mentioned the Ministry, Severus? Hermione can bring the monstrous thing here."

Snape folded his arms.

"That means bringing Potter with it. I knew this would happen."

"Potter can be accommodated within the Fidelius."

"You can trust Harry as much as you can trust me," Hermione pointed out, "and you haven't felt the need to Oblivate me yet."

"Oh, give it up, Severus!" Lucius exclaimed, "It's been eight years! Either make up your mind to emigrate or come out of hiding! Stop living this half-life! Live the life you deserve."

"No," said Snape. "You can bugger off, the pair of you!" He strode out of the room with his robes almost crackling in anger.

"How about Kingsley Shacklebolt?" Hermione asked, after a long and rather uncomfortable silence. "He's a level fourteen, I believe, and he isn't the sort to bear a grudge."

After another silence, Lucius nodded.

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"That was fun," Harry remarked, sitting up and wiping the ash from his glasses with his sleeve. "Was it supposed to do that?"

"Probably not," Shacklebolt rumbled, getting to his feet and offering Hermione a hand up. "Are you all right, Malfoy?"

Lucius frowned and waved a puff of white smoke away from his face.

"Did anyone note whether the voice was yelling in a Brythonic or West Germanic language?" He stood up and used a charm to vanish the dust, ash and splatters of black goo that had exploded from the vat of dry ice in the centre of the room.

"The accent was too thick," Hermione told him. "Damn. I knew we should have persuaded..."

Hermione's throat suddenly closed up as if she were having the most acute attack of laryngitis of her life; she spluttered and choked. Harry rushed to her side and

Shacklebolt raised his wand, but Lucius said quickly, "Stop trying to talk."

She nodded, realising that the modified Fidelius charm had prevented her from speaking Snape's name in front of the others. The spasm in her larynx immediately eased, and she coughed.

"Sorry, ash in my throat. If you'd all just wait a moment, I'll see if we got anywhere."

She directed a non-invasive spell at the scroll and stared at the numbers that appeared over it.

"Well?" Lucius enquired.

"It worked. Look, the curses are lying in parallel."

"The explosion must have been a type of ward, designed to prevent tampering." Lucius approached the simmering strongbox. "Your *Protego* is impressive, Mr Potter. Thank you for your timely intervention. Now you can begin to work on the curses one at a time, Hermione. My word, there are some beauties here! See, that's an early variant of the Eyeball Exploding Curse, and a range of very nasty and insidious little blood and bone hexes..."

"Thank you all for your help," Hermione said before Lucius got too carried away in his admiration for the creators of the curses.

"I've got a copy of Cobbold's 'Curious Curses and their Origins', which might help you to identify them," Shacklebolt remarked, "but I suspect Malfoy's library will be of more use. Harry, have you completed your report on the funfair murder yet?"

"Still waiting for Magical Forensics to come up with the magical residue analysis. I can give you a draft copy, though."

"Yes, please. The Wizengamot needs a précis before Vaughan's trial. Tell me, did Tony get anything on the wand fragments you found..."

Hermione watched them leave, Kingsley's dark head inclined towards the smaller man as they spoke. Lucius flicked an invisible speck of ash from his robe.

"Go on, say it," Hermione said, and he raised his eyebrow at her, exaggerating his expression of polite enquiry. "I could never have contained that explosion with just one other person to help; you were right."

"Of course," he said equably. "And now I expect to claim my just reward."

"Which is?"

"Your company at seven-thirty at the Manor for dinner, and a glass or two of fine wine to celebrate our first victory over the Futharc runes."

"I've still got all those curses to unravel yet."

"And when you finally hold the manuscript in your hand, disarmed and innocuous, we shall have a proper celebration, with champagne, but for now, do join me for a meal *en famille*."

"Oh, if you insist," Hermione said, and he bowed and smirked before Flooding away from the Ministry.

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Hermione placed a dish of Hercules Horrocks' Gourmet Kneazle Nosh on the kitchen floor and stuck her head out of the back door.

"Crookshanks, your supper's ready! I'm going out tonight so you're getting fed early."

Crookshanks turned his head to blink at her, raised a front paw and licked it delicately. Having made it perfectly clear that half-Kneazles never obeyed orders, he jumped down from the garden wall and sauntered inside, whiskers twitching. He mewed politely and settled over the dish. The house seemed too quiet, and Hermione realised she missed the high-pitched twittering of Ron's owl, who by now would have been circling Crookshanks' head in the hope of snatching a scrap of Kneazle food. She never thought she would pine for Pigwidgeon.

"Should I buy myself an owl?" she asked the cat. "What do you think: a nice big impressive tawny owl?"

Crookshanks ignored her, intent upon clearing his plate. The Floo behind her flared into life and Hermione turned around.

"Hi," said Ron's head, "can I come through?" Seeing that Hermione was wearing a set of smart robes and high heels, he added, "I won't stay long."

"Okay," Hermione said dubiously, and his head withdrew; then the fire roared high and her ex-husband stepped into the kitchen. Crookshanks ignored him, too. Like Hermione, Ron was dressed in his best robes.

"Just wanted to tell you something," he said. He appeared embarrassed, looking around the untidy kitchen rather than at her face. "Thought it was better than sending an owl, or letting you read about it in the gossip column of the Prophet."

"Go on, then," Hermione said, already suspecting what he was about to say.

"I'm seeing someone." He glanced at her to gauge her reaction and was obviously reassured by the lack of anger in her expression. "I only met her last week," he added hastily, as if about to be accused of carrying on behind Hermione's back during their marriage.

"That's great," Hermione said, "and thanks for telling me yourself. I appreciate it."

"Yeah, thought you might." Ron grinned suddenly, and Hermione was reminded of the schoolboy he had been. "Bet you thought Ginny put me up to this, didn't you?"

Hermione grinned back.

"It did cross my mind for an instant, but we all had to grow up at some time. Have a good evening."

"You, too." He reached up, without looking, for the pot of Floo powder on the mantelpiece and as he threw a large pinch into the fireplace, he added, "It was Harry who said I should tell you, actually. The Leaky Cauldron!"

Crookshanks looked up at her and asked, "Mmmrrupp?" and she sighed.

"I'm fine, Crooks." Yet there was a curious little empty ache in the region of her diaphragm, as if something had been gently extracted without her realising it.

# Chapter 3

## *Chapter 3 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Hermione followed the house-elf into the dining room of Malfoy Manor where candles sparkled upon crystal, silver and a dazzling white tablecloth. A grey-clad wizard turned from his contemplation of the sunset across a large lake, and for a moment, Hermione wondered why Lucius had cut off his magnificent hair.

"Hello, Granger," Draco drawled. "Congratulations."

"Hello, Malfoy," Hermione said coolly, "Congratulations for what?"

Draco contemplated her for a moment, then shrugged.

"Take your pick."

"Hm." Hermione handed her one and only velvet evening cloak to the waiting elf. "I doubt if you're very interested in my work on futharc runes, so it's a toss-up between getting your father out of his self-imposed seclusion or failing to get Snape out of his."

"Why should I congratulate you on a failure?"

"I emerged unhexed and with my memory intact, which is a good start, don't you think?"

"I was thinking more of your decision to dump the red-headed idiot," Draco said casually. "Good move, that."

"For a Mudblood, I suppose."

They stared at each other for a while. Something warmed in the depths of the sea-grey eyes, so like his father's.

"Truce?" Hermione suggested and he gave a sharp nod.

"Why not? I gather you'll be around for a while, at least until you've worked your way through the library." He picked up a small glass from the mantelpiece and sipped before adding, "And satisfied your curiosity about Snape, of course. Sherry?"

"Dry, if you have it."

She almost missed the slight flicker of his smile. "What else? Sweet sherry is an abomination."

"Good grief, that's exactly what my father says."

She surprised a short huff of laughter from him. Draco crossed to a side table and poured the sherry, handing her the glass.

"Is your wife here?" Hermione asked.

He shook his head.

"She's taken Scorpius to visit her aunt in Ireland; I had an important business meeting today, so I'll join them tomorrow."

They seemed to have exhausted the possibilities of polite conversation for a while and stood watching two white peacocks squabbling and chasing one another, flying back and forth across the lake. Hermione drank her sherry (dry but mellow; her father would have approved) and pondered upon fate and Malfoys and why she had allowed Ginny to choose her shoes, which were even more uncomfortable than they were stylish.

"Ah, there you both are. I apologise, I had to prise Severus away from his potions with a pikestaff." Lucius smiled that satisfied smile that always made Hermione think of something cool, sleek and carnivorous. Possibly a cobra. "You haven't killed each other, which is very pleasing."

"We decided that blood-stained carpets are so passé," Draco remarked. His father inclined his head, a gesture that indicated both amusement and mild censure, and went to help himself to the sherry.

"Severus will join us in a moment. No doubt he has recalled that we have guests for dinner and does not wish to join us perfumed with frog guts, rat spleen and armadillo bile." He affected a shudder. "Potions are so very messy."

"I always enjoyed Potions," Hermione said. "At least, when I wasn't being shouted at for being an insufferable know-it-all."

"Yes, I did too," Draco agreed. "Potter-baiting made a grand spectator sport."

"You did your share of it yourself."

He shrugged an impeccably clad shoulder. "It went both ways, didn't it? He gave as good as he got. I recall a firework in a cauldron in our second year."

"That was a diversion," Hermione admitted. "I was able to raid Professor Snape's store under cover of the chaos."

"Really? Goody-goody Granger actually stole from Snape's stores? What in Merlin's name were you doing?"

"Brewing Polyjuice."

"In your second year?" Lucius purred. "My word, what a precocious child you were."

"Harry and Ron impersonated Crabbe and Goyle; they wanted to find out if you were the heir of Slytherin," Hermione told Draco. "We were convinced you'd opened the Chamber of Secrets."

"I'm flattered," Draco said dryly. "Although I wonder if you shouldn't have been in Slytherin yourself. Stealing from Snape, sending your minions into the serpents' den..."

"Ah, well, I was going to come, too, except that instead of Polyjuicing into Millicent Bulstrode, I accidentally Polyjuiced into her cat."

Draco almost spluttered his sherry.

"I'd have loved to have seen that!"

"It was highly embarrassing," Hermione admitted. "And yes, Professor Snape, I do owe you an apology for stealing your Boomslang skin."

Snape glided into the room, drew himself up and said softly, "Fifty points from Gryffindor. I assume the potion worked otherwise?"

"Of course."

"Insufferable know-it-all Muggle-born," Draco muttered.

"Teacher's smarmy pure-blood pet."

They stared at each other, but the old fire had died away. Draco shook his head. "Just doesn't work anymore, does it?"

"You'd better be careful; you'll be polite to Harry next."

"Too late," Draco admitted glumly. "We're both on the Nocturne Alley modernisation committee. Oh, Merlin, the Malfoys are becoming respectable." He glanced aside at Snape. "You're a bad influence on us."

"I'm sure. Have you been forced to be pleasant to a Weasley recently?"

Draco brightened up. "You're right; there is hope for me yet. I had a long argument with one of them about the quality of the line of cauldrons that I wanted to import from Germany."

"Percy," Hermione said.

"Not to mention the one at the joke shop, who simply refuses to let me buy him out?"

"George."

"I'm sure I could pick a fight with the Weasel if I tried. All is right with the world."

Prossy popped up beside Lucius, who nodded once, and dishes appeared on the table. They took their seats, Hermione wondering how on earth she had come to this: dining at Malfoy Manor and conversing politely with three archetypal Slytherins.

"I gather your paper on the uses of dragon's saliva has been accepted for publication by the *Journal of Applied Sorcery*, Severus," Draco remarked, flicking out his napkin and spreading it upon his lap. "Remind me to warn Daphne." He caught Hermione's curious glance and explained, "Severus publishes under the names 'King and Greengrass'; any queries are directed via my sister-in-law, who handles the correspondence and the accounts."

"King?" Hermione turned to Snape, who sneered at her across the table. "Of course, you're the mysterious Mr Aurelius King, of King's Potions."

"Quite although hardly mysterious. I'm simply the backroom boy who brews the potions."

"Including the most effective variant ever of the Wolfsbane potion, among others."

Snape gave a wave of one hand, but the gesture was not intended to dismiss her comment; on the contrary, he clearly regarded the praise as no more than his due. Hermione looked down at her plate and her mouth watered.

"Mm, asparagus," she murmured happily.

"Allow me?" Lucius reached across and held up a bottle of wine. "We have pumpkin juice if you prefer, but you might find that this Sauvignon Blanc goes excellently with vegetables and salads. Do let me have your opinion."

"I'm hardly an expert," Hermione said quickly. "Although my father did try to educate my palate. He always shudders when my mother puts lime juice into her lager."

"I'm not surprised," Lucius muttered, filling their glasses. Hermione wondered if his comment meant that he expected all Muggles to be barbaric. Snape wore an expression of supercilious amusement, and she just knew he enjoyed watching her struggle to keep up with the nuances of Slytherin conversation. She was outnumbered three to one she rather wished she had Harry or Ginny beside her for moral support and these three had known each other almost all their lives.

The answer came to her not in a flash of light or sudden revelation, but like something she had always known but had temporarily forgotten. She would never out-Slytherin a single one of them; she merely had to out-Gryffindor them.

"Since Muggles don't even know about us," she remarked, "it isn't really possible to have a two-way exchange, is it? The few who do know, like my parents, have to promise to keep the Wizarding world secret."

Lucius nodded politely. Draco, who knew her rather better than his father did, watched with curiosity.

"So," Hermione said, holding her glass of wine up to the light, "knowledge and customs can really only pass one way, from Muggle culture, via the Muggle-borns and half-bloods, into Wizarding society."

"Historically it was a two-way exchange," Lucius protested. "Muggles took knowledge from Wizards in the past."

"Only up until the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy of 1692," Hermione pointed out, "which pre-dates the development of Sauvignon Blanc, for example."

Snape gave a little huff, and when Hermione glanced at him, he smirked at her. "What is your point, Miss Granger?"

"That the Wizarding world takes from the Muggles without giving anything back, and Wizarding society is derived from Muggles if it wasn't, people like me wouldn't even be able to understand the language, would we?"

"Would such an acknowledgement make you happy, or is the point simply that it would make purebloods unhappy?"

Hermione remembered then that Snape had never played nicely.

"Neither," she responded, "it was merely an interesting intellectual exercise."

"You're suggesting that wizards and witches are no more than parasites upon the Muggle world, Miss Granger."

"Aren't we? We make use of those parts of it that we want and ignore the rest. We have the power to do great good, and we refrain."

"Ah, but we also have the power to do great evil. Don't Muggles also have the power to do evil?"

"Of course, but they also make excellent Sauvignon." Hermione held up her glass and sipped appreciatively. "You can't claim that this is elf-made either, I saw the label."

"But they have to work so hard at it," Draco protested, "everything is done by sheer physical labour while all we have to do is wave a wand."

"You travelled on the Hogwarts Express, didn't you?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Who do you think invented the steam engine? It certainly wasn't a wizard."

"My dear Miss Granger," Snape said, in a tone of repressed irritation, "do you really think you can change the entire world to suit your own rather extraordinary principles and viewpoint? Have you brought along multi-coloured badges stating 'Hug a Muggle Today!', 'Join the Campaign for Centaur Equality!' or 'Vote for Saggy the House-Elf for Minister of Magic!'?"

Hermione laughed. "Thank Merlin for that, I was starting to wonder how far I'd have to go to get a reaction."

"Oh, you were just being irritating!" Draco exclaimed. "I thought there was some kind of subtle plot, but I was forgetting I'm not used to conversing with Gryffindors anymore."

"Never mind," Hermione told him, "I'm sure you can hire one if you start getting too deficient in Gryffindor characteristics. Everyone needs a sprinkling of the other houses' qualities. I've found that a dash of Slytherin cunning is a great help in the Ministry."

"Your opponents are probably so astonished that they fail to react in time."

"Now, now, Draco," his father chided, "don't be snide to our guest." But the corners of his mouth were twitching upwards.

"Harry and I like to act the archetypical Gryffindors," Hermione said, "because people don't expect it when we do a Slytherin on them."

"I didn't realise that you could."

"Didn't you know? The Sorting Hat wanted to put Harry in Slytherin, but he asked it to let him join Gryffindor, with Ron."

Draco snorted, but Snape cocked his head and stared at her.

"And you? Did the hat offer you Ravenclaw?"

"Well, it dithered a bit between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. Did it think about putting you into Ravenclaw, too?"

Snape nodded.

"Wouldn't the world have been different," Lucius said dreamily, twirling his almost empty glass between his fingers so that the last few drops of pale wine caught the candlelight, "if Severus and you had gone into Ravenclaw and Potter into Slytherin?"

"You would have been my Head of house," Hermione told Snape, but he shook his head.

"I doubt I would have become a teacher."

"Of course. You clearly didn't enjoy it."

"Tell me, do you ever engage your brain before speaking?"

Lucius gave a tiny hiss of surprise or displeasure, but Hermione shrugged.

"It was clear to everyone how much you disliked us and how you resented teaching dunderheads."

"I resented the almost intolerable position I was put into by your beloved mentor."

"If you truly think the three of us idolise Dumbledore," Hermione said, keeping her voice light and steady with an effort, "then you're not using that brain you're famous for, are you?"

"Dumbledore let Potter get away with everything," Draco muttered, his voice tinged with old resentment.

"We were naive," Hermione told him. "We thought it was because Dumbledore thought Harry might die. It was only at the end that we realised it was because Dumbledore knew that Harry *had* to die."

"He knew?" Draco stared at her. "Potter walked out there, knowing he was going to his death?"

"Gryffindor through and through," Snape sneered but the sneer was half-hearted at best.

"We're good at the big dramatic finish, Professor. It took a true Slytherin to spy for year upon year and still remain true to the very end. We couldn't have succeeded without you, and if Harry was here, he'd echo my every word. Thank you, Severus Snape."

He inclined his head graciously, and Lucius swiftly refilled their glasses, raising his own in a toast to his friend.

"There you are, Severus, perhaps you'll have Gryffindors as well as Slytherins naming their little wizards after you."

Hermione looked at Draco. "You didn't, did you?"

"Scorpius Severus Malfoy," Draco said with satisfaction, and Hermione gave a crow of delight that made all three stare at her.

"Harry and Ginny's baby is going to be baptised Albus Severus Potter," she explained.

If only the Fidelius charm would allow her to show the memory of Snape's horrified expression to the Potters.

# Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

"That was delicious," Hermione exclaimed. Prossy looked suspiciously at her out of the side of his prominent eyes and popped away with the empty dessert dishes, leaving port, glasses and a small silver box upon the table.

"Of course it was," Lucius said complacently. "I'd have been mortified had it been otherwise." He left unsaid the proviso that if the master had been mortified, the elves would have suffered more than mere mortification. Hermione pursed her lips but did not rise to the bait. She was aware of Snape smirking on one side of her and Draco on the other.

Lucius lifted the decanter of port and poured out four glasses. Hermione had already drunk more wine than she usually imbibed in a month, and she suspected she was well over the limit to Apparate. Lucius flicked his wand and levitated the silver box to Snape's end of the table. Snape opened it, lifted out a cigar and held it below his large nostrils, sniffing appreciatively along its length. Then he took a small pair of clippers from the box and trimmed the ends before lighting the cigar. He glanced at Hermione and twirled his wand, setting up a vortex of air above his head that sucked the smoke away into nothing, leaving only the faintest hint of the sweet-sharp aroma in the air.

"For some reason, I don't dislike the smell of cigars," she remarked, sipping her port. "When I was little, I always thought they smelled very grown-up."

"Masculine and virile," Draco drawled.

"Not exactly. My grandmother smoked little King Edward cigars and I still associate them with her."

Snape leaned back in his chair and blew out a perfect smoke ring, watching as it floated upwards before disappearing into his air-clearing charm. He looked rather less fallow than she remembered, and he had obviously washed his hair recently although it was still lank and could do with a good trim. She wondered why she had never identified the cause of the stains on his fingers, his yellowed teeth and unhealthy skin when she had known him at Hogwarts. It was obvious that he was a heavy smoker.

"I drank far too much black coffee and whiskey, too," he murmured, his comment segueing so well into her thoughts that Hermione nodded, then caught herself, and then she realised that he was unlikely to have used Legillimency on her when he wasn't even facing her. He twisted the hand with the cigar, gazing contemplatively into the wisps of smoke. He was smirking quietly to himself.

"One could hardly blame you," Hermione said.

"Does one really imagine that *one* has the right to blame me, for anything?"

"No," she agreed, "the debts are all paid."

He gave a sharp nod and drew in another lungful of smoke from his cigar.

"Speaking of coffee," Lucius remarked, "would anyone like some?"

"If I'm going to Apparate home, I'd better switch from port to coffee or risk splinching."

"There's always the Floo," Draco said.

"I left it locked."

"Really? Why?"

"Standard procedure for Aurors and Unspeakables; we never leave an empty house unwarded or the Floo open."

"So you can't even Floo into your own home? That's ridiculous."

"Oh, I could," Hermione protested, "I'd just have to be sober to open the wards. They're quite comprehensive; Harry helped me build them."

"Oh well, if Saint Potter built them, they must be perfect."

"Draco," drawled his father, "do let go of this old resentment. It won't help you, you realise?"

Draco pouted, and Hermione suppressed an urge to snigger.

"Potter wasn't a paragon of virtue in school, neither was he particularly bright."

"No doubt, my boy, but that is immaterial to what he is now."

"The shining light of the Wizarding world," Draco muttered.

"The most powerful wizard alive," Lucius stated, and Hermione looked sharply at his composed, elegant face. "You said to me, Hermione, that your friend is 'something like a sixteen', which was stretching the truth a little. It was clear from the strength of his Protego charm that he is probably verging on a level eighteen on the AIM scale; certainly he is already at seventeen. Don't you agree, Severus?"

Snape shrugged.

"I haven't encountered the boy since he came of age, but if you say so, Lucius. You have, after all, had as much exposure to a high-level wizard as I have."

"Indeed, the Dark Lord would have reached nineteen or twenty, but you also knew Dumbledore far better than I. Where did he lie upon the scale?"

"Nineteen, but he was declining for the last decade of his life. The Dark Lord probably overtook him towards the end, but of course he seasoned his magic with the vehemence that comes with a total lack of conscience."

"So did Dumbledore," Hermione said, and surprised a snort of wry laughter from Snape.

"My word, you have begun thinking for yourself. Congratulations, Miss Granger."



"What level is your magic, Professor?"

Snape regarded her out of narrowed eyes and Hermione felt her lips curve into a smile. "Sorry, that's a personal question. I'm a thirteen, Lucius is fourteen and verging on fifteen, Draco..." She tilted her head and nodded. "I bet you're a thirteen, too." She was convinced he was actually at level eleven or twelve. He had never appeared to be particularly magically powerful in school, and the faintly self-satisfied edge to his smirk told her that her private assessment was probably correct. "I'd put you at a higher level than Lucius, Professor."

The fact that Lucius did not argue convinced her.

"What I'd love to see is Severus and Potter in a duel," Draco remarked. "A formal duel, I mean, not a fight to the death."

"It would be spectacular," Hermione agreed.

"Five hundred galleons on the Slytherin, Granger," Draco drawled.

Hermione shook her head. "Apart from the fact that I don't have that amount of cash to spare, I'd put it on Professor Snape, too. I think cunning and experience would have the edge over sheer power."

Prossy appeared bearing a tray of cups and jugs, accompanied by the fragrant scent of fresh coffee.

Once they were all settled with their choice of coffee, milk, cream and sugar, Draco remarked loftily, "I bought out Gutteridge's shop last Friday. Old coot finally decided to retire to his cottage in the country."

"Gutteridge's pies and pastries? Are you going into catering now?" Hermione enquired, and Draco snorted.

"The shop if you can call it that, shack more like is next door to Weasley's. That means Weasley can't expand into it."

Hermione scowled at him.

"You know that I'm friends with the family."

"Exactly."

"So you want me to tell them about it? Why?"

"Because Weasley is making a fortune," Draco said, assuming a rather unconvincing mantle of patience. "Weasley will want to expand. Since I own the shops on either side, he'll have to move out into larger premises, leaving me owning the entire length between the butcher and the apothecary. He'll have to sell up eventually."

"He may prefer to sell to someone he knows."

"But he can't guarantee that they won't be tempted by a good offer." Draco shrugged. "Malfoys have money, but we work at it, you know, and we take the long view. That reminds me, Father: didn't you say you'd drawn up the documents for the trust fund for Scorpius?"

"They're in my study. Did you want to see them tonight?"

"If I may. Astoria's aunt wants to talk to me about a legacy from her grandfather. I'm hoping she'll let me invest it for her, and if there's something coming to Scorpius, we might as well make the most of it from the start. I may want to amalgamate the funds..."

"Please excuse us," Lucius said with a slight bow towards Hermione and Snape. He and Draco took their coffee and went out of the dining room, already deep in conversation about bonds and shares and interest rates.

"Bless their little Slytherin hearts," Hermione remarked. Snape chuckled, a deep, dark-chocolate sound. She had never heard him chuckle before; surely she would have remembered.

"Miss Granger, you have grown up into a cynic."

"A realist. And for God's sake, won't you call me Hermione? We're no longer Professor and student."

"Indeed, we're not, are we?"

He gazed at her through the faint drift of steam from his coffee, tilting the cup to his lips as he sipped. Hermione knew that look. She had seen it years ago when she'd had her short-lived dalliance with Viktor Krum; she had occasionally seen it in Ron's expression at the start of their marriage. But she had never expected to encounter lust in Snape's sharp black eyes.

He recognised her moment of realisation, and the bastard deliberately allowed his gaze to drop to the neckline of her evening robes, where the scalloped edge exposed the rounded tops of her breasts. Hermione huffed, sat forward in her chair and wiggled slightly, so that her robes slipped down and the lace of her bra peeked out. Thank Merlin she had thought to wear her best, most frivolous underwear tonight!

"Does that mean I get to call you Severus?"

"If you wish."

How the hell did he do that? How did he make three simple words sound like an invitation to bed? He had always had such wonderful control over his voice, wielding it as a weapon no less powerful than his wand. She covered an urge to giggle by taking a sip of her coffee, thoughts of investigating Snape's wand going off in an entirely new direction.

"Severus." She tried out the name, hissing the three syllables over her tongue. "Sev-er-us. Wasn't he a Roman emperor? Septimius Severus, father of Caracalla?"

"No doubt," Snape said in an off-hand manner. "However, Severus Prince was my maternal great-grandfather; my mother hoped to ingratiate herself with her grandparents by saddling me with his name. It didn't work; he wrote her out of the will anyway for marrying my father."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you?" He cocked one eyebrow at her.

"He was a Muggle, wasn't he?"

"He was, although that made less impression upon them than the fact that he was a brute and a drunkard. He would have converted the money to piss by the way of beer anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"You must stop this Gryffindor habit of taking responsibility for everything, Miss Hermione."

"It was merely an expression of sympathy. I'm lucky: my parents are Muggles but very nice ones, whom I love dearly, but I know at firsthand how neglect in childhood can stain the rest of a life."

"Your friend Potter, no doubt." Snape sneered and finished his coffee.

"Yes, but there's no need to scoff like that. The Muggles treated him like a house-elf; they dressed him in his cousin's old cast-offs, they barely fed him, they forced him to cook and clean when he was a tiny child. Worst of all, they never showed him an ounce of affection; they reared him to believe he was unworthy of love, and it was only through meeting people like Hagrid, the Weasleys, and me, and learning to love us and allow us to love him in return, that he was prevented from becoming another Tom Riddle."

"Dumbledore forged him into a weapon."

Hermione suspected this was as close as he could get to admitting that she was correct. He had not denied her assertions, at any rate.

"No more than he used you."

"I allowed it to happen; Potter was given no choice."

"What did you just say about the 'habit of taking responsibility for everything'? Are you suggesting that Dumbledore gave you a choice? Because I beg to differ."

Snape leaned back in his chair, allowing his hands to fall to the arms. His slim fingers caressed the finely carved wood.

"Ah, how I missed the passion of Gryffindors, and the wonderful world view that allows no shades of grey. First Dumbledore was a saint, now he turns into the devil."

"That isn't fair. He was a very clever, very manipulative and very powerful wizard, who looked at the big picture and was, shall we say, careless of the people whom he had to use to achieve his objectives. We would be living in a very different world if it hadn't been for Dumbledore."

"That much, I'll allow."

"There, not so different from the Slytherin view, after all."

"Extraordinary," Snape breathed and shifted slightly in his seat.

"What is?"

"Why did you marry Weasley?"

The question came like a hex out of nowhere, startling her into defensive anger.

"Lots of reasons."

"I'm hardly surprised that he didn't realise how incompatible you were, but surely *you* didn't think it could work? Or was that the only way you and Potter could cling to the memory of the mighty threesome, by bringing Weasley's sister into the mix and binding yourselves into two Weasley marriages?"

"And to think that for a few short hours, I believed you weren't a vicious bastard after all."

He ignored the insult, staring at her with a slightly quizzical expression, one black eyebrow quirked.

"Hermione, you are very intelligent now that you have stopped relying entirely on books and started to apply your mind and magically gifted. You have more influence upon the most powerful wizard in the country than anyone except his wife another strong and clever witch, although I'll never admit to that in public and you are making a name for yourself in an arcane and dangerous field of work. You have grown up into an attractive woman. Why on earth did you marry a Quidditch-mad twit?"

Hermione was unable to suppress a bubble of laughter.

"Now I'm starting to wonder what you're after. Compliments, from you?"

His expression changed from interrogative to predatory with just the realignment of his eyebrows.

"I have stated nothing that you don't already know. I do not offer idle flattery."

Hermione's heart gave a little stutter inside her chest, and she knew that only a sherry, four glasses of wine and a large port gave her the kind of idiot courage required to verbally spar with Severus Snape. They also ensured that she didn't really care whether she won or lost.

"What do you offer, then?"

Her question hung in the air. Slowly, Snape got to his feet, his heavy black robes whispering around his ankles as he rounded the table towards her. Mesmerised, she stared into his eyes. They were not black, she realised, but the darkest possible brown, darker than cocoa, the colour of black coffee.

"Only what you have already made up your mind to accept," he whispered. He leaned to touch his lips to hers.

She could smell him now, a hint of the herbs that had always hung around his brewing robes, mint and rosemary to cut the taste, overlaid by the faint citrus of his aftershave or cologne. He tasted of port and the rich, sweet smoke of his cigar. Oh, he was good. He did not demand her kiss; he enticed her with little nips and flicks of his tongue.

Ron had usually waited to see if she was interested, but as soon as she had made her agreement plain, he had dived in and snogged away like a vacuum cleaner. Snape was certainly not lacking in confidence, but he was surprisingly considerate. *Slytherin*, she thought. *He's going to tease me until I make a move, and then I'll have to admit that I want him.*

For just a moment, she stood aside from herself, amazed that she was reaching up to kiss the Greasy Git of the dungeon, the horrible, ugly, sneering Potions master. Except he wasn't ugly, not really. He had a hooked nose and olive skin worthy of a Roman emperor, he could do with a good Muggle dentist to sort out those stained uneven teeth, but he could kiss like she had never been kissed before.

She got to her feet, her arms wrapped around him. He was more solid than she had expected; perhaps he had gained weight since the war years, although there was no excess fat on him. He was not as lanky as Ron. Throughout her schooldays she had thought of Snape as a tall man, looming ominously over her, swooping like a bat through the corridors, yet he was only a little taller than Harry was. She could kiss him without getting a crick in her neck, and wasn't that wonderful? He was working down the side of her throat, now, with little butterfly nips and sucks. One hand was around her waist, the other crept upwards, to settle as lightly as a butterfly on her breast, stroking her nipple, just a little more than a tickle through the lace of her bra, enough to arouse her.

He was breathing more deeply now, giving her a sense of power. He wanted her. She moved one foot so that her thigh was between his legs, and yes, there beneath the heavy folds of his dress robes was his firm erection. It butted against her hip and she shifted a little against it.

"Perhaps we should take this elsewhere before we embarrass ourselves in front of the house-elves," he suggested.

"I could happily listen to that voice of yours reciting a shopping list," Hermione sighed. He gave his low, deep chuckle and it vibrated through her, igniting something deep in her abdomen.

"I can quote Shakespeare if it would help."

"Anything. Has anyone ever told you how sexy your voice is?"

"Occasionally, yes. I am not unaware of my assets; I have to make the most of them." He leered and tucked her arm through his.

"Aren't you going to sweep me off my feet and carry me away to your chamber for a night of torrid passion?"

"You have clearly been reading the short fiction in *Witch Weekly*. If I'm going to wrench my back, I'd rather it was after the torrid passion than before."

"Fair enough shit!" Hermione's foot twisted beneath her as her heel caught on the edge of one of the magnificent carpets. Snape grabbed her around the waist and held her steady.

"Why you females insist upon wearing such impractical footwear, I'll never understand."

"Supposed to be sexy," she grumbled, reaching to remove both shoes and sighing with relief as she flexed her aching feet in the pile of the carpet. "Ginny chose them for me; I've never worn heels this high before in my life."

"Wanting to make an impression upon the Malfoys, were we?"

"I am not unaware of my assets; I have to make the most of them."

Snape's eyes glittered as he looked sideways at her.

"Be careful, Hermione, you could bankrupt yourself."

"Nah, not me." She swung the delicate strappy shoes from one hand. "This was a one-off, I couldn't be another Narcissa."

"Indeed you could not," he murmured. When her face fell, he reached up and tapped the side of her head. "Narcissa was a good and courageous friend and a gracious lady," he said, "she wasn't a fool, but she had nothing like your intellect, my dear."

"Since when is being an intellectual sexy?"

"You have no idea," he growled.

He pulled her into his arms and closed his lips over her mouth, reigniting the fire that had died down inside her. He released her far too soon. "Come along, Miss Granger."

"Detention, Professor?"

"Absolutely."

She laughed and followed in his wake, her shoes dangling from her hand.

oooOOOooo

Hermione glanced around the large, airy bedroom. No matter where she was, who she was with or what she was about to do, she always took notice of her surroundings. Having been married to one Auror and being best friends with another, she had picked up some of their habits. Snape closed the door, murmured a privacy and silencing spell to warn the house-elves away, and then turned to her, his wand still in his hand. Hermione experienced a moment of unease before hearing him mutter another charm. It was the one that Madam Pomfrey taught the fifth years in their sex education lessons at Hogwarts, the standard spell to protect against pregnancy. Hermione opened her mouth to tell him he needn't bother, but realised he probably wouldn't believe her anyway. She waited until he had cast the contraceptive charm, and then she reached up to the fastening of her robe. Snape's hand shot out and caught her wrist.

"Allow me, Hermione?"

She dropped her hands and let out her breath on a long sigh. "Just keep speaking to me in that voice, and I'll allow you to do almost anything you like."

"Hm, I was under the impression that the damage to the vocal cords had rather spoiled my voice."

"It has a kind of edge to it, that's all, a roughness that it didn't used *oh*." He had unfastened the top buttons of her robe, pushed it back over her shoulders, and leaned to mouth her left nipple through the lace of her bra. His hot, humid breath and the light swipes of his tongue made her insides go hot.

"You were saying?" he murmured against her as he transferred his attentions to the other breast.

"Used to be like silk," Hermione panted, "but now it sounds like velvet being rubbed up the wrong way..."

His quick fingers unfastened another few buttons, so he could push the robe down and leave her standing there in her bra, panties, suspender belt and stockings.

"Excellent work, Miss Granger."

"Do I get points for this?"

"Undoubtedly."

Hermione knew, in the sensible part of her mind that had not been completely turned to mush by alcohol, that she was not unaffected by his praise. She had spent six years at school desperately trying to earn approval from him, longing for him to acknowledge that she was good at Potions. Now she revelled in his obvious admiration, even though a small, cynical voice reminded her that he was a randy Slytherin who would probably say anything to get inside her knickers. She told the little voice to shut up; she might as well enjoy herself while the opportunity presented itself. Snape was brilliant at potions; was he as thorough and conscientious at sex? She very much wanted to find out.

He swooped down upon her, enfolding her in his arms so that the wool of his robes scratched softly against her bare skin. There was something exceptionally erotic about the fact that he was still fully clothed, something naughty and forbidden, like snogging her teacher in the potions prep room. Snape guided her backwards until her calves met the side of the bed, all the while nuzzling at her throat and fondling her breasts. Then he pushed her back onto the bed, hooked his thumbs on either side of her panties and eased them down. Hermione was slightly disappointed, but not for long. He lowered himself onto the bed, enveloping her in his robes like a film vampire about to suck her blood, and moved down to take one of her feet in his hands. His touch was light, just firm enough not to tickle.

"Severus, what are you ... oh!"

He took her big toe into his mouth and licked it thoroughly.

Why the hell hadn't anyone ever done that before?

How had she been married for five years to a heterosexual wizard who had sworn he loved her and wanted sex to be good for her too, and yet not known that her feet were incredibly sensitive, and having her big toe sucked was just wonderful? Snape applied the same thorough attentions to every toe on both feet, then kissed his way up her ankles, her calves, and then demonstrated that the backs of her knees were equally sensitive, kissing and sucking on the skin. Hermione thanked the gods of sex that she had not only showered before coming out to dinner, but had used a depilatory charm on her legs.

He kissed his way up the insides of her thighs, and then he buried his large nose between them, breathing in the scent of her arousal. Had Hermione not been rather drunk, she would have been too embarrassed to enjoy the sensations of his hot breath and the tip of his nose, nudging at the folds of her sex.

She had never done anything like this with Ron. The very thought made her blush; it was as unlikely as the idea of Molly suggesting that Hermione gave Ron a blow-job to keep his interest; as unlikely as Hermione going to bed with Professor Snape.

She had stepped so far outside the usual parameters of her life that she felt as if she were flying or breathing underwater, encountering sensations so novel and strange that she could do nothing but lie back and allow them to overwhelm her.

Snape's tongue was doing amazing things to that little nub of flesh that she knew was her clitoris, that she had never realised could feel like this. She arched her back, trying to press herself even closer to him, and heard his slightly muffled chuckle and felt it vibrate through his mouth. She bumbled something like "God, yes! Just there! Oh please...." and then before she could warn him, her insides were spasming in a climax so intense she thought she might black out. He didn't seem to mind at all; in fact he emerged looking supremely self-satisfied as far as she could tell through her daze of pleasure.

Snape unfastened his robes, allowing them to drop to the floor. Under them he wore a white shirt, black trousers and black boots, all of which he shed efficiently, and then he climbed onto the bed beside her. He was pale, with a slight dusting of black hairs on his chest and a thin line leading down to the inky thatch at his groin, where his erect cock bobbed, dark red and gleaming. He was lean, some might say scrawny, but he had enough muscle to look like a mature wizard rather than a skinny adolescent, and there was no sign of a middle-aged paunch. He probably looked the best he ever had, she thought, as he grasped his cock and lined himself up to enter her. She canted her hips and he plunged into her, hard enough to make her gasp but not hard enough to hurt. He stopped moving then, gazing down into her face.

"All right?"

"Oh yes!"

Hermione twitched her internal muscles and he smirked and began to thrust. She reached up to hold onto him, seeking his mouth, the brush of his lightly furred chest against her breasts and the long, lovely rising tide of mutual enjoyment. Her orgasm triggered his; they came together in a delicious cresting wave of sensation. To Hermione, it felt like a burst of magical energy roaring through her nerves, the feeling she had had when she had first used her wand to cast a perfect (if simple) charm.

Snape subsided onto her and they lay in a sweaty tangle of limbs. He looked as open and vulnerable as he had when he lay, seemingly dead, on the floor of the shack. Filled with a sense of relief that made her light-headed, Hermione kissed his nose and gently swept aside the tendrils of black hair that stuck to his face. A black eye opened and swivelled to gaze at her. Hermione sensed the Occlumency that was so habitual that it had become a part of him remained lowered, and she smiled, rather honoured that he trusted her this much. He rolled so that his weight no longer lay on her, although his thigh still overlapped hers, and he muttered something and the covers slid up to cover them.

"Nox," he said, and the lamps faded to darkness, and Hermione closed her eyes and fell asleep almost at once.

oooOOOooo

Hermione felt vaguely woolly-headed and lethargic, with gritty eyes and a dull, heavy feeling behind her eyes that threatened to turn into a hangover as soon as she was awake enough to fully register how much she had consumed the previous night. The early morning sun was in her eyes, and for a moment, she thought she was in the bedroom in the cottage she shared with Ron. Even then, she had a sense not of wrongness, but of difference. The bedroom even smelled different.

Something screamed outside; she recognised the high, piercing cry of a peacock, and everything clicked into place in her brain. She was in Malfoy Manor, wearing a pair of stockings and a suspender belt, she had got rather drunk last night and she had shagged Severus Snape.

"Bloody hell." Hermione sat up, staring around the large, airy bedroom. Her head throbbed warningly. She was alone and the house was silent around her. On the beautiful rosewood bedside table sat a vial of green glass with a silver-edged label: the best-selling hangover cure from King's Potions. Hermione groped for the vial, yanked out the stopper and swallowed the contents. Her ears went hot as steam fizzed from them; then the feeling of dull lethargy lifted and her headache pulsed once and vanished.

A brief investigation led her to an adjoining bathroom, with a wonderful, huge claw-footed bathtub with a shower head in the shape of a serpent's head. She showered, attempted to cast a charm upon her impossibly tangled hair and collected her scattered garments. She was debating whether to attempt to sneak to the Apparation point, or if getting caught would be just too humiliating, when someone knocked on the bedroom door. Taking a deep breath, she opened it to find a house-elf peering up at her.

"Master says to tell Miss that breakfast will be served in ten minutes," it squeaked. "Miss to please tell Uppity if Miss likes tea or coffee, and if Miss wants her eggs scrambled, poached or boiled."

"Oh," said Hermione, wondering if finding strange women in the bedrooms was all in a day's work for the elves in a high-class establishment. "Thank you. I'll have coffee and scrambled eggs, please, Uppity." The exceptionally high voice and demurely large pillowcase suggested that Uppity was female, and Hermione stifled a giggle. Was it appropriate to ask an elf to assist with repairing laddered stockings and detangling a bad case of bed head?

The elf cocked her head and asked, "Is Miss requiring anything?"

"Do you have Sleekeazy's hair potion?"

"We does not!" Uppity squeaked indignantly. "We has King's potions *Tidy Locks*." She glanced down and clicked her fingers, then presented Hermione with a pair of sheer stockings, a comb and a bottle of hairspray, before vanishing.

Hermione had no great hopes for the hair potion, but she sprayed it liberally onto the mess that, last night, had begun as a neat twist pinned on the back of her head. To her surprise, the comb glided through the strands, which miraculously unknotted themselves, and she was able to quickly pin her hair up in its usual tidy bun. She discarded the laddered stockings and cast a charm to get the creases out of her robe. She was reluctant to transfigure her best robe; Malfoy knew she had stayed the night so she might as well be brazen and wear the same clothes that she had arrived in.

Lucius Malfoy was alone in the breakfast room. He was eating poached eggs on toast, drinking tea and reading the *Daily Prophet*. He lowered the paper sufficiently to glance at her, wish her a good morning and indicate the coffee pot before resuming his perusal of the news. Hermione was unsure whether to be glad or sorry that Snape was absent, as she had no idea what to say if she saw him. Uppity appeared bearing a dish of eggs and fresh toast, and Hermione busied herself with breakfast. Eventually Lucius folded the paper and enquired.

"Will you be working in the library today?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Now that the curses are parallel, I can start breaking them one by one, so I'm likely to be at the Ministry for at least the next week."

"Do owl me, if you wish to use the library, or if I can be of further assistance."

"Thank you."

He nodded, getting to his feet and offering the paper. Hermione took it with a nod of thanks.

"Is Severus still here?"

"He has an appointment with Daphne, then he will be working on the ideas he brought back from the conference in Australia. I wouldn't expect to see him for the next week at the very least."

"Oh. I see."

She was annoyed with herself for being disappointed. No promises had been made on either side, but Hermione had assumed he would want to see her again. He had enjoyed talking to her, surely? Or had he flattered her simply to get her to have sex with him? Lucius raised an eyebrow and she forced herself to smile. No way did she want him to see how disheartened she was.

"Please give him my regards when you see him, and I'll let you know how I get on with the curses."

Lucius gave a short bow and left the room.

Hermione Apparated home where she changed into her working clothes and fed Crookshanks; then she Flooed to the Ministry and the vat of curses awaiting her.

oooOOOooo

Hermione allowed Ginny to convince her to continue to attend the traditional Weasley Sunday lunches at the Burrow.

"You're a Weasley in the same way that Harry's a Weasley; it doesn't matter whether you're married to us or not."

"I don't think Molly sees it that way," Hermione said glumly. "She's glad to get rid of me."

"But the rest of us aren't, sweetie! Mum will ignore you for a while, and Ron will sulk, but you can't tell me that Dad, Bill, Fleur, Charlie, Percy, Penny, George, Angelina, Harry and I won't be pleased to see you. Harry told Bill about your weird curses, and he's fascinated; you can spend the entire time talking shop."

"Is Charlie home again?"

"Yes, he had to come over to collect a Welsh green egg from someone in Beddgelert so he's taken a week's holiday. Mum'll be too busy trying to persuade him to find a nice witch to worry about harassing you."

"Doesn't she realise he's gay?"

Ginny sniggered.

"Hard to tell whether she thinks it's just a hobby that he'll grow out of or that she can force him to get married to a witch whether he wants to or not."

"Doesn't she realise how miserable he would be, and his wife, if she forces him to marry?"

"Don't worry, he won't. He's more than able to stand up to Mum for himself, and the rest of us would back him up; he knows we're all on his side. I think he'll settle down soon; he's been seeing that German dragon handler for years."

Ginny reached out to prevent James from pulling Albus's cot over in an attempt to see what the baby was doing. "Come along, James, time to wash your hands and face; we're going to the Burrow for lunch."

"Don't want to!" James stamped his foot, so Ginny calmly picked him up under one arm. He screamed as if mortally wounded.

"You don't know what you're missing," Ginny said darkly, leaving Hermione to watch the baby while she took her struggling son to the bathroom. Harry wandered in, clad in shorts and a tee-shirt and scratching at his chest and yawning.

"Late night?" she asked, and he blinked at her.

"Hi, Hermione. Yeah, another big undercover job. We got him, though, bastard had been selling cursed artefacts to rich Muggles, then laundering the funds and putting them through Gringotts. I had to pretend to be a Muggle millionaire trying to bump off a blackmailer. Didn't get in till three this morning. Are you coming to the Burrow?"

"Ginny's persuaded me."

"Good. Just ignore Molly and don't let Ron get to you. They'll get over it. Suppose I'd better go and get changed."

He wandered out again, and Hermione suddenly wished she could tell her friends about Snape.

She had tried to convince herself that sex with her old teacher had been nothing but an aberration, fuelled by too much to drink and a desire to get revenge on Ron for finding someone else. The trouble was she wanted to see Severus again. The sex had been mind-blowing, as far as she could remember through the haze of alcohol, but more memorably, he had been considerate and witty and interesting to talk to. Even if he had simply been polite in order to seduce her, she had seen a side of him that she had never suspected.

In every spare minute of her day, and lying alone in bed at night, she had remembered the feel of his hands and his mouth. She had touched herself, pretending she was being touched by him. She knew what his mouth tasted like, and how his tongue felt against her own. It wasn't that she missed sex as such, she just missed Severus, and wasn't that strange?

Molly gushed over Harry, Ginny and the children, ignoring Hermione, but since everyone else made an equally obvious point of greeting her exactly as usual, she didn't really care. Even Ron made an effort to smile and kiss her cheek, although he looked awkward while doing it.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"We're still mates even if Mum has got her knickers in a twist."

"How was your date?"

"Okay. How was yours?"

"The same."

They looked at each other and blushed. Ron shook his head.

"Weird, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Ginny grabbed them each by an arm and grinned at them both.

"Now remember, Mummy's got a really nasty Bat-Bogey Hex if you don't play nicely, so be good children and there may be trifle."

Ron stuck out his tongue and went off to talk to George.

"Very mature," Hermione sighed. "Thank God he didn't bring his new girlfriend."

"I think he's playing the field. Ron said you were seeing someone...?"

Hermione shook her head, knowing better than to try to say anything about her night at Malfoy Manor.

"No. I just went to dinner with Lucius and Draco Malfoy."

"You what?" Ginny shrieked, and Hermione had to explain about the invitation to celebrate the first victory over the cursed parchment.

"Rather you than me. You wouldn't get me to go there under any circumstances."

"Draco's grown up," Hermione explained. Harry nodded.

"He's okay. Still keeping his secrets, though."

"What sort of secrets?" Ginny asked.

"Dunno there's something I can't quite put my finger on." Harry rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "He has this air of knowing something that I don't, sometimes, and it's something that amuses him to no end. I don't reckon it's anything evil, though; he doesn't really do evil."

"Could have fooled me," Ginny muttered.

"No, Gin, he used to try to do bad stuff when he was a kid, because it was cool or because he hated me and desperately wanted to get back at me, but when he lived with it at home and really understood what it meant, he couldn't do it."

"I think even his dad has realised that Voldemort took evil to levels he couldn't handle," Hermione said.

"You mean Draco and Lucius have kind of fallen into doing good by accident?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Harry chuckled. "More like they've fallen out of doing bad when they found it didn't pay. Draco seems to take after his mother rather than his father."

"Lucius has his good points," Hermione said, trying to sound off-hand, but Ginny fixed her with a gimlet stare.

"Oh, yes? Since when? Has he been letting you in on his hair-care secrets?" She reached up to tweak Hermione's unusually well-behaved tresses. Hermione remembered Uppity and she blushed, making Ginny crow with laughter. "My god, he has!"

"His elf recommended King's *Tidy Locks* instead of *Sleekeazy*."

"His elf? Oh yeah? Tell us more!"

Hermione opened her mouth and felt the muscles tighten warningly in her throat.

"I can't."

"Can't?" Harry peered at her. "Do you want to?"

Did she? Well, these were her two best friends in the world; the man with whom she had gone through hell and the only real female friend she had ever had. Hermione nodded.

Harry glanced around, checking that James and Albus were with Molly, who was introducing the baby to Andromeda and Teddy. The two older women had their heads together and were glancing at Hermione in a way that told her exactly what they were talking about.

"Okay," Harry said, taking Hermione's arm and leading her into a corner, "animal, vegetable or mineral? Just nod or shake your head."

"What?" Ginny looked perplexed.

"Old-fashioned Muggle child's guessing game," Hermione told her.

"Fidelius?" Harry asked shrewdly.

"Oh," Ginny's eyes went round in surprised comprehension.

Hermione nodded with a slight balancing gesture of her hands.

"Modified," said Harry the Auror. "Animal?"

Another nod.

"So it's hiding a person?"

She nodded again.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "The Malfoys are hiding someone, but you obviously aren't worried about them, so they can't be a fugitive Death Eater or other criminal ..."

"Alive or dead?" Ginny asked suddenly and Hermione didn't know how to reply. She made the tipping gesture again, and Ginny demanded, "Narcissa?"

Hermione shook her head, staring from Harry to Ginny and back again.

"You're on the right track," she said, wondering how much she could say before she began choking. She put a hand to her throat, and Harry's green eyes widened.

"At the Ministry, it wasn't ash in your throat, it was the Fidelius. What were we talking about? Malfoy asked about the voice that came out of the scroll, and you started to tell us something and then choked. What did you no, don't say it." He frowned.

"I said we should have persuaded someone to accompany us," Hermione said carefully.

"So if you and Malfoy wanted them instead of me or Kingsley, they must be bloody powerful and they must be knowledgeable about the Dark Arts ... and we think they're dead. The Malfoys are hiding him." Harry took in a deep breath, his hands clenched at his sides. "Draco is heavily involved in King's Potions, isn't he?"

She nodded. "You've got it, Harry, but please don't say his name or I'll start choking."

"Fucking hell," Harry breathed, his voice reverential. "That's Draco's secret! He's hiding him!"

Ginny stared at Hermione and then she reached up to whisper something in Harry's ear. He nodded once, sharply, and his wife gave a short squeak then clapped her hand over her mouth. A couple of people looked around, and she lowered her voice to a whisper.

"My god, but how?"

"If anyone could put a stopper in death, he could. Shit, this is some secret; no wonder ferret looks smug. Apart from anything else, he's got a potions business that's bound to make him a fortune, knowing who's in charge of the brewing, and the chief brewer can't very well strike out on his own or take a job with the opposition either. Draco and Lucius have him trapped."

"It isn't like that," Hermione said. "He goes abroad to conferences, under a glamour I suppose, or Polyjuice, and he seems content. He never was a very sociable sort, was he?"

"No, but he should have the choice. Christ! Mulciber! Did he capture Mulciber for us?"

"Yes, so he said. I think he might have dealt with a few others as well. Look, my throat and chest are getting tight and achy; can we stop talking about it for now?"

"Of course, love. This has given me a lot to think about."

"You won't betray him? I found out by accident, but he trusts me."

"It stays between the three of us," Ginny said at once. "Not even Ron."

"Especially not Ron," Hermione muttered, and her friend gave her a startled look that morphed into astonished comprehension. Damn, she sometimes forgot how very astute Ginny was. She shook her head, but knew she would have to ask Lucius or Severus to allow the Potters into the Fidelius if, of course, she ever saw Severus again.

## Chapter 5

### *Chapter 5 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

There was something very authoritative about the knock on the front door. Hermione had taken the day off work to await the estate agent, now that she and Ron had agreed to put the cottage on the market and split the proceeds, so she went to the door expecting to greet a Percy Weasley-type in a suit. What she got was Lucius Malfoy. He pushed straight past her into the hall, swung around and confronted her, his cane in his hand.

"What have you done to Severus Snape?"

He seemed too big for the narrow room, his height emphasised by the swirl of robes and the bright blond waterfall of his hair. His grey eyes blazed with an arctic light and he looked exactly what he was a very dangerous wizard indeed.

Hermione drew her wand and took up a defensive stance.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What did you do to Severus?" He spoke between gritted teeth. "More to the point, what are you going to do about it?"

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about!"

"Don't give me that, girl!" He loomed over her, the cane trembling perceptibly in his grip; such was the force of his rage. "You damn well shagged him!"

"I didn't realise there was a law against having sex," Hermione snapped. "And it would be more accurate to say that he shagged me! How dare you barge into my house flinging accusations at me? If you don't want your boyfriend to sleep with anyone else, you should keep him on a tighter rein!"

"Are you denying all knowledge, then?"

"If you would like to explain what the hell you're blathering on about," Hermione said sweetly, "I can perhaps tell you if I know anything about it!"

She had to tip back her head to glower into his eyes. He glared right back. Then he gave an undignified yelp and leaped aside, raising his cane to defend himself against the irate ginger cat who had hurtled from the kitchen and fastened his claws into Malfoy's ankle.

Hermione ducked under his arm and snatched Crookshanks up before Malfoy could curse him.

"I demand that you hand over that dangerous beast at once "

"If you attack a witch in her own home, you can expect her familiar to defend her!"

Malfoy sneered. "Do you think that you and a mangy cat can defeat me in a fight?"

Hermione pointed her wand out of the front door and snapped, '*Expecto Patronum!*' Her otter erupted in a blaze of silvery light and gambolled around on the doorstep.

"No, Mr Malfoy, but my Patronus can call more Aurors than you can handle. One more threat and it'll be on its way to fetch Harry and Ron and the rest of their team."

Malfoy took a deep breath and held up both hands in a placatory manner.

"Perhaps we had better start this conversation again, Miss Granger."

Hermione was reminded of the occasion in the Department of Mysteries when Malfoy had tried to obtain the prophecy about Harry while restraining his insane sister-in-law and the other Death Eaters, who would happily have killed a bunch of schoolchildren without a second thought.

"Perhaps we had." Hermione flicked her wand to dismiss the Patronus, which dispersed into a glowing haze and vanished. She shut the front door and marched into the kitchen, Malfoy on her heels. When she put Crookshanks down onto the floor, he sat down to watch with a very suspicious expression on his squashed ginger face.

"Now," said Hermione, "what is the problem? You're well aware I stayed the night and slept with Severus at Malfoy Manor five weeks ago, but I haven't seen or heard from him since."

"He has been ill," Malfoy told her in a terse, angry sounding voice. "He started feeling unwell the very next day."

"He'd disappeared when I woke up."

"He went off to the Dower House, where he has his brewing facility. That's what he does, when anything perturbs him. Clearly, he wanted to be alone. You must understand that Severus is a very private and self-contained person."

"Of course he is. So many people have let him down that he prefers to rely on himself."

"Yes, well, by dinner time the elf that cleans his laboratory came to tell me that she was concerned, so I went down to check on him. He has a bed there for when he needs to stay the night to oversee some finicky brew, and I found him asleep. I didn't disturb him, but I returned in the morning. He was irritated with the elf for fetching me, annoyed with me for fussing, and furious when he found that the potion he had been brewing had overcooked and was ruined. Such volatile behaviour has not been unknown in his past, but since the war, Severus has become rather less temperamental. I put his temper down to you. You reminded him of things he preferred to forget, and he was furious with himself for having given in to temptation and leaving himself open to an emotional attachment that he does not want."

"That's why I haven't heard from him, then," Hermione said slowly. "I kept wondering whether to contact him. Please, go on."

"He collapsed three days later. I found him lying on the floor next to his cauldrons, doubled up in pain. He admitted then that he woke next to you with a pain in his gut, but put it down to colic as a result of vigorous exercise on top of a big meal."

"Don't smirk," Hermione said. "You know what we got up to. Didn't you call a Healer?"

"Not then. Severus is perfectly able to cast basic diagnostic charms and look for the obvious problems. He told me that he'd cast the full range of diagnostics, and every time they had come back with the result that he was in pretty good shape for a wizard of his age. There was nothing wrong with his digestive system, bladder, gall bladder, appendix, prostate and so on. He decided that the cause was psychological; he was inflicting cramps upon himself in punishment for sleeping with a student."

"That's ridiculous. I haven't been his student for eight years."

"Which I was at pains to point out. He dosed himself with painkillers and after a few days, the problem resolved itself until ten days ago, when he was sick."

"Sick?"

"Nausea and vomiting. Intermittent to begin with, but for the last three days, he has been unable to keep anything down except dry toast and water."

"I should hope you *insisted* on him seeing a Healer."

"I did begin to wonder if you had dosed him with a slow-acting poison in revenge for the misery he inflicted upon you and your friends at school," Malfoy said lightly. "However, that isn't the Gryffindor way, is it? Yes, I called a Healer and performed a nice little Memory Charm and sent her on her way once she had come up with a diagnosis. Then I called another Healer, since Severus insisted she was an incompetent twat, to use his own words, and this one dithered around but came up with exactly the same result. Another *Obliviate* and off he went, with a vague memory of having been called to treat a broken finger on a careless house-elf."

"So," Hermione said, with a show of patience, "what's wrong with Severus Snape, and why is it my fault?"

"There's nothing wrong with him at least, no injury or disease to speak of. He has merely grown an additional internal organ; a very muscular one, hence the abdominal cramps. Specifically, a uterus."

"*What?*"

"A uterus, womb, female reproductive organ. Furthermore, he is pregnant. The current occupant is less than half an inch in length, but appears to be healthy and growing well, according to my admittedly rusty charms."

"Is this some sort of joke?" But Hermione could not imagine Lucius Malfoy being this good an actor. He shook his head, his hair flowing like liquid over his broad shoulders.

"I wish it was."

"Why are you blaming me?" Hermione asked. "I mean, if it was the other way round, if I was the one who was pregnant, yes, perhaps Severus would have sent you to tell me that I was a careless stupid idiot, but how can you blame me for this? Surely you're more likely ..." She let her words trail away, realising that she had been thinking aloud. Lucius cocked his sardonic blond eyebrow at her.

"You are wondering if I am the father, are you not?"

"It did cross my mind."

"I am not. Narcissa bought a book when she was pregnant which contains charms to check a baby's progress before it is born. The book also contains a charm to confirm paternity, which both Severus and I cast. Each time the result was the same: the father, the provider of sperm, was Severus Snape. We amended the charm to determine the identity of the mother, the donor of the egg. It was you."

"Good god." Hermione sat down hard on a chair. "That isn't possible."

"I assure you, my dear, it is. You're going to be a mother."

She shook her head.



"I can't have children." She looked up into his smooth, still-handsome face. "I was cursed during the battle of Hogwarts, with *Uterus Calix*. I've been to see Healer Strood, she's the best Healer there is for gynaecological problems, and she confirmed that I'm infertile. It was the final straw for my marriage; that's why Ron and I split up."

Lucius sat down on the opposite side of the kitchen table.

"I see. Did Severus know this?"

"Of course not. I didn't tell him; why should I? I knew I couldn't possibly get pregnant. He cast a contraceptive charm but I just let him do it. He might not have believed me if I'd told him not to bother." She shook her head. "I don't understand it. Surely this would require a lot of powerful magic?"

"One would have thought so. Severus believes you cursed him."

She gave a little gasp of laughter. "Paranoid git, of course he would. I bet he's calling me all the names under the sun."

"In between bouts of heaving with his head stuck in a toilet."

"What is he going to do?"

"That rather depended upon what I found out today. Obviously if you had cursed him, we would expect the curse to be reversed immediately my dear, you're very, very knowledgeable about curses, so naturally we blamed you. However, we couldn't quite understand why you left your own signature so obvious, or what message you intended to leave."

Hermione waved her wand at the kettle and frowned.

"I need a mug of tea. I've got Earl Grey if you'd like some." He nodded, and she levitated mugs, sugar and milk to the table. "He needs to see Healer Strood, for a start. Then we ought to look for magical signatures, traces that might lead us to what set the entire process going yes, I know, me having sex with him must have done that, but how, and why?"

"You need a house-elf," Lucius remarked, peering into the mugs on the table. "Great Merlin, there's enough tannin in here to preserve a pair of dragon-hide boots. You will kindly accompany me back to the Manor and continue this conversation accompanied by tea in clean cups and with Severus present."

"I can't, I'm waiting for the estate agent to look at the house. We're selling it."

He looked around at the small, rather cramped kitchen, then surged to his feet and peered into the fireplace.

"Is your Floo open?"

"Yes."

He took a pinch of powder from the pot on the mantelpiece and threw it into the fireplace, stating clearly, "Malfoy Manor." Then he stuck his head into the flames and Hermione heard the distant tenor of his voice. Lucius withdrew looking insufferably smug and flicked his wand to remove the traces of ash from his hair and clothes.

A minute later, a house-elf popped up beside Hermione, bearing a huge tray loaded with tea, sandwiches and cakes. Barely had she poured herself a cup of tea when the Floo blazed green and through it stepped a familiar figure in black.

Severus looked pale, thin and thoroughly out of sorts. His expression, when he looked at Hermione, was that of her old Potions professor, glaring at the children who had made his life a misery.

"I hope you are pleased with yourself, Miss Granger." His voice was as precise and vicious as she remembered. "How overjoyed you must be; at last you have your revenge for all that adolescent angst and those imagined petty slights."

"Severus," Lucius said quickly, "do sit down and stop attempting to intimidate the child. She is undaunted and fired with the righteousness of the innocent unless Gryffindors have learned to dissemble far better than Slytherins, which is unlikely. Have some tea."

Severus moved with the care of someone recovering from an injury. He lowered himself onto a chair and folded his hands over his waist. Hermione wondered if it was an unconscious gesture. She felt something quivering deep inside her; simply seeing him again was unsettling, and knowing what he was carrying filled her with a curiously guilty excitement.

"Tea, Severus?"

"No."

Lucius sighed but poured his own tea and selected an egg and cress sandwich. Severus' hand moved, performing a little circular motion over his robes, as if trying to soothe his queasy stomach. Hermione had to force herself not to stare at his middle.

"I have explained the situation to Hermione," Lucius said benevolently. "She is as much at a loss as we are to explain it; however, there is a circumstance of which we were unaware. I believe that it has a bearing on the case. Would you mind telling Severus what you told me?"

Hermione repeated the explanation of her infertility. Severus merely listened, his head inclined so that his expression was hidden behind the lank curtains of his hair.

"I wondered if it could be a reflected curse," Lucius said, cutting a slice of Battenberg cake. "That is, one initially applied to Hermione, which was triggered when you had sexual relations and then adhered to you. However, that would not explain why her husband was unaffected."

"Unless it was applied in between Ron and me splitting up, and me sleeping with Severus?"

"By Weasley himself?" Lucius enquired, and Severus snorted.

"Hardly. He doesn't have the power, the malevolence or the capability."

"I know who bloody well has," Hermione said darkly. "My mother-in-law."

"Molly Weasley? Why on earth would she do something like this?" Lucius demanded.

"Because she's an interfering old bag. Just before Ron and I separated, she told Ron that she was going to sort things for him, something about old ritual magic. She said she'd ensure that Ron would have at least one child."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Lucius dropped his slice of cake onto the plate. "She's been dabbling with early fertility rituals? No wonder we're in a pickle. Those antediluvian charms are notoriously unstable and difficult to direct."

"We're *in a pickle*?" Snape snapped. "It's me who's in the untenable situation!"

"What are you going to do?" Hermione asked in a small voice. "Professor?"

"Be sick," Severus said succinctly. "Bathroom?"

She pointed him in the right direction and heard the unmistakable sounds of retching a few minutes later.

"Oh, dear," Lucius sighed. "Poor Severus; I'd better take him home. Unfortunately he's been too unwell to brew himself a safe anti-nausea potion."

"I can do that."

Lucius nodded.

"You'd better come over to the Manor when your estate agent has gone. Come for dinner. We need to talk."

"Yes, Lucius, we do. I'll be there at eight."

He nodded and went off to the bathroom. When he returned, he was supporting a rather green-faced and drooping Severus under one arm.

"Floo or Apparate?" Lucius enquired. Severus looked at the fireplace and groaned.

"Not the Floo."

"Side-along, then. How far do your wards extend, Hermione?"

She took out her wand.

"I'll key you both into them as long as you don't try to attack me again."

"Attack you?" Severus stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Lucius marched in with his wand blazing when he thought I had cursed you," Hermione explained. "It was rather touching; he was beside himself with anxiety." She smiled sweetly at Lucius, who bared his perfect teeth in a parody of a smile and turned on the spot, carrying Severus away with him.

oooOOOooo

"You'll need to lift the Fidelius," Hermione stated. She had expected Severus to refuse; the fact that neither wizard argued but waited for her explanation gave her a warm, comforting glow. "First, because Severus should see a good Healer and they'll need to monitor him, which they can't do if we keep Obliviating them. Second, I don't have much influence on Molly Weasley."

"Who has?" Lucius muttered, frowning.

"Arthur doesn't, I'm afraid, but our strongest ally has got to be Harry. Yes, I know, but he's incorruptible, he's famous for it. He'll be absolutely furious with Molly, and I know Ginny will side with us too."

"Molly's baby girl," Severus said. "I always wondered if she would grow up to be a better witch than her mother. She wouldn't need to try very hard, after all."

"She did; she's a good match for Harry. With those two and Arthur on our side, the rest of the family will listen to our case. I hope we can force Molly to reveal what she did and reverse it." Hermione dug in the pocket of her robe. "Here, I brought this for you." She held out a vial of potion. Severus took it, opened it warily and sniffed.

"This is not a standard morning sickness potion."

"No, I made it. I substituted galangal for half the ginger, and fennel for a quarter of the anise, plus added colchicum. I reduced the chaste berry and increased the ginseng in the base."

Severus tipped the potion into his mouth. He didn't even grimace, although he obviously struggled to keep it down for the first few seconds.

"I would have used gingermint instead of peppermint, but otherwise marginally acceptable." He let his head roll back on the sofa and breathed deeply.

"I take that to mean it worked."

"Yes, Miss Granger, it worked. Take half a house point. Did you find the recipe in a book or have you at last begun to think for yourself?"

"Severus," Lucius sighed, "restrain your temper, if you please. You are getting repetitive and we require Hermione's help."

Severus drew himself upright on the sofa and they glared at one another. "Is that so?" His voice was silky, his enunciation precise. "Miss Granger owes me more debts than she can ever repay, and she knows it."

The air seemed to thrum with repressed magic, making Hermione's skin prickle. She smacked her hand down on the arm of her chair.

"Stop it, both of you! This has nothing to do with life debts!" When both wizards glanced at her, she asked sharply, "Do Slytherins ever do anything for each other simply because they're friends, or because it's the right thing to do? Or is everything bound in a complicated web of debts and repayments and favours?"

"Of course," Lucius said, raising his eyebrows, although it was unclear which question he was answering. "Although we must assume that things are different when dealing with Gryffindors."

"I wish I hadn't even mentioned houses. Can we discuss this without resorting to insults or bitching, please? Let's look at the situation and consider our options like adults."

"Yes, my dear, if you insist," Lucius said blandly, his grey eyes crinkled with amusement.

"I don't find this funny," Severus said through gritted teeth.

Lucius and Hermione shared a moment of mild exasperation, which unnerved her a little.

"If you'll lift the Fidelius, I'll make an appointment with Healer Strood. We can discuss your options when we know exactly what the implications are."

"Before we do that," Lucius said slowly, stroking his chin, "shall we discuss what we would/like to happen? Life-altering decisions should not be made lightly."

The implications were not lost on Hermione, nor on Severus if the dark anger clouding his brow was anything to go by.

"Professor," Hermione said, refusing to sound placatory, "what do you want?" She folded her hands and waited, schooling her face to an expression of calm she didn't feel.

Severus shifted slightly in his seat, glancing aside at Lucius for a moment, who gazed back with polite interest. Hermione's heart beat faster, his hesitation raising her hopes in a way she had wanted to avoid, in case they were immediately dashed.

"I suppose you expect me to carry your spawn to full term, do you?"

Hermione flinched at the bitter spite in his voice. Severus clapped a hand to the robes over his flat, narrow belly. "You want to see me reduced to waddling, the greasy Potions master become a bloated swollen monstrosity for your friends to laugh at? I was foolish to believe that my debts to society were paid, that I could live in peace. I should have Obliviated you the moment you saw me!"

Hermione felt a faint prickling behind her eyes, but she dug her fingernails into her palms and tried to hold onto her facade of calm. "You are aware that I didn't intend this to happen..."

"Oh no, you didn't *intend* anything, of course; you are utterly innocent, one of the stainless golden trio, untouchable in your reflected glory, while the old Death Eater gets the blame and suffers the consequences!"

"I don't recall using the Imperius curse to get you to sleep with me."

There was silence for a moment, broken only by Severus' elevated breathing. A vein pulsed in his temple.

"If you have quite finished," Lucius said, "we might return to discussing what we intend to do? Severus, if we can reverse the spell, will you abort the child? It is, after all, your decision."

Severus' dark eyes flickered as he glanced at his friend, then at Hermione. Again, she tried not to let herself hope too much.

"It may not be possible," he muttered. Lucius blew out a long slow breath and nodded.

"So you've already tried. Is this why you've been so ill?"

"Possibly." Severus glared at Hermione, as though he was braced for attack.

"That's your prerogative," she told him. "It may still work if we can persuade Molly to reverse the magic and get Healer Strood to do it."

"I attempted to banish the uterus," Severus snapped, "before I realised that it was not empty."

"Hermione, you're the other parent, what is your desire?"

Hermione answered Lucius' question without moving her gaze from Severus' hand, resting protectively on his belly.

"It's my only chance of ever becoming a mother. I could adopt children but this is my own baby, so of course I want it. I can't force you to carry it against your will, which I suspect is what you're so uptight about, but if you don't want to raise it, I'm more than happy to take it right after birth and allow you as much or as little contact as you want. The ball's back in your court, Professor."

"You may have no choice either way," Lucius pointed out. "It may be impossible to remove it, or else it may be too dangerous for you to carry to term."

Severus turned his face away, staring into the gently crackling log fire.

"Make the appointment with your Healer."

"Thank you. The Fidelius?"

Lucius drew his wand from the head of the cane leaning against his chair and began a long, complex series of flourishes and a whispered incantation.

Hermione felt something lift, a feathery weight rising from her throat and chest.

"You've removed it completely?" Severus asked and Lucius nodded.

"It's time, my friend. At least this fiasco may have the result of bringing you back into the Wizarding world where you belong."

"Bollocks," said Severus, but without heat, and Lucius looked smug. Prossy appeared then to tell them dinner was ready, and Severus strode off in a swirl of black robes. Behind his back, Lucius gave Hermione a self-satisfied little smile and indicated she should precede him to the dining room.

oooOOOooo

Healer Strood sat with her elbows on her desk, her fingertips together, listening gravely as Hermione related how she and Ron had split up just after Molly had promised to ensure that Ron had a child, that she had slept with an old acquaintance, and that the wizard had acquired female internal organs and was now pregnant.

The Healer turned to where Severus sat, simmering like a cauldron on the verge of boiling over.

"Everything said in this office is entirely private," she remarked. "I am under the standard Healer's oath of confidentiality. In order to carry out a thorough examination, I will need you to remove your glamour, please."

Her tone was brisk and professional. Severus gave a short nod, made a gesture with his hand and dropped the charm that made him appear as a brown-haired, mildly handsome man. Hermione decided that she preferred the real Severus, hook nose, sallow complexion and all; he was certainly more interesting than the bland persona he had chosen in order to travel to the clinic in Diagon Alley.

Strood didn't even blink. She indicated the couch and waited until Severus was lying down before performing a series of wand movements, so rapid that the tip of her wand blurred. Charts, numbers and diagrams blinked in and out of existence above Severus' body. Tiny coloured lights winked in a complex pattern, then clumped together and dived through his clothes, and he gave a little gasp.

"There may be a sensation of mild cold or prickling," Strood said, "but it is perfectly harmless."

Severus' abdomen glowed briefly as if a bright light had been switched on under his robes, then the lights emerged, forming a translucent three-dimensional shape in the air, a rounded organ with a tiny glowing spot inside it. Healer Strood used her wand to point to it. "This is a representation of your womb, which appears perfectly healthy, and here is your son."

The glowing spot expanded suddenly until Hermione could clearly see the shape of the embryo, curled pink and alien, with its huge head and buds where the limbs would develop.

Hermione stared until the picture winked out and the Healer placed her wand neatly on her desk. Severus sat up, pulling his robes straight and glowering at his knees.

"What are the implications?" he demanded suddenly. "Is it possible to remove it, remove all evidence?"

"It may be," Strood said levelly.

"May be? This was inflicted upon me without my knowledge. Are you telling me I'm stuck with it?"

"It is my opinion, judging from what Mrs Weasley said..."

"Miss Granger," Hermione said automatically, and Strood inclined her head.

"I'm sorry, from what Miss Granger has told me, old and unpredictable ritual magic was used in an attempt to enable her to conceive."

"Completely against *my* knowledge," Hermione added.

"The magical imperative was for her to have a baby. This imperative this requirement came up against not only the deep-seated curse on her womb, but a powerful and effective contraceptive charm. Did you cast it?"

He nodded.

"It was impossible for her to conceive, so the next best thing was to use your body. You are magically strong enough to sustain a child to term. This imperative is very robust indeed, Mr Snape." A muscle twitched in his cheek at her use of his name, but he did not speak. "An attempt to remove the embryo from the womb, or the womb from your body, could result in considerable damage. Also, please bear in mind that the abortion of a magical child is illegal unless the pregnancy is the result of rape, or if continuing it threatens the carrier's life."

"Would the fact that Severus was impregnated totally against his will count as rape?" Hermione asked in a small voice. "That he was forced to become pregnant when we didn't even know it was a possibility?"

There was a long pause before Strood replied.

"As far as I am concerned, yes, it would."

"If we were able to convince my mother-in-law to reverse the spell, would you try to terminate it?"

"If that is your wish."

"What would be the risks of going through with this farce, of carrying to term?" Severus demanded abruptly.

"How old are you?"

"Forty-five."

"You appear to be in good health, although I would recommend that you cease smoking, and drastically reduce your alcohol intake. There is a risk to your health and indeed to your life, but no more than there would be for a healthy forty-five-year-old witch embarking upon her first pregnancy. I would monitor your condition closely, and you may require a regimen of potions and bed rest to carry to full term."

"And the birth?"

"You may develop a birth canal near to your delivery date. Also, you may undergo structural changes so that your pelvis more closely resembles that of a female. This depends upon the particular shaping of the initial ritual, assuming it requires the survival of both parent and child. In that case, you may opt for a natural birth; however, I suspect you will require the magical removal of the baby. This is a procedure closely allied to a splinched Apparition. One of our experts will Apparate you, leaving the child in situ. It's a relatively quick and painless procedure."

"When do we have to decide?"

"Ideally, within the next two weeks."

Severus stood up and pulled his black travelling cloak around himself with a dramatic flourish. "Owl me with an appointment in two weeks' time. I can be contacted at King's Potions, the Dower House, Malfoy Manor."

With a sharp crack, he turned on the spot and vanished. Hermione slumped in her chair and clutched at the bushy mane of her hair.

"Oh, good lord."

Strood maintained a tactful silence.

oooOOOooo

"Sit," Ginny commanded as she thrust a large glass of red wine into Hermione's hand, placed a dish of Molly's home-made savoury cheese straws on the coffee table and handed Harry a pint of lager. Ginny opened a bottle of butterbeer; she was breast-feeding Albus so was still off the alcohol. "Go on then, tell us all."

"Yes, Severus Snape is alive, the Malfoys are hiding him. Yes, Ginny, you're right, I slept with him, but not until after Ron told me he was seeing someone, for what it's worth."

"You sound as if you regret it," Harry said, after taking a deep and thoughtful swallow of his pint.

"You wouldn't believe how much."

"That bad, was he?" There was a faintly pleased note in Harry's voice that made Hermione's hackles rise.

"No, actually, he was bloody brilliant; he applied just as much focus and passion as he does to his potions. I wish he hadn't been so good, actually, because the chances of ever doing it again with him are around zero. Your mother cast some sort of ancient ritualistic spell on me, Ginny. She told Ron she'd ensured that he had at least one child except that she cast it on me, not him, and it didn't matter who I slept with."

"You're not!" Ginny gasped, slopping butterbeer down the front of her jumper.

"No, I'm not pregnant... but Severus is."

"What?" Harry shook his head as if irritated by a fly. Ginny waved her wand to banish the butterbeer from her chest, without taking her eyes off Hermione.

Hermione told them about the visit from an irate Lucius Malfoy, how they had worked out what must have happened, and the appointment with Healer Strood.

"I can't believe this," Harry muttered. "You can tell I was Muggle-raised things like this still do my head in."

"I'm as pure-blood as they come and I'm equally confounded," Ginny assured him. "Merlin, I bet Snape's furious!"

"He's incandescent. He's reverted completely to his wartime teaching persona, all spite and sarcasm. It's such a shame, because that evening, that one evening when we had dinner with the Malfoys, he was so charming and witty."

"Because he wanted to shag you," Ginny said.

"Maybe it was only because he wanted sex, but it showed that he could be a great companion."

"Is that what you want, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged elaborately and realised she had fooled neither of her friends.

"Yes, I suppose so. He's so clever, and his sense of humour is very dry and cryptic."

"Being great in bed isn't such a disadvantage either," Ginny said.

"What about the baby? Is he going to carry it?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. He kept saying things that made me think he might, but he's full of resentment."

"Story of his life, really, poor old sod."

"He's not that old, Harry; he's only twenty years older than we are. Oh, you should have seen his face when I told him you'd named your son after him and Dumbledore!"

Harry gave a great crow of laughter.

"Poor Snape!" He sobered abruptly. "You'll have to tell Ron."

"I know. Will you two back me up?"

"Course we will, Hermione."

Ginny was frowning as she sipped her drink. "When's Snape making his decision?"

"Next Wednesday. We've got an appointment with Strood to discuss it."

Ginny put down her bottle and selected a cheese straw.

"You're planning," Harry said fondly. "I can tell."

"Mm, I am. Let's not say anything until we know what he's decided, okay? If he demands to get rid of it, we'll go in with all guns blazing. Mum had no right to do what she did even if she did think she was doing the right thing but what makes me really angry is how careless she was. She should never have messed with ritual magic without knowing exactly what she was doing."

"Totally agree with that," her husband grunted.

"If he decides to carry it, you need to rush up to her and thank her profusely and tell her how delighted you are to be able to have your own baby."

Hermione slowly started to grin. "She'll be mortified."

"Exactly, and what's more, there'll be no need for a huge family row, which would result otherwise. When she thinks about it, she might even realise that Ron had a lucky escape, because otherwise, it would be him up the duff."

Hermione let out a squeal.

"God, I never thought of that!"

Harry squirmed.

"She'd better not decide we need more kids. Christ, that doesn't bear thinking about!" He peered shrewdly into Hermione's eyes. "When is the cottage going on the market?"

"In a couple of weeks, when the surveyor's been. Why?"

"Ron's staying in George's flat permanently, but you won't have anywhere to live, will you?"

"Of course she has!" Ginny protested robustly. "She'll be moving in here!"

"No, she won't." Harry sat back and folded his arms. Hermione's grin widened.

"Oh dear, I'll have to find someone with a large house and ask if I can stay with them, won't I?"

"If you're lucky, they might even have a library you can use."

"Ah," said Ginny with a smirk, "not to mention an old friend with a bun in his oven."

"Right in one. Cheers."

They raised their glasses in unison.

oooOOOooo

Severus swept into Strood's waiting room, the effect slightly diminished by his appearance as the handsome brown-haired wizard, but Hermione would have known him anywhere. The glare was all Snape, as were the sweeping gestures, the air of suppressed ferocity and the silky, scathing voice.

"Miss Granger, let us get this over with, shall we?"

Hermione's heart lurched, but she preceded him into the surgery. Her palms were sweating and she felt slightly sick.

Healer Strood flicked her wand to close and ward the door, and Severus dropped his glamour. He was rather less fallow-faced than when she had last seen him, and she thought he might have regained a little weight. Clearly, her anti-nausea potion was still working; she had owled him a flagon of the brew and received a terse note in reply, telling her that even though he was male, there was no need to be quite so heavy-handed with the ginseng. She took that in lieu of thanks.

The Healer waited with her hands folded and an air of polite interest. Hermione forced herself to sit still and wait. Severus' scowl deepened, a Slytherin who hated to be manipulated into speaking first, but he was clearly too impatient to wait them out.

"Despite all the rumours to the contrary," he spat the words at Hermione, "I am neither entirely callous nor a murderer of children."

She was unable to suppress a little gasp. Strood got to her feet and indicated the examination couch.

"Please remove your robe, Mr Snape. I need to give you a full physical examination and would like your permission to take a blood sample."

"Do you want me to wait outside?" Hermione, filled with excitement, felt that she should be magnanimous, but Severus shrugged so she stayed.

He lay on the couch, staring up at the ceiling, his shirt pulled up and trousers pushed down so that they discreetly covered his groin but bared his pale belly, which curved very slightly outwards between the hips, instead of being concave as she remembered.

Strood began by pressing all over the area with her fingertips. "This firm swelling is the uterus rather than the foetus, which is still very small. There is a considerably increased blood supply, which you may sense as a feeling of fullness or heaviness, and you may notice that your magical level fluctuates."

"That's started already," he said bitterly. "What other delights might I expect, along with the vomiting?"

"You will probably feel very tired and lethargic. As the baby grows, it will press on your bladder and you will need to urinate more frequently. Because your hips are narrow, the entire uterus will rise upwards and outwards earlier than it would in a mature witch, making your condition obvious by four to five months."

Severus held up his hand. "That will do, thank you. You can tell me all about the swollen ankles, varicose veins and stretch marks nearer the time."

Strood busied herself with her diagnostic charms and then used her wand to nick his finger and transfer blood into a tube. She dripped the blood into a series of tiny vials and added potions, cast charms and muttered to a quill pen, which scrawled the results onto a sheet of parchment.

"I'm pleased to note that you took my comment about reducing your smoking seriously," she said pleasantly. Severus sniffed.

"They taste odd and make me nauseous."

"I'm going to prescribe some potions you can have made up at any apothecary "

"I shall brew them myself."

"Two of them require precisely controlled charms applied during the brewing."

"Then I'll ask a friend to assist if my magic isn't up to it."

"The problem will be with your fine control rather than with the actual level of your power, Mr Snape. Please take the potions as directed, follow the enclosed advice about rest, exercise and diet, and I'd like to see you again in two weeks."

She handed him a scroll, which he tucked into his robes. He nodded once to the Healer and strode out, ignoring Hermione completely, which on reflection was no more than she had expected.

## Chapter 6

### *Chapter 6 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Hermione looked up see someone in red Auror's robes standing in the doorway of her office. She recognised the woman as one of Harry and Ron's team, a Muggle-born witch of some forty years of age.

"Hello, Wendy, can I help you?"

"Harry asked me to give you this, Merlin knows why. We should just Banish it not as if it's worth much." She levitated a cracked pottery jug across to the desk. "Watch it, it bites, nearly took Giles' hand off."

Hermione cast a couple of investigative charms and grinned.

"Thank Harry for me. He knows I'm fascinated by old curses, and this one's a cracker. I haven't seen a snapping curse this old since I was a trainee."

"Have fun."

Hermione floated the jug into one of her warded carrying cases and ordered a cup of coffee from the canteen. It arrived as oxtail soup, which was a distinct improvement on yesterday's lukewarm, over-sugared tea.

oooOOOooo

Lucius Malfoy looked up from his desk and gave his complacent little smile.

"Why, Hermione, how pleasant to see you. How may I help you?"

"Hello, Lucius. I thought you might be interested in this." She opened the case and displayed the decrepit jug. "Snapping curse, early fifteenth century at a guess. The Aurors dug it up at a crime scene."

"Fascinating," he breathed, approaching carefully. "Does it ah, yes." He prodded the jug with a roll of parchment and it lunged and bit off the end. "It doesn't differentiate between inanimate objects and fingers, I see, a very early version of the hex. I don't have this in my collection."

"You're welcome to it; they were only going to Banish it."

"How are you getting on with your Cumbric curses?"

"Slowly but steadily. I've had a lot of other work come in so I had to put them to one side, but I've dismantled ten. I've recorded all the details and brought you a copy of my report."

"How kind. Would you like tea?"

"Thank you."

They settled in armchairs beside the fire and watched one another across the tea table.

"He is still sulking," Lucius said eventually.

"Predictable. Has he brewed the potions Healer Strood recommended?"

"As far as I know; he certainly consumes potions after his dinner. One assumes that since he has decided to go through with it, he'll do it properly."

"I want your advice," Hermione said, and he raised his eyebrows, genuinely surprised. "I'm going to tell people. I can't just turn up in six months time with a new baby and introduce him as my son, can I? I want to let my parents know, and my closest friends."

"Do they not know already?" Lucius asked blandly, and Hermione felt her face heat up.

"Two of them do, but they're sworn to secrecy and I'd trust them with my life. The problem will be telling the Weasleys, especially Ron. I don't want to just speak up without Severus even knowing, and ideally, I'd like him to be there."

"Hm. You want them to believe that you have a relationship, I assume?"

"If everyone thinks that the baby is planned, and that we're friends, if not lovers, it'll go easier for him and for the baby."

"You expect me to bask in your reflected glory, do you?" Severus' voice was acrid with spite. Hermione twisted in her chair to see him leaning in the doorway with folded arms.

"I could just as easily claim to be basking in yours."

Severus sneered as he walked into the room. Hermione glanced at his middle, but his usual billowing black robes hid any sign of expansion. "How are you, Professor?"

"Blooming." He threw himself into a chair and steepled his fingers. "What are you plotting to do to me now?"

"I just want to tell my parents and friends about the baby, and I'd prefer to do it so that they don't hate you, so please stop being such a suspicious bastard."

"Says the girl who set my robes on fire, who stole from my stores..."

"I was a child! You did stupid things as a kid, so did I!"

"Children, please," Lucius sighed. "Stop forcing me into the role of mediator; it doesn't suit me at all. I'm supposed to be the personification of evil around here."

Hermione chuckled and Severus' lips twitched.

Lucius nodded. "That's better. Now, Hermione, I assume you wish to tell your parents and the Weasleys..." he gave a tiny shudder, "...accompanied by a plump, pleasant and personable Severus?"

"That's the general idea."

"Good luck with that. You might manage a bad-tempered bastard with a bulging belly."

"I am not bulging," Severus snapped. He glared at Hermione, who was making good use of the excuse to stare openly at his stomach, and then with a very put-upon grunt, he slid his thumbnail down the row of buttons on the front of his robes. They slid apart to reveal that his trousers were straining over a gently rounded tummy. "Happy now?"

Greatly daring, Hermione stretched out her hand.

"May I?"

"You won't be able to feel a thing yet." However, he did not move as she pressed her palm against him, feeling the shape of his hard belly under the taut woollen fabric.

"Hello in there," she whispered and he snorted.

"I suppose you're going to want to bond with the little squirt like this for the next six months."

He was getting visibly twitchy, so Hermione withdrew her arm and took up her teacup.

"Thank you, yes; it would be nice, since I'm going to be caring for him."

He waved his hand to refasten his robes and snatched up a shortcake biscuit.

"I have a number of important commissions to brew while I'm still able to get close enough to the cauldrons, so I shall owl you with dates when I'm available to be displayed to your associates."

"That's great," Hermione told him. "You'll have to owl me at the Hog's Head, though."

"That dive? What in Merlin's name are you doing there?"

"The cottage is being sold," she explained composedly, "and I can't afford to stay at the Three Broomsticks or the Leaky Cauldron because I don't know how long it will take me to find a cheap flat. I don't earn enough on my own to splash out, and I've got a baby to save up for now, too."

Lucius cleared his throat.

"You might find bonding with your son is easiest when in close proximity," he suggested with a small and perfectly evil smirk. "The Dower House is more than large enough..."

"No," said Severus, "absolutely not. The Dower House is my brewing facility, and I will not put up with feminine fripperies hanging in the bathroom or Kneazle hairs floating into my cauldrons."

"Very well," Lucius said, pouring himself another cup of Earl Grey. "That's settled. Hermione, you may move into the Manor whenever you please. I only ask that you do not allow your familiar to chase my peacocks or enter the Dower House."

Hermione's thanks were tempered by the feeling that far from doing the manipulating herself, she had just been perfectly manipulated.

oooOOOooo

Severus entered the Burrow on Hermione's heels, his robes and cloak swirling around his slender, angular frame in full pantomime demon king mode. The effect was everything she had hoped for. There was a moment of stunned silence before a babble of shrieks, exclamations and swearwords burst out of the assembled Weasleys and hangers-on. Harry got to his feet and, with Ginny at his side, strode across the kitchen with his hand extended.

"I'm delighted to see you again, sir," he said clearly. Severus slowly reached out his thin, pale hand and allowed Harry to shake it, his black eyes emotionless. "Please, accept my thanks for everything you did for us, and my apologies for doubting you, and for all the stress we put you through." Lowering his voice a little, he added, "I'll kneel, if you want me to. Hermione tells me that she promised on my behalf."

Severus tipped back his head. He was only an inch taller than Harry was now, but he still managed to look down his impressive nose at him.

"That won't be necessary, Potter. However, I shall hold the offer in reserve for when I really need it."

Ginny took Harry's place and also shook Severus' hand, and then there was a rush of bodies as Bill, Fleur, George, Angelina, Percy, Penny and Ron all jostled to congratulate Severus for being alive.

"Oh, my," Molly gasped, fluttering around the table. "Harry, why didn't you tell us?"

"Because Hermione asked me not to," he replied placidly, although there was a gleam in his green eyes that suggested he was enjoying the situation far too much. "Professor Snape is Hermione's guest, not mine. Didn't Ron tell you she was seeing someone?"

"She's seeing *Snape*?" Molly shrieked and heads turned towards her. Ron gaped rather unflatteringly.

"What? You and *Snape*?"

"Professor Snape, Ron," Hermione couldn't resist muttering.

"Good heavens, Severus," Arthur remarked. "You've always been a dark horse, haven't you? I always wondered if Hermione wouldn't be happier with an intellectual rather than," he glanced fondly at his youngest son, "a pure man of action."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but merely murmured, "Quite."

"And the good news is," Hermione exclaimed, "Molly, you remember that ritual magic you invoked to give Ron and me a baby?"

There was a sudden, apprehensive silence.

"What was that, dear?" Molly asked, her tone cool.

"You used old ritual magic before Ron and I split up to ensure we had a baby. Don't you remember?"

"I might have cast a charm or two, yes, but that was before you separated."

"It worked," Hermione said brightly. Now the silence was palpable, so filled with tension that she could almost taste it, metallic and dry.

"You're pregnant?" Ron breathed, looking horrified.

"No, don't be silly, I can't get pregnant, can I? Healer Strood told us that. No, the magic that your mum used was so powerful that when I got together with Severus, it rebounded onto him. He's about three and a half months along."

Severus stood with his feet planted on the flagstones, in the balanced yet easy stance of a duellist, his face schooled to impassivity, his black eyes alert.

"Molly," Arthur whispered into the hush, "what have you done?"

"Shit, Mum!" Ron exclaimed. Severus' lips curled into a tiny smirk as he swept his hand down to release the fastening charm on his robes. He was wearing a tailored shirt and trousers that hugged his body. There was too little fat on him to smooth over the swell of his small cantaloupe belly. It was obviously no flaccid middle-aged paunch. He rubbed it idly with one elegant hand.

Ron had gone completely white, his freckles standing out on his face like spots of paint.

"That could've been Mum!" He rounded on Molly, who stood staring at Severus with her mouth open. "What the bloody hell have you done?"

"Given me the baby I never thought I'd have," Hermione said.

"Placed me in a delicate and peculiar situation," Severus added. His voice was very quiet and precise, far more lethal than Ron's bluster. "Do not expect me to forget or forgive this in a hurry, Molly Weasley." He snapped his robes shut, turned on the spot and Disapparated straight through the Burrow's wards.

"That's a shame, I was hoping he was going to stay for lunch," Harry said after a moment. "I would have liked to talk to him."

"So would I, the greasy bastard," Ron growled, and his entire family, with the exception of his still-astounded mother, rounded on him. Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex was exceptionally impressive today, Hermione thought, as Harry seized her around the shoulder and hugged her to his side.

"You'd better go and find him," Harry whispered as he leant towards Hermione. "He must have been excruciatingly embarrassed. God, that man's brave, and you can tell him I said so."

Hermione nodded, slipped out of the door and Apparated to Malfoy Manor.

oooOOOooo

Severus stood by one of the tall windows of the drawing room, staring out over the formal garden. Hermione was about to walk through the doorway when she heard Lucius' low voice.

"It's done now, Severus, you've taken the hardest step. The rest will be easier."

"Like this?" Severus asked bitterly, running his hands around his belly. "I should be used to humiliation, but as I've had the last seven years without it, it seems I'm out of practise."



"You shouldn't let it distress you so."

"Oh yes, I forgot, it's bad for the baby. Well, fuck the spawn, it's turning me into a hormonal mess, and I look like a snake that's swallowed a Bludger whole."

"Severus," Lucius purred, "you'll just have to put up with it for another five and a half months, and then it will all be over. It isn't a lifetime sentence. Hermione is more than willing to take the child off your hands. That's what you want, isn't it?"

There was a long pause as Severus sighed.

"I don't know. I don't know what I want, except for it to be over and finished, and then I can think about it rationally."

"Have you felt it move yet?"

"No, Strood said I'll feel it between four to five months."

"Narcissa wasn't really very taken with Draco at first," Lucius said. "She'd already lost the two previous little ones, so she didn't dare let herself care until he started to kick. By the time he was born, she already loved him with this fierce, possessive need that quite took me aback. Wait until you can feel him somersaulting around in your tummy before you decide whether to give him up." Lucius got to his feet from his chair beside the fire and laid his book aside. Severus looked around at him. Hermione could see the gleam of his black eyes, reflecting the firelight, but he was too intent upon Lucius to notice her.

"You sound as if you want him yourself."

"Well, he *is* yours." Lucius stepped closer, reached out and placed his spread hand firmly on the front of Severus' robes. Hermione, holding her breath, heard Severus let out a little sound, almost a whimper. "I want to feel him squirming inside here," Lucius whispered, and he took the final step that brought them chest to chest. Severus tilted back his head to look up into Lucius' eyes. Lucius began rubbing Severus' belly in a firm circular movement. "I want to watch you growing fuller and rounder day by day," he growled. "I want to pretend that he's mine, and that you are utterly mine."

Severus groaned and made a half-hearted attempt to push him away.

"I'll never be owned by anyone again, Malfoy, so bugger off."

"I don't want to own you," Lucius breathed, lowering his head and biting softly at the side of Severus' neck. "I just want to fuck you till you scream."

Hermione bit the back of her hand to prevent her gasp betraying her. Lucius shifted so that one of his legs was between Severus' thighs, eliciting a distinct humping movement before Severus stilled again.

"Bastard." His voice was thick and shaky. "You know the bloody hormones make me randy as hell."

"Are you accusing me of taking advantage of poor little Severus? As if I would." Lucius nibbled around the edge of his ear, and Severus quivered visibly. "If I'd known how a simple belly-rub would affect you, I'd have tried it years ago."

"Only works," Severus gasped, "when I'm pregnant. Lucius, stop."

Lucius smirked down at him.

"You don't really mean that, do you?"

"Granger will be here at any minute."

"She's supposed to be having lunch at the Weasley place."

"I left in a rage after threatening Molly. I can guarantee that Granger will follow me."

"Call her 'Hermione', Severus. It's much friendlier. Besides, calling her 'Granger' makes us sound like a pair of old perverts."

"We are." Severus made another attempt to pull away. "If this isn't perverted, I don't know what is. Were you all over Narcissa like this when she was carrying Draco?"

Lucius reared back.

"Great Merlin, are you still jealous of Narcissa? Yes, I did like to feel him move inside her; he was my son."

Severus snorted and this time, Lucius let him go. Severus pushed his hair back, burying his fingers in the lank black strands.

"I'm ... Yes, I am still jealous of Narcissa. I hate you for stringing me along for all those years, your little bit on the side, when I wanted you like hell."

"You wanted Hermione Granger too, I noticed. You like her, don't you, Severus? I must admit that the girl has a terrific brain in her head."

"Now that she's learned to use it as more than a filing system for facts learned by rote, yes."

"Not to mention a very grabbable, round little arse."

Severus huffed, in amusement or irritation, it was hard to tell. Hermione eased carefully back until she was watching them through the crack between the hinges of the door.

"You made it perfectly clear that our relationship was not exclusive on the day you proposed to Narcissa."

"I had no choice," Lucius said with a hint of exasperation. "It was arranged for me. Severus, we have gone through all of this a thousand times."

Severus wrapped his arms around himself, hunching slightly into his robes. "I know. I just feel ..."

"Fat? Angry? Vulnerable? In need of a damn good shag?"

"Fuck off."

There was reluctant laughter in his voice now, and Lucius seized him and slid his hand under the gentle curve of his belly to his groin.

"This suggests the latter." His other hand came up and grasped his hair gently, holding his head still so he could cover Severus' mouth with his own. Severus grabbed Lucius by the shoulders and rubbed against him shamelessly, pushing upwards into the kiss, making small, deep humming sounds in his throat.

"That's better," Lucius murmured, leaving his mouth to lick around the shell of his ear. "Much better. Let yourself go, Severus, let us look after you." He raised his head and stared straight at the narrow gap at the edge of the door. "He loves having his nipples nibbled, you know. Why don't you come and assist?"

oooOOOooo

Hermione's knees almost buckled. She felt dizzy with shock and excitement and lust it was lust that curled, hot and quivery, deep inside her; lust for that tall, arrogant handsome wizard despite all the reasons why she ought to hate him, and lust for Severus with his fecund little belly, even though she told herself she was wrong, perverse and sick.

She stepped into the room. Severus was still holding himself up by Lucius' shoulders, possibly not even aware she was there. When she began to unbutton his robes, he twisted to stare at her, but Lucius held him tight.

"Hush now, let's do this properly. Hold my arm, Hermione."

He Apparated them directly to the master bedroom. Hermione was aware of acres of pastel carpets, sheepskin rugs and a huge four-poster bed with green hangings, but Lucius was spreading Severus out on the bed and opening his robes and she forgot about the decor.

Hermione's hand trembled as she unfastened Severus' shirt and trousers. The line of little black hairs curved down into his white underpants, and when she pulled them down, his cock bobbed free. He was staring at her with his black eyes hazy with lust.

"Bastard," he panted, "you set this up."

"Of course I did," Lucius agreed. He was climbing out of his own robes, revealing a pale, trimly muscled physique with broad shoulders and an impressive erection. "I wasn't going to wait until you were the size of an erumpent with a temper to match before suggesting the threesome that we all want, was I?"

"Are you both bisexual?" Hermione asked.

"Of course," Lucius said. "Although I tend to prefer men and Severus is prone to falling for unsuitable women. However, Narcissa wouldn't entertain the notion of sharing at all. She was prepared to turn a blind eye to my little peccadilloes, but that was as far as it went."

"I'm a little peccadillo, am I? Oh God!"

Lucius shut him up by simply leaning down and sucking Severus' cock into his mouth. Severus tried to thrust upwards but Lucius' hands on his thighs prevented him.

Hermione had never in her life imagined that Severus could babble like that, his sinful voice reduced to an incoherent stream of nonsense. When she sucked and bit gently on one of his nipples, he positively squealed. She considered that Lucius Malfoy lived up to his reputation as a complete bastard when he let go of Severus' cock before he came, leaving him swearing and jerking his hips in a futile effort to regain the hot warmth. Instead, Lucius Accio-ed a jar, the contents of which he slathered onto his own cock before plunging a slicked finger into Severus' arse.

"You evil shit! Malfoy, get inside me before I explode."

"As you wish."

Lucius lifted Severus' legs, lined himself up and pushed steadily inside him; Severus writhed. Hermione could hardly tell if he was in agony or the most exquisite arousal, although judging by the way his cock jerked and leaked fluid, he was very happy about the proceedings. Hermione applied her mouth to a nipple in an attempt to wring those embarrassing noises from him again and succeeded while Lucius snapped his hips in a punishing rhythm.

One of the supremely satisfying moments in Hermione's life was seeing Severus' eyes roll back in his head and hearing him shout as he spurted creamy white curds onto his own belly while Lucius Malfoy shuddered and came inside him.

Lucius crawled onto the bed and collapsed beside Severus, smugness personified.

"I need a fag," Severus groaned, and Lucius hitched himself up on one elbow and trailed a finger through the sweaty hairs of Severus' treasure trail.

"No, you don't it'll only make you feel sick. You need to recover for a few minutes and then we have a very important task: a task which, as a wizard and a gentleman, I am honour bound to carry out, and you can damn well help."

"What?"

Lucius leaned his head close to Severus' ear and said very quietly, "We're going to make Hermione scream louder than you did."

"I did not scream."

"You did," Hermione told him. "You positively gibbered."

Severus opened his eyes and peered up at her, then frowned.

"Miss Granger, you are unsuitably clothed. Get that robe off at once."

"Yes, Professor Snape."

"Sarcasm does not become you."

"That wasn't sarcasm, it was irony."

He heaved himself up until he was sitting against the pillows and gazed thoughtfully at her.

"You really have grown into something of a handful, haven't you?"

"I heard that I have a very grabbable arse."

She turned around and dropped her robes, wriggling the said arse. When she looked back over her shoulder, a twitching in Severus' nether regions suggested that he agreed. Lucius rolled over onto his back, sighing happily.

"I can see that the next few months are going to be very entertaining indeed."

How right he was.

oooOOOooo

The next day, Hermione was eating toast in the breakfast room, waiting for an owl to deliver the morning paper so that she could glance through it while she drank her coffee, when the Floo alert chimed gently in the hall and she heard an elf questioning the visitor. She wondered if she had time to find out who it was before Apparating to work. Feet pattered on the marble tiles as Prossy hurried in.

"Miss Hermione, the Wheezy in the hall must speak to you, it is very very urgent, the Wheezy says. Shall I tell the Wheezy to go away?"

"No, I'll see them."

To her astonishment, Ron was pacing before the fireplace. As soon as she appeared, he hurried to her and grabbed her by the upper arms. His hair was tousled and his eyes wide.

"Hermione, thank Merlin! Call Snape and Malfoy right now."

"What?"

"We only have a few minutes, get them now!"

"Prossy, bring Master Lucius and Professor Snape here right away. What is it, Ron?"

"I'll explain when they get here. Trust me, Hermione, it's looking pretty damn bad."

Lucius came from the library, fully dressed and radiating chilly annoyance at the interruption to his morning routine. Severus, who required more sleep nowadays, came down the stairs wrapped in a black dressing gown and appearing unshaven, bleary eyed and surly.

"Harry sent me," Ron explained rapidly. "Snape, there's a warrant out for your arrest, and the Aurors will be here in around ten minutes ."

"What?" Lucius drew himself up and reached for his cane. Ron held up his hands.

"Just listen, okay? They're putting up anti-Apparation wards so you can't get out. I have to go before they block your Floo; they don't know I'm here. You mustn't fight them. They're coming in droves and you can't win, so don't try. They might be looking for an excuse to rough you up, so don't let them have it. Keep calm, don't argue. Play for time, demand legal representation and so on I'm sure you know the drill, Malfoy. Harry says that he'll sort it, he's seeing Kingsley now. Got to go, good luck."

He threw a handful of powder into the fire and stepped in, saying "Aurors' office, Ministry of Magic," as he did so.

"Well," Lucius drawled, looking from Hermione to Severus, "your fears appear to be well founded, Severus."

Severus shrugged.

"It was too good to last. I'm going to get shaved and dressed; I might as well attempt to retain a little dignity."

He had sufficient time to shave, dress and consume his morning potions before someone hammered on the front door.

"They've drilled through my wards with a ten-person lightning bolt curse," Lucius muttered.

"That's illegal, isn't it? They're supposed to tell you to come out first."

"Not if you're in pursuit of ex-Death Eaters, it appears. Let them in, Prossy, before they blast the door open."

Aurors in red robes poured through the front door, taking up exaggerated defensive postures around the edges of the hall. Lucius held up his empty hands.

"I assume you have a warrant for this intrusion?"

"Of course we bloody do, Malfoy; we're not stupid enough to come near a slippery bugger like you without all the paperwork." A big, burly Auror whom Hermione did not know well waved a roll of parchment. "But you can keep your knickers on; we're not after you this week."

"Then who are you after?" Hermione asked, stepping out from behind Lucius and Severus. A ripple of shock ran around the room, and the big Auror looked momentarily uneasy.

"Mrs Weasley? What're you doing here?"

A couple of members of his team, rather sharper on the uptake, winced visibly.

"My name is Granger," Hermione said coldly, "and I didn't realise it was against the law to stay with friends, Auror Stott. What's this all about?"

"I have a warrant for the arrest of one Severus Snape."

"On what grounds?"

The Auror bared his teeth in an unsightly grin.

"The use of Unforgiveable curses. Come on, Snape, you coming quietly or do we do it the hard way?"

Severus drew himself up and donned an aura of icy disdain, along with the travelling cloak handed to him by a trembling Prossy.

"We'll see you later, Professor," Hermione said.

"Don't bank on it," muttered one of the Aurors as they trooped out, jostling Severus in their midst.

"I'll go to the Ministry," Hermione said as soon as the front door slammed shut. Lucius lifted down the bowl of Floo powder and held it out.

"Go now. I'll Floo Draco and we'll get legal representation for him. Don't do anything hasty."

"Right. Good luck."

As she stepped into the green flames, Hermione realised she was shaking.

oooOOOooo

"Here." Harry thrust a mug of hot milky tea into her hands and Hermione took a grateful gulp. "He's in the holding cells, the Chief Warlock is convening the entire Wizengamot later today for the preliminary hearing, and we've got to move fast if we're to keep him out of Azkaban."

"Oh, no," Hermione breathed. "Oh, please, not Azkaban."

"The Dementors have gone," Harry said bracingly, but Hermione just stared into her mug of tea, trying to hold back tears of frustration.

"Harry, his pregnancy is being sustained by his magic, and Azkaban has had magic-dampening wards a mile thick ever since they banished the Dementors."

"Then we'll have to keep him out, won't we? Drink your tea." He conjured up parchment and a quill and sat down behind his desk. "We need to get everyone on his side to attend the hearing, plus everyone who is likely to be outraged at a miscarriage of justice ... Hermione, I'll do what I can from here, you go to Ginny and help her round up anyone you can think of: the old DA members, Order members, Hogwarts people, everyone. Go on, hurry. Use my Floo. Oh, and you'd better get the Malfoys here, too. If all else fails, we'll break him out and send him to France on a Thestral. We'll look after him, Hermione." Harry patted her shoulder and gave her a gentle shove towards the

fireplace.

Less than an hour later, as Hermione and Ginny crouched beside the Floo with soot in their hair and a list of people still to contact, Harry's Patronus galloped through the wall of the kitchen and gazed wisely down at them.

"The Wizengamot is convening in ten minutes down in courtroom ten. Come at once."

"Go," Ginny said briskly, "I'll join you in a few minutes." She had already taken her sons to the Burrow, although she had not explained to Molly what the emergency was.

Hermione seized a handful of Floo powder and plunged into the flames, breaking into a run as soon as she reached the Ministry and hurtling down into the bowels of the building. Just along the corridor from the courtroom, she skidded to a halt before two tall, elegant wizards who appeared to be holding a convivial conversation.

"Miss Granger," Lucius drawled, "good morning. Allow me to introduce you to Master Euripides Squiffle, head of the firm of Squiffle, Jinx and Scurrie, Master of Wizarding Law and Lore, and provider of general legal advice to the Malfoy family for the last five generations."

Squiffle, a cadaverous individual, raised a pair of lorgnettes to peer at Hermione and sniffed audibly.

"Is this the young person responsible for Professor Snape's lamentable condition? Well." He sniffed again. "I see. How unfortunate. I do hope you will sit still and keep quiet, young woman, and not jeopardise our case."

Hermione opened her mouth to tell the old man exactly what she thought of his bad manners, but Lucius placed a spotless black boot on her foot and pressed warningly. Squiffle nodded and strode away, his robes flaring, and Lucius muttered, "No time, we must go in." Seizing Hermione's arm, he drew her to a small, inconspicuous doorway. To her surprise, it let them in to the back of the courtroom where the members of the Wizengamot were already shuffling into their seats. Lucius headed for a shadowy corner, pushed Hermione onto one of the benches, sat down beside her and whispered, "Read this."

He passed her a folded copy of the *Prophet*. She lit her wand.

"Rita Skeeter, special correspondent, interviews the courageous war-heroine Molly Weasley in an exclusive insight into the affairs of the famous. Molly admitted, with a tear in her eye, that she had not always been on good terms with her now ex-daughter-in-law, Hermione Granger. 'But how she could leave my Ron and take up with that murderer, Severus Snape, a man old enough to be her father, with the ink barely dry on their divorce papers, I really can't say.' Granger, a bookish, ambitious young woman famous only for her friendship with Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, had been seen in the company of notorious ex-Death Eater Lucius Malfoy. Has she already dumped one bad boy for another? Has Snape's miraculous return from death swayed her from her ill-advised relationship with the richest wizard in the west of England? turn to page eight for more details."

"Skeeter appears to have an axe to grind," Lucius murmured. He leaned back on the hard bench with his arms folded, his eyelids lowered, but the cool grey eyes were alert as he watched the members of the Wizengamot.

"She hates me; I've had a run-in with the bitch before, but I could kill Molly!"

"The Weasley woman may have done nothing more than admit you've been in a relationship with Severus which was your intention anyway."

"I suspect she volunteered the information. Is this why they've arrested him because of this trash?"

"It brought him to their attention."

"You've been expecting this, haven't you?"

"It hasn't come as a surprise. Despite his Order of Merlin, there are plenty of people who haven't forgiven him for Dumbledore's death."

"But he received a posthumous full pardon."

"Apparently not so full. Ah, that's the chief warlock."

An elderly, cumbersome wizard flopped into his seat with a grunt, and the whispering died away. Down in the space before the tiered seats, a red-haired figure tapped upon the table with a gavel and cleared his throat.

"The Wizengamot is now in session," the chief clerk of the Wizengamot proclaimed portentously. "Fetch the accused!"

Severus was brought in at wand-point by four Aurors. He held his head high and walked steadily, his black robes swinging from his shoulders and his cloak flaring out behind him. People murmured and rustled as he passed them, but he stared straight ahead.

"Severus Snape," said the chief warlock, "you know why you're here. You have been accused of using Unforgiveable curses. Do you deny the charge?"

"No," Snape said quietly.

"Very good. You know that..."

"Excuse me, Chief Warlock Bunter," Squiffle called out, getting to his feet, "my client had excellent reasons for..."

"Mr Squiffle," Bunter rolled the syllables around in his mouth, as if savouring them. "Well, well, this is a surprise." A ripple of laughter ran around the benches of the Wizengamot. "Your client's excuses are not up for discussion at this time; this is a preliminary hearing. We are here to decide whether there is a case to answer which there is, on Mr Snape's own admission and what to do with him in the meantime. My own preference is to lock suspects and offenders safely away in Azkaban, but as you all know, I'm an old meanie." There was another gust of laughter. Bunter peered around with an air of satisfied complacency. "We will decide upon a date within the next six months for a full trial and..."

"Chief Warlock, my client's physical condition makes it unsafe for him to be sent to Azkaban."

"Really, Squiffle, is that so? He looks healthy enough to me, but of course, I'm not a Healer. Why, pray, should Snape not avail himself of the sea air and wide open views of our prime detention centre?"

"The anti-magic wards would be detrimental to Mr Snape's health, Chief Warlock."

"Hm. Well, we could all make that complaint, couldn't we? Snape, why should we not send you to Azkaban to await trial, hmm? Come along, give us your reasons, we haven't all day."

"As a result of a misdirected spell," Snape said in a clear and emotionless voice, "I am almost half way through a magically sustained pregnancy."

The clerk was forced to rap his gavel on the desk to restore order.

"Great Merlin," Bunter said with obvious distaste, "do we have a Healer in the Ministry who can confirm this rather implausible statement?"

A witch in a green robe stood up and stated that she had examined Snape and confirmed that he was indeed carrying a child.

"Do you also confirm that confining Snape to Azkaban will jeopardise his life?"

"Possibly," she said, "but not necessarily."

"Damn," Lucius whispered.

"I request that my client be granted bail, due to his previous good character and the risk entailed in imprisoning him within anti-magic wards," Squiffle said briskly.

The members of the Wizengamot leaned towards one another, whispering and glancing at Snape. Bunter turned right around in his seat to talk to the witches and wizards behind him. After about five minutes of conversation, he flapped a hand at the clerk in a demand for a call to order.

"Very well, very well. Snape will be freed on bail until the time of his trial, yet to be decided, on one condition: that twenty wizards or witches of good standing shall each be prepared to forfeit the sum of ten thousand Galleons if he fails to stand trial."

## Chapter 7

### *Chapter 7 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth. The sum was astronomical; surely no-one would be prepared to risk that amount and the horrible old warlock knew it, judging by the way he was leering at Snape, highly pleased with himself.

"I'll stand ten thousand for Professor Snape," a familiar voice called from the back of the dungeon.

The chief clerk, quill in hand, said in a bored voice, "Just come into the light so we can see you, and then state your name and occupation, please."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake Draco Malfoy, company director."

"As I said, twenty wizards or witches of good standing," Bunter called out, amusement in his voice. "No-one else? Then I "

"Harry James Potter, Auror."

Silence followed Harry's voice, in which his ringing footsteps echoed as he walked forwards to stand beside Draco. Lucius gave Hermione a little nudge, breaking her tense concentration, and she pulled herself to her feet, clinging to the back of the bench in front of her. Snape had better not run off; she couldn't lay her hands on ten thousand Galleons.

"Hermione Jane Granger, Unspeakable."

Harry turned to smile at her as she tottered to his side.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic." Kingsley's slow voice held a depth of reassurance; he came to stand behind Harry with his arms folded.

"Ginevra Potter, journalist and sports reporter."

"William Weasley, curse-breaker."

"Fleur Delacour-Weasley, house-wife and muzzair."

"Arthur Weasley, head of the department for Magical-Muggle Co-operation."

"George Weasley, shop proprietor."

"Angelina Weasley, Quidditch player."

"Luna Lovegood, magazine publisher."

Luna smiled mistily at Hermione as she came to stand in the little crowd. There was a pause, and then a set of brisk footsteps sounded behind her as a crisp voice declared, "Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts." For the first time, Snape showed a flicker of emotion; his black eyes widened as he turned his head to stare at his ex-colleague.

"Filius Flitwick, Deputy Head of Hogwarts."

"Neville Longbottom, Professor of Herbology, Hogwarts."

Hermione bit the knuckles on her fist, her eyes stinging.

"Blaise Zabini, spell-crafter and charms consultant."

"Pansy Parkinson, interior designer."

"Horace Slughorn, Professor of Potions - retired, you know, but always happy to help an old colleague."

After another pause, a voice drawled, "Lucius Malfoy, retired company chairman, currently undertaking academic research."

"Took your time," Harry whispered as Lucius took his place.

"Something to do with 'of good standing', I suspect," George muttered and Angelina elbowed him sharply. Lucius pretended not to hear.

When a familiar voice called out, "Ronald Bilius Weasley, Auror," Hermione very nearly sobbed. He gave her an embarrassed little grin and a shrug.

"That's twenty, Chief Warlock," the clerk said.

"I made it nineteen," Bunter snapped, thoroughly ruffled.

"Oh, did I not say?" The clerk cleared his throat officiously and scribbled on his parchment. "Percival Weasley, chief clerk of the Wizengamot. There, that's your twenty, sir."

"Severus Snape, you will not be sent to Azkaban; however, I am very reluctant to release you to run amuck in Wizarding Britain, casting who knows what curses here there and everywhere. Do you have his wand?" He gestured at the Aurors guarding Snape. Hermione grabbed Harry's arm.

"The old cheat, he can't snap his wand!"

"Chief Warlock," Kingsley remarked in his deceptively slow, easy voice, "I suggest that Severus Snape is released into the custody of someone of unimpeachable conduct and reputation, with the power to restrain him if required."

"Whom d'you suggest, Shackbolt? I'm not letting him go to anyone untrustworthy, mark you." He glared at Lucius, who responded with a supercilious sneer.

"Harry Potter."

Bunter fidgeted with his quill and then flapped a hand.

"Yes, yes, get on with it then. Let him go."

"Snape's wand, please," Harry said pointedly and waited until one of the Aurors produced the wand and handed it over. Harry tucked it up his sleeve into his wand holster. "Professor, please come with me. Ron, Hermione, you'd better come too."

Hermione saw Draco catch Harry's eye and give a short nod, which was returned, and then Draco hurried to whisper to his father.

"Conspiring with Slytherins, are we? My word Potter, think of your reputation," Severus murmured. Harry's expression, as he cast Severus a sideways glance, was almost amused.

"The trouble was, as teenagers we were far too self-involved to appreciate the droller side of adult humour," Harry said.

"And you are so much older now so wise and venerable?"

"I'm old enough not to rise to your bait, Professor."

"I am no longer anyone's professor, thank Merlin."

"The relief is mutual, I assure you."

As they left the courtroom, a tall, severe witch in tartan robes pushed past Hermione.

"Severus Snape! You you impossible man! How could you do this to us? You wretch, you let us all mourn you as dead!"

"Headmistress," Severus said, with a dip of his head, "I had no choice in the matter at the time."

"But later, boy! You could have sent an owl!"

"Would you really have wanted me back?"

McGonagall made a sound of exasperation and threw her arms around his neck. Severus staggered slightly and patted her shoulder, looking both embarrassed and surprised.

"Minerva, please control yourself; there are journalists present."

"You idiot," she sniffed, releasing him and groping in her sleeve for a handkerchief, "why didn't you contact us? Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"That's a long story," Severus said darkly.

"Then you must come to Hogwarts and tell it over a wee dram."

"A cup of tea perhaps, whiskey no longer agrees with me."

She cocked her head.

"What was that about a baby? Is it true what they said in the hearing?"

For an answer, he pulled his robes taut for a moment to display his distended belly.

"My word, surely not a potions accident?"

"I'll explain later."

"See that you do, young man, or else I'll send Filius to come and get you."

"Oh, yes, indeed," squeaked Professor Flitwick from down near Hermione's thigh. "However, Headmistress, we'd better hurry back. My fifth-years will be charming the clothes off each other by now."

"And my lot will be in among the Mandrakes," Neville said. "Glad you made it, Professor."

"Longbottom!" Severus snapped.

Neville paused while the other professors hurried away towards the public Floos. "I gather you avenged me," Severus said in a silky tone.

"What? Oh, the snake. Evil bugger, I chopped its head off with Gryffindor's sword. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Severus inclined his head. "That was well done."

Neville stared for a moment before nodding back, a gesture of respect between equals, and then he followed Flitwick away up the corridor. Severus watched them go, something oddly like yearning in his eyes.

Ginny nudged Hermione.

"Skeeter's on her way."

"Get me out of here before I throttle the cow!"

Harry snorted. "You read the *Prophet*, did you? I need to have words with my mother-in-law."

"Don't, Harry. You'll probably never know exactly what Mum said; you know how Skeeter misinterprets everything."

"You're right as usual," Harry sighed.

"Molly's never really liked me," Hermione pointed out. "Remember when Skeeter wrote that I was your girlfriend and I'd dumped you? The year of the Triwizard Tournament? Molly believed her. Not giving Ron babies was just the final nail in my coffin."

Ron's ears went red, but he didn't deny the accusation.

"Right, we're going back to our place," Ginny said briskly. "Professor, one of us will have to take you Side-Along to get through the wards."

Hermione stepped to Severus' side. He gave her a thoughtful look as they set off to the Ministry's Apparition point, but did not speak. He allowed Hermione to grasp his wrist and Apparate him to the front garden of Chervil Cottage. Hermione suspected that she knew why he looked around warily, but although Harry and Ginny had bought a house in Godric's Hollow, it was out of sight of Lily and James' old home.

Ron cleared his throat. "Do you really need me here? I can go back..."

"Yes, we do," Harry said forcefully, "we're up against the Wizengamot, mate; this needs all three of us."

"The Golden Trio." Severus' smooth voice was as deceptively bitter as dark chocolate.

"Exactly," Harry snapped, turning to him, "except that this time, the trio is fighting on your side, so don't knock it. Use it to your advantage. Gin, d'you want to go and get the boys while I sort out some lunch?"

Ginny met her husband's eyes and her mouth curved into a rather scary smile.

"Yes, that's a good idea. I might be a little while." She turned on the spot and winked out of sight.

"Perhaps I should..." Ron started to turn but Harry grabbed his arm.

"No, Ron. If you go, your mum will end up shouting. Ginny will wheedle the info out of her, and with luck, she'll even find out what spell she used."

They went into the house. Chervil Cottage, despite its quaint name, was a modern, spacious Wizarding home, as unlike number twelve, Grimmauld Place as it was possible to get, apart from the single elderly house-elf who glared at them from the kitchen doorway.

"Will Master wish to prepare his own lunch again, or will Kreacher be allowed to be a proper house-elf and actually cook?"

"Hello, Kreacher," Hermione said, which earned her a sniff.

"You'd better cook," Harry told the elf. "How about your famous chicken soup?"

"The chicken soup that Kreacher is allowed to make once in a blue moon? Yes, if Master wishes, Kreacher will try to remember the recipe."

"Great!"

The elf snorted audibly and pattered away into the kitchen, muttering, "Chicken soup indeed. My old Master and Mistress had proper luncheon, yes indeed, with five courses and wine to boot, and desserts and pastries ..."

Harry turned to Severus.

"Is chicken soup acceptable? I thought you might want something light after this morning's ordeal."

"Acceptable," Severus murmured.

"Something to drink while we wait cup of tea?"

"Water," Severus said. Hermione thought he appeared paler even than usual and wondered if the Apparition had upset his stomach. Harry narrowed his eyes.

"Didn't they allow you anything to eat or drink this morning?"

Severus gazed guilelessly at him.

"Yes, but because Veritaserum can have ill effects upon a growing foetus, I accepted nothing."

"They can't do that!" Ron exclaimed. "Not without Ministerial approval! Anyway, Veritaserum is tasteless; how would you know?"

The look that Severus turned on Ron would have shrivelled a schoolboy, but it made even the adult Auror take a step back.

"King's Potions has the Ministry contract for the supply of truth sera," Severus said in a voice like ripping silk. "Are you suggesting I am unable to identify one of my own potions?"

"Um, no ..." Ron muttered, shifting his feet. Meanwhile, Harry levitated a drinking glass from the draining board, moving it under the tap, which he turned on; after allowing it to fill, he floated the glass to Severus all wordlessly with his hands stuck in his pockets. "Show-off," Ron grumbled. Severus accepted the glass and drank from it thirstily. For some reason, Hermione was fascinated by the bobbing of his Adam's apple with its fine tracery of silver scars.

They followed Harry into the living room. Severus settled himself smoothly into an armchair and finished his glass of water. Kreacher staggered in a moment later, bearing a tea tray far larger than he was and muttering under his breath. Hermione knew that Ginny had provided him with an elf-sized tray, but he refused to use it. Kreacher had raised domestic martyrdom to the level of a Shakespearean tragedy and battled daily against Harry and Ginny's reluctance to overwork him.

"Tea, Master," he groaned, hefting the tray onto the coffee table, "as Master requested. Kreacher lives to serve, indeed he does. Tea, Master says, soup, Master says, tidy the garden, Master says, dust the stairs, Master says ..."

"Thanks, Kreacher," Harry said cheerfully, and Kreacher rolled his eyes and shuffled away. Snape accepted a cup of tea. He looked like a crow, hunched with his beaky nose over his teacup. His black robes pooled around him on the arms of the chair, outlining his shoulders and arms. He shifted, sitting up and arching his back slightly as if it ached, so that his robe pulled around his body and tightened over the vulnerable curve of his belly.

"I've spoken to some of the members of the Wizengamot," Harry said in between gulps of tea. "You were granted a full posthumous pardon for the death of Albus Dumbledore, but unfortunately, the pardon didn't mention the use of Unforgiveable curses."

"That's a technicality, surely?" Ron asked. "I mean, so what? The bloke's forgiven, that should be the end of it."

"Unfortunately we're dealing with the law, Ron," Hermione said, "and more to the point, with the Wizengamot some of whom have reason to hate Death Eaters."

"I was unpopular as a teacher and as headmaster," Severus said. He sipped his own tea primly, a wordless reprimand. Harry's eyes glittered with appreciation and he deliberately gave a slight slurp.

"That's totally petty and reprehensible," Hermione protested. "Harry, for Merlin's sake, grow up! Surely they need to accept that you were spying for us and under tremendous pressure! They can't imprison someone for sarcasm, surely?"

Harry abandoned his attempts to wind his companions up and leaned forwards with his hands hanging between his knees.

"There's more at stake here than just Snape. It's the Ministry's anti-Slytherin bias at work, like when Narcissa died."

Severus raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"Surely she was killed by a Slytherin?"

"Yeah, but there wasn't much effort to find her killer, was there? The case was given to me, only I'd just got my Auror's badge and I hadn't much of a clue. You don't give a murder enquiry to a complete novice unless you're not bothered whether the case ever gets solved. I only made it because I was given excellent unofficial advice from Kingsley and a couple of Tonks' old friends. See, if Narcissa had been a high-profile Gryffindor, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, the case would have been handled by the top Aurors in the murder squad. Kingsley is working hard and doing great, but he can't change everything on his own."

"You intend using me as a poster boy for Slytherin, do you?" Severus sneered at him. "Good luck; you'll need it."

"If it makes you feel better, you can tell yourself that I'm not doing this for you I'm doing it for justice."

"Potter the hero rides again."

Hermione choked back a groan. Severus' hands were clenched on the arms of his chair, and Ron's expression was dangerous, his hand hovering over the wand in its belt holster.

"Hate me as much as you want," Harry said evenly, "although you might find things go more your way if you work with us rather than against us."

"I could make your life hell, Potter," Severus ground out. "I know what you're really like."

"Been there, Snape, got the t-shirt. You see, I know what *you're* really like."

Severus and Harry glared at one another, and then Severus countered in a smooth, conversational tone. "I see you finally mastered the art of Occlumency."

Harry clearly recognised the peace-offering for what it was.

"Eventually, yeah, I got the general idea."

"Who had the dubious pleasure of teaching you?"

"Kingsley."

"Of course, only the best for the Golden Boy."

Harry's green eyes glinted behind the rectangular frames of his spectacles.

"Yeah, good job he was on our side, he's a damn good wizard. He told me..."

But what Kingsley had told him was never revealed. A loud and indignant screeching noise from the kitchen made Ron leap up, wand in hand.

"Oh, that's the owl trap!" Harry strode quickly into the kitchen, returning with a large cage floating before him. It contained a very angry eagle owl clutching a red leather satchel in one talon.

"He's called Trojan," Severus said calmly. "Lucius sent him, knowing that I'd recognise him."

Harry released the door of the cage, and the owl immediately scrambled out and flew to Severus, dropping the satchel in his lap. It wheeled around the room making snapping sounds with its formidable beak, flying from window to window until Harry let it out.

Severus opened the satchel and peered in, gave a small nod, and then closed it again.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly, "but I need to examine that."

"Am I to be allowed no privacy?"

"Allowing you to keep it without checking will cost me my job," Harry stated. "If you're not sent to Azkaban after that, you'll find yourself in the care of Gaius Stott. He was very eager to arrest you and was the one who put the Veritas serum in your drink this morning."

Severus picked up the satchel and held it out. Harry took it and looked inside.

"What are the potions, Professor?"

Severus sighed as if asked to perform an onerous task against his will before lifting out the rack of vials and holding it out to Hermione.

"I doubt if you will take my word for anything, so perhaps your friend will identify them for you."

Hermione pointed to them one by one.

"Anti-nausea potion, general iron and vitamin tonic, this one's to keep hormones in balance, a headache remedy, this one's for blood pressure and this for indigestion and heartburn. They're all specifically formulated to be safe to take during pregnancy."



"Very gracious of Malfoy," grunted Ron. "What's he up to?"

"He isn't up to anything; he's Severus' friend!"

"Oh, 'Severus' is it, now?"

"Ron, what part of 'we're having a baby together' do you not understand?"

"I want to know what Malfoy has to do with anything; I don't trust that slimy..."

"Stop it!" Hermione was dimly aware she was shouting and that the three wizards were staring at her in astonishment. "Shut up, all of you! This isn't going to fucking work, is it? You're all going to snarl and throw hexes and bring up every bloody insult and slight from ten years ago and Severus will get sent to Azkaban and he and the baby will die!"

"Well, yes, that's one possibility," drawled a familiar voice from the doorway, "although there are plenty of people who intend that nothing of the sort will happen."

Harry and Ron had their wands trained on the intruder. Draco held up his hands to show they were empty.

"How did you get in here, Malfoy?" Ron snapped.

"I accompanied my wife and son, naturally, and they were invited by Potter's charming wife, who gave Astoria the password, and your house-elf let us in. Is Mrs Potter not here?"

"She's gone to get the boys," Harry said, still training his wand on the Malfoys. Astoria, a tall, elegant young witch in a designer robe, was accompanied by a female house-elf pushing a baby in a silver perambulator and another witch whom Hermione recognised from their own year at Hogwarts: Astoria's sister, Daphne Greengrass. Daphne gave a little cry and dashed across the room to clasp Severus around the neck and kiss his cheek.

"Severus! Oh, Merlin, we were so worried! Are you unharmed? Did they hurt you?"

Severus patted her silk-clad shoulder and murmured, "I'm fine, Daphne, don't fret," although he didn't sound particularly reluctant to be fussed over.

Daphne lowered her voice and asked, "Are you sure? Is everything all right in here?" She rubbed his tummy lightly.

Hermione's chest felt so tight that she could hardly breathe. How dared she?

"I assure you, my dear, I am quite well." Severus' voice was smooth and slightly amused.

Daphne perched herself on the arm of Severus' chair and gazed down at him fondly while Hermione gritted her teeth.

"Thank Merlin for that. Now, Draco and I are going through all the outstanding orders; we'll make up the straight-forward ones and owl them out, and send everything that we can from stock, of course, and we'll owl everyone else and explain that the business is on hold as a result of personal circumstances. Do you want us to cancel the adverts in the papers?"

"Yes, it would be best. I doubt that the Potters will allow me to run my potions business from their kitchen."

"Surely you're not staying here!" Astoria exclaimed. She turned large blue eyes to her husband. "Draco, Severus must come and stay with us!"

"It isn't possible, I'm afraid," Draco said, and wasn't it odd that his was the voice of reason in this increasingly infuriating conversation? "Severus hasn't been freed; he's on bail pending trial and no doubt there are stringent rules in place to ensure the safety of the Wizarding public from such a notorious criminal."

"You don't say," Ron muttered, earning him glowering looks from all the Slytherins.

"Unfortunately, that's the case, yes." Harry, by contrast, sounded businesslike and not unfriendly. "At present, Professor Snape isn't allowed to go anywhere without an accompanying Auror."

"And that's you, is it, Mr Potter?" Daphne asked coolly.

"Yes, that's me."

"How pleasant for you. You'll have ample opportunity to have your revenge on Slytherin."

Harry settled himself into a chair and placed his fingertips together beneath his chin.

"Mm, that's right. My wife is helping me; she wickedly suggested that we start by inviting another new mother and baby, with her husband and sister, round for coffee and a chat, who just happen to be Professor Snape's business partners and friends. We've evilly asked our house-elf to make some nutritious chicken soup for his lunch, and no doubt we'll plan some equally devilish nastiness for dinner probably cursed lamb chops, new potatoes and peas."

Kreacher chose that moment to appear levitating a large pot of soup, bowls and a basket of bread rolls.

"Here is soup," he croaked, glaring around, "as Master commanded. Here is enough soup for everybody except baby; soup is too chunky for baby, for baby might choke. Kreacher must make pureed soup "

"No, he's just been fed," Astoria said hastily, as if she suspected the elf of evil intent toward the blond baby sleeping peacefully in his pram. The little female elf was gently pushing the pram back and forth in a rocking motion; she glared at Kreacher as if daring him to attempt to feed her precious charge.

"I'm fine," Daphne said loftily, "but do go ahead; don't miss your lunch on our account."

"Look, I'm going back to work," Ron told Harry, "but I'll have a word with Kingsley, shall I?" Harry nodded, and Ron waved at Hermione and hurried out, the pop of his Apparition sounding a moment later.

"Severus didn't have any breakfast," Hermione said. She wanted to get into the conversation somehow; she felt as if she was not so much excluded as simply beneath the notice of these pale, self-styled Slytherin aristocrats. They didn't even look around at her, but rather crowded around Severus, fetching his soup from Kreacher, offering bread, asking if he had taken his potions and if he was sure he was well.

It was with great relief that Hermione heard Ginny arrive. James ran into the room, stopping dead with a squawk of astonishment when he saw all the strangers, and then scampered to his father, who bent down with his arms outstretched and lifted the toddler onto his lap. Ginny followed him, carrying Albus. Daphne and Astoria fluttered to admire the baby. Ginny returned the compliment by cooing over Scorpius, which was so completely out of character that Harry caught Hermione's eye and winked; she managed a twitch of a smile in response. Draco took the opportunity to sit down near Severus and engage in a low-voiced conversation as Severus finished his soup.

Hermione tried desperately to look as if she didn't care when Daphne returned to Severus and resumed her perch on the chair arm.

"You will attend your appointment with the Healer, won't you?" she said solicitously. "And make sure that you get enough exercise without overdoing it."

"I shall endeavour to follow the Healer's instructions, insofar as my situation allows."

"We'll get you released," Daphne assured him, as if being confined to the Potter household was one step away from consignment to purgatory. "Draco already has some ideas. You mustn't worry."

Albus awoke and began fretting, which set Scorpius to crying lustily, and the Malfoys and their entourage left shortly afterwards. Hermione allowed herself to relax until she caught Severus watching her with his trademark sneer and an amused glitter in his black eyes. Feeling angry at herself for allowing her emotions to show and at him for being a bastard, she retreated to the kitchen where Ginny was now feeding the baby.

"I hadn't realised before what a vapid cow Daphne Greengrass is," Hermione said, trying to sound unconcerned.

"She did rather drape herself over him, didn't she?" Ginny settled Albus more comfortably at her breast and smiled down at him.

"The way she was patting his stomach, as if she had a right to touch him ..."

"Hermione, the Malfoys and Daphne have been Snape's only friends for seven years."

Hermione winced.

"Yes, I suppose they have. If I want the right to crawl into his lap I'm going to have to earn it."

"Who says you haven't already got it?" Ginny asked placidly. "Come on, why wouldn't a middle-aged and rather plain wizard want an attractive young witch plastering herself all over him? He tolerated her in front of us, but I doubt if he could actually live with her. She's a bit superficial and gushing." She squinted up at her friend. "You sound as if you want to make a go of it with him."

Hermione shrugged elaborately. "I'm thinking about it."

"Hmm, and the luscious Lucius? What about him?"

"What *about* him?"

"Harry and I wondered if you were getting rather too fond of him."

"Perhaps I am."

"You can't have them both."

"Can't I?" Hermione smiled in what she hoped was an enigmatic manner and returned to the living room before Ginny prised any more uncomfortable truths from her.

## Chapter 8

### *Chapter 8 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Harry was bouncing a giggling James on his knee while Severus sipped a second portion of chicken soup. He put down his spoon and leaned back to gaze thoughtfully up at Hermione.

"I note that you didn't rush to drool over Scorpius Malfoy," he said in his smooth, silken voice. "Do you not like babies, Miss Granger?"

"I don't dote on them," Hermione replied.

"One wonders if you are cut out to be a mother, in that case." He smirked up at her, his hands folded protectively on his abdomen.

"That isn't fair," Harry said hotly before Hermione could think of a reply. "I didn't drool over Malfoy's baby either, but that doesn't mean I don't adore my own two. Hermione loves James and Albus, and the Weasley children. Not every witch is a Molly Weasley."

"Thank Merlin for that," Hermione muttered and couldn't resist adding, "Daphne seems to be very fond of your bump, but then, I suppose she did know about it long before I did."

"Of course the Malfoys knew before I even discovered that it was yours."

Harry stopped bouncing James and looked sharply at Severus. "Whose did you think it was, if not Hermione's?"

Snape narrowed his eyes.

"Why should it have been anyone's other than mine, Potter?"

"He thought it was Lucius'," Hermione said.

Severus surged to his feet, his hands clenched at his sides.

"Why, you..." He bit off his sentence as James let out a wail, alarmed by the violent movement and the sudden tension in the room. Harry shushed him and settled him to cuddle against his chest.

"So your friends are allowed to know but mine aren't?" Hermione asked sweetly. She had the feeling that if she allowed Severus to intimidate her even once, she would never regain his respect.

"My friend's reputation has suffered enough," Severus snapped. "I will not allow it to be smirched with another scandal, not after he has done so much for me."

"That's fair enough," Harry agreed, "and I wouldn't dream of saying anything to anyone. It was you who accused my friend of not being a fit mother. Are you surprised that she retaliated? People do, Snape, when you hurt them, or didn't you know?"

He got to his feet, hefting James under one arm. "This little lad is overdue for his nap; I'll just take him up to his room."

Severus subsided back into the armchair, his expression once again schooled into impassivity.

"I could sit on the arm and coo and pat your tummy, if you like," Hermione said lightly. She startled a rare, soft gust of laughter from him.

"Do you really wish to?"

In answer, Hermione plonked herself where Daphne had sat and reached down. He caught her hand and placed it on the hard, warm swell of his belly.

"I'm too full of soup to be patted."

"You'll soon be full of baby."

"I'm all too aware of that fact, Miss Granger."

"What does it feel like?" she whispered. "I'll never know, so this is the nearest I'll get to being pregnant."

"I feel full awkward when I bend down and I can't tolerate anything tight around my middle."

"You must feel vulnerable."

"Yes," he said after a moment.

"I was so worried when the Aurors took you away. I've heard a few unpleasant rumours about Gaius Stott."

"Well, I survived," Severus said brusquely. "Your baby is unharmed." He firmly lifted her hand away, and even though he barely moved, his body language changed to an attitude of rejection. As Hermione drew away, rather hurt, she heard what Severus had already noticed: Ginny's brisk footsteps approaching the door.

"Mrs Potter, thank you for inviting the Malfoys into your home. It was ... kindly done."

"You're welcome," Ginny said. "We're not monsters, you know, despite what Miss Greengrass says." She glanced thoughtfully at Hermione before taking a seat on the sofa. Harry came down the stairs, realised that she was clearly waiting for him, and sat down next to her with an interrogative expression. Ginny sighed.

"Well, Dad is going to be furious if he finds out. Mum used a sex-magic ritual, and I suspect he didn't even know anything about it; she did the preparatory spell before he came into the room, and she made sure he'd had rather a lot of mead first. I've borrowed the book that she got the ritual from." She held up a small, battered volume with a Spellotaped spine.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Hermione peered at it. "*Nanny Hogg's Tips and Wrinkles for Love and Marriage?* When was this published?"

"Around the middle of the nineteenth century. It was my great-grandmother's." Ginny flicked through the book. "Most of the recipes are for harmless charms and simple potions, but at the back, there's a section on conception and childbirth. This is the ritual she used." She held out the book. Severus took it, and Hermione watched his black gaze skimming rapidly from side to side. He sat back again, letting out his breath with a sigh.

"She's pinned it in place with true sex magic."

"One of the three great generators of magical power," Harry said, quoting from the *Standard Book of Spells, Grade Seven*. "Sex, birth and death. Does that mean that the birth magic can be used to remove the spell?"

"Birth or death."

"Death magic is Dark magic," Harry said warningly.

"So it is, Potter. Birth magic is taken to be intrinsically Light, and sex magic depends upon the purpose and the nature of the generating ritual. Magic generated by rape is Dark. At least in this case, the sex was by consent even if Arthur had no idea that Molly was gathering the generated power or why she was doing it." He sighed and placed his hands flat on his robes, spreading his fingers out across his belly and massaging it lightly. "I'm stuck with this for the duration; only the birth can unhook the spell."

"I'm sorry," Ginny said. He quirked an eyebrow at her, and she gave a wry little smile. "I'm sorry that Mum was such an idiot and did this to you, but I can't say I'm sorry that my best friend has a chance to be a mum, though."

"I'm bloody furious about the court case," Harry said. He slid an arm around his wife's shoulders and she leaned against him. "You shouldn't have to go through all this stress."

"I am resigned to spending the rest of my unplanned and unnatural pregnancy at your beck and call, Potter. I consider it the icing on the cake."

Harry made an irritated flapping motion with his free hand. "You always were a drama queen, weren't you, sir? I've no intention of turning you into some sort of house-elf." He frowned in thought. "I'll have a word with Meridia tomorrow."

Meridia Frimp was the head of the Auror office, one of Kingsley's first appointees and a very sensible and efficient witch. She reminded Hermione of Professor McGonagall.

"I did have a thriving business to run," Severus said in a snide tone. He folded his arms.

"Were you intending to work throughout your pregnancy?"

"Witches do."

"Witches are designed for pregnancy, wizards aren't," Ginny said not unkindly. "You might find that your back and hips start protesting once you get heavy. My babies were carried cradled in here," she indicated the space between her hips, "a lot of the weight towards the back. Your hips are too narrow for that, so you're going to carry a big bump right out in front and you'll have to arch your back a lot more to compensate."

"Is it the money you're worried about?" Hermione asked. Severus glowered darkly.

"I have savings unless the Wizengamot decides to seize my assets."

"They might."

"They'd better not," Harry muttered. "We won't throw you out on the streets, destitute, whatever happens. I give you my word we'll do what we can for you."

"I have an appointment next week with Healer Strood," Severus told him. "I have been advised to walk a minimum of two miles a day at a brisk pace at this stage, to retain muscle tone, and I have my potions. No doubt Mrs Potter knows the essentials of a suitable Healer-approved diet."

"Have you been walking?" Hermione asked curiously, earning another glower.

"Around the Malfoy estate every morning after breakfast."

"Speaking of Malfoy," Harry said, "I really ought to see the letter."

"Letter, Potter?"

"The letter that I'm sure he put in with the potions."

Severus waved a hand at the satchel, which floated across the room into his grasp. He extracted a roll of parchment and held it out. Harry glanced down it and handed it back with a nod. "Thank you. If I'm asked, I can now say with complete truth that I've seen the letter you received from Lucius Malfoy. We both know that he will have included another letter for your eyes only."

Severus stared at him, frowning in thought rather than anger.

"I would almost believe that you are learning to think like a Slytherin, Potter."

"Didn't you know? The Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin."

There was something satisfying about the momentarily horrified expression on Severus' face.

oooOOOooo

Hermione paused by the bedroom door, wondering whether to ease it open to check if Severus was still awake.

"Either come in or cease skulking around, Miss Granger."

He was lying in bed, propped up against a pile of pillows with a book in one hand.

"I just wanted to see if you were all right," Hermione said. Severus huffed and let the book fall to the counterpane.

"If I am required to spend the next five months being asked at hourly intervals if I'm all right, Miss Granger, you will find out how very good I am at wandless hexes."

"Put it like this," Hermione stated as she sat down on the edge of the bed. "I don't quite trust you."

"That much is very apparent," Severus said through gritted teeth. "Now get out..."

"You misunderstand. I don't trust you to tell me if anything's going wrong. I don't trust you not to put up with pain and discomfort, because you've always been forced to be self-sufficient and I suspect you've put up with a lot of pain in your life. You'd rather suffer and try to deal with problems with your own potions than tell anyone else."

"That is a reasonable estimation of my character," Severus said dismissively. "Now, if you would care to go away, we'll both be happier. You have checked up on me and have informed me that you care."

"I want your word that you'll tell me or Lucius or Healer Strood if anything concerns you."

"Very well, you have it. Now bugger off."

There was a curiously light note in his voice just a hint that he was not as irritated as he wished to appear. Hermione grinned.

"In exchange, I'll promise not to pester you. You see, if I can trust you to tell us if you're unwell or in pain, I won't need to keep asking, will I?"

"I suppose you don't include attempting to bond with the squirt under the heading of 'pestering', Miss Granger?"

"Sorry, no. May I?"

He shrugged, and she slid her hand under the quilt, between the buttons of his nightshirt and onto the warm, smooth skin. As she did so, she noticed the book lying discarded at his side. "*Magical Pregnancy Month By Month?* Did Ginny lend you this?"

"Her pregnancies were perfectly normal and un-magical," Severus said dismissively. "Lucius sent it."

"Hidden in the satchel?"

"No. While you were exercising your maternal instincts with the Potter offspring after dinner, you may not have noted the appearance of a Malfoy house-elf, bearing a trunk containing clothing and books."

"Did Harry check them?" she asked anxiously and Severus snorted.

"No elf would Apparate into the territory of another house-elf without permission that ancient reprobate informed his Master as a matter of course before allowing Prossy in. I would have informed Potter anyway. He was under no obligation to treat me as a guest rather than a prisoner; I am aware that my situation is comfortable only because of his intervention on my behalf. Do you consider me boorish enough to abuse his hospitality?"

"I'm never sure of anything with you."

"All part of my innate charisma, my dear."

Hermione chuckled. "That's a Malfoyism if ever I heard one."

"Yes, he is as much of a peacock as his pets."

"That suggests he's all show and no substance, which I don't agree with. He's far more knowledgeable than I expected, to be honest."

"Draco did not come by his prowess at potions by accident," Severus said; then, at Hermione's dubious expression, he added, "I admit that the boy was lazy, concentrating his efforts upon besting Potter, playing politics and impressing his teachers rather than in academic achievement, but even so, his grades were earned by merit, as were his father's."

"Nowadays, I'm regularly surprised by Slytherins," Hermione told him. The skin of his stomach tightened and twitched under her hand as she smoothed it, and she realised that his breathing had deepened. She looked into his eyes, black and wide, and the next moment, he had pulled her down onto the bed by her arms and rolled on top of

her, pinning her down.

"Really?" he purred, reaching to push the heavy mass of her hair back from her face.

"Oh, yes."

He smirked and whispered, "Had you not better cast a silencing spell before we surprise the Potters?"

Hermione fumbled for her wand as he obligingly lifted his weight from her arm and waited as she cast the spell. He traced the shape of her mouth with his fingertips, his brow slightly furrowed in concentration. Hermione felt she had never been subjected to such a close and intense scrutiny. She felt shivery with excitement, eager to be pinned under more than just the weight of his regard, and yet she placed a hand on his chest, pressing her palm against the hard bone of his sternum.

"And what is bothering you now?" he asked, although without apparent rancour.

"Lucius."

He let out a long breath.

"I never could compete with the beautiful Malfoy," he said in a tart voice, and Hermione gave a little gasp.

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant! It would be nice if he could be with us, but Severus, what worries me I don't want to come between you and him. I don't want to spoil things between you."

"You really think he cares what I do without him?"

"Yes, I think he does."

Snape flopped back onto the bed, staring up at the lamp lit ceiling.

"My dear girl, as long as I am still his shadow, his dark acolyte, I doubt if he gives a flying fuck. I'm a good shag, I work hard to please him, I'm discreet, and I'm intelligent enough to amuse him on winter evenings. He and I are inextricably bound in a web of debts and secrets and lies."

"Lies?"

"We're Slytherin; of course we tell lies. After all, if you usually tell lies, people don't notice the occasional accidental truth. Dear God." He prodded himself in the middle with a forefinger. "The hormones appear to have made me lachrymose as well as embittered and randy. What a horrible combination."

Hermione surveyed him with narrowed eyes.

"You loved him," she stated finally. "You followed him to Voldemort because you loved him, and you still love him. You don't do things by halves, do you?"

She rubbed the soft, worn cotton nightshirt where it rose over the bulge of his belly, and he observed her suspiciously. "You're aware what that does to me, aren't you?"

She allowed her hand to slide around the curve to nudge at his erection.

"Mmmhmm. Shall we do something useful with this?"

"Such as?"

Hermione released him to unfasten the zip of her jeans, kneeling over him and shrugging out of her clothes as he watched her. Then she lifted his nightshirt up over his head.

"I'm not exactly pretty to look at," he muttered, turning away, and Hermione grasped his chin and forced him to face her.

"I could kill Lucius Malfoy! Doesn't he ever tell you how sexy you are? Because you are!" She continued her protest as he attempted to argue. "You're elegant and your voice is like melted chocolate and you move beautifully and you have the darkest eyes I've ever seen!" She kissed him to stop his rebuttal, adding against his mouth, "And so what if you've got a big tummy? It's my baby in there, and you wouldn't believe how sexy that feels!"

He rolled over on top of her again so that the round, hard shape pressed down into her abdomen and she could pretend for a moment that it was she who contained its subtle weight. She locked her ankles behind his back and felt his cock prodding eagerly at her. She wriggled until he sank home and they each gave a sigh of pleasure.

"Witch," he murmured against her hair. "This may be over faster than either of us would wish."

"Doesn't matter. Do it again later."

"You hope." He began to move in her, adjusting his speed to match the pull of her legs behind his back in a way that Ron had never seemed to grasp, until his control broke and he thrust fast and hard, coming in her with a bitten-off cry. Hermione lay beneath him, sweat-soaked and slick, wondering if he would simply fall asleep, and was astonished when he slid down, still panting, and nosed at the damp curls between her thighs. Her clitoris was already sensitised and his hot, puffing breath, his teasing tongue and deft fingers brought her to a swift conclusion every bit as satisfying as his.

He gazed at her with glittering eyes.

"Yes?" She slid a fingertip across his chest, flicking gently at one of his small, brownish nipples. "Something amuses you?"

"It is ungentlemanly to comment upon your previous paramours," he said, stretching his back and shoulders.

"But you do wonder why I married him. Shall we just say it wasn't for the sex and leave it at that?"

"Or the intellectual conversation, I suspect."

"I thought you said that was ungentlemanly?"

"Did I ever claim to be a gentleman? 'Greasy bastard' was, I believe, the more usual term." He reached out towards the bedside table and his face seemed to sink into a scowl as if his affability was an act and this was its default expression. She realised that he had automatically reached for his wand, forgetting that it was still in Harry's possession. He bent down to pull the quilt up over them, huffing as his stomach got in the way. "Kindly put out the lamps, Miss Granger," he said stiffly.

Hermione sighed and groped for her wand. She was almost asleep when she heard the soft rumble of his voice.

"I was never a *nice* man, Hermione."

"No," she said drowsily, "but you've always been a good one." She nestled into his side and fell asleep with his arm around her.

oooOOOooo

Hermione sat bolt upright, reaching for the wand that she always, always kept under her pillow, except that it wasn't there, and the echoes of a scream still reverberated in her ears.

"Fuck!" The voice was male, and familiar, although slightly hoarse. She remembered where she was, remembered leaving her wand on the bedside table, groped for it and lit the tip. Snape's black eyes glared at her out of his pale, sweaty face.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?"

He sank back against the pillows and threw his arm across his eyes to block out the wandlight.

"Go back to sleep. I knew I should have thrown you out as soon as we'd finished."

Hermione stared at his naked chest with its sprinkle of dark hairs, the ugly old tattoo faded to a grey shadow on his forearm, and his tense jaw, the only visible part of his face.

"I have nightmares about that snake," she confessed, flicking her wand to extinguish the light. Severus snorted.

"Do you." It was not a question.

"We all do. Have nightmares, I mean. Ron and George, Harry and me, Neville and Ginny."

"Please renew the silencing spell," he said abruptly. "I would rather not have to explain to your anxious friends that I have neither killed you nor used the Imperius curse to get you into my bed."

Hermione cast the spell, then placed her wand carefully under her pillow. When she moved warily closer to Severus, she felt him flinch.

"Do you want me to go?"

"It would be best."

"But do you want me to? I'd rather stay."

"I'll only keep you awake."

"That doesn't matter."

The bed dipped, and she realised he was getting up. "Severus? Don't go, please."

"Bathroom," he said shortly, and she heard him pad barefoot across the room and into the adjoining bathroom, closing the door quietly. He returned after a couple of minutes and subsided onto the bed with a sigh. "Little bugger's squashing my bladder," he grumbled, "and he isn't even kicking yet. Oh, this is such fun."

Hermione reached out and embraced him, feeling him go tense and still in her arms. She began rubbing soothing circles on his abdomen. He seemed unused to anyone showing him any affection, and although he gradually relaxed, he made no move to return the favour. As her eyes began to droop shut, she suddenly realised she could hear small, curling snores, and she smiled and allowed her hand to fall still, cupping the place where their child grew in warmth and darkness.

oooOOOooo

"Morning," Harry said from behind the *Daily Prophet* in response to Hermione's greeting. She slipped into a chair and helped herself to tea and toast. Harry lowered the paper. "Where's Snape?"

"Having a shower. I ought to go into work today I won't have any leave left at this rate."

"I want Snape to come to the Ministry with me this morning; you'd better come with us. Ron's arranged us an appointment with Meridia."

"Oh, right. Anything I ought to know in advance?"

He shook his head and handed her the paper. "No, Ron just said that he had an idea and needed Meridia to approve it. I don't think she was very pleased about me being tied up Snape-sitting until the court case."

"That might be ages. Didn't that awful Bunter say something about a trial within the next six months?"

"Yeah, and I think he'll try and arrange it at the most inconvenient time he can, like when poor old Snape's about to pop. Oh, bugger." He gave a little shiver. "I might have to cope with that."

"You managed all right when Ginny had the boys, Harry."

"That was different; that was my wife. I don't fancy having to deal with a Snape in labour; that's scary."

"Healer Strood says they'll remove the baby by magic when it's ready. It's like a splinched Apparition they Apparate him Side-Along and leave the baby behind."

Ginny came in carrying Albus and with James trotting along behind her, dragging his toy erumpent and singing a tuneless song that seemed to consist of the words, "The feeeeenix and the dwagon, the feeeeenix and the dwagon," over and over again.

"Favourite bedtime story," Harry told Hermione, rolling his eyes. "The tale of the dragon who stole a phoenix egg. Very emotional."

"Dwagon!" James yelled and hit everything within reach with his erumpent. "Yeah, dwagon! Bad dwagon, we'll get the dwagon! My Daddy's a naurer an' he'll 'rest the dwagon!"

"Merlin save us," Severus murmured, pausing in the doorway.

"Dwagon!" screeched James and ran round the room beating off imaginary dragons with his stuffed toy.

"I've changed my mind," Severus said calmly, "I'm sending it back."

Ginny sniggered.

"Too late, Professor. Kreacher, where are you?"

"Kreacher is cooking breakfast, Mistress," the elf croaked. "Being a lone house-elf and therefore doing the laundry, cooking breakfast and attending to the owl post while writing a shopping list..."

"Yes, great," Ginny interrupted him, "I'm sure you're up to your eyes. Boiled egg and soldiers for James, please. I'll have porridge. What about you, Professor Snape?"

"Tea and toast will be sufficient."

"Tea and fresh toast and that nice lime and quince marmalade oh, and pumpkin juice for James." She looked at Severus. "Fruit juice? We have fresh orange or apple, and what about some yoghurt?"

Severus shuddered. "No, thank you."

"You should have fruit and vegetables, and milk or yogurt for calcium."

"I am perfectly aware of what I require, thank you, Mrs Potter."

Ginny shrugged. "I'm sure you are. Don't worry, I had far too much smothering from Mum when I was pregnant to inflict it on anyone else, or at least, anyone else who's likely to be better than I am at wandless hexes."

Severus' lip curled slightly into a reluctant smirk, and Hermione noticed that he poured himself a glass of apple juice when he thought no-one was watching him.

oooOOOooo

"Ah, yes, Snape." Meridia Frimp looked up at him over the tops of her spectacles. "My nieces always spoke very highly of you when they were at Hogwarts."

Severus frowned for a moment and then his brow cleared.

"Vanessa and Veronica Woodcraft. Vanessa excelled at Potions; her sister was stronger at charm work and transfiguration."

"Weren't in Slytherin, were they?" Harry asked blandly.

"Indeed they were, Potter, as was their mother and both their aunts." Frimp nodded once at Harry, who took up a position beside the door, hands clasped behind his back and feet shoulder-width apart every inch the professional Auror. "So," she said, leaning back in her chair and placing her fingertips together, "I really don't want one of my best young Aurors tied up for the next who knows how long, guarding the man who was responsible for helping him to rid the world of that mad wizard. Potter, do you have Snape's wand?"

"Right here, Ma'am." Harry handed it over.

"Could Snape overpower you without his wand?"

Harry stared at Snape for a moment, who gazed impassively back.

"Yes, I expect he could."

"Waste of your time guarding him, then. Anyone could do it since he'll escape if he wants to anyway. Granger, no doubt he could subdue you and escape just as easily."

It was typical of Frimp that she knew Hermione had reverted to her maiden name.

"Yes, he could."

Frimp reached down into her desk drawer, picked up something small and tossed it at Hermione, who just managed to catch it. It was a red and silver badge. "You're now a community Auror. Usually they work a minimum of five days a year in the public service tasks like stewarding at international Quidditch matches, assisting the Aurors in emergencies, and so on. In your case, you're assisting Potter on guard duty." She showed her teeth in a grin. "Snape, one of Kingsley's conditions is that you submit to a custody spell, attached to Potter and Granger. You'll have to remain within ten yards of one or other of them or else the spell will kick in."

"With what consequence?" Severus asked, his voice level and face a blank mask.

"Oh, they'll both be alerted and you'll find yourself in a full body bind until one or other comes to release you. It'll kick in if you try to Apparate alone you'd spread yourself across the landscape, so don't try it." She drew her wand. "Do you accept the custody spell?"

"What choice do I have?"

"This or Azkaban."

"I accept," he muttered with ill grace. Frimp spun her wand in a complex series of passes and a glittering light shimmered over Severus for a moment, outlining him in silver before vanishing. A deep coppery glow bloomed around Harry, and then Hermione saw her own hands glimmer as if illuminated by a sunset, before the magic sank into her skin and disappeared.

"Kingsley thought you'd be peeved," Frimp remarked. She picked up Severus' wand, handling it respectfully, but even so, Hermione saw Severus wince. "This is the wand that killed Dumbledore, is it?"

"I have never denied it," Severus said in a tightly controlled voice. "Kindly do not snap it."

"Oh, I've no intention of snapping it; this is a prime piece of evidence." Frimp reversed the wand and held it out by the tip. "Besides, Kingsley assures me that you'll behave yourself even if I give it back."

Severus hesitated for a moment before taking the wand and stowing it in his sleeve. Frimp nodded. "The charm I cast on you is tied in to the Ministry's surveillance systems, so if you try to break it, you'll find yourself surrounded by Aurors. It can only be lifted by a Ministry employee with top-level clearance. The death or incapacitation of either Granger or Potter will automatically sound the alarms here. Everything clear?"

"As daylight," Severus muttered. Frimp clicked her tongue.

"Potter, I'll expect you back at work after lunch. Granger, Kingsley has spoken to Headingly about releasing you from your usual duties until further notice. Snape ..." she waited until he looked at her before saying quietly, "good luck."

Harry opened the door and waited politely for Hermione to precede them out of the office.

"Could have been worse, Professor," he said bracingly. "You could have been attached to just me."

Severus' face twisted into a scowl, but he did not deign to reply.

# Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 16

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Hermione stifled a ladylike burp and surveyed the wreckage strewn across the dining table. Severus leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh.

"Told you you'd like the takeaway," Harry said with satisfaction. Ginny waved her wand, banishing the empty foil containers and sending the plates to the kitchen.

"Haven't you eaten Chinese takeaway before?" Hermione asked, and Severus shook his head.

"My mother would get us fish and chips as a special treat," he said, "and the Hogwarts house-elves stick to a very traditional British menu, so no, I have not. A lamentable oversight."

"Who wants dessert?" Ginny asked. Severus pressed his fingertips cautiously to the front of his robes.

"I believe I've just gone straight to nine months."

Ginny laughed and levitated a bowl to the table.

"We'll try Indian next time, if you like spicy food."

Dessert was fruit salad, and Severus nibbled on a few cherries and grapes as Kreacher popped in to serve the coffee, grumbling about Muggle take-away being an affront to the dignity of house-elves everywhere. Hermione cleared her throat.

"Yes, I was wondering who would begin," Severus muttered. He smirked as she assumed an injured expression.

"We can't stay here until the court case," Hermione stated in the tone that meant she was not prepared to argue with anyone. It had always been quite effective on Ron and Harry at school, but she had a feeling that Ginny was harder to steamroll. Severus was impervious to it, of course.

"Where are you going, then, the Hog's Head?" Ginny demanded. "You might be prepared to live in that flea-infested hovel, but Professor Snape needs somewhere comfortable."

"It wouldn't be fair to stay here, Gin, not for up to four months. You've both got jobs; you've got your children to look after..."

"You can't go back to Malfoy; neither the Wizengamot nor Frimp will let you get away with that," Harry insisted. "They might be prepared to allow Snape some leeway, but Lucius only got off by the skin of his teeth, and they'll never trust him. Draco and Astoria have the baby to look after, so it would be no different from staying here..."

Severus simply stretched out his legs under the table, watching them and stroking his front with that infuriating smirk still in place. He had the air of a spectator at a Quidditch match. When they all fell silent, Hermione insisted that they could not impose themselves upon Harry and Ginny for more than a few days, and the Potters equally adamant that they should stay, he sighed theatrically.

"I appear to have no say in the matter of where I spend the remainder of my increasingly frustrating and uncomfortable pregnancy."

They had both changed, Hermione thought, as Harry turned to apologise. The old Severus would have ranted and ended up going head to head with Harry, rather than manipulating him into feeling guilty. The old Harry would have disregarded Severus' feelings as irrelevant. Hermione herself felt a pang of remorse.

"Where do you want to go, Severus? I'll have to come with you, but as you say, you're the one whose comfort matters most."

"Has it not occurred to you that I have a house of my own?"

They stared at him in surprise.

"I thought you'd lost everything when you were assumed dead," Harry said.

"The *Malfoys* never assumed I was dead," Severus pointed out rather acerbically. "And neither did the goblins at Gringotts. Draco ensured that the house remained Unplottable; I had Gringotts transfer it into his name so that none of my distant relations could get their hands on it and sent in the Malfoy elves to clear out any perishables and put protections on the place."

"Where is it?" Ginny asked curiously.

"Spinner's End, in Brudderswick, the town in Yorkshire where your mother and aunt were raised, Potter. Your mother referred to it as 'Shudderswick' when we were teenagers."

Harry stared at Severus, his green eyes wide.

"Can you... I mean, would you tell me a bit about her? My mum? Some time?"

"Has your aunt not done so?"

"You knew Petunia," Harry said with a note of accusation. "D'you really think *she'd* tell me anything about magic? You're the only one left who knew Mum."

"On the contrary, Potter. Any of the older staff at Hogwarts can tell you about her at great length."

"You know what I mean. You knew her as a kid, as a friend."

Severus continued to stroke his round paunch as he considered Harry's request.

"No doubt you will wish to give your friend a regular respite from my presence. After all, spending my time telling you about your mother might be a lesser hardship than attempting to train you to brew potions or teach you Legillimency."



Harry smirked at the familiar barb. "I'll take that as a yes, Professor." His expression softened. "Thank you," he added gratefully.

Severus nodded and got to his feet. The swift grace that had always made Hermione think of stalking cats was giving way to a measured, stately pace as his weight increased.

"I will bid you all a good night. My digestive system insists that I take to my bed, if you will excuse me."

"We're not letting them send him to Azkaban," Harry said fiercely once they had listened to Severus' steady tread ascend the staircase.

"There was a time when you'd have executed him yourself, Harry."

"Yeah, well, people grow up, don't they? It took him a long time, mind you," he added with a wicked glint in his eye, "and I think he could still be a right bastard."

"He isn't under all that stress any more, is he? The other teachers at Hogwarts seem to bear no grudge, so I bet he was polite to them," Ginny said, "and he must have been nice to the Slytherins to make them so loyal to him. Amazing what regular sex can do for someone's temper, too."

She grinned at Hermione, who made a rude gesture and said, "Thanks, pal."

"You're welcome."

oooOOOooo

Hermione said nothing, not wishing to reveal to Severus how grim she thought Spinner's End really was. The house had an air of poverty and neglect. Old newspapers and rubbish had collected against the front door, which opened directly from the narrow street. The alleyway to one side smelt distinctly of urine and dustbins, and the only person in sight was a man in a flat cap, who tossed his cigarette end into the gutter and shuffled past with his chin buried in his collar.

Severus unlocked the front door and Hermione followed him inside. There was no hallway; she found herself stepping straight into a small sitting room, where the walls were completely lined with books.

"Oh," she said, looking around. Her fingers itched to investigate the nearest volume. "Did the Aurors get in here?" She indicated one of the prominent gaps.

"Did you not notice my wards? I had Draco fetch the most relevant books when I started my potions supply business; they are at the Dower House."

He stared around at the worn carpet and dilapidated furniture. "I spent little time here after I began teaching at Hogwarts."

"It does look as if it could do with a good clean," Hermione ventured, and Severus gave a soft snort.

"Complete renovation, more like. Since I can trust you to treat the books with the respect they deserve, you are welcome to do as you wish."

"We can't get more than ten yards apart," Hermione reminded him.

"I doubt if we could get more than ten yards apart here, unless one of us went to the front end of the attic and the other out into the back yard. I should be grateful to be permitted that modicum of privacy, I suppose." He lowered himself into the armchair, and a faint puff of dust erupted around him. "Welcome to the Snape family estate."

He leaned his head back and shut his eyes. After a few seconds, he added waspishly, "I am perfectly well, Miss Granger. I am merely tired, irritated and emotionally drained. Kindly leave me to brood in peace."

Hermione patted his shoulder as she walked past him to explore the house.

oooOOOooo

Hermione conjured parchment and quill and began making a shopping list. At least this made her feel she was achieving something. A Victorian house-wife would have felt perfectly at home in Severus' kitchen. There was a colony of doxies under the bed in the smaller of the two bedrooms, and the spiders appeared to be developing their own civilisation. The flaking paintwork and cracked linoleum, battered chairs and table and congealed candle wax convinced her that this had never been a welcoming, comfortable home, even when Severus was a child. Poverty was as ingrained as the dirt.

Hermione went into the living room to find Severus gazing blankly at the empty fireplace. He was lying back in the old armchair and had slipped both hands inside his robe, holding the proud arch of his belly. Hermione's heart gave an urgent jolt inside her chest.

"Severus?"

He looked up at her.

"Come here, Hermione."

When she obeyed, he reached out for her hand and drew it into the warm gap where he had unbuttoned his robe, pressing it hard against himself. Hermione's heart sped up even more. Something twitched under her palm, like a grasshopper jumping inside him.

"Oh, wow! That's that's magical! It's him, isn't it?" He nodded. "Has he just started moving today?"

"No, he has been wriggling away for a couple of weeks but I've only recently been able to feel him from the outside."

Hermione sat down on his lap so she could lean against him, massaging lightly to encourage the tiny thing to keep moving against the gentle pressure. After a moment, he shifted to a more comfortable position and slipped an arm around her, slightly awkward, as if he had never settled a girl on his knee in his life and was unsure of the correct protocol. Hermione found this tentative gesture incredibly endearing. Ron had always assumed she desired what he did, without asking if she really wanted to be pulled into a rough bear hug, snogged up against a wall or fondled with hearty enthusiasm.

"We should think of a name for him," Hermione said. "We can't keep calling him just 'him', or 'the bump'."

"How twee," Severus sneered. "What about 'squirt'?"

"Master Squirt Snape? No, I don't think so."

She felt Severus go tense.

"I assumed you would wish to retain your own surname for your child."

"You're his father; it's traditional to call children by their fathers' names in the Wizarding world, isn't it?"

"And saddle him with an evil reputation that he has done nothing to deserve?"

"Severus!" She raised her hand and smacked him, although not hard enough to hurt. "Stop it. You're every bit as much a hero as I am. Any child would be proud to carry your name especially if he gets sorted into Slytherin."

"Most likely Ravenclaw; the Gryffindor impetuosity and Slytherin reticence will cancel each other out and let the intellect shine forth. I have no idea about his name; I had assumed that would be your decision."

"No, he's ours, not mine. What was your father's name? Tobias?"

He shuddered and his arm tightened around her.

"No."

"Okay, not his grandfather then."

"What about your own father?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I love my Dad but I wouldn't call a baby wizard by his name. He's Thomas Granger."

"Yes, I understand not wishing to name a magical child 'Tom'," Severus said dryly.

"I do want a Wizarding name, though, something he won't be teased for. Was there anything suitable on the Wizarding side of your family ...?"

"My mother's father died just after I began at Hogwarts," Severus said after a long pause. "He was pleased that I was sorted into his old house. He fell out with my mother when she married a Muggle, but I was occasionally allowed to visit after they were assured that I was a wizard, and the old man was kind to me in his way. Had he lived, perhaps my life might have been different. Who knows?"

She slipped her arms around him, cuddling his lean chest and the incongruous hemisphere that swelled where his waist had been.

"What was his name?"

"Hugo Prince."

"I like that," she said. "Hugo. Yes, if you agree, this is little Hugo." She smiled and pressed gently until Hugo squirmed like a tadpole. Severus' heavy breathing was moist against her neck. She assumed he was reacting to her rubbing his belly, until something warm and wet trickled down into the collar of her blouse.

She knew better than to draw attention to the fact that Severus Snape was weeping silently against her hair. She simply sat on his lap, leaning against him, hugging him tightly and waiting until he recovered.

"I'm sorry..." he began, his voice hoarse and nasal as she squeezed him.

"Hormones; don't worry about it. Ginny imitated a fountain when she was expecting both of hers; the silliest things set her off. You probably never mourned your grandfather at the time. Is Hugo all right, then, with you?"

"I never believed I would father a son," he whispered. "I don't know if I can do it."

"Harry said exactly the same when James was on the way. You'll manage, like everyone does. Lucius raised Draco, didn't he? And he turned out well in the end."

She had said the wrong thing, for his breath hitched and then he said, in a completely different voice, the voice of the old Professor Snape, cold and deadly, "Do not expect me to give up Lucius for you, Hermione."

"Oh for Merlin's sake!" She sat up, staring into his hard black eyes, and folded her arms. "I could just as easily demand you should not expect ~~me~~ to give up Lucius for you! I'm not some silly sixteen year old who thinks you'll marry me and sweep me away to a cottage with roses round the door. I'm an adult, I have a good job and a life, interests and friends, and you have the same. I very much hope I shall be able to *share* you with Lucius, that he'll enjoy Hugo with us even though he already has his own heir and grandson. I want you to be as involved in Hugo's life as you wish to be."

She reached to gently tuck his hair back behind his ear. Severus eyed her thoughtfully.

"You're a fiery little witch, aren't you?"

Hermione opened her mouth to retort and saw the flicker of amusement in his dark eyes.

"You're a patronising git, aren't you? If that was supposed to be a patented Malfoy pick-up line, it was crap."

"Yes, they often are, but he seems to get away with them."

"Not with me, he wouldn't. I'd hex his balls for that one; one red and one gold."

"Mm, sweet," growled Severus, and pulled her close again, bending his head down for a kiss. "I like the way you think."

"Together, we should be able to run rings round him, Severus." He didn't reply, being too busy sucking on her earlobe to speak.

oooOOOooo

Hermione paused at the end of the street, squinting through the hazy summer rain. The tarmac gleamed darkly underfoot, and a teenage boy cycled past, his hoodie pulled up over his lowered head. Severus walked slowly towards her. He had transfigured his travelling cloak into a Muggle overcoat, large and loose enough to disguise his altered shape.

"Which way now?" she asked, and he dug his hands into his pockets.

"Back."

"I thought you were supposed to be doing two miles a day, we've barely made a quarter of a mile."

"I need to go back home," he snapped.

Hermione counted to ten before she trusted herself to speak. "Very well, but we'll get on a lot better if you would just tell me what the problem is."

"Instead of biting your head off, you mean," he said after a long pause. "I have lived most of my life in situations in which an admission of weakness meant at best, a chaotic classroom, and at worst, a death sentence. I apologise for being boorish."

She took his arm. "What's wrong, Severus?"

"My back is killing me." He reached behind himself with his free hand and pressed it to his lower back, just above his arse. She realised that he was walking with a slight roll, as if his back and hips were not quite flexing normally.

"Did it start suddenly?" she asked anxiously. She had a horrible feeling that she recalled Ginny telling her about back pains during labour. He shook his head.

"The pain is constant and has been building slowly for a couple of hours. I've probably been doing too much lifting and stretching." They had indeed spent the day cleaning the house. "I have not had a twinge of bellyache, so I'm sure Hugo is fine."

"I'll contact Healer Strood and get your appointment brought forwards."

He didn't argue, leaning quite heavily on her shoulder as they walked back to the house. He subsided onto the old sofa and stretched out with a groan. Hermione knelt beside the fireplace and reached for the pot of Floo powder.

oooOOOooo

"Nothing to worry about," Strood said briskly, stabbing the tip of her wand at the series of runes hovering above Severus. "Apart from the back pain, have you noticed any other symptoms?"

"What sort of symptoms?" Severus asked. Hermione thought he sounded slightly evasive.

"Any changes in the genitalia? Breast tenderness? Nipple enlargement?"

"I can still maintain an erection, if that's what you mean."

"Changes, Mr Snape. Because my diagnostic tests tell me that you will soon notice them, if you haven't already."

"This is humiliating," Severus muttered.

"Do you want me to leave the room?" Hermione asked, but to her astonishment, he not only shook his head but reached for her hand and gripped it.

"I appear to have acquired a vagina," he said. Hermione bit back an exclamation but it came out as a squeak.

"A birth canal," Strood agreed. "The spell is restructuring your body. The pains in your back and hips result from changes in their shape and articulation; your pelvis is widening to allow room for the child to pass through. I estimate that when the changes are complete, you will be able to give birth."

"Oh joy," Severus growled. "Is this reversible?"

"I suspect it is. When you have given Miss Granger a child, the spell will be completed, and if it doesn't bring you back to your original condition, we'll be able to do so. It may require a stay at the clinic and a series of potions. The good thing is that you will feel more comfortable once the womb is able to take up a more natural position in your abdomen and you'll carry the weight more easily when the baby gets large." She stowed her wand away and smiled at him. "You're no less of a man, you know. You have no ovaries; you are merely a temporary carrier for your baby."

She glanced around before stepping into the fireplace to Floo back to her office, and Hermione was glad she had exercised her transfiguration skills on the carpet and furniture.

"Yes, I know another thing that I didn't tell you." Severus shifted uncomfortably on the sofa.

"You didn't need to be embarrassed," Hermione said. "I think it's wonderful. The whole thing is a miracle."

"I have no intention of grunting and groaning my way through labour, so you can forget all the guff about the miracles of motherhood, thank you very much. I shall have the squ *Hugo* removed magically as soon as he is big enough to thrive on his own."

"I don't blame you in the slightest. What do you fancy for supper?"

"Sardine sandwiches."

"Fish oil, that's very healthy."

"I don't even *like* sardines, but I could easily eat a couple of tins. Have we got any olives left?"

"You are having me on, aren't you?"

He shook his head.

"Hugo demands that I eat sardine and olive sandwiches and who am I to argue?"

"You'll get a stomach ache."

"You'll have to rub it for me." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "You want to investigate, don't you? Yes, you're blushing, Miss Granger. I shall assist in your further education, seeing as how you are developing into a complete pervert. This is all very gratifying; Lucius will be delighted."

"Shut up or I'll spike your sardine sandwiches with gherkins."

"Hm ... pickles ..."

oooOOOooo

Hermione woke as Severus rolled onto the bed with a grunt.

"All right?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Shh, go back to sleep."

This had the effect of bringing her fully awake.

"Severus, what's wrong?"

"I'm fine," he murmured. "The house is being watched; however, the wards are intact, so I do not believe that the watcher has malicious intent at this time."

"Aurors?"

Severus shook his head. "Unlikely. They are being very subtle about it."

"The best Aurors can be pretty damn subtle."

"I'm sure they can, but why bother? Potter can walk straight through my Floo whenever he wants; why set anyone else to watch us? No, I suspect the usual ex-Death Eaters with a grudge. They loathe me with a passion exceeding that with which they hate Potter."

"Because you fooled them all for years and made them look like complete prats."

"Exactly."

"Should we call Harry?"

"No, they will have set alarm charms. As soon as he appears, they'll Apparate away."

"We should have insisted that you stayed safe at Malfoy Manor," Hermione exclaimed, thumping her clenched fist down on the mattress. Severus snorted.

"My dear girl, what makes you think the Manor is any more safe than here? Believe me, there are only a few moderately dangerous middle-ranking Death Eaters at large. Luckily, the two remaining deadly ones intend that my skin remains in one piece."

"If somewhat stretched in places," Hermione said, running her hand across the shiny, smooth dome of his belly. He caught her hand, pulling it downwards. "Decidedly stretched. Positively straining, I see."

She straddled him, and he caught her hips and guided her until she felt the tip of his cock nudging at her opening. "Mmm, yes, very dangerous indeed, Professor Snape."

"You'll have to do all the work," he said, as she settled herself comfortably and began moving.

"God, yes, I don't want you to wrench your back. Is this ...?"

"Fine," he panted, and although he made some interesting sounds after that, none of them were very comprehensible.

oooOOOooo

An eagle owl landed with a thump upon the kitchen table, almost knocking the chopping board onto the floor. It snapped its bill at Hermione as she attempted to reach for the scroll attached to its leg.

"Trojan, is it?" Hermione asked, moving the stew pot out of its way. "Severus is lying down, so why don't you let me..."

The huge bird took off, flapping through the open door into the living room. She heard Severus speaking to it, and a moment later, it returned the way it had arrived, soaring out of the open kitchen window. Hermione scraped the contents of the frying pan into the stew pot, added a pinch of salt and shake of pepper, clamped on the lid and put the entire thing into the oven. For a kitchen that had once belonged to a witch, everything was extremely Muggle. She guessed that Snape senior had insisted upon the creaky old refrigerator and ancient gas stove.

Severus was reading the latest copy of *New Sorcerer*, his legs stretched out along the sofa and a heap of conjured cushions behind his back. They were all in shades of green.

"Letter from Lucius?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Hmm." He turned the page without looking up.

"Anything interesting?"

"That blithering idiot Heracles Yaffingale has restarted the old argument about whether charms can be used to bind together incompatible ingredients in a potion base..."

"In the letter, Severus!"

He lowered the magazine and gazed at her, and then as if making a sudden decision, he reached inside his robe and withdrew a roll of parchment. He sent it bobbing across the room to her hands. Hermione sat down in the armchair and unrolled it. It was filled with Lucius' elegant copperplate script.

*Malfoy Manor,*

*Weston Piercy,*

*Chippenham,*

*Wiltshire.*

*My dear Severus,*

*You will be pleased to know that Squiffle still has high hopes of having all charges against you dropped very soon, so keep up your spirits. I hope the little witch is looking after you in a satisfactory manner; you are so much more amiable when regularly shagged. If only I were there to assist! I had not dreamed that a baby in your belly would be so arousing for either of us. How large are you now, Severus?*

*I remember those desperate days when the best we could hope for was a half hour together in my study after a meeting with the Dark Lord. I sometimes wake from nightmares in which He is still living in my house and we dare not even allow ourselves that swift and dirty release. Then I remember that young Potter prevailed and we are alive and free well, as free as we can hope for. Yet there was something so sweet and wicked about bending you over my desk, my dear Severus. You would be wearing your oh-so-prim-and-proper Professor's robes, and I would hoist them up around your waist and push you down onto the desk. You would claw at my papers, growling like an angry cat as I breached you. You always needed someone to take charge, didn't you? Your choices left you pulled between those two terrible wizards like a bone between two dogs, and neither one used you kindly or exactly as you needed or wanted to be used. Of course I was equally as foolish, and my lamentable lack of judgement and my desire for power almost destroyed my family.*

*You ached to be filled. You needed my cock so badly that sometimes you took risks. Do you remember the occasion when Narcissa came in as you were lying across the dining table and we had to pretend you had lost your balance when reaching for an escaped owl? I'm sure we didn't fool her for a moment, but she allowed us to believe that we had. Or the time Draco caught us down by the lake at Hogwarts, when I visited in order to wish him a happy birthday? Poor lad; he asked me why he couldn't remember the evening of his birthday, and I had to tell him he had fallen foul of a Memory Charm set into a card by a Gryffindor school rival. He guessed eventually, of course.*

*Are you full enough now, Severus? Or is that eager arse of yours waiting impatiently for our next meeting? For there will be other meetings, my black-eyed snake; there MUST be other meetings. I cannot bear to consider the alternative. I have grown so used to you being here that waking in the mornings to a Snape-free house is exquisitely painful. I long to fling you across my desk once again. Or are you too swollen for our old games? I am equally happy to lie face to face, so that your hard round*

*belly presses up against mine.*

*Can you feel movement yet? I would sit for as long as Narcissa would allow, gently rubbing her belly and talking to Draco as he moved under my hands. The best sex I ever had with her was when he lay between us. With you, my Severus, it would be spectacular. Ah, yes, I know, I am guilty yet again of attempting to make you jealous. You are so passionate in your envy and your anger. Yet she is gone, Severus; she is part of the past, and although I regret the death of a dear friend, you are, and have always been, so much more.*

*I fall to sleep thinking of you, and what you are getting up to with that wicked little witch. I imagine you on top of her, grunting as you ride her, your full belly swaying. Dear Merlin, I should be there! Would she be amenable, do you think, to having you inside her as I bugger you? I would dearly love to have the both of you beneath me. The very thought makes my balls ache. Dear Hermione can have your cock as long as your arse is exclusively mine!*

*I am rambling after too much cognac but I shall send this with Trojan nevertheless. Do look after yourself and think of me, as I think of you.*

*Lucius Malfoy*

Hermione allowed the scroll to drop to her lap, breathing a little fast.

"Well," she said, and Severus shifted slightly and turned over the page of *New Sorcerer* with unnecessary force.

"Indeed."

"Severus, this is a love letter."

"This is Lucius grown maudlin after too much brandy, as he says himself. I do not put too much store by it; he is lonely and he is missing his regular bouts of buggery."

"But you do miss him, surely?"

"Of course I bloody miss him!" Severus shook the magazine angrily, as if it had offended him. "I've grown used to living in luxury, to having his house-elves and owls at my beck and call, to his library and his company."

"And to having his cock up your arse."

"That, as well. Why? Do you disapprove?"

"Oh, Severus." She went to sit upon the sofa, and after a moment, he shuffled so she had room to sit against him and slide her arms around him. She rubbed his back, and he gradually relaxed against her. "I'll try and get Kingsley to let you and Lucius meet..."

"Don't bother," he said rather petulantly. "It will only make matters worse. The Slytherins will be accused of plotting again."

"And you don't want to get your hopes up," she sighed. "I'm sorry. You must miss him just as much as he misses you."

Severus didn't reply, but he did not need to. She was getting good at reading him by now, and hearing the slight catch in his breathing meant he was stifling another bout of hormonally enhanced sentiment.

oooOOOooo

Minerva McGonagall met them at the gates, her prim tartan robes, severe bun and brisk manner calculated to dispel any incipient emotional display on anyone's part. Hogwarts looked as it always had: a fairy-tale castle upon its hill.

"Welcome back, Severus, Hermione."

Severus inclined his head. "Thank you, Headmistress."

She gave him a mildly exasperated look and led the way towards the main entrance.

A mixed group of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs on their way to the greenhouses glanced curiously at them, and Hermione realised there was no longer a single student here who remembered Severus, either as the great bat of the dungeons or as the terrifying headmaster.

"As you can see, the renovations are now complete and every part of the castle is fully operational. We have made some minor changes: a memorial tablet in the Great Hall with the names of the fallen, a number of young trees to replace those uprooted by giants, a rather more roomy and modern house for the gamekeeper ..." She chattered on about the changes Hagrid had made to the animal pens and Neville's plans for the gardens and how the new Potions mistress, Ludovica Casadei, was getting on. "I shall offer her the position of Head of Ravenclaw when Filius retires. He's been invited to live with his granddaughter; I can just see him in the middle of an extended family, surrounded by children. Neville will take over as Head of Gryffindor when I go."

Severus had the air of studied calm that suggested he was Occluding like mad.

"You say that as if you expect to go soon, Minerva," he remarked.

"That depends. I would like to retire but not until I'm sure that I'm leaving Hogwarts in safe hands. I had hoped Filius would take his turn, but he is older than I am and wants to spend his remaining time here at a more leisurely pace. I'd be prepared to remain for a few more years as Deputy while the new incumbent settles into the position of Head."

She strode ahead, her robes swirling as she hurried up the staircase towards her office. Hermione, being the shortest, had to trot to keep up, and she could hear Severus breathing hard.

"Old cat's up to something," he muttered as they stood on the ascending spiral stairs.

"She must realise you don't want to go up there," Hermione agreed.

"Have you ever tried using tact?" Severus asked her.

"Have you?"

He snorted, stepping off the top of the staircase and coming to a sudden halt. Hermione bumped into him and then peered around his shoulder to see that McGonagall was waiting for them outside the doorway to her own office.

"Hermione, would you do me a favour?"

"Of course, Headmistress."

"Can you open this door? And do, please, call me 'Minerva'; you are no longer my student."

Puzzled, Hermione reached for the handle. It didn't move, even when she exerted considerable force on it, so she drew her wand. Minerva held out a hand to prevent her from attempting to open the door by magic.

"Severus? Maybe you could try?"

As soon as his slim fingers touched the door, it swung open with a faint creaking of hinges. Severus glared at McGonagall, who refused to be intimidated, but gestured that he should precede her into the office.

The portraits on the walls rustled, and a familiar voice exclaimed, "My dear boy!" Severus gazed up at Dumbledore, then around at the others as they began to applaud. A staid old witch snatched off her pointed hat and threw it into the air; Phineas Nigellus crowed "Bravo! A veritable hero for Slytherin!" and Hermione saw the painted tears that trickled down Dumbledore's face.

Severus turned to face McGonagall and said flatly, "No. I will not do it."

With his black hair, black robes sweeping straight from his shoulders to the floor, pale face and burning black eyes, he appeared to be a heraldic figure carved from basalt and marble.

"Umbridge!" Hermione exclaimed, with sudden comprehension. McGonagall frowned at her in puzzlement. "When Dolores Umbridge tried to take Professor Dumbledore's place, the office wouldn't let her in. That wasn't the Headmaster's doing, was it? It was the castle's."

"Of course," the Headmistress said with satisfaction. "This door opens for me, and for Filius, but it refuses to allow any of the applicants for the position of Head into the office. The castle is well aware that Severus is still alive, and is still the rightful Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"I am not!" he snarled. His hands were clenched at his sides. "I formally renounce the position."

"I shall ignore that for now," McGonagall said. "Do sit down, Severus; I'm sure it isn't good for you to get over-excited in your condition."

Hermione thought for a moment that he really would hex the woman, but many years of Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry had built up both her resistance to Severus' scowl and his resistance to her needling. She clapped her hands, and a tray appeared on the low table by the fireplace. "Tea, Severus? Hermione?"

Severus slowly subsided into a chair and accepted a teacup with ill grace.

"Just listen to what I have to say before you tender your formal resignation, Severus. Oh, do help yourselves to the cakes." She selected a slice of fruitcake, broke off a corner and ate it with every sign of satisfaction.

"I loathed teaching idiots," Severus said.

"Of course you did, and no-one expects you to do that again. Tell me, though, do you truly enjoy brewing potions day in and day out? Making basic healing potions, acne cures and sleeping draughts?"

Severus shrugged. "It's a living."

"Yet you are capable of so much more, my dear. Your year as Headmaster was terrible for everyone, for you most of all, yet afterwards, when Filius and Pomona and I had time to reflect, we realised that you tried so hard to do good when you could get away with it. Do you not wish to complete what you began? You can openly work for house unity, for equality of Muggle-born and half-blood and pureblood witches and wizards, for a truly comprehensive syllabus for Defence Against the Dark Arts. You could even teach advanced Potions to gifted students. I have tutored a dozen pupils in advanced Transfiguration these last eight years and enjoyed the experience immensely." She waved a hand at the teapot, which obligingly filled their cups.

"My personal situation precludes it," Severus said flatly.

"I was coming to that," McGonagall told him, sipping her tea. "Hermione, I need someone to compose a syllabus for a new addition to the timetable. I wish to replace Muggle studies with Muggle-Wizarding studies, in which Muggle-raised and pureblood students discuss the ways in which their own society does things and each can learn from the other. First-years would look at simple matters: say, good manners, travel and pets. As they get older, they might compare Muggle medicine and chemistry with potions, or look at household charms and discuss how a Muggle would carry out similar tasks. In their final two years, students would study politics, laws and economics. I believe you once said that you wished to do some good in the world."

"I did," Hermione said. "And I'm not doing it in my present job, that's for sure."

"What better way would there be of breaking down the barriers between the Wizarding and Muggle worlds than by ensuring that each learned about the other? I can think of no-one more capable than you of writing and delivering such a complex and exciting curriculum. Please, do consider joining us, both of you."

"What about this?" Severus snapped, spreading his hands across his middle so that his robe stretched taut and silhouetted his belly.

"Severus, this is a school! There have been families here over the years; Professor Titmouse lived here with his wife and children when I was a student. There is a precedent."

"I very much doubt if there has ever been an unmarried pregnant Headmaster before."

"Great Merlin, Snape," remarked Phineas Nigellus' snide voice from the darkness of his portrait, "do you mean to say you haven't married the witch? Shame on you!"

"Preposterous," snorted an elderly warlock, "scandalous! In my day, she'd be whipped through the streets and you would hang from your thumbs, young man..."

"*Oh tempora! Oh mores!*" Hermione muttered and Severus snorted.

"Oh, the times, oh, the morals'?" McGonagall translated, looking puzzled.

"Spoken by Cicero, a Muggle," Severus told her. "Around 60 BC, I believe. *Quam diu etiam furor iste tuus nos eludet?*"

Hermione looked at the man who could quote classical Latin with her, who knew more magic than she did, who was going to give her a child, and realised that it was all absurdly simple, really.

*\* And for how long will that madness of yours mock us?* From The Catiline Orations, speeches given in 63 BC by Marcus Tullius Cicero, the consul of Rome, exposing to the Roman Senate the plot of Lucius Sergius Catilina and his allies to overthrow the Roman government.

# Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 16

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

On Friday evening, just after tea, someone knocked at the front door. Severus narrowed his eyes, putting down his book as Hermione went to answer the summons, her wand at her side. Harry stood there looking smug, but more surprisingly, Ron loomed behind him.

"Friday night is witches' night out, Gin tells me," Harry said as she stood back to let them in. "At the Three B's. Rosmerta has baked her famous sausage plait. Go on, bugger off and get sloshed."

"But who's looking after the boys, Harry?"

"Molly, of course; did you think I'd leave them alone?"

"You heard the man. Shoo," Ron told her.

"Not until I know what you two are up to." Hermione stood her ground, glaring at them.

"Do you not trust me to look after myself, Miss Granger?" Severus leaned back in his old armchair with his feet up on a stool and a cushion supporting his back, a position which made his outthrust stomach look huge. Ron goggled at him. "I am sure the saintly Potter will prevent his hot-headed friend from hexing a patently pregnant wizard."

"What are you here for, Ron?" Hermione demanded.

With a flourish, Ron produced a familiar battered wooden box from under his travelling cloak.

"I'm going to thrash Snape," he told her with a leer, then turned back to Severus. "Neville told me there's a trophy at Hogwarts with your name on it; Slytherin chess champion 1976, and when you started teaching, none of the other staff except Dumbledore would play against you because you always won and got really snotty about it."

"Really?" Severus purred. "You fancy your chances, do you, Weasley?"

"Yeah, I do."

"I won't let them come to blows," Harry promised. "Go on. Ginny promised me I could go to the Quidditch game tomorrow and to the pub after with Ron and George if I Snape-sat tonight, so make the most of it."

Hermione ran upstairs to change her robe and shoes, cast a quick series of charms on her hair, applied a spray of 'Tidy Locks' and Apparated to the Three Broomsticks.

She hurried into the back room, which was already very warm, and smelled of a fragrant mixture of perfume, mead, Butterbeer and savoury cooking. Ginny waved and indicated the seat she had saved.

"Bit short notice, isn't it?" Hermione said as she slid into the chair beside her friend.

"Not my idea, this time. Look over there."

The usual crowd occupied Ginny's table; Fleur, Angelina, Katie and Luna were passing around photographs of Fleur and Bill's children. At the next table, Hannah, Cho and the Patil twins were chatting to Rosmerta, but beyond them, looking both haughty and slightly ill at ease, sat Daphne, Astoria and, to Hermione's complete amazement, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode.

"Gosh, who invited them?" Hermione whispered.

"Luna. She's launching another campaign."

Luna looked up and smiled at Hermione.

"Hi, Hermione." She was wearing tiny wooden carvings of animals as earrings, a cat dangling from one ear and a rabbit from the other. She noticed Hermione's interest and fingered them. "Pretty, aren't they? I carved them myself. They're fertility symbols, of course; I'm wearing them in Professor Snape's honour."

"Um, yes, lovely," Hermione said, doubting that Severus would appreciate the gesture. Luna stood up and waved her hands in the air, as if about to start dancing to music inaudible to anyone else. This had the intended effect: all conversation stopped as people stared in surprise.

"Hello," Luna remarked "It's lovely to see you all again. Isn't this nice? I've got the latest edition of *The Quibbler* with me, so you can all be the first to read about our new crusade. That's it, really." She sat down again and lifted a cocktail glass containing a pale green liquid, a radish, two slices of cucumber, an olive and a paper umbrella.

"You can't leave it like that, Luna!" Ginny exclaimed. Luna stared at her with wide blue eyes.

"Can't I? It's all in *The Quibbler*, you know."

Ginny huffed and stood up.

"It's about Professor Snape, of course. The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot is determined to send him to Azkaban, and we're even more determined to keep him out."

"Who's this 'we' you're on about, Weasley?" Pansy demanded. Ginny turned to face her. Pansy sat with her arms folded and her face set in a scowl.

"It's Potter, Parkinson," Ginny snapped. "And the 'we' is everyone who believes Snape was fighting against Voldemort..." there was a mass outbreak of flinching at the name "...and that he killed Dumbledore on Dumbledore's own orders, and he did his very best to protect everyone at Hogwarts when the Death Eaters were in charge. He doesn't deserve to be imprisoned; he got an Order of Merlin first class, for Merlin's sake! He's a hero, and Harry and I are going to do everything we can to make sure he remains free."

"You're only doing this because your buddy is sleeping with him," Millicent growled. "You don't give a toss about Snape himself. You hated him at school."

"He wasn't a nice teacher," Ginny acknowledged, "but he's a good man. No kid likes a teacher who makes them do as they're told."

"So what do you expect us to do?" Pansy asked shrewdly.

"Whatever you can."

"Yeah, right, and what are *you* going to do?"

"The same. Luna is going to publish a series of articles about the 'hidden hero of Hogwarts', interviews with people who knew him well, that sort of thing. Harry is talking to members of the Wizengamot to persuade them not to convict him, and I'm making up a list of influential people. I'll circulate it to anyone who wants it, and we'll send owls asking them to support Snape. Not Howlers at this stage; we want to persuade rather than annoy. If you can contact the Slytherins and get them to do the same, it would be a big help."

"Some of 'em think he was a traitor," Millicent rumbled.

"He was a traitor to the Dark Lord," Daphne said suddenly, "but he was never a traitor to Slytherin house, was he? He looked out for us. If we approach it from that angle, there are a lot of people who will send an owl or two for him."

"Draco says he's going to get Slughorn to help," Astoria remarked. "He knows influential people."

"That'll be brilliant," Ginny told her. "Thanks."

Astoria sniffed resentfully, as if Ginny had usurped a meeting that Astoria had actually called.

"That's really nice," Luna said dreamily. "I liked Professor Slughorn. He was always polite to me."

"Snape wasn't," Cho Chang said.

"No, but he wasn't very nice to anyone, was he? He was always so unhappy." She looked at Hermione. "Is he happier now?"

"I hope so."

"I've got something for him." Luna picked up a large orange shoulder bag and rummaged in its depths. "Here. Tell him to tie it around his tummy." She held out a length of purple ribbon, attached to which was a metallic spiral adorned with crystals of coloured stone. "It will keep away malignant influences from the baby."

"You didn't give me one of those, Luna," Ginny said, obviously trying not to giggle at the thought of Severus tying a purple ribbon around his middle.

"Of course not; I didn't need to. You don't have lots of people trying to harm you, not like Professor Snape. Ooh, here's Rosmerta! Do you think she's made pudding, too?"

Rosmerta clattered into the room on her high heels, levitating a huge platter of steaming sausage plait, fresh from the oven, and all conversation ceased as they busied themselves with plates and forks.

oooOOOooo

Hermione kept to the Butterbeer, despite Harry's admonition to 'get sloshed'. She Apparated to Spinner's End and warily opened the front door.

Severus sat leaning over the chessboard, Ron equally intent opposite him, while Harry lounged on the sofa reading what looked like one of Severus' books. Once he had grown out of his typical teenage-boy antipathy to schoolwork, Harry had discovered that he actually enjoyed reading more than just Quidditch magazines. He would never love books as Hermione did, but he was happy to immerse himself in fiction and anything that related to his job. She had no doubt that this was one of Severus' more dubious Defence Against the Dark Arts reference books.

"Still all alive, then," she said, hanging up her travelling cloak. Ron held up an imperious hand for silence and moved a bishop. Harry grinned at her, stood up and indicated the hidden doorway to the kitchen.

"Well?" she asked, tapping the kettle with her wand and getting out the teapot.

"That was funny," he said, leaning on the table. It creaked ominously and he quickly stood upright again. "They both started off thinking it would be a walk-over. Ron was all swagger and Snape all dangerous silence, and they both got a shock. We know how bloody good Ron is but Snape's brilliant too. Ron won the first game by the skin of his teeth. Snape fought back really hard and won the second after a long struggle, and now they're playing the decider for the evening."

"I never thought of getting them to bond over a game of chess."

"It isn't exactly 'bonding' more like an unstable truce, if you ask me. How did you get on? Did Luna manage to get any Slytherins to join in?"

"Yes, Pansy, Millicent, Astoria and Daphne came, and they're going to help. I'm getting a bit more optimistic, actually."

"Good. We've got to keep plugging away. Tell you what, have you bought your tickets to the dinner dance yet?"

"No, should I have? What's it for?"

"For Kingsley's charity fund for the war orphans. Quite a few of them are starting at Hogwarts this year, and we want to make sure they can buy all the books and robes and stuff they need."

Hermione nodded. She and Harry both hated the Ministry galas, being put on display and fawned over, but the cause was a good one and close to Harry's heart.

"You'll have to bring Snape," he said, "because Ginny and I are going."

"I don't think he'll want to go."

"He needs to be seen with us and Kingsley and the old Order members you know, make sure people see him with the good guys. Okay? I'll get Draco and Astoria to sit at our table so he has someone to talk to as well as you."

Hermione nodded. "I'll owl the Ministry and order our tickets tomorrow."

"Good girl." He patted her shoulder. "Accio milk and sugar. Let's go and see who's winning."

Ron was triumphant, but only after a long and bitterly contested fight.

"The set was my Granddad's so the pieces know me really well," he said, attempting to sound magnanimous in victory. "They don't trust you yet."

Severus leaned back and folded his hands on the front of his robe.

"They are rather too Gryffindor in their attitude," he said. "They eschew subtlety in favour of smashing their opponent to bits. Next time, I shall use my own pieces."

"As long as they have the standard anti-cheating charms," Ron muttered, opening the box and watching as the chessmen lined up and marched in. Severus sniffed and accepted a mug of tea.



Hermione told him about the dinner dance later, but she waited until he had collapsed on her, panting and sweaty and sated. She might be a Gryffindor but she wasn't completely reckless.

oooOOOooo

Severus looked well, he looked like Severus, but he also looked rather magnificent. It was surprising what a difference a haircut and a visit to Madam Malkin's could do for a wizard. His new dress robe was cut to flow from his shoulders, skimming his distended belly so that it was barely noticeable. The seamstress had put in an Expansion Charm and Hermione suspected a subtle Disillusionment Charm too.

She walked into the Ministry ballroom on Severus' arm, feeling a flutter of nervous excitement. Many pairs of eyes turned to watch them arrive, and she heard their names whispered around the room. Kingsley made straight for them, and she allowed herself to relax a little. The Minister shook Severus' hand.

"Good to see you again, Severus. I hope things aren't too difficult for you under virtual house arrest."

Severus shrugged. "I spend most of my time resting now. It could be worse."

"Still no date for the trial," the Minister muttered. "They're dragging their heels, I'm afraid. But we shall prevail, never fear. Ah, Arthur, glad you could make it."

Hermione felt Severus' arm twitch under her own, and looked around to see Arthur and Molly Weasley approaching. She gave a little tug, and he allowed her to steer them to where Ginny was waving at them.

"Harry's gone to get drinks," she said as Severus sank down onto the chair next to her.

"What have you done with the children?" Hermione enquired suddenly.

"Mum wanted to come tonight. This is for the orphans; she does a lot of work for the charity, so I asked Fleur if she'd have them. Harry and I will then look after Victoire and Etienne in exchange so Bill can take Fleur out for her birthday."

Harry returned levitating a bottle of champagne and tray of glasses. Severus accepted a glass of pumpkin juice and sipped it with that air of poised calm that always indicated that his emotions were veiled behind a wall of Occlumency.

True to Harry's word, Hermione and Severus were seated at one of the round dinner tables, between Harry and Ginny on one side and Draco and Astoria on the other.

"Who's sitting there?" Hermione asked rather anxiously, concerned that Severus would be facing a Weasley in one of the two vacant places opposite them. Harry tried to look mysterious.

"Don't you trust me?"

"Not entirely, no. We've got three archetypal Gryffindors and three equally typical Slytherins here, so I hope you haven't added anyone too incendiary to the mix."

"Good evening!" boomed a familiar voice, and Horace Slughorn waddled across the room to plop into one of the vacant seats. "Well, well, Severus, my dear boy, how are you? You'll soon be as fat as I am, I dare say. Harry, wonderful to see you; Mrs Potter, as vibrant as ever; Miss Granger, what a lovely robe; Mr and Mrs Malfoy, a pleasure..."

He might be ingratiating, but at least Slughorn could be relied on to make polite conversation at the dinner table. He, Draco, Severus and Astoria very quickly got into one of those conversations punctuated with "Did you hear about old so-and-so?" as they updated each other with news of Slytherins they had known.

It was with pleasure that Hermione saw the tall, severe-looking witch in red robes edged with tartan, striding to take the spare seat. Minerva McGonagall looked around at her dinner companions, and her eyes took on a martial gleam.

"Aha, two well-matched teams, I see. Good evening, everyone."

"Minerva!" Slughorn raised his glass to her. "My dear old adversary, welcome."

"Less of the 'old', Horace, if you please. Draco, was that your father I saw on my way in?"

Hermione glanced aside at Severus, who appeared to be listening with an air of mild interest.

"Yes, oddly enough it was. Someone owed him with a ticket and an anonymous note, suggesting he needed to get back into Wizarding society again."

"Didn't he suspect a trap?" Harry enquired. Draco shrugged.

"I think he recognised the handwriting. He decided to risk it, anyway. He's over there with the Zabinis and the Parkinsons."

Under the table, Severus grasped Hermione's thigh, gave it a quick squeeze and then let go. She concentrated on buttering her bread roll.

oooOOOooo

The meal was as good as house-elves could make it, the champagne bubbled freely, and everyone at the table made an effort to avoid confrontational topics of conversation, so all in all, Hermione enjoyed herself. She was very conscious of Severus beside her, self-contained and outwardly calm, occasionally joining in to make insightful and sometimes caustic comments. This was what he must have been like at the staff table at Hogwarts, she realised. She was also keenly, acutely aware of the wizard in embroidered robes of heavy silk, who chattered and ate with his Slytherin companions and who met her careful glance with his own every time she sneaked a peek in his direction.

After dinner, as the elves served coffee and tea, she made her way to the witches' restroom, glad of a moment of respite from the tension that was thrumming through her. Lucius was here, and she ought not to be as excited as she was. She was Severus Snape's lover; they were having a child together, but the equation was incomplete without Lucius Malfoy, damn him. She charmed a few stray hairs into place in her elegant chignon and checked her lipstick, then took a deep breath and stepped out into the corridor. He was leaning on his cane and smoking a cigar.

"Lucius."

He inclined his head. "Hermione. Thank you for the ticket."

"You're welcome. We've missed you."

"Have you?" He cocked his head to one side, flicking away the half-finished cigar. It vanished in a little puff of fragrant smoke.

"God, yes. Severus is pining for you."

"Really," he drawled. "Pining?"

"Yes. Surely you know how he feels about you?" She moved closer to him, wondering if she could cast *Muffliato* without arousing suspicion.

"He certainly likes what I can do to him," Malfoy said. His voice was cool and almost careless. She felt like stamping her foot.

"Lucius, do either of you ever tell the other how you really feel? Is it too un-Slytherin to reassure him? Because at the moment, he really needs reassurance. He's afraid he'll spend the rest of his life rotting in Azkaban."

Malfoy examined his fingernails. "That isn't going to happen."

"Of course it isn't, but he's still afraid that it will. There are people watching his house, and we don't know who they are. He's undergoing physical changes that worry him, he's getting uncomfortable and tired, and he misses you."

His steely grey eyes met hers.

"Then I need to speak to him. There's a cloakroom over there," he nodded towards an unlit doorway, "the hat-check elf won't return until people begin leaving. The dancing will start shortly; I'm sure you can entice him away for half an hour."

He inclined his head, whirled and strode away, his silk robes rippling.

Hermione slipped back into the ballroom, where the round tables had vanished and elves were levitating chairs to the edges of the room. The carpets rolled themselves up to reveal a polished wooden dance floor, and a group of witches and wizards walked in, carrying instruments.

As the music started, Harry stood up and held out his hand. Ginny took it, and they whirled out onto the floor as Arthur led Molly out. Kingsley invited McGonagall to dance with him and Hermione turned to Severus. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Do you dance?" she asked him.

"No doubt I can manage a staid waltz, but don't ask me to tango with this belly on me." He got to his feet and took her lightly in his arms. As they moved out onto the dance floor, he spoke next to her head. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing nefarious, I promise."

She could feel his breath on her ear, the slight pressure of his hand on her back, the smooth fabric of his robes under her own hand, the clasp of his hand on hers, and nudging against her hip, the hard shape of his abdomen.

"It hasn't been too bad, has it?" she asked, her voice betraying her anxiety. "I know you don't like this sort of thing, but you have more right to go where you want and do what you want than most."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Whatever makes you happy," she whispered. "I want you to be happy, Severus. I just want you to have the choice, that's all. If you want to stay at the Dower House and brew potions, or go back to Hogwarts, or enter politics, or move to Australia and live in the outback, I just want you to be free to choose."

She realised he was steering her towards the corridor leading to the restrooms.

"You must excuse me for a minute," he said, "all that pumpkin juice has gone straight to my bladder." He gave a slight bow and strode off quickly to the wizards' room. Hermione wandered towards the cloakroom, pretending to gaze out of the window overlooking a garden that certainly did not exist in this part of London.

"Hermione, there you are!" The pompous voice was familiar, and she looked around to see a red-headed figure hurrying towards her.

"Hello, Percy."

"I'm glad I've found you alone." He caught her arm and drew her further from the ballroom. "I want a word with you."

"Yes?"

"About Ron."

Her heart sank.

"What about him?"

"Will you give him another chance, Hermione? You two were made for one another, you know. Yes, I realise you're upset that you can't have children, but this thing you've got with Snape it's unnatural, can't you see that? He's a Slytherin!"

"Percy..."

"You and Ron always looked so right together, you know each other so well, you understand him..."

"He doesn't understand me, Percy!"

"...and we all knew you should be a part of the family, just like we knew Harry should..."

"Your mum didn't think so."

"...and Ron's going wild without your steadying influence. He's seeing a different girl every week, going out to pubs and clubs and coming home at ridiculous hours of the morning. Mum's worrying herself to a frazzle over him. He should be settled now, not gallivanting about..."

"Your mum claimed it was me who was gallivanting, not Ron."

"...so will you please give him another chance?"

"I'm sorry, Percy, no."

It was as if she was mouthing nonsense at him. He ignored her words.

"Please, Hermione? He's my little brother; I want to see him happy again."

"Excuse me." A long pale hand reached to tap Percy on the shoulder. He glanced around, then whirled with his wand in his hand.

"Malfoy! What do you want?"

"Miss Granger, do you wish me to remove this annoying little wizard for you?"

Hermione was very tempted.

"Percy, I'm never going to get together with Ron again, believe me."

"Keep your paws off her, Malfoy," Percy spat. "She's family!"

"My family," said a poisonously soft voice from behind them, "since I am carrying her baby. Off you go, Weasley. Your mother was a very poor match-maker, and I suggest you do not attempt to emulate her."

With evident reluctance, Percy stowed his wand and walked back to the ballroom, watching them suspiciously out of the corner of his eye.

"Severus," Lucius murmured, "come with me." He moved back into the shadows, Hermione and Severus following. Hermione felt the slight watery shiver of a Notice-Me-Not Charm as they entered the small cloakroom, pushing between racks of travelling cloaks and hanging hats.

Lucius whirled around, his robes flaring, and he gathered Severus in their billows like a Lethifold. Severus let out a sharp exhalation, gripping the silk over Lucius' back.

"Severus," Lucius sighed, "my, you *have* grown." His large hand spread over Severus' belly, rubbing the heavy robe in circles.

"So many times we parted without saying goodbye, wondering if we'd meet again," Severus whispered.

"Always lent a certain piquancy to the proceedings, did it not? Getting maudlin, my friend?"

"Hideously emotional. I need you to keep me grounded, tell me when I'm making a fool of myself. You always did that so well ah, Lucius!"

He arched back, his eyes fluttering closed, as Lucius lifted his robe and slid a hand between his thighs. Lucius' breath went out in a shocked hiss.

"Merlin's balls, Severus!"

"Surprise!" Severus gasped, with a shaky chuckle, and then he gave a low moan. "Inside me, please..."

"With pleasure," Lucius growled. "Shall I take your virginity in this orifice as well, up against the wall? Do you remember our first time, all those years ago? You were such a ferocious creature, all claws and teeth, so eager and lusty, that I didn't realise until afterwards that it was your first time."

Hermione was trying to keep an eye on the corridor, to warn of anyone approaching, as well as watch the two wizards. There was a swift scuffling, and then she saw Lucius hoisting Severus up in the corner and Severus' pale thighs wrapped around Lucius' dark robe at his waist.

"You're getting too heavy for this game," Lucius complained. He was trembling slightly with the effort of supporting his lover's augmented weight. Severus drew his wand, directed it at himself and whispered a feather-weight charm, and then he whimpered, actually whimpered, as Lucius gave a sharp jerk of his hips.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Yes, you bastard!" Severus snapped. "Do it again!"

"Smooth as silk," Lucius sighed, finding his rhythm as Severus gripped his shoulders and threw back his head, groaning as Lucius thrust into him. He clawed at the fabric of Lucius' fine robes, writhing against him, urging him deeper, faster and harder. Hermione, standing in the shadows, caught sight of their expressions. She had expected snarls of animalistic need, but there was something gentle in Lucius' grey eyes and an almost sublime hunger on Severus' face. The connection between them went far deeper than a need for sexual release.

Even so, Hermione could imagine nothing more erotic than the sound of Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape losing control, of Lucius gasping "Severus!" as he came, of Severus giving a little moan and slithering down into a heap on the floor.

Severus fumbled in his robe and Lucius seized his wrist.

"No, you don't."

"You came; I need to."

"Of course you do, but not like this." He turned his head, strands of pale hair sticking to the sweat on his face. "Hermione, darling, if you are going to be a pervert, we'd much prefer you did it here with us."

Hermione gave a final look up and down the corridor and sidled into the dimly lit room.

"I would happily delve into your luscious little fanny," Lucius said, "but at my age, even a wizard needs a little time to recuperate, and we had better not be too long or we will be missed. Severus, on the other hand, is in urgent need of release."

Hermione gathered up her robe and Lucius made an appreciative noise. "Silk stockings. Mm, you look delectable, my dear. Severus, does she not look edible?"

Severus heaved himself up onto one elbow. He looked delightfully debauched himself in the dimness of the cloakroom, slender pale limbs and black robes tangled in a heap and his dark cock glinting with moisture.

"A cushioning charm, if you please, Lucius?" Hermione said. "Severus has been having trouble with his back and his hips."

Lucius seized the cane that he had left propped against the wall, withdrew his wand and cast the charm, then with the air of a master of ceremonies conducting the proceedings, he placed a hand on Hermione's hip and the other on Severus' waving cock. He appeared to take great pleasure in guiding them together, helping Hermione to balance as she lowered herself down onto Severus. He knelt beside them, lightly rubbing Severus' glistening pale belly, murmuring encouragement before slipping a hand between them to gently stroke the moist folds of Hermione's sex. Already aroused, and then stimulated by Lucius' wickedly clever fingers, Hermione did not take long, and her shuddering orgasm triggered Severus'.

As they lay side by side on the invisible cushions of Lucius' charm, Lucius caught Hermione's hand and pressed it, and his own fingers, to Severus' belly. Inside, the baby flexed more strongly than Hermione had ever felt him. Lucius gave a delighted little chuckle.

"That's Hugo," Hermione said breathlessly.

"Hugo Snape," Lucius purred, rubbing firmly to make Hugo dance, "enchanted to meet you."

Severus burped and then snapped, "Don't!" pushing their hands away. "Unless you want puke down your dress robes. This was a very bad idea on top of a rich meal."

Lucius stood up, reaching down to pull Hermione up, and then took Severus rather more gently by the arm.

"Up you get, old chap. A gentle walk will help your digestion to settle."

Severus allowed himself to be helped to his feet and then flexed his shoulders, lightly clasping both hands to his stomach.

"Well," Hermione said, looking down at her crumpled, stained robe, "isn't it a good job we've got magic?" She was casting charms to remove the last of the creases when

Lucius grasped her arm.

"Someone's coming," he breathed.

Two pairs of swift footsteps echoed along the corridor, and Hermione heard another very familiar male voice.

"Along here, there's a cloakroom we can use!"

A girlish giggle answered him and Hermione stifled a groan.

"What do we need a cloakroom for, Ronnie? Are we going somewhere?"

"You'll be flying in a minute, sweetheart! Come on."

"I think someone's already here ..."

"So what? They'll only be doing the same as us anyway. That's a bog-standard Notice-Me-Not Charm, nothing to worry about: look *Finite incantatem!* There, see? Now come here ..."

"Oh, Ron ... Oh, yes ... You're my hero, you've always been my hero, did I tell you that? You must be so brave!"

"I may vomit," Severus breathed against Hermione's hair.

There was a rustle of silk as Lucius slipped past the canoodling couple, a shadow against the light of the corridor, and then he was gone.

"Went through some bad times," Ron said, in between kissing noises, "fought a few bad guys, you know how it is."

"And you're best friends with Harry Potter."

"Yeah, that's right. Harry and me go back a long way."

"Always at his side, the two heroes."

"Yeah. He couldn't have done it without me, you know."

"I know."

Severus made a faint gagging sound, and all movement stopped.

"Who's there?" Ron demanded, and the tip of a wand flared blue-white, making Hermione shield her eyes. "Bloody hell," Ron groaned.

"Who is it?" the witch demanded tremulously. She sounded very young.

"Just a couple of unsung heroes," Severus said, in his smooth, scathing voice. "Do go back to whatever you were doing and don't mind us; we are leaving. Hermione?"

She took his arm and they walked out, Hermione trembling with an urge to laugh that finally bubbled up once they reached the ballroom.

"You look ... charming," Severus told her.

"Do I? Thank you, Severus."

His dark eyes glittered.

"Well-shagged is a look that suits you, Miss Granger." She stared at him, and he reached up to finger a lock of her disheveled hair. "One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything, except a good reputation."

"Wilde," she said and he smirked at her. "My reputation grows with every failure," she suggested and he frowned.

"Shaw."

"It is! Go on, your turn."

They avoided the knots of dancing couples, deep in conversation, while numerous pairs of eyes watched them go.

## Chapter 11

### *Chapter 11 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Harry staggered to their table, one arm around a giggling Ginny and the other waving a champagne bottle.

"The hunter returns triumphant!" he crowed, plonking the bottle down in the middle of the table. "Go on, get stuck in."

"Thank you, but I will refrain," Severus told him, sipping from a cup of peppermint tea provided by an obliging house-elf.

"I'll be too pissed to Apparate," Hermione protested half-heartedly as Ginny sloshed champagne into her glass.

"Then Floo, dear Hermione, Floo."

"Severus can't Floo."

"Course he can."

"He cannot," Severus stated, "because he has no intention of spewing all over his hearth rug upon arrival. I am sure I can Apparate a drunken witch side-along."

"Good evening," said a tall wizard, pausing as he skirted their table.

Hermione squinted up into rather amused grey eyes.

"Mr Malfoy," Harry said coolly.

"Mrs Potter." Lucius inclined his head regally. "Miss Granger, Mr Potter, Mr Snape. Why, you look positively corpulent, Severus. Are you sure you have only one offspring in there?"

Severus glared but didn't reply. Lucius turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, you may be interested to know that I have acquired a copy of Warren's *Annotated Runic Inscriptions of the Celts*, in which she states..."

What Warren stated went unheard, because a large wizard in disheveled robes stepped in front of Lucius with his wand raised. Lucius had to pull back his head to prevent the tip from being thrust up his aristocratic nostril.

"Malfoy," snapped Gaius Stott, "I should have known."

"Should have know what, Auror?" Lucius used a finger to direct the wand away from his nose. Stott bared his teeth in a humourless grin.

"You making plans with your Death Eater buddy, Malfoy? Think you're going to break him out, are you? I'm watching you, you bastard." He spun to point the wand at Severus. "And you, Snape. There's a lot of people want to see you rot in hell for what you did. You put one foot out of line, just one foot, and I'll have you in Azkaban so fast your robes will catch fire!"

"Guy!" A rather lumpy-looking witch hurried to him and caught his arm. "Gaius, no, don't, please!" She cast a rather frightened look at Harry and stuttered, "Mr Potter, I'm sorry, he's been drinking, won't happen again. Guy, come on! You're making a scene!"

Stott tried to shake the woman off, but she was determined. Though he must have realised he looked foolish because he muttered something very rude under his breath and allowed her to drag him away.

"He was completely out of order," Ginny said, staring at where Stott and the witch appeared to be having a fierce but whispered argument.

"Off duty, though," Harry told her, "and if I make a complaint, it won't help: it'll only make him more resentful. He already thinks I've only got where I have because of my name." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Didn't know he had a girlfriend. She reminds me of someone."

Hermione knew she hadn't seen the witch before, yet something teased at her memory, just out of reach; something about the slant of her head and her deep, slightly rough voice.

"I'm glad to see that the Auror corps is under exceptional control," Malfoy said. "It fills me with such confidence in the forces of good. Good evening." He nodded and strode away to join Draco, Astoria and a small party of Slytherins. The group had been clustered around Horace Slughorn, but their focus immediately shifted to Lucius as he took a seat between his son and Pansy Parkinson.

Severus touched Hermione's arm.

"I apologise for dragging you away from your friends, but I should return home." He forestalled her automatic question with an upraised finger. "Did I not promise I would tell you if there is anything wrong?"

"You did, yes, but it doesn't stop me worrying."

"Fussing, Miss Granger, not worrying. If you insist upon details, my back aches and I have indigestion, neither of which are in any way life-threatening, but which combine to make me desire my bed and a stomach potion in preference to an uncomfortable chair and more to eat."

"Stott's put a damper on the evening anyway," Hermione told him, getting to her feet. She kissed Ginny and Harry, leaving them to finish the champagne, and then she took Severus' arm, helped him to his feet and accompanied him to the nearest Apparation point. As they left, she noticed Stott with his back to them, gesticulating angrily at a house-elf that had refused to serve him more alcohol. The squat witch stood by his side, but her gaze was upon Severus and Hermione as they left.

oooOOOooo

They settled into an odd kind of restrained domesticity. Hermione spent a lot of time researching old Wizengamot cases in musty ledgers that Harry obligingly brought from the Ministry. Once a week, he and Ron would arrive to 'Snape-sit' while Hermione, Ginny and Luna planned their publicity campaign, sent owls, drank red wine and attempted to convince the Slytherins that it was in their interest to have their own war hero declared innocent.

Severus had stopped brewing when his back and feet protested at standing for more than half an hour. He seemed to view the approaching trial with fatalism. His sarcasm lost its biting edge, and although far from placid, he gained a more contemplative, inward-looking air and spent much of his time reading classics of Muggle literature from his extensive library.

Hermione had always tried to preserve her own space when with Ron. He had taken for granted his right to fondle her when he felt like it, assuming that if she responded, then she must be in the mood for sex. Severus, on the other hand, whether because of his temperament, his age, or the sheer physical weight of his burgeoning belly, made no such assumption. Rather, he seemed happy for her to sit beside him immersed in her own reading and made no objection if her hand rested upon Hugo. She liked to feel the baby bumping vigorously against her fingers.

"Hermione." His velvet voice never failed to send a small quiver through her. She looked around and saw that he had put down his book and was gazing thoughtfully at her.

"Mm?"

"You once asked me what it felt like." He patted himself and his robe moved visibly as Hugo flexed against the confines of Snape's body.

"I'll never know, will I?"

"You can, if you trust me."

Hermione sat up and saw that Severus had drawn his wand. He raised it and looked quizzically at her. Her eyes widened but she nodded, biting her lip *L'égilimens*," Severus said softly.

Hermione felt a sense of pressure against her thoughts. Memories flickered unbidden through her: eating breakfast opposite Severus, accompanying him to Diagon Alley for his recent appointment with Strood, watching as the Healer examined him, her fingers probing the taut skin of his now impressively bulging belly. Then she felt as though she were being drawn out of her head. There was a brief sense of falling through darkness, and then she was seeing herself. There was something slightly odd about her appearance. Hermione was sure she was not quite that tall or graceful, that her hair was untidier than this, her eyes less bright. She was seeing herself through the distorting lens of Severus' mind, and what he saw was a beautiful woman. She was rather stunned by this revelation, and only when she felt his growing impatience did she return her attention fully to what he was doing.

"Look into my eyes and concentrate," he whispered. His voice echoed, smooth and sensuous, wrapping her in dark silk. For a moment, she had the odd impression that she was two people: Hermione Granger sitting on an old sofa and staring into the eyes of Severus Snape, and at the same time, she was looking at herself. Then she was inside a different body.

There was a curious background sensation, like a low-level hum, the alien feeling of a male form. It was larger than her own, longer and leaner, and its sexuality was nearer the surface than she was accustomed to. She felt that a touch, a word or a sultry look might trigger a state of arousal. Then Hugo kicked and she gasped. He was huge, his weight pressing downwards, his movements almost powerful enough to hurt, thrusting against her intestines, kidneys and bladder. He stretched her skin and muscles, an intimate and overwhelming presence inside her. She felt full and oddly complete.

When she reached to clutch at her stomach and found it flat and unaccountably empty, the connection was broken. Severus allowed his wand to drop.

"Oh, wow," she breathed. "That was intense. How on earth do you manage to sleep with all that inside you?"

"With difficulty," he admitted, stowing his wand away in his sleeve. "However, you don't take into account that I have grown used to him as he grows; it was hardly a sudden transition."

A fluttering at the window attracted Hermione's attention. She flicked her wand to let in a brown Ministry post owl, which landed on the arm of the sofa, dropping a pale blue envelope onto the floor. Severus drew his wand and pointed it at the letter as Hermione gave the owl a treat and let it out again before closing the window.

"It's safe, Severus, I recognise the writing."

Severus began to lean down to pick up the letter, grunted, then thought better of it and levitated it to Hermione's hand.

"It's from my mother," Hermione said as she opened the envelope.

"Is she not a Muggle?"

"Yes. She sends letters to me at the Ministry; they have a Muggle postcode for families and friends to communicate with Muggle-born employees. That was one of Kingsley's innovations. The post room witch usually sends the letters on to the right department; my boss must have told her that I'm away from work."

She settled down to read the long, handwritten letter.

"Are you close to your parents?" Severus asked suddenly. Hermione realised that he hadn't returned to his reading, but was watching her thoughtfully.

"I was. I grew away from them once I started at Hogwarts and they didn't know anything about what I was doing. During the last year of the war, I modified their memories and sent them to Australia, to keep them safe."

"You modified their memories," he echoed her words softly. "When you were seventeen?"

"Yes."

"Did you know what you were doing?"

"Of course I did!" she protested fiercely. "Severus, I expected to die. I needed to know they were safe."

He nodded. "You're a remarkable witch, Hermione Granger. How did they react when you brought them back?"

"They weren't very happy, as you might expect, and we've been very wary around each other ever since. I've been trying to think how to explain about Hugo, and I keep putting it off. I've only just told them about the divorce, and this is my mum's reply. She likes the Weasleys, so she's rather upset."

"Are you intending to wait until he is here and then present them with a grandson? Because I doubt they will be very happy about that, either."

"I know." Hermione pulled distractedly at a lock of her hair.

"I suggest you visit them and tell them in person."

"Yes, you're right. I'll ask Harry when he'll be available to stay with you."

"Why?" Severus asked blandly. "May I not accompany you?"

"I what of course you can! I just didn't expect you would want to."

He shrugged. "Why not? I assure you, despite the house's reputation, there have been plenty of half-blood and a few Muggle-born children sorted into Slytherin. As Head of house, I have paid visits to Muggle households and explained about magic to some very sceptical people. I doubt your parents will be as suspicious and defensive as some of those."

"Explaining male pregnancy to a pair of dentists is going to be rather simpler if they actually have a specimen of a very pregnant wizard in front of them," Hermione agreed. "They'll have to believe me then."

oooOOOooo

"So Molly cast a charm to help me and Ron have a baby," Hermione explained. Her parents sat opposite her at the kitchen table, sipping coffee and listening intently. "She knew we'd been trying for a family and she just thought she was helping, but I can't have children. That was the biggest reason why Ron and I decided to split up, actually."

"Are you absolutely sure you're infertile?" her mother asked, a depth of sadness in her quiet voice.

"Yes. I was cursed during the battle of Hogwarts, and I didn't know until it was far too late to reverse it."

"Have you seen a gynaecologist?" Mr Granger asked.

"The curse was *Uterus calyx*. It is irreversible," Severus said. He sat beside Hermione, as completely out of place in the Grangers' airy modern kitchen as a condor. He wore wizard's robes, a travelling cloak and an air of impenetrable calm. "I wish that it were not so."

"So what happened when Molly Weasley cast her charm?"

Trust her mother to pick up on the most important thread in the conversation.

"It attached itself to me, although I didn't know anything about it. Ron and I agreed to divorce, so it remained dormant until I next slept with someone."

Thomas Granger leaned forward slightly, his intent gaze upon his daughter. "So are you telling us that you're pregnant?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I'm not. I don't know if the charm would have been strong enough to overcome the curse, given the chance, but my partner cast a contraceptive charm. He's a very powerful wizard and the charm rebounded onto him."

"So that he would impregnate the next woman he slept with ..." Her mother's question tailed off as Hermione shook her head.

"No, Mum, he's carrying the baby."

"Gosh," said Marion Granger faintly after a long pause. "Your baby? From your egg?"

"Yes, your grandson."

"That's incredible," her father muttered, sounding very dubious.

"It's magic, Dad."

Both of Hermione's parents looked at Severus, who gazed back impassively.

"Professor Snape, I assume you are involved in this rather far-fetched tale in some way," Marion said in her brisk, businesslike voice. "Would you care to explain how?"

"I am an expert in the Dark Arts," Severus told her, sounding no less professional than Mrs Granger. "I taught Defence Against the Dark Arts for a while at Hogwarts. I can assure you that Hermione is quite correct: there is no cure for her infertility. The charm cast most ill advisedly by Molly Weasley was very tenacious, but was deflected by the contraceptive charm. It was inevitable that it would impregnate whomever Hermione slept with, male or female, being unable to act upon her doubly impervious womb."

"Is it possible for a male to carry to term? Would he survive?" Thomas asked with a little shudder.

"The charm has created a womb, so yes; there is not much more risk than there would be for a witch of equivalent age and health."

"What will happen to the baby?"

This was the question that concerned the Grangers most of all. Hermione saw her parent's arms move as they clasped hands beneath the table.

"I very much hope that he'll be raised and loved by both his parents," Hermione said softly. She saw her mother's gaze flick to Severus. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she caught what must have been an infinitesimal change in his expression.

"Professor Snape," Marion said carefully, "are you carrying Hermione's baby?"

Severus inclined his head and, without speaking, ran his thumb down the front of his robe, releasing the row of black buttons. He was wearing black trousers and a white shirt, originally voluminous in cut, but now fitted snugly around his girth. He placed a hand flat upon the side of his belly and pressed inward, probing with his fingers until he achieved his objective: waking Hugo and causing him to kick strongly. The outline of a tiny leg and foot appeared momentarily under the taut fabric of the shirt. Severus rubbed soothingly to settle him again.

"Good God," Thomas said faintly.

"I hope," Marion said through tight lips, "that you don't intend to rush into marriage simply because of the baby."

Severus gave a startled little snort. "I wondered if you would *insist* upon marriage," he said when she raised her eyebrows at him.

"Professor Snape, my daughter has only just ended a marriage in which she was obviously unfulfilled. We like the Weasleys very much, but Ron, for all his virtues, is not someone who appreciates Hermione's interests or her intelligence. We saw her increasing restlessness and unhappiness, but unlike some, felt we shouldn't interfere. Would her marrying a much older man, a man about whom, if you'll forgive me, we've heard some terrible things, simply be leaping from the frying pan into the fire?"

Hermione felt her face heat up. She had indeed said some rather awful things about Severus back in her schooldays when they had all believed him a traitor.

"I do not intend to leap into anything," Severus informed them. He gave a flick of his fingers and his robe fastened itself neatly again. "Hermione and I are still in the process of getting to know one another, although for my part I find myself hoping that this will become a more long-term arrangement."

Hermione gaped at him. "Severus, that almost sounds like a proposal!"

His black eyes held a glint of something she could not identify.

"I would not ask you to marry a man for whom Azkaban is still a distinct possibility, Hermione."

"Azkaban? Isn't that the prison?" Thomas demanded. Hermione sighed and began another long explanation.

oooOOOooo

Severus lowered his bulk onto the sofa and groaned with relief.

"Thank you," Hermione said, hanging up their travelling cloaks.

"For what? Not hexing anyone? Do you not trust me to retain my self-control in front of Muggles? I'm not Lucius Malfoy, Hermione. Besides, your parents seem intelligent and surprisingly broad-minded."

"What's surprising about that?"

He shrugged and Hermione perched on the sofa beside him and began massaging his shoulders. He rolled awkwardly so she could rub his back.

"Perhaps my experience of Muggles has given me a jaundiced view."

"Your father?"

Again, he shrugged. "He and his friends were not inclined to discuss poetry or literature, shall we say." He gave a derisive snort. "Broad minded or not, I note you did not mention Lucius."

"Yes, well, I thought I'd already given them enough to think about."

"Promise me that you will not attempt to introduce Lucius Malfoy to your parents without my accompanying presence."

"You think it'll take two of us to hex him into good behaviour?"

"No. He is capable of behaving himself when he feels that it is in his interest to do so: I just don't want to miss seeing him do it. A little lower if you would ... yes, there."

He sighed and kneaded the jutting curve of his belly. "I have had more than enough of this. Strood had better get him out soon or I shall burst."

"Healer Strood says you're doing brilliantly," Hermione said. "He's growing really well."

"Are you patronising me?"

"Merely repeating what she told us at the last appointment."

Hermione got up, walked to the end of the sofa, sat down again and drew off his boots and socks. He had long, thin, white feet with delicate blue veins. She enjoyed massaging them and Severus never complained. He pushed himself over onto his back and rested his feet in her lap, his fingers running back and forth over his abdomen.

"Feeling uncomfortable?" Hermione enquired as she swapped feet.

"That is my permanent state of being," he muttered. "The Braxton Hicks contractions do not help."

"Do they hurt?"

"They are mild cramps, annoying rather than painful."

"Only six weeks to go, Severus."

"I hope she'll get him out before then." He glanced at her face and raised an eyebrow. "What, no protests about having to do what's best for the sprog?"

"I know you'll do what's best for him. There, would you like me to rub the potion into your stretch marks now?"

"You just want to fondle my belly," he muttered, unfastening his shirt. "Insatiable perverted woman."

"I like your belly; I like all of you, actually."

He gave her a mildly disbelieving look and sprawled with his head thrown back. "Go on then, do your worst. I shall lie here and bulge unbecomingly."

Hermione snorted and summoned a vial of potion, which she tipped into her hands and began smoothing onto his pale skin. The faint pink striations faded as the potion soaked in. Severus shifted slightly and when Hermione looked down, she saw the predictable tent in his trousers.

"What was that you said about bulging?" She allowed her hand to trail downwards, and the sensitive skin flinched under her fingers as she unfastened his flies.

"Inevitable physical reaction to being caressed by a pretty woman," he said, his voice catching slightly.

Hermione reached into the gap in his trousers and three things happened at once: Severus moved fast, drawing his wand, pushing his upper body upright and swinging his feet to the floor all in one convulsive movement; the wards on the house rippled their warning across Hermione's skin; and she snatched her own wand out of her belt.

Lucius Malfoy's lazy, cultured voice remarked, "My word, what a delectable sight," as he strolled through the doorway from the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione demanded.

"Put my wards back up, you bastard!" Severus snarled, thrusting his wand back up his sleeve and glaring up at the elegant figure leaning on his cane on the hearthrug.

"I replaced them immediately, Severus, but I notice that they made no real attempt to keep me out."

"Of course they didn't keep you out; I coded you into them for emergencies."

"Why are you here?" Hermione stood up to face Lucius. "Unless this really is an emergency, you'll get us all into trouble with the Aurors."

"Only if they know I'm here, my dear. I have a water-tight alibi; I am currently shopping in Diagon Alley, clearly visible to any Auror wishing to check upon my whereabouts."

"And how did you manage that, Lucius? Polyjuice?"

"Exactly so."

"Who was mad enough to do that for you?"

Lucius examined his fingernails.

"Someone who owes me a favour. Draco put a young Slytherin in touch with me; she wishes to start a small business and, because of her family's rather dubious past, is unable to obtain a loan. I offered her the money at a fair rate of interest if she would allow me to sneak a visit to a friend. She has three doses of the potion, so we have just less than three hours."

"She could be up to anything; you could get into terrible..."

"My dear Hermione, do you think me a fool? We made a limited but binding wizard's oath that she would go shopping for a new cloak, books and other odds and ends while I would do nothing illegal. She does not wish to be brought to court for aiding and abetting in a crime. I told her I would visit a secret lover, which she thought was romantic. She believes that I have an interest in a married witch."

He leaned his cane against the fireplace and unwrapped his silk scarf from around his neck. "I appear to be interrupting something; pray continue."

"There isn't room on here for us all," Severus grumbled. Hermione pointed her wand at the sofa, and it creakily expanded itself until it took up almost the entire room. Lucius climbed onto the sofa and approached Severus on his hands and knees, resembling a great panther in his black velvet robes. Severus watched him over the top of his swollen belly.

"I am glad that I have not missed this," Lucius breathed. "Severus, you are exquisite."

Severus made a very inelegant and disbelieving noise.

"I am cumbersome, ugly, irritable and freakish."

"Rubbish. Hermione, you agree with me, surely?" Lucius reached out and gently caressed where Hugo kicked in his warm home.

"Yes, I agree. Severus is incredibly sexy."



"There you are." Lucius shifted slowly closer to Severus, enclosing him in a tight embrace, leaning down to nibble on his lower lip. "Now, you relax and let us pander to you."

Severus jerked a little as Lucius slid a large hand down into his trousers.

"Is there any way," Hermione asked rather tentatively, "that you can be inside Severus while he's inside me?"

Severus jerked again and gave a little groan.

"My dear," Lucius purred, "you *are* a brilliant witch. We are all wearing far too many clothes, however, so shall we begin with a simple disrobing charm?"

With a flick of Hermione's wand, their clothes rearranged themselves into three neat piles on the floor.

"You obviously educated her well, Severus."

"With all due respect, *Mr Malfoy*, I am capable of independent thought. I still don't trust you."

"Very brilliant witch," Severus said breathlessly. Lucius attempted to look affronted but could not repress a smirk.

"Let's see if she is supple enough to shag you at the same time that I do, shall we?"

However, Hugo was now too large to permit Hermione to get into position. Lucius pondered for a moment before his grey eyes widened and a positively evil leer spread over his pale, patrician face. He reached for his wand and conjured a small pink object with a flared end.

"Hold on," Hermione said dubiously, but he placed a finger across her lips. He knelt with his strong thighs apart and his balls hanging, and didn't look anything like as awkward or inelegant as he should.

"This, my dear, is not for you." He tapped it with his wand and it glistened in the lamplight. "This is for Severus. Simple mathematics, my dear witch, tell us that Severus has two needy orifices and I have only one member capable of doing the deed. Severus, assume the position, if you would be so kind?"

Severus silently pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. He was breathing fast, trembling slightly, his erection bumping against the lower curve of his belly. Lucius ran a hand over his narrow arse then slapped it lightly. "Good man. Take a deep breath and push back ..." he placed the rounded end of the plug on the furred bud of Snape's anus and began to press it inside. Snape wriggled until it was seated inside him with only the very end, where it flared out, still visible. "There. It is exactly the right size and shape to stimulate the prostate gland, which, in case you are not aware, is the source of much pleasure for the discerning wizard." He tapped the plug with his wand and Severus gulped and began to pant. "Now, Hermione, if you would care to apply your talented and delightful mouth to our lover's erection, I shall slip into the silken depths and we will see if he expires from sensory overload..."

"Shut the fuck up and get on with it," Severus growled.

Hermione wriggled between his arms, shuffling until her face was beneath his cock. His hanging belly brushed against her breasts as she conjured a pillow under her head and licked the end of his foreskin. She felt his hair tickle her thighs and then her bottom was hoisted upwards on more cushions and his nose burrowed into her bush.

He tasted of salt: bitter-sweet and faintly yeasty. He groaned and rocked back and forwards as Lucius entered him and began to thrust with long, even strokes that were relayed to Hermione through the movements of Severus' cock against her mouth and his own mouth along the moist folds of her sex. That delicate, fluttering tongue on her clitoris, his rhythmic groans, the sight of him above her, shining with sweat and trembling with the exertion of holding himself on hands and knees, were enough to bring her to the brink of climax. She braced a hand against Hugo, who flexed so powerfully that she could see the shape of Severus' belly change. She wondered what it felt like, to be so filled with sensation; to have his body stimulated from inside and out: in his anus, his vagina, his cock and his belly. She massaged Hugo to make him writhe and licked along the vein on the underside of Severus' quivering cock, then sucked the droplets that seeped from it.

Hermione ran her tongue around the rim of his foreskin and Severus shuddered, and her mouth was suddenly flooded with hot, bitter fluid. He gave an inarticulate groan and threw back his head. Lucius' arms came around his chest, holding Severus up as he gave the last few convulsive jerks and then lowered Severus down onto his side, so that he didn't crush Hermione. He lay curled, completely limp; his eyes rolled back and mouth gaping. Hermione took the opportunity to spit out the mouthful of semen. Was she supposed to swallow it? It was not as revolting as many of the potions she had ingested, but not something she had particularly enjoyed.

She wiped her mouth then gave a squeak as strong hands caught her thighs and she looked down to see Lucius Malfoy's broad shoulders and tousled blond head. He gently pushed her legs apart so that he could kiss the inside of her thighs, moving closer, teasing her, and then he blew apart the damp curls and inserted his tongue inside her.

"Or would you prefer this?" he enquired, his voice slightly muffled, as he lapped delicately at her clitoris, which was thrumming with anticipation.

"Oh God..."

He chuckled and held her down as she bucked and tried to press closer to his mouth. She came within minutes, and Lucius allowed himself to flop back with a satisfied sigh.

Severus kicked him on the ankle.

"Malfoy, banish the bloody plug."

"Oh, sorry, is it too much for you?"

Lucius twirled his wand, and Severus' breath came out in a great whoosh of relief. He pushed the heels of his hands into his sides, staring down at himself.

"He's moved."

"Yes, I could see him kicking away," Hermione said.

"Changed position."

"Is that good or bad?" Lucius asked, lifting himself up onto one elbow and trailing a finger around Severus' protruding navel.

"Good, I believe. Strood said he was breech, but ..." he rubbed the top of his tummy and nodded, "he is now kicking my ribs. He's turned so that his head is down. Not that it matters, since he will be removed magically."

"It means he's developing normally," Hermione said happily, pressing to feel Hugo kick against her hand.

"With luck, he may stop dancing on my bladder."

Lucius moved abruptly, shifting to sit behind Severus, one leg on either side, and wrapping his arms around him, holding his belly and rubbing it gently.

"Hermione?" Severus held out his hand, and when Hermione took it, he pulled her against himself, so that he was sandwiched between her and Lucius. Severus allowed his head to roll back, resting against Lucius' shoulder, and closed his eyes, hugging her as she sat sideways on what remained of his lap. Hugo struggled, not yet settled

into his new orientation, but as all three placed their hands on him, he subsided into gentle undulations that didn't even ripple the taut skin.

"There, now," Lucius murmured, leaning against the back of the sofa, "you see? All will be well."

"I'm almost daft enough to believe you," Hermione told him. Severus merely snorted.

## Chapter 12

*Chapter 12 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Severus frowned at the piles of parchment on the kitchen table.

"Surely this has nothing to do with the court case?"

"Mm?" Hermione looked up. He was wearing his black dressing gown, which no longer stretched around him; it gapped slightly in the front displaying a sliver of pale, hairless skin. She had no intention of telling him so, but he looked as if he'd swallowed a beer barrel. "Oh, this is the syllabus for Muggle-Wizarding studies."

Severus lowered himself carefully onto a kitchen chair.

"So you intend to take the job?"

"Yes." She took in a deep, slightly tremulous breath. "I haven't handed in my notice at the Ministry yet, or officially responded to Minerva's offer, but yes, I'm going to teach at Hogwarts. I want to make a difference, Severus, and it all fits in with the rest of my life as well. I'll be free during the holidays for Hugo when he's old enough to go to school. There's a little primary school in Hogsmeade that has a very good reputation."

"You have thought this all out very carefully," he said. His dark eyes were almost blank. "Do I fit into this plan of yours?"

"Of course you do!" She put down her quill. "Severus, whatever you decide to do, you'll be a big part of Hugo's life."

"And your life?"

"If you want to, yes."

"I am ... considering Minerva's suggestion."

"That would be wonderful."

"However, it all hinges upon the outcome of the court case."

"I had an owl from Squibbles; he says there's no decision about the date yet. Harry says the Wizengamot members have been scuttling around a lot recently, so he and Kingsley think something's going on."

Severus shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair.

"I shall owl Strood and instruct her to remove Hugo tomorrow or Friday. I believe she will be agreeable."

"He is very large," Hermione agreed. "Two weeks early shouldn't be a problem for him, should it?"

"It cannot happen soon enough."

Hermione smiled as he heaved himself to his feet and waddled out of the kitchen. She and Ginny had already been shopping for everything needed to turn the smaller bedroom into a nursery. Severus had refused to visit Diagon Alley for the last month, claiming that his back would not withstand the amount of walking. Hermione couldn't really blame him. He was a very private person, and although the surge of mild popularity resulting from Luna's campaign might stand him in good stead when it came to the court case, he would not tolerate middle-aged witches clucking over him, patting his tummy and asking when he was due.

She heard him treading slowly up the stairs, then water clanking in the old pipes as he ran a bath.

There was a sudden flare of green and Harry's voice called her name. Hermione jumped to her feet and leaned down to talk to his flame-shrouded head.

"Court case is called for tomorrow," he said.

"Oh, hell."

"Exactly. The bastards did this to me as well. They're not going to owl Severus till tomorrow; luckily Iorweth ap Howells is friendly with us; he tipped the wink to Kingsley."

"Severus was going to ask Strood to get Hugo out tomorrow."

"Would be best if he didn't," Harry said, scratching his ear. "Frankly, he should use every weapon he can. The witches will be more inclined to be lenient if he's still flaunting a huge belly."

"Hardly flaunting."

"You know what I mean. He needs to look noble, long-suffering, heroic and dignified."

"And about to explode."

"A sympathy vote is still a vote. Got to go; I'm not supposed to know about this and certainly not supposed to warn you in case Snape does a bunk." He rolled his eyes. "Don't think he's in any state to fly, is he?" Then, after a beat, he added, "Don't panic, Hermione, we'll be okay."

With that, he withdrew and the flames died. Hermione sat back on her heels and practised taking deep, slow breaths.

oooOOOooo

Hermione watched as the members of the Wizengamot took their places, trying to guess from their expressions whether they were for Severus or against him. Many of the staid witches and wizards looked angry or alarmed when they saw the large crowd already gathered in the court room, although a number appeared pleased, and a few went so far as to acknowledge friends in the audience.

The Weasleys were there, including Molly, to Hermione's surprise. Minerva led a delegation from Hogwarts that included Flitwick, Neville, Hooch, Sinistra, Vector and Trelawney. Luna appeared, looking chirpy and flourishing a long ostrich feather quill, and a small crowd of Slytherins collected around the triple hubs of Lucius and Draco Malfoy and Horace Slughorn.

Bunter waved at Percy, who banged his gavel on the desk before him and called, "Bring in the accused!"

Severus was accompanied by only two Aurors: one tall and gangly with red hair, the other smaller and slighter, his messy black hair and bright green eyes instantly recognisable. Harry had one hand under Severus' elbow and was speaking to him quietly.

Severus himself wore plain black robes and a black travelling cloak. He made no attempt to disguise his unwieldy shape, and once he had allowed Harry to help him to a seat in the centre of the room, he rested one hand on top of his belly. Harry and Ron each took a step back and clasped their hands behind their backs, looking alert, competent and very much as if they were protecting Severus rather than expecting to restrain him.

"Severus Snape," Bunter said rather more loudly than necessary, "you are accused of using Unforgiveable curses. Let's face it; this is all a waste of our time, isn't it? You admit that you killed Albus Dumbledore may he rest in peace using the Killing Curse. The Killing Curse is Unforgiveable; ergo, you cannot be forgiven. All we need to do is decide the exact level of punishment..."

"Chief Warlock Bunter, my client had very good reasons for what he did, and I intend to prove to this court that he had no choice in the matter, and if he is to be punished at all, that punishment should be trivial."

"Of course you do, Squiggle, Squiffle, whatever your name is. That's what you're paid for."

Next to Hermione, Ginny gave her a bracing smile as Squiffle called his first witness.

Minerva McGonagall was an impressive witch under any circumstances. She described the terrible time when Severus had been Headmaster without mincing her words, admitting that she had hated Severus for what he had done. She told how she and the other staff gradually came to understand how he had protected them and the students, shielding them from the excesses of the Carrows. Then she relayed how Harry's words and those of Dumbledore's portrait had changed her mind about Severus, once she believed that it was too late to ask his forgiveness.

Next Draco Malfoy spoke, describing his own part in the downfall of Dumbledore in a level, clipped voice that spoke of deeply controlled emotions. Luna's quill and those of the other reporters present scratched busily on their parchments.

Other Hogwarts staff and ex-pupils gave their evidence. Squiffle was building up a picture of Severus as a deeply honourable man who had been placed in an impossible situation. From the cross-questioning by the members of the Wizengamot, Hermione began to fear that Squiffle's plan was flawed. The Wizengamot witches and wizards were not concerned with why Severus had done it; they cared only that he had admitted to having killed. There would be no forgiveness for Severus Snape.

"It'll be okay," Ginny whispered, squeezing her hand. "Ron's got a plan."

"Oh, no ..."

"Hermione, think! He might be a bit of a plonker but what's he good at?"

Hermione looked at her friend, a glimmer of hope flickering in her heart. "Chess."

"Exactly. He and Harry were huddled in the study till one o'clock this morning. All they would say was that there wasn't time to tell me anything but that they'd got a plan."

oooOOOooo

With a show of reluctance, Bunter conceded to Squiffle's request for a two-hour lunch break to allow Severus to rest. Harry and Ron took him off to their office, where Harry transfigured a chair into a sofa and sent a Ministry elf for sandwiches and pumpkin juice. Hermione, Ginny and Squiffle joined them, and then there was a flurry of raised voices outside the door while Lucius Malfoy marched in, trailed by an irate Auror.

"It's okay, Wendy," Harry said, waving her away. "I doubt if any of us could keep him out."

"What is that meant to mean, Mr Potter?" Lucius demanded, looking down his nose as if Harry was a small and irritating animal sniffing around his ankle.

"You've protected Professor Snape for the past eight years; I didn't expect you to suddenly stop."

"If you can call it protection," Ron muttered. "Looked more like imprisonment to me."

"I remained at the Manor by choice, Weasley." Severus lowered himself onto the sofa and sighed, folding his hands on top of Hugo.

"There you go," Harry said, levitating plates of sandwiches and jugs of pumpkin juice around the room, "help yourselves. Snape, which sandwiches do you want? We've got ham, cheese and pickle or egg and cress."

Lucius Malfoy caught one of the plates and a goblet and handed them to Severus, seating himself on the sofa so that their thighs almost touched.

"Eat, Severus. You're too thin."

"You are joking?"

Lucius placed a finger under Severus' chin, turning his head so that they were eye to eye and pursed his lips. "Your face is almost as gaunt as it was when you were Headmaster, my friend. Are you not eating?"

"There hasn't been a lot of room in here for food lately. You try eating a big meal while someone kicks your insides."

Lucius placed a large hand firmly on Severus' belly and said, "You in there, behave, or I shall have words."

"I do not believe that will have much effect," Severus said, biting into an egg sandwich. He grasped Lucius' hand and pressed it against himself for a moment before pushing it away and releasing it.

"Start as you mean to go on," Lucius stated, standing up and adjusting his cloak. "They won't play nicely unless trained from an early age." Turning, he addressed Squibbles. "Another of the young Slytherins has agreed to speak on Severus' behalf; I believe she will be an excellent witness. I will introduce you if you will accompany me."

"What was that about?" Ginny breathed into Hermione's ear. Hermione shivered and shook her head as if she had no idea, as if she had not just seen Lucius Malfoy display both his affection and his anxiety for Severus. Lucius swept out of the room with Squibbles at his heels, and Severus stared blankly at the wall, chewing on his lunch as though he were eating sawdust.

oooOOOooo

"It is of no matter," Bunter snapped, his jowls wobbling. "We are uninterested in *why* Snape acted as he did. You can make all the excuses you want, but the members of the Wizengamot are interested only in the fact that the blasted wizard is guilty! He used an Unforgivable Curse and that's an end to it!"

A babble of voices rose from the crowd in the public gallery, a few yelling, "That's right! Send the bastard to Azkaban!" And rather more shouting, "No! Shame! Snape's a hero!"

Hermione held on to Ginny's hand. She was furious and terrified. Severus, however, stared at the Chief Warlock with an air of mild curiosity, as if the wizard was reciting ingredients for a potion. Squibbles stood up.

"Chief Warlock, my client is in no fit state to be sent to Azkaban; the journey itself might be enough to kill him. Surely his child is innocent?"

An elderly witch leaned down from the Wizengamot bench.

"He's right, you know, the baby is nothing to do with this. I move that Snape shall be held safely here at the Ministry until he has produced the child; then he should be transferred to Azkaban and the child given to its other parent."

"Sound thinking, Madam Murgatroyd, very sound. All in favour? Has anyone..."

"Excuse me, Chief Warlock." Harry took a couple of paces forward, standing lightly balanced on the balls of his feet, his hands still clasped behind his back. Ginny's grip tightened on Hermione's hand.

"Yes, Auror Potter?"

There was an air of anticipation in the courtroom now, as people leaned in to listen to what the Chosen One had to say.

"It seems to me that Professor Snape..."

"Snape is no longer a professor, Potter!"

"...that Professor Snape is being victimised simply because he was and still is a Slytherin."

"Snape is being brought to justice because he used an Unforgivable Curse, that's all there is to it."

"It doesn't appear that way to me," Harry said, although in a very pleasant and polite tone. "To me, it seems like he's paying for a choice made for him when he was eleven, by a senile mediaeval artifact."

"No, Mr Potter, he's guilty of using an Unforgivable Curse!"

"But non-Slytherins don't get hauled up in front of the Wizengamot for that," Harry said, his green eyes wide and guileless.

"They would be treated in exactly the same way, I assure you! Do you have anything to add?"

"Yes, I do. I'm equally guilty, so why am I not standing over there with him?"

"Come, come, Mr Potter!" Bunter waved a hand jovially, and Hermione was reminded of Cornelius Fudge. "Any curse that you used against the Dark Lord is a different matter, that was war ..."

"No," said Harry. "I disarmed Voldemort with *Expelliarmus*." He smiled slightly as the majority of the Wizengamot flinched at the name. "Let's see, I used four Unforgivable Curses: I tried to curse Professor Snape with the Cruciatus curse, I definitely used Cruciatus on Bellatrix Lestrange, and I used the Imperius curse on a goblin named Bogrod and a Death Eater named Travers. I was in Gryffindor, though, so I've never been brought to trial. One rule for Slytherins and another for everyone else, is that right? No wonder dark lords pop up every fifty years trying to fight for Slytherin supremacy the Slytherins have chips on their shoulders a mile wide, and I don't blame them one bit if this is supposed to be justice."

Bunter bared his teeth in what he possibly thought was a smile. "Your misguided loyalty to Snape is excusable; you were very young and impressionable..."

"Yeah, didn't stop you all expecting me to off Voldemort though, did it?"

There was a tense silence, broken as Bunter slammed his hand down on the bench in front of him. "I will not allow Snape to walk out of here just because you say so!"

"Then apply the same rules to everyone, Slytherin or Gryffindor!"

"Very well!" Bunter pointed a shaking finger at Harry and shouted, "You stand accused of the use of Unforgivable Curses, Harry Potter! What do you say?"

"That I am guilty," Harry exclaimed over the rising voices.

"Potter, no!" Severus half-rose from his seat, but Ron pressed him back down with a hand on his shoulder and leaned over him. Hermione bit on her own knuckle as she and Ginny clung to one another.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione groaned, "I hope he knows what he's doing."

Ginny nudged her. "Look at Ron and Snape. Ron must have planned this."

Ron Weasley was speaking quietly, close against the fall of Severus' straight black hair. Severus was listening intently, his black gaze on Harry. He glanced across at Hermione, gave a tiny nod and returned his attention to Ron.

Harry turned to face the massed benches of the Wizengamot.

"If Snape's guilty, then so am I. If you allow amnesty for me and send him to Azkaban, then you're guilty of the most blatant injustice imaginable, and I don't want to live in a country where something like that can happen."

"That's right, Potter, you tell them!" screamed a witch from the back of the crowded public area. Hermione thought that it might have been Daphne Greengrass.

"They've backed themselves into a corner," Hermione said to Ginny. "Oh shit, Harry, they're going to send you to prison as well!"

"I don't want to do this, Potter, but you're forcing me to it!" Bunter roared over the rising cries of "Shame!" and "Harry Potter!" Harry threw back his head and waited with an expression of fierce anticipation. "I find you guilty, both of you!"

Aurors appeared, forcing back the witches and wizards who attempted to storm towards the Wizengamot. A few wands were drawn and the trial appeared to be about to descend into a brawl.

Some members of the Wizengamot were already sidling towards the exit behind their benches when a magically amplified voice commanded, "Ladies and gentlemen, kindly remain in your seats!"

Kingsley Shacklebolt strode over to stand beside Severus. He was wearing flowing blue robes that emphasised his broad shoulders and considerable height, and Hermione saw that he held his wand discreetly at his side, among the folds of his robe. "Chief Warlock Bunter," he said, inclining his head politely towards the portly wizard.

"Don't think you can overrule the Wizengamot, Minister!" Bunter slapped both hands down on the bench, making his papers flutter.

"I have no intention of anything of the kind," Kingsley said in his deep, reassuring voice. "It's the role of the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot to decide whether these two wizards are innocent or guilty of the crimes of which they're accused." He nodded at Harry, whose mouth twitched in a tiny smile. "However, it is the *Ministry* which decides the penalty for those crimes."

"A lifetime in Azkaban, isn't it, Shacklebolt?" Bunter was sweating and his eyes looked wild.

"That is one option, yes," Kingsley agreed, "however, due to the serious nature of the accusations, plus the fact that it appears that the entire Wizengamot is in agreement..."

"That's not true!" A thin wizard jumped to his feet, waving his hands agitatedly. "There hasn't been a vote, look you!"

"Thank you, Mr ap Howells, for pointing out that technicality. Witches and wizards of the Wizengamot, do you find the accused innocent or guilty of using Unforgiveable Curses?"

A number abstained, three obstinately voted 'no' despite the fact that both Harry and Severus admitted their guilt, and Bunter thrust his hand into the air and glared at his companions as they hesitantly raised their hands, condemning both wizards to whatever fate the Ministry decided awaited them.

"So now you're going to suddenly make it permissible to cast Unforgiveable Curses, are you?" Bunter demanded furiously. "Change the rules for the Golden Boy?"

"Not at all, Chief Warlock. You may be aware that although life imprisonment is the usual punishment for this crime, in earlier times other rules applied, and those have never been repealed."

Harry walked to stand beside Severus, both facing Kingsley with calm expressions, although Hermione thought that Severus looked very pale. Kingsley waved a hand, and Aurors strode, in step, to form a semicircle around the two wizards.

"But that's impossible no!" Bunter began to stand up and then flopped back again, staring aghast at Kingsley. "You can't mean the death penalty? For Harry Potter?"

"Yes," said Kingsley Shacklebolt.

## Chapter 13

### *Chapter 13 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Hermione screamed, and Ginny seized her as she tried to get to her feet.

"Hermione, no! Look at Ron, Hermione, *look at Ron!*"

Her ex-husband was still standing tall beside Severus, one hand resting on his shoulder. Ron was frowning slightly, but if he displayed any anxiety at all, it was in the looks he cast at the frantically yelling and gesticulating audience in the public seats. If Ron wasn't desperately frightened for his best friend, then Kingsley must be in on the plan. She allowed herself to relax, just a little, and saw that Harry was trying to catch Ginny's attention, and when he succeeded, he gave her a reassuring little shake of the head.

Kingsley watched until the Aurors had disarmed a dozen of the most excitable of Harry's supporters and some of the irate Slytherins. Percy Weasley, who had been taking notes, hammered on the table, and the hubbub gradually died away. Kingsley turned to the Wizengamot.

"Would this satisfy you, that Severus Snape should pay the penalty for his transgressions?"

"I don't wish to be a part of the Wizengamot that condemns Harry Potter to death," an old witch stated.

"Nor I," exclaimed Iorweth ap Howells, "but I don't want either wizard to die! Innocent or not, Snape's a war hero and this is shameful!"

"Snape killed Dumbledore! He used the killing curse!" Bunter bellowed. His face was purple, and he looked rather like an overgrown toddler who had been denied his toys. "Wizards can't go round using Unforgiveables! Hang the pair of them!"

"Thank you, Chief Warlock, I think we all know where you stand on this," Kingsley said. He spoke softly, forcing everyone to quiet down or else miss his words. "Both these wizards have been found guilty; both should pay by their deaths. Each has stood up for his beliefs in a way that none of us can emulate. Harry walked out to meet his fate boldly, never expecting to return, and he underwent the Killing Curse at Voldemort's hand. Severus Snape spied for us for many years. Without his aid, Harry could not have prevailed, and he faced death at the fangs of the snake Nagini. Both Harry Potter and Severus Snape were prepared to die for all of us." He paused and glanced around. "Harry tells us that he died and was given the choice to return. Mr Malfoy assures me that his late wife, Narcissa, and some of the best Healers struggled for weeks to bring Severus Snape back from a coma that was as near to death as one can possibly be. His convalescence lasted two years. I consider that they have already paid

the highest price for any sins they may have committed." He paused a moment to survey the room shrewdly, satisfied that everyone was hanging on his every word. "As Minister for Magic, I state that all convictions shall be considered spent, and both wizards are free to go."

Kingsley pointed his wand at Severus and twirled it in a very complicated series of spirals. The glow of the custody charm flared copper-gold around Harry and Hermione and silver around Severus, then blinked out of sight as Kingsley neutralised the spell.

Ginny and Hermione hugged each other, Ginny squealing, "Oh my God! Ron's a genius!" and Hermione trying not to break down and sob. "Come on," Ginny said, dragging Hermione with her towards where Harry and Severus were besieged by well-wishers and reporters.

The Aurors had formed a cordon around Harry and Severus, so it was not until they had almost reached the exit that Ginny and Hermione caught up with them. Harry looked around and grabbed Ginny. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Harry Potter, don't you dare do that to me again! I could kill you myself, you git!"

"I told you Ron had a plan. Hermione, are you okay?"

"When my knees stop shaking, I will be."

Harry grinned and moved aside so she could push past him in the crush.

Severus' eyes were bright. There was a slight flush over his high, narrow cheekbones. Hermione grasped his arm and he leaned on her, breathing fast. As the crowd surged, one of the Aurors was buffeted against them, making Severus stumble. Harry and Ron immediately took up positions flanking Severus, and they pushed forwards out of the doorway.

As soon as they were in the wide corridor, Harry seized Severus' elbow with one hand and Ginny with the other. To Hermione's complete astonishment, Severus grasped her hand. Ron came up behind them and took hold of Harry's shoulder, leaning in close to speak so they could all hear him over the noise from the courtroom.

"Kingsley says to go straight up to his office; we'll have to use the lifts unless you can manage three flights of stairs, Snape?"

As Severus turned his head to reply, Pansy Parkinson came hurrying towards them. Hermione wondered how she had managed to get out of the courtroom so quickly.

"Severus Snape!" She thrust a bunch of flowers into Severus' free hand. "I'm so glad you're getting what you deserve!"

Hermione wondered if she had chosen such unusual blooms because they were ingredients for potions. She recognised lobelia, marigold and a single velvety black rose. Then a hook grabbed her behind her navel, and she was dragged violently into darkness, her only contact with reality the grip of Severus' slender hand in her own.

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Hermione was thrown fiercely from side to side, tumbling helplessly as the Portkey dragged her through space. She felt herself falling, to land with a thump that jarred all the breath from her body. Her head hit the floor so hard that white stars burst through her vision and she could do nothing but lie there, trying to drag air into her lungs. Someone else slammed onto her, pinning her to a cold stone floor. She heard a woman swear, and a man cried out in pain or alarm. Then everything stopped, and Hermione found that she could breathe again, although in small, shallow sips due to the heavy body sprawled across her middle. She made an ineffectual attempt to push it aside and felt it stir, and the female voice exclaimed, "Ow! That's my eye, you oaf!" and she realised that she could hear Ginny.

"Sorry, Gin," Ron gasped and dug a knee painfully into Hermione's ribs, making her grunt.

"Everyone keep still a minute," Ginny said. "I'm on the top, so if I get off first, we can sort ourselves out."

Hermione heard movement, and then Ginny said breathlessly, "Right, who's this?"

"Me," Harry told her. There was more scuffling and Hermione opened her eyes. The light was very dim, but she could make out Harry and Ginny standing over her. "Is this you, Ron? Can you get up?"

"Yeah. Blimey, that was a bloody awful Portkey. Whoever set it deserves to be hexed." Ron scrambled off Hermione, and she drew in a deep gulp of cold, fresh air.

"Everyone okay?" Harry asked. "Ginny?"

"All right apart from what's going to be a very black eye."

"Ron?"

"Bruised but okay."

"Hermione?"

"I hit my head," she said, reaching up to feel the very tender spot that was already starting to form a bump, "but it isn't too bad, I'm okay." She rolled over to get up and discovered that someone else still lay beside her, someone who was curled up and breathing in quick, shallow whoops, someone whose rounded body was immediately familiar. "Severus?" she whispered, reaching to run her hands across him.

"Sounds like he's winded," Harry said, coming to kneel beside her. "Here, put this under his head." He pulled off his cloak and rolled it up, and Hermione carefully slipped it under Severus' skull. Then Harry drew his wand and said, "Lumos."

Nothing happened. He gave his wand a little shake and tried again, but it didn't produce a single spark. Ron and Ginny both attempted the spell next, but without success.

"Well," Harry said in a carefully neutral voice, "that confirms where we are, doesn't it?"

"Somewhere with anti-magic wards," Ginny muttered. They were silent for a moment. Severus' breathing had eased to steady little gasps. Just on the edge of hearing, a seagull called, and nearby, there was the delicate trickle of water. Hermione looked up at the high, barred window that showed nothing but unbroken cloud. The room was small, about four paces across, and the single door was a blank rectangle barely distinguishable from the stone wall. Ron strode to the door but there was no handle, and he was unable to hook his fingernails around the edge to lever it open.

"Azkaban," Hermione said, and no-one disagreed.

"Pansy Parkinson put a Portkey in the bouquet," Ron said. "If it was Pansy."

"Probably not," Harry said. "She likes Snape. She'd be an obvious person to Polyjuice into if you wanted to get close to him, though. Has anyone still got the flowers?"

"They're here." Ron picked up the rather battered bouquet. "Hey, Gin, remember that 'language of flowers' stuff Mum used to go on about? What do you make of these?"

Ginny took the flowers from her brother and held them up under the window so that the grey daylight fell on them, the only colour visible in the gloom.

"Well, if we'd had our wits about us, we'd have realised."

"I thought she'd chosen them because they were potion ingredients," Hermione said.

"They probably are, but in the language of flowers, these carry a pretty grim message. Look." She picked out a couple of evergreen sprigs. "Cypress, that's for death and mourning; and cherry laurel, perfidy."

"There's a rose," said Ron, for whom Herbology had never been a strong subject.

"Yes, but it's been stained black, so it stands for death and hatred, the same as the fumitory. Aloe is for grief, lobelia for malevolence, marigold for pain and this one," she held up the large bundle of delicate yellow flowers, "this is bird's-foot trefoil; Merlin knows where she got it from at this time of year, but this is the clincher. There's loads of it and it stands for revenge. The whole bunch means hatred, perfidy, revenge and death."

"But people will be looking for us and they'll find us soon enough," Hermione said rather desperately, "won't they?"

"There are thousands of empty cells in Azkaban," Harry told her quietly. "They keep all the doors locked, and they might check the entire place once a year when they go through and clean it. No-one knows we're here, I'm afraid."

"I suppose there's no point in making a noise?"

"If anyone did hear us, they'd think we're just inmates kicking off," Ron said disgustedly. "What about these wards, Harry?"

"Might as well do a proper diagnostic," Harry told him, "see what we're up against. You fire and I'll detect."

"Any particular spell?"

"How can you use magic in here?" Ginny asked.

"Ron's going to fire spells into the wards. I'm good at detecting magical traces, so I'm going to look for any echoes of magic bouncing around. If anything at all comes back, it means the wards haven't entirely dampened the spell in that particular spot and there might be a weakness we can use."

They stood together, wands extended, and Ron began muttering spells while Harry spun his wand in tiny concentric circles. They worked steadily, turning on the spot, moving their wands in a pattern up and down the walls.

"How's Snape?" Ginny asked as she and Hermione returned to the curled dark figure in the middle of the room. He stirred as Hermione touched his shoulder and pushed himself up into a sitting position. His head drooped, black hair veiling his face, and inside his cloak, his arms were wrapped around his belly.

"Are you hurt?" Hermione asked gently. She heard him swallow.

"Where are we?" His voice was barely more than a croak.

"Azkaban."

He gave a soft grunt and she realised he was trembling.

"Who else is here?"

"Ginny, Harry and Ron."

"Oh." He raised his head, black eyes wide in a glimmering white face. "Dream team."

She gave a little gulp of laughter. "Yes, that's right. Harry and Ron are testing the wards, but there'll be plenty of people looking for us."

"Do not," he said hoarsely, "attempt to placate me with empty reassurances."

He straightened his back. Inside his cloak, Hermione could see his pale hands moving, pressing around the circumference of his heavy abdomen as if checking its boundaries.

"Is Hugo all right?"

"At present he is kicking away in his normal fashion."

"At present?" Ginny repeated, sounding wary, "Do you expect that to change?"

"Inevitably, Mrs Potter." Severus shifted his weight uneasily from side to side. "The Portkey journey had the unfortunate result of rupturing the amniotic sac."

"Your waters have broken?" Ginny asked, as if needing him to confirm what he had just said. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm fucking sure, you stupid girl!" He drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly through his nose. "I apologise."

"It's okay," Ginny murmured, rubbing his shoulder briefly. "Shit. Are you having contractions yet?"

"I have had mild cramping and a backache since early this morning."

"You were already in labour during the court case?" Hermione demanded. "Severus, why didn't you tell anyone?"

"He did," Ron said, interrupting Harry's diagnostic procedure. "He told me at lunchtime, told me to tell Malfoy, who promised he'd Floo Severus' Healer and get her lined up all ready to take the baby out this afternoon."

"But you didn't tell me," Hermione said, not caring that she sounded like a petulant child. Severus reached up and briefly cupped her face with one hand.

"Had Hugo moved quickly, I would have told you. I was unsure if this was true labour, and you were worried enough."

"You didn't mind worrying Lucius, though."

"I doubt he was particularly troubled."

"Looked worried sick to me," Ron muttered, but Harry elbowed him and they returned to their wand work.

"Isn't he early?" Ginny asked.

"Only two weeks. Healer Strood said he's already nice and big. Severus was going to ask for him to be removed tomorrow anyway." Hermione grasped Severus' hand in her own. For a moment he tried to pull away, but then probably realised she needed the comfort for herself and curled his fingers around hers. "It looks like he's going to be born the usual way after all."

"Urgh," said Ron. "Is that possible? I mean, how's he going to get out?"

"Through the birth canal, you dunderhead," Severus snarled. "What did you expect, that I would void him out of my anus?"

"Well, I dunno, do I? You're a bloke."

"Thank you for that astute observation, Weasley."

"The charm Molly cast gave Severus a vagina," Hermione explained.

"Bet Malfoy liked that," Ron muttered.

"Yes, he did!" Severus snapped. "Would you like to know the details?"

"No! Flaming hell, I was kidding." Ron turned around, making Harry growl with annoyance. "Look, Snape, I hope you don't think you can mess around with your bum-chum now that you're with Hermione, because Harry and I won't stand for..."

"Ron!" Ginny leaped up, her hands on her hips, looking and sounding so much like a slimmer version of her mother that Hermione shivered. "Stop being so thick! Snape and Malfoy and Hermione are a threesome, or hadn't you realised that?"

"Can we please finish this diagnosis before I get a cramp in my wand hand?" Harry demanded, and Ron turned back with a muttered apology.

"Good," Ginny said, kneeling down again. "Well, I can't say I've had formal training or anything, but I've had two babies and I was with Fleur when she had Etienne, so I've a fair idea of what to do."

"Since I had no intention whatsoever of doing this, my knowledge is minimal," Severus said. "I suspect it will involve a great deal of mess, indignity and pain."

"The indignity comes first, Professor. Then it hurts so much that you don't care, and then when you get the mess, you're so relieved that it's over that you don't care about that, either."

"You're not helping, Mrs Potter."

She patted his belly. Even in the semi-darkness, the power of his glare was considerable.

"Sorry, I just had to do that. How far do you think you've dilated?"

"I have no idea what you mean."

"How far has your cervix opened? I assume that you have one, of course."

He shrugged.

"I'll need to look," she said. "Can you lie down and open your legs?"

"Certainly not!"

Ginny grimaced and shifted to sit beside him.

"Professor Snape, I'm not doing this to embarrass you or anything, but if we're going to help you, you need to trust us."

"There is not a great deal you can do," he told her. "Allow me to retain a little dignity until I have no choice, if you will."

"Okay. Just don't push, right? You mustn't push until the cervix is really open; otherwise, you'll damage yourself, I do know that much. Try to relax and rest while you can, gather your strength for later. Are you warm enough?"

He must have been cold; Hermione certainly was. The stone floor and walls seemed to suck the heat from her. Nevertheless, she took off her travelling cloak and wrapped it around him. He lay down, his head pillowed on Harry's folded cloak, his knees pulled up and hands tucked around his belly.

"Here," Ginny said, shuffling next to Hermione and opening her own cloak. "We'll share this one." They sat shoulder to shoulder as Harry and Ron continued their methodical testing of the wards.

oooOOOooo

"We're not going to get out of here easily," Harry said, sitting on the floor next to his wife and putting his arm around her.

"That's the understatement of the year," Ron muttered.

"There's a well, I wouldn't call it a weakness, more of a soft spot, up in that direction." Harry pointed with his wand. "There's a little bit of give. When I've had a rest, I'll see how strong it is."

"You can't possibly break out of Azkaban, Harry," Hermione said. "Both Sirius and Barty Crouch escaped by stealth; no-one can get through these wards."

"Shut up, Hermione!" There was a faint note of panic under the irritation in Ginny's voice. "Are you saying we shouldn't even try? We should just sit here and and starve to death?"

"The wards are built to hold prisoners," Harry said with an air of forced calm. "They haven't got wands and they're held singly. We do have wands and we can work together. Anyway, we don't need to break out, just lift the wards long enough to get a message out."

"Patronus?" Ron asked and Harry nodded.

"If I can lift the wards for a moment, just long enough for you to send a Patronus, we'll be okay."

"We should all try sending," Ginny said "In the hope that at least one can get through. I'll send a Patronus to Dad. Hermione, you can send..."

"To Lucius," Hermione stated, but when Ginny gave a little snort, she added defensively, "He'll be going mad with worry and he'll get us out of here; he's still a mover and a shaker."

"Do you *want* to get out?" Ron asked. "I'm sending mine to the Governor of Azkaban. He's only a few hundred yards away. Snape, you send yours to Kingsley."

Severus ignored him. He was huddled on the floor, shivering slightly and hugging his middle.

Harry stood up, pointed his wand into the far corner of the ceiling and began muttering under his breath. The others watched him, hardly breathing. Harry clasped his wand with both hands, braced his legs and cast a charm so powerful that Hermione felt her teeth rattle. The wards absorbed it within a second, and a single spark fell from the tip



of his wand to fizzle out on the stone floor.

"Shit." Harry dropped to his knees, panting. "Those are some fucking wards."

"Let's try pooling our magic," Ron suggested. "You have a rest, then we'll try together, okay?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. We'll crack them, don't worry."

"You won't." Severus' voice was sharp and clear. He pushed himself onto one elbow, his face pale in the fading daylight. "There was barely a tremor in the wards. Do not exhaust yourself for no purpose, Potter."

"What do you suggest, then?" Ron snapped. "We give up and starve, like Ginny said?"

Severus gave him a glare that seemed to dissolve away as he closed his eyes, holding his breath and compressing his lips into a thin line. When he could breathe again, he swallowed audibly and continued as if Ron had not spoken. "There are a number of possible outcomes to my predicament, all of which generate magic that you will use to augment your own."

"Birth magic," Ginny exclaimed, "of course!"

"You do know how to gather magic and utilise it, don't you, Potter?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Ron and I have pooled magic before."

"Good. If I successfully give birth, you will gather the birth magic."

"What about the other outcomes you mentioned?" Harry asked warily.

"If Hugo dies, you will use the magic generated by his death; similarly, if I die, you will trap and use my magic. If I fail to produce the child, and it is clear that I am weakening, you will open me using whatever means you have at hand your fingernails if nothing else presents itself and use the birth or death magic, whichever is available."

"Fucking hell, Snape, you're telling us to kill you!"

"I am telling you not to let my death go to waste. If Hugo is too large to pass through my pelvis, or if I become too exhausted to complete the process, he and I will die anyway unless we can get medical assistance. If you pull him out of me, he has a possibility of life and then you can utilise my magic to save yourselves."

"Severus," Hermione whispered past the lump in her throat, "please don't die."

She knew it was a pathetic, inadequate and unhelpful thing to say. Severus' black eyes flickered as he blinked, and then his hand emerged from the folds of his cloak as he reached out. She shuffled herself to his side and wrapped his thin hand in both of her own.

"Severus, you're freezing!"

"The prisoners are given straw and blankets," he said, "We do not appear to have that luxury."

"We need to share our body heat," Ginny told him. "We're going to be stuck here until Hugo decides to be born, and the cramps will be even worse if your muscles are cold."

"Hate to say this," Harry muttered, "but I need a piss."

"In that corner you will find the outlet from a pipe which delivers drinking water," Severus said. "The water runs into a gulley and exits through the hole in the floor used as a toilet."

"You were imprisoned in Azkaban, weren't you? I forgot about that." Harry went across to the corner, and they all politely pretended not to listen as he relieved his bladder. When he returned, they arranged themselves with Severus in the middle, Ginny and Hermione on either side of him and Harry pressed against Ginny. Rather to Hermione's dismay, Ron came to sit next to her.

They spread two cloaks on the floor to insulate themselves from the cold stone and shared all the others, so that they had three layers of travelling cloaks over them. Ginny rolled down the top edge of the cloaks on the floor to create a thin pillow.

Severus stopped shivering after a while. He lay on his side, his head tucked in against Hermione's shoulder. Hermione could feel where his ribs flared out over his abdomen, the occasional jerk as Hugo kicked, the rise and fall of his breathing and the steady beat of his heart. Then everything suddenly went hard and tight under her hand, and he hissed through his teeth.

"You need to keep breathing," Ginny said. Hermione realised she was rubbing Severus' back. "Try to breathe while you're riding the contractions, okay?"

"Rather hard to think about doing anything," he mumbled. "How the hell did your mother go through this six times?"

"She just likes babies. You can scream if you want to none of us will hold it against you. Will we, Ronald?"

"No way," said Ron. "You do what you need to do. I just don't want to see the messy part."

"You are not setting eyes on my bits, Weasley."

"Don't want to, thanks, Snape."

After a while, Ginny wriggled out of the cocoon of comparative warmth.

"Sorry, people, but I've got to go to the toilet. What do prisoners use as toilet paper?"

"Straw," Severus told her.

"Hold on, I've got a packet of tissues in my pocket," Hermione said. "I thought I'd end up crying in court, one way or another."

"Thanks. I'll try and be as economical as I can. Isn't this embarrassing?"

"I want a drink of water," Ron said, "so we might as well all do what we need to now and then try and get some sleep."

Severus clambered laboriously to his feet. Hermione shook out one of the cloaks and wrapped it around him.

"How are you feeling?"

She felt rather than saw him shrug.

"Complaining won't make me feel any better. I need to walk a little, I'm getting stiff."

"It might help," Ginny said, returning the pack of tissues to Hermione. "Whatever you feel most comfortable with."

"Wish we'd got something to eat," Ron mumbled. "Don't suppose you've any food in your pockets as well, Hermione?"

She didn't answer right away and Ron crowed, "You have! I knew it, good old Hermione and her beaded bag!"

"All I've got is a small packet of raisins."

"We could share it?" Ron suggested after a long pause, then sighed melodramatically. "Yeah, okay, shall we toss a coin?"

"Snape needs the energy more than we do," Harry said. Ron grunted a reluctant acquiescence and threw himself down onto the cloaks.

Severus was walking slowly around the perimeter of the room. He stopped and reached out to lean on the wall, his hand pale against the stones.

"I wish I could help." Hermione went to him and he grasped her shoulder, breathing hard. "Sorry. I just feel so helpless, and helplessness seems to breed platitudes."

"Walk with me. You can hold me up when the contractions hit."

"Would you like to eat these raisins now? They're not much but they might give you a bit of energy."

He held out his hand and she shook some raisins into it. They made a couple of circuits of the room, and he had just swallowed the last of the dried fruit when suddenly he hunched, hugging his belly, and staggered slightly. Hermione caught him, and he leaned on her until the pain receded.

"Bad one?" Harry asked in the solicitous tone of a father who had attended the births of both his sons. Ginny snorted.

"They're all fucking bad," Severus growled. "Imagine having the Cruciatus curse aimed at your belly every ten minutes. I need to urinate, if you'll excuse me."

"Do you do that like a bloke or a girl?" Ron asked curiously. Severus ignored him, going to the corner and fumbling with his robes.

"He's still male, Ron, if it's any of your business."

"That was nearly me, you know. I was kind of wondering what I'd narrowly avoided."

"A very nasty hexing, if you don't watch it, Ronald. Severus might not be able to hex you now, but he'll remember it."

"Hey, I was the bloke who kept him out of Azkaban!"

"Um, actually ..."

"Yeah. Right."

Severus had had enough of trying to walk, and so they settled back into their uncomfortable huddle on the floor. Hermione wrapped her arms around him, tucking her head in against the side of his neck. She had barely slept the previous night from worrying about the court case, and despite the cold and the discomfort, she felt her eyelids slowly begin to close. She fell asleep to the faint, familiar sound of Ron Weasley's snores.

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Hermione was horribly hungry and uncomfortable, and for a moment, she thought she must be in a tent in the middle of nowhere with Harry and Ron. Then she heard the sound that had woken her: someone was trying to stifle an agonised moan.

There was a different quality to the faint daylight, and she realised that the sun was rising over the sea. Ron lay next to her on his back, snuffling rhythmically, and on her other side, Ginny curled in Harry's arms. Suddenly anxious, Hermione raised her head.

Severus sat with his back to the wall. He was gripping his raised knees, and as she watched, he leaned forward, his belly pressed between his splayed thighs, his face contorted with pain. She wriggled out of the cocoon of cloaks and crouched next to him. He raised his head and gazed blankly at her from beneath drooping eyelids.

"You had better wake the others," he told her, sucking in sharp, shallow breaths between the words.

There was no need; Ginny was already getting to her feet and Ron and Harry were both stirring sleepily.

"Okay," Ginny said, retying the ribbon that held her long hair out of her face, "how often are you getting contractions?"

"Minute or two," Severus mumbled. "Belly's killing me. Dear God ..."

"Come on." Ginny pulled at his arm. "Hermione, help him to lie down over on the cloaks."

Severus attempted to shove them away, but between them, Ginny and Hermione dragged him over to the makeshift bed, where he rolled onto his back and threw an arm across his face. Ginny pushed up his robes and removed his underpants before he realised what she was doing. He made an ineffectual attempt to cover himself, but another contraction interrupted him and he grunted, pulling up his legs. Ginny took her chance to push his knees apart, peering at his genitals.

"Too damn dark," she muttered. "Sorry, I'm going to have to feel you."

"Blimey," Ron muttered, turning away. "Never thought I'd watch my sister fingering Snape's equipment. How's he doing?"

"Dilating," Ginny said with satisfaction.

"Fucking hell, is that what you call it?" Severus asked, his voice shaking. "I'm going to split open shit!"

He twisted, as if trying to find a position that didn't hurt quite so much, and then he flopped, panting. "Got to push," he gasped.

"Yes, push down on the next contraction. Get ready to gather the birth magic, Harry."

"Have your wands out to cast your Patronuses, then."

"Patronuses or Patroni?" Ron wondered aloud, loosening his wand in his sleeve holster.

"Hermione?" Severus gasped, as if he couldn't see her through the blinding pain. When she touched him, he grabbed her hand and clenched it in his own.

"I'm here, Severus. You're almost there, you can do it."

"Rub his tummy," Ginny suggested, and Hermione used her free hand to massage the solid shape of the baby. Hugo kicked and struggled, distressed by the swift, hard

muscular spasms that rippled through Severus' body. She could feel Severus straining through the next contraction, trying to force Hugo through the narrow exit from his body.

"Tell Lucius," Severus whispered, and Hermione leaned closer.

"He knows, Severus."

She squeezed his hand and he screwed up his face, pushing hard.

"That's it, push through each one," Ginny urged him as she got up to collect some water from the slow drip in the corner of the cell.

The contractions kept following on one after the next, relentlessly, and Hermione wondered if even Severus had ever fought this hard before in his life.

"Not moving," he said, as Ginny brought water back in her cupped hands. "He's not moving."

"He will," she said, waiting until a brief respite and offering the water. Hermione supported him as he lowered his head to sip thirstily.

"If he doesn't, you *will* take him out of me. Promise me."

"Yes," Harry said, clear-eyed and pale in the growing daylight. "We promise, but only as the very last resort. We won't stand by again to watch you die unless we have no choice."

"Hermione?"

"Here, Severus."

He held on to her, as though able to tell her what she meant to him only through the medium of their hands.

"Never have sex again after this!" he exclaimed, and Ginny laughed.

"That's exactly what I said! Don't worry, though, you will."

He curled, grunting with effort, and then heaved himself onto his elbows.

"Not fucking moving."

Ginny pushed him back with a hand on his chest and felt between his legs.

"Yes he is. You've dilated a bit further, just keep working at it."

For all Ginny's quietly competent assurances, Hermione could tell that Severus was tiring. He had barely slept for the last two nights, barely eaten, and was trying to give birth on a cold stone floor. She had to keep her rising panic clamped down, under control, in case she infected him with her own fear.

"Come on, try walking for a bit," Ginny said suddenly, "it'll speed things up."

"Can't," Severus said, sounding mutinous. Ginny gripped his arm, and she and Hermione got him to his feet. Then she felt Harry take her by the shoulders and move her aside.

"Ron, let's walk him around for a few minutes, give the girls a break."

Hermione took the chance to relieve her bladder, rinse her hands and walk a little of the stiffness from her legs. Severus slumped between Harry and Ron, an arm around each of their shoulders and his head drooping.

"Hurts," he mumbled.

"I know," Harry said gently. "It'll be over soon, I promise."

"Is that what you said ..." Severus panted, pausing to groan through a contraction before continuing, "... to Dumbledore?"

Ron gasped, but Harry was no longer an impetuous schoolboy.

"Yeah, it was. We killed both the old buggers between us, didn't we? Just like he planned."

Severus snorted impressively. "Bastard would have laughed himself sick to see this."

"Yeah, wouldn't he just Severus Snape up the duff and Harry Potter foiled by a bunch of flowers."

They walked in slow circles for a few minutes, until Severus' legs threatened to give way completely, and then Harry and Ron lowered him back onto the pile of cloaks.

"Opened a bit further again," Ginny said cheerfully.

"Keep your cold hands off my genitals, woman!"

"Get on and push him out, then, and I won't need to."

"You sound like Madam Pomfrey," Harry told Ginny.

"Yes, well, if you men would just do as you're told ..."

Severus gripped Hermione's hand again, and she realised he was holding onto Harry as well. As she looked at her friend's face, she read the barely concealed fear in his green eyes.

Time seemed to slow down, minutes measured by Severus' laboured breathing between pauses in which he struggled unsuccessfully to deliver her son. He no longer wasted energy in speaking or even groaning. Even Ginny's brightly encouraging comments began to wane until she checked between his legs, looked around and asked quietly, "Does anyone have a knife?"

# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 of 16

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Someone was slapping her face lightly. Hermione realised she was huddled against a cold stone wall, feeling sick and dizzy.

"No!" she whispered, trying to pull away from the insistent hand.

"Hermione Granger, pull yourself together!" Ginny snapped and shook her.

"You're going to kill him."

"No, I'm not! I want to make a cut in his perineum. The baby's head is sitting right there ready, he just needs a bit of help. Now, have you got anything I can use?"

"I've got a key." Hermione fumbled in the pockets of her robe. "We might be able to sharpen it against a stone."

She never expected to be so grateful that her parents insisted she had a spare key to their front door. She tried rubbing it against the flat stones of the wall, but Ron prised it from her fingers and reached up to sharpen it on the rim of the stone windowsill. He was the only one tall enough to reach.

Severus whimpered faintly as she returned to his side and took his cold, limp hand in her own. He mouthed something and she leaned in closer.

"Kill me."

"Not yet, love." She stroked the damp hair from his face. "Ginny has an idea. She's going to make a cut in your perineum; we think that'll let Hugo be born."

He was too exhausted to reply. Eventually Ron came to them, shaking his aching arms at his sides, and handed over the little Yale key to his sister. She knelt down next to Severus.

"Hermione, will you hold Hugo back for a moment? Put your fingers here against his head and I'll cut the skin as soon as there's a bit of give in it. Then you'll need to push for all you're worth, Professor. Harry, get ready."

They clustered around the slumped form of the exhausted Severus. Hermione saw Ginny's hand make a quick movement, and Severus tried to jerk away and gave a sharp cry. Something warm and wet slipped onto Hermione's fingers, and she smelled the faint, metallic tang of fresh blood.

"Push, damn it!" Ginny exclaimed. "Ron, lift him up and hold him around the chest so he's kneeling. Now push down, Snape, give it everything you've got!"

His teeth bared and eyes screwed tightly shut, Severus clung to Hermione. Dark spots of blood dripped onto the cloak between his knees.

"He's coming!" Ginny cried exultantly. "Another one or two and his head'll be out. Harry, get ready!"

Severus gave a convulsive heave and something round and dark appeared between his pale thighs.

"Wands!" Harry snapped and Hermione hurriedly pulled out her wand. As Ron drew his wand, Severus slipped down from his grasp onto the floor. Harry knelt over him and then Severus' hand came up to clamp onto Harry's fingers where they curled around his wand, and Harry pointed the wand up into the corner of the ceiling and exclaimed

"Now! *Praesidium Erigo!*"

Three voices chanted, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

There was a deep, long, creaking sound, as if the Earth itself was being rent apart.

Hermione had rarely felt less able to think the happy thoughts required to cast a Patronus; however, like the Aurors, Unspeakables underwent training to channel their thoughts and energies under pressure. She concentrated fiercely on her son, who was even now slipping out of Severus' body onto the floor, and told herself they *would* all survive.

Glowing, silvery shapes emerged from three wands and went flying upwards, imbued with their creators' urgency. She saw Ginny's silver horse kick up its heels, Ron's terrier scampering at its side, and something long and sinuous rippled in their wake that did not quite resemble her otter. All three vanished; there was a tinkling, crashing sound as if a thousand bottles smashed all around them, and Harry toppled onto Severus' supine body without a sound, his wand flying from his hand.

Both Ron and Ginny scrambled to lift him as Ron slid a hand inside Harry's robe over his heart.

"He's alive, thank Merlin," Ron said fervently. "Snape?"

Severus, too, appeared to be unconscious. Hermione fumbled, shaking, to feel his pulse. It was thin and fast, but his heart still beat. A small, high wailing noise made her look to where Ginny was holding the baby, the umbilical cord still attached.

"Is he all right?"

"Seems to be a fine little lad, fingers and toes and everything all present and correct."

Hermione knew she ought to be overjoyed, but all she could feel was bone-deep exhaustion and anxiety. Ginny used the corner of her own blouse to wipe Hugo's face and placed him on the cloaks, then used the sharpened key to cut the umbilical cord.

"Come on Snape, you need to expel the afterbirth." Ginny began massaging his belly hard enough to make Hermione object, but although he didn't wake, the contractions must have been completely involuntary. A dark mass pushed out of him and Ginny sat back on her heels.

"Well, let's hope we don't have to wait long for help to arrive."

Hugo wailed, waving tiny fists in the air.

"You're dead right, kid," Ron told him. He pulled off his robes and used his t-shirt to wrap the baby, gazing down at him for a moment before handing him to Hermione. "There you go, Mum. Don't let him get cold."

She wondered when Ron had grown up, and if this new version might make some lucky witch a great husband.

"We shouldn't let them get cold either," Ginny said, nodding towards Harry and Severus.

"Yeah, a major magical drain could make them go into shock." Ron pulled on his robes again and began wrapping cloaks around Harry's unconscious body.

"We need to bring the afterbirth," Ginny muttered.

"Yeuch! Why? Oh, don't tell me Snape wants to use it for potions? That's gross!"

"More like we want to prevent anyone else from using it, Ron," Hermione said. "It could give someone with ill intentions a lot of power over Hugo."

Ginny used the most badly soiled cloak to wrap the placenta and then began rearranging Severus' robes and covering him with the remaining cloaks.

"He's still bleeding quite badly but there isn't anything we can do except hope."

They got into a huddle again, with the two unconscious wizards and the baby in the middle. Hugo made tiny, unhappy noises and nuzzled blindly at Hermione as she rocked him.

Ginny said, "I've weaned Albus, unfortunately, so I haven't any milk. It's possible to induce lactation, Hermione, if you've considered feeding him yourself."

"Too much information, sis."

"I thought you wanted kids, Ron?"

"He needs to marry a witch who'll look after all that for him," Hermione said. "More of a home body than I am."

Ron snorted but didn't argue.

"Merlin, how does anyone survive this place for more than a few days?" he muttered, pulling his robes tightly around his neck. "I'm starving, freezing and I feel filthy."

"That's because we haven't eaten and we don't have straw and blankets," Ginny said reasonably. "Prisoners do at least get fed."

Hermione could feel Hugo's tiny, warm body against her chest inside her robes. He felt incredibly fragile; too young to even lift his own head. She wondered if he would be as hard to kill as his father.

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She jerked out of a stupor and sat up, waking Hugo and making him whimper. Ginny gave a sleepy, interrogative sound.

"I thought I heard something."

Hermione felt dizzy with hunger and her feet were so cold that she could no longer feel them, even inside her sensible leather boots. She must be delirious; surely she could not have heard someone singing in Azkaban?

"A little bit o' what yer fancy does yer good," chanted a gruff male voice, and she distinctly heard a door creak open. "A little bit o' what yer fancy does yer good," and the scrape and rattle of a key in a lock. "A little bit o' what yer fancy, so I shagged me Auntie Nancy, a little bit of what I fancied did me good."

"Ron!" Hermione jabbed him with her elbow. "Ron, wake up!"

"Wha'?"

"A little bit of what yer fancy might be nice," the owner of the tuneless voice was nearer now, opening another door.

"Oh my God, someone's looking for us!" Ginny exclaimed and gave Harry a little shake. He didn't move. Hermione fumbled to hold Hugo with one arm and feel Severus' face with her free hand. He was still warm, still breathing softly.

"A little bit of what yer fancy might be nice ..."

A key twisted in the lock and the door swung open, revealing a dark figure holding a lantern in one hand. The light was dazzling after so long in the dim cell, and Hermione blinked and looked away.

"Well, lookee here! Oy, Sid! Get 'ere and see wot I've found!"

The figure placed the lamp on the floor and rubbed his hands. Hermione saw that he wore a grey uniform, heavy boots and had a baton stuck through his belt. He was a very large, powerfully built man with massive shoulders; he seemed to fill the doorway.

"Fuck me," said a smaller, slighter man, edging his way into the cell. "This is all right, innit?"

"Who are you?" Ron asked, getting warily to his feet so that he stood over Harry's supine form.

"Don't fink you're in a position to ask the questions, sonny," Sid told him. He was leering at Ginny. "Toss yer fer the red-head, Mick?" He grinned at Ron, exposing rotting teeth. "Don't fink that'll do you any good in 'ere, yer great streak of piss."

Ron had drawn his wand. Ginny grasped his arm and leaned to whisper something, and then she faced the two men with her head high.

"Don't you know who you were supposed to be looking for?" she asked, her tone carefully polite. Mick cleared his throat and spat to one side.

"Don' matter. If yer in Azkaban, yer done summat to deserve it. Get yer kit off, girlie."

"This is Harry Potter," Ginny said in a tightly controlled voice, "and I'm his wife."

"An' I'm Albus Dumbledore," sniggered Sid.

"For Merlin's sake," Ron exclaimed, "this is Ginny Potter, I'm her brother, Ron Weasley, this is Hermione Granger and that's..."

"Fucking hell," breathed Mick, "That's Severus sodding Snape!"

"Now do you believe us?" Ginny demanded angrily. Mick stared down at Severus with narrowed eyes.

"That bastard took points off me for fucking *breathing*!"

"Which house were you in?" Hermione asked; anything to distract him from what she feared he was about to do.

"Gryffindor, o' course," he muttered. "Never fort I'd get Snape where I wanted 'im, on the floor in front of my fucking boot!"

He drew back his foot and Hermione cried, "No!" Despite the fact that she was still holding Hugo, she stepped between Mick and Severus' body. "Ginny, take the baby. Look, Mick, you can have me, just don't hurt Snape, for God's sake!"

"I can 'ave you after, anyways, missy..."

There was a loud crack and Mick swayed, his eyes glazed, and he stumbled to his knees. Behind him, Hermione saw Ginny wielding a baton like a beater's bat in both hands, and Sid, disarmed, bent almost double with his arm pulled up behind his back by Ron.

"Still make a good team, don't we, little sister?" Ron said, his teeth bared as he jerked Sid's hand even higher.

"Do you think I ought to hit him again?" Ginny asked, gazing speculatively at Mick, who was shaking his head and getting slowly to his feet.

"What's going on down there? Ramsbottom, Tarpit, what are you two oh!" Another uniformed guard, this one looking rather more dapper, came to a sudden halt in the corridor outside. He stared from Ginny to Ron, then to Hermione. "What on Earth is going on in here?"

"You tell me," Ginny snarled, glaring at Mick. "These goons wanted to rape me and my friend and beat up an unconscious man. If this is the calibre of guards in Azkaban nowadays, I need to have words with my contacts in the press."

"I'm sure they were only having a bit of a laugh ..." his voice trailed off as Ginny took a threatening step towards him and Ron yanked Sid's arm up so that he squeaked. "Yes, well, I assume you're Mrs Potter and Mr Weasley, are you? And Miss Granger?"

"Yes, we are. Are you going to get us out of here?"

"Do let go of Ramsbottom before you break him, Mr Weasley. I'm sorry you felt it necessary to use violence..."

"Would you like us to testify under Veritaserum, or let you view our memories?" Ginny enquired sweetly. Hugo began to cry and the man's eyebrows climbed almost to his hair.

"Great Merlin! Let's get you up to the governor, shall we? Tarpit, pull yourself together and take that fellow..."

"No way!" Ron released the unfortunate Ramsbottom and leaned down to pick Harry up in his arms. He was almost staggering with exhaustion, but Hermione knew exactly how he felt. She lifted Hugo out of her robes and held him out.

"I'm assuming you won't hurt a newborn baby," she said frostily. "Ginny and I will bring Snape."

"Now that isn't necessary, not necessary at all, my dear girl..."

"Don't you 'my dear girl' me! Do you really expect us to trust *anyone* after what's happened to us? What's your name, anyway?"

"I'm Senior Warden Reece. Ramsbottom, fetch two stretchers. Tarpit, tell the governor that we have found the Potters and their friends, and then report to first aid and have your head seen to."

Ron lowered Harry to the floor and sat down beside him with obvious relief. The two warders went out, Tarpit rubbing the back of his skull and muttering under his breath. Ramsbottom returned carrying the stretchers.

Ron and Ginny lifted Harry onto one while Reece and Ramsbottom loaded Severus onto the other, and they set off along narrow stone corridors, Hermione cuddling the grizzling Hugo and not taking her eyes off the two warders who carried Severus.

They were met by the governor himself, flanked by four more warders. When they tried to take Harry's stretcher, Ginny refused to let go.

"My dear Mrs Potter, I understand you're distressed..."

"I am not distressed," Ginny said in a deadly quiet voice, "I am fucking beside myself with rage. Do not lay a finger on my husband!"

"She is quite beside herself," Reece whispered to the governor. "Must be the shock ..."

"Can I suggest we get out of here and get medical attention as soon as possible?" Hermione snapped. "We have a newborn baby and two very sick men here!"

"Yes, yes, come up to my office, just up another two flights. I have a Floo connection."

"That accounts for the weakness in your wards," Ron said breathlessly.

"Indeed, Mr Weasley, one has to compromise. My office has an exit through the anti-magic wards. This way, please."

Despite their exhaustion, Ginny and Ron carefully lifted Harry up the stairs. Hermione followed, her feet like lead, Hugo a wriggling weight in her arms.

As they reached the top of what felt like a flight of a hundred stairs, someone came out of an open doorway in a billow of robes and swirl of long blond hair. Hermione gave a little gasp. Lucius paused for a moment, staring down at Severus' almost translucently pale face, and then he leaned down and swept him up into his arms. He looked around and when he saw Hermione, something warmed in his grey eyes.

"Follow me," he said and strode back into the room from which he'd emerged. As Hermione reached the doorway, she saw him free one hand from the bundle of cloaks wrapped around Severus, drop a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace and step into the green flames, declaring "Malfoy Manor!" as he vanished.

"If he thinks we're going to take Harry to Malfoy Manor, he's got another thing coming!" Ron exclaimed.

"It's that or St Mungo's, Ron," Hermione said.

Ginny met Hermione's gaze and shrugged.

"Come on. Once we're there, we can Apparate out again if we need to."

Ron heaved Harry up over his shoulder, groped for the pot of Floo powder beside the fireplace, grimaced, said "Malfoy Manor!" and disappeared.

Hermione held Hugo close and followed him into the flames.

oooOOOooo

Hermione stepped out into the wide entrance hall where Ron was holding Harry as if he feared that his friend was about to be snatched away at any moment. Ginny spun into being in the hearth and stepped out warily. Lucius lowered Severus to the floor, stood upright and clapped his hands once.

"House-elves!"

With a series of pops, the household elves appeared in a cluster, staring wide-eyed at the bedraggled guests. Lucius pointed.

"Prossy, take Professor Snape to the master bedroom and bring Healer Strood to him at once." Prossy immediately levitated Severus and hurried off up the stairs, the unconscious wizard bobbing along before him. "Uppity, there is a new baby to be bathed, fed and generally attended to..." He was interrupted by a high-pitched squeal.

"Oh, Master is too good to Uppity! Uppity is such a lucky elf..."

"Yes, yes, don't get too excited; he's only visiting."

Hermione slowly lowered Hugo so that the little elf could reach him. Rather to her surprise, Uppity immediately lifted the baby into her thin little arms as if he weighed no more than thistle-down and scuttled away, cooing gently to him.

"Hessy, take Mr and Mrs Potter to the blue suite. Barrowly, fetch Healer Ransome to attend to Mr Potter. Hobbins, install Mr Weasley in an adjoining room, and the rest of you, provide hot baths, clean clothing and a light meal for our guests."

Hessy levitated Harry up the grand staircase, and Ginny and Ron hurried after him. The other elves Apparated away and Hermione let out a great sigh. She felt as if all her emotions escaped along with her breath, all the anxiety and fear and tension of the last days rushing out of her body, leaving her feeling empty and numb.

"My dear girl," Lucius said quietly and he held out his arms. Hermione took a step towards him. She didn't recall crossing the rest of the space between them; one moment they were five yards apart, and the next, she was surrounded by the heavy silk of his robes, his muscular arms, the fresh citrus fragrance of his cologne, and she was sobbing helplessly against his shoulder.

She had always despised women who fell apart as soon as a man was there to take over. She would never, ever have intentionally shown weakness in front of Lucius Malfoy.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispered over and over. "Dear Merlin, I thought I'd lost both of you. I thought I'd lost you."

Hermione snuffled and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. Lucius had his face hidden in her hair, breathing unsteadily, and suddenly she no longer cared that he'd seen her burst into tears.

"Impure-blood Miss is not to enter library," squeaked an elf, and Hermione looked around to see Crundy glaring at her. "Miss is a dirty witch!"

Hermione looked down at herself, at her fingernails still caked with Severus' blood, her ruined robe and stained blouse, and a slightly hysterical bubble of laughter welled up in her chest.

"You're right, Crundy. I'm filthy."

Crundy gave a short nod, as if approving of the admission, and added, "When Miss is clean, Crundy has collected references about teaching Wizarding culture to impure-of-blood children as Master ordered, all ready for Miss."

"Later, Crundy," Lucius said and the little elf popped away. "She is correct; you need a hot bath and something to eat."

"I need to know if Severus and Harry are going to be all right first."

Lucius nodded, took her arm and Apparated them both to the wide corridor that led to the master bedrooms. He tapped on a door, opened it and stuck his head in. "Mrs Potter?"

Ginny came to the door. Her eyes were reddened, and she looked as dishevelled and exhausted as Hermione felt, but she smiled bleakly.

"He's going to be okay. His magical core's severely depleted, but he's had nutritive and magic-balancing potions and he's asleep. The elves have run me a bath, then I'm going to have some soup and a sandwich and oh, Merlin." She closed her eyes and sighed. "I want to sleep for a week but I'll have to see Mum and Dad; they'll be worried sick."

"The Floo is open," Lucius told her, indicating the marble fireplace. "May I suggest you remain with your husband and send your brother to report to your family?"

"Leaving Harry Potter in your clutches, Malfoy?" Ron asked, coming to put a hand on Ginny's shoulder.

"Yes, Mr Weasley, I intend to sacrifice him at dawn."

Lucius and Ron stared at one another, and then Ron gave a tired little grin.

"Yeah, okay. I'd better go now before I fall asleep on my feet. What about the boys, Ginny? D'you want me to leave them with Mum or bring them here?"

"They won't let Harry sleep if they come here, and honestly, I'm too shattered to watch them properly. They'll be fine with Mum till tomorrow."

Ron looked at Hermione.

"Look after the greasy git, yeah? And I want to meet that little lad properly in a week or two."

"Thanks Ron. You were great." She reached to kiss his cheek. He nodded, as if this was only his due, and strode to the fireplace, reaching for the Floo powder and calling out, "The Burrow!"

"And thank *you*, Ginny, you were brilliant. Severus and Hugo would have died if it hadn't been for you."

Ginny blushed slightly but met Hermione's gaze with the bright fearlessness that had always been such a part of her. "Harry was right; Snape's a really brave man."

Hermione hugged her and then turned to Lucius, who already had his hand on the handle of the ornate white door at the end of the corridor.

Severus lay flat in the huge canopied bed, his chest rising almost imperceptibly as he breathed. Healer Strood was packing potion bottles into her bag; she looked up as she heard them come in.

"Well, hardly the outcome I had planned," she said crisply, snapping her bag shut and shrinking it to place it in her pocket. "However, thanks to someone's somewhat clumsy intervention, all ends well."

"Clumsy?" Hermione demanded, incensed. "What do you mean?"

"It appeared that someone hacked at his perineum with a saw!"

"We were transported by Portkey to Azkaban," Hermione said in a tight voice she barely recognised, "where we had no magic, nothing but the contents of our pockets, no food, no bedding, and the only thing we could use was a key, sharpened on the stone wall. He was exhausted and wasn't able to deliver the baby we didn't have much

choice!"

"No magic?" Strood shuddered. "He delivered without any charms?"

"None. We couldn't use any of them."

"I'd assumed that he used his own magic; he's almost stripped clean of it."

"He and Harry lifted the wards on Azkaban."

Lucius gave a little gasp and Strood's eyes widened.

"I see. No wonder he's so exhausted. Let him sleep for as long as he wants, and I'll call back tomorrow to check all is well. I've given him blood replenishing, healing and nutritive potions, and healed the tears internally and externally. He'll feel sore and uncomfortable for a few days. Now, where's the fruit of his exertion?"

Lucius clapped his hands and said, "Uppity," and the elf popped onto the rug beside the bed. "Bring young Master Hugo; the Healer needs to check him."

"Young master is beautifully clean," squeaked the elf. "Young master has drunk his milk and is sleeping." She snapped her fingers and an ornate cradle appeared beside her. Inside it, Hugo slept peacefully under a little blanket of fine wool, edged with lace and embroidered with the Malfoy coat of arms. He stirred slightly as Strood waved her wand over him, but didn't wake.

"He appears to be perfectly healthy," Strood said with satisfaction. "All I need to do now is check the placenta to ensure that everything was expelled."

Hermione pulled a face. "Oh, hell, I didn't remember to bring it; I'm sorry."

"Uppity is doing the things for the new baby. Uppity has the afterbirth."

The elf clicked her fingers again, and a bundle of messy blankets appeared in the air. Hermione turned away as the Healer examined it. She felt nauseous with hunger and stress and fatigue.

"Hold on a minute! I forgot about it and left it in Azkaban. Uppity, did you fetch it?"

"Uppity was looking after Mistress Narcissa and baby Master Draco, Uppity knows what is needed when a baby comes. Uppity has a daughter of her own; we knows what is done."

"Can you get through the anti-magic wards?"

"Elf magic is different," the elf told her, as if it didn't matter.

"You could have got us out," Hermione groaned.

"Only if we'd known you were there," Lucius said soothingly, "and we didn't. Uppity, did you know where Master Severus and Miss Hermione were?"

The elf began tugging on her ears.

"Master and Miss was in the dead place, Uppity is a bad elf, Uppity didn't know Master and Miss didn't want to be there, Uppity must go and grate her nose in the cheese grater..."

"No!" Hermione cried, and Lucius waved a hand.

"No punishment is necessary; otherwise I shall never hear the end of it. Go and look after the baby."

Uppity and the cradle vanished again. Strood bade them goodbye and stepped into the Floo to return to her surgery.

Lucius blew out a long breath. He dragged his fingers back through what had been perfectly coiffed hair.

"I'm an idiot. Why didn't I send an elf to look for you?"

"Because you don't notice them. To you, they're part of the furniture, and you don't even view them as living beings, let alone realise that they can think for themselves." Hermione had not intended to speak so sharply. Lucius drew himself up, and his eyes flashed as grey as stones.

"This is the trouble with you Muggle-raised idealists; you think you can change a culture that has existed for a thousand years with just a wave of your wand. My elves are *my* business, Miss Granger, and I shall treat them as I think best!"

Perhaps she had subconsciously waited for this, for Lucius Malfoy to display his true colours. All she felt was a bone-deep exhaustion. She wanted to curl up somewhere safe and go to sleep and pretend that she still existed in that first, rosy-hued flush of love, in which her Slytherins were sweet-tempered and attentive. *Right, and sparkly unicorns dance on the lawns of Malfoy Manor amid the rainbow-hued flowers.*

"At least we Muggle-raised idealists don't expect anyone else to haul our arses out of the fire," she snapped. "In fact, we Muggle-raised idealists are the reason you still have a fucking Wizarding culture at all!"

He stared at her, and her hand tightened around the handle of her wand, and then Lucius snapped his fingers.

"Hessy!"

The elf appeared and bowed.

"Hessy is pleased to serve Master."

"Of course you are. Miss Granger is in dire need of a hot bath, a bowl of soup followed by something light and tasty, and a large glass of red wine. After that, my dear, you will sleep for twelve hours and *then* we shall debate the merits of my treatment of house-elves."

"Hessy has run a bath for Miss in the green bathroom," the elf squeaked and beckoned Hermione to follow.

The green bathroom was so called because it more resembled a greenhouse than a bathroom. A marble pool steamed gently amid great pots of orchids and lilies, beneath trellises covered with honeysuckle, jasmine and stephanotis. Tiny twittering birds flittered through the daylight streaming in through skylights in the roof. Hermione threw off her clothes and climbed down into the water. She submerged her head and groped for the shampoo on the shelf beside the pool, but found her hand gently seized and the bottle removed from it.

"Allow me?"

Lucius had slipped down into the pool beside her. He began lathering her hair, and she leaned against him and tried to prevent the warmth from lulling her to sleep.



"Didn't know this room existed."

"It was Narcissa's private bathroom."

"Hedonistic."

"Mm, she did enjoy her little luxuries. I find it a trifle cloying. I much prefer the clean, classical lines of my Roman plunge pool with just the odd potted fern. You must try it next time. Rinse, please."

She ducked her head under the water, and his strong fingers massaged her scalp. When she re-emerged, he gathered her hair and squeezed out some of the water before wrapping a towel around her head.

He helped her up out of the bath and Summoned a huge bath towel for each of them.

Hessy was waiting with a bowl of leek and potato soup, bread rolls hot from the oven, and a cheese omelette with steamed broccoli. Lucius sat with her and sipped at a glass of white wine as she ate. Then, barely able to keep her eyes open, she crawled into bed and allowed sleep to claim her.

## Chapter 15

*Chapter 15 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Someone was shaking her arm, and Hermione found herself staring up into two huge, slightly bulbous eyes.

"Prossy is sorry to wake Miss, but Professor Sir is being awake soon and Master says Miss will want to see him. Master told Uppity to bring baby Snape."

"Thank you, Prossy; I do want to see him."

There was a heavy satin dressing gown at the foot of the bed, and a pair of silver slippers that perhaps had belonged to Narcissa. Hermione pulled them on and wandered out into the wide, white corridor. The carpet was forest green, and her feet seemed to sink into it. A small part of her was rather relieved that she was going to live for most of the year at Hogwarts; she could easily get far too accustomed to this level of luxury.

The door of the main bedroom was ajar, and she peered inside.

Lucius sat on the edge of the bed, holding Hugo in the crook of one arm. Severus pushed himself up against a heap of pillows and blinked rather dopedily around the room.

"How are you?" Hermione asked, going to the bedside.

"Oddly empty," he said, "and clearly drugged up to my eyes on potions. What the devil have I been given?"

"Apart from a general healing potion, and perhaps a blood replenisher, nutritive potion, vitamin and mineral tonic, pain relief, sleeping draught and a mild sedative? I've no idea. Is there anything else you'd like?" Lucius asked.

"A large Firewhisky and a fag, but I doubt that I'll get them."

"I fear not," Lucius told him. "The smoke would be very bad for Hugo. Here, meet your son."

Lucius handed over the baby with the benign confidence of a father who had obviously had much more to do with his child than Draco ever let on. Hugo kicked his boot-clad feet free of the shawl as Severus took him rather awkwardly and settled him against his chest.

Severus stared down at Hugo.

"One day, I shall tell you what you put me through, you little monster."

Hugo yawned and screwed up his face. "Exactly," Severus said. "I see you have your mother's nose, fortunately for you. Your hair has no chance of ever being under control, you may develop tolerable bone structure, and simple genetics suggests you will have a spectacular intellect which is just as well, since you are a quarter-blood and have no established Wizarding family to fall back upon."

"He has us," Lucius remarked, casually examining his own fingernails. "What more will he need, hm?"

"God-parents?" Hermione suggested. Lucius gracefully inclined his head towards her.

"Of course. Who are you going to ask?"

"You," Severus said softly, and the note of cautious hope in his voice made Hermione's heart lurch.

"I would be honoured," Lucius murmured. He ran his finger softly over the baby's head. "Do you have anyone else in mind?"

"Harry," Hermione said.

"And Minerva," said Severus with an air of finality. Hermione smiled, more than happy with his choice. Severus looked down again and Hugo opened his eyes.

They stared at one another: the gaunt wizard with bedraggled greasy hair and the baby, one pair of dark eyes shrewd and mistrustful, the other pair wide, unfocussed and wondering. Perhaps there was a moment of unintentional Legilimency between them, or just a sudden realisation on Severus' part that this small thing, who had lived inside him for eight and a half months, was now a complete and independent person. Severus' gaze softened, and some of the lines smoothed from around his mouth. He raised his free hand hesitantly towards Hugo's face. Hugo made a sudden grab for him, and tiny pink fingers curled around his thumb.

"That's the thing, you see," Lucius remarked, "it's unconditional." There was a slight catch in his voice; he cleared his throat and looked away, suddenly fascinated by the view out of the window.

"It's not I don't..." Severus allowed his voice to trail away into nothing.

"He's so perfect," Hermione said. It had never occurred to her how miraculous other people's babies were. James and Albus Potter, the Weasley children, they ~~just~~<sup>were</sup>. They arrived after nine months of gestation, all pink and wrinkled, and she made the right polite noises and cooed as necessary, but Hugo was different. He was a part of her and Severus, their responsibility, entirely dependent upon them for everything.

"Yes," Severus said, "he's perfect. That's the terrifying part of it."

"You'll muddle through," Lucius told him, patting his shoulder with uncharacteristic awkwardness. "I did, and Draco seems to be making a decent job of it."

Hermione lifted her legs up onto the bed and settled beside Severus with a suspicion that she was going to have to wait quite a while before she would be allowed to cuddle her son.

oooOOOooo

Hermione jerked awake from a dream in which she had been trying to recognize the almost-words whispered by the rustling flowers in the green bathroom. It had been so important that she understood.

She sat up and asked aloud, "What happened to the flowers?"

A low red sunset spilled through the mullioned windows and glowed across the thick rugs, sumptuous bed linens and polished wood. There was an abrupt pop and Prossy appeared at the foot of the bed.

"Did Miss call?"

"I'm sorry, I was dreaming. What time is it?"

"It is half an hour before dinner time," the elf told her reproachfully. "Master says that guests are to sleep as long as they likes even though it is very near dinner time."

"I'd better get up then, Prossy."

"There is clothes over there. Master sends Prossy to fetch them."

"Thank you."

The elf glowered and Apparated away. Hermione looked at the wizard beside her. Without opening his eyes, he remarked, "You shouldn't thank him. He didn't do it for you, he did it for Lucius. Thanking him makes it appear that he acted on behalf of someone outside his family."

"We very nearly are family, aren't we? Are you getting up for dinner?"

"I suppose so."

Severus threw aside the bedclothes and swung his legs off the bed. He ran his hands down his nightshirt, pressing the soft bulge of his belly. "I hope this isn't permanent, I feel positively obese."

"It'll go down over the next couple of weeks; Ginny lost her bump pretty quickly."

He nodded and stood up, wincing as he walked across the room to collect his robes. They dressed quickly and made their way down towards the dining room, Severus walking carefully, as if no longer accustomed to his own body.

"Ah, there you are!"

Lucius popped his head out of a doorway and smiled as though he was heartily pleased to see them, and as Hermione followed Severus into the drawing room, she realised why. Harry and Ginny Potter sat stiffly in front of the fireplace, holding glasses of sherry and appearing no more comfortable than their host.

"Sherry?" Lucius asked solicitously and Hermione nodded. Severus shook his head.

"I promised myself that as soon as the squirt was out of me, I'd drink his health in Firewhisky."

"And why not? One glass of Old Ogden's Old twenty-five-year cask-matured Special Reserve coming up."

Lucius busied himself pouring drinks as Hermione sat down next to Harry.

"Are you all right?"

"Feel like I could sleep for a week," he admitted, "but otherwise okay. You?"

"I'm fine. You did the impossible again, didn't you?"

He gave a self-deprecating little grin.

"Only because I had Snape's help again. I could tell even the birth magic wasn't going to be enough until he gave me all the magic he'd got. We're lucky we didn't both end up Squibs."

Severus lowered himself into a chair and grimaced.

"I bet you're sore," Ginny said and he glowered.

"No worse than I would have expected; I'm bleeding, which is embarrassing to say the least, my arse is numb, and I still have mild cramps."

"Sounds about right."

Hermione looked at the vase of hot-house orchids on the mantelpiece.

"What happened to the bunch of flowers?"

"Expect it's still at Azkaban, in the cell. Why, d'you want it as a souvenir?"

She frowned. "No, Harry, I want to have a closer look at it. There's something niggling at me about the flowers..."

Lucius clapped his hands and Prossy appeared on the hearthrug.

"Is Master ready for dinner?"

"Not quite yet. One of you, go to Azkaban and bring back the bunch of flowers that was used to Portkey Master Snape and his companions."

Prossy Disapparated with a crack. After a moment, Ginny gave a little gasp. "We could have..."

"Yes, I know," Hermione said, sensing rather than seeing Lucius' discomfort. "We've already realised someone could have sent a house-elf to find us. Kreacher probably knew where you were, too."

"Shit! We could have called him to us!" Harry exclaimed but Lucius shook his head.

"Your elf would not have heard you inside the wards. He might have found you, had someone told him to do so, and he would have been able to go through the wards because they were not designed to suppress elf magic, but your own magic would not have been able to call to him."

"Snape wouldn't have had to go through all that if you'd sent an elf to find him!"

"Mr Potter," Lucius said very quietly, "do you believe that I am not aware of that? Or that I shall not continue to berate myself for it?"

"Don't," Severus told him softly and reached out. Looking slightly bemused, Lucius took his hand. Severus squeezed briefly and let go again, turning his head away to take a sip of Firewhisky.

A different elf popped into sight.

"I is sorry, there is no flowers in Azkaban!" The elf began wringing his ears in his hands.

"There is no requirement for punishment, Hobbins," Lucius said loftily. "It is to be expected that the flowers were disposed of. Return to your normal duties."

The elf released his ears.

"Hessy is telling that dinner be almost ready, Master."

"Very good. We will make our way to the dining room."

Hobbins vanished.

"Do you have a Pensieve, Mr Malfoy?" Ginny asked. He raised his eyebrows.

"Of course. I shall fetch it immediately after dinner."

"We both examined the flowers, Hermione, so if you take a look at my memories and your own, you should see everything that was there."

Over dinner, Hermione realised that her presence allowed everyone else to relax. Because she was completely at ease with both the Potters and the two Slytherins, she acted as a social lubricant. She knew that Harry and Ginny would never be friends with Lucius, but they would tolerate him for her sake, just as he was prepared to act the gracious host for her friends.

Severus and Harry, however, seemed to have acquired a degree of mutual respect that boded well for a genuine friendship in the future. Ginny had a temper when angered, but usually she was as easy-going as anyone who had grown up with six older brothers. She had never had any particular reason to hate Severus, or he to dislike her, as Ginny had been generally well-behaved, good at Potions, and had not suffered from association with Harry in her schooldays since they had been in different years. As Severus and Harry got deep into an argument about the best way to counter an obscure curse, Ginny caught Hermione's eye and winked. Lucius noticed and smirked at them.

The Malfoy elves were doubtless constitutionally unable to produce a bad meal. After an excellent roast dinner followed by blackberry syllabub, Lucius led the way to the library and unlocked a cupboard beneath one of the bookcases, lifting out an ancient Pensieve.

After a brief lesson from Severus on how to extract exactly the memory they required, Hermione and Ginny took turns to place their memories of the flowers in the stone bowl. Then Hermione plunged in to view the results. She emerged almost immediately.

"I was right. Ginny, what's the meaning of pansies in flower language?"

"Depends. Wild pansies heartsease mean pleasant thoughts or 'think of me,' purple pansies mean that 'I'm thinking of you', and mauve and yellow pansies mean 'don't forget me.'"

"They were purple and yellow. To me, they seemed out of place with the other messages."

"I reckon they're telling us that we should remember Pansy Parkinson," Harry said. "She gave us the flowers."

"She said, 'You'll get what you deserve'," Hermione said.

"Pansy came along to all the Save Snape meetings," Ginny chimed in. "She worked hard to get the Slytherins on our side, and we ended up being almost friendly."

Severus shook his head.

"That was not Pansy Parkinson. Miss Parkinson and I had an excellent relationship throughout her school career."

"Right," said Harry, leaning forward in his chair and clasping his hands, "who do we know who's got it in for Snape and can create an illegal Portkey?"

"I suggest you begin by speaking to Miss Parkinson herself," Severus told him, and Harry nodded. Lucius got to his feet, his heavy grey silk robes whispering.

"It is not too late to speak to the lady now. Do you wish me to call her?"

"Yeah, go on, why not?"

Lucius twitched slightly but made no response, sweeping out of the room to use the Floo in the hall. Harry grinned.

"I wind him up a bit, don't I?"

"Lucius is more tolerant now than he used to be," Severus remarked. "There's nothing like giving house room to a megalomaniac to make one reassess one's values."

"I warned him," drawled an elderly wizard from a painting on the wall, "told him nothing good would come of allying himself to a half-snake. Serpents have their uses but not as one's commanding officer, and certainly not when the serpent is no gentleman. A Malfoy should maintain certain standards."

"That smacks of half-snake prejudice to me," Ginny said with a snort. "That reminds me, Hermione, has your Patronus changed recently?"

"Has it? I hadn't noticed."

"You lie! That was no otter!"

Hermione glanced at Severus but he gazed calmly back.

"Go on," Harry urged her, so she sighed, drew her wand and cast the charm.

A long silvery shape burst from the tip of her wand and undulated around the room. It was unmistakably snake-like, although it bore a plume of feathers around its head and down its back.

"Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent," Severus said. "The patron god of the Aztec priesthood and god of learning and knowledge."

"Close enough to the Slytherin mascot," Ginny stated smugly. "You should be flattered. She loves you for your brain, not just the wild passionate sex."

A slight blush rose over Severus' cheekbones, and he scowled at Hermione. "Have you been discussing our private damn!"

"Go, me!" Ginny crowed, punching the air. "Don't tell me I just out-Slytherined a Slytherin!"

Harry sniggered and then elbowed his wife as footsteps approached the door.

Pansy followed Lucius into the library. She looked mildly puzzled to see them gathered around the Pensieve on the central desk, nodded a greeting to Severus and sat down on the chair that Lucius summoned for her.

"Thanks for agreeing to talk to us," Harry said, his formal Auror persona wiping out all trace of his recent amusement.

"Sure. I don't know what this is all about, though."

"Do you remember Professor Snape's court case?"

"Of course I do, Potter! It was only a couple of days ago."

"Do you remember what happened after Minister Shacklebolt announced the final verdict?"

"A bit of a riot. Everyone jumped up; I remember hugging Millie and Daphne. Draco was yelling something about arranging a party to celebrate. Why?"

"What happened next?"

"We must have all pushed out together, I suppose."

"Don't you remember?" Harry's voice was gentle and encouraging.

"It's a bit of a blur. We were all incredibly excited. I'd been very worried, you see, and Professor Snape looked so haggard. They shouldn't have forced you to go to court until after you'd had the baby! You looked exhausted."

"I was in labour," Severus told her. "Do you recall actually leaving the court room?"

"Yes, of course!" She frowned as she spoke. "That was odd, actually. I felt a bit dizzy and had to sit down, and when I felt better and looked around, everyone else had gone."

"Ah." Lucius sat back in his seat. "My dear, it appears you were subject to some sort of charm or curse."

"What?"

"Confundus," Harry said. "Or you were Obliviated, or maybe even subject to the Imperius curse."

Pansy narrowed her eyes.

"If you weren't the sainted Potter, I'd think you were trying to frame me for something."

"Someone else framed you, Pansy, not us. Someone who looked like you gave Professor Snape a bunch of flowers that acted as a Portkey to Azkaban."

Her eyes widened in genuine shock. The pupils were open and dark.

"I wouldn't!"

"We know that; we want to find out who would."

"Miss Parkinson, may I use Legilimancy on you?"

She stared at Severus and then nodded sharply.

"Yes, as it's you, Professor, you may."

He gazed into her face with an almost gentle expression, pointed his wand and murmured, *Legilimens*. After only a couple of seconds, he lowered the wand again. "Thank you, Miss Parkinson. Potter, you need to find a woman; that is all I can tell you. Miss Parkinson recalls the end of the court case, as she described, and then woke on one of the benches at the back of the court room with a headache."

"Oh, yes," Pansy looked bemused, "that's right. Why didn't I remember that?"

"Because you were Obliviated. You glimpsed a woman out of the corner of your eye immediately before your memory faded completely. I suspect, from the dull headache and lethargy, that you were merely Stunned, your memory of whoever Stunned you rather sloppily erased, and left to come to your senses at the back of the room where you were hidden by the seats in front of you."

"Polyjuice, then," Harry said.

"Indeed. Someone who can brew a rather complex potion..."

"No," Lucius interrupted him. "I know who it was." He got to his feet, robes snapping and swirling as if they were imbued with his anger. "Damn it, this was my fault!"

"How?" Harry demanded. "How was it anything to do with you?"

"Because I gave her the Polyjuice!"

"That Slytherin you told us about?" Hermione asked. "When you came and ..." she cleared her throat, "... visited us?"

"That one, yes. She told Draco that she couldn't obtain credit and he sent her to me, as no doubt she suspected he would. I asked her as a favour to Polyjuice into me ..."

"That is an uncharacteristic thing for you to do, Lucius. You are generally so protective of your reputation."

"We made an agreement that I'd do nothing illegal and she'd go shopping. There seemed to be no harm in it ... Why in Merlin's name did I do that? She might not have actively committed a crime, but she could have made me a laughing stock ..."

"Come here, Lucius. Let me look."

Lucius actually dithered for a moment before going to sit opposite Severus. Hermione suspected that he was not so concerned about his friend poking about inside his head, but rather afraid of what they might find out. Severus gazed into his eyes and Hermione held her breath.

"The Imperius curse," Severus whispered, and Lucius collapsed back into the chair with a groan. "Very lightly applied, more a suggestion than a compulsion. Not easy to spot, although clear enough to one who knows you as well as I do. Who was she, Lucius?"

"Apollina Carrow."

"*Carrow?*" Ginny shot upright in her chair. "One of *those* Carrows?"

"Younger sister to Alecto and Amycus," Lucius said heavily. "I gather you knew her older siblings well, Mrs Potter?"

"I'll say! Evil bastards, the pair of them."

"I wouldn't argue with that assessment," Severus told her. "Even Miss Parkinson might concur."

"They were rather over the top," Pansy agreed. "Using the Cruciatus curse on first years who forgot to wipe their shoes was a bit much. Can I go now? I was supposed to be going over to visit Draco and Astoria this evening."

"Of course," Lucius purred. "Thank you so much for your invaluable assistance, my dear. Allow me to see you to the Floo."

"Do you know anything about Apollina, Severus?" Hermione enquired.

"They all attended Durmstrang; the family hated Dumbledore and did so even before the Dark Lord rose. She would have seen her brother and sister only in the summer holidays; she was a great deal younger, so they had left school before she started. I remember meeting her once or twice in the company of Alecto, but she was too young to join the Death Eaters."

"I bet they filled her head with tales of what they got up to," Ginny said with disgust. "The twins and Ron used to drive me up the wall, but I remember hanging on Bill's or Charlie's every word. I bet she was the same."

"Now they're in Azkaban for life," Harry said, "and she wants someone to blame. I put them there, and Severus is the headmaster who betrayed them and their cause."

"How did she ... Hold on," Hermione stared at Harry. "I think we've met her, all of us. Lucius? Would you take a look at this memory?"

He paused on his way back to his seat and watched as she withdrew a memory and placed it into the Pensieve. He leaned over the stone bowl, did not even bother to touch the surface as a tiny picture formed in the reflective mist, and stood up again.

"Yes, that is Apollina Carrow."

Hermione let out a great huff of mingled frustration and relief. "We met her at the Ministry ball; she's Gaius Stott's girlfriend! *knew* she reminded me of someone; I spent long enough staring at the Carrows during their court hearing. She was probably there in court as well, but we wouldn't have noticed her."

"Stott!" Harry groaned. "That's how she knew how to make the bloody Portkey; Aurors are taught how to do that for emergencies! I bet he told her all about Azkaban as well; he's escorted enough prisoners there over the last eight years." He got to his feet. "May I use your Floo to contact Kingsley? We need the pair of them brought in as soon as possible, and I'd better warn Ron in case Stott tries anything on him, too."

"Of course."

Severus leaned back in his seat and Summoned a bottle from the dining room.

"I believe we all deserve a drink, do we not?"

Lucius waved airily and conjured a tray of glasses. "Don't jog the bottle; that's a fine old crusted port."

"So it is, Lucius. I hadn't realised. How do you like being a member of the dream team?"

"I could get used to it," Lucius said. "Port, anyone?"

oooOOOooo

Hermione's feet seemed to have developed a magnetic attraction for a sunny room on the first floor of Malfoy Manor. There, she would find the little house-elf, Uppity, humming softly as she washed, changed, fed, rocked and attended to her charge. It was clear that Uppity loved her role as Hugo's nursemaid.

"Did you look after Master Draco when he was a baby?" Hermione asked her. Uppity's ears drooped.

"Yes, Uppity was Master Draco's elf, but Master Draco left home to start his own family."

"Didn't you want to go with him?"

Uppity looked sorrowfully at Hermione.

"Master Draco took four elves to start his home: Uppity's daughter, Downy, and Downy's mate, Puckins, and Whispery and Nudger. Downy is having little elves soon."

"Don't you go to visit them?"

"Uppity goes with messages and Downy comes here. Downy is getting a fat elf!" She mimed a large round stomach. "Master Draco says that when Downy's baby elf is ready to be born, Uppity is allowed to be with her! Master Draco is a very kind master."

"That's good," Hermione said. She was wary of accidentally hurting the feelings of Lucius' elves. Uppity pointed at a pile of baby clothes, which floated to an oak dresser

and folded themselves neatly into the drawers.

"Miss is not to think bad thoughts about Uppity's family!" the elf squeaked suddenly.

"Oh, I don't!" Hermione protested immediately. "In fact, I'm getting extraordinarily attached to at least one member of your family."

Uppity sniffed.

"Miss is not a good Miss."

"Why?"

"Master thinks you is a bad Miss!" The elf stamped a tiny foot on the floor, although not loudly enough to wake the baby.

"Why, Uppity?" Hermione felt something clench in her chest.

Uppity folded her arms and scowled.

"Master is telling Master Snape that you is a bad Miss! Master is telling Master Snape that you isn't making an honest wizard of Master Snape, and Master is a governor of Hogwarts, and he says Headmaster ought to be happily married and be an honest wizard and not make baby Hugo Snape have unmarried parents! Master Snape says you isn't having him because you is too good and too young for Master Snape."

"Master Snape is an idiot," Hermione breathed, once she had worked out what the elf was talking about.

"That's what Master says," Uppity squeaked. "Master says Master Snape needs a clip round the ear. Master Snape says Master is a poncy dunderhead."

Hermione stifled a chuckle. "I bet he did."

"Uppity isn't liking it when people calls her Master a poncy dunderhead, so Uppity is hoping Miss will marry Master Snape and make him stop." Her ears drooped and she looked at the cradle. "But when Master Snape goes to Hogwarts, little Master will go too."

"I wonder if Lucius will loan you to us, just to look after Hugo until he's old enough to go to school ..." Hermione suggested tentatively. Uppity looked horrified.

"Uppity is a good elf! Uppity doesn't want to go and live with those wild elves at Hogwarts!" She lowered her voice to a squeaky whisper. "There is wicked elves there! There is free elves!" She shuddered.

"We'll just have to ask Master Lucius to invite lots of people with babies to come and stay, so you can look after them."

Uppity puffed up her chest inside her starched pillowcase.

"Uppity is looking after Master Scorpius when he is visiting and Master Hugo when he is visiting, and Uppity will look after other babies when they arrive. Miss is not to be interfering with Uppity!"

"I wouldn't dream of it," Hermione assured the elf and, after leaning down to kiss Hugo's downy head, left the room in a very thoughtful mood indeed.

## Chapter 16

### *Chapter 16 of 16*

Molly interferes, Ron is a twit but gets over it, Lucius is reformed (well, a bit), Draco grows up, Ginny is a good friend (apart from recommending the shoes), Harry is a hero, and Hermione has fun and spends a lot of time in a library. Snape, meanwhile, considers that he is getting his usual shit deal from fate, although to be fair, he never expected to find a family of his own.

Snape stood next to one of the tall bookcases, an ancient calf-bound volume in one hand and a parchment and quill suspended in the air taking notes. Hermione could hear the low cadence of his voice, although not the actual words. He was wearing a tailored waistcoat over a white shirt and black trousers. The waistcoat did indeed emphasise his waist, perhaps not quite as slender as it had been before Hugo had taken residence, but slim enough to cut an elegant figure. He looked up, closed the book and Summoned the jacket of his suit.

"Always in black, even when dressed as a Muggle," Hermione remarked. He shrugged.

"You object?"

"Not at all, Headmaster Snape." She went on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "You look splendid. Thank you for agreeing to come with me."

"It isn't every day that my son meets his grandparents for the first time."

She caught the proprietary note in the word 'my' and smiled to herself.

"Uppity, is Hugo ready for his outing?"

"Master Hugo is all clean and fed and ready," Uppity said, looking sulky.

"I don't think my Muggle parents are quite ready to cope with a house-elf as a nanny yet," Hermione told her. "Perhaps next time, okay?" She lifted the baby, snug in his carrycot, and Snape immediately reached to take him from her.

As they walked out of Malfoy Manor into a crisp, sunny winter's day, Hermione said casually, "I've booked us a table at Merlin's Retreat for dinner, if that's all right with you?"

"If you have money to burn, or rather, eat. What is the occasion?"

"I just wanted an evening with you."

"You could always ask Lucius to bugger off for a few hours."

"Hardly fair in his own home."

"We'll be at Hogwarts after Christmas and have plenty of time together."

"While I'm hunched over lesson plans and a heap of marking and you're up to your ears in Headmaster-type paperwork? I don't think so, somehow."

"One of things that I like about Gryffindors; I can always tell when you're plotting."

"Just adds to the excitement."

Mr and Mrs Granger were delighted to meet Hugo, who gurgled and waved his limbs around and generally acted in a manner calculated to ensure that he would be doted upon. He seemed to be a remarkably sunny child, a characteristic which, her mother assured Hermione, was inherited from her own side of the family. Hermione told her parents that she was taking up a teaching position at Hogwarts, which pleased them greatly. The visit lasted some hours, long enough for her parents to feel happy but not so long that Hugo started to fret or Severus became too bored.

They returned to Malfoy Manor, returned Hugo to Uppity's eager embrace and Apparated to the best restaurant in Wizarding London.

oooOOOooo

He was such good company, Hermione thought as they lingered over coffee. Not handsome, but very striking, highly intelligent and capable, and hiding a courageous and unprejudiced nature under his acerbic wit. It was not a question of 'she could do worse,' but rather of 'how could she possibly do better?'

"Severus, I want to ask you something."

His dark eyes gave nothing away.

"You can always ask."

"You know that I wasn't brought up in Wizarding traditions, I've flouted convention all my life, I'm not a proper little house witch, and this is a very irregular thing to ask and will probably cause a scandal when it gets out..."

The corner of his mouth curled slightly. "Just say whatever you're going to say, will you? Stop blathering!"

"Severus Snape, will you marry me?"

He was stunned into silence. After a minute, she began to wonder if she had made a terrible mistake.

"You mean it, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"For Hugo..."

"No, I'm being entirely selfish; I want to be married to you."

"And Lucius?"

"Will always be welcome in our bed and my heart. He won't leave his home, will he? And I think he would rather be a very regular and beloved guest than leave his routine and his comforts."

"Then yes," Snape said, his voice a low, warm, furry growl, "there is nothing I would like more."

When they told him, Lucius rolled his eyes and muttered, "Thank Merlin for bossy and incorrigible witches!" Only later did she wonder if his nod of approval had not been aimed at her at all, but at the house-elf who was tucking Hugo into his cot behind her.

oooOOOooo

Hermione paused on her way out of the Great Hall to watch the Headmaster of Hogwarts striding towards the main entrance of the school, his trademark black robes billowing behind him. Since his marriage, he had made an effort to keep his hair trimmed and clean, and none of his current students associated him with the Greasy Git of legend. He had even mellowed somewhat in his behaviour, although he was still prone to err on the side of Slytherin in disputes.

"Good evening, Headmaster." The newly elected chairman or rather, the newly re-elected chairman of the board of governors of Hogwarts fell into step beside him as they turned back into the school, his grey eyes gazing coolly around at the familiar stone walls. Students emerging from the hall gave the pair a wide berth on their way up to their common rooms. Lucius Malfoy noticed Hermione and gave her a polite nod as he passed her.

"Professor Granger? Do you have a moment?" A light, feminine voice interrupted Hermione's scrutiny of Lucius Malfoy's beautifully tailored robes.

Hermione smiled at Johanna Hales and waited for the sixth-year student to join her.

"I've an appointment in a few minutes, Jo. What is it?"

"My dad owed that book I told you about, the one on Wizarding international law."

"Excellent! May I borrow it until next Wednesday? My seventh-years are covering the differences between Muggle and Wizarding law outside Britain, and it'll be most helpful."

"Sure." Johanna pulled the book out of the pocket of her robes. "You have to treat it politely; otherwise it tries to sue you."

"I can imagine. Thanks, Jo. Have a good evening."

The girl rejoined the friends waiting for her, and Hermione trotted off up the nearest staircase in pursuit of the Headmaster. Now that she was a bona fide member of staff, the staircases worked for her, rather than against her, and she gave an apologetic smile to a group of second-year Hufflepuffs left stranded as a stairway changed direction to take her to her destination.

Lucius touched Severus' arm to attract his attention and turned back, waiting for her. "Professor Granger, will you join us for a glass of Beaujolais Nouveau?"

The Hufflepuffs watched curiously as Hermione resettled the bag of books over her shoulder.

"That's kind of you, Mr Malfoy. I think that I can spare an hour."

"Good. Do lead on, Professor Snape."

Severus flicked an eyebrow, spun on his heel and marched off towards the entrance to the Headmaster's tower.

"How is your son getting on?" Lucius enquired. "Settling in without Uppity?"

"Yes, he has a new admirer now. I don't know if you remember hearing about Winky, the elf whom Bartemius Crouch set free?"

"Vaguely," Lucius admitted. "Did the creature not turn to drink after the deaths of her family?"

"She's looking after Hugo now and hasn't touched a drop of Butterbeer since he arrived. She just wanted to feel needed."

"Don't we all," Lucius muttered before casting a very insincere smile at the austere figure awaiting them beside the gargoyle. "Good evening, Professor McGonagall."

"Mr Malfoy, Hermione." The deputy headmistress gave Hermione a slightly disapproving look before turning to Severus. "Severus, despite my every attempt to mediate, Professors Longbottom and Casadei are still unable to come to an agreement. Neville insists that the Curling Cucurbits cannot be harvested until after the next full moon, whereas Ludovica says that in Italy," she said the name as if speaking of somewhere very dubious indeed, "they are always picked in the third week of November, come what may."

"Surely as the deputy headmistress, you can sort out this squabble, Professor?" Lucius enquired. She glared at him.

"I certainly could, had I the knowledge of potions ingredients. This is Severus' area of expertise. Had he not been present, I would have owed Horace Slughorn for advice."

"Of course, Minerva. Puff adder," Severus said to the gargoyle, which moved aside. "Please tell Professor Casadei to check Starkey's *The Moon and Potions: a Guide to the Effects of the Lunar Flux Upon Ingredients* and inform Professor Longbottom that he is perfectly correct. I suspect Casadei has mistaken the Cucurbits for Glabrous Gherkins; the two are easily confused, but she is unlikely to have come across this particularly variety in Italy they are devilishly tricky to grow. I congratulate Longbottom on his latest success."

"Thank you. Goodnight, Severus, Hermione, Mr Malfoy."

She hurried away, and Lucius indicated that Hermione should precede him up the stairway to the Headmaster's office.

The portraits around the walls watched curiously as Severus flicked his wand, closing the door and lighting the lamps. The office reflected his personality: rows of shelves filled with books, a collection of rare and obscure ingredients in jars, stacks of parchments coded with coloured stickers. There were no longer any quaint little machines. McGonagall's tartan, shortbread and thistles had returned to Gryffindor tower along with their owner; now the office gave the impression of an orderly and scholarly mind.

"Good evening, my boy," Dumbledore said amiably. "And Hermione, my dear, welcome. Ah, Lucius, I see you're back once again. Come to stir up more trouble, have you?"

"It is bad form to hex portraits, Lucius," Severus remarked, "even infuriatingly meddlesome ones."

Lucius twirled his cane. "Good evening, Albus. I never could pass a wasp's nest without wanting to poke a stick into it."

Phineas Nigellus sniggered and sidled into view in his portrait. "How pleasant to see Hogwarts run by Slytherins once again."

"They don't have it all their own way," Hermione assured him.

"Let us retire to my sitting room and open that bottle of Beaujolais without interference, shall we?" As Severus opened the door to his private rooms, Hermione heard Dumbledore continuing to speak behind her.

"It is good to see that for Severus' sake, Hermione and Lucius have buried the hatchet."

"And not even in each other's backs," the snide voice of Phineas Nigellus added.

Severus swept his wand across the door, closing it and setting the wards. Lucius swung his travelling cloak from his shoulders.

"I have every intention of burying my hatchet in your Muggle Studies professor," he murmured.

"Muggle-*Wizarding* Studies professor, Mr Malfoy," Hermione corrected him primly. She placed her books on the table and ran her hands down her demure, high-necked, full-skirted Professor's robe. "Excuse me, but I do have a reputation to uphold here. I am a highly respected school mistress."

"My mistress," Lucius said with a deep bow. "Mistress of mistresses." Hermione smiled and began to unbutton her robe.

The effect was all she had hoped. Men, even wizards, were such suckers for silk stockings, lacy black knickers, red garters and a red and black satin basque.

Severus groaned. "Merlin, if I'd known you were wearing *those* under your robes..."

"You'd have been hard all day and would never have concentrated through the staff meeting."

Lucius prowled around her, gazing admiringly.

"Well, now, what an enticing package."

"I think," Severus said, "that I should like to watch while my wife ravishes you. Where is that Beaujolais you mentioned?"

"I lied," Lucius told him with a smirk. "I thought that as we are to christen your rooms, we should have champagne at the very least." He extracted a box from his robe, enlarged it and revealed a wicker hamper. "Champagne, chocolates and some tasty little nibbles involving smoked salmon, truffles, pate and oysters."

"That deserves a damn good ravishing," Hermione said approvingly.

"Ah, yes, and Severus, old friend." Lucius produced a pink dildo with something of a flourish. "If you're just going to sit and watch, I insist you do it with a degree of internal stimulation. In fact, should I have brought two ...?"

"No! One is quite enough, thank you."

"Why keep the equipment if you're not going to use it?"

"You can plumb its depths later. I need to relax after a hard day at work and be entertained for a while."

Hermione had quietly drawn her wand and now she pointed it at Lucius.

"You're horribly over-dressed, Mr Malfoy. Kindly put that plug wherever you intend to put it and get your clothes off."



"Bossy," Severus murmured, then stifled a yelp as the pink dildo flew across the room and shot up his robe. "Bastard! Oow! Ah, sweet Merlin ..."

"That hit the spot, did it, Severus?"

"Settle down!" Hermione snapped. "Enough talk in class! Robe off, now!"

Lucius hurriedly put down the champagne and hamper and spelled away his boots and robe to reveal boxers of dark green silk.

"Ten points to Slytherin for style," Hermione said. "However, I understand you have been badly behaved lately. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"That I deserve detention, I suspect, Professor Granger."

"Exactly. You admit, then, to being outrageously sexy?"

"Very much so."

"Bend over."

Lucius stared at her for a moment, and Hermione wondered if she had gone too far. Then his lips curved into a wicked smile.

"Are you going to put me across your knee, Professor?"

"I certainly am."

She sat down on the sofa and he knelt down so that his chest and hips rested across her thighs. He gave a little wriggle and she felt his erection nudging against her leg.

She could hear Severus breathing and he kept shifting slightly in his chair. Hermione suspected that Lucius enjoyed power, rather than pain, and he would not tolerate humiliation. This role-play was acceptable to him as long as it was obviously a game. There was something darker in Severus Snape, a hint that he would accept punishment because beneath everything, he still believed that he deserved to suffer. Even Lucius understood this, and if he and Severus had ever played dangerous games, they were long ago and in another world.

She slapped the silk-clad arse lightly and Lucius gave an exaggerated jerk, pressing the tip of his cock against the inside of her thigh. Then he surged up, his arms outstretched, throwing her back along the length of the sofa and covering her with his body.

"Naughty Professor," he murmured against her hair, "what would your students think if they could see you acting like a wanton little witch?"

"What would the board of governors think if they saw you shagging the Headmaster's wife?"

"Half of them would expire from apoplexy and the other half would be secretly jealous as hell."

He nuzzled the side of her neck and asked, his voice slightly muffled, "Haven't you opened the champagne yet, Severus?" He raised his head. "Severus! Now who's being naughty?"

Severus had slid one hand down into his robe.

"I need..."

"Ah-ah! Not yet, you don't. Hermione, dearest, I think we must put this on hold and do something about Severus before he does it all by himself."

Lucius lifted himself up, waved away his boxers and strode across the room with an imperious tilt to his chin, as if he always walked around in nothing but a smirk. "Too many clothes, Severus. Off with them! Now, across the desk or on the sofa, your choice."

"Desk," Severus growled, and Lucius swept aside the books and papers, cast a cushioning charm and pushed him, face down, onto the desk. Lucius tapped his wand against the end of the plug that peeped between the cheeks of his arse and Severus grunted. He attempted to press his engorged cock against the edge of the desk, but the cushioning charm prevented him from making contact. The plug seemed to blur and Hermione realised it was vibrating.

"I have an idea," Hermione said and ran to collect the champagne bottle. She tapped it with her wand to withdraw the cork, capturing the froth in a conjured glass. Filling her mouth with the chilled, fizzy wine, she knelt down beneath the desk and drew Severus' cock between her lips. He groaned and as Lucius lined up his own cock and slid home into his vagina, Severus' eyes rolled up into his head. He shuddered, and then to Hermione's glee, Lucius grabbed his wand and conjured a green leather cock-ring, constricting Severus' balls and cock just enough to stop him coming.

"Not until we tell you to, my sublime snake!"

"You," Severus panted as Lucius thrust into him, "absolute, oh God, bastard!"

Hermione had never attempted to deep throat, but suspected she had no need to, as the chill and the tickling bubbles seemed to be sending him into nirvana, or else into complete overload. Lucius frowned in concentration as he applied himself to deep, even strokes, gradually speeding up and then banishing the cock-ring and the plug just before he came. Severus almost exploded. He bellowed and jerked his cock out of Hermione's mouth, coming in long ropy streams across her face. Lucius withdrew, patted Severus' bare arse and stumbled to the sofa, where he sprawled, looking highly delighted with himself.

"Shit," Severus mumbled, twitching on the desk like a stranded beetle. "Oh shit."

"This from a wizard who swore off sex," Hermione said, getting to her feet.

"What?" Lucius looked horrified.

"He was trying to give birth to Hugo at the time."

"But still swearing off sex? Dear, dear, Severus!"

"You try it." Severus pushed himself up and tottered to join Lucius on the sofa. "Shoving something the size of a pumpkin out of your arse."

Hermione put her hands on her hips and tried to glare.

"Look at the pair of you!"

"Give me ten minutes, and I shall be ready to drink champagne out of your shoe," Lucius said magnanimously.

"I've been wearing them in class all day, so I don't recommend it."

"Where is your romance?" He levitated the hamper until it came to rest beside him and delicately selected a morsel. "Come here and allow me to feed you nectar and ambrosia, sweet girl, or at the least, a rather good Bollinger."

"I want," Severus mumbled, "to lick champagne out of your navel."

"While I would rather suck chocolate from your nipples," Lucius purred. "Much as I love shagging Severus, I do love the texture of a woman's breasts under my tongue."

"What's wrong with my nipples?"

"Hair, Severus. Your nipples are surrounded by hair."

Hermione enlarged the sofa and Lucius reached out to pull her between them. "There, now it's our turn. It works exceptionally well, does it not? We burn off our baser urges on each other and then have time to pander to your every whim. I hope that your whims tonight include canapés as prepared by Hussy and Hobbins." Lucius ran his fingers around the top of one of her stockings. "Your thighs are like silk, my darling. And your mouth tastes like a strawberry," he whispered, leaning over to taste it languorously.

Hermione sighed and wrapped her arms around his sleek, muscular torso. Severus poured champagne into two new glasses and topped up Hermione's, waiting until Lucius broke off the kiss before handing them out.

"To us," he said, and they clinked the glasses together and sipped the crisp, fruity champagne.

"For how long do you intend to retain your female equipment, Severus?" Lucius asked, idly twirling his glass to make the bubbles spiral through the wine. "I want to make the most of it while you have it."

"Oh, I'll keep it for awhile. Double the fun."

"That isn't fair," Hermione pointed out. "You don't have ovaries so you don't get the mood swings or the periods, and you have a cock as well."

"My cock is available whenever you wish to borrow it."

Hermione rolled over onto her front, propping up her chin on her hand. Lucius trailed his hand admiringly over her arse, then slid it inside her knickers.

"What about Legilimency? You can share what it feels like to be inside me."

Lucius dripped champagne into the hollow of her back and leaned to lick it off, while slipping a finger lightly over the folds of her sex.

"You see, wasn't it a brilliant idea to marry a clever witch, Severus?"

"And sometimes, it would be good to make affectionate straightforward love," Hermione said.

"It can be arranged," Severus told her, leaning his forehead against hers. His eyes were so close to her own that they filled her vision.

"Because you love each other," she whispered, and to her surprise, Lucius gave a little chuckle and said, "Yes, I do believe that we do."

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The weather was too chilly to allow them to remain outside for long, so the party moved into the Great Hall. Hugo, the two-year-old birthday boy, played happily with the box in which a giant plastic car had arrived from his grandparents, aided by Albus and Scorpius, who were fascinated by the colourful wrapping paper and the car, respectively. The older children were being organised into teams by Ron and Harry in preparation for a rowdy game involving toy brooms, a slow-moving Snitch and padded bludgers.

"Excuse me, Professor Snape?" Hermione looked around to see Victoire approaching somewhat shyly. Severus inclined his head.

"Miss Weasley."

She had her mother's exquisite features, but something of her father's colouring in her light dusting of freckles, hazel eyes and strawberry blond hair.

"I'm coming to Hogwarts next year," she said.

"So you are."

"Is your Potions mistress any good?"

Severus observed her gravely. She did not appear to think her question was at all odd or rude; she simply wanted to know.

"She is very able," he said after a pause. "Why do you ask?"

"I like Potions, a lot. My mama and dad are both good at potions and they started teaching me years ago. I had a toy potions set when I was five. Dad says you were the best but you don't teach anymore."

"Professor Casadei is an extremely capable and popular teacher," Severus said.

"Yes, but is she any good at potions?"

This surprised a snort of laughter from Severus.

"Yes, she is good at potions. However, the very best pupils in the higher years attend special classes with me, so I suggest you work diligently and well for Professor Casadei and obtain a place in my select group of students."

"Thank you!" She gave him a stunning smile and skipped back to join the junior Quidditch team.

"A rather charming child," Lucius observed. He had come silently up behind Severus and Hermione while they had been talking. "Who is she?"

"Victoire Weasley, daughter of Bill and Fleur Delacour."

"Hm. Pure blood, then."

He dodged the elbow Hermione aimed at his ribs and gave his superior little smile. "I also notice that Mrs Potter is expanding rapidly."

"She says she's expecting a girl this time. Harry wants to call her Lily Luna."

"Did you ever wish for a daughter, Lucius?" Severus enquired. Lucius looked down and brushed a speck of glitter from his robe.

"I had one, once." There was silence for a moment, as Hermione and Severus both tried to think what to say. Lucius gave a little sigh. "When Draco was two, Narcissa gave birth to a premature baby girl who died after three days. We didn't try again. She had lost babies before Draco, but after he was born safe and well, we assumed that things would work as they should from then on. Although we didn't tell anyone about the pregnancy, by the time she reached six months, we were quietly confident. Rosalinda was two months early and she was too small for her lungs to work properly. I often think of her." His grey eyes were calm as he lifted his gaze to face Hermione

and Severus. "I have a fine son and a dear grandson, and a delightful godson, so I am more than content."

"I wouldn't have asked had I realised..."

"Severus, I wanted to tell you. I no longer mourn, but I remember her with love."

He nodded and turned away to lift Scorpius into the toy car. Severus watched the children playing, with a deeply contemplative look on his face.

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"Happy birthday, Lucius." Hermione reached to kiss his cheek and levitated his travelling cloak to the hook on the back of the door. "I'm sorry the party has to wait till the weekend but..."

"I understand, dear girl. Riotous orgies are all very well, but not on a school night. I quite understand; besides, Draco, Scorpius and Astoria took me to lunch in Vienna, so I am perfectly content to wait. Where is our Severus?"

"I'm not sure; he muttered something about a potion. The elves have prepared a light supper, and I've got champagne on ice."

"You're so good to me. Ah, Severus, there you are."

Severus came in carrying a small box in both hands. He placed it on the desk and smiled. Hermione loved his smile, the real one, the one that only she, Hugo and the Malfoys saw. It was small and secretive, sweet and affectionate.

"Happy birthday, Lucius, my friend."

It was a measure of how relaxed they were with Hermione, that Severus and Lucius could exchange a simple hug in her presence, one that had nothing to do with sex.

"I assume that the box is for me?"

"For you and for all of us." He opened it to reveal three little bottles of potions, of different colours, and a tightly rolled parchment.

"Then you had better explain," Lucius told him, sitting down with a pleased and eager expression. "This looks interesting."

"I hope you like it." Something in Severus' tone, an edge of serious intent, made both Lucius and Hermione look more closely at him. As he removed the three bottles, each in their own turn, he explained their purposes. "This potion is for Hermione, to ensure that she ovulates. This one is for you, Lucius. For the week following ingestion, it will cause you to produce sperm that will only father a girl child. And this one's for me. It prepares the womb for the reception of a foetus. The scroll contains a spell to transfer a fertilised egg from Hermione into me; from there, it's developed by the charm Molly Weasley cast upon Hermione."

"You'd do this?" Lucius appeared stunned. "For me? You'd give me a daughter?"

"If you both agree, yes."

"She'll have three parents," Hermione said. "How fantastic!"

"Severus," Lucius whispered, drawing the name out on a long breath. "I don't know what to say. Thank you."

Lucius turned his gaze on the pair of them and placed one of his hands over each of theirs.

"You know," Hermione stated thoughtfully, "I believe I have the perfect name, too." She smiled knowingly at Severus first, and then cast a warm gaze at Lucius. "How do you feel about 'Rose'?"