

The Witchhiker's Guide To Beltane

by *TeddyRadiator*

Wizards Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Prologue: Evocation

Chapter 1 of 13

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Thank you, jenidralph for this prompt. I had a blast and a half writing this fic for her. A huge thank you to my beta, stgulik for her inspiration and encouragement.

Also, I would like to apologise in advance to my Pagan friends. This is my take on the Beltane ritual, and while I have used authentic parts of the ritual, I have also used other quotes from authors and my own imagination. The final speech in chapter 12 is based on a poem by Osho, and Hermione's discourse on the god and the goddess in chapter 5 is based on an essay by Beau Ravn Ap Gwyddon. The original prompt was: Hogwarts Gone Wild.... a spring break escapade. I hope I have given them a wild ride, indeed.

I sing this prayer to the old one, to the Lord of the Hunt, to the wild, dancing, mischievous masculine, to he who is born in winter and dies with the leaves. To the soul guide and pathfinder Cernunnos: lead my arrow true. Fill me with virility that I might stand strong and proud, ride hard, sing loud, and drink deep of all that is set before me.

If you're going to do something, by the gods, do it! Don't waver, don't waffle, don't sit around thinking, "Should I?" or "Shouldn't I?" With any ritual, one's convictions are the predominant means of success. It takes practice, attention to detail and a certain ability to queer the pitch if necessary. I mean, if it were easy, any old Muggle would be out there, prancing around in stag horns, pretending to know what they were doing.

~ Introduction: Evocation - The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

Open for me the secret way, the pathway of intelligence, beyond the gates of night and day, beyond the bounds of time and sense. ~Beltane Ritual

Minerva McGonagall closed the book with a loud *THUMP*. "Gods, I hope for her sake I never run into her in Knockturn Alley," she muttered. "And if I do, I hope I have a copy of this book with me. It'll be very satisfying to beat her repeatedly about the head and shoulders with it."

She looked around and wondered, not for the first time, if voicing violent thoughts to oneself was a prerequisite for the Head's job. A lifetime of talking to portraits had a way of doing that to a person. "Well, that settles it, then," she said, staring ahead, her eyes troubled. "I only hope I'm doing the right thing."

"I am convinced of it, my dear Minerva," replied a lilting voice. Minerva looked up at the familiar, painted face of Albus Dumbledore. He was smiling benevolently down on her, as he had done for so many years in real life. A quick glance told her that the rest of her past predecessors were fast asleep, or at least pretending to be. Oh, they were always awake for the gossip and the unwanted advice, but ask them anything during a real crisis and you'd think they'd had Dreamless Sleep Draught mixed in with their pigments. She knew a fake snore when she heard it. *Flaming lot of bloody cowards, the lot of you.*

Albus was the most infuriating of all. As irritatingly cryptic in death as his corporeal counterpart had been in life, his portrait often gave Minerva the feeling that he loved the conflicts best of all, that he thrived on a little bit of whinging and turmoil. The look on Albus' face at present gave Minerva a queasy feeling of déjà vu. He had always been a secretive wizard, and never so conniving as when he looked his most innocent.

With his blue eyes twinkling wistfully, he looked positively beatific. "It is a good plan, Headmistress, and a fine idea." He sobered. "And completely necessary, as you well know."

"I don't like meddling," Minerva retorted, shooting the portrait a hard look. She stood and straightened her dark robe. "That was always your department, Albus, and he's not going to like it coming from me any more than he did from you."

The portrait's subject nodded gravely. "No doubt, Minerva, no doubt at all." He heaved a great sigh and threw up his slender, spidery hands in a 'what-can-you-do?' gesture. "Sometimes, though, dear Headmistress, meddling is the only way to show someone you love them."

Minerva's face twisted into a sour expression, irritated at Albus' smug complacency. "That's your style, Albus, not mine. The boy needs help, I'll be the first to admit, but there's a last-resort feel to this scheme that makes me feel like an arch manipulator."

Before Dumbledore could reply, the door chime sounded. Grateful to turn her attention elsewhere, Minerva glanced up at the clock, and took an educated guess as to who was entreating entrance to her study. "Come in, Filius," Minerva called.

Filius Flitwick strode into the room, a warm smile upon his homely face. Some of her unease dissipated as she greeted her diminutive Deputy. It was hard to keep her dour Scots mood while in his endearingly sunny presence. Hogwarts' Charms professor and Head of Ravenclaw House barely reached Minerva's hip, but that had never prevented him from casting a large shadow. Whether it was because of the nature of her chosen lifestyle or her personality, Minerva had few friends she could honestly say she trusted inside and out, but she would have stated emphatically that Filius was one of them. He had ever been a loyal, encouraging friend; he always managed to make a room grow brighter merely by walking into it, and he always came bearing her favourite biscuits.

Now, he was practically humming in anticipation as he faced his boss. "Well, is it done?" he asked, his merry eyes bouncing with excitement. "Is it going forward?"

Minerva nodded. "It is, my friend." She cast a final glance toward the peanut gallery. "For better or worse, it's done."

"Huzzah!" Filius cried in delight, and shot a quick burst of multi-coloured fireworks from his wand. He clapped enthusiastically, with a bright, hard gleam of expectation in his eyes. "Well done, Minerva. A bold move, to be sure, but the right one. I told you bringing Harry on board would seal the deal." He, too, glanced at the wall of portraits, and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Have, er, *they* been told yet?"

Minerva's smile faded. "Not yet. I thought I'd announce the plans during evening meal, then call the staff in for a quick meeting afterward." She shrugged. "It's a bit cowardly, springing it on them like that, but since it's a *fait accompli*, I don't want to give them time to think about it too much."

Filius nodded sagely. "Good idea. Catch 'em after they've got stoned on treacle tart and you can convince them of anything. You know the type of reaction you'll get, but stand firm, Minerva! You can count on the rest of the faculty for support."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I know. And we'll do everything we can to make it worth their while." She glanced at the thick book on her desk, and Filius' eyes followed hers. The leather binding was deep green, almost black, and innocuous looking. "This was so cruel, Filius. An outrage! After all that happened, after all he's been through and back again. He doesn't deserve it."

Filius' sunny demeanor refused to dim. "Of course he doesn't! And this will be just what is needed to illustrate that very fact." He placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "We are doing the right thing. *You* are doing the right thing." He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "I for one am looking forward to a return to the old ways. We need them. We've allowed our world to become too homogenised and Muggle-ised."

"That's not a word and you know it," she chided mildly. "Muggles have had precious little to do with us forsaking our rituals. Voldemort did enough of that." She cast him a sly look. "Besides, I know you're merely looking forward to cavorting naked with a bunch of witches around a bonfire."

"It's a tough job, but someone has to do it," he replied sincerely, a great beaming smile lighting his face. "Besides, we have a higher purpose than just doing a reel around a bonfire. We have a friend to restore."

Another chime sounded. "Yes?"

Although no one appeared at the door to the study, a familiar voice called out, "Professor McGonagall? We're going to Hogsmeade now. The Hogwarts Express is due in forty minutes."

Both Minerva and Filius cast wistful glances toward the door, and to the voice beyond. It sounded so empty and colourless, like a finely-crafted instrument left neglected to gather dust and lose its tuning. It carried no warmth, but no real bite either.

"Thank you, Severus," Minerva answered, and looked at Filius. He shook his head, and she suddenly felt a little better about the scheme they had spent the entire Christmas break composing. "We'll be waiting for you."

"As you wish, Headmistress."

They listened silently as Severus Snape descended the stairs from her study, his boots making a soft sound on the flag steps.

"I used to love the sound of his voice," Filius sighed, his eyes sad. "Even when he was in a mood, it was a thing of beauty."

"I know," Minerva agreed. "He's like a shade of his former self now. You can't even get him all riled up anymore."

For a moment, both Headmistress and Deputy were silent. Then Filius perked up.

"Well, I think that is proof like no other. You've made the right decision," he nodded, his good humour restored. "The lad gave his all for us; it's time we returned the favour."

Chapter One: Opening the Circle

Chapter 2 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Prompfest.

Thank you for such an enthusiastic response for the beginning of the story! I am thrilled you are enjoying it. I must state here that this is a work of fanfiction, and the characters are the property of JK Rowling and Warner Brothers. I make no money from this story.

As with any ritual you are about to undertake, preparation is the key. Aside from all those lines which have to be memorised, there's a lot of furniture one has to navigate, so to speak. Approach it with confidence, but also realise you have to be flexible; these things rarely go according to plan.

~Chapter One: Opening The Circle - The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

Now is the darkness. Now is the pain. Now is the fear.

Now is the danger. Now is the hate. Now are the tears.

Call on our mother! She is the one! Hers is the way!

She will bring comfort. She will bring life. She will bring day. ~Beltane Ritual

Snow had begun to pile around his feet as he stood on the Hogsmeade Station platform, waiting for the Hogwarts Express to roll in and belch out its semi-annual cargo of cranky, tired teenagers. As soon as they arrived, Professors Snape and Granger would have the happy task of herding the students into the waiting carriages. At least thestrals didn't appear to suffer in the cold. Probably due to a lack of skin.

Professor Snape turned his back on the biting wind and cast a surreptitious Warming charm over himself and his colleague. In the short amount of time since Professor Granger had accepted a post at her former school, he had come to regard her as the one of the few bright spots in his otherwise benighted existence. Not that he would ever tell her, much less pursue her.

Undeniably attractive though she was, between her complicated love life and her insufferably chipper attitude toward everything from teaching methods to the rights of centaurs and house-elves, her life was currently a medley of social dramas. She was what his dignified Slytherin seventh years would call a crazy-maker.

Even her hair was mad. He couldn't help but stare at it. Beneath her knitted hat, Professor Granger's wild hair shot off in every direction like underwater seaweed. Her mile-long scarf wound around her head and neck so many times, only her flashing, amber eyes were visible. One ragged end of the scarf had come untethered and was flapping wildly in the frigid wind. Before it could beat her to death, he reached forward and tucked the stray end back into itself, somewhere in the vicinity of her right ear.

"You look like a mummy whose bandages are coming unwrapped," he quipped.

She made a charming little growling noise. "If only. At least mummies rest in warm places," she retorted sourly. *Not quite so chipper now, I see,* thought Snape. Her thunderous mood made him wonder, not for the first time, if she was as fiery in other aspects of her life as well.

She gave another soft growl. "Why did we get the short straw and have to freeze our arses off waiting for the bloody train?" she grumbled rhetorically. "Why can't these bloody students arrive during the day?" Her voice was muffled under her voluminous scarf. "Merlin, I'm hungry! Why can't they come sooner..."

"Are you a witch or not?" he replied with asperity, and cast a second Warming charm over them both. "We're here because we're the only faculty under sixty and without the clout or tenure to wriggle our way out of it, and the students don't come earlier in the day because then we would have nothing to whinge about."

"I know, I know! You don't have to remind me!" For a moment, they were silent. "Thanks for the heat," she muttered sullenly. He suspected she wasn't talking about the Warming charm, which perversely improved his opinion of her personality. He decided to make an effort to draw her out. The prospect of baiting her some more, he discovered, made him feel decidedly warmer than the present temperature.

"You're usually in a much more disgustingly cheerful mood," he remarked, and noted the murderous look in her eyes. This was proving to actually be an enjoyable conversation. "What's the matter? Did your holidays not go as planned?"

He had not expected an answer; in fact, he'd banked on her not dignifying the bait with so much as a reluctant nibble. Instead, she sighed, and her breath misted out in front of her face like a grey ghost. "Oh, the holidays were great. Wonderful, in fact."

"So I see. The boundless enthusiasm gave it away."

"Right up until two days ago," she continued. "That's when Ronald made his semi-annual announcement that surely by now I'd come to my senses and was ready to jump the broom. He wants to get married, you see, and start the next batch of Weasleys on the go."

"Ah," he replied. It was all he could think to say. Privately, he'd always believed Granger and Weasley would make a fine, if annoyingly Gryffindor, couple. Good enough, at any rate. That she didn't consent to marry Weasley, though she continued to be his girlfriend year after year, was, in his opinion, part of her crazy-maker ways.

"I hate when he does this," she continued. "It's always in front of witnesses. He thinks it'll be harder for me to say no if he proposes at a public gathering or family get together." She shook her head, and the stray edge of the scarf floated free again.

"So how did he ask this time?" Severus tucked in the end more firmly. "Somewhere a little more public than a family reunion?"

"Try the middle of the Quidditch Regional Finals. In Ireland. Over the Wizarding Wireless."

Severus winced. "Why don't you put Mr. Weasley out of our collective misery and just say 'No'?"

She turned to him, exasperated. "You're missing the point, Professor! I do say no! I say no every time! I don't know how many other ways to say no. I've said it in six different countries, four different languages, and twenty different scenarios! But Ron still thinks that I'm secretly pining to get married, and I'm too proud to admit it." She shook her head in frustration. "I don't know which part of 'no' he doesn't understand."

He mentally rolled his eyes and decided to descend into the madness for a moment. "Well, perhaps I can offer a suggestion. Top of my head. Oh, I don't know." He leaned toward her and spoke slowly, as if addressing a dimwitted child. "Why don't you put Mr. Weasley out of our collective misery and just say 'Yes'? Surely a wizard that tenacious is worth a second glance." He stepped back, in case the explosion was larger than the powder keg might indicate.

"I wish I wanted to say yes, Professor. Merlin knows it would make my life simpler. And a wizard like Ron deserves a loving, devoted witch. But I'm not that witch." The look she gave him was almost sad. "I know where I want to be, and it's not with Ronald."

Severus blinked at that, but the sound of the approaching train whistle spared him having to ask what she meant. Soon, they were neck-deep in the horde, students milling around them like so many black-clad sheep, aimlessly bumping into one another and generally ignoring instructions as to what to do.

As the final carriages were loading, he helped Professor Granger into the last one and took a seat beside her, renewing their Warming charm. A comfortable silence descended between them. Naturally, she felt the need to break it.

"I did plan on marrying Ron, you know. After the war. But it was too soon." She glanced away. "And now it's too late. I've moved on. I can't understand why he can't move on as well."

"Oh, really," he drawled. "Could it be because you continue to date him on holiday?"

She gave an incredulous look, then laughed. "Ron and I don't date each other anymore! We haven't been together in over six years!" She scoffed. "Where did you hear that nonsense - the papers? You of all people should never believe what you read in the *Daily Prophet*." She froze, her eyes wide and stricken with remorse. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Don't be ridiculous, Granger. Point taken, however," he added, surprised in spite of himself. Merlin knew in the early days after the Battle of Hogwarts, when he had recovered from his injuries and spent time in the *Lumos* as the mysterious anti-hero of the war, he had been featured time and again in the gossip column for doing things... or witches... he hadn't remotely considered or were strictly out of his league anyhow. And then Rita Skeeter decided to truly get her claws out...

"So all those tales of your sordid love life were just idle gossip? Well, I won't lie: I'm dashed, Granger." He sat back with a heaving sigh of disappointment. "And here we were, hoping that our at least youngest faculty member at this monastery of a school was getting her leg over."

He was rewarded with first a gasp of surprise, then a smile. At least, he saw the corners of her rather lovely eyes crinkle in what looked like a smile. The rest was still ensconced in that horrific scarf. She gave his arm a pat. "Well, I do hate to be the destroyer of your dearly held beliefs, but I'm currently as cloistered as they come. About the closest I get to anything remotely saucy are those abstracts I checked out of the Library last month about the sex lives of banshees."

Severus gave a dismissive "Hmmp," and turned away to signal the conversation was over. He was grateful that, in the dark, she could not see the sudden heat he felt rise to his face.

As they rode along in tense silence, Hermione loosened the scarf from her face. She muttered tiredly, "I despise the end of Christmas break."

Severus grunted. "Do tell. I've always said Hogwarts would be a picnic if these bloody students didn't keep showing up. I'm not optimistic that this year will prove the exception to that rule."

She laughed unwillingly. "Well, I can't argue with you there. They come straggling in, bad tempered..."

"...bored from too much time at home with nothing to do and unable to perform magic..."

"...stuffed and bloated from holiday binge eating..."

"...and completely incapable of paying attention to anything until at least mid-March," Severus finished. Almost to himself he added, "And we poor professors with nothing more salacious to look forward to between now and then but farting pink cherubs at the Valentine's Dance."

They rode on in silence for seven more hoof beats. Granger turned to him, her face working like a rubber mask. In a strangled voice, she replied, "Blimey, Snape. I never pegged you to be such a riot."

He decided to try for imperious reproach, but found his own mouth twitching in response. "And why, pray tell, Professor Granger, would that be?"

She had lost any pretence of trying not to laugh. "Well, are we looking forward to pink cherubs that fart, or when we fart, pink cherubs blast out of our backsides?"

"You really must learn to glean information from inflection, Professor."

He could feel the carriage shaking with her laughter. "Either way the visual image is pretty fucking funny, but surely you see my point: it pays to be specific." Her laughter bubbled up in a silly giggle, until she was wiping her eyes. "Farting pink cherubs. Oh, that's going to stay with me all through dinner."

For some reason, that made him feel better. Warmer, at least. He had the strongest urge to join in her laughter, but there were students in earshot. "True, Professor Granger. I stand corrected."

Severus, lad, you've been through a lot in your forty-eight years on this earth he told himself. *I think the term 'hard cheese' pretty much describes you to a Knut. Crappy home life, dismal parents, hand-me-down robes. Ridiculed, sorted into the most snobbish, elitist House in school, bullied, fallen in with the wrong crowd, forced to murder your mentor, almost killed by a giant snake.*

And that passed for a good day.

Pack it up, Sev, he continued his inner monologue, while he reached for his second glass of wine *It could be worse. You could be dining on stale bread and water in an oceanfront room in sunny Azkaban.*

Instead, he was sitting at the Head Table at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, having finished an excellent meal, sitting beside a pretty little witch, thinking about farting pink cherubs (the ones that fart...not performing the act himself) and speculating on her love life, or lack of same.

As he looked out over the sea of students that were reeling from dinner and dessert, he risked a glance at Granger, who was chatting amicably to Pomona Sprout, her face animated and bright. After his cherub quip, she had considerably improved from the grumpy little witch traipsing through the frozen slush earlier in the evening. As her hair curled and fluffed around her face, Severus allowed himself a moment to enjoy her sharp wit, her deft, able hands, the slim column of her throat, her pert, tantalising breasts...*Alright, that's enough. You'll look a right tit should Minerva request everyone to stand for a toast right now. Well, you'll look like a right perv in any case. Think of*

something else, man!

In the ten years since he had miraculously survived Nagini's bite, Severus had been vilified, acquitted, ostracised, shunned, sneered at and attacked, both verbally and physically. Finally, he'd been exonerated, after which he had hoped for a quiet life. Instead, he got a sullen one.

Oh, he had friends. On the occasional night when the Firewhisky was flowing and the faculty oozing goodwill, Severus would himself admit that he was treated well by some of his peers. Minerva McGonagall had tried her best to make his re-emergence into Wizarding society a positive one. Hell, even the Boy-Who-Lived-Yet-Again had stepped up to the wicket to cloak Severus in his sincere love-me-love-my-dog fame and beneficence.

Severus took another sip of wine and met the unfriendly stares of the students. *Whoever said it was better to be feared than loved must have been a teacher* he thought. Only by the strictest intimidation and fear-mongering was he able to keep students in line, up to and including his own Slytherins. And that took too much energy for what it was worth. At the end of many a night, he would fall into bed, exhausted just from being frightening all day. *I don't know how Tom Riddle kept it up, I really don't.*

And it might have gotten easier, had Lady Luck been willing to give old Toby Snape's boy a break. Hermione Granger had joined the faculty eighteen months before, fresh from her spectacular stint as Potions Mistress at Beauxbatons. Severus had tried to show willing. He had been polite and quiet, and held his temper, even when she pestered the hell out of him on matters of Potions. She brought a fresh, lively approach to the subject, merrily allowing her first years to blow up half the laboratory, then sending the staff into peals of laughter about it in the lounge the next day. Only Severus remained unmoved, although, he had to admit, there were times he had to hide behind the *Daily Prophet* or leave the room to hide his smile. It wouldn't do to encourage her.

She wore deliciously high heels and, when not teaching, favoured tight Muggle t-shirts and jeans which set off her lovely arse to perfection. Crazymaker she might be, but she was easy on the eye. And she was nice to Severus. Far too chipper and optimistic in the mornings, of course, but at least she never acted judgmental when he dragged himself to her office asking for a Hangover Potion. She just grabbed the nearest one and said, "Bottoms up!" in that insufferably cheerful way that made him want to spin her around and bend her *bottoms up* over her desk...

He groaned inwardly. Too many of his thoughts were segueing into that territory lately. What time over the Christmas break he hadn't spent fantasising about Granger he'd spent chastising himself for it. *Another one completely out of your league, man.* Better to lust after her from afar, where he could remain unnoticed, than to make a complete pranny out of himself in public again. Hell, he'd mooned over Lily Evans for twenty years and look where *that* had got him.

Of course, that didn't stop him from thinking about screwing his courage to the sticking place and asking Professor Granger out for a drink and dinner. He'd thought up at least three different all-but-foolproof scenarios where he could just casually slip into the conversation some innocuous reason to invite her to the Broomsticks.

But he should have known better. Just when Wizarding Britain had stopped baying for his blood and demanding his head on a silver platter in the Atrium of the Ministry, Rita Skeeter had decided she needed a new villa in Spain, and wrote a tell-all book about him entitled *Severus Snape: Nobody's Hero*. Dear, dear Rita. Severus devoutly hoped there were special demons in hell for yellow journalists, and they'd already got Rita's suite ready for her.

He had been quietly dismissive at first. The public knew what Rita was; surely they wouldn't fall for this particular brand of defamation. Unfortunately, Rita knew her public just as intimately: it was a voracious beast that needed feeding, and she had the sense to feed it raw meat by the book load.

If anyone had considered Severus the least bit dodgy before, they needed only to consult the book to confirm their every suspicion. Within its tawdry pages, he was portrayed as the sort of bounder heretofore only found villainously twirling his moustache while tying heroines to railroad tracks. He found himself longing for the days when he was just considered a greasy git and an undercover vampire.

Soon Aurors had to be called in to monitor Severus' DADA classes in case of attacks. He was pelted with garbage in Diagon Alley. Howlers were sent to him by the owl-load. School had to be frequently delayed because every manner of Weasley Wizard Wheezes that could spit, smoke, burst into flame or turn someone chartrouse was thrown at him, usually during mealtime when the cowardly little shits could hide amongst their fellow miscreants.

Humiliated, Severus went to Minerva to resign. He gave his reasons as not wanting to disrupt the routine of the school, but in reality he was sick of it...the embarrassment, the feeling of being misunderstood *still*, the hurt of his sore heart. What must he do to prove himself worthy? He was tired of trying to answer that question. Better to leave than to be stuck pondering why he would never be, *had never* been accepted.

Minerva refused him, knowing, as did he, that Hogwarts was the only real safe haven for him. "This will blow over, my boy," she said, siphoning off a horde of slime from his cloak. "Do *not* let that wretched woman win!"

"It's not her winning that bothers me, Minerva," Severus barked in reply, cleaning the snot-green gunk out of his hair. "The Marauders weren't this bad."

The Headmistress was unmoved. "You just leave it to me," she said, beady eyes narrowed and predatory.

Minerva had not been called the Order of the Phoenix's bludger for nothing. True to her nature, she set out to resolve the problem in typical Gryffindor fashion...with a sledgehammer. She sent a blanket w-mail Howler to every student's parents, informing them that the next time *any* professor was attacked, and the culprit protected by his fellows, every House point would be removed from every House. If the students wanted to gang up on their innocent professor, then the school would gang up on them.

The only positive note of this debacle to emerge was Professor Granger, who could not bear to see a homesick student cry, a third year struggle through a crush or a seventh year break out in boils over their N.E.W.T.s. She took it upon herself to be Severus' new best friend. In spite of their shared past, the young witch had decided to let bygones be bygones and became his staunchest ally, telling anyone who would listen that she had always respected Severus Snape as a teacher and a person, and that they were the most ungrateful bunch of hoodlums for not acknowledging him as a hero. Further, she stated emphatically that Rita Skeeter was scum of the first order, and if anyone had a problem with that, to see her during her office hours, Monday, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 3:42 to 5:17 p.m.

And Severus had to admit that, after a very odd, one-sided conversation he witnessed one afternoon between the two witches while he himself skulked in a dark corner in Diagon Alley, Rita had backed off a little bit on the vitriol. Her book still sold well, but she abruptly stopped promoting it with such aggression. He really should find out what Granger had done to merit this new attitude, but he never seemed to get around it. It would mean bringing up the whole, sordid subject of the book in a conversation, and he avoided *that* like Voldemort's breath.

Had it not felt so much like pity, Severus might have enjoyed having Granger for a champion. Unfortunately, it would also force him to admit that his feelings for her might edge a little beyond the respect for a fellow colleague, much less a former student. The irritatingly smug swot he had once sneered at had been tempered by war and maturity. She was attractive, brainy, sweet, fierce, protective and funny in spite of the baggage that she still carried around. She also filled out a set of dress robes like a thoroughbred race horse did a racing form.

In fact, she was everything that had ever fired him up since he was old enough to understand the real purpose of that lump of skin flopping around between his legs. But a witch like Hermione Granger... well, a witch with Hermione Granger's good sense and perfect arse and luscious tits wouldn't see a touchy, Northern, increasingly middle-aged wizard like Severus as any sort of catch now, would she? What on earth could he offer her if she turned down the likes of Ron 'Quidditch-Ambassador-Playboy-Extraordinaire' Weasley on the grounds of not being good enough?

As if she mentally heard him ogling her bum and itching to give her bra a squeeze, Granger turned to Severus and gave him a kind smile. "Enjoying your dinner, Professor?"

He inclined his head and scowled in return. "I would have if we weren't surrounded by this din."

Her smile seemed to grow sunnier and sadder at the same time. "Cheer up, Severus. It's the beginning of a new school term. Let's make a pact to make the best of it. Who

knows what pleasant surprises it will bring?"

He scoffed. "A dose of dragon pox on the entire student body would be a nice start."

She looked at him, shocked, then grinned mischievously. "First cherubs, now dragon pox. I'm starting to suspect you might be up to something, Professor. Should Fred Weasley be worried about you giving him a run for his money?"

Severus snorted. "Hardly."

Granger's smile never wavered. "You're wicked, that's what you are, Severus." With what could only be considered a flirtatious little wiggle of her head, she added, "I can see I'm going to have to keep an eye on you this term."

Severus felt his face go numb. *What in the name of Merlin's rotting rectum was that supposed to mean?*

As Severus gaped at his former student, Minerva tapped on her water glass and rose to her feet. "May I have your attention, please?" The students settled down, and waited for the usual speech. Some were already dozing at their seats.

"I have an announcement that I believe will be met with interest by both you and your professors." She gave a quick glance around the Head table. Severus looked at Granger, eyebrows on the rise, but she shrugged, as clueless as he.

Minerva looked out on the sea of faces. "As you know, we are approaching our tenth anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. Many friends and loved ones fought in that war, and gave the ultimate sacrifice. Many of your professors fought, and fought bravely."

Severus could feel Granger's eyes on him, and he forced himself to remain staring straight ahead. If he turned to see tears in her eyes, he would not be accountable for his actions.

"As time passed," Minerva continued, "it was hoped that the years following the demise of Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters would see a revival in the Wizarding community...a return to the traditions and customs that we suspended during those dark times. But we've not advanced as far as I would like, and the Board of Governors agrees.

"Since Hogwarts has ever been the beacon of learning and achievement for Wizarding Britain, it was decided that we would be the first to participate in a Ministry-approved initiative to return our world back to the ways that sustained us Magical folk for centuries. To do this, we will be making a change in the school schedule. The Spring break will be extended for an additional three weeks."

She waited for the predictable cheering to die down. "However, the end of school will also be extended for one month, during which time Hogwarts will play host to something very special."

Minerva stood serenely at the dais and waited for the murmuring around her to die down. "This May, we will be hosting the sacred festival of Beltane, one of the most important events of the Pagan calendar, complete with all the traditional rites and rituals. There hasn't been a Beltane festival here at Hogwarts in over one hundred and fifty years!

"Your Professors will participate as the revelers in the magic circle, and the celebrations will culminate with a traditional dance and feast for everyone. To stress the Ministry's commitment to the initiative's success, this will be carried over the Wizarding Wide Web in a special broadcast.

"In addition, we are honoured to have Magister Cornelius Honeyclutch join us in April. He is a renowned expert in the field of Druidic Studies, and he will be giving a series of lectures on Pagan festivals in your History of Magic classes. There will be a fieldtrip to Stonehenge for the N.E.W.T. level students who wish to participate in the festival as stewards. We will also celebrate with the Muggle version of the Maypole for our younger students."

The buzz coming from the long tables sounded much more enthusiastic now. "The Ministry will be sending leaflets out to your families next month on how to host their own Beltane celebrations in conjunction with our broadcast, so we can experience a community feeling throughout the country, not just here at school.

"We hope that by reinstating our magical rituals and customs, we can get back to the basics of our special world, where dark and light live together in balance. No longer should the dark be feared because of our past, but embraced as part of our magical makeup.

"Should this prove to be a success, it will be expanded to a much larger venue next year. There has even been talk of having an International Beltane Ritual right here in Wizarding Britain, so I want us to be the vanguard for this exciting venture. I know I can count on you to help make this a complete a total success. Hogwarts, the world is watching!"

The room erupted in wild applause, and Minerva stopped to give them all a smile of approval. "We'll be discussing this with you at a later date. But for now, off you go, get a good night's sleep, and good luck with your classes tomorrow."

Minerva turned back to the stunned faces at the Head Table. "Meeting. Faculty Lounge. Ten minutes, please." With that, she swept from the Great Hall to supervise the students.

Chapter Two: If It Harms None, Do What Thou Wilt

Chapter 3 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Thank you for all the great comments and encouragement! I'm thrilled you're enjoying it!

I must, however, give credit where due. The oath Severus swears in the previous chapter (Merlin's Rotting Rectum) is no more mine than, well, Severus himself. It was originally penned by the great RedSkyAtNight, whose incredible fics were sadly taken down years ago. It's one of my favourite swears, but I don't feel right in having folks

think I made it up. Thanks to RedSky for such a filthy, hilarious oath!

Now, on to the staff meeting:

There's always one in every bunch: the naysayer, the skeptic, the one who says patent leather should never be worn after Mabun. Don't be swayed by them. In a ritual like Beltane, the mind must be open to all possibilities. If they are not...it's up to you to open them! That's what your wand is for.

~ Chapter Two: If It Harms None, Do What Thou Wilt...The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

It is said that a child conceived on this day will grow up to wield great power and knowledge and to be healthier than upon any other.

While the progeny of Wizarding Britain gorged on pumpkin pasties and bragged about their Houses' chances to win that year's House Cup, Rita Skeeter sat in her luxurious office at the *Daily Prophet*, pouring over the latest figures. Her readership was up twenty-three percent from last month, and her editor was talking about another raise...fifty-seven percent of her present salary. Not bad for Ivor Skeeter's skinny, buck-toothed little almost-Squib of a daughter. Rita smirked and adjusted one of her perfect curls. She loved proving the big boys wrong.

And she loved playing them for chumps as well. Ever since the new book had come out, Rita had been sprinkling a few well-placed rumours here and there about offers to move to the States and start her own publication house. Perbody J. Smoklehouse, Editor-In-Chief of the *Daily Prophet*, would have a litter of Crups before he let her *gothat* easily. Nothing brought in the revenue like a good Rita Skeeter story. She honestly believed she could fart better copy than most of these hacks could produce in a year of work, and fortunately for her, dear old Perby felt the same way.

She looked over at her latest work and gave the book a fond little pat. On the dust jacket, the book's subject glared up her with a milk-curdling sneer of contempt, highlighting his preposterous nose and sallow complexion. *Severus Snape: Nobody's Hero* was a huge seller, even better than her Dumbledore bio ten years before.

She allowed herself a satisfied smile. She'd been vilified for that one, until the real facts came out shortly after the war. Only Rita had told the truth about old St. Dumbledore...well, a very good-sounding truth. The gist of it all was real enough to knock the barmy old coot off his altar and put him back in the dirt where he belonged. His popularity had dipped fourteen percent in the first four and a half months alone, and twenty-seven percent overall. Not a bad average.

And now it was Snape's turn. If that bitter old crow couldn't do the noble thing and shuffle off when he was at death's door, then he would have to face the music. Her sources informed her that since the book was released, demands to have him removed from the Hogwarts staff had risen forty-four-point-six percent.

Rita considered it her civic duty, really. The public had a right to know the truth. Or at least, they had a right to buy Rita's version of the truth. Didn't they?

She tapped a long, green-lacquered nail against her teeth. Everything would have been fine if that Granger bint hadn't cornered her in Diagon Alley, with her veiled threats and her holier-than-thou attitude. Rita had been spitting fire ever since that little reunion.

She had immediately cornered Ronald Weasley after his last proposal debacle. Twenty-two percent of her best flame stories came from jilted ex's. And after that fiasco in Ireland, he might be in the mood for a bit of vengeance gossip. But the ginger twat wouldn't even speak to her. He even had the audacity to have his lawyers threaten litigation if Rita tried to pursue the story further. Didn't the idiot know he could make money from his misery?

So Rita had gone back to basics and looked through every piece of back copy she could find, trying to find a dirty angle she could use to disgrace Granger, but the smug bitch was too goody-goody for words.

And now she was doing Snape, Rita was sure of it. She could practically feel it in her thorax. She was ninety-seven percent sure ~~that~~ that was the reason Granger had threatened her with exposure again if she didn't climb off Snape's hunched back. Why else would someone like Granger stand up for a slippery creep like him?

Rita had spies planted everywhere, cameras in hand, just waiting for the opportunity to catch them somewhere together. She had Ron Weasley's flat on speed-Floo, just in case she needed to go and break the wretched news to the jilted lover and jump-start that lead again.

Scandal would get Granger off her back quite nicely, she thought, smiling to herself. It would almost be worth keeping it schtum for a bit. It might mean years...and Galleons...of blackmail. She would just have to be patient. *Pride goeth before a fall, Miss Granger.*

And she *would* fall. The goody-goodies always did. Law of averages and all that.

"So, let me get this straight, Minerva," Madam Hooch said, her yellow eyes glowing dangerously. "This May, we will be performing a complete and traditional Beltane rite, in full livery, with the entire Wizarding world watching?"

"That's correct, Rolanda," Minerva replied, with more confidence than she was feeling. The staff's reaction to her announcement had been, to say the least, underwhelming. She huffed in exasperation. "For Merlin's sake, it's not a human sacrifice, people! We are reviving a sacred ritual, one that has sustained magical folk for countless generations. Why, pray tell, are you all so unenthusiastic about it?"

Looking out at the group of sullen, uncooperative faces, she tried another approach. "What is so unsavoury about taking a venerated rite that we witches and wizards have performed since Merlin was a boy and showing the world how beautiful and unifying this type of social tradition can be?"

Severus, leaning against the mantle with his arms folded, pushed himself upright. "I fear it may be a case of too little too soon *and* too much too late, Minerva."

"Gods, Severus. That is cryptic, even for you. What's that mean when it's at home, man?"

He gave a scowl of concentration. "I think many will see it as a gimmick set up by the Ministry to encourage the more conservative magical folk to engage in a bit of ritualistic tree-hugging to show how open-minded and free-thinking they are."

"Well, that's codswollop!"

"Didn't say it wasn't," he said, with an elegant shrug. "There may be others who might view it in less than bright light."

"Meaning?"

Severus suddenly looked uncomfortable, as if he wished he hadn't brought it up. He added haltingly, "Tom Riddle advocated the performing of ancient rituals for his own perverted use. There could be some who think this hits a little too close to those so-called Dark Revels." He couldn't meet her eyes. "Especially if it were discovered that certain persons, myself in particular, are participating."

The room erupted in a chorus of protests and angrily defensive declarations. Minerva, unnerved at his dispassionate but plausible argument, cried, "Everyone, please!" and the room gradually quieted. Before she could lose any more control, she gave them all a hard stare, and they settled back into grim silence.

As she opened her mouth to speak, a soft voice called out into the room. "Headmistress, may I say something?"

"Of course, Professor Granger," Minerva answered. The young woman stood, and looked around at her fellow professors. Most of them had been her teachers at one point, and they all, with one exception, had adored her feverish love of scholarship and industry.

Hermione faced them all with a rather self-conscious smile. "I hope I don't sound presumptuous, and I apologise if I do. But growing up in a Muggle home, I never participated in anything like this. I'd read all the Muggle stories about witches and *warlocks*, of course." She rolled her eyes, and everyone laughed shortly. The tension in the room seemed to ease by a fraction. "And I'll admit, I regarded these rituals as somewhat dark and sinister. People who didn't understand them spoke of devil and demon worship, and that all magical people were somehow in league with the dark forces.

"It took coming to Hogwarts to understand that people were merely ignorant of the true purpose of these rituals. They thought this way because they didn't know any better. I completely understand Professor Snape's reticence, with all due respect," she added quickly, turning toward him with a little bow, "but perhaps this is the best and greatest opportunity to prove that theory wrong once and for all.

"If we do this, not to glorify the Ministry and their ideas, but do it to act as a purification of the ritual itself, then we're doing our job, aren't we? We're educating. It stops being a dog-and-pony show for the government, and it becomes an educational tool to show that these rituals are nothing to fear, but something to embrace as our culture and our love for nature and one other."

"Well said, Hermione, well said!" Filius answered, applauding. The other teachers, with one exception, nodded thoughtfully, and Pomona Sprout squeezed Hermione's shoulder encouragingly. She blushed and looked around hastily, a little abashed at the reaction.

"Thank you, Hermione. I couldn't agree more. We shall stop promoting this as the Ministry's do, and treat it as a lesson to be taught. Besides," Minerva said with a smile, "This is supposed to be a retreat for us as well. Three years ago I had the opportunity to visit Knappogue Castle. It's a very luxurious spa retreat. Two pools, five wet bars, all private en suites, you know the type.

"Well," she added with a flourish, "Filius and I have been doing a bit of Transfiguration on the fourth floor, and we've managed to recreate the entire spa in the Northwest wing! I've even asked two of Knappogue's masseurs and one of their bartenders to be on hand during Spring hols. While we're preparing and rehearsing for the ritual, we can retire there in the evenings and do a little team building, as the Muggles say. That's a lot of massages, hot springs and letting our hair down, while we're pondering the mysteries of Beltane, wouldn't you agree?"

Now that got their attention! Even Severus had dropped all pretence of ignoring her. "Face, it, my friends," Minerva, added, taking it home, "you'll never get more relaxed and legless cheaper."

"Well, that's more like it, Min," Rolanda crowed, rubbing her hands in anticipation. "You should have told us that in the first place instead of all that ritual rubbish."

"Oh, make no mistake, the ritual will be an involving, time-consuming part of it all, but in between, what happens on the fourth floor stays on the fourth floor." She eyed them all as throats were cleared and faces flushed guiltily.

The general chatter sounded much more relaxed as Minerva signaled for quiet once more. "Now, one more order of business, and I'll let you go. As you know, the Beltane ritual is comprised of several smaller rituals culminating in a dance at the end. We will perform the rites themselves on the Quidditch Pitch. Filius has been overseeing the redesign, which will transform the pitch to suit out needs following the last game of the season. It's the perfect place to hold the ceremony and the dances afterward."

"Oh, yeah," Hooch said, her eyebrows wagging lecherously. "All those lovely dancers in the light of the bonfire. Leaves you randy as a stoat."

"Yes, thank you, Rolanda. There will be students present for parts of this," Minerva replied archly, giving her a withering look. "My point is that the ritual requires a witch and a wizard to act as the High Priestess and High Priest, who will in turn become the embodiment of the god and goddess. These roles require a great deal of preparation. The Room of Requirement will be used by our High Priest and Priestess to rehearse separately from the entire group."

She glanced at Filius, who gave her a solemn wink. "I don't have to tell you how important these roles are. The High Priest and Priestess are our gateway to the divine aspect of the rituals. They call all the rites to order and perform the more intricate and formal ceremonies. Further, they will receive a bonus from the Ministry due to the extra work they will have to do to get everything in order."

The faculty started twittering amongst themselves again, each eyeing the other. "Do we volunteer, Headmistress?" Sybil Trelawney asked, rising from her chair as if she'd been pulled up by her hair. Behind her monstrous glasses, her eyes blinked owlishly; her thin, thready voice wafted through the air like the smoke from a sputtering candle. "In that case, I would be willing to put myself forward as..."

"While I appreciate your sacrifice, Sybil, in this case that will not be necessary," Minerva declared, smiling indulgently at her Divinations professor. "The Deputy and I have already decided that your High Priest and High Priestess for this year's Beltane will be Severus and Hermione."

A collective gasp sucked all the air out of the room, and both Severus and Hermione looked at Minerva in growing horror.

Severus began to sputter like a Muggle motorboat. "But...but, but why me? Potter...he's your man! He should be the High Priest..."

Minerva stopped him with a look. She'd been prepared for this argument, thank Merlin. "Harry Potter has his own part to play in the ritual. Now, this is quite exciting, and very confidential. We're keeping this part a complete secret, so you must not tell a soul; it'll spoil the surprise." She looked out into their curious faces. "Wands out. You'll all take a wand oath of secrecy."

After the reluctant oath was given, she continued, "At the point where the Oak King is ready to return to the goddess, Harry will perform the rite of the Firebringer. He will be the embodiment of the bonfire as the symbol of good banishing the darkness. It's a very difficult role; he has to train very hard for this. He'll actually 'become' the fire. He's already started training for it...it takes a huge amount of stamina and magic to perform the rite."

"Oooh, I was in Yugoslavia several years ago for Beltane and saw that rite enacted. It was very impressive. Nice touch, Min," Pomona Sprout said with a smile.

"It's not been performed here in Britain for over two hundred years, so it's going to really increase the wow factor, I can assure you," Minerva added, feeling slightly dizzy with relief. She caught Filius eye. *Well, we certainly dodged that Avada, didn't we?* his eyes seemed to say.

"I want this to absolutely bring down the house, as the Muggles say, hence the wand oath to keep this a complete secret. I don't want anyone giving that away," she replied, fixing her eye on Severus. "Now, I want you two to meet with me on Wednesday, and we'll discuss the schedule you'll need to follow."

Turning away from their pale, astonished expressions, Minerva beamed at her staff. "Right! Now, isn't this exciting? We'll talk more during the next staff meeting. Good night, everyone!"

She and Filius almost ran out of the room. "What do you think?" Minerva asked her old friend as they sped down the hall. "Do you think they'll balk? I thought Severus was ready to walk out for a moment!" She dabbed at her upper lip with a handkerchief. "Merlin, I haven't been so nervous since I took my N.E.W.T.s. I think they'll do it, don't you?"

Filius patted her hand reassuringly. "Of course they will!" he declared breathlessly, running to keep up with her long strides. "I wanted to kiss Severus for bringing up Harry Potter...that was the perfect distraction!"

"It may have waylaid the others, but Severus wasn't buying it," she added ruefully.

"Oh, pish tosh! This is exactly what Severus needs. And Hermione as well. She's got to convince young Weasley that all this mooning is counterproductive and distracting."

Not to mention pointless." He stopped her by grabbing her hand. "It will be wonderful, Minerva. For all of us. You wait and see."

After the rest of the staff filed out, talking heatedly amongst themselves, Severus turned to Hermione. She was wearing a look that was equal parts excitement and terror. Finally, unable to withstand his silent, flat stare, she gulped, "Well, I must say I didn't expect that! It's...rather exciting, don't you think?"

Severus shook his head. "I can think of several adjectives, but exciting isn't one of them." He sat down heavily in a chair. He shook his head and hissed to himself, "What on earth is Minerva thinking?"

"...When I returned from Christmas hols Professor McGonagall suggested this book on the revival of the old rituals..."

"...It's obvious that sly harpy already had this planned. A fait accompli." He fumed. "And they call Slytherins devious..."

"Have you read it?"

He stared at her for a moment, taking in her hopeful 'let's-make-the-best-of-things' expression, then frowned. "Read what?"

She made an exasperated little tutting sound that he remembered from her days mothering Potter and Weasley, and resumed digging around in a small handbag, muttering, "It's in here somewhere." She shoved her entire arm down into the bag, to Severus' bemusement. Clever little witch, that. The bag was about as large as a small wallet...nice bit of extension charm work.

"Oh, I just saw the ..." Suddenly she made a sound of triumph. "Aha! Here we are!" she announced and produced a small golden book with a flourish. *The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane*, by Sebelius Slunt."

"Sebelius *Slunt*? That sounds like Wizarding Rhyming Slang for..."

"Yes, I'm very aware of Wizarding Rhyming Slang, thank you," she replied prissily. "It's a very approachable and entertaining look at the entire process of Ritualism. I think you might find it an enjoyable read."

He managed to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. Barely. "Professor Granger. Hermione. Why on earth would I want to be entertained by a piece of pop-culture trash?"

She plopped down in the chair next to his, waving the book under his nose. "It's not pop-culture. It's a very accessible guidebook to the rituals. I mean, they're very complex."

"I'm well aware of the complexities of ritual..."

"Then you are well aware that the culminating ritual of Beltane is the fertility rite. That's when the High Priest and High Priestess represent the God and Goddess during the ritual. It's rather ..." she blushed charmingly. "Well, it's all a bit s-sensual and erotic, quite frankly." She gulped and looked at her hands, her face scarlet. "The goddess runs through the hedges, and the god must catch her, and when he does, well, erm, it's all rather ... you know, s-sexy, actually."

Severus paused. Suddenly, this ritual bollocks didn't sound all that heinous. "I see," he replied, lowering his voice by a minor third and settling a layer of sable over it. "So you and I will be reenacting the mating of the god and goddess." It was almost worth it to see a little gleam of *something* appear in her warm brown eyes.

She stammered, "Well, we, erm, yes. I mean, if one takes it *symbolically*..."

Severus watched her squirm her way through the explanation, growing colder by the second. It was obvious she had been reading up on this; it was also obvious that the idea of having him as her consort, even *symbolically* was about as attractive as if the role were given to Argus Filch.

He interrupted her with a terse, "Are you sure you're a good enough actress to *symbolically* overlook all my shortcomings?"

She stared at him blankly. "Sorry, I'm not following you."

"Granger, I'm not blind. I'm saying you no doubt would prefer performing this 'sensual and erotic' ritual with someone whose physical attributes were more pleasing. I'm old enough and ugly enough to know I'm old enough and ugly enough." He could not prevent the bitter tone from leeching into his voice. "I don't need a mirror to know I'm not exactly Gilderoy Lockhart."

Her eyes widened in alarm. "No, you're not, and thank fuck for that," she stated baldly. She gave him another exasperated huff. No wonder Potter and Weasley ran from her like the plague when she was on the warpath. "There's nothing wrong with you physically, Severus. Merlin knows, if I have to do this with anyone, I would want it to be you."

He looked at her obliquely. "Would you indeed? Either you are an appalling liar, or you really *do* need to get out more, Professor."

Ah, now there were the flashing eyes he saw at Hogsmead! Her brows rushed together in that instant, and she gave him a look that was both angry and hurt. "Oh, don't be such an arse, Severus! I just meant that, we'll, this is going to be seen on the WWW! They say it adds at least a stone to your bum alone."

Baffled, he retorted, "Why? Are you planning on eating it? Talk sense, Granger!"

"I'm saying that the camera makes one look fat! I'm not really into exhibitionism, but when you add the factor that I'm going to be cavorting around in front of the entire world with an extra stone on my bum..."

She broke off, and looked away. "This is an important, if *not* the most important ritual in our culture. It's prestigious to have the role of the god or goddess."

Severus looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She was absently chewing on her thumbnail. "So it's not just the idea of being seen with me then?"

She made that charming little growling sound again. "Your insecurity is showing, Snape. I'm trying to say, well, I'm trying to say that it just feels like it's a private thing, and, well, you and I are one thing, and you and I and the entire Wizarding populace ogling us is quite another." She gave him a sheepish, apologetic shrug. "I'm a witch. Can I help it that I want to look dead sexy while you chase me in front of all those millions of witches and wizards?"

Feeling more pleased that he should, Severus replied, "I'm sure that the more, shall I say, explicit parts of the ritual will be edited for the WWW broadcast, Granger. No need to worry about Weasley seeing you dancing around the bonfire in your smalls."

The look on her face was so priceless it took all his training not to laugh. "Umm, it didn't mention having to strip down to your underwear in the book," she said, skeptically, frowning as she rifled through the pages. "I'm sure I would have remembered mention of dress protocol..."

He should have resisted. He should have kept his mouth shut. Instead, he leaned over, and in his silkiest, most sinuous voice replied, "Actually, participants in the Beltane ritual traditionally dance skyclad."

She froze, her eyes so large he thought they would fall out and roll across the floor like two marbles. He smirked, "I can imagine worse things for the Wizarding populace to see than you belly-dancing around a balefire wearing nothing but a smile."

Then the realisation of his words dawned on them both almost simultaneously, and Granger's mouth twisted into an answering smirk. "Well, then. I look forward to *your* equally naked tango, Snape."

He watched her as she rose from her chair, grinning down at him. In a voice too innocent to be innocent, she cooed, "Sleep well, Professor."

Alone, Severus dropped his head into his hands, and wondered which god he'd pissed off this time. He was going to have to dance, naked, around a bonfire, on the WW Bloody W.

He could *Avada* himself now, and save the trouble of memorising all those incantations...

Chapter Three: Consecration and Blessing

Chapter 4 of 13

Wizards Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Thank you all for the great comments and encouragement! I am thrilled to pieces you all seem to be enjoying this fic.

Some housekeeping things: Please give three cheers for Stgulik, the beta/editor extraordinaire, who makes sure my sentences are legible, and who makes me laugh and think and inspired and everything that an author needs and wants.

Also, please be reminded that this is a fantasy Beltane Ritual. Some parts of the actual Pagan ritual are included in the story, and some parts are the product of my imagination. I apologise to any of my Pagan friends - I mean no disrespect with the changes and augmentations made herein.

Distractions are inevitable, but you can't allow them to detract from the plan. As with all magic, intent and focus are the keys to a successful ritual. Whether drawing the circle, the fire or the moon, if you let your concentration slip for one moment, not only will disaster be imminent, but you'll have a bloody great mess on your hands.

~Chapter Three: Consecration and Blessing - The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

Come join the dance, that doth entrance, and tread the circle round.

Be of good cheer that gather here, upon this merry ground.

Good luck to we that faithful be, and hold our craft so dear,

For 'tis our delight of a shiny night, in the season of the year. ~Beltane Ritual

"Alright, class, you have about ten minutes to finish up. I require a small vial of your completed potion, then you'll need to clean up. I ~~do~~ expect to see unused sludge floating around anyone's cauldron after you leave, or there will be detention with Professor Snape. Not an experience anyone should wish to repeat, eh, Mr. Walters?"

"No, Professor Granger," the young man muttered, eyes focused on his cauldron.

Hermione smiled inwardly. Jaime Walters, a bright and handsome little fifth-year Slytherin, had a way with the young witches and a penchant for thinking himself above the rules. He reminded Hermione absurdly of Draco Malfoy, who was currently living in France with a Quidditch star named Martin.

After repeat offences of finding Jaime's potions leavings congealing in a supposedly-cleaned cauldron, Hermione sought out Snape and asked her illustrious predecessor his advice. "Ah, makes me long for the good old days," he'd drawled, giving her his patented Snape sneer. "I am, of course, being facetious." He gave her an imperious look of calculation. "Send him to me, Granger. I'll make sure your cauldrons are squeaky clean from now on."

Hermione never asked, and Jaime Walters never confided the nature of his detention. However, he returned to her class the following day looking decidedly green around the gills, and Hermione could have eaten out of his cauldron ever since.

Once the Hogwarts tomtoms had spread the word that crossing Professor Granger earned detention with their dreaded DADA teacher, Hermione rarely had any problems. She sent Snape a nice bottle of firewhisky for Christmas as a thank-you for his assistance.

As the students filed out of her last class of the day, Hermione allowed herself yet again to brood over the enigma that was Severus Snape. To be fair, she also gave herself equal time in questioning her attraction to him. During her sixth year, when he was their DADA professor, she'd sort of fancied him. A bit.

Well, he was different from any man, wizard or Muggle, she had ever known. And he had exhibited an aura of aloof, controlled menace that admittedly troubled and intrigued her. And there were times when he would cut his black eyes over her that made her wonder what would it be like to ...

But those were the idle fantasies of a seventeen-year-old girl for her dark, mysterious professor. In other words, hardly potential boyfriend fodder. And Harry had hated him so much during that time...it was difficult to define her own feelings for a man who was so vehemently despised by her best friends. She wasn't chummy enough with her own roommates to even broach the subject. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the Slytherin girls found him dead fancy-able.

More than once she'd overheard them speculating about him, their eyes darting over his passing figure with cool, open regard. They discussed everything from the size of his manhood to his sexual proclivities, like he was a bit of a catch. She had certainly never thought of him that way, but then again, he had treated her, Ron and Harry like Blast-ended Skrewt spurt for the better part of seven years.

The horrors of the war had turned everything she'd ever thought about him on a sixpence, and the messy aftermath had only served to confuse her even more. It had taken years of absence from Hogwarts to enable her to sort out her feelings, and they changed yet again when she returned to take up his old Potions position. Imagine her surprise to find not the witheringly unpleasant Professor of her school years, but a quiet, solemn man, vilified by the press, but by and large respected and liked by his colleagues.

Yes, he could still cut the tongue out of a dunderhead at twenty paces, and he could be irascible and ill tempered and occasionally unkempt and hungover, but he wasn't a monster. He could be very funny, and when in the proper mood, almost courtly. He had stopped being an enigma; he was just a man, if a wizard like Severus Snape could ever qualify as *just* a man. Their frequent conversations had been enjoyable and stimulating, and Hermione longed to spend more time with him. He was the only man who'd ever gave her an intellectual run for her money, but he also seemed to see her more than just a brain box. Sometimes, like the night the students returned to Hogwarts, they actually had moments of fun, as if he might possibly *like* her.

But he was a man whose heart belonged to another. After the war, Harry had confided that their professor had been in love with his mum, and still carried an undying love for her. It was the deciding factor of his duty to protect Harry and the defining moment of his trial after the war. Snape's love for Lily Evans Potter had transcended Tom Riddle's reign of terror, his death and rebirth, and even Lily's murder. According to Harry's testimony, Severus Snape loved Lily, and always would.

Sometimes, Hermione hated Lily Evans, and felt awful about it. She had no right to. Lily was, by all accounts, beautiful and kind and accomplished. Men fell out of the sky to declare their love for her. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black had adored her. Even old Professor Slughorn used to wax lyrical over her in a way usually reserved for who could provide him with the best seats at the World Quidditch Cup or his favourite sugared pineapple in bulk. Everyone was in agreement: Lily was perfect - the bitch.

So Hermione had reconciled herself. If Snape was incapable of finding another witch worthy of his love, she could at least become his friend. Then something had happened. Well, a series of somethings had happened.

First, Ron had started his twice-yearly let's-get-married-and-have-lots-of-sex-and-babies campaign, even though he was screwing his way through every witch with a Season Ticket to the Chudley Cannons. That had worn on her nerves to the point where she cringed if she saw his old owl Pig fluttering her way.

Then she heard a little tidbit from her students that, following the Jaime Walter's incident, Snape had informed their shared students that should they disrupt Professor Granger's classes and be so foolish as to earn a detention from her, they would answer personally to him. Professor Snape, it seemed, was quite protective of Professor Granger. But Hermione couldn't decide if it was because he cared, or because he was gloating over the fact she couldn't maintain her own discipline.

Then, last Halloween, she had been sitting at the Feast, feeling rather alone and sorry for herself. Moodily, her eyes had drifted over to opposite end of the Head table, when Snape was sitting, equally alone. When she cast a moping glance over at him, he was looking at her with eyes that were large and liquid and ... and...

Smoldering. He was looking at her. Sloe-eyed. Burning with a man's fire. For a woman. *Oh, Merlin's knobblies.* On the receiving end of that intense, fiery glare, Hermione felt her entire body flush hot, glazed in the kiln of that incendiary stare. It was possessive and bold and not a little untamed, and no one, *no one*, had ever looked at her with such heavy, heated...

Then Snape realised she was staring back. He blinked, calmly rose to his feet and stalked away. She had sat there, breathing hard, trying to assimilate what had just happened. Snape had scorched her to cinders with *one look*.

She had scuttled back to her quarters that night as soon as she could make her excuses. She dashed into her bedroom, warding the door within an inch of its life, and barely had time to find her vibrator. In her hastily-sketched fantasy, instead of racing away, he had held her gaze and approached her. Without a word, he had taken her hand and they had raced to her classroom, where he had laid her down on the desk *she had sat at when he taught Potions* and rogered her into insensibility, consuming her in the beautiful blaze of those dark, overpowering eyes.

She came with his name on her parched lips. Again and again. She could barely look at him throughout November without blushing. And it wasn't enough that she had spent Halloween diddling her hair purple over him... she'd spent the rest of the year, including the Christmas holiday, doing it as well. It became her go-to fantasy, and she got herself off on it more than any she'd ever spun before. And each time afterward, when her pounding heartbeat finally slowed down to normal, she would look around her sterile little Hogwarts bedroom, and fight the urge to cry.

He might cast the occasional ocular *Incendio* her way, but his heart belonged to another. Always.

How was she supposed to compete with a dead woman?

A knock on her door jarred her out of her morose thoughts. "Enter!" she called. Minerva poked her head into the classroom. Hermione stood. "Hello, Professor McGonagall. Please come in."

"Thank you, my dear," the headmistress said with a smile, and followed Hermione into the small room off the Potions classroom that doubled as her study. "How are your classes going this first week back?"

"Well enough, Headmistress. You know how it is," Hermione answered, setting her kettle to boil. "And what brings you down to the dungeons on this lovely afternoon?"

Blithely, Minerva replied, "Oh, just seeing how you're coming along with preparations for the upcoming festivities." She nodded approvingly at the copy of *The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane*, sitting on the corner of Hermione's desk. Lying beside the book was a bit of parchment with her notes. From where both women sat, they were easily readable: *Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence, within you. And before the rite is ended, if it is appropriate, become one with your working partner, physically as well as spiritually.* Hermione had circled the last sentence several times.

With a blush as red as the ink used to encircle the quote, she hastily laid her third-year class' Potions quiz on top of the parchment. Minerva looked up and smiled at Hermione. "I see you've gotten stuck in on the material. I was hoping we could perform the Consecration and Blessing ceremony this evening. That way, you can start rehearsals in the Room of Requirement. It's all ready, you know."

Hermione eyed the tower of papers guiltily. "Actually, I attempted to talk to Professor Snape this morning before breakfast. I had hoped we could agree on a time for the C&B Ceremony for this evening, but..." She grimaced. "Let's just say he threatened to turn my schedule and notes into a pile of ash."

Minerva's eyes grew wide, then she laughed. "Och, you don't mean you tried to get anything coherent out of Severus before he had his morning coffee? I'm surprised he didn't turn *you* into ash."

Hermione smiled ruefully. "Well, I'm not so naive as to think he didn't consider it." She winked. "But I was always pretty good at dodging hexes. And his aim is awful without caffeine."

The two witches laughed together, then Minerva grew pensive. "I had hoped after the war that life would be kinder to Severus." Her eyes grew shuttered. "He certainly didn't receive much in the way of kindness before. We all treated him so abominably, Hermione. You weren't here. You have no idea what that boy went through." She shook her head, her eyes dark with remorse. "He deserves better than this, Hermione. He deserves to be appreciated."

"I appreciate him," Hermione answered softly, her eyes locked on the stack of parchment. She ventured a look at her mentor. "I just want to help."

Minerva brightened. "Of course you do, child! That's why you and he are perfect as our High Priest and Priestess! You'll be brilliant, I know you will. And as you said, we're there to educate the rest of the country. Think of it as a giant classroom, and you and Severus will be giving the lecture of your lives!"

"I think that's the problem, Minerva," Hermione answered. She chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully. "He's so worried that his presence will be disruptive." She took a deep breath, and spoke her true thoughts. "I have to question the fairness of coercing him to do something that could set him up for humiliation."

The headmistress pursed her lips. "Hermione, no one wants that to happen, least of all me. But I keep thinking of the positive outcome this can be, if performed correctly. You and I both know that Severus is a very powerful, charismatic wizard. I think with the proper motivation, he could simply steal the show!"

Hermione couldn't help but smile. "I agree, he is very... charismatic," she said, thinking of the man who had blistered her from across a crowded room with a single look. "But his heart isn't exactly in it. I think that will come across as someone who really doesn't want to be part of the rituals, and that will compromise the integrity of the entire ceremony."

Minerva regarded her with something approaching guile. "You're right, of course, Hermione. He can dig his heels in with the best of them. But he's not above the right kind of motivation, now is he?"

Hermione felt her face grow warm. "Well, I..."

"Inspire him, girl! Make him remember what life is worth living for!"

"Minerva!" Hermione felt as if someone had dumped a cauldron full of Freezing Draught over her head. "I...I, well, I don't deny I find him intriguing, but-"

"Hermione, honestly! If I were forty years younger, you'd have competition, I'll promise you! Severus Snape is a wizard worth fighting for, and a witch like yourself needs a cause to fight for. Make him your cause."

Hermione closed her eyes. "It's complicated, Professor."

"Why?"

She looked away. "You know why. Everyone does."

"Humour me. I've apparently forgotten."

Hermione sighed. "Lily Potter."

To Hermione's surprise, the headmistress laughed. "You don't believe all that nonsense about Lily and Severus, do you? Dear, I was ~~there~~ *here*. Childhood sweethearts do not an eternal flame make, Hermione. That's the hopeless romantic in you talking."

"But Harry told me about the memories-"

"Have you ever asked Severus about them?"

Mortified, Hermione cried, "No! And please don't say anything to him, Minerva!"

The headmistress stood and continued briskly, "Alright, I won't. Get a schedule pinned down with Severus today. No excuses. And for Circe's sweet sucking sake, talk to him! You two are going to be spending time alone in the Room of Requirement, rehearsing your parts. Get to know one another. That's an order." She locked her gimlet eye on Hermione. "Now, I'll hear no more of this nonsense. Tell him I have commanded you both to be in my office this evening at eight o'clock for the Consecration and Blessing. Understood?"

Resigned, Hermione meekly nodded. "Yes, Headmistress."

"Good. I'll see you then."

Minerva made her way back toward the Great Hall. She thought of Severus and Hermione; two fiercely intelligent, powerfully magical, totally clueless people. It would take a blind person not to see they were made for one another, but after all, love was blind, as they said.

Lily Potter. Gods, what silliness Severus had wrought with those memories. Minerva sighed inwardly. True, the girl had hurt him, but he'd been a complete arse...and at fifteen, who has any common sense anyway?

Wizards, she thought. Trust them to do something absolutely stupid when they think they're going to die. And equally stupid of Hermione to think Severus wasn't interested in her.

Minerva had seen the looks he'd given Hermione when he thought no one was watching. The boy was half in love with her already; all he needed was a little encouragement. Hogwarts' headmistress straightened the front of her tartan robe and headed for the stairs, a gleam in her eye. As Filius was fond of saying, Ignorance was forgivable. Stupidity was not.

It was up to her to make sure those two didn't do something stupid, like miss this opportunity to fall in love.

Severus could tell by the knock on his door that it was Hermione, and he straightened up from the essay he was murdering and released the lock with a careless wave of his hand. She ducked in with wave of greeting. "Mind if I come in?"

He nodded, and looked pointedly at the parchment before him. "If you've come to save this tragedy in three acts, otherwise known as Miss Remelak's essay on the Unforgivables, you're too late, Granger."

"That riveting, huh?" she smiled as she approached him, and Severus forced his eyes away from her lovely form back to the parchment at hand. She leaned over, giving him a panoramic view down her Muggle jumper to her enticing cleavage, and wrinkled her nose. "Ouch. It looks like the victim of a *Sectumsempra*."

"Very amusing, Professor. Have you come to kibitz or did you actually have a reason for interrupting my free hour?"

He lowered his head back to the parchment, but out of the corner of his eye he saw her resolutely plant her hands on her hips. Something in her stance had a worrying finality to it, and he thought he might have been a tad too terse. He dropped his quill, and rocked back in his chair, lacing his fingers together. "My apologies, Professor Granger. Hermione. I'm not having a very good day."

Her honey-colored eyes grew warm with concern. "I'm sorry to hear that, Severus. Is there anything I can do to help?"

He favoured her with a rueful glance. "Can you convince Minerva to pull me off this High Priest nonsense? That would be lovely for a start."

She pulled up a nearby chair and propped her elbows upon his desk. "Fat chance. She's just been to my room to do the pep talk. I'm afraid you and I are the starting two. We're to meet in her study tonight at eight for the C&B, like it or not."

He sighed harshly. "I don't want to do this. I don't want to have to face Wizarding Britain as their 'High Priest', just to be pelted with Merlin knows what during the purification ceremony."

Hermione's face was suffused with sympathy. "Severus, that isn't going to happen! You're the perfect wizard for this."

"The perfect wizard to make a complete arse out of himself, you mean."

"That's most certainly *not* what I mean and you know it," she shot back, her silky brows rushing together. "Look, Snape, are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

Severus blinked, and stared at Hermione in puzzled silence. "Wha...why would I...," He pursed his lips. "Granger, why would I be ashamed to be seen with you?"

She gave him a haughty look. "Well, you just keep moaning on how you don't want to be the High Priest and dread the entire thing and how awful it's going to be, and I just can't help but wonder if you'd rather have another High Priestess with you."

He frowned at her, wondering if this was some clumsy Gryffindor attempt to back-foot him with reverse psychological rubbish. "Don't be daft, Granger," he said, uneasily, feeling back-footed anyway. "You sound positively narcissistic. I don't want to do it because the Wizarding public would love to see me looking like a right zoom, trying to ingratiate myself back into society."

Hermione slumped slightly, as if relieved. Then she shook her head. "Severus, how on earth would you look a zoom? As the High Priest, you're in charge of the bloody ceremony... you will be splendid! And why do you really care? If Wizarding Britain is so moronic that they only thing they choose to believe about you is what Rita Skeeter has written, they don't deserve your regard."

"That's easy to say when you're not in danger of losing it," he said, and hated the puling, whining sentiment of it. She was right, of course. "It's not that I want their regard, truly. But Merlin, I'm so tired of their contempt. I'm not like your friends Potter and Weasley. I don't relish the fame and attention."

"That's not fair. They don't relish the attention. Well, maybe Ron does, but that's beside the point!" she protested. "You're doing the very thing you loathe the public to do." She straightened. "You chose to believe the worst because it fits your presumptions. Harry hates the attention and the spotlight, and just wants to live a quiet, normal life with Ginny and the boys. I'm not stringing Ron Weasley along by dating him, then refusing to marry him. Ron and I haven't dated since I first moved to France to teach at Beauxbatons, and we never will. I don't want him. And you, Professor, you," she shook her head. "You just want to be thought of as the wizard you are, not the villain Rita's book has painted you."

She leaned down, and to Severus' surprise, she lifted the edge of his dark hair and tucked it gently behind his ear. "We are going to be part of something beautiful, and special. Who knows? It may change our lives forever. In any case, we're making history again, and this time we're calling the shots. Let's prove the naysayers wrong." He looked up at her impish smile. "C'mon, Severus. What could be more fun than making Rita Skeeter look like a muppet while getting relaxed and legless, hmm?"

She patted his shoulder, and headed for the door. "I'm going to be at Minerva's study at eight o'clock to be consecrated and blessed as the High Priestess of the Hogwarts Coven. I really, really hope you'll be my High Priest." She turned back to him with a grin. "I dare you."

With that, she was gone, leaving behind the lightest mist of her perfume and the ghost of her smile, which floated, Cheshire cat-like, in his memory. Well that, and the subtle emphasis she'd placed on the word 'him'. *I don't want him.*

Then who did she want?

Hermione tried to hide her relief and pleasure as she turned the corner and saw Severus, his scowl firmly in place, waiting for her at the foot of the stairs leading to the Headmistress' office.

"Professor Snape," she said solemnly.

"Professor Granger," he replied, his voice sonorous and resigned.

"Shall we proceed?" she said, nodding toward the stairs.

"If we must," he answered with a ragged sigh. He indicated for her to go first, and as she walked past him, he placed a hand on her shoulder. When she looked up into his troubled eyes, her heart ached. He looked so defeated. "Don't make me regret this," he said quietly.

"You won't. I promise." She nodded her head firmly, wishing her conviction was as strong as her bravado.

"Hermione, Severus, you're here. Excellent!" Minerva ushered them in, smiling. "You're just in time for refreshments. Now, have you met Magister Cornelius Honeyclutch?"

Hermione saw an elderly wizard bounding toward Severus with the energy and enthusiasm of a golden retriever. He must have been at least one hundred years old, and had the merry eyes of a particularly kind Father Christmas. "Oh, Severus and I are old friends," the elderly wizard said, his voice sounding warm and grandfatherly. "That is, I feel like I know him from our correspondences. How nice to finally meet you, Professor."

To Hermione's surprise, Severus gave the older wizard a smile as they shook hands. "The pleasure is mine, Magister. I didn't realise you'd be here for the Consecration."

"I'm performin' it, my friend! I don't miss any Beltane service if I can help it! Witnessin' the Consecration and Blessin' of a High Priest and Priestess is one of the greatest privileges...and a jolly nice perk of being an expert in the field of ritualism." He winked at Severus, then turned his attention to Hermione. In spite of his advanced age and portly stature, he took her hand with a gallant bow.

"My dear Miss Granger! I've read of your great deeds and thrilled to tales of your bravery and cleverness. And now I bow to your loveliness." He looked up from his bow with unabashed adoration. "To be in the presence of such a powerful and beautiful witch takes my breath away! How do you keep from kneelin' at her feet each time she passes, friend Severus?"

Terrified of what Severus might actually say in response, Hermione hastily replied, "Magister Honeyclutch, it's such a pleasure to meet you at last! I'm planning on attending your lectures while you're here. I've watched several of your MAT talks on the WWW."

Minerva and Severus both looked confused. "It's a series of lectures," Hermione explained. "Magical, Academic, Tradition. Speakers from all over the world give them online. I've seen loads of them." She turned to the old wizard, who was clearly delighted. "I'd love to sit down and have a nice chat with you on your correlations between Ritualism and Arithmancy."

"Oh, I'm sure you would," Severus drawled under his breath.

Hermione gave him what she hoped was 'play nice' look, then turned back to the Magister with an apologetic smile. "Sorry. That's Professor Snape's way of letting me know I'm talking too much."

Magister Honeyclutch chortled. "Nonsense, my dear. We'll find a bit of time this week and have a lovely chat." He patted her hand and looked around. "Now, before we begin, does anyone have any questions?"

"Yes," Severus replied, sourly. "How can I get out of this?"

"Severus!"

"It's alright, Minerva," Honeyclutch said, his eyes full of concern. He stepped up to Severus. He was much shorter than the younger wizard, and had to peer up into

Severus' downcast face. His voice was both sweet and sad, like a wistful little tune. "My friend, in my lifetime I have officiated at approximately five hundred and thirty four Beltane rituals. I have been the High Priest at two hundred and twelve.

"I tell you this to assure you of my knowledge and experience of the significance of both the ritual and the role. And I'll tell you for free, my dear friend," he said, his smile as caring and compassionate as his soft hazel eyes. "You are the perfect embodiment of the High Priest. A wizard who has seen both the light and the dark, and has given his all to protect those he loves. It is enough to try," he added, as Severus tried to interrupt. "It was enough that you tried.

"And I can state with a full and light heart, my friend Severus: I'd rather have you presidin' over this ritual as its High Priest than any other wizard in the world."

Magister Honeyclutch drew himself up to his full height, and in a voice full of power and dignity, he pronounced, "You are *everything* Beltane stands for, Severus Snape."

The moments seemed to spin out into a small eternity while the four of them stood in the Headmistress' study. Then Severus turned to Hermione and held out his hand.

"Kneel with me, Hermione. Let's do this before I come to my senses."

Hermione could think of only one thing that could get her on her knees faster for Severus Snape. She took his hand, and together they knelt before Minerva. She drew a rune in the air, and Magister Honeyclutch placed his hands on Severus and Hermione's bowed heads.

His voice rolled over them as he intoned, "I conjure thee, o gods of the ancients. Make within these your servants a meeting place of love and joy and truth for you to abide with us. Take as your countenances and acolytes this Severus and this Hermione. They will be our models of your love, our beacons of your joy, our teachers of your truth, our shields and protectors against all wickedness and evil.

"What is consecrated today in the names of Cernunnos and Aradia cannot be defiled. So mote it be."

A blast of shock rocked Hermione back on her heels. It felt as if Magister Honeyclutch had thrown a bucket of icy water in her face. She gasped, a deep, alarmed breath that left her heart pounding. Adrenaline flooded her body so quickly her skin ached with it, and she felt Severus' hand clamp down on hers painfully.

"What in Merlin's name..." she choked, and opened her eyes. She was no longer in the Headmistress' office; she was standing by a still lake; the huge, bloated moon overhead was a smooth disk of beaten silver, shining on the mirror-like surface. There was a man standing on the other side of the lake. He was pale and beautiful, wearing a crown of deer antlers and verdent green leaves, and he beckoned to her. He opened his mouth to speak, and she instinctively knew his voice would be the most beautiful sound she had ever heard...

"Hermione."

Minerva's voice was calm, but it still jolted Hermione back into the room. She was tingling all over; strong magic was flowing over her skin, giving off little sparks of colour all over her body. She turned to Severus and her words died in her throat, even as she heard Minerva and Honeyclutch's cries of surprise.

Severus' dark hair gleamed blue-black; his skin had the softest flush. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing deeply, slowly, peacefully. But that wasn't what made them gasp.

He was glowing. A corona of light softly shimmered around him, bathing him in a pearly radiance that was so beautiful Hermione felt tears fill her eyes. Then, to her disappointment, the light faded, and the room felt stark and cold in its absence.

Slowly he opened his eyes and stared at Hermione blankly. "What happened?" he demanded, helping Hermione to her feet. Minerva and the Magister were smiling. "How long were we gone?"

Magister Honeyclutch took their hands. There was reverence and humility in his voice. "You and Hermione didn't go anywhere. What you saw was the god and goddess visitin' you. Minerva and I administered the Consecration; only the god and the goddess can bestow their Blessin'. It doesn't always happen, but by Merlin it did just now! You have literally been touched by the god Cernunnos. Do you not feel it, Severus? Do you not see?"

Severus looked from one to the other. Hermione had never seen him look so unsure of anything. "Are you alright, Severus?" she asked softly.

To her surprise, he relaxed. "I'm... I'm well, thank you, Hermione." He nodded to Minerva, then shook the Magister's hand. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go to the kitchens. I'm suddenly ravenous."

He made to leave, then halted, and turned back to Hermione. "Tomorrow night, we will begin rehearsals." He spun around, and was gone. The swift tread of his footsteps on the stairs faded, and Hermione turned to Minerva, who looked at gobsmacked as she felt. The Magister, on the other hand, looked not one whit surprised.

It was only later that Hermione realised that Severus had commanded *her* to show up for a rehearsal he had all but refused to attend not an hour before. It also occurred to her that she ought to feel a bit irritated about it, but she just couldn't make herself.

It was much later in the evening when Hermione realised that, between kneeling in Minerva's office and Severus informing her about the rehearsal, she had no clear memory of what had actually transpired. Even stranger still, she didn't really care.

Chapter Four: Besom, Cauldron and Chalice

Chapter 5 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Just a little warning, this chapter goes a way toward earning this fic it's NC-17 rating. We're not all the way there yet, but we're close! As with the rest of The Witchhiker's Guide, the characters in this story are the property of JK Rowling, but I just like to let them run around in the yard and stretch their legs every once in awhile.

Approach with reverence, but with a certain blatant disregard for propriety. The goddess is to be worshipped with reverence, but never forget that we are pagans. Preparing the high priestess for her high priest is a sensual, earthy delight of flesh and fancy. In other words, if your smalls aren't straining, you're doing it wrong.

Chapter Four: Drawing Down the Moon, or Preparing the Goddess...The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

She is youthful or old as she pleases, she sails the torn clouds in her barque,

The bright silver lady of midnight, the crone who weaves spells in the dark.

The master and mistress of magic, they dwell in the deeps of the main,

Immortal and ever renewing, with power to free or to bind.

~Beltane Ritual

Two weeks after she dared Severus to join her and prove the naysayers wrong, Hermione entered the Room of Requirement alone. She and Severus had met a few times to discuss their roles. They had argued, and shared too many cups of tea and packets of biscuits, and they had even laughed and occasionally agreed on parts of the rituals. Now, for the first time, they were going to perform one of them: the Preparation of the Goddess, one of the two rites which would be performed in private the morning of the actual Beltane ritual.

Hermione was nervous.

The room was a black void with only a small light in the middle, like a spotlight shining from above. She was a bit disappointed; she had hoped that it would be a little more frou-frou than this. Instead, it looked like an interrogation room in the old Muggle films. All it needed was a chair, a metal table, and an ashtray overflowing with dog-ends.

The door swung open behind her, and Severus walked in, holding a small hold-all bag. He, too, looked at the scenario with puzzled displeasure. When he glanced toward Hermione, she shrugged and quipped, "Ah, there you are, Detective. I'll be good cop, you be bad cop."

He harrumphed. "Perfect casting, but I thought we were here to rehearse the Goddess ceremony, not to re-enact The Sweeney." At her raised eyebrows, he added, "I was raised in a Muggle household too, you know. It was my dad's favourite."

Hermione smiled, trying to picture young Severus sitting on an orange sofa with his dad, watching Regan swear his way through the Flying Squad. "Get your trousers on, you're nicked," she said gruffly, in a passable South London accent.

He made a surprisingly impressed face. "Not bad, Granger."

She snorted. "Typical. The first time you actually compliment my abilities, it's for imitating a 70's cop show character."

He shrugged. "Gather your compliments while ye may, Granger. I've got twenty-two third-year essays on Hinkypunks to grade after we finish. I'd like to crack on."

"Of course." As they spoke, the area transformed. The beam of light swelled, revealing a long, cathedral-type room only slightly smaller than the Great Hall. At the end where they stood, a lovely stone altar rose as if it had grown there, and it was surrounded by ancient tapestries depicting other Pagan rituals. They were faded and dusty, as if they had hung there for centuries.

Hermione gaped at the splendour of it. "Do you suppose this is an exact replica of the Knappogue altar?" she whispered, awestruck at the ancient, grounded feel of the room.

Severus shouldered past her. "Haven't a clue. And why are you whispering? Last I knew, we were the only ones here."

She was about to lecture him on the reverence of the setting, decided it would come across as both pretentious and unnecessary, and settled on following him to the altar, where he was already setting out the instruments they would need for this portion of the ceremony.

He removed a glazed ceramic bowl from his holdall, filled it with sea salt from a leather pouch, then placed it on the altar. A small dish of powdered sage was next, followed by a pewter chalice of water, a small brass pitcher of oil. He paused and flicked his hair from his eyes with a practiced jerk of his head.

As he readied the elemental representations they would use, she cleared her throat. "Something on your mind, Granger?" he asked, not bothering to turn around.

Facing his broad back, Hermione told herself to get on with it. Facing him would be much harder. "Well, it says in the Witchhiker's Guide that this is one of the two rituals we are supposed to perform in private before the rest of the participants arrive."

He ignored her as he produced three candles...white, red and black. "I have read it, you know." His beautiful, intoxicating voice rolled through the room. He glanced at her with a pleased look, as if he knew all too well the effect his voice produced.

Pain in the arse- "Well, then, Professor, you will have read that this portion of the ceremony is to be performed, er, without any clothes on."

He stopped rummaging in the bag, straightened up, then turned back to her. "Would you care to repeat that, Professor?"

Hermione repressed the urge to stamp her foot. "This portion of the ceremony is to be performed naked."

"Are you afraid I'll critique?"

She forced herself to meet his flat stare. "Yes," she grumbled. To her surprise, he laughed. He had a nasty laugh, all smoke and dirt and something that tickled the inside of her thigh.

"Rest assured, Professor Granger, I'm hardly in any position to find fault with another person's physical attributes. I'm hardly an oil painting myself."

"I know, but..."

"Merlin, Granger, your lack of tact is only succeeded by your dearth of common sense. Remind me again why Weasley thinks you're the catch of the century?"

She looked up at him, furious. "Circe's sake! You don't have to be so cruel! I..." She was ready to launch into a tirade when she caught sight of his face. His smirk was vintage Snape, but his eyes... They were playfully bright, like a mischievous boy's.

Ruefully, she ducked her head, and made herself laugh with him. "Snape one, Granger nil."

He dismissed her statement with an elegant shrug of his shoulders. "Call it a draw, Professor. I'm quite impressed with your ability to reel in your self-righteous indignation. I think you've finally grown up."

She looked at him levelly. "I'm certainly no longer a student. And I hope you don't still see me that way." She glanced again at their list of instructions. "This is going to be a very uncomfortable hour otherwise."

Severus drew his cloak about his person, and regarded her thoughtfully, a small frown between his black brows. He sniffed and met her gaze with immense dignity. "No, Professor Granger. I think I can state unequivocally that I no longer think of you in those terms."

"Excellent!" she said, sounding more confident than she felt. "So, shall we, you know, get on with it?"

"As you wish." He gestured to the far wall. "Any time you're ready, Professor."

Hermione balked. "After you."

His smile was wolfish. "I don't think you've read your Witchhiker's Guide thoroughly, Professor."

"I think you'll find I have, Professor," she retorted, and pulled the book from her satchel. "The participants will be skyclad..."

"Participant. Emphasis on the singular. I am fully clothed for this part of the ritual. The High Priestess presents herself to the High Priest without clothing, in order to be venerated and consecrated by him to become the living embodiment of the goddess. The opposite is true of the cleansing ceremony. I'm undressed, you're fully clothed. But for now..." He tilted his head, a beatific look on his severe face... "it's time to get your kit off, Granger." He spun on his heel and walked to the bench.

Hastily flipping through the book to the relevant chapter, Hermione read the instructions with a sinking heart. Oh, Merlin's toejam, he was right. Taking a deep breath, she stiffened her spine. *I can do this, I can do this. But if he makes some snarky remark or, Merlin forbid, laughs at me...*

She thought about her old scar...the one she'd received during her fifth year from Dolohov. Over the years, she'd always worn a glamour over it, but for some reason, she didn't want to bother with it here. If she was to represent the Priestess of the Old Way, she would do it truly skyclad, scars and all.

She glanced over at Severus, who had retreated to one of the darker corners. He had changed from his standard teaching uniform of frockcoat and trousers into an old-fashioned, floor-length wizarding robe of deep, forest green. It was made of a soft, flowing material, and swirled around his ankles as if spelled to move that way. From within his hold all, he produced a crown of multi-coloured oak leaves, in the verdant colours of Spring, silver and green and white.

As Hermione removed her clothing, the light faded to a soft, rosy glow, making the room seem smaller, more intimate. She felt curiously lightheaded as she pulled her robe over her head, then removed her underwear.

For the briefest moment, they stood still, and regarded one another silently. As if unable to stop himself, Severus' black eyes traveled from her face, sweeping down to her breasts, her belly, her thighs. They reluctantly returned to meet hers again, and Hermione saw the fire spark in them, the same heat that had seared her in the Great Hall. Her body flushed as an answering blast of excitement washed over her. *Oh, seven devils.*

It was incredibly thrilling, and, she understood in that moment why the Priestess was supposed to be naked. If she could enthrall a powerful wizard like Severus Snape with just a glance at her nude form, becoming a goddess should be a dawlde.

In that instant, he must have realised that he was gawking, and she was watching him gawk. They stared into one another's eyes for a beat too long; then the spark was gone, and in its place was something softer, like understanding, perhaps even admiration. His thin lips quirked into a smile that held regard and a touch of wistfulness.

"Right," he said. "I'm nearly finished." He dropped his gaze as he placed the crown on his head. He adjusted it infinitesimally, then dropped his arms to his sides. Hermione stared at him until her eyes almost fell out. Magic simply radiated from him, throwing a corona of light over his entire body.

"You look...amazing," she said, her voice cracking on the last word. To her surprise, he ducked his head shyly, like a fifth-year on his first date. "No, really," she insisted, trying to hold on to that feeling that she was seeing a Severus Snape no one else had ever seen. "You're perfect."

Actually, he was more than perfect. To Hermione, he looked every inch the pagan god Cernunnos*All he needs is a set of antlers*. That thought segued into the idea of a rutting Snape, taking her roughly from behind. The fantasy was so paganly erotic it left her slightly dizzy, and in that moment, it felt more like a memory. She could actually feel his hands on her hips, feel the thrust of his body into hers, the grunt of his effort as he filled her over and over...

When he looked up again, his eyes were blandly inscrutable, and Hermione was brought down to earth with a sickening jolt. The breath left her body, and for a moment, she swayed.

"Are you alright?" he asked, with a frown of concern. The thin line of whatever-it-was between them snapped, leaving Hermione feeling adrift and self-conscious.

Pull yourself together, girl! Are you in such a hurry to do something you're going to have to live down for the rest of your life? Yes, I'm fine."

The concern changed to skepticism, then he shrugged it away. With an almost formal bow, he gestured at the altar with a large, elegant hand. "Shall we do this, then?"

She nodded, her mouth dry. "O-of course." She stepped into the open space where they would cast their circle. "I'll just wait here until you're ready, shall I?"

At his nod, they stood together, and, using her wand, Hermione drew the circle around them. She then lay her wand on the altar and picked up the Sword of Gryffindor from its ornate stand. It was monstrously heavy, but when laid in Severus' hands it looked like a toothpick.

Severus consecrated the circle with the sword, chanting in his magnificent voice, "Ye Lords of the Watchtowers of the East, ye Lords of Air; of the South, ye Lords of Fire, the West, ye Lords of Water, ye Lords of Death and Initiation, of the North, ye Lords of Earth; Boreas, thou gentle guardian of the Northern Portals; thou powerful God and gentle Goddess; I do summon, stir, and call thee up to witness our rites and to guard the Circle."

The circle's glow grew steadily brighter, and the other lights in the room dimmed until their faces were illuminated by the circle's light. At their feet Severus placed the chalice of water, the dish of sea salt, and the three candles. He reached into the small bowl and dusted his hands with sage, then anointed Hermione with eucalyptus oil. As the pungent oil threaded across her body in warm rivulets, Hermione felt truly naked for the first time.

He looked deeply into her eyes as he intoned, "This is a time that is not a time, in a place that is not a place, on a day that is not a day." His voice was silvery and soft, and she watched in fascination as magic quickened and swirled around them. It actually pushed the oil across her skin, and she marveled at this incredible wizard and the powerful magic he could call forth with just his voice.

He continued, the poetic words rising and falling in cadence. "I stand at the threshold between the worlds, before the veil of the Mysteries. May the ancient ones help and protect me on my journey." He looked at her and nodded, as if approving.

"I light three candles for the beloved Goddess of fertility and plenty... the Great Lady of Three Aspects." He passed his hand over the white candle, and it sparked into flame. "The Glorious Maiden, Goddess of youth and new beginnings, dawn and the planted seed. Goodness and the social order...the life-giving qualities of milk and semen."

The red candle glowed beneath his hand. "The Great Mother, Goddess of magic and plenty, love and knowledge. The ambiguous element of unpredictability and ritual power. The bright blood of life. Menstrual blood...the blood of first sex."

Lastly, he passed his hand over the black candle, and it flickered into life. "Dark Crone, wise Goddess of the night, death and rebirth, and the darkness that is the opposite

of good...decayed blood and putrefaction."

He eyes bore into hers as his hands passed over her body. His voice was deep and breathlessly intimate. "I welcome the Goddess; she is beauty in all her forms."

Hermione shivered. Even though he was not physically touching her, she could feel the electric charge of magic sparking between his fingers and her skin. "The goddess is manifest in my Priestess, and I am her servant and consort."

He opened his eyes and she saw the reflection of power in his beautiful and fathomless eyes. Even caught up in the incantation as she was, she marveled that this wizard truly saw himself as nothing special. Here, in his swirling robes and crown of oak, with magic literally pulsing from his fingertips, Severus Snape was nothing short of spellbinding.

And they hadn't even really started the ritual yet.

He knelt before her, and bent low. To be naked and vulnerable while this dark and powerful wizard knelt at her feet was like nothing Hermione had ever experienced. She felt as much as heard his voice as his breath puffed against the top of her feet. "Blessed be thy feet, that have brought thee in these ways."

His hands close around her feet. Warm, soft lips kissed the top of each foot, first right, then left. She felt his dark hair spill over her skin like skeins of silk. She could barely breathe as Severus rose to a crouch. "Blessed be thy knees, that shall kneel at the sacred altar." His hands closed over the backs of her thighs, and he reverently kissed her knees, his lips lingering on her skin. His breath quickened, but his eyes were calm, as if in a trance.

Hermione swayed, and he placed his hand on her hip to steady her. As he straightened, his ebony eyes locked on her mons. The hand on her hip changed from supporting to a light caress, and he whispered hoarsely, "Blessed be thy womb, without which we would not be."

He glanced up at her, and his eyes flashed with emotion, even as he leaned into her and placed his mouth on her belly. Trembling from head to toe, Hermione could only stare in wonder as he leaned closer and inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring, his eyelids fluttering closed. He opened his mouth, as if trying to taste her in the air, and soft, "Ohhhh..." escaped her lips. She knew he was scenting her, smelling her arousal.

Silently, he rose to his feet and moved within a hair's breadth of pressing his body to hers. He was close enough to see the pulsing heartbeat at his throat, and smell the warm, masculine clean scent of him. As he towered over her, Hermione knew what was coming next and oh, she wanted it. *To hell with the ritual*, she thought.

"Hermione?" he breathed, and jolted from her desire-filled reverie, she jerked her head up toward his. He was watching her carefully, and when he licked his lips, she gasped, dying to feel his mouth against hers. He swallowed, and said huskily, "You...you're supposed to raise your arms parallel to this floor at this point."

"Wha...Oh!" Hermione nearly cringed with embarrassment. She had totally forgotten she, too, had a part to play. She meekly raised her arms out by her sides, and nodded. "Sorry."

It seemed like a small forever before he moved. Finally, he lifted his hands, and as gently as if he were picking up the most delicate of potions ingredients, he cupped her breasts. His hands were warm, and calloused and soft all at once in all the right places, and it felt as if he had been made to hold her, and she made to be held by him. For a moment, all she could do was remain still. She was afraid if she moved, he would take his lovely hands away and she would just have to hex him for that.

His voice shook as he rasped, "Blessed be thy breasts, formed in beauty." And then it happened. He leaned forward and touched his lips to the top of her breasts, and a huge shiver started at the top of her head and jittered through her body down to her feet. Her core welled with desire, and though it wasn't in the ritual, she softly stroked his silken black hair.

His hands gently squeezed her breasts as each was kissed slowly, reverently, and she silently begged him to continue, to lower his head more and find the already taut nipple that waited for him, begged for his mouth...

He released her breasts, his fingers grazing across them as he lowered his hands. She twitched a little when he placed her palms on either side of her head, and lifted her head to his. Against her lips, he whispered, "Blessed be thy lips that shall utter the Sacred Names." His mouth was soft, and warm, and he kissed her chastely. She sighed against his mouth, and he moved against her lips with innocent tenderness that turned her knees to jelly.

The kiss grew deeper, and her arms were around his shoulders before she could think. For an eternal, perfect moment, their lips fused and moved against one another. He suckled against her mouth and she silently begged for more. A soft breeze stirred their hair, moving around them like a teasing whirlwind. It was the magic he had called forth, and it answered him as the god and goddess joined the ritual, and in that split second, something shifted.

Later, Hermione would try to put her finger on exactly how it felt; her notes the next day were filled with descriptions *Like being in the back seat of a car while someone else drove. Being in a dream and having no control over your actions or movements. Using mutual Legilimency with another person.* It was none of those, but all of those.

In that moment, she was watching outside herself and she and Severus met in a fiery embrace, their mouths fused together in lustful passion, and when he delved into her mouth with a deep, growling moan of desire, she surrendered, forgetting about everything around her but his warm mouth, his demanding, velvet tongue. She returned his kiss with every skill she could claim, and his arms tightened to the point of breathlessness.

Slowly, so slowly, he pulled away, kiss by tender kiss, until she was panting, clutching his shoulders as if she would never let go. With something like his trademark smirk, he took her lower lip between his own and licked. When she gasped and pressed against him, he chuckled, and to her amazement, he knelt at her feet. His hands slid down her ribs, making her shiver.

Looking up at her with a wicked gleam in his eye, he purred, "I invoke thee to descend upon the body of this thy servant and priestess. I lowly bend before thee, I adore thee to the end, with loving sacrifice thy shrine adore. O Mighty One, descend to aid me, who without thee am forlorn."

He pressed his forehead against her womb, then looked up at her, his gaze full of desire and need. He took her hands in his and kissed them softly, and Hermione was grateful that she was not required to speak during the ceremony. She couldn't have threaded two words together at that moment to save her life.

Then, with a snap, she was back inside herself, and Severus was pulling away, a look of stark surprise on his angular face. Gracefully, he rose to his feet, and the room's rosy light changed to a colder, brighter one.

"Um, was it just me, or did you have a..." she stopped and shook her head to clear it.

Severus opened his mouth to reply, then shut it, frowning in confusion. "I don't know what I had, but yes, something definitely happened." He looked down at his robe, and flushed at the obvious erection. "I apologise," he said, looking miserable. He shook his head and turned to go. "This was a mistake."

"No, Severus, please!" Hermione caught his arm and pulled him back to face her, but he would not meet her eyes. "This is a fertility ritual," she said, pleadingly. "I think if..." she nodded briefly toward his crotch, "...that didn't happen, we wouldn't be doing this properly."

Reluctantly, he raised his humiliated gaze to her. Hermione drew closer; her libido would not let her keep her distance. "Actually, I'm really flattered." When he shot her a look of warning, she hastily added, "And relieved. I was afraid I, well, wasn't exactly..." She looked down at her body, grimacing at the scars, the ugly bits, the tracks of the oil he'd poured over her. "I'm the one with the less than perfect bum and the scars on show. If anyone has any call to feel humiliated, it's me."

Long fingers pressed beneath her chin and raised her face up to his. "Don't be daft, witch," he said, softly. "You're..." he flushed. "You're perfectly lovely."

"Thank you, Severus." She watched him warily, thinking, *in for a Knut, in for a Galleon.* "The way you kissed me made me feel like a goddess." He lowered his head and

muttered something. "What was that? I didn't quite hear you," she said.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "I said, 'You don't need me to be a goddess'."

She shot him a coy look. "Well, you did enjoy it though, didn't you? Just a little?" She held up her thumb and forefinger to indicate.

He stared at her, then his eyes narrowed. "Are you trawling for compliments, Granger?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I have never been kissed by a High Priest before and, well..."

"Well?"

A smile danced on her lips. "Well it was very enjoyable kiss."

"I *am* kissing a goddess," he quipped, his smirk firmly back in place. "I thought it might be wise to bring my A-game."

Rita Skeeter had to duck out of the Ministry's press conference early, so she flagged down one of her fellow *Prophet* reporters to find out all the goss. He'd already started boring her before he even launched into the story. *Ministry to re-establish values blah blah blah... Hogwarts to host first Beltane in umpteen years blah blah blah... Ministry sending out leaflets on how to throw a Pagan Party blah blah blah...*

She waved her hand dismissively. "Typical Ministry propaganda. Hardly worth sending out the *Prophet's* ace reporter."

One of her rivals caught up with them. "Oi, Skeeter! You planning on covering the Hogwarts story?"

She snorted. "Yeah, right! Like I have time to watch a bunch of flabby old witches glomping around a bonfire to the tune of I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside. Not half."

"Even though Hermione Granger and Severus Snape are the High Priestess and High Priest?"

Rita kept walking. "Those two? Also rans, the pair of 'em. Granger's a dried up old spinster and Snape? Well, I've cornered the market on him, haven't I?" Several other reporters around them laughed raucously. "To tell the truth, I'm more interested in that new Quidditch seeker for Ireland. I've heard he's got a lovely little bird nested in a Mews in London, while wifey sits at home in Killarney knitting her own yoghurt and growing her own corduroy..."

She continued to laugh and chat with the others, throwing them off the scent, and by the time she returned to her desk her mind was whirling with ideas. Her Arithmancer had predicted that there was a forty-one percent chance that some sort of story between Granger and Snape would break this week, and this was exactly the kind of scoop she was hoping for...one with plenty of scope for exploitation.

An hour later, she was swearing under her breath and ready to start throwing hexes. Her problem was that reporters were not allowed at Hogwarts for any of the preparations, and even after calling in every favour she had, she could find no Floo access, no Portkey, no Apparation point available to get her in there. It didn't do to look too eager about it; Merlin knew there were other reporters who would slit their first-born's throats to get a good story out of this.

She was so wrapped up in the percentages of ensuring a way into Hogwarts, Rita didn't see the hooded figure slink into her office until he had slammed the door behind him.

Not one to give into intimidation, Rita showed him the business end of her wand and hissed, "Back off, creep! I know how to use this."

"Put away your wand, Rita. You can barely light your fags with it," said the figure in a low voice. "I didn't come 'ere to do you mischief. I'm here to do you a favour." The man removed his hood; Rita froze in recognition, but quickly recovered.

Leaning back in her chair, willing her heartbeat to return to normal, Rita straightened her shoulder pads and jutted out her chin. "Well, well. To what do I owe this pleasure, Mr. Filch?"

She and the Hogwarts caretaker regarded one another silently. Argus Filch was a tall, thin man, with long, stringy hair and a chip on his shoulder visible to the naked eye. He was dressed in faded tweeds, clean but worn, and large black dragon-hide boots. Even at his age he was still an imposing man. For a Squib.

Filch looked at her slyly. "I thought you might be interested in some information. An exclusive to Rita Skeeter. A chance to report from the heart of Hogwarts before anyone else. I can get you a front row seat...for the right price."

"How exactly would you do that? And *why*?" she asked, intrigued in spite of herself. Filch had always been strictly under her radar, but he had access to every part of Hogwarts...

He shrugged. "I can sneak you in."

She snorted. "I'm perfectly capable of sneaking myself into Hogwarts," she lied. "You'll have to do better than that..."

"They're doing some pretty out-there stuff in this ritual, you know. I've seen the scripts."

"What kind of out-there stuff? And you haven't answered my question. Why are you doing this?"

He scoffed, and fixed her with a baleful eye. "Let's just say that there are plans. Special rites that special people will be performin'. I'm saying I can get you into the private areas. What you do when you're there is up to you, as long as you leave me out of it. It's more than me job's worth if you get caught."

Something about his furtive, not-quite explanation set her antennae to its highest sensitivity setting. "I won't get caught. You just tell me where I need to go and what's going on; I'll do the rest."

Filch looked smug. "It won't be cheap, mind you."

Rita cancelled the wards. "I need to get my boss in here." Whatever the price, Perby would pay it.

Moments later, the fifty-percent down payment had been made, and Rita had confirmed her instructions to meet Filch at Hogwarts during the Spring Hols.

After the caretaker had gone, Rita turned to her boss. A smile slunk over her lips. "That's the angle, isn't it, Perb? What's Snape doing? Re-enacting Dark Revels? Using the Gryffindor Princess to resurrect You-Know-Who?"

Perbody Smoklehouse, a monstrously fat wizard who had been printing half-truths, speculations and downright lies when Rita was still in nappies, snorted derisively. Wheezing like a pipe organ, he mumbled, "You're gonna have to tread lightly, Rita, my darling. This is the Ministry we are talking about. They've obviously put a lot of time and money into making this a success."

She gave him a wide-eyed, earnest look. "All the more reason for us to expose the scandal and corruption that may be lurking within the hallowed halls of Hogwarts, leading our young people astray, seducing them with these Dark Revels." She put a confiding hand on his arm. "The Ministry will be relieved to know the truth, Perby. This might just earn you that Order of Merlin you've been hoping for."

Smoklehouse gave her a randy look of greed. He had always said gossip was the one true lust in the world. "You may have a point, my dear. Nevertheless, you be careful. Quiet as a mouse. Quick in, quick out." He shook his head with a frown. "I just can't make myself believe that Minnie McGonagall would allow Snape to do somefink that radical right under her nose, though, Rita. I just can't believe it."

Rita stroked his arm soothingly. "You don't have to, Perby darling. The point is whether or not Wizarding Britain believes it." She sat back, her hands shaking with excitement. "Can you imagine what the public will do when I break the story that Snape is using this Ministry-sanctioned Beltane ritual, not to mention Miss Perfect-War-Hero Hermione Granger, to bring back the Dark Lord?"

Smoklehouse laughed darkly, but shook his head. "It's the kind of scoop we all pray to the newspaper gods for, Rita darling, but you'll never make it stick."

"Oh, I don't have to make it stick," she cooed, her mind already whirling with copy, print size and column lengths. "I just have to throw it on the wall. By the time I'm finished, Wizarding Britain will be more than ready to glue it there themselves."

Chapter Five: Dowsing

Chapter 6 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments! You make me so happy. Next, a little Coven love...

The Coven is a strong, binding community, whose role is multi-faceted...mentorship, support, protection, education. Never forget that the power of the Coven is greater than the sum of its members. It truly encompasses the many moods and agendas of the goddess, as any wizard who's stuck in a Coven full of randy witches can attest. Not that I'm complaining, mind.

~ Chapter Five: The Role of the Coven...The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

"Whenever you have need of anything, then shall ye assemble in some secret place ...

There shall ye assemble, ye who are fain to learn all wizardry, yet have not won its deepest secrets; to these will I teach things that are yet unknown." ~Beltane Ritual

"What I want to kn-know," hiccupped Rolanda Hooch, "is what is the significance of men being of 'service to the goddess'? I mean, 'Service to the Goddess' is the realm of the Divine ...hic...Feminine! Or, erm, something like that," she finished with a belch.

"Heavens, Rolly, how much of that wine have you drunk?" Pomona Sprout asked, sounding every bit as squiffy as her colleague.

Madam Hooch fixed her with a look of studied determination, the likes of which are only found on the faces of the very intelligent or the highly pissed. "Less than you, old thing," she slurred.

"I think it's the heat," giggled Hermione, taking another sip of the heady, golden elf-made wine. "Perhaps the steam makes the alcohol go to your head."

There were murmurs of consideration all around. All of the female staff members were sitting around in what appeared to be Knappogue Castle's famous magical underground hot springs, up to their bosoms in bubbly hot water that smelled sharp and metallic, like copper and iron. In Ireland, the springs gushed up from an artesian system deep within the castle, almost at boiling point, then cooled to a bearable temperature in the naturally-formed pools dotted around the wellspring.

Hundreds of miles away, on the fourth floor of Hogwarts, they could have been easily forgiven for thinking Minerva had Portkeyed them all to Knappogue while they were busy getting pissed. It was worth being there to see the Transfiguration and Charms work alone. Hermione knew herself to be a dab hand at both, but she honestly had no idea how Filius and Minerva had done it.

It was inspiring stuff, which, of course, was why she'd felt compelled to launch into a blazingly deep discussion of the male and female roles in Pagan ritualism, while the rest of the party was merely content to enjoy the heat and the booze.

"I believe you're missing the point, Madam Hooch. It's the role of men to *bemen* in their inherent sacredness, and women to *bewomen* in their inherent divinity."

Septima, Rolanda, Poppy, Pomona and Sybill all looked at her blankly, but Hermione was enough into her cups to blunder on. She'd never allowed Harry and Ron's oblivious incomprehension of her theories to stop her when she was on a roll...she saw no reason to be deterred now.

"I'll be the first to admit that I think men are afraid to face the stigmatised image of the god and embrace their own sacredness. It *is* his failing that needs addressing with this ritual," she said, emphasising her words with her sloshing wine glass.

The five witches continued to stare at Hermione as if they'd been Petrified, until Rolly Hooch said, "My dear, just how long has *ibeen* since you last got laid?"

The room erupted with laughter. "Why, that's just... I mean I.... for Merlin's sake, ladies!" Hermione sputtered, but even as her indignant embarrassment shocked her almost sober, she began to laugh. "What a horrid bunch of old crones you are!"

Minerva, who had been lying on the massage table while one of Knappogue's borrowed masseuses pummeled her into submission, pushed herself into a sitting position. "Thank you, Mathers. I've arranged some refreshments down the hall, if you're hungry." The masseuse bowed and took her leave. The headmistress moved to sit beside the pool.

"Ladies, stop teasing Hermione," she chided. "She's not been around you long enough to understand your questionable sense of humour. It's times like these when I'm not

sure I have, either."

There were a few contrite murmurs, and Hermione waved them away, announcing, "Thank you, Headmistress!" with exaggerated dignity. She added, "And if you lot think you can live vicariously through me, you'll be sadly mistaken! Honestly, you're worse than Severus." At the series of raised eyebrows, she shrugged. "Up until the beginning of term, he was still under the misapprehension I was Hogwarts' resident femme fatale."

"We all were, and I for one think you should be," Rolanda insisted, as the laughter died down. "A young witch your age has no business thinking about all that serious rubbish. You should be out working your way through all those eligible British wizards. Why, when I was your age..."

"Oh Rolly, please," Pomona said in a pained voice. "No one wants to hear about your exploits. It's not for nothing that Quidditch players used to wear scarves that read, 'Save a broom, Ride a Hooch'."

Hermione and the others guffawed, as Madame Hooch, who looked far from embarrassed, actually took a bow. As they quieted, Hermione sighed tiredly. "You're probably right. I've been kidding myself. Even after Severus..." she stopped herself, but sadly not in time. Her heart fell to her abdomen with a thud, and the witches zeroed in on her blunder like sharks to blood in the water.

"Now, *this* is more like it!" Pomona Sprout declared gleefully, as she refilled Hermione's glass. "What's Severus doing that's not helping? Come on," she cajoled with a smile. "Tell Aunty Pomona your troubles."

"There's nothing to tell, actually. Which is sort of the problem. Oh, sod it; I'm too drunk," Hermione said, giving in. She was not, in fact *that* drunk. Her almost-declaration of her sexual frustration had gone a long way toward sobering her up. But as she looked around the room of women, she saw the one thing she'd never really had: *female* friends.

Most of her school life she'd hung around with the boys, and after that, she'd been too caught up in schoolwork and the occasional date. Oh, she'd had roommates, but they had always treated her like a gooseberry because she didn't sit around practicing makeup charms in her spare time. Molly and Ginny Weasley almost didn't count as well; they were too motherly and close to Harry. She didn't feel comfortable confiding in them about her love life, especially not with Ron ducking in every six months to pop the question.

Looking around at the gaggle of witches marinating in the hot water with her, Hermione realised they were exactly what she needed. They were her coven, her confidants. They might even be prepared to offer intelligent solutions and suggestions. And if not, at least they'd commiserate and get drunk with her.

"I think I've fallen for Severus," she said. The words fell from her mouth before she could stop them. Now that it was out in the open, not festering away in her heart, she felt both horrified and relieved.

"And what's wrong with that?" Poppy Pomfrey asked, with a motherly smile.

"Because he's not interested in catching me." Her eyes filled with alcohol-flavoured tears, and she wailed, "I'm doomed to live the rest of my life loving a man who can't love me back, aren't I?"

There was a general splash as the woman moved closer to comfort her. "Why on earth wouldn't he love you back, dear?" Poppy said, putting her arm around Hermione. "He should count himself lucky to have the affections of a witch like you."

The others nodded in agreement. Hermione shook her head sadly. "I would love to try and prove that to him, but he'll never be able to care for me."

Minerva looked concerned, but sounded unsympathetic. "Now, what you on about? We were having a lovely time getting pleasantly pissed, and you've only gone and spoiled the mood over nothing!"

Hermione sighed miserably, "I'm sorry, Headmistress, really I am. But it isn't exactly nothing..."

"Didn't I tell you to speak to Severus?"

"I couldn't..."

"Speak about what?" Pomona demanded, then a look of understanding appeared on her face. She threw up her large hands, splashing her colleagues. "You're not going on about that Lily Evans nonsense, are you?"

To Hermione's astonishment, the words were met with a chorus of sighs, curses and oaths.

"Merlin's bollocks, not that again."

"I thought all that crap was over."

"Honestly, I think he plays the sympathy card too often."

"So sick of hearing that pish."

"Wait, wait," Hermione interrupted, holding up her hands for silence. "What are you all talking about? Lily Evans Potter was the love of Severus' life. I know all about it." The ensuing silence told her that apparently, she did not. "What?" she said, when the blank stares became too much to withstand. Inside her heart was this impish little brat, calling for hope. "If you all know something I don't, I really, really wish you'd spit it out."

"I don't know," Minerva said, looking at the others with a sly gleam in her eye. "It doesn't seem right, talking about Severus behind his back like this."

Hermione floundered in the pool, trying to scramble onto her feet, "Oh, please! In approximately one hour I've got to meet him in the RoR so we can perform the Purification Rite. He's going to be starkers, and I have to bathe him. Give me something to hope for while I'm washing his todger."

Poppy pounded Hooch on the back to help her stop choking, and there was a plopping sound as Sybil's wine glass fell from her fingers into the pool. Rolling her eyes, Minerva cried, "Circe's girdle! It's not like you've never seen one, much less heard about it!" She cleared the mess and eased into the water, hissing as her skin made contact with the heat. "All right! When you put it thus, I suppose it's considered a necessity."

Hermione waited for her to settle in, and with a sudden jolt to her wine-soaked brain, she was reminded that Minerva was completely naked, that *they* were completely naked, and she hadn't thought a thing about it in hours. Perhaps this dancing skyclad around the fire business wouldn't be so bad if she got a little tight beforehand.

Minerva paused, and took a drink. "Nice wine," she remarked, licking her lips approvingly. "Now, I'm telling you what I know, and you girls can corroborate as well as you can."

"Yes, Severus carried a torch for Lily Evans all through school. They'd met before Hogwarts, you see. He'd had a terrible home life, poor lad. When he first came to Hogwarts, he was like a little wee animal, neglected and feral."

"He was a right mess. Desperate to fit in somewhere, but angry and scared uncomfortable in his own skin. And yet, he was tender-hearted all the same," Pomona added with a nod.

Minerva gazed into the distance, her eyes clouding with the memory. "They both had tempers, and Lily pushed him hard...because she could. She was a lovely girl, but vain, and proud. She used to drag him around like a rag doll that first year, until she got in with the Gryffindor crowd. By then, she was popular, you see, and it went to her head. She forgot the golden rule; you might make new friends, but you don't stop caring about your old friends."

"Well, of course he cultivated relationships in Slytherin. He had to in order to survive, but he chose unwisely. He didn't realise just how unwisely until later, of course," Hooch chimed in.

"But those Marauders of Minerva's decided he was a handy target. They bullied him, no doubt. Severus was a scrapper, though; gave as good as he got. The fights those boys got into...over her!" Madame Pomfrey declared, with a shake of her head. "Blazing rows. And most of the time, Lily would just sit back and let it happen."

She looked at Hermione sadly. "If you asked me, she's the one that got those Marauders to gang up on him. She was a teen aged girl, and having all those boys fighting over fed her ego in a terrible way. Then she took up with James, and Severus reacted pretty much the way one would have expected. He lashed out, calling her that awful name, and you know the rest. He became a Death Eater, and I truly believe it was because he just wanted to belong to something, to someone who saw him as a person of value."

"Don't we all, though? I've said it before, and I'll say it again: we should have paid better attention to the situation. Hogwarts has a lot to answer for in that regard," Pomona declared. "We should have protected our Slytherins more from the lure of You-Know-Who. We should have known Horace wouldn't fight his corner, at least," she added with vehemence, and Hermione felt a greater kinship at Hogwarts' Herbology Professor. There was a general murmur of agreement, and not a few looks of remorse were shared around the room.

"So, sad," Sybil Trelawney cut in, with a sniff. "When I think of what one misheard prophecy can do. All of this set in motion because he..." Her face crumpled, and Minerva gave Hermione another reproachful look, as if she were to blame.

"Don't you see, Hermione? Lily's death nearly destroyed Severus, but it became his salvation as well."

Hermione's heart felt as if it would break in two and spill into the pool. "I know. I heard what he told Professor Dumbledore: 'Always'." Her eyes filled. "That's why it hurts, knowing I can't compete with her memory."

Minerva flicked water in her face, hard. "I'm not finished, so kindly postpone your descent into the deep abyss of love for a few more minutes, for Merlin's sake! What I'm trying to say, Hermione, is that Lily was no saint, and neither does Severus think so. Now, I've had it from the horse's mouth. When Severus was recuperating in St. Mungo's after the war, he said, no matter how he tried, he just couldn't make himself think of Lily anymore as the love of his life. He tried, and all he could feel was the friendship they'd had as children.

"It hurt to lose a part of him he'd carried around for so long, but it also freed him. He'd done all Albus had demanded of him; he'd kept Harry safe. He helped defeat You-Know-Who...sorry, force of habit...Tom Riddle. Now that his pledge had been fulfilled, he could let her go. She could return to a proper place in his heart. And that's what happened."

Minerva reached out, and gently wiped Hermione's face, and it was then she realised that tears were streaming down her cheeks into the water. As gently as Hermione had ever heard the Scotswoman speak, she added, "Now, I think the world of Severus. After all he went through, that terrible year when he almost died without a friend to call his own..."

She sighed. "He's thin-skinned as a four-year-old girl, and he's as touchy as a vain old bachelor twice his age, but most of all, he's scared. But I've caught him looking at you, and I'll tell you this: if a wizard looked at me that way, I wouldn't be sitting here gossiping with a bunch of old hags and feeling sorry for myself. I'd be getting to that Room of Requirement, and soaping up his willy!"

"MINERVA!" Shouts of raucous laughter echoed off the walls.

"But what are they doing in there?" she whispered.

Filch shrugged. "What they do every time they get together. They gossip, and get drunk and talk about sex," he added with a leering wink. Rita's skin crawled.

The door opened, and an Amazon of a woman in a long white robe exited the room and headed toward the alcove where Rita and Filch were hiding. "Who's that?" Rita whispered, as the tall woman disappeared down the hall.

Filch made a strange face. "One of them masseuses they seconded from Knappogue Castle. Strange bunch. Keep to themselves, mostly."

"Ooh," Rita answered, her mind whirling. "Maybe I can have a little chat..."

"Don't bother."

She shot him a hard look. "Why not?"

Grumpily, he answered, "She's from one of them funny Druidic orders, in't she? She don't speak at all, to anyone. Vow of silence, the headmistress calls it."

Rita scoffed. "For the right amount of Galleons, I could make a mute talk. Besides, she can write, can't she?"

"You'll get nothing. I've tried," he shot back morosely. "They're not interested in money; come to think on it, not much they seem to be interested in." He waved in the direction of the masseuse dismissively. "Look, I've proven to you that I know where things are happenin'. I said I'd get you past the wards, and I did. I said the witches would be in there, and they are." His smile had all the warmth of a crocodile's. "Proof of me worth, ye might say."

Rita eyed him coolly. He was right; he'd been able to get her into Hogwarts with no problem, and given her a listing of activities the staff would be engaging in during the Spring holidays while school wasn't in session. Tonight, he'd led her to where all the Hogwarts female staff were meeting. She'd heard plenty to go on, but nothing titillating enough to appease her agenda.

"Alright, but I need more. What are Granger and Snape doing now?" she demanded.

Filch took out a parchment and consulted it. "Well, according to the schedule, Professor Granger and Professor Snape are doing summat in the Room of Requirement, but that's not for another few hours. Professor Granger will probably stay here until it's time to meet with Snape."

Rita read the listings quickly. *S. Snape/H. Granger: RoR, Monday, 9:23pm. Purification Rite.* "Can you get me in there?"

Filch looked at her keenly. "Aye. You'll have to wait in my quarters, then be at the room no later than nine fifteen. Be on time. Professor Granger is a one for punctuality."

Rita scuttled down the hall, and Filch pretended to leave as well. As she walked away, he took out a small bit of parchment, and opened it, studying it carefully. A smirk of pleasure crossed his weathered face, and he rolled up the parchment and started off in the opposite direction.

Just as he passed by a door, the large woman in white appeared in the doorway. "Wotcher, Sadie," he said.

Sadie Mathers nodded, then in a gruff, Dublin accent, replied, "The witches are all pissed as newts, but having a good laugh. Seem like a right nice bunch."

"Everything else ok?"

Sadie smiled. "Yep. It's nice here. I miss Ireland, though."

Filch grunted. "Me mam was from Killarney. I have an excellent bottle of poteen if you'd like to stop by, off-duty like."

Her large eyes widened. "Real Wizarding poteen? I might take you up on that, boyo. After that Skeeter bint leaves, o' course."

Argus smiled. "O' course. Shall we say ten o'clock?"

At six forty-five, Severus entered the Room of Requirement. He looked around, shaking his head in wonder. He had always known it was one of the most magical places in the castle, but it had clearly outdone itself tonight.

He was in the middle of a misty forest, surrounded by moss-covered trees, their dying leaves a multi-coloured carpet at his feet. He could smell dampness in the air, wet leaves, woodsmoke. He headed down a path in which the dirt had been packed for aeons, listening to the soft sloughing of distant pines, evening birdsong, the croaking of a toad, calling his lady love.

He arrived at a clearing and uttered an oath under his breath. In the middle of the clearing, rising a foot off the forest floor stood a large bier of pale, pinkish-grey granite. Upon the bier was the largest bathtub he had ever seen, made of the same polished stone.

Huge white candles the size of a man's thigh stood at the four corners of the bier, and the entire clearing was suffused with a gauzy, rosy light. Steam rose from the tub, smelling of magical herbs. The air itself was infused with magic. It slid against his skin, causing the hairs on his arm to rise.

He opened his hold-all and produced a parchment listing his instructions for the ritual, a skin of mead and a pewter goblet. He gave the contents of the skin a cautious sniff; the liquid smelled incredibly sweet. *Sip the drink and sit quietly; make yourself a vessel ready to receive the inspiration of the higher realms* the instructions read, in Hermione's purposeful handwriting. Severus obediently took a sip, then inhaled sharply with a cough. It was very sweet, and as potent as brandy.

It ran down the inside of his body like molten gold, and caressed everything it hit on the way with warmth. Then it his bloodstream like firewhisky. Merlin's nads, that was wonderful! He decided to become an even better vessel for the higher realms by taking another drink.

The next portion of the instructions read: *You must become a mead cup ready to be filled, not with the brew of everyday life, but with the clear, bright liquid of illumination. You are a perfect vessel for divine inspiration.*

He pondered this for a moment. "Well, that's all a bit woolly, innit?" he mused aloud. He pondered his goblet another moment. "Perhaps all that's needed is to fill myself with more of this clear, bright liquid of illunima, illimunin..." He stopped and ran his tongue over his teeth. "Illumination," he managed, enunciating each syllable with tightly precise diction. "Well, now," he said, saluting the Room with his mead, "I can certainly see the merits to becoming a perfect vessel."

Absently raising his cup, because the instructions told him he must. He read aloud, "So drink the good wine to the Old Gods, and dance and make love in their praise, Till Elphames' fair land shall receive us in peace at the end of our days!" He quaffed the rest of the mead, licking his lips with a contented sigh. He felt bloody fantastic. "This calls for a celebration. More mead, I think."

He uncorked the skin, and tipped it into the goblet, but no matter how it was shaken and tilted and squeezed, the skin had provided all the mead it was willing to give. Severus' head dropped to his chest, and he sighed in resignation. *So much for divine inspiration.*

He looked around and sighed. Some of his divine illumination faded, leaving room for defensive insecurity to bleed into his thoughts. He glanced furtively about, feeling exposed and foolish and wondering how he had managed to place himself in such a potentially humiliating and insufferable position with Granger. Any moment now she would appear, take one look at him swimming around in that huge tub and most likely burst out laughing. He was supposed to feel adulated and anointed; he just felt like a forty-eight year old man preparing for his sponge bath at St. Mungo's.

The Purification Rite was a sacred ceremony, according to the Witchhiker's Guide. The High Priestess showed her worship of Cernunnos by cleansing him in the sacred forest pool, anointing him with oil, and preparing him for their marriage at Beltane. Cernunnos, tall and beautiful, horned and crowned with nature's glory, the wild, fierce god of the elements.

Severus looked down at his ropy, skinny body, his knobby knees, his general unattractiveness, and made a decidedly human sound of defeat. Out loud he intoned, *By night he's the wild wind's rider, the Lord of the Shades. By day he's the King of the Woodland, the dweller in green forest glades.* He groaned. "And by the time this sodding ritual is done, he's going to be the laughingstock of Wizarding England, bar none."

With a sigh he felt down to his long, bony toes, he removed his robe and boots and approached the marble steps leading up into the tub *You could refuse, you know. You don't have to do this. There's no Dumbledore, guiltling you into doing it, no Tom Riddle Crucio-ing you into it. Just tell Minerva you're not going to base yourself anymore for someone else's idea of the Greater Good of Wizardkind.* He backed down, and reached for his robe. *Let someone else play the part of the stooge this time. I've had enough.*

As his fingers touched his robe he was overcome by a sudden violent shiver. It started at his head, like an icy cold finger racing down his spine, and he shuddered. His vision blurred, then doubled, and for a moment he felt faint. He grasped the edge of the tub for balance, but it felt wrong, as if it was too low, or he was too tall. His heart was pounding, and for an awful moment he wondered if he was having a heart attack. He felt unnaturally strange; his feet felt too far away, his body not his own.

Then deep, calming warmth stole into him, and he closed his eyes. A dream, or a vision, *osomething* filled his mind, like a gentle hand stroking his hair, his face, his chest. It was innocent, and magical, and it washed all his worry and care and fear away, replacing it with peace. The dizziness passed, and his head felt incredibly clear.

He opened his eyes, and saw a small snake coiled on the marble bier. It was a beautiful little thing, with scales of Slytherin green kissed by silver and gold, giving it the painted look of cloisonné. Since his last encounter with a snake, Severus had been understandably wary of any reptiles, but something about this one struck him more friend than foe.

"Hello," Severus said softly, and the little fellow uncoiled and slithered up his arm, encircling it like a band. Its slender head rested atop his shoulder, and it gazed into his eyes with the unnerving calm of a familiar, as if it did this every day. Its tongue darted out, scenting the air, nearly flickering against Severus' nose.

There was a sound, and he turned to see a lovely doe entering the clearing. Her graceful head was held high, her expression was serene and placid. In this dreamy, half-awake state, he dimly understood that this was his Patronus in corporeal form. He hadn't cast a Patronus since the night he had sent it to help Potter find the Sword of Gryffindor.

All his life, he had associated his Patronus with Lily; but now, face to face with it in the flesh, all he could see was himself in the animal; the boy, standing at the crossroads of his life, before he had made his choices and burned his bridges. Within this doe, he saw only potential...the chance to do things differently this time around. With that thought came another, more grounding one: *Lily is no longer my Patronus. I am.*

He held out his hand, and the doe came to him without a trace of fear. He felt the soft suede of her muzzle as she brushed against his hand. The unquestioning trust in her soft brown eyes filled him with peace. The doe kept walking toward him, but instead of moving to allow her to pass, Severus stood still. The moment her moist nose touched his chest, she dissolved, and entered his body as if he were a door.

The little snake unwound itself from his arm, and it, too, slipped into his chest. Severus sagged, and leaned against the bier, his head on his arms. He didn't know how long he'd been there, but gradually his head cleared of his vision. He stood up, and looked around the clearing, blinking away the cobwebs. "That mead must have more of a kick than I thought," he muttered. He felt slightly confused, but wasn't sure why.

Oh, yes. He'd planned to leave. Why? He felt a slow smile spread across his face. He felt great! Staying here was a grand idea. Granger would be here soon. She would understand. He quickly undressed and headed for the tub.

Leaning over the water, he was assaulted with a mixture of scents and sensations. The aromas overwhelmed his senses, and he laughed shakily. It felt a little like getting high. He gingerly lowered himself into the water, gasping as he sank into its depths. The water was almost too hot to endure; he made an undignified noise as he gradually eased his more delicate bits into the scalding water. As his body gradually acclimated itself, he relaxed once more. Now that he was growing used to it, the marvelously hedonistic feeling of freedom and peace returned.

He drifted off, and in his half dreaming, half awake state, Hermione returned to his thoughts, with her earnest eyes and crazy penchant for lost causes. He wondered exactly what he wanted from her, what he felt for her. Admiration, affection, aggravation. Well, wasn't he just trawling through the A's this evening?

She was a gutsy witch; he'd give her that. She'd faced him absolutely starkers, standing there as proud as Hecate, and accepted his tributes. As he'd taken every liberty he could get away with, it suddenly occurred to him that, far from being disgusted by a man twice her age pawing her, she had enjoyed it. Kneeling at her feet, he had been so entranced by the scent of her arousal it had been all he could do not to drag her down on the floor with him and show her just how much he enjoyed cunnilingus. Her skin had been like silk, and her breasts! Just the thought of those warm, soft mounds cupped in his hands had been prime wank fodder ever since. He only had to conjure the image of those rock-hard nipples aimed at his chest and he was off like the Hogwarts Express.

Thankfully, he'd somehow stumbled through the ceremony without making a complete berk of himself, until they kissed. Nimue's naughty knickers, she had the softest lips. Severus allowed himself a moment of fond remembrance. That had been a great kiss, quite possibly the best of his life. He really ought to kiss her again. She might even let him. Perhaps tonight.

He thought he might have fallen in love with her. He closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him, filling him with emotion, a joy that was wonderful and terrible too, because it was bigger than he was...it was bigger than he had wanted to be in a long time. It was the sort of feeling that made him want to hold her with one hand and draw his wand against the world with the other.

There was the sound of a twig popping, and Severus sat up, splashing water, his heart thudding in his chest. He peered into the misty, steam-laden clearing, squinting as Hermione walked into his field of vision.

Chapter Six: Athame and Bolline

Chapter 7 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Prompfest.

Thank you for your amazing comments - they are like Valentine's Day Candy - definitely moreish! Just a pause in the action to remind you that these characters are the property of JKR and Warner Brothers, and that I make no money from this fic.

The High Priest has a terribly important responsibility in Beltane. He is the catalyst to everything that has to happen in order to have a successful rite. Without him, the High Priestess cannot become the goddess, and if this doesn't happen, the High Priest cannot become the goddess' consort, and the entire Beltane ritual will fail like a failing thing. I know it's a little confusing; it's hard for me to get my head around sometimes, and I'm an authority on the subject. Suffice to say that a wizard is a wizard and a witch is a witch. I don't know how to put it any simpler.

~Chapter Six: Drawing Down The Sun, or Preparing the High Priest The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

Sky's Father, Wise Father, Sun Father, Song Father!

Lord of forest, field and beast, Lord of harvest, hunt and feast,

King of heaven's golden fire, Dancer of the soul's desire,

Shine on us and warm our souls -- Teach us how to make us whole!

~Beltane Ritual

She was barefoot; her hair was bound high on her head, but several curly tendrils escaped the chignon, falling about her face like honey-coloured streamers. She was clad in a simple, low-cut white cotton robe, its long sleeves tightly fitted against her wrists. She looked like a lovely, ghostly apparition, called forth from the mist.

She crossed the clearing, and walked up onto the platform to join him. According to the Witchhiker's Guide, reacting to this ritual with carnal lust was not only acceptable but expected, but Severus still felt shame roiling in his belly. It was bad enough feeling like a shabby pervert; it was another thing entirely to prove himself one. He promised his poor cowed prick all sorts of masturbatory workouts later if it would just maintain a little self-control *now*.

Hermione favoured him with a tense smile, her expression closed, but he could see the determination in her eyes. Nervous she may be, but she wasn't going to do anything to spoil the moment. "I have come to purify," she said, her voice soft.

"I accept your tribute," he answered, thankful he could still think straight enough to remember the words of the ceremony. "May I be cleansed in soul as well as body."

In the semi-gloom, their eyes met, and in that heartbeat between them, Severus saw something in her face he'd never seen in a woman. It looked like it carried a heavy weight, as if it had been borne of the humid air and the powerful kiss they'd shared. For a moment, she rewarded him with a chance to Legilimise into her mind, and he was almost far enough gone to accept it. Then, watching her prepare his bath he thought he must have imagined it.

She first rinsed his hair, then drizzled shampoo over his head and began to scrub. Her strong, slender fingers slid through his mess of hair, as he gasped as her short nails raked over his scalp, hitting every nerve centre on his head.

"Too rough?" she asked.

"Not at all," he rumbled sleepily, too relaxed and blissed out for subterfuge. "With the exception of my mother, you're only one of two people who has ever washed my hair, other than myself."

Her wonderful ministrations ceased. "I see," she said, in a soft voice. He could actually feel her drawing inward, like a mussel retreating into its shell. He was thrown out of the dreamlike state of the ritual, leaving him feeling alone and strangely bereft.

He frowned, and looked up at her. She was upside down in his vision, and the look on her face was anything but relaxed. If anything, she seemed disappointed. Uncertainly, he added, "Right after the war, Poppy used to wash it for me while I was recovering. Raising my arm was too painful on that side, and I learned the hard way it's nearly impossible to wash my hair one-handed."

Hermione started, and a smile grew on her face. "Madam Pomfrey? I thought you were referring to-" she closed her mouth abruptly, then started to wash his hair again, her movements gentle and relaxing again.

"Referring to whom?"

"Doesn't matter." She resumed her delicious administrations, and it might have been his imagination, but it seemed her hands were moving slower, more deliberately, with greater care and attention. In any rate, by the time she was done, he was purring and too zoned out to ponder her odd behaviour. Knowing Granger, she would probably tell him anyway.

All too soon she was rinsing the soap from his hair. He idly wondered if he could somehow convince her to do this on a regular basis; it really was a marvelous feeling, lying back and having someone scour his scalp like that.

Once his hair was rinsed to her satisfaction, she knelt by the side of the tub, her expression neutral, but her face set in lines of intent. He was suddenly nervous in anticipation of what was to come, and judging from her stiff posture and refusal to meet his gaze, she felt the same.

Finally, she looked at him, her pretty face flushed. In a breathless, low voice, she intoned. "May this cleanse your heart and soul, and make you worthy of the goddess."

Slowly she untied the ribbon at the neck of her robe, and removed the outer robe, revealing a sheer, sleeveless shift underneath. Severus swallowed as he saw the dark outline of her nipples through the fabric. They were very hard, and Severus knew then and there no matter what entreaties he gave to his nether regions, they simply weren't going to be up to the task of obeying him, not with Granger's hard nipples and soft hands inches away.

Hermione waited for his nod of assent, then plucked a small flannel from a stack by the tub. She submerged it in the water, and Severus held his breath as she stroked his face with the warm, wet cloth. "Blessed be thy Mind, that learns of the ancient ways," she said, startling him with the words of the ritual. He'd forgotten that they were here for a reason. The soft cloth slid over his forehead to his closed eyes. "Blessed be thine eyes that have seen this day."

The cloth moved across his jaw, then to his lips. "Blessed be thy lips, that speak our rites and keep our secrets." In spite of himself, he sighed as her fingers slid over his neck and down to his collarbone.

He opened his eyes again, and saw that her nipples were very close to his face. He willed his body, begged his body not to respond. It no longer cared for his futile threats; it was how he was *supposed* to react. The goddess was ministering unto the god; they were one and the same, light and dark, yin and yang.

A warm breeze of magic fluttered between them, and it spoke to him. *There is no wrong in this place that will be done... all that is done is good and meet unto the moment...* With a jolt of realisation he accepted that the magic would not allow anything to happen that was not meant to happen. It was a marvelous freedom; he had only to follow the magic they created.

It was at that moment that Severus knew he was not Severus anymore; he was the High Priest, the living embodiment of the god. He looked at Hermione, bewildered.

She smiled. "I wish you could see yourself," she breathed.

"And you," he said, aching to touch her again. "I feel so..." he closed his eyes, as his strength waned.

"It's alright, Severus," Hermione replied reassuringly, her hand on his bare shoulder. "Let's move on. I think you'll become overwhelmed with it, otherwise."

As she washed his chest and arms, he involuntarily flinched as her hands moved over the faded smudge of his Dark Mark. She gently whispered, "Does it hurt?"

Well, that was a question, wasn't it? That damned tattoo had caused him more pain than he was willing to ever admit to anyone. It had been used in a dozen hideous ways to punish, to reward, to demean, to subjugate, and he hated it as much as the man who'd placed it on his skin. "No," he said, his voice a whisper. "It's just... I'm ashamed of it."

Giving him a look of great tenderness and compassion, took his hand. "You're a good man who made a wrong choice as a very young boy, Severus. You've got to learn to cut yourself some slack."

Severus laughed in spite of himself. "You know, that might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

She rubbed his shoulder, a friendly, caring gesture. "Then I need to work on that."

Leaving him to ponder that cryptic statement, Hermione stood, and indicated for him to follow. Slowly, Severus obeyed, rising from the water on unsteady legs. She started with his lower body, washing his long, pale thighs and calves. As her hands moved slowly over his limbs, she murmured, "Blessed be thy knees, that shall kneel in supplication before me." To wash his feet, she made him lift them out of the water and balance them on her knee. She felt surprisingly, comfortably solid. "Blessed be thy feet, that have brought thee to my Sacred Altar," she breathed, as her robe grew wet and more transparent.

Her hands moved across the taut flesh of his buttocks, and he could not prevent his body from responding. He remembered what the magic had told him; nothing could happen that was not supposed to happen. "Blessed be thy phallus, for without which I could not receive life," Hermione whispered hoarsely, as her soapy hands closed over his raging erection.

She licked her lips, all the while staring at his straining, soap-slicked cock. *Oh dear gods and goddesses. I am a dead man,* he thought, moaning helplessly. She cupped his balls and stroked him. Looking down at her, Severus ground out, "Hermione, please..."

"It's alright, Severus," she replied, her eyes large and dark, entranced. Slowly she stroked his shaft with her slippery hands, and when he reached for her, she pushed his hands away. "Let me."

"Oh, gods," he moaned, giving in to her lavish ministrations, pumping his hips until he was fucking her hand, and nothing was going to stop this...

He came spectacularly; white ropes of semen sprayed from his twitching cock, spilling on the ground, as Hermione milked him with shocking expertise. Panting, moaning, Severus shuddered as his spent cock slipped from her fingers. He gaped stupidly at her, too stunned to try to make sense. "Why did you, I mean... what... why...." He gave up, and managed to collapse back into the tub without doing himself damage.

She was looking at him with large, bewildered eyes. "I'm sorry. I just... it's like I couldn't help myself." She licked her lips again, and Severus was tempted to pull her into the tub with him. "Did I... did I hurt you?"

"Wha...?" he gasped, too muzzy to be obtuse. "Granger, you just jerked me off. Let's just say I'm not complaining, but I wasn't exactly expecting a happy ending, either. I don't know what's going on in that brain of yours, but I can't decide whether to run away screaming or try and talk you into doing it again."

For a moment, the both looked away, too shocked to face one another. Finally, he forced out the words he'd wanted to say the minute he stopped coming all over the Room of Requirement. "Did you enjoy it? Doing that to me, I mean?"

She glanced at him warily, as if afraid of giving the wrong answer. She swallowed, hard, then nodded, still not quite meeting his eyes. "I loved it. It was the most erotic thing I've ever done."

"Well, that makes two of us," he muttered. Another slow, agonising moment passed.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice, her face crimson. "I mean," she added, and rolled her eyes, "I feel I took horrible advantage of you."

Severus stared at her, marveling. He was quite sure in that moment he was never going to truly understand how a witch's mind worked. "I accept your apology, if that will make you feel any better," he said, putting just the right amount of Slytherin martyrdom in his tone. "However, if you feel you must atone, you're more than welcome to try."

Several heartbeats later, he saw her lips curl into a smile. "It was fun, wasn't it?"

"From my vantage point, very much so, Hermione."

She laughed, and the warmth of her smile seemed to raise the temperature of the clearing. "The magic of the ritual doesn't allow anything to happen that is not meant to happen, Hermione. We haven't... *you* haven't done anything to be ashamed or in fear of."

"I know," she answered, her eyes soft. "Neither of us have." With great ceremony, she stretched her arms outward to him. "Blessed be thy body, formed in strength and power," she intoned, her voice rich. She smiled at him. "Now rise. You are bathed in the power of the goddess."

Relieved that they were back on even keel, Severus patted her hand, and prepared to rise from the tub. He stood too quickly, and the combination of heat and alcohol and post-coital angst went straight to his head, causing him to sway alarmingly. Hermione reached out to steady him, but he pitched forward, his arms windmilling as he tried to catch his balance. "Oh shit!" he yelped, as his foot caught the edge of tub, and he went lurching toward Hermione as if she'd *Accio'd* him.

She tried to halt his forward motion, but his foot slipped and together they crashed down onto the forest floor, arse over teakettle. Severus grunted as the impact jarred every bone of his body. Good thing Granger had been there to cushion his fall, really...

He had barely got his breath when he realised he was suffocating the poor girl beneath him; he was a dead weight, and her scrabbling hands frantically pushing at his slippery flesh added nothing to the mood, except to make him feel even more idiotic than he'd felt languishing in the tub. "Gods, Hermione!" he gasped, trying to scramble off her soft, yielding body. She was desperately gulping in the air he'd knocked out of her.

He somehow managed to clamour off her, still feeling woozy and weak. He plopped on his backside, hissing as his bollocks frantically tried to crawl inside his body and away from the cold dirt floor. "Are you alright?" he gasped, frantically. Her torn robe and disheveled hair made her look like an assault victim in Knockturn Alley. "Gods, Hermione, I'm so sorry. I felt dizzy, and..."

"No, no, I'm fine. Well, not fine yet, but I think I'll live," she said, shakily. She was holding her side, and he realised he had landed on her directly.

He gingerly helped her onto her feet. A wave of remorseful, protective fear roughened his voice. "Are you sure you're unharmed? Perhaps Poppy..."

"No, thank you, really, Severus," she answered hastily. "All I need is a bit of a cleanup and I'll be right as rain." She tried to smile, but it was a pathetic thing, and it made Severus feel like hippogriff dung.

"Remind me never to mix alcohol and hot baths. Especially in conjunction with pagan rituals and hand jobs," he muttered, still naked and feeling more foolish by the second.

She tried to smile. "I'm sure one day we'll look back on this and laugh."

"You'll pardon me if I'm not in that big a hurry to enjoy yet another laugh at my expense," he shot back. At her startled expression, he looked away, feeling too battered and vulnerable to deal with it. "Right. Perhaps we could just finish this? I believe I've had about as much preparation as I can endure."

They were both covered in mud and dead leaves; Hermione performed a hasty *Tergeo* on herself, then conjured a large bucket. She scooped water from the bath, and sluiced it over him until he was clean again. Silently, she dried him with a large white towel, and he allowed himself to be placated as the soft cotton towel moved over his body. Her touch was firm, enveloping him with comfort and care. When she had finished, she tied back his damp hair with a burgundy ribbon.

Lastly, she gathered her wild tumble of curls in hand. She flicked her hair first across his chest, then down toward his stomach, the timeless symbolic gesture harkening back from the days when a Priestess would dry the High Priest using only her hair as a towel. The feel of her soft hair brushing over his bare skin was shockingly intimate, and palliative in a way that made him feel even worse for snapping at her. He felt an old familiar ache within. Once again, he'd managed to hurt someone he cared about by being an arse. He felt limp and dazed, and for some silly reason, near tears. He was so tired of inevitably screwing up even the most unassailable of moments.

Once she was done, she stepped back, her arms at her side. Severus concluded the ritual by kneeling at her feet. "I am your humble acolyte, my goddess," he recited wearily. "I am purified by the honour you have bestowed upon me. I will be perfect for my duties as your consort." He lowered his head, and he felt her hands caress the crown of his damp head.

She answered, "You are purified in my regard. I await your pleasure within the circle." There was something in her tone that made him relax. *Understand*, it seemed to say. *We don't have to be perfect in one another's eyes.* He rose, and took her in his arms, and she melted against him. It was unbearably sweet...beyond passion, beyond this poxy ritual, it was just so damn sweet to hold someone who accepted him, warts and all...

There was no gradual reduction of temperature; in an instant, the misty, wooded clearing simply changed to a stark white box so chilly Severus could see his breath mist the air. It was too cold to even appreciate what the drop in temperature did to Hermione's nipples...he was too busy trying to keep his genitalia from disappearing into his stomach.

"Killjoy," he muttered under his breath, as his flesh goosebumped and Hermione shivered. She quickly retrieved his robes, and helped him to dress, then donned her own robes. The moment they were both properly dressed, the climate grew pleasant again. It was enough of a warning call to them both, and the sensual atmosphere bled out of the room. Severus saw a trace of embarrassment on Hermione's face as she turned to leave him. He had the presence of mind to catch her hand in his; he felt her pulse quicken beneath his fingers.

"Hermione," he began.

"Yes?" she answered too quickly, too hopefully, and the temperature lowered threateningly again. Severus stood staring down at her, but it was as if he'd been hit with a *Silencio*. Nothing seemed appropriate, and yet he needed to tell her...

His hesitation lasted a shade too long, and Hermione's expression grew resigned and self-conscious. "It's alright, Severus. I understand."

Alarmed, he tried to say, "Understand what? How can you understand when I don't have the first clue?" But she was walking away, leaving him frozen to the spot, unable to decide the next course of action. *Do something, say something, you idiot! Don't just stand here like a lemon while she walks away!*

"Let me go! I need to fix this!" he growled to the room. It took Hermione leaving the room for it to reset it back to normal, and he could move again. He dashed out into the hall, and caught sight of her moving toward her quarters. For a short little thing, she could certainly eat up the mileage when properly motivated.

He strode after her, determined to catch her before she decided that he was too much of a lost cause even for her.

"Excuse me, Professor Snape." Severus whirled around impatiently, ready to cut his interrupter to ribbons, but calmed at the sight of Argus Filch stumping toward him in some haste.

"Yes, Argus? Is there a problem?"

"I was wondering, sir," he said, "If you needed anything out of your classroom before I start cleaning it tomorrow. The doxy bomb has to remain undisturbed for two days."

Severus thought. "Actually, yes I do. I'll take care of it first thing in the morning before you start. Thank you, Argus." He turned to leave, but Filch stopped him again.

"Well, that's the thing. I was hoping to get started a little early, you see. I was wondering if you could go and take care of it now, before your meeting."

Severus frowned. "What meeting?"

"The one you have with Professor Granger in the RoR, sir." Argus gave Severus a faintly chiding smile. "It's on the schedule. Don't tell me you forgot already, Severus. Professor Granger won't be too pleased about that."

"The meeting's over. We're done for the evening."

Filch looked almost crestfallen. "Oh? Wasn't it scheduled for nine o'clock?"

With a shrug, Severus replied, "Everything's subject to change."

"But I were right, though? It were for nine?"

Puzzled at Filch's insistence, Severus replied, "It was, but we changed it. Pardon me, but is that all, Argus? I have a matter I must attend to."

"Of course," Argus said, waving him on. "Good night, Professor. Don't forget to get those papers."

"Yes, yes, alright," he answered impatiently, already on the move. "Good night, Argus."

He rapped on her bedroom door. Suddenly it seemed more important than ever that he speak to her. "Hermione!" he hissed. "Please open the door."

After a moment, she opened the door. She had changed from her white robes into a pair of Muggle tracksuit trousers and a faded Weird Sisters t-shirt. Her expression was shuttered, and for a moment he felt strangely guilty.

"Why on earth did you storm away like that?" he said, his voice rougher than he'd planned, and he cursed inwardly as she recoiled slightly. Gods, things were going well.

Woodenly, she answered, "It's alright. I told you I understood. Let's leave it at that. Goodnight, Severus." Before she could duck into the safety of her room he barged his way in, running on pure instinct.

"That's the second time you've said you understood. Explain it, then. Help me to understand." He took her face in his hands, she wouldn't meet his eyes. "Hermione, if we're going to do this ridiculous ritual thing, we need to talk. And I'm not talking about how many times I have to snuffle all over your tits to placate Cernunnos, or whoever is keeping count. Something is happening between us. I don't know if it chills or thrills me, but we just can't keep dashing away from one another. If we're going to work through this Beltane nonsense..."

"I know you don't really feel this way about me. It's the magic."

She might as well been speaking Mermish for all that her words made sense. He looked down at her blankly. "Who says I don't feel *that* way? Hermione, please remember you're talking to a wizard, not a god, which means I'm clueless to the ways a witch's mind works. I don't know what I've done wrong."

She was shaking her head, and he was stunned to see tears in her eyes. "This isn't fair. It's not fair on either of us. Minerva was wrong to put us both through this."

Severus frowned. "Granger, I know I'm still slightly drunk from the mead and your bathing skills, and I can't be sure my swan dive from the tub didn't addle my brains, but this riddle is doing my head in. What are you talking about?"

Hermione grew more flustered than ever. "Oh, I shouldn't have done this! I knew it was horrifically masochistic but I couldn't help myself. I just wanted to be near you, and I thought..." She ventured to look up into his face, her lovely eyes full of resignation. "I remember the trials, the Pensieve. You... you still...I mean, in the memories you said you'd love her always..."

Severus stilled. "Oh, Merlin's saggy mantits." He closed his eyes, and pictured the one woman who had come between him and every possibility for happiness he'd ever known. "Lily."

She all but cringed away from him. "I'm sorry!" she said, her face stricken. "Minerva kept telling me I needed to talk to you about her, but I didn't want to bring up all these painful memories! I know you'll never care for anyone else and it was stupid of me to have any false hope..."

"Oh, Circe wept," he spat, and slumped against her. He grasped her shoulders and shook them gently, almost playfully. "You don't mean that you believed all that tripe, do you? Didn't Potter tell you?"

Hermione gave him a look of such profound confusion he nearly laughed. She closed her eyes, and screwed up her face. "What should Harry have told me?"

"May we sit down?" At her nod, he followed her into her quarters, which he found surprisingly like his own...a trifle messy, stacked with books and quills and parchment. Several pairs of her pointy shoes lay strewn haphazardly beneath a comfortable looking chair, and a tray of tea and biscuits sat under a stasis charm on a nearby table.

"I had the elves bring this. I desperately needed a cuppa," she explained. "Would you like some as well?"

Once they were settled on the sofa with a brew, Severus began, "Hermione, I thought Potter would have told you the entire story by now. As soon as all this book nonsense came about, I knew he'd be as much in the spotlight as I was because of my so-called relationship with his mother. I had to tell him the truth." He rolled his eyes. "I

suppose I assumed you, Potter and Weasley were so joined at the hip thoughts just passed telepathically from one buttock to the next."

"Oh, cheers for that," she said, and laughed unwillingly. "I never realised you gave my buttocks so much consideration."

"You've no idea," he countered. He leaned forward and scrubbed his face with his hands, trying to reset his brain to thinking mode again. "Hermione, when I gave those memories to Potter in the Shrieking Shack, I knew had to give him something profound. I had to tell the boy that he was supposed to allow himself to be killed." He turned to her. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to do that?"

She took his hand. "I can't imagine at all," she said, rubbing the soft pad of her thumb over the inside of his wrist.

He nodded. "Yes, well, I wasn't exactly in the best frame of mind at the time, you know. I thought I was dying. I needed to impress on Potter the validity of what I had to tell him. And so I padded it full of sweet memories and pledges of undying devotion and remorse and grief and everything in between. And all those things were true, lest you think me even more a cold-hearted bastard than you probably already do.

"I did feel horribly guilty. I had brought about the death of the first real friend I had ever had." He felt the grip of her hand change, from sympathy to support. "Much has been said about my undying love, but in reality, Lily and I had grown apart long before her son was born. She went with James Potter and I, well, you know.

"It will also come as no surprise that I was a completely objectionable shit with a penchant for the Dark Arts and running with the wrong crowd. She wanted to be popular, to be the Gryffindor sweetheart. She was the perfect golden girl, and I was a petty, greasy git, even then. Not exactly boyfriend material, wouldn't you say?"

"So she spurned me for falling in with the Death Eaters. I just wanted some control over my life. And I exerted it by calling her a Mudblood in front of the entire school population and making an absolute arse out of myself."

Hermione was quiet for a moment. Finally, she said, "I appreciate you confiding in me, Severus, but all this is well-known. These are all memories you gave Harry."

He nodded, and took another sip of the excellent tea. "Yes. Well, when Rita Skeeter's tell-all Book of Snape Shit came out, I knew I had to set the record straight. By that time, all the Marauders were dead, so I could tell the truth. Yes, I cared for Lily, but by the time we finished school, I was sick to death of her. She was a pretty, popular, nice girl, but she was no saint. At first, I thought she just used me, but she wasn't above doing whatever was necessary to get her way.

"She used to give Slughorn handjobs to garner better Potions grades once I was no longer propping them up. She had a go with every Marauder, Pettigrew included. And when she wasn't sleeping around with Sirius Black and that werewolf Lupin, they were tucked up in the Gryffindor dormitory screwing one another *and* James Potter."

To keep Hermione's imminent fainting spell at bay, he hurriedly added, "Mind you, I didn't tell Harry *that* part. They were his parents after all; I wouldn't sully their reputations just to launder mine. I despised James Potter, and I told Lily so, but that was more about the history between me and the Marauders, not Lily and me. No matter what people think, I'm not *that* much of a prick."

Hermione's eyes were huge, and for a moment he thought he had repulsed her. Lupin's memory was still sacrosanct amongst the Order. "I'm sorry, but that's the truth. I left school thinking myself well shut of her. Of course," he sobered, "when I heard the prophecy, I put the wheels in motion that destroyed all those lives..."

He was breathing hard; this was still so damn hard to think about, much less confess aloud. "I swear to you, Hermione, when I told Tom Riddle what I'd heard, I had no idea it pertained to Lily in any way. I didn't even know she was pregnant, much less having a son. I didn't love her anymore, but I wished her no ill will. The day she was killed, the guilt I felt over it wrecked me. I was the reason she was dead."

He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "And so I defected and went to Albus. I thought if I could make amends and do right by her son, I could somehow erase the guilt. I had to make him hate me, to keep me at a distance, don't you see? I couldn't be Dumbledore's so-called Master spy, otherwise. And to be honest, he looked so much like sodding James Potter, hating him wasn't nearly as hard as it should have been."

For a moment, neither spoke. Hermione opened her mouth twice to respond, then closed it. "Fancy that," Severus marveled, sitting back. "If I had known this story would render you this speechless I'd have started trickle-feeding this information to you starting the day you arrived as a professor."

"Oh, don't be such an arse," she said, absently. There was an automatic tone to it, as if she were merely going through the motions, saying what she felt was expected. "How did Harry react to all this? I mean, I know he regards you with a fair amount of hero-worship now."

Severus stretched his cooling muscles with a soft groan. "He was actually quite stoic about it. He had always thought the memories were a little too pat. And by then, he understood Albus a little better," he said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. He shrugged. "And apparently Black himself regaled the boy with some of the Marauder's less- pure-than-driven-snow adventures."

In the silence that followed, Hermione made a strange sound, somewhere between a snort and a giggle. "I'll bet Sirius didn't tell Harry about him and Remus." She shook her head, squinting her eyes. "I *knew* there was something between those two! Remus always acted so strange about marrying Tonks," she mused. "Not that I didn't love them both to bits, but it really was a one-sided relationship."

"Yes, well, Lupin was very upset about Black's unfortunate demise. I personally don't think he ever got over it." He cast a sly look at Hermione. "On the other hand," he added, "Lupin was an unrepentant flirt." He watched her reaction out of the corner of his eye. "Male or female, didn't matter. If it had a pulse..."

"Are you implying, Professor Snape, that Remus Lupin chatted you up?" Hermione challenged, her eyes dancing.

He nodded solemnly. "He did."

She gasped and laughed her delicious laughter. "And did you take him up on it?"

He gasped in revulsion. "I most certainly did not! Besides which, I would have thought by now that my sexual preferences were quite obvious, Professor Granger."

"Oh, *quite* obvious, Professor Snape," she retorted playfully. "So, you only enjoy flirting with the witches, huh?"

"I've never had much opportunity, to be honest," he said, drawing his robes together with grave dignity. "Besides, I don't think it's all that effective if you have to announce it beforehand."

She shook her head, marveling. She gave him a sly look out of the corner of her eye. "Still. Can you imagine him and Sirius going at it in their animagus forms? They'd be stuck together like a cork in a bottle for hours."

He suppressed a snort of laughter, and they relaxed. Something stretched between them, and it felt good, like a tenuous connection grown solid and strong. The self-conscious discomfort was gone, and Severus felt a passing dizziness that resembled nothing more or less than gratitude.

They sat in a companionable silence that Severus thought he could easily get used to. Crazymaker or no, in any case, Granger was a good listener. He leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees, and she rubbed his back soothingly, as if stroking a pet. It was strangely comforting, and he thought that, if he was never afforded the opportunity to see her body in that sheer gown ever again, he could live with her gentle touch. It didn't feel pitying or conciliatory; it felt like a nice, Granger-ish version of normal.

"Hermione. I have to tell you something else."

Sensing the change in his tone, her palliative strokes stilled. "Yes, Severus?"

The magic allows nothing to happen that is not to happen."I'm not hopelessly in love with a dead woman. I'm not gay. I'm not particularly interesting. I'd have to say that most of the women I've spent any time with in the last ten years liked the idea of getting to know the so-called Unsung Hero, but none survived the morning-after reality that I'm just an ugly wizard who got caught up in something huge. I played my part, but I'm nothing special."

At last, she gave his back a pat. "Well, I can't agree with a lot of what you said."

Severus sighed. It wasn't the first time he would be misunderstood; it wouldn't be the last. "Whether you agree or not..."

"I don't agree that you're nothing special. I don't agree that you're not interesting."

There was a sudden wrench, and Severus found himself facing her. Hermione put her hands on either side of his face. "And if you're ugly, then you're the most handsome kind of ugly I've ever seen."

When he raised his head, Hermione put her arms around him. Her warm breath tickled his ear as she whispered, "There is a moment near the end of the Beltane, where Cernunnos chases his goddess through a field. You are Cernunnos, and I am the goddess. I'm supposed to evade capture, but if Cernunnos catches me, it is his right to take me in the moonlight and make me his consort."

"As soon as the field is planted, we'll go there, just you and me. Now, I'm going to run like hell, and if you think I'm worth it, you're going to chase me." He shivered as her lips brushed against his. "I dare you to catch me."

He didn't bother keeping the smirk from curving at his lips. "Another dare?"

"Yes. One with benefits."

"You heard the man, Rita. My information was accurate. You can't deny it."

Rita glowered at Filch. He was right, but she hated wasting time. "Alright. I'll admit your information has been spot on; but near-misses don't write good copy." She tried to front the old Squib out, but he seemed implacable. "Give me something I can use, Filch, or the deal's off."

He nodded. "Tomorrow we'll all be meeting for the first run through."

"Who cares?"

He leaned in, touching her arm. "In two weeks we start creating the field around the magic circle. You know the rite; Cernunnos chases the goddess through the field, and if he catches her..." he made a lewd gesture that made Rita's skin crawl. "That's a scoop worth catching, my dear."

Chapter Seven: Pagan Rede

Chapter 8 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Thank you for all your amazing comments - they have been the best Valentine Candy! :) I need at this point to thank my precious Muse, who handed me this chapter in one fell swoop and gave me one of the most enjoyable writing experiences of my life. These characters do not belong to me - they are the property of JK Rowling, and I do not make any money from this writing. I am only paid in good karma, which feels pretty darn good from where I'm standing.

In the olden times, the High Priestess would wear seven scarves, which harkened back to the legend of Salome and her dance of the Seven Veils. As she ran through the fields, with the High Priest giving chase as the great Cernunnos, she would allow him to catch her, one scarf at a time.

Some of the more well-traveled Covens adapted the seven scarves into the colours of the chakras, and the Priestess would relinquish her scarves in order from white to purple, to blue, to green, then yellow to orange to red, the basal colour of the seat of life. Wear what you like, Priestess, but remember: once you are in the field, he must chase you until you catch him.

~Chapter Seven: Chasing the Moon, Catching The Sun...The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

"Beltane is the climax of Spring, a celebration of fertility. In ancient times it was the Beltane Rites that reconnected each year the King to the Goddess, the masculine to the feminine.

It is a time for us to give thanks for our fertile lives, our creativity and our gender specific gifts and roles. It's a time to notice and honour the difference in the masculine and feminine. It is a time of increasing growth, building to almost full potential, of beauty and heightened passion."

~ Unknown

The chime rang just after two o'clock, and Minerva looked up from the mountain of scrolls and parchments, grateful for the interruption.

"Come," she barked. She hoped it might be Filius with a new packet of biscuits, come to talk her into an early tea break. Instead, Argus Filch's balding head appeared as the stone steps rose to her study. He stood just inside the entrance, as if unsure of his welcome. Albus had confided that Filch had done this as long as he had known the

man.

"Headmistress," he said, with a nod of greeting. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"Interrupt away, Argus," she replied, removing her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose. "The Board of Governors and the Ministry are pelting me with so many notes today, my study's starting to resemble the owlery."

"All wanting to get in their two Knuts' worth about the Beltane, eh?" He rasped, and made a little gesture of apology. "Well, any road up, I'm sorry to disturb you, Ma'am, but I wanted to know if you'd had a look at the pitch yet."

"What? Oh," she said, with a rueful laugh. "I keep forgetting. How is it going?"

"Well, it's looking a right treat, if you ask me, Professor," Filch replied staunchly, warming to the subject.

"Excellent! Now, if the Ministry will just stop nagging me every five minutes about the logistics of this bloody ritual, I might actually have a chance to participate in it," she declared vehemently, indicating the stacks of letters spilling over her desk.

"Well, begging your pardon, Ma'am, but you can't let these bunch of limp-wristed, big girls' blouses interfere." He nodded contemptuously toward the letters. "I don't remember seeing them down here helpin', even when you were begging for manpower during the restoration."

Minerva softened, touched at Filch's righteous indignation. "You'll get no argument from me, Argus. We who have taken care of Hogwarts will always do our duty to protect it. If they want to complain, they should have been here protecting it with us, instead of waiting until it was all over so they could tell us how to repair the blasted thing."

Filch seemed to find something fascinating on the wall behind her head. "True enough, Ma'am. But do go down and have a look when you've got the chance. It might cheer you up."

"I will, Argus. Hagrid told me about the long hours and hard work you've put in assisting him. Thank you."

He shrugged modestly. "Me old Grandad was a Wizarding farmer. I think he would've been pleased. The largest are nigh on six feet tall now and the rows are fifty yards deep. By Beltane, they'll be almost nine feet high and it'll go twice that deep, I reckon."

"It sounds splendid, Argus. I'll take a break around tea time, and have a look before dinner."

He seemed shyly pleased. "As you like. Will the Professors be rehearsing down there tonight?" he asked, as an afterthought. "If they are, I'll make sure they've plenty of lamps."

"Professors Granger and Snape will. It'll be their last chance to rehearse their parts before the students return, and the privacy wards go up. Once school's back in session, only authorised personnel will be allowed down there. Oh, and if you see Severus between now and then, tell him to be on the lookout for an owl from the *Daily Prophet*. They want to interview him and Professor Granger."

"Will do," answered Filch with a nod.

"Argus?"

He paused at the steps and turned back. "Ma'am?"

"I would like you to participate in the ritual as well."

He froze, then blinked several times. "Me, Professor? But, I'm..." he coughed, and shook his head. "You don't suppose that I would be welcome?"

"You are as much a part of this little family of ours as I am. It would mean a great deal to me if you were to join us. It's a lovely ceremony."

Filch drew himself up to his full height. His eyes were suspiciously moist. Formally, he announced, "It will be my privilege, Headmistress." With a proud nod, he turned and left. She could hear his heavy boots clumping down the stairs. *There goes another one with a little more spring in his steps* she thought, and allowed herself a smile. Argus had been inconsolable at the death of his beloved cat, Mrs. Norris, last summer, and Minerva had spent more than a few hours working on the problem of how to pull him from his slough of despondency.

After the war, Argus had seemed uncertain of Severus' friendship, not to mention his loyalties, and had kept his distance. Time and circumstance had helped mend the rift, and it was gratifying to see them play the occasional game of darts together at the Broomsticks.

She allowed herself another smile for Severus. Before lunch she had asked him to her study to discuss the ritual. Far from the resentful, reluctant wizard who had been dragged kicking and screaming into the High Priest role two months before, he was now clear-eyed and alert. Elegantly sprawled in one of the guest chairs, he had been relaxed, almost enthusiastic...well, as enthusiastic as Severus Snape could be about anything nowadays. Even his voice had regained some of the deep, beguiling cadence of old.

And while he would never be anyone's idea of sweetness and light, it seemed to Minerva that he looked more content than she had seen him in years. He carried himself with quiet confidence, and it was all she could do not to leap up onto her desk and dance a reel.

Minerva eyed the scrolls that littered every square inch of the surface. "Correspondence before dancing," she chirped with feigned alacrity, and reached for the one closest.

"The next time you decide to crawl down my neck, you'll be in for a squashin'," Filch grumbled with a shudder, as Rita changed from her Animagus form. "I could hardly talk to the Headmistress with you climbing all over me. Gave me the willies."

"Hphmm. Next time try getting somewhere near a bar of soap. I've got about three weeks of your grime under my nails," she hissed back.

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "But you heard her, didn't you? They'll be there tonight. Meet me in my quarters at ten o'clock..."

Rita drew herself up to full height. "You'd better be right about the time, Filch, or I swear I'll..."

"You'll what? Rumble me? Where will that leave you, Rita?" he glowered at her with narrowed, sharp eyes. "When have I told you wrong, eh? When have I give you inaccurate information? If you call me out, I'll do the same. It's all for one, one for all."

Rita snapped, "Don't play games with me, Filch. Especially not ones I invented."

"Then don't be surprised when the rules change," he bit back. "Now, you just be there at ten o'clock. I'll get you onto the Quidditch pitch."

"I'm telling you, dearie, you look like a dream. Trust me."

"Oh, shut up, you," she muttered to her mirror. "I still haven't forgiven you for not telling me I had my robe caught in my knickers. It stayed that way for three classes before Pomona yanked it free for me."

The mirror snickered unrepentantly, and Hermione seriously rethought the repercussions of blasting it into seven years' worth of bad luck. Most mirrors were charmed to offer suggestions and support. She truly believed this one had been charmed to deliberately make her look bad. And it was a terrible liar when it got caught.

Finally she settled on checking to make sure she had nothing between her teeth (five minutes of brushing), her hair wasn't going to turn into a giant pygmy puff the moment she left the castle, and her new underwear looked deadly. The bra and knickers were a gorgeous peacock blue, and the saleswitch threw in the matching suspenders and stockings for free. Even so, she took a moment to chide herself for taking so much care with underthings that were not even going to be seen.

Hermione dropped her robes over her head, making sure nothing got caught. A glance at the clock told her she had enough time for one final read-through. She picked up her now decidedly ragged copy of *The Witchhiker's Guide*, and turned it to Chapter Seven. Sebelius Slunt was not the most eloquent writer, but he did have a coarse, earthy quality to his prose that made for enjoyable and interesting reading. Never had it been so prevalent as in this portion of the ritual:

The Priestess (Hecate) will run, and the High Priest (Oak King) will give chase. One has to ask oneself at this point who is running after whom. There are some experts (Brockhurst, Finsdale and Pertwee: Ancient Rites and Rituals, 1878, for example) who believe that the act of running itself allows Cernunnos and Hecate to enter the physical plane using the bodies of the Priest and Priestess. In any case, it never hurts to cover the basics.

High Priest and Priestess notes: *They don't call it 'the thrill of the chase' for nothing, you know. Make it a real competition! Oak King, this is the only time you'll be able to show Hecate she's worth the trouble. And Hecate, if you've run him off his feet and he's still coming back for more, at least give the poor sod a good bunk up...he's earned it.*

Coven notes: *If your High Priest and Priestess fancy one another, don't expect them to come out of that field any time soon, especially if they're in good physical shape. I often advise Covens to bring books and a picnic for this portion of the service. And for Merlin's sake, be patient! You don't want to interrupt the God and Goddess going at it, do you?*

This was the final part of the ritual Hermione and Severus would perform exclusively together, and the one she was most nervous about. Closing the book, she tried to visualise what would happen. She and Severus would cast the magic circle, and invite the others inside. The chanting and dancing would begin. Drums would beat a steady, driving rhythm, and while the others danced, they would both disappear from out of the light and safety of the circle. She would run, and Severus would catch her, and then they would...well, that was the twenty-thousand Galleon question, wasn't it? What would they do?

When they had discussed this all those weeks ago, it had been simple. She would leave the circle and run a few yards into the darkness. He would 'catch' her, they would return to the circle, and go through the remainder of the ritual. Afterward they would head back to the castle, have a drink, compare notes and that would be that. But that was before he had knelt before her naked form and kissed her. That was before she had bathed him in an enchanted wood and brought him off. That was before she knew the truth about Lily.

She bit her lip thoughtfully. What was really going on between her and Severus Snape? Hermione knew now she wanted him. And she had a fairly good idea that he fancied her a bit as well. The night they had come to their new, rather enjoyable understanding, she had dared him to catch her. Had he taken her seriously? He was the most maddening wizard...she still didn't know what he was truly thinking most of the time. Sometimes he seemed as transparent as glass, and sometimes the machinations of his brilliant, convoluted brain were beyond her formidable powers of comprehension. He swathed himself in his own set of veils, each one hiding some part of him that he didn't want seen in the harsh light of ridicule. Getting a read on Severus Snape was the toughest thing she'd ever done, and she'd brewed Polyjuice potion at age twelve.

"Oh, who am I kidding?" she moaned into the room. "I might as well put on my granny knickers and my old cotton sports bra and pin my hair into a bun for all the High Priest and Priestess hanky-panky we're going to get up to."

"Don't be idiotic, witch," the mirror chirped. "You're gagging for a shag and if you're talking about that ugly wizard who was in here the other night, he looked even more desperate than you!"

Hermione stuck her tongue out at her own reflection and stalked out of the room, vowing to have a new mirror installed before the end of the week.

As Hermione came within sight of the Quidditch pitch, she froze in shock. Green was everywhere. It stretched as far as she could see...past the tall spectator stands, around the perimeter of the pitch, up to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and down to the backside of the castle. It was dense and tall and inviting, and when Hermione realised that *this* was where she would be running, she broke out in goosebumps. The entire area had been transformed into a massive cornfield.

As she drew closer she heard voices weaving through the restless leaves, men's voices, like Severus' and...

"Harry? What on earth?" She raced toward her dear friend, who greeted her with open arms.

"Hermione! I was hoping I'd get to see you while I was here!" he exclaimed, enveloping her in a tight hug. He gave her a kiss for good measure. With a mock stern frown, he added, "Now, I've been told by Ginny to give you a good telling off for not coming 'round during Christmas. Consider yourself told."

"Duly noted, and properly chastised. I'm sorry I didn't make it; after 'The Ron Thing'..."

"Yes, well, 'The Ron Thing' is the reason you're not being chastised by Howler," he added. "And I'm not to leave Hogwarts until I get a promise you'll come soon to Grimmauld Place for a visit."

"As soon as Beltane is over, of course I will. But what are you doing here in Scotland? I thought you weren't due to join us for a few weeks yet."

Harry answered, "I dropped by to speak to McGonagall. Since I'm lighting the Balefire at the end of the ceremony, I wanted to make sure I had the proper instructions."

The three of them walked toward the middle, down a long, narrow corridor between one section of stalks and the next. In spite of her best friend talking about Ginny and the boys and work and family, Hermione found her attention wandering. The wind sloughed through the leaves, a rustling, crackling sound, and the smell of new corn was all around them, fresh and musky, a masculine scent that at once soothed and excited her, because it seemed to connect her with the tall, intense wizard walking silently by her side.

It seemed to take ages to reach the centre; as they walked, Harry whistled in admiration. "It's extraordinary, isn't it? I have to admit, the first thing I thought about was the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Talk about déjà vu of the worst kind."

"I know. Me too." Only one other person beside Hermione truly understood how awful that night had been for Harry. The poor boy had innocently run into a maze, hoping to win a shiny cup and a few Galleons, and stumbled out of it bearing the news that the foulest, most fearsome Dark wizard known to mankind had been reborn.

"McGonagall told me she was worried that a lot of people would be reminded of it, so she decided to make it a cornfield instead of another type of maze," Harry replied. They eventually reached the centre of the pitch, a large, brightly-lit clearing where the actual Beltane ritual would take place in its entirety.

Hermione nodded toward the dead centre of the circle, toward a five-foot wide divot rounded out in the dirt. "There's your spot." This was where the large bonfire would be lit when she and Severus returned from the hunt. "This is where we'll dispel those old connotations once and for all."

Harry gave her a fierce hug. "I know we will," he said. "And I'm proud to be part of the ceremony. It's apparently a real honour, like being chosen to light the torch in the Muggle Olympics."

"Quite correct," Severus replied. "Lighting the Beltane fire is the ultimate symbol of light banishing darkness. I think the significance of you being the Firebringer will not be lost on the Wizarding world."

"If I pull it off, that is," Harry said, with a smile. "It's not really something that can be practiced. I only have one chance to get it right on the night."

"I shouldn't worry about it that much, Mr. Potter," Severus replied, his tone laced with irony. "The consequences for banishing the darkness aren't quite as dire now as they were the last time this space was appropriated. I think you could be forgiven if you took a couple of running starts at it."

Harry laughed. "That's true." He gave Hermione's hand a squeeze. "In any case, I saw the Professor as I flew over and stopped by to say hello and wait on you to arrive. And now that you have, I'm leaving." He added with a wink, "Have fun, you two, and I'll see you in a few weeks' time."

"Give Ginny and the kids my love."

"Will do. Now, do I have your promise you'll stop by?" He gave her that sweet, boyish smile that melted the years away. "I won't be able to go home, otherwise."

"You have it. Go home with a clean heart."

Harry shook Severus' hand, and leaned toward him conspiratorially. "Thanks for the advice, Professor." Severus nodded by way of acknowledgement, and he and Hermione watched as Harry mounted his broom and flew from the pitch with the same easy grace that had made him Hogwarts' youngest Seeker seventeen years before.

They waited until he was out of sight before Hermione queried, "Advice?"

Severus busied himself with unpacking his hold-all. "A small matter. Nothing of consequence."

Hermione didn't reply. She knew enough to know that Severus Snape would tell her if he deemed it pertinent. If not, a team of centaurs wouldn't drag it out of him. She contented herself with a final consultation of her notes. "I say we just practice our lines, set the circle, and see how we go."

Severus nodded. "Once we leave it, we must return together for the next step." He smirked. "I trust you're not planning some great display of hide-and-seek skills. I don't relish a broken ankle from stumbling around in the dark."

"Heavens no! Not at all," Hermione replied, too quickly and shrilly to her own ears. "I'll just trot a few meters into the field, let you catch up, tap me on the shoulder, and then we'll come back and do the remaining bit."

"Good," he replied, then turned back to his hold-all. Hermione watched silently as he produced a small box and enlarged it. Within it sat the crown of the Oak King. Like the circlet Severus had worn for her purification ceremony, it was wreathed with beautifully burnished leaves in various shades of green. This one, however, also boasted a rack of stag antlers two feet long.

With great dignity, Severus lifted the crown and placed it upon his head. His dark hair gleamed, reflecting the leaves in his crown. With a whispered spell and some tasty wand-waving that looked neither foolish nor silly, he transformed his regular clothing into a long robe of deepest green. It was trimmed with chocolate-brown fur at the edges of the openings and the cuffs. "This is actually what I'll wear after we return from the hunt, so to speak." He carefully removed it, and folded it into his hold-all. He rose from his task and faced Hermione.

A soft noise escaped her lips before she could stop herself. He was bare-chested: the ropey, wiry frame that she had so carefully bathed looked carved from white marble in the soft lamplight. Intricate blue-black celtic knots were drawn tattoo-like on his biceps; a spiral started at his left nipple and radiated outward, ending at his collarbone. He wore an intricately engraved gold torc around his neck, and a leather-and-fur breechclout at his waist. A wide leather belt encircled his hips, and his feet were clad in tall boots the colour of deer hide. He looked magnificent, and so powerful Hermione felt chills run down her spine. Magic radiated from him in intoxicating waves.

The sound that had come from her lips caused his smirk to curve into a credible semblance of a genuine smile, and with sincere admiration, she finally found her voice enough to reply, "I think you look beautiful, Severus. I'm... Merlin, I'm at a loss." She cursed for acting like a seventh-year with a hard crush. "I'm sorry. But you see..."

"Hermione," he said, his tone almost pitying, "I appreciate your appreciation, but it seems a bit unfair for me to bare all and you to stand there buttoned up like one of Knappogue's Druids. We've both seen one another naked by now." His glittering eyes softened. "I assure you I'm not dreading what I'll see."

Hermione laughed. "Yes. I know. No, I don't. Oh, sod it." She took a steadying breath, and raised her wand. Her robes shimmered, then transformed into seven long multi-coloured scarves, interwoven around her body like a toga. Watching his face was an education in and of itself. His smirk faded, and his eyes first widened, then lowered to half-mast. His lips parted, and his sharp, wicked tongue darted out to moisten them.

Hermione had never felt more exposed. "Does this meet with your approval?" she retorted, unable to keep her smile from growing.

He nodded solemnly.

Severus raised his wand, and in a broad, graceful sweep of his arm, he conjured a golden, glowing circle that encompassed the entire centre of the field. Words poured like honey from his throat as he intoned, "I draw this circle in the names of Cernunnos and Aradia."

Hermione repeated the gesture, and soon a silver band encircled the golden one. Her voice shook a little as she answered him. "Now it is time for the Oak King to take Our Lady and make her his own. No longer will she be the Virgin Huntress and Maiden. She is now to be Hecate, the Queen of Elphame. But first..."

She faced him, and her throat went dry. He took a silent, careful step toward her, his intense, concentrated focus burning her like the sun through a magnifying glass. Her face flushed hot, and a shiver rolled down her spine all at once. Gone was any reverence or self-consciousness; Severus Snape was watching her with pure, pagan lust, and she felt it like a molten knife spearing into her very core. Hoarsely, she finished, "But first he must catch her."

His breathing quickened, and the same dark flame she had first noticed that long ago night in the Great Hall ignited in his eyes. "Are you, Hermione?" he ventured softly, taking a step nearer. "Are you a Maiden?"

Hermione's knees almost buckled at his whispered words, and she gasped, "No. But right now, I wish I was. For you," she added, unable to prevent the longing in her voice.

Severus took yet another step forward, and somewhere deep inside Hermione knew she should move as well, but her feet were glued to the spot as if they'd been spelled there. He seemed to grow taller, broader, stronger, and she quivered with anticipation. *Oh, Merlin...*

"Run, witch," he growled, and his step brought him within touching distance. His voice was charred with desire, and she could feel his breath against her face. "Run, and if I catch you..."

Hermione turned and sprinted toward the cornfield as fast as her legs would carry her.

She galloped hard, feeling the corn leaves slap against her face as she flew past. As she ran, a sudden, happy feeling welled in her breast, and her insecurity left her. She felt as if she could run for miles. There was something so primitive, so primal, about being *wanted* enough to be chased by a man she wanted as well, and it filled her with wild, unfettered elation. It bubbled up from her chest until she laughed from the sheer erotic thrill of it.

She ran several more yards and paused, listening for Severus, but she could hear nothing but the rustling leaves.

Suddenly, a hand caught at her arm, and as she leapt away, she felt one of the scarves unceremoniously yanked from her body. She danced away from him with a little squeal of pleasure and surprise, and turned around to see what he would do.

Severus stood still, his chest rising and falling like bellows. He was holding the white scarf, and as Hermione drank in the sight of this pagan beauty of a man, he brought the scarf to his face. His eyes fluttered closed as he inhaled deeply, and when they opened again, they caught hers in a blaze of lust so powerful, it nearly knocked her off her feet. He let the scarf slip from his long fingers, and as it floated to the ground, he laughed, a dark, beautiful sound. "Run, goddess," he purred.

Hermione ran.

She ran like a wild creature, her heart full of joy and pleasure and crazed excitement. Severus was fast and strong and tracked her like a true hunter, giving her legs when he got too close, closing in when she grew too confident.

She flew with wings on her heels, laughing, darting away from his long reach, but he was swift to strike. The purple scarf was caught almost casually, and before it hit the ground they were off, speeding through the night with the thoughtless grace of male and female, hunter and prey, god and goddess.

Breathless, she could hear his laughter as he ran by her side, keeping up, but unwilling to end the game too early. Hermione was fast, but he always outwitted her. Blue, then green, then the yellow scarf was stolen and won, and still they ran, laughing and taunting one another like children.

She heard the thunderous sound of his heavy boots in the next row, slightly in front of her, and it sounded like the hoof beats of a powerful stag. She fainted one direction, then doubled back, screaming with joy as the orange scarf was torn from her body.

She turned back on herself, then changed her bearing once again, trying to prolong the final chase. She was tiring, but this dash through the darkness with a laughing, teasing Cernunnos at her heels was the most thrilling thing she had ever experienced. She spun in a full circle, laughing with the rapturous feel of freedom...

And crashed straight into the arms of the god.

Chapter Eight: Amulet and Talisman

Chapter 9 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Thank you for all the wonderful comments - I'm over the moon you are enjoying the story, and I apologise for leaving you dangling, as it were...oh, and by the way, this chapter earns the story it's NC-17 rating and contains explicit sexual content.

Beltane isn't only about the sexy bits and getting pissed and having a sing-song, you know. It holds a very sacred, important place in our yearly calendar. Make your Beltane ceremony more than just a rite-by-the-numbers, or a study in call-and-response. Make it a true experience of mind, body, heart and soul; at one with the natural gifts we are all given.

I might joke around about many things in this loo-roll-substitute of a book, but this ain't one of them.

~Chapter Eight: A Puppy is Not Just For Beltane The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

You see that earth, woman?

It is your body?

You see your body, woman?

It is that earth;

Mound of hip

And musk of sex

Dive down, nuzzle deep

Taste what it is

To be with your own kind

Take off your decency

Take off your shoes

And for this moment

Forget the sky gods

You can always go back

But for now

Come DOWN woman

Let the leaves rustle your hair

Let your wild roots dig deep

Get dirty

And when you are thirsty

From all that muck rolling

Dip your tongue beneath the surface

And drink

The water there will be sweeter than rain

Sweeter than anything you have ever tasted

It is the ground flow

Yours by birthright

There all along

On the tip of your tongue

Waiting.

~ Karen Motan

Severus' grip felt like iron bands on Hermione's arms. Her legs were trembling; she felt feverish and wild and grateful for his strength. They were both panting like marathon runners, their mingled breaths hot and hard enough to stir one another's hair.

As she looked up into his flushed and austere face, Hermione was nearly overcome by his incandescent beauty. Power and magic radiated from him in waves that pulsed in time with his pounding heartbeat, answering the vital rhythm of her own taxed heart. As she drank in every feature, from his hypnotic eyes to his reddened lips, he rewarded her with a slow tantalising smile that was both sensual and predatory. He was the very image of Cernunnos, her god, her mate. His crown of antlers looked organic, as if they were part of him.

Slowly and with sensual anticipation, as if she were a package to be savoured in the opening, he tugged at her final veil... the red one. As it fell free with a soft whisper of silk, he brought it to his face and sniffed deeply, closing his eyes in rapturous pleasure. With a voice that made chills race down her spine, he purred, "The most delicious scent on earth." The veil fluttered to the ground, spilling like rubies from his hand, forgotten.

She moaned helplessly as he pulled her tight to his body. The air around them was chilly, but he was a furnace; even with the light sheen of sweat on his glowing skin it was like being smelted and refined by her own personal sun.

His eyes roamed over her hungrily. "Cunning and art he did not lack, but aye, her whistle would fetch him back." His voice was pure Snape, spellbinding by inflection alone. It was low and so silkily seductive and in that moment Hermione knew she would gladly whistle the William Tell Overture as long as he continued holding her and looking at her with those blazing, kaleidoscopic eyes.

She nuzzled against him, and the scent of him, spice-laden and woody, made her mouth water. His breath was warm and fragrant on her face, and the feeling of his rigid cock against her belly made her quiver. Hermione puckered her lips and blew a shaky note, and when he laughed softly she yanked his head down to hers with a desperate whine.

He dove into the kiss with a deep growl of triumph, clasping the back of her head, dominating her with his large, warm hand. He slanted his face to hers, plunging into her mouth with fierce, hungry passion, and Hermione pressed hard against him. Mouthful by glorious mouthful, he consumed her, stealing her breath and her will, and when he finally broke away from the kiss she gulped for air like a drowning woman.

He gave her another crooked, wicked smile full of lusty intent. "I have well and truly caught you, goddess. Do you yield?"

Hermione's breath left her body in a gasp, and she almost sobbed, "I yield. Oh, Severus, gods, do I yield..." He pulled her down with him, muttering a Cushioning Charm as he lay her down on the moist ground. Hermione's head was full of a sweet, feverish buzz of desire as he covered her body with his, capturing her mouth in another demanding, ardent kiss. He was a heavy, addictive weight on top of her, and his moan of lust vibrated against her chest, sending her heart into a skidding, crazy gallop, even as she fought for her next breath.

He tore his mouth away from hers almost angrily, and as he looked down at her with his heavy-lidded, burning gaze, his long fingers stroked the side of her breast. "Lovely undergarments," he purred, hooking his finger into the strap of her bra. "But they are most certainly in the way."

A whispered spell later, and they were blissfully naked, and *Severus Snape* was plundering her, his calloused fingers rolling and squeezing her nipples until she was mewling and writhing helplessly beneath him. His tongue flickered against her taut areole, and he softly blew on the wet flesh until it ached. She tried to draw his mouth down to her breast, but he caught her wrists in one large hand and held them over her head.

"Patience," he crooned. Hermione moaned deliriously, caught up in his power, his passion, and when his mouth closed over the tight peak, she cried out his name like an invocation. He sucked her nipples hard, pulling each pert bud between his teeth, nipping, lapping, sending a screaming, twisting signal of pleasure straight into her core. She humped wantonly against his thigh, desperate for that sweet friction.

He moaned against her feverish flesh. "Beautiful witch. Open for me, Hermione." Her thighs parted like water. Warm, dexterous fingers eased into her eager slit, and he made a harsh, low sound in his throat. "Your cunt is so plump and wet. I have to taste you."

Her head spinning, Hermione hissed, "Yes! Do it..." His fingers slid through her slick folds, and some of his controlled seduction broke as he found her obscenely wet and ready for him. He teased her swollen, ripe clit skillfully, relentlessly, until her hips were rocking against him of their own frantic volition. The smoldering fire within quickly caught, and with each stroke of his long fingers she felt it grow brighter and more fierce.

Severus trailed hot, moist kisses down her belly, his wicked tongue pausing to teasingly dip into her navel, and he laughed as she squirmed. He glanced up at her, and his

boyish, delighted expression completely enthralled her. He rose up, and carefully removed his elaborate crown, placing it reverently on the ground beside their spell-removed clothing. "I don't want any nasty accidents," he said, rather breathlessly, his face flushed. "Especially when I do this..."

His incredibly soft lips caressed her mons, and Hermione was suddenly aware he was nuzzling at the nest of curls, snuffing, inhaling. He was smelling her, burying his large nose in her pubic mound. It was so completely filthy and compellingly erotic she moaned, "Oh, *fuck...*" in a helpless, grinding voice. His silent laugh ghosted warm breath over her, as large hands pushed her trembling thighs apart. With a loud, yearning moan, he buried his mouth against her core.

Hermione dimly realised she was making ridiculous noises but she was past caring. All that mattered was this wizard, weaving his sensual spell as the breeze rustled around them like a curtain. His long fingers worked their sweet magic, probing and caressing her as his tongue drew her into a tighter and tighter coil of need. She shuddered as rills of insensate pleasure raked over her in waves.

He lapped at her thirstily, first with the flat of his warm, silken tongue, then spearing her core with the entire length of it. It rolled leisurely around her clit, teasing her primed flesh, curling inward by slow, maddening circles, until he was suckling it like a little nipple.

He released it with a hard, sucking pop that made her wail uncontrollably. "So fucking good..." he whispered raggedly. His glossy voice was roughened by desire and his fingers pumped into her tight sheath, while his thumb slid over her swollen nub. Hermione whimpered as she shook and shook.

The fire inside her turned white hot, burning through her higher thinking processes until it felt a sliver away from dangerous, like something that could deprave and corrupt them both with its combustion. Pleasure swirled around her like a conflagration that would incinerate them both, and she knew there was no way to stop the fuse as it burned its way to the explosion.

Her cunt, her nipples, her spine, her head pulsed like her pounding heart, each beat igniting burst after burst of unspeakable ecstasy through her. She screamed out her release with each gasping breath, until she fell back, trembling, twitching with the ebbing pulses still racking her body.

His eyes locked with hers, a look of incredulous, unfettered joy on his face. "Oh, Hermione, I felt it. I felt you coming. It was so ... perfect. You are perfect, my goddess."

He lowered himself to her, and rewarded her with a kiss that made everything up to that point feel like a dress rehearsal. His mouth tasted of her and his own delicious flavour, and he supped from her as if she were his only nourishment. She drank down his moans and his soft sighs, and as she felt his large, erect cock sliding between her thighs, she rocked upward, curving her hips against his.

His body went rigid and his breath caught as he slid home, his expression dissolving into a mask of pure bliss. He gave a choking cry that sounded as much agony as pleasure, and she vowed to do whatever it took to hear it again.

"So good. So warm and tight and good. Hermione..." he drew back, and hissed like a serpent. He opened his eyes, and she was staggered at what she saw. Aching, beautiful vulnerability changed in a heartbeat to divine joy, and he wrapped his arms beneath hers and hooked her shoulders.

He rocked against her, his hips churning sensuously, sending pleasure sizzling up her spine. His cock felt huge inside her, and she realised with stupid clarity that she was beneath Severus Snape, and knowledge of it was so thrilling she threw her arms around him and pulled him in, embedding him inside her as if to keep him there. He was large, and burning hot, and she felt him stretching her past anything she had ever felt before. He pushed in completely, until his coarse pubic hair nuzzled against her clit, and he was buried to the hilt. Her walls mapped every ridge and vein and pulse of his cock, and melted around him.

His eyes widened in surprise. "Like that, do you?"

"Oh, yes," she managed, and tightened her inner walls around his cock, making his eyes roll back in his head.

"Devil witch," he moaned raggedly, his old familiar sneer playing on his lips. He gave her another brain-melting kiss. "Then I predict you will like this as well," he purred, as he rose up onto his forearms.

He fucked her with abandon, without constraint or mercy. He growled and panted against her ear like an animal, and Hermione matched him, stroke for generous stroke, her legs snaked around his waist, urging him on, his for the taking, daring him to fuck her *harder, faster, pound into me, dammit!*

His teeth worried at her throat, sucking hard enough to leave a mark, but she was past caring for anything so mundane. Sex with Severus Snape was like nothing she'd ever experienced before, and their animalistic grunts and growls only fired her passion for him even as his cock pistoned into her, each stroke like bright shafts of lightning.

Pain and pleasure became the same word and the same sensation, and she held on, helplessly, unable, unwilling to slow down. It was like their run through the cornfield, a chase to get to the bottom of one another, full of innocent, pagan delight and magic and pleasure, oh gods, so much burning, wild, sweet pleasure as the man thrust and grunted and the woman shook and keened and the night welcomed their passion as their gift to the gods.

As Hermione gazed up into his taut face, the moon framed his black hair like a halo, and a corona of magic flared around him, like a blue flame dancing over his pale skin. "So...beautiful," she mewled, feeling small and helpless as he seemed to grow bigger inside her, outside her, around her. He opened his blazing, fathomless eyes, but they were not Severus' eyes...they were the burning, mesmerising eyes of a god, a true god...

"Cernunnos," she gasped, frightened and aroused beyond reason. A searing, shocking power rushed into her body like fiendfyre, and her own skin blazed with red and gold light. She surrendered to him, understanding. "My love," she screamed, in a voice that was not her own, and he cried out in recognition and exultation.

Her orgasm flung her from the edge, and she welcomed the sweet, shattering oblivion that only this kind of rapture foretold. No one could survive this screaming, blistering ecstasy and live. She held onto Severus, as his moans turned to growls and his face contorted with anguish and pleasure, and he howled her name as the gods tore their bodies apart, the best, the only true, worthy sacrifice.

The world went wonderfully, blissfully dark...

Severus shook his sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes, and waited for his head to clear of the lust-saturated fog that stewed every thought in treacle. His spent cock slipped from its sweet haven, making a sucking noise that should have embarrassed him, but in light of recent events, only produced a certain bleary smugness.

He'd had a moderately fair share of good sex in his life, but nothing had ever come close to this carnal, pagan erotic coupling with Hermione Granger. It was bloody inspiring. He idly wondered if he could persuade Minerva to let them do this every month for every holiday. He mentally gave himself a shake. His head was still swimming. The only thing he was certain about was Hermione. Gods, she had fulfilled every filthy dream he'd ever had and some he'd not even considered. The feel of her, the taste of her...Merlin's 'nads.

Feeling a bit more *compos mentis*, he glanced down at his lover, his gorgeous, witch-goddess lover. She was lying beneath him, her arms flung over her head, her long neck arched upward toward him. Her eyes were closed, and there was the faintest smile playing upon her kiss-stung lips. Like him, she was still literally glowing, but in the slow winding down of their afterglow, it was fading. Suddenly it wicked away, like the snuffing out of a candle, leaving only the two of them, lying naked in a cornfield, covered in sweat and dirt and smelling of good sex musk.

He tried to move and winced; he was going to hurt all over in the morning.

Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, and she gave him the most brilliant, dozy smile anyone had ever given him, post-coitus or otherwise. In the seconds it took for her to come back to herself and realise where they were and what they had just done, Severus sat up, wondering what the first words out of her mouth would be.

Hoarsely, she announced, "You've been hiding your light under a bushel, Severus. That was bloody brilliant. We should have been doing this months ago."

He opened his mouth to reply, and laughter escaped before he could catch it. "Would it be inappropriate for me to return the compliment?"

She grinned. "I think at this juncture it would be damned inappropriate not to." She tucked a wayward strand of his hair behind his ear. "Did you feel...?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure I did," he answered quickly, stretching his shoulders. She swallowed hard, and he fumbled through his discarded clothes to locate his wand. He transfigured a pebble into a glass and filled it with water. She rewarded him with a look of profound gratitude and drank thirstily, holding the empty glass for him to refill it for himself.

They sat in silence, curled up against one another, passing the glass back and forth. Sleepily, he opened his mouth to yawn, but instead, he said, "I've wanted you for a long time." The words came out of his mouth, but he felt no control over actually saying them. "I want more than just wild, abandoned sex in a cornfield with you." He pressed his lips together, horrified at his own lack of artifice. Gods, what was he doing?

"I want this to be the beginning, not the culmination, and I don't know why I'm telling you this out loud I can't seem to stop myself..." He gasped, straining against the compulsion, frightened that he was having some sort of seizure that forced him to say whatever drive was sitting in his frontal lobe at the time. The only explanation for his extraordinary lack of control was that he must have ejaculated his brains out. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I don't know what is happening..."

A gentle hand stroked his arm. "Severus, it's alright. It's alright."

He shook his head, unable to face her. "What a fool you must think I am!"

"I don't. Unless, of course, all those things aren't true. Are you saying you don't feel that way about me? That you are saying things you don't mean against your will?" Her voice sounded husky and apprehensive, and he turned back to her, shamed at the anxious look in her eyes.

He gave up trying to fight it, whatever it was, and took her head in his hands and kissed her. "Merlin, no! I meant every word. I just don't know why I suddenly have no internal filter on my mouth. I don't know why I can't seem to stop saying every ruddy word that comes into my head. Salazar Slytherin must be spinning in his grave right now."

She put her arms around him, and he pulled her so close he could hear her struggling to breathe. "Of course I meant it, Hermione," he continued. "I've thought about little else than you since..." he bit his lip, but the words were pulled from him mouth like fish on a string. "Since you came back to teach at Hogwarts."

"Thank Merlin," she said, and actually sagged against him with a laugh. She kissed him hard on the lips. "I've wanted this for so long now. But I didn't understand about you and Lily Evans, and now that I do..." She stopped and sighed blissfully. "I think you're bloody marvelous, you babbling madman. And I think we need to do this again and again. To make sure we're doing it right, of course."

"Like an examination," he said, warming to the subject. They held onto one another, and her body was so soft and smooth, and his cock, that treacherous bastard between his legs, stirred and bobbed toward her like a divining rod.

Her smile was impish and captivating. "Like Apparition."

He laughed and stroked her silken cheek. "Destination, determination, deliberation," he answered, and kissed her, nibbling her plump lower lip.

As they relaxed into one another's embrace, something seemed to lift from Severus, like a heavy garment removed from his shoulders. The irresistible need to spew his puerile ravings aloud dissolved with it; for a moment he was almost regretful. There was something incredibly disconcerting about it, like being given double-strength Veritas serum, but it was also quite liberating as well. Like the Christian dogma of 'Thy will be done'...

Suddenly he understood. The bright, incandescent power that had infused him while he chased Hermione, the surge of strength and elation, the exhilarating joy and otherworldly self-awareness, the blinding, overwhelming ecstasy...

"Cernunnos," he whispered, and Hermione looked up at him curiously. With a giddy feeling of relief, he explained, "I think I was being influenced by Cernunnos."

A tiny smile teased the dimple in Hermione's cheek. "I thought you knew that, Severus. The book says that true passion will call down the gods." His surprise must have been obvious, because she hastily added, "But it was still us. Still our desire, still our feelings for one another. The gods didn't take over, they just sort of," she shrugged, "went along for the ride, I think."

He frowned. "It felt like he was doing most of the driving," he answered, grumpily. Instead of replying, Hermione laughed, and his breath caught as her warm, smooth hand slipped around his cock and gave him a very definite tug.

"Is he driving now?" she asked playfully, pushing him down onto the grass. She gave him another hard, deep stroke, which made him tingle from bollocks to arse and back.

"No. But you might want to do that again, just to make certain," he managed, and she placed a warm, wet kiss on the head of his straining cock, running her tongue over the slit. His hand braided through her wild, honey-coloured hair, and he drawled, "I'd love to expand this analogy, but I can't think straight right now. Not with you doing... doing that... oh, fuck..."

Her lips parted, and slid down on his cock, painting every sensitive spot with pleasure, and he closed his eyes as she sucked him into complete and utter enslavement.

Later, after spending another lazy hour lying in one another's arms, marveling over their wild chase through the corn and snogging themselves dizzy, they retrieved Hermione's scarves with a series of *Accio*s. They dressed, discussing the next step in the ritual as they walked back toward the centre of the circle, arm in arm. "So, I take it we will not be re-creating tonight's race through the field at the actual ritual."

"I somehow don't think so," Hermione answered primly. "On the night, we'll time it for about ten minutes, then return. Once we return, I'm supposed to be placed into an enchanted sleep only you will be able to break. It's actually part of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. It's quite an interesting story: you see, during the Goblin Wars, a High Priestess named Beaht was placed..."

"Ah, Professors! There you are!" They froze at the sight of Argus Filch. Severus wasn't sure if he was annoyed or relieved at the interruption.

Hermione, wearing only her scarves, blushed modestly, and Severus retrieved his large ceremonial over-robe and threw it over her shoulders. "Hello, Argus. Can we help you?"

Filch glanced from professor to the other, his face frozen in a watery smile. "Just checking the field. Was told you might be here... rehearsin'..." His weathered cheeks were stained deep pink.

Severus gave up any pretense of trying to be coy. With a sigh, he replied blithely. "Yes. As a matter of fact we have been...rehearsin'. Quite vigorously."

"And we were just going," Hermione added, her face almost as red as Filch's. "All that we have left of the ritual to do is the final part, and it really can't be done without everyone present."

"Really?" Filch answered, and there was a tone of genuine interest in his voice. "What happens after you and him, well, you know?" Filch blushed so deeply Severus thought he was in danger of spontaneous combustion. "I mean, after you get at it...I-I mean get on top of it, um, get done with it," he finished, looking exhausted with

embarrassment.

Taking pity, Hermione smiled at the caretaker. "Well, the High Priestess...that's me," she said, placing a hand on her chest, "is placed in an enchanted sleep, and the High Priest..."

"That's me," Severus deadpanned.

"Um, him," she said, rolling her eyes, "leaves the circle and goes into the darkness. It's to represent winter and the death of old life. While he is away, the balefire is lit, which is Harry's part in the ritual. He is the Firebringer, and the High Priest..." she nodded toward Severus again, "returns to the light. He awakens me from sleep... and that represents rebirth of the season. Simple, really." She shrugged. "And then we all sing and dance around the fire and eat and drink and make merry."

Filch listened intently, and replied, "So you can't wake up until His Nibs returns, eh? What happens if he falls asleep or gets distracted by summat and forgets to come back?"

"Your faith in me is touching, Argus," Severus interjected.

Hermione laughed. "In the highly unlikely event that Severus fails to return to the circle, the ceremony would be defiled, and according to legend there would be a terrible harvest and ruin would come to all those involved in the ritual." She said it in a mock frightened voice, but Severus wondered just how much of that she actually believed.

Filch seemed to consider her words carefully. "Then we must make sure that doesn't happen, eh, Professor Snape?" He drew himself up with great dignity. "I was on my way to the kitchens to see if I could rustle up a cuppa and some sandwiches. Would you care to join me, Professors?"

Hermione looked up at Severus hopefully. "Actually, I do feel quite peckish. All that running, you know."

Severus felt the warmth in her eyes all the way down to his stones. "Indeed."

Chapter Nine: Dedication and Initiation

Chapter 10 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Promptfest.

Thank you, all of you, for your amazing comments. I'm thrilled to bits so many have taken the time to write such nice things about the story. I hope you continue to enjoy it.

A couple of housekeeping things - thanks to that sterling, composite figure of kindness, tough love and genius, Stgulik, for her amazing beta/editing work. She is so important to what I do. Every paragraph you see has been gone through and meticulously corrected by her, so if you see any mistakes, you'll know I made them after she gave it back.

And finally, as always, I do not own these characters, nor do I make any money from this or any work of fanfiction.

Beltane and Samhain are bookends for the most important, fertile months of the calendar year. It marks the beginning of a world bursting with life and possibilities, just as Samhain marks the dying off and preparation for the cycle to start up again.

Aleister Crowley said it best: 'Magick is the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity to will.' For good or bad, it is our will and our intent that breathes life into our magic. We're on an endless carousel in life, a circle that goes around, ad infinitum. You can't get off if you want to stay on. And you can't learn from mistakes if you don't make them. When you enter the magic circle, think of it as a metaphor of your life; it can become a stagnant, predictable place where the scenery never changes, or you can make each revolution more brilliant and beautiful than the last one by living the journey as well as the destination.

~Chapter Nine: Calming Those Pre-Beltane Jitters The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

The dark and the light in succession, the opposites each unto each, shown forth as a God and a Goddess: this did our ancestors teach.

If It Harms None, Do What Thou Will shall be the challenge, so be it in love that harms none, for this is the only commandment, by magic of old, be it done!

~Beltane Ritual

As Filch, Snape and Granger made their way back toward the castle, Rita Skeeter fluttered about, barely able to keep her wings still. She was excited and furious and ready to rip Filch's stringy hair out by the roots. Also, she was fairly angry with herself for falling for the old Squib's ruse. He'd played her for a chump, and she'd let him. She'd known there was a twenty-eight percent chance he might pass her bogus intel, but it was a risk she'd been willing to take.

She had bought his little scam hook, line and sinker. He'd conned her every step of the way. Oh, he'd given her the facts, but looking back at the averages, she should have figured it out long before now. Nine percent of the schedule was changed at the last minute, making her either too late or too early. Seventeen percent of the days were incorrect, meaning she either showed up on the day before or two days after; six percent were postponed due to the wrong kind of weather, well, duh, *Scotland...* thirty-three percent. No margin for error was that high.

Tonight had been the kicker. 'Meet me in my quarters at ten o'clock,' he'd said. 'That's when the professors will be down at the pitch. I know a back way out to the grounds. The wards are weakest there; never got repaired from the war, proper-like. You'll get all the scoop you want once we go there.'

She looked at her watch. It was nine thirty. He'd known full well they would be there earlier! If she hadn't seen Harry Potter flying in at six o'clock and come down on her

own, she would have never been the wiser. *Wards, my arse.* She straightened her glasses, and quickly placed her Quick-Quotes Quill back in her bag, leaving her parchment copy floating near her shaking hand. She needed a drink, badly.

Trying to catch those two skinny tinribs *in flagrante* in the dark had been like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. She'd circled that thrice-damned cornfield for ages but had seen nothing. Oh, it was obvious what they'd been doing when they staggered into the clearing, all dewy eyed, reeking to the sky of sex and loam. Salacious, most certainly, but hardly scandal-making. Not nearly enough to appease her readers.

She had already spent far too many Galleons on this, and Perby Smoklehouse was beginning to drop dragon dung-sized hints about it every time she came to the office. *We need to get these expenses reeled in, Rita angel... If you'll just devote your attention to the Walter Bloombird piece, Rita dear... I need you to be here on Monday for the Knockturn Alley Minster scandal story, Rita love... there are three solid leads languishing on your desk, so why not leave this silly Beltane business to the boys at the WWW, Rita darling... I think we're getting a wee bit obsessed with this Hogwarts business, Rita dearie...*

That was Perby's problem...no vision. She was sitting on top of a fantastic scandal that could spell absolute destruction for Snape and Granger and provide fodder for juicy gossip stories for months to come! Did he honestly think she would let that go to some undeserving fool who couldn't write good copy for toffee?

As she read back over her notes, including that final convo between Filch and the professors, she looked for the angle, the one fact she could tweak and bend and mold into good, juicy dirt. She carefully re-read Granger's pompous little speech about the end of the ritual, and her smile grew. Her shaking stopped, her focus narrowed down onto one pinpoint of thought.

An idea took root; a brilliant scheme bloomed in her head like a giant dahlia, full of colour. It was so daring and bold, it scared her a little. She, Rita Skeeter, was a certified genius. She might even get an Order of Merlin when she blew the lid off this story for the world to see. She knew she could make it work. It would have to be done under the densest cloak of secrecy, but she was used to working alone. No one else to take the blame, but no one else to share the credit, either.

Of course, it would be easier if a second person were involved but... She shuddered when she thought of just how close she might have come to clueing Filch in on the deal. Filthy, scheming Squib! You couldn't trust any of them.

And Snape! When she was finished with him, Snape would be so disgraced he would never be able show his face in Wizarding Britain again. If she played her cards right, he could even end up in Azkaban. She could get revenge on everyone. They would all pay. Then they'd be sorry.

Rita's mind whirled with all the preparations needed. First things first: she had to get to London. She needed Galleons, lots of them, to pull this off. Favours had to be called in. She'd have to keep Argus sweet for a while longer; he couldn't know his cover was blown, and as delicious as tonight's shenanigans in the cornfield were, they constituted no more importance than a starter, a side dish. She was going for the main course, and Granger herself had given her the kitchen in which to prepare it.

"Oh, I like that," she cooed to herself. Taking a good analogy to its logical conclusion was better than sex.

"Getting nervous?"

Hermione jumped at the question, then gave Rolanda Hooch a rueful laugh. "I think at this juncture, 'no' would be a little hard to pull off."

Hooch companionably threaded her arm through Hermione's as they walked from the midday meal in the Great Hall to their first afternoon classes. "Well, I think you'll be grand. I really do."

Hermione flushed with pleasure. "Thank you. I hope that I'll prove everyone's confidence in me."

The older woman nodded absently. There was a frown between her brows, and she glanced at Hermione with her sharp, yellow eyes. "I was about your age when I came to Hogwarts, you know. Fresh from a triumphant season with the Liverpool Larkspurs, green as a grindylow. I didn't know the first thing about teaching. I was absolutely horrendous...I kept the Infirmary full with all my injured students that year."

Hermione couldn't be sure exactly sure where the conversation was heading. It felt a lot like Rolly was setting her up for one of her questionable jokes. "Well, you seemed to have eventually got the hang of it," Hermione ventured.

Hooch shrugged. "I never quite got you on good terms with a broom, though, did I?" she asked wistfully.

"Well, that's true. I'm still rubbish at flying. I suppose I eventually learned out of necessity, but I've never stopped being afraid of it."

"I seem to recall a story about a young girl riding on the back of a blind dragon. Was that apocryphal?"

"Believe it or not, but yes it's true. But you have to remember that 'young girl' was so strung-out on fear at the time, riding a dragon barely made a dent. When I think about it now..."

"That's because you're still thinking like a Muggle, love. Don't forget: you, me, all of us have the ability to fly on our own. A broom is just a tool, like our wands, or cauldrons, or crystal balls...or the magic circle."

Hermione stopped. "Are you trying to tell me something, Rolly? Because if you are, you're taking 'beating about the bush' to a whole new level."

Hooch threw back her head and laughed, earning several smiles from a group of nearby Ravenclaw seventh-years. "Heavens, girl, you're such a Gryffindor! Subtle as a Minotaur."

She regarded Hermione affectionately. "Look, love. You're doing something wonderful. You and Severus are reuniting us with the old ways. You're telling us all to stop being afraid to fly, and to trust ourselves. The light and dark both live within all of us. You're reminding us that isn't a bad thing."

To Hermione's surprise, Hooch leaned over and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek. "I'm trying to tell you I'm proud of you and Severus both. We all are. And we're going to be right behind you, showing the Wizarding world just how much fun being a pagan can be!"

It happened while invigilating the O.W.L. Herbology exam. He was sitting at Pomona's desk in Greenhouse Three, when a sudden chill passed through him, and suddenly the room seemed too bright. He closed his eyes and suddenly he was no longer at Hogwarts. He was at the edge of a lake, lit by the silvery moon...

He jerked back into reality. For a moment, he'd simply been... not there.

Severus quickly looked around, in case the students noticed anything amiss, but they were deeply focused on their task. The sound of scratching quills and discreet throat clearing were the only sounds in the room.

He held himself very still, mentally taking an internal assessment. His head was clear; heart rate and temperature seemed normal. No aches or pains to speak of. He glanced at his pocket watch; it was half ten in the morning. Had it been later, he might have blamed it on the afternoon drop, like that queasy feeling when he used to skip lunch on those dark days during the war. He felt perfectly fine, quite alert, in fact. So why did he get the feeling he'd taken a trip somewhere and just returned?

Perhaps I should mention it to Poppy... Gods, no. What am I thinking?

The chime sounded. "This test period is complete. Down quills. You as well, Miss Hamilton. Turn your parchments over. This concludes your O.W.L. exam for Herbology. You will receive your results in approximately seven weeks. You are dismissed."

The students filed out, some talking in animated tones of relief, some silently pensive. They all had that overly-bright look in their eyes from too little sleep and too much last minute revising. It had come as no surprise to anyone that most of the students chose to take their exams early rather than later. A few of the more industrious and ambitious among them opted to use the extra time to swot up a bit more, but most were content to get it over with. Severus didn't blame them.

He stretched silently, and ran his internal diagnostic again. No, nothing amiss. "I must have simply dozed off," he muttered to the empty room as he collected the O.W.L. papers.

As he walked back to the castle, his thoughts settled back to the subject that had hijacked every waking moment since that mind-bending run in the cornfield with Hermione. To say he was finding it less than a hardship to open his eyes each morning to a noseful of Hermione's crazymaker hair and his arms full of said witch would be an understatement. He was enjoying it more than he was willing to admit even to himself.

It probably should irritate him that he was constantly on the receiving end of leering winks and knowing, fond looks from Filius and Hooch, but he found he didn't have the wherewithal to truly mind. After all, Hermione Granger was considered by and large a bit of a catch. It wasn't as if he had planned it, but she was as much fun to bait out of bed as in it.

~o0o~

"This celibacy thing is for the birds," Hermione had grumbled, tossing the Witchhiker's Guide on the floor. "Who's going to know if we abstain the entire week before Beltane?"

Severus had reserved his most self-satisfied smirk for that remark. He'd been affording her that particular look a great deal lately. Perhaps it was the fact that she was sitting up naked in his bed, eating his best biscuits and sipping tea as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

She had glared at him suspiciously. "You're looking awfully smug for a wizard whose steady diet of good sex is about to be cut off for an entire week."

He'd laughed at her. She was so unfailingly Gryffindor. "Granger, you're slipping. Either that, or I haven't rogered you past the pedant barrier yet."

She'd made that little growl that reminded him of a long ago day waiting for the Hogwarts Express, when he'd first realised he might have a chance in hell with her. Scornfully, she'd retorted, "Oh yes. That's right...go ahead...throw back your head and laugh like a musketeer. Are you going to clue me in? Let me guess: are you planning on dazzling me with some Slytherin loophole-finding crap that everyone in your house learns as a first year? And I am not pedantic, thank you very much! Are there any chocolate biscuits left?"

Fishing around in the biscuit tin, he replied, "You penchant for non-sequitur is astonishing. And I'll thank you to not insult my house. I threw back my head and laughed like a musketeer, as you so charmingly phrased it, because I've used my advanced Slytherin loophole-finding powers and discovered one."

She paused, and her eyes grew very wide and very interested. "Go on," she demanded.

Placing two chocolate biscuits on her plate, he'd purred, "Can't wait to get into my knickers again, Granger?"

"Don't be an arse! You know I can't," she said, suppressing a smile. The movement caused a charming little dimple to appear in her cheek. Devil woman. She would be the death of him.

"Wording. It's not even a difficult or tricky work round. Not exactly taxing my abilities, at any rate. I think your friend Sebelius Slunt didn't try too hard, either *Accio Witchhiker's!*"

The book had flown into his hand, and he'd flipped through the pages until he reached Chapter Nine. He had proceeded to read aloud in a prissy, fraitfully naive accent. "The High Priest and Priestess need to take every precaution to avoid any procreative or sexual congress of a period no less than six consecutive days before the ritual. This time must be spent purifying the mind and body for communion with the god and goddess, et-cet-e-rah, et-cet-e-rah." He'd shut the book with a satisfied thump and waited for the penny to drop.

She had stared at him blankly. "Well? There it is, in black and white. No sex."

"No sexual congress. No procreative sexual congress." He rolled his eyes as she stared at him blankly. "Gods, Granger, you were quicker on the mark back when you were vicariously living through mating banshees!"

She had glowered at him, but he could almost hear the gears turning. Suddenly her eyes narrowed, and she pushed him onto his back. "Are you saying I can do..."

"Anything your depraved little brain desires, as long as it doesn't involve my penis entering your vagina for the next six days."

Then she'd favoured him with a smile that made his cock sit up and beg. "Anything? I can think of quite a lot," she'd cooed, unbuttoning his shirt.

She *had* thought of lots of ways. The wicked, torrid creature had mauled him for the past week. She was incredibly deviant, his witch. At this rate, all that would be left for Cernunnos to inhabit would be a husk of a wizard. If he was lucky.

Severus would have never believed avoiding sex could be so pleasurable.

There was no way around it; Rita was going to need a second pair of hands to make her plan work. She knew it increased the chance of failure by twenty percent, but she thought the odds were worth the risk. The real question was, who would make the best patsy, should things go the way of that twenty percent?

"You know me, Mr. Weasley, or may I call you Ron? I have very accurate sources, Ron. They're never wrong. And mine comes from the very heart of Hogwarts." She leaned in, the compleat picture of concern. "It's pitiful, really, how she's been moping for you ever since Christmas."

"Who's moping for me?" Weasley asked. As least that's what Rita thought he said, around the mouthful of food in his big gob. It sounded more like, "Ooze moatin' fer may?"

Rita had sipped her coffee hastily, trying to avoid watching him eat. These Weasleys were all bottom feeders. "Why, your Miss Granger, of course!" she'd trilled. She arranged her expression into one of dire concern. "It's all she can talk about, how romantic you were at the Quidditch match. She's told everyone how much she regrets saying no."

Weasley had looked at her with hope in his watery blue eyes. "Really? Then why hasn't she said anything?"

Rita stroked his arm coyly. "Well, Mr. Weasley, you know how women are. A debonair man of the world such as yourself is quite a catch, and she felt you'd simply not feel inclined to give her another chance."

He frowned, his mouth open, absently chewing. *Mouth breather*. "So, what exactly are you saying?"

"You know about the Beltane ceremony, don't you? It's all everyone's been talking about for weeks! Aside from the fact a wedding performed that night would be televised all over the world, Beltane is considered one of the most auspicious days to get married." *And believe me, you gormless twit, you're going to need all the help you can get.*

When he stared at her blankly, she huffed, "Don't you see? You have the most perfect opportunity to stake your claim, to show her you're serious! And," she took a deep breath. In for a Knut...

"I have it on good authority that Severus Snape is planning on proposing to her."

Weasley sprayed the table with half-chewed chicken. "WHAT???"

"Keep your voice down!" she hissed, and looked around the room. Most of the other diners in this particular restaurant were of a similar ilk; dodgy politicians, fallen celebrities, Knockturn Alley libertines. No one wanted to catch Rita Skeeter's attention. They glanced her way, then quickly returned to concentrating on the quality of the Béarnaise Sauce.

She turned back to Weasley. "I told you. I have sources. He's quite determined. Catching her on the rebound and all that. He confided to my source that he planned to do it during the ceremony, seeing as Beltane is the perfect time to pop the question."

"What question issat?"

Rita stared at him and put all her energies into not hexing the oaf. Gods, she never thought she'd say it, but getting Granger married to this idiot might be all the revenge she'd need. "Will you marry me, of course."

Weasley blushed. "Sorry Rita, but as you know, I'm sort of already spoken for, sort of." He cast what he apparently thought was a smouldering glance. "However, if you're free this Wednesday..."

"I don't want to marry *you!* Gods, how on earth do you find your way to the Quidditch pitch?" she snapped. "I mean that Severus Snape is going to ask Hermione Granger to marry him during the Beltane ceremony!"

Weasley gasped. "Oh, I see." His face fell. "I don't want that to happen." He brightened. "I've got an idea! What if I ask her before he does?"

The *Lumos* was finally lit, praise Circe and all her sisters.

Rita explained the plan over that very costly lunch; it took her three starters, two main courses and half the sweets trolley to wind Weasley up to the point where it all seemed like his idea. Still, that's what her *Prophet's* expense account was for.

~o0o~

Now, a week later, they were standing in the shadows of the great magic circle, hidden by Disillusion. It was taking all of Rita's time and energy to keep Weasley from wondering off. Gods, the idiot had the concentration span of a Niffler in a Gringott's vault. She tapped him on the head to get his attention. Trying to keep the dunderhead focused on the task at hand, Rita whispered, "Alright, Weasley. Let's run through this once again."

"This is wicked, innit?" He chortled, looking around. "This is going to be awesome!"

Rita rolled her eyes. Confounding Weasley would've been easier than this, but quite possibly as equally maddening. The wizard was a complete imbecile. "Listen to me!" she hissed, then turned away. By the gods, if she got through this evening without casting the Killing Curse on this idiot... "Now, remember what I told you?" she asked patiently. "I have it on good authority that Snape is going to propose, but that's only a ruse. His real plan is to sabotage the ritual, and harm Hermione."

"Right," he answered automatically, then frowned. "So... so... when am I supposed to rescue her?"

"When Snape comes back..." Rita stopped and pressed her hands against her eyes. "For the last time, Weasley, you'll know...there will be danger. Use your brains, boy!"

"Sure, sure," the lunkhead answered, wobbling his head in an approximation of a nod. "I'll know."

"You'd better," she muttered under her breath, watching from the darkness. In the distance, near the castle, she could hear drums and flutes and those shake-y things, whatever they were called. She checked her supplies and ran through her plan once more, checking for any possibility for error.

She looked again at the Weasley oik. He was her unknown quantity, but hell, if he didn't deliver, she could make it look like his fault. It wouldn't take much. She could make anything look like anyone's fault, given enough words and column space. Besides, after tonight, no one would be thinking about her.

Severus Snape would be the star of this show.

Chapter Ten: Invocation

Chapter 11 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Prompfest.

When I'm asked which is the most successful Beltane I've ever witnessed, I am hard put to answer. What makes it perfect? I once participated in a ceremony in which not a word was out of place, not a dance step wrong. Every part of it ran like a military operation. It was the driest, most boring afternoon I've ever spent. Didn't even get my leg over. Perfect, when it comes to Beltane, is in the eye of the beholder.

~Chapter Ten: Don't Panic, It Can't Possibly Be That Bad The Witch Hiker's Guide To Beltane

~o0o~

"The sun and moon are your eyes, and your mouth is fire; your radiance warms the cosmos. You lap the worlds into your burning mouths and swallow them. Filled with your terrible radiance...the whole of creation bursts into flames. Tell me who you are, O Lord of terrible form..." ~The Bhagavad Gita

The chime rang, and Minerva called, "Come."

Filius' head appeared in the doorway. "All ready to go, Mistress of Revels?"

The laughter left her lips before she could rein it in. "That has got to be the most lurid robe I have ever seen, Filius Flitwick, and I worked with Albus Dumbledore for forty years!"

Swanning into the study, Filius swept about, almost dancing around the room, showing off the robe's kaleidoscopic patterns of red, purple, green, yellow and black. "I know, and isn't it wonderful? I feel like a gaudily-plumed bird." He gave her one of his beaming great smiles. "You look radiant yourself, Minerva. Like a phoenix in human form."

She adjusted her red, orange and yellow robes. "Thank you, Filius. Let's hope that's a good omen."

"Absolutely! The Wizarding world, rising from the ashes. That's what we're doing tonight...showing the world that the traditions are as natural and necessary as the cycle of life...and just as beautiful."

She was calmed by his cheerful and insightful soul. "You're a fine wizard and a great man, Filius."

Abashed, he blushed. "And you are a great woman and a formidable witch, Minerva. And long may it be so!" He offered her his arm. "Harry's on the pitch, as ready as he'll ever be. The rest of the staff has gathered on the front steps, ready to go. They look incredible. And they're well up for it; I've not seen them so excited since...well, since I don't know when."

"Severus and Hermione?"

Filius looked up to the heavens in gratitude. "They look amazing. I'm glad we had them practice on their own. Everyone is agog. You can't take your eyes off them. They're going to steal the show!"

Minerva released the breath she had not realised she'd been holding. "Then lead on, Master of Revels."

She and Filius reached the group waiting on the stairs, and she stopped in her tracks. Her staff was talking in animated, excited tones. Every bright colour of the rainbow was well represented; they looked like so many raucous parrots. Just beyond them, standing apart, were Severus and Hermione, chatting desultorily with Magister Honeyclutch. "You weren't exaggerating, Filius," Minerva breathed, marveling.

Hermione and Severus hadn't yet noticed Minerva, so she took the opportunity to have a long look at them. Curling in long, ribbon-like spirals of honey-coloured curls and interwoven with small flowers in every colour of the rainbow, Hermione's hair was a feat of magical engineering. Her gown was a Grecian style, soft and flowing in shades of copper, amber and jade. Her waist was girdled in a wide band of gold overlapping ovals, which were overlaid with bright green cloisonné. She looked as fresh and wholesome as spring, and her skin glowed with the excitement and health of youth.

The Magister made an amusing comment, and she threw back her head and laughed, her eyes sparkling. Severus ducked his head and laughed shortly, his eyes fixed on her with quiet, fond appreciation. Minerva had been jesting when she had teased Hermione about giving her a run for her money, but seeing Severus Snape like this was serious incentive to consider it. *Cornelius was right*, Minerva thought. *Severus is everything this ritual is about.*

He looked like a textbook illustration of Merlin come to life. He was resplendent in green and brown, with a magnificent robe trimmed in fur. The antler crown sat atop his glistening hair as if it grew from his head, and the golden torc at his throat gleamed dully, reflecting against his marble-pale skin. He held a long staff in one hand, and Hermione's hand in the other.

"Was I right, or was I right?" Filius asked, brimming with satisfaction.

"Have the press seen them?" she asked.

"Not yet," he replied conspiratorially. "I thought it best to stay out of sight as much as possible until we make our grand entrance."

Minerva nodded. "Let's make it, then. It's almost time." She called out, "Everyone! Your attention please. As the Muggles say, 'It's Showtime!'"

As they waited at the entrance into the pitch, Severus felt that strange, disjointed, not-quite-himself feeling again. It was there and gone in a quick, jolting instant, but instead of making him feel dizzy or absent, it filled him with a sudden, racing excitement. He turned to the headmistress. "Let's do this, Minerva. Hermione?"

He turned to the beautiful witch who had kept her hand clasped in his all the way from the castle to the pitch. She looked up at him with affection and excitement sparkling in her warm eyes. "I can't wait...let's do it," she declared, her smile brilliant and more importantly, just for him.

Everything was going to be perfect.

They walked through the cornfield to the sound of pounding, insistent drums, trilling flutes and the silver ring of tambourines beating out a rhythm. As Minerva appeared in the center of the circle, the spectators' excited babble increased to a roar. It sounded like a Quidditch crowd, loud and happy and ready for something good.

The stands had been magically raised, so the spectators could see down into the circle, and yet have a good vantage point of the surrounding cornfield and one another. The stands were full of witches and wizards all dressed in bright, flashy colours. Many were waving pennants flashing "*I heart Beltane*" and "*Beltane me, baby*", alternately. Many were dressed like Cernunnos, with antler crowns; just as many were dressed like the goddess, in her gown of green, copper and amber. There were dozens of maypoles dotted around the perimeter of the pitch, and children danced around them, weaving them with brightly coloured streamers. Flowers were everywhere, making the pitch look like a cornfield surrounded by a garden. He counted at least five weddings being officiated.

Overhead, Severus saw several unmanned brooms swooping across the sky. They were the famous Wizarding Wide Web broom-cams that would broadcast the ritual live all over their world. He turned to Hermione, who was watching a bride toss her bouquet toward the stands. "That could have been you, Granger," he said, whispering in her ear. "I'm surprised Weasley hasn't decided this would be a perfect time..."

"Don't even say it, Snape!" she declared. The look she gave him was part amused and part horrified.

He watched as the broom-cam director got them all in place, and yelled, "Okay, we are going live in five... four... three..." He mouthed *two, one,* and pointed to Hermione.

Hermione raised her hands, and in a *Sonorus*-enhanced voice, she cried, "Wizarding Britain! Blessed Be!"

Severus took a deep breath, and mimicked her gesture. "Blessed Be!"

The crowd leapt to their feet, and "Blessed Be!" rang from thousands of throats in the stands, in Wizarding Britain, and all over the world. The words washed over Severus, and he swallowed hard. The electric excitement of the moment was a collective feeling that spread throughout the crowd like wildfire, and it was hard not to get caught up in it.

Severus blinked and continued, "Turn to thy friend and spin deosil round, that the gods may bless your communion with us tonight."

He took Hermione's hand and kissed it, spinning her clockwise. She laughed delightedly. Caught up in the emotion of the moment, his heart swelled with the realisation that he had fallen in love with Hermione Granger. It might have been a long time coming, but it was right on time.

He actually opened his mouth to tell her, but before he could confess, she was spinning away toward Magister Honeyclutch, and Severus was moving toward Minerva.

"Blessed Be, Severus," Minerva said, as he spun her in his arms, and he kissed her weathered cheek. She looked up at him with fondness. "You look absolutely splendid. I'm so proud of you! Thank you for being our High Priest."

"Thank *you*," he replied, truly humbled, and she gave him a kiss in return. Each witch of his 'Coven' was spun in turn, and kissed, and they told him how beautiful he was, and how lucky they were. It was enough to turn a wizard's head, but by the time they were done he'd spun around so many times he had to whisper a quiet self...*Equilibrium* to keep from staggering all over the pitch.

Finally, all the greetings were made, and the crowd quieted. Hermione held aloft the Sword of Gryffindor, and turned slowly in the middle of the circle, chanting, "Ye Lords of the Watchtowers of the East, West, North and South, we ask that you join us in this most sacred Beltane!"

Magic swirled around them, kicking up dust devils inside the circle. Severus could see the corona of light as it blazed over Hermione's body, and it took his breath away.

She continued, "The old way has been ever thus: whenever we have need of anything, then shall we assemble in some secret place.

"We who are fain to learn all wizardry, yet have not won its deepest secrets; to these will the god and goddess teach things that are yet unknown. The dark and the light in succession, these are opposites each unto each other."

She turned to Severus, and in a clear, strong voice full of conviction, she recited, "And we shall be free from slavery; the god and goddess do not demand sacrifice. As a sign that we are really free, we shall dance, sing, feast, make music and love, all in the praise of the god and goddess of Beltane. For behold he is the Father of all living things. She is the Mother of all living things. Together they become the soul of nature, who gives life to the universe.

"Enter with me into this rite of Beltane, my friends. For this is the only commandment: If It Harms None, Do What Thou Will. This shall be the challenge: So be it in love that harms none, by magic of old, be it done!"

At the last word the large circle began to glow with golden light, and the crowd cheered as if their home team had just scored a Double Quaffle Turnback in the final seconds before the snitch went to ground.

Hermione turned back to Severus, and placed the sword in his hands. The crowd calmed a little, and he could almost feel them leaning forward. His voice sounded musical to his own ears:

"For in old time, Woman was the altar. Therefore should we adore it; therefore, whom we adore we also invoke."

He closed his eyes, and blocked out everything but the magic, and the incantation. "I conjure thee, O Circle of Power! Thou art a meeting place of love and joy and truth; a shield against all wickedness and evil; in the names of Cernunnos and Aradia!"

He knelt at Hermione's feet and allowed the emotion to colour his voice. For once, he didn't care who was there who might mock, or scorn, or condemn him. He spoke only for the witch before him, the woman he loved. "O Circle of Stars, marvel beyond imagination, soul of infinite space, before whom time is ashamed, the mind bewildered, and the understanding dark, not unto thee may we attain unless thine image be love."

A silver circle entwined with the gold, and the Hogwarts Coven was enclosed in shining, pulsating light. Severus rose, and together, they recited: "For thou art the point within the Circle, which we adore. The point of life, without which we would not be. To the wonder and glory of all men."

The drums started a slow, steady beat, and the Coven backed out of the circle together, until only Severus and Hermione remained. A soft rush rose from the stands; a low, collective voice, chanting in time with the drums. He looked at Hermione in puzzlement, but she merely smiled back at him.

Suddenly, Magister Honeyclutch bellowed in a ringing voice, "Now it is time for the Oak King to claim Our Lady goddess. For only then can life return to the earth; for only then can darkness return to the light. No longer will she be the Virgin Huntress and Maiden. She is now to be Hecate, the Queen of Elphame. But first, he must catch her!"

The crowd roared like a mighty animal, and Severus understood at last what they were saying. They were chanting, *"Horned Stag, run through the wood, the wood of gold and green, Lead us down the ancient path to mysteries unseen..."*

With a wink, Hermione ran from the circle. Severus threw his large over-robe onto the ground, cancelled his *Sonorus*, and gave chase. The crowd went wild.

When he and Hermione had made their first incredible run through the cornfield, culminating in the best sex he'd ever had (well, up to that point), it had been pitch dark. Even though Severus had made a snide comment about not wanting to trip over and breaking something, he had in fact not given a toss about anything but snatching those poxy scarves away from Hermione and getting to the last one. Now, running by her side, he could feel that same sweet madness buzzing inside his head, that same wild desire to chase her down and take her like a rutting buck.

Of course, he couldn't. Not with the entire Wizarding world watching. They had already enacted the rite; now they were just acting out the symbolism of it.

Two broom-cams flew over their heads, tracking their every movement. Oh, they made it look good, feinting and teasing one another. Twice he almost caught her as she quickly doubled back and taunted him. Each time she slipped through his fingers with a scream of delight, the crowd roared, cheering them on: *"Horned stag, run through the wood, the wood both new and old, Teach us of the ancient ways, your wisdom to unfold..."*

Finally, she shouted, "Do you think this is enough?" She was panting. "My feet hurt!"

Severus laughed aloud. "Nothing to do with being caught on the WWW broom-cams, eh?"

She turned around and headed straight toward him. "It's more a case that sooner you catch me, the sooner we can be done and get back to shagging in the privacy of our own rooms."

"Good point." He grabbed her as she ran past, and swung her up into his arms while the crowd cheered.

"I yield, my priest!" she exclaimed, and he carried her into the clearing, presenting her to the cheering and bawdy crowd, who were making suggestive gestures and pulling their own women into their arms. He roared, "Cunning and art he did not lack, but aye her whistle would fetch him back!"

The crowd gave a victorious shout, cheering and stamping their feet. Witches in the stands were whistling...they were actually wolf whistling at *him*. Stunned, Severus looked out into the vast assemblage, trying to believe his eyes and ears. They were cheering *him*.

"They like us!" Hermione said, marveling. She waved and blew a kiss to the crowd, and they lapped it up like cream.

"I feel like I've just caught the Snitch," Severus quipped, as he carried Hermione around the perimeter of the circle.

"I'm starting to get a better appreciation of Quidditch," she replied, with a laugh. "Now, let's get this business over with so we can get drunk and dance around the fire."

"Impatient, my goddess?" he asked, and she kissed his cheek.

"For you? Yes, actually. Now, don't forget to make sure my dress is covering all my pertinent bits. And remember to wake me up," she added impishly, and he chuckled.

"You really are a bit of a sauce box, Granger. Remind me to give you a damn good seeing to when I get you back into my bed."

Severus waited until Minerva and the rest of the staff returned to the inner circle. He turned to Magister Honeyclutch, who conjured the formal, funeral bier. The noise of the crowd died off almost immediately, and Severus could almost feel their apprehension. He realised they were totally caught up in the ceremony, hanging on to every word, every symbolic gesture.

With great ceremony, Severus gently laid Hermione onto the platform. "Have a lovely nap, my Sleeping Beauty," he whispered.

She smiled at him, and whispered back, "I will. I want to be nice and rested for all that shagging, Cernunnos."

This time he did laugh. "Witch, you'll be the death of me." He raised his wand. Drawing a complicated symbol over her outstretched body, he whispered, *Soporbilatus*."

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed, and he waited, watching her chest slowly rise and fall. They had practiced before, of course, but it was a daunting thing, knowing nothing and no one would awaken her until he uttered the counterspell. He kissed her forehead and recited:

"They told me she'd been a prisoner, trapped in a mountain, taken by the Queen of Winter,

at last Summer's end. How could I live, when my Queen lay in Winter's frozen slumber?"

He backed away; there wasn't a sound to be heard. It was as if everything had disappeared. Only he and Hermione remained, and a crazy, sweet wish rose in his heart that they *were* the only ones left on earth. His sleeping beauty, awaiting him to be reborn, that summer could return. He could be content with that.

It didn't make walking away from her any easier. For some silly, stupid reason, tears welled in his eyes, and he allowed them to fall. It felt as if he was walking away from his heart. *Don't be stupid, Severus. It's a bloody dumbshow.*

He turned to the hushed congregation, and opened his arms. His voice was thick with tears, but he didn't care. "How can I live, when my Queen lies in Winter's frozen slumber?" He dropped his arms, and lowered his head. Grief racked his heart, and he let it go. Beltane, Hermione had explained the night before, was a time for beginning and ending relationships. He had understood she was trying to tell him that she was ready for him. He had not been able to admit that he was ready for her, and she had left his bed with her question unanswered.

Well, here is your answer, witch. Lily is gone; she is nothing but my lost childhood. You, Hermione Crazymaker Granger, you...I want you in my future. I want you to be my future. Now if I can only find the juice to say those things to your face when you wake up.

Severus turned and walked away from the bier. It felt as if a little more of his grief dropped with each tear, until he felt light, and free, and suddenly he couldn't wait to wake her, take her in his arms, and tell her how he felt. Gods, he was turning into a Hufflepuff.

He backed into the darkness, and as he moved farther and farther from Hermione's still form, the Magister continued, his strong voice sounding sad and forlorn: "The Oak King is dead. He has died of his love for the Lady that the Earth may live. So has it been for year after year, since time began. But the Oak King, the God of the Waxing year, must live so the crops in the Earth can come forth.

"Kindle the Beltane fire! May the Oak King live again. May the Earth bring forth her fruits, may the animals bear their young, and the land be fruitful again!"

The drums began to beat in a slow, steady rhythm, and the Coven began to chant, "Kindle the Beltane fire... Kindle the Beltane fire... Kindle the Beltane fire..."

Wiping his eyes, Severus watched intently from the darkness just outside the circle. The spectators in the stands joined the Coven, droning the slow, insistent chant. He allowed himself to relax a little; it would be a few moments before his cue to return. He stretched his neck, and it creaked like an old man's. The crown was heavy; he'd probably need a muscle warming potion later.

As he waited, he felt the sudden, split-second disorientation again, only this time it was followed by a needle-sharp pain in his temple. The pinprick erupted in his head with a blinding white flash of agony. He tried to call a name, but his world went black...

Minerva chanted with the rest, feeling the growing excitement in the crowd. *Folks, in the immortal words of that Muggle AI Something-or-other, you ain't seen nothing yet.*

The crowd's chanting faltered as a slender figure entered the circle, walking purposefully toward the centre. An excited rush of sound filled the air as Harry Potter, in blood-red robes, reached the middle of the circle. He leaned over the recumbent figure on the bier, and kissed her forehead just as Severus had done.

He turned to the crowd, and with the charisma and confidence of a star Quidditch player and politician-in-the-making, he announced, "I am the Firebringer, the Living Phoenix. I am the keeper of the Fire that banishes the darkness. I am the Light that welcomes the return of the Oak King!"

"Light the Beltane fire... Light the Beltane fire..." the voices rose again, as if by their very words the deed would be done.

Harry faced the North, and sketched a jagged symbol in the air with his wand, exclaiming, *Exuro mi!* A red-gold trail of fire hovered in the air, in the shape of the symbol. He turned doosil toward the East, and repeated the symbol and the incantation. He did this at all the points of the compass. Finally, he drew the symbol over his head until he was surrounded by all sides and above by this fiery sigil. Minerva's heart was pounding as the chant grew in volume and speed: "Light the Beltane fire! Light the Beltane fire!"

Suddenly, Harry shouted, "*Incendado Beltane! Victusphenice!*"

With a loud, booming, crackling sound, Harry's body burst into flame. The crowd gasped. Minerva felt Cornelius' hand on her shoulder. "See? What did I tell you? He's magnificent!" he crowed.

Harry opened his arms, and the fire opened around him, glowing like a thousand flames, as if he was encased in a suit of blazing armour. Then the fire pushed away from him, and encircled him, lighting up the sky. Inside this circle of intense heat, he stood, his arms raised, controlling the fire with his will.

"The fire will be him," Cornelius had explained when he suggested Harry Potter perform this part of the ritual. "This is great and powerful magic, hard to control and beautiful to behold. When the Oak King returns, he will deliver Harry from the flame and together they will awaken the goddess! Oh, it's a beautiful thing when it's done right! Of course, it's dangerous, but that's what gives the ceremony its spice!"

It had not been hard to convince Harry to do it. He was one of those completely typical adrenaline-junkie Aurors that loved this sort of madness. It was all Minerva could do not to dance a jig on the spot. All the secrets, all the security, all Harry's months of practice and endurance training had paid off in spades.

Harry Potter, the saviour of the Wizarding world, had become the incarnation of the Firebringer.

Minerva could see the broom-cams swooping around like mad, recording the moment for posterity. She stepped close to the fire, which was hotter than any bonfire she had ever felt, and held up her hands for quiet. As young and strong as he was, even Harry's magic couldn't last long. The spell was a magical syphon, and it was draining him faster than she wanted to let on.

She raised her hands and cried out, "The Firebringer has purified us from the ashes of the old darkness. Come back to us, Oak King, that the land may be fruitful! Renew your consort and bring life back to your people in the new light!"

The silence stretched out. Nothing.

Nothing.

She glanced outside the circle, where she knew Severus was waiting for his cue, but in the glare of the blaze she couldn't see him. Within, she could see Harry, breathing hard, his face strained with the effort to keep the flame in control.

Raising her arms again, Minerva shouted, "Come back to us, Oak King, that the land..."

From the clearing, Severus strode into the circle, his face stamped with fury and something she could not define. When he reached her, he grabbed her arm and threw her aside like a rag doll. "Severus?" she cried, horrified at the unholy rage contorting his face. "What are you..."

He laughed then, an ugly, obscene sound. In a strange, unnatural voice, he announced, "The Oak King is back, and he has come to take what is rightfully his!" With another hideous laugh, he aimed his wand straight at the heart of Harry Potter, and shouted, "**MORSMORDRE!**"

There was a hideous noise, like a great "**FLOOMP!**" A vacuum of air sucked all the air from the circle, and Harry's head snapped back as if struck by an invisible hand, knocking him unconscious. The red flame imploded into a noxious green, and from the green flames rose the awful Dark Mark. It ascended into the sky, hovering over the Pitch like malignant, poisonous gas.

People in the stands began to scream, and some ran in panic. "Everyone, please sit down!" cried the placating, amplified voice of Magister Honeyclutch. "It's all part of the show!"

Severus turned to him. "Oh, I'll give you a show, old man!"

Minerva recoiled at the hideous, warped joy on Severus face. "What in Merlin's name are you doing?" she shouted. He turned on her, wand out. "And I'll thank you to put that away," she warned.

Severus' *Sonus*-enhanced voice bellowed over the pitch. "You stupid hag! You must have been mad to think I would squander this opportunity to bring about the return of the Dark Lord!"

Chapter Eleven: Balefire and Bane

Chapter 12 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Prompfest.

Sorry to leave you at such a cliffhanger. I didn't plan on keeping you waiting long, honest! ;)

Of course, certain protocol must be met. But don't feel that the entire thing is ruined just because someone forgets a line or misses a dance step. The gods do not demand perfection, or even competence. They just want your heart to be in the right place. Besides, at this point, old Cernunnos has had a metaphysical shag; he's not going to be too picky. If you miss a cue, just wing it.

The bottom line is to play it loosey-goosey; if you expect everything and nothing, you're not bound to be disappointed now, are you?

~Chapter Eleven: If It All Goes Pear-shaped The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

Perhaps you have found something you did not expect. You have looked into the darkness and found your greatest fear. You are being shown what you have placed in the shadows of your consciousness. What you wanted to forget has raised its head, but only to ask if you have gained enough wisdom and strength to deal with it more fully.

It may seem like a nightmare at first. You may not want to look at it. But you must accept your dark side, your hidden desires and integrate them with your light side in order to experience wholeness.

You are never given a challenge that you do not have the skills to meet. It may seem as though you are shooting in the dark, but go ahead. Use the skills you have been working to develop. This is their supreme test.

A new surge of power awaits your success. The mask is lifted as you look behind the face of things to see that your fear was merely self-doubt rather than an external enemy. Take heart. Lift your bow of confidence, and shoot pure thoughts of love, strength and highest vision. Aim for the good of the whole.

~Carol Bridges

The crowd gasped as Minerva recoiled in shock. She looked past Snape to the unconscious figures of Hermione and Harry. Without Harry to control the fire, it started spreading both inward and outward. He was trapped, unconscious, in the inner dome of fire surrounding him; soon there would be no oxygen left for him to breathe. With a

sickening jolt of fear, Minerva realised he was essentially inside a burning cauldron. "I do not know who you are," she called to Snape, "but you have to release Harry! Only your wand has the power to do it...he'll be cooked!"

"Then the Dark Lord will feast on his corpse, as he should have years ago!" Snape looked around, his face a mask of unholy glee. "Tonight, the Mudblood will conceive, and will bear a new Dark Lord to truly rule over the Wizarding World! I, Severus Snape, will impregnate the goddess! It is the perfect beginning of a new era!"

"You're mad!" Magister Honeyclutch proclaimed. Snape rounded on him.

"*Stupefy!*"

The old man went down. Minerva threw a stunning spell at Snape, who blocked it.

The rest of the professors tried to come to their Headmistress' rescue, but Snape corralled them all in the same green fire as he had Harry. "Move and I'll burn this entire pitch down and everyone inside it," he drawled. "And don't pretend I can't."

"Stop this NOW!" came the shout of a new voice. And as if the entire madness had not gone off the scale, Ronald Weasley ran into the circle, closely followed by Argus Filch.

"Don't you dare touch her, you..."

"This ain't the Professor, Headmistress!"

Ronald placed himself between Snape and Hermione, his wand drawn. "You leave her alone, Snape! She told me you'd pull something like this!"

"Who told you he would pull *what?*" Minerva roared. The fire was licking at the base of the platform upon which Hermione lay. Harry was a dim, shadowy figure lying just inside the flames. His robes had started to smoke.

Argus cried out, "Rita Skeeter! She's behind all this! She's been trying to ruin this for weeks!" He pointed to Severus. "She's done something to the Professor, I know she has!"

"Rita Skeeter?" Snape scoffed. "That bitch will be the first to die when my Lord is reborn." He swung toward Ronald. "Get out of the way, Weasley! I have come to claim what is mine."

The boy stood his ground. "You'll have to kill me first, Snape," he growled. He shot a hex toward Snape, who batted it away, then disarmed Ron for good measure.

As the boy's wand skittered over the ground, Snape laughed, "It will be my pleasure to rid the earth of a Blood Traitor like you, Weasley. Say hello to your brother for me!" His face grimaced hellishly as he raised his wand. "*Avada...*"

The world exploded.

A voice like thunder roared, "***YOU DARE DEFILE MY CONSECRATED CIRCLE, MORTAL?!***"

Three things happened simultaneously: the fires surrounding Harry and the rest of the coven snuffed out completely, plunging the circle into darkness. Hermione woke up with a scream of panic, and found herself on a smoking, roasting-hot platform. She rolled off, and fell unceremoniously on to the ground with a grunt of pain. A cool rush of air hit her face, then the world was illuminated by a light so bright, people could see it through closed eyes.

Hermione's eyes finally focused on the menacing figure in dueling position opposite Minerva. "What's going on?" she demanded, but no one paid her any heed. "That can't possibly be Severus," she said, to no one in particular.

The bright light dimmed to a glow, and the world seemed to gasp as a second Severus Snape leapt into the circle. Hermione realised with a jolt that *this* wasn't Severus, either.

"Cernunnos. Oh, gods, we've only gone and summoned Cernunnos," she whispered. It was then that she glanced around, shocked at the carnage surrounding her. "What the hell happened while I was asleep?"

Cernunnos' large burning eyes swept the circle, and he glared at the Severus standing by Minerva. "***WHO IS THIS FILTH WHO MOCKS ME?!***"

It was Severus' voice, but louder than any *Sonorus* could produce. It hurt the ears, it entered the body through the chest, the eyes, the groin.

The audience screamed with one voice as Cernunnos picked up Snape by the throat, and held him aloft. Faced with two identically-dressed Snapes, Minerva looked first at one, then the other, her face dark with anger and uncertainty.

Hermione painfully pulled herself to her feet and raced toward the god. "Stop, please! Please, Cernunnos! Whoever that is, don't hurt him!"

Cernunnos looked down at her, and his stern expression softened. In a voice more like Severus', he asked, "My Queen, why should I spare the life of this one? He has mocked me, taken my form! This one has defiled the sacred rite of your rebirth!"

"It ain't a 'he', it's a 'she'! It's Rita Skeeter, I tell ya! I know it is!" Argus shouted. He swept his arm across the wreckage of the circle. "The real Professor Snape would never do this!" Filch pointed up to the snarling and kicking Snape in Cernunnos' grasp. "With all due respect, that ain't the Professor, sir," Argus said, with a bow.

"Ah hell, it bloody isn't. Filch is right. It's Rita Skeeter."

Everyone turned toward the owner of the voice. Ron was kneeling at Harry's side, helping him to sit up. He glanced toward the still-struggling Snape. "She must've used Polyjuice. Whoever it is, you can bet I'm pressing charges," he added grimly.

Cernunnos turned to Hermione. Indicating the figure still clawing at his iron-grip, he said, "This one has used magic to imitate me! To kill, and cast the blame upon my servant!" He released the fake Snape, who crumpled to the ground, choking and retching.

"That bloody woman!" Minerva exclaimed, looking stricken. "I knew something was wrong the moment Severus walked into the circle. I..."

"Minerva." They turned as Magister Honeyclutch slowly rose to his feet. Professor McGonagall turned to assist him but he waved her away. "I'm fine, m'dear. Just a little winded." He took a large breath, and inhaled with a puff. "Ah, that's better. Please allow me." He patted her arm reassuringly, then turned to Cernunnos rather stiffly. He dropped down on one knee. "My Father, I pray you will spare that one's life. Whoever it is, they must be tried by our laws of justice."

Cernunnos looked down upon the old man with imperious stubbornness. "It is not my life to spare." He turned to Hermione, and took her in his arms. In a voice as silvery as the moon, he entreated, "My Queen, say the word, and I will give thee all that is within my power to give, including that one's life." He searched her face. "Command me, and I will grind that one's bones and bless the four winds with it."

Looking up into his dark, fiery eyes, Hermione was truly awe-struck. She was literally in the arms of a god, and he was ready to wreck the world at her whim. "No, m-my

King," she answered. "We'll see that she is punished for her crimes."

He looked skeptical for a moment. "No punishment is adequate," he said softly, and stroked her cheek. It was like being stroked by nature itself. His fingers were warm, and rough, and yet incredibly gentle. He smelled of good earth, and spicy woodsmoke. "That one defiled me. That one defiled the sacred ritual. That one would have killed an innocent. That one threatened the Firebringer. But most of all," he said, and pulled her close. "That one tried to harm my Queen." He released her. "For that I cannot forgive."

"You must, my King. There has been no death here today," Hermione pleaded. She looked around until she spotted Harry sitting on the ground, holding his head. "Look! The Firebringer, he's alright, aren't you, Harry?"

Harry looked up at her with a mixture of exhaustion and incredulity. His face was covered in greenish soot, and he was still wheezing. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Great. Give me five minutes and I'll be ready to burst into flames all over again. Piece of cake." He managed a watery smile. "Cheers."

"See?" She said to a very skeptical god. "And the ceremony isn't ruined, it's just ... in intermission. We'll get it going again. And I'm fine! So you don't have to grind her up, or anything."

Cernunnos made a harsh, animalistic sound of frustration. "That one has harmed my Queen! Why should I not break her on the wheel of life?"

Hermione closed her eyes and prayed for the right words. This was a god; he wasn't going to take no for an answer unless she could give him a good reason. She looked into Cernunnos' face. Up close, she could see it was not Severus at all; it was as if Severus was merely a suit that Cernunnos had donned, and stretched him to fit. It was scary, and Hermione wondered just how aware Severus was of what was going on.

"My King, Severus spent a great deal of his life under the control of two masters, and because of them, he was forced to do terrible things. They made him suffer so much pain and humiliation. And even though you are a god, you are still controlling him right now."

Cernunnos frowned, and placed a hand on his chest. "I would never harm this one."

"I know you wouldn't. But if you killed that one, Severus would believe the blood was on his hands, don't you see? He would ~~fe~~ have done it, under your command."

His dark brows rushed together. "He would have vengeance!"

"No, my King. *You* would have vengeance," Hermione said, gently. "I'm sure Severus wants her to be punished, but not like this. He would think of himself as a murderer, and it would be too much for him to bear. Please, my King. Give him the final say."

Cernunnos' mouth twisted into a smirk so like Severus'. "You are protective of this one. I felt your passion for him when you ran with me through the corn. You gave yourself willingly, lustily. You gloried in the joining. You love this one." His expression grew joyful. "You will protect and cherish this one? You will be his consort?"

She smiled. "I already am, my King."

Ron's voice rang out. "See, see? I told ya! Polyjuice!"

Hermione turned just as the face of the Snape on the ground began to bubble and melt like a wax mask, and the body began to reshape from masculine to feminine. A nearly-naked Rita Skeeter dragged herself onto her feet, dressed only in Severus' trousers. The beleaguered crowd began to hiss and boo her, and she looked around in growing dismay. The Magister hastily robed her in a more modest gown before binding her hands. He returned Severus' wand to Minerva, who pointed her own at Rita.

"How dare you, you vile woman!" Minerva hissed, her eyes snapping in fury. "Assaulting a Hogwarts professor, impersonating to deceive, attempted murder! Rita, you tried to kill young Ronald!" She shook her head. "Why would you do this?"

"Why?" Rita scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Why *are you* allowing an ex-Death Eater to preside over one of the most sacred rituals in our world? Why *are you* pandering to this murderer? Leopards don't change their spots, McGonagall. You can protect him all you want, but Severus Snape was one of Voldemort's most loyal followers! Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater!"

She fought against her bonds as she became increasingly agitated. With narrow-eyed contempt, she added, "How do you know ~~he wouldn't~~ have seized the chance to get rid of the so-called 'Golden Trio' when given the perfect opportunity? If old horn-head here hadn't shown up," she added, giving Cernunnos a withering look, "none of you would've had any problem believing Snape had done all because that's the kind of wizard he is and always will be!"

"You scheming, vicious little insect!" Hermione thundered, drawing her own wand. "And to think, I actually pled for your life. I ought to save Cernunnos the trouble."

"You wouldn't dare!" Rita shot back.

"Really? Try me, sunshine," Hermione replied warningly. "It's bad enough that you attempted to frame Severus, but how ~~bloody dare~~ you try to make this all sound like he was the reason you did it!" Hermione smiled mirthlessly. "I warned you Rita. Remember? I said the next time you put one antenna out of line I was going to..."

"Oh, shut it, you malingering cow!" screamed Rita, spitting in fury. Her eyes were wild with hatred and malice. "You think you're so perfect! But you're like everyone else - I don't care who you are; you've a closetful of things you don't want anyone to know." She turned to the hostile group. "You *all* have your dirty little secrets, and I'll find them all! You'll be sorry! You'll pay for this! All of you!"

Suddenly Rita was no longer there. The robe she had been wearing stood empty for a heartbeat, then crumpled to the ground.

"What happened?" Minerva demanded looking around frantically. "Where did she..."

Faster than humanly possible, Cernunnos swiped the air with a swift, grabbing motion, then made a sound of grim triumph. "That one is here." He held out his large, closed fist. "She turned herself into a flying creature. I have her."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Right. Okay, my King. I'm going to take care of this once and for all." Bending to the ground, she plucked a blade of grass and Transfigured it into a jar, which she held out to Cernunnos. "Place her in here, my King. I'll see she gets exactly what she deserves." With a smile, the god turned his hand over and dumped the large beetle into the jar.

Minerva looked grim. "Rita Skeeter is an Animagus?" She looked at Hermione critically. "How long have you known?"

Under Minerva's stern demand, Hermione felt her bravado deflate. Sheepishly, she answered, "Since my fourth year, actually."

The Headmistress gaped at her in shock. "What? You do realise that failure to report this is as much a crime as her status? You could go to Azkaban with her!"

Hermione glanced at her two friends. "Yes, and Harry, and Ron would be in the cell next door."

A large shadow loomed over her and Minerva. "You will *not dare* touch my Queen, mortal," Cernunnos threatened, his voice low and dangerous.

Minerva looked up at him, irritated. "I'm not going to do anything to your precious Queen." She turned to Hermione with a tight smile. "If anything, I was going to hug the sly boots."

There was a soft sound of a throat being cleared, and everyone, Cernunnos included, turned to the source. Magister Honeyclutch gave them all a fatherly smile, and said, "Pardon me, friends, I realise this is all tremendously excitin', but we're in the middle of a Beltane ritual that's bein' shown throughout the world."

Hermione looked at Minerva in horror. "Oh gods. We've rather dropped the Quaffle, haven't we?"

Honeyclutch hugged himself with a little chuckle. "Not at all! After The Father caught that Skeeter woman, I had the WWW director cut the broadcast." He winked. "Technical difficulties. Apparently it happens all the time." He clapped his hands like a delighted child. "Technology! What a delightful thing to blame our problems on!"

"So we haven't made complete prats of ourselves in a hundred countries?" Ron asked, his slow grin appearing. "Why don't you just start from the last bit and finish?"

"Well, I don't know," Minerva said, turning to the Magister. "Can we?"

"Of course! We are nothin', if not flexible!" he said. "Now, our Firebringer has done his part, so..." With a little flourish of his wand, the Beltane fire burst into life again, dispelling the Dark Mark.

Cernunnos looked toward the fire. "This one's body is tiring," he admitted. "It is difficult for him to relinquish his control to me. I must go, or he will harm himself."

He turned to Hermione and pulled her into his arms with a strange mixture of tenderness and impatience. His eyes bored into hers, and instinctively, Hermione whispered, "Don't hurt him."

He smiled down at her. He seemed to be shrinking, growing dim. His eyes were tired. "You are a worthy consort. He loves you, my Queen, just as I love you. He is here, within, fighting me with all his strength, trying to get to you. He protects you with all his heart. Cherish him, and he will worship at your feet."

"I don't want him to worship me. Okay, maybe a little," Hermione replied, and Cernunnos laughed. "I just want us to..." she stopped. What did she want? "I want him to be happy. And I think we can do a pretty fair job of being happy together."

The god touched her face. "My Queen is my life, just as you are his life. Even more than he knows himself. I have felt your power in your joining. He is yours, and you are his. Together, you are worthy. I bless you both."

He pulled her into a swift, chaste kiss. Hermione felt an intense tingling, starting in her heart. It raced through her body like a live wire, hitting everything along the way, lighting her up like a Christmas tree. She felt magic spark out of her fingers, toes, hair. She felt it sizzling across her lips as they moved against his. The feeling faded, and Cernunnos relaxed in her arms. Then he kept relaxing until Hermione realised his knees were buckling.

"Blimey! He's going over," Ron said, as Hermione struggled to stay upright with him. Together with Harry they helped Hermione lower Severus to the ground. His face was ashen and slack.

"Merlin, he looks worse than usual," Ron added.

"Shut up, Ron! He's not breathing!" Alarmed, Hermione looked beyond the circle and cried, "Madame Pomfrey! We need your help!"

There was a rush as Poppy ran to her side. Her swirling turquoise robes struck Hermione as strangely significant for some reason, and she shook her head to clear it. She was going mad.

She stared down at Severus' unmoving form as the Mediwitch performed a rapid series of diagnostic spells. Finally, she pointed to Severus' heart. "*Ennervate!*"

Nothing happened. Poppy cast spell after spell, her hand moving over his chest. "I don't really know what's wrong with him..."

Hermione choked back a sob. Not now. Not when they were so close. "Oh, Severus please..."

"Get off me, you overgrown MOOSE!" Severus bellowed, surging from the ground, his eyes wild and staring. "If you muss one hair on her head, so help me I'll blast you..."

"Severus! It's alright!" Hermione cried, holding him in place. He was drenched in sweat and shaking and fighting like a tiger.

"Take your hands off my witch! I don't care who you are! I mean it..."

"Severus! It's over! Stop fighting, dammit!" she cried. She drew back and punched his arm as hard as possible. He ceased his struggling immediately, and stared at her in shock, as if he'd never seen her before. He blinked several times, gasping.

"There's no need to shout, Granger," he said petulantly, rubbing his arm ruefully. "And even less need to resort to violence, you little brute."

Hermione did what any sane witch would do. She burst into tears.

This seemed to alarm Severus even more, if possible. "What are you crying about?" he said, looking around. He spied Ron and Harry, and his eyes narrowed. "Has this idiot interrupted the ritual just to harass you into marrying him again?"

Everyone looked at Ron accusingly.

"Open for me the secret way, the pathway of intelligence, beyond the gates of night and day, beyond the bounds of time and sense. All life is thine own, all fruits of the Earth are fruits of your womb, Thy union, thy dance. Lady and Lord, We thank thee for blessings and abundance.

"Join with us, Feast with us, Enjoy with us! Blessed Be!"

"Blessed Be!" the entire stadium shouted. Hermione turned to Severus, and they toasted one another with wine. He looked considerably revived as he drank the wine thirstily.

"One more bit, and we're through," she whispered.

"Can't be soon enough," he muttered in reply.

Hermione silently agreed. The Magister had suggested they start the ceremony at the point where Severus (the real one) returned to awaken the Queen from her enchanted sleep, and the crowd, completely on their side now, went happily along with it. As Magister Honeyclutch had said, "Well, at least you can be assured this is a Beltane they'll never forget."

After that, it was just a matter of passing around the wine and cake, and everyone ate and drank and saluted the gods. The House-elves played their part by allowing the witches and wizards to serve them wine and cake (being careful not to offer it in any kind of towel or piece of cloth that might be construed as a garment), and the ritual part of the ceremony was all but at its end.

Hermione and Severus faced one another, the Sword of Gryffindor between them, and recited, "Ye Lords of the Watchtowers of the East, West, North and South, now our time together is at an end. And ere ye depart to your pleasant and lovely realms, we do thank you for attending our rites. Until we meet in this circle again, we bid you hail and farewell... hail and farewell."

Another tide of magic swirled between them, and for a moment, Severus was again the great Cernunnos. Touching her face, he whispered, "Farewell, my Queen. Until we meet again."

Then Severus blinked and smiled down at her. "Now dance, and sing, and make ye merrie 'til dawn banishes the darkness for always!" Lively music swelled around them. The crowd roared its approval, and erupted into dancing.

Rolly grabbed Severus' hand, and dragged him into the circle. "Come on, Sev! You'll have plenty of chances to dance with Hermione!"

Hermione felt a familiar hand on her shoulder. "May I? For old times' sake?"

Hermione looked up at Ron. "You're not going to..."

"Hell, no, Hermione! If I've learned anything from this mental cluster fuck you call Beltane, it's that you don't piss off a god." He winked. "Or his Queen."

Together they joined the circle of dancers. Harry was on her left, Ron on her right, and across the fire, she saw Severus' fierce, angular face relax as his feet and body found the rhythms of the dance.

He glanced her way, and catching her attention, he gazed at her with Cernunnos' consuming, lustful reverence, his eyes reflecting the balefire flames. She actually stopped in her tracks, and shook her head. He was doing that on purpose. As if he read her mind, he gave her a smile so wicked she felt it right down to her toes. He twirled around, his breechclout flaring out like his billowing robes.

His grace and beauty sent a wave of pure lust over her, and she felt light as a feather, as if she could leap over the massive bonfire without one speck of magic to aid her.

Raising her arms in joyous abandon, Hermione twirled and spun, giving her heart and soul away to the dance...

Chapter Twelve: Handfasting

Chapter 13 of 13

Wizarding Britain, ten years after the war. Things are good, but the Ministry thinks what's needed is a good old fashioned Beltane revel. Hogwarts is just the place to do it. In the meantime, Severus isn't enjoying life right now; he's the subject of Rita Skeeter's new tell-all book. And don't get Hermione started on how Ron continues to make her life a misery. Perhaps this Beltane stuff may just be the ticket to help them out as well. Written for Jenidralph in the winter 2013 LiveJournal SSHG_Prompfest.

A final thank you for all the wonderful comments I've received for this fic. If you like it, please tell your fanfic-reading friends! I had such a wonderful time writing this, and your encouragement has been appreciated more than I can say. Thanks also to Stgulik, who is my Magnetic North. She is the best beta in fanfiction, and the best friend in the world.

Lastly, I do not own these characters. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my reason for reading Harry Potter die in the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.

Once the fire dies, once the revelers are danced out, once the mead and wine have been drunk, don't forget to congratulate yourself. Give yourself a bit of credit...you did it! You entered into communion with the gods. That's nothing to sneeze at. According to the Christian religious ethos, Yahweh is so powerful that, were you to actually behold him, you would be instantly blown into dust, consumed by his power. Our gods aren't nearly so difficult to have fun with. They want to be consumed by you.

~Chapter Twelve: The Morning After the Night Before The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

"We are much too hard on ourselves. Really we are. We beat ourselves up, we 'should' on ourselves, we compare ourselves to others, we postpone self-love until we reach a stage of perfection that is impossibly unrealistic. We are so hard on ourselves, but how are we to know better? It's not like there is a book that lays it all down. It's not like we downloaded perfection. We are still writing that book, writing it with the blood of lessons learned, writing it with ink that is forged in the fires of transformation. We are learning as we g(r)o(w). So let's give ourselves a break. Often. Kindly. Gently. Really. It's a huge thing to grow beyond the parameters of our familiar ways of being. Berating ourselves won't get us anywhere. A little self-love will go a long way."

~Jeff Brown

"Oh, my, that was the best Beltane band I've ever heard. I can't remember when I've danced so much! Circe, my poor feet are going to be sore tomorrow," Pomona Sprout declared, raising one pudgy foot from the water and waving it about.

"I have a good salve for that," Hermione said, sipping her wine. She leaned back into the crook of Severus' arm and yawned. The warm water along with his equally inviting body combined to make her relaxed and a little sleepy. "And it's already tomorrow by several hours, Pommy."

"This is quite relaxing," Harry said, across the way. He was up to his neck in one of the fourth floor's hot springs. His glasses were fogged, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Too right," Ron agreed affably. He was sitting in one of the two shallower pools, with the water up to his freckled chest. "I'm beginning to understand why you enjoy working here so much, Hermione."

Severus tensed, but Hermione tried to assure him with the touch of her hand on his thigh. "Well, it's one of the perks, but not the best one by far," she replied blithely, stroking Severus' bare leg.

The dancing, drinking and overall Dionysian debauchery had carried on for several hours after the actual ceremony ended. The WWW had long since packed up their broom-cams and departed, and at three in the morning, Minerva told the revelers they didn't have to go home but they couldn't stay at Hogwarts. As soon as the last group Apparated from the castle grounds, Minerva cocked her eye to her staff and commanded, "Fourth floor. Let's all have a nice drink and a soak. Bathing costumes are

mandatory. That means you, Rolly," she said, to her pouting Flying Mistress.

Severus had been strangely quiet as they joined the others. He had relaxed in the springs' soothing waters, but he seemed withdrawn and pensive as everyone performed the post-mortem of the evening. While some of it focused on the positive aspects of the ritual, it was inevitable that the primary conversation centred around Rita Skeeter's psychotic attempt to sabotage the Ministry's big moment and destroy Severus.

Harry had taken Ron, Minerva and Magister Honeyclutch's statements before contacting his fellow Aurors. "Looks like it's Azkaban for Rita," he'd said. "I also spoke briefly with her boss, what's his name? Big, sweaty bloke, looks like a Christmas pudding with legs. Smoklehouse, or something like that.

"Anyway, he didn't sound too surprised when I told him what she'd done. He said he'd been 'somewhat concerned' about her behaviour recently. Been drinking a bit, showing signs of paranoia. She had become obsessed, he said, with trying to embroil Hermione in a scandal involving Severus. Of course, he knew nothing of her intentions, whether he did or not."

"She hated me," Hermione said. "And she hated Severus. I threatened her last year with exposure if she continued to hound him." She shook her head contritely. "In a way, this is my fault."

"Pack it up, 'Mione," Ron said sympathetically. "I'm not wild about Snape meself, but I'd never try to frame him with murder! The woman was mental. I mean, this sounds like one of those Muggle detective stories with Shylock House."

"Sherlock Holmes, Ron."

"Whatever."

"That's another thing: why are you even here, Ron?" Hermione demanded, and felt Severus tense again. "I thought you were in Europe."

Ron favoured her with a sly look. "I was supposed to be. Then I got Floo'd by our favourite dung beetle." The entire group sat in rapt fascination as Ron told them how Rita Skeeter had enlisted his aid to try and convince him Severus was going to sabotage the ceremony and harm Hermione.

"It was a completely mad idea, but sort of clever if you think about it. From what I've ascertained, apparently she waited until she was sure I wasn't paying attention, and Snape left the circle."

Harry nodded in agreement. "She used a very illegal high-lacewing-content Polyjuice. Volatile stuff, as you know. The empty vial was found in her bag. She also used some kind of charm to change her voice to sound more like Snape's. I've never seen it; it's not a licensed spell. We're investigating it, but it looks like it has some sort of trigger that acts in tandem with the Polyjuice.

"I think her plan was for Ron to make a scene, then she could injure him and try and pin it on you, Professor. If it had all gone according to plan, she could have slipped away into the cornfield while we were all running around like headless chickens. We would have found you on your own, and your only defense would have been that you'd been knocked out by some unknown, unseen person. *Priori Incantatem* would have shown the spells had come from your wand. It would have been your word against everyone else's."

He grinned. "But just as she was about to kill Ron, the cavalry arrived."

"Did it ever." Hermione turned to Severus. "What do you remember?" He looked about the room uncomfortably, and Hermione instantly wished she hadn't asked. "I'm sorry; I realise it's a bit personal. You don't have to answer, Severus. I can imagine it might be something you'd rather keep to yourself."

"Well we don't!" Rolly Hooch said adamantly. In a tone best described as whining, she begged, "C'mon, Severus, we're your friends. I would have defended you, no matter what. I knew from the moment that malodorous bitch showed up dressed in that getup something wasn't right."

There were murmurs of ascent all around the pool. Severus ducked his head. "Thank you," he said quietly. "It's... it's nice to be believed in." After a moment, he continued quietly. "I remember being stunned, and waking up and seeing the Dark Mark in the sky. It was like some hideous déjà vu. The last time I saw that mark in person was the night..." he swallowed, and flicked a sharp gaze toward Harry. "The night your mother and father were killed."

Harry gave him an understanding look, but Severus still looked ashamed. "I could hear screaming and..." his voice faltered.

"Severus, it's alright," Harry said. "You don't have to go on."

"I do! I do," he said, in a crabbed and hurt voice. "My actions caused the death of your parents that night! All I could think about was that I must not allow Hermione to be hurt. She was in an enchanted sleep. No one could wake her but me, and I was trapped. My head was pounding; I couldn't concentrate enough to do wandless magic. I was useless.

"I kept thinking, 'I must make sure Hermione's safe'. It never occurred to me that Mr. Potter was in danger, or that anything else was going on, for that matter. I just had to save Hermione. If something happened to her, I couldn't live with myself. It was bad enough then; but this is the woman I..." He took a deep breath. "And then, as I struggled to free myself, I realised I wasn't alone.

"I felt this enormous pressure, as if something was squeezing into my body with me. It was like being trapped in the cupboard with Hagrid."

"Now, Perfessor, I tole ye, that was an accident!" Hagrid rumbled.

Hermione looked at Severus. He shuddered. "Don't ask."

"Don't worry," she replied, with a matching shudder. "So, you were trapped..."

"In my own body, it seems," he answered hastily, his face flushed. "It has...I have experienced a similar feeling more than once, since the night of the Consecration and Blessing."

Magister Honeyclutch nodded his head vigorously. "Of course! You told me you had received the Blessin's of Cernunnos. He would have stayed near." He seemed transported with the knowledge.

Severus frowned in concentration. "It was disturbing, like being *Legilimised*, but it was also exhilarating. All that power. It felt like fire in my veins. I could sense his thoughts, and I could hear and see what was going on. He was furious that Hermione had been threatened." He turned to her. "I think if you had given the word, he would have destroyed the entire grounds."

"He would, and he could," Magister Honeyclutch added, his voice serious. "Severus, I realise this is all overwhelmin', but can you tell me what it was like to commune with the Great Father?" He leaned forward, his eyes as bright and guileless as a little boy's. "After all, you shared your consciousness with Cernunnos! What was it like? Was it marvelous?"

Severus looked at the older man, and suddenly a smile as big as Cernunnos himself lit up his face. "It fucking was, actually."

The Magister clapped his hands like a child, and sat back with a satisfied air. "I knew it! Well done, my friend Severus!"

Ron shook his head. "Yeah, it was probably dead wicked, being a god and all, but it's pretty scary how close Rita came to getting away with it. It sounded pretty convincing

when she was trying to set it all up."

"So what gave it away?"

"Well, she didn't have her facts straight, did she? I mean, the minute she started talking about Hermione pining away for me, I knew something was up. Hermione hasn't pined for me since our sixth year."

"Then why do you keep pestering her to marry you, Weasley?" Severus asked, his voice tinged with scorn.

To Hermione's amazement, Ron just sat back, a self-deprecating smile on his face. "Oh, I just do it for Mum's sake. She's been nagging me to settle down and get married for the past two years, but I wasn't in any hurry, was I? So every so often I'd make this big proposal, knowing full well Hermione was going to say no, and it got Mum off my back for a few more months."

Hermione sputtered, nearly choking on her wine. "You WHAT? And when were you going to tell me this? You've been embarrassing me for years with these silly proposals! What if I had said yes ..."

"As if you would! I knew you were never going to marry me. We'd have driven one another barmy in a month! As long as I kept asking you, Mum was content to leave me alone. I could do whatever I wanted." He blushed. "I will admit, though, I told her if you turned me down at Christmas, I was going to stop asking. The lads were starting to rag me something rotten." He shrugged with irritating insouciance. "And to be honest, I met someone last month I actually want to marry." He smiled fondly. "And I *think* this time when I pop the question, the answer *will* be yes."

"That's...that's wonderful, Ronald," Hermione said, and in her heart she meant it. "Even though I think you're a complete arse for dragging me into this year after year."

He smiled that lazy grin that Hermione had to admit was charming. "Aw, thanks, 'Mione. I knew you'd be happy for me. Hell, you'd be ecstatic...you won't have to constantly look over your shoulder at the next big do." He nodded at Severus. "Besides, it looks like you're doing alright here. You two kept that quiet, ay?"

"Pot, kettle, Ron. You haven't exactly kept us in the loop either. Not like you at all," Harry countered. "I'm beginning to think you're actually serious about this one. So, is it anyone we know? Care to give us a name?"

Ron gave Hermione a quick glance, then took a deep drink of wine. "David."

In the silence that followed, Hagrid said, "David, huh? Thass an unusual name fer a girl, Ron."

Rolly gave the half-giant an affectionate clap on the shoulder and helped him from the pool. "Never you mind, Rubeus. Why don't you and I give the house-elves a little holiday and head down to the kitchens? We'll bring back some sandwiches for everyone. Come on, I could use the ballast. And on the way I can tell you about the time my Aunt Dolly from Cockermouth..."

Everyone was quiet as they left. Hermione looked at her friend, and felt she ought to say *something*, but she knew it would probably be totally inane. Surprisingly enough, it was Severus who saved her. "I believe you were regaling us with the sordid pact Rita Skeeter attempted to make with you."

Ron shrugged modestly. "Nothing more to tell, really. As I say, she was talking utter bollocks, but something told me to go along with it. I figured if she was actually telling the truth, I was needed here, and if she was desperate enough to be up to something dodgy, I'd better come along in case there was serious trouble."

"She didn't suspect you of duplicity?"

"Nah, I played it really dumb. She thought I was an idiot."

"That shouldn't have been too difficult."

"Oy, watch it, Snape!" Ron laughed with the rest of the party. "Anyway, when I got here earlier, I snuck up to the castle to find out what was really going on. That's when I ran into Mr. Filch. He looked about as worried as I felt. Well, we started chatting, and ended up putting two and two together."

"Yes, and that reminds *me*," Minerva interjected, fixing her caretaker with a gimlet eye. "What exactly is your involvement in all this mess, Argus?"

Filch, who seemed to suddenly find something fascinating on the trim of his old-fashioned bathing costume, mumbled something unintelligible.

"Pardon?"

He looked fairly miserable. "I just wanted to be like Professor Snape."

Hermione looked up at her companion, who was staring at Filch in disbelief. "Why on earth would you, or anyone for that matter, want to emulate me?"

Filch ducked his head. "Well, you were a Master spy, wadncha? I know all about what you did during the war. It were heroic," he said, with great dignity.

"Rubbish," Severus replied, not unkindly. "Argus, I did what was necessary to try and atone for the mistakes I made." He gave Hermione a meaningful look. "I'm no hero, in spite of what people say. And I'm certainly no one to look up to."

"I know *why* you did those things, but that weren't the point," Argus continued earnestly. "I've talked to the old Headmaster's portrait a lot, and he told me how you kept all them plates spinnin' during the war. And you never let one drop, not one."

He pointed to Hermione, then to Ron, then to Harry. "These three alone coulda dropped at any time, and that woulda been the end of it. You kept them going while you spun the whole school with one hand and the Carrows with t'other. And you were so good at it no one even knew it were you doing the spinnin'."

Severus tried to interrupt but the old man was talking too fast. "And telling You-Know-Who one thing, then doin' another, and keeping the Headmaster alive, then having to...well, you did terrible things, because you had to, and great things, because you wanted to. You cared." He stopped and sighed.

"Argus..."

"I know I'm an old fool, and a Squib, and to most of our world that means I'm no damn use to anyone." He looked from Severus to Minerva to Filius. "But you've always tried to make me feel useful, like I had a right to belong here. Well, when this Beltane mess was announced, I knew that Skeeter woman would find a way in. I didn't know how, but I knew she would, 'cause she did during that Tri-Wizard muck."

He looked apologetically at Minerva. "So I went to Rita's office and fed her a batch of cobblers about being underpaid and underappreciated and wantin' revenge. She gobbled it up. I told Professor Dumbledore m'plan, and he told me if I could keep her distracted and back-footed, I could keep her out of the way."

Minerva huffed in indignation. "That meddling old oil slick. And neither of you thought to tell me what was going on?"

"I knew you were worried about the ritual and school and all the things you have to worry about, and I didn't want to add that awful woman to your troubles. Plus she'd been so cruel to Professor Snape, and I didn't want to open that sore for him. And I knew how she felt about Professor Granger...she were vicious about her in the papers! So I decided to help, and do it in a way that no one would find out and fret over."

"I asked the house-elves to help. They love all of you so much, and when I explained m'plan they were better than good. They helped me keep m'eye on Rita. Even the Druids from Knappogue were in on it. There wasn't one moment she were in the castle grounds that me or the others didn't know where she was or what she was up ta.

"I told her the wrong dates, and sent her on wild goose chases and had her barking up the wrong tree. I kept her too busy to find out anything you were all doin'."

Severus shook his head in wonder. "So while we've been swanning around, wearing ridiculous costumes and getting massages and pissed, you've kept Hogwarts safe with this spy network of yours."

Filch looked morose. "Some network. I failed, didn't I? Somehow or 'nuther she found out, and it almost cost young Weasley his life."

Filius patted Filch's shoulder consolingly. "Mr. Filch, that wasn't your fault. On behalf of the staff, I want to thank you. Thank you for taking such good care of us. And I mean that sincerely."

"Hear hear!" the group answered, toasting him.

Severus added, "Once this is made public, my guess is there will be a new chocolate frog card coming out sometime in the future."

Filch looked embarrassed, but shyly pleased. "Give over! They don't award chocolate frog cards for Squibs."

"No," Hermione said softly. "They award them for heroes."

Severus sighed heavily, and Argus risked a glance at him. "I never wanted to be a hero, Professor, any more than Professor Snape did. I just... wanted to act like one."

Hermione felt her heart turn into mush. She looked at Severus, who was looking at Argus with a brow furrowed in thought. Suddenly he removed his arm from around her. "Excuse me, Hermione," he said, rising from the water.

He quickly donned his robe and left the room. For a moment, everyone was silent. Argus looked as if he might cry.

Casting about for the proper thing to do or say, Hermione turned to Honeyclutch. "Magister, all things considered, was it a complete disaster?"

Honeyclutch sat back, and paddled his feet playfully in the water. "Well, I'm not the rest of the Wizarding world, my dear, but I don't think so. The purpose of the Beltane is to banish the darkness and make way for the fertile months of the year." He glanced over to a nearby table, where a large beetle roamed restlessly in a jar. Hermione had placed a *Muffliato* and wrapped a piece of parchment around the jar, so that Rita would not be able to hear or see anything going on around her.

"I'd say you met your objective." He tipped his head toward the door. "And *hewas* splendid. I've only seen Cernunnos in the flesh once before," he said wistfully. "It was a special, defining moment in my career, but it wasn't a patch on what happened tonight! Think of it, dear; the great Father, come to life to protect you!"

Hermione was still for a moment. She glanced around the room. Her fellow teachers, her two best friends, all those who knew and cared for her were with her in that room. She was going to sleep soon in the arms of the man who had fought a god to try and protect her. All in all, the evening *had* been pretty damn special, when you put it that way.

The door opened, and Severus strode into the room. "Is everything alright, Severus?" Minerva said warily.

Severus grunted in agreement, then moved to where Filch sat, trying to look small enough to be unnoticed. Severus squatted down at the edge of the pool, and put his arm on Filch's shoulder.

"Argus, you said you didn't want to be known as a hero. Well, there is one fundamental problem with that. When you are surrounded by people like these Gryffindors, you're going to be treated like a hero whether you like it or not. Because sometimes, Argus, we get what we deserve, especially when you get caught."

Silently he retrieved a small black leather box from the pocket of his robe, and opened it. From inside, he drew out an Order of Merlin, First Class.

As one, the entire group stood where they were and raised their glasses while Severus recited the traditional words. "All those within the sound of my voice, know ye this day, that Argus Filch is hereby awarded this Order of Merlin, First Class, for his heroic efforts to thwart sabotage and attempted murder during the Ceremony of the Feast of Beltane on this, the First Day of May, in the Year 2008."

They raised their glasses and gave three huzzahs as Severus solemnly pinned the medal on Argus' swimming costume. Argus looked embarrassed but pleased. "Don't be daft, lad! It's a kind gesture and all, but you can't give away your medal."

Severus looked surprised and rather offended. "Argus, while I appreciate what you've done, I'm not nearly that philanthropic. It took almost having my throat torn out to earn *my* medal, and it is safely tucked away in my desk." He pointed to the badge on Filch's chest. *That is your* OMFC."

Argus peered down at the engraving. "That's my name," he said, his voice hushed with surprise. He looked up at Severus with complete bafflement. "That's my name on it. Is this a joke?"

Severus slipped into the water beside Hermione and picked up his wine glass. "I've just had a Floo call with Minister Shacklebolt. He saw the broadcast, of course. When I explained the part you played in this little ceremony of ours, he asked me what I thought would be appropriate recompense.

"I reminded him that he has authority to grant the Order to whom he sees fit, and he agreed that this was a prime opportunity to exercise that authority. Your official documentation is owling its way here even as we speak." Wryly, he added, "To be perfectly frank, I think he was so glad to get rid of Rita Skeeter he would have pretty much given you anything you wanted."

Filius raised his glass. "Friends, a toast. To Argus Filch. The Hero of Beltane."

"To Argus!" the group repeated, and drank to his health.

Dawn was breaking over Hogwarts. In spite of a feeling of abject exhaustion, Severus was restless, his mind whirling. The events of the day continued to play in his mind, and he knew that once again, he'd added another string to this strange bow of his life...a thoroughly mad moment in time the likes of which he would probably never see again. It seemed to be a recurring theme for him. *Wonder what it would be like to have a quiet life?* he mused. *Pretty damn boring, in all likelihood.*

He felt a tug on his sleeve, and Hermione smiled up at him. "Too gee'd up to sleep?" At his answering nod, she asked, "Me too. How about a walk around the lake?"

They walked under a fading canopy of stars, the world around them quiet and hushed, waiting for dawn, waiting for light. The same stars that looked down on them now had looked down on the night of Cernunnos' rebirth, the night he arose to claim his own goddess.

As Severus thought of that first moment the Oak King cast his restless, urgent gaze on his consort, he realised he and the Wizarding world were fairly insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Years from now, when he and Hermione and even Hogwarts were all dust blowing through the forgotten legends of time, Cernunnos would still be there, standing in the shadows, waiting to find his love and so the world could be born again.

He wanted to share this profundity with Hermione, but he was too damn tired. They slowly made their way around the Black Lake, watching as the Squid lazily broke the

surface, clocked the two professors, then sank slowly into the fathomless depths. "I'll bet *he* was on Argus' payroll," Severus quipped, and Hermione laughed.

"Probably. Everyone else was. It was sort of nice though, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"Well, being protected, without even knowing it." She reached up and stroked the lapel of his robes. "I seem to recall another master spy with a penchant for keeping his recalcitrant charges alive in spite of themselves."

He sighed. "Not all of them. But I wanted to. I never believed that was good enough. But I'm starting to realise at the end of the day, I am only one man. I did the best I could...I *do* the best I can, and I have to accept that's enough."

She put her arms around him and hugged him tightly, never breaking their stride. They walked over to the fallen log that had sat by the lake as long as Severus could remember, its surface smoothed to a satiny sheen by the backsides of generations of Hogwarts students. Severus took Hermione's hand and he led her over to the end with the small indentation; it had always been his preferred spot even as a boy.

They sat in comfortable silence, listening to the world around them stirring, watching the fading stars leaving their part of the world to begin their journey through another. Gradually the tense knot between his shoulders loosened, and he stifled a yawn as his body relaxed. Severus knew himself well enough by now to know that, by the time they walked back to the castle, he'd be almost asleep on his feet.

As he was about to suggest they return, Hermione sat up and peered out over the water. "I don't believe it. There it is," she said, her voiced hushed with wonder.

"There what is?" he asked, looking around. They were on the castle side of the lake; on the far side was the Forbidden Forest. "What is the significance of this particular spot?"

"The night we met in the Head's study for the Consecration and Blessing, right before it was over, I had a-a something, I don't know. A vision, I suppose." She frowned. "It's strange, but I'd completely forgotten about it until just now."

"Go on," he urged, intrigued in spite of his weariness.

She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. "In was dark, and the moon was very full. I was standing here, looking over the lake toward the forest, and suddenly a man appeared right over there, across the lake." She pointed to a spot where the waves of the lake had deposited stones and bits of silt, building it up to a more-or-less beach. "He was so beautiful, and I felt instantly drawn to him."

She turned to him and put her hand against his cheek. "I didn't know it then, but it was you, dressed as Cernunnos." They rolled into one another's arms. "I remember in that very moment I wanted to hear his voice more than I wanted my next breath," she whispered, her soft lips teasing his ear. His body was engulfed in a delicious shiver, and he kissed her, moaning softly at the sweetness of her mouth. He plunged in greedily, giving in to his most selfish, hungry self, trusting she'd let him know if enough was too much. She yielded like ripe fruit, taking as she gave.

"That's what I love about you, Granger," he rumbled, as he broke away from the kiss. "You trust me."

"Why wouldn't I, and what did you say?" She blinked at him owlishly. He tensed, and she pulled him back, a slow smile spreading over her face. "Uh uh. Don't you dare, Severus Snape. You said love and trust in the same breath. Give me a little credit for loving you, and trust me as well."

He knew he should, and eventually would. "As long as you give me a little time to work up to it," he admitted. "I have had... issues with trust in the past."

She gave him a wry look. "Do tell. But all things considered, I'd say your issues were justified." Her expression grew mischievous. "So we'll take it a step at a time."

She looked down at their makeshift bench, and rubbed her hand along the smooth surface. "You know, I told you about my vision, but I never told you about my fantasy."

Thoughts of dozing in front of the fire with a glass of wine vanished from Severus' mind, and he was instantly alert. She had that bright, hard gleam in her eye, the one that precluded soft whispers, wicked intentions and dirty talk. "I'm straining with anticipation," he drawled.

It came as no surprise that she was willing to tell him in great, juicy detail. They had, after all, spent the last six days doing everything but. It took an indecently short amount of time to bend her over the log and sink into that warm, tight heaven that was his lover, his love. Severus tried to take it slowly and be tender with her, but she growled in impatient frustration and pushed back against him with such strength he was almost knocked backward. "I know you can be gentle, Severus," she moaned, rotating her hips in that way that made his bollocks tingle, "and I'm sure I'll want that later, but right now I want you to fuck my brains loose!"

"If you insist," he grunted happily, grabbing her hips hard enough to leave a bruise. He pulled her back on his cock with the force of a god, and her answering cry was as sweet as any goddess'. Soon their cries of release joined the songs of the waking forest.

As he sat in sweat-soaked, muzzy-headed satisfaction, his back against the log, Granger in his arms, they watched the sun rise over Hogwarts. The early morning sky bloomed into an iridescent swirl of coral, pink and blue. "It's so beautiful," Hermione whispered, her voice hushed with awe and wonder.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Whispering. No one else is around."

"Prat."

"Your prat."

She chuckled. "True." She sighed contentedly. "This is what it's about, though. The dark circle, growing warm by the fire; Cernunnos returning to his goddess. This is what we represented, you know. Darkness before the new dawn."

Severus bundled her closer; the temperature had dropped. "Perhaps this is what he felt, the first time he saw his goddess waiting for his kiss to bring her to life."

"You're very eloquent for this time in the morning."

"Just wait until I've had my coffee."

Several tranquil moments passed. "Sev'rus?" Hermione called sleepily. He made an acknowledging sound, somewhere between a hum and a snore.

She turned and looked up at him. "Will you marry me?"

He stared at her for a moment, searching her face for any sign of mockery, but it was just a knee-jerk reaction. He knew better; Granger wouldn't mock about something like that.

"I suppose someone has to," he said finally, and she relaxed against his chest. "But if Weasley tries to use our wedding as a high-profile opportunity to propose again, I really will have to hex him."

She laughed out loud, and he pulled her close, feeling very pleased with himself.

Epilogue

And so there we are, my friends. You have lit the Beltane fire, you have welcomed the god and the goddess, you have danced and loved and blessed your community. Does that mean a perfect harvest? Does it mean that you won't have any problems, drop your toast marmalade side up or not fear the darkness anymore? I should Coco.

Who can say what will happen? The earth is a fickle mother, and the god and goddess are like their counterparts all over the planet bloody minded and indifferent to our petty little life squabbles. You never know what they're going to do, and if you don't like it, hard cheese. So why do we do it? Why do we reenact this ritual every year, not knowing what results will follow?

We do it because the gods need us to love them in order to exist. And if they exist, so do we. It's that old circle within a circle within a circle. The Beltane ritual, any ritual, for that matter, reminds us that we don't have any control over the gods, and knowing that, we can face anything they throw at us. Blessed Be!

Epilogue: Surviving The Morning After and Beyond...The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane

~o0o~

"Never blame anyone in your life. The good people give you happiness. The bad people give you experience. The worst people give you a lesson. The best people give you memories."

~Anonymous

Everyone deserves someone who makes them look forward to tomorrow.

Magister Honeyclutch's yellow robes were almost too bright to look at, Minerva thought. They made her eyes water, but the man conducted an excellent handfasting. She looked on approvingly as he addressed the assembled staff, colleagues, house-elves, families and friends of Hermione Granger and Severus Snape, and beamed his jolly great smile.

The bride was resplendent in a light, diaphanous robe of coral, with flowers in her long honey-coloured hair. Her groom was in a severely tailored robe of darkest green, trimmed in sable fur. Matching velvet green buttons marched down the front of the robes from throat to ankle, and his long black hair gleamed half-way down his back like the sleek sable at his wrists.

The service was nearing an end, and Minerva noted approvingly that her staff were doing their part...as members of Severus' and Hermione's Coven, they had already been charged with providing support and care to the couple. Pomona and Hooch were standing close to one another, their own little support group.

Sentimental Hagrid and Poppy kept one another's hankies near, and Filius, dear Filius, stalwart as always, stood by her side. She thought back to their plans for Beltane, and smiled. It had been fun; strange, and dangerous, but fun. Typical Hogwarts, really.

And Severus and Hermione. All it had taken was a little quality time together. Well, that, and Hermione's steadfast belief that one could learn anything from a book. Honestly, who ever heard of a Beltane ritual that involved the High Priest and Priestess bathing and kissing one another in private?

Minerva smiled down at Filius. "Well done, Mr. Sebelius."

He grinned. "And you, Mr. Slunt."

As Cornelius wound the traditional silken cords around the clasped hands of the wedding couple, he said warmly, "And so my friends, as you go forth into your new lives as husband and wife, here a few things to remember:

"Love, but not as a need...as a sharing. Love, but don't expect...give. Love, but remember your love should not become an imprisonment for the other.

"Love, but be very careful; you are moving on sacred ground. You are going into the highest, the purest and holiest temple. Be alert! Drop all impurities outside the temple.

"Severus, never love Hermione as a mere woman. Hermione, never Severus as a mere man; if you do, your love is going to be very, very ordinary; your love is not going to soar very high.

But if you love one another as Cernunnos loved his Queen, then love becomes worship. Now, Severus, I hope you don't mind, but your hands are occupied and your lovely lady wife is tearin' up."

Everyone laughed, including Hermione, as Honeyclutch conjured a huge yellow silk handkerchief and blotted the tear that escaped down her cheek. "Sentimental Gryffindors," Severus muttered, but a blind man could have seen the affection and happiness in his harsh face. "Those better be tears of happiness."

Hermione sniffed, then murmured, "No offence, Magister, but if you don't hurry up and finish this, I'm going to go spare. We've spent two nights apart, and if I don't get my honeymoon shag soon, Severus will think I don't love him anymore."

It was worth it to see Severus' face flush that alarming shade of red. Instead of losing his rag, he merely shrugged with authentic Slytherin resignation. "You heard the witch, Magister. Please finish this Handfasting before my dear wife loses what little propriety she possesses and ravishes me in public."

"Certainly, friend Severus!" Honeyclutch exclaimed, hugging himself with joy. "Now, by the gods and goddess, I declare you joined on this day, to spend your lives in true lovin' harmony. Passion, fire, tenderness, joy, sorrow, loss and riches will ye bear, but if they be borne with love, you will be forever blessed. So mote it be!"

The guests shouted in agreement, "So mote it be!"

The Magister opened his arms, and exclaimed, "Friends, I give you Hermione and Severus Granger!"

The crowd cheered as the couple jumped over the broom, and later as the toasts were drunk and the congratulations meted, Hermione looked up to see Ron heading her way with a handsome man in tow. They were holding hands.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Granger!" he exclaimed, shaking Severus' hand. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard you were adopting Hermione's name, though. I don't think I'll ever break the habit of thinking of you as Snape."

"I shall consider the source, and tolerate it accordingly, Mr. Weasley," Severus replied dryly. He glanced at Hermione fondly. "We decided that perhaps Granger-Snape was too pretentious, and since I have never held any regard for my surname, Granger it is."

"No, it's good. It suits you," Ron answered, looking from one to the other. "I think you two make really good sense, in a scary sort of way." He turned to his companion. "Speaking of making sense, I'd like you to meet David Holdsworth, my partner. David, meet Hermione and Severus."

They shook hands with the dashing young man, and Hermione looked from him to Ron in affectionate amusement. "It's lovely to meet you, David. Now I don't have to avoid Ron at every major do anymore." She smiled at her old friend. "How's your mum?"

Ron grinned. "She took the news very well. Hell's she's just thrilled I'm settling down."

David added pleasantly, "She was very nice. Said I needed fattening up; she's been feeding me ever since I arrived at the Burrow."

While the two couples were talking, Harry and Ginny joined them. The sextet were chatting when suddenly they were accosted by a young woman in flashy robes of mind-bending orange. A riot of flouncing brunette curls all but overwhelmed her small head. "What a shot! The Golden Trio, plus spouses! Jules, try to get all of them in the photo!" she squealed, in a grating American accent. As the flash powder burst in their faces, the young woman stuck her hand out to no one in particular and announced confidently, "Hi! I'm Veronica Moniker, reporter for the *Daily Prophet!*"

She gave them all a smarmy little shrug, squinting her eyes in what was supposed to be friendly confidentiality. "Who da thunk it? My first assignment for the *Prophet*, and it's the wedding of the year! Now, friends, what do we think of...oh, **MERLIN'S BALLBAG!**"

With a wild look in her eye, she drew her wand and aimed directly for Severus' shoulder. "Take that, you little bastard!"

Everyone dove for the ground, as she sent a zapping spell into the air. "Damn! Missed again!" She narrowly missed clipping Ron's ear as she sent another zapper into the air.

"What the...are you mental?" Ron barked.

"No! I'm trying to get that damn bug! Hold still, you little pest!"

"What is the meaning of this?" Severus roared, placing himself between the lunatic and Hermione. "How dare you show up here and attack us? I'll have you arrested, you idiot woman!"

Veronica Moniker straightened and re-ordered her mop of curls. She seemed incredibly unfazed by Severus' threat, especially in light of her previous behaviour. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Granger, but I swear, I would never have come to England if I'd known it was so infested with beetles. They're everywhere, and they give me the heebie jeebies!"

She rolled her eyes as she tossed her hair for emphasis. "I was promised the nicest office at the *Prophet*, and they've had the exterminators in twice. They still can't get rid of them! I swear I hear them buzzing around my head in my sleep!" Suddenly, she brightened. "Oh, there's the Minister of Magic. I've been dying to introduce myself." She took off after Kingsley Shacklebolt at a run, waving at them over her shoulder. "Excuse me, folks. Oh, by the way, Congratulations. We'll talk soon!" She blew a kiss to the entire group, then dashed away in earnest, her long-suffering photographer Jules in tow.

The six of them looked at one another in bafflement. "So that's Rita Skeeter's replacement. Well, it looks like the *Daily Prophet* has really upped their game," Ginny said breezily, rolling her eyes.

"She was rather... excitable," Harry muttered. "I never actually saw what she was firing at, to be honest."

"Neither did I," Severus added. They looked at one another with dawning apprehension.

"You don't think...?" Ron asked, uneasily.

"Nah, couldn't be," Harry said quickly, glancing around. "There's no escaping Azkaban. Besides, where could she go?"

"Good point," Severus agreed.

The silence stretched. "Perhaps an insect-repelling charm wouldn't go amiss," said Hermione.

"I'll contact Azkaban," Harry said bleakly.

Now our time together is at an end. And ere ye depart to your pleasant and lovely realms, we do thank you for attending our rites. Until we meet in this circle again, we bid you hail and farewell...

Hail and farewell.

A Glossary of Terms Used in The Witchhiker's Guide to Beltane, as compiled by Sebelius Slunt

Altar - An area or surface built or designed exclusively for magickal or religious workings and ritual.

Amulet - A natural object, often of stone or fossil used as a protection device to the holder.

Athame - (AH-tha-may) The ritual knife often associated with the element of air and the direction of east, though some traditions attribute it to fire and the south. The handle is traditionally black or of natural wood.

Balefire - A synonymous word of 'Bonfire', a balefire is a communal bonfire of the sabbats, most notably used at Beltane, Litha and Lughnassadh.

Bane - A negative force or energy. Another word for bad, negative, or in opposition.

Banish - The removal of negative energy or force. To rid the presence of unwanted entities.

Bealtaine - (Bee-Al-tin-aye) The old Irish word for 'Beltain'.

Beltain - (Bell-tain) A grand sabbat also known as Walpurgis night, May eve, Roodmas, celebrates the symbolic union and mating of the goddess and the god. Often celebrated April 30 or May 1, the true occurrence is more often May 5-7th. A time of fertility and growth. A very important day to most Pagan paths.

Besom - (Beh-som) A witch's broom used to sweep a sacred area and in effect, purify the sacred space. Legend comes from early fertility rites where besoms were 'ridden' over crops to enhance the coming bounty.

Bind - Restraining one's self or someone, using magick.

Bolline - (Bowl-in) A curved knife, often white hilted, used for the magickal gathering of herbs and other natural reagents. Whereas the athame is a religious knife, the bolline is its practical working sister.

Cauldron - Often replaced by the cup or chalice in ritual, this tool is used for making brews or magickal potions. It symbolizes the womb of the Goddess.

Chalice - A ritual tool used in libation, this feminine principle tool represents the element water and the west.

Chakra - One of the seven major energy centers in the human body. These are at the third eye, head, throat, chest, navel, abdomen and groin.

Circle - Sacred space where all magickal rituals and workings are performed. The circle not only protects the practitioner from outside energies but contains the working energies within.

Consecration - Blessing an object (usually a ritual tool) to purify it and empowering it with positive energy.

Coven - (Kuhv-en) A group of witches who work and rite together utilizing the greater empowerment of the sum of its members, as opposed to the power of those members added individually. Containing both male and female members, traditionally a coven has 13 members but may contain any number of members.

Dedication - The acceptance of the craft (of any way), as one's path and religion, followed by intense study to gain the necessary knowledge and preparation to be adept at this tradition.

Deosil - (Jesh-il) The working act usually in ritual or song of moving or dancing in a clockwise motion. This is used for positive works and is also known as "Sunwise".

Dowsing - A divination method using a pendulum or stick to answer questions similar to the popular "Ouija" board. Some forms of this include water finding where a dowser uses a forked stick or the like to find water underground.

Drawing down the moon - Used primarily during an esbat to draw down the powers of the moon into a female witch. Very powerful when a sabbat and esbat conjunct.

Drawing down the sun - Used to draw down the powers of the sun into a wizard. Very powerful on the Equinoxes and Solstices.

Element - The primary elements are earth, air, fire, water and spirit. Each of these 5 represents a point on

the pentagram. The elements and their directions are extremely important in Pagan ritual.

Esbat - (Es-bat) From the french word *esbattre*, meaning to frolic, the esbat is the powerful ritual time of the full moon. There are 13 esbats in a year, all known by moon names.

Evocation - The act of summoning the presence of spirits, dieties or elementals to your sacred space.

God - The aspect of a masculine deity.

Goddess - The aspect of a feminine deity.

Handfasting - A Pagan or Wiccan marriage ceremony which traditionally takes place at a specified period of time depending on one's tradition.

Initiation - The transformation of one's ideals and values into the ideals and values of a particular path. Please note one can be in dedication but is not yet initiated whilst an initiated is always in dedication.

Invocation - The drawing of an aspect of a deity into one's self using magickal ritual.

Mabon - (May-bun) The Pagan Thanksgiving, or second harvest. Mabon falls on the autumnal equinox, when the light of the year shifts toward darkness. It is a traditional time for feasting.

Magick - Aleister Crowley said it best: "Magick is the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity to will."

Pagan - (Pay-gun) One who follows or practices an earth-based or nature religion.

Pagan Rede - Summed up as "An ye harm none, do what thou will".

Ritual - A mental ceremony using a prescribed set of rites and tools to perform magickal acts or workings.

Sabbat - (Sabb-at) One of the days of Power. These are comprised of the eight solar festivals that celebrate the wheel of the year.

Skyclad - Nudity in ritual is said to be done "skyclad".

Spell - A specific ritual designed to change one condition or thing. Also known as spinning, weaving, casting and spellcraft.

Talisman - An object empowered to protect its wearer. Note this differs from the amulet as it is empowered, not naturally protective as is the amulet.

Triple Goddess - The 3 aspects of the mother goddess in one, maiden, mother and crone. A symbol widely found throughout the civilized world. The representation of the triple goddess is the waxing, full and waning moon.

Wheel of the Year - The never ending seasonal shift throughout the 8 sabbats or days of power. In Pagan mythos, the goddess turns the wheel bringing everything to season.

Widdershins - (Widd-er-shins) The working act usually in ritual or song of moving or dancing in a counter-clockwise motion. This is used for banishing or negative works. This is the opposite of deosil.

Witch - A general word for Pagans worldwide although traditionally those of Anglo-Celtic, Celtic or Teutonic traditions.