

Coerced Salvation

by Southern_Cocoa

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This is a collaboration between Southern Witch 69 and CocoaChristy.

Chaper 1

Chapter 1 of 11

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A/N: This is a collaboration between Southern_Witch_69 and CocoaChristy. We've decided to try something a bit new by working together, and I can't convey how fun and easy it is to write together.

Thanks go to NotSoSaintly for taking a moment to beta read this!



"Severusss," the Dark Lord said, placing a hand on his shoulder briefly, "you have done well. I didn't think that the Malfoy boy would be able to go through with it." He glared at everyone present, eyes settling on Narcissa, who was kneeling at Snape's feet. "Some of you should have a lesson in what it means to bear my Mark. Some of you," he looked at Draco, "are just not worthy and lack conviction."

"My... my Lord," Draco began, "I didn't mean to fai..."

"Silence, boy," came the reply.

"My Lord!" Bellatrix said suddenly, coming forward. "If I might speak for my sister...?"

"Very well," he said, flat nose flaring momentarily before he moved to sit back on his throne-like chair.

"She has always been loyal to us and our cause. Her only fault is that she loves her son. I cannot understand a mother's love, but I wish that I had a son to give to you in service. My many years at Azkaban took that chance away from me." She stood next to Snape. "If we did have a child, Rodolphus and I would have taught him right. Lucius, he was too worried about putting up a public front when you first were lost to us. He didn't do right by raising his boy in the way..."

"Don't you dare speak that way about my husband," Narcissa interrupted. "He is a good father and a loyal Death Eater!"

"Cissy, he taught your son to be weak, to not follow through with orders... Master's words are law." She sighed. "It's the Dark Lord first and then the family. You know this."

Narcissa looked up at the Dark Lord. "I didn't try to stop him. I just wanted him to have a little help. I wanted your will to be done and am glad that it has been."

"Costing me the closest spy that I had in the process," he said coldly. "I thought that if the boy succeeded, then it would be easy enough to have Severus guide Potter to me. That will not be possible now that he's wanted by the Ministry for doing your son's task."

"Forgive me. I did not think. I only went to Severus as I thought Lucius..."

"Luciuss," the Dark Lord hissed, "has been disappointing me for months now. I can see the truth in your eyes, Narcissa Malfoy. You do want my will to be done. You simply didn't have faith in your child to follow through. I believe that is because you know that Lucius has not done right by his son, showing him how to be strong and follow commands."

"But, Master, I..."

"Enough," he said quietly. He looked to Bellatrix. "Your sister's life will be spared, but I want it known to all of you that the next time someone attempts to interfere with my plans, I shall not be so lenient."

"What of Draco?" Narcissa asked immediately, tears still lining her cheeks, worry lacing her voice.

"He may be of some use yet."

"Thank you, my Lord," she replied, bowing her head.

"You've not yet heard *your* punishment," he said, clearly enjoying her startled expression. "I have plans for you." He looked at Snape. "Severuss, she will be staying with you. I shall speak with you alone after the meeting to explain the details in full."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said, nodding his assent. "Am I to return to my home or stay here?"

"I have another place in mind. Later. First, we must decide what to do now that Dumbledore is gone." He pointed to Narcissa. "Bellatrix, take Narcissa and the boy out of here. They are no longer privy to our information. Come back once you've safely locked them into my chambers."

Narcissa began to pace as soon as they entered the Dark Lord's chambers. Turning to her sister, she asked, "What do you think he will do, Bella?"

Bellatrix glared at her sister. "I told you from the beginning this was a bad idea. I knew our Lord would be displeased, especially now that your son, not to mention your husband, has disgraced your family. You should have never gone behind his back that way, Cissy."

Narcissa rounded on her sister so fast that Bellatrix nearly stumbled. "How dare you? *You* are not a parent! You have no idea what it's like to fear for your child's life, and you would presume to tell me how to care for mine when I do?"

"I know I would never go against our Lord! Think, Narcissa! First, Lucius displeases him, then Draco, and after all of that, he finds out you went behind his back. Your whole family has fallen in ill favor with him. This does not bode well for the Malfoys. You are lucky that I spoke for you and that I alone was able to get him to spare your life."

Narcissa went pale. "I know... I just... Bella, Draco is my son. I couldn't leave what needed to be done up to chance. Don't you see that? Draco would never have had the strength to follow through. He's a good boy."

Bella snorted. "You and Lucius have raised a weakling...a coward! You have been too soft, Cissy, and now you will pay the price. I just hope that..."

"I am right here! Stop speaking of me as if I wasn't!" Draco was getting tired of their talking. He was nervous enough as it was.

"You will mind your tone, boy! You have gotten your family into enough trouble as it is, and now your mother will have to pay the price for your insolence. If it were up to me..."

"Well, it's not up to you, is it, Aunt? Maybe you need to worry about your own family and keep your nose out of ours!"

"Draco!" Narcissa was appalled. "What is wrong with you? Bella is only trying to help."

"No, she is taking satisfaction in the fact that you have fallen in ill favor. I think she hopes this will place her family above ours in the Dark Lord's eyes."

Raising her eyebrow, Bellatrix told her nephew, "At the moment, that is not such a feat. I would bet that even lowly Wormtail is above your family. Draco, if you intend to survive, you are going to have to toughen up. It's not only your life on the line, but also the lives of your parents. You have no idea how unforgiving our Lord can be when he is highly displeased."

Draco started chewing his thumbnail, looking from his aunt to his mother. Suddenly, he broke down. "I am so sorry, Mother! I didn't mean for this to happen. It's just that when I was face to face with Dumbledore..."

"Ssh, Draco, it's all right." His mother soothed as she gently rubbed his cheek. "I am just happy that you are going to be spared." Turning away from Draco, she told her sister, "Oh, how I wish Lucius were here." Sighing, Narcissa sat on the bed in defeat, leaning forward and placing her face in her hands. "I just wish I knew what my punishment is going to be!"

Suddenly the door burst open, and a smug looking Wormtail entered the room. "Anxious for your sentencing, are you? Well, indeed you should be, Narcissa. I don't think you are going to like this at all!" he said, snickering at her expense. "No, not at all."

"What do you mean?" Bella asked, striding forward. "Speak! Have they started without me?"

"You should hurry back. He's started and sent me to keep watch over them." Wormtail's beady eyes glanced over to the Malfoys.

"I don't think so. Get out," Bella said, pushing him back out of the door. "I shall return, Cissy."

Once she closed the door, she warded it with her wand. "And don't think you can push my sister around, rat, or I'll do terrible things to you."

As the door unlocked and opened, Cissy left Draco's sleeping form and made her way over to Severus, who'd entered.

"Where's Bella?" she asked, looking behind him, twisting her hands.

"Gone. All have been dismissed for now. There are some plans that need to be set in motion."

"Severus, what's wrong?" she asked worriedly, noting how dismayed he seemed.

"I've been given orders to see through your punishment," he said quietly, nodding towards the fire. "Come. I'm to explain the terms to you and await your decision."

She didn't like the slumping of his shoulders. The normally proud Severus that she knew would never hold himself in such a manner. He waited for her to be seated and took the seat across from her.

"Well? What is it?" she asked after a long silence.

"He has ordered me to brew a couple of potions."

"All right." That didn't sound so bad.

"I'm to administer them to you once ready."

"Oh." Well, that wasn't too terrible. "What sort of potions?"

"Fertility and ovulation."

"Well, what in the world...? Lucius is in Azkaban. What does he mean for me to do? Slip in to visit him?" she asked incredulously. "I was told that even with potions my body wouldn't bear another child. When I had Draco, my womb..."

"Lucius lied to you. He had his heir and wanted no other children." He smirked and glanced at her bosom before lowering his eyes to the curve of her hips. "Your body is quite capable of bearing more children."

Narcissa sank back into the chair. "Severus, no, he wouldn't do that. He told me that he wanted many children. It was one of the stipulations of our contract. He was deeply disappointed that... Really, I... I would have adopted, but he said he wouldn't have someone not of the Malfoy bloodline being raised with Draco." She shook her head in disbelief.

"I don't care if you believe me or not, Narcissa, but this is the Dark Lord's will. It shall be done or you will suffer the consequences."

"Does he mean to break Lucius out?"

"Indeed."

"W-when?" This was news to her. While she was eager to see her husband again, she feared he'd be disappointed that she'd gone to Severus for help with Draco's task, dishonoring them and angering their Lord. However, she'd always wanted another child. And if he had lied to her just to finagle his way out of fathering more, this could be worked to her advantage. He couldn't refuse if his Master ordered it. So, ultimately, this was not a punishment. Not really.

"We are uncertain."

"All right."

"Tonight, you and I will leave here. You will come to stay with me in an undisclosed location, known only to our Lord. I will begin brewing the potions." He cocked his head to the side, lost in thought for a moment. "Yes, it should take maybe a week. The moon's in the right phase. After that, I'll start administering them to you."

"Well, shouldn't I wait to take them until Lucius is released?" she asked curiously.

"You misunderstand," Severus said, gazing directly into her eyes. "Part of your punishment and Lucius' is to have your child sired by one whom our Lord feels is worthy."

"Sorry?"

"He wants you to bear another child as punishment and have to watch as it is raised the correct way. Not Lucius' way. Lucius' punishment will be that his wife has birthed another man's...I should say, a more worthy follower's...child." His gaze moved over towards the chaise that young Draco slept on. "Your son's punishment is to see his mother used in such a fashion, to bear his father's anger, and to see another child rise up and take his or her place in the circle in the manner that he should have."

"I won't do it."

"There's always a choice, Narcissa. You know that you don't have to do this."

"What is the other stipulation?"

"Death, I'm afraid."

"Oh, my God," she said, gasping and holding her hand against her mouth. She had two choices: consent to birthing a child with someone other than her husband or death. How was that fair? She'd not done anything wrong. Yes, she was looking out for Draco first and the Dark Lord's plans second, but she knew that Severus would come through. "Did my sister approve of this?"

"It was unanimous."

"But did she not speak up for me?"

"She was only interested in gaining your life, and that's been achieved."

"What sort of life is this to be? There's no guarantee that Lucius will approve, and he might harm the child!"

"Not if he doesn't want to suffer our Lord's wrath," he said, irritation building in his voice. "Our Lord feels that with Dumbledore gone, victory will be ours for sure." He cleared his throat. "All male Death Eaters have been requested to help build a larger following... loyal members that we know we can trust. It will take time, but the Dark Lord feels that in another twenty years, we'll be stronger than ever."

"You mean everyone has been ordered to bear children?"

A light of amusement lit Snape's eyes. "The males will have to impregnate their wives of course."

Narcissa waved away his sarcastic remark. "I mean to say... Bella?"

"Every female Death Eater, every wife of a Death Eater, every girlfriend of a Death Eater, and those of us who have no one readily available have been ordered to find someone and make them be available. Well, everyone except Lucius, that is. The Dark Lord feels that any heir of his may not be worthy."

"Oh, dear God," she said, paling slightly. "All of this is because of me, isn't it?"

"I'm sure this situation gave him the resolve to enforce it, but it's been on his mind for a while. Who better to trust than family? Than followers who come from us and were taught by us?" He leaned forward. "It is time to stop stalling, my dear. What is your decision, Narcissa?"

She blinked. Would he kill her instantly if she declined? Was that why their Lord had sent Severus, her longtime family friend? "Who has he picked, Severus? What man does he want me to... to couple with?" She cringed as she thought of her choices.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "He's delegated this task unto me."

Narcissa nodded, realizing it was true. Who else would be asked? Severus was the favorite. Severus was most trusted. Severus was most worthy. After all, Severus killed the only man the Dark Lord ever feared with a flick of his wand. And Severus was Lucius' closest friend. It would hurt Lucius the most if Severus took her.

"I don't want to die, Severus," she said, voice pleading.

He extended a hand, which she took. "Then you must agree to this, Narcissa. Live to fight another day." In an attempt to reassure her, he gave her what could be considered a small smile, though it faltered. "You will gain a child if nothing else."

She looked over to her son's sleeping form. "But will I lose another? What will Draco think of me? I love him, Severus. I couldn't bear it if he thought ill of me." Tears filled her eyes. "Lucius will not want me any longer. He might kill me. I don't suppose the Dark Lord cares."

"Lucius needs you more than you realize, and if he doesn't..." His words trailed away, and he shrugged.

Narcissa swallowed thickly and said, "Tell him that I will accept his orders."

Her hand was released, and he quickly strode out of the room. The complexity of the situation was too much for her. Lucius had lied. Everyone knew. She felt like a fool. Now, she would be forced to have...*Oh, dear God!*...sex with Severus to have a child. Her world was falling apart, and she was uncertain if she could handle it. She fainted the moment she stood on shaky legs.

Draco, who had not truly been sleeping, quickly went to her and placed her back into her chair. He'd find a way to fix things. There was no way that he'd allow his mother to be treated like some whore! The Dark Lord would pay! So would anyone else who stood in his way!

Draco was sitting in the room assigned to him in the home that the Dark Lord inhabited, plotting his mother's escape. He was forced to remain behind while she'd gone off to some undisclosed location with Snape. No way would he let her be used that way! She was a *Malfoy* and above such degradation. If only he'd done what he'd been ordered to do... But he just couldn't go through with it when he'd been face to face with the headmaster. Dumbledore, he'd truly wanted to help, and he would never have threatened to kill someone's family just to force them to do his bidding.

Snape, Draco thought the name bitterly. No doubt starting the brewing of the potions as soon as they arrived at their little cottage. Can't wait to do the Dark Lord's bidding and shag my mother, can he, the bastard? When my father gets out, he will deal with Snape...Malfoy style.

Thinking of his father gave him mixed emotions. *Did he really lie to mother? Why would he deny her other children? It's not as if having more would have inconvenienced him in any way. No matter...he must have had his reasons, even if he did break mother's heart. He undoubtedly did it for her own good. He loves her... I know he does!*

Suddenly, Draco grabbed a crystal vase and hurled it against the wall, feeling impotent fury. He wondered what Snape meant when he'd told his mother that the Dark Lord said that she would have to 'watch' as the child is raised the correct way. Did that mean that she would have no say in the bastard's upbringing? Draco sighed in defeat. He knew that would kill his mother. She'd always longed for other children...for him to have a brother or sister.

Immediately, a thought occurred to him. *This child will be my half brother or sister. Certainly not a Malfoy...but of my blood nonetheless. Who will raise it? The Dark Lord? Or will he leave that task to Snape? Surely they aren't suited to raise a Black heir?*

Wearily, Draco lay down on the bed, fully clothed and clasped his hands behind his head. He had heard his mother telling Snape that his father wouldn't want her anymore when all was done. Well, she was right about that...he probably wouldn't, he does have his pride, but what would he *do* to her? Draco secretly hoped that the Dark Lord would forbid him to take any action against her. It was bad enough that she'd have to endure being Snape's whore and birthing a bastard, who she may or may not have a hand in raising.

If only he knew where they were, he could better formulate a plan of escape. He knew that his family had land in France that no one knew about...supposedly Unplottable even to the Dark Lord. Perhaps he could find a Secret Keeper just in case, and they could go there. But who to trust? Was there anyone? Nobody, he had to admit. Not for something this important.

Turning on his side, he closed his eyes and willed sleep to come. According to Snape, the potions would take a week to brew. That gave Draco one week to formulate a plan...find their location, snatch his mother, and go off to France or any place safe. He idly wondered if Potter would help them. "Not bloody likely," he murmured to himself.

Southern's Notes: Ah, poor Narcissa. Christy and I were sucked into the Narcissa and Snape world thanks to an RPG community that we used to play in. The person playing her character was simply magnificent. Don't worry. This will definitely be HG/SS before too long.

Christy's Notes: Well, it seems that Narcissa has once again gotten Severus caught in the middle. Doesn't look like Draco appreciates it! What will Lucius do?

Chapter 2

Hermione and the others get together again. Snape and Narcissa plan their "encounter" while Draco plots on ways to escape.

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A/N: I just want to remind everyone that this will be an SS/HG story before long. We have just a few kinks to work out first (SS/NM and HG/RW). So bear with us. Hope you enjoy!

Thanks go to NotSoSaintly for taking a moment to beta read this!

Hermione sat in the living room, gazing out the window, watching for Harry and Ron, who were supposed to come for her. The owl had said that they'd most likely bring Remus and Tonks as well. She had only been home two days and was leaving again to go to headquarters.

Her parents had been very upset that she was leaving so soon after returning home. She'd told them as much as she could, but left out many details about the Horcrux and most of the horrible things that Voldemort had been doing. If she had told them the whole story, then she would have tried to force her to wait until after her eighteenth birthday in September to leave, and she wanted to go on the best terms as possible. She sighed and laid her head against the window. She really couldn't wait to see Harry and especially Ron. During Dumbledore's funeral and on the way home on the Hogwarts Express, he'd been a good comfort, holding her close and protectively.

Fighting with her parents had left her emotionally exhausted. They knew something more was going on, they just didn't know exactly what. Her father had threatened to keep her home, but thankfully, her mother had intervened. "John," her mother had said, "we can't keep her here under lock and key. And if she is going, I would much rather know where and who with than have her try to sneak out of the house and go."

Apparently her mother knew her very well, for that was exactly what she would have done. Her father had tried to disagree, but Hermione had blurted out that she had been of age in the Wizarding world for many months and could just Disapparate away without their permission, leaving them without the ability to force her home or even find her. His words kept replaying over in her mind. "So, we send you to this school, and all they've done is taught you how to be rid of us... less worthy folks who can't wield a wand." They'd all cried then, knowing things would never be the same again.

With promises to owl whenever possible, her parents reluctantly agreed to her going to spend the summer with the Weasleys. She just didn't tell them it would be spent wherever they chose to be...headquarters, the Burrow, Hogwarts, or out on the road. They were uncertain where their adventure would take them. She certainly didn't let on that she might not even be returning to school that fall. She would deal with that when the time came.

Harry had to go spend the previous night with the Dursleys. They hadn't even gone to get him at King's Cross when the train had brought the students back. He'd left with the Weasleys, spending one night with them before Mr. Weasley escorted him to their home, demanding that he be allowed to stay his one night... or else. Harry had sent instructions with Hedwig for her to be ready, as he and his escort would swing by to pick her up on the way. She was grateful for that. After the argument with her folks, tension was running high in the Granger household.

Suddenly, she saw a slight flicker in the sky. "Mum! Dad! They're coming!"

Her parents came into the living room to see their daughter off. "Did you pack everything, sweetheart?" Jane asked sadly.

"Yes, Mum." Hermione leaned into the hug her mother offered. Turning to her dad, she said, "I love you, Daddy. Please understand that I have to help my friends."

Sighing, John squeezed his daughter tightly. "I love you, too, poppet. Be safe and owl us when you have a minute."

Sniffing, she told her mother, "I love you. I will owl! I promise."

A knock sounded on the door, breaking them away from their hug. Hermione ran to it, looked through the peephole, and opened the door. As soon as she saw Ron, she flung herself into his arms. "Ron! I've missed you!"

Blushing to the tips of his ears, he said, "Bloody hell, Hermione, it's only been a couple of days!" Secretly, he was pleased.

Harry cleared his throat behind them. "Oi, I'm here, too!"

Blushing, Hermione turned to Harry, hugging him. "It's good to see you, Harry!" Looking behind the boys, she greeted the two escorts. "Tonks, Remus! Hello!"

Chuckling, Remus asked, "Are you ready? Do you have your things?"

"Yes, just there," she said and pointed to her trunk.

Remus shrunk it and placed it in his pocket. With a nod of acknowledgement to the Grangers, he said, "We'll just wait out here while you say your goodbyes."

After another tearful goodbye, Hermione walked outside to see them all standing about, holding brooms. She winced.

Harry teased, "I don't suppose you want to ride with me?"

"Um, I don't want to ride at all, but I think I will ride with Ron." She grinned. "He's a bit less keen to do anything daring."

"What's that supposed to mean? I can do most of the same..."

"Oh, honestly," she said, moving behind him. He opened his mouth to speak but quickly shut it as her arms slid around him from behind.

"Er... yeah," he said, trying to sound steady, "I won't do anything dodgy with you on here, though I could, mind."

She giggled and leaned closer, enjoying the feel of his warm body against hers. She closed her eyes and counted to ten *Flying's not so bad. I'm just a bit shaky with it, is all. Ron knows what he's doing.*

After Remus Disillusioned them, Ron kicked off the ground steadily, following Harry's lead, and headed for headquarters. Hermione vaguely wondered if Bill and Fleur were still planning on getting married, what with his run in with Greyback, and if so, where would the wedding be? *Where would her family stay, the Delacours? Surely not everyone could fit at the Burrow easily.*

Her stomach lurched as Ron took a swift turn to the right, causing them to lean over some. "Oh!" She tightened her hold on him, clutching his robes in her fists.

"Sorry," he said, big grin on his face.

For reasons unknown to her, she leaned forward and pressed a kiss on his pale neck, enjoying the way his flesh immediately reddened. As he dipped lower, flying towards the ground, she closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his shoulder.

Narcissa stood against the railing on the back veranda with her arms crossed to ward herself against the cool evening breeze. She had no idea where they were, but the view was spectacular. There were mountains in the distance, clouds hovering close to their peaks. She looked down at the ground many feet below her, wondering how high up they were. It seemed that part of the cottage was built to hang over part of a quick moving, clear river. The bank below was quite rocky and would not bode well for anyone trying to jump.

Not that she would.

Her punishment, while extreme, could have been much worse. She could have been forced to watch Draco's torture or demise. She could have been tortured. A shiver passed through her body. She'd never been able to take much pain. Her labor with Draco had been quite hard on her, and for that reason alone, she'd bought the lies that Lucius had told her about her inability to bear any more children. She'd tried to talk to him about adopting some quaint little orphan, but he wouldn't have it.

The prospect of feeling life growing within her again was welcome, but she hated that it would be Severus' child...not that she had anything against him. It's just that she loved Lucius. He was a good husband, always faithful, a good father to Draco, always showing him how a gentleman of pride should act in public, and he'd always protected them when he could. Part of her felt bitter.

You just had to land yourself in Azkaban, she thought sadly. I didn't know what to do, really. I thought I was doing right. Maybe I should have just taken Draco and fled, but it would have been much worse for us if we had done that and the Dark Lord had found us.

She'd been at their current location with Severus for four days. He'd not once tried to touch her or do anything inappropriate. In fact, he seemed to like to keep to himself...only joining her for meals or for an evening drink before they parted for the night. He'd always been good to her family, and it made her happy to know that the only reason he was going through with this is because he had to. Many people would never know it, but Severus was a kind man beneath that brooding façade. Or at least that was how she saw him.

He was always readily helping Lucius with anything he needed...potions and other darker things. Why, he'd even helped to ward and construct the manor's hidden dungeon. The Ministry had never been able to find anything in all their searches, the daft bastards.

"Narcissa?"

She turned around and smiled. "Yes?"

"Dinner is ready. Would you like to come in?" he asked, voice silky and even.

"Of course," she replied, taking a deep breath. "Isn't it just beautiful here?"

He looked around and shrugged.

Men! They never did appreciate the beauty of nature, did they? No, they more or less enjoyed the beauty of power, money, and a woman's body. Shaking her head, she said, "Just like Lucius, aren't you? Never see true beauty even with your eyes wide open!"

"I see true beauty," he said, gazing at her, dark eyes meeting her blue pair, "when it is before me."

She felt suddenly flustered. Was he flirting with her? Swallowing, she asked, "Indeed?"

"Indeed." He offered her his arm, which she took, led her inside to their small dining table, and held out her chair for her.

"Oh, the elf's gone all out tonight, hasn't he?"

"I suppose." He sat down a little roughly, scowling, and filled their goblets with wine.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, wondering why he was acting so strangely.

"Narcissa, the potion, it's nearly complete. I suppose I am just trying to prepare myself for... the inevitable."

"Oh," she said, taking a deep drink from her goblet. She felt her heartbeat speed up and her body flush.

"I know that you don't really want to do this, and I hope you understand that I would never put you in this position if I didn't have to." His voice was calm, but she could see his fingers tightly clutching the napkin beside his plate.

"I sense there is more that you want to say," she said more calmly than she felt.

He nodded. "I've been thinking that we could do this without actually having intercourse..."

"Is there a way?" she interrupted hopefully.

"Yes, but after reading through this book," he nodded to a thin hard-covered book to their left, "I've found that even with magic, it's not always successful." He paused. When she said nothing, he said, "I don't want to fail. Our best chance is to proceed normally."

Narcissa looked down and nodded. She felt as if her last thread of hope had vanished. She would have to go through with this *So much for thinking this to not truly be a form of punishment*, she thought sadly.

"Severus, don't sound so guilty. This wasn't your doing."

"But I've found that I *do* want you..."

Upon hearing this soft confession, her head sprung up quickly to gauge his sincerity. He was a master of deception when he needed to be. Was he simply trying to put her at ease? Did he truly harbor some feelings for her? It would explain why he was acting differently...fighting feelings of guilt over wanting something that shouldn't be his and taking advantage of the situation. She should be honored. For as long as she could remember, Severus never seemed to agonize about much. She frowned slightly. She didn't know if his admission made things easier to accept or not.

As if reading her mind, he said, "I know the sentiment is not reciprocated, nor do I ask it to be. I simply want you to know that I will do what I can to ease your discomfort while I find my pleasure and consummate our task." He looked down at his plate and began nudging his food with his fork, obviously trying to think of anything other than what he'd just told her.

A rush of affection flooded her. She suddenly felt as if the situation was much more bearable. It wouldn't be some fellow throwing her down and taking her without worry for her feelings. It would be Severus, who would be gentle and craved to have her. Had he not had a woman in so long that he would desire his best friend's wife? It felt good to be wanted. Every woman felt that way. And she'd been so lonely since that Potter brat had helped to send Lucius to Azkaban. While she would never have openly sought him out, she supposed that if she had to be with another, then Severus should be him. When she went to him the previous year to ask for his help, she'd known that he could have very well said that he'd help if she'd have sex with him, paid him, or any number of things. She'd been prepared to agree then, no matter the request, but he hadn't even had those thoughts. He'd simply agreed to help, as any good man would do.

"You're a good friend to me, Severus," she said quietly, adding, "and to Lucius." She saw him pause while chewing. "I do not mean to hurt you by saying that. You should

know that he would do the same for you if the situation would be reversed." She took a sip of her wine. "I do feel nervous about all of this." She smiled shakily. "Quite nervous in fact."

"Perhaps we'll open a bottle of whisky," he said, looking up with a light smirk on his face. "Maybe that would help settle your nerves a bit."

She nodded. "I really think so. We'd definitely both be more comfortable." Feeling much more at ease, she began eating as well, making light conversation with him during dinner as if his admission had never been spoken. Once they were through and went to sit before the fire, she asked, "Why did you never marry, Severus?"

"I suppose no one has ever appealed to me."

An egotistical part of her wanted to ask if he'd been harboring feelings for her and if that had anything to do with it, but she remained silent. His expression softened as he lost himself in thought, and it made her wonder if there was someone else that he harbored feelings for.

"Ever appealed to you? You jest. Surely there was someone."

"Once," he said quietly.

"What happened?"

"She died."

"Oh," she said with a slight gasp, "Severus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry." Ego deflating, she asked, "May I ask whom?"

He was silent for a long moment before finally saying, "I don't think that's something that I wish to discuss." His expression hardened, and he rose to go look out of the window.

"I apologize." She felt a pang of guilt for her questioning, and she felt quite horrible to have even thought that *he* might have been the reason he'd remained unmarried.

"It's all right," he said. "That was long ago." He spun around. "I think I shall retire for the evening."

"Wait," Narcissa said quickly, rising and moving to him. She put a hand on his cheek only to have him flinch slightly. "There will be someone for you, Severus. After this passes," she gestured between them, "and the Dark Lord is victorious, you'll be able to settle down finally."

For an instant, it felt as if he leaned into her palm, but then he backed away. "Good evening."

She watched as he retreated through the door that hid his bedroom and closed it with a snap. *Poor Severus*, she thought, pitying her friend. *He's never had it easy, has he? Mother killing his father and then being sent to Azkaban! The only woman he cared for died, leaving him to pine after her for all his days.* She shook her head sadly. If she could give him solace for at least one night, she would do so.

"This is Lucius' fault," she said aloud, easing her guilt. "If he hadn't..." Tears began flowing down her cheeks slowly. Her vows had always been sacred to her. She'd been a good wife, always doing her husband's bidding and being the perfect woman. She'd been a good mother, always caring for her son, sending him sweets and trying to protect him. Stiffening her spine, she went to the doorway that led to her own bedroom. She would do what she must to survive. She would make certain that her son... and the child that she would soon be carrying would survive this war. If Lucius couldn't understand that, then so be it. She could always point out that he would never disobey the Dark Lord's commands, so how could he expect her to?

Draco was sitting in his desk chair chewing the end of a quill. Four days had passed, and he was still no closer to figuring out how to help his mother than he had been on the first day he'd arrived. *How bad is she suffering? How many times has that bastard and supposed friend to my father, Snape, had his hands on my mother?* Those thoughts made him nauseated.

Draco growled, flung the quill on the desk, and walked to the window. "There has got to be something I can do! Damn it all to hell and back!" When the door opened, Draco visibly calmed himself and turned to see who had entered, hoping that it wasn't the Dark Lord. He'd been lucky enough to avoid him during most of his stay, but for those minutes that he was in the man's presence, he felt as if his mind was being probed, no matter how much he tried to hide his thoughts. He had nothing to hide. Not really. But it didn't sit well with him that his personal thoughts and memories could be snatched. What if he used something in there against him? Maybe he'd try to harm Pansy just to make him suffer. That's how he worked, the Dark Lord. He used his followers, threatening and forcing them to do his bidding.

"Talking to yourself again, Little Malfoy?" Wormtail snickered. "Wondering what delights Severus is taking from your mum, are you? Well, you can be sure that if it were me..."

"Shut your mouth, you filthy vermin! If it were you, she'd kill herself!" He curled his lip in disgust and looked the man up and down. "Now, what do you want?" he asked in his most condescending voice, tired of the tosser's continued interruptions.

"Nothing, nothing at all, just wanted to play with the Little Malfoy!" He licked his roughly chapped lips. "You know, I could help you. I could make things pleasant for you... Give you extra comforts. All I would ask is that you show your appreciation in a way that is favorable to me. You have the look of your father, you do, somewhat hard, but your mother's blood softens you. Makes you almost pretty."

"Pretty?" Draco asked incredulously. "What are you on about?"

"I could take delight in you and help you in the process. Understand?"

Draco couldn't help but to burst with laughter. "Are you mad? Yes, you must be, if you think I would even consider... Leave here, rat, and never darken my door again. Do *you* understand?"

Flushing red with embarrassment and humiliation, Peter said, "Oh, you will be sorry, very sorry indeed. You have made an enemy here, so you'd better watch your back."

"Apparently, you'll be watching my back for me," Draco said loftily.

"Sleep with one eye open, boy. You'd be surprised at all the places a rat can get into." He scurried out of the room, slamming and locking the door.

"Ruddy rat is a right nutter! Wait...what did he say? Rats can get into all kinds of places... Hmm. He's right. Maybe I shouldn't be so quick to dismiss him. Perhaps I should make him think I will befriend him. He could turn out to be very useful in the future."

With a new plan formulating in his mind, Draco went to lie on the bed. *After he outlives his usefulness, I will dispose of him. I think I remember that Granger has a big, fat half-Kneazle.* He blinked. "Not that I'll be asking her for help, mind."

Southern's Notes: Ah, and so it begins. The next chapter will be up soon. Christy and I are already going forward with things. Thanks for reading!

Christy's Notes: So, the plot thickens! Narcissa has accepted her fate, and Draco is starting to use his Slytherin brain and scheme. Our trio is reunited once again!

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 11

An Order meeting takes place. Ron and Hermione get a little close while Harry thinks of Ginny. Narcissa and Severus go through with the Dark Lord's orders.

Disclaimer: We've borrowed some of J.K. Rowling's characters for a bit of fun. We'll return them shortly! Don't worry; no Galleons are being made.

A/N: We just want to thank those that have been supportive of this fic. We're trying something new and having a good time. Thanks for the reviews so far. We'll try to keep updating quickly.

Thanks go to NSS for beta reading this for us!

Hermione was glad to finally arrive at headquarters. Flying always made her nervous, even when she flew at her own speed on her own broom...like when she played a mock game of Quidditch at the Burrow. It was just a little scarier with someone else in control of the broom. After they were inside and the portrait of Mrs. Black was silenced, Hermione ran into Molly Weasley's welcoming arms.

"Hermione, Harry, it's good to have you two here where I know you will be safe. I worry so for everyone's safety, what with Severus on the loose."

"Too right," Arthur agreed. "Come on in out of the doorway. Sorry I couldn't be part of the escort, but I had to contact the Order members for our emergency meeting. In the wake of all that's happened, we felt the sooner we had one the better."

"It's all right, Mr. Weasley," Harry assured. "All was well."

Saying nothing, Hermione only hugged her harder. After she finally released Hermione, Molly turned to give Harry a hug. Hermione looked up to see Harry smothered in Mrs. Weasley's arms and thought about how much Ginny loved Harry...and how Harry loved Ginny, for that matter...but she also understood Harry's reasoning behind his breaking up with the only Weasley daughter to a certain extent. Ginny was a part of things, after all, whether she was with Harry or not. It saddened Hermione when thinking of how depressed Ginny was on the train home.

"Where is Ginny? I was hoping to get to see her today," Hermione inquired.

"Oh, there's a sore subject!" George said.

"Too right," Fred agreed. "Had a big row about being made to stay at the Burrow with Bill and Fleur. Got a right temper, that one!"

Patting Harry on the back, George teased, "You made a narrow escape there, mate!"

"George!" Hermione exclaimed. "Ginny loves Harry! How could you..."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Hermione! I was only pissing around! They *aresoul mates!*"

"Yes," said Fred, continuing his brother's sarcastic voice before taking a serious note. "And if the bloke is lucky, my wonderful, ill-tempered sister will have him back when he comes to his senses!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and went to Harry. She knew he was hurting, even though he was trying to play it off. "Come on, Harry." Turning to Ron, who was looking at some object Fred was showing him, Hermione asked, "Ron, are you coming?"

"Sure," he answered.

"We are going in search of doxies," George informed the trio conspiratorially after Molly and Arthur went into the kitchen. "Doesn't hurt to get a few free while we can."

When the twins sprinted up the stairs, Tonks turned to the trio and said, "Remus has a great bottle of Ogden's for later...care to join us? It will only be us five left here to do the warding."

"Sure..."

"You bet..."

"Um, I don't know if we should..."

"Come *on*, Hermione! We will be here at headquarters all night! It's not like we are going anywhere! We're of age, and it's Harry's house! Besides, we will be with Tonks and Remus, for Merlin's sake!" Ron practically pleaded.

Hermione turned to look into Harry's pleading eyes and gave in. Her best friend had to give up so much already; what was one night of fun? All too soon they would have to forgo any recreations and get down to finding the Horcruxes and figure out how to destroy Voldemort once and for all. She just wanted to make sure they warded the house first.

"Oh, all right." She was actually quite nervous, not having had anything stronger than a lowly butterbeer, which only had trace amounts of liquor.

"Great!" Tonks exclaimed. "There is going to be an Order meeting after supper, and then when everyone leaves, we'll meet in the sitting room."

Remus kept quiet about Harry joining him and Tonks for a drink. He knew that James, Sirius, Peter and himself started getting pissed in their fifth year.

"As for the meeting? I assume that we will be privy to this one, all things considered?" Harry asked. He was not about to be excluded from any more important discussions. It was past time they realized that he, Ron, and Hermione were more a part of this than anyone else.

"Yes," Remus assured him. "But you must understand that Molly insists that Ginny not be told what's going on if it can be helped."

"Well, I agree with that," Harry said.

"Harry James Potter! How can you say that?" Hermione demanded. "She is a part of this, no matter how much you want to protect her. You know how dangerous it is to keep someone in the dark! Especially someone who is determined *not* to be in the dark."

"Enough, Hermione," Ron gently scolded. If he had his way, Ginny and Hermione both would stay locked in headquarters until the ruddy war was over. "Harry is just doing what he thinks is best. Leave off."

Folding her arms across her chest, Hermione said, "Right, and we have all seen what happens when someone makes the decision to keep important information from others. Look at Professor Dumbledore! He was also doing what he thought was best, and look what Snape did to him." She glanced at Harry, worried of his reaction, but felt he needed to be reminded of what happens when you keep things from the ones you love. It always backfired.

"Hermione!" Remus couldn't believe she had just said that. "Now, I know that you think..."

"No, Remus. It's time to stop tiptoeing around this. It's painful...trust me, I know...but we have to discuss what happened and reason it out."

"Reason? You think there is *reason* for what Snape did? Well, I can tell you what the reason is right now! He is truly a Death Eater and did just what his Dark Lord asked him to do! If you could have seen the look of pure hatred on his face... you wouldn't question it, Hermione. *I* was there, and I know what I saw." Harry was heaving, having gotten so worked up.

Very gently, Hermione said, "Harry, you have got to set your hatred of Professor Snape aside for a moment and simply think. Now, for those past two days I was at home, I did nothing except think, and what I have concluded is..."

"Hermione, we will discuss all this at the meeting tonight," Remus told her. "I will say this now, though. None of the Order members trust Snape, and we have to ward this house against him. Albus is still the Secret Keeper, even in death, until the house owner breaks that vow," he nodded towards Harry, "so we have no worries about other Death Eaters showing up here, but as for Snape, he is just a risk we are not willing to take. Now, no more talk of this until tonight."

Sighing with defeat, Hermione conceded. "All right, but I would just like to say this. I am not saying that we should tell Ginny everything, but I don't feel right excluding her either. As for Snape, I just wish we could come up with a plausible reason why he did what he did!"

"Tonight," was all that Tonks said.

Suddenly, they heard Mrs. Weasley call out, "Supper! Wash up!"

The meal was a strained affair. Harry was upset with both Hermione and the situation with keeping things from Ginny, and Ron felt as if he was in the middle of Harry and Hermione, being pulled in both directions.

When the last bite was eaten and the last dish was washed, Molly told everyone it was time for the Order to have the meeting. "Why don't we have pie in the library?"

When Harry walked into the library, they were already in a deep discussion, seemingly about Snape. It seemed that some were still surprised about what had happened, and some acted as if they weren't surprised in the least, never having fully trusted Snape. And although Snape had killed Professor Dumbledore, Hermione just hoped there was more to it than what they knew. The consequences of Snape being a true Death Eater were too scary to her. She'd always respected him and had even stood up for him.

"Well," Hermione wondered, "did anyone ever get Professor Dumbledore's portrait to say anything about it? Harry said that he didn't say anything when he saw it. I am not saying that Professor Snape is innocent by any means; I am saying that we should discuss all other possibilities. Professor Dumbledore trusted in him..."

"I have spoken with his portrait," McGonagall said shortly, "but he doesn't say anything about this. Claims he will in time."

Hermione nodded. "I think that if we could figure out why he..."

"That's enough of this nonsense, girl!" Moody exclaimed, making several people in the room jump. "Snape is a traitor, plain and simple. There is your only possibility. Now, I don't want to waste anymore time talking about him tonight. We've other, more important things to go over."

"Agreed," Kingsley said, ignoring the hurt look in Hermione's eyes. Turning to Arthur, he asked, "Are you still planning to go back to the Burrow tonight?"

"Yes," Arthur told him. "Now that we have made sure Harry and Hermione arrived safely, we need to go back to the Burrow after this meeting, what with us needing to vote on a new leader and all, to get things set up for the wedding."

"So much for talking about it in the meeting," Hermione mumbled to herself, feeling slighted.

"I wonder if that boy shouldn't postpone this wedding," Moody said, ignoring her. "It's too big a risk!"

"Well," Molly said, "I think Bill is past the age where we can order him about, Moody! Besides, Arthur and I were wondering if maybe we couldn't ward the Burrow's grounds as well, enabling us to screen anyone visiting that we haven't directed the wards to allow through. It's a good idea with Harry staying there in any case."

"I agree," Kingsley told them. "It never hurts to take extra precautions with everything that's going on."

"I think before we go any further, we should appoint a new leader," Arthur said. "It should be someone we all agree on and trust."

"I agree," said Harry, speaking for the first time since the meeting started. "I think Professor McGonagall would be a good choice."

"Well, what about Moody?" Mudungus Fletcher said. "Always vigilant, that one!"

Harry spun at the sound of that voice. "What is he doing here?" Looking at Mundungus, he told him, "I want you out of my house now, you thieving, rotten..."

"Harry Potter!" Molly exclaimed. "That will be enough of that, young man!"

Looking Molly right in the eyes, Harry calmly told her, "No disrespect intended, Mrs. Weasley, but this is *my* house, and I don't want him in it. He stole from me, the git! Was probably just waiting for Sirius to leave the house so he'd have a chance to take something!"

"Now, now, let's let bygones be, boy! I didn't do you any harm!" Mundungus said apologetically, voice tinged with a bit of fear as he backed away when Harry stood up.

Thinking of the things that had belonged to Sirius being missing and that this was the man that had taken them, although Sirius hadn't wanted most of it, Harry lunged. Suddenly, it was all too much. Before he could reach his target, each twin had taken Harry by an arm. "Now's not the time for this, mate. Try to calm down!"

Harry roughly shook the twins off and turned his back to Mundungus. If Harry's glare was filled with wandless magic, his gaze would have seriously injured Mundungus.

"Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, I think Professor McGonagall would be a great choice."

Hestia Jones nodded. "I agree with Harry, I do. Minerva would be just the one to follow in Albus' footsteps." She grinned toothily at Harry. "Right trustworthy, Minerva is."

"Dumbledore would agree with tha'," Hagrid said solemnly.

Moody spoke gruffly, saying, "I'm not interested in leading anything. I'm interested in catching Death Eaters. I haven't the want to hang back while there's tasks to be done."

Kingsley boomed, "Motion made and seconded. No controversy from the other mentioned party. All in favor of Minerva becoming the Order's new leader?"

Unanimous 'ayes' came from everyone in the room. Harry grinned as the Weasley twins pointed to their purposely bulging eyes while agreeing with the others. There were several members present and only a handful missing. Harry swelled with pride and determination, knowing that these people were loyal to Dumbledore and were willing to sacrifice their time and possibly their lives for the cause he'd led.

Minerva rose and faced everyone. "I accept. Thank you." She gazed at Harry and gave him a tight smile. "I think we should all be aware of the warding placed on headquarters. They will be designed to alert anyone within the house if Severus comes near the property, giving them time to alert Aurors and any of us."

"What if he comes by in the night real sneaky like," Dedalus Diggle asked. "I don't think 'e's thick enough to come in broad daylight while we're possibly all about."

Moody stood. "I'll handle that. There's lots of ways to keep someone unwanted from entering your place. Lots of work with that, I have. By the time he dismantles all the wards and gets past what I can set up, it'll be too late. Someone'll be here to get him."

Kingsley said, "The warding is easy enough, but you, Harry, will have to do the main one, allowing it to recognize all of us."

"What if Snape comes when nobody is about? How would we ever know?" Ron asked, suddenly serious. "I mean, he's trained in the Dark arts. I'm sure he can get past a few..."

"Too right," Lupin agreed. "Severus is no fool. He'll be expecting traps."

"Which is why he'll likely not come here," Minerva put in. "There's really no good reason he would. He'd be foolish to do so. These are just precautions. Surely he wouldn't think that we'd leave the place unprotected or Harry unguarded."

"In any event," Tonks added, "the wards can be set so that no matter who is here, Harry would still know...even if he is not. Aurors would still be alerted."

Elphias Doge called out, "Right then. It's settled," before looking at the timepiece on the mantle. "It's quite late already, and I've got to take over the watch at Hogwarts shortly."

"Fair enough," Minerva said. Eyeing Tonks and Lupin, she added, "You two, you're going to oversee that it's all done?"

"Yes," they replied in unison.

"Very well. This meeting will be adjourned. We'll still have the regular Saturday meeting, so I'll see you here at the normal time then." She smiled sadly. "I thank you all for continuing with Albus' cause. He gave his life for this. Now, we must be the ones to see it through."

Tonks, Remus, Harry, Hermione, and Ron all began putting up the warding as they'd discussed in the meeting... as soon as everyone had left. It hadn't taken very long, even when they tested it to make certain it worked. Moody agreed to return the next day to add his finishing touches. Deciding enough was enough, they retired to the sitting room to open the large bottle of Ogden's.

A few rounds of drinks had gotten everyone loosened up. Sighing, Tonks said, "I think it's very romantic that Bill and Fleur are still going on with the wedding. With this war and all, we need a happy occasion, I say!" She looked at Remus wistfully, causing him to blush. "She doesn't care about his injuries Greyback inflicted."

"Yes, I agree," said Hermione. "She must love him more than we all thought to accept him with those injuries. It made me rethink how I thought of her. I never thought she would be into the 'beauty and the beast' thing, though! Although, Bill is no beast," she told them seriously.

"Aw, Hermione, don't 'cha have any romance in ya?" Ron was well on his way to becoming very drunk. "She is very beautiful, you know!"

Giggling, Hermione said, "Harry, look at your best mate! He's right pissed, he is!"

Harry smiled. "You sound pissed yourself!"

"Maybe some, but not as much as Ron, I'd say!"

Grabbing Hermione and pulling her on his lap, Ron said, "Nope! Not pissed, just feeling really good!" He wiggled his eyebrows. "Give us a kiss then!" He leaned forward and kissed her until she was breathless.

Harry watched his two best friends, sulking, thinking of the girl at the Burrow who loved him and wondering why he broke things off. Right now, he couldn't wrap his mind around a single good reason.

Clearing his throat, Remus told the trio, "It's time to turn in. We have a busy day tomorrow. Goodnight."

After everyone said their goodnights, Harry watched Remus take Tonks' hand and lead her to his room and smiled, glad that Remus had finally found someone to share his life with.

Ron told him, "You go on, Harry. I am just going to walk Hermione to her room."

Grinning, Harry said, "Right! Night, mates!" On the inside, he was lonely. He missed Ginny more than he could admit, but he had to finish this with Voldemort and try to keep her safe in the process.

When they were alone in the sitting room, Ron turned back to Hermione and gently cupped her face, pulling her to him and kissing her softly. Enjoying his tenderness, Hermione leaned into him and responded eagerly to his kiss.

Feeling her slip her tongue into his mouth, Ron groaned, tasting the whisky and Hermione. Pulling her closer, he ran his hands up and down her sides. When she didn't stop him, he gently cupped her breasts on the outside of her shirt.

She groaned, arching into his hands. It felt so good. Becoming emboldened by her reactions, Ron deepened the kiss. He kept one hand on her breast and moved one hand down her body. She shivered in response.

When he reached the top of her jeans, Ron deftly slipped a hand in without unbuttoning them and rubbed the outside of her lower lips before slipping one finger inside her and moving it around gently. *Oh, this feels much better and different when he does this than when I do it myself... Wait...I have to stop this* She gasped and suddenly came to her senses.

"Ron, stop." It was as if he didn't hear her, and he kept gently moving his finger inside of her, beginning to grind his hips a little in time with his hand. She gave in to the wonderful pressure for one more second and then said more forcefully, "Ron, no!" She pulled at his arm to get his hand off of her.

Groaning, with disappointment this time, he said, "Hermione, what's wrong, love? Did I do something wrong?"

She went to move and felt his erection, and it made her blush. "No, nothing wrong, it's just, I want to do these things sober. And, to be honest, I am not quite sure how far I want to go yet, but I know if we carry on right now, I'll likely not be able to stop you."

"Hermione, please," Ron begged. "You know I care for you. I would never hurt you. Never. I want to love you."

"I know. I feel it, too. That's why I know you won't be mad that I want...need...to stop. Now, I am going to go to bed. You stay here until you... get some control. I will see you in the morning." She turned and left without kissing him again. She wasn't sure she would be able to stop if they started back.

When she walked out of the room, Ron raised his hand and sniffed his finger. Sighing contentedly, he decided what he needed at the moment was a shower and the relief of a good wank.

Narcissa wiped her mouth with the crisp, unsoiled napkin, though she'd barely eaten anything. Her stomach was churning too much, thanks to her nervousness. Severus had told her that this would be the night for their coupling and had already given her two phials of potions to drink. She'd watched him through dinner, and nothing he did belied any nervousness. His hands didn't shake as hers did while he cut into his steak. Nor did his appetite appear to suffer. She bitterly assumed that he was likely more excited than nervous.

"Severus, I think I will retire to my chambers," she said quietly.

He looked up at her, face expressionless. "Did you need any firewhisky?" he asked before taking a bite of his pie.

Mesmerized by his mouth as he chewed, she simply nodded. It would indeed help to calm her nerves and give her the resolve to get through their situation. She trusted him. When he'd told her that he would do his best to put her at ease, she believed him.

Flicking his wand, he summoned an opened bottle of liquor to the table. He quickly poured himself a generous glass and then passed the remainder to her. "Take your time," he said silkily. "When you turn your lights down, I will come for you. Is that agreeable?"

"Yes," she said, taking the proffered bottle and rising. As she approached her doorway, she glanced back to see him watching her. She could have sworn that he was smiling smugly before turning back to the rest of his meal. *Of course he is smug, he is getting exactly what he wants.*

Stepping through her doorway, she closed the door and leaned against it. "I can do this," she said determinedly, closing her eyes. She had only been a blushing virgin once in her life. She'd easily found that she thoroughly enjoyed sex, especially with Lucius' expertise. She was never left wanting or frustrated. The only reason she felt some trepidation was because this was another man.

Would he feel the same? How would their bodies fit together? What if he didn't find her as appealing as her husband did? She smirked at this. Of course he would find her appealing. Moving away from the doorway, she tossed the bottle onto the bed and quickly went to the bathroom to wash up. After scrubbing herself clean, she slipped into a sheer, silvery nightgown and unpinned her hair so that it flowed down her back.

Once she sat on the bed, she opened the bottle of Ogden's and sniffed the liquor, wrinkling her nose. It smelled quite strong. Shrugging, she took the glass from her nightstand and poured a dash into it. She downed it, choking as it burned her throat. "Good Lord," she murmured, aghast at the sensation, holding one hand out in front of her. There was no discernible shake to her fingers. She quickly poured another drink and drank it immediately, relishing the warmth in her belly. She placed the glass and the bottle on the nightstand, ready to do what must be done.

The potions he'd given her to drink hadn't been unpleasant, and she hadn't noticed any difference in herself. She could only hope that the potions truly did work as well as he believed they would and that this one coupling would be enough to conceive. A hand lifted to caress her stomach. "I'm going to be a mother again," she said quietly, happy yet saddened. "Oh, Lucius, what were you thinking getting us mixed up with the Dark Lord?"

Pushing all thoughts of her incarcerated husband from her mind, she leaned over and turned down the lamp next to the bed, leaving it with only a dim shine and shrouding the room into shadow. Seconds later, the handle on the door twisted and clicked open. *He must have been standing outside my doorway waiting, she thought sulkily. Feeling a bit eager, are you?*

"Narcissa?" he called from the doorway.

"I am here," she said, knowing he could see her silhouette if nothing else.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him before striding towards the bed. Once he was just to her left, he began disrobing without any pretense. She was about to ask if she should take off her gown when he spoke.

"You needn't worry. I don't believe it will take long."

"I am not worried about that," she said more confidently than she felt, wanting to also put him at ease.

She sank back against her pillows in hopes of luring him into a light conversation to ease the tension between them, but he was now undressed, save his underpants, and moving onto the bed with her, nudging at her legs just below her knees to get her to open them.

"What are you about?" she asked, closing them tighter.

He stared at her for a moment, seeming uncertain. "We agreed that we would..."

"Yes, I know, but what are you doing? I'm still dressed," she nodded to his underpants, "as are you."

He looked down at his body, then at hers, and then met her eyes. "I thought it would be easier for you if there was less intimacy."

"I agreed to do this," she began indignantly, "and I will, but I won't have you treating me like some random Madame! This is not putting me at ease. It's making me feel like a common trollop!"

She noticed his eyes narrowing, but he said nothing, sliding away from her and pulling down his underpants. He stood before her, eyebrow raised arrogantly, and allowed her to look her fill. He was quite thin, chest lightly dusted with dark hair that angled down into a line and into a thick patch, surrounding his generous erection. *Fair is fair*, she thought, moving to sit at the edge of the bed, hiking up her gown to rest about her waist for a moment, allowing him to gaze at her bare thighs. Once she'd pulled it up and off of her, leaving her completely naked, she dared to look up into his face, and for the first time, she saw emotion flickering there.

"I don't need to be completely naked to see to your needs, Narcissa," he said. The deep timbre of his voice as he lowered his lips to her ear caused her to shiver. "However, since you insist..." His tongue traced her earlobe, startling a slight gasp from her and sending jolts of tingles through her body. Of its own volition, her head tilted to the side, giving him more access to her neck, which he greedily accepted.

A long-fingered hand came up to brush back her hair while his mouth lowered to suckle the sensitive bit of flesh just behind her lobe, giving her gooseflesh on her arms and legs. *Perhaps this will not be so bad after all*, she thought, enjoying the feel of his lips against her flesh. *If only his mouth can make my blood heat, what can the rest of him do?*

She didn't have to wait long to find out, for his hand slid down to explore her body. His mouth nibbled a trail from her neck to her lips where his tongue probed to enter.

Upon opening her mouth, she found herself suddenly laid back with him over her, one hand teasing her nipples, the other lost beneath her, kneading her arse.

Their kiss wasn't broken until one practiced finger slid into her. She moaned, throwing her head back, and thrust her pelvis against his hand, searching for more. He obliged by inserting another finger and using his thumb to circle her clit lazily.

"Good God," she moaned.

"That I am," he said arrogantly, voice sounding much like the contented purr of a feline. A minute of teasing passed by, and his mouth began a path at her collarbone, venturing down to the valley between her breasts, circling each soft mound, nibbling the underside heatedly, laving the hardened nipples hungrily, before moving lower still.

He's going to... "Severus, no," she mumbled.

"No?" he asked quietly before nipping at the skin of her stomach.

"Just... take me now," she said, desire at its peak. Many months of being lonely and refraining from giving herself pleasure was quickly building into a frenzied need for release. "I *do* need it," she said aloud, sounding as if she was convincing herself.

Within seconds, his body was nestling more firmly between her thighs, and he was guiding his girth into her slowly. From the sound of his sharpened intake of breath, she could only imagine that he was pleased with the feel of her. There were no words, only heavy breathing and a few grunts that joined her encouraging mumbblings and moans. His pelvic bone ground against her perfectly at his current angle. She needed only to eagerly meet his strokes to achieve the building sensation of climax.

"Don't... don't stop," she heard herself say.

"Nearly... there," he replied, steadily plunging into her, seeking release.

In the next instant, nothing mattered. She felt as if she were shattering into a million pieces, feeling more satisfied than she'd been in ages, tears of gratification sliding down her face. *If only Lucius were out of Azkaban...* She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her intently while he indulged in a few more thrusts with his nearly flaccid prick. Compelled, she brought a hand up to touch the side of his face. He didn't flinch this time. Allowing her hand to guide his face to hers, she kissed him full on the lips, sealing their coupling.

"I'll go," he said quietly, beginning to pull away from her.

Remembering that she wanted to give him one night's solace, she whispered, "Stay just this night and hold me." It would feel good to have a man's body pressed against her back once again, even if it was not the man she wanted it to be.

Long after he'd used his wand to clean their bodies, Narcissa stayed awake, thinking about what they'd shared. She'd never again be able to think of Severus as just a friend. He would be the father of her child. She moved one hand down to her stomach to cover his, which had been resting there possessively since he'd fallen asleep. *Did we succeed, Severus? Are we to be parents?*

She smiled softly, thinking of holding a little bundle once again, blue eyes staring up at her inquisitively. Her smile faltered. This child might have dark eyes like his father. That changed everything. A few tears of guilt slid down her cheeks as she thought of the cool silvery grey eyes of her husband...eyes that often filled with warmth and desire while making love with her...eyes that her son had inherited.

In his sleep, Severus mumbled and held her more tightly. She hoped that this wouldn't end up hurting him in the long run. How would he feel if Lucius were the one to tuck his child in each night, not that he would, mind, but if their son or daughter lived at Malfoy Manor, Severus wouldn't be privy to every part of his or her life.

Thinking back to their conversation, she wondered if she'd even be allowed to raise the child at Malfoy Manor, remembering that the Dark Lord wanted Severus to influence this child...not Lucius. Surely she wasn't supposed to stay in residence with Severus. They would simply work something out. That was all there was to it. She sighed sadly. From the way Severus had been so thorough and gentle, it was clear he cared about her. In fact, after she'd come down from her high and saw him staring at her in such a way, she knew instantly that he was in love with her. *Please don't fall too hard, Severus. I am a married woman. While you'll always be close to my heart for all you've done for me and mine, you'll never be inside of it. Lucius owns that.*

Southern's Notes: Things are about to get very interesting. :) Evil grin.

Christy's Notes: Wow, a lot in this chapter! The trio is together again and a new leader appointed. Severus and Narcissa (hopefully) created a life. Looks like Narcissa is going to try and fight the Dark Lord's orders for her to stay away from the baby.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 11

Everyone gathers at the Burrow for the wedding; heated discussions and moments ensue. Narcissa realizes that things are not as they seem.

Disclaimer: We've borrowed some of J.K.R.'s characters here! We'll return them shortly, all nice and clean.

Thanks go to NotSoSaintly for beta reading this.

Harry stood watching the ones that he loved in momentary happiness. If things could always be this way, people smiling and laughing, the world would look like a much better place. He sighed, looking around the Burrow's garden, enjoying its new look, as the weeds and overgrown grass had been cleared away, the gnomes had been thrown out, and even the gnarled trees had been decorated for the event. Bill and Fleur's wedding had taken place about an hour before, and the reception was going strong. His gaze turned to where Ginny stood...as it always did. She was talking with Neville and Luna, laughing at something Luna had said.

Beautiful, he thought forlornly. *I miss her so much, but I have to do what I think is best. I have to keep her safe.* In his mind, if he was no longer associated with her, nobody would purposely seek her out to harm her in order to get to him. He also knew that he could not hold steady to the task at hand if she was around to distract him.

Unfortunately, he and the others had been staying at the Burrow for the past couple of weeks, and she was right there the entire time, pretending as if all was well, but he was no fool. He knew that she was hurting. He could see it in her eyes, even when she smiled.

He turned his head slightly and watched Ron and Hermione; they were talking intimately, voices low, and each drinking a glass of champagne. He had noticed that they had become closer over the past couple of weeks. Hermione still shared a room with Ginny while he still roomed with Ron, but they had started taking walks alone every evening after dinner, usually coming back happy and flushed. A sudden flash of envy welled up inside, forcing Harry to quickly squash it. He felt guilty for even one second of begrudging them any happiness. He smiled wistfully when Ron gently cupped Hermione's face and kissed her, thinking nobody would notice.

Harry turned away before they noticed him watching and looked to Remus and Tonks. He was very happy that Remus had finally let the younger woman into his life. It was obvious that she made him happy and looked after him. He couldn't remember ever seeing his dad's old friend look so healthy and whole. Harry smirked when he remembered how surprised Remus had looked when he'd mentioned that he knew he was 'unofficially' living with Tonks when he wasn't busy trying to uncover information about the other werewolves.

Most of the members of the Order had been invited to the wedding. All were laughing, talking, and having a good time...able to let go for a few hours and forget about the recent tragedy that had taken place. Oddly enough, Voldemort and other Death Eater activity had been nonexistent since Dumbledore's death...that they knew of anyway. Wanting to not think of the headmaster or what happened, he forced himself to look back at the others. There was closeness here between everyone, a deep fondness and trust that Harry knew they would need to put to use very soon. He was glad to be a part of it. He had never seen Professor McGonagall smile quite so much, wagging her finger at Moody while she talked animatedly, spilling her heavily spiked gillywater as she did so. Seeing her smile happily made him smile in return.

Watching Molly Weasley was a quiet contentment. She bustled about the garden, making sure everyone had enough to eat or drink. She was truly the only mother he'd ever known, and he loved her as such. She nurtured and cared for him, showing him the love and affection he'd never received in his first eleven years. He loved Arthur as well...the whole Weasley clan was like family for that matter. They'd all adopted him in a way: accepted him, cared for him, and even loved him. He felt the same about Hermione, too. She was the sister that he'd never had.

Turning his head, he spotted the newlyweds talking with the bride's parents. Fleur absolutely glowed with happiness. She'd always been beautiful, but he'd never seen her look more beautiful than she did when she smiled at Bill, who never took his hand off of her...constantly touching her in some way. For some reason, he felt extremely lonely just then. He wanted Ginny.

"A Sickle for your thoughts," the object of his desire whispered in his ear.

Turning his head only, he said, "Not worth even that. Just watching all the people here, noticing how happy they all are at this moment, and wondering when it's all gonna come crashing down..."

"Please, Harry, not today. Okay? Can't you just set all that aside for a day? Hell, I'd settle for half a day!"

"I don't recall asking you to settle for anything, Ginny."

Her eyes rounded in shock and then narrowed with hurt. "No, you've never asked anything of me except for time. I've tried to give it to you, but, Harry, the longer I wait, and the more space I give you, the more bitter you become. It hurts me to see you like this. I want to help."

"Oh, I'm sorry for being bitter. How silly of me, being bitter about having to kill a madman...or worse...being killed by him! What was I thinking?" Harry didn't mean to lash out at Ginny, but because he wanted...more than anything...to take her into his arms, he decided to push her away. He knew he would have to be harsh because it seemed like every other way he'd acted towards her had only given her false hope. "I think you should go back to your friends, Ginny, and leave me alone. There is nothing you can do for me."

"Funny, I thought I was with a friend." She gently laid her hand on his shoulder. "Please trust in me, Harry. I am here for you, and if you'd let me, I'd be there when you have to face Vol... Voldemort."

"No, you won't! You will not be anywhere near me at that time!"

She simply gave him an incredulous look, saying nothing.

"I mean it, Ginny. I have made my decision on this."

"Listen, Harry, I know you've made up your mind, and truly, I do understand, but I want to help you and be there for you."

"Ginny, I won't get into this with you. You know why I broke things off...I did what I needed to do! Look," he said a little more kindly, "it's not only for you, but for me, too. I need to be able to focus, and for some reason, that's hard for me to do around you, so I decided to end things. For now."

"Yes, *you* did! I didn't even have a choice in the matter. Harry, I tried to understand because I knew you were going to end things...I even agreed with you...to an extent. I had told myself that I accepted it, but it's hard for me...especially knowing you care about me, too. You think that if we were together that I would be a target? Well, I am simply a target just by being a Weasley and not following the Dark Lord. And even though you and I aren't together, you are still close to my family! Everyone knows that!"

"It's not the same! Don't you see that?"

"No, actually, I don't see that! What of Hermione?"

Exasperated, Harry threw his hands up and said, "Hermione's different."

Narrowing her eyes, Ginny said, "Different? How is she different? May I remind you that I am only one year younger than you? I can help you if you'd just let me! Don't shut me out, Harry, please. I care for you." Sighing when he said nothing, she told him, "If you don't want me fighting, I guess I won't be there, but there are other things I could do... Maybe I could help you guys research or something..."

"I know you won't be there," Harry simply told her. "I won't allow it."

"YOU WON'T ALLOW IT? Why are you being so hateful? I'm not asking for much here!"

"Harry! Ginny! That's enough yelling now!" Hermione admonished. "Do you want to upset everyone today?"

"No," Harry said. "We don't."

"What the bloody hell's going on?" Ron demanded.

Harry stared at Ron firmly while replying. "I was just trying to explain to Ginny why I thought it would be best if she not be involved with ~~the~~ certain things."

Ron nodded. "Ginny, you know that this is a situation you can't help with. Besides, you will be back at school! And you know Mum will never allow you to fight, so why are you bringing it up? Harry has enough on him right now."

"We don't mean to shut you out, Ginny. It's just that right now, there is nothing more to be done that we aren't doing, and Harry promised Professor Dumbledore that only we would handle it. Please try to understand. We aren't trying to hurt you," Hermione explained.

Ginny sighed, tired of it all. "Enough. I don't want to disrupt Bill and Fleur's day with this. I won't cause that. You're right, I suppose." Looking towards Harry, she said sadly, "Sorry. It just hurts me to see you hurting and knowing there is nothing I can do." She turned to see Neville and Luna watching them, unsure if they should approach or not. "I am going over to talk some more with Luna and Neville."

"Didn't those two come here together as a couple?" Hermione asked.

"No, I don't think so. They say they came as friends." With one last longing look at Harry, Ginny walked back over to her two friends and assured them she was fine.

Hermione walked over to Harry and engulfed him in a hug. "I'm sorry, Harry. Is there anything I can do?"

Letting out a breath, he told her, "No, not really. It's just, *I know* I am doing the right thing here, and nobody seems to get that."

"Well," Hermione began, "if I were her, I wouldn't want to be left behind either." She looked between them. "And I won't be."

"Look, mate," Ron started, "I don't know if you're doing right or not, pushing her from you like that, but I do know it's your decision. Well, yours and Ginny's, except you really aren't giving her much choice, but I can understand that you feel you need to do this, even if I do think you are just being stubborn. Personally, I think you should still be with her if that's what you want. I'm sure many people know that you fancy her, and whether she is your girl or not, it would still hurt you to lose her."

Exasperated, Harry said, "Ron, just stop. Ginny was right about one thing. I don't want to talk about this now. It's not the time, okay?"

"Sure, whatever you say," Ron agreed.

Noticing that Ginny had walked over to talk to Fleur's sister, Gabrielle, Harry told Ron and Hermione, "I am going to speak with Neville and Luna. It's getting dark, and I expect they will leave soon. You two coming?"

"Not just yet, I... Um... I mean to say that... Hermione and I are going for a walk and then we will."

Grinning, Harry said, "Sure, Ron, you two go ahead." Turning to Hermione, who had been unusually quiet, he teased, "Don't go too far now."

Blushing, she said, "No. No, we won't."

After Harry walked over to Luna and Neville, Ron took Hermione's hand and led her away from the crowd to the secluded spot he'd prepared for them earlier in the day. She'd been letting him go further with his petting, and he hoped that this night would prove to be 'the night' for them.

When they reached their spot by the pond, Hermione smiled. It meant a lot to her that he would go through so much trouble to please her. Besides a blanket, she noticed a bottle of what she assumed was elf-made wine and two glasses. One lonely candle was lit.

"Ron, this is lovely! I don't know about the wine, though. I've already had three glasses of champagne."

"One glass won't hurt, love." He took her hand and led her to the blanket. After they got situated, he handed her a glass, which she reluctantly took.

"I'm worried about Harry and Ginny. Do you think..."

Ron gently placed a finger on Hermione's lips. "Ssh. No talk of them or anything of that sort now. Right now, it's just you and me. I've been thinking about this all day."

After taking a generous sip of her wine, Hermione asked, "You have? Just what have you been thinking, Ronald?" She smiled teasingly at him.

Taking her glass from her and setting both his and hers down, he pulled her to him and whispered, "This," and tenderly kissed her.

Enjoying the taste of the wine on his tongue and the feel of his arms around her, Hermione moaned and deepened the kiss, much to Ron's excitement. He laid her back on the blanket and started massaging her breast on the outside of her robes.

She arched up into his hand and wove her fingers through his hair. Feeling emboldened by her moves, he slowly started unzipping her robes. She stopped kissing him for a second and simply looked into his eyes, which halted him. She saw want, need, respect, and what she had been looking for, love. Showing her courage, she laid her hand on his and finished unzipping her robes.

Ron began to breathe a little faster, becoming more excited. Suddenly, he felt a little shy; she'd always stopped him before. "Hermione, are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. I am ready to take this step with you, Ronald. Are you sure?"

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life, not even with Lav..." Ron started blushing, certain that he'd ruined things.

So, it's as I thought. He did sleep with her. Not wanting to deny him anything that Lavender had given him, she quickly said, "Let's not talk of the past just now. I want you, and you want me. That's enough. Do you, um... Do you know the Contraceptive Charm?" It was Hermione's turn to blush. *It must be the wine making me so bold!*

"Yes, I do. Here," he grabbed his wand and pointed it at his very noticeable erection. After muttering some words and rotating it two times clock-wise, there was a white glow, which showed he had performed the charm correctly. He put his wand down and turned back to Hermione. "Now, where were we?"

"Right here," she answered, pulling him back into her arms.

He finished unzipping her robes and pulled them off. He rose up to look at her in only a simple white bra and blue knickers, smiling. "Very nice," he complimented.

Hermione reached up to pull on his zipper, feeling bashful. When he'd taken his off, he reached for his boxers, too, wanting to remove all the barriers as quickly as possible. He felt like he would explode any second.

Hermione watched him with wide eyes, not exactly sure what to do. Not noticing her discomfort, Ron leaned down and began kissing her again, pulling her bra below her breasts. He wasn't sure how to work the clasps, as Lavender never seemed to have one on when they met for a shagging session.

He gently rubbed her breasts for a bit, exciting her, and then he moved down and started removing her knickers. She felt a moment of panic and stiffened, but after a couple more kisses, she relaxed enough so that he could remove them.

Once he had gotten them off, he gently began massaging her, trying to make her ready enough for him. After a couple of minutes, he deemed her ready and moved on top of her, bracing himself on his elbows and looking into her eyes. "Hello, there," he teased with a smile and gently kissed her once more before positioning himself and slowly thrusting inside, breaking her barrier with one push.

Hermione cried out, but the sharp pain only lasted a moment, shocking her more than anything. She looked up into his face and thought *What a comical expression... He nearly looks like he's in pain!* He had his eyes closed tightly, and his lips had flattened into a thin line.

Just as his rapid, repeating thrusts caused Hermione to feel the tension building in her belly and had coerced her into moving in time with him, Ron suddenly stiffened and groaned. He whispered, "Oh, Hermione!" and then pulled her close to him, panting heavily.

Dazed, Hermione put her face against his shoulder. It wasn't quite what she had expected, but he seemed to enjoy it very much. She nearly asked if that was it, but she decided that might not be the right thing to ask. He seemed finished. *Well, if that was all he and Lavender did, I don't get what the big deal was. I suppose the pressure and the friction was quite nice though.*

After a few moments, he told her, "We better get back, love. It's getting late. Are you all right?"

Softly smiling, she assured him, "Yes, I'm fine. It's just..."

"I know, for me, too," he said, thinking that she felt the same as he did. Squeezing her hand once, he helped her up. After they'd dressed and cleaned everything up, they headed back to the Burrow, hand in hand...one feeling as if he owned the world while the other felt a little disappointed and awkward.

"What's wrong?" asked Rodolphus, putting away his knife and sharpening block.

"I'm pregnant," Bella replied snidely. "How am I supposed to go about my normal duties if I'm to grow huge? Our Lord had better not think to keep me away from my work! I won't have it."

"Your pregnancy *is* his work," he said, moving behind her and putting his arms around her, resting his palms on her stomach, rubbing gently. "You've been going on how you would be a better mother than Narcissa, stronger, showing our child the ways of our Lord. Here is your chance." He kissed the nape of her neck.

"But I don't like playing the role of a weak female." She turned around in her husband's arms. "Mother or not, I refuse to stay behind and help with the next generation of Death Eaters while you and the others get to have all the fun."

"You're so lovely when you pout," he teased. "I wish you'd be in this mood more often."

"Don't get used to it," she said, glaring slightly. "I wonder how Narcissa is handling things. I wonder if the potion worked for her."

"Who cares?" Rodolphus said, unbuttoning her robes. "We've other things to do... like celebrating on our good fortune."

"I care, that's who!" she said heatedly, though she'd maneuvered so he could more easily reach the lower buttons. "I'll bet Snape has had his filthy hands all over her every chance he got!"

"I thought you'd forgiven Severus," he said, pushing down the robes and cupping her chemise-covered breasts.

"Well, he's our Lord's man, no doubt there now, but that doesn't mean I want him to be with my sister!" She reached down, slapped her husband's hands away, and ripped the lacy fabric to free her breasts herself before placing his hands back on her exposed flesh. "The Dark Lord won't even allow me to send her an owl. Why, she should be here with me if anything! Why the seclusion?" She pulled at her hair and growled, suddenly enraged. "He's rewarding him with a sex slave for doing his deed! I'd bet my last Galleon on it! My sister deserves to be more than some half-blood's whore!"

"Lucius won't be too happy; that's for certain," Rodolphus commented before leaning down to lave a hardened nipple.

"I'll kill Malfoy if he touches her," Bella said seriously. "This is all his fault, the lot of it, the arrogant prat!"

"Come," he said, nodding towards the couch. "Let's not worry about them right now." When her eyebrow rose in challenge, he added, "I'll have my contact at Azkaban slip Lucius a letter, giving him fair warning of what's going on. He won't dare act out in anger if he's had some time to think on it. However, he might try to find away to thwart Severus' position as favorite if he gets the chance."

She nodded. "And tell him that he will have me to answer to if he thinks he can punish my sister in any way." She grinned impishly. "As for Draco, well, that's entirely up to him. The boy should have been taught a bit more of a lesson. It would strengthen him for future missions."

"If you say so."

Bellatrix realized that her husband had completely undressed her and led her to their couch. His fingers were nimbly removing his own clothing. Reaching down to touch herself intimately and bringing a finger back up to her lips for a lick, she said, "Are you going to fuck me or stand there playing with your robes?"

A knock at her door broke into her reverie. "Yes?" she called, uncertain if it would be Severus or a house-elf. He'd left just after breakfast to meet with the Dark Lord, and she hadn't seen him since. Being forced to remain in the cottage was starting to make her feel like a prisoner. She supposed that was exactly what she was though.

"I'd like a word," Severus said, opening her door completely but not entering.

She saw his eyes dart over to her bed and then back to her. He'd not stepped one foot inside of her room since the morning he'd crept from her bed after they'd made love. Wanting some amusement after being so bored all day, she smiled seductively, hoping to make him nervous. "You can come in," she said, gesturing to the bed, which was the only place he could be seated, as she was in the only chair.

"And just as easily," he said, nodding behind him, "you can come out. I will be waiting." He left abruptly, closing the door with a snap.

Her playful smile faded. Something must have gone wrong. He'd never used such a curt tone of voice with her before. Had the Dark Lord given him bad news? Deciding not to prolong their talk, hoping he had news from Draco, she stood and made her way out to find him sitting near at the table they took meals upon.

"Is something wrong, Severus?" she asked uncertainly. It wasn't often that she felt uneasy around him, but she definitely felt as if something was amiss.

"Not that it concerns you, but I will be working on something important for the Dark Lord..."

"Am I to continue staying here alone?" Narcissa interrupted. *It's bad enough with only Severus for company, but I don't think I could bear it without any human contact whatsoever!*

His gaze darkened. "If you don't mind?" His eyebrow arched as if challenging her to speak. When she said nothing, he continued in an annoyed voice. "It seems that only I can do what must be done, and it will take time, as I cannot openly be seen in public." He rose and approached her, pulling his wand and pointing it at her.

It took all of her strength to keep her back straight and expression nonchalant. Had he been ordered to terminate her after all?

"I need to check to see if you are pregnant. It has been two weeks," he explained.

"Very well," she said, relief flooding her.

After a flick of his wand and a faint glow, he nodded. "You are indeed. It seems that my potions have been very successful."

"Are others pregnant?" she asked, unable to help herself, moving her gaze down to her stomach and placing a manicured hand upon it. Soon she would grow round and feel her baby moving within. She'd fallen in love with Draco's turns and kicks during her first pregnancy and eagerly awaited the fluttering sensations again.

After they both were seated, he spoke again. "Yes," he said, gazing down at her hand, which was still caressing her stomach. "Of the twenty-three women who took my potions, nineteen are pregnant. We confirmed that today." He gave her a tight smile. "It seems Bellatrix is also expecting."

"Oh! Bella, a mother!" She grinned broadly. "I think being a mother will show her that it's not always easy to just watch your child..." Her words trailed away as she realized he would not approve of what she was thinking. "I suppose we will have to talk about how this child is to be reared, what is expected of me and of you... That sort of thing."

"Narcissa..." he said, voice nothing more than a whisper, "I believe you should remember that the Dark Lord wishes for me to raise this child and teach him or her the ways of our Lord." He looked away uncomfortably. "You are intended to do nothing but birth it."

The breath left her body, and she felt a bit faint. "That's... No. You must have misunderstood him. He meant for us to... to work together. He meant for me to rectify my mistake with Draco." She nodded hopefully. "I can do better this time. Really, I can."

"I am afraid not, Narcissa," Severus replied dispassionately, leaning forward. "Your punishment for your part in Draco's failure is this. I am certain in what he meant, as he spoke of it earlier."

"The Dark Lord will change his mind," she blurted. "You'll talk to him for me." She reached across the table and touched his hand. "You've always been there for us. You'll help me."

He looked down at her hand. "Don't make this harder on yourself." He reached inside his pocket. "Here is a letter from Draco." He smirked slightly. "It seems that he has been delegated some light duties... alongside Wormtail." At her silence, he added, "Personal errands mostly." His smirk changed to a sneer. "The Dark Lord feels it's good to have him humbled."

"Severus," Narcissa said, suddenly deciding something. She could use his feelings for her to sway his resolve. He wouldn't let her down. She couldn't believe it possible of him. "I'll do anything that you want," she said suggestively.

"There's nothing," he replied, swallowing thickly.

Rising, she moved to his side, pulling at the shoulder ties of her dress. When one side fell down to reveal a satin-covered breast, she reached for his hand and placed it over it. "You can have me... an-anytime you'd like." She smiled shakily. "I know that you want me... and have for a while."

"You misunderstand me, Nar..." he began.

"No, I don't. I see it in your eyes." The other tie fell away, and her dress slid down to pool at her waist, leaving her upper body displayed. "You enjoyed my body."

"I did," he agreed.

"You can have it. Please. Just find a way for us to work things out." She pulled his other hand up to cover her other breast, feeling the heat of his palm through the fabric. "I've wanted another child for so long, and to lose this one... even if it's yours..."

"Enough!" he said, pulling his hands away roughly. "Cover yourself, woman!"

Stepping away from him, startled by his angry voice, she pulled the top of her dress up over her bra. "Please, Severus..."

"How dare you tempt me with your body, thinking to use me," he said in a dangerously low voice. "You are Lucius' wife! Do you think I would eagerly take what is his?"

"That didn't stop you from..."

"From simply following my orders. Otherwise, I would have never touched you," he said coldly. "Yes, the fuck was quite nice. I thank you for that. However, that does not give you leave to think that you can control me or sway me by offering your body." He gazed over her body from top to bottom and back up again. "I can easily get someone else to warm my bed if I so choose."

Stunned, she plopped down in the chair roughly, tears coming to her eyes. She had been certain of his feelings. How could she have been so wrong? It was possible that she hurt him with her words. She had a full nine months to change his mind. She would simply bide her time. This child would not be lost to her. A shudder passed through her body as she filled with dread. If Severus didn't care, who would protect her from Lucius if he went mad about what she'd done and been forced to do? He'd likely not dare harm her while pregnant if he escaped Azkaban, knowing the Dark Lord would not allow it, but after the birth, it appeared she would have to fend for herself. She knew that the Dark Lord had to know how this would affect Lucius and his regard for her since he'd said it was punishment for him as well. What would Draco think when he learned of her pregnancy and how she'd been used? Unable to stop the emotions flooding her body, she sobbed openly and loudly. She never noticed that he stood and walked to his room, shutting his door behind him.

Southern's Notes: Some of you are concerned that this doesn't seem like it will be an HG/SS story. It will be. Things will start moving along now that we've had the proper background for the story taken care of. So, what do you think about Snape? Does he or doesn't he? (love Narcissa, I mean...) Teehee!!

Christy's Notes: I feel bad for just about everyone in this chapter! Harry and Ginny...loving one another and having to be apart, Ron and Hermione...getting mixed signals (poor Ron!), and poor deluded Narcissa! She still thinks she can change the Dark Lord's mind.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 11

Time moves forward. Narcissa and Bella meet for a sisterly chat about their circumstances. Lucius finally makes an appearance. Hermione and Ron make a decision, and there is finally a breakthrough with the Horcruxes... thanks to an anonymous tip.

Disclaimer: We've swiped some of J.K.R.'s characters, but we'll return them shortly. We just want to have a bit of fun.

Narcissa peeked at her sister through the fingers that were covering part of her face. "How could you say such a thing? This child is part *of* me!" Her sister had been going on about how the baby would be weak and was already causing Narcissa to be weak early on in her pregnancy, as she had been experiencing terrible sickness most days.

"Yes," Bella said, waving her hand dismissively as she stirred her tea, "but it's also part Snape. Therefore, it's lacking already in its bloodline, which is likely causing all this. You know that child's father is part Muggle and part--"

"He's part Prince if you'll remember correctly. Why, his mother's family--"

"Told her to get out of their sight when she up and married that Muggle," Bella finished, smirking smugly at her sister. "Now," she purred, "you can't say you were this ill when pregnant with Lucius' child, can you? *A pure-blood?*" When Narcissa shook her head, she continued, a triumphant gleam in her eyes. "While Draco isn't the cleverest wizard, he is part Black and part Malfoy. Those two names mean something and are an excellent combination. He's an example of pureblood..." She frowned. "Well, he did disappoint our Lord, but I don't think it's because of his bloodlines. He was too pampered, too spoiled!"

"When you have your child, Bellatrix, you will understand what being a mother is about. You will learn that simply sending them off to war where they could be harmed or killed isn't very easy." She smiled fondly, thinking of all Severus had sacrificed at her request. "Admit it here and now that Snape is more of a wizard than you thought before."

"Oh, perhaps he did something I didn't expect, but that doesn't mean anything. Time will tell if he's truly become someone worthy of my respect, which at the present seems harder to come by than the Dark Lord's."

Narcissa frowned. "You've always looked down on everyone else."

"As have you," Bellatrix countered.

"That might be true to an extent, but I have always at least had an open mind about things." Her eyes widened. "WHAT are you doing?"

Pausing the pouring of whisky into her tea, Bellatrix looked up in confusion. "I'm having my tea."

"You're not still drinking *hard* liquor?" Narcissa asked incredulously.

With a shrug, Bellatrix said, "So what if I am? I don't see why I should change anything just because I'm to become a mother." She grinned. "I'm a strong woman, no doubt *my* child will be strong, and I won't have some pregnancy keeping me from doing the Dark Lord's will." She gave her sister a scathing glance. "You are using that child as an excuse. Perhaps if you just acted as if nothing was amiss, you'd not be feeling so ill."

"But your baby..." Narcissa watched in horror as her sister took a deep drink of her tea and added another shot of whisky to it. She couldn't believe that she would knowingly put her child in jeopardy. A thought occurred to her. "Bella, liquor isn't good for a baby. You do know that, right? What if you should harm the child? If the child is deformed in any manner, do you think our Lord will still welcome him with open arms?"

"The child will be fine. I told you it's going to be strong. Besides, you don't think that our mother remained prim and proper while pregnant with us, do you?" She sneered suddenly. "Perhaps during Andromeda's pregnancy." She nodded to herself. "Yes, that would explain why she's always been so weak-willed and meek." She shook her head and made a tsking sound. "And just look at her pitiful offspring."

Narcissa stood and strode to the window. "I can't believe you are acting this way. Have a care with how you approach pregnancy, or you could lose your child."

"You're just trying to find something at fault with me because I've hit a nerve. Or... could it be that it's simply because you're angry with Snape?" Bella accused, pointing a finger at her.

"Of course I am angry with him, but that's not the reason I'm trying to steer you the right way." She sighed in frustration.

"Ha! And what way is that? How to raise a brat in a manner that will offend the Dark Lord? Don't need that sort of advice, thanks. I'll just look at your son--"

"Don't you speak ill about my son again," Narcissa said, whirling around angrily. "You've been blabbering long enough this morning, I think."

Taken aback by her sister's sudden vehemence, Bellatrix nodded. "Fair enough." Deciding to change tactics, she softened her expression and voice. "Come now, Cissy. Tell me what the bastard has done." She rubbed the chair next to her, smiling as her sister strode forward and took the seat.

"He's done nothing!" Narcissa complained, wanting to confide in her sister. "He leaves for days on end, sends no word to me, doesn't really talk to me when he's home, and seems indifferent about the baby, only occasionally asking if anything is amiss."

"Indifferent to your charms, you mean?" her sister asked knowingly. "Don't worry. I can understand that it must be difficult being cooped up as you are, no husband warming your bed, needing a man--even if it is Snape--to keep you *company*."

Narcissa's cheeks reddened. "Well, yes, I must admit that I wouldn't mind a little company. On the days that I've not been feeling ill lately, I've been feeling lonely and longing for Lucius, though I know that's impossible. So, yes, I do want a little something with Severus... maybe... but only for now." She shrugged. "I don't understand. I'm certain that he loves me. Or at least I thought he did. What would make him act this way towards me? When I gave myself to him that night, he eagerly accepted my body. It wasn't just a task to him."

Bella leaned forward conspiratorially. "I'd say he's afraid of Lucius. Likely doesn't want to overstep any lines not ordered by our Lord. You see, Snape, being weak, wouldn't do that. He remains under the Dark Lord's protection by not touching you again." She grinned impishly. "Maybe he's hoping that you will eventually be gifted to him completely. He probably feels that Lucius couldn't fault him if he appeared to be forced into it." Sneering, she added, "Which I will never allow to pass. My sister is no whore, especially a half-blood's whore, and will never be used as such."

Not able to meet her sister's eyes, Narcissa admitted, "My husband does frighten me, so I can see where Severus might have concerns. When you told me that Rodolphus sent him that letter, I feared he'd find a way to break out of Azkaban and come to kill me." She placed a hand on her stomach protectively. "I don't understand what I'm feeling. I love Lucius, always have and always will, and family is important to me, but for some reason, Severus intrigues me."

"It's only because he's acting as if he doesn't want you." Bella laughed. "All women like a challenge, sister dear. You don't really want him. Why, you never gave his skinny arse a second glance before." She shook her head. "No, you just want him to want you. It gives you power over a man when he's panting after your body and the rewards you could bestow on him with a simple touch of your hand to his flesh."

"You're a wicked woman, do you know that?"

"And you should heed my advice. Leave him be. You don't need any more entanglements with him." She looked away and seemed to be thinking something over. "If you must know," she said reluctantly, "Lucius and the others will be out soon. Our Lord is seeing to it even as we speak. I know of an ingenious plan that will see our brethren free."

Narcissa's pulse quickened. "Oh, God, so soon." She envisioned her enraged husband grasping her throat tightly and squeezing the life from her body. "What if he..."

"Then I shall kill him," Bellatrix vowed. "He'll not harm you. Besides, you know the Dark Lord would never permit that. He wants Lucius to suffer through your pregnancy and experience humiliation as part of his punishment."

"What if he harms my child? I won't allow it," Narcissa said firmly. Another vision of Lucius forcing her to drink an abortion poison came to mind.

"He wouldn't dare openly do anything. The Dark Lord would see him punished for harming you, for it was his order that saw you in Snape's bed and pregnant with his babe." She rubbed her rounding stomach. "I say, do you think I should be looking pregnant already, what? It's only been just over three months."

"Some women show sooner than others," Narcissa shrugged. "Maybe you've been eating too much." An elegant eyebrow arched as she took in her sister's snug robes. "I think you could do with a larger set of robes. Just how much have you been eating?"

"For two," she said with a frown, eyeing her sister's flat stomach. "Rodolphus makes certain I eat double the amount than I normally do. We heard that's what a woman should do." She sighed. "I suppose you've been too sick to keep anything down to add on any weight." Making an expression of disdain, she said, "I think you've lost weight! And you look like you've got circles under your eyes."

Narcissa shrugged and reached for her cup of tea with a shaky hand. "I've had a lot on my mind."

"Well, now that Lucius will be out, you need to work on getting one person off your mind: Snape." She reached out and placed a hand over her sister's affectionately. "Lucius will get over this--if he hasn't already. When this child is born, it will cease to be a burden to you and will then be Snape's problem. You and your husband need never think of it again."

"No!" Narcissa exclaimed. "I want to be a part of this child's life! I will find a way to... to..."

"To do what? Keep it?" Bella shook her head. "Cissy, it's been decided already as part of your punishment."

"How can you sound so nonchalant about this?" Narcissa asked, tears welling in her eyes. "I can't just carry this baby and leave it. I love it already--just as I loved Draco when I carried him!"

Dismissing her sister with a disbelieving expression, Bellatrix moved their conversation forward, saying, "So, speaking of Draco, do you think he will do well on his first real assignment?"

"What assignment?" Narcissa asked, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"Oh, if you don't know about it, I don't think I should say anything." She smiled kindly. "Stop crying, Cissy. All will be well." In a soothing tone, she added, "Your son is being given another chance to prove himself, and this time, it's something much easier." She snickered. "I suppose he has to start someplace. Pity it's at the bottom and under Wormtail's nasty little paw."

"I've no one to tell. Why the secrecy? What's he doing?"

"Let's just say that he's working with Wormtail on retrieving something. No possible way to bollocks that up," Bellatrix said confidently. "Maybe he'll prove himself yet." She stretched and yawned slightly, her liquored breath wafting over to Narcissa. "We'll have a couple of things to celebrate soon: this mission's success and the return of our friends."

If there was one thing Narcissa knew, it was that the Dark Lord never assigned anything easy, especially not for those he looked upon with disdain. She could only wish that her son would do the deed without giving the man reason to criticize. Placing her hand back on her stomach, she thought, *And I will find a way to be a mother to you, my child. I would that I could free you from this tyranny all together.*

Hermione was sitting in the library at number twelve, Grimmauld Place reading a book on the founders of Hogwarts. She was trying to figure out what Voldemort could have used of Rowena Ravenclaw's to hide a piece of his evil soul in. They'd received an anonymous message a few days prior, and it hinted heavily that an old artifact of Ravenclaw's, a jeweled hairclip in the shape of a raven, could be found hidden at an old rundown mill. Nothing in her books told her anything about Rowena sporting a clip such as that. How could they know that it wasn't a trap? Why would someone send them word anonymously?

Her instincts told her initially to trust the missive. There was something familiar about the spiky writing, but she simply couldn't place it. Did someone else know of Harry's mission to find Horcruxes? Was this a Horcrux? She wished that they'd simply signed their name. Harry didn't want to go to the old place, to which the directions were conveniently enclosed, because he was suspicious about it being a trap. She had to agree it was a definite possibility.

She hadn't gotten very far into the book when she felt the tickle of warm breath on the back of her neck. She had pulled her hair up to keep it out of her way while she did her research.

"Mmmm. Nice," she murmured, moving her head to grant more access to the soft caresses.

Feeling emboldened by her response, Ron gently started nuzzling and nibbling her neck, moving around to the front of her throat. Hermione closed her eyes and sighed in pleasure as she lifted her hands to his hair to run her fingers through the ginger locks.

Suddenly, Ron roughly groped her breast through her jumper, pulling and tugging her nipple that was deflating from his inflicted pain quickly. "Ow! Ron, stop! That hurts."

He rolled his eyes. His expression seemed to say that he felt that Hermione was always complaining about something he did. "I don't get you, Hermione. It seems I can never do anything to please you! I know for a fact that playing with breasts excites women!"

"Humph! What you were doing was not playing, Ronald! There is a thing called finesse that you've yet master. Besides, we don't have time for this! I have to try to find proof that this supposed hairclip did belong to Ravenclaw."

"*Everything* is always more important than this," he complained in frustration as he moved his hand back and forth between them. "You act like your reading is more important than I am!"

Hermione knew that when he was with Lavender, they'd probably had sex on a regular basis with the girl only putting him off if it was her time of the month. ~~Ha~~, she thought jealously, *even then, Lavender likely did other things for him to keep him satisfied.* Hermione felt that what he demanded was more of a chore than a pleasure, and she had the feeling that he sensed it, too. It made her angry that he would continue to push for sex when she'd told him earlier that she had work to do.

Throwing her hands in the air, Hermione exclaimed, "It's more important! God, finding the Horcruxes is one of the most important things for us to do! Without destroying them, Harry won't be able to destroy Voldemort. You know that."

"Yes, I do know that, but I also know that if we don't take a little time for ourselves, we will burn out. We hardly ever... you know... be together in that way anymore. We've only done it a couple of times lately, and I have needs, Hermione."

"Well, forgive me if I can't spare a few minutes right now to see to your needs!" Hermione was tired of feeling like she always had to give in to Ron. Why should she have to compete with what his ex-girlfriend had done? And frankly, the thought of him grunting over her like some sort of pig just wasn't very appealing at the moment. She supposed she wasn't being fair. Ron wasn't all that bad. It was just that the few times they were together, it seemed he'd been rushed and always finished before she'd even gotten started, leaving her feeling wound up for nothing. Obviously, she liked a bit of foreplay, and he was more of the 'go for the goal' type.

"A few minutes?" he murmured incredulously to himself. "What is she getting at? I am not some few strokes bloke! I know the last time was quick, but we were trying to finish before Harry or someone came in..." He looked up at her, blinking away his indignation. "Are you saying I am the only one with needs? Don't you ever want to...?"

Hermione sighed. She really did not have time to stroke his ego right now. "Not really." When she saw the hurt look come into his eyes, she told him, "I just have too much

on my mind right now. I can't concentrate on something that is just not a top priority."

Ron folded his arms across his chest and snorted. "I always said you need to sort out your priorities. I think if it were possible, you'd rather shag a bloody book than me!"

Hermione slowly stood, looking at him with a mixture of hurt and anger. "Well, if I did, then at least there would be something interesting about it, not just someone squishing me, taking and not giving! At least after I've read a book I feel satisfied."

Hurt and trying not to show it, Ron said, "I don't understand you, Hermione. I really don't. You act like you like it when we're doing it, and now you insult me, saying I'm not a good shag? I get that we have a war to win and that there are things that have to be done in order to ensure that we do win. I am not trying to stop you from doing what you need to do. I just ask that every once in awhile, you remember you have a boyfriend that needs you. Or is that too much to ask of you?"

Hermione sat back down and let out a breath. She really didn't want to fight with Ron right now, especially over something as trivial as sex. "Look, Ronald, maybe Harry had the right idea, what with his idea about ending things with Ginny. It's just too hard to try and keep a serious relationship going with everything else that we have to do."

"What? What are you saying then? You want to end things, is that it?"

"Calm down, okay? Look, I love you, you know that I do, but we have *got* to get this done. I have to be able to concentrate, and it's hard for me to do that with your breathing down my neck for sex all the time. You make it sound as if it's my duty as your girlfriend, and it's not."

"How would you know? You have never been anyone's girlfriend until now, and you certainly don't act like a proper girlfriend!"

This caused Hermione to stand again and put her hands on her hips, tears of hurt welling in her eyes. "Do not go there, Ron. Just don't. I won't be compared to Lavender!"

Ron blushed because that was exactly what he'd been doing. "I wasn't... I'm not... Bloody hell, Hermione! All I am asking for is a little bit of attention from you. You are always either too busy or too tired. You don't even offer to give a guy a wank! How am I supposed to feel? I'll tell you how I feel deep down. I feel like you don't care for me that way."

Hermione rubbed her hands over her face, frustrated by the interruption and this argument. "I care for you; you know that. Like I said before, I think we need to back off from our relationship for now. I don't have time for the distractions."

"Fine," he spat. "That's just fine. Cozy up to your research and books, but don't expect me to be waiting in the wings for you."

As if on cue, an owl tapped on the window. Turning her head, Hermione said, "That's odd. That's not Errol or Pig, and I don't think any of the Order would owl us at this time of night."

Blushing once again, Ron cleared his throat. "Um, that's for me. I'll get it." He rushed to the window and took the rolled parchment. He quickly shut the window without giving the owl a treat.

When he turned back to Hermione, she had one eyebrow raised. "Who is that from?"

Knowing he was caught, Ron decided that if Hermione wanted to end things, he would show her she was not the only witch in the coven. "Lavender. She owls me every once in awhile." Every other day was more accurate, but Hermione didn't have to know that.

"I see." And she did. Lavender had never stopped wanting Ron. The question was, did he want Lavender again?

"We're only friends. You know, like you and Krum?" Ron smirked. "You seem to think it's just fine to owl him...I see nothing wrong with having a friend of my own."

"There is one significant difference there. I never *shagged* Viktor!"

"Maybe not, but he wanted to!"

Hermione actually growled. "This is ridiculous! I won't fight with you anymore. I have got to finish this. Just... Just go and owl your *friend* back!"

"Fine! I will!"

"Good! Go!"

And with that, Ron slammed out of the room and left Hermione alone. Angrily, she flung her book across the room, immediately regretting her action.

"Blast," she mumbled, quickly crossing to retrieve it. Her hand stilled just before snatching it up. Before her was a small picture on the page of Rowena Ravenclaw and holding back a few locks of her hair was a jeweled raven hairclip. "Harry!" she called excitedly. It looked like their anonymous friend truly did want to help them. Surely it wasn't a trap. They would have to set out quickly, if the tone of the message had been anything to go by, to retrieve it before anyone else did.

Lucius pulled the worn parchment from his pocket, opening it slowly and smoothing the wrinkles out so that he could read it again. Holding the small paper near the single candle in his dark cell, his cold, grey eyes showed no emotion as he read the words Rodolphus had written to him over two months prior. He knew the letter by heart, knew about his wife's betrayal--no matter what the Dark Lord demanded she do, it was betrayal--knew about his son's failure, and knew who the Dark Lord favored above all these days.

"Snape," he hissed softly, curling his hand into a fist.

Oh, they would all pay somehow. He'd made a mental list of everyone who'd wronged him. He'd bide his time and take whatever his Dark Lord tossed at him, all the while planning his revenge on each of them. As always, he crumpled the parchment with his fist and threw it against the wall, wishing he had the might to destroy it. However, if he did that, he feared he might lose some of the bitterness that had settled over him. It was this bitterness that would see his plans through, exacting revenge on those who'd earned his wrath, keeping him from losing sight of what was important.

A click of the door behind him caused him to quickly pick the parchment up and pocket it before turning around. Once he did so, he blinked rapidly, disbelieving what he was seeing. "Have I finally gone mad then?" he murmured aloud.

"You've not gone mental, old friend," came the quiet voice of Severus as he stepped out of the shadows near the doorway.

"You dare call me *that*?" he asked, unable to keep the resentment from his voice. "What the hell are you doing here? How did you get by the guards? I could kill you with my bare hands!"

"We've been fortunate enough to find a greedy guard who didn't mind granting us access from an old, unused passage." He frowned. "I thought you might be angry once you found out. In fact, I insisted that I be the one to get you so that I could tell you all that has passed. I suppose, from the look on your face and your murderous threat, someone has already done that," Severus said, striding forward confidently. "However, I do have faith that you will have the good sense to understand that our Lord will not take no for an answer when he wants something."

"But you got what you wanted, didn't you? You've always coveted my life: my wife, my money, my connections..." Lucius accused, straightening his back.

"I cannot deny that I have often longed for wealth and a woman in my bed when the urge came to me," Severus said quietly, allowing an uncomfortable silence to stretch between them.

At his friend's silence, Lucius asked, "And did she...? Was that what she wanted?"

Severus turned away from him then, pulling down the hood that had helped to conceal his identity, as he glanced about the room. "You know that you are all she ever wants." His voice was barely audible.

Feeling slightly mollified, Lucius replied, "Yet she still chose to do it. She gave herself to you."

"It was that or death."

"She should have chosen death," he said firmly. "She may yet wish that she had."

"She would have, I think," Severus said sagely, turning back to face Lucius, eyes glinting with annoyance. "But she would never have allowed Draco to die, would she? No, I think not. She's much too good of a mother for that. Nor would you have wanted her to. I believe you care for your son much more than you let on." At these words, his gaze intensified, driving home his point.

"Our Lord would have killed Draco had she declined?" Lucius asked incredulously. "That is ridiculous! He's just a boy, and he should never have been given..." He shut his mouth quickly, not wanting to say too much in Severus' presence. He was uncertain where the man's loyalties stood, especially after all that passed. They used to be able to speak freely on how they felt, but much had happened to change things.

"I agree," Severus said with a nod. "Your wife has not been unfaithful otherwise."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Lucius," he began, sigh of frustration edging his words, "that it was only the one time. There was a potion that I created to ensure that a repeat was unnecessary. I never touched her again. Nor did she ask me to."

"Why, Severus, are you telling me this? Do you fear for her life?" When Snape didn't answer, he asked, "Or do you fear for the life that grows within her body?" Again, Snape didn't answer. "So, that has to be it. You are here to soothe things over so that I won't do anything to harm your child or Narcissa. Perhaps you do feel something more for her. Your personal feelings for a woman never stopped you from doing business as usual. Even back when your precious L--"

Stepping closer and glaring at him fiercely, Severus said, voice low, "I am simply here to let you know that I have not been inappropriate with your wife, only doing what was bid that one time as did she. You can take my words as they are meant, or you can keep them in your mind and let them fester until they drive you mad. I certainly don't give a fuck either way." He waited a moment before adding, "And I do not have to worry about anything happening to my child... or her."

"And, pray tell, why not?" Lucius asked, surprised by Severus' confidence.

"Because if you touch her or the child, the Dark Lord will have you killed," Severus said simply before moving back, adding, "likely by my hand." He sneered slightly. "I happen to know, Lucius, that, unlike your wife, you value your life too much to allow yourself to do something that might jeopardize it. Tell me, *old friend*, what would you have done if our roles had been reversed? Would you have chosen death for Draco or yourself had you been given the choices that she was given?" Silence. "I see we understand each other." He strode to the door and pulled his hood back up. "Come, Lucius. We've been very lucky this night and have been able to get in undetected."

"Are you serious? I'm truly being released?"

"As I said earlier, we're breaking you out," Snape said with a smirk. "Rodolphus and the others are getting everyone else. It's simple enough. The greed of that one man with a few Imperius Curses to a couple of weaker guards... and death to one is all it took to gain entrance to this level." Without another glance at Lucius, Snape tossed him a wand. "Follow me."

Knowing he could not do anything to jeopardize his release, he decided it would be prudent to press things no further at the moment. Pending freedom was just too enticing. "Where will we go?"

"You will go to our Lord for a time and get *reacquainted* with our ways," Severus said, peeking around the corner.

"And Narcissa?" Lucius questioned, knowing he'd not like the answer.

"She will remain in my care until she births the child." Severus turned on him suddenly. "Don't let this cloud your mind. Not now. There are other things of greater importance."

Nodding, Lucius followed him in silence, passing one dead guard along the way.

Draco sat staring sullenly out of his window. *I wonder how Mother is doing? I bet Snape is using her daily, the git! Oh, I can't wait for Father to escape and find out. I know he will find a way soon...then Snape will pay...Malfoy style.*

Suddenly, Draco heard a scratching sound, and he looked up to see his door inching open. He swallowed back the bile that had risen in his throat. He had to be nice to this rat if he ever thought of getting away from this place. The horrid things he'd had to say lately were getting to him, and he'd even been forced to let the rat watch him shower. Things were getting out of hand. He had to do something... and soon.

Sniffing the air as if smelling Draco's scent, Wormtail greeted, "Hello, pretty little Malfoy. I have a surprise for you!"

Oh, God... "What sort?"

"Well, the Dark Lord wants me to fetch something of great importance for him. I am his most trusted and loyal servant, you know, and if you are very good to me--very good to me--I will allow you to go with me, and I will make certain you can leave this room more." Wormtail decided not to let Draco know that his Lord had ordered him to bring Draco along.

"Um... How good?" Draco prayed he wouldn't be sick right there on the floor. He had some idea of what Wormtail wanted, as the bastard had been hinting at it for the last few days. He could only hope it was something simple, a few words to tide him over or... He wondered how quickly the Dark Lord would appear to destroy him if he was able to overpower and kill Wormtail. *If you'd muster the bollocks to do so, you little coward,* a snide voice inside his mind called.

Walking up to Draco and leaning close so that he could whisper in his ear, he told him, "I think you must have some idea what I would like from you, yes? We don't have time just now. It's very important we retrieve this item as quickly as possible, but just as soon as we get back. Do you agree to this?"

"Yes, whatever you say, Wormtail." Draco, fighting off the sickness from the foul odor coming from the small rotund wizard, would have told him anything to get out of those rooms. If he was ever going to make a break for his freedom, he would have to do something on this trip. He'd find a way to come back for his mother somehow.

"Very good. Now, hold on to me tightly so that I can Apparate us there."

As soon as they reached their destination, Draco immediately let the rat go and took a large step back, having felt an obvious arousal pressing against his leg. He looked around and sneered at his filthy surroundings. *This looks like a place this little lecher would feel comfortable coming to!*

"Draco...I'm afraid I can't wait," Wormtail said suddenly. "I would like my service now." He pointed down to floor in front of him and gestured for Draco to move there.

Hell and damnation! "But what of the Dark Lord? Did he not send us here to get something specific for him? Quickly?"

"Yes," Wormtail agreed, quivering in his lust. "But he won't hear us. He won't know! I'll just say it took a while to find it. Oh, I have just got to have your hot little mouth on me, Luc...er...Draco!" He

Oh, great! He has a thing for father and wants to live out his little fantasy with me, the next best thing. Ruddy hell! What can I do to stall this? "Are you sure? We had better get what he wants so that you can take it back to him quickly. No doubt, he will be grateful!"

"It won't take me long to finish." His eyes became hard. "You said you wanted to be my *friend*, Draco. I am beginning to think you have changed your mind."

"No, I haven't. You want to do this here? What if someone comes in? We don't know who's about in this place!" Draco said, sounding incredulous. When Wormtail simply nodded, Draco said, "Fine," and dropped to his knees.

The sight of a Malfoy, any Malfoy, on their knees before him excited the rat beyond measure. He quickly started to fumble with his pants. Right before he could lower them, Draco took advantage of his aroused state and elbowed him in the stomach.

When Wormtail doubled over, Draco grabbed his wand and shouted, *Stupefy!*

As soon as Wormtail fell, Draco jumped up and began running as fast as he could in the direction he thought would take him from the hellhole. Suddenly, he rammed into a hard body and fell backwards onto the ground, losing the stolen wand as he did so. When he looked up to see who he'd crashed into, he shouted, "Bloody hell! Could this day get any worse?"

Notes: We apologize for the length of time that it took between updates. Real life has been terribly unreasonable lately. We'll be back in the swing of things now though, already planning out the next chapter and hoping to upload it in five days.

Thanks for reading and for letting us know what you think. We've moved things forward just a bit. In the next chapter, we will have a little Snape and Hermione interaction finally. Woohoo!

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 11

Draco runs into the trio, literally. Lucius and Narcissa face off, as does Hermione and Ron. Snape watches Grimmauld Place, making plans of his own.

Disclaimer: We're having a bit of fun with some of J.K.R.'s characters. No Galleons are being made. Just smiles...hopefully!

Thanks go to RobisonRocket for beta reading this!

Ron took the lead as they walked into the abandoned mill, not caring that Harry had intended to go first. He didn't want to have to watch Hermione walk in front of him and see the sway of her hips or the shake of her arse, which he was no longer allowed to touch. Ever since their argument, Hermione had been pointedly ignoring him and making certain to avoid being alone with him. He supposed he'd been pressuring her some, but hell, what did she expect? She was his girlfriend! Damn it! Wasn't he entitled to a little affection?

He had written to Lavender about the situation, and looking back, Ron admitted...if only to himself...that maybe Lavender was not the best person to confide in. However, he knew that at least *she* cared about how he felt and would listen. In her last letter, in fact, she'd admitted she wanted another chance, and part of him was feeling inclined to give her one.

It wasn't that he didn't love Hermione...Merlin knew he did...but it was somehow different with Lavender. She didn't question his needs, and she had needs that he didn't mind helping her with. He ultimately figured that if Hermione was putting him off and saying such things about their intimate times together, then she truly didn't love him. Not like he needed to be loved anyway. He sighed. If only she would give him some sort of sign... He closed his eyes, trying to calm himself. He didn't want to get worked up over their situation again...not when they were about to find a Horcrux and might run into trouble.

It was bad enough that he had Percy on his mind. That bloody git waltzed into Sunday dinner at the Burrow announcing that his wife...no one had known that he'd married Penelope...was expecting a child. Since then, their mum had been owling constantly, making plans for a party in their honor and requesting strange things. What did he care about Percy anymore? The prat only came around if he needed something, and now he was trying to get back in the family? Ron smirked to himself. *He probably sees he's wrong about things now that Dad's higher up than him at the Ministry. That's right. All that arse kissing didn't exactly pay off. Not when it was to the wrong blokes.* Suddenly, something rammed into him and hit the ground.

Ron opened his eyes in surprise and looked down at Draco Malfoy, who was sprawled at his feet. He snarled, "Well, what have we here? Harry? Look who else has decided to drop by! What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Ron was just itching to punch his pointy little face, enabling him to release some pent up frustration.

Draco was very torn. He had to get away from Wormtail before he woke up, else he wanted to be his playmate, but he didn't want to beg Potter and his groupies for help either. Part of him knew, though, that if anyone could help him, it would be the three imbeciles before him. Looking at the three shocked faces, he decided to direct his words to the Prick Who Lived, who seemed to have the least hatred in his expression. "Potter, we have to go. *Now!* Before he awakens!" He hooked a thumb behind him towards the body.

"Oh, I don't think so!" Weasley said angrily, pulling him up by the front of his robes. "Why are you here? On a mission for your Lord?"

"Hush, Ron!" Granger said, elbowing him roughly. "Don't go blabbing just because you're angry with me!"

Weasley glared at her, clenching the fist of his free hand. His wand never left Draco's face. The scene, however, gave Draco a little hope. If he could pit one against the other, someone would help him. He once again looked at each face. *What were they doing here at the same time Wormtail and I were ordered to come? Did they know something?* Fighting his fear of the rat waking and his curiosity to find out what the golden trio was up to, he gave in and said, "I suppose we are here for the same reason." They didn't have to know that he had no idea what he was supposed to be retrieving.

"So, you know then?" Potter asked, face paling slightly for a moment before he took a step forward. "It would only make sense that Voldemort would send you here."

Raising a self-important eyebrow, Draco lied, "Of course I know. How did you find out?" He hated the way Potter simply said the Dark Lord's name without worry... hated it and reluctantly admired it. No other person, even his own father, dared to say the name in such a manner.

"Now is not the time to be discussing all of this, Harry!" Granger said, suddenly flicking her wand to disarm Draco of Wormtail's wand.

"Oi!" Draco yelled, trying to snatch it back...to no avail.

Weasley dug his wand into Draco's face, saying through clenched teeth, "I dare you to take another step towards her, mate."

Nervously, Draco had the urge to look around. He felt as if he were being watched, and he could only hope that Wormtail wasn't watching, pretending to still be out. "Back off, Weasley," he gritted out finally, holding up his hands in surrender. *Let him think he's won*, he thought to himself.

Granger pointed to a set of old cabinets to their right. "Look," she said, voice a near whisper. "It should be just there... in that cabinet. Let's just get it and go."

"What of Malfoy?" Weasley asked furiously. "We can't let him go now! He knows that we know! He'll run off and tell You-Know-Who!"

When she started to argue, Potter held up a hand firmly. "He's right, Hermione. We can't just leave him here now."

"I know that! Do you boys think I am stupid?" Sighing with frustration, she said, "I was going to suggest that we bind Malfoy, get what we came for, and take him back with us. He can answer all of our questions at headquarters."

Weasley rolled his eyes. "Bloody brilliant, Hermione," he said sarcastically. "And give him access to a Secret-Kept place? I don't trust the ferret and don't want him there!"

Draco did not like being spoken of as if he was not here, but he really needed to get away from Wormtail. Besides, he'd be safe with the stupid Gryffindors until he could figure out a means to get his mother away from Snape. However, not wanting to be too suspicious, he knew that it would not do to appear to be too eager. They would suspect something, especially Granger. "I think not. It seems we were all after the same thing, so what makes you pinheads think I would willingly go with you? I can just leave and never say that I saw you."

"Umm, maybe because you have no choice? Mione's got your wand, you git!" Ron bit out, hate showing in his voice. "Hang on... You said we had to go before he awakens."

Potter turned from his other friend to look at Draco. "That's right. You did say that. Who are you talking about? Who's here?"

Before he could answer, Granger, who had started towards the cabinet, gasped and pointed. "Harry, Ron, it's Pettigrew! Just there!"

Suddenly without any warning, Weasley pointed his wand at Draco and shouted, *Petrificus Totalus!*

When Draco stiffened and fell, Harry turned to Ron. "RON! What are you doing?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing? Are you daft? He is here with that rat bastard! We have to get back before they notice we've gone, and I for one don't feel like talking to this Death Eater scum. Did you forget about all that he's done this past year, Harry?"

Obviously fighting his temper, which was no easy feat lately, Harry told Ron, "No, I haven't forgotten anything. But I watched him more closely than either of you, and I say he was wavering on his decision to follow Voldemort's orders! I *know* he faltered when he tried to kill Dumbledore. If Snape hadn't been there..." Shaking his head as if to clear that image, he said, "I suppose it doesn't matter right now. He has to come with us."

Hermione, who had walked over to the cabinet to fetch the hairclip, said, "I don't like it, but I suppose there is nothing for it now. I think we should go before Pettigrew wakes up."

"Before he wakes up?" Ron asked incredulously.

"We're going to bind him, too," Harry said.

"No, we mustn't!" Hermione said urgently. "The way I see it," she said, lowering her voice, "is that they had no idea we'd be here. Wormtail will have to go back without Malfoy and, more importantly, without the clip, which is likely what they were after. Maybe Vo-Voldemort won't know that we were the ones to take it."

"He betrayed my parents," Harry said grimly, gazing at the fat lump on the floor. "But... you're right. I can and will deal with him later."

"She's always right," Ron said bitterly. "Even in this, I guess."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "How are we going to explain Malfoy being at headquarters to the others when they come around for our meetings?"

"Well, they all know that we are doing the job Dumbledore assigned us before he... Well, before. We will just be honest and say that we ran into him and for safety reasons, brought him back with us," Harry explained, shrugging.

"Oh, yeah! Moody will love that," Ron said sarcastically. "Constant vigilance and all that rot."

"This *is* being vigilant, Ronald! Besides, we can't just leave him here. He has hexed him," she pointed at Wormtail, "for some reason. What if he was trying to hurt Malfoy? We need to find out what was going on and what they know. I think... I think that Malfoy is keeping something from us. This is the only way to find out what." She looked around nervously. "Now, let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps!"

"Why are you defending Malfoy now, Hermione? A couple years ago, you slapped him in the face, and now you're acting as his champion?"

"For heaven's sake! I am only being reasonable! Surely you see that..."

"I'll tell you what I see! I see you defending this rotten excuse for a person!"

"ENOUGH!" Harry yelled. "Stop this right now! It's annoying and distracting. He is going, and that is final!" When he got nods of agreement from both of his friends, he turned to Draco, flicking his wand to levitate him.

Once they were all outside, he stopped to whisper to Draco. *Finite Incantatem*. All right?"

Draco nodded, eyes blinking as he took in the bright sunlight.

Harry kept his voice low and said, "The place we are going to is Secret-Kept. The address is number twelve, Grimmauld Place."

"Sounds familiar," Draco muttered.

Just as Harry put his arm through Draco's, he heard a twig snap. He whirled around, but he didn't see anything out of place. He could tell that Hermione had heard it as well; their eyes meeting momentarily. "Let's go," he said. Once both Ron and Hermione had Disapparated, he closed his eyes and Disapparated himself and Malfoy, praying they wouldn't Splinch.

"Cissy, what's wrong?" Bellatrix asked as her sister ran into her room and collapsed onto the bed, sobbing uncontrollably.

When her sister didn't reply, she sat next to her, patting her shoulder affectionately. If Snape had harmed her sister, she would see to it that he saw the end of her wand. He should know better than to treat a pregnant woman so abominably. While she admired a man who could look at and treat a mother-to-be the same way he did before she became pregnant...unlike Rodolphus who felt the need to treat her as if she were a fragile doll...it wouldn't do to allow him to treat her sister in such a manner.

Pregnancy and motherhood obviously did something different to her sister than it did to her. Why, she couldn't imagine disobeying the Dark Lord just to bail her pampered child out of a predicament that he should be proud to be in. When she noticed her sister's tears waning, she asked, "What's the bastard done this time?"

Looking up and seeming to not care about her tear-streaked cheeks, Narcissa shook her head, saying, "Lucius," she choked back a sob, "has returned, and he..." Her sobs returned, snatching the ability to speak coherently.

Bellatrix frowned. "But that can't be right. I was told that I would be able to go along on the mission. They were meeting and making plans when we spoke earlier, but the actual breakout isn't scheduled until thirty minutes from now. I was just getting ready."

Narcissa wiped her eyes and face, taking a deep breath and trying to compose herself. In a steadier voice, she said, "No, Rodolphus didn't want you to go. He feared that you or the baby would be hurt. The Dark Lord agreed."

"WHAT?" Bellatrix screeched. "How dare he think to go behind my back to my Master and request that I be left behind!"

"I don't care about that just now," Narcissa snapped. "Lucius, he looked at me with such contempt, and he talked to me like I was nothing more than Mudblood scum! And Draco... oh, dear God, my boy..."

Focusing on her sister and pushing her anger aside for a moment, she asked, "What happened? Tell me everything. Leave nothing out."

"I was only back at the cottage that I'm sharing with Severus for a little while when he came in to tell me that the Dark Lord wished for me to return here with him and that Lucius and the others had been freed." She smiled sadly. "I was happy to hear it and frightened at the same time. He told me that all would be well and that Lucius knew everything."

"And?" Bella prompted when she seemed lost in thought.

"We returned not long after. I started to go to Lucius' side, but Severus pulled me back, forcing me to remain with him for some reason, and told me to be still. I..."

"How dare he think to treat you in such a way!" Bella interjected vehemently. "He's lucky to have even been allowed to touch you!"

"I know," Narcissa agreed, "but he was right in this instance. He must have known that the Dark Lord would have reprimanded me and that Lucius is quite angry with me."

"But still," Bella disagreed, "he's no right to command anything of you."

"Anyway, Lucius looked at me for a long moment...God, his eyes were so cold...and he eyed my stomach as if trying to see if I truly were pregnant." She stood and began pacing. "There was such loathing in his eyes...not only for me, but for Severus as well!"

"I can't blame him there," Bellatrix said with a snort. "About loathing Snape, that is."

"Hush, Bella," Narcissa scolded. "The Dark Lord was berating him so badly for being caught in the first place and saying how many Galleons we owe him for being lenient with me and Draco and for the cost of finally breaking them out." She stopped pacing and faced her sister. "As if we haven't given him enough already!"

"That's traitorous talk, Cissy," Bella said, quickly looking around. "Don't say such things."

"Lucius asked if I may be returned to him after I finish birthing Snape's child, and our Lord agreed that I could be, self-satisfied of course that we all seemed so miserable with the situation." She resumed her pacing. "Nothing seemed to faze Severus. He just stood by, seemingly bored, while my life was being decided for me, while my husband glared daggers at us."

"Well, it doesn't sound as bad as all of that," Bella said soothingly. "Your husband obviously still wants you."

"He acted as if I were property, Bella. It wasn't that he seemed to be eager to have me back, just to show that I was his, and he wanted to make sure Severus didn't get to keep me." She sighed. "And to think that I love him so deeply. I mean, yes, I have been engaging in fantasies of having sex with Severus again, but I was only lonely. Really."

"Do you fear for your life?" she asked her sister, noticing that Cissy's hands were shaking.

"I didn't... until Wormtail came in," she admitted.

"Wormtail? He's only just now returning? I would have thought that he'd have returned earlier. What of Draco?" she asked, not liking the pained expression on her sister's face.

"He said that Draco tricked him, took his wand, Stunned him before taking something that belonged to the Dark Lord, and took off, apparently to go into hiding." She moved to sit back next to Bella. "I was happy to hear that my son had escaped." She held up her hand when Bella tried to speak. "I know it's wrong, but I am certain you will understand one day when your child is born."

"I can't believe he just up and left!" Bella said incredulously. "He was being given a second chance. Our Lord will surely..." Her eyes narrowed. "Perhaps I should have a talk with Wormtail."

Narcissa shook her head. "Severus is seeing to it as we speak."

"Well, go on then. What happened next?"

"Lucius was so angry. He struck Wormtail repeatedly, obviously taking out anger...to the Dark Lord's approval of course." She gulped. "And then he turned on me..."

"Did he hit you?" Bella interrupted.

"No, he advanced on me, fists clenched at his sides, saying I had been a bad influence on our son and that our Lord was right about me being weak. He was going to hit me. I could see it in his eyes...oh, the malice there!"

"What stopped him?"

"Severus stepped in front of me," she said, eyes shining with new tears. "Told him that if he ever found out that I'd been touched in a harmful way, he would see to it that it never happened again."

"Well, it's about time Snape does something right," Bella said approvingly. "And your husband?"

"Oh, he didn't like it at all, even asking the Dark Lord for permission to deal with Severus' blatant interference." She chuckled mirthlessly. "He was immediately struck with the Cruciatus. I suppose he learned the hard way that Severus is not to be opposed and is the Dark Lord's favorite man these days, what with all he does for him."

Bella nodded. She knew only too well that she couldn't push Snape too far, especially not in front of the Dark Lord. "He'll think twice about doing it again."

"When that was done, I could nearly feel his humiliation and anger. It was just coming off of him in waves! It hurt me to see him so humiliated." She toyed with her wedding set, turning it around and around her finger. "He's been warned to never lay a hand on me, for I am only doing my reparation as directed and should not be viewed as if I'd outright betrayed him."

"See there? All will be well."

Narcissa shivered. "I suppose, but he looked at me and coldly said, 'I'll not lay a hand on her... or a wand.' I think that means he's going to find other ways to seek vengeance on me. I mean, what? He would have done the same thing, saved his own life when presented with the option to do so."

"You will be fine, my sister," Bella said, hugging her affectionately. "What of Draco? Have they not found him? What's his fate to be?"

"I th-think he's to be brought back for the Dark Lord to deal with personally when found," she said, voice cracking.

Bellatrix watched her sister fight more tears and admired the attempt. She supposed Narcissa was entitled to them, for it sounded as if Draco's days were numbered. When one turned his back on his Lord and was sought out for it, their lives were as good as forfeit. Why, the same thing had happened to her favorite cousin, Regulus, the misguided fool.

"Bella," Cissy began some time later, "I am going to try to save this child. I don't want to just hand her over to Severus. He won't know how to properly care for her."

"His decision has been made. You've no choice."

"I wonder... If something happened to Severus, surely the child would have to remain with me."

Shrugging, Bellatrix said, "I am not certain." She took in her sister's determined expression and added, "Don't think that you can go up against him and win, Cissy. He hoodwinked Dumbledore all these years. That should speak for something." Nodding, she said, "Just do as bidden. Things will work themselves out."

"Sometimes, Bellatrix, we have to do what we must for those we love."

Hermione glanced across the room to Draco and watched while he read from a book. His hair had grown out longer since he'd fled Hogwarts with Snape, but it lacked the sheen it once had. She supposed he hadn't been living the high life and part of her wondered how he was handling that. *What the bloody hell am I doing feeling sorry for Malfoy?* she wondered.

They'd found him nearly a week before, and they hadn't gotten him to say very much about what he'd been doing or where Snape was hiding. Harry had told her that Malfoy had been taught Occlumency by Bellatrix...something he'd overheard with Snape and Malfoy the previous Christmas. She supposed it didn't pay to try Legilimency on him, not that she could do it, mind, because she'd tried it on Ron once, whispering it quietly and gazing into his eyes. Nothing had happened. She'd decided to study up on it and had done just that, but she still felt that it would do her no good.

"Like what you're staring at?" Malfoy asked.

"O-oh..." she stammered. "Sorry."

He closed his book, tossed it aside, and moved to stand next to her chair. "What I don't get," he said, looking around in distaste, "is why you three are keeping me here. Every time someone comes over, you make certain I'm warded into my room so that they don't know." He swallowed and paused. "Aren't you going to alert the Aurors?"

"For what?" she asked, thinking she could try to be his friend. Maybe then he'd confide in her... the way he'd been confiding in Moaning Myrtle. Surely by now he felt the need to have a confidant.

"For... You know bloody well what for!" he said, yelling suddenly, white face turning red.

Hermione closed her own book and placed it next to her. She gazed up at him and calmly said, "Draco, Harry told us right after Snape killed Dumbledore that you wouldn't have done it, that you'd lowered your wand." She jutted her chin up and firmly said, "It's Snape who's the bad guy here. Not you. You're a prat, yes, but you're no murderer. All you did was run."

"But the Ministry, Wormtail says they're looking for me, will take me into custody or hex me on sight," he said nervously, as if thinking an Auror would pop into the room at any moment. "Isn't that true? He saw it in the *Prophet* he said."

"They would take you in, but what would they charge you for?" She could see the gleam in his eyes, which was a positive change from the bleak stare he'd had since they'd caught him. It looked to her as if hope had been brought to someone desolate, and it made her feel good that she had been the one to give him hope. However, in the next instant, that was shattered as Ron spoke from behind them.

"They'll arrest your arse, toss you into Azkaban, and forget the ward they use to lock you in, they will," Ron said hatefully. "That's right. Did the same thing to Stan Shunpike just because he was running his mouth and trying to impress some girls." Ron brushed past Draco roughly. "Just imagine what they'll do with a *true* Death Eater...one who is at fault for Dumbledore's death and my brother's getting injured at Hogwarts."

"Ron, stop it!" Hermione admonished.

Draco had paled and walked silently back over to his chair, where he sat and just gazed at the fire. Hermione felt that her progress was ruined, thanks to Ron and his big mouth. He was slowly but surely diminishing all that'd she'd felt for him...in that way.

"You have to spoil everything!" she said, suddenly springing up from her chair. "We were getting on just fine before *you* came in!"

"Getting cozy with the ferret, are you?" he said, turning his cold gaze on her. "That's bloody it!" The words were spoken like a threat.

"What do you mean?" she asked in confusion.

"You'd better decide on things, Hermione, and you'd better decide on them quickly, else I might not be around for you to fall back on when you finally think you have time for me," he said firmly.

"Everything doesn't have to be about us, Ron! You are completely missing the..."

"What's it got to be about? Can't be about you always trying to be five feet away from this git," he said angrily, hooking his thumb in Draco's direction. "If I didn't know any better, I might think that..."

"Bugger off, Weasel," Draco spat from his chair. "I expect she knows who's the better company out of the two of us then, even if she is a Mu..."

His words were cut short, but Hermione knew he'd been about to call her a Mudblood. She hoped the hurt didn't show in her expression, but one look at Ron's thunderous face told her that he knew it, and though he might be mad at her, he wouldn't let anyone hurt her. No, that was a job he reserved for himself.

When Ron physically charged Draco, starting a round of grunting, hitting, and rolling about on the floor, she said nothing, simply backing out of the room to yell for Harry.

"What is it?" he asked, running forward with his wand drawn.

"Sort them out," she said quietly before making her way up to her bedroom, greatly disappointed. Once inside, she locked the door and threw herself on top of the mattress. "Some things will never change," she whispered aloud before tears of hurt washed over her.

She was uncertain if she was upset with Ron's words, with herself for treating him terribly, with the situation, or with Draco for still being the prat he'd always been when she'd hoped that maybe he could change. *So much for getting him to confide in me,* she thought bitterly. *Harry's likely going to be the one to gain his confidence.* She snorted at the thought of Ron and Draco becoming friendly. "That would be a cold day in hell."

Deciding to stop feeling sorry for herself, she got up and made her way to the desk in the corner, taking out a hidden piece of paper. An owl had delivered a letter to her the day before, and since the others' names weren't on the parchment, she'd kept it from them. Looking down at the paper, handwriting still oddly familiar, she read the message once again.

Hermione Granger,

You are doing the right thing. I know you have another boarder, and I agree that he should be kept safe. Have you destroyed the previous gift that I led you to find? If the answer is no, which I'd bet it is, perhaps you should look closely at the desk in your home's study. I am certain that there might be a hidden drawer with a book that can help you.

There is another gift that I am aware of. I shall be in touch when it is safe to obtain.

A friend.

She knew that she should show Harry and Ron the note. She'd wanted to locate the hidden drawer and retrieve the book first, but she hadn't been able to find anything, no matter how many ward detectors she'd tried. In wanting to save Harry added stress, she'd made things worse for herself. Now she'd have to explain why she'd kept the note a secret. Partly she knew it was because she didn't want to hear their misgivings. How did this person know so much about headquarters? About the task Dumbledore gave them? Was it an Order member who just didn't want to be involved? Something told her that it might be Remus Lupin, and that would make sense. He did work for Dumbledore doing God knows what, and he likely wouldn't want to be involved because of his Auror girlfriend. Hadn't he looked at her knowingly just the day before when he'd stopped by? She shoved the parchment into her pocket and decided to go down to show Harry.

From the shadows of the trees in the backyard, Severus watched the light appear in her window. If any of the dunderheads could figure out where to go next with limited instruction, it would be her. He only hoped that she didn't put the clues together as to who he actually was. Satisfied that all was well, he slowly backed away, making certain not to trip any of the substandard warding that they had in place, which were done in hopes of detecting him if he neared. They should know better than to think that they could keep him out if he wanted in.

He'd been watching them when they'd gone for the Horcrux, but he was surprised to see Draco and Wormtail there. That was something that his Master hadn't confided in him...not until after Wormtail had failed. Severus' plans to aid them could have been thwarted, but luckily, Draco was able to get the upper hand on Wormtail quickly. Severus had nearly been forced to hex the little bastard himself, the dirty little rat. Arrogant idiot that Potter may be, the boy had enough sense to not turn Draco over to the Ministry. Maybe some things could change. Was it that he was finally learning things now that he was on his own in the wake of Dumbledore's death? Had the old man's plans finally come to fruition? That remained to be seen.

Southern's Notes: And I swear this time. There will be real interaction with Hermione and Snape. Things move forward again somewhat, and it's time to have something happen. I believe we've got the background down enough to get on with things. Muahahaha!

Christy's Notes: Things are moving right along. Seems like everyone has some sort of agenda!

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 11

Ron is unhappy about Draco's new role in things. Hermione and Snape finally meet and speak.

Disclaimer: We don't own this, unfortunately, but we do enjoy having fun with JKR's characters!

Thanks go to Soul Bound for beta reading this for us.

Ron sat in the library at Grimmauld Place, rather impatiently, as he waited for Hermione to come out of the locked study. She'd gone in there with Malfoy again, supposedly to find out more information on the next Horcrux. With the information their "friend" had been sending them, it didn't seem like she'd need the blond git's help.

Ron didn't know what else they talked about besides Horcrux research, and that did bother him some, but that wasn't the majority of his ill feelings about things. All he knew was that it had been almost three months since he'd had his hands on her. He was getting rather sick of the ferret and his act.

Even though Hermione had told him that she wanted to cool things for a while, Ron hadn't really believed her. Hadn't Lavender told him in her last letter how desirable he was? Of course Hermione wanted him...she just got distracted in those damn books sometimes. And Malfoy sure knew how to use that, being somewhat of a bookworm himself.

Of course it was an act. The pity was that only Ron could see through it. Bloody hell! Even Harry was falling for it and had taken to confiding everything to him. For all they knew, the whole thing about finding Draco had been a set up.

"Ron, mate, Draco is changing!" Harry had told him the week before. "Do you think he enjoyed hiding out with Pettigrew? Having that rat paw him and such? He knows how Voldemort is now, Ron. He took his mum and punished her in some way for crying out loud!"

Ron got up from his chair and started pacing, running his hand through his hair. And it wasn't as though they'd only recently started to confide these things to him. In only a few weeks, Harry and Hermione had begun to trust Draco with most of their secrets, believing that he could be of some help. "Well, a hippogriff doesn't change his feathers, I say," Ron muttered to himself. "We don't know for sure that Vold...er...the Dark Lord punished his mum because he won't tell us what the punishment was, will he?"

Even the blasted Kneazle, who'd ousted that blasted rat quick enough, seemed to be rather fond of Malfoy! He could admit to trusting Crookshanks' judgment on some things, but the beast wasn't bound to be right all the time, was he?

And another thing, after we told Mum and the others the truth about having Draco here, allowing them to come here and us to go there, how could those two not have noticed how he paws on Hermione one second and then eyes Ginny the next? When she enters a room, he doesn't take his eyes off of her! She should have stayed at Hogwarts for the holidays! I thought Harry thought it was too dangerous for her, and yet there she is at home and coming here with our parents!

Ron had been thinking that he would have to confront Hermione, scare her some. If she thought that it was either him or Malfoy, which it really was, he had no doubt that she would tell Malfoy to shove off. Then when Hermione tossed him over, Harry would be quick to follow. Then things would be back to normal, the way Ron liked them.

If that failed, then Ron decided he'd have to give in to Lavender's incessant whinging and ask her to Christmas dinner at the Burrow. Hermione had always been jealous of Lavender...

"... That book that my source told me of, we can begin to work out how to destroy the ones we've already found," Hermione was saying as she walked into the library.

Ron let out a growl at the sight before him. There was *his* girl, walking right in the middle of Malfoy and Harry, talking excitedly and gesturing as she did when she felt passionate about something.

"I don't know about that source, Mione. We don't really know anything about him or her," Harry started, only to be interrupted by a furious Ron.

"How cozy! Is there a new trio in the making?"

"Ron! You startled me!" Hermione said. "What's wrong with you?"

"I need to talk to you...alone." He watched as she chewed her lip...either nervously or in thought...it was hard for him to tell.

"Ron, we can have nothing to say to one another that Harry and Draco couldn't hear, surely. What's on your mind?" She walked to the couch and sat primly.

"I said I want to talk to you *alone*, Hermione! What's the matter with you?"

She furrowed her brow in a way that told Ron she was getting upset. Good. "Nothing is the matter with me, Ronald! I just want to look through the books in here and see if we have this one that our source let me know of! It has information on destroying Horcruxes..."

"Is that all you ever think of? I am standing here, right in front of your face, upset and needing to talk to you! Don't you care about that at all?"

Snickering, Draco said, "Apparently not."

Ron whirled to face Malfoy. "Shut it, Ferret! Why don't you go back to your Master, eh? You're not wanted here!" Ron had bunched his fists at his sides, longing to plow them into Malfoy's face.

"Ron!" Harry said. "Draco has been a lot of help to us. As a matter of fact, we wouldn't have found that last Horcrux without him...you know that!"

"What I know is that he has you both fooled!" In his anger, he turned to Hermione, eyes blazing. "It's time you made a choice ~~clear~~. You can't have it both ways. Decide now: him or me!"

Hermione sucked in a breath. "Ron, I've told you..."

"No! No more games!" he shouted, anger evident in his entire being. "I have sat by and watched you studying books with him, going off behind closed doors to do God knows what with him, and the two of you clawing each other. I am tired of it, Hermione. Decide. Now."

"That's not fair, Ron," she told him quietly. "And you are being unreasonable. There's nothing more than friendship between Draco and me...or you and me for that matter. We've already had this discussion, and I for one don't care to repeat it."

Ron noticed the smug look on Draco's face and the worried look on Harry's. "You would actually choose him? Over me? The bloody prat nearly called you a Mudblood during his first week here, and both of you seem to act like that's all right! After all these years we've been friends, you would actually..."

"YOU CHOSE LAVENDER OVER ME! How can you stand there and say these things? There is nothing but friendship between Draco and me, Ron, and I don't appreciate your attitude."

"It always comes back to Lavender, eh, Hermione?" Ron said as if that was the only thing he'd heard. "You're still jealous of her after all this time? Look," he said before she could comment, "it's not her I want; it's you! But you have to leave off with Malfoy because I won't have it, Mione."

Hermione's face contorted with anger and turned a dark red shade. "You... won't... have... it? YOU WON'T HAVE IT? Well, I've never asked you to, have I? I *will* leave off with Draco! We are friends. Nothing more. But if we wanted more, it would be no concern of yours, would it? We are no longer a couple!"

"I know you don't mean that. After this Horcrux business is finished, we can pick our relationship back up."

"No, that's not what I want. I'm sorry, but it's just not." Hermione looked sad for a moment. "Ron, I do care for you. You're one of my best friends, but..."

Draco burst out laughing, looking as if he couldn't hold his glee in any longer. "There, there, Weasley. She loves you...as a friend."

Ron spun around and almost tripped in his anger. "Shut it, Malfoy! Nobody asked you!" Then he spun back to Hermione and took a few steps towards her, fists once again clenched at his sides. "Hermione, I am warning you..."

"That'll do, mate," Harry said in a deceptively low, calm voice, stepping closer. "I think you'd better calm down and back off of her."

"Don't tell me what you think I'd better do, Harry. I don't recall asking," Ron spat in his fury.

"Nevertheless..."

"You're just as bad as she is! Don't you see him watching Ginny all the time?" Ron smirked at Harry's confused look. "That's right. When we've been at the Burrow, he watches her."

Harry looked from Ron to Draco, who sat silently. "Draco? What's that about?"

Sounding bored, Draco told Harry, "I have no idea, really. As if I would look at a *Weasley* in that way. Please. She's all yours, if you want her."

Proud that Malfoy was sounding more like his old self, Ron looked at Hermione who was sitting there with an odd expression on her face. "Something wrong with my sister, Malfoy?" Ron baited, wanting him to further incriminate himself.

Raising an eyebrow, Draco said, "Other than the fact that she is related to you?"

"Watch it," Harry said coolly to Draco. Ron took two steps towards Malfoy when Harry stepped in front of him and put his hands on his chest. "Don't. This is ridiculous! We shouldn't be fighting amongst ourselves, you know!"

That hurt Ron more than he would let show. His chest felt tight, as if a vice was squeezing inside him. All but whispering, he asked, "You'd actually take his side, Harry? What about you, Hermione? Is it Malfoy then?"

"Ron, please don't do this. Harry and I love you, but there is nothing wrong with letting Draco help us! He has inside information!"

"Yeah, so did Snape. Look where that got us." Ron felt momentarily bad for the pained expression on Harry's face, but quickly quashed it when he remembered Harry's defense of Malfoy.

Surprisingly, Malfoy's face contorted in anger at the mention of Snape. "Oh, he'll get his, Weasley. Count on it." Suddenly, Malfoy turned and left the room.

Harry took his hands off of Ron's chest and laid one on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Ron, honestly, Draco is better than he was at Hogwarts, and he is being a huge help..."

Ron shrugged Harry's hand off of him and turned to Hermione. "What's it going to be, Mione? Decide."

"Ron, you're being unreasonable! Don't do this, please."

"I see. Draco then." Ron turned to walk out of the library and looked back at Hermione. "If you talk to Ginny before I do, would you let her know that Lavender will be staying a few days around Christmas? Tell her to make room for her in her room."

"What? Ron, you can't! There is too much we have to keep secret now..." But her words were falling on deaf ears as Ron walked out and shut the door, happy that his parting shot hit its mark.

Harry walked over to Hermione and put his arms around her. "Don't worry, love. Ron will get over it. Just give him a day or two."

She laid her head on his shoulder. "Perhaps, but I may not."

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"Bellatrix, I wouldn't be here if I didn't deem it necessary," Severus said, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"I don't know that I truly feel up to moving about," she said with a bored yawn and a hand lightly caressing her bulging stomach.

"Indeed? Then I shall inform your sister of your sentiments," he said with a nod, knowing he'd get a rise out of her.

"Come back here, Snape," she said, sitting upright quickly. "I don't want you telling her anything. I simply don't trust your motives. Why come to me for help now? Does the Dark Lord know you're here? Not getting attached to Lucius' wife, are you?" She tsked loudly and wagged a finger at him. "I don't know that he'd appreciate that. He wants her returned to him after she births your spawn, you see."

"I will gladly escort her back to her husband's bed once her duty is done," Severus began, "and as for the Master knowing about my request, he's the one who thought I should come here. However, I will be glad to inform him of your laziness and explain that the past few months of being forced to remain behind and not doing any other duties has made you a bit of a sloth."

"How dare you say that to me! You know how I feel about my sister and about doing my Master's will!" She stood and moved towards him menacingly. "Show me where she is."

"As you wish," he said mockingly, grabbing her arm to Side-Along Apparate her to the home he shared with Narcissa. Once there, he released her quickly and nodded towards her bedroom. "She's there."

Giving him a glare, she went into the room he directed and slammed the door behind her. Severus smirked and shook his head. He had things to do, and he didn't feel like sitting around to mollycoddle Narcissa all day. The woman had become quite a nuisance lately, continuously asking for something or other and complaining about aches and illnesses. He was glad that there were only a couple of months left before she was due to give birth. It wasn't that he was anxious to look after a newly born infant. In fact, he wasn't looking forward to that at all, but he wanted to send her on her way. The sooner she returned to her husband, the sooner things could return to normal.

Not wasting another moment, he checked to make certain his vial of Polyjuice was still in his pocket and Disapparated away, leaving Bellatrix in charge of Narcissa and her depressed blubbering. Once in the darkened alleyway, he drank the contents of the vial and felt his body shortening and widening as it took on the appearance of the Muggle he'd snatched hair from. Quickly, he made his way onto the streets of Muggle London and walked towards the designated area of the park that he was to meet Hermione Granger in.

"She'd better be alone," he said to himself. To ensure his safety, he placed wards to alert him of any presences other than hers and to keep anyone from hearing what they discussed. It wasn't long before she walked over to the bench he was seated on.

"Hello," she said softly.

"Miss Granger," he replied gruffly, nodding his head in greeting.

"So, it is you," she said in relief. "I was uncertain what to expect, and... You don't look familiar to me at all. I was expecting someone else."

"Indeed," he commented. "Have a seat. We've much to discuss in very little time."

She remained standing and gazed at him with a furrowed brow. "I do know you, don't I? You're in disguise...probably Polyjuiced."

"Brilliant deduction, Miss Granger. Then again, you always were a know-it-all," he commented dryly. "Now, are you going to sit down, or do you plan to gawp at me all afternoon? My time is precious."

With a small thump, she sat at the end of the bench, eyes wide. "You've something for me?" she finally asked.

He simply pulled a parchment from the pocket of the coat he'd quickly Transfigured his robes into after drinking the potion and handed it to her. He watched as she eagerly went through the words he'd written.

Her head lifted. "Godric's Hollow then?"

Nodding, he said, "I'm certain."

"Why are you doing this?" she blurted.

"My reasons are my own."

She bit her lip and seemed to be measuring words in her mind. "Sir, I think... in fact, I know who you are."

"Is that so?" he asked, arching an eyebrow. "Enlighten me."

"Professor Snape," she said in a tone so soft he barely heard her.

Instinctively, his hand lowered to the pocket of his coat where his wand lay nestled. "Why do you say this?"

"The last couple of letters you sent... You sounded just like him at some parts, and you know so much about everything...things nobody else knows." She swallowed thickly. "And even though you've a different voice right now, your words and mannerisms are his...yours, I mean. And you're the only person who ever calls me a know-it-all." She jutted her chin up challengingly. "Am I wrong?"

"What do you plan to do with this information?" he asked, noting that she didn't seem to fear him.

"I... Nothing...for now."

"I see," he said with a nod.

She chuckled. "I see, too."

"Is that so?"

"You wanted me to know it was you," she said firmly. "You want me to testify on your behalf after things are over." She shook her head. "I'd hate to say this, Professor, but after what happened... I don't know that my words will help you."

Suddenly angry, he leaned forward and heatedly said, "I am *not* asking for your help to keep me out of Azkaban, girl. I doubt I will live long enough to have a trial. There is something else that I request that you do for me." When she visibly bristled, he held up a hand. "Don't worry. Your virtue is quite safe with me. This is something of another matter entirely."

"Well? What is it then? Your help and information for what?"

"I cannot justifiably say at this moment," he admitted. "But upon my demise, you will receive instructions."

"But, sir..."

"Do I have your word?" he asked. "It's of utmost importance."

"I don't know what you're asking of me. I can't just agree to something like this."

"Of everyone in our world that I could have turned to in this, I chose *you*, and you do owe me for the information I've been giving you." He decided to sweeten the deal. "And if you want to know the Dark Lord's location when the time comes, you'd better agree."

"All right," she said reluctantly. "I will help you in what you ask so long as it's nothing that will harm me or anyone else."

"Agreed." He rose stiffly. "I will be in touch soon." Pointing to the parchment in her hand, he said, "Bring Draco with you. He'll be of some help in dismantling the warding. It's much like those on his own home."

"Will I see you again?" she asked, standing quickly.

"I see no reason to. I will continue to owl you as per normal. I simply wanted to speak to you in person to judge your reaction for myself and to procure your promise on my demands."

"There are so many things that I want to ask you..."

"And I doubt I would answer any of them." He nodded briskly. "Good day." Before she could say anything else, his long strides sped him away from her until he could safely Disapparate.

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Ginny sat in her attic, staring out of the window. Lavender had only been at the Burrow a few hours, and already Ginny wanted to kill her. She was so bad in fact that Ginny decided she would rather spend time with the ghoul. *How does Hermione stand being around that cow for an entire school year?*

Sighing, Ginny leaned her forehead on the window. *Why does Ron have to be such a git? He knows Hermione is better for him than Lavender! What is he thinking? If he isn't careful, he's going to lose the best thing that's ever happened to him and end up miserable with that stupid bint! There is no way that girl makes him happy... She makes me want to puke.*

I suppose Christmas dinner will be ruined now. I don't see how it can't be, what with Lavender sitting there shooting Hermione smug looks all the time. If she does that, I hope Hermione slaps that look right off her face! Well, she's a better person than I am, that's all I know.

Harry is no better. She absently wiped the tears that had started falling down her cheeks. Everything was so messed up! I don't see why we can't be together. Everyone knows that he is close to my family and that we dated. I don't see how being with him could put me in any more danger than I am already in. Besides, anyone who doesn't support that mad man is in danger anyway.

If only he could trust and confide in me... Let me join in on whatever it is that they're doing. I know I could be of some help...I'm not stupid or helpless! As much as I love her, I have always envied Hermione that part of Harry's love. Well, the three of them actually. She shifted to get more comfortable and leaned her back against the wall.

Closing her eyes, she folded her arms across her chest and stopped wiping the tears, not caring about them anymore. *They're even starting to trust Malfoy! I cannot believe that they've actually told that arse more than me. I can see why Ron would be upset; Hermione does seem to be getting close to Malfoy. But, really! As if she would ever look at him in that sort of way.*

I think it a bit odd, the way he was staring so much at me. As if... She shook her head and scrubbed hard at her face. *Well, as if he'd seen right down to my soul and that he'd liked what he'd seen. What was odder still was the peculiar and exciting feeling his look gave me in the pit of my stomach. For a moment, I felt like I could just get lost in his gray eyes.* She trembled from the intense feeling the thoughts of Draco Malfoy gave her and frowned. Was it sick of her to have those kinds of feelings about Malfoy? She wasn't sure, but she did know one thing. This was going to be the worse Christmas she could remember having. She pushed those thoughts away and made her way to the door, wishing Harry would reconsider things and wishing all would go back to how it was before Dumbledore's death.

Southern's Notes: Sorry for the long time it took between updates. All I can say is that both Christy and I have been swamped with RL issues and at different times. When she had time to write her part, I didn't have any. That's how it goes though! However, if you do like the premise of this story, I am writing one that's somewhat similar and am updating it weekly. The title is "Flight of the Prince." Check it out.

Christy's Notes: I, too, apologize for the delay, but I hope you guys think it was worth the wait! I have to second "Flight of the Prince." It's awesome and just keeps getting better with each chapter! I've started a new fic for the Potter_Place prompts. It's called "One Vital Ingredient." If you get the time, give it a read!

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 11

Bellatrix and Lucius have a plan that backfires. Hermione leaves Grimmauld Place in order to think about things, but Severus decides it's time she keeps up her end of the bargain they'd made.

Disclaimer: We're borrowing some of JKR's characters, but there's no money being made!

Thanks go to Soul Bound for beta reading.

"Lucius, the least you could do is to answer the letters she gives me to deliver to you. She's uncertain what her future might be with you, and you could put her at ease. Lately..." Her voice trailed away, as she didn't want to say too much. Deciding on the right words, she said, "This horrid pregnancy has been trying for her. She's had it rough from the beginning, what with all that sickness and now these hormonal depressions."

Lucius curled his lip in disgust. "While I appreciate your concern for your dear sister's welfare, need I remind you that she bedded another man and is now carrying that same man's child...a man whom I've always considered as a friend?"

Bellatrix snorted. "And had you not let yourself be overpowered by children and sent to Azkaban, would you have interceded when our Master gave her this mandate? This was not her choice!"

"I wonder."

"Believe me, she abhorred his touch." Changing tactics, she added, "You'd better let her know that you will welcome her back into your life and bed, Lucius, else she might want to accept some of Snape's advances."

"Advances? Meaning that he's been after more? He's told me that there's nothing else."

Bellatrix shrugged. "At least he seems concerned with her welfare. Perhaps he is starting to fancy her. I expect he need only to plead his cause to our Master, and he'd be granted favors. Poor Narcissa, my dear sister." She clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

"Wormtail says that she didn't seem to mind..."

"You dare listen to that rat! You know of his lies and sly ways. He's not told you that I found out that he'd been molesting Draco, has he?"

"What?"

She smirked and placed a hand over her lips, pretending to have let that slip. "Whoops. It appears I've said too much."

Lucius' pale face whitened even more. "Is this the reason that Draco fled, do you think?"

"I'd say so," she said in a bored tone. "The boy, though, was quite weak in all things. It's a wonder he's survived as long as he has, really. I wouldn't doubt he allowed the molestation in order to get on Wormtail's good side so that he could flee our Master."

"Don't speak of my son that way!" Lucius said indignantly, though he grimaced.

"Write to her. She's been in a terrible state for a while now, and since Snape approached me before Christmas last month to see to her, she's only worsened." Her eyes narrowed. "You know she's been wanting another child and how easily she gets attached to things. It's killing her to know that she might not be able to raise it."

"Raise *Snape's* child!" he thundered. "That in itself is a betrayal. He has no right mixing with Black blood and polluting their lines! That's likely the reason she's had such a hard time of it!" He threw his tumbler across the room in his rage. "His mother was nothing more than a blood traitor! A whore to a bloody Muggle!"

"Ah, yes, something we finally agree on," she said snidely. "However, you should reassure her that she needn't stay attached to the little thing, as she will have a peaceful home to return to." Bellatrix flicked her wand lazily to fix the shattered glass he'd thrown. "Snape's spawn will be nothing but a soldier and will likely *die* for the cause one day."

Lucius nodded grimly. "Perhaps someone should see to it." He gave her a meaningful glance. "It would right things and be quite a cold dish of revenge for afters."

"Indeed," she agreed, thrusting a quill and parchment at him. "Get busy so that I might send this to her." She looked over to the cabinet in the far corner of the room. "In fact, I've an idea. Let me get that potions book."

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"So did he look well?" Narcissa asked as she took the letter from her sister's hands. "Did he ask of me? Have news of Draco?"

Bellatrix lied smoothly, saying, "He's worried about Draco and hopes you'll be feeling better soon." She smiled. "You'll be back home before you know it...only a couple of months left now."

"Did you ask him if he'll speak to the Dark Lord about allowing me to keep this child?" She quickly looked towards the doorway and lowered her voice, "Severus is adamant that we follow the Dark Lord's rules, but I am telling you that I can't leave this child. What with Draco gone, it's all I have." She opened the letter and swiftly read its contents.

"There, there," Bella said. "You'll be all right. It's not as if Snape's going to lock the little child away from you."

"He says nothing of the baby! Or Draco," Narcissa said, tossing the letter aside and rubbing her large stomach with both hands. "Mummy won't leave you, little one."

"Oh, come now. It can't hear you."

Snapping her head up and narrowing her eyes, Narcissa asked, "Do you not speak to your child? Dream of her?"

Bellatrix shrugged and slipped one hand into her pocket and pulled out a phial of potion. "Severus says you should have some of this. It will ease your discomfort."

"No."

"Cissy, I won't leave until you take this." She flashed her kindest smile in hopes of swaying her sister. "For me, so I don't worry about you so."

"Oh, all right," Narcissa replied with a soft sigh. "He's always so adamant about me taking any potions because of the baby. I suppose he's tired of my whinging then."

"I expect so." Bella squeezed her shoulder affectionately. "All will be well sooner than you think." She watched smugly as her trusting sister's eyes drifted closed. "Sooner than you think indeed."

She took the phial and placed it back into her pocket and quickly left, telling Snape that her sister had gone to sleep, exhausted, when she made her way out to Disapparate. He nodded without looking up from his book, and when she reappeared in Lucius' rooms to tell him how easily things had gone, a terrible, blinding pain filled her body, forcing her to double over.

"What drama is this now?" Lucius asked, annoyed at the woman's theatrics.

"Get Rodolphus," she said between deep gasps. To her horror, she felt warm liquid gliding down her thighs and noticed a growing, bloody stain on her smoke-colored robes. "It's... wrong. Ah, good God!"

"You idiot! Did you handle the potion's ingredients with your bare hands?"

She nodded, unable to speak through the horrible feeling of her womb trying to push through her center at once.

"Have you not heard of gloves? You can't even handle them, else it will cause your body to abort as well! Fuck!"

"Rodo... Need Ro..."

"And let slip what we've done? I think not," he said adamantly. "We need to think this story through. It will be too much of a coincidence if both pregnancies terminate!"

Her world was dizzy, things were blurry, and she could barely feel the pain any longer. It was as though her body was numbing, yet someone was screaming. Who? If she didn't know better, she'd think it was her... *It is me*, she thought in shock while she continued screaming. She'd handled all of the ingredients while making the potion, not even thinking of gloves, as she was so intent on getting it right and adding a draught that would put her sister to sleep. Sometime later, her husband's face hovered over her, worry etching his brow. Then everything faded; everything except a part of her mind that seemed to be taunting her with the numerous times Narcissa had cautioned her to take better care of herself...no liquor, no overly rough sex, no lifting, no running.

*No murdering your sister's child...one who's loss would kill her.*As the guilty thought vanished, so did her consciousness.

Much later, when she was able to open her eyes, she could make out the figure of a person looming over her. Her throat was very dry, and she tried to form enough words to find out who was with her. From the long, blond locks, she was fairly certain it was Narcissa. She could only hope that she'd be able to forgive her one day. Interestingly enough, she felt the pang of the loss of the life that had been growing inside of her. She thought she would finally be able to honor the Dark Lord by giving him loyal followers, her children, and it was all ruined by her stupidity.

"Cissy...?" she managed.

"Delivered a small, but thriving daughter two days ago," came the soft voice. "Of course she's beside herself at your part in things and having to return to my rooms with me, sans brat."

It was Lucius, not her sister. So, her sister's child lived. What of hers? She feared she knew the answer to that already. There had been so much blood, so much pain. What would the Dark Lord do to her for her failure? For her part in trying to harm Snape's heir?

"I'll bide my time, of course, and stick to our original plan," Lucius said, fumbling with her pillows. "It's a pity you'll not be around to see that fulfilled. I'm certain you'd like to, but there's no way I can risk your meager Occlumency skills and inability to lie while taking Veritaserum, allowing you to give away my part in things."

"Wha... what?"

Before she knew what was happening, he'd shoved her pillow over her face and was pressing down tightly, cutting off her oxygen. She hadn't the energy to fight him off, and when she did try to force her hands to move, she realized that her body was already bound to the bed. He'd been intent on doing this even before she'd awakened. Many different scenes flashed before her eyes.

Her proud father as he gave her to Rodolphus in marriage.

Narcissa's smile as she showed her family the engagement ring Lucius had given her.

Andromeda's tearful face when Bellatrix told her to never speak to her again.

Lucius' body undulating over hers as he rutted between her thighs after one too many glasses of port many years back.

Rodolphus... Her rounding stomach... The remembrance of a small kick from within and the feel of her stomach shifting as if a wave had passed beneath its flesh's surface...

A blinding white light...

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Hermione and Draco sat in the library at Grimmauld Place going over a map of Godric's Hollow that they'd dug up, trying to determine the best possible place for entry.

"Hermione?"

"Huh? What is it?" she said distractedly. She really wanted to get on with this because she felt time was running out.

"Do you really think we can trust your informant? I mean, at any time we could be walking into some sort of trap."

Hermione studied Draco intently while chewing her bottom lip. She'd been wanting to talk about what she'd discovered about their informant for awhile now, but there was no one she felt she could talk to about it.

If you so much as mentioned Snape's name in front of Harry, he went off on a tangent. She certainly couldn't confide in Ron, they weren't even speaking at the moment. As she watched Draco, she came to a decision. "Well, I am pretty sure we can trust him. I mean, I all but figured out who he is."

"You did? Well, why didn't you say anything, Hermione? Do we know anything about him?"

"Yes, we know quite a bit actually. Draco... if I tell you this, you have to give me your word you won't say anything to anyone. I want to trust you with this, but I have to know you won't betray my confidence."

"Okay, you have my word." When she kept staring, he said, "What do you want? A Wizard's Oath?"

"No, we don't have to resort to such extreme measures. I don't think." Pausing a few moments more, she seemed to have come to a decision. "Draco, I think our informant is Professor Snape."

He immediately stiffened in his chair and sat up straighter. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, from his speech and mannerisms for one thing. He even called me a know-it-all. And when I confronted him about it, he all but admitted it."

"Oh, I really wish I would have been with you! You are not to meet him alone again! Do you hear me?"

Taken aback by the fierce look in his eyes, Hermione asked, "Why? I thought you were rather fond of Professor Snape."

"Perhaps at one time I was, but that was before I saw him for the bastard that he is. I don't trust him, Hermione, at all. Now I'm leery of even using this information."

"Well, everything he's given us so far has been valid, so I don't really see why this wouldn't be. Tell me, Draco, what's happened? I know it has to be something recent."

"I don't want to talk about it. But suffice it to say, if I see him, I won't be held responsible for what I may do to him."

Starting to worry now, she asked, "Can't you trust me? I trusted you." Seeing the unsure look on his face, she persuaded, "Draco, I won't tell Harry or Ron if that's what worries you. Perhaps I should offer to take an oath now?"

He smiled slightly and took a deep breath. He hated saying anything that would put his family in any kind of bad light. He decided to go with his instincts and trust Hermione. "I am sure you remember that fateful night that Snape murdered Dumbledore." She nodded, not wanting to interrupt. "Well, what you don't know, and what I've only recently found out myself, is that my mother had Snape take an Unbreakable Vow to help me in any way he could should I fail. Not much faith in her son, eh?"

Placing her hand on top of his, she said, "Draco, I'm sure that's not what prompted her to do that. You were only sixteen! No match for Professor Dumbledore. I'd say she's not a fool."

"Well, at any rate, when I started to fumble...Hermione, I would never have done it; you know that...Snape had no choice, you see. Because of that Vow, he had to do it or die. I have wondered many times since then if he hadn't discussed things with that old man beforehand, planning it all out with him."

Hermione suddenly remembered the conversation that Hagrid had overheard. It was all starting to make sense...

"When we returned to the Dark Lord, he was very upset needless to say. I honestly thought he was going to kill me for failing. Oh, but his punishment of my family wasn't complete. Sometimes I think death may have been the better choice."

"Don't say that!" Hermione hissed. "Don't even think it!"

Draco shrugged and continued, wanting to finish. "My mother's punishment for interfering in the Dark Lord's plans is to have a baby by someone other than my father and to give the baby up to its father, someone who would know how to raise a child the way a true Death Eater should be raised. I wasn't up to par in that area, you see."

Hermione snorted. "Well, that's the best thing you've said yet."

"My father's punishment," he continued, ignoring her statement, "for being thwarted by a group of kids and being sent to Azkaban, is to know that my mother actually had a child with another man...a more worthy follower."

"My punishment is to see my mother used like that, to bear my father's anger, and to see another child rise up and take his or her place in the circle in the way that I should have done. Now, three guesses as to who the 'more worthy' follower is."

"Snape," Hermione whispered. Then their earlier conversation came back to her. *There is something else that I request that you do for me... Upon my demise, you will receive instructions... It's of utmost importance...* Dear Lord, could this have something to do with that baby? Hermione decided that she would keep that part of the conversation to herself for now. She needed to think on it some more.

"Right in one. And now that he's actually gotten my mother pregnant with his spawn, he should leave her alone, but he won't. He just keeps at her I'd bet. When my father returns..." Draco shook his head. "Just promise me you won't meet with him, okay, Hermione?"

Hermione wasn't so sure things were as cut and dried as Draco seemed to think. There was more going on here; she was sure of it. Patting his hand, which was still under hers, she said, "We won't speak of it anymore just now. It upsets you...understandably."

"How are you doing?" he asked, changing the subject. Draco had his own plans for Snape, and he was determined to see them through. Just as soon as his father was out of Azkaban. "You've not said too much about the Weasel since Christmas, and that was a month ago!"

She shrugged. "Fine."

"No."

"No? What do you mean no? Of course I am."

"Hermione, there is just no way you could be fine after that fiasco during the holidays. I'm not sure I'm fine!" Draco shuddered. "Ron was a real prat to you, you know. Snogging and all in front of you. And I *know* you heard them that last night before she left. Besides, Lavender all but admitted to you that they'd been shagging, bragging that way during breakfast. Lord, it would serve the bugger right if he impregnated her, I say."

Hermione lifted her sad eyes to Draco's. "It hurts; I'll admit that. Even knowing that he was only doing it to hurt me, he actually did it." She folded her arms on the table and laid her chin on top of them. "After that, my thoughts that Ron and I aren't a compatible couple were only confirmed. I would never deliberately hurt someone that I supposedly loved that way. You know?"

Draco laid a hand on her shoulder. "Buck up. Trust me when I say he isn't good enough for you."

Hermione's eyes widened, and she sat up and laid a hand over her heart. In an exaggerated voice, she said, "What? *Pureblood* not good enough for a *Mudblood*? Do my ears deceive me? Did Draco Malfoy actually admit that?"

"Oh, stuff it, you! You know he's not your equal, Hermione. You two are just on different levels."

"Well, I know we're not suited as a couple, but I do love Ron. I really don't want to lose his friendship."

"He'll come around. Say, speaking of coming around, what's the deal with Potter and Weasley's sister?"

Hermione raised both eyebrows. "You mean you care?"

"Not especially. I just noticed the tension, that's all. She seems to really love him, and he seems to feel something for her. So, what's the deal?"

"She does love him. I'm not sure if Harry even knows if he loves Ginny or not, but he does care about her. I think if he's not careful, he may lose her. I haven't decided if I think that would be a good thing or a bad thing."

"I see. I think it would be a good thing. Potter is a taker when it comes to her. She has given and waited, and he takes that for granted. He needs someone that wouldn't take his bullshit. She deserves better, too...like you."

"Better? You perhaps?"

"Just better. That's all. He doesn't love her, or he wouldn't treat her that way. So, he needs to find someone that he does love, and let her go."

Suddenly, they heard a voice from the doorway. "Well, well. Isn't this cozy?"

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Ron had been listening in at the door with a pair of Extendible Ears and couldn't help coming in and showing himself to them, wanting a word with Hermione. He'd seen them through a crack in the doorway, but he couldn't make out what they were saying and figured they were planning some tryst or talking badly about him, so he'd quickly gone to get his Ears to listen in. He was sort of right. The first thing he'd heard was Draco calling him "the Weasel" and commenting on Christmas.

While he hated Draco and all the interfering he was doing in their lives, he couldn't help but to be thankful for what the boy had told Hermione. It was true. She did deserve better. Just hearing the catch in her voice and practically feeling the pain in her words made him feel like shit. She really didn't deserve that. It was apparent they were very friendly, yes, but he'd been a fool to not see it for what it was. Hermione...his Hermione...was only trying to help Malfoy. It was the same thing she'd do for any poor sod who needed help. Just look what she'd done for the house-elves...tried to do anyway.

And if he admitted his true feelings, he'd been a git about it all, even feeling a bit smug about having Lavender and showing Hermione what she was missing out on. By the time they'd left the Burrow and Lavender behind them, he'd been relieved to be rid of her and her pestering. The girl sure liked making Hermione jealous, and at the time, he'd been all for it. Now, he felt like an arsehole.

"Piss off, Weasley," Draco said angrily.

"What did you hear?" Hermione asked, looking nervous.

He shrugged. "Enough to know that he's been thinking about my sister...bet Harry won't like that one bit." Chuckling, he added, "Or was it Harry he was thinking about?"

Malfoy was out his chair in a flash. "Don't you dare spread your filthy lies, Weasley! I never said that!"

"Ron, just go," Hermione said, not facing him, shoulders slumped.

He frowned. *I'm bloody doing it again. Why do I have to do this?* Deciding to buck up and do right by her, he said, "Fair enough. I just want a word, Hermione." He looked at the furious blond git and added, "Alone."

"No way. Didn't you hear anything else? She's better off without your head games, and another thing..."

"I'll be all right, Draco," Hermione said, interrupting him politely. "Just give us a moment."

Without a word, he left and shouldered past Ron roughly. Head down, Ron closed the door and moved towards her, stopping when her white trainers came into view. "I don't know where to start."

"Just say what it is you have to say."

He looked up then, noting her voice had taken on a bitter tone. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he blurted. "I don't know what's going on with me. I've been..."

"An arsehole?" she supplied.

Nodding, he said, "Yes. I don't love Lavender. I do care about her, but you're the one that I'd want my life with. I'll tell her. I'll wait for you until you're ready. Be nicer to Draco. Anything..." His voice trailed off as he saw her tears and the shaking of her head. He moved closer and pulled her up into his arms, holding her tightly against him and feeling her body shaking as she gave in to her tears. "What can I do? What can I say?"

"I don't know," she said softly, miserably. "It's been so hard." Her voice cracked, and she sobbed silently while he held her.

"Please... stop crying. I didn't want this." It was a lie. It had been exactly what he'd wanted, and he sure felt like an arse now that he'd got it.

She pulled away, sniffing. "I need to think. There's just so much that's happened." Trying to smile bravely, she added, "It was never that I didn't love you." Her smile faltered. "H-how could you do this to me, R-Ronald? You meant for me to hear you shag her! After we'd..."

With that she quickly fled the room and ran outside, managing to avoid him, Draco, and Harry on her way out. Even as she heard them all calling her name, she disappeared with a loud pop and promptly reappeared in the very park she'd met the informer in. Blindly moving towards the bench they'd shared, she plopped down and



put her head in her hands.

Many minutes passed, and she heard footsteps nearing her, but she assumed it was Harry or Draco, as they'd recently practiced tracing Apparitions. The blood chilled in her veins as she heard the soft, silky baritone of Professor Snape.

"Tears never change anything and only make you appear weak to your adversary."

Snapping her head up in fear and scrambling for her wand, she was quickly subdued with a softly spoken spell, her hands and feet suddenly going rigid. "Stop... please," she managed, eyes widening as he stepped closer.

"Dear girl," he said in a mocking tone, "you didn't seem this frightened last time."

"Knowing it's you and s-seeing you are two different things." She quickly added, "Sir," to try to stay on his good side...if he had one...until she could think of a way out of her current situation.

"We had an agreement, did we not?"

She nodded minutely and opened her mouth to speak.

"Silence. You will listen to what I have to say." He looked around suddenly, as if sensing someone was nearby, moved closer, and then pulled her up by the arm, taking the wand from her immobilized hand. "It's not safe to talk here, but I will quickly let you know that it's time for you to meet your part of our bargain."

"The end is near then?" she asked, unable to help herself, visions of Harry facing Voldemort flitting through her mind.

"Not that one. Not yet, but the part of our bargain where you promised to do something for me. I need you to fulfill that now, and you will indeed agree if you want your precious Potter to continue getting help." He smirked. "I've been watching Grimmauld Place for two hours now. Lucky I saw you leave and tracked you here. Curious, though, isn't it? That this is where you came."

Panicking, she said the first words that came to mind. "But you're not dead."

"Not yet," he told her before he sneered hatefully, tightened his grip on her, and Side-Along Apparated her away without anyone noticing they'd even been there.

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**Christy's Notes:** It's too bad it took something drastic for Bella to see the truth. What's Lucius planning now? Ron finally realized the error of his ways, but too late it seems. Now, where is Snape taking Hermione? I hope you liked the chapter--the heat is on!

**Southern's Notes:** And is it obvious what he wants of her now? We have some good stuff planned and will be updating at least weekly. Hope to hear from you, as it seems nobody's reviewing anymore!

## Chapter 9

*Chapter 9 of 11*

Ron, Draco, and Harry try to find Hermione, but she's been spirited away to Snape's home where he tells her what he needs from her.

**Disclaimer:** We're snatching some of JKR's characters for a bit of fun. Teehee.

*Thanks go to Soul\_Bound for the beta read.*

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"HERMIONE!" Ron bellowed as Hermione Disapparated away. "Don't go! I'm sorry!"

"Where did she go, Weasley?" Draco looked around the yard frantically. Fists clenched, he turned back to Ron. "Why did she take off that way?"

Ron was also looking around the yard, but he knew it was a wasted effort. He'd seen his love when she'd popped away. "We were talking about things, and she got a little upset. But I didn't think she would just take off that way, not with everything that's going on."

"Are you stupid? Of course you are; I forgot myself for a moment," Draco said sarcastically. "Do you not understand it's dangerous for her to be alone right now? You know, you only think of yourself and how *you* feel! Could you not see how bad your little stunt at the Burrow hurt her? Don't you even care?"

"Yes, I care! I love her! I just wanted to explain...to let her know..."

"Let her know what? That as long as she's ready for a shag you love her, but when she wants to cool things down a bit, you love Lavender Brown again?"

Ron turned his furious eyes towards Draco, and for a moment, Draco could see how dangerous this man could be if he ever got out from Potter's shadow. "That's enough from you, Malfoy. I know that you want her. You're always lurking around her, putting the moves on her. I could hear you poisoning her against me, you know!"

Draco laughed and followed Weasley back inside. "Oh, mate, you don't need me to do that. You've done a nice job of showing your true colors without me saying a thing."

"Yet you did. What is it? Snape or Vol...er...You-Know-Who send you here to get close to us, find out information? You may have Hermione and Harry fooled, but you don't fool me. You know what I think? I think that you are in cahoots with Snape, you are. Plotting and planning. Well, it's not going to work! I am going to find her and bring her back, and when I do, maybe she'll be convinced of how you really are."

At the mention of Snape, Draco lost it and went for Ron. "Shut it, Weasley!" Draco shoved Ron into the bookcase, knocking a few books to the floor. "You don't know anything! She left because of *you*! Because of something you said! Not me!"

"Well," Ron said through clenched teeth, "if you weren't always trying to make me look bad in front of her, I wouldn't have to try to defend myself!"

Harry had been in his room studying different ways that could be used to destroy the Horcruxes when he'd heard the commotion and yelling downstairs. Wand at the ready, he hurried down the stairs to see what was going on.

"You stupid PRAT! You look bad without any help from me!" Draco shouted at Ron as he shoved him again. "Now, what the hell did you say to her?"

"None of your damn business! And keep your ferret hands off of me if you want to keep 'em." Grabbing Draco by the front of his robes, Ron hauled him up. "What were you two discussing in here so secret?"

"What is going on in here?" Harry demanded. "Stop it, both of you!" Harry went to stand between the two men on the verge of a fight.

"Ask your best mate, Potter." Draco sneered at Ron. "He's said something to Hermione," he pointed towards Ron, "and now she's gone. She just Disapparated away while crying and didn't even say where she was off to!"

Harry turned to look at Ron, who was standing red-faced and about to pounce on Draco. The look on Ron's face frightened Harry a bit. "Ron? What's he talking about?"

Slowly, Ron turned towards Harry, and Harry caught himself before he stepped back. The look on Ron's face made Harry glad he wasn't Draco Malfoy. "I wanted to talk to Hermione, explain some things. Apologize for some things, too..."

"Yeah, I can hear it now," Draco drawled. In a low voice meant to mimic Ron, Draco said, "Oh, gee, Hermione, I'm really sorry that I brought your rival into my home and threw her in your face. I knew it hurt you, but oh, well. And when I shagged her rotten, I'm sorry that I made sure you could hear us. I just wanted you to know what you've been missing, even if I am a right bugger!"

"That's it!" With a deep growl, Ron pounced on Draco and knocked him to the ground. Forgetting his wand, Ron drew back his fist and punched him right in the face.

"Ron! Stop it!" Harry grabbed the back of his best friend's robe and pulled as hard as he could to get him off of Draco. Ron simply shoved Harry back.

"I don't see why you'd want to defend him! He's been sniffing after Hermione since he got here. I think he's in with Snape and is trying to get close to her to take information back to them!"

"For the love of God! Ron, he is not! If you could see past your jealousy..."

Standing up and dusting himself off, Ron told Harry, "Right. I'm just jealous, not at all concerned about anything else. I don't have enough smarts to actually think of anything important, right? Can't put two and two together."

"I never said..."

"You don't have to. I know what you and Hermione think about me. If it's not Quidditch, I'm ignorant. That's fine. I've learned to live with that. But whether you believe me or not, I love Hermione and all of my feelings do not stem from jealousy. I just think it's odd that he showed up when he did."

"Ron, you're wrong. We don't think any such thing about you, but you have to admit that whenever another guy gets around her that you get a bit mental."

Smiling almost evilly, Ron told Harry, "Why don't you ask him what he said about you and Ginny?"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Draco said. He'd gotten up and dusted himself off. "As touching as this little love scene is between the two of you, don't you gits think we should GO AFTER HERMIONE?"

"I've had just about enough of you..."

"No, Ron, he's right. We've got to find her before discussing anything else. Have you looked all around this area?"

"No," Ron told him guiltily. "We, uh, never got past the yard."

"All right. Let's look." Harry had simply taken command, not even thinking about issuing orders. "Draco, you go left. Ron, you go right. I will look out back, and we'll meet back here in fifteen minutes."

Without saying a word, both men went in opposite directions. Harry went out back and was starting to get very worried. When they met back up, Harry said, "Okay. Don't worry; I'm sure she's fine. Hermione can take care of herself, ya know. Let's search the neighborhood."

"Not if she runs into Snape," Draco said, obvious distress on his face. "Why don't we just trace her Apparation?"

Harry slapped himself on the forehead. "Fuck me! Why didn't we think of that sooner instead of wasting all of this time here?"

For once, Ron agreed with Draco, so he didn't say anything. Each taking one of Harry's arms, they followed Hermione's Apparation and ended in a park, close to a bench.

"What now?" Draco demanded. "She's not here!"

"We're going to have to search around," Ron said. "So, we'll split up. It won't take long."

After they'd searched the entire park, Harry said, "She must have left. Hold on, we'll trace her again."

When they tried, nothing happened. Harry was starting to get frantic with worry, trying again and again. He couldn't bear it if something happened to Hermione. She was family to him. "It's not working! Why is it not working? I don't sense a block!"

"Because," Draco informed him, "she isn't the one that Disapparated the second time. She went with someone else. Feel that different magical residue?"

"Who would she be meeting here on such short notice? It's mental!" Ron said. "She wouldn't do that to us! Well, she may do that to me because she was upset, but she wouldn't worry Harry like this." Swallowing his pride, he relented, "Or you, for that matter, Ferret. Hermione is loyal and considerate when it comes to her friends." When tears filled his eyes, Ron turned away, ashamed.

"There, there, Weasel. Your selfishness couldn't be helped. You just don't know any better."

Ron sniffed, dried his eyes, and turned to Draco. Leveling a look at him, he said, "One of these days, Malfoy, we'll be alone. When we are, you'll get yours. Count on it...I'll be coming for you." Turning to Harry, he said, "Ask him about Ginny."

"Let's go back to the house first in case she comes back," Harry said.

Draco had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. She'd been meeting Snape, but he couldn't say anything, as he'd promised her that he'd remain silent, and for once, he wanted to keep a promise. He cared about Hermione...now that he'd got to know her better.

Besides, if it was Snape, there wasn't anything they could do. They didn't know where Snape was, so they couldn't go and get her. And he had to admit, if only to himself, Weasley made him nervous. He Disapparated back to Grimmauld Place with Potter and Weasley.

Once they were inside, Harry turned to Draco. "All right, Malfoy. What's the deal about Ginny?"

Draco shrugged. "Back to Malfoy, are you? That's fine. Nothing about Ginny. Hermione and I were just talking of your relationship...or lack of a relationship...with her."

"What about it?"

Leaning against the wall, Draco said, "I just said it's apparent that you don't love Ginny, that's all. And Ginny just lets you walk all over her."

Face turning red, Harry told Draco, "My relationship with Ginny Weasley is none of your business, Malfoy!"

"Well, I talked to her some when we were at the Burrow."

"Why? You don't even like her!" Harry yelled.

"Tsk, tsk, Harry," Ron said sarcastically. "He's just her *friend*. It's not like they've been tucked away in a library all alone for hours at a time or anything, searching for things we know already."

"Shut it, Ron! You were the one who told me to ask him!"

"Yes, I know. Because I can see things. He watched her, you know. Every move she made, his eyes followed. Kept following her around, wanting to get her alone. I waited for you to notice, but you never did. So, I began to wonder...how *do* you feel about my sister? She's in love with you. Thinks she should wait for you, I expect."

Harry sighed, defeated. "Ron, I care about Ginny. But honestly? Right now, I can't think beyond that. I have to finish this. If I don't do this all successfully, it won't matter how I feel about anyone."

"Harry, she's at Hogwarts, and you're here. It wouldn't take more than a few letters." Realization dawned on Ron's face. "It's true. You're not in love with her! Damn it, Harry! Let her go!"

"He can't, Weasley. She's too available for him, don't you see? If he needs someone, why, there Ginevra is. She's his security." Draco was smug as he looked between the two friends.

"You don't know anything about it, Malfoy! Nothing at all! I do care for her! I've never used her, I..." Harry stopped and turned away. "I've never meant to use her, Ron. You have to know that." He turned his eyes to Draco, and they just stared at each other, not saying anything. Harry had a tight feeling in his chest. "I've had this talk with her many times. She knows how I feel about this. She even said she wouldn't wait for me... yet she acts like she will. She's right confusing if you ask me."

Ron had begun to pace, worrying about Hermione and hurting for Ginny. "Whatever, Harry. Just fix it. Stop giving her false hope. She deserves better." Turning to Draco, he said, "And you! Stay away from my sister!"

Smirking, Draco said, "Why? Scared she'll fall for the Malfoy charm? And make up your mind, please. Who is it that I supposedly want? Hermione or Ginny?"

"Just... Just stay away from them both! I think you're trying to get close to Hermione, but I see the way you look at Ginny." Banging his head on the wall once for effect, Ron felt completely helpless. "Where the hell is Hermione? FUCK!"

Ron knew that after Hermione had left, he'd reverted back to acting like a prat. He was just so frantic with worry. No, he wasn't stupid. He knew his Hermione, and his Hermione would never needlessly worry them like this.

*I have got to change my ways, or she'll never have me back. I need to think before I act. Oh, but Malfoy knows he gets to me. Does it on purpose, he does. Likes to rile me up. Fine...that's just fine. I can ignore him.*

He turned to see that Harry had moved closer to Malfoy, neither saying anything. *Odd. Harry seems to be finding comfort by standing near Malfoy.* Ron got a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach suddenly. *Hermione, come home, please!*

Nobody said anything, just stood, staring at the door, willing Hermione to rush through it. When darkness fell, the three men each knew that Hermione was not coming back. Something was terribly wrong.

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"Let go of me!" Hermione said loudly the instant they Apparated into a small sitting room. Whatever hex he'd placed on her still had her partially immobilized, rendering her unable to pull away from him.

"Lower your voice immediately," he said, gripping her tightly. "I shall explain the way of things, but first, I need your word that you'll calm down."

"I will *not* calm down, Professor Snape! How dare you think to haul me off after we made a bargain! I thought I could trust you. I should have known...mmp!"

To her horror, Snape clamped a hand over her mouth, forcing her words to halt and her breaths to come in shocked gasps through her nose. His face had transformed from mildly irritated to furious in seconds.

"Listen to me now, Miss Granger. Our deal was for you to do something for me, and in return, I would continue doing as I have and make it possible for Potter to meet the Dark Lord." His eyes darted to an open door just to their left. "Circumstances have changed... Things have happened weeks sooner than I'd thought, and I need your help now rather than later."

Hermione began to shake slightly. There were so many things she wanted to ask him, but she was uncertain what would happen if she did. He was watching her intently, as if trying to read her thoughts. She wished that she'd practiced Occlumency a little more and knew there was no way to keep him out of her mind if he truly wanted in. Suddenly remembering what Draco had told her, she glared at him and wondered if the reason he'd darted toward the doorway was because Narcissa Malfoy was about. Was she here to be some sort of maid or cook?

"You will be my *guest* over the next few weeks. Once things are ready and the time is right, you will be free to leave this place if you so choose. Regardless of what you might think, I don't want any harm to befall either of you. Do I have your word that you won't yell or throw any tantrums?" She nodded her head. "You are at my mercy, Miss Granger. Don't make me regret this."

He released his grip on her arm and the hold on her mouth. An instant later, he flicked his wand, and she was able to move fully again. Stepping away from him, her eyes darted around to take note of any possible exits or any one else who might be about. Closing her eyes, she tried to decide if she should Disapparate. There was no reason she should trust him, even if he did sound sincere. He'd already broken his word. They would find Voldemort some other way. Harry would understand.

Opening her eyes, she flashed a triumphant smile at him and concentrated on Disapparating to Grimmauld Place. Just as she felt her magic tug at her, she felt the heat of foreign magic slapping her strongly in the chest, causing her to stumble and fall to floor in a panting heap.

"Anti-Disapparation Wards, of course." He smirked. "Only I have the means to leave here. You will not be able to do so until I release you."

"Bastard," she muttered, slowly sitting up and trying not to wheeze.

"Language, my dear," he said smoothly, stepping forward and offering her a hand, which she refused.

Getting up on her own, she faced him defiantly. "You owe me an explanation."

"And as soon as you are finished with your dramatics, it'll be my pleasure to do so." He nodded towards the couch. "Take a seat."

Pride wounded and feeling hopeless, she did as he requested and waited until he poured himself a glass of something from his bar before speaking. "You said 'either' of us. I don't understand."

Glass in hand, he moved to sit in the chair across from her, and after taking a small sip, he said, "There are things that have transpired that you are not aware of. Suffice it to say that now, thanks to the Dark Lord, I have someone under my care."

"Yes, Narcissa Malfoy!" Hermione blurted, quickly biting her lip as she realized what she'd let slip.

"So, Draco has confided in you," he said with a nod. "I wondered how much you might know. Did you tell him what I asked of you?"

"No," she said quickly, turning her eyes away from his.

"You're lying."

"I didn't say that you needed me...only that you'd been helping us, but he didn't seem to appreciate that very much. Or trust you."

Snape looked away this time before softly saying, "Not that I blame him." Clearing his throat, he added, more loudly, "Narcissa is no longer here. She has returned to her husband's care."

"But then..." Hermione was interrupted by the loud wail of a small baby. Her eyes widened as she looked from Snape to the doorway he'd been gazing at earlier. "The baby? But how? I calculated Mrs. Malfoy's due date, and it shouldn't be for at least another seven weeks, and only that's if she conceived on..."

"It seems that her sister tried to terminate her pregnancy for her," he said in a clipped voice, rising from his chair and placing his glass on the table next to it. "Luckily, I went in to check on her and was able to safely deliver the child."

"How horrible!" Hermione said, also standing, though noticing the little cries had stopped.

"Master," a voice squeaked. "I wasn't knowing you is here."

Hermione then realized that a house-elf had made its way into the room. If Snape had a house-elf, then he wouldn't exactly need someone to watch over the child now that its mother was gone. What exactly did he want from her then? Her question was answered when he spoke again.

"Yes, Zigby, I have returned." He pointed to Hermione. "She will be handling the child from now on. You will assist her in whatever she asks of you... as she will be the new mistress here."

Zigby nodded vigorously, bat-like ears flapping as he did so. He then gazed at Hermione directly with his large, yellow, saucer-sized eyes. "Missus just be needing to call Zigby, and Zigby comes."

"Thank you," she said softly, uncertain what else to say to the elf. Addressing Snape, she said, slightly panicked, "Professor, I don't know what you mean by asking *me* of all people to do this for you, but I have to warn you: I haven't any siblings, and I've never babysat any small children. I haven't the slightest idea of what to do."

Looking at her incredulously, he asked, "And you think that I do?" He pointed towards the doorway. "I have been reading, Miss Granger, and learning things. You can do the same." He sighed slightly before adding, "It seems that women have an instinct about these things that men don't seem to possess." Speaking to the elf, he said, "Leave us."

With a pop, the elf was gone. Hermione's feet began the short journey to the room and to the small crib near the far wall. What she saw made her smile. A tiny baby without any hair at all lay sleeping on its side, small fist clenching and unclenching near its mouth.

"My daughter," Snape said from her side.

She could detect a small amount of pride in his shaky voice, and in that moment, things changed. He was just a man...not a spy, not a murderer, not her jailor...he was a man who had a little girl and who needed help caring for her. Someone who obviously knew how to worry and, to her surprise, how to love.

"Being born so early, is it safe for her to be like this? I thought most children were kept in the hospitals for a while."

"A fellow D... Someone I know has experience with birthing children and the care for them. He's checked her over and is surprised at how healthy and strong she is. She's in no danger, just a lot of extra attention, which I am unable to give her."

"Why me?" Hermione asked softly.

"Because you're the only one that will keep her safe from scorn in my absence. When you easily trusted me and looked past what... occurred, I knew that you wouldn't fail me in my one request...whether you liked it or not."

"What is your request, Professor? You told me that you were likely going to die and you... Do you mean *for* me to raise her?" she asked, finally realizing what he was saying.

"As your own," he said with a firm nod.

"But I can't do that! I'm only eighteen years old and have plans for my life." Visions of her toting a little baby to Order meetings flitted through her mind.

He sighed and sat in the rocking chair next to the crib. She noticed for the first time that he seemed exhausted, shadows and lines marked his face near his tired eyes. "I have reason to believe that her life could be in danger. Lucius Malfoy isn't pleased that his wife... that Narcissa and I have done this."

"You were forced to hear Draco tell it! It's not like you showed up in her bedroom and asked for..." Her voiced faded away, and her cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

"Lucius pretends to understand that," Snape said with a smirk. "However, I am certain he's not truly being very forgiving about it. The whole situation with what Bellatrix did doesn't feel right. I think he was the one to coax her into doing it."

"But to kill an innocent child?" She shook her head sadly and knew that Draco's father would be capable of it. He'd put one of Tom Riddle's Horcruxes in Ginny Weasley's possession when she'd only been eleven...not to mention trying to kill her and her friends. The bastard was capable of anything then.

"She must be kept safe from him. I can see to her protection right now, but after... once I'm killed in the..."

"Why do you think you'll be killed?" she asked quickly, interrupting him.

"By the time things happen, I'm certain both sides will be aiming for me. I'm good, Miss Granger, but even I'm not that good."

"Surely there are others who would care for her. Have you no family?"

"No one."

"What of Mrs. Malfoy? Surely she'd want her child."

"Have you not been listening? Lucius won't allow her to have anything to do with the baby. He'll see her dead first. The Dark Lord doesn't want her to have the child either... as part of her punishment."

"But when this is over...after Harry wins...Malfoy should be back in Azkaban... or dead." She bit her lip. "So that would leave her clear then."

"She just might find herself in Azkaban. Besides, I've thought about this, and only with you could the child have a good life. Narcissa is a Death Eater as well, remember?"

"There are homes."

"Like the one the Dark Lord grew up in? Who would want Snape the Traitor's child? She'll live in scorn, Miss Granger, for something that isn't her fault, but if you were the one to introduce her to the Wizarding world, her guardian, a friend of Boy Wonder, she would have a chance for the right kind of life...one that I will never be able to give her."

Hermione's response was interrupted by another little cry. She gazed down and smiled again, as she saw that the baby was awake again and trying to nibble on her tiny fingers. "Oh, look at her," she said softly. "I think she's hungry."

"Here," he said, rising and moving to the corner where there was a makeshift kitchen. He opened a small cooler and pulled out a large, glass container with what seemed to be formula inside.

The little one began to scream louder, so Hermione did the only thing she could. She reached down and, as gently as possible, picked up the tiny bundle. "Sshh, little one. All will be well. Daddy's gone to fetch your bottle."

Dark eyes peered up at her beneath a wrinkled brow, and she couldn't resist placing a kiss on the hairless, perfectly round little head. Hermione had never held anything so small or fragile in her life, and she feared harming her, but the little girl seemed content to be held next to the warm curve of a woman's breast. Sitting in the rocking chair, instinct, as Snape had called it, took over, and she tried to hum and rock to soothe her charge. When Snape finally appeared at her side with a warmed bottle, she offered it to the baby and grinned as she hungrily began sucking on the nipple.

"She's beautiful, Professor."

"I am amazed with her as well."

When Hermione looked up and met his eyes, she said, "I promise that I will help you, but you have to let my friends know that I'm well. Please."

"Out of the question."

"Please. Just an anonymous owl written in my own hand that I've decided to take some time to myself." She hoped he would relent. She didn't want this to harm Harry or distract him...her being missing.

"They will never believe that!" he said, shaking his head.

"Yes, it would be believable. I could say that I've gone to stay with a friend because I want to get away from things. Ron and I have broken things off, and he's constantly at my throat and accusing Draco and me of being involved. Tonight, things came to be too much, which is why I ran off like I did."

Snape brought his index finger to his lips and traced them lightly as he thought over her words. "You could say that you are with the same friend who has been sending them help and that you've decided you could do more help from our end instead, forcing those three berks to do the dirty work."

She smiled and felt hopeful for the first time since she'd been there. "I think this truly could work. Thank you for that at least."

He nodded and looked down at his feeding daughter, wonder suddenly filling his eyes. Hermione gazed down just in time to see some of the milk dribbling out the side of her mouth and to see her choke slightly. She removed the bottle and wiped her mouth, only to hear small cries.

"Right feisty, this one," she commented as she again began feeding her.

"Yes, I don't know that I've slept more than a few minutes at a time since she's been born."

"Professor, if you'd like to rest now, please do it. I'll watch over her." She gave him a small smile. "First, could you recommend a book that I could read in order to make certain I'm doing things right?"

He nodded and pointed to the bookshelf. "That first book there is informative." Snape then he showed her where everything else was kept that she might need, informing her that he'd be keeping her wand handy, but she could always call upon him or Zigby if she needed anything.

"I'll do that." She frowned slightly. "You mean to say that she never sleeps?"

"No, on the contrary, she does sleep, but I just didn't feel comfortable sleeping and not watching over her. I'm to make certain she doesn't stop breathing or have any other troubles."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "Where is my room going to be?"

He swallowed thickly. "This *is* the extra bedroom. I Transfigured it to suit the baby's needs. Your room, I'm afraid, will be the same as mine."

The color left her face, and she felt her stomach bubbling uncomfortably. "What are you saying, Professor Snape?"

"I won't touch you," he said after a long pause, "but the only reason the Dark Lord is allowing you to stay here is because he thinks that I've... I've chosen you."

"Chosen me?"

"As my consort."

"But he'll only need to take one look at me to know that's not true!" She began to panic. "Oh, God, Harry! Voldemort is going to see what I know and know what we've been doing!"

"No, he won't. He..."

"All that talk about needing my help, making me feel sorry for the baby and your situation... it was all just talk. You've been planning this?"

Snape ran his hands through his oily hair and closed his eyes in frustration, seemingly counting to calm himself. "I'm exhausted, Miss Granger. There are many things that

you do need to know, and I give you my word that I will tell you everything. We won't be bothered for a while yet by anyone and have time to prepare things so that no one will be the wiser."

She gazed at him uncertainly for a moment before directing her attention back down to his daughter, whose eyes were closing and suckles were getting slower. Hermione took the bottle away without any protest, and she placed the baby against her shoulder, softly tapping her back in hopes of burping her. "What's her name?" she asked softly, obviously surprising the man before her.

"I... I haven't named her yet. I've just been calling her 'baby.'" His lips curved up slightly. "Are we agreed, Miss Granger?"

Nodding, she said, "Yes, but I won't sleep in your bed. I'll take a cot in here." When he seemed to want to protest, she added, "You said yourself that we have time to come up with a plan. I'll stay with the baby for now. Many new mothers do much the same anyway."

"Very well. I will be directly across the way in that room there."

"Rest well," she said and watched him, noticing that his shoulders were slightly slumped. What in the world had happened to the Professor Snape that she knew? Who was this man?

A small burp drew her attention to her sleeping bundle. She gently placed the girl back in her bed and checked to see if she needed a new nappy. For the moment, she was clean and dry. After she covered her, she went in search of the book he'd indicated and settled down for a long read, continuously looking at the crib and the beautiful child sleeping within.

"I guess that answers that question then," she murmured to herself. When Draco had told her that his mother and Snape would be having a child together, she'd wondered what the baby would look like. As far as she could tell, she didn't look like either of her parents. Thoughts of Ron, Snape, and everything else vanished as she became engrossed in the book and learning to care for Snape's little girl.

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**Southern's Notes:** Ah, things are finally coming together. I promise the next bit to be very interesting.

**Christy's Notes:** So the plot thickens! What will Harry do about Ginny? How will Ron react when he learns that Hermione is not coming back? And what will Draco do when he discovers that she means to stay with Snape?

## Chapter 10

### *Chapter 10 of 11*

Hermione settles into her new role, names the baby, and talks with Snape while the boys learn to get along in her absence, finally getting serious about their work!

**Disclaimer:** We're borrowing some characters from JKR, but we promise to return them soon!

*Thanks go to Soul Bound for giving this a beta!*

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Hermione tossed the soiled nappy into the dustbin and pulled down the baby's gown over the new one she'd just put on, smiling as the little legs kicked slightly. "You're so beautiful," she said softly. She'd never been around small babies before, aside from her cousin's two daughters, but she'd only seen them when they were older, as her cousin lived on the continent. However, she found her heart softening as each minute passed. She'd spent the first hour wondering what ways she could convince Snape to find someone else, but the more she thought about it, gazed at the tiny baby, and read in the book, she wasn't sure that she could trust anyone else to do it. And he'd had a point: How would the world treat his heir?

After reading most of the book and getting a better understanding of things, she felt more confident about what she had to do to care for the little one, but she still had a few doubts. How would she know if the baby was hungry or perhaps simply gassy? She didn't want to overfeed her if she simply needed comfort. There were so many things in the book, but one thing was for certain. She was going to keep a record of everything...how many soiled or wet diapers, what she ate and when, how much she slept, or anything else! If there would be some problem, she could easily show the Healer a list of everything so that he or she could make a valid decision.

A gurgle brought her attention back to the baby. "Hello, little sweetheart. You're so sweet. Yes, you are." Lifting the child up, she cradled her against her bosom and slowly rocked while whispering words of comfort and affection. Snape had been sleeping for nearly nine hours. With each passing hour, she wondered if he'd ever wake up or if he'd slipped out unnoticed. She was getting a bit tired, but she could understand what he meant by not wanting to fall asleep while caring for the baby. She'd nearly nodded off a couple of times, only to startle herself awake again.

"What can we call you, love? Daddy hasn't thought about naming you, has he? Been stressed out, I expect." The baby's eyes were closed, but her mouth was open slightly, and one of her fists was closed around Hermione's pinky. "We've got to give you a name. We can't just call you baby forever. No, no..."

Despite what she'd told Snape about her plans of school and a career, she, as with most other girls, had thought past that to a future of marriage and children. She'd always liked the name Elizabeth. To her, the name was regal and would always be popular and proper. Before she'd started Hogwarts and had gone to Muggle schools, some of the kids used to make fun of her name because it was so strange and quite rare. One of her teachers had overheard one day and came to her defense, saying that her name was in one of Shakespeare's plays and that none of the three teasing her could say the same. The teacher had gone one step further to say that something so unique was special and was much better than having a plain name that everyone else had.

Regardless of that, Hermione had been determined to not give any of her children odd names. Interestingly enough, the Wizarding world was filled with strange names, and nobody seemed to bat an eye. Smirking, she shook her head, and she had a sudden inspiration. Alena had been her maternal grandmother's name. It wasn't very unpopular, and many names were similar to it. People liked to vary names these days.

"You don't look like an Alena though," she said softly. And then it hit her. Snape's mother's name was Eileen. It was only right that the baby have her name or a name special to him, but would he want that? Why hadn't he thought of that on his own? Did he have a good relationship with his mother? Was she even still alive? Hermione frowned. "You don't look like an Eileen anyway, and you'll already have Snape's last name. I wouldn't change that to Granger... I don't think." She truly didn't know what she'd do. For now, she'd worry about first names only.

"Eilena? A mix of the two then?" She grinned at the irony. There was nobody that she'd ever met with the name Eilena, so she'd gone against her own rules. "Can you say

that? Eye-lay-nuh?" she said to the baby, sounding it out. "The second 'e' sounds like a long 'a' when pronounced."

"What are you talking about?" Snape asked.

Her head snapped up. "Oh, I didn't realize you were up."

"I've made some coffee." He nodded at the baby. "How has she been?"

"She's been sleeping a great deal, eating; not too many nappies needed changing." The little one had fallen back to sleep again. "How about you? Did you get your rest then?"

"Yes." He remained quiet as she placed the baby back in crib, but when Hermione turned to face him again, he asked, "What were you discussing with her?"

At this Hermione burst out laughing, causing him to glare at her. "... I don't mean to laugh!"

"Then why are you?" he asked sharply.

"It's just that I wasn't *discussing* anything with her. Not really. I was just talking to her and mostly to myself." Her smile faded. "It just sounded like you think of her as an adult who can understand everything and communicate back. She's just a baby."

His eyes narrowed even more. "Don't assume anything about what I think...on any subject. You know very well what I mean."

Suddenly nervous, Hermione blurted, "I was thinking about what name she should be given."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"My grandmother's name was Alena." She paused to see what reaction he had, but there was none. "And I know that your mum's name is Eileen, so I thought..."

"And just how do you know that?" he asked, stepping into the room, eyes again narrowing.

"Er... last year... I was researching in the library, and I found a clipping about her marriage." She lowered her eyes, hoping he didn't ask what she'd been researching at the time, not wanting to get into that conversation with him.

"I see."

At this, she looked up. "Well? What do you think?"

"You want to name her Alena and Eileen?" he asked, curling his lip upwards slightly.

"Eilena... something from each of them."

Snape strode forward and looked down into the crib, the line of his mouth curving up into a small smile. One long-fingered hand lowered and caressed the side of the baby's face. "Eilena," he said, testing the sound. Tilting his head to gaze at Hermione, he nodded and said, "I like it. It suits her."

"Thanks. Now... sir, not to annoy you..."

"Can that truly be avoided, you think?" he quipped, looking back down at his daughter.

Huffing, she said, "If I do annoy you, it's your fault! You're the one who brought me here!"

"Enough," he said softly. "None of this in front of her."

"Agreed."

"Shall we go into the next room? There is the matter of owling a letter to my friends that I'd like to discuss."

"Very well," he said, bringing the soft blanket up to cover Eilena's lower body.

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Harry nodded awake as he heard a tapping coming from the kitchen window. He nudged Ron and kicked under the table at Draco. "Oi. An owl! Maybe it's some news on Hermione."

Quickly going to the window, he ducked to let the large owl swoop past him and circle the room once. When it came back to land on the counter, he took the parchment from its leg, not offering it anything to eat, but allowing it to snatch one of Hedwig's owl treats from the counter, and quickly opened the letter.

"It's from Hermione!" he said excitedly. The other two jumped up and eagerly listened as he read the letter.

Harry, I just want you to know that all's well. Please don't think that I've run out on you. I haven't done that. What with all the arguing at the house, I think it would be best if I'm not around. Bickering will only distract you and the others from our plans. I've decided to stay with our "friend." Yes, it's the same person who's been sending us the help all this time. I was able to figure out who the person is, and I feel I can do more on this end than I could there. I hope you understand. As soon as I can, I will return. Don't worry about me. I am safe and agreeable to my situation. I'm not in danger.

Ron, please don't beat yourself up about this. You just made me realize that we need time apart. Too many things have happened between us now, so I don't know that I can ever go back to feeling the way I did before... You know what you did. I won't go into it. However, you should know that Draco and I are friends. You need to accept that.

And lastly, Draco, I know you'll be worrying, but I want you to know that everything is fine. Please try to get along with Ron. He means well, but he just has a bad way of showing it sometimes. Harry needs you both to be mature about this and help in any way possible. Hopefully, this will all be over soon. I will write again.

Love from,

Hermione

Without even questioning the others, he flicked his wand and muttered an incantation he'd recently learned. It would reveal if she'd been forced to write the letter or if she'd written it of her own will. When the page glowed yellow, he grinned. "She's telling the truth, mates. She's not in danger. Just went off to try to help us." He sighed in relief. "I don't like it, I admit, but I feel better now."

Ron didn't say anything at first. He was watching the expression on Draco's face. "What do you know, Malfoy? Do you know who her 'friend' is?"

Draco schooled his features. "No, I just don't like the fact that she is off like that. We know, um, nothing of this person."

"Well, we know that she wrote this of her own free will, and trust me, Hermione wouldn't willingly say that she's fine if she wasn't. There must be something very important for her to do where she is." Harry looked at Ron. "Ron, don't. It's not your fault."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe not all, but some of it is. She ran out of here in the first place because of me." He turned to leave. When he reached the door, Draco called out to him.

"Weasley, you know, now that Hermione is gone, I'll need some help researching. Potter is still reading up on hexes and the like. What do you say; are you up for it?"

Ron stopped and looked over his shoulder, trying to decide if Malfoy was being honest or if this was some sort of trick. "Yeah, I suppose I could help you. I need to warn you now, though; I'm not the greatest at that sort of thing."

Draco snorted. "No! You don't say?"

Ron narrowed his eyes. "Look, Malfoy," then he stopped. He'd promised himself he was going to think before he spoke and try to do better. "I can try."

Draco nodded. "Good enough."

Harry looked at the two speculatively. "Does this mean that it's safe for me to go upstairs and practice those new spells I've been learning?"

Shrugging, Ron said, "Sure." Turning to Draco, he said, "I'm going to go outside for a bit. I'll be in to help soon."

Draco nodded and Ron walked out. "It truly bothers him that Hermione is gone," he said, sounding surprised.

Harry turned to him. "Of course it does. He's in love with her."

"Mate, he has a funny way of showing it."

"The thing with Ron is that when he gets mad or hurt, he lashes out. Rather than discuss things, he gets even so to speak."

"Yet you and Hermione claim he's your best mate?"

"You have to remember that Ron is the youngest of six boys. Besides, I've never had any friends as loyal as those two, Draco. Even in the middle of an argument, if things got bad, I could still always count on either one of them to back me up. We love each other...we're family."

Draco looked at Harry, deep in thought. After a moment, he said, "I've never had a friendship like that. I've never trusted any of my mates that much." Turning to the window, watching Ron sit on a bench with his head in his hands, he said quietly, "But I was beginning to trust Hermione." He nodded towards the window. "Is he going to be all right?"

Harry walked over to stand beside Draco so that he could see Ron out of the window. "Yeah, he will. Oh, he's hurting, but he'll do what needs to be done. Would you do something for me?"

Draco turned to look Harry in the eyes. They stood there staring for a moment when he asked, "What would that be?"

"Just don't needle him too much, okay?"

"You take the fun out of everything," Draco joked. When Harry said nothing, he said, "Fine. I'll try to behave."

Harry blurted, "Do you really want Ginny?"

Cocking his head to the side, Draco asked, "Do you care?"

"I'll not see her hurt."

Raising an eyebrow, Draco asked, "You mean the way *you* hurt her? You and your mate out there confuse me. You act like it's okay for the two of you to hurt or lash out, but God forbid anyone else to do it. Do you know what the lot of you are? Hypocrites. Well, perhaps not Hermione, but you and Weasley certainly are."

"I do love her." Harry turned away. "I never meant to hurt her. She's great. But..."

"But you're not *in* love with her."

"I don't know. There's just so much going on. I just want some time to..."

"You don't have to be. Just don't let her think you are or that when this is over, you're going to go back to her...unless you're certain." He laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "We both know that you're not though."

"So that the door can be left wide open for you?"

"Perhaps. She's a very beautiful young woman. But I've not got the time to be thinking of that just now...or of any other doors that might be open. I've debts to pay and things to see to. So, first things first."

"I see." Harry walked away. "I'm going upstairs to practice more."

When Harry left to go upstairs, Draco went into the library. He truly hoped that Snape had not hurt Hermione. Sure, she was not forced to write the letter when she wrote it, but he didn't have the heart to point out that anything could've happened to her since.

He thought of his mum. Now that Hermione was there, what had happened to his mum? Was Hermione right in trusting Snape? Where was Lucius? Did he find out about what Snape had forced her to do? Draco grinned evilly. He well and truly hoped that he had.

"I don't think I want to know what's running through your mind right now, Malfoy," Ron said from the doorway.

"Just thinking about some debts I'll be collecting soon. You okay to help?"

"Yeah. I need to do something. What is it you want me to start on?" Ron looked wearily at all of the books on the table.

"Hermione and I were going to start researching removing Horcruxes in living things and power transfers during hexes."

"Oh, you mean like that snake You-Know-Who has?"

"Right. We need to figure out how to destroy that one before *he* can be killed."

Ron narrowed his eyes in concentration, wondering how difficult this was going to be. "Fine. Where do I start?"

Pointing, Draco said, "We haven't started looking though that book there yet."

Saying nothing, Ron sat and opened the book. He absently reached for a quill and some parchment to take notes with. They stayed silent for about an hour when Ron's stomach suddenly growled.

Draco looked up. "Hungry?"

"What? Oh, no, you go ahead." He didn't want to admit it, but this book was very interesting. "You know, it says here that a person can be a Horcrux."

"Hmm. Does it?" Draco had a feeling where Weasley was going with this but decided to wait him out to be sure.

Ron looked up sharply. He wondered... "Yeah, it says that a person could be a Horcrux and that there could be a strong connection between the person with the Horcrux and the person the soul came from. And I got to thinking."

Draco started to say something sarcastic and held back. He hated Weasley in a temper and wanted to change the subject, so he asked instead, "Does it say anything about animals or reptiles?"

"I was thinking that Harry has a connection to You-Know-Who. Quite a coincidence, don't you think? Or had you and Hermione been thinking that all along and just keeping it to yourselves?"

"Look, I thought the same thing, but Hermione explained to me how that was simply not possible." Draco snapped, aggravated that Weasley had actually thought the same thing he had himself. He wasn't as dumb as he looked.

"Well, it sure seems possible when I read this."

"Yes, I know. But then Hermione pointed out that to create a Horcrux, one must commit murder."

Ron threw up his hands in frustration. "Um, Draco," he started, barely aware he was using his nemesis first name, "~~had~~ commit murder! Remember Harry's mum and dad?"

"Yes, that's true, but after hearing the prophecy, his intent was to murder Harry, not to create a Horcrux. Besides, Hermione told me that Dumbledore told Harry the Dark Lord was likely going to use *Harry's* murder to create a Horcrux, but then the Killing Curse backfired, and he lost control of his body and fled. After that, he didn't have the time or means to create a Horcrux."

Ron scratched his chin in deep thought. It all made perfect sense. He was glad that he didn't have to add worrying that Harry had a part *of* his soul inside of him. A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Hermione sure confided in you a lot."

Draco looked up at Ron and answered cautiously. "Yes, on certain things. Certainly things of this sort."

"The two of you seemed to be getting pretty close."

"Don't start that shite, Weasley. Just don't. I'm not going to defend myself anymore. I will say once more that she and I are only friends, and I'm not here to spy and take information back to Snape or anyone else."

Ron grinned and held up his hands. "All right! All right! Jeez!" Then just as suddenly as it appeared, his smile faded. "I can't believe she's really gone. I pushed her out."

Draco sighed. He wasn't the comforting sort. "Maybe today, but I think that if she hadn't gone today, it would've just been another day. We've each got things that we need to be getting on with, and this is hers."

Ron nodded. "I suppose you're right. I just... It doesn't matter. I'm going to fix meself a sandwich and finish this. You want one?"

"Yeah, that'd be good. Just don't make it as big as you do yours! I'll never be able to fit it into my mouth!" Draco teased.

Snorting, Ron said, "Wimp." Then he turned to walk to the kitchen and fuel himself. It looked as if he had a long night ahead of him.

Harry stood gazing out of the window of his room. He'd come up here to be alone and study, but found himself thinking of Ginny instead.

Am I in love with her? he wondered. *Is this what all of these feelings are inside of me?* He didn't really have a basis of comparison. He'd never truly loved anyone before Ron and Hermione.

Hermione. He knew that he loved Hermione, but his feelings between the two women were completely different. When he was around Ginny, his stomach knotted, his palms sweated, and he always wanted to touch her.

When he thought of her with another man, not just Draco...anyone, he hurt. No, he didn't want her to be with anyone else. He turned from the window and put his face in his hands. *It's true. I do love her deeply. This has to be that lasting love like my parents had!* The next thought didn't make him feel any better. *Not only love her, but I need her as well.*

Harry walked to his desk. Sitting, he took out his quill and parchment, deciding to write Ginny a letter. He had some things he wanted to tell her, and since it was impossible to do so in person and he couldn't keep his feelings for her inside any longer, he figured writing to her was the next best thing.

He only hoped that it wasn't too late.

Authors' Notes: So, the boys are now trying to work together finally. Pity it took Hermione's leaving to get them together. Hope you're enjoying! More up soon.

Chapter 11

Hermione and Severus have an unexpected visitor. Harry sends Ginny a message, and the boys learn to work together.

Disclaimer: CocoaChristy and Southern Witch have swiped some characters created by J.K.R. for a bit of fun. Hope you enjoy.

Thanks go to Soul Bound for the beta read.

"Now that you've written to your friends, would you care to use my bedroom to rest?" Snape asked, putting his cup aside.

"I thought we agreed that I would stay in the baby's room?" Hermione said, panicked.

"Would you be able to sleep comfortably with me hovering about? With the baby... with Eilena crying at times?" He pointed towards his room. "I only mean for you to have peace. While you do so, I will see about fixing the room to your liking, making it comfortable for the both of you."

"There's so much that we have to talk about. I have so many questions." She yawned as she stretched. "Though I guess I should sleep. I am very tired."

He stood and said, "Come," beckoning with his hand.

She followed him cautiously, suddenly very self-conscious about their situation. She was about to lie in his bed, and that was something very intimate to her. Her body would be on his sheets where his had been. Did he sleep starkers? That thought made her stomach clench nervously. Yes, she'd been in Harry's bed before, but that was definitely not the same thing...he was just Harry! She'd never even been inside of Draco's room, much less sat on his bed, and she'd been in Ron's both when he'd only been a friend and a lover. However, this was something different altogether.

Here was a man that she wasn't quite certain she trusted, and yet she was in his home, albeit forced, with no one else around to buffer anything that might happen. She stopped in the doorway as he closed the thick curtains to block out the sunlight. She remembered part of their conversation from the evening before.

"Your room, I'm afraid, will be the same as mine."

The color left her face, and she felt her stomach bubbling uncomfortably. "What are you saying, Professor Snape?"

"I won't touch you," he said after a long pause, "but the only reason the Dark Lord is allowing you to stay here is because he thinks that I've... I've chosen you."

"Chosen me?"

"As my consort."

He'd seemed sincere when he said he'd not touch her, but what if this was some ultimate plan to... to what? *To get in your knickers?* a sarcastic voice whispered to her mentally. *Please! He's told you what he needs you for, and it certainly isn't anything physical. Even Ron knows when to cut and run... Look at what he did to you...he chose Lavender, had a romp in the next room without using a Silencing Charm to hurt you. If a boy knew to pass you by, no man would be interested in your body... not really.*

"Is something wrong?" he asked, making his way back to her.

She stepped back in alarm. "I just don't know about this. Perhaps I could sleep on the couch."

"Nonsense. I insist you use my room." He pointed to the bed. "Zigby has placed clean linens for you, and he's gathered some of Narcissa's things left behind. You may make use of them."

"Professor? What's happened with her? How could she leave Eilena? Is it true what Draco said?" she asked, unable to help herself.

He gazed at her thoughtfully. "I will tell you everything you wish to know once you've slept."

She nodded and stepped past him, pausing to make certain he'd leave before she approached the bed.

"Miss Granger, I told you that I'd not touch you, and I meant it. You are quite safe from my affections, I assure you."

"You frighten me," she admitted, not sure why.

"Good."

"I don't know what to think, but you seemed so earnest in your request for help that I couldn't possibly turn you away...especially not after seeing and being with Eilena."

"And?"

"And I ask that you never abuse the trust I am trying to place in you, sir. You have my word that I'll do what you ask of me, but you must give me yours that you'll respect me as well." She shivered slightly as the thought of him pulling away her shirt entered her mind. "I know that Voldemort..."

"Don't speak his name," he said quietly. "Not ever."

"I know that he believes that you and I are to become lovers, and you've insinuated that eventually we will have to make certain he doesn't suspect that we aren't, but it will only ever be an act."

His eyes narrowed. "Do you believe that I am making this up to seduce you, Miss Granger? Using this to get you in my bed?" He stepped closer and sneered slightly.

"N-no, that's not what I meant. I only mean that you should remember to..."

"If I wanted to seduce you," he said softly, gazing down at her cleavage for a moment, "I wouldn't use any ruse. I would simply do so, and you would walk into it willingly. Make no mistake. The situation we're in now isn't about you. You are a means to an end. It's about Eilena, the only female on my mind presently."

With that said, he turned on his heel and left her gaping behind him, closing the door with a sharp snap as he exited. "Well, that went well," she muttered, feeling a tad unsettled. She hadn't meant to insult him, but he'd certainly meant to insult her, hadn't he? And the worst part was that it'd worked. Ignoring the soft nightgown obviously laid out for her by the house-elf, she kicked off her trainers and crawled onto the bed, pulling the fresh sheet over her clothed body and letting sleep find her.

Sometime later, she heard a loud crash and a high-pitched shriek. Bolting up in the bed, she looked around in confusion. Where the hell was she?

"Snape's place," she said, realization hitting her. She scooted to the edge to find her shoes and began to toe them on, stopping when she heard another ruckus and then

the wails of Eilena.

"Don't you do this to me!" a woman yelled loudly, sounding hysterical.

"You must leave here immediately," Snape replied.

"Why should I? Will you move? Let me go to her!"

Hermione crept towards the door and wondered why this woman wanted to see her, and then she realized what was going on. It was Narcissa Malfoy, and she wanted to see her baby.

"Eilena!" she whispered, still hearing the little one cry. Why wasn't Snape or Zigby doing anything to comfort her? Why didn't he let her mother see her?

"Don't make me physically remove you, Narcissa," Snape hissed dangerously.

Hermione peeked through the crack in her door and saw that he was standing in front of the heavily breathing, angry woman, not allowing her to pass.

"Your husband is likely tracking you as we speak," he added.

"Severus, please, if you ever cared for me even in the smallest..."

He forcefully grabbed her arm and pushed her back a few steps towards the Floo. "I don't know what you thought, Narcissa, but I only took you in because the Dark Lord made it so."

She slapped him then with her free hand. "You're lying! Are you afraid of what Lucius might do? How could you do thi..." Her words trailed away as her eyes met Hermione's just as she stepped out of the bedroom. "What is *that* doing here?"

Snape turned to see that she was there, and she could see that he visibly paled, obviously wishing she hadn't made her presence known.

"I heard Eilena," she said simply, looking towards the doorway to Eilena's room and seeing the house-elf reaching into the crib to pick her up.

"Eilena?" Narcissa questioned incredulously. "Do you mean that you've given my daughter a name? What sort of name is that?"

"My daughter," Snape said, rounding on the livid woman again. "Don't make me hurt you, Narcissa. I will do what I must to ensure my Master's laws are followed."

Sagging against him and sobbing hysterically, Narcissa said, "H-how could you let that filth around our daughter when you could have me? We could leave together. They wouldn't find us if we went to the continent."

"No," he said firmly, though Hermione took note of the way he carefully pulled her over to the couch. At that moment, he turned to Hermione and said, "Go to her. I will deal with this."

Quickly moving to take her charge from Zigby and administer the bottle to the hungry infant, she made certain to listen to the words exchanged in the next room.

"I've lost my boy. My sister has died, and now I can't even see my own baby.... What point is there to living?" Narcissa said tearfully. "I've nothing."

"You have your husband," Snape said curtly, adding, "and our Lord's followers. Surely that is enough."

"What is that girl... that scum doing here?" she asked brokenly. "You aren't seriously allowing her to care for the baby? The baby needs her mother...me!"

"Don't speak about Hermione that way," he said quietly, still towering over Narcissa. "She's here under the Dark Lord's approval...and mine."

Hearing her given name spoken in such a way, Hermione couldn't help but to feel pleased that he'd defended her and didn't mind that it sounded as if something more was between them. She supposed he had to keep up appearances. However, her heart went out to Draco's mother. She thought her son was gone, and now Snape wouldn't allow her to see her own baby.

"You have to leave, Narcissa, and it won't pay for you to try to return, for I intend to make certain you'll not be able to return."

The distraught woman didn't reply, simply sobbed, head hung low and hands cradling her face. Stepping away from her, Snape turned and went to where Hermione sat with Eilena.

"She will not leave unless I force her to, and if I do that, she'll likely Splinch herself."

"I'm surprised you care, given your attitude towards her," Hermione said sharply.

"I don't care."

"Since you've not filled me in on things, maybe you could answer a question for me, Snape. What harm is it if she just sees her child?"

"You don't understand," he said in resignation. "I have my orders."

Wrinkling her nose in disgust, she spat, "Always following orders, aren't you?"

"If she saw the child, she would only want to see her more. It's best she doesn't interact with Eilena at all."

"Severus..."

It was Narcissa. She'd silently made her way into the room and was standing just behind him and looking at the small bundle in Hermione's arms.

Snape exchanged a glance with Hermione before moving aside with a sigh, allowing Eilena's mother to approach Hermione's chair and kneel down to inspect Eilena.

"She hasn't any hair," she whispered with a smile. "Oh, she reminds me of Draco... Look at her ears, the same as his, and her little nose!" Her eyes rose to meet Hermione's. "I do so love her."

"Hold her," Hermione offered, heart breaking for the woman before her.

"Hermione," Snape warned.

"Only a moment," she replied to him. "Please..."

"No."

Eagerly Narcissa reached out to touch the baby's round head and brought her lips to the baby's soft spot. Tears formed in Hermione's eyes as she watched the wonder play over Narcissa's face, and she then noticed that it seemed like Eilena had opened her eyes and was gazing at her mother intently.

Wanting to ease the woman's pain, or at least the cause for some of it, Hermione softly said, "Draco is alive and well."

Sharply, the woman looked up. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"That will be all, Hermione," Snape said, stalking forward to pull Narcissa up. "It's time for her to leave now."

"Severus, is this true? Is Draco all right?" Her voice was laced with hope.

"It is what Hermione says."

"Where? I must see him. I have to...ahhhh!" She suddenly clutched at her throat and pulled at the locket. "He's calling me, has noticed I've gone."

"Leave and never return," Snape urged. "I'm serious, Narcissa."

"I..." She nodded. "Take care of them, Severus. Draco and our daughter, the only good things to come from me it seems." She looked at the baby once more before fleeing the room and Disapparating with a loud crack.

Seeing the angry look on his face, Hermione swallowed thickly. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. She just seemed so pitiful."

"Do you have any idea as to what you've done, you bloody swot? Lucius will retrieve that information from her and possibly use it. You may have ruined things for your friends."

"I think it's time you told me everything, Snape, else this might not work."

"Zigby has fixed dinner, he has. Are you wanting to be eating now?" squeaked the house-elf, who'd popped back into the room.

"We will go shortly. That will be all," Snape commanded.

Once the elf was gone, Hermione said, "Well?"

"I will teach you Occlumency," he said, surprising her. "Soon. I can't be certain what Lucius will do once he has the information that you know where Draco might be. We'll have to shield your mind."

"What did she mean that her sister died?"

"Bellatrix, yes," he said, not supplying anything else.

"I didn't realize." She looked down at the baby and adjusted her. "It almost serves her right after what she tried to do to Eilena... and to her sister. How horrible."

"We finally agree on something." He reached down and took the baby from her, and she stood, indicating that he could take the seat.

"So what's next?"

"Well, I've made a decision about expanding the room so that you can be comfortable here. I thought you might like to hear about it before I actually did it."

"All right." Her stomach growled loudly, causing her to flush in embarrassment. "I can practically smell the roast chicken from here now. Are you hungry?"

"Go on," he said. "I'll join you after I put her down."

"Bring her with us," she said. "She can lie in that little basinet while we eat. If she gets fussy, which I seriously doubt it...not once she's eaten and had her nappy changed anyway...one of us can tend to her."

"Very well," he said, rising awkwardly. "Go on. I'll change her first and bring her in."

"Here. I'll help." Hermione opened the top drawer of the changing table and took out the needed items, watching as Snape tended to his daughter.

After a few moments, he said, "This might sound mental, but it's as though she's already changing, filling out even. She's not as thin as she was at first, and her coloring is changing."

"To hear my mum tell it, she had to take pictures constantly because I changed all the time. When I was younger, I had very light hair, almost blonde. It darkened as I got older."

"I've always looked the same," he said. "I favor my father mostly."

Not knowing what to say to that, she simply nodded, feeling pangs of hunger lapping at her insides. The graceful way his hands cleaned and powdered Eilena reminded her of the days in his class when he'd handle his ingredients. It was with the exact same care and precision that he was using now.

He cleared his throat and drew her eyes up to his. "Once you've started learning Occlumency, we'll gather memories, making new and false ones if we have to, so that you can learn to project them at will... in case the Dark Lord does indeed look."

"All right," she said, feeling slightly nervous. "New memories? Such as this one with Eilena or with us having dinner? Where it looks as though we're getting on well, that I'm adjusting?"

"Yes."

"False ones. Us being close?"

He nodded. "Come. Let's eat. We can talk after."

"I'll bring the basinet in."

"Allow me," he said, flicking his wand and lifting it magically.

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Ginny sat in the Great Hall, moving her breakfast around on her plate. She had no appetite, not since she'd received a letter from Ron the night before.

He'd told her that he and Harry had had a long talk, and Harry had confessed that he wasn't truly in love with her. Then he'd warned her off Draco Malfoy. Ginny snorted, imagining Ron's expression while he'd scribbled away. Draco.

She'd had mixed feelings where he was concerned for a while until she spent some time alone at the lake and worked them out. She came to the realization that it wasn't exactly *Draco* that she'd wanted; it was the attention he had been giving her.

With Harry, she'd been feeling neglected and left out. Draco actually took the time to speak with her, notice her. After all, he was in the same spot as the other three, and yet, he took time out to make her feel like a person and not simply a problem he needed to figure out what to do with.

And the way he'd looked at her! She shivered just thinking about those gray eyes penetrating her brown ones, as if he could see right into her soul. If she hadn't loved Harry with all her heart, body, and soul, she wouldn't have minded giving Draco a try, but she knew that it wouldn't have been fair to him. Until Harry was out of her system completely, it wouldn't be fair for her to give anyone a try.

She started to rise, deciding to use the hour she had before her first class to study in the library, when a familiar white owl caught her attention. "Hedwig! What brings you here?"

Harry's owl gracefully landed in front of Ginny on the table and cooed at her. Ginny gently stroked Hedwig's head, slightly afraid of the contents of the letter tied to her foot. She'd recognized Harry's handwriting immediately.

The owl stuck her foot out as if to say, "Take it!" and Ginny slowly untied the letter. Giving the snowy owl a bit of water and toast, she took the letter and decided to go to the tower rather than the library. She instinctively knew she would need privacy for this.

When she started past Colin Creevey, he grabbed her arm. "All right, Gin?"

Sighing internally, she eased her arm out of his grip. He'd been after her to go out with him all year. "Yes, Colin, I'm just fine as I've told you every day this week." His constant picture taking of her lately was beginning to grate on her nerves.

"He doesn't want you, you know. You're wasting your time."

Slinging the hair that had fallen over her shoulder behind her back, Ginny told him, "It's mine to waste, isn't it? Colin," she said, more softly, "even if I wasn't in love with Harry, I couldn't be with you that way. I don't think of you like that."

"I know it!" he all but shouted, embarrassed that he was being let down, no matter how easy. "I just hate to see you hurting, that's all."

She smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate your friendship, honestly. I just don't want to give you any false hope that there will ever be anything more between us. I don't mean to hurt you, or to make you feel brushed aside, because I do care for you."

"I know it. Harry's a fool," Colin declared. "He'll come to his senses. Don't fret."

Simply smiling, Ginny merely patted his hand and walked to the tower. Hardly anybody went there anymore since the death of Professor Dumbledore. She found that she really enjoyed the solitude.

Sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, Ginny opened Harry's letter, trying to prepare herself for the rejection to come. She read:

*My Dearest Ginny,*

*I bet you are surprised to be receiving a letter from me, eh? Trust me, I am surprised myself to be writing this at such a time, but I couldn't go on another day without telling you how I truly feel.*

Bracing herself, she thought, *Okay...here it comes. He's going to tell me there's no chance for us.* Blinking back the tears, she continued to read:

*I've done some soul searching lately, and by doing so, I've come to realize what a berk I've been. Before I go any further, I want to apologize to you for that. Please know that I never meant to hurt you.*

*I only wanted to protect you, first and foremost. You know that I've thought all along that if you were connected with me, you would be a target for Voldemort. I never considered that you're a target anyway, whether we're together or not. Anybody who is not sided with him in this battle is a target.*

*I've really tried to make you stop wanting me...and myself to stop wanting you...and I almost had myself convinced that I didn't, that we'd be better off without each other. That's the reason I mostly ignored you during Christmas and all the other times. I wanted you to believe I didn't want you any longer in that way. I figured it would be best if you could have a future without me, that you would be happier that way. And if I happen to get killed, then maybe it wouldn't be as hard for you to move on. I'm going to fight, and I'm going to win and live. Can I go on without you after all this is said and done? I'm just not sure I could handle that. I know I wouldn't be happy because I love you, Ginny. I am truly in love with you.*

*Please tell me that it's not too late for us. I want...no, I need...you with me, where you belong. You know me, good things and bad, and yet you've never stopped loving me. I know I don't deserve you, but I would like to try to, starting now, if you'll let me. Will you forgive me, love, and give me a second chance? I'll eagerly await your reply.*

*Forever yours,*

*Harry*

Ginny sat staring at the letter, gobsmacked. She'd been trying to prepare herself for the inevitable letter that would come, him telling her to get on with her life once and for all.

She stood, wiping the tears from her cheeks, hugged the letter to her chest, and let out a yell of joy. Since she was alone, she danced a small jig around the room. *He loves me!* was all she could think.

Her joy was abruptly cut short as Draco's words sounded in her head. *He only uses you, you know. When he's lonely or needs something, there you are. But, Ginevra, when is he ever there for you? He strings you along because you're there and it's convenient for him. You deserve so much more. Don't be his doormat, where he is welcome anytime, no matter what.*

"Am I just a convenience? A doormat? Does he truly want to work things out and be with me, or will he decide next week that he can't be bothered with me because he has too much to do?"

She began pacing again, out of worry this time rather than joy. She wanted Harry with every fiber of her being. She couldn't remember a time when she didn't want him. Mostly, she remembered him continuously hurting her. But his letter seemed so sincere... He'd never written something so long and meaningful before.

*What am I going to do? Should I follow my heart and welcome him back into my life, or should I take some time and see if he's serious and not just feeling lonely at the moment?*

She stopped pacing, placing a hand over her mouth, remembering the letter Ron had sent her the night before, telling her Harry admitted he wasn't in love with her. *What's*

*going on here? Is Ron just saying that to keep me from Harry? But why?*

Ginny grabbed her book bag and headed back down, not wanting to be late for Potions. She would have to think long and hard before replying to Harry. There was only so much a heart could take, and her heart had just about taken all that it could.

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Ron and Draco sat in the library, going over the last few books. They'd both found a lot of information and decided to start practicing what they'd learned so that they could destroy any living Horcruxes when they found them.

Harry was pacing the floor and muttering to himself every so often.

"Harry!" Ron said, exasperated. "You're driving me nuts, mate. What bug's crawled up your arse?"

Draco snickered. "It's true. Why so irritable? You look like you're waiting for something...or someone."

Ron jumped up so suddenly that a few books fell from the table. "Is it Hermione? Have you heard from her? Is she coming back?"

Draco could have bitten his tongue. He and Ron had been getting along lately, and to his own surprise, Draco was beginning to have some understanding of Ron's actions.

Harry stopped pacing and turned to his best friend. "No, Ron. I'm sorry. If I had heard anything, you would be the first I'd tell. I promise."

"Well then, what is it?" Ron asked as he sat back down, embarrassed. He hated making a fool of himself, regardless of what others thought.

"It's noting, really. Just waiting on... well... I wrote to Ginny," Harry admitted. He wasn't going to say anything, but he saw that he had no choice.

Narrowing his eyes, Ron asked, "So? You've written to her before and not been so churned up about it."

"Harry, what did you do?" Draco wondered out loud. "You've asked her back, haven't you? That's why you're so nervous."

Ron gritted his teeth, chanting in his mind, *Think before you speak! Think before you speak!* Slowly turning his head towards Harry, going for nonchalance but looking threatening, he asked before Harry could comment, "Why would you do that? Why must you insist on hurting my sister, Harry?"

"I don't! It's not like that!" He threw his hands up in a show of aggravation. "I mean, I have lately, and you agreed I should push her away, but I've realized a few things. I *am* in love with her, Ron. For real."

"So you say," Draco spat, as if he had a say in the matter. "She's not someone for you to go to on your whims! Ginevra is a person with feelings, in case you've forgotten!"

Harry spun towards Draco, wanting to look away from the heat in Ron's eyes. "What's it to you? And stop calling her Ginevra!"

Ron stood once more and walked over to where Harry was. "Harry, you're my best mate, you know that. But if you hurt my sister again, I'm going to have to hurt you. And then the rest of my brothers will," he said, only half joking.

Harry smiled shakily, thinking of Ron's brothers. Wanting to change the subject, he asked, "How's Penelope?"

"Fine as far as I can tell. She's due in about a month I think, and Mum's happy that she and Percy have been coming around more. I still say he's a git though," Ron said as he shook his head. "It's odd that she even got pregnant because I heard Perce say that he wanted to be at the Ministry five years before they started a family."

Draco sat up straighter as alarm bells started going off in his head. *The timing is right... Mother will be due around then, too, I think.* "They didn't plan this baby, Ron?"

"No, and Perce usually follows his plans through. He sets goals for himself and doesn't rest until they're reached." Ron rolled his eyes. "Goes on and on about something, can't get him to shut up once he starts."

"Well, mistakes happen," Draco said, but he had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Yeah, true, but not usually with him. He's anal, eh, Harry?"

"Yes, he is," Harry agreed, wondering what was bothering Draco but decided to let it pass. He didn't want any more problems today if he could help it.

Just then, the *Daily Prophet* owl came with the paper delivery. Draco stood to take it and place the money in the pouch.

Walking back to his seat at the table so that he could read it, Draco stopped suddenly and let out a sound of slight distress.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked, alarmed by Draco's behavior.

"They've found my aunt Bellatrix's body."

Both Harry and Ron wisely stayed quiet, neither considering that a bad thing. Then Draco said quietly, "I hope nothing has happened to my mother..."

Green eyes locked on blue then, both filled with dread and concern. They both thought of Hermione and wished she was there. She'd likely know how to comfort Draco while they had no idea what to say.

Author's Notes: More up soon!