

Strega Letteraria

by notsosaintly

Years after Voldemort is destroyed, Hermione struggles to have the life she has always wanted. **Note: This story is **on hiatus**. It isn't abandoned; I simply have no idea when it will be continued.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 17

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Author's Note: I'd like to thank my two betas, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern Witch 69](#), from the bottom of my heart. They have both been instrumental in helping me to write the best story I possibly can.

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Chapter One

From the thick shadows that conveniently lived in the alleyway between Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop and Gladrags, the Stranger watched. The glow from the half-curtained picture window spilled across the street, and the woman could be seen working diligently within, as was her habit, as she carried on with her evening ritual of closing up the Strega Letteraria bookshop. The hooded Stranger was indistinguishable from the violet-black of the evening, and not even the occasional passer-by felt the Stranger's presence. Immoveable, the Stranger was nothing but a shadow in the night.

A shadow that seemed very interested in what a certain Hermione Granger was doing, night after night, as she worked tirelessly in the bookshop she had owned for the last five years. The Stranger knew many things about her, including when she had purchased the space and that, of late, she struggled to keep her business afloat.

Hermione hadn't always attracted such close attention from the Stranger. Rumor had spread on the edges of certain circles in the Wizarding world that the owner of the bookshop might ultimately find herself in peril. It was the barest whisper of a rumor, one that might have been mentioned in passing, but afforded a mere shrug of the shoulders by those who were in the business of rumor-mongering. The Stranger seemed the only one to pay closer attention, and the last few weeks found the shadows darker somehow and of more substance.

The only movement the shadows made was when Hermione Granger unexpectedly stepped outside of the shop. The movement was subtle, and it could have easily been mistaken for the wind, if anyone had taken notice, as the shadows drew the Stranger further into their depths.

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Hermione finally finished recording and shelving the last of the books that had been delivered that afternoon and, after sneezing a number of times, decided she needed to step outside to clear her sinuses. She thought briefly that it would probably be prudent to take a dust cloth to the shelves, but then that would merely erase a bit of the

atmosphere that all real bookshops had. There was just something so satisfying about pulling a book down from a shelf and having to blow off a layer of dust.

A glance down the street in both directions made it painfully obvious that she wasn't expecting any customers. Not that there ever were any at this time of night. Crossing her arms to keep out the evening chill that was typical of mid-February, she leaned against the building and looked up at the night sky. The clouds were in a hurry tonight, and the air smelled of the rain that had fallen earlier in the day: that sharp, clean smell that bit into the insides of your nostrils. The moon hung low and large, and the clouds seemed to be running away from its light.

It's the same moon Mum and Dad are probably looking at right now The thought always ran through her mind every time she gazed at the nighttime sky. When Hermione was small, the summer before she first left for Hogwarts, her father had taken her out one evening to look at the stars.

"See all these stars, Hermione?" she recalled him saying. "No matter where you go, they will always be there. And whenever you see the moon, remember that we are looking at the same moon, too."

She missed her mum and dad. They had just recently sold their dentistry and retired, deciding to travel around the world. They had been in China for the last month. At the moment, they were probably in between destinations. Andrew, the clerk at the post office, was tickled at the tiny Asian owl that had delivered her mum's letter, and for a week all he could talk about was how the only food the owl had accepted was rice.

Hermione sighed and stood up straight, only to look down at her feet. She felt sort of foolish standing outside of the bookshop, alone and with nothing to do. She felt she ought to be doing something useful with her hands, and she wrung her fingers, thinking that a scandalous habit of cigarette or pipe smoking would be quite useful at the moment, if only to give her an excuse for being outside. She smiled faintly at the absurdity of the thought, seeing as she had come out here to clear her lungs, not pollute them further. A couple of deep, rain-fresh breaths and she went back inside.

It was the end of the month, and the ledger was lying on her desk, staring at her demandingly, waiting to be balanced. It wasn't a task she was particularly looking forward to, and she had been procrastinating all day even though it wouldn't take but mere minutes of her time. Normally, she enjoyed bookkeeping. She had always done her own, never hiring anyone else for the task. But lately, it had become agonizing to watch as more Galleons were paid than were brought in.

Owls needed to be sent in the morning with the mortgage and taxes and the usual bills from her suppliers; there was no more procrastinating to be done. Lifting her quill, she made the additions and subtractions and discovered that, indeed, the latter were more numerous this month. After the bills were paid, she had nothing left for the new set of robes she desperately needed, much less food. It had never been this bad before. She would have to go to Gringotts in the morning after sending the post to withdraw a stipend from her vault. It was something she hated to do since that money was supposed to be for her trip to Italy next summer. If she withdrew any more after tomorrow, there would be no trip.

It was enough to make her feel a little despondent. Feeling her throat tighten with emotion, she closed the books and checked the timepiece on the mantel: fifteen more minutes until closing. She knew no one would be coming in, but as always, she stayed open until exactly nine o'clock, not wanting to miss even the possibility of a customer coming in at the last minute. She slumped behind the counter and rested her head on her hand, letting her low spirits drag memories from her past that she had not thought about in quite some time....

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The bookshop had been her dream. Ever since she was a little child, she'd loved books, and she would tell people that when she grew up, she was going to own her very own bookshop. The adults would chuckle, no doubt knowing how much work owning a business was and how few children actually realized their childhood dreams, and would pat her on the head, saying that there would be no other place they would expect to find Hermione Granger.

It finally happened the year after she'd completed her education at Hogwarts. She remembered feeling impatient that her final year had been delayed a full year because she, Harry, and Ron had joined the Order and Minerva McGonagall had made the very difficult decision to close the school after Albus had been killed. To everyone's surprise, Albus's ghost was found one day, floating down the hallway on the seventh floor of the castle, deep in discussion with the Bloody Baron, and Minerva nearly split a rib scolding him for not letting her know sooner that he had chosen to remain in spirit. Still, parents simply didn't feel safe sending their children to Hogwarts without a corporeal Albus, and Minerva was more than a little relieved that she wouldn't bear the responsibility of keeping them safe. As a result, eliminating the scourge of Voldemort got her undivided attention, and she made sure it was the main course on everyone's plate.

Luckily for everyone...for Minerva really was a demanding headmistress of the Order...the war was over by the following spring. On the day she should have been taking her NEWTs, Hermione was dodging curses and throwing hexes. After all the hard work they had put into destroying the Horcruxes, making battle plans, and attending various meetings...until they'd truly believed there was nothing else to life but meetings...Voldemort had finally been vanquished. There were casualties, of course. Many casualties. She, Ron and Harry had made it through in one piece, and for a while it looked as though everything would go back to being normal...or at least the same as it was before.

So they started their seventh year a year late. Perhaps it was because so much had changed at Hogwarts with several professors needing to be replaced, or perhaps it was because they no longer had the shadow of evil hanging over their heads, but things just didn't feel the same. Ron became distant. Death Eaters had killed Percy during that year, and his father had been killed in the final battle. Eventually, Ron found solace in Lavender's arms once again because for some reason she never asked about his family. Hermione supposed it was probably for the best. She had felt something for him in her sixth year, but seeing Ron weak and needy, yet pushing her away every time she tried to get him to talk about it, killed any special affection she might have had for him.

She and Harry had grown closer, but he spent half his time with Ginny and the other half playing Quidditch. So, feeling friendless, Hermione threw herself into her schoolwork, to avoid missing the way things used to be, and began planning for her future. To her surprise, the Order members had each been granted a monetary reward from the Ministry for all their hard work during the war, and Hermione knew exactly how she was going to spend it...on a bookshop in Hogsmeade. Diagon Alley had Flourish and Blotts, and she felt Hogsmeade should have something comparable.

Thus, the Strega Letteraria was born. The money she had received from the Ministry went to pay for remodeling the space. Most of all, she'd wanted to create an atmosphere that would be comfortable, someplace that would be attractive and welcoming, someplace that would invite customers to find a cozy niche and relax with a good book. Books lined every single wall, and bookcases wound their way through the shop like a maze of sorts. She decorated everything in burgundy and gold, proud of her Gryffindor heritage and not willing to let go of it easily. There were plush chairs, poufs, floor pillows, and an ancient fireplace she had acquired from a defunct pureblood family estate that was constantly crackling with a fire in the grate. Old-fashioned desks could be found in various nooks and hideaways for those who wanted to study or compose a letter. She'd thought of everything. To her, it was a home away from home.

Or rather, it was a home beneath her home, as she lived in the flat right above the store. Her flat was lined with even more books, but the chairs were softer, the lights were dimmer, and it was someplace the customers never saw. The only way she could escape the pressures of being a not-quite-successful business owner was to climb up the stairs after a long day and fall head-first into a story that would transport her to a different world.

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And that was her plan for this evening, just as it had been last night ... and the night before that. Why should tonight be different from any other? Just because she had no money left over this month for food or even a drink at the Three Broomsticks...never mind that Madam Rosmerta would probably let her drink on the house...she wasn't about to let that prevent her from relaxing and enjoying a good book. But somehow, it was becoming more difficult to convince herself of this month after month, as the bills seemed to get larger and her finances grew tighter. It was getting more difficult to forget her worries and lose herself in a book. In fact, she felt rather close to panicking. The only thing that kept her from doing so was that common sense would take hold at the very last second, scolding her that it really wouldn't do any good. It wouldn't change anything.

Noticing that it was now ten minutes past closing time, she moved to lock the door and extinguish the lights. As was her habit, the very last thing she did was to put out the fire in the grate. As she turned away from the darkened fireplace, her line of sight skimmed past the now-darkened, giant plate windows at the front of the shop, and she hesitated. It seemed that something had moved in the alleyway across the street. Peering deeper into the shadows, she tried to make out what it was. Eventually, she

chalked it up to imagination, deciding nothing had been there. Her eyes...or perhaps her mind...were playing tricks on her.

Shaking her head and feeling a little bit silly, she double-checked the locks and ascended the stairs to read a book and go to bed. At least sleeping didn't cost her any Galleons.

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It was a dangerous pursuit to lose oneself in one's thoughts. Through the window, the Stranger could see Hermione fade into daydream, something she did often as she waited for closing time. As if inviting everyone in the vicinity to accompany her down memory lane, the Stranger was pulled along for the ride, forced to revisit some pleasant and some not-so-pleasant memories. When the lights were finally extinguished in the shop, the Stranger was caught off-guard. For a prolonged second, all breathing ceased, and it was obvious that she had noticed the quick shift backwards, the reflexive swallow of the shadows. In the end, her darkened silhouette seemed to shrug it off and continued out of sight.

And finally, the Stranger felt free to pursue other interests ... until the shadows returned the next evening.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 17

Hermione bumps into Harry in Diagon Alley unexpectedly, and he knows exactly what to say to make her lighten up a bit.

Author's Note: As I will in every single chapter, because they deserve it, my heartfelt thanks go out to my two betas, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#). Without your keen eyes and your support, I would be floundering.

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Chapter Two

The book she had chosen to wile away her worries lay ineffective upon her bosom, pages pressed flat against her chest, her hand resting upon the splayed-open spine. Her breath caused a gentle rise-fall of the book, and to any onlooker, it would look as if she lovingly cradled a child to her bosom. The book was not forgotten, merely a means of comfort as she slipped deeper into sleep. It wasn't long before the dreams began. She gripped the spine of the book harder, her eyes moving sharply beneath their lids, as though subconsciously she hoped leather and parchment could make the dreams go away....

"No." She refused to believe him. Harry had always hated Professor Snape, but aside from Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, he was the one she looked up to the most. She wouldn't believe him. Snape wouldn't have done something so ... so heinous ... so unfeeling. Would he?

*He had walked between the worktables in the Potions classroom, and whenever he had passed hers, his face would become blank, and he would either walk past without a comment if he was having a particularly bad day, or he would mutter, "Well done, **as usual**, Miss Granger," beneath his breath on his better days. No matter that he was unable to rid his tone of that ever-present mockery.*

He had taught Defense Against the Dark Arts the same way, teaching defensive spells that she already knew because of the D.A. sessions, and commented similarly, though sounding less caustic and more defeated as time wore on. She was worried about her professor, about his subtle change of mood.

No. He couldn't have done it. Could he?

Dumbledore's form lay upon cold, hard stone. But she couldn't see him beneath the shroud. How could she be sure it was him? Fawkes flew overhead, his mournful cry piercing the silence. Sorrow pierced her heart. It was he. The seemingly invincible Albus Dumbledore lay dead, as cold and as hard as the stone he lay upon.

His murderer had fled. Her cheeks burned as she branded Professor Snape with such a title. Murderer. How could he have done it? He couldn't.

He wouldn't.

She refused to believe it.

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A charmed dawn broke through the window of her bedroom, forcing her eyes open. Alarm clocks never had worked well for her...she had learned to sleep through noise of varying levels throughout her years at Hogwarts...but she never could sleep unless the room was dark. Hence, the charmed window; she had developed the charm herself, and even Filius Flitwick had been impressed. She had it set to brighten at six a.m. every morning, being of the mind that sleeping any later was time wasted. It was a good thing she didn't have to set it every night as she always fell asleep before she thought about doing so, usually with a book draped across her chest. This morning was no different.

Still, she felt no driving need to get out of bed. The errands of the day weighed her down. Not that there were too many...she had very few, as a matter of fact...but the errands she needed to take care of today meant there would be less money in her bank vault. She had to pay her mortgage and her suppliers, and there was that trip to Gringotts, which made her want to burrow her head deeper into the pillow and go back to sleep. Except that she couldn't sleep with her stomach in knots and the gears of her mind churning. The bills were multiplying. Her savings was dwindling. Lately, every day was a struggle, and she wasn't so sure anymore that her business venture was going to succeed.

Responsibilities were responsibilities, however, and she eventually dragged herself out of bed and climbed into the shower to wash away sleep. The water trickled through her hair and slid down her face, slowly waking her, coalescing her thoughts, even somewhat solidifying her determination. It was not productive to lose hope, she reminded herself. If she lost hope, her dreams would be lost as well. If worse came to worse, she knew she would never be destitute. She would just have to sell her shop and get a "real" job. The bookshop could always be reopened at a later date, and she would make wiser, more profitable choices the next time around. A lump rose in her throat. It

couldn't come to that. She wouldn't let it come to that. Things would get better ... she hoped.

A cup of coffee and she was out the door before seven o'clock, wanting a good two hours before the shop opened to send her owls and go to Gringotts. A nice, brisk walk on a clear morning always worked wonders for her state of mind. She breathed in the crisp, air of late winter, enjoying the way it made her feel alive and strengthened her resolve to do better, to make everything work. She loved clear mornings, even though they were colder than overcast days, and the cornflower-blue of the sky was doing wonders for her mood. By the time she reached the post office, a smile had unconsciously appeared, and she was beginning to feel a little silly that she had felt so hopeless just moments before.

The clerk looked up from his book, noticing Hermione's wind-brushed cheeks and breathless smile, and grinned in return. "Oi, lassie. Yer lookin' brigh' 'n' cheerful this mornin'. What's the occasion?"

"Oh, nothing really, Andrew. It's just a beautiful morning, is all," she said, handing the postmaster five pre-addressed envelopes. "I need to send five today. They need to be there by tomorrow at the latest." She handed him a Galleon in payment, the last coin in her purse.

He eyed the empty purse warily and held up a hand. "It's on the 'ouse today, lassie. I owe yeh fer findin' me tha' book las' week. The missus is readin' it for the third time, yeh know." He winked at her conspiratorially.

Hermione laughed and placed the lone Galleon back in her purse. "Thanks, Andrew. I appreciate it." She wasn't about to argue. Walking around with an empty purse was asking for trouble. Too many "what-ifs" plagued her mind every time she dared to venture out Knutless.

"Ave yeh 'eard the lates' bi' o' gossip, lassie?" Andrew leaned in closer, elbow on the counter. He always loved imparting the latest gossip of Hogsmeade. He felt rather smug, too, when he beat Madam Rosmerta to it. "Seems Connor go' 'imself in qui' the pickle las' nigh'. Tried kissin' ol' Rosie affah a few, an' now ol' Connor's sportin' a face fullah pink spots. Two Healers a' the pub refused tah 'elp 'im, so Connor's paradin' down the street this mornin' an' grinnin' li' a Cheshire a' all the passers-by. Qui' a sigh', tha' 'un."

Hermione stifled a laugh behind her hand. "Oh, good one, Andrew. I hadn't heard about that yet. Now I'm sorry I didn't go down to the Three Broomsticks last night."

"Yup. Yeh missed a good 'un, fer sure. Don' be a stranger, alrigh', lassie?"

"I'll see you later, Andrew," she called over her shoulder as she left, still giggling and keeping an eye out for the miscreant Connor.

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At least Apparating is still free, she thought as she reappeared outside Gringotts Wizarding Bank in Diagon Alley. She hesitated merely a second, trying not to be too upset that she was withdrawing funds from her personal account when her business should be grossing enough to pay for the essentials. She hoped this wasn't going to become a habit, especially since she hadn't put anything into her vault for going on a year. Just as she placed her hand on the handle of the giant oak doors, a familiar voice called out from behind.

"Oi! Isn't that Hermione Granger, friend of the famous boy who spat in Voldie's face and made him die?"

Hermione spun around to see none other than Harry Potter bounding up the steps two-at-a-time towards her. The sky whirled overhead as Harry picked her up and spun her around.

"Harry!" she screamed. "Oh, Harry. I've missed you so much! How have you been? What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to be with the team in Ireland."

"Oh, they rearranged the schedule this season. Some nonsense about the Minister's daughter's wedding...."

She swatted him on the arm. "How is Ellie? You still making her jealous with Ginny?"

"Aw, she's over it. Since Ginny married that great brute, Alpin, Ellie doesn't mind so much anymore when she visits. Still don't know what she sees in him," Harry grumbled.

"Her two children are probably awfully glad she does see something in him. Oops! Make that two-and-a-half. Did you know Ginny's pregnant again?" Hermione grinned, partly because she was ecstatic for Ginny and partly because she knew the news was going to make Harry wince.

"Don't remind me." He shuddered at the thought. "At least she's getting the children she wanted." He waved his hands like he was glad he had no part in it.

"Yes, she's very happy." Hermione nodded.

"Sickeningly so," Harry agreed, falling silent for a moment.

Family was important to him, especially since he had lost his mother and father at such a young age. If it weren't for the Weasleys, he would never have had an example of a normal family, of parents who loved their children. Still, he had grown up in an environment where love was not given freely and was conditional. He didn't think he would be *that* kind of parent, but at the same time, he didn't know *how* to be a parent.

Truth be told, children made him nervous. After getting back together with Ginny the year after Voldemort had been destroyed, they had spoken often of their future. Whenever she talked about having kids, though, he froze up inside. He had no idea how to relate to a small child, much less a baby. He had never been around any other children other than Dudley until he went to Hogwarts, and then he only knew children his age and older. It really was understandable. Ginny understood, and she wasn't willing to wait around years to see whether this was just a temporary anxiety or a lifelong one. In the end, they had parted amicably.

"I went to the Weasleys for dinner last night. Ron won't be able to come to the wedding. It seems a Horntail mother was killed, and she has two babies that need tending."

Hermione worked hard at not showing her relief, as it seemed to upset Harry that Ron wasn't going to be there. Ever since she and Ron had parted soon after Voldemort was killed, it had been really awkward being around him. His family still accepted her as one of their own, which was wonderful since she was still good friends with Ginny, but Hermione tried to avoid family functions that Ron attended.

"He was supposed to be your best man, wasn't he?" she asked.

"Yeah. Well, Ellie's brother is going to stand in Ron's place. It's no problem. He let us know far enough in advance. There's still a month to go, and announcements haven't been printed yet." Harry brushed off the subject as if it didn't matter, but it was obvious that it did matter very much.

"So," Hermione said, trying to change the subject. "What are you doing in Diagon Alley today? Is Ellie with you?"

Harry grinned. "Well, I heard the most beautiful witch in Great Britain was going to be here, and I had to come." He winked at Hermione and shied away from another swat. "No, Ellie's not here. She's visiting a sick aunt in Yorkshire. Supposed to be away for a week."

"Oh, it's too bad that you won't get to see very much of her while you're home." Hermione's tone sounded more disappointed than Harry looked.

He shrugged and looked at his feet. "Just gives me more time to do other things," he said. "Besides, after next month, I'll be seeing her every day I'm home for the rest of my life."

Hermione looked at him curiously. He didn't sound like a man dying to be married. "You need to talk about it, Harry? I'm here, you know."

Harry's head jerked up, and his eyes twinkled to cover for his momentary lapse in joviality. He grasped her hand in his. "More than that, I'd love to get dinner tonight with you, if you'd accept a date from Puddlemere United's humble Seeker."

Hermione giggled. "It's a date. Be at the shop by seven. I'll close early. I think Harry Potter visiting Hogsmeade is considered a special occasion ... if not a downright holiday."

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Even though she had looked forward all day to her "date" with Harry, she still felt a pang of guilt at closing early. She had only two customers all day, and one hadn't bought a thing. Her practical side wanted to stay open just in case another customer stopped in, and it kept nudging her to go owl Harry and make it nine o'clock instead of seven. Then her common sense prevailed. How many times did Harry make it into town anyway? She would post a note on the door, and undoubtedly anyone who stopped by...if anyone stopped by...would understand and come back tomorrow.

Seven o'clock on the dot, Harry walked in the door and made sure she knew it, too. "Her-MY-oh-NEE!" he sang. "Tell your practical side to take a flying leap off the Astronomy Tower, and let's go!"

From somewhere in the maze of shelves, Hermione's laughter rang out. "You know me too well, Mister Potter."

A couple of bumps and thuds preceded Hermione as she very dustily made her way to the front, wiping her hands on her jeans.

"There's my little dust bunny." Harry mockingly turned up his nose.

"This coming from the poster boy for cleanliness," she snorted. Harry had sent her a poster-size photo of himself during the game between Puddlemere and Chudley. He was reaching out for the Snitch and was covered goggles to boots in mud.

"Liked that picture, did you? I thought of you when the photographer sent it to me." Harry grinned like a little boy overjoyed with the thought of a romp in the mud and ran a hand through his hair. "Well? Let's go. Brush off that dust. I have reservations at Madam Puddifoot's."

"You do not," Hermione chided, cast a couple of Cleaning Charms, and thought briefly before Transfiguring her clothing into something a little more dressy-but-casual. "No, really. Where are we going?"

"Oh, nowhere special. Only Madam Rosmerta caught me on my way here and threatened me within an inch of my life if I didn't bring you to the Three Broomsticks."

She laughed. "I knew something like that would happen. What do you expect? People around here aren't used to seeing anyone famous...well, at least since you went to school here. Dark-Lord-Slayer-turned-Puddlemere-Seeker is a pretty big deal to them." She tried to keep a straight face as she said it, but ended up giggling by the end.

"Ha ha. Very funny, Miss Smarty Pants. Still can't tell your own jokes with a straight face. Haven't changed much." He tucked a much cleaner Hermione under his arm and headed for the door.

"Oh, wait. Almost forgot...I have to lock up," she said as she pulled away to douse the lights and lock up the till. She ushered him out the door, placed the note her common sense side told her would suffice...to Harry's great amusement...and locked up tight. She threw up a few wards for good measure.

"Expecting trouble?" he asked, eyes widening at the last ward she threw up. He hadn't heard that one since their missed year at Hogwarts.

"One can never be too careful. Con..."

"Constant Vigilance, I know. But that particular ward was one Minerva used to lock up the meeting room at Headquarters. You don't need that, do you? Or is there something you aren't telling me?"

The apprehensive look in his eyes made her pause. It had been a while since she had seen Harry look so concerned. Ever since the war, he had been so carefree, not wanting to take much too seriously. Even when he and Ginny had split, he had adopted the stance that it just wasn't meant to be. Everyone knew the thought of kids scared the pants off him, though, so no one was too surprised at his attitude.

She threaded her arm through his and started to walk in the direction of the Three Broomsticks. "Well, for some reason, I've had this really eerie feeling for the past few weeks. I'm probably being silly, but I swear it feels as though someone is watching me. I'm okay during the day; it's just the nights are kind of creepy."

"There's nothing else going on? Strange visits? Anyone say anything odd?" He stopped walking and turned her to face him.

"No. If there were, I'd tell you. Honestly! It's just my overactive imagination. I think maybe I've just been alone too long. You know, with my parents still abroad and all my friends so far away or busy with their own lives, no one would know if something happened to me until the deliveries started to obscure the windows...." She trailed off, feeling a little foolish at having divulged one of her relatively minor fears.

"Hmm ... let's see, books piled high against the windows. Nope, I doubt anyone would notice even then," he chided her.

She swatted him on the arm, hard.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 17

A night out with Harry makes Hermione forget her worries for a while ... and adds a few more.

Author's Note: A thousand hugs, as always, to my two betas, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#).

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Chapter Three

Ensnared in the veil of shadows, the Stranger watched as Harry and Hermione left the bookshop, arm in arm. The Stranger hesitated. Hermione never closed up shop early. Never.

A note stuck to the front door of the shop, one corner fitfully flapping in the breeze. Once the couple was out of sight and it was determined that they were not going to return, the Stranger emerged and surreptitiously approached the door.

"Closed early. Sorry for the inconvenience," the note read. *"We'll be open at 9:00 A.M. Thank you!"*

It was concise, and it revealed absolutely nothing. The Stranger turned to look down the street in the direction Harry and Hermione had disappeared into the darkness. It was too late to follow now; they could have Apparated anywhere. A search would most likely be a waste of time.

Hermione was a creature of habit...that the Stranger had already learned...and her habit had become the Stranger's habit. It was routine to watch her through the window of the shop every evening as she performed her closing ritual, locked the doors, and disappeared up the stairs. The Stranger would always stay until the lights came on in the flat above the shop, confident that she had survived another day without coming to harm.

It wasn't until now, when that routine was broken, that the Stranger realized her safety meant a little more than previously believed. The vague overheard threat to her safety aside, women working alone in a public establishment were vulnerable to the riff-raff that occasionally passed through this less-traveled section of Hogsmeade. The Hog's Head was just down the side street. It was only natural to want to make sure she was safe, after all.

After staring a while in the direction Hermione had parted, the Stranger seemed to come to the decision that she was most likely safer with Harry Potter than with anyone else and turned to walk in the direction of the Hog's Head. The night had a chill, and the pub sounded like an inviting place to warm up the insides before returning to the alleyway to await Hermione's return.

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Madam Rosmerta welcomed Harry and Hermione exuberantly, and the evening turned out to be the best night out Hermione had in a long time. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she had had so much fun. Having Harry back, even if it was only for a short while, had improved her mood considerably, and she even managed to forget about her troubles for a few hours.

She couldn't remember when the butterbeer had turned into wine, and ultimately champagne, but that didn't matter when a good time was being had. Together, they managed to finish three bottles of Merlot and one bottle of Rosmerta's finest Wizard's Vineyard champagne, all of which was on the house due to Rosmerta being totally infatuated over Harry's visit. Of course, several patrons sent Harry shots of liqueur and glasses of Firewhisky, just so they could say they had drinks with the Great Harry Potter.

Needless to say, by the time they left the Three Broomsticks around midnight, they were both pretty inebriated. Just as they had arrived, they left arm in arm, this time to ensure that they both remained upright and could walk in some semblance of a straight line. Harry found himself sat soundly on his bum once...or was it twice?...when Hermione lost her balance and pulled him down with her. The wizards and witches they passed were greeted loudly and jovially, and each answered in kind, laughing at the enthusiastic, stumbling pair.

When they reached the side door to the stairs that led up to Hermione's flat, Harry toppled against her, his body heavy as he pressed her up against the doorframe.

"Thththat wuz great," he said, his words shuffling together much like his uncoordinated feet. "We shshould do thish more offen."

Hermione giggled. "Yes, we should."

Harry's body felt warm and comfortable against hers, and apparently Harry thought so as well for he made no attempt to move off. Instead, he scrutinized the girl he had pinned against the doorframe, twisting a lock of her hair around one of his fingers.

"Bushshy as always, I ssee."

He smirked and accepted the playful swat he had earned. Sober or drunk, Harry had to make comments about her hair. She had never minded it though, and right now, she was enjoying how he was running his fingers through her hair. She rested her head on his chest and let him play with the tangled strands just a little longer.

"I don' wanna leave," he whispered, which made her look up into the fogginess of his eyes.

"Then don't," Hermione replied. She missed Harry and all the fun they once had. If only this night could last forever. If only he didn't have to go. If only.

She blinked, lost in Harry's gaze, and then suddenly she felt something soft and warm against her lips. A kiss. Tipsily, her head spun as she realized she was kissing Harry ... and it was good. *Very* good. His kiss made her feel sober...dizzy, of course, but sober. All her senses seemed to awaken from their alcoholic slumber and coalesce into thinking only about Harry.

She knew it was wrong, but at the same time, she thought, what did it matter? Who would find out? No one. They had been friends for so long, it was almost inevitable that this would happen. What was one night of passion between friends? She loved him, had put her life on the line alongside him. Why shouldn't this happen? It was perfectly understandable. It made sense.

She lost herself in his soft, inviting kisses. Every time her mind tried to analyze why she was in Harry's arms, how strange but how right it felt to be kissing him, she got caught in the whirlpool and was dragged back down where thoughts no longer mattered. Harry's lips on hers, insistently tangling his tongue with hers; Harry's hands in her hair, fingers entangled in the curls; Harry's body pressed tightly against her, harder than she ever remembered his body being: every point of contact was felt with great acuity. Only when their heartbeats stumbled over one another, and every breath was drawn merely to survive, and their bodies wound tighter in anticipation did they part and look at each other in a shocked sort of desperation.

"What are we doing?" Harry asked, sounding as sober as she suddenly felt.

"I don't know," was the honest reply.

"I want this. Do you?" Honesty between friends. Not afraid of the other's answer. It's what she always treasured about Harry.

"Yes." She breathed in the heat of his body, his musky male scent, and she couldn't help but want more, to find out what lay beneath Harry's exterior.

"We should go inside before we become the talk of the town," Harry whispered as he kissed the edge of her earlobe.

"Right," she answered ... or thought; she wasn't sure anymore if the words were coming out of her mouth or if she was just thinking too loud.

The locks came open easily, but it took her three tries to remove the wards. Her shaking hands made it difficult to perform the exact wand movements. It didn't help that Harry was hugging her from behind, pressing his hard body against her and placing kisses on her neck. When the door finally opened, she tugged him by the hand and led him up the stairs as quick as his stumbling feet could follow.

Harry had never seen her flat before ... The errant thought broke the surface and threatened to bring the real world back sooner than she wished. He had either been too busy or too involved soothing the easily-ruffled feathers of his overly jealous fiancée. Now his fiancée truly had reason to be jealous, Hermione supposed. Still, she found

that she didn't really care at the moment. Perhaps she would later, in the morning; perhaps never. It didn't matter. She drowned the thought in another kiss, and the passion returned.

Several glasses of wine helped by a couple flutes of champagne removed their clothing before either of them knew what was happening. They collapsed onto the rug of her sitting room before the fireplace, and neither of them seemed to be able to stop the course set by the alcohol still swimming in their blood ... even if they had wanted to.

Hermione's consciousness swam. Harry's hands on her body, his mouth on hers ... trailing over to her ear ... it was all too much to comprehend. It was like a dream. Sweet, sexy Harry...yes, she had always thought of him as sexy. His image had been fuel for a fantasy or two during those moments she had taken for self-pleasure. But she had never seriously contemplated any relationship with him other than that of very good friends.

The room was spinning. Her body was throbbing. She didn't know how to deal with the situation, except to let it happen and deal with it tomorrow...when her mind was clearer and able to deal with things. Right now, all she wanted to deal with was ...

Harry's mouth kissing, nipping, sucking her swollen breasts. She arched her back to greet him, silently encouraging him. His fingers found her wetness below, and she slid onto him easily and let him caress her inside and out. She needed to make him feel what he was making her feel, felt an intense need to do so. Letting her hand slide down his body, she felt her way to his hardness and imitated his movements, simulating what it would be like if he were inside her at this very moment. Yes, she definitely wanted him inside her.

Harry groaned at the contact. "Hermione. Gods, I need you ... now. Oh, please." He was pleading, desperate, frantic as his hands roamed her body, requesting more than what she was already giving him.

Who was she to refuse? She wanted him. Oh, gods, yes. It was a fantasy come true. A dream. In the morning, it would all be a dream anyway, wouldn't it? Her mind was convoluted with desire and champagne. She wanted this. She wanted him.

She nudged him over, and he slid between her legs in response, each of their bodies pleading for the other to need, to want, to take. His needs were her needs. His desires were her desires. With heaving chests and burning lungs, they moved together over and over, bodies glistening in the firelight, hungrily devouring each other's burning flesh ... and this continued into the wee hours of the morning, until they both completely exhausted each other.

~ o ~

The Stranger had been lost in a Firewhisky haze, having had just enough to relax but not deaden the senses. Harry and Hermione's return was earlier than expected; many witches and wizards out for an evening stayed out long past the witching hour. And their return was inconsequential ... until Harry leaned into Hermione and their lips met in a kiss that was meant for more than friends.

They kissed with great familiarity, and it made the Stranger wonder if this relationship had been ongoing for some time. The conversation that followed was intimate, but not so quiet that the Stranger could not hear with a flick of a wand, and it became apparent that Harry and Hermione had never done such a thing before. For some reason, the Stranger breathed easier with that knowledge.

It wasn't until the door slammed shut to the flat above the shop that the Stranger finally left the pair to their privacy.

~ o ~

Hermione awoke, not in her bed but on the floor, completely nude beneath an afghan that usually decorated the back of the sofa. She wondered for a second how it happened that she came to sleep here. A turn of her head found Harry, fully dressed and looking out the window. Hazy memories began to filter back into her brain. Sitting up, she carefully wrapped the afghan around her shoulders and waited for her woozy head to clear a bit.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Harry said, turning from the window with a smile.

Groggily, she answered. "G'morning. What time is it?"

"Only half past six. I made coffee. Would you like some?"

She nodded, and as Harry walked into the kitchen to get the coffee, Hermione wandered into her bedroom to put on a robe. The afghan was a little scratchy, and she felt slightly awkward sitting around Harry with nothing on save a bit of loosely knitted yarn. No matter that he had seen quite a bit more the night before. The thought made her blush.

She stopped to use the loo and wash her face a bit. Looking at herself in the mirror, she was glad she hadn't one of those nasty charmed things they used to have at Hogwarts. If it was one thing she did not need this morning, it was a judgmental piece of glass. She was judging herself enough as it was.

That reminded her ... She rummaged about in the bathroom cabinet, picking up this bottle and that, looking to see if she had any Morning-After Potion left over from gods-knew-when. She didn't think she had any, and if she did, its efficacy would probably have expired. She'd have to remember to place an order with the apothecary later this morning after she opened the shop.

Walking back into the sitting room, she noticed that Harry had placed two mugs of coffee on the table and was already seated on the sofa. Suddenly a little shy, her first instinct was to take the chair, but Harry patted the space next to him on the sofa. With a small smile of thanks, she sat down next to him and gratefully picked up the steaming mug of coffee, sipping it noisily to cool it down before it hit her throat. It was bad manners, but it was either that or she would remain decaffeinatedly incoherent.

Her coffee was half drunk before she realized that Harry was just sitting there staring into his still-full mug. Suddenly, she felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. It was all her fault. She should have never closed up shop early last night, and she should have never agreed to go to the Three Broomsticks. She would remember to listen to her practical side next time...if there ever were a next time.

"Harry, I'm...I'm sorry," she managed to say, though her throat felt too constricted to speak.

Harry looked up suddenly and put his mug down on the table. "No. No, Hermione. Don't be sorry." He took her hand in his. "Look, I'm the one who should be apologizing. It was all my fault. I kissed you first."

She smiled. It was so like Harry to take full responsibility for everything.

"Yes, but I kissed you back." The childish banter lightened the mood and made it easier to talk.

"True," he replied. "True. You know this can never happen again, right? I suppose that's kind of silly to say. Of course you know."

"Yes, I do. You will be married next month and off defeating the Wimbourne Wasps next. And I'll probably not see you again for another couple years...oh, except for the wedding. I didn't forget about that! Anyway, we're better off as friends, Harry. I know that." She decided to stop talking before she said something that sounded stupid or something that could be misinterpreted. She hadn't planned what had happened, of course, but it was embarrassing, and she felt an awful lot like crying. "This won't ruin our friendship, will it?"

For the first time since he woke up that morning, cuddling skin-to-skin next to Hermione, he touched her. Placing a hand on her arm, he smiled and said, "Of course not, Hermione! I don't ditch my friends over a bit of rough and tumble. If I did that, Ron and I wouldn't be best mates...." His grin faded. "Oh, that didn't sound the way I meant it."

Copious amounts of laughter dispelled any lingering embarrassment between the two.

~ o ~

Harry ended up leaving at half past eight. Surprisingly, they had found much to talk about that hadn't been covered the night before, catching each other up and fitting in all the conversation they would miss out on in the near future. What had happened between them the night before was easily pushed aside for comfort's sake, but certainly not forgotten, at least not by Hermione.

Hermione opened the shop right on time and was surprised to see a customer already waiting at the door. She let the woman in with a bright and welcoming, "Good morning!" and saw the note she had put on the door the night before lying on the ground. The reason for the note came back to haunt her momentarily, and her morning turned out to be very unproductive indeed.

One thing she did manage to accomplish that morning was to send a request to the apothecary through the Floo Network. That seemed to be the one thing her mind was willing to grasp hold of and carry through with, at least.

~ o ~

The Floo flared green and spat out a singed piece of parchment onto the floor. Old Mister MacDougal levitated the parchment to his waiting hand, having lost his ability years ago to bend over and straighten back up successfully. He placed his spectacles upon his nose and squinted at the order.

ORDER

ITEM: 10 grams Morning-After Potion

RECIPIENT: Hermione Granger, Strega Letteraria, Hogsmeade

PAYMENT: enclosed

Please deliver this afternoon.

Old MacDougal tipped the envelope and heard the satisfying clink-clink of two Galleons hitting the counter. He shuffled back to his storeroom where he kept various potions in various quantities, ready to fill any order as soon as it arrived.

Squinting his spectacles up his nose, he focused on the small labels. He'd really have to remember to tell his son to write a little larger. His spider-scrawl was nearly illegible. Finding what he was looking for, he took down a small, red bottle and held it up to the sconce-light of the storeroom.

He could make out a script M and a P and what looked like scribble in between. Satisfied that he had found what he was looking for, he walked to the front of the store where he kept his prescription labels. He removed the old label and worked up a new one, complete with Hermione Granger's name and the directions to take one ounce every morning for three days, and slapped it on the tiny bottle.

As the apothecary's owl took flight with its cargo secured tightly to one leg, the old label was whisked off the table and floated to and fro until it came to rest upon the floor. It wasn't found until later that day when Old MacDougal's son was sweeping the floor. The boy picked it up and eyed it. *Memory Potion*, it stated, quite clearly in his opinion, on the label. His father had gone to have a bit of a lie down as he did every afternoon. Deciding he'd wait to ask the old man about it later, he pocketed the label ... where it remained, forgotten.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 17

Harry marries the Minister's daughter, and Hermione deals with the consequences of their night together.

Author's Note: Many thank yous to the brilliant [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern Witch 69](#), who have both taken it upon themselves to find all my plot holes and nag my commas into order. Without them, this story would not be the same.

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Four

Sleep hadn't come easily to Hermione in the scant weeks since Harry's visit. She attributed it to over-thinking and her overactive imagination since it seemed that his visit had dredged up all sorts of memories, some which she had thought long forgotten ... and some she never even remembered happening. Life had become a sort of alternate reality, with memories blending in with everyday occurrences to the point where she sometimes questioned her sanity. Oftentimes she found herself in a daze, half in a daydream, and she had to forcefully bring herself back down to earth. She figured that because Harry visited so infrequently, and this last visit had been particularly unusual...as well as memorable...it was only natural that it would affect her thoughts ... and her dreams.

It was the dreams that woke her at least a couple times a night. Some mornings she would look at the clock and decide that it wasn't even worth going back to sleep, and she would set about re-shelving books in the shop. Unfortunately, some dreams were more insistent than others, and it so happened that one particular dream resurfaced...one that had haunted her for months after Harry killed Voldemort. Eventually, like all bad memories, it had slunk back into the shadows, fading away until she was no longer aware of its absence. But Harry's visit had reawakened it, and it had become the mainstay of her unconscious mind, and the main reason why she preferred to stay awake....

The smell of death was everywhere. The fog swallowed it. Entrails of smoke from used-up spells breathed it. It was suffocating. Through the gloom and haze, she could see glimpses of friends and acquaintances, flashes of bone-white masks and black-as-night cloaks, glittering spell-strands of red ... and sometimes green.

The fog seemed to isolate. If she concentrated really hard, and filtered out the cacophony of echoless shouts and cries, she could pretend that she was here alone. Except that the scenes that broke through the mist were those nightmares were made of.

A faceless enemy threw a curse, just grazing her cloak beneath the arm, slicing open the fabric. As she tucked into a roll, she quickly fingered the gaping hole and looked at her fingers to see only a smudge of red. Not life threatening. Rolling up to a crouch, she shielded herself from the next curse and mirrored the hex back at her assailant.

The dark-cloaked figure fell and writhed on the ground, hand grasping outward, feeling for a wand that lay just past the reach of his fingertips. The Death Eater's leg was cut just above the knee, the severed tendons rendering the leg useless. She stood over the figure, and he stilled his attempt to locate his wand.

The skull-like mask melted away as though it had never been there at all, and she looked down upon the soot-smudged face of Lucius Malfoy, still arrogant in this subservient position. His ice-blue eyes stared with a wordless dare, boring into her own.

"Ah. It seems I was right. You can't kill me. Your inferior heritage makes you weak," Lucius's haughty voice echoed in her ears, making her blood boil. The fog carried bodiless voices that chanted, "Mudblood," over and over, further inciting her anger.

"We don't have to resort to Unforgivable Curses to defeat you lot," she spat back at him, pointing her wand at his face nonetheless.

"Then you're stupid ... and useless. I would expect nothing less from a Mudblood." He sneered.

Anger made her head spin, all extraneous thoughts caught up in the centrifugal force, ripping them away from the only thought that seemed to matter right now: to kill Lucius Malfoy.

She shook her head ... no. She would not resort to a cowardly Killing Curse. It wasn't necessary. He was wandless. She had control here. A Full Body-Bind would do...

And her head spun again. Kill him, a voice in her head said. He doesn't deserve to live, another chimed in. Yes, raise your wand ... that's a good girl. Her thoughts weren't her own anymore. Too many were in her head, but they weren't the right ones.

And Lucius Malfoy just lay there ... waiting.

"Well? Aren't you going to do it? If you don't kill me, you will most certainly live to regret it." Lucius's eyes fell into her own.

The voices escaped the confines of her mind and joined the chorus of "Mudblood" that continued to ring all around her: "Yes, kill him." "Dangerous." "Will regret it if you don't."

She watched as her wand arm rose, seemingly of its own accord. The hate within her grew to proportions she never before had realized. She could feel the fog-borne, echoing words fuel her hatred of the man in front of her. And then, with a voice devoid of all feeling, she heard the words fall from her lips: "Avada Kedavra."

In an instant, the voices stopped, and Lucius Malfoy lay unmoving on the ground, his glacial stare frozen open in death. She had killed him. She had never killed anyone before. She felt nauseous, and she fell to the ground on all fours, beside the body of the man she had just murdered, and vomited.

Hermione sat up in bed with a start, feeling sick to her stomach. Frantically, she kicked away the covers and ran for the bathroom.

A little while later, she wept as she splashed cold water on her face. *Of all the dreams to have to return, this had to be the one* she thought acerbically. She had admitted to the killing after the battle was over. She insisted that it had happened, though the Aurors never found the body of Lucius Malfoy among the deceased. They had, however, found his wand, lying broken and trampled in the mud. The Aurors told her that she must have been wrong. Maybe she had thought she had killed him, but he had only been injured. After a while, she had let it go, realizing that the Aurors weren't really interested in avenging the death of a Death Eater. In fact he was actually dead.

In any case, Lucius Malfoy seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth, though that could be said about a number of Death Eaters. Quite a few had gone into hiding or left the country, leaving their pure-blood estates to relations no one suspected and living their lives anonymously rather than being sentenced to a life in Azkaban...a fate that was treacherous, demeritor or not. Serving a sentence in Azkaban stained a perfectly good pure-blood name; avoiding being charged and going into hiding was more reputable, for it showed defiance of the Ministry and support of all that they believed.

Hermione had heard that Draco had survived and had returned to Malfoy Manor not long after the war. Neither he nor Narcissa were ever seen in public. Only their closest friends and blood relatives knew what had become of them, and they weren't talking. Gossip among purebloods stayed among purebloods.

Hermione brushed her teeth, spat into the sink, and then scrutinized the fine lines that creased the corners of her eyes. All of this was so long ago. Why did she insist on holding onto such unpleasant memories when there were more pleasant ones to be had ... like Harry's visit.

That thought had popped out of nowhere and made her blush uncontrollably. She wasn't supposed to be thinking of Harry's visit ... not that part of it anyway. He was getting married next weekend, and she was going to be there no matter how she felt....

Felt about what? Surely she hadn't fallen in love with Harry? She let that question settle within her gut for a few seconds, trying to determine the true answer. No. She didn't love him any more than she had before. But did that mean that she had romantically desired him before the night his visit turned into something more intimate ... more passionate? She was certain she didn't. He was her best friend, and she loved him as such. That was all.

Then what was going on? Suddenly, the thought of Harry getting married to Elsbeth made her stomach twist in knots. It could be that she was feeling guilty, or that she was afraid Ellie would somehow know what had happened the instant she saw Hermione. And that would be a terrible way to spend one's wedding day, with the knowledge that your fiancé had sex with his best friend only a month earlier.

Throwing down the hand towel disgustedly, Hermione decided that she was being morose and that she needed to stop this nonsense and make herself a decent breakfast for a change. Scrambled eggs and bangers and mash maybe ... or maybe not. The mere thought of frying up all that food had her hanging her head over the porcelain bowl once again.

~ o ~

The ceremony was beautiful. No expense was spared for a Minister's daughter. That was for sure. The perfect day...the first day of spring. The perfect wedding. The perfect couple. Hermione greeted the couple afterward, forcing a smile on her face, trying to convey how happy she was for them. She hoped she was successful. She hoped she didn't give away how uncomfortable she was. In her hand she still clutched the wedding program, embossed in gold lettering, which had been handed out to every guest by dashing decked-out house-elves.

The stark truth of it was her best friend had just gotten married, and she wasn't happy for him. She hadn't seen Harry since the night they'd had together, and she discovered out that what she'd feared was true: she couldn't help but see him in a different light. Harry was different somehow. When she looked at him, she saw a different Harry, one with whom she shared a special connection.

It was selfish, and she knew it. So she plastered on a smile that she hoped was genuine and hugged both Elsbeth and then Harry, lingering a bit longer than she probably should have. Harry looked happy. Why shouldn't he be? Elsbeth was beautiful, and she filled the position of 'Wife of the Boy Who Lived' quite nicely, being the daughter of the Minister for Magic. And then there was the reason he had broken off his relationship with Ginny years ago: he didn't want to have children. His reasons were many

and, for him, were quite logical. It was rare to find a woman who thought along the same lines as he did, but he found her in Elsbeth.

The wedding was the most difficult thing Hermione had had to endure, and it obscured everything else going on in her life, including...miraculously...the financial problems of the bookshop. Those had taken a backseat to what had happened with Harry, having to attend the wedding and reception and act like everything was the same as always ... when it most definitely wasn't.

It was a good thing Ginny was invited to the wedding. Ginny, who could have married Harry if only she had given up her desire to have a big family. Hermione supposed she now had something in common with her friend; they both knew Harry intimately but Harry was marrying someone else. Ginny was happy; she had Alpin, her two kids, and she was pregnant again. Hermione, however, was miserable.

Hermione made her way swiftly to the loo for the fourth time that evening, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, which wasn't difficult considering the number of completely pissed wizards and witches who were dancing ferociously to The You-Know-Who, the live band the Minister had procured for his daughter's wedding reception.

Hermione rested her head against the wall of the cubicle, trying to fend off the nausea she had been feeling all evening. She felt the suction as the door opened, inviting the music in until it was sucked out by the door falling shut.

Ginny called out, "Hermione? Are you okay?"

Inwardly, Hermione groaned, but mostly, she was grateful. Tonight of all nights, she needed a friend. Someone who could lighten her mood, perhaps.

A knock came on the door to the cubicle, and Ginny carefully pushed it open. When she saw Hermione leaning against the wall, looking a little green, she bustled her way in very Molly-like and took charge. For the first time that evening, Hermione visibly relaxed.

Ginny left for a moment, grabbed a towel from a basket on the counter next to the sink and dampened it with cool water. When she returned, she wiped the perspiration from Hermione's face and forehead.

"I know you haven't been drinking tonight. So, do you want to tell me what is going on here?" Ginny had this way of bossing her slightly older friend without sounding too motherly.

"I feel sick is all. It's nothing." Hermione gave her friend a weak smile.

"It's not nothing," Ginny retorted. "In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were pregnant."

Hermione sucked in a breath, and her eyes fixed on her shiny, patent leather pumps in an attempt to stay focused and not give in to her body's attempt to either be sick or pass out. In one evening, Ginny had guessed what Hermione had suspected for a couple weeks now but had been too nervous to confirm.

"I'm not sure, but I think I may be," she said weakly. Just clarifying it out loud made her head swim even more than it already was.

"I thought so," Ginny said. "You never told me that you had a boyfriend, Hermione. Who is he? You should have brought him to the wedding."

Who was he? She couldn't very well come out and tell Ginny that it was Harry's baby. If she told even one person, it would destroy Harry's life, and she didn't want that.

"I *don't* have a boyfriend," Hermione began. "It was a one-night stand...a Muggle I met at a night club in London. He was charming and good-looking, and he literally swept me off my feet, I guess. It was a glorious evening, really, and I had more fun than I have had in a really long time. I never expected to see him again, and well, then this happened...." Hermione could feel the tears burning her eyes.

Ginny hugged Hermione close. "Oh, sweetie. It'll be okay. You know Alpin and I will help out whenever you need it, and it'll be like the kids have another sister or brother."

Hermione sobbed into a wad of toilet paper. If only she could have gone to Ginny the moment she had suspected. But she wouldn't dare. The fact that it was Harry's baby consumed her to the point where she was literally afraid to say the words, "I'm pregnant."

"You're the best friend anyone could ask for, Ginny, you know that?" Hermione wiped her nose and tossed the paper into the bowl. "I just never imagined that I would be a mother ... No, that's not it. It just never occurred to me that my child wouldn't have a father."

"All children have a father, Hermione, and you know who he is. Now, maybe he wasn't the wisest choice, but there are plenty of other men who will give your child a nice, solid male influence. And if you're ever in desperate need of one, you can always have him...or her!...spend a weekend with Fred and George."

That was enough to crack a smile in Hermione's otherwise gloomy expression, and she laughed a little, grabbing Ginny in a tight embrace. "Yes, I suppose there's always that," she admitted. "It will be all right, won't it?"

"Yes, it will. And you should enjoy this pregnancy. I mean, you don't know if you'll ever be pregnant again, so make this one count, right? Are you getting enough to eat? Are you feeling sick all the time?" Ginny mother-henned her.

"Every morning, but the evenings are the worst. Usually I can eat a few crackers and some fruit in the afternoon and keep it down. Otherwise..."

"Yes, I'm quite familiar with it." Ginny grinned, patting her own bulging stomach. "It'll get better; I know it's difficult to believe. Here, let's get you cleaned up and presentable."

Her wand came out, and Ginny had Hermione fresh and ready to face the world in no time. Hermione looked at herself in the mirror and refreshed her lipstick charm...just a touch; not too much...and tried on a smile. She didn't notice that Ginny was watching her closely.

"That's not the only thing that's wrong," Ginny said suddenly.

Hermione looked up sharply in the mirror to look at her friend. *That girl probably got an Outstanding in her Divination N.E.W.T.*, she thought and then shook her head. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?" she said, trying to sound more lighthearted than she felt. She sighed for effect. "You know, it's just so hard seeing all my friends 'grow up' and get married.... I don't know. I wish Harry all the happiness in the world, really, but I just never saw him as the marrying type." There. A partial truth was better than a lie.

"I heard that Ellie doesn't want children, so at least they have something in common," Ginny said quietly through a faint smile. "I know what you mean. It's difficult to see Harry get married. I hope he's happy, though. He deserves it." She exhaled forcefully and swept up stray towels and threw them in the dustbin. "We *all* deserve to be happy. Right?"

Hermione smiled back faintly and tossed out her own towel with determination. "Yes, we do."

"Good," Ginny said, taking her friend's hand. "Now, I heard the bartender makes a mean orange juice. Not to mention, he's drop-dead gorgeous!"

Hermione laughed weakly at Ginny's attempt to cheer her up. With shaking breath, she sighed and followed Ginny out of the restroom to go help ogle the bartender.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 17

A little business is a welcome thing ... or is it?

Author's Note: I would like to recognize my betas, the much-appreciated [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#), without whom this story would not be the same.

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Five

Hermione was thankful to have survived the Wedding of the Century, as the *Daily Prophet* had declared it. She was fortunate to have missed all the photo opportunities...those were reserved for the happy couple and the Minister himself more than the guests, thank Merlin. She had read through the article, searching for any scandalous news, and breathed easier when she found none.

As far as her own bit of scandalous news, Hermione had implored Ginny not to tell anyone yet of her predicament. She figured it would begin showing soon, but she didn't want to have to talk about it with anyone until it was absolutely necessary. Though, she did wonder what Harry would think when he heard through the grapevine that she was pregnant. Undoubtedly, he would shy away from visiting her, considering children made him nervous. In a way, it would make things easier. She had visions of the child looking very much like Harry and everyone knowing upon sight that it was his child. If he didn't visit, he never would have the chance to suspect.

It was a lazy Sunday, and she opened the shop on time, though she wasn't expecting any customers. She almost never got customers on a Sunday, making it a good day for projects. The project of the day was reorganizing the textbook section. The summer term at Hogwarts was due to start, and that meant the professors were already deciding what books they would be requiring the following year. Hermione wanted to get a head start on ordering the books and having them available to any students who planned on buying them before they left for the summer holiday.

Today she was going to pull all the textbooks left over from the current year to make room for those that were incoming. Her one consolation for not having sold all the textbooks was that she could return these to the supplier for a refund. Of course, all that money would go to purchasing the new titles.

With the books pulled and packaged, she sent an owl off so that they would be picked up the next day. The textbook section was right at the front of the shop, and the shelves looked barren. If it was one thing she detested, it was empty shelves. There was only one thing to do: place the next order as soon as possible.

She looked over the titles. Professor Flitwick was ordering his usual, not having strayed from the same set of textbooks since he was hired. They were good textbooks, no doubt, but Hermione was of the mind that a little variety kept things exciting. She loved Charms and especially Professor Flitwick's teaching style. He was a patient man, and students learned much from him. Even when Lavender Brown had Banished a frog into Professor Flitwick's cup of tea unknowingly...and he had taken a drink before he noticed...he remained as calm and forgiving as ever. Hermione wasn't sure she could have maintained her dignity in such a situation.

Glancing down the list, her eye caught the titles of the texts the Potions professor was ordering. The incoming professor was new...Slughorn was finally retiring, thankfully; he was a good professor, but quite dull in her opinion...and she was ordering the latest in Potions textbooks. For first year, there was *A Potions Primer*, which Hermione thought was perfect for beginning students, having looked through the book last year. But her favorite was the book for the N.E.W.T. level class: *Obscure Potions in Everyday Life*. That one caught her attention immediately. It was supposed to be an excellent resource, even for Potions masters. Hermione could feel her fingers itch; she wanted to get her hands on the book so badly.

She remembered her N.E.W.T. level Potions class, the year they had returned to Hogwarts. Slughorn was teaching, and she had been positively bored. All of the potions he had scheduled for the class to work on she had heard of and were not challenging to brew; plus, Slughorn had a tendency to lecture, and her attention would wander. She would half-listen to what he was saying, but it was never anything of importance; though she was sure it would show up on an exam, and it inevitably did. She had passed her N.E.W.T. with an Outstanding and was thankful the class was finally over.

It was sort of disappointing since she had always loved Potions when Professor Snape was the one teaching it. Professor Snape was dreadfully biased against Gryffindor House, but his classes were never boring, and he always challenged her. Sometimes he even assigned her a different potion to brew, knowing that the one they were working on in class was below her ability. He seemed to appreciate her interest in Potions, even though she was a Gryffindor.

At the end of her fifth year, Professor Snape asked her to stay after class. Without actually complimenting her...because that would only happen when Hades froze over...he had told her to consider taking Potions as an independent study the following year. He told her that if she studied the sixth-year Potions text over the summer, she'd be more than ready to work on potions beyond what the other students were working on.

She'd studied the text and spent the summer brewing potions, but she never got the chance to ask him about independent study because when the new term started, Professor Snape had become the new Defense instructor. She brought up the possibility to Slughorn, but he looked at her blankly, asked who she was, and insisted that while Professor Snape might have been an excellent Potions professor, he had a different teaching style and she should learn alongside the rest of her class.

Professor Snape never asked if she was taking Potions as independent study, and she didn't offer the information, nor her disappointment that it had never happened. As it turned out, it didn't matter if he knew or not since he disappeared at the end of the year with the death of Dumbledore.

Harry told her what Snape had done. Harry had been there, under his Invisibility Cloak, and had seen the whole thing. At first she refused to believe it; then she slowly came to accept it. And she never saw Professor Snape again. Though Ron had insisted that *he* had.

During the battle, right before Voldemort had been killed, Ron reported that he had faced a Death Eater whose cloak was torn and mask had slid. He said he saw straight, black hair through the torn hood, and the mouth was set in a sneer that just had to have been Snape's. The Death Eater took one look at him and had lowered his wand, something Ron admitted to freely, calling it an act of cowardice. Ron had taken him down, throwing a Slicing Hex at the Death Eater's legs and a concussive hex at his head. The man had fallen, and Ron became so preoccupied with fending off other Death Eaters in the area that he never saw what happened to the Death Eater he swore had been Snape.

Of course, Severus Snape was not found among the injured or the dead. It was as though he had never been at the battle, and with all the Death Eaters cloaked and masked, it was impossible to say who had been there unless they were among the injured or dead. Ron, however, continued to insist he had been there and that he was definitely injured if not dead. Harry and Hermione chose to believe him because Ron was so adamant about it...and because Hermione knew all about missing Death Eaters and what it was like not to be believed.

Tearing herself away from unpleasant memories, Hermione sent a second owl to her supplier with the order. She decided to place a smaller order this year, hoping that the money she would receive from the return of the old textbooks would cover the new order. She expected that she should receive the books by Tuesday, and she could start planning the display, complete with references to other books related to each subject that the students might be interested in.

She began planning out the reference charms for each title and which books she would link to the textbooks. Before she knew it, the sun was lowering in the sky and her stomach was beginning to complain, half in hunger and half in nausea. She wasn't sure if she could eat, so she took some soda crackers from her desk drawer and began nibbling on them while she continued her work.

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The cold, hard marble of the floors did nothing to improve Draco's mood. He and his mother had sold the last of the Persian rugs last week, a necessity since the Malfoy estate assets had been frozen since right after the war. Now the sharp tap of his heels could be heard as he walked down the hallway, and he *hated* it.

He hated the fact that he and his mother had to live like paupers, though thank the gods the mansion had been in their family for centuries and couldn't be taken from them. He hated seeing the pinched, drawn, pale expression his mother wore day in and day out. He hated how bleeding *cold* it was in the manor all the time. But most of all, he hated that his father lay comatose two floors up, as good as dead, and he hated the person who put him there...Hermione Granger.

His anger had been building for years, but in the last few months as the last of their pre-war liquidated funds drained away, it had become nearly unbearable. Draco scowled as he traveled the last remaining steps to the laboratory beneath the kitchen. If he thought it was already cold, the frigid breath of air that emitted as the door to the laboratory opened made the house feel positively tropical. He steeled himself against the inevitable shiver and walked over to the cauldron that had been waiting for his return. He wrinkled his nose slightly at the unattractive, muddy potion that still bubbled slowly within and its matching fetid odor.

Draco drew an envelope from an inner pocket and opened it, revealing a ragged lock of dust-blond hair. Its donor had been quite willing to part with it...and a few Muggle pounds...with one easily pronounced, "*Imperio!*" It was so simple to strip Muggles of their valuables this way; he figured it would be the perfect way to make a living of sorts once the small amount they received from the rugs ran out.

Checking the antiquated watch on his wrist and seeing that it would soon be nightfall if he didn't hurry, he measured out some of the potion into a small flask and capped it. Polyjuice Potion lasted an hour, though the exact amount of time really depended on the brewer. He held himself in some esteem when it came to potion-brewing, and it wasn't the first time he had brewed Polyjuice Potion after all. Still, it was always good to be safe and wait to drink it until the very last possible moment.

He would Apparate from the old, abandoned servants' quarters on the fringes of the considerably large plot of land the Malfoys owned. He hadn't had the energy to refresh the anti-Apparition wards on the entire property; they had been satisfied with merely keeping the manor safe from Apparating vandals these past few months. Not too many paid them much attention anymore, like they had right after the end of the war, but one was enough to cause considerable damage.

The hair-filled envelope found its way back to the inner pocket of his robes along with the flask of potion, and Draco climbed the staircases to find his mother to let her know he was leaving. Not surprisingly, he found her bent over his father's bed; praying or asleep, he knew not which.

"Mother?" he called out softly, not wanting to wake her if she were indeed asleep.

Narcissa's head and shoulders slowly straightened at the sound of her son's voice. It was the only indication that she had heard, for she didn't turn toward him and she rarely bothered to speak any longer.

"Mother, I'm going out. I shouldn't be long, one or two hours tops," he added. She always worried about him, that she would lose him as she had Lucius.

The only reply from Narcissa was a slow, brief nod of her head, and then she resumed the same position he had found her in when he had entered the room. Draco backed through the doorframe and began to pull the door shut. The sight of his father's face, illuminated by the soft light his mother had lit next to the bed, made him pause briefly. It shone gently upon the angular, aristocratic face of Lucius Malfoy, placing half of it in shadow. He watched for a brief moment, looking for the gentle rise-fall of the blankets that covered his father's chest, holding his breath so that he'd be able to detect even the slightest of movement. When he could finally see it, Draco exhaled and closed the door all the way.

The walk down to the empty servants' quarters was quick and uneventful. He welcomed the opportunity to get out of the too-big, too-quiet house. For all the determination and otherwise unemotional look on his face, his stomach made little leaps every so often. He was finally going to exact revenge for the joke his life had become. If his father were not frozen in a state of forever-sleep, life would be different for his mother and him, for all of them. It might not be everything it once was, but it would definitely be better. It was high time he *thank* the person responsible for his father's condition.

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The sun hung just above the horizon, casting long shadows of pre-dusk, as a dark-blond man of average height, average looks, and presumably average wealth approached the door of the Strega Letteraria. He peered through the window, protecting his eyes from the slanting sunlight with his hand. Seeing no one within, he checked the small placard that stated the hours the bookshop was open and saw that the doors should still indeed be unlocked. Pulling on the door did in fact prove that the bookshop was still open, and with a look to the right and left, and then a glance behind, he walked inside.

"I'll be right there!" a voice called cheerily from somewhere in the back as a little bell made his presence known.

"Take your time," he called back, choosing to browse through a small display of sale items placed next to the door while he waited. His nose wrinkled at the number of Muggle books there were in the pile.

Hermione extricated herself from the stacks, a notepad in one hand, her wand behind her ear, looking very dusty. She figured she must look quite a sight when the stranger waiting for her by the entrance stared at her in surprise. It only took a second to say the proper charms, de-dustifying herself and tidying up her hair.

"There now, I believe I look to be the proper shop-mistress," she quipped with a smile on her face meant to put her customer at ease. "What can I do for you, sir? Looking for something in particular?"

The man returned a book to the sale cart and tried to draw himself taller than he actually was. "Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact, I am," he answered, clearing his throat a little at its tightness. "A couple of things, actually. I've been shopping all day, and I just cannot seem to find the final two texts I need for my research."

"Please, come to the front desk, and I'll do my best to help. If I don't have what you're looking for, chances are I know where to get it." She motioned to the customer side of the counter while she took perch on a stool behind, facing a square black panel with writing seemingly lit up from within.

"Is that one of those Muggle contraptions, a...what do you call it?" he asked with just a touch of disdain. Apparently, it wasn't the first time she'd happened across a reaction like that, for it did not seem to bother her one bit.

"A computer, yes. It helps me keep inventory on everything in the shop, and while there are certain charms that I could buy for that express purpose, I am under a budget. This," she pointed to the glowing screen in front of her, "was a present from my parents a couple years ago." Hermione smiled at the man, whose look of pure loathing of everything Muggle still sat firmly in place. "So, what can I help you find?"

The man visibly shook himself back to the topic at hand. "Right. Let's see," he said as he drew a piece of paper out of his robe pocket. "I'm looking for two titles *Malefic Magical Maladies* by Myrddin Wyllt and *The Mortal Magus* by Cygnus Black."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Boy, you don't want much, do you? The first, I can tell you now was last in print in the early 1700s; only ten reprints were made at the time. The

second, I can tell you I don't have ... though it seems familiar to me ... but let me check the pre-owned lists for you on the Wizard-Wide Web." Her fingers clicked across little black buttons.

The man leaned in over the counter to look at the screen. "You mean wizards use these things?" he asked incredulously.

"It's more common than you think," she answered, smiling at him appeasingly. She wasn't about to tell him that it was founded and ran by Squibs.

Her eyes darted across the screen, and she tapped a small elongated stone, which was connected to this 'computer' of hers by a long, thin cord, a few times. Finally, her eyes lit up in recognition.

"Well, here is the one by Cygnus Black ... of course," she said more to herself than to the man in front of her. "The other isn't listed here, but then again, I didn't expect it to be. Let me try one more list."

Again, the tap-tapping and click-clicking with a little bit of muttering under the breath. The man took great interest as a new box zoomed to the forefront of the lighted screen. When she again spoke, he straightened himself up suddenly, the interest disappearing and the look of disdain reasserting itself upon his features.

"I found the Black book on a new list, opened by one of the oldest wizard families in Great Britain. It's called 'Aunt Elladora's Reading Room.' It's the Black family, of course. If anyone would have that book, it would be them. Apparently, it's not in print anywhere at the moment, but they can have one duplicated for you, for a price." She jotted down a figure on a piece of paper and returned to the screen.

"This second book it appears I can get for you, also for a price. I have a few connections with a certain place I'd rather not name, and I've just put in an inquiry. It'll be just a moment before I receive a reply..."

"That quick?" the man asked, surprised.

"Yes, it's sort of a magical version of e-mail, sort of like computer post. Quicker than using an owl, actually. It only works, though, if the person you are trying to contact has a computer like this one. Well, actually, there are larger and more expensive models out now, of course." *That* got the man's attention. "Here it is. Wait a minute while I read their reply. Hmm ... well, Mr...?"

"Burke."

"Not of Borgin and Burkes?" she had to ask.

"*Very* distantly related. His branch of the family uses an 's' at the end of their name, I don't," he replied quickly, hoping she wasn't going to go off on a tangent at his prolonged explanation.

"Anyway, Mr. Burke," she continued, "this place informs me that a copy of the book can be found to the tune of this amount."

Scribbling another figure onto the piece of paper, she slid it over and turned it around so he could read it. If the amount surprised him, he didn't let on.

"Very well," was his reply. "Of course, there will be mark-up on your end, won't there?"

"It's already figured in," she replied inscrutably.

"Ah, a shrewd businesswoman. I can respect that." He paused a moment, looking at the figures one last time as though determining something. "And when can you have these two items for me?" he asked.

Hermione tapped her wand on the magically rotating calendar, which floated above her desk. "Let's see ... I should have them in about two weeks; how about you stop by again around the 20th to be on the safe side? Oh, and I'd need a 20% deposit."

Nodding, Mr. Burked fished in his robe pockets, and unexpectedly came up with a handful of Muggle pounds. He placed them on the counter.

"You wouldn't happen to accept Muggle currency? I mean, since you work with Muggle technology and...I'm totally assuming now...since your parents are Muggles?"

She ignored his assumption, not wanting to offer too much information about herself. His obvious dislike of Muggle technology had her a little leery of letting him know she was Muggle-born.

"I have no problem whatsoever accepting British pounds. Let's see what you have here...." She counted out the pounds he had placed on the counter and performed a minor calculation on the computer. "This is slightly less than the 20%, but I'm willing to make an exception for you, Mr. Burke. Something tells me you will be returning for these two books."

"Most definitely," he answered.

Hermione walked over to her desk to finalize the purchase. "Follow me, Mr. Burke. Have a seat. Could I interest you in a spot of tea?"

"No, thank you. I'm rather in a hurry to get home," he replied.

He took the proffered seat across from her at the desk and watched as she pulled an invoice from a drawer, tapped it, and muttered a few unintelligible words. Words appeared and figures tallied. When the paper was done formulating itself, she handed it to him.

As he folded the invoice and stood to put it in his robe pocket, his eyes fell on a book that lay flayed open, face down on her desk. It was obviously a Muggle book: a still picture of a very pregnant woman sitting in a rocking chair was on the cover, and the words 'What to Expect When You're Expecting' were printed over her head. His eyes widened fractionally, and he scrutinized the bookshop owner from under hooded eyes.

"Well, thank you for your business, Mr. Burke. Like I said, check back around the 20th, and they should be here."

"I will do just that. Thank you, Miss...?"

"Granger. Hermione Granger," she replied, holding out her hand to seal the deal.

He took her hand and shook it, glancing down at her only mildly rounded belly. "Thank you, Miss Granger. I'll see you in a little more than two weeks then."

Hermione watched him as he left the store, suddenly a little self-conscious. She had noticed him looking at her appearance. She smoothed down the front of her jumper, looking to see if she had missed any large motes of dust with that cleansing spell earlier. Perhaps he was a little disdainful of her Muggle clothing? Well, it was easier to climb ladders in jeans than in a robe. Surely, he could understand that.

She looked at the copy of the invoice she had given Mr. Burke. She felt a pull of anxiety as the full realization hit her of the number of Galleons this order was going to cost her. She should have insisted on a higher deposit. Now she was going to have to make yet another withdrawal from her bank vault. Though, she would get it back double once Mr. Burke paid his bill in full. Taking a deep cleansing breath and shrugging, she picked her notepad back up and headed off into the stacks once more.

Mr. Burke exited the shop just as the sun lost its battle with the encroaching night. Hurrying across the street, he slipped into the alleyway and felt the Polyjuice Potion begin to wear off. He Disapparated just as his dusty-blond locks began to lengthen to their usual length.

The shadows hadn't stirred a breath as they watched the strange, average-looking man approach, nor had the Stranger, who had taken up residence just in time to see the man shaking hands with Hermione in the shop. The Stranger performed a silent Disillusionment Charm when it became obvious the man was seeking the cover the alleyway offered.

The shadows swallowed almost all the light that managed to come in from the street. That didn't stop the Stranger from noticing that the man's hair appeared to be getting longer right before he Disapparated. The Stranger remained both Disillusioned and frozen, as if Petrified, for a few long minutes after the man had disappeared, very deep in thought.

The Stranger barely noticed when Hermione finally closed up shop and went up to bed.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 17

A little danger this way comes....

Author's Note: I have had the fortune to have a couple of the best writers as my betas for this story [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern Witch 69](#). I am deeply in their debt.

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Chapter Six

Draco Malfoy Apparated inside the run-down, graffiti-sprayed servants' quarters on the outskirts of his property. It was crude graffiti, definitely not creative in artistic value or literary value for that matter. In fact, the blithering idiots couldn't even spell, for Merlin's sake.

Still, what would normally have fueled Draco's anger seemed to register only barely in his conscious mind. Wrapping his cloak about his body to ward off the chill in the air, he quickly made his way back up to the safety of the mansion. There were still a few lingerers-on who apparently didn't think his family had suffered enough in the war and afterwards, and this made being anywhere outside of the manor a little unpredictable.

He hung his outer cloak in the hallway, no house-elves to take it any longer...they had all been sold...and he walked determinedly into the study to ration himself a shot-glass of Firewhisky. It burned down his throat as he tossed his head back and swallowed it all in one go. The lead crystal glass fell heavily on the heavy oak of the carved bar, and he stared at the bottle. It was half-empty. He really shouldn't have any more; it was his last bottle, and finances were such that Firewhisky was not on the priority list.

"Oh, bugger all," he muttered and, grabbing a larger glass, served himself another, considerably more generous, serving.

He took his time, sipping slowly, deep in thought. The words 'What to Expect When You're Expecting' kept revolving around his mind, affecting his equilibrium. It couldn't be ... but apparently it was. Why else would she be reading a book with that title? She could be counseling a friend...but for some reason, he didn't think so.

Or perhaps, he didn't *want* to think so. It was the first stroke of luck he had had in five very long years: Hermione Granger was pregnant.

The first smile in months appeared on his lips...and it wasn't a pleasant smile.

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Narcissa looked at her son with apprehension. For the first time in months, he seemed almost happy. She had no idea what he had to be happy about. Her pale hand clutched her robes about her body tightly, trying to keep the frigidness of the manor at bay, keep it from grabbing hold of her heart and squeezing what little life still existed within it. Her hands and shoulders shook as her body reacted to the near freezing temperatures.

She padded softly down to the study to see Draco slowly nursing a Firewhisky ... and more than his usual portion at that. He had gone out earlier to buy yet another bottle. Where he had gotten the money for it, she did not know; their liquid funds were still intact. He had been leaving the manor quite often these past few days, always Apparating from the edge of the property. She didn't know why; he could have done so from the front porch. She was growing concerned.

"Oh, hello, Mother," Draco drawled.

He was so much like his father, sounded so much like his father, *looked* so much like his father. Her own greeting was lost in a sea of memories that rendered her mute.

Lucius had always been a considerate husband, always looking out for her well-being, making sure she never wanted for anything. She knew what he had planned, though he had never found out that she knew. If he had, he never let on. It was never spoken of. Distasteful things like death were not a proper topic of conversation in their home, at least among family members.

That hadn't stopped Lucius from discussing that very topic with his dear friend Severus less than a week before the battle that had put Lucius in a coma. In hindsight, she wished that she had had enough common sense to keep walking and not eavesdrop after hearing her husband mention her name. But curiosity had bested her, and the partially open door concealed her from being discovered.

"All I'm saying is that I need to have certain precautions in place, Severus, just in case ... well, just in case the Dark Lord falls. I will not leave Narcissa at the mercy of the Ministry."

"Well thought. And how do you plan on ensuring her continued well-being?" Severus had asked, apathetically curious in his usual manner.

"If the Dark Lord's demise is imminent, I will take certain measures to make sure I don't come back. My death would absolve Narcissa of any responsibility for actions I took in support of the Dark Lord."

"It's not as if she didn't fully support them as well, of course."

"True. She's a very supportive wife and has always been behind me...and the Dark Lord...one hundred percent. But the Ministry won't see it that way. If I fall in battle, she can play the part of grieving wife. The estate will be bequeathed to her and Draco, and their lives will go on much like they always have."

"Except without you in them," Severus admonished mildly.

"I suppose there's that, and I feel terrible about that aspect of things, but I've no wildcards left, old friend. That stint in Azkaban left a sour taste in the mouth of the Ministry. I used my last favor to finagle my way out. If I live, I will be returning to Azkaban, and she will miss me anyway. And more than likely, she will end up serving a stint in Azkaban herself...."

"And you'll manage this how, exactly? It would be rather difficult to use the Killing Curse on yourself. Not to mention how much of the estate would be tied up if it were discovered that you committed suicide."

Lucius had laughed at this, though how he could be so blithe in the face of his own mortality, Narcissa couldn't understand. "No. No, my friend. That would be difficult indeed. No. I will force someone to do it for me, someone who has had a part in plaguing our very existence, someone whom the deed will haunt 'til the day she dies..."

"Ah," Severus had muttered with understanding. "Of course, a Mudblood would be most fitting, one whose sensibilities would prohibit her from using the Killing Curse, making it all that more devastating to her sensibilities."

"My thoughts exactly. When the winning side has been determined, before it is all over, I will find her, and she will play the part of my murderess."

"Simple, yet conniving. I'd expect nothing less from you, Lucius."

She had indeed been approached by the Ministry. They'd come looking for Lucius that long week after the war had ended, and their search of the manor had come up with nothing, of course, because he wasn't there. She'd played the part of grieving wife perfectly. In fact, she was the grieving wife, for she truly believed her husband to be dead.

It wasn't until nearly a month had gone by and the Ministry had lost interest that Severus had shown up at her door. He was paler and gaunter than he had ever been in all the time she had known him. But all impressions of his appearance were soon forgotten as he limped through the door, levitating the limp body of her husband before him.

"Lucius!" she had cried, running to her unconscious husband, weeping over his still-levitating body. But he had not reacted. His eyes had remained closed, his body as still as death, and yet she could still feel the warmth of his body, the light beating of his heart.

"He hasn't awakened since the battle," he told her. "I've done the best that I could, taking care of him, keeping him away from the manor until the Ministry stopped coming, but now his care is up to you."

She had tried to register what he was telling her, but her mind wouldn't wrap around it. She had been so relieved that her husband was still alive, yet a sickening feeling of dread had begun to seep coldly into her heart.

"What is wrong with him?" she had asked weakly, looking up into Severus' eyes with fear.

"He has fallen into a coma. I've tried several potions and spells, but to no avail. I thought you'd rather care for him here. I could have taken him to St. Mungo's...."

"No, no. Of course he's better off here at the manor."

What Severus hadn't told her was that her husband had indeed sought out a Mudblood to take on the role of his murderess, one Hermione Granger, a fact that he did later tell Draco in his father's abandoned study. Narcissa had been listening at the door, quite deliberately eavesdropping, wanting to know what others had deemed she should not.

"Your father had planned this in advance, to force a Mudblood to take his life in the event that the Dark Lord lost the battle. He wanted you and your mother to retain your standing in the community and not be pursued by the Ministry for his crimes. He wanted to make sure that your mother would not go to Azkaban for supporting the Dark Lord, and he wanted to make sure that his estate would fall to the both of you in the event of his death."

"He chose Hermione Granger to perform this deed, and he cast the Imperio Curse on her, forcing her to use the Killing Curse on him. However, as near as I can tell, if someone as strong in her magic as Hermione Granger most certainly is, is so unwilling to submit under the Imperio Curse, any spell she would be forced to cast would be indeterminately altered. That combined with the fact that your father most definitely did not want to die but was attempting to do so because he felt a duty to do so had the unfortunate effect of rendering him comatose rather than outright killing him."

For several months, Narcissa tried to hate this Hermione Granger that her husband had chosen to deliver his fate. She'd tried really hard. Then she'd tried hating Lucius. That was easier to do. After all, if he had just gone into hiding, she would still have her husband. Perhaps he would not be able to take her to all the social functions she was used to attending, but he would be there to love her, and hold her, and talk to her.

Oh, how she missed the way he would attend to her every night. Her baths, carefully jasmine-scented and candle-lit by house-elves would become sensuous foreplay as her husband lovingly washed and then brushed dry her waist-length, ice-blond locks. Her hair was always her weakness, and Lucius knew that. He also knew that such simple foreplay would fuel her desires for an entire evening of lovemaking.

No man had known her like Lucius had. In fact, no man other than him had known her at all. From small children, they had been betrothed to each other, promised by their parents. Oh, she knew Lucius had had his dalliances with several women, and probably a prostitute or two, before they were married, but her mother had told her of the experience a man would gain by doing such, and the knowledge...while it did fuel some jealousy within her...mostly served to fuel her fantasies of her wedding night.

Lucius was everything she had imagined...and more. From that very first night, he had paid attention to her needs, making his seem secondary to her own. He never rushed; the first touch was as well-placed as the last kiss. And his fingers! Oh, his long, graceful fingers knew exactly where she wanted to be touched; never hesitant; hard, yet never painful; never lingering long enough to cause her to lose interest.

And his stamina was astounding. In talking with her sister and friends, and even once her mother, she discovered that Lucius was truly skilled in that area too; everyone was jealous. Bellatrix had even threatened once in a fit of despair at Rodolphus's ineffectualness to experience true pleasure just once in her life at the hands of Narcissa's husband. That was until Narcissa jealously hexed her sister's hair sick-green and grew her a few warts that took nearly a month to remove.

Yes, her Lucius was truly endowed, larger and lustier than most. Narcissa couldn't get enough of him, and she discovered early on to keep that fact to herself. Lucius was her first love, her only love ... her last love.

After an exhausting couple years of trying to hate, and failing, she fell into a deep depression. She rarely spoke now. Sometimes she would think she had spoken, but gradually she came to realize that house-elves were neglecting to follow her orders, and her son would often give her expectant looks as though waiting for an answer to a

question she had forgotten.

Lucius remained in stasis, his muscles being prodded by charms she had set to automatically massage and flex his limbs twice daily in hopes that he would eventually wake up and begin to use them himself. Even from the depths of her grief, she had never lost hope.

"... Granger." Her son had spoken, and that one name served to bring an abrupt halt to her reverie.

Her throat scratchy after several days of disuse, she asked, "What?"

Surprise peaked Draco's brow and had him walking towards her. "I said, I think I've found a way to get revenge on Hermione Granger."

Suddenly, her mind was crisper than it had been in years. Even her vision seemed to clear up. Draco had lost quite a bit of weight, it seemed.

"How?" she asked, reduced to one-word questions in her shock at being harshly brought back to the present.

"I paid her a visit a few days ago," he began, turning to pace the study floor, glass of Firewhisky still in hand. "I needed to feel her out to see how best to get back at her for father's ... situation."

Like the word 'death,' since Severus brought Lucius home, the word 'coma' had succumbed to the same fate. Draco took a rather long draught of the amber liquid in his cup, draining it and then pouring himself some more. Narcissa wanted to tell Draco he had been drinking entirely too much lately, but what he had to say about Hermione Granger was too important to interrupt.

"Anyway," he continued, clearing his throat of the Firewhisky-burn, "it seems that *Miss* Hermione Granger is pregnant." He paused to let that settle into Narcissa's wide-eyed comprehension. "And I've just figured out how I'm going to work this to our advantage."

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 17

The Stranger makes a bold move.

Author's Note: I have had the fortune to have a couple of the best writers as my betas for this story [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#). Thank you, ladies!

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Seven

For two weeks, the Stranger had pondered the strange visit from the amorphous, Disapparating man, trying to come up with a feasible plan to keep Hermione Granger safe. Nothing further untoward had happened since, so perhaps it was just an overactive imagination and paranoid reaction to the man's presence that fueled the Stranger's unease. However, rumor had it for some time now that Hermione Granger may be at risk: a phrase here and there, a dropped word or two spoken behind-hand in circles that he had been privy to. Never a direct threat, only hints as fleeting as the image of the Disapparating man.

Of course, there had been some commotion soon after that last battle. Hermione had insisted that Lucius Malfoy was dead and that she had been the one to kill him. Word of that had infiltrated the Wizarding world, through a scandalous comment here and there in the *Daily Prophet*. They never found Lucius' body, though, and the Ministry soon lost interest in trying to find him. Fortunately, or unfortunately, for Hermione Granger, depending on how one looked at it.

Without Lucius present to question about certain events, the Ministry couldn't place any blame on Narcissa or Draco. Lucius would have of course been given Veritaserum in their questioning of him, and certain facts would have become known, implicating both wife and son. Considerably unhappy at one of the key players in the Dark Side of the war having escaped, they had frozen the Malfoy estate, making it impossible for the remaining Malfoys to access their Gringotts account.

Word along the high-society grapevine was that Narcissa had submitted herself into self-exile and Draco was left to fend for the two of them...through any means possible. Draco's ever-increasing anger had surfaced in minor fits of rage and frequent not-so-empty threats of exacting his revenge. Very out of character for a Malfoy, and it became quite the talk among the ladies at tea-time.

No one in the rumor-mill even suspected that Lucius lay comatose within the very walls of his mansion. At least Draco had wisely kept his mouth shut on that score. If even a breath of knowledge seeped out into the community, the Ministry wouldn't hesitate to investigate, and both Narcissa and Draco could be detained for harboring a known criminal, however incapacitated he was.

The Stranger had also pondered why Hermione Granger's well-being should be so important. That question had come up more often than not in the past two weeks, and had led to a disturbing discovery. It started out as denial and ended up in defeat. Perhaps the weeks standing across the street from her shop had taken its toll and damaged his mind? After all, he hardly socialized any longer, and lack of proper social contact with human beings could cause strange fixations. Perhaps he felt it to be a duty of sorts to look after her? She was a single woman, working all alone, often past dark, and was quite vulnerable to the riff-raff that still hung about in not-so-surprisingly large numbers.

In the end, he had to face the truth: he fancied Hermione Granger.

And then, he had to face an even more insidious truth: he had begun to fancy her before he had spent even one night guarding the door of her shop. He refused to explore just how far back this admiration went. Absolutely refused.

Whether he fancied her or not was completely off the topic, however. The Stranger suspected that the man seen departing the bookshop a fortnight ago was most likely Draco Malfoy ... and no one...fancied or not...deserved a fate at the hands of a Malfoy intent upon revenge. It wasn't a certainty that it was Draco, but a very high probability, considering both the rumors milling about and the brief glimpse of lengthening, blond hair the Stranger had seen right before the man had Disappeared.

Unable to keep a constant, surreptitious watch on Hermione, there was only one thing left to do: place a miniature monitoring device that could record all goings-on within

the shop. Muggles used them all the time and had dubbed them 'bugs,' most appropriately, as they looked like tiny little cockroaches in his opinion. Of course, that would mean entering the premises and placing the bug by hand. It was the only way to ensure placement in an area most conducive to hearing conversation while remaining concealed.

This bug he had procured from a Muggle shop that specialized in private investigation tools and equipment. It cost a pretty Muggle pound...thirty-five to be exact...but this model came with an earpiece for constant monitoring. He had placed a few complex charms on both the bug and the earpiece. Now it could record indefinitely and had instant playback with a couple spoken words. The earpiece could be Disillusioned with a tap of the finger for those times he was feeling 'social.' A Muggle apparatus would be very conspicuous indeed. And with a double-tap and the incanted words, '*Portus Strega*,' it became a Portkey and would bring him instantly to a predesignated spot in the alleyway.

An hour before nightfall found the Stranger in that alleyway with the magically altered Muggle device in hand. An aimed wand placed a few glamours upon his face, hair and voice. It wouldn't do, after all, to be recognized in any way. And, emerging from the shadows that had only begun to collect, a rather tall, somewhat handsome, white-haired man crossed the street in the direction of the Strega Letteraria.

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Hermione sat at her desk, nibbling a soda cracker, sipping soda, and staring at the growing pile of bills that were due on the first of the month. She didn't have to think about paying them for another week, but Mr. Burke's order had just come in today and with it the resulting cash-on-delivery bills. She sent cash payment back with one owl...the poor thing had struggled with the resulting weight...and wrote a credit slip from her Gringotts account with another. Her nausea intensified with the sudden loss of funds, no matter that they would be refunded in less than a week with Mr. Burke's payment.

Ginny had been a godsend ever since she had found out Hermione was pregnant. She had sent Hermione a book by owl the morning after Harry's wedding entitled *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. It was a Muggle book, something that didn't surprise Hermione in the least since Ginny was as avid a reader as she was herself. Hermione was nearly finished with the book ... for the second time, having placed magical note-markers in areas that were of the keenest interest.

Reading the book had made her feel more attached to the growing fetus inside of her, excited over actually having another little life to care for and...to be completely honest with herself...extraordinarily terrified at the same time. She was rather looking forward to having the baby, now that she had grown accustomed to the idea. Maybe it was the hormones now rampaging through her body, but the fact that Harry was the father of this baby made her feel even more of a connection to the child, even though she was only two months along. Knowing that the little lump growing in her tummy was a part of her and Harry made loving it even easier, strengthened the bond between mother and child.

A care package had arrived by owl post a week after the book, complete with ginger tea, peppermints and soda crackers, all to help with the nausea; a pregnancy journal to keep track of all the changes that were happening with her body and so she could keep avid notes, of course; and a Muggle measuring tape, which had made Hermione smile. She had taken to measuring her abdomen and her bustline every morning. So far, there wasn't much change, though her jeans had gotten too tight, and this morning she found that she couldn't button them anymore.

Fortunately, Ginny never questioned the story that the baby had a Muggle father and never brought up the fact that the baby would never know him. But ever the pragmatist, Hermione was ready with particulars, should Ginny ask, including what the father had looked like. Hermione could safely say that the father-in-absentia was dashing handsome...okay, so she was a little biased where Harry was concerned...with black hair and green eyes; no one would be the wiser. That way, if the baby ended up looking like Harry, no one would think to put two and two together. There were certainly several men with that description residing in the Muggle world, not to mention quite a few in the Wizarding world.

The only thing marring this happy occasion...for that is definitely what it had become...was that she still had no idea yet how she was going to support both herself and a baby. Ginny and Alpin were most generous in their support, whether it be babysitting or a place to stay; they kept telling her that she was part of the family, after all, and she had done more than enough helping them out when they were in a bind. They assured her that no matter what, she wouldn't be destitute or homeless.

She may not become destitute, but she very well may lose the bookshop, and that fact positively depressed her. She had even begun looking through the advertisements in the *Daily Prophet* to get ideas, just in case she had to put the Strega Letteraria up for sale. She could only stomach doing that for a minute or two at a time, though; the very idea had her reaching for the soda cracker tin.

The bell ringing at the front of the shop alerted her that someone had entered. She had been so engrossed in her musings that she hadn't even noticed the potential customer. Jumping out of her seat while simultaneously brushing soda cracker crumbs off her robes, she turned around to greet the man.

He walked towards her with a slight limp, helped along with a silver-topped ebony cane. His hair was straight, silvery-white, and fell softly about his shoulders. His features were angular, his skin tea with cream; definitely not unattractive. He was no one she had seen before around Hogsmeade, or anywhere else for that matter, but she was always happy to obtain new customers, regardless of where they were from.

"Good afternoon. How can I help you?" she asked warmly, hoping to offset her initial inattentiveness.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly. "I've stopped by to see if you have the latest Potions book the new professor up at Hogwarts has requested. *Obscure Potions in Everyday Life*. You see, my son is entering his seventh-year in the fall, and I want him to get a head start on studying. He has set his sights on becoming a Potions master."

The man's voice was soft and lent to his overall attractiveness. His whole demeanor was soothing, giving an overall sense of someone who could be trusted, drawing him to her on an emotional level. She looked at him appraisingly.

"Well, you and your wife must be very proud of him," she stated.

"We are. We are," he said emphatically. "We have a daughter as well, but it'll be another year before she attends Hogwarts."

It was the picture of the average family: father, mother, and two children, one on his way to an honest career. A little mite of envy twinged on the cords of her heart. She plastered a smile over the unwanted feeling and remembered that the book was still boxed up at the back of the shop. With all the reading she'd been doing, and how scattered her mind had felt these last couple weeks, she found herself procrastinating when it came to working on the textbook display.

"I just got the stock in last week but haven't had a chance to put them on display yet," she admitted. "It'll be just one moment while I bring one from the back." Smiling, she hustled off, not wanting to make the man wait.

"You have such a nice shop," the man called out, eyes quickly scanning the immediate area.

"Thank you," Hermione called back as she levitated a couple boxes to get to the one that particular book was in. "I'm rather fond of it myself."

Satisfied that Hermione was properly occupied, the man let his fingers run under the ledge of the counter, looked behind the till and a quill-cup, glanced over to the desk...but quickly discarded that idea once he saw how neat she kept it...trying to find the optimum location to place the bug. He could hear boxes restacking themselves at the back of the shop and knew he didn't have long before she returned.

Desperately, he settled upon a spot high enough that she would not be able to reach, much less see, and placed the tiny bug on top of the mirror, which hung behind the front counter. It was a good location and would allow him to hear all conversation between her and any customers. A whispered charm secured the bug to the frame and another activated it. Any sounds, any conversation, anything that went on in the shop at all would now be delivered directly into his ear. No matter where he was, he would know instantly if Hermione was in danger.

"Have you been in business long?" he called out to her, trying to get a feel for where she was. "I don't recall ever seeing this shop before."

Hermione rounded the stacks at that moment with the book in her hand to see the man standing by the mirror. It was a bit disconcerting to have him behind the desk in an area reserved for the shopkeeper, and he could sense her discomfort. Yet, if he moved now, she would also be suspicious of his reasons for being back there. He made a show of peering at the glowing screen, as though he had never seen one like it before.

"Oh, I've been in business for nearly five years. I suppose it will take some time before I garner as much attention and business as Flourish and Blotts," she replied.. *If at all*, she added silently to herself.

"Well then, it's my fault for not noticing sooner." He smiled, making eye contact for a scant couple seconds. "Oh! I wanted to ask you...what exactly is *this*?" he asked, pointing toward the screen.

"Ah! You are the second person to ask me this in as many weeks. If anything, I'll become widely known as that shopkeeper with the strange Muggle device!" she exclaimed, warming up to the man on her side of the counter.

He chuckled along with her, thinking that now there were two 'strange Muggle devices' her shop could be widely known for.

"This," she said, pulling out a tray with a series of black buttons, "is a computer. My parents bought it for me a couple years ago. I keep track of my inventory in here, am supposed to log my income and expenses...though I'm dreadfully behind...and can access the Wizard-Wide Web, a computer-network for wizards."

His eyes widened at that last fact. While he was familiar with what a computer was, he hadn't known that the Wizarding world had come out with its own version of the Internet.

Hermione brushed past him as they exchanged places, he returning to the customer side of the counter. On his way around the desk, he noticed two books lying on top of a swath of butcher paper, ready to be wrapped. *The Mortal Magus*, he read and then surreptitiously tried to read the title on the spine beneath it while Hermione was otherwise occupied. *Malefic Magical Maladies?* Now he was certain it was Draco who had paid a visit to the shop. High probability had just become a certainty. And with certainty came a vague sense of urgency and dread.

"Um, sir?" Hermione's voice broke through his thoughts. "That'll be five Galleons and six Sickles."

"Oh, yes! Most sorry. Here you go," he said, handing over payment and waiting for his change.

Hermione held a few Sickles in her outstretched palm, waiting for him to take his change. As he deftly plucked the silver coins from her hand, she found herself gazing almost appreciatively at his long, tapered fingers. The simple motion made her feel wistful for a moment and gave her a peculiar sense of déjà-vu, almost as if something had been both remembered and forgotten at the same time. The feeling had discomfited her so that she only barely registered that the man had thanked her.

"You're most welcome ... and thank *you*," she answered dutifully.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 17

Delving into the Malfoy frame of mind....

Author's Note: As always, my heartfelt thanks go to [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#), who have not only been an inspiration to me as a writer, but are two of the best betas in the world.

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Chapter Eight

Draco waited in the shadows, tapping the tip of his wand against his leg to the skip-jump beat of the music playing in his ear. The song came to an end and started over again. Draco sighed and looked at the display of the miniature music box he had taken from some poor, hapless sod of a Muggle the night before. What was wrong with this thing anyway? He could see a whole list of songs on the display, but could not figure out how to make it play more than just this one. The words were memorized, not to mention the entire drum solo, and the noise was getting on his last raw, bloody nerve. He cocked his arm back to dispense of irritating thing, snarled as the cord jerked the tiny speaker out of his ear, and smiled as it shattered satisfyingly on the pavement a few meters away.

Even more satisfying than the splintering finale of myriad pieces of plastic tinkling across concrete was watching the lights in the office building at the end of the car park finally go out. Draco waited until the man in the dark, pinstriped, silk suit turned around to close the door, sticking a small piece of metal into what he had discovered in the past couple days was the Muggle equivalent of a Locking Charm. He didn't give the man an opportunity to finish his task, however.

"*Imperio*," he whispered while aiming his wand.

The man stiffened immediately, frozen with his hand still on the metal locking device. Walking directly up behind the suit, Draco prodded the point of his wand at the man's spine.

Go back inside, Draco thought and smiled as the man's wrist twisted in the other direction, releasing the lock. The man removed and pocketed the piece of metal, reopened the door, and stopped just inside, nearly causing Draco to walk into his back. Silently, Draco cursed himself for the minor faux pas.

You want to go to your office, Draco suggested, following as the man took the cue and began walking again.

Draco had been watching the man for two days now. What had initially drawn Draco's attention was the wallet full of British bank notes the man had pulled out to pay for an *Evening Standard* from a seller on a street corner. The man had been too absorbed in the front page news to notice Draco feigning interest over a cluster of blossoms at a

flower vendor a few paces away, or Draco rapidly becoming disinterested as he strolled passed, or Draco casually falling in step behind him.

The man had willingly given Draco all the notes in his wallet, as subtly suggested through a briefly spelled Imperio, in the quiet space between the dual entrance doors to a high-priced Japanese restaurant. The poor bloke had continued on in, none the wiser, and Draco had exited, much the richer. He'd pocketed the wad of notes, knowing that he had acquired more than his desired quota for the evening.

He had contemplated Apparating back to the manor for the evening, but the hustle of London's streets was infinitely less suffocating than the heavy weight of responsibility and depression his life had become. Draco had hesitated at the corner on which the restaurant stood, pondering the course his evening would take, when the suit pushed angrily out of the restaurant, talking into a small, rectangular box that he held to one ear with meaty fingers.

"No, Sam. I don't know what happened. I tell you, it was full when I bought the bloody *Standard*." He stopped talking, paced the corner quite close to where Draco was standing, and began talking again into what obviously was a communication device. "Never mind. I'll order takeaway and pay for it out of petty cash. I'm heading back to the office."

Draco's ears had perked up at the mention of cash. There was more cash? It was certainly worth following the man back to the office if it would end up being lucrative.

When they had reached the man's office, Draco following at some distance to avoid being noticed, he had discovered the man worked for a firm of solicitors. This could only mean more money. A couple of his father's friends had been solicitors, and they certainly made a fair number of Galleons.

He had decided it would be worthwhile to keep an eye on the man's office and had spent two days undercover, Disillusioned, watching the comings and goings of the employees and their clients. A few clients' wallets were suggested empty in the duration; a good opportunity was never wasted.

Thus, the location of 'petty cash' had been discerned, and as it turned out, it wasn't so petty after all.

On one of his many Disillusioned wanderings through the firm, he had found an antique safe in a room that was kept locked at all times ... until someone needed to enter it. He had noticed an occasional employee entering the room with heavy bags and leaving empty handed, and once he had overheard the receptionist request some 'petty cash' and followed the designated, key-entrusted employee into the locked room.

He had squeezed behind the portly woman, careful not to disrupt his Disillusioned status, and had watched as she spun the dial this way and that, pulled down the large wooden handle, and opened the heavy iron door with some considerable strength behind it. Draco had to wedge himself against the wall to avoid being discovered and found he had the perfect vantage point to see the contents of the safe.

Yes, it had definitely been worth following the man and spending two days staking out the place.

The pinstriped suit paused outside his office to turn the handle of the door. That wasn't the door Draco wanted him to open, however. He stopped the man with a thought.

Not that door. Draco turned his head and looked at the door the safe lay behind, which effectively turned his Imperioed victim's attention in the same direction *Open **this** door.*

The man turned on his heel and walked slowly to the door, fishing another metal unlocking device out of his pocket in the few steps it took to reach the door. Fitting it into the small slot above the handle, he released the lock, swung the door open, and waited.

Draco prodded the man inside at wand-point. *Go inside and unlock the safe.*

Without hesitation, the man did as was suggested, as if the very thought had generated from his own will. The numbers of the dial blurred one way, then the other, stopping only long enough to lock in the sequence. The handle was pulled downward. And then, suddenly, the great riches of the safe were laid bare in front of Draco's eyes. Great bundles of secured 20-pound and 50-pound notes just asking to be freed from their prison.

It was beautiful. He nearly shed a tear.

Grabbing a burlap bag from a pile on the floor, Draco placed it in the man's hand and wordlessly ordered him to fill it. When that bag was full, he placed another in the man's hand, and so on until the safe was empty of its 'petty cash.'

Sure, it was Muggle currency, but it was a minor inconvenience. A Polyjuiced trip now and then to Gringotts would solve that problem. After all, he wouldn't want to draw attention to the fact that the Malfoys had suddenly become self-sufficient, now would he?

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Narcissa leaned against a high wooden stool, stirring the cauldron in front of her. *Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight.... Where is that boy? He makes me do all the dirty work while he's off drowning himself in Firewhisky, no doubt.* Draco's absences had become more frequent over the past couple weeks, and he always returned smelling like alcohol. She had no idea where he was procuring the funds for his newfound drinking habit, but after sparing a brief moment or two dwelling on it, she found that it really didn't matter to her as long as he wasn't touching the scant amount of cash they kept in the manor.

Likewise, she hadn't really cared too much at first when Draco had told her Hermione Granger was pregnant. She had been peripherally aware that Draco had been growing increasingly angry, but had not known that he had been planning any sort of revenge. The fact that the woman was pregnant meant nothing to her until he let her know what he had in mind. When Draco had asked for her help in this plan of his, she had readily complied and set to brew an abortifacient to rid the Mudblood of her offspring. Having a goal to work towards had brought her back to life, made life worth living again...not only as her husband's caregiver.

Of course, what they were about to do would not bring Lucius back, but Draco had given her another ray of hope: the Granger-trollop had procured two hard-to-come-by texts, which...rumor had it...documented cases similar to Lucius's. Whether or not any had been cured and how exactly it could be accomplished remained to be seen. It wasn't guaranteed, but it was more than they'd had before, and whatever it took to help Lucius was worth it.

Her poor, poor Lucius. She stirred the cauldron more vigorously...*Sixty-nine, seventy, seventy-one...*careful to calm down before tossing in some wormwood so that none of the potion would splash onto her robes. Calm...yes, she had to calm down.

The more she had thought about it in the past few days, the angrier she had become. She was angry at everything and everyone, as though Draco's attitude had been contagious. She was even angry at Lucius...for he was essentially at fault for what had happened...but she wanted the opportunity to let him know, to wail and rant at him, and then to ferociously make up with him. Even though logic told her that Hermione Granger had no control over her actions that fateful day, Narcissa was even angry with the Mudblood for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It would feel good to make someone pay for the condition of her husband.

The door to the laboratory banged open, and Draco came in, smelling like fresh evening rain and, predictably, of Firewhisky. He came over and kissed his mother's cheek perfunctorily and peered over her shoulder into the cauldron.

"Nearly finished?" he asked, unburdening himself of several heavy bags, lumping them heavily onto the floor.

"Yes, and I'd be much farther along if you'd been here to help," she replied acidly.

Draco patted his mother's shoulder. It used to irritate him that she always got short of temper when under stress. Lately, however, he had taken to prompting little fits of pique on purpose, overjoyed that she had begun speaking to him again and was no longer a waking version of his father.

"Don't fret, Mother. I'll take over."

He gently pried her anger-tight fingers from the wooden spoon and continued where she left off. All too happy to relinquish control, Narcissa reached back to pull the elastic out of her hair, letting it fall about her shoulders and running two tired hands through the limp strands.

"So you'll go tomorrow then?" she asked, kneading her stiff neck.

She knew that her next task would be to get her hands dirty in the kitchen. She cursed the fact that they had to sell the last house-elf the previous month. She detested menial work, be it stirring a cauldron or...like she was expected to do now...bake. She only hoped that she remembered how. The last time she had done anything domestic was the summer before she married Lucius when they were still wooing each other and she had wanted to impress him.

"Yes, Mother. As soon as I'm finished here, you can add it to the muffins. You did decide on muffins, didn't you?" He looked up briefly to add the final ingredient.

"Yes, they're kinder on a pregnant woman's stomach than anything else. Though I suppose that won't matter...." Narcissa's voice trailed off.

"Not having second thoughts, are you, Mother?" Draco asked, ice-cold, as he turned off the heat to the cauldron and turned around. "Because if you are, I can very well do this alone."

Narcissa straightened up at her son's threat. She knew he didn't need her, but she wanted to do this. She ~~had~~ had to do this ... for Lucius. "No. No, I'm not having second thoughts. I was just remembering when I was pregnant with you ... how proud Lucius was to be having a son."

He gave his mother an even, critical look. "Well, if that's all it is," he said dismissively.

"Yes, that's all it is." Now it was her turn to be angry. "Who do you think has been slaving over a hot cauldron for the past three hours? If I had been having second thoughts, I would have dumped the entire contents out and been at your father's side...where I am *needed*."

His features softened, which had the effect of calming his mother down, letting her know that he most certainly deserved the tongue-lashing. He walked over to her and took both of her hands in his.

"You are needed right here, by me," he stressed. "I need you. I need Father too. That is why I do what I do."

"Which is what? Drinking Firewhisky at the local pub?" she stabbed with her voice, aiming for any soft spot she could.

"Hardly. Take a look." He pointed at the several burlap bags he had deposited on the floor.

"What's this?" she asked, unsure of whether she wanted to touch the rough, dingy fabric.

In answer, Draco led her over and opened one of the bags, allowing the stacks of Muggle notes fall out across the tile. He looked up at his mother *This is what I have been doing every night for the past two weeks: securing our future.*

Narcissa eyed the Muggle money at first with derision, then with hunger. They would be able to afford to live once again. Perhaps not up to the same standards she was once used to, but definitely well enough to buy back some of the things they had sold. They might even be able to buy back their house-elf.

Suddenly, she felt very much like baking. With the first smile in months forming a crease on her face, she levitated the cauldron and headed up the stairs, Draco following closely behind.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 17

What does revenge taste like?

Author's Note: Once upon a time, there were two lovely ladies who agreed to beta this story. And this grateful author is pleased to give credit to both [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#). Thank you, girls!

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Nine

"How are you doing, love? Everything okay?" Ginny greeted her friend, giving Hermione an awkward, sideways hug, letting her protruding stomach shift off to one side.

Ginny pulled back and looked at Hermione worriedly. Hermione was paler than usual, her smile weaker, her hug a bit needier. She looked more worried than usual, more preoccupied.

"Oh, I'm all right," she reassured her friend, wishing that Ginny wouldn't look at her in such a way. Seeing someone else's concern for her had always made her feel that much worse. "What's this?" Hermione laughed, pointing at the rather large basket Ginny was still levitating off to one side.

"Oh, this!" Ginny laughed herself, setting it down on the floor. "Just my way of taking care of you, you know. I can't have you starving yourself in your condition. There are biscuits and soda crackers, some dried fruit. I also picked up some vitamins you really need to keep your strength up."

"I'm trying, really," Hermione answered, conveying her gratitude with another lengthy hug. "Thank you. What would I do without you?"

"Oh, you'd wither away, most likely." Ginny laughed again. "So, really. How are you feeling?"

"I still feel sick most of the time. I can't wait for this part to be over. The book says the nausea usually lasts for the first three months."

"It's different for everyone. When I was pregnant with Molly, I didn't feel sick at all. With William I was sick every night for the first three months and couldn't eat a thing. This one, I only felt sick sometimes, and my appetite is uncontrollable. You'll see if you ever have another one." Ginny grinned widely, knowing what kind of response that would engender.

"*Another* one? Believe me, I'm never getting pregnant again. I absolutely *hate* feeling this way," Hermione responded queasily. "Besides, I have no idea how I'm going to support one child. I can't even imagine two!"

Ginny's forehead wrinkled in worry. "Yes, you know, I was wondering about that. How's business been with the shop?" She looked around at the obvious lack of customers.

Hermione put her head in her hands. She thought back on the two customers she had this month. One was due to pick up his books this evening, as a matter of fact, which would mean she would be able to just squeak by with the bills. Personal expenses would have to come out of her Gringotts account once again. She sighed heavily.

"It's been terrible, to tell the truth. I've decided to put the shop up for sale." Her breath shuddered. Tears threatened, but she promised herself that she would not cry.

"Oh, sweetie." Ginny put her arm around Hermione's shoulders. "I know how much you want this bookshop. I wish it could have worked out."

Hermione slumped into Ginny's half-embrace and couldn't stop the tears from coming. It felt good to let go, to have Ginny's emotional support right now. She was tired of carrying everything on her shoulders. It was too much. Her failing business. Her pregnancy. Her decision not to tell Harry...

As if Ginny were reading her mind, she asked, "Are you still sure you don't want to tell the father? Most men are ready to step up and help out, you know. And he might like to know about his child."

Hermione felt even sicker to her stomach than she normally did. Tell the father? Tell Harry and ruin his marriage? And what was she supposed to do when the truth came out? It would devastate Ginny to know that Harry had broken it off with her because he didn't want to have children and then had gone ahead and had one anyway with someone else. How could she do that to her friend? All she could do was shake her head and wipe away more tears.

"No. I've made up my mind. I'm going to do this on my own. I'll sell the shop, find a job ... I'll manage," she said resolutely.

Ginny gave Hermione her best Molly Weasley smile. "You do what's best for you. Just know that Alpin and I are here to help if you ever need it."

Hermione nodded and hugged Ginny even harder.

~ o ~

A tiny bell sounded in the Stranger's ear, alerting him to the fact that someone had entered the bookshop. It was early in the afternoon, still well before tea time, and he was hard at work in his laboratory as he was every afternoon at about this time. The little ward going off in his ear didn't rattle him, though. It was a bookshop; bookshops had customers. Still, he needed to be sure she was all right; he had bugged her shop for a reason, after all.

He touched a finger to the earpiece and said, "*Audio*." Instantly, he could hear the conversation between Hermione and her visitor as clear as if they were standing in front of him.

"There are biscuits and soda crackers, some dried fruit. I also picked up some vitamins you really need to keep your strength up."

"I'm trying, really. Thank you. What would I do without you?"

"Oh, you'd wither away, most likely." The visitor laughed. "So, really. How are you feeling?"

"I still feel sick most of the time. I can't wait for this part to be over. The book says the nausea usually lasts for the first three months."

"It's different for everyone. When I was pregnant with Molly, I didn't feel sick at all. With William I was sick every night for the first three months and couldn't eat a thing. This one, I only felt sick sometimes, and my appetite is uncontrollable. You'll see if you ever have another one."

"Another one? Believe me, I'm never getting pregnant again..."

Pregnant?! The Stranger had to support himself against the table. Hermione was pregnant? He didn't even know she was involved with anyone. Surely, he had never seen her with anyone. Well, no one but Mr. Potter, but that was two months ago. Surely she and he hadn't ...

Suddenly he remembered: having gone to the Hog's Head while after they had gone out, still having been somewhat blurred by the Firewhisky when they had returned, their kiss... a kiss that was meant for more than friends.

He nearly swooned at the thought. The child belonged to Harry Potter...the dates fit. He had hoped that she would have been more intelligent than to get involved with someone in such a way without taking the proper precautions. And now ... but it was certain that Harry and she were not involved with each other. After all, the news of Harry's marriage to the Minister for Magic's daughter had been virtually plastered all over the *Daily Prophet*, both in the week preceding and the week following the gala event. Still, it was Harry Potter's baby.

His heart sank. He sat heavily on the chair, oblivious to what the two women were talking about, until he heard...

"It's been terrible, to tell the truth. I've decided to put the shop up for sale." Hermione sounded as though she was about to cry.

"Oh, sweetie. I know how much you want this bookshop. I wish it could have worked out."

The room was silent for a few moments, and then Hermione's visitor asked, "*Are you still sure you don't want to tell the father? Most men are ready to step up and help out, you know. And he might like to know about his child.*"

"No. I've made up my mind. I'm going to do this on my own. I'll sell the shop, find a job ... I'll manage."

Never mind the bookshop. He was still stuck on the fact that the father wasn't in the picture. Something akin to relief washed over him. At the same time, he knew how wrong it was to feel this way. He should feel awful. He should be sympathetic to her predicament. But in the end, he couldn't help what he felt a strange sense of lightness, which had suddenly replaced the lead weight in his stomach.

That didn't change how he felt about her being pregnant. He was disappointed, actually. Disappointed that she had neglected to think about birth control ... Disappointed that she had been in bed with someone else. This hadn't happened too long ago; she wasn't very far along. In fact, she didn't even look pregnant at all when he saw her just the other day.

But wait a minute ... she was thinking of selling the shop? That wasn't like her at all to give up on something she had worked so hard for. Still, he had discerned over the past few months that her business wasn't doing all that well. It was obvious that it was a constant source of stress for her. And now, with a baby on the way, how would she support both herself *and* a child when supporting herself was a chore? It really was the only logical thing to do, and if Hermione was anything, she was certainly logical.

He touched the earpiece once again and said, "Quietus."

He didn't want to hear anymore. There was too much to think about now, and it all weighed upon his heart heavily. She needed help both financially and emotionally, and to top it all off, unbeknownst to her, her life was most certainly in danger. There had to be something he could do....

He put stasis charms on a couple cauldrons, marked where he was in a couple of reference books, and prepared himself to go out...a truly rare occurrence. He suddenly needed to make a couple of stops in Diagon Alley.

~ o ~

Hermione was emotionally wiped out. Ginny's visit had been sorely needed, that was true. Ginny was the only source of emotional support she had right now. Her parents were still on their round-the-world trip...they had been in New Zealand for the past three weeks and had put the rest of the trip on hold because they were enjoying it too much. That was all right; Hermione wasn't sure she was ready to disappoint her mother and father with her news.

Both bits of news, actually: that she was pregnant and that she had failed as a business owner. If she wasn't so dehydrated from all the crying she had done during Ginny's visit, she would be in tears right now.

She looked forlornly at the advertisement she had placed just the day before in the *Daily Prophet*. She had cried as she formulated the ad and edited it four times. She had cried as she walked to the post office to send the request and the fee to the Advertising Department of the *Daily Prophet*. She had wiped her face dry, applied a glamour, and affixed a false cheery disposition before entering the post office so that Andrew, the clerk, wouldn't ask her any questions. She had made a hasty exit before the tears could start flowing once again.

Needless to say, between yesterday and today, she was all cried out. She felt wrung out, like a used up face flannel. She wanted to close up early for the evening, every cell in her body screamed out for her to do so, but today was the day she had told Mr. Burke to return. The two books he had ordered were lying on the counter, ready to be wrapped after he saw everything was in order and paid the balance. At least she knew that after tonight she would be able to pay the monthly bills. That was a positive thought.

As though the very thought had made him appear out of thin air, Mr. Burke entered her shop. He looked a little more disheveled than the last time she saw him...more disheveled and a little less composed, a little more bright-eyed perhaps. She couldn't quite place it.

"Why hello, Mr. Burke." She smiled at him pleasantly as the door to the shop swung shut and he approached her.

"Good evening, Miss Granger." He deposited a package on the counter. "I trust you have the books I ordered?"

It was right down to business. He certainly was a no-nonsense sort of man, and tonight she really did not mind. A slightly inebriated sort of man as well, she discovered as his Firewhisky-laced breath wafted across the counter. He smelled distinctly of pub.

"Of course. They're right here." She directed him to the other end of the counter where they lay upon the parchment. "They are exactly what you ordered. Would you like me to wrap them for you?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Mr. Burke replied, glancing first at the books and then distractedly around the shop and at the door. "Business is quite slow tonight," he said conversationally, though stiltedly.

"Yes, I'm afraid it has been for some time," she answered, not quite sure why she felt it necessary to impart such information to a relative stranger. It was just on her mind so much lately that it seemed to just leak out of her mouth.

"Too bad, too bad," Mr. Burke said, trying to sound as though he was truly sorry for her situation. But he sounded distracted, and it came out sounding more perfunctory than sympathetic.

The package was secured with a flick of her wand, and she looked up to see Mr. Burke's overly bright eyes fixed in her direction. He fumbled in his robe pocket a moment and came out with the proper coinage, this time in Galleons, to pay the remainder of his bill.

"This should about cover it," he said as he placed the sack of coins in her outstretched hand.

"Thank you." She weighed the bag on a charmed scale that told her exactly how many Galleons were inside. He had paid her in full, not that she had expected any less.

"Oh, and I wanted to thank you for being able to obtain these rare books for me. I had my wife bake these muffins for you." He pushed the package he had placed on the counter in her direction. "I hope they're to your liking."

Hermione smiled. Well, now. How nice! It seemed everyone was taking care of her today in some small sort of way.

"Why thank *you*, Mr. Burke. It really was unnecessary, but who am I to turn away such a treat!"

"Well, I just wanted to show my gratitude, that's all. You definitely deserve it," he deadpanned.

She didn't know exactly what it was in his voice that sounded not quite right, but there it was again. There was a stiff, emotionless quality to his voice, still kind but not quite ... friendly? She couldn't quite place it. Still, it was kind of him to give her such a gift.

He didn't linger, saying his good-bye quickly and leaving Hermione to shake off the odd feeling he had given her. Perhaps he was just a bit shy.

~ o ~

Tapping the earpiece twice, the Stranger said, "*Portus Stregal*" and he was transported instantly to a darkened corner of the alley.

He was running late tonight. He had gone to Diagon Alley to take care of a few things and was still straightening up his laboratory and finishing up writing notes on a couple experiments when the tone in his ear told him that someone had entered the bookshop.

It was after dark. He should have been there already. Blast it! Abandoning his notes, he donned his hooded cloak, grabbed his cane, and transported himself to the alleyway. With a muttered, "*Audio*," the conversation became audible.

Draco was in her shop. Of course, the man didn't look like Draco, but he recognized him from what little he had seen the other night. There was the familiar Malfoy way he held himself. And the lilt in the man's voice as he spoke to Hermione was all wrong.

Something was wrong. He could feel it in his very bones.

"Oh, and I wanted to thank you for being able to obtain these rare books for me. I had my wife bake these muffins for you. I hope they're to your liking."

"Why thank *you*, Mr. Burke. It really was unnecessary, but who am I to turn away such a treat!"

"Well, I just wanted to show my gratitude, that's all. You definitely deserve it."

What was this? A batch of muffins? Wife? The boy still knew how to lie believably. Those muffins were not as innocent as 'Mr. Burke' would have them seem, that was for sure. And Hermione just accepted them without question ... Hopefully she would use a little of that Moody-esque 'Constant Vigilance' before she ate anything.

Mr. Burke left the shop and hurried across the street, once again into the same alleyway that the Stranger was currently occupying. This time, the Stranger got a longer look at his appearance, and the expression upon the man's face was not the satisfaction of one who had just come across a desired acquisition. No. It was twisted in another sort of satisfaction...one he had seen several times before, in darker circles and situations that he would have thought long past.

The man exuded impatience. The Stranger could tell he wanted to leave, but the man was waiting for something and appeared intent upon watching Hermione through the large picture window of the shop. As the Stranger split his attention between Hermione and Mr. Burke, the Polyjuice Potion began to wear off. Hardened Malfoy features replaced the softer and less malignant features of his disguise. When Hermione finally untied the package and exposed the attractively wrapped muffins, Draco seemed satisfied, and his sneer of satisfaction Disappeared with a pop.

In one swift movement, the Stranger concealed himself in the voluminous hood of his cloak and hurried as fast as his limp would carry him across the street. He entered the shop swiftly, making Hermione drop the muffin she was about to bite into. She let out a squeal and backed away quickly, simultaneously drawing her wand and aiming it at the cloaked figure that had entered her shop.

"What...what do you want?" she managed to stutter.

The Stranger stopped, not wanting to frighten her any further. She had dropped the muffin; that was all that was important at this point. He spoke softly, gently, trying to calm her while at the same time trying to explain himself as swiftly and concisely as possible. He didn't want to draw attention to himself. He hadn't had time to place any glamours on his appearance or voice. The cloak sufficed to disguise his figure, but nothing would stop her from recognizing his voice if she had the time to think about it.

He humbled his posture, which had the effect of making her stance relax a bit.

"Forgive my rude entrance," he said quietly. "I need to let you know that your life is in danger, and I believe it might be from the very man who has just left your shop."

"Mr. Bur...Burke? But he...he seemed so nice."

"Mr. Burke isn't who he seems," he almost growled, then indicated with his wand toward the muffins. "May I?"

Hermione nodded, unsure of what was going on, a little frightened at this new figure that had burst into her shop. If he was truly looking out for her well-being, it couldn't hurt to have him inspect the muffins. If he wasn't...well, she still had her wand aimed at him and a spell on her tongue.

The Stranger cast a few diagnostic spells on the muffins and then bent over to smell them. He purposefully let her hear the spells he was casting so as to relieve any doubt she may have had of the veracity of his intentions. The smell seemed to confirm his suspicions. He motioned her closer.

"Come here. You can smell it. The wormwood, the Mugwort ... the cotton root bark. This has been laced with a potion."

Her eyes widened as she stared at the dropped muffin she had nearly eaten. The list of ingredients swam through her mind, and she realized what each of them could do alone ... but mixed together they would have made a potent potion indeed. And, yes, now that the Stranger mentioned it, she could smell the ingredients too. It wasn't an off-putting smell...it was very subtle...but definitely noticeable if one was paying attention. She looked up at the hooded figure and realized that all she could see were the folds of his heavy hood.

"Who was he?" she asked. He must know who it was trying to poison her. "How did he know ... *Who are you?*"

"What matters," the Stranger whispered, "is what you do with the information I've already given you."

With a swirl of his cloak, the Stranger turned and swiftly limped toward the door, leaning on his silver-tipped ebony cane, and exited the shop.

Her mind swirled much like the Stranger's cloak. She had nearly been poisoned. All those ingredients ... she would have lost the baby. In fact, those ingredients mixed together...well, their only purpose would be to make her lose the baby.

How did Mr. Burke know that she was pregnant? She tried to remember...had she said anything to Mr. Burke about being pregnant? She didn't think so. In fact, she was pretty sure she hadn't. Somehow he had found out. Somehow he knew.

And who was Mr. Burke? For that matter, who was this dark-cloaked figure who had just saved her ... saved her baby?

She stared out the mirror-black windows, trying vainly to see out in the darkness from her brightly-lit shop to where the Stranger had gone. Then she looked down at the open package of innocent-looking muffins, aimed her wand, and said, "*Evanesco.*"

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 17

Solving mysteries one at a time, and taking a step in the right direction.

Author's Note: I've been gently poked by my two betas, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#), to wake up and write, and as always I listen to them. Thank you, girls!

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Ten

"I need to let you know that your life is in danger..."

Curses slicing through the fog of a battlefield. Dark, hooded figures with grotesque masks, bone-white, a nightmare come to life. Turning this way and that. Aiming her wand. Voiceless commands. Spells racing to meet their targets.

"...and I believe it might be from the very man who just left your shop."

Fog molding itself, forming images of men, women, Death Eaters ... Mr. Burke. Once benign features transforming into malignant, bone-sharp angles. Lips curled back, a deformed sneer. Her aimed wand shook. Fear froze her throat. Words failed her.

A gnarled stick, producer of spells, aimed at her head. A breath. Mouth forming words meant to injure, to maim ... to kill.

And then ... an arm about her waist, holding her tight, pulling her out of harm's way. The spell skimming past her robes so close she could feel its energy jar her very bones. Sharp words she could not understand...muffled, distorted. Light spinning towards her attacker, traveling quickly, finding its target.

She turned in the arm that still protected her. She was safe. He held her tighter, their bodies joining as one, repelling the evil which surrounded them. Her savior.

She looked up, but the fog was so thick she couldn't see his face. Who was he?

~ o ~

Hermione awoke feeling as though she hadn't slept at all. She had stayed up late, her mind churning over the strange events of the day, unable to fall asleep. When she finally had fallen asleep, dreams plagued her. Strange dreams. Dreams of vague battles where the players were equally vague. Dreams where she was the target, in danger...

The strange, hooded man had told her she was in danger. But from whom? He hadn't seemed to think that it was important to let her know; that she was in danger was enough. *"What matters is what you do with the information I've already given you."* What was she supposed to do with so little information to go on?

What plagued her thoughts most was that she didn't know who the dark-cloaked man was. She didn't know who Mr. Burke really was either, for that matter, but that didn't seem to bother her as much ... though that did not say much for sorting her priorities. Not having been able to see the dark-cloaked man's face, not having been able to discern anything at all about his identity ... it made him a complete unknown, a mystery. She had always loved mysteries, but this one seemed to be a mystery that needed to be solved, and soon if her life was supposedly in danger. The sooner she knew who he was, the sooner she'd be able to find out who her attacker was.

He had saved her once ... but what if something else were to happen? Considering the multitude of information he had imparted before he had left her the night before...well, how would she know what to be on the lookout for?

His voice had been indiscernible, low, a near-whisper. Still, there had been bass undertones that could not quite be hidden. She assumed that his voice at full volume would be low in range, full-bodied, resonant. The softness of his words was meant to throw her off. He had been hiding his voice. But why? If he had spoken aloud, would she have recognized who he was?

Hermione formed a picture in her mind from what she could recall: He had been tall and not overly heavy, though she couldn't really tell for sure since he was cloaked. Other than that, since they had had no contact, she couldn't even venture a guess as to his stature. His hand...the only part of him she had seen when he had drawn his wand...had been pale, fingers long and thin, and he had held his wand with a certain grace and deftness.

Then there was his limp and the cane he used to aid his step...a black cane with a plain, round, silver head. A wizard having a limp was not unheard of...after the war there were several injuries that couldn't be completely healed by the Healers since dark spells sometimes caused permanent injury...but she did find it strange that she had seen two wizards with a limp in such a short period of time. Thoughts returned of a customer just last week with a similar limp. If it was the same customer who had come to her aid, however, she couldn't fathom why he'd have a reason to cloak himself last night.

Suddenly, she realized she was obsessing over the same exact things she had obsessed over before falling asleep the night before. She really had to stop this, get out of bed, definitely get some coffee...sod it, she shouldn't drink coffee anymore...make that herbal tea.

Mysterious strangers ... odd dreams ... no coffee ... She felt grouchy.

~ o ~

Not fifteen minutes after she had opened the shop, trying to pretend her herbal tea was coffee while reading the latest *Daily Prophet*, an owl came swooping through the small swing door she had installed for just that purpose. It dropped a thick stack of parchments, which thudded dully on the counter, and looked at her haughtily, apparently awaiting something.

Hermione peered at the topmost parchment, which read:

To: Miss Hermione Granger

Owner: Strega Letteraria

*This is to notify you that an offer has been made as per your ad in the **Daily Prophet** on April 19, 2004. In lieu of a direct purchase of the establishment, Strega Letteraria, my client offers the opportunity to enter into a joint venture agreement in which he would join resources and efforts with you for a span of ten years. During this time, you would be co-owners of said establishment.*

The following are the legal papers to set up a joint venture agreement. If you agree to the offer my client has put forth, please sign in the highlighted areas and return by owl at the address provided. If you do not agree to this, please return the forms unsigned.

Yours truly,

Edmund Everhart, Solicitor

Wright, Talbot, and Sharpe LLP

The following page began the legalese, something which she never truly had the mind for, though at least somewhat understood. She skimmed through the myriad pages, wondering who would offer her the opportunity to essentially keep her business. She had never thought of this possibility. Partner with someone for a set period of time, enough to get her feet back on the ground. Perhaps with their combined assets she could finally advertise the bookshop as she had always wanted to, but never had been able to afford. A ray of hope brightened the darkness she had been living in for so long.

She paged through, looking for the highlighted areas in which she needed to sign. There had to be a place somewhere where the other person also needed to sign. She checked off nine areas where she needed to sign and two where she needed to initial ... and finally, at the very end, there was a line with a name printed neatly beneath where the man offering to enter into the joint venture with her had yet to sign.

S. Prince

She blinked. That name sounded very familiar. Where had she heard that name before? Prince ... yes, of course. Sixth year. Harry's borrowed Potions textbook. Prince was a name of a somewhat known pureblood family, but the familial line had ended when Eileen Prince had married Tobias Snape and ...

It couldn't be. But there was no other explanation. It had to be him. It had to be Severus Snape.

Severus Snape had been a wanted man by the Ministry ever since the death of Albus Dumbledore. When it had come to the Ministry's attention that the ghostly apparition of Professor Dumbledore's ghost had been seen roaming the grounds of Hogwarts, an official had naturally been sent to question him about his murder and the whereabouts of his murderer. The ethereal Dumbledore, much the same as the corporeal Dumbledore, had given a vague, enigmatic answer: "All will be known in due time, my dear sir, in due time."

They hadn't returned until after Voldemort had been defeated, after Ron had insisted to all and sundry that he had either injured or killed Snape. When no body had been found, the Ministry had thought it time to question Dumbledore's ghost yet again. The official whom the Ministry had sent had been relatively new to the job and had offered up with very little prodding from Albus what had supposedly transpired between Ron Weasley and Severus Snape on the battlefield. Professor Dumbledore had affected a serious, concerned mien and had wandered off where no flesh could follow, leaving the poor official in the lurch. As far as Hermione knew, it was still an open case in the Ministry's eyes.

She noticed the owl was still there when it started pecking on her oak counter. It had left a present for her as well. *Damn bird*. She tossed it one of Ginny's biscuits and told it that she didn't have an answer yet and it could leave. The bird thankfully took off through the swing door, and Hermione pulled out her wand to clean up the bird's mess.

She wanted to jump at the chance. She wanted to sign the papers and have the weight of making this all work without the proper help or gold behind it taken off her shoulders. But if S. Prince was who she thought it was ... to just sign the papers on a whim like that would indeed be rash. She wanted answers first.

Pulling a parchment from a stack by her computer, she decided to request a meeting with this Mr. Prince. That would be the logical thing to do, the right thing to do. After all, no business decisions should be made without a face-to-face meeting at the very least. With the note to the solicitor finished, she went to attach it to the owl's leg ... only to realize that she had let the damn bird go. Now she'd have to make a trip to the post office over lunch.

~ o ~

It took three days for a reply to come from Mr. Everhart, the solicitor representing Mr. Prince. She had begun to doubt whether the owl had indeed reached its destination and had decided that if she hadn't heard anything by five o'clock, she would owl him again and this time request a receipt notice. She didn't want to sound impatient, however. If she sounded too eager, Mr. Prince might deduce that she'd been having a difficult time drumming up business and back out.

This undoubtedly meant that she had effectively made up her mind, she realized. After having a few days to think about it and read over the thick sheaf of parchments, not to mention showing it to Alpin, Ginny's husband, who knew the various ins and outs of everything legal, she was ready to go ahead with the joint venture. The only thing stopping her was that she needed to know who exactly she was going into business with.

When the same haughty brown owl flew through the swing door just as she was worrying over the solicitor's non-response, she sighed heavily to dispel the nauseatingly twittering butterflies in her stomach.

She snatched the note from the owl's leg and perfunctorily tossed it a biscuit to keep it occupied.

To: Miss Hermione Granger

Owner: Strega Letteraria

After due consideration, since he is a very private man, Mr. Prince has decided to meet with you. However, it must not be in a public locale. This letter has been charmed into a Portkey, which will transport you to his location at exactly 9:00 p.m. this evening.

Yours truly,

Edmund Everhart, Solicitor

Wright, Talbot, and Sharpe LLP

Butterflies became fire-breathing dragons, and she had to take a biscuit, much to the owl's annoyance, who thought it had been meant for it instead of her. Of course, this posed another dilemma. The Stranger did warn her that her life was in danger. What if meeting this Mr. Prince wasn't such a good idea after all? He was asking that she meet him under his terms in an unknown place. What if he was the one she needed to beware of?

She couldn't believe she was actually waffling over whether or not to meet Mr. Prince when for the last three days she had been worried over his response. If she wanted to make a better place for herself in the business world, then she'd have to take chances.

But that did not mean that she didn't have to come prepared. A search in one of her drawers turned up a little Chinese figurine her mother had sent her a couple months back when they were still in China. Breathing a few words over it, it became a Portkey as well, ready to transport her back to the safety of her flat above the bookshop.

It was pure torture waiting for nine o'clock to roll around. Numerous times she had checked her appearance, determined how much time remained, patted her pockets for her wand and the little Chinese figurine-cum-Portkey. She had tried to contact Ginny through the Floo Network this afternoon, but no one had been home. A quickly penned message had to serve instead, a short note letting Ginny know that she was going to meet the man who wished to become her business partner and that she had no idea where the meeting was going to be, but here was the solicitor's contact information...just in case something went wrong.

She hadn't heard back from Ginny. She only hoped that little Molly or William hadn't gotten a hold of her message before Ginny had. In any case, it was too late to worry about that now. The solicitor's mail lying on her desk would have to suffice as evidence in the event that she did not return.

At two minutes before the Portkey was to activate, Hermione secured the shop with its usual locks and wards ... and waited.

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The lights of the bookshop dimmed. To the casual observer, the Strega Letteraria was closing up for the night. The Stranger, however, knew that it was still a few minutes to closing time. It was extraordinarily unusual for Hermione Granger to close her bookshop early...even by a couple minutes.

He waited, naturally cloaked in the shadows, fingering an old silver spoon in one hand. At one minute of nine o'clock, the antique piece blinked out of existence, pulling the Stranger along with it through another dimension to a small house in a rather dingy part of London.

The Stranger positioned himself at the top of the steps leading to the entrance of the house. The hood of his cloak was down this time, his appearance unglamoured. He leaned upon the ebony cane heavily ... and waited.

At precisely nine o'clock, the air wavered, twisted, and deposited a woman just meters in front of him. She didn't notice him right away as she scanned the surroundings, and then her head turned.

Held breath expelled forcefully, half anxious, half curious. "It's you."

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 17

Coming face to face with the Stranger.

Author's Note: An appreciative nod to my betas, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#), who will get the next few chapters to look over shortly. Thank you, girls!

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Eleven

The witch who appeared before him looked out of place in the dank, inhospitable surroundings. A breath of fresh air where none was to be had. He regretted she had to be brought here, but it was a necessary evil to meet somewhere out of the way, somewhere only a scant few people knew about...and it was highly improbable that any of them would be watching the place or stop by. In any case, Hermione Granger was finally a guest at his family home in Spinners End.

He could see recognition dawn in her eyes. Then those same eyes sparked in triumph, and he realized that she undoubtedly figured out it was him after viewing the papers his solicitor had sent. Both reactions were almost immediately replaced by obvious nervousness, however. He had forgotten how easily Gryffindors wore their emotions on their sleeves.

Her eyes skimmed quickly over his predictably black-cloaked form, from his limp, black, slick-straight hair down to his familiar hard-soled boots. Somewhere in between the two points, both hands braced the weight of his body upon a walking stick. It was too dark to tell much more, what with the stinginess of the street lamps. Still, it was definitely him.

She held her hands together tightly, willing them not to shake. She didn't want him to notice how nervous she was. It was one thing to come to the conclusion all on her own that S. Prince was Severus Snape, another thing altogether being face to face with the man. The man whom she had already decided to go into business with. What would it be like to go into business with a fugitive from the Ministry, she wondered.

"It is you." Her voice shook with the force of trying not to appear nervous.

"It is," he replied simply.

There was absolutely no derision in his voice at the obvious statement as she would have expected...well, as she would have expected from *Professor* Snape anyway. This man was no longer a professor and hadn't been for a number of years. She took a few hesitant steps forward, wondering if he was indeed to be trusted.

She remembered how Ron had described him at the last battle, described how Snape had even lowered his wand instead of fighting him; though that hadn't stopped Ron from using a Slicing Hex on his opponent. If the man before her had refused to fight one of her very friends, that in itself had volumes to say in favor of her being able to trust him now.

"We all thought you were dead." Her mind was spinning so fast with questions, it was all she was able to say at the moment, and it certainly didn't encompass all the thoughts that had passed through all of their minds soon after Voldemort had been defeated.

"That was rather the point. As you can see, I'm very much alive...a little worse for wear, but alive," he stated the obvious for her benefit.

By this time, she had finished the short walk to the bottom of the steps that led to the front door of the house. She decided that rather than ask another obvious question, she would simply assume this to be his house. It wasn't Secret Kept, that was for sure, since she could see it without him having to tell her its location. So why hadn't the Ministry found it? There were enough questions to be asked, however, that adding another would be tiresome. The questions were already prioritized in her brain...had been since she had received the solicitor's owl earlier that day. She was nothing if prepared.

Taking a deep breath, she shrugged away the rest of her nervousness and said, "Well, are you going to invite me inside?"

He smirked at her boldness, turned slightly to open the door, and waved her inside ahead of him with a sweep of a hand. She climbed the steps and brushed past him, entering the extremely modest house. The doorway led straight into an abbreviated sitting room of sorts. A chair and meager fireplace were its only occupants. She walked through to the next room, a bit larger though no less sparse in its furnishings. There were, however, a small sofa and a matching chair, probably last upholstered about a century ago. But she wasn't here to pass judgment on the way he chose to...had to?...live.

The door shut and locked, and she heard him walking unevenly behind her, the telltale sound of a cane hitting the floor every other step. A cane. That would make *three* wizards she had seen in the last couple weeks who walked with a cane. She had heard someone say once that there was no such thing as coincidence....

"Have a seat, Miss Granger." He indicated the sofa, the less worn of the two pieces of furniture. "I'm sure you have a few questions for me."

"Yes, I do...uh, Mr. Snape ... or do you answer to Mr. Prince now?" That was the question at the top of her list.

He smiled faintly as if expecting that to be the first question. He waited until she had sat down, and then he seated himself in the chair across from her, balancing the head of his cane carefully against the arm. His preciseness in doing so drew her attention first to the hand performing the delicate task and then to the ebony stick, which was topped with a plain, round, silver head.... And all the questions she had queued up in her mind flew out the dusty window.

Her mind felt like a fast-moving car being thrown suddenly in reverse. Her arrested thoughts dangled her over the bottomless pit that had once been her stomach. Potions.

The man who had saved her from the dangerous Mr. Burke could smell the ingredients of the potion lacing those muffins. Then, the very next day, receiving notice from S. Prince's solicitor. When was she going to finally learn that there was no such thing as coincidence?

Her throat suddenly felt very dry, and she wasn't sure she could get the next words out of her mouth without choking. If she thought she could at all swallow, she would be wishing for a very tall glass of water.

"You. *You* were the man in my shop the other night ... the one who stopped me from eating those poisonous muffins," she clarified so he wouldn't think she was accusing him of being the other. She could only hope that there was a smidgen of gratitude in that accusation so he wouldn't think her an ungrateful brat.

The vague smile dropped from his face, and his countenance became quite serious. Caught unprepared. He hadn't been expecting this so soon.

He nodded his head slowly. "I am that man," he answered matter-of-factly, "and I'm sure that poses a whole set of completely different questions."

"It sure does," she said, thoughts once again flooding her mind with a few more in tow. She was sure she was going to overlook something. "First of all, you said I'm in danger...and before you say anything, I took precautions before I came here with that in mind. Who exactly am I in danger from? I'm assuming that Mr. Burke isn't really Mr. Burke, and I assume you know who he is and why he wanted to harm me..." *Or my baby*, she thought to herself. "You said what mattered was what I did with the information, but you didn't tell me anything, really. I hardly know what to do!"

The mini-tirade put a smile back on his lips. "First of all, he didn't want to hurry you...well, he did want to hurt you, but indirectly. You have figured out what that potion would have done, haven't you? In fact, I believe you figured it out that very evening."

"Yes. It..." *would have caused me to miscarry*, she finished in her head. Then she realized that he was a Potions master and knew very well what those ingredients were used for.

"It would have caused you to lose your baby..." he finished for her emotionlessly, "quite painfully, I might add...thereby causing you great distress, both emotional and physical."

She looked down at the scuffed toes of her shoes and worked her hands in her lap. No one but Ginny and Alpin knew about her pregnancy. Well, apparently so had Mr. Burke, and now he did too. It wasn't much of a secret anymore if people who hardly knew her knew about it, now was it?

"Does the baby have a father, Miss Granger?" he asked, more for his own clarification than the reason he was about to give. "After all, if your life is in danger, that would make *his* life in danger as well."

"The baby has no father," she muttered, looking up at him finally.

"All babies have fathers," he countered, "just like all babies have mothers."

He dreaded hearing the answer, that Harry Potter was indeed the father of her baby. He had already drawn that conclusion, but for some reason, hearing it out loud would set it in stone, make it real, make it a fact that the boy who had always gotten under his skin was the father of Hermione's baby. Suddenly, he realized that he didn't really want to have that particular question answered tonight, which was just as well since it didn't seem like she had any plans on answering.

Very smoothly, he changed the subject. "To answer your question, I suppose you remember the last battle when Voldemort was destroyed ... and what you did."

Her eyes hardened. "Of course I remember. How could I forget? I still have nightmares about it."

"Right. I already know, but let's make sure we're on the same page here. Tell me the story you told the Aurors," he said.

It would have been easier to talk about her pregnancy, and suddenly she wished they were back on that topic. She felt tense, about to bare her soul to her ex-professor as she would a parish minister. She had tried to tell herself for so long that it wasn't her fault; after all, Lucius Malfoy had used the Imperio Curse on her. She felt responsible, however, for not being strong enough to break his hold on her.

She took in a lungful of air and exhaled forcefully, plunging right in. "I came upon Lucius Malfoy on the battlefield. He insulted me, of course, like he always did. I thought he was going to kill me, but instead of the Killing Curse, he used the Imperio Curse on me. He forced me to use the Killing Curse on him instead. I tried to fight it. I tried to push his desires out of my mind ... I tried to resist! In the end, I...I killed Lucius Malfoy."

He let that proclamation hang in the air for a dramatic moment as a precursor to what he had to say. "What if I told you that Lucius Malfoy didn't die?"

All the air left her body. She couldn't breathe. Gasping like a fish out of water, she weakly tried to form a response. "Wh...what do you mean he...he didn't die?"

Severus Snape stood up suddenly, and startled, she pushed away from him into the hard back of the bare-bones sofa.

"Care for a drink?" he asked and walked across the room into the kitchen when she nodded.

He returned with two tumblers of Firewhisky, well-iced, which she accepted more than gratefully, taking a moment to calm her nerves with a few steady swallows. Then he held his hand out to retrieve the tumbler from her shaking fingers.

"Pregnant women should monitor their alcohol intake," he offered as an explanation. "If I let you hold this, you may drink more than you should."

She nodded her acceptance, grateful his head was clear enough to remember her situation. To be honest, she had briefly forgotten she was pregnant, what with the shocking news. Pregnancy and shock didn't mix, and a spot of stabilizing drink couldn't hurt. When she seemed able to handle the full story, he continued.

"I'm sure you are aware that Lucius and I were friends. Before the last battle he shared with me his plan in the event that the Dark Lord's demise was imminent. He was going to find a Muggle-born and force that witch or wizard to kill him. He felt that if he was dead, the Ministry would leave his wife and son alone since they only had evidence on him. If he lived, they would be able to procure incriminating evidence that implicated both Narcissa and Draco as supporters of the Dark Lord. His desire was that his wife and son would remain in the same station they were accustomed to.

"I noticed when he found you on the battlefield. I saw the struggle you put forth when he had the Imperio Curse on you. I had come upon your friend, Mr. Weasley, at the time, and my attention was divided. Hence, the damaged muscle and nerves in my leg. That boy knows how to use Sectumsempra well; I'll give him that. After you had killed Lucius...or thought you had...I Disapparated with his body. I was going to return him to Narcissa, and then I realized he wasn't dead.

"At first, I didn't understand what had happened. I tended him for nearly a month until the Ministry lost interest in questioning the family of his whereabouts. They searched the manor for him, thinking Narcissa was hiding him. All that time, she feared he was dead. When I showed up with him at her door, at first she was overjoyed. But he was comatose. I wasn't really returning her husband. I was returning a shell of what he once was.

"I've thought on this often, and all I can figure is that your resistance to the Imperio Curse and not really *wanting* to use the Killing Curse put Lucius into a coma instead of killing him outright. I've visited Narcissa and Draco a few times since, and she has fallen into a deep depression. I doubt she'll ever recover.

"Needless to say, the Ministry froze the Malfoy's liquid assets, thinking that it would force them to betray Lucius's location. About all they have is the manor and whatever is in it. They had a stash of savings hidden somewhere, which I'm sure is used up by now.

"Are you still all right?" he asked. "There's more, but perhaps I should let you digest this much first.

Hermione nodded thankfully, reached for the tumbler of Firewhisky he still held in one hand, took only a couple modest swallows this time, and handed it back to him.

"I never knew..." she choked out through the Firewhisky-burn.

"No one does," he answered simply.

"It's not much solace, though. I mean, he's been in a coma ever since. It must be really hard for his wife and son to see him like this every day. He might as well be dead. In effect, I still killed him. But they couldn't know ... How would they know that mine was the wand who made him this way?"

He let her think out loud. It was a lot of information to give her all at once, and she needed to sit with it for a while. She was coming to conclusions all by herself without him having to help her along. He expected nothing else of a mind as great as hers had always been. Still, he wasn't prepared to tell her that Draco did indeed know it was her wand, that he had told Draco everything when he had brought Lucius home.

Going off on a bit of a tangent seemed to be in order. "You can call me Severus, by the way, since we are to be business partners. That is, if you're going to sign the papers."

"That's good," she answered, glad for the change in subject, "because the whole Mr. Snape-Mr. Prince thing was giving me a headache."

He laughed a little at that, the corners of his eyes crinkling where the skin had rarely before been creased. Obviously, there hadn't been much to laugh about, much less smile about, for a very long time.

"It gives me a headache, too," he answered truthfully. "My public persona has been that of Mr. Prince ever since the end of the war...well, ever since Dumbledore's death, to tell you the truth. Albus was the one who helped establish my alternate identity, as a matter of fact. He had the modest Prince fortune transferred to a new Gringotts account under my new name and thought it best that I keep my familial home since the Ministry knew nothing about it. The Ministry is still looking for Severus Snape, so I venture out heavily glamoured, and I am able to function as a member of wizarding society as Samuel Prince. I tend not to go out too often, so I'm rather unused to hearing the name."

"Well, Severus is much easier. Thank you," she answered.

The build-up of further questions was apparent in Hermione's eyes. As much as he had scorned her seemingly endless need for knowledge, it was one thing that he had always admired in her. It was refreshing to see that she hadn't lost the curiosity of her youth, no matter what difficulties she had had to endure.

"You're most welcome, Hermione. You don't mind that I call you by your first name as well, do you?" She shook her head no. "Good. Because calling you Miss Granger makes me feel like I should be your professor rather than your business partner."

"I'll sign the papers, by the way," she blurted out, eyes widening at the sudden admission. She knew she was going to sign the papers, but once said aloud, it sounded impetuous, not thought through, not exactly ... intelligent.

Severus' eyes widened a fraction. "So quickly? I'm surprised you trust me. You don't even know why..."

"Why you killed Professor Dumbledore?" she interrupted, unable to stop herself. "Of course I'd like to hear that story, but I long ago deduced that Professor Dumbledore had asked you to do it. In fact, his death had been instrumental in bringing about certain events much sooner than they would have happened otherwise. The war with Voldemort could have lasted for years...."

He nodded his head. "He did mention that. Know that Albus treated me like the son he never had. He was like a father to me. He took me in when I was at my lowest. Casting that Killing Curse was the hardest thing I ever had to do...and believe me, I've had to do some extremely difficult things in my role as Death Eater Spy.

"Albus had confided in me, about his search for Voldemort's Horcruxes. I was the one who had researched and found the location of the locket. Well ... the fake locket, as it turned out. The potion that one had to drink to retrieve the locket was real, however. I had told him it would be fatal...that it would result in a long, drawn-out, agonizing death. One for which there was no known cure. But, he had been resolved to do it. He wouldn't hear any arguments, as often as I tried to get him to listen to some sense. He said much the same you did, that his death would bring things to a culmination much sooner. There would be less loss of life, and that was more important in the end than the life of one lemon-sucking old codger like him."

Hermione sobbed out a laugh at that. It sounded exactly like something the headmaster would have said, and she suddenly felt the pang of his absence very dearly.

It was much as she had thought. Harry had told them of the search for the Horcrux that fateful night, and she had purposefully researched the locket, the location in which it was found, and the Inferi that guarded it. She had discovered that it used to be a common practice to protect something valuable by immersing it in a potion that would be fatal to the drinker. Of course, one in search of something that valuable usually intended to steal it, and a person like that generally wasn't above using the Imperio Curse to get another to drink the potion. Knowing the importance of the locket, Dumbledore had offered his life so that Harry wouldn't need to do so in the future.

After having found that bit of information, she had brought it to Harry ... mistakenly, as it turned out. He had not wanted to hear about poisoned potions. That would mean he had killed Dumbledore, not Snape. After all, Harry had been the one who forced the potion down the old wizard's throat.

Severus left her to her thoughts for a long while and passed the glass of Firewhisky to her after a few minutes, but she held up her hand. "No, thanks. I'm fine."

"I'm glad," he said and walked back into the kitchen to get rid of what was left of both of their drinks.

It was funny...odd funny, not laughingly funny...'glad' was not a word she would have thought to be in Severus Snape's vocabulary. No *Professor* Snape anyway. She had to start distinguishing between that man and the one who was now rinsing the glasses in the small, stark kitchen. How very different, yet how very much the same, this man was. She supposed she had never known the man behind the professor.

He nodded at her when he came back into the room, taking notice of her thoughtful disposition. She looked overwhelmed, and although he was certain she wanted to ask more questions, he wasn't sure if it would be a wise thing to give her more to think about right now. She needed to fully absorb what he had told her first.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concerned that perhaps it all was a bit too much for her to handle in her condition.

"This is all a lot to take in," she admitted. "There's so much I want to find out, but I suppose if we are to be business partners, there will be a lot of time to talk."

The smooth skin at the corners of his eyes cracked once again. "True."

"So, partners then?" she asked.

"Partners," he answered. "Though, please, I must insist: no one but us need know who Samuel Prince really is. I don't want to draw unnecessary questions, ones that might damage your reputation. I've managed to stay out of public notice for quite some time, and I would like to keep it that way."

"Understood. I'll keep your identity a secret. I expect you'll be available for me to contact, to meet with on a regular basis?"

"Of course. We'll find a more ... convenient place to meet next time. Perhaps in the flat above your shop?" he added.

"Our shop." She smiled. "And, yes, that would be fine. We'll have a lot of work to do, though, if we are to increase business at the shop. I have a couple ideas, but never had the funds to realize them."

"Don't worry on that score. It will all be handled. Being the last of the Prince line, I have enough to contribute to the business venture, as well as a few ideas myself." He smiled.

She stood. "I suppose I should be leaving then, let you get back to ... whatever it is you would be doing," she said, waving a hand ineffectively in the air.

Their good-byes were friendlier than their hellos. Not that their hellos were unfriendly in any way. But both parted feeling a little more confident, a little more untroubled than they had felt before. And Severus actually felt happy that he had agreed to the meeting.

Hermione decided to use the figurine Portkey to return home. She was too tired to Apparate. It had been an exhausting evening. So much information all at once. Well, she had complained about having too little information to begin with, hadn't she? The thought made her smile. She would sign the papers and send them back to Mr. Everhart tomorrow with a nice little 'thank you' note on top.

She was so exhausted, in fact, that she had to force herself to get into her pyjamas and wash her face instead of just lying down on the bed and passing out. She tumbled into bed, dizzy from fatigue, her mind flitting about like an out-of-control Snitch. She had very nearly fallen asleep when it suddenly dawned on her that she had forgotten to find out from Severus exactly who Mr. Burke was. He had started to tell her, had told her the story of Lucius still being alive....

"Blast!" she swore aloud when it was obvious she wasn't going to fall asleep for a very long time.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 17

A business meeting stirs memories and brings the business partners closer together.

Author's Note: Thank you, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern_Witch_69](#), the best betas in the world.

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Hermione stood, staring at her profile in the mirror, admiring the slight bulge of her abdomen, smoothing her hands over it lovingly. She closed her eyes and imagined what the small being inside of her looked like; once she reached three months gestation in a couple weeks, it would be a miniscule, completely formed child, according to the book Ginny had sent her. It was a fact she thought of often, and the thought made her smile.

Oddly, the fact that she could no longer wear her jeans also made her smile. Normally, something like that would have had her dieting and weighing herself obsessively until the button on her jeans closed and the waistband no longer cut into her skin uncomfortably. Last weekend, however, she had happily folded all of her jeans and placed them into storage. The only problem was she had no idea when she'd have the time to shop for larger clothes. She could visit Madam Malkin's or Gladrags for some robes, but she really wanted some regular Muggle clothing as well. She was wearing her exercise outfits and knit skirts now because they all had elastic waistbands. Her tummy curved outward enough that if she didn't put a robe on, she invited the question, "Are you pregnant?" from the grandmotherly types who thrived on other people's business.

She smoothed her jumper over the small bulge, trying to make it look larger than it actually was, and for a brief moment, Harry's face flitted about the edge of her thoughts. His baby. This was his baby. And he knew nothing about it. Couldn't know anything about it...he was married to someone else now. She gently pushed those thoughts away; she didn't want anything to spoil her mood. Things were finally looking up, and she wasn't going to let these twinges of guilt ruin that right now.

She hadn't felt this happy in a long time. The business partnership with Severus had relieved much of the stress she had been under for so long, and today everything was finally going to be settled. She had signed and owed the papers to the solicitor the morning after her meeting with Severus. It had taken two weeks for everything to be finalized, but the wait hadn't dampened her spirits one bit.

The meeting she had had with Severus was still very fresh in her mind. Their conversation had replayed in her mind countless times since then: the realization that it had been he who had prevented her from eating Mr. Burke's potion-laced muffins, the discovery that Lucius Malfoy was still alive but in a coma, the truth behind Albus Dumbledore's death....

Her reflections had made her acknowledge that Severus Snape...or Samuel Prince as he was now known in the wizarding world...was someone she could trust. After all, he had saved her baby and had offered answers to all of her questions without reservation. And then there was the fact that he was also saving her business, something she was immensely grateful for, though she couldn't figure out just yet what had impelled him to do so.

Then there was the added benefit of somehow feeling safer these past couple weeks. Severus Snape had shown up out of the blue and rescued her, and now it felt as though he were watching over her, ready to catch her if she should fall, to prevent any catastrophe that may come her way. She had this somewhat illogical feeling that if something else was to happen, he would show up and 'save the day.' That thought made her laugh out loud. It made him sound like her own personal superhero. Yet, oddly, in a way, he was. A superhero who had been there at exactly the right time to pluck her from danger... How he had happened to be there at that precise moment remained a mystery. Though why should she complain? She deserved to have someone else looking out for her, especially now, when she had been doing it all on her own for so long.

More likely, she felt safer because she had very quickly deduced the true identity of Mr. Burke. She had had plenty of time to figure it out as she had lain in her bed, unsuccessfully trying to sleep after their meeting, going over all that had been said. Even though the question went unanswered, lost in the melee of all they had spoken about, somewhere within their convoluted conversation the answer had become obvious. She had just needed time to review the evening and pick apart their conversation. With the question, *Who exactly am I in danger from?* he had coaxed her into telling him what had happened with Lucius Malfoy on the battlefield and had told her that Lucius Malfoy was still alive, though barely.

After the surreality of the evening began to wear off, it all had become painfully clear. Lucius Malfoy was in a coma because of her. It would only make sense that his family, upset by his condition, would want to exact revenge. She didn't really know Narcissa Malfoy. The woman was a passing acquaintance, Hermione having only had a minor

encounter with her, which hadn't been too surprising, and Hermione had developed a hard shell against the bigotry of her blood status by then... But Draco. She wouldn't put it past him to try to harm her. Less substantial things had provoked the boy into acting irrationally in the past. And never mind that harming her or her baby wouldn't bring Lucius Malfoy back to the land of the living. It had been done simply because he had been impotent to do anything else. Hermione wondered in a mind as twisted as Draco's was, if it was at all satisfying.

It had all fallen neatly into place, like a jigsaw puzzle, as soon as she figured it out. The books that Mr. Burke...Draco...had ordered from her shop were rare and hard to come by for a reason. They dealt with the aftermath and aftereffects of Dark Magic. Draco must be looking for a way to revive his father. He had also been looking for a reason to get close to her. How ironic that it was she who had been able to procure those books for him. It was sort of like killing two birds with one stone: he obtained the books needed that had the best chance of helping Lucius, while at the same time, he could get revenge on the person who placed his father in this condition.

With all the guilt she had felt, and still felt, over what she had been forced to do to Lucius Malfoy...irrational guilt, she knew, but guilt nonetheless...she was more than happy to help rectify the situation by supplying Draco with the books. Oddly enough, she found she could understand Draco's need for revenge. If someone had hurt her parents in the same way, even accidentally, she would be devastated. Though, she had to admit to herself, she would never seek revenge ... and if it had in fact been an accident, knowing what she knew now, she would feel pity for the person, rather than anger. And he hadn't succeeded, so no harm done. She just had to be more careful in the future...more aware of the people she came into contact with on the street, in the bookshop. Any one of them could be using Polyjuice Potion or glamours to disguise their actual appearance. And once Draco found out that she was still pregnant...

Shuddering, she stepped away from the mirror, not willing to visit that scenario. It was nearly time to open the shop, and she didn't want to open late. She had work to do in preparation for her second meeting with Severus. That wasn't going to happen until tonight, after the shop closed, but she wanted to be prepared. She had a couple ideas she wanted to propose to him to attract more business, and with his added funds and support, she should be able to realize them.

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Severus had a few ideas of his own to propose to Hermione, and he was busy preparing for the meeting as well. A stack of small mirrors, each a few inches across, were sitting patiently next to his cauldron as he mixed together the necessary ingredients: liquefied moonstone, black beetle eyes, powdered hellebore, and Jobberknoll feathers. The resulting potion had an opalesque appearance that seemed to shift in and out of visibility until you told yourself it was impossible and blinked your eyes, only to have it happen again. It looked very inviting, actually. The kind of look that made you need to touch out of curiosity, like an involuntary glide of a finger across the sheen of an intriguing fabric in a garment shop. But Severus did in fact think twice about putting his finger in this potion.

Making sure he was organized, he gently immersed each of the mirrors in the awaiting potion, dropping them in, one by one, for a few seconds and then retrieving them with a pair of tongs. He took care to place each mirror upon the wooden work board to the side of the cauldron in a predetermined area; for as each mirror emerged, wet with potion it had a jewel-like, shimmering quality, but as it dried, it gradually became invisible. After they dried, he'd find them only by touch. Once dry, it was safe to touch them. He wouldn't recommend coming into contact with one while wet.

One of the first things he planned to propose to Hermione at their meeting tonight was installing a surveillance system throughout the bookshop. This was mostly for her safety; Severus would be able to watch the goings-on in the shop through identical coupled...though not potion-immersed...mirrors that he would keep in his home.

The invisible mirrors would be located around the bookshop, and the customers would not realize they were being watched. He figured that, in a way, this was impinging on their privacy, but Hermione's safety took precedence. He wouldn't be watching the mirrors all the time, but he did still have the little spelled 'bug' in her shop and the wards that warned him if someone entered, and he could easily check through a simple *Audio* if the mirrors needed monitoring.

There was an added bonus to these mirrors as well. If he was unable to monitor them at a particular moment, they performed much like a Muggle surveillance system and would remember and replay anything they 'saw' within the last twenty-four hours. He loved these little mirrors; they were quite versatile.

Once they all had been submersed and had sufficiently dried into obscurity, Severus gathered them all into a little velvet pouch and prepared himself to Apparate into the alleyway across from the bookshop. He assumed she had anti-Apparition wards on the bookshop and the flat above. If she hadn't before the incident with Draco-as-Burke, he knew she would have installed those wards afterwards. It was, after all, logical, and Hermione had always been a logical person.

Pointing his wand at his face, he applied the glamours that he had been accustomed to wearing when going out amongst the wizarding public as Samuel Prince. In a few seconds, his skin had warmed to a golden tan and his hair had taken on a silvery-white hue. The structure of his face became more angular, cheekbones higher and a little more aristocratic. Overall, he looked older and more worldly, probably more handsome, he admitted freely. For some reason, when he wore this face, he felt a little more confident, a little more willing to share a bit of his real personality rather than the dour, dark, professorly countenance he had effected for so many years that it had become, in essence, 'him.' It was wonderful to be able to relax into the more likeable Samuel Prince and let a bit more of himself come through.

Checking the time, he saw it was nearly nine p.m. Hermione would be closing the shop soon, and he didn't want to be late. It wasn't his habit to be late for anything, but he was most looking forward to this meeting. He hadn't been frequenting the shadows of the alleyway ever since their meeting, and he found that he actually missed seeing her. But the sun had started setting later, and the likelihood that he would have been noticed by a passer-by was greater. In any case, he felt there was no immediate threat. As far as Draco was concerned, he thought he had rid Hermione of her child. Draco would find out soon enough that he hadn't been successful, and Severus hoped the gossip that filtered through the pure-blood circles would give him ample warning if and when Draco decided to act again. For now, the little bug he had placed above the mirror in the shop was sufficient and helped him feel better about not holding vigil outside the shop.

He locked the front door as he stepped outside and then took the usual wizarding precautions and added a few wards. One could never be too vigilant. He rolled his eyes; his outcast status had made Alastor Moody's motto a way of life, but the word 'vigilant' always made him think about the one-eyed Auror, a thought he could really do without.

Confident that he had what he needed and everything was locked up tight, he Apparated to the alleyway across from the Strega Letteraria. Dusk hung heavily over Hogsmeade in the lazy way it always did in the spring, and he breathed in the heavy, dewish air. It was a lovely evening, perfect for a stroll, and he regretted not getting out enough to enjoy evenings like these.

He could see Hermione through the large picture window of the shop. The lights gently glowed through the slowly deepening gathering of night, and he watched as she swiftly bustled about, tidying up, getting ready to close, unaware that she was under scrutiny.

He hesitated, content for the moment to admire how the still-dim lights of the shop softened her image and made her curls shine like burnished copper. Every time she would pass the mirror behind the front counter, she would pause to check her appearance. Sometimes it was just a glance; twice she stopped to remove a smudge from her cheek and apply a Cleansing Charm. He could see she was nervous, especially when she checked her watch one, two, three times, undoubtedly anxious for his arrival.

Thinking it best to end her anxiety, he made his way across the street and entered the shop. He smiled, a comfortable, casual smile of greeting, and Hermione looked at him in hesitant recognition. This was the face he had worn when he had first entered the shop a few weeks ago with the intention of placing the bug above the mirror...a doting father of a Hogwarts soon-to-be seventh-year.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise as she recognized him as that man. And then, "Oh!" in a different tone of voice as she realized it was Severus beneath the glamour. The smile that grew upon her face made his chest swell. It was welcoming, genuine, and not a hint of hesitancy resided in it. Her nervousness, however, was also apparent. She fidgeted with a book she had been about to reshelv and suddenly had no idea what to do with it.

"Good evening, Hermione." He smiled at her in return. "Please, don't let me stop you from closing the shop."

Spurred back into action by Severus' words, she nodded and resumed her duties. "Right, then." She moved off to put away the book she was holding and then turned around again, flustered, and said, "I'll be right with you," before bustling off to hurriedly finish her evening duties.

It was a flurry of unnecessary activity. She would go one way to do something and then remember she had forgotten something else and turn to do that only to remember what she had been about to do. A couple times, she hesitated in obvious uncertainty of what needed to be done next. Finally, the doors were locked and the evening wards were in place, and she turned to face him, suddenly bereft of any busy work to hide her nervousness. Her fingers took up the duty, and her nervousness had an outlet in the twisting digits. She looked a little relieved when she found the otherwise composed Mr. Prince was similarly fidgeting with a small velvet bag at his side.

"Mister...um, Severus...what do I call you when you look like this?" she asked awkwardly.

Mr. Prince smiled...a stunning, rather attractive smile, leaving Hermione to wonder what a smile like that would look when he was wearing his own face...if it would look as becoming. Some of his original features, especially his nose, shone through the glamours, but only because she knew who he was. It did make it easier to think of him as Severus even though he wore Samuel's face.

"It's probably best that you get used to calling me Samuel when I look like this. This is my public persona, the one everyone sees, and it should match with the name."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Samuel," she replied, trying the name out for size, trying to internalize this name and face so she wouldn't slip up and call him Severus in public. "That shouldn't be too hard to get used to ... I think." She smiled shyly.

"Good." There was that disarming smile again, which put her at ease. She knew glamours only obscured one's true appearance, not one's personality. Samuel...no, Severus ... obviously it was going to take a little getting used to...undoubtedly had a few personality traits he didn't feel comfortable sharing without the anonymity of a glamour.

"What's that?" Hermione pointed to the little velvet bag, which no longer was victim to fidgeting fingers.

"This," Samuel walked forward so he could show her what was inside, "is your new security system."

There was nothing in the bag, yet from the outside, its bulk showed that there must be something within. She looked at Samuel with a quizzical eye.

"Security system? I don't doubt that I need one, but I don't see anything in this bag," she said, reaching out to let the weight of the bag rest in the palm of her hand.

Samuel kept silent while the gears turned in Hermione's brain. When realization dawned on her face, Severus smirked beneath his Samuel guise in appreciation of the Hermione-ish expression.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. "Of course! An invisible security system ... How clever!"

Her eyes darted sheepishly toward Samuel, expecting a rather Professor Snape-like reaction to her exclamation.*Clever*. How *unclever* of her to say something so spontaneous around him. He laughed though, putting her uneasiness to rest.

"Clever, indeed. Well, that wasn't exactly what was going through my mind when I was brewing the Conspicio Adversus Potion, but 'clever' is rather more complimentary."

His laughter was contagious. Her softer, higher tones complemented his.

"I suppose not," she conceded. "I've never heard of the Conspicio Adversus Potion. Strange, since I think I've read every Potions book I could get my hands on. Well, aside from the vast library on Dark Potions. I've only read a few of those. This isn't..."

"No, it's not," he interrupted before her imagination could abscond with that thought. "You don't know about it because this potion happens to be one of my own creations. There are several volumes of those in my personal library. If you had heard of this potion, I'd have to revisit my own security wards and check my lab for wayward body parts, since my texts are further protected with some rather ... damaging hexes, if you don't know the proper passwords."

Her face ashen a few shades at the thought. Well, she had wondered where the old Potions master had got off to. Looked like she just found him. The dichotomy between the smooth, more affable Samuel Prince and the harsh, stringent Severus Snape made her heart step its pace up a few beats per minute.

A cough behind her hand attempted to quiet the sudden fluttering inside her chest. She understood the possibilities behind an invisible surveillance system, and it was exciting, to say the least.

"Don't tell me you have a system of closed-circuit televisions somewhere, where you can monitor what's going on in the shop?"

His eyes lit up at the decidedly Muggle choice of words. "Not televisions, of course, but a set of mirrors that have been coupled to the ones in this bag. I will be able to watch what is going on in this shop, and if I miss anything, I will be able to play back anything that happened in the last day."

"So, I suppose I shouldn't pick my nose or adjust my brassiere or anything like that, then," she said most seriously.

"Not unless you want me to know what color lingerie you are wearing that day, no, I suppose not." His smirk was tempered by Samuel's features.

She smirked in kind.

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After watching Samuel remove the mirrors from the bag, looking as though he held nothing but air between two fingers, Hermione relegated herself to merely pointing out the locations, which she had long ago discovered had the best vantage point of various areas of the shop. It didn't take long to finish the job, and only minor adjustments were needed to ensure there were no blind spots.

When he was finished, a slight awkwardness settled over the two. There was much to talk about, but neither really knew how to begin. Finally, Samuel made a move and insisted that the night was far too beautiful and that they should not waste it by remaining indoors. So, checking his visage in the mirror behind the register, which would have looked vain if Hermione had not known he was only double-checking his glamours, he led her out the door and re-locked the doors for her, motioning her to put up the wards, which only she knew.

It was a lovely night, just as Samuel had said. Spring had been kind to them this year, and early May had been particularly so with balmy evenings, fragrant with spring blossoms. She was glad for the exercise and the fresh air, something, he told her, that she should indulge in more frequently in order to keep up her health. The night air seemed to relax them, and they walked side by side at a leisurely pace.

The more comfortable atmosphere seemed to open the doors to conversation, and ideas flowed from Hermione like a babbling brook. It had been so long since she dared to dream of what her shop could yield. In the beginning, she had been wary of spending any money, frightened a little, if truth be told, because she wasn't sure how expenses would balance with whatever profit she made. She admitted right off that she had been conservative in her business venture from the outset, and by the time she had realized that that had probably been a mistake, she had very little money to work with.

Severus listened, visibly enjoying the springtime air and finding that he enjoyed Hermione's exuberance as well. It was refreshing and reminded him, only briefly, of the little girl who sat in his class with her hand permanently in the air, an answer forever on her tongue. He didn't miss much about Hogwarts, but one thing he did miss was the rare student's enthusiasm...even the occasional eager hand constantly waving itself in front of his face...and the last student who had impressed him with such a bright attitude had been Hermione.

Hermione. By the time her sixth year was winding down to a close, she had blossomed into a woman, nearly of legal age. Though not many boys her age had taken notice...save for Ronald Weasley, who couldn't quite get it together to realize he *had* noticed...Severus had noticed her. He remembered thinking at the time that she would

be an amazing woman when she finally graduated and found her niche in the world.

He had forgone relationships for so long because he had never met someone who lived up to the standards he had set for a life partner. It was strange to find a student who indeed filled those standards, and he had watched her that whole year, wishing that circumstances were different, that Voldemort had truly died all those years back, that he didn't have to maintain his role as "spy," that he could watch her graduate, become a woman, and eventually court her.

But circumstances were what they were, and life didn't always travel down the desired path. Especially when Albus Dumbledore threw his wand into the mix. Bloody meddling old man. Severus still had fond feelings for the deceased wizard, regardless of Albus's never-ending manipulations.

His smile blanketed the conversation as they walked. He was content with being in Hermione's company, listening to her thoughts and ideas, and offering the occasional comment whenever she allowed a respite in her continuing dialogue. Her ceaseless banter seemed to affix his smile more firmly. He was here, spending time with her; she knew who he was, accepted him, and understood why he had done what he had done; she valued his opinions and was wonderful at holding an intelligent conversation. His life was permanently altered from what he had ever thought it could be, but she seemed to fit into it so well. What more could he want?

By the time they had exhausted all talk about the shop, for that night anyway, conversation flowed more freely than it had when the night began. They became so engrossed in talking about Severus' independent research and invented potions that they didn't even notice passing by the door to the bookshop for the third time. When they did finally realize how late it had gotten...thanks to good old Connor and his solitary, inebriated antics as he stumbled out of the Three Broomsticks, only to be followed by Madam Rosmerta's "Thank ye gods!" and the door loudly locking behind him...Hermione was listening to Severus expound on his childhood dream of patenting potions and authoring textbooks.

Hermione chose to walk next to Severus without looking at him. By doing so, she could listen to his voice, deep and warm and soft, and keep her mind on the fact that it was Severus, and not Samuel, with whom she was sharing this beautiful evening. Maybe it was because of this that when Severus started talking about boyhood dreams, she felt the strangeness of the situation. She never would have believed she would ever be having such a conversation with Severus Snape. Though for however much it was a strange situation, it was one she'd not trade for anything in the world at that moment.

It was with the realization of the late hour that they agreed to schedule weekly meetings so that Hermione could update him on the goings-on of the shop. Severus insisted that she get her much-needed sleep and Apparated them both to the door of the bookshop. He waited until she was safely inside and her wards had slid into place. Only when a light finally appeared above his head, signaling that she had entered the flat above, did he allow himself to Disapparate home.

Hermione heard the crack of his Disapparition and sighed. She had had such a lovely evening. It had been a long time since she'd had the opportunity to speak to someone like this, both professionally and personally. She wandered into her bedroom and lazily began getting ready for bed, too happy to focus on such a mundane activity, their conversation and Severus' voice still floated through her mind.

She had noticed halfway through their walk that Severus had let the glamour on his voice slip, and she was sure it was intentional, for voice glammers were the easiest to keep in place. It was enjoyable to listen to him talk about potions, and especially the intimacy of his childhood dreams, in his own voice. A smile formed upon her lips as she felt the impression of his voice settle over her body in a very pleasant way. It had her heart skipping beats and her cheeks darkening.

She found herself wishing it was next week already.

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A/N: The whole idea of the mirrors must be credited to Lotm (aka [ladyofthemasque](#)), who created linked mirrors (though I'm not sure any were invisible) in the Sons of Destiny series (octet) of books, of which [The Sword](#), [The Wolf](#), and [The Master](#) have now been published. I've been lucky to be one of her betas throughout. She has created her own magical world in these books, and it is a romance (and quite the romance, if you know Lotm!) to boot. The titles of the books are linked if you want to know more.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 17

Draco enlists the aid of a family friend.

Author's Note: Thank you, [ladyofthemasque](#) and [Southern Witch 69](#) for their help in reading over the story for inconsistencies, suggesting changes, and fixing my occasional punctuational faux pas.

Disclaimer: My thanks to JK Rowling for having such a splendid imagination and for allowing us to play around with her characters in the fanfiction universe. She gets all the credit for anything you recognize; the plot for this story is entirely mine (though I don't get paid).

Chapter Thirteen

That should do it, Draco thought as he tossed in the last shreds of finely minced belladonna and stood back. Just in time, too, for the potion exploded in a shower of sickeningly green sparks, as it had every other time he had brewed it. He regretted the lack of windows in his subterranean laboratory because throwing the entire conglomeration, cauldron and all, out a window was very appealing right about now. Peering into the cauldron revealed that the explosion had once again wiped away all evidence of any potion having been brewed, right down to giving the pewter a just-scrubbed shine.

"Great. Just bloody great!" he shouted at the stark, stone walls and sent the wooden spoon flying. His eyes flared in the anger of the moment, and not having been satisfied by the flying utensil clattering against the far wall, he picked up the cutting board, threw it after the spoon, and proceeded to sweep the various ingredient jars off the table. Glass jars bounced and bumped against each other, but none of them broke, which only served to increase his anger even more. It was evidence his mother had been casting spells in his laboratory, and he just barely tolerated her using his laboratory for mixing potions much less messing around with the way he liked things kept...such as glass jars that would shatter gratifyingly upon impact.

Narcissa had nearly reached the door to the laboratory when the explosion rattled the door on its hinges. She awaited the inevitable outburst, first vocal, then physical, her mouth a tight, thin line of disapproval. Much like his father, Draco had a tendency to let his frustrations run away with his temper. The tell-tale sound of spell-imperviated glass hitting the floor and Draco's irritated growl signaled that his temper tantrum was nearly at an end. She opened the door a crack but didn't dare to peek any further around the edge than she could easily see. Draco had been known in the past to hurl objects at her when in this state. She knew better than to put herself in harm's way.

"Is it safe to come in?" she inquired, trying to keep the patronizing tone she'd rather have used out of her voice.

"Apparently it is since the potion is a bloody failure once again," Draco growled at his mother as the door opened with more than its customary creak. He stood glaring daggers at his mother as she entered the room. "And don't say a word," he added peremptorily.

She stopped, carefully schooling her features into an expression of one who's just been insulted. "I was just going to say that perhaps a little help from an old friend wouldn't be remiss. I know you were always good with potions, but a potion of this magnitude requires a master."

"We don't need to involve Snape. I can do this myself," he stated with finality.

"I'm sure you can," she replied condescendingly...oh, how he hated when she spoke to him like that, "but Severus knows about Lucius and our situation. He might even be familiar with the potion you are trying to brew. And in any case, he was always loyal to Lucius. I doubt anyone else would do what it takes to bring Lucius back."

He was still angry, but he knew his mother was right. If he wanted help with the potion, if he wanted to do all he could to bring his father back, Severus was the best person to ask. He was the only person to ask.

"Fine, have your way. I'll contact him." She was right, but that didn't mean he had to like it. "Now, what are you doing in my laboratory?"

"No need to get tetchy with me, young man. I was just coming down to let you know that Crispy has made lunch." Her faux-friendly tone of voice was reminiscent of times before the war, before Lucius' affliction, yet Draco could not say he missed it very much.

He eyed her suspiciously. "He's still not living up to his name, is he? Because if he is, I swear, Mother, I am returning him to the elf barracks as soon as I get this mess cleaned up."

"Now, don't be so hard on the poor elf." He knew her display of concern was equal to the absolute lack of concern she actually felt. "Lunch looks much better today than it did yesterday. You can't fault him much; when you purchase an elf from the barracks, you know they aren't going to be trained properly. This way, we'll be able to train him the way Malfoys expect their elves to be trained."

When Draco had brought Crispy home, Narcissa had looked down her nose at the creature. He had worn a sack marked with the signature of the barracks, and the first thing she had done was to command that he burn the hideous piece of cloth. She would have no one suspect that a Malfoy had obtained an inferior elf, and she had vowed to teach the creature to live up to her standards if she had to beat him into doing it.

Narcissa's hands busied themselves, righting ingredient jars with her wand and lifting a lid here, a lid there to peer curiously inside, all the while looking almost-convincingly like she had meant the words that had just fallen from her lips.

"Since when are *you* so understanding, Mother?" Draco asked, slapping her hand lightly before she could open a jar full of wasp wings. He was not about to go chasing the bloody blighters all over the laboratory again.

"Who, me? Aren't I always understanding?" she answered innocently.

His mother never said anything innocently. Draco's eyes narrowed to slits as he stared at her, and his mouth readied itself for the apology he knew must follow if he wanted his mother to stop putting so much effort into feigning happiness.

"All right," he said through clenched teeth. "I apologize for going to the barracks to purchase an elf, but the society sells them for four times as much, and I figured having an elf around...regardless of its training...was better than no elf." Draco sneered at his mother's ingratitude. She was damn lucky to even have an elf.

"You think?" was her acidic reply. "What about going to the Flints and offering to purchase back Fritz ... Or I seem to remember that the Parkinsons have a house-elf for sale. I seem to remember they did a couple months back anyway. But no, my son has to stoop to purchasing an elf from the filthy barracks where the elves aren't even fit to serve Mudbloods."

Before she could start listing all the places he *should* have gone to obtain a house-elf, Draco cut her off. "You know very well that we cannot go around advertising the fact that we've come across a few extra Galleons," he said. "You know how fast gossip travels amongst your *friends*. The last thing we need is for the Ministry to come poking their noses into our business, what with half the manor smelling like burnt belladonna and father lying upstairs and..."

"Oh, fine. You've made your point," Narcissa spat. "Now come upstairs and eat your burnt muffins and scalded tea. Don't ask me how one scalds tea, but Crispy has managed to figure it out."

Her haughty brow bespoke disdain, and gathering her robe around her body, she tromped up the steps as loudly as she could, considering her feet were rather small and the steps were made of stone.

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Severus had dismissed the owl an hour ago with a response to the hastily scrawled letter, which he still held in his hands. Draco wanted a meeting, and it had to be today. Most annoyingly, the letter didn't request his presence...it demanded it. Severus scowled heavily into his slowly cooling morning cup of tea. He detested being ordered around; he hated last-minute meetings; and while he felt sorry for Narcissa and Draco's circumstances...not to mention Lucius'...he rather preferred not to go to Malfoy Manor.

He let the letter fall onto the table and rubbed his forehead, trying to erase the tension headache that had made an early appearance this morning. He was pretty sure why Draco wanted to see him. In fact, Severus had been expecting Draco to contact him for a while, ever since he found out what books Draco had gotten hold of. Counter measures to Dark spells were complicated, and it was entirely possible that a counter-spell to what plagued Lucius existed somewhere, perhaps even in one of those books. He wondered if Draco had found something. Since Draco had virtually no experience with the application of Dark magic, aside from an Imperio and an occasional Crucio, application of any counter measures would require someone with more experience. That's where he came into the picture.

Severus scoffed. Lucius was practically dead. For all he knew, Lucius' body was merely a shell; whether or not it still housed his soul was another question. Severus had heard of only one other time that the Killing Curse had failed, so he had nothing to base any opinions on. Anything was possible.

With his tea finally finished, Severus set about clearing his schedule for the day.

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The candlelight danced oppressively on the walls of Lucius Malfoy's sick room. Severus hadn't seen Lucius since the day he had brought the unconscious man home to Narcissa. By design, his visits never brought him this far into the manor. Truth be told, he had always avoided sick rooms, hospitals or otherwise, regardless of who was in them. When his own mother had lain dying upon her bed so many years ago, he had refused to go see her, to the great chagrin of his father. Even the minister who had come to pay his respects and administer last rites had looked upon young Severus with a reproving eye. She had died without laying her eyes upon her son one final time.

Every muscle was straining to remain at Lucius's bedside while simultaneously wanting to flee. Draco stood on the opposite side of his father's bed, the corpse-like figure of father and friend lying in stasis between them, expecting his father's friend to have answers, to impart some shred of hope. A very strategic positioning it was. Critical, in Draco's mind, to help his father's friend make up his mind.

Severus knew Draco was waiting for an answer. He had shown Severus the books, the marked pages where mention had been made about Killing Curses that had gone

awry, some with consequences much worse than what had happened to Lucius. Though what was worse than a persistent vegetable state, he did not know. In some cases, the victims of the failed curse had been healed, though the process was grueling and never certain.

In particular, there was a series of potions that needed to be administered, and they had to be brewed in a precise manner, for they were quite potent and lethal if not brewed correctly. Severus wanted to help...he truly did; he missed his old friend and hated knowing he lay half-dead, half-alive in some sort of purgatory...but something in him wanted to leave all this behind and tell Draco that he possessed the skill to brew the potions on his own. Even though Severus knew he did not. But how would he feel if Draco inadvertently killed his father through an inadequately brewed potion? Could he ever forgive himself?

Lucius slumbered on, unaware of his friend's inner turmoil, of his weakness. He would rather leave a Potions master's brewing up to a boy...capable of an Outstanding N.E.W.T. in Potions, true, but a boy nonetheless...in order to avoid having anything to do with a situation that made him feel profoundly uncomfortable.

Severus wondered if he could have helped prevent this situation in the first place. Would his friend have listened to him all those years ago if he had tried to dissuade him from his suicide mission? Lucius had never listened to anyone. When he had made up his mind about something, it was going to happen his way or no way at all. Severus hadn't even tried to convince Lucius to do anything differently. Perhaps this was as much his fault as it was Lucius'. He supposed he owed it to his friend to try to rectify the situation.

"So, you will help us then?" Draco spoke, tiring of this infernal waiting game.

The boy's eyes pierced the lowly lit room...Lucius' eyes, haunting eyes...the candlelight oddly reflected in his dilated pupils. It was a disconcerting effect and served to remind Severus of the dark lengths they would need to traverse to reverse the effects of the spell.

For as much as he didn't want to look at Lucius, much less be at his bedside, Severus had difficulty not staring at his friend. He was amazed that he looked to be merely asleep, when for all these years he had thought his friend as good as dead. In the end, there was no real decision to be made.

"I will help you, yes," Severus said, his warring conscience forcing the words from his lips, knowing that his agreement would mean he would no longer be forced to hold vigil over his friend's body. "The potions should be ready by the end of the week. If I can get a hold of all the ingredients, that is."

"I'm glad. I'll have Mother start making the preparations then."

Draco shifted as though ready to leave but, to Severus' dismay, held back a little longer to stare at his father's prone form on the bed. "I, for one, look forward to seeing my father able to oversee his house again."

"Draco, you are aware that this may not..."

"Don't you dare say it," Draco spat, his blazing eyes helped by the flicker of candlelight. "How dare you even think it! As far as I'm concerned, you are as responsible for this situation as he is. You could have stopped him. You knew what he was planning."

The words hit home, stinging, for they mirrored his thoughts with stunning accuracy. Still, a reply was ready in his defense, supplied conveniently by his conflicting inner dialogue.

"And since when has my opinion ever mattered to your father? I was his sounding board, nothing more. If it had worked, you and Narcissa would have been no better off than you are now. You could have moved on with your lives, if nothing else."

"You owe him. You owe Mother. You owe *me*."

"Maybe that's true. I said I would help you, didn't I?"

Draco grunted noncommittally as though he expected nothing less than Severus' help but didn't trust that he would follow through at the same time. Severus stared at the boy hard, but Draco's eyes were glacially riveted upon the form of his father lying on the bed. It was obvious that Draco was angry at his father for putting the family in this situation. He made a mental note not to be present for the reunion if they were indeed successful. Tempers may need to be mollified.

Severus buttoned up his cloak and patted his pocket to make sure he had put the lists of ingredients and the copies of the potions to be made inside. Satisfied that he had, he turned to go, relieved not to have to stare at Lucius any longer. He did, however, have a few words of "fatherly" advice for the young boy, whom he hadn't had to tutor in so long.

"If this does work...and I hope it does...don't let anger mar the occasion."

"Anger?" Draco's bitter voice spoke behind his back. "I only have anger for one person: the Mudblood who did this to him ... and I've taken care of her."

"Have you," Severus stated calmly. "And how did you do that, pray tell?"

"The Mudblood was pregnant. I caused her to lose the child," Draco said triumphantly, proud of himself for having exuded so much power over someone so inferior.

Severus hesitated for a moment near the door. If he didn't care for Hermione, he might let it slip that Draco had failed, that Hermione was still in fact pregnant. He didn't want Hermione to come to further harm, but the desire to knock Draco's smugness down a few notches was equally as great.

"Don't allow your anger to be misplaced, Draco. She was merely your father's tool," was all he allowed himself to say.

Intake of breath indicated he wanted to say more, and he hesitated for a brief moment, but he knew common sense was unavailable to the boy as long as his father suffered the effects of this curse gone wrong. There would be no convincing Draco otherwise. As far as Draco was concerned, all the players shared an equal amount of blame.

Severus never had a choice but to help Lucius. This was the price he had to pay for the part he played.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 17

Hermione realizes how she feels about Severus and receives much advice about her situation.

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Chapter Fourteen

Hermione hadn't felt this happy in ages. It wasn't lost on her that only a few weeks ago she had been at probably the lowest she had ever been. What a difference only a few weeks had made.

It was still early, barely six o'clock, but she was eager to get to work on one of the new ideas she and Severus had decided to pursue...opening a website version of the bookshop. She had applied to the Wizard-Wide Web last week for the address, appropriately named after the physical bookshop, and was granted access a couple days ago. Now all that remained was much of the design and populating the virtual shelves with the inventory. Luckily, the Wizard-Wide Web had offered the software as part of the package, so much of it was already done for her. However, being the perfectionist that she was, she had already found a few things she wanted to change.

The first day of July presented itself muggily, promising a repeat performance of the last couple days' tepidly humid weather. There were times she longed for drier climes, especially in the late spring and early summer when the humidity and incessant midges worked together to make life unbearable. Being pregnant seemed to increase her body temperature, making her feel as though it was warmer than it really was. It didn't help that in order to keep the midges out of the shop she had to keep the doors closed. It was downright stuffy inside, and she was constantly casting Cooling Charms about her so she wouldn't perspire under her breasts and belly. She thanked the gods that she was only four-and-a-half months pregnant; if she were any further along, she might just go mad.

The day had awoken, but most everyone was still asleep, lending a deserted quality to the streets. Hermione loved this time of day. It was so quiet, save for a few birds twittering about, that she felt as though she were the only person left on earth. Not that she actually wanted to be the only person left on earth. There were family and friends she couldn't part with and, of course, the baby, who was the reason for her pleasantly rounded tummy. And then there was her new business partner.

Business meetings had increased in frequency over the last few weeks to where they were meeting nearly every night now. Severus would invariably show up right before closing time, and they would talk about the more mundane parts of their day while tidying up shelves and setting the wards. She would have called it small talk, but everything he shared with her, no matter how inconsequential, revealed more of his likes, dislikes, opinions, and overall personality that it was too important to her to call small. Conversation with him was enjoyable. No, it was more than enjoyable; it was stimulating, exciting, thought provoking...

Her mind wandered to the night before, after the shop closed and business-talk had sort of segued into not-so-business matters. Slowly but surely, she was getting to know the true Severus Snape. Not the one who'd taught her while she was a student. He was still there, of course, and there were traits she had really admired that were still present: his dedication, his work ethic, even his stern impatience with thoughtless behaviors, flouting authority, or sheer lack of common sense. There were things she hadn't liked as well, but it was the combination of both good and bad that made up a person, and she knew that his less than admirable side strengthened those parts of him she admired, giving his personality a darker, richer hue, something deeper, more three-dimensional.

She hadn't found it surprising that he still dabbled in potions on the side and had, in fact, been preparing and selling them as a way to support himself and keep busy. Aside from the occasional foray into Diagon Alley as Samuel Prince, his home had been his sole refuge. He hadn't even felt it necessary to travel outside of the country, unless absolutely needed, saying that while he was used to being alone, traveling alone didn't suit him. He did make it a point to venture out once or twice a week so he wouldn't lose touch with the wizarding world, and his sanity, even though he couldn't do so as himself.

They had spoken for a length of time on what she had been reading, and she had discovered that he was quite well-read. His favorite books spanned different genres, but his most treasured were Muggle classics, which surprised her initially and pleased her greatly because he was in tune with his Muggle side. A few friendly debates had ensued about the differences between authors and the best-portrayed character. It was a subject near and dear to her heart, and he had held his own admirably in her eyes.

The realization had sort of snuck up on her that she was beginning to fancy this new Severus Snape. They had much in common, not including their joint business venture, and little things he said here and there made it obvious that he had her best interest in heart. He was always looking out for her, and she felt so taken care of, which was refreshing after being on her own for so long. She felt drawn to him; she couldn't stop thinking about him. In fact, falling asleep had been near impossible the night before because she couldn't stop thinking about him, and her incessant thinking had woken her way before dawn after a night of dreaming about him.

It wasn't the talk about business, potions, or books that had had her mind working double time, they always spoke about such things, but the lengthy discussion they had had about the baby. Thoughts of the baby, now four-and-a-half months along...halfway to her due date...consumed her every waking hour. She was happy...more than she had a right to be, she thought to herself, considering she had started out by getting pregnant before establishing a stable, two-parent home...but she was also very conflicted.

Whenever she spoke with Ginny, her worries, doubts, and self-incriminations over her child having a fatherless home would surface, and Ginny would listen and sympathize like a good friend should, but Hermione felt that sometimes the subject was exhausted with her friend because Ginny would either tell her everything was going to be all right or simply be supportive and agreeable to whatever Hermione said. Hermione needed someone who would challenge what she was doing, give her opposing views, help find ways maybe not to fix...because at this moment, fixing was a moot point...but make the situation better ... not always tell her that everything would be all right. The truth was, it was not all right. Having a husband beside her, supporting her, looking forward to the baby being born and the beginning of their new life: *that* would be all right.

Perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised, but Severus had filled the position of devil's advocate nicely. Not once had he told her that everything would be all right. In fact, he had told her that being a single mother would be one of the most difficult things she would have to endure and told her a story about someone he had known who had also decided to raise a child on her own. Yet, he did stress that being a parent...according to the people he knew who were parents...would end up being one of the most rewarding occupations of her life.

Deep down, she knew this to be true, but she still couldn't shake the feeling of having wronged her child right from the start, failing to give her child its rightful beginning. And she had chastised herself for letting herself down; her principles were generally much more conservative, and yet now she found herself paying closer attention to them a few months after the fact. Severus had smiled grimly when she'd said that and hadn't offered any platitudes or attempted to lessen the importance of what she was saying; instead, he had quietly nodded his head and contemplated for a moment.

When he had finally spoken, he held her rapt attention. "While that's true, you must know that even people of the highest moral fiber make mistakes; we're all human. Regardless that you've found yourself in such a situation, I admire that you normally hold yourself to a higher standard."

She had blushed at the compliment and actually felt a little better, for she had been beating herself up obsessively for a very long time. The subject of the baby's father, however, still had her on pins and needles. It seemed as though she'd been holding her breath the whole time they'd been talking, waiting for him to ask who it was, but he had carefully stepped around the topic, never directly addressing the question. He had, however, told her in no uncertain terms that he felt the father should know about the baby. If *he* were to get someone pregnant...and he'd assured her he never had...no matter how unexpected the situation, he would want to know that he had fathered a child.

"Oh, I don't know, Severus. He was pretty adamant about never wanting to have children. Plus..." she had said, looking down at her feet, "well, it was only one night, we aren't really involved, and ... well, he has a life now that would be completely destroyed if I were to tell him. I just don't have the heart to do that."

When he had hesitated, her attention had piqued. Did he suspect who the father was, she wondered? The possibility had had her stomach churning uncomfortably. If he found out Harry was the father, what would that do to their relationship? Not that they had one exactly, but she rather felt like they were developing one.

Eventually, he had said, "You know, Hermione, a child changes everything, not only for the mother but for the father as well. It will change not only the physical aspects of

your life, but your opinions and views about the world will change too. It doesn't matter if the child is planned or unexpected, the result is the same. I'm sure that whoever it is would come around and learn to accept the fact that he is going to be a father. Even if he wants nothing to do with the child, at the very least he will know. And if he is truly a man, he will offer you some assistance."

She had looked Severus squarely in the eyes, his candidness a little unexpected. "I suppose you're right," she had conceded. "This is as much his responsibility as it is mine. It's just so ... hard."

At her faltering confession, Severus had laid his hand upon hers. "I know, Hermione. But doing the right thing is often the hardest thing to do."

...

Hermione had no idea how difficult it had been for Severus to say these things, or that he did indeed know who the father was, or that what he had really wanted to say was bugged the father, he would take care of her and the child. She had no idea how Severus felt about her, that he had been watching her out of a desire to take care of her, that he had gone into this joint venture with her because he couldn't stand to see something she wanted so badly to fail.

And Severus had no idea that Hermione was gradually growing feelings for him as well.

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Hermione stared up at the looming castle as she slowly approached, admiring every cone-tipped tower, every turret, every gargoyle, trying as she always had to see it with virgin eyes. It was a breathtaking sight. She felt dwarfed by the magnificent stone towers that seemed to touch the clouds, miles of stone interrupted by scattered panes of glittering colored glass that went on forever. Amazing how she lived only a few minutes' walk away and yet hadn't been by for a visit since she'd graduated.

She didn't know exactly why that was. She loved the castle from the moment she had first seen it, and she had several very fond memories of her school years. But there also were some very horrid memories as well, ones that she would rather put behind her, truth be told. Ones that would no doubt be dredged up by a moving staircase, a certain hallway, or maybe even the Whomping Willow. The memories still affected her and pulled her nightly dreams in directions she was forced to follow.

She shuddered and pushed the more unpleasant thoughts aside. A pleasant visit with Professor McGonagall and perhaps have a nice walk about the grounds before heading back into town were exactly what she needed today. The happier memories deserved to be remembered just as often as the uglier ones after all.

Lost in her daydreaming, Hermione hadn't noticed the doors to the castle part until Professor McGonagall's words greeted her ears.

"Hermione!" Professor McGonagall looked as prim as ever, but the smile on her face was genuine and unforced, and the woman, in a fit of energy that belied her age, bustled down the steps to greet her ex-student. "How good it is to see you!"

"You too, Professor." Hermione smiled and gave the woman a warm, lingering hug. How she had missed her old professor, her head of house.

Professor McGonagall pulled back from the hug and held Hermione at arm's length to get a good look at her. The all-knowing sparkle in the woman's eyes was very reminiscent of the previous headmaster of the school, making Hermione wonder if that was something inherent of the position.

"Now, Hermione. You've been away for far too long," the headmistress scolded mildly. "I have a pot of tea waiting for us, and we can talk about why you're here. But most of all, I want to know about this."

She patted Hermione's protruding belly in a motherly fashion, making Hermione blush. At four-and-a-half months, none of her clothes fit anymore. She had resorted to wearing skirts with elastic waists and dresses that fit looser around the middle. Her wardrobe was rather sparse at the moment, and by looking at the stretch of material around her waist, it was obvious she was in dire need of a shopping trip.

"This? Um, well ... I'm pregnant?" Hermione felt as though she were admitting being out after curfew and at the same time felt very silly for it. She was a grown woman now, but being back at the castle made her feel very much like a student again.

Professor McGonagall chuckled at the shy confession and pulled Hermione into another hug. "I thought so! Oh, wonderful! I'm so happy for you! And who's the lucky father?"

The dreaded question. Hermione didn't allow herself to feel any guilt for the lie she was about to tell, and didn't have time to either, as Professor McGonagall wrapped an arm about her shoulders and began to lead her up the steps and through the main doors. She found herself falling comfortably into the lie she had repeated to more than one person in the last couple weeks.

"Oh, he's a Muggle, but he won't be playing an active role in the child's life, I'm afraid. I'm okay with that though. I have friends. Ginny's offered to help on more than one occasion."

The professor laughed and led Hermione toward the staircase that would take them to the seventh floor and the proffered tea. "I'm sure she has. There would be no one else I'd trust my child to than one of the Weasley women."

They fell into an easy banter, and before Hermione knew it, she was standing before the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the headmistress's office. The stony creature transported her back in time to school days long forgotten when the gargoyle had protected the office of Professor Dumbledore. Standing in front of it had meant something entirely different then. Her hesitation was noticed by the older woman, and a reassuring hand rested upon Hermione's arm in understanding before an uttered password granted them entrance.

The journey up the stone-grating spiral was silent, as though Professor McGonagall was as lost in her thoughts and memories as Hermione was. It was a strange hushed feeling of visiting someone's grave. With just the barest of nods and a smile, she invited Hermione into her office where a table had already been laid out with a wonderful tea service. The sight banished funereal feelings and memories from her mind, and she soaked in the unfamiliar surroundings.

Hermione was surprised at all the feminine touches. Not that she had previously seen this office too often, but the impression this place made when Dumbledore resided as headmaster was definitely more masculine, a little imposing, and awfully cluttered. The office was well-ordered, everything in its place, and there were pictures in frames on various shelves with a valued trinket occasionally placed among them. It was a home away from home to the current headmistress. The table at which she was invited to sit was clad in a muted red and black tartan cloth, and she noticed that the windows were swathed in draperies that matched. It was truly an office belonging to Professor McGonagall, and she voiced her appreciation.

"Yes, well, Albus was always so ... Well, let's just say he collected a lot of extraneous things. I've packed them all up and sent them into storage. I've told him if he wants to play with his toys, he'll have to unbox them himself." She chuckled when Hermione gave her a momentary perplexed look. "Of course you haven't forgotten Albus is still spiriting around here somewhere. Perhaps you'll see a bit of him later. He knows you were visiting today."

"Oh, I'd love that!" Hermione exclaimed. "I hadn't forgotten exactly. I guess I'm just not quite used to the idea. I've never seen a ghost of someone I knew when they were alive. And ... well, I never thought of Professor Dumbledore as being the type who would choose to be a ghost."

"You're not alone there, my dear. Many people haven't. He makes himself scarce though. Too many people try to use it to their advantage. The Ministry being the greatest culprit." Professor McGonagall pursed her lips. "They always find an excuse to corner Albus' ghost for one reason or another. For some reason, they're under the impression that he'll be more forthcoming dead than alive."

Hermione chuckled, wiped her fingers on her napkin, and picked up one of the delicate finger sandwiches that she had had her eye on before she had even sat down. They were as delicious as they looked. Small talk, tea, and sandwiches took the ladies' attention for a length of time, and then it was down to business. Hermione wanted to get a

leg in this year with the incoming and returning students. She hoped Professor McGonagall would make a small mention on this year's supplies list that Strega Letteraria in Hogsmeade also carried the required textbooks. The 10% off coupons she had printed impressed Professor McGonagall greatly, and she agreed to include those with the letters as well.

It was very difficult to draw herself away from her old professor's company, but she insisted that a trip to Diagon Alley for new clothing was necessary. Professor McGonagall doted on her like a mother hen, offering any help she could spare to her and the baby, and Hermione suddenly felt wistful for her own mother, whom she still hadn't told about the pregnancy. Tears sprung into her eyes, which resulted in the old professor tut-tutting and giving her one last reassuring hug before sending her off and reminding her to look for Albus on her way to the gate.

Having closed the shop for the morning, not expecting many visitors at this time of day, she decided to make the rounds, visiting all the haunts she and Harry and Ron had frequented over the years, before heading on to Diagon Alley. The greenhouses where Professor Sprout taught her classes finally loomed in front of her, and the bobbing hat of the Herbology professor behind some overgrown foliage on the opposite side of the dingy windows made her smile. Long-awaited reunions weren't desirable today, especially in her condition, so she turned and walked in the other direction.

As she rounded the greenhouses, she found the rose garden was in full bloom, wonderfully fragrant, and inviting. Walking along the meandering paths, she found a stone bench to sit upon and rest her aching feet and back. It was a perfect place to let her mind wander, and wander it did ... right back to thinking about Severus.

The fact wasn't lost on her that she had very much been the damsel in distress and Severus, very much the knight in shining armor who swept in and saved the day. An in more than one way too: first by saving her business from sure demise, and second by saving her from Draco's vengeful attempt on her baby's life. Severus had stepped in when it had mattered the most and had come up with the support she needed to save her business; he had miraculously appeared at the right time to stop her from eating those deadly muffins, and now he was here to provide her honest and much-needed counsel.

Her mother had told her once, some years ago, that if a man went out of his way to look after a woman's well-being without being asked, he had feelings for her. Once more, Hermione tallied up everything Severus had done for her in the past few weeks, and she felt her cheeks flush pink. It was the only thing that made sense: he cared for her.

But how long he had felt this way...or how much...she wasn't sure. He seemed to have appeared out of the blue, knew her shop was in trouble, even her life for that matter, so that had to mean that he had been keeping tabs on her for quite some time. How else would he have known that Draco was about to poison her? Or that her business was in such dire straits? Sure, he could have read the *Daily Prophet's* advertisement section and seen that she had placed an ad, but he had responded to it awfully fast...as though he had anticipated it. A small part of her thrilled inside at the thought of Severus Snape fancying her. Another part of her wondered if perhaps she shouldn't be feeling a little alarmed that he knew so much about what was going on in her life. But she had known him for years. Perhaps it was a bit strange ... but wrong? No, her gut, which usually warned her of such things, didn't give her that sense at all ... in fact, exactly the opposite. It calmed, soothed, whenever she thought about this man, telling her everything was just right. The little fluttering thrills that joined in every so often told her that it was more than just right.

Almost painfully, she was startled right out of her pleasant reverie when, "Ah, Miss Granger. So nice to see you have finally come for a visit," was spoken right next to her ear.

She jumped, and the apparition next to her chuckled. Hand clutching her thudding heart so it wouldn't escape her chest, Hermione gasped and looked taken aback for a moment. She knew Albus Dumbledore was around, and had even looked forward to conversing with him, but she found that she was a just little unprepared to actually see him.

"Professor!" Hermione exclaimed, a little embarrassed at her reaction and hoping she hadn't offended him in any way. "I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you sit down...well, I don't suppose I would have, would I? How have you been?" She hadn't meant to draw attention to the fact that he was a ghost. Did proper etiquette demand one not bring up one's ghostly appearance to a ghost, she wondered?

"I've been fine ... just fine. You know, it's amazing all the parts of the castle I can explore now that I was never able to before." Professor Dumbledore winked at her, putting her mind at ease. "My, the roses are beautiful, aren't they? Pity I can no longer smell them. I used to enjoy the garden so much..."

Hermione looked squarely at the ghost for a moment, then looked away. She had so many questions she had no idea where to begin. Any small talk seemed superfluous, and she figured answers to any of her questions would come in riddles and elusive meanderings. She doubted death had changed that in the man.

Professor Dumbledore looked at her pointedly, shedding all pretense of small talk. "How is the bookshop faring? I heard that you have taken on a business partner."

Hermione pulled back slightly, wondering how he could have known. Then the realization hit her that he would have been told by Minerva. And if Minerva had thought to share the name of her business partner, undoubtedly Professor Dumbledore knew exactly who it was since he had helped Severus build his Samuel Prince persona.

"Fine, thanks," she answered, a little relieved at being able to talk to someone freely about her business partner without having to hide anything. "It's much better actually. My business partner has been a godsend."

"Hmm, indeed," the ghost replied in his usual, but more ethereal, knowing voice. He settled a little more solidly at her side, as if solidifying his unwavering resolve. "And how *is* Severus doing?"

The mention of Severus' name had her heart skipping beats and quickening its pace; whether out of anxiousness that his identity was being spoken of openly or the recent self-awareness of her feelings, she wasn't able to determine. Her cheeks flushed rose-colored, blending with their surroundings.

"Ah," Professor Dumbledore broke in before she had a chance to speak, "so he's doing just fine, is he?" A little smirk played about his lips, and his eyes brightened, though twinkling seemed to be impossible in his semi-transparent state.

"He's ... ah, yes, he's fine," she managed to say, clearing her throat and trying to reduce the redness in her face to no avail. "I see him regularly, almost nightly in fact." She had the distinct feeling that he could see through her as easily as she could see through him.

"Good, good. I'm glad to hear that." Professor Dumbledore looked at her squarely, smirking no longer. "And you? How do you feel about having Severus as your business partner?"

Darn if that blush hadn't become a permanent fixture. "I'm quite okay with it. I admit it was a shock at first. Though ~~he's~~ a different man than I knew him to be when he was teaching. More approachable. Less caustic. He's the same in some ways, different in others. He's certainly been there for me when I needed him the most, and for that I'll be eternally grateful. I mean, if it weren't for him, the bookshop ... Well, it's been a lifelong dream of mine, and..."

Albus nodded throughout, smiling. "I'm quite happy to hear he has made such a difference...and a positive one at that. But life isn't all about business ... business is something you do so having a life is possible." At Hermione's questioning look, he added, "I guess my question is how you feel about having Severus around, as something *other* than a business partner."

The audacity! was her first thought. Then she realized there was no one else she could talk to about this and relaxed. She knew what she felt; she just wasn't sure she was ready to tell anyone yet. Still, this was the headmaster, and she'd always had difficulty evading the truth around this man.

Her frustration dwindled to nothing as she replied, "I find it quite ... nice? Oh, that's not the word. I don't know. We have a lot in common, we talk a lot, he looks out for me, I feel so safe when I'm around him, and he cares for me; he must because he's always making sure I'm all right, that I have everything I need, and..."

Albus laughed. "And I take it this pleases you greatly."

Hermione nodded her head, her rambling dialogue reduced to speechlessness.

And then, "But what does he think of you being pregnant?" he asked gently.

"I, uh..." she looked shocked for a moment "...well, he wants me to tell the father about the baby. Said he'd want to know if he'd got someone pregnant...not that he has!" she quickly added.

With a chuckle, Albus replied, "To my knowledge, he never has, that's true. But have you told Severus who the baby's father is?"

A shocked "No, of course not!" escaped her lips before she could check it. Then more calmly, she replied, "No, I couldn't. I mean, if he knew..."

"You're afraid it would push him away," was the old man's answer, making Hermione stare hard at him, wondering if he knew Harry was the baby's father.

"You know, Miss Granger, being a ghost has taught me many things and afforded me different experiences. One being that ghosts have inherent knowledge of things in the universe. We are one with the aether, so to speak. So certain knowledge comes to us when bidden. People's feelings and thoughts are their own and do not pervade the aether, but their actions, physical happenings, those are facts that cannot be denied or changed and float in the aether for the gathering. So, yes, I know that Harry is the baby's father."

Hermione looked down at her feet, ashamed. Ashamed that her secret wasn't really a secret. Ashamed that Harry, the boy who had looked up to Dumbledore as a father and who Dumbledore looked upon as a son, was involved.

"Hermione," he called to her, lifting her head and her spirits, "Severus and Harry had their differences in the past, that is true. They may still have their differences even now, if they were able to have them properly. But Severus' heart is true. Never would he make another suffer for those differences. Know that, Hermione. Listen to Severus' advice, and trust him enough to confide in him. He's a good man. If you put your trust in him, he will devote himself to you unconditionally...."

Hermione stared at the spot, eyes unfocused, where Albus's ghost had simply faded away, thinking about what he had said. Some minutes later she seemed to awaken, a determination on her face that hadn't been there previously. As she stood, she realized that she hadn't had the chance to ask Professor Dumbledore all the questions that had been burning in her mind, but then again, what he had told her was infinitely more important than having questions answered about past events. This was her future. This was her child.

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It was a day for simple potion brewing. He had purposefully re-filled the orders for more complicated, time-intensive, concentration-consuming potions and decided to work on simple things like pain relievers and sleep inducers. He couldn't keep his attention on swatting the midge, whose sole mission it was to annoy the hell out of him today, much less skin a shrivelfig. Chop, toss, and stir: that was about all he was up for.

The fact that his concentration was thoroughly scattered caused some consternation. And it was all over a woman. One of his father's favorite expressions, when he had been alive, had been, "Son, if it's over a woman, it's not worth it." Fortunately, the man had died a rather prolonged and painful death, which he silently credited to karma.

This woman, however, Severus found extremely worthy. Worthy of his attention, of his time, of anything he had to do to keep her safe and well taken care of. Their evenings together meant more to him than brewing potions, and that said a lot. He found himself increasingly more reluctant to leave every night, wanting to prolong what little time they had together. Even a few hours a night just didn't seem to be enough anymore.

Their conversation last night had stuck with him all night and into the morning, coloring his dreams and his waking thoughts. They had spoken of the subject now too far along to be avoided any longer: her baby. Though he had always believed Hermione to be too responsible to get pregnant, to hear from her own lips that the situation had been unexpected, the results unintentional, and to hear her voice concerns and worries over the welfare of the child had sent him falling over the edge, down the slippery slope from which no smitten man could climb, into the turbulent waters called *love*.

Yes, he realized it. He had been treading that path for some time now, but last night ... last night it had become a certainty, one he could no longer deny. He loved Hermione Granger. Baby and all.

He had encouraged her to tell the father, the father whom he was supposed to know nothing about but did, and if indeed Harry Potter became a part of the child's life, he would accept that as well. Because it was part of *her*. She had yet to admit the father's identity to him, but when she finally got the courage to tell Harry, telling him would become inevitable. Severus found himself rehearsing his reaction as she revealed the father's identity, making sure that his response would be one he...and she...would be proud of. He was pretty sure that any feelings that would have him going off half-cocked were pretty much under control by now.

A regal tap-tap-tap at the window brought his attention back to an empty cauldron and a potion not even begun. Sighing, he set down the knife he found himself uselessly holding and walked over to the window to greet the most pompous looking owl he'd ever seen. The bird stepped onto the ledge, and its beak jerked haughtily upward as it held out its leg, waiting for Severus to take the message. It was almost laughable. That is, until Severus saw whom the note was from.

Draco. The pretentious little brat had got himself a new owl. That figured. He was sure he'd hear all about what excellent stock it had come from, and so on and so forth. He hoped Draco at least had the decency to keep his mother within her comfort zone rather than squandering his spoils...because that's what they undoubtedly were...on firewhisky and escorts and owls of exceptional breeding.

Opening the seal on the flap, he unfolded the parchment to find Draco was in one of his more stroppier moods.

Severus,

Since I haven't heard from you in a month, I can only assume you are still doing your part for my father. It has crossed my mind, however, that you might renege on your responsibility.

Strangely enough, certain information has fallen into my hands regarding a business venture you are currently involved in. No need to ask how I found out, but note that while Samuel Prince might fool most, I am simply not that ignorant. You can imagine how betrayed I felt when I discovered you were business partners with that Mudblood, the very one who attempted to end my father's life. You might also imagine how surprised I was, when I was in Hogsmeade the other day, to find that the little trollop was still pregnant. Something you conveniently forgot to inform me of at your last visit.

Putting all the facts together was quite simple, really, and it suddenly became obvious that you weren't quite truthful when you said you would help me. I waited beyond the week you said it would take to brew the potions before following the trail that led to your current occupation ... or should I say 'occupations'?

I will make this very clear to you, Severus. Your unwillingness to help me will directly affect one of your 'occupations'. I wonder what you shall do without her occupying most of your time. Brewing perhaps?

Draco

Severus blanched. Then he quickly shoved the note into his pocket as he ran up the stairs to check the mirrors that linked to the bookshop.

"*Audio!*" He tapped his little earpiece, worn throughout the day from force of habit. He was met with only silence.

He reached the set of matched, linked mirrors and gazed at each one in turn, and then at each one again in case he had missed something or she had simply been out of range when he'd looked at them before. Nothing. It looked as though no one was in the shop.

Hastily performing the charms that would transform him into Samuel Prince, and then a few extra to ward his home, he grabbed his cane, stepped out the front door, and Disappeared.

~ o ~

Since it was only eleven o'clock, Hermione figured she had plenty of time to Apparate to the Leaky Cauldron, visit Madam Zelda's Maternity Shoppe and get back to open the bookshop at one. The thought of buying clothes that actually *fit* made her almost giddy with excitement.

Tom greeted her as she appeared inside of the Apparition point, but halfway through his customary question of whether she'd like something to drink, he looked up, eyes widening, and smoothly changed his question to: "Alright, Miss Granger! Could I interest you in a ... milk?"

"No, thank you," Hermione said laughingly. "I'm just passing through today, Tom. Got some shopping to do, as you can see." She profiled her belly for him, her upbeat attitude making her bolder than usual.

"No idea you were in the club, young lady. Who's the lucky guy?"

Always the same bloody question, she thought, but cheerily replied, "Oh, no one you'd know, but we're very happy!"

"Well, that's just bangin'! Get yerself going, then; got lots to do by the look of it!" Tom answered and went back to putting away crockery.

Stepping out onto the pavement on the wizard side of the Leaky Cauldron, she had to move to avoid an unusually large crowd. It was summer, and while many local witches and wizards went on holiday, students who were usually in school were free to roam as they pleased, and there were many foreign witches and wizards who travelled to visit the London wizarding community. They'd had their share in Hogsmeade as well. Diagon Alley affected a more circus-like atmosphere, however, and attracted more hooligans than Hogsmeade, and for that Hermione was grateful she could go home and not have to deal with the dross of society.

She adeptly side-stepped the buskers and tourists who didn't mind they had come to a complete stop in the middle of the pavement and eventually made it, a little breathlessly, to Madam Zelda's. Thankfully, when she went in, the older proprietress was free and approached her immediately, gently shoved a cup of herbal tea into her hand, and led her to the counter to look through various catalogues. Madam Zelda did all the thinking for her, knew exactly what she needed, what was necessary, what wasn't...Hermione had told her she had a budget...and soon had her trying on skirts, dresses, jumpers, and added a few knickers and bras for good measure. By the time Hermione had paid and left the store, all she could think about was getting home and changing into one of her new outfits.

The crowd seemed to be even heavier than when she'd arrived, and she glanced at her watch: only twelve thirty. It was lunchtime, but no one seemed to be mindful of that fact. She got bustling about by unseeing people, not noticing that they were shoving around a pregnant woman, yet she managed to remain on her feet and keep moving in the general direction of the Leaky Cauldron.

After one particularly nasty sod slammed into her shoulder without even a hint of an apology, a hand reached out and grabbed her elbow before gravity had her bum meeting the pavement. She turned to thank the helpful stranger ... but lost all ability to speak as her eyes met with a familiar icy-blue gaze.

"I should have let you fall, Granger, but I have something better planned for you." Hate froze his words and shards broke off and prickled up her spine, making her feel lightheaded.

Unable to respond, she felt him drag her out of the crowd and into the narrow, cramped alley that separated two buildings, where only a dustbin and a couple rats resided. She thought, *I should be yelling for help*, but no words came. Possibilities of what he might do couldn't even occur to her; her mind was frozen with fear. But she did think of all the new clothes she had just purchased...and still clutched tightly in one hand...and knew instinctively that she would no longer have reason to wear them. And that thought, that one single thought, broke the dam that prevented her mind and voice from functioning, and she began to scream.

"Stay away from me! Don't you dare hurt my baby!"

She swung the packages at him, aiming for his head, missed, and swung again. Draco laughed. His tone mimicked her, and chills swept up her spine. Still, she fought.

"I am going to teach you, and your *gallant* business partner, a lesson once and for all. Do you hear me, Mudblood? And when I'm through with you, your life will be as empty and useless as my father's."

The words struck like knives, felt like knives ... infinitesimal cuts penetrating her body, bleeding away her resolve. The fight was leaving her. She tried to scream, to fight back, but Draco was retreating, gloating, and she knew he had done something ...

She slumped to the ground, the shopping bag's wares spilling all around her. Then a door opened into the narrow alley, a backdoor to one of the shops, and a portly woman was asking her if she was all right and yelling for someone to get a Healer ... and Hermione felt herself slipping into unconsciousness.

Author's Note: My never-ending thanks go to my beta, [Southern Witch 69](#) who caught several things that needed to be fixed and asked all the picky questions. Another thank you must go to [ladyinthecloak](#), who begged me to have a peek at the chapter and I let her on the condition that she alert me to any mistakes or Americanisms. One of my goals in this story is to not only get rid of my Americanisms but use as much British as I possibly can to make the story more authentic.

Way back in Chapter One, I made brief mention of Albus's ghost. At that time, one of the reviewers expressed difficulty in believing that Albus would come back as a ghost, claiming that it went against her picture of his personality. I could see her point. However, since then, I've endeavored to bring Albus's ghost into the story as a minor character, even though I didn't plan to originally, in order to explain why I think this would be possible. The reason will become more obvious in a future chapter, but if you read closely, it was answered subtly in this one.

Finally, I must admit I borrowed the name Zelda from [R J Lupins Kat](#), who just finished her most gloriously written story (SB/HG), [The Valiant Never](#). Her Aunt Zelda was such an intriguing and lovable character, I borrowed the name for a minor character, though my character is nothing like her namesake.

Chapter Fifteen

Hermione is in St. Mungo's, and the attack causes Severus to realize a couple things.

Author's Note: Oh my gosh! I updated! And I think it was, what, less than two weeks since my last chapter? Are you impressed? I remember the days when I'd update so quickly the story hardly had time to leave the front page. Alas, those days are behind me. I'm much older *cough* or much slower in any case, and that doesn't always have to do with age. When I finished the last chapter, I went right into the next one, and before I knew it, the first half of what you will read had been written. The second half was difficult. I knew what I wanted to do, and I'm glad I finally got to do it, but I wanted it to be just right. Now, [ladyinthecloak](#), who got a preview of this chapter, told me she was *in tears*, while [Southern Witch 69](#), who betaed out my few punctuation and typing snafus, told me it was "cute" (well, actually, she said, and I quote *cute cute*). So I leave you all to decide for yourself how the end of this chapter makes you feel.

Disclaimer: JK Rowling would never do this to her characters, so I take great pleasure in doing it in her stead.

Chapter Fifteen

Consciousness swirled dizzily around her, allowing her to grasp snippets of conversation before she slid back into the unknown. Eyelids fluttered, trying to open, to signal she was here, awake, and were rewarded with encouraging words: *you'll be okay, there's been an accident, everything'll be all right*... The platitudes continued whenever she struggled to remain conscious, but none of the voices had anything important to say, nothing that told her what had happened or where she was. And no one at all bothered to answer the all-important question—the only one, really, that had become something of a mantra in her semi-conscious state—*my baby, is my baby okay?*

She tried to speak, but couldn't find the strength to form the words. Speech didn't seem important enough for her lungs to surrender valuable breath. She wasn't even sure her lips moved. Silence was forced upon her; knowledge was forbidden her. Her fickle consciousness erased any divulged tidbits by the next time she awoke, and she was left feeling that she should know *something*, but that *something* remained just out of reach.

Voices ... She couldn't recognize any of them; faces blurred with the voices, neither clear enough for her to distinguish who was who. And then a voice she thought she knew ... An attempt to turn, to get up, only to be thwarted by a gentle force encouraging her body to relax. And then all was lost once more in the haze of confusing dreams, distant whispering voices, vague memories of being in hospital as a child. A mix of features, familiar and foreign, expressions contradicting each other, some concerned, some bright with feigned cheerfulness. It was difficult to discern her dreams from reality.

Finally—thankfully—the voices were silent, there were no more faces, no more empty assurances, and a Healer gently placed something hard and cool against her lips and told her to drink....

~ O ~

"Mr. Prince, you'll have to calm down if we're to help you," the Welcome Witch said. The kind disposition all Welcome Witches were required to wear slipped as it was put to the test by the white-haired man towering over her, his fisted cane shaking in her face.

"I will *not* be dismissed, Madam ... Oldridge," he growled after peering at her badge. "Miss Granger is my business partner. She has no other family present—her parents are out of country on holiday and unreachable at the moment—so I *am* the sole person responsible to dictate what sort of care she gets!"

Madam Oldridge didn't seem sufficiently impressed, and he didn't doubt she'd been jaded from numerous dealings with patients' irate friends and relatives on a daily basis. It was something he could, unfortunately, understand, and he suddenly felt sorry for shafting her.

"Nonetheless," she continued, "she simply hasn't a medical expense account set aside at Gringotts for private care. I can't very well—"

"You seem to have misunderstood me, Madam," he drawled in a voice much calmer than he felt. "I will be responsible for any costs incurred. Information to my Gringotts account is *here*." He slapped a card onto the counter. "I expect she will have a private room, the top Healers working on her case, and the best care one could expect in an establishment such as *this*."

A disdainful look emphasized his final point to the obvious vexation of the witch sitting behind the desk. His disparaging statement narrowed her eyes, and she looked about to respond in kind when her eyes scanned the card that had been unceremoniously placed in front of her. He watched in satisfaction as her impatience vanished and her attitude adjusted abruptly.

A quickly scratched note on a fluttering piece of parchment was sent off posthaste, whipping upwards, above heads and down the corridor. Severus relaxed slightly, regaining a more preferred composure, his cane now fulfilling its intended duty.

"She will be moved immediately, Mr. Prince," Madam Oldridge informed him affably. "I've alerted Healer Bane, and he will be reassigned to her case as well."

A nod of his head indicated he understood and any misunderstanding had been forgotten. His eyes darted occasionally down the corridor the note had flown, and the flesh between them pinched with concern. The best care, the best accommodations: he could only hope it was enough. He would do anything in his power for her. He *should* have been able to do more, to stop this from happening. He thought he had been prepared for something like this. Unfortunately, he had underestimated Draco and had got lax over the last few weeks, as it seemed Draco had believed his vengeful act had been successful. No, he should have been able to do more....

Severus had Apparated directly to the Strega Letteraria only to find the doors locked, warded, and posted with a note stating the shop would be open at one o'clock, sorry for the inconvenience. He had unlocked and unwarded the doors and strode inside to find no one there, then had gone directly up the steps to her flat, which had been taken two at a time, calling out her name. A thorough search of the flat had proved equally futile, so back down into the shop he had gone to try to determine where she could possibly be.

Riffling through a stack of papers on the front counter, his hand had inadvertently bumped against the mouse to her computer, making the screen spring to life. Little notes were pasted all over the screen in what looked like different colored pieces of paper, though when touched, he had found they were in fact part of the screen. Smirking through his panic at something that was so *Hermione*, he had quickly scanned jotted notes about book orders, bills due, shopping lists, and general reminders until finally his attention had lit on one in particular: *Minerva, 10:00*.

With no time to waste, he had run back up to Hermione's flat to use the Floo. Before throwing in a fistful of Floo powder, it was necessary to remind himself in his panicked state that Samuel Prince mustn't affect a familiar attitude with Minerva. Thankfully, years of practice had skilled him in subterfuge under panic. A quick call, a quick explanation, and Minerva had divulged that Hermione had planned to go to Diagon Alley, shopping for maternity clothes. Words of thanks were barely out of his mouth before he had ended the call, and then he had somehow made his way out of the shop, miraculously remembering to lock and ward as he went, unable to Disapparate quickly enough.

He had got no further than the Leaky Cauldron, where gossip had already consumed the lunch-hour crowd. Passers-through had been milling about, more than willing to talk to the patrons about the current excitement: *a pregnant woman bleeding, found by Proprietress Sweeting—right behind her shop, no less!—cuts all over the poor girl's body, there were! Oh, yes, Healers called for, but an off-duty Healer across the way had kindly tended to the bleeding girl—poor thing!—and Disapparated with her directly to St. Mungo's*.

That had been all he needed, and now he was standing before the information desk at St. Mungo's, talking to the Welcome Witch—and apparent funds-verifier—Madam Oldridge, and awaiting news about Hermione. Inside, he was literally sick with worry, his thoughts an incoherent tangle of if-onlys and what-ifs. Outwardly, however, he affected an air of concerned business partner, willing to do anything to ensure comfort and top-rate care, revealing nothing of his inner turmoil.

Fluttering parchment and scratching quill caught his attention, and Madam Oldridge pushed a yellow slip toward him. "Her room number is on the badge, sir. Please be sure it is upon your person at all times."

Fourth Floor, Albus Dumbledore Ward, he read with some surprise. He looked up questioningly. "I'm sorry, Madam. Where—"

Madam Oldridge conjured a ball of light no bigger than a Snitch and said, "Follow the ball. It will lead you to her room. Don't forget, without the badge, you won't be admitted."

Distractedly, he touched the yellow slip to the front of his robe, where it grabbed the fabric securely. The ball of light hovered before him, shifting side to side, as though anxious to get moving, though it made no sign of doing so on its own.

Severus looked at it in consternation, waiting for it to do something, and finally said, "Well? Now would be nice."

The ball took off with a start, zipping and zinging through the throng in the hallway, and Severus had a job keeping up as it flitted in and out and up and down, mindless of its floor's disparate size. At least it had the decency to wait for him when it reached the lift.

~ O ~

Healer Bane was slow in emerging from the room. So slow, in fact, that Minerva had appeared, and no sooner had she arrived than a fit-to-burst Ginny catapulted off the lift and commenced chattering nervously about whom she had informed about Hermione's being in hospital. She'd instantly Floo-called Molly—who was beside herself with worry and ended the call promptly to contact Arthur—had left a message for Ron, who was onsite with his Horntails and probably couldn't be arsed to find the courage to come by for a visit anyway, and finally had got a hold of Ellie, who had promised to tell Harry at the first possible opportunity. And Alpin—*poor Alpin, how could he live with such constant prattle?*—had been enlisted to contact everyone else Ginny'd been unable to reach.

Mr. Prince had relegated himself to the end of the hallway, cringing while Ginny whinged, and paced. He'd rather have waited in silence—and preferably *alone*—but, he had to admit, Hermione would be appreciative that her friends had called on her. Thus, he remained stoic and tried to appear unaffected, aside from the path he was wearing in the floor and the occasional anxious glances he shot at the closed door of Hermione's room.

He had shaken hands with Minerva, who'd greeted him warmly; though the way she had looked at him bordered on recognition, whether imagined or not he wasn't sure. She had introduced him to Ginny as Hermione's new business partner, Samuel Prince, and Ginny had congenially mentioned that Hermione had only nice things to say about him. It was a worn-out cliché, something one automatically said when acquainting oneself with a friend of a friend, but somehow, he didn't doubt that Hermione had confided in her friend and there could be some truth in what she said. He hoped it was true anyway.

All three paused when the Healer appeared, pulling the door to Hermione's room silently shut behind him. Mr. Prince wasted no time walking over to the two women, and they waited—he assumed both were as anxious as he was—for news. Nodding his greetings, introductions falling by the wayside in lieu of more important information, Healer Bane looked at the trio gravely.

"Miss Granger has suffered quite a bit of blood loss," he began, "but we've managed to get it under control, and she seems to be taking well to the Blood-Replenishing Potion. I have no idea what sort of curse was used on her. She hasn't been conscious or coherent long enough for us to properly ask. There were several cuts to her body: her face, her arms, legs, chest, stomach—"

Minerva's gasp filled the corridor, Ginny sobbed, and Mr. Prince braced himself against the wall with a hand. Deep breaths staved off the nausea he felt and stabilized the dizzying spin of the corridor. Focusing on the Healer's face and voice helped calm the overwhelming desire to push past him, burst into Hermione's room, and rush to her side. He knew, of course, what curse it had been, and he had never thought he'd truly rue the day—as much as he did at this moment—that curse was created.

"She was very lucky," the Healer continued. "Pregnant women, of course, seem to have an innate instinct to protect their unborn child. Most of the cuts to her abdomen were superficial. There was only one we were concerned with, but it wasn't crucial. Her arms sustained multiple defensive wounds."

The two women at Mr. Prince's side began talking simultaneously at the Healer, firing questions off so quickly he couldn't possibly get a word in edgewise. Under different circumstances, Severus might have found the doctor's fishtailing head amusing as he looked back and forth between the two women, mouth opening and closing with unvoiced answers. As it was, he thought a well-placed *Silencio* was in order.

Finally, he had had enough. Mr. Prince's cane struck the floor with such force sparks flew upward from the floor, and the corridor was once again filled with blessed silence. The calmness in his voice as he spoke contradicted the roiling insurgence in his gut.

"Please, Healer Bane. How is the baby?"

The two women looked at the Healer expectantly, and even the usually stoic, regal countenance of Mr. Prince contained a dichotomy of fear and hope.

Even the minute hesitation of the Healer folding his clipboard under one arm and pushing his glasses up his nose before speaking had a number of hexes running through Severus's impatient mind; *suspense belongs in a bloody book, not in hospital, for Merlin's sake!*

"The baby will be just fine," he finally said, to the sudden tearful outburst of the two women and the slumped shoulders of one very weary and relieved Severus Snape.

~ O ~

Hermione's eyes opened to find unfocused light coming from across the room. Had she fallen asleep on the couch again? Why were her eyes so blurry? A hand lifted heavily to rub her eyes, but ended up bumping into the side of her face and slumping off somewhere to the side. She was so tired. *Exhausted* was an understatement. But there was so much to do; it wouldn't do to have a lie in today. Yet her leaden body refused to obey the command to get up—and panic set in when the next few earnest attempts proved futile as well. What in Hades was going on?

She blinked at the fuzzy rectangle of light, trying to clear her vision. It looked to be some sort of window, but no window she was familiar with; that she knew without even seeing it clearly. Her mouth peeled open, tongue unwillingly removing itself from the roof of her mouth, and she tried to call out. For water. For help. Anything.

The bustling of matronly robes at her side suddenly made her aware that she wasn't alone, and she forced her throat to make a noise—no matter it felt as though it were about to split—a thousand questions compressed in a single "Unh?"

Flimsy plastic smelling faintly of petroleum met her lips and offered refreshingly cold water, from which she drank heartily until the cup was prematurely removed and a voice "tut-tutted" beside her head.

"Don't drink too quickly, Miss Granger. You'll make yourself ill. A little at a time, that's a dear."

The cup was offered again after a short respite, and what felt like a hand slid behind her head for support while she drank. She dutifully took small sips until her mouth no longer wanted to stick together, her throat felt more lubricated, and she felt as though she might be able to speak.

"Where ... am I?" she was able to whisper with some difficulty. "What—?"

A voice belonging to a small but round silhouette, which partially occluded the fuzzy window-light, interrupted her questions, gently saying, "You're in St. Mungo's, Miss Granger. Do you remember what happened?"

St. Mungo's? She had no memory of getting there or even why she was there. But something was definitely wrong. She couldn't move, could barely see much less speak, and ... oh, gods. The baby.

She felt the tears forming at the corners of her eyes and begin to slide down the sides of her face. She had trouble forming the words. She wanted so desperately to put her hands on her stomach, to feel what she hoped was still the rounded bump of her belly—even though, gods, what if nothing was there, what if...?—but her arms flopped uselessly at her sides.

"My baby...?" her voice croaked, choked with tears and hoarseness of throat.

A comforting hand rested upon one of her shoulders—*too* comforting, the panicky voice in her head suggested—and the tears now fell in earnest. The touch was so sympathetic, so gentle, as if coming from one who was soothing a great loss....

The woman hushed her and allayed her quickly mounting fears by saying, "Your baby is just fine, Miss Granger *just fine*. She wasn't hurt at all. Quite lucky, the little mite. You just relax. Get your strength up. The waiting area is full of people who will be happy you've finally woken up."

Relief flooded through every limb of her body, weakening her even more if that were even possible, and with arms still unwilling to move, she concentrated *of feeling* the baby inside, caressing it with her thoughts. *Everything will be okay, little one. Hush, we'll be okay.* The woman let her drink a little more and continued to chatter in her ear.

"Have patience. It'll take some time before you are strong enough to move. You had severe injuries, mostly to your arms, some to your legs, chest and stomach, a couple to your face—we administered a regenerative potion to your eyes since he cut one of the tendons quite close, so things'll be a bit hazy for a while. You've been given a nerve regeneration potion as well as a lot of Blood-Replenishing Potion, and those will take a bit of time to work properly. And don't you worry, none of that will hurt the baby. She's been monitored since you arrived, and none of the cuts penetrated your womb or cut off critical blood supply."

The woman's voice faded into the background as memories began to resurface: Diagon Alley, shopping for maternity clothes, the crowd, being pulled between shops by Draco, struggling... *"I am going to teach you, and your gallant business partner, a lesson once and for all. Do you hear me, Mudblood? And when I'm through with you, your life will be as empty and useless as my father's."*

"He ... he cut me?" Hermione asked shakily.

"Several times, dear. We counted forty-two slashes. Most weren't very deep, but some ... some were quite serious. If the shopkeeper hadn't noticed you immediately like she had, you might not be with us now."

A shopkeeper? She didn't remember that. But ... oh! Her shop! She had to—gods, she had to contact Severus, tell him to—

Suddenly, nothing mattered but Severus. She just wanted *Severus*.

"Who's here?" she asked, hoping Severus would be waiting for her. Maybe he didn't know. No one knew how to contact him.

"At last count, let's see ..." the woman paused, mumbling, "there's a Professor McGonagall; Ginny—she's *very* pregnant, that one—surprised she didn't begin her labor, so upset she is; your business partner—Prince, I think his name was? Oh, yes, a Mrs Weasley—she's so nice; she wanted me to tell you she has all your purchases safe at the Burrow. A middle-aged couple; their last name is Granger like yours, but for the life of me I cannot remember their first names—they're Muggles by the looks of them. And some boy who looks incredibly familiar just arrived before I came in: tall, nice build, messy hair, glasses?"

Harry. She wanted to groan. Not only that, but her parents too? She suddenly wanted to hide, wanted all of them to go away. Well ... all but one.

"Can I see Se—Mr. Prince?" she asked. "Just ... just Samuel Prince."

She felt the woman arranging her bedclothes and tidying bits of her hair, tucking the unruly parts behind her ear and under her head. "Of course, dear. Just Mr. Prince. He seems quite concerned. Has been pacing for gods know how long, even after the Healer told them you'd be all right, waiting for you to wake up so he could see you. Hardly speaks to anyone except to ask if you've awoken yet."

Hermione smiled, and the woman encouraged it. "That's it, dear. You look right pretty when you smile. And you're all nice and tidy, so don't you fret about how you look for your Mr. Prince."

She felt the blush rise in her cheeks. Was it that obvious how she felt about Severus? And, oh dear, it suddenly occurred to her that if that were the case, the woman probably believed her baby to be Snape's—well, Mr. Prince's—child. Well, no matter. It looked as though she would be forced to have everything out today, and no more lies would have to be told.

"If you need anything, I'll be here the rest of the day and most of the night. Just call for Matron Bonham, dear." The portly silhouette moved off in the direction of the wall opposite the window, skirts bustling in her wake. When the noise from the hallway reached her ears through the open door, Hermione called out.

"Wait!" she said as loud as she could manage.

Matron Bonham paused and asked from the doorway, "What is it, dear?"

"Did you say '*she*'?"

The woman chuckled. "Yes, dear. It's a girl."

~ O ~

When Severus entered the room, she felt as though her face was glowing. Her entire body was vibrating with the news. Just three little words *It's a girl!* made every other difficulty she had endured and would have yet to endure today seem so far away. The telltale sound of Severus' cane in counterpoint to solid steps had her head turning in the direction Matron Bonham had exited only a minute earlier.

"Well, you look a lot better than I expected," he said gently. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because you're here," she whispered. "Because ... because it's a *girl*, and she's okay, and you're here now so everything will be all right..."

Something clattered to the floor, and she felt the bed depress as he sat on it and his arms gather around her gently. He remained that way for some time, his face buried into her shoulder and his breath soft and pulsing in short, semi-controlled gasps. She tried to wrap her arms around him, to comfort him, as she could feel how upset he was, but she was too weak. Slight disappointment followed as he laid her back down carefully, and she felt his fingers smooth away locks of hair and then caress the side of her face.

"Gods, Hermione, I was so scared," he half-whispered. His voice wavered, and she regretted not being able to see his face. "I received an owl from Draco. He threatened ... he *suggested* that if I wasn't so occupied with you perhaps I'd have the time to finish his potions. I Apparated to the shop, searched your flat, finally found a note that you'd gone to see Minerva, so I Floo-called her, and she said you'd gone to Diagon Alley, but by the time I got there, people were already speaking of the attack in Tom's pub." He took a deep breath as though he hadn't taken one since he'd received Draco's owl. "I'm so sorry, Hermione. Oh, gods, I'm so sorry. I should have been there. I should have been able to stop him. I'm so sorry."

She did the only thing she could to comfort him, to let him know it was all right, and her cheek leaned into his caressing hand as she shushed him with comforting words. "No. No, Severus. Don't be sorry. It wasn't your fault. You can't possibly be with me all the time. You can't possibly protect me from every nutter who's out to do me harm. I don't blame you. Really, I don't."

"But I tried, Hermione. I tried everything I could to make sure you were safe. I should have gone with you to Diagon Alley—"

"I should have let you know I was going, and I didn't, so I'm at fault more than you," she countered before he could finish.

"No. I should have—it's my *duty* to make sure you're all right. You are going to have a baby," he said, placing his other hand on her stomach to emphasize his point and allowing her to finally *feel* that her child was still there, "and you have no one to take care of you/I want to take care of you. I—"

"Severus," she said in a quiet voice, but one that brooked no argument, "listen to me." With a great effort, she struggled to move her hand towards the one he'd laid upon her belly. She felt him reach for her and grasp her hand, pulling it together with his to rest on the swell of her stomach.

"Everything you've done for me ... I'm so grateful. I don't know what I'd do without you. I don't know where I'd be right now without you. Probably homeless and begging for Knuts on the steps of Gringotts." She chuckled, but then grew serious. "You saved me from Draco once. We thought it was over. Maybe we got a little overconfident. Maybe we underestimated him. He blindsided us—*me*. But just because you happened not to be there that *one time* does not mean you failed. It doesn't mean I think any less of you. It doesn't mean I think you don't care."

Severus pulled her hand upward until she felt his lips brush the back of it, felt them linger longingly on her knuckles, and sighed. *More* than care for you, Hermione Granger. I don't know what I'd do without you. My life—well, it was practically nothing without you in it. I don't want to go back to *nothing*. You give everything I do a purpose. And I ... I nearly lost you today." His voice dwindled to a whisper at the confession that sounded as though it were a recent realization. "I don't want to lose you."

Her throat swelled with impending tears. His voice telling her these words: it was a heady feeling. She was extremely glad at this moment that she couldn't see his face clearly because this way it was Severus Snape saying these things to her, not Samuel Prince.

"Severus," she choked out, trying hard not to cry, "I don't want to lose you either."

A loud, unsteady exhale revealed he had been holding his breath, as though waiting in suspense for her response. She felt movement beside her, heard him mutter *Finite Inflecta Vox Vocis*, and watched the blurry shape of his body loom larger until she felt the tip of his nose graze hers and felt his breath against her mouth.

"Hermione Granger," he breathed in a voice that was all Severus Snape, free of glamour, "I love you."

His lips descended, touching, sliding against hers gently. A soft, slow, languorous kiss that spoke more than could be fully conveyed with a simple 'I love you.'

When he pulled back, she sighed in pure happiness and knew she was grinning like a fool. Still holding her hand captive, Severus placed kisses on each knuckle. She savored every one and wished she were strong enough to return those kisses. Instead, she was relegated to just lying back, enjoying the attention, and basking in her newfound happiness.

"Why are you smiling?" he murmured against the back of her hand.

Sighing, she said, "Because you're here. Because right now, despite everything, I am so incredibly happy. And because ... I love you, Severus Snape."

Finite Inflecta Vox Vocis: End warped voice

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 17

Hermione finally tells the truth to her parents and Harry.

Author's Note: A giant hug to [Southern Witch 69](#), who put up with my version of Harry to beta this chapter.

Disclaimer: JKR owns the characters and the universe. I'm just giving them a little dose of reality....

Chapter Sixteen

Severus remained a few selfish minutes longer at Hermione's side, simply relishing that she was there with him ... that she was even there at all *My God*, he thought, *by all rights, she shouldn't be lying in this bed, certainly not in hospital*. Morbidly, he pictured her cold and unresponsive at Talon & Crane's, laid out on a table for identification purposes. If the proprietress of that shop hadn't gone off for a fag at that exact moment ... Well, he felt fairly dizzy and nauseous at the direction his thoughts were taking him, and he resolved to banish them forever from his mind.

Severus had meant every word he had said to Hermione. Everything he did now, he did with her in mind. Never mind that they were now business partners, which he had indeed done entirely for her. Literally, she was constantly on his mind: He woke up in the morning wondering if she had slept well and if she had awoken yet. He brewed potions at times he knew she wouldn't have need of him. He never failed to ask if he could pick something up for her when he ran errands. Hell, he even bought food and cooked meals he knew she would like, regardless she wasn't there. As he had said: without her, his life *was* meaningless.

They spoke for a while, drawing out his visit as long as possible without offending anyone...too much. There was a corridor full of people waiting to see her, and it had to be

decided what she would tell them.

Once the question had been posed, she remained silent for a time, then turned her face towards him, though her eyes didn't directly meet his in their unfocused state. "Severus, I..." Unable to continue, she just stared off helplessly in the other direction.

"Perhaps I should tell them you're still too weak. They can wait until you have slept a bit, gathered more strength..."

"No," she said then, looking back towards him. "No. I am going to do this, and I'm going to do this now. Everyone...all the people I need to speak to are here anyway. I might as well get it over with."

He hesitated. He was one of those people, and he was here now. How much of what he already knew should he let on? A quick moment's thought made his decision to act as though he knew nothing. And because she couldn't see him clearly, he only had to worry about his voice giving him away.

"Everyone?" he asked quietly, encouragingly.

Her eyes wavered, the unfocused stare giving a false impression of indifference as she looked away once more, and she sighed. "Yes, Severus. Everyone. Gods, I need to tell you...and it's so bloody *hard*. I can only imagine what you will think of me..."

He wasn't able to withstand the suffering in her voice. She had already had a day that was too difficult for anyone to bear, and with circumstances being what they were, she had to add a few really difficult conversations to her list of burdens. The least he could do was make it a little easier on her.

"Harry is the father of the baby, isn't he?" All judgment, all condescension, all distaste for the boy he had previously harbored was completely absent from his voice. And it startled him that those feelings no longer existed; though, he had to admit, even without daily contact, he still found Potter to be rather annoying.

She looked up, startled, and gasped a "Yes" through fresh tears.

He just held her and let her cry. Because telling Harry would be infinitely more difficult than telling him had just been. Because telling her parents would be equally as difficult, he imagined. And telling Ginny ... Well, he didn't feel like being around when Hermione told her, being very familiar with the way Weasley women dealt with shocking news.

When she had finally settled somewhat, he helped to straighten her bedclothes once more, neaten her hair that seemed to want to resist any form of order, and wipe her eyes and nose gently to erase all evidence of her tears. She smiled at him gratefully and asked tremulously, "You don't...you don't think any differently of me, do you?"

That she was so worried how he felt, how he thought of her, had melted his heart. And this unfamiliar feeling startled him a bit too. "Of course not," he assured her. "I said 'I love you,' and I meant it with all my heart. I also said I wanted to take care of you, and I meant that too. I promise you, Hermione, you have nothing to fear. I will always be here, and I *will* take care of you."

She visibly relaxed at his words, and he saw the contentment on her face ... and something else. He almost wasn't able to describe it. And then, suddenly, realization dawned on him: all worry had vanished. She had been worried, about her bookshop, about her pregnancy, about the baby not having a father, about not having told her parents, about so many things for so long that it had become permanently etched upon her face. But now, not one line of worry crossed her features. How it could be after a day like this, he didn't know, but she looked as if she had finally found peace.

He squeezed her hand and silently turned to leave the room. When he reached the door, he looked back upon her serene face and said, though at this point it was probably unnecessary, "Be strong. I'll be right outside the door if you need me."

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"Mum, really, I'm fine," Hermione complained as her mother hovered alternately next to her and over her and asked what seemed like a million unnecessary questions.

"Are you sure you're warm enough, dear? I wager I could get one of those nurses to get you another blanket. Here, let me pull this blanket up a bit ... Oh, this won't do. Frank, go ask a nurse for another blanket. I brought a toothbrush and a bit of toothpaste, Hermione...they're samples from the office; the toothpaste won't last for more than three or four days if you are brushing correctly, so I brought a few...oh, and a hairbrush, though I didn't think to bring any conditioner ... Do you think they'll let you wash your hair? I could ring up the chemist and see if they have conditioner ... Wait, there isn't a telephone. Do they have chemists here...?"

"You're doing it again, dear," Mr. Granger kindly told his wife, to Hermione's immense relief.

"I know," her mother said, "but I just want to make sure everything is all right. Our baby is having a baby, Frank, and someone needs to take care of her! And how do we know that ... that...oh, what was his name?"

"Draco, Mum," Hermione dutifully responded.

"Yes. How do we know that ... that ...*cretin* Draco...sorry, dear...won't come back and try to hurt her again while she's in hospital. Oh, Frank, maybe we should stay here. I'm positive the nurses would let us stay here if we asked nicely."

"We'll stay in the hotel, Jean. It's already paid for, and Hermione will be just fine. Won't you, luv?"

"Yes, Dad." Hermione smiled, though she couldn't see either of them well. Hearing their banter back and forth was so comforting. She had missed that so much these past months with them gone on extended holiday.

Telling them about the baby hadn't been so bad, really. She had immediately owned up to Harry being the father, but had told them also...and rather embarrassedly...that it had been a one-night fling, and Harry didn't know yet...and she had no idea how he'd take it...so would they please not say anything to anyone when they left? Her parents promised her they'd say their goodbyes..."It is only polite!" her mother insisted...and leave promptly so as not to get caught up in any conversation.

She heard her mother sniff and could imagine her dad with one arm wrapped around her mum's shoulders, as he always did when comforting his wife. Hermione felt bad suddenly. She didn't know if her mother worried for her because she was pregnant or because she'd been attacked. Probably both, though. Her mother wasn't the sort to judge anyone, even her daughter. "Whatever is cannot be changed," she'd always said when Hermione was growing up. "You can't complain about it; you just have to learn how to deal with it." Well, this was one of those times.

"I'm fine, really, Mum. If you worry, I'll just feel worse. Dad, watch that she doesn't worry?" she asked her dad, hoping that she was at least meeting his eyes. She didn't want her injuries to be more obvious than they already were.

"I will, luv. You get your rest. You need it more than ever now. Need to take care of the little nipper, you know," her dad responded, and she could hear a tone in his voice she'd never heard before, but she knew in that moment that he'd be a phenomenal grandfather. "We'll be at the hotel. I left the telephone number on the ... Well," he laughed, "I guess there aren't any telephones here. The number *is* on your bedside table if you need it. Someone could make the call for you perhaps?"

"Yes, Dad. If I need you, I'll have someone place the call for me." She smiled, knowing they weren't used to Healers, wand diagnostics...the Healer had come in to check her vitals earlier while they were visiting, and they had looked on in utter fascination...and phoneless hospitals.

"Maybe that Mr. Prince could help you out," her mother said thoughtfully, which Hermione knew meant her mother suspected there was something between the two of them. "He seemed awfully nice..."

"He is awfully nice, Mum." Hermione laughed. "Now, go before..."

"I'm only saying," her mother interrupted, "if Harry isn't available to take care of you and the baby, maybe Mr...."

"Mum!" Hermione shouted, scandalized. Leave it to her mother to pick up certain vibes, as she always did, when it came to Hermione's love life.

"Alright! We're going, we're going!" her mother shouted back.

"We'll see you in the morning, Hermione," her father added, chuckling, and Hermione was relieved to hear their voices retreating towards the door.

"Just make sure Mr. Prince looks out for you!"

"Jean! Why do you always need to get in the last word?" her father scolded, and the door was promptly opened and shut, leaving Hermione in peace.

She laughed a little, happy that her parents had cut their trip short. They were just what she needed today. They always knew how to lighten a mood, and hers needed lightening right now. She sighed, took a deep breath and slowly let it out. A fluttering had begun in her stomach, which she was sure had nothing to do with the baby. She knew what she had to do next. She had given Severus specific instructions on whom to send in first, and so on. She had felt she owed it to her parents to tell them first, just because, well, they were her parents. But she couldn't very well tell anyone else until she had spoken with Harry, as much as she would have liked to put it off.

While she waited for her next visitor, she tried experimentally to lift her hand. Surprisingly, she was actually able to raise it from the bed beside her and rest it on her stomach, though still with some effort. Still, it was reassuring that the potions were working. She hoped that by tomorrow she'd be able to see better. The Healer had as much as promised she would, but Hermione didn't want to get her hopes up. As it was, it was probably best that she couldn't see properly right now. She really didn't want to see Harry's face when...

"Hermione?" The voice came from the door, but she heard no movement: no footsteps, no rustling of trouser legs or robes, no breathing, nothing.

"Harry?" she asked, thinking that perhaps he had taken one look, changed his mind, and gone.

"Uh ... yeah."

The finality in his voice made her feel instantly leery. When she didn't hear him come any closer, she encouraged him. "Harry, you have to come closer. I can't see very good right now, but if you come nearer, at least I'll know you're here."

Footsteps slowly approached from the door. Not hesitantly, though definitely not assuredly, just slowly, the way one would walk if expecting a bad bit of news...though maybe that was her imagination playing with her. His blurry outline stopped next to the bed, and she tried to raise her hand to hold his, but she wasn't able to raise it very far. And he made no attempt to reach for it.

"Harry, I..."

"You're pregnant," he said matter-of-factly, cutting her off.

"Yes," she agreed and remained silent, waiting for him to continue, as she could sense he had more to say and thought perhaps it might be best to let him say it before she said anything.

"I didn't know. Ginny knows. I heard her and McGonagall talking ... I didn't believe them." He stopped speaking for a while, then as though he had just thought of something, said, "Why didn't Ginny tell anyone?"

"I asked her not to," Hermione replied simply.

"Is it Mr. Prince's? Because I saw him in the hallway. He seems like a halfway decent bloke. A bit snobbish for my taste but..."

The hopefulness in his voice made her cringe inwardly. She had to stop him before he started getting the wrong impression. "No, Harry, it's not Samuel's."

"Well, whose then?" he asked, though his voice seemed to get a little smaller, and Hermione could sense the hopefulness in him dwindle.

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to give her the strength she felt she didn't have. "I've only been with one man in the last year...well, actually, make that two and a half years," she half-laughed in embarrassment, "so I guess it's pretty obvious."

"How...? I mean, when...? What are you telling me, Hermione? That this *is* my baby? I can't have a baby. I'm *married*, Hermione. I married Ellie because neither of us *want* kids, and here you're telling me that I'm going to have a kid?!" he began to shout.

"Harry, if you're going to yell, put up a Silencing Charm. I don't have my wand," she scolded.

"*Silencio!*" he yelled, his voice aimed in the opposite direction, so she was certain he didn't just hex her. "Hermione. You *knew* I didn't want to have children. Gods, I broke up with Ginny because she wanted children and I didn't want any! Breaking up with her was more difficult than ... than killing Voldemort, and finding someone who I loved *and* felt the same way I did wasn't exactly easy either!"

"You think I did this on purpose, Harry?" she asked in matching tone. "Do you really think I planned this, that at the time, with my bookshop failing and barely having any money to support myself, that I would actually *plan* to have a baby?"

"Well, I don't know what you'd do anymore!" he shouted. "I have plenty of money. Perhaps the money I'd give the child was enough..."

"Harry James Potter!" she exclaimed. "How dare you! How *dare* you imply that I used you to get at your money. How *dare* you accuse me of putting a child in a precarious position just because I was practically destitute. Believe me, if I had needed money that badly, I'd have just asked you for it. You should feel ashamed of yourself!"

"Me?" he shouted back. "Me. *I* should be the one ashamed of myself? Look *at* you. You're the one advertising for the whole wizarding world to see that you are unmarried and pregnant. I suppose you'll have the reporters knocking at your door now that Hermione Granger is carrying the son of Harry Potter! How bloody *fortunate* for you! I'm sure Rita Skeeter will have nothing but *glowing* things to say about you and the baby! And me. Well, I might as well dig my own grave now and climb in because I'll never recover from the shame *this* is going to cause. I can just see the headlines now: *Hermione Granger, Mistress of Boy Who Lived, is Peggish!*"

"First of all," she snapped back, "it's a girl, not a *boy*. Secondly, aside from my parents and Samuel, I've told no one. Not even Ginny. She thinks I got pregnant by a Muggle and that he wants no part in the baby's life. Thirdly ... well, yes, I *do* rather feel like a walking billboard for unwed pregnant mothers, but I *am not* letting it affect the way I feel about this child. This child is *mine*, Harry Potter. You had a part in creating it, that's true. But it is obvious...and it was obvious well before I got pregnant...that you want nothing to do with children, and I won't force you to have anything to do with this one.

"But let me tell you, *Mr.* Potter, if you make the decision now to have nothing to do with this child, you cannot change your mind in ten years and expect to be welcome, either by me or my daughter. You are married. I don't expect you to give that up, nor do I *want* you to. Whether you tell Ellie about this or not is your choice. But I've gone on with my life with the realization that you and Ellie are married and that is not going to change. I've done the best that I could, and I feel I have a pretty good future

shaping up, so make your decision. Just keep this in mind: if you choose not to have anything to do with her, you are *not* her father. Her father will be the man who is there when she falls down and scrapes her knee, who teaches her how to fly her first broom, who holds her when she has a bad dream, who stays up with her when she's sick. You might have donated the genetic material, but don't worry, a *father* you don't have to be."

She was exhausted from her tirade, but Harry deserved it. He had no right to be angry with her. He was as responsible as she was for this pregnancy. If anything, he should be angry that she had taken this long to tell him about it, not that she was pregnant!

His silence said volumes. She knew he was glowering, much like he always had when something had upset him, which meant he probably wasn't going to say much else.

She waited about a minute, until she felt the silence had gone on long enough. "Well, Harry? What's it going to be? Because I'd like to get on with my life, thank you very much."

"Go on with your life, Hermione. It doesn't matter one whit to me. I'll do what's right of course, and I'll arrange a monthly transfer of funds with Gringotts to support the child. But that's as far as it will go. I will not tell Ellie, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone else. Not even Ginny. I don't need the truth getting back to Ellie." His voice was cold and detached. She'd never heard him speak in such a tone before, not even when he and Ron had had a disagreement and weren't speaking to each other.

"All right," she agreed. "For the sake of your marriage, I will go on lying to my best friend. It's the least I can do."

He snorted as if to say there was a lot more she could have done, and that piqued her ire.

"This is just as much your fault as it is mine, Harry," she said, "no matter what you choose to tell yourself."

"Yeah, well, whatever," he replied disdainfully. "But *you* are the one who chose to keep this child..."

"You're bloody right I decided to *keep* this child. I wonder if *you* would have had the courage to end an innocent life. Because that's what this is, Harry. She's innocent. Why should I make her suffer for our mistake? How unfair would that be to her? I wouldn't be able to live with myself. Even during the war, we aimed to disarm and disable the Death Eaters and only killed when absolutely necessary. This *child* is no Death Eater. She's a *baby*. She's pure and innocent and hasn't had a chance to live yet. I am going to give her that chance, Harry, because I don't believe in ending someone's life just because it's *inconvenient*," she spat in his direction. At this point, she didn't know whether it was pity she felt for him or hatred. She figured it was a bit of both.

"I suppose you have it all figured out, then," he deadpanned with finality. "I told you what I'd do, and I'll do it. You won't have to worry about me returning in the future to claim rights to your child."

She nodded silently. Saying anything else would prove futile. His was a very thick head, and when he had an opinion, it generally could not be changed. She heard footsteps, firm and determined, heading for the door and felt relieved, not only because she'd finally told him but also that he was leaving.

The door opened, and she thought he would leave without another word, but to his credit, he did say, "I hope you feel better," before the door shut behind him.

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Severus noticed when Harry left Hermione's room. He looked serious. No, he looked angry but was trying to mask it as seriousness...or probably concern over Hermione's condition; it was difficult to tell. Harry had never been entirely successful in hiding his emotions, but it didn't matter at the moment because he merely nodded in Professor McGonagall's direction and continued on down the hallway. Ginny, Mrs. Weasley and Professor McGonagall exchanged a look, shrugged their shoulders, and started for Hermione's room, Mrs. Weasley bustling to the fore.

Severus' attention turned back to the team of Aurors, who had stepped off the lift just a couple minutes earlier and were no doubt waiting to see Hermione. He silently felt out the strength of his glamours and sighed. The Aurors were regarding him with keen interest now that he was the only remaining "visitor" in the corridor. Rather than prolong the anticipation, he walked over to the group of men and women.

One of the men looked up as Mr. Prince approached and nudged the woman next to him. "Hello, sir. I assume you're familiar with Miss Granger?" he asked while the female Auror got her quill and notepad ready and seemed to be appraising him.

"Yes, I am very familiar with her. She's my partner," Mr. Prince replied.

"Would that be, erm, spouse, boyfriend ... what exactly, Mister...?" the female Auror asked for clarification.

"Prince," he said. "Samuel Prince. And I'm her *business* partner. Any other relationship I have with her I'm afraid is none of your business."

"Oh, but I think it *is*, Mr. Prince. You see..."

"And *you* are?" he interrupted the female Auror, deciding at that point to be helpful, but not too helpful. They may be an excellent asset in deterring Draco from further attacks, but an inquest on his personal affairs was simply unacceptable.

"Auror Banks," she replied tartly. "And this here is Auror MacMillan."

Severus looked askance at the male Auror to see if he had any resemblance to Ernie MacMillan, but he thankfully didn't see any. The glamours were pretty much failsafe, but one never knew when an Auror would see right through one, especially if they spotted a similarity.

"As I was saying, *Mr. Prince*, we must have any and all information regarding the attack on Hermione Granger so that it's investigated properly. Your relationship with her is an important part of the puzzle, whether you think so or not," she stated imperiously.

Gods, he hated Aurors.

"Very well, we do have a more intimate relationship," he supplied, "though I am not her spouse, and I would not consider myself ~~boy~~friend at my age."

MacMillan chuckled. "Of course not, sir. I heard she's pregnant. The child is yours then?"

Mr. Prince looked challengingly down his nose at the man. "Biologically ... no."

Banks scribbled something with her quill as Mr. Prince rolled his eyes. "I do not see what this has to do with anything. *You should* be finding the man who attacked Hermione and interrogating him, not me."

"We're getting to that, Mr. Prince. But since you bring it up, any information you have would be appreciated," MacMillan said, "though we really need to speak with the victim herself. Unless you were a witness...?"

"No, I wasn't a witness, but I..." he started, but was quickly cut off by Banks.

"If you weren't a witness to the crime, Mr. Prince, whatever you tell us would be hearsay and would not stand up as proof in front of the Wizengamot. Therefore, I suggest you keep silent on the matter."

Banks tucked her quill and notebook into her robes, signaling they were finished asking him questions. It was just as well. If they had asked him who had attacked Hermione, he wasn't sure he'd have obliged. Draco knew who Mr. Prince was. Severus had no doubt if Draco were confronted by Aurors with his crime, a bit of extraneous information might just 'inadvertently' slip about the true identity of Hermione's business partner. He couldn't allow that to happen.

"If you would excuse us, Mr. Prince," another Auror stepped forward. "My name is Robards, Head of the Auror Office, would you mind terribly if we spoke to Miss Granger?"

While slightly mollified at the Head Auror's politeness, he had to wonder what his interest in this case was. Mr. Prince answered, "She has visitors right now, but I'm sure they can wait in the hallway while you speak with her. I would appreciate being in the room as well, if you don't mind. Hermione's had a very upsetting day."

"Of course, of course, Mr. Prince. That will be fine. Shall we?" Robards indicated the door, inviting Mr. Prince to precede him.

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He had indeed preceded them into the room, intent on getting to Hermione before the Aurors did. The three females were standing close by the bed, Molly Weasley adjusting a second pillow beneath Hermione's head to make her more comfortable and conjuring another to place behind the small of her back. McGonagall and Ginny had enough sense not to interfere while Molly mothered Hermione a bit. Everyone knew that it was in Molly's nature to do such things.

"My dear, these Healers just don't *think* of these things. You wouldn't believe what I had to do when Arthur was here!" Molly exclaimed as she asked if Hermione felt more comfortable, if she needed anything else.

Hermione was laughing and assured Mrs. Weasley that whatever she'd done helped "oh, so much" and "thank you, Mrs. Weasley, you always know how to make someone feel better."

The three women looked up at Mr. Prince's entrance and saw the flock of Aurors hovering about the doorway. Hermione, too, turned her head in his direction, no doubt knowing it was him by the thud of his cane opposite each footfall.

"Ladies." He nodded as he greeted them and stopped at the side of the patient's bed opposite her visitors. Hermione's head settled in his direction, her eyes not focused, but certainly conveying her curiosity. "The Aurors are here to question Hermione on what happened during the attack."

Professor McGonagall eyed the Aurors with a suspicious eye. "So many? Looks a bit much," she said querulously. "Isn't that Head Auror Robards?" Her voice rose in pitch at the second question.

"Indeed it is," Mr. Prince answered. "And before you ask, I have no idea why he found this case important enough to attend personally, nor why there needs to be more than the customary pair of Aurors on this case."

"Well, Hermione played an important part during the war. Didn't you, dear?" Mrs. Weasley patted Hermione's hand reassuringly. "That's probably all it is."

"Probably," Mr. Prince outwardly agreed. "In any case, they've allowed me to be present during her questioning, but have asked that you ladies step out until they're through."

"Well, I for one could use a spot of tea," Professor McGonagall said. "And we need to get Ginny off those feet as well, so, ladies, what say we make a trip to the Visitors' Tearoom upstairs?"

"Sounds just lovely!" Mrs. Weasley answered and turned to her daughter. "I'm sorry, dear, I should have conjured a chair for you."

"Don't think on it, Mum. I wouldn't have sat anyway," Ginny reassured her mother, who was now holding Ginny's elbow as though she couldn't walk in her condition without help. "Hermione, we'll be back later. Just ... try not to let the Aurors upset you too much."

"I won't," Hermione promised.

When Severus took her hand and sat on the bed next to her, she tried to meet his gaze, though she looked slightly to the left and a tad too high.

"Hermione," he whispered as the three women slowly made for the door...Ginny seemed to have cottoned on that Mr. Prince wanted to speak with Hermione before the Aurors came in and was playing up her 'condition.' "I am going to perform Legilimency on you, so let me turn your head just a bit ... there. I can now look in your eyes. I am not going to look at your memories. Instead, concentrate on the images I am releasing. We have little time, and I don't want the Aurors aware of anything."

"All right," she whispered with a smile. And with a quietly incanted *'Legilimens!'* Severus slipped into her mind.

A piece of parchment removed from an owl's leg; a feeling of annoyance as the letter was unfolded, revealing it was from Draco *Strangely enough, certain information has fallen into my hands regarding a business venture you are currently involved in. No need to ask how I found out, but note that while Samuel Prince might fool most, I am simply not that ignorant; panic rising in her chest, mimicking his, as he read the final lines: I will make this very clear to you, Severus. Your unwillingness to help me will directly affect one of your 'occupations';* panic settled into mutual worry as mental pictures segued into a mental voice that said, "If Draco is captured by Aurors, there'll be no doubt he'd let slip your business partner's true identity. We can't let that happen. Make no mistake, I will take care of Draco, and he won't be able to hurt you any longer."

When Severus ceased the connection, he saw out of his peripheral vision that the Aurors had entered the room. He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"I love you, Hermione. It'll be okay. I'll be with you," he said as much for her benefit as for the group of Aurors now clustering around her bed.

"I love you, too," Hermione answered, and the Aurors had a firm impression of just how deep their partnership went.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 17

Draco's attack is not without lasting effects.

Author's Note: A huge thanks to [MHaydn](#), whose shared analysis and opinions about this story greatly influenced the direction of the plot in the second half of this chapter.

I got the message from [Potter Place](#) that this story was wanting to be updated by Christmas, and so, having a little time on my hands with the wind-down of my children's school into Christmas holiday (one more week to go!) and needing to channel my emotions into something more creative than setting fire to the vehicles of Those Who Should Not Be Allowed to Drive, I more than happily acquiesced to the request. I hope you enjoy. My apologies for the long wait.

□

Disclaimer: I own nothing in JKR's little world of magic, but I perform my own magic to round out her characters' lives a bit ... just because I can.

Chapter Seventeen

"Miss Granger."

Auror Banks separated herself from the cluster that now hovered at the foot of Hermione's bed, and Head Auror Robards watched with more than a little pride as his protégé took charge. With a minor spell, quill was set hovering above parchment, leaving Auror Banks free to pay attention to the woman lying on the bed, whose head turned towards her but whose eyes didn't seem to be capable of focusing.

"How are you doing?" Auror Banks asked sympathetically and not without a little feeling, and Robards knew at that moment exactly why the group had chosen her to approach the victim.

"I'm all right, thanks," was Miss Granger's hoarse reply, though Robards noticed how weakly her hands rested upon her stomach, covered by the stronger hands of the man who sat silently by her side.

Auror Banks coughed lightly and walked around to the side of Miss Granger's bed as though about to share a confidence. "My apologies, Miss Granger," she said, a little more intimately now that she was closer to the woman, "but you don't *look* all right."

Miss Granger laughed weakly. "No, I suppose I do not," she answered, and Mr. Prince's fingers tightened almost—but not quite—imperceptibly around hers.

"I need to ask you a few questions," Auror Banks said apologetically and waited for Miss Granger's simple nod before continuing. "Do you remember what you were doing in Diagon Alley this afternoon, Miss Granger?"

"I needed clothes. Nothing fits me anymore for some reason," Miss Granger replied with a small smile. Robards noticed Auror Banks relax even further into the role of efficient-but-kind interrogator.

His eyes met his protégé's as she glanced at him over the bed, and he inclined his head encouragingly, communicating wordlessly she was doing an excellent job and to continue with the questioning. He really did not want to be here all day.

"Can you tell me how it was you came to be attacked?" Auror Banks' question was accompanied by the scratching of the hovering quill.

Miss Granger's face crumpled, noticeably upset at the stirred-up memories, and she turned her head toward Mr. Prince, who sat stolidly beside her and gave her hands a reassuring squeeze. "I had left Madam Zelda's with my purchases and was going back to the Leaky Cauldron, but ... it was crowded. Someone bumped into me and I nearly fell. I was grabbed before I could fall. I was turning to say 'thank you' to whoever had managed to catch me, but ... I was dragged into an alley...."

"Did you see who it was?" Auror Banks asked gently after it seemed Miss Granger wasn't going to continue.

"I ... No, I ... He wore a hood. It covered his face. I only heard his voice."

Robards thought it odd she called her assailant 'he'. True, it wasn't difficult most of the time to tell the difference between the voice of a man and the voice of a woman, but in his vast experience, glamours were often used to disguise one's voice. Miss Granger didn't seem to hesitate on the point that her assailant was male. He futilely tried to gain Auror Banks' attention.

"Are you sure it was a man, Miss Granger?" Auror Banks asked, to Robards' pleasure. He had certainly taught her well.

"Well ... yes. I mean, his voice was too low to be a woman's, and he was rather tall. I can remember his hand on my elbow as he dragged me into that alley, and it felt large."

"Begging your pardon, Miss Granger," Robards cut in—he couldn't help it, "but you aren't a large woman. What are you, a meter sixty-two?"

"Fifty-six," she corrected him as her eyes tried to pick him out unsuccessfully from the crowd. He knew then the Healers hadn't exaggerated the extent of her injuries.

"You've made my point," he continued. "Any woman of average height or greater could fit that description. And there are a number of voice glamours one could use."

Auror Banks took up where he left off. "Since you didn't see the face of your attacker, we can say that either he or she was larger than you. That would be safe to say then." The scratch-scratching of the quill added finality to the statement. "Did this person say anything to you? Anything at all. Even what seems insignificant to you could be important."

The quill hovered in anticipation of her answer as the Aurors collectively held their breaths. Robards' eyes darted back and forth between the faces of Miss Granger and Mr. Prince, trying to glean any sort of attempt at deception. Something didn't feel right about this situation. It was a gut instinct, and he was rather well-known for his gut instincts. But all Mr. Prince did was lower his gaze to their entwined hands and stroke a thumb across the back of her hand.

"When he ... when he pushed me into the alley and started coming at me, I yelled at him not to ... not to hurt my baby. And he called me a Mudblood. Said I ... I deserved what I was going to get. I didn't hear any spells...." Her voice trailed off weakly, and Auror Banks placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"It's sounding as if they were nonverbal spells, and that's important. Only about half of the wizarding community are adept at those, so that will narrow the field. And I think we can safely say your attacker was a pureblood," Auror Banks looked up and nodded at Robards, "and obviously still holds antiquated prejudices left over from the war."

Murmurs went around the room as Aurors discussed their suspicions quietly. Robards sent a warning glance their way; a few picked up on it and shushed the rest of the crowd. Miss Granger was visibly shaking now, and Mr. Prince looked up at the questioning Auror and then over to Robards, who was quite impressed at the man's self-control. If it had been *his* wife in that hospital bed, he was unsure he would have been able to remain so composed. Usually, the Auror department preferred to question victims alone because albeit well-meaning friends and family invariably interrupted and marred any attempt at getting a decent interview. Mr. Prince had remained quiet, however, confident in the woman's ability to answer on her own, even though the questioning was obviously upsetting her.

"Are there any more questions?" Mr. Prince broke his silence. "I'm afraid she can't take much more. She's still weak and she hasn't had the best of days."

"That's putting it mildly, Mr. Prince," Robards answered. "She's fallen victim to a very serious attack, and we very rarely find someone callous enough to attack a pregnant woman."

"Still," Auror Banks intervened, "I believe we've got all we can at the moment. If I have any questions, Miss Granger, do I have your permission to contact you?"

"Of course," Miss Granger replied, smiling tremulously in Auror Banks direction.

With a round of 'thank you's', the Aurors gathered themselves and exited, leaving the couple behind. As Head Auror Robards shut the door and turned to Auror Banks, he commented, "Well done. Especially that bit about asking her permission to contact her in the future. But I don't know ... My gut feeling is telling me she knows more than she let on."

"I don't know why," Auror Banks answered, "but I think your gut feeling may be contagious."

~ O ~

"Are you nearly ready, Hermione?" Jean Granger called from outside the bathroom door, knocking lightly.

Hermione looked at her reflection in the square piece of glass which hung above the sink and ignored her mother. *Ready for what?* she thought. *Ready for someone to hex me when I walk out the door? Ready for the press owls that will hound me until they get a proper interview? Ready for the latest insult from Mr. Harry Potter to get hurled at me like a Bludger?*

She'd been in hospital for two weeks now and felt as though she were going stir-crazy. Her mother's question was left unanswered, as she didn't trust herself to say anything kind enough at the moment. Sighing and resting her hands upon the washbasin, she stared at her fingernails while attempting a couple of relaxation techniques the medi-counselor had taught her the day before.

"You are too tense. Wound up tight like a panther waiting to pounce on its prey," the middle-aged woman had said. Hermione had found the alliteration and simile odd for someone in the healing profession; it smacked more of fiction-writing than anything else.

"Yes, well, being pregnant by a man who wants nothing to do with the baby will do that to you. Not to mention being a hex magnet," Hermione had shot back rather snottily.

She had immediately felt awful for taking it out on the medi-counselor and apologized, allowing the woman to teach her a few relaxation techniques as penance, which so far had worked only part of the time. This was *not* one of those times. She made the nastiest face she could in the mirror, trying to make her reflection look as ugly as she felt on the inside.

"Tut, tut, a girl as pretty as you shouldn't make faces like that. Your face might—"

"Say one more word and your next method of employment will be *asseveral* compact mirrors," Hermione interrupted the talking piece of glass. The mirror had been blissfully silent up until this point. Obviously, it wasn't charmed with any sort of self-preserving intelligence or it would have held its silver tongue.

"Sorry, did you say something, Hermione? I didn't hear you," her mother called again, reminding Hermione that her parents and Samuel were waiting on the opposite side of the door to take her home.

The Welcome Witch had sent a memo up earlier informing them that a small group of reporters were waiting in the lobby, and Severus had immediately gone to arrange travel by Floo. She imagined little reporter heads satisfyingly snapping off one by one as she walked through the lobby, question upon question dying on their lips. Exactly why she was *not* going home that way. At this rate, she'd end up in Azkaban. Glowering at herself in the mirror one last time, she turned and opened the door.

"Oh, Hermione. There you are. I was getting worried," her mother said, her whole body seeming to sigh in relief. "I nearly had Samuel open the door with his magic wand. I had never seen that done before and I remember something you said about a spell—*ello, hello-rah*—well, whatever. I asked, but he said you merely needed more time and —"

Hermione smiled tightly, lips pressed firmly together so as not to utter any of the myriad saucy things that were popping into her head, and glanced at Samuel, who just shrugged away her mother's rambling dialogue. Her father intervened, as usual, and was murmuring something to her mother, thankfully out of earshot, and ushering her out of the way. Only the sound of her mother's controlled but urgent whisperings carried over in her direction. She closed her eyes and firmly rubbed her right temple with the heel of her palm. She really needed to relax. Her mother might be a little ... overbearing at times, but she meant well, and Hermione really didn't want to lash out at people who didn't deserve it, especially her own mother.

"I already sent your case on ahead," Severus' voice rumbled sotto voce next to her ear, and he replaced her hand with both of his, kneading her temples gently. She allowed herself to rest a while against his soothing touch. "We'll get you settled, and I'll make sure your parents get home safely after tea."

"I just want to sleep in my own bed and not get woken up every hour to get poked, prodded, or lit up like a lightbulb by some ... some ... *Healetraine*," she whispered vehemently.

"Nice, clean bed; no interruptions," he promised and took her hand to lead her home.

~ O ~

She could hear her parents in the other room still talking to Severus, her mother's animated, ever-questioning tone reverberating above everything else. Even with her head between mattress and pillow, she could still hear the constant murmuring. It was driving her mad, but it wasn't as though it was preventing her from sleeping. She wasn't tired. That had been a little fabrication in order to get some 'alone' time—away from meddling Healers, away from her mother's constant questions, away from *everybody*.

That thought made her cringe. She didn't want to be away from *Severus* and quickly rescinded the thought. He actually seemed to be the only person who currently *understood* her state of mind. He was the only person she could *talk* to, to release some of the vitriol she kept contained around other people. She wasn't about to tell her mother what Harry had said, only that he was married now and didn't want his wife to know but would be supporting the child monetarily. She didn't feel like sharing that he blamed her, nor that he accused her of getting pregnant to get money from him, nor that he had more or less told her, albeit not in so many words, that she should have gotten rid of it.

That was the part that echoed in her head day and night ever since the furor of that day had died to a dull roar and she had been able to think once again. She almost wished she was incapable of thinking or that Harry hadn't said what he did or that he had never come in the first place and still didn't know about the baby. But he had, and he did, and now she had to live with knowing her daughter's "father" not only wanted nothing to do with the baby but with her as well. She *knew* Harry had never been good at dealing with disappointment. But it had never been she on the receiving end of his temper before, not really, and it *stung*. Hell, it bloody well *hurt*.

Throwing the pillow against the wall did nothing to calm her anger. It sort of *justthwumphed* noiselessly against the plaster and fell to the floor anticlimactically. She wanted to slam doors. She wanted to scream. She wanted to break dishes and whip all of her belongings into gratifyingly shattered heaps all around the flat. And she would do none of that because she did not want her parents to know how affected she was by everything that happened.

She sat on her bed, staring blankly at the window, wanting more than anything to use the Floo to call Harry and give him a piece of her mind and tell him what an insensitive prat he was and how *dare* he accuse her—his best friend!—of *anything* that would hurt him and—. Unfortunately, he was in Pembroke this week and would be in Cardiff the next ... and she had no idea why she even had *wanted* to know that bit of information, but there it was. He wasn't available to get yelled at through Floo was

all that mattered. Maybe she'd send a Howler. Yeah. A Howler spelled with a loop that would scream its message at him repeatedly and follow him around for at *least* an hour.

Severus had had to stop her from sending an owl to Ellie, during a brief moment of intensified insanity only a couple days after Harry's visit, telling her the whole story, complete with apology. He had taken the letter from her and tucked it inside his jacket and told her that her child didn't deserve a life of turmoil, and if she sent that letter, that is undoubtedly what she'd create. He had begged her to let him take care of her and the baby, to be the baby's father, to forget about Harry and his "typical pompous, self-centered attitude," as he had called it.

He had been right, and she'd been glad in the end that she hadn't gone through with owling that particular letter. And she had felt bad because she could tell Severus had important issues weighing on his mind and she was giving him no respite to think about let alone solve them.

She sighed heavily and wrapped her arms around her legs, resting her head on her bent knees in defeat. She needed to forget about Harry. He was a prat, plain and simple. Always had been; was probably never going to change. He had no idea what she had been through or what she was going through, and he never would, no matter how often or how hard she tried to tell him. He was an ignorant fool and his predictable behavior was merely due to shock. She should have owled him with the news and let him digest it before he had seen her. If it only weren't for the accident....

Hex. If it only weren't for the *hex*. If there was one person she should spend time hating and plotting against, it was Malfoy. Both Malfoys, actually. Hell, for all she knew, all *three* of them. She didn't know if Narcissa was involved in any of this or not. Narcissa could have baked those muffins herself, for all she knew.

And now Draco was threatening Severus with ... well, *her* demise should he not follow through on his promise to brew that potion for Lucius.

Like father, like son. First Lucius Malfoy forces her hand to attempt murder—*Suicide by Hermione*, she thought acerbically—then his son repeatedly attempts to murder her child as payback. A nasty little thought niggled at the back of her brain that Harry might have appreciated the effort, but she forcefully drowned it in the pool of nasty little thoughts that had gathered over the past two weeks she'd spent in hospital.

Never mind it was Lucius' own fault he now lay in a comatose state. Of course *she* was the one who botched the killing curse. And she was glad she had. What was it anyway with people who thought killing was the answer to everything? She refused to have any part in it. At least Harry hadn't come barging in with an Imperio and forced her to abort her child. There had been enough death.

Well, Draco wasn't going to succeed. There was no way some Muggle-hating pureblood was going to destroy her life. And there was no way on this earth that she would allow a family of still-loyal Death Eaters to resume their accustomed status in the wizarding population.

A little smile quirked at her lips. *If anyone* deserved to be a recipient of her unleashed wrath, it was the Malfoys.