

# To Beget an Heir

by GinnyW

**\*\*COMPLETE\*\*** Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

## I

Chapter 1 of 19

**\*\*COMPLETE\*\*** Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.

Disclaimer: I am not JK Rowling. I do not own any of the characters or things in Ms. Rowling's wonderful universe, although I would really love a Time Turner!

***Special thanks to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69, and to my wonderful muse, Meredith!***

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She stood there staring at her reflection in the floor-length mirror, rubbing her hands down along her waist and resting them on her flat belly. She had a fair figure, not overly thin, but definitely not heavy. Only a few slight curves. Her breasts weren't large, by any means, but maybe that would change too.

What would she look like when this was all over?

"Oh well," she muttered.

"Staring at yourself won't make you any prettier, sweetheart," snapped the mirror bitinglly.

She rolled her eyes and proceeded to get dressed. She looked around at her small flat. It wasn't much; it was just a single room that held her bed, a chair, a small bookcase, and armoire. In the far corner was the fireplace with a small countertop, a sink, and a small icebox. The bathroom was shared with three other tenants down the hall. It was worth *almost* anything to get out of this dump, to get out of her financial debt, and to finally have the chance to make something of her life.

It was not as if she wasn't intelligent. In fact, she had been told by several that she was 'the brightest witch of the age' or 'the cleverest witch of the century'. However, no matter how intelligent you are, you still need money to survive. She had worked for seven years supporting Harry and Ron through school as well as another year aiding Harry in his pursuit to destroy Voldemort. When the final battle came, many people died. Most of her friends were gone. Dumbledore had died from Voldemort's wand. Lupin had died at the hand of Pettigrew, literally. Then Pettigrew had sacrificed himself so Harry could finish the final portion of the ritual to destroy Voldemort. Harry had died, in a sense, as Voldemort fell. Both of their souls had become trapped within a Pensieve. There was no way to retrieve one without the other. Thus, her friend was gone for good.

Soon after the battle, Hermione's parents had been killed in a fire. It had been considered an accident by the Muggle authorities, but there was something to suggest that this had been a post-war retaliation by a few of the remaining Death Eaters at large. The Ministry of Magic, in turn, did not acknowledge the Order of the Phoenix members at all. They felt that Dumbledore and his group had worked too far out of Ministry control to be considered legal. This left those that survived somewhere stuck in the middle. They were considered outlaws. Though the Wizengamot eventually released all of the remaining survivors of the Order, the should be war heroes were not held in any

esteem and their records were tarnished.

It was because of this tarnished record that Hermione had not been able to find a decent job after the war. The Ministry of Magic refused to employ her because of her *criminal record*, and she could not get an apprenticeship with anyone. She had considered attending a Muggle university until the accident that killed her parents. Her parents' death left her in severe financial debt in the Muggle world, and thusly unable to afford going to university. She had left the Muggle world with no hopes of being able to repay their debt and was now trapped in the Wizarding world, where she had set out to find work.

Three years later, she had little to show for her efforts. She desperately wanted to do something, anything to advance herself. She barely worked enough hours at her two jobs to be able to pay her rent and buy necessities. She couldn't even think of being able to afford to further her education in the Muggle world or line the pockets of the right people to further her education in the Wizarding world.

This was all until she had run into Lavender Brown while working three weeks ago. Lavender had also been ostracized in many ways as a result of being a member of the DA and working for the Order during the war. Lavender had also not been able to pursue her career of choice without the necessary galleons to ensure that her criminal record did not follow her.

Hermione had been shelving the newest shipment of school textbooks at Flourish & Blotts when Lavender walked in. Same long brown hair, thin frame, but she had a glow about her cheeks and a definite swell in her belly. Hermione had walked up to greet the old friend that had shared her dorm at Hogwarts and asked how she was doing. After several minutes of casual conversation, Hermione asked if Lavender was married and was surprised to hear that she was not. Unwed pregnancy may be common in the Muggle world, but it was not common in the Wizarding world. Seeing Hermione's look of shock, Lavender proceeded to tell her about the latest 'job' she had taken. Lavender was surrogate mother.

Later that evening in her flat, after the initial shock, Hermione thought about the amount of galleons that Lavender had said she was earning for carrying a child for a Wizard couple that was not able to have children of their own. Hermione looked around at her own meager surroundings and began to wonder if it was something that she could do. The pay was substantial, being enough to get her into an apprenticeship nearby or even allow her to leave Great Britain to pursue her career of choice elsewhere. There were definite possibilities here.

Just then a Post Owl swooped in and dropped her latest round of bills on her table. With great trepidation, she opened the scrolls. There was nothing unusual until she reached the last one. It was addressed to Miss Hermione Granger c/o the Leaky Cauldron, and it had a Muggle stamp on it. *Definitely not a good sign*, she thought. Just as she had feared, it was the English Government with a threat to garnish her wages at the Leaky Cauldron to begin to pay her parents' back taxes. With the Leaky Cauldron also a part of Muggle London, they were able to track her employment with the establishment.

"Great! Just great! Now I can't even hold that as a second job!" she had screamed to her empty room.

When she had finally calmed down, she weighed her options and knew that she had little choice. She could either continue to live hand-to-mouth like she was doing, or she could do something drastic in an attempt to change her position. Looking at the piece of paper with the name of the agency that Lavender had given her, she wrote a letter requesting an application before she could change her mind.

The process had been rather quick, quicker than she had initially thought it would be. Hedwig had returned by noon the next day with an appointment time for Hermione. She had found herself going through the extensive application process in the clinic in only three days time.

The application process had consisted of a five-foot scroll of parchment dealing with her heritage, a blood test was taken to test for genetic abnormalities, photos were taken, and she even took personality and intelligence tests. She questioned the woman administering the tests on the reasons behind them. Hermione knew that Lavender was only carrying the child for a couple, and it seemed odd that they would need to know things such as personality traits. Hazel, the witch taking her through the application process, explained that some people had need for the egg of the witch carrying the child, but she would be compensated accordingly should that be the case with her. Hermione was a little taken aback by this bit of information. Carrying a child for someone was one thing. Actually having that child be a part of her and then giving it up was something else that she had not considered. She wasn't certain if that was something that she could do. She shoved the questions from her mind and decided it mattered little right now. She would 'cross that bridge when she got to it' as her mother had always said.

Within three days she had been called in for an interview. It was with a couple. The same witch that had taken her through the application process was there as a mediator as the couple asked Hermione what seemed like a million questions. Finally, they told her that they would contact the agency if they were interested in her. Her second interview was in a room with a mediator and a large window. It reminded Hermione of interrogation rooms she had seen on old police television shows that she watched when she was a child. She did not meet the people that were interviewing her then. Hazel just had a long list of questions that Hermione answered and she left. Again she was assured that she would be contacted if the people were interested. A few days after that she had yet another interview with an anonymous couple.

After hearing, for the third bloody time, that she would be contacted should the couple be interested in her, Hermione became discouraged. It was starting to feel like she was under a microscope. Here were people dissecting every part of her, yet she had no say in the people that spoke with her. She had no control. It was frustrating, nerve wracking, and more stress than she had been in since the final battle.

After a week of not hearing anything, she'd decided to quit counting on the money she would need to continue her life. She had resigned herself to trying to find a plan that was better suited to her when an owl arrived while she was having her morning toast and pumpkin juice. One of the couples she had interviewed with was interested. They wanted to meet with her at the agency at her earliest convenience, finalize the paperwork, and continue with the proceedings.

So, now, here she was, getting ready to go meet the couple and sign away the next year of her life. "Okay, it's now or never," she sighed, grabbing her threadbare cloak and leaving the room. She walked down the hall to the Apparition point. *CRACK!* She found herself at the entrance to Wilhelm Wigworthy's Wombs for Went.

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Once again, she was sitting in the same interrogation room as she had been in three times prior. The witch with whom she had spent those interviews was sitting across from her with a genuine smile on her face.

"Don't be nervous, child," Hazel said. "I think you will be very happy with the arrangements that are being made."

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to relax. She knew she would have some answers soon. It wouldn't bode well for her to appear overly anxious or nervous. The couple had not officially hired her yet. Therefore, they still could opt for another *carrier*.

*Oh God, what am I doing?*

There was a small flash in front of them on the table. A scroll of parchment and a quill appeared. Hermione reached over and grabbed the scroll to open it. She scanned the document quickly and was stunned at the fees being offered to her. Lavender had told her about the standard fee, but that sum failed in comparison to the offer that Hermione was reading.

"This total is 35,000 galleons," she said to Hazel in disbelief.

Hazel smiled and nodded her head. "Yes, that's correct, Miss Granger."

"But, why so much?" asked Hermione. "My friend, Lavender Brown, said that the standard fee was 10,000."

"Yes, Miss Granger, but you need to read over the stipulations in this contract carefully. The gentleman making this offer is asking for quite a bit more than Miss Brown had to give." Hermione looked down and began reading the details of the contract carefully.

Okay, she thought. *So, they want to use one of my eggs. That explains part of the excess fees.* She continued reading while absently twirling the quill in her fingers. The contract seemed fairly standard to her. She would have no rights to the child.

*No rights to your own child, Hermione,* said a voice in her head that sounded incredibly like her mother. *Do you really think you can do that?*

*I don't think I really have a choice at this point,* she silently replied back as she pushed the forming feelings of guilt aside.

A secrecy clause was included; no one would know that this child was partly hers. *That makes sense. I wouldn't want people to know that I had a child that I had essentially disowned,* she thought bitterly.

The final bit struck her as a bit odd. "I have to move in with this couple and live there until the baby is born?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Granger, that is correct. The gentleman has requested that you live with him, stating the desire to more closely monitor your health and the child's health."

Something finally struck Hermione. "Wait! You said *gentleman*? This isn't a couple?" she finally asked when she was able to find her voice.

"Yes, gentleman. He is single and desires an heir to carry on his family name," stated the witch matter-of-factly.

A thousand thoughts began swirling in Hermione's brain. She would have to live the next 9 months or so with a single man. He could be anywhere from 18 years of age up to 170 years old. He could be one of the Death Eaters that had bought their way out of Azkaban! This could be some sick ruse to hurt her, abuse her, or anything really!

She stared firmly at Hazel for several moments in contemplation. Finally she put down the quill, saying, "I won't sign anything until I meet this person."

She didn't notice the wall to her left melt away to reveal a tall man in long black robes. "That is a very wise decision, Miss Granger," he said in his most intimidating, low voice. A slow smirk grew on his face as he saw her surprise at his sudden appearance.

"P-Professor Snape!" she exclaimed when she realized who was standing in the place where the wall had been.

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a/n: This is only the beginning, many (no, not all) of the questions that I know that you are all dying to ask will be addressed in the next chapter. Also, in case you are wondering, yes I do have another WIP in the early chapters here on Ashwinder. That one, along with this story, will not be abandoned. My betas won't allow it. ;-) Both stories are outlined and plotted. Thanks!

Wilhelm Wigworthy wrote "Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles"...a required textbook for 3rd year Muggle Studies...mentioned in POA and FB.

This is based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge posted by *Okonchristy!* The guidelines for this challenge are as follows (and yes, I'm only posting this once!):

Plot: After the war Severus decides now that things are safe he wants an heir. Thinking no witch would ever marry him because of his background he decides to hire a Surrogate Mother. Of course, it will have to be Hermione. He wants an intelligent witch and she is the smartest one of the age! As to why Hermione does this, that is the author's discretion.

Requirements:

-Severus must interview at least 5 witches

-Severus insists Hermione live in his residence during the pregnancy.

(Whether he is still at Hogwarts or not is the author's choice.)

-At least one of Hermione's friends tries to talk her out of it.

-Severus insists on a confidentiality contract so no-one, including

the child will ever know she is the mother and a contract giving him

all rights to the child and her none.

-Hermione gets at least one weird craving and Severus gets it for her.

-They must at some point during the pregnancy develop romantic feelings for each other.

-Authors choice how it ends, but I prefer happy!!!!

## II

### Chapter 2 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

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Severus Snape had been through a very long and tiring process. This entire ordeal had begun nearly eight months prior. He had hoped that he would have been nearly done with the entire mess by now. As the war with the Dark Lord had ended, Severus Snape found himself caught between a rock and a hard place. Throughout the war he had positioned himself in such a way that no matter the outcome, he would be safe. If the Dark Lord had won, Severus would have been praised as one of the Dark Lord's right-hand men. If Dumbledore had won, Severus would have been named a war hero who had sacrificed himself above all else in order to ensure the survival of the Wizarding race as it had been known.

The one outcome that Severus had not imagined was the fall of Lord Voldemort, Dumbledore, and the boy-who-didn't-live. Sure, he had anticipated their demises. However, the damned Ministry of Magic took full advantage of the death of these prominent wizards. In the Ministry's infinite wisdom, as well as their fear of public outcry for retribution, the Minister had named the Order of the Phoenix members nothing more than a group of vigilantes---no better than the Death Eaters. The Ministry behaved the same as they had three years prior to the final battle when they had declared Albus Dumbledore and bloody Harry Potter outcasts.

Severus Snape, along with many other members of the Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix, quickly discovered the value of a Galleon when placed in the proper hands. It had cost Severus nearly his entire fortune: monies he had acquired through his years of teaching, spying, and raiding, not to mention the inheritance from his mother. The simple fact that he had been both a Death Eater and an Order member with loyalty lines obscured somewhere in the middle had cost him more than any of the other persons who had to 'buy their way' out of Azkaban. At the time, Severus was actually thankful that he had been allowed to keep his job as Potions professor at the school.

Now, it was three years after the fall of the Dark Lord. Severus was still employed at Hogwarts. He hated it just as much as he had before the war, if not more. The loathsome idiots that plagued his doorways on a daily basis were almost enough for him to wish that the Dark Lord had survived, enabling Severus to at least be able to do something different. He had very little in his vault at Gringotts now. He was thankful his living expenses were so low. However, after reviewing his monthly account, he figured it would be nearly seventy years before he could retire from teaching, and that was not even a full retirement. That would be contingent on him being able to continue his Potions research, and hopefully, he'd be in high enough standing to enable him to contract some work.

He had reviewed his notes over and over again during the course of several weeks, and then he had taught a class with a student who could rival Longbottom in his abysmal lack of skill in Potions. That was when he decided he needed to do something to get him out of that Hellhole sooner rather than later.

Severus' remaining option, aside from attempting to rob Gringotts, was his father's will. At his father's demise, Severus had not cared about the stipulations in his father's will. Stephen Snape had been a horrible man, and Severus hated every part of him. The mere thought of touching his father's estate was so abhorrent that it had taken his current financial predicament and a seventy year sentence of teaching for him to seek out the exact interpretation of his father's Last Will and Testament. Severus had no need and no use for his father's monies before, but now he was seeing that accepting the finances could help him put the past to rest, as well as get him out of his disdainful life of teaching.

The conditions were simple. To inherit the monies and properties from his father's estate, Severus simply must supply an heir. Severus had read the terms carefully and had hired a Wizarding solicitor to review the will in detail to assure that Severus was not required to marry, that the child could be of either gender, and that the child need not be a Pureblood. The only stipulation was that the mother of said heir must be a witch, no matter her bloodline.

Severus had reviewed his options after that point. He had spent so long spying for the Death Eaters and for the Order that he had not had time to pursue a 'love life'. Neither had he had any desire to pursue such a thing following the war. He had pondered the possibility of having a child. There were a few options. If it had not been for the fact that his father's will had stated that the child actually needed to be of Snape blood, then he would've adopted a sixteen year old war orphan and been done with the matter.

He had also quickly decided that he was not about to waste several years on some ~~relationship~~ with a witch in the sole attempt to obtain an heir. Finally, he had decided that the simplest and most effective course of action would be to hire a surrogate mother to carry his child.

After making his decision, he had contacted Wilhelm Wigworthy's Wombs for Went. *Such an idiotically stupid name*, he thought each time he saw or heard it. He had met with a consultant stating what was required. The consultant had informed him that the selection process would be more difficult for him because Severus required the egg of the surrogate mother as well. After the preliminary work had been completed, the tedious interview process had begun.

Severus had reviewed no less than 75 applications. He had been surprised at the vast quantity until the Wilhelm Wigworthy representative informed him that they were applications taken from their offices all over the world. Whenever Severus had found an applicant that he felt was worthy of his more scrutinizing attentions, he would request an anonymous interview where he could view the entire exchange between the mediator and the applicant from a secret room. He had the distinct pleasure of appearing for eight such interviews when he came across Miss Granger's file.

It had surprised him that the Gryffindor know-it-all had stooped herself to the level of selling a part of her self. As soon as he saw the girl's name on the application form, he had been inclined to discard it immediately. After a few minute's contemplation, however, he had quickly breezed through the positive aspects of Miss Granger being the genetic mother of his child. The sheer fact that she had survived his constant attempts to degrade her during Potions class, and she had still wound up scoring higher than even he had on her N.E.W.T.s, was by and large very admirable. He had made arrangements to schedule an interview with the young woman at her earliest convenience.

Following her initial interview, Severus had to admit that he had been impressed by the young woman's tenacity. She had obviously not been as lucky as some of the other Order members had been. No money to 'buy her way out' of her situation simply had her at the mercy of the Wizarding world. Why she did not just go back to the Muggle world, he did not know, but he had decided that he would ask her when he had the chance.

After that time, Severus spoke with both the representatives from Wilhelm Wigworthy's and his personal Wizarding solicitor to work up a feasible contract to present to Miss Granger. The representatives had informed him that requiring the woman to live with him was above and beyond normal expectations; he had conceded by adding additional monies to the contract. There was one point he would not concede to. If a woman was going to carry his heir, he was going to watch her like a hawk to ensure that she was taking proper care of his progeny. He was uncertain as to how much Miss Granger could be swayed by monetary means; however, he figured it was at least a starting point for negotiations.

Over the last three years, since depleting his stores to save his own hide, he had acquired enough Galleons to pay the required fees to Wilhelm Wigworthy's and to supply the necessary living expenses for himself and the surrogate. The moment the child was born, his father's estate would be released to him, and he could pay whatever remaining fees were necessary to the young woman and be able to quit his Godforsaken teaching job.

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He was silently pleased as he watched Miss Granger struggle with her decision. *She is finally showing some sense*, he thought, as she put down the quill she had been twirling with in her fingers and refused to accept the proposal in front of her until she met the man that she was signing a portion of her life away to. She was refusing to sign until she met Severus Snape.

He tapped his wand on the invisible barrier that was between himself and the table where Miss Granger and the consultant sat. To him, it was merely a step across an imaginary line. To the others in the room, he knew, it appeared that there was an actual wall that was melting to reveal the rest of the room. Miss Granger didn't appear to notice the wall to her left melting away to unveil a tall man in long black robes. "That is a very wise decision, Miss Granger," he found himself saying in his most intimidating, low voice. A slow smirk grew on his face as he saw her surprise at his sudden appearance.

"P-Professor Snape!" she exclaimed when she realized who was standing in the place where the wall had been.

His dark eyes met her large brown saucers. She was, obviously, surprised. Severus found that he had to bite back a chuckle. It was enjoyable to watch another person's surprise. It was even more enjoyable to be in complete control of a situation and to manipulate the direction of every event. "Miss Granger, please close your mouth as it accomplishes little more than to aid in your imitation of a goldfish," he said to her with his best sneer. As an afterthought he continued, "Although, I must say that it is an improvement to the beaver that was ever present until that unfortunate hex from one of your classmates." He could tell by the flashing in her eyes that he had successfully

hit his mark. He conjured a simple straight-backed chair next to the Wilhelm Wigworthy representative and sat down directly opposite of his prey.

"Miss Granger, I believe that you were considering signing that document in front of you, were you not?" he finally inquired after surveying her thoughtfully for several minutes.

She appeared to gain her composure rather quickly as she replied with a simple, "Yes, sir."

"Well, Miss Granger, what is the delay?" he asked, gradually becoming more and more annoyed with the chit sitting in front of him. He watched her take a deep breath, seemingly to organize her thoughts.

"First of all, why do you want to have a child, Professor?"

"I do not see how that is any of your business, Miss Granger," he retorted.

"You are asking for my egg, genetically my child," she said sternly. She stared deep into his black eyes and continued. "I have every right to know why you are seeking to have a child."

"I wish simply to have an heir that can carry on the Snape family name and traditions," he answered straightforwardly. There was no reason to inform her of the monetary perks involved.

She eyed him quizzically. "And, how do you think that you will take care of a baby, Professor Snape?"

He quirked his eyebrow at her and shot back, "And, what makes you think that that is any of your business, Miss Granger? I have the financial means to provide for a child, and I do not appreciate the liberties you are taking in your questions."

She looked slightly taken aback as she looked down at her hands which were now again holding the illustrious quill in her hands. "I'm sorry, Professor. I just want to make sure this is the right thing."

The last few words were barely a mumble. He was slightly discomfited by her last few words until he remembered, *Oh, yes, a ruddy Gryffindor!* Severus quickly decided that a new tactic was in order.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, what is it that brings you to such desperate measures?"

"Money," she replied frankly, as she looked back up at him. He grabbed a hold of the wand in his pocket and thought the spell in his head. *Legilimens!* He held her gaze and briefly caught a few images flashing through her mind. *Meandering through the remains of a house that was devastated by fire. Reading a summons for a trial in front of the Wizengamot. Standing at the mock grave of Harry Potter.* He was jolted back to his present surroundings by what felt like someone shoving him in the chest.

"Did you see enough to satisfy your curiosity, *sir*?" Hermione shot at him.

He did not allow the feeling of shock at this young woman's apparent aptitude for Occlumency to appear on his face. "Nearly," he said.

"Ask your questions so we can get this over with, Professor, and stay out of my mind!"

"Very well, Miss Granger, what is it, specifically that you require money for?"

Hermione appeared to be thinking on this, and when she spoke, it seemed that she was forming her words carefully. "Well, sir, since the war I have not been able to find gainful employment, nor is anyone willing to take me on as an apprentice." She began speaking faster as she spun out the details of her parents' deaths, their large amount of debt that they had accumulated while Hermione had been a student, and finishing off with how the Muggle world had now discovered Hermione's second job as a housekeeper at the Leaky Cauldron. She even told him that they were threatening to garnish her wages.

"Miss Granger, surely you are aware that the Muggle world cannot strap you with your parents' debt after their untimely demise."

"In most cases, Professor, you would be correct. However, my parents applied for and received a large amount of financial aid to pay for my school supplies and education. Thus, the debt was in my name. And, before you tell me that Hogwarts doesn't cost any money, you need to think about the Muggle-born children that are about that don't pay taxes into the Wizarding Government. All of my parents' assets were liquidated to pay off all of their back taxes and miscellaneous bills. However, the education loans made it impossible for me to pursue my career through strict academic means. Then, the Ministry of Magic had to pull that whole "you are a member of the Order of the Phoenix and a vigilante" crap! I have spent the last three years barely scraping by, Professor Snape, and I need a way out of this mess." She had rambled through all of this quickly, and her temper seemed to be flaring. This was obviously something she had thought about on numerous occasions.

Severus sat back in his chair, deep in thought.

Hermione leaned over the table and broke the silence, "Professor, if I could afford to hire a solicitor in the Muggle world or the Wizarding world, I may have a chance of fighting some of this. However, I have found it very difficult to do anything. I feel blocked at every turn. I need to get out of this miserable existence, and right now, money seems to be the only way to do that."

Severus looked at the young woman's face. He didn't need Legilimency to see the truth behind her deep brown eyes. "So, Miss Granger--Hermione--you are willing to sell your soul to the devil?"

"No, sir, I am willing to sell my body *for my soul*." Both sets of eyes looked down at the contract in front of her. Both seemingly contemplating the situations.

Severus finally spoke, "What if we change the conditions of the contract, Hermione?" She looked up and again met his gaze.

"I will hire a solicitor that specializes in both Muggle and Wizarding law to clear up your financial problems. I will ensure that your Ministry *criminal* record is non-existent." The disgust in his voice at the word 'criminal' did not go unnoticed by Hermione. Severus paused momentarily before continuing, "and I will see that you are able to pursue whatever form of academia that you prefer, whether it be to study as an apprentice or continue on to university." As he spoke these words, the payment terms on the contract changed to reflect his promise. He watched her grip the quill ever more tightly in her fingers and place the tip of the quill to the parchment. She laid the quill back down before signing her name.

"I have another question, Professor."

He rolled his eyes. "Now why does that not surprise me, Miss Granger?" he drawled. "Ask your question."

"Why do you want me to live with you?"

"Because I want to ensure the health and safety of my heir, Miss Granger," he replied simply. "It is nothing more than that. I assure you."

She simply nodded, reached out, and grabbed the quill again. She signed the scroll with a tight, messy signature. The scroll immediately rolled itself up and vanished. She looked back up at him. "So, now what happens?"

"Well, now, Miss Granger, I'm sure that your mother didn't die before telling you about the birds and the bees?" The evil grin he had worn when he had first entered the

room now returned to his face as he saw, again, the sheer look of horror appear on the young woman's face. He again found himself biting back a chuckle.

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A/N: Sorry, I like evil cliffies. ;-)

B/N: All questions will be answered eventually. Ginny is very secretive and loves suspense.



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Hermione felt her chest tighten upon hearing the words, and a chill shot down her spine. What had she gotten herself into? *Birds and the bees, indeed* She didn't have to have sex with this man, did she? *Oh God, please no!* She sat there silently staring at the man in front of her. His dark eyes seemed to bore into her soul. It took every ounce of control Hermione had to keep from reaching up and smacking that bloody smirk off his face. Just when she thought she could not take anymore of his sneer, Hazel spoke up next to her.

"Now, see here, Professor Snape! That is **not** the way we do things here!" Hazel was stern, and Hermione knew that this woman was not to be crossed. Hermione said a silent prayer of thanks.

She let out a slight sigh of relief as Snape's smirk became more pronounced. His eyes narrowed at her, and Hermione could see something that looked like humor in his eyes. The ruddy git had enjoyed that! She knew right then that this was going to be a very long nine months.

"Very well," said Snape silkily. "You will do what *this* witch tells you."

Hermione nodded her understanding. This made a little more sense to her; at least she no longer had to worry about being locked in a dark room with this man and 'let nature take it's course'.

Professor Snape continued talking. He actually had a business-like manner about him, as if he was reading from a script. "It will take two weeks before we know that conception has taken place. You will return home this evening, get your affairs in order, and arrive at Hogwarts exactly two weeks from tomorrow. The students are to return from their summer holidays in three days. That will give me time to settle in with the next group of dunderheads and idiots before you arrive."

Hermione listened closely. She only had two weeks to give notice at her jobs, to pack her things, and to prepare herself to live with this man. *have to live with him!* She buried her face in her hands at this realization.

"Miss Granger!" he snapped, causing her to jolt and look up at him. "Pay attention. I only intend to explain these things once!"

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Now," he said, "do you have any further questions, or can I get out of here?"

"You could be a little nicer," she shot back at him.

He scoffed at her comment as he began to stand up.

"Professor," she said, "if I'm not supposed to tell anyone about this, how am I going to live at the castle with you unnoticed?"

He stopped, set his hands on the table and leant over. "I never said that no one would know, Miss Granger. I just don't want any one to know that you are the biological mother. They will know that you are a surrogate, nothing more. Do I make myself clear?" He narrowed his eyes accusingly at her.

"Yes, sir. Perfectly." Like she would actually want to admit any *of that* to anyone!

Hermione watched him as he straightened and strode out the door, his black cloak billowing out behind him.

Hazel smiled at her. "Are you all right, Miss Granger?" she asked in a comforting, motherly tone.

"Yes, I will be fine. Thank you," she said. Now *that* was gone, Hermione started to feel more relaxed. *Nine months*, she told herself. *It's only nine months. Less than a year.* She smiled back at Hazel to reassure her. "Okay, now what do I do?" she asked the older witch.

"Come with me, child. We'll get everything all ready for you."

Hermione stood up; the butterflies began churning in her stomach. She was now venturing into truly foreign territory.

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Fifteen minutes later, Hermione found herself in a room, much like a doctor's office. She was stripped down to nothing except the flimsy gown she had been given to wear, and her legs were covered in nothing more than a small lap sheet. She was cold; the Mediwitch who had given her the gown had also given her strict instructions not to use a Warming Charm.

The Mediwitch returned shortly with a Healer. "Good day, Miss Granger," said the Healer very pleasantly. "I am Healer White. I'm going to give you a quick exam so we can determine what potions we will need to use."

Hermione nodded. She seemed to have lost her voice. She had been looking for information on surrogacy the last few weeks; there was very little information available in the Wizarding world. She was cursing herself for not taking more time to look for information at the Muggle library.

She lay back on the table as Healer White poked and prodded at every inch of her body while the Mediwitch stood back taking notes. Hermione stared up at the ceiling trying to imagine she was anywhere but on that table.

Finally, Healer White held her wand over Hermione's abdomen and muttered a spell. The wand tip held a small green glow for a few seconds. "Oh, too bad," she sighed. "Well, we'll have to add a couple more potions, I suppose."

Hermione looked at her closely. "What potion? What happens next?"

"Oh, don't worry yourself, child. It's just two more potions, though it is a little more uncomfortable and does take just a bit longer." Healer White smiled reassuringly. "It's really nothing."

The healer turned around and addressed the Mediwitch. "Madame Morgan, please go get the potions so we can get started."

Healer White turned back to Hermione. "Now, you will be taking five potions. The last thing that I tested was what stage of your cycle you were in. Your menses appears to have just ended, thus the uterine lining is thin, and it will be another week or so until you will ovulate on your own. The two extra potions will remedy this. One will cause you to ovulate; the other will cause the lining of your uterus to thicken. Both processes can be a little bit uncomfortable. However, it truly is negligible compared to pregnancy."

Hermione smiled, but the only thing going through her head was, *Oh, yes, that's real reassuring!*

Healer White continued informing her about the potions. "Another potion is to help make the egg more susceptible to fertilization, and another will help ensure implantation. Finally, the last potion is a standard prenatal vitamin supplement."

"That seems like so many," said Hermione as the Mediwitch reappeared with a tray filled with three vials and two goblets.

"Well, Miss Granger, we only wish to do this once," stated Healer White matter-of-factly. "Unlike the Muggle world where it can take several attempts to achieve conception--and some never do---we have streamlined this to achieve conception at the first attempt 98.6% of the time."

"Oh," was all that Hermione could get out as the Mediwitch began forcing the potions on her to drink.

They were bitter and awful, every one of them. The final potion was the worst. It had a horrible aftertaste of something that reminded Hermione of blood. "What was that last one?" she asked.

"That was the vitamin potion, Miss Granger. You will need to take that one daily."

Hermione made a face of disgust as she asked, "What was that foul taste? It almost tasted like blood!"

The healer laughed, "No, it's not blood, you just tasted the iron. The iron levels need to be high. You can add the potion to your morning drink, if you'd like. It will help hide the flavor."

Hermione nodded. "Okay, now what?"

"Now, Miss Granger, we wait. We need to wait for you to ovulate."

"Okay, how long will that take?" she asked.

"Well, it varies with everyone, but usually within a couple of hours. You will know when it happens. You will feel a sharp pain on one side of your belly. When that happens, just ring this bell, and we'll come in to finish everything up."

"Can I get dressed?" asked Hermione. She was still rather cold sitting there.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I tend to forget how cold it can be in here," exclaimed Healer White. "But, no, you may not. We are trying to keep your body at a very specific temperature. The room is charmed to maintain a specific level. It is another thing we do to help ensure conception." The Mediwitch gathered the tray of used vials and goblets and exited the room while Healer White conjured a stack of pamphlets and set them on the examination table next to Hermione. "Just sit back and read these. Hopefully, it won't be too long for you. Ring the bell when you're ready!"

And with that, Healer White left her alone again.

Hermione didn't care what the temperature of the room was supposed to be; she liked to have clothes on. Even when it was sweltering hot outside, she was only comfortable with at least a thin layer of clothes covering her. She looked down at the stack of pamphlets that Healer White had left with her.

There were a wide variety of titles such as *Pregnancy and Confinement for Witches and Healers, Mediwitches, & Midwives Answer Your Pregnancy Questions* Hermione thumbed through them and glanced at pictures of a growing fetus. She looked at a picture of a ten-week fetus, showing the heartbeat fluttering under the chest. The next page showed an eighteen-week fetus turning, kicking, and sucking its thumb.

Hermione settled in to read a pamphlet on proper care of her body during pregnancy, such as, the sort of diet she should be consuming, daily exercise, and post-partum care. She read that keeping both her mind and her body healthy were imperative for bearing a healthy child. There was also an interesting article that stated a witch that did not properly feed her mind and practice her magic during pregnancy was more likely to have a Squib. *Really? Not doing magic enough can cause a Squib birth?* Certainly not what Hermione had thought. She had assumed that it was because of all of the inbreeding of purebloods that had caused the increase in Squib births over the last several decades.

She became so absorbed in her reading that she had lost track of time until she felt a very sharp stabbing pain, as if she had been pierced by a knife, on the lower right side of her abdomen. She immediately grabbed her hand to her side. The pain eased slightly, and then it returned with what Hermione felt to be a small explosion. She doubled-over and reached with her other hand to ring the bell to call back the Healer.

Healer White and Madame Morgan were at her side in a thrice. The pain was easing some, but Hermione still felt a stabbing pain that would come and go.

"Well now, let's take a look-see," said Healer White. She instructed Hermione to lay back, which caused another surge of pain as Healer White waved her wand back over Hermione's abdomen muttering a spell. This time the tip of her wand glowed a light pink for several seconds.

"Yes, perfect!" exclaimed Healer White. "Madam Morgan, if you will get everything, Miss Granger is ready."

The butterflies that were in Hermione's stomach earlier returned with a vengeance. There was no turning back now *Oh God!* She took several slow deep breaths to try to calm her nerves. She began reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood and then went on to the ingredients and process of preparing Veritaserum. Madame Morgan returned with a small, silver tray. It contained what looked like a small gel-covered pill and a wand.

"All right, Miss Granger, just relax," instructed the Healer.

"W-what are you going to do?" asked Hermione. She tried to make herself sound calm, but she was failing miserably.

"Well, it's very simple. This is a special wand. Its core is the tail hair of a baby unicorn. Most wandmakers use adult unicorn hair since it has more power. However, for this we need something that is gentle and pure. The capsule here is very thin and will dissolve almost instantly. Madam Morgan will conduct a spell locating your egg, and I will Apparate the capsule to that location with this wand." Healer White was very calm as she explained the procedure to Hermione.

Hermione didn't need to ask what was in the capsule. She knew, but she really didn't want to think about it. She **really** didn't want to think about how they'd gotten it!

*This is just a medical procedure, she kept telling herself. Nothing more.*

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Several hours later Hermione was home and thinking about the day's events. She had really signed away the next several months of her life. But, it will be worth it, she kept telling herself. Besides, it was already done.

A bright side to everything was that she would be moving back to Hogwarts, despite the fact that she would have to share living space with that overgrown bat. Hermione had not missed the fact that Snape had called her by her given name during their discussion. He was trying to manipulate her, she knew. She was going to have to watch him closely.

Hermione knew she would have to find something to keep herself busy. She certainly couldn't spend all of that time locked away in the dungeons. She would see if she could help some of the professors with their grading, or see if Madam Pince would let her help reshelving books in the library. Maybe she could even convince one of them to take her on as an apprentice once she was no longer considered a *criminal* by the Ministry of Magic.

Now she had other things to worry about. She had to quit her job. She had already given her notice at the Leaky Cauldron once she had received that disturbing letter from the Muggle government, but she still had her job at Flourish and Blotts. Then she needed to pack, inform her landlord that she would be moving out, and she had to tell her friends where she was going.

She collapsed on the couch at that thought. *Oh God, what is Ginny going to say?* She was thankful that she didn't have her parents to worry about, but her parents had not held any magical powers, like Ginny did!

Deciding that it was best to get the worst over with as soon as possible, Hermione got up from the couch and went to the fire. *Incendio!* she muttered at the empty grate. Immediately a small fire sprang to life. She grabbed a pinch of Floo powder from the bowl on top of the mantel and threw it into the flames. She knelt down before the now green fire calling, "Number 12 Grimmauld Place!" She stuck her head into the warm flames and found her head in the fireplace of the kitchen at the old headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix.

"Ginny! Ginny!" Hermione called.

Within only a few seconds, she heard someone running across the floor and opening the kitchen door. A very hurried looking young woman with long red hair came into the room. Ginny spotted Hermione's head in the fire immediately.

"Hermione, what's going on? You're usually working on Friday nights!" exclaimed the redhead.

Hermione smiled at her friend, she was frank, to say the least about her. "I need to talk to you; can I come through?" she asked.

"Oh sure," said Ginny. Her words were shaky, however, and Hermione was certain that her friend was anything but sure. Ginny's eyes kept glancing towards the kitchen door.

"If now is not a good time, Gin, I can come back later," supplied Hermione.

Ginny took a deep breath and looked at Hermione closely, "No, Hermione, it's fine. *He's* just here right now, and I don't want another row."

"Oh. Well, I'll behave if he does." Hermione wondered if she really could keep her temper *in his* presence, but she decided that it was worth it. She didn't want to be alone right now. "This is important, Ginny. I really need to talk to you."

"Okay, Mione, come on through."

Hermione was thankful that her friend finally agreed to her plea, as Hermione's knees were beginning to ache terribly. Normally she would've put a pillow on the floor if she was planning on holding a conversation via Floo for more than a couple of minutes, but she didn't want to have a Floo conversation. This needed to be done face-to-face.

She stood up and stepped through the flames and swirled until she found herself in the grate of Grimmauld Place. Hermione brushed the soot off her as she stepped out of the fireplace. She then looked up at her friend and gave her a smile.

Ginny promptly came forward and gave her a small hug. "What's the matter, Mione?" she asked while gesturing to the kitchen table for her to take a seat.

Hermione sat and let out a huge sigh. She rested her hands in her face and began feeling the sudden swell of emotion that had been bubbling below the surface for the majority of the day. She didn't even notice Ginny conjuring up some tea and sitting across from her at the table. Hermione found her composure quickly as Ginny grabbed one of her wrists from her face and pulled it down to the table.

"What happened, Hermione?" asked her worried friend.

"I don't know where to start," said Hermione. Another sigh escaped her lips as she used her free hand to begin twirling her long brown locks around her finger. "I guess...I guess that it started a few weeks ago when I received a letter from the Muggle government threatening to garnish my wages from the Leaky Cauldron because they are also listed as a Muggle establishment. Then, it ended today with me agreeing to be a surrogate mother."

"WHAT?" asked Ginny in shock. "How do you go from Muggles taking your earnings to being a surrogate mother?"

"It's a long story, Gin, but basically they said they were going to take my wages. I already can barely scrape together enough money to get by on. I needed a way out. You inherited Harry's money and this place, and you were able to use it to allow you to be able to actually live your life. You were able to help Ron do the same. Me? Well, I've been stuck allowing my brain to turn to mush because I can only obtain a minimum wage paying job because of the blasted Ministry of Magic!" Her voice had slowly become louder and louder with each breath to the point that she yelled the last few words.

"I'm sorry, Mione," said Ginny as she squeezed her wrist a little bit tighter. "I wish I could've helped you out, you know, but at the time we all thought that your parents could help. And well, you and Ron had the horrible break-up that I really didn't think that doing anything like that for you would be prudent."

Hermione held up her hand to silence the younger witch. "I know, Ginny. I'm not blaming you. No one thought that the Ministry was going to be able to hold up these shams called charges against me. And well, I knew once I broke things off with Ron that I couldn't stay here." Hermione shook her head. "I just never knew that the Ministry would work so hard to ensure that I could never do anything with my life."



"Are you really thinking about this surrogacy thing?"

"Yes. Well, I've more than just thought about actually."

Ginny's hazel eyes grew wide. "What?" she asked. "You don't mean that you've already... you're already?"

Hermione nodded and moved her free hand to the center of her forehead. "Oh, God," was all she could manage to say.

Ginny grabbed Hermione's other wrist and pulled it from her face. "Look at me, Hermione," she snapped.

Hermione's eyes slowly moved up and met her gaze. "You're pregnant?"

Hermione closed her eyes and looked away. "I don't know yet."

"Okay, tell me what happened," prodded Ginny.

"Well, I've done several interviews over the last few weeks, and someone requested to make me an offer. I met with the consultant today, and I accepted the offer." It was only after looking back at her friend's confused face that she realized that she was skirting several key issues. "Well, the contract promises that he will hire a solicitor versed in both Muggle and Wizarding law. He will also ensure that I can find gainful employment and pursue any educational avenue that I prefer."

"Oh, God, Hermione," said Ginny shaking her head. "Who are these people that you are doing this for?"

Hermione removed her hands from her friend's vice-like grips and covered her face as she mumbled his name.

"What?"

Hermione dropped her hands back down and answered. "Severus Snape."

"WHAT?" fumed Ginny. Her face instantly reddened, and the fiery redhead rose from her chair like a towering fury. "How could you? How could he?"

"Calm down, Gin. It's not like that," she said, attempting to tame the blazing inferno.

She could tell that Ginny was mentally trying to calm herself, inhaling slowly and deeply and repeating the process on exhale. Finally Ginny spoke. "A surrogate, right? You didn't have to *sleep* with him, did you? It's not your baby, right?"

Hermione knew that Ginny was only looking for some reassurance. She wanted to be truthful with her, but she knew that she couldn't tell her everything. "Yes, Gin, a surrogate. I just carry the fetus through gestation, and then I give it to him. For your second question, no, I didn't have to *sleep* with him. And, on your third question, surrogates don't have to be the biological mother of the child; they just have to act as an incubator." *It isn't a total lie*, she told herself.

Ginny's eyes narrowed and watched Hermione closely. She slowly nodded her head in understanding. "So, are you or aren't you pregnant now?"

"I told you. I don't know. They did the procedure today, but I won't know for about two weeks whether or not it 'stuck'." She saw Ginny's confused look as she said the word 'stuck'. "Stuck, as in the embryo 'sticking' to the uterine wall. It's too easy to miscarry during the first few weeks to really consider it a pregnancy."

Ginny sat there silently nodding her head, and finally said, "So, you're going to have Snape's baby?"

Neither witch had heard him bound into the kitchen, as they were too wrapped up in their own thoughts, but they were quickly alerted to his presence when he began shouting. "WHAT? You're going to have Snape's baby?" screamed Ron.

Hermione grabbed her hands back up to her face and muttered, "Oh, God!"

Ginny took her cue, and she quickly explained the circumstances to Ron who appeared dumbstruck by the story that his little sister was telling. Hermione felt him lean down and wrap his arms around her, holding her close. It was the first time that he had held her in nearly three years, and it was her breaking point. All of the pain, confusion, and fear that had been boiling in her for ages poured out of her as she buried her face in his chest and wept.

He mumbled words of condolences and comfort as he brushed his hand over her hair and held her tight. When her sobs finally slowed, he began to release his grip around her. He turned her face towards his to brush away her tears. "I'm so sorry, Mione."

"Me too," she answered simply.

"No, Mione, I mean I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry that no one helped you sort through the affair with the Ministry. I'm sorry I was such a bloody arse when your parents were killed. If I wouldn't have..." He paused; there was a wave of guilt that washed over his face. "I wish that I wouldn't have cheated on you." He turned his head away from her; he couldn't look into her eyes anymore.

"I know, Ron. I know." It had been the thing that had ended their relationship. Ron had cheated on her with Parvati Patil shortly after the fall of Voldemort. They had been fighting ever since. This was the first time that Ron had ever apologized for his actions. Any other time that they had discussed it, he had blamed the liquor, the thrill of celebrating, or the depression he felt from losing his best friend. This was the first time he had truly apologized for his actions. And, with this apology, some of the resentment and anger she had felt towards Ron these last few years began to melt away.

He let go of her and slumped into the chair beside her. Hermione picked up the tea that Ginny had conjured earlier and began sipping at it.

"So, Hermione," said Ginny, in an obvious attempt to break the silence. "What happens now?"

Hermione explained how she was to quit her job and pack her things. She explained that she was to go back to Wilhelm Wigworthy's exactly two weeks from the day to test that the pregnancy was viable. Then she was off to Hogwarts the following day to live with the greasy git. She glossed over the part about having to live with Snape and brushed it aside as if this was a typical for a surrogate mother. There was no reason for them to know any different.

The tension she had been feeling up to now was beginning to ease some. She was so glad to finally have this entire thing off of her chest.

"Wow, the great greasy bat of the dungeons with a baby," laughed Ron. "Now, that will certainly be a sight worth seeing!"

At that all three of them burst into a fit of laughter.

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Two weeks later, she found herself back at Wilhelm Wigworthy's Wombs for Went. The time had flown by. Even though she had so very little, it had been very difficult getting all of her affairs in order. She had been so busy that on most days she'd forgotten about the reason for arranging her finances, packing, cleaning, etc. She was still working at Flourish and Blotts until the day before. During every free minute while working, she could have been found in the Anatomy and Physiology section or in the Parenting section. Although she knew full well she was not going to actually *be* a parent. She quickly learned that these books contained quite a bit of information on pregnancy.

She wasn't certain if it was her imagination from reading these books or if it was something else, but a few days before, she could have sworn that she felt a small cramping feeling in her lower abdomen. Only the day before, she had read that some women have the same sensation during implantation. She was also beginning to notice an increased tenderness in her breasts. Again, she wasn't sure if this was due to pregnancy, if it was merely her overactive imagination, or if it was the fact that she would be starting her cycle within the next week due to the forced cycling that two of the potions had forced on her.

Back in the doctor's office, Healer White came through the door to see her. Now that she was not longer worried about the impending procedure, Hermione was able to look at the Healer. Her name certainly matched this woman's appearance. She was petite with short, white, curly hair. She wore a long, white lab coat, and as far as Hermione could tell, her clothes beneath the lab jacket were white as well. Even the Healer's skin was nearly as pale as Professor Snape's.

Healer White smiled at Hermione and said, "Well now, go ahead and lie back. I'll run the test." Hermione was incredibly grateful that this time she was not required to disrobe for the exam. Healer White held her wand over Hermione's uterus and uttered a spell under her breath. There was a faint turquoise glow at the tip of the wand.

"Another success," announced Healer White cheerfully.

"That's it?" asked Hermione. "Couldn't I have just done that at home?" She was a little disgusted that she had been required to come all the way down for a test that took little more than 30 seconds to perform.

Healer White chuckled. "Yes, that's it, and you are correct. You could've done this yourself at home. No doubt you will during your pregnancy, most women do. Once the fetus has a heartbeat that spell is used to listen to it. But, you needed to come down here so that we could document the success or failure of the pregnancy and go over a few small things with you."

Hermione nodded in assent.

"So, first of all, there are a few rules, Miss Granger," started the Healer in a firm tone. "Have you been taking your vitamin potion?"

Hermione opened her mouth to say yes, but she wound up sputtering, "Well, I've tried. I do most days, I suppose."

The glare she received in response was enough to cause her to feel guilty for her error.

"That, my dear, is the very reason that this man wishes for you to live under his care. You need to be taking your potion daily. It will help to ensure that you grow a healthy baby." Healer White was speaking very sternly to her.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Next, here is a pamphlet on potions that are acceptable during pregnancy. Read it cover to cover. It should answer most of your questions. Being that Professor Snape is a Potions master, then it is likely he already knows which potions are acceptable, as well as the approved individual ingredients. I suspect that he will already have removed any potentially harmful potions or ingredients from his rooms, or at least have them so highly warded that no one could break into them."

Hermione gave a small smile and a nod.

"Then, there is travel. Truly, Miss Granger, the only safe way to travel during pregnancy is either via Portkey or on the Knight Bus. Brooms can be dangerous, as it is too easy to fall off, and well, Apparating has the risk of splinching. You really don't want to splinch as a pregnant woman."

Hermione shuddered at this thought. It hadn't occurred to her that her travelling options would be limited so much. "What about Floo?" she asked.

"Well, in moderation, I suppose it is all right, but it's really not good getting all of that ash into your system. Too many risks."

Healer White pulled out a few more pamphlets and placed them in Hermione's hands. "This one has information on proper diet and exercise, including exercising your magic. Then, this periodical has information on just some frequently asked questions. Most of your questions will be answered in there. If you still have questions you can contact me, Madam Morgan, or --I believe there is a Mediwitch at that school where you will be living-- you may ask her."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," said Hermione. She was feeling calmer now, a little more relaxed. At least she didn't have to drink any more potions.

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The next morning found Hermione at the gates of Hogwarts with her trunks. She had ridden the Knight Bus to get there, and it had been anything but pleasant. For some reason, that nutty, old loon, Madam Marsh, was **always** on the bus when she was. Madam Marsh always seemed to be vomiting. Hermione let out a small shudder. She had been forced into the unfortunate pleasure of sitting next to the retching woman all morning. It took every ounce of Hermione's strength to avoid losing her breakfast as well. *Thank God this isn't a few weeks later!* thought Hermione dryly.

She pulled open the gates and waved her wand over her trunks. "*Locomotor trunks!*" She saw a tall black figure standing near the main doors to the castle, and she slowly walked towards it. She watched both castle and man growing closer to her while her trunks floated dutifully behind her. A deep feeling of dread swept through her as her stomach once again began roiling. *What have I gotten myself into?*

## IV

### Chapter 4 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.

Disclaimer: I am not JK Rowling. I do not own any of the characters or things in Ms. Rowling's wonderful universe, although I would really love it if she would send me a Time Turner!

**Special thanks to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69, and to my wonderful muse, Meredith! Also to Charmed\_Nay who really helped out with the grammar on this chapter! ;-)**

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Severus Snape received an Owl during the evening meal confirming Miss Granger's pregnancy. Following the letter, some of what was occurring began to finally register with him. He had spent **months** searching for the *right* woman to hire as a surrogate mother. Now, after all of the interviews, all of the plotting, all of the planning...it all came down to Miss Hermione Granger. He knew from the moment he saw her in that interview room that she was the appropriate choice for this *endeavor*.

He had known that the time had been nearing when she would be arriving at the castle. It had been a hellacious week. The week had been filled with the latest batch of unlearned dunderheads and the Weasley-Twin wannabe miscreants. He had already had the pleasure of two exploding cauldrons...courtesy of the young Neville prodigy, a Miss Schmidt...followed by the unwelcome advances of Professor Trelawney, not to mention the countless detentions that he had been forced to oversee. He allowed himself a small smirk. He had not actually been *forced* exactly. He'd given out the detentions to hopefully teach these degenerates about proper and acceptable behavior. He did enjoy, however, the bringing about of unabated fear and dread that gave him his very satisfying reputation.

After reading the letter, he finally decided that it was time to inform the headmaster of his soon-to-be houseguest and the reason for it.

He had been undecided as to what information to give the old man even though he himself had been the one to insist on that damned secrecy clause. With his choice of a surrogate, things had changed. What had he truly hoped to gain from that? Well, initially, he had planned to hire a woman, have her secreted away somewhere, deliver the child, and then have the child delivered to him. The secrecy clause was to ensure that this woman did not attempt to re-enter his life or his child's life at a later date. This clause guaranteed him sole rights to the child. The witch would never be allowed to speak of it or her role in its *creation*. No doting witch turning up at birthday parties and holidays suited him fine. He wanted the witch completely out of *his* child's life and definitely out of his own.

However, when he'd seen the state of Miss Granger, he had felt *something* for her. *Something* unidentifiable. *Pity? Maybe*. After all she had done for the Order of the Phoenix, she had nothing to show for it. In fact, she was nearly unemployable. Yes, it was pity, he decided. This pity led him to enact a clause stating that she would need to come and live with him at Hogwarts. He'd realized immediately that with the small change, people would know the identity of the carrier, but it wasn't like he could secret her away to the dungeons and expect her to stay put. No, he knew enough of the *Golden Trio's* antics to know that she would definitely not remain there obediently. He'd told himself that he wanted her to stay with him so that he could ensure that she would take care of herself and conversely *his* child throughout the pregnancy. She was likely to become all noble or something equally Gryffindorish and attempt to break the contract if left her to her own devices. That was the one thing he was most worried about. He knew that he would have to play her very carefully, and he'd need to be sure that he played to her other traits of honor, such as showing her the importance of upholding the contract...to the letter.

With all that in mind and still desiring to maintain the secrecy of the actual biological mother, Severus had decided that it was much easier to say that the child was the result of a donor egg and that Miss Granger was only the carrier. Of course, people would still speculate, but if she denied that the child was hers, no one would refute the honorable Gryffindor.

With those thoughts clear in his mind, he proceeded to the Gargoyle that guarded the headmaster's office.

"Harry James Potter", Snape hissed. Oh how he hated the new headmaster's *choice* of passwords. Unlike Dumbledore, who had used a vast variety of sweets as his passwords, the new headmaster rotated the passwords with the names of students who had received the exceptionally high mark of Outstanding on their O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s. Potter, unfortunately, had been one of those students that had impressed the old man when he had tested the boy on his Defense Against the Dark Arts exam during Potter's fifth year.

The mocking of the Gargoyle pulled Snape out of his reverie. "Yeah, don't choke on your words there, Professor," it chuckled whilst taking Snape up to the headmaster's office.

He knocked on the large brass knocker in the shape of an eagle several times when he finally heard, "Enter!" from the other side of the door.

He entered the headmaster's office, the blue and gold carpeting was a sharp contrast to the maroons that had draped the floor and windows from the previous owner. *Yes, definitely no subtlety to the man's previous House affiliations*, thought Snape with a scowl.

"Oh, Professor Snape," said the very old wizard seated behind the dark mahogany desk. "It is so wonderful of you to drop in! You know, I'm thinking of using you for the next password," announced Headmaster Tofty in amused tones.

"No, sir. That will not be necessary," replied Severus curtly as he gracefully sat himself in the plush armchair facing the Headmaster's desk.

"Oh, but, Professor," exclaimed the headmaster. "You had exemplary scores! You deserve that honor you know. Yes, yes, I remember quite clearly," he continued with a smile. "You received 12 O.W.L.s in your fifth year with some of the highest scores since Albus Dumbledore himself."

*This man sounds so pathetically gleeful*, thought Severus. He let out an involuntary shudder. True, Albus had been a doddering and meddlesome old fool, but at least he had intelligence and sense to make rational decisions. This Headmaster was just plain...*something!* Severus didn't know what he was exactly. Tofty was daft. True, the man had been a very intelligent wizard in his time, and he had been an outstanding professor and had done well working on the Wizarding Examinations Board. However, Tofty was well past his prime now, and it seemed that old age had finally caught up with the man. Severus had long since suspected that Tofty had been shuffled off to Hogwarts following the war to ensure that the Ministry of Magic and the School Governors would be able to push through whatever *new rules* that they deemed necessary. Luckily for all of them, the deputy headmaster was not quite so simple minded and being not nearly as old as the current headmaster; Professor Flitwick had a strong mind about him.

Severus snapped his head back to the conversation when he heard Professor Tofty say, "...Hermione Jane Granger..."

"What?" he cried, nearly forgetting himself.

The headmaster gave his young teacher a small smile. "I said that since you insist, then perhaps I will use Hermione Jane Granger for the next password, you know her scores..."

Severus cut him off, standing to his feet, "No!"

"Pardon Me?" inquired the aged wizard.

Calming himself immediately, whilst inwardly chastising himself for losing his temper so quickly with the old man, Snape resumed his seat. "I'm sorry, sir. I did not mean to react so negatively to your suggestion." Snape paused and eyed the headmaster carefully. "Please reconsider that decision until I have said what I have come up here to tell you."

No, having Hermione's name as the password to the headmaster's office would not do. All too soon, the young woman would be once again wandering the halls of Hogwarts, and Snape was certain she would be the hot topic of conversation and idle gossip. At that rate, the door to the headmaster's office would constantly be opening to anyone who happened to utter her name in the hallway. Severus did allow himself a small inward smirk at this thought.

Severus took a deep breath and looked up at the painting of Albus Dumbledore which was positioned directly over the desk of the current Headmaster. Albus gave Severus a small smile and attentively leant forward in his frame.

"Do go on, Professor Snape. You seem to be full of opinions of my new passwords this evening," prompted Headmaster Tofty.

"You see, sir. I have made an *arrangement* with Miss Granger. She will be coming to stay here through the end of the school year," said Severus very calmly.

"Really?" inquired Professor Tofty. "Well, she can't work here, you know. The Ministry has been very adamant on that point, my dear boy."

"Yes, sir, I am very aware of the *Ministry's* influence on Miss Granger's life," spat out Snape with a clear tone of disdain. "However, Miss Granger will not be working here." Severus held up a hand to stop the old wizard from interrupting him with another useless statement. "Nor will she be training under an apprenticeship, Headmaster. I am very aware of how the Ministry views her and her *war crimes*." He barely uttered the last two words. It disgusted him to the core of the Ministry's intrusion into the young witch's life.

Professor Tofty was paying rapt attention to the Potions master and was clearly waiting for Severus to continue. Severus was finally prompted when he heard Professor Tofty prod him, "Yes, Professor, then why is she moving here for the school year?"

"I have contracted her to bear me a child," replied Severus simply whilst turning his gaze to focus on the fire roaring next to him. He couldn't quite bring himself to look at the current headmaster and was also very much avoiding the glare he knew he was receiving from Headmaster Dumbledore.

"So, then you are marrying the girl?" asked Professor Tofty.

"No."

"Oh, so you were both careless then?" asked the headmaster in a bemused voice. "Well, that happens. I must say that when I was young—"

Snape did not allow the headmaster to finish his reminiscing. "NO!" he shouted bringing his gaze back to the old man in front of him. "I *hired* her through a fertility clinic. They placed an already formed embryo in her womb, and now she is pregnant with my heir," said Snape as cruelly as he dared, ensuring that he left no room for misinterpretation. "I merely wished to inform you of the circumstances of her arrival and to divulge the truth to you before rumors begin flying about the castle like a pack of Weasley's Whiz-Bangs!"

The old wizard flinched slightly when Severus shouted, but he inwardly mused at how different life was versus life nearly 200 years ago when he had been born.

Severus glanced briefly up at Dumbledore with a gleam of fire in his eyes, daring his old mentor to say something negative about this situation. No words came, only a slightly bewildered look and a brief twinkle in his eyes. *Damn, did that artist have to capture that accursed twinkle!* thought Snape with disgust. *Do not forget the bloody bowl of sherbet lemons sitting on the table next to the portrait version of Albus!* Snape reminded himself.

He turned his attentions back to the current headmaster. "Miss Granger will be arriving at the castle tomorrow, and she will be staying in my quarters. I have already commissioned a house-elf to prepare rooms for her."

Professor Tofty nodded. "And, what do you expect to tell the students, Professor?"

Severus looked at the man thoughtfully. "I expect the students to mind their own business, Headmaster." Then he added, "as well as the nosey staff!"

"Oh surely you don't think you can stave off rumors that way, dear boy?" interjected the voice of Professor Dumbledore.

Snape looked up at him and saw that his old friend now had a small smile playing on his lips. "That will merely pique their curiosity. Don't you agree, Severus?" prodded Dumbledore.

"Yes, you are right, as usual," replied Severus with a definite air of contempt. "I intend to inform the students the truth, Albus. She is being paid, it is not her child, the girl never had to bed me, and once the child is born, she will be gone." Severus waved his hand carelessly.

"Hmmm," was Dumbledore's only reply.

Headmaster Tofty finally spoke, "Well, certainly not the way we did things in my day...but to each his own, I suppose." The daffy old man had a humoring smile playing on his lips.

"Yes," replied Snape as he stood to leave. "Good evening, Headmaster." Severus strode to the door, and as he left, he could have sworn he heard the headmaster say, "Well, Dumbledore, since that young man shot down all of my other passwords, perhaps we'll use your name next. How about I just use your initials as a code?"

Snape rolled his eyes as he exited the room and strolled down to the dungeons to prepare the accommodations for Miss Granger.

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Severus watched as she slowly walked towards him from across the grounds. It was an early September morning, and the dew was glistening on the grass and the brush. He could see the nervousness in her face and by her timid stride. He had been waiting for her; however, he had never heard confirmation from Miss Granger that she would abide by his wishes and arrive at Hogwarts today. Neither of them had discussed a meeting time either. However, here she was, exactly when he had expected, looking much like a first year fresh off the Hogwarts Express.

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Hermione was approaching the castle with increasing trepidation. She wondered briefly how he had known when to expect her. She had not Owled him regarding her plans of traveling this morning. She briefly wondered if he had been informed yet of the status of her pregnancy. She arrived at the front steps, and he merely gave her a curt nod and led her into the school.

It felt almost like walking into a dream. It had been nearly four years since she had set foot in Hogwarts' entryway. It had been her home for so long, and now she felt like a stranger here. Her eyes went up to the high ceilings of the entryway, and she was only brought back to the present by the stern voice of the Potions master. "Miss Granger, as useless as your time may be, I assure you that I have other things to attend to today," he snapped.

She quickly drew her attention back to him and began to follow him down to the steps that led to the dungeons. Professor Snape stopped, however, and nodded to her trunks. "Leave those here; the house-elves will ensure that they are brought down to your room."

Hermione nodded, raised her wand, and muttered, "*Finite Incantatem*". The trunks gracefully dropped to the floor, and she proceeded to the dungeon corridors that she had trudged through during her seven years of attending Potions class. They came to a portrait that Hermione knew to be Merwyn the Malicious and stopped. She could not discern the words that Professor Snape uttered to the portrait, but the man within the canvas nodded his head and gave Hermione a sly grin as he allowed the portrait to open, revealing a small corridor.

"You will use this entrance at all times," came the voice of Professor Snape as he led her into the corridor.

Hermione nodded. She knew better than to ask for the ruddy password now. She followed him through the short passageway to a door which he opened and led the way to his quarters.

She found herself in a large sitting room. She looked around the room; it was not quite what she had pictured when she had prepared herself for living in the pit of despair. The carpet was deep blue with flecks of green and gold. Two green leather armchairs sat in front of the fire with a small sofa, also in deep emerald green with deep mahogany wood for the frame. Off to the left was a small dining table with two chairs. Hermione was definitely getting the feeling of intimacy and she was quite

uncomfortable at the thought of spending her many free hours in these rooms with *this* man.

She quickly distracted herself from this thought by looking at what else was in front of her. The drapes were drawn, so she could not see what was beyond the windows, although she assumed that they looked into the underground lake. She wasn't sure that was a sight she really wanted to see. Hermione was not fond of the creatures that roamed the lake, and the thought of the eye of the giant squid peering in at her caused her to shiver. She continued looking at the walls along side the mantel. Bookshelves occupied the walls not encased by windows. Hermione found herself instantly drawn to them. Tomes from a large genre of magic and classical literature adorned the shelves, and she was itching to pick one up.

"Ahem," she heard from behind her.

"Sorry, sir."

He simply waved off the apology and began to walk to the far side of the room where there were two doors. "This door is to my bedchambers," he said simply. Then he turned to her, dark eyes glaring. "Stay out!"

She nodded.

"This is to your bedchambers. If you find something unsatisfactory, inform the house-elves; they will accommodate your wishes. There is a private bath off of your rooms. This door," he said pointing to the final door in the room that Hermione had not noticed along the same wall as the one they had entered, "leads to my office. Again, stay out!"

"Yes, sir."

He watched her carefully before he spoke again. "I have spoken with Headmaster Tofty, and he is aware that you will be staying here for the duration of the school year."

Hermione couldn't stop herself from asking a question. "What did you tell him?"

He leant in close to her, his voice cold and dangerous. "I told him, Miss Granger, that I had hired you as a surrogate for my heir. Nothing more. You will not say anything else either. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, meeting his piercing gaze with her own glare of steadfast determination. She knew full well what he expected of her. She only wanted to make sure that the headmaster had been informed of her *condition* before rumors and innuendo began flying about.

He stepped back again and regarded her resolve. *Well*, he thought, *at least I won't be living with a cowering fool for the next several months.*

"Have you eaten yet today, Miss Granger?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't have time."

"You will eat now," he said simply as he walked to the mantel and rang a small bell, which brought a house-elf to the room with a *Crack!*

*God, he's like hot and cold, isn't he?* She went to her door and peered inside. The room was larger than the flat she had just left. A bed, similar to what she had slept in while in Gryffindor Tower, was the centerpiece of her room. It was swathed in deep maroon and emerald greens. *Beautiful!* Along the far wall was a large armoire with a St. Louis XIV writing desk in the corner. What caught her attention the most was that, once again, one wall appeared to be draped in bookshelves and books. Obviously he knew what would keep her entertained. *Probably wants to keep me busy so that I won't annoy him with small talk,* she mused.

The gruff clearing of his throat brought her attentions back to the man that was still standing by the fireplace. "Sit down and eat, Miss Granger," he said gesturing to the table that was now laden with a wide variety of fruits, breads, and cheeses.

"Thank you, sir," she said as she walked to the table. "It looks delicious."

"Hmmm," was his only reply.

She sat down and began to eat. She had not been able to calm her nerves enough the night before to tolerate much food, and it was already late morning now. She didn't notice Snape until he appeared next to her at the table and emptied a small vial in her pumpkin juice. She eyed him warily.

He was instantly annoyed at her questioning look. "Oh, think, woman! Do you really think that I would try to poison you?" he spat.

Her eyes became wide at his sudden outburst, and something akin to fear began swimming behind them. "Umm, no, sir."

He quickly calmed. "I *apologize*," he mumbled. Apologies were not something that Severus Snape did on a regular basis, but he figured if he had to share his space with this woman, he would have to do his best to maintain some degree of civility. Quiet evenings were the only times that he could drop his guard; her being fearful of him would definitely not give him the peace that he was accustomed to. "It is the vitamin potion, Miss Granger. Just drink it," he demanded quietly as he sat in the chair opposite her whilst pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

She continued to watch him closely while nodding and bringing the goblet to her lips. *That vitamin potion is still foul*, she thought. Only now she was forced to drink an entire goblet of foul tasting pumpkin juice to finish off the potion.

She ate and drank in silence as she sustained her gaze on the man before her. She was uncertain of what to make of him. It had been his demand that caused her to move out of her flat, quit her jobs...such that they were...to live here with him. It was his idea, but he acted as if she was nothing more than an intrusion. *Well, what did he expect? And, what does he expect a child will be?* She found herself wondering, not for the first time, if this man could really handle such an intrusion in his life.

"When you are finished, Miss Granger, go in and become acquainted with your quarters. After that, you will take a nap."

"What?" Who did he think he was by telling her to *take a nap*?

"You heard what I said, Miss Granger!" he yelled. His voice became low as he leaned across the table towards her. "Your health, Miss Granger, is my sole concern, thus the reason you are living here. It has already been a busy day for you. You *will* take a nap."

Her brown eyes flashed at him. She wasn't a five year old child! Although she was, in fact, tired from her trip and certainly could *use* the rest. She just did not like the idea of being *ordered* to do so. She took a deep sigh and conceded. "Yes, sir."

"Afterwards, Miss Granger, you are free to walk the grounds. Just be wary, there are still students that are children of former Death Eaters within this castle." He stood from his chair. "There will be a chair for you in the Great Hall at the evening meal. I expect you to be there. Ring the house-elves for anything else." With that, he headed towards the door leading to his office. "The password to the room is 'Potter Stinks'. You will *not* change it!" He opened his door and slammed it as he exited.

*Of all the nerve! Potter Stinks! Whatever happened to not speaking ill of the dead?* She found herself so upset at the gall of the man that she was now being forced to share a living space with that she found that she could no longer stomach the food. She rose and strode to *her* room, ensuring that she slammed the door equally as hard as he

had.

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He left his quarters for the solitude of his office. This was going to be the only place that he was going to be able to find peace this year. He was certain. *It's your own fault, Severus! You insisted that she live with you*, chided his inner voice. Yes, yes, his own fault, he knew. Hopefully the books he had provided her with in *her* room would be enough to placate her and keep her out of his hair.

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A/N: Sorry that took so long, but there wasn't an evil cliffie and real-life really took a toll. Next I have to finish up a chapter for my other fic and then I'll get back to this one. Hopefully, it won't be any longer than a week. Also, you'll notice that I lost the single POV per chapter. I knew I would eventually and I wanted to show Hermione seeing her new living conditions from her perspective...and I saw no point in breaking up the chapter. ;-)

Merwyn the Malicious: Appears on chocolate frog card #15. From medieval times, he is known for creating many of the unpleasant jinxes and hexes. Very appropriate for Snape, without being too cliché and using Salazar Slytherin. ;-) This information is from the HP Lexicon.

[http://www.livejournal.com/users/ginny\\_weasley31/](http://www.livejournal.com/users/ginny_weasley31/)

## V

### Chapter 5 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.

Disclaimer: I am not JK Rowling. I do not own any of the characters or things in Ms. Rowling's wonderful universe, although I would really love if she could send me a Time Turner!

***Special thanks to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69, and to my wonderful muse, Meredith!***

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Every morning when Hermione woke, she would find Professor Snape and her breakfast waiting for her in the sitting room. After the first day, however, Professor Snape merely set the vitamin potion on the tray and would watch as Hermione downed it quickly, followed by a large swig of pumpkin juice. After that, he would leave her in peace to eat. Apparently though, the house-elves had been instructed to not take the tray unless Hermione had finished eating everything. She could've sworn that they gave him a daily report of her actual food intake.

"Good morning, sir," Hermione said when she exited her bedroom nearly two weeks after first arriving to live in the dungeons of Hogwarts.

She only received a slight nod in reply.

"You know I haven't spoken to anyone for days, yet you avoid me as if I were a Chimaera. The very least you could do is hold a normal conversation with me once in a while!" The pent up frustration that Hermione had been feeling since her arrival began pouring out of her. She was thankful that, in this case, her frustrations were being vented upon the proper target.

"I am not what one would call a *morning person*, Miss Granger," he replied without looking up from his newspaper.

"You're not an any time of day person." Although she muttered this comment to herself, she could have sworn she saw a slight smirk flash on his face for a moment. Buttering her crumpet, she tried once again to start a conversation. "I think there is something wrong with my shower."

"Hmmm" he grumbled, while giving his full attention to the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet*.

*Well, he's not yelling at me.* "I am assuming that there wasn't a bathroom there until just prior to me moving in. Is that correct?"

Severus slammed his newspaper down and glared at her. "I presume that there is a point to this conversation, Miss Granger," he spat out through gritted teeth.

"Yes, sir," she replied. She allowed herself the pleasure of a small smile

Eyeing her closely, he answered. "Yes, Miss Granger, you are correct. The bathroom is new."

"Well, it just seems odd to me, sir. I think that there must have been some mistake made by whoever did the magic to put it there." She was speaking in a sly and curious manner. She did not want to risk accusing him; that could always be dangerous.

"Out with it, Miss Granger! I am not going to spend my entire day discussing a bathroom with you!" His hands were now folded together and rested on the table, seeming to steady him from the onslaught of questions that were now being fired at him. He glared intently into her large brown eyes.

Hermione met his gaze with her own hard stare. "Of course not, *sir*. My problem is that whenever I take a shower it begins pleasantly hot, but it shortly becomes ice cold."

In his most condescending tone, he responded, "Apparently you are not aware of it, Miss Granger, but this is a very old castle, and the pipes predate Muggle plumbing by centuries. It should not be surprising that the shower in a magically transfigured room, using pipes that were required to move themselves from where they had set for ages, suddenly does not hold the appropriate temperature as well as the rest of the pipes in the castle." He began to rub his temples with his long pale fingers to fight the headache that this pointless discussion was earning him. "I suggest, Miss Granger, that you learn to take shorter showers," he said in silky cold tones.

Hermione watched him as she continued to eat her meal. *This is the longest I have actually gotten him to stay for breakfast! Score one point for Granger.*

"Now, if that is everything, Miss Granger..." he began while standing.

"No, sir, that is not everything." She hitched up her breath, steadying herself against the new onslaught of insults her next statement was going to earn her, and she said, "Professor, I am bored."

"I am not your babysitter, Miss Granger. I was generous enough to give you a room full of books to keep you occupied!" This was stupid. He knew that she would become demanding sooner or later. Inwardly, he was actually impressed that she had kept quiet for as long as she had.

"Oh, yes! A room full of books to keep me out of your greasy hair, *Professor*," she spat with a smirk that could rival his. "I'm sorry to say, *sir*, that they were not enough to keep me occupied. The majority of those books are copies of what Madam Pince has in the library upstairs, and in my seven-year stay here as a student of this school, I read every book she has in there. Besides, did you forget where I worked? What do you think I did when I wasn't busy while working at Flourish & Blotts?"

"Touché, Her...Miss Granger," answered the Professor with slight sneer. "However, you seem to be forgetting that I have not shackled you to the dungeons...yet. You are free to wander about the school."

"I am aware of that. Nevertheless, you told me that there are still Death Eater spawn roaming the halls and to be careful," she countered.

He considered her for a moment. "Yes, that is true." He knew she was right; he had been silently pleased that she had not taken to wandering the halls at her leisure and risking his child to prejudiced teens. So far he had not heard many comments from the students regarding Hermione. A few concealed murmurs and hushed whispers, yes, but that was the worst of it. Then again, it was still very early in her pregnancy, and there were only a few rumors flying about regarding the reasons that she was staying at the castle.

"I realize that you are busy and that you would prefer to spend as little time around me as possible, sir, but if you could perhaps set up a time when I could visit some of the other teachers or *something*..." She was faltering. In this one instance, she was purely counting on the fact that he couldn't possibly be the monster that Ron and Harry had always claimed that he was.

Hermione knew that he could argue that she ate both her noon and evening meals in the Great Hall per his orders. In this case, though, it was true that there were several people that she was acquainted with, yet she was still alone. She was forced to sit by herself at the end of the long Head Table in a place that was reserved for visitors, spouses, and apprentices. Well, Hogwarts rarely had visitors. Most of the spouses didn't live at the school, and none of the current professors had apprentices. This left her with the small inconvenience of being separated by several empty chairs, and then by professors that were new to their positions in the last few years. The nearest professor to her that she even knew by name was the headmaster, and he was so old that Hermione was certain he wouldn't even be able to hear her. *What had the Ministry thinking when they appointed that man as the headmaster?* Hermione had found herself thinking on frequent occasions.

Professor Snape rose from his chair, pulling her away from her thoughts. "Very well, Miss Granger, I will see to it that you have an escort following your noon meals to take you where ever it is that you wish to go."

He strode towards the door that went to his office while Hermione congratulated herself. *That was definitely a victory.*

The professor stopped as he opened the door to his office. "Quit congratulating yourself, Miss Granger. It is most *unseemly*." Before he snapped the door closed, he paused once more to say, "Drink the vitamin potion!"

Begrudgingly, Hermione gulped down the accursed potion, thankful that for once he actually trusted her to drink it herself without watching her as if she were a toddler.

That afternoon, following a very filling meal, Neville Longbottom approached Hermione just as she was rising to exit the hall. She had honestly expected Professor Snape to conveniently *forget* the promise he had made earlier that morning.

"Hi, Hermione," Neville said tentatively. "Would it be okay...I mean, would you like to take a walk with me?"

Hermione beamed at Neville while shooting a quick glance at Professor Snape who looked away as soon as her eyes set on him. "I would like that, Neville. Thank you."

They walked out the staff door off to the side and wound their way through the rooms to the entrance. Soon Hermione found herself outside breathing the fresh air. "I'm so thankful that it's still reasonably warm today," she said as she let all of her worries and frustrations flow out of her exhale. "I don't think that I could have stood another day down there by myself."

Neville looked at her oddly as they began to walk down near the lake. "Ummm, Hermione..."

She interrupted him before he could ask his question. She knew it was coming, but wanted to put it off as long as possible. "So, Neville, I knew you were teaching. I just never see you at the meals. Why is that?"

She watched Neville as he regained his footing over her manipulating the direction of the conversation. He was still the shy, timid boy that stuttered and stammered all through school. However, thanks to Herbology and the D.A. meetings from their fifth year, Neville had begun to find his confidence. Apparently, though, that was where his confidence still remained.

"Oh, yeah, well, I mostly spend my time in the greenhouses." He stopped briefly to watch her reaction. "You know, like how Trelawney used to stay up in the tower all of the time?" Hermione nodded. "Well, I spend all of my time in the greenhouses."

"But, don't you get lonely, Neville?"

He smiled at her. "No, I have my plants. You know, the *Mimulus mimbletonia* is almost like a person itself," he said excitedly. His round face lit up with pleasure at the mention of his beloved plant.

Hermione couldn't help thinking that Neville had really begun to almost act like Professor Trelawney in his excited manner about his subject. *He thinks of his plants as if they are his friends*, she thought with amusement.

"So, what brought you to the noon meal today, Neville?" she asked.

"P-professor Snape," he stammered out. Hermione began to see the small school boy in him as he stuttered through the professor's name.

Hermione had a difficult time resisting an eye roll. *Neville is now Snape's colleague, and he still acts like a frightened first year!* Okay, so why is this the first time that I've seen you since I've been here, Neville?"

"P-professor Snape."

Hermione laughed. It wasn't anything that she could hold in. The great bat had intimidated her friend into not speaking with her when she first arrived, and now he had intimidated Neville into taking her for walk. "I'm sorry, Neville," she said when she saw his blushing face. "I'm really not laughing at you. I'm laughing at Professor Snape." Neville seemed to relax a little when she said that. "I just can't believe that you still allow him to bully you like that. You know, he can't give you detention anymore. You really need to learn to stand up to him," she said in her normal bossy tones.

"I can't, Hermione. That man is scary. No matter what I do, he still treats me like I'm one of his students."

"I'm sorry, Neville. You know, you really were sorted into Gryffindor. I've seen your courage. You can do anything that you need to," she said encouragingly while placing a

hand on his back for comfort.

"Hermione," he said. "Why are you back at Hogwarts?" He didn't meet her eyes when he asked his question.

"What have you heard, Neville?" Hermione knew that the rumors were running rampant throughout the school, mostly because Snape refused to say anything to anyone. As far as Hermione was aware, Professor Tofty knew more about her and Snape's current situation than anyone else.

"Ummm, well. The best I heard was that you and Snape were both strongly... ummmm...intoxicated one night at The Old Crones, and you hooked up. Then Snape got you, er...pregnant, and now you have to live at the castle." Hermione looked at him uneasily. As far as stories go, it wasn't too terrible. In some ways, Hermione wished that particular rumor was the truth instead of what she was faced with; except for the main point, though, because there was no way in Hades that she would ever shag Snape. She shuddered at the mere thought.

"Okay," she said. "What's the *worst* that they are saying?"

Neville began shifting between his left and right feet and staring down at his toes of his shoes, which were just barely visible from beneath his long brown robes. "Well, Hermione, they are saying that...that you are nothing more than a, ummmm, than a prostitute." The last word was so quiet that Hermione barely heard it, but she knew what Neville was going to say.

*It was to be expected, she told herself.*

"So," Neville continued, "they are saying that you are only living with Snape because he was ordered to get shagged on a regular schedule to keep from biting off the heads of the younger students."

Hermione began laughing at the absurdity. The worst of it being that there was a little bit of truth in both sordid tales. At Hermione's laughter, Neville visibly began to relax again. It was obvious that he took her laughter as a sign that the rumors were indeed false, and he believed that there must be some other reason for her stay at Hogwarts.

He smiled at her. "So, why are you here, Hermione?"

"Sorry, Neville," she said while wiping a tear from her eye. Still smiling, she sucked in her breath and told him. She told him about the pregnancy, she told him about the living arrangements, she told him that Snape was a complete arse, and that she was now, obviously, being told how to spend her afternoons since the 'dear professor' was going to set up her *dates* for her. Per her agreement with Snape, the only detail she left out was the maternity of the embryo.

"So, how many weeks are you, Hermione?" asked Neville once he was finally able to find his tongue.

"Six. Only about 34 weeks left in this living hell," replied Hermione. The disgust was clearly present in her voice.

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"It's all right. I'll enjoy the time that I'm here, even if most of my time is spent with that bat."

"If you need anything, Hermione, just ask...okay?"

"Sure thing, Neville. Sure thing."

~~~~~  
"I trust that *Professor Longbottom* was sufficient company this afternoon?" inquired Professor Snape that evening. Typically he spent the evenings in his office marking essays. Tonight, however, Professor Snape took his grading into his quarters and sat at the dining table while Hermione sat on the sofa reading.

"Yes, he was," she replied. She set her book down and looked at him. He had been sitting in the room now for over an hour furiously scratching on each poor student's assignments. Hermione felt small pangs of pity for the children that he was taking his frustrations out on.

"Thank you, Severus," was all she could manage to say.

He was obviously taken aback by her sudden casual tone, and the use of his given name did not go unnoticed. However, the chastising that Hermione had braced herself for never came. *Another point for me, she thought.*

"You are welcome, Mi...Hermione. Tomorrow, Professor Flitwick will collect you from the Great Hall. He seems most anxious to share with you some new techniques in Charms."

Hermione's face lit up with excitement. "Thank you."

He did not respond. He merely went back to marking the essays, but Hermione could almost swear that the feverish scratching of the red-inked quill had calmed, at least a little.

~~~~~  
After nearly a month of living in cramped and tight quarters with the annoying Gryffindor, Severus was beginning to see a noticeable difference in Hermione. Not that he thought he could ever tell a difference in her emotional stability. In Severus' opinion, all women were emotionally unstable and were constantly prone to sudden outbursts. Be they outbursts of anger, screaming, tears, or mushy proclamations of love. No matter what they were, Severus wanted no part of them.

He was beginning to become concerned about her, however. Since ensuring that she had adequate company during the last two weeks, she was suddenly becoming withdrawn. Then today, she had yet to come in to join him for breakfast. It was nearly eight o'clock, and Hermione had not been seen. She was usually in the sitting room chatting away sometime around seven.

Severus cursed himself when he realized that Hermione had won. About two weeks ago, she had coaxed Severus into some form of conversation in the mornings, and he had wound up spending most mornings breakfasting with her before he went up to the Great Hall to make an appearance, since. However, Severus did insist that the *only* reason that he now marked his student's assignments in his chambers was because his office was too cold. He had moved a small writing desk into his sitting room and had begun doing his evening work while Hermione sat by the fire reading.

"Miss Granger," he called whilst rapping on the door to her bedroom. After no reply, he opened the door. He looked quickly around the room and did not see her in there. He then headed towards the bathroom. In the perfectly tiled white bathroom sat a lump on the floor. She was nothing but a disheveled mess. *That ruddy hair sticks out everywhere!*

"Hermione, what is your problem?" he snapped. He did not have time for anything more this morning. He had already wasted the last hour of his time waiting for her to arrive at the table for breakfast. Her head was buried in her hands. He could barely hear her mumble into her hands.

"Go away."



He walked forward and loomed over her. "Get up, Hermione."

She brought her hands to her temples. "I can't. Please, just go away."

Severus could feel his temper rising quickly at her show of weakness. He took a quick breath and sighed. "How long have you been sitting on the floor this morning?"

"Over an hour, but if I try to get up, I become ill."

"Well, Mi...Hermione you need to get up and get something in your stomach. Otherwise you will succeed in nothing other than spending the entire day on the floor of the bathroom." He maintained his demanding stance and voice of control. He knew she would have no choice but to respond to him that way.

After several minutes of no response from her, however, he held out a hand and said, "Please, Hermione, get up. By this point you are likely dehydrated. You will not feel better unless you get some fluid back into your system."

Hermione silently nodded. She pulled her dressing gown tightly around her, took his hand, and allowed him to pull her up to lead her into the sitting room. She willed herself not to be sick on the short journey to the dining table.

Severus maintained his commanding presence and stood over Hermione as he directed her to drink a cup of lemon tea. Once she seemed somewhat settled, he pulled out the vitamin potion and gave it to her. Hermione peered up at him horrified. "We have been through this before! I am not trying to poison you! Just drink it!"

Hermione's anger rose quickly. "I won't be able to keep that down! I'm not taking that this morning!" she spat. "Maybe with the noon meal or maybe with supper, but definitely not now!"

"I have classes in ten minutes, Miss Granger. I do not need anything else wasting my time this morning. Now, you will drink the vitamin potion so that I can deal with the rest of my life that does not revolve around you!" His dark eyes seemed like they were attempting to bore holes within her head. Hermione met his gaze with her own piercing stare. After a few moments, she gave up. Following a morning of retching, she did not possess the energy to fight with him. Lemon tea with a little bit of honey did very little for providing the body with much needed calories.

"Fine," she mumbled. She took the potion and downed the contents quickly. Promptly, Hermione vomited the remainder of her stomach's contents all over the front of Professor Snape's teaching robes and onto the tips of his black boots.

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A/N: Before I get flames from people trying to do the "math" on Hermione's pregnancy...Yes, I realize that at the time that she tells Neville she is "6 weeks" pregnant, per the story she is 4 weeks post conception. This is normal. It's like a two week grace period, if you want to call it that. 40 weeks gestation is truly 38 weeks of pregnancy. Confusing enough for you? ;-)

## VI

### Chapter 6 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

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**Special thanks to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, and to my wonderful muse, Meredith! ;-)**

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*Oh, God, I can't believe I did that.* Hermione placed her face in her hands at the shameful memory. *How could I vomit on him, of all people?* Ruddy morning sickness! She was now lying on the sitting room chesterfield where she had been since said incident. He had not looked *pleased*. After a quick *Evanesco*, the esteemed professor had left the chambers quickly to be anywhere but with her. "Well, at least I now know how to get rid of him," Hermione announced with a snort to the empty room.

Unable to move from her place on the soft length of furniture, Hermione settled herself in and went back to sleep. She was awoken several hours later by the same professor standing over her again. Wiping the sleep away from her eyes for the second time that day, she attempted to sit up. He still bore the look of deep contempt on his face. "Good afternoon," she managed.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," he said simply while thrusting a goblet into her hands.

"I am not drinking the vitamin potion again today, *Professor*," she stated, albeit weakly.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Give me a little credit, Miss Granger!" he spat, clearly annoyed. "I have no desire to have to change my robes yet again today. Vanishing the actual contents of your stomach off of me was one thing; however, the odor lingered until I removed the robes entirely."

"I'm sorry, sir," she replied while looking down at the goblet. "What is this?"

"It's a Rehydration Draught. I believe I told you this morning that if you became dehydrated then you would wind up in a cycle of feeling ill. This will restore balance to your system and provide you with the necessary electrolytes." His speech sounded very stale and rehearsed. Hermione couldn't help but wonder if there was any care or compassion behind any of his thoughts or actions.

"Thank you." She drank the contents quickly. Slick and sweet, not necessarily the best combination for someone suffering from severe nausea even though it didn't come right back up. That was promising. "Why can't I just have an anti-emetic? That would be so much easier." she stated half grumbling.

"Need I remind you that you are pregnant? There are many different components in anti-emetics and anti-nausea potions that are not considered to be completely safe during the first trimester." He paused and looked at her carefully. Hermione made no move to argue. She just silently resigned herself to the simple fact that *he* was pulling

all of the strings. "If, Miss Granger, you are still feeling like *this* once you reach fourteen weeks, I may reconsider."

Letting the solution settle in her stomach, Hermione was finally able to sit up fully. "Thank you," she replied genuinely.

He nodded curtly. "I believe you have an appointment with Professor Flitwick this afternoon. I'm sure you do not wish to keep him waiting." He pulled his wand from his robes and performed a quick succession of charms. Hermione's mussed up hair quickly righted itself into a neat French braid, freshly laundered robes replaced her dressing gown, and food appeared on the dining table. "I suppose a bit of a nosh is in order, as you missed two meals already today."

She smiled at up at him as she rose from the chesterfield to sit at the dining table. Once again, she would attempt to eat. "Thanks."

Hermione was surprised that she managed to keep her food down. Like many of the breakfast meals that she had grown accustomed to sharing with this man, he sat with her quietly. He read the latest article in *Ars Alchemy*, sipped on his beverage, and nibbled at his light meal. It was all strangely comforting. After seven years of noisy meals in the Great Hall, Hermione had become used to being among people. Her last few years of living, if it could truly be called that...more like surviving, had been solitary. Lonely. It was much like it had been in her days before Hogwarts. As an only child, Hermione only had her parents for conversation.

*This*, whatever it was, was nice. Someone to eat a meal with. Someone she didn't feel obligated to talk to. Someone with whom she could just *be*.

His words broke her from her thoughts. "If you are finished, I believe Filius is waiting for you."

"Yes, Professor," she said, rising from her chair. *Wow, he didn't even force me to eat everything. Maybe I should throw up on him more often*, she thought with a smirk.

"You do realize, Miss Granger, that your thoughts are rather loud at times?" he queried. "I do not need to use Legilimency to know what you are thinking," he said with a slight sneer.

Her eyes shot up to him as he led her out of the rooms to the dungeon halls. *Blast!*

"Do not think for a moment that your recent bout of emesis will result in me being any less hard on you," he disparaged. "I still expect you to comply with my wishes; they are in your best interest."

"Of course," Hermione answered. She was uncertain which meaning she should take from his last statement. Would he harm her if she did not comply, or was he only requiring things that would help her? Either way, she thought it was best to leave well enough alone. They walked the rest of the way to Professor Flitwick's Charms classroom in silence. Once there, Professor Snape quickly left her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," squeaked Professor Flitwick jovially from a pile of books behind the desk.

"Hello, Professor." Hermione smiled. It was oddly comforting to see her old professor perched on his stack of books. It was the same way she had seen him while she was a student at the school. Some things never changed. She realized, at that moment, that she no longer saw Professor Snape as her teacher though. *Really odd, that. Why has he changed in my eyes?* Hermione sat down at a desk in the front row of the class. "Good afternoon."

"Well, I've heard that it's been a rough few weeks for you."

Hermione snorted in reply. "That would be an understatement, sir."

"I am not going to pry, Miss Granger. I just wanted to talk to you about next year."

"Please, call me Hermione. I really don't want to feel like a school girl right now," said Hermione with a chuckle.

"Yes, yes, I can understand that," he said, giving her a cheeky smile. "Well *Hermione*, Professor Tofty will be retiring at the end of the school year." He laughed. "Oh, come now! Don't look so surprised. He never should have been put in as Hogwarts' Headmaster to begin with. You know that as well as anyone." His beady little eyes glinted mischievously.

Hermione nodded. "Too right," she agreed with a knowing smile. The acting headmaster was nothing more than a joke. The poor man truly should have been allowed to retire, not forced to sit in the position as the head of a school so that the entire Wizarding world could witness his mental faculties failing.

"Well, I will need a new Charms professor when I take over as headmaster. I would really like it if you would fill that position."

Hermione watched the small wizard closely. What was he playing at? This was almost a dream come true for her. Teaching! It was such a perfect career for a bossy little brain. However, reality and fantasy were still too far apart for Hermione to begin confusing the two. "You know, as well as I do, Professor, that you cannot offer me that job. To do so would be violating three separate *decrees*, mind," her voice cracked before she added, "I would love to do so." Hermione stood up as a wave of nausea passed over her. This time, however, she wasn't certain if the nausea was from the pregnancy or from her disgust with the bloody Ministry of Magic, the set of great miserable wankers!

Professor Flitwick hopped down from atop his pile of books and came over to where she was standing. "I am aware of the Ministry and their *decrees*." The Charms professor gave her a small smirk. "I also know some of the agreement that you have with Professor Snape. He will uphold his end of the agreement, Hermione. Nothing to fear there...which means that you will be eligible for employment before the next school year."

Hermione matched Professor Flitwick's grin. She felt as if a small weight, one that had been sitting on her shoulders for years, had just been removed. It was a relief! A small piece of her freedom was being given back to her. "Of course, Professor Flitwick, I would love to teach Charms. Won't I need more education? Training? Something?" Too excited to stand still, Hermione began pacing throughout the classroom.

"Calm down, child. Normally you would mentor with someone for a semester and slowly begin to take over the classes and what have you. However, in your case, that would not be *legal*." He wriggled his bushy brows conspiratorially. "So, I think that it would be best if you met with me a few evenings each week. We can go over what I've done in the lessons during the day, have you work with the essays, and get a feel for the written work. Nothing but busy work for now, but I'm sure that a little bit of busy work may be exactly what you need right now?"

"Yes, sir. Busy work is exactly what I need," she said with a small smile as she sat back down.

"After the Holidays, I can work with you on some more advanced Charms. You need to be practicing your magic daily, you know. But, I daresay that you are likely finding it a little temperamental right now?"

"Yes, it is."

"That's normal, what with all of those hormonal changes. It will settle out nicely by the time you are well into your second trimester."

"That's good to know. I've been afraid that I'd turn Professor Snape's socks into pink mice while trying to reheat my morning tea." Hermione laughed. It was almost half-true. She truly had accidentally turned Professor Snape's socks pink, and one had even squeaked! Thankfully she was so quick to fix the problem that she didn't think that he had noticed.

"Oh, I bet Nyx would love that," laughed the tiny professor. Hermione was caught off guard by this remark, but before she could comment, Professor Flitwick changed the

topic. "Actually, speaking of Severus...there is one favor that I have to ask you, Hermione."

"What is that, sir?" she asked, sitting back down again.

"Well, normally I wouldn't bring this up, but since you are in an unusual position, I was hoping that you would be able to influence him some." She noticed that Professor Flitwick's tones were squeakier than normal, and she vaguely wondered if he'd already tried to talk to him. "This school would be nothing without that man trudging through the halls and scaring half of the student body. I would appreciate it if you could convince our Potions master to stay on at the end of this school year."

"Sorry?" she asked, suddenly numb.

"Severus intends to leave Hogwarts and end his stint as a professor here. I need your help, however I can have it, to get him to stay on."

Hermione had spent the next hour only half listening to Professor Flitwick's ramblings. Apparently the wizard had an odd notion to begin a choir at the school. She could recall utterances of the choir singing during various feasts during the year, something about giant toads, and some wonderful chorus music with the lyrics inspired by the witches in "Hamlet". She was too focused on his request to convince Professor Snape to stay on at the end of term to listen much to the Charms master's desire to lead a school choir.

She wasn't sure why the news of Professor Snape's plans to leave at the end of the school year came as such a surprise to her. They had not spoken about his plans after the baby arrived. In passing, he had briefly clipped, "It's none of your business, Miss Granger."

It gave her a feeling of unease. She had pictured Snape raising their...*his*...child at the school. It was almost comforting to know that people like Filius Flitwick and Neville Longbottom would be around to see that the child was being cared for. When Flitwick had offered Hermione the teaching position, she had a brief image of being around the child much more than she had originally anticipated. It had given her a small thrill...a brief glimmer of hope...from the part of her that was hoping that Snape would not hide the child away from her. Then, to hear that Severus was leaving at the end of the school year was almost like squashing a dream. Odd really. This was not what she had expected. She had signed the agreement giving him full rights, full custody, but was that really what she wanted? *Bloody hell! I'm confused.* She didn't know anymore. This *child*, barely larger than a grain of rice, was somehow having an emotional effect on Hermione that she had not anticipated. *It must just be my hormones*, she decided.

It was all becoming so confusing that she wasn't certain what to think anymore. She wished that she could talk to someone about it, but thanks to the secrecy clause, she had no one to voice her *true* concerns to. *Best not to think about it*, she told herself.

Hermione ultimately decided to draw a bath to ease her troubles. She always thought better in the silent seclusion of the hot water and the fragrant soaps. It was nearly suppertime. The professor would be returning from his classes soon, and they would attend the evening meal in the Great Hall.

Hermione slowly walked through her rooms, into the bathroom and began filling the tub. Twenty minutes later, the shouts of profanity issuing from the bathroom were loud enough to be heard in the Potions classroom where the sixth year Advanced Potions students were just finishing up for the day.

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**Southern's Notes:** I'm anxious to find out what happens next! I just know our little Gryffindor will want these questions answered...and soon! Ginny's take on this challenge is quite believable, and I adore it. I'm wondering what Hermione is confused about (feelings, perhaps, for her baby's father?). Sigh...I have to wait patiently like the rest of you. :) Cheers!

**A/N:** You are too funny, Southern. You know way more than anyone else! I'll get more up soon, already started on the next chapter. I have the rest of the story mapped out to be 8 more chapters and an epilogue...will see if I actually hold to that. :) ~Gin

## VII

### Chapter 7 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

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Severus was sweeping about the classroom of his sixth year Advanced Potions class. Despite the fact that they were the chosen *few* students that had achieved top marks on their Potions O.W.L.s, Severus still felt that the classroom was full of dunderheads. Regardless of the unfortunate events of the morning, he was not in as foul a mood as usual. The midafternoon break that he had from classes was spent with Hermione, and although it was no different than any other time he had spent previously with her, it had been...*pleasant*.

He was currently walking between tables and workstations looking for an unsuspecting student to terrorize. He spied a likely target and went in for the kill. Peering down his long nose whilst standing over the student's cauldron, he sneered scornfully. "At what point in the instructions does it say that the potion should turn red, Mr. Cobblepot?"

Severus enjoyed this part of teaching, the belittling of students. It made him feel an inch taller, for a few moments at any rate. It was always a short-lived glory, but he had decided long ago that he would take whatever he could get. He had to suppress a grin as the nervous boy shuffled and stuttered his pitiful reply. Of course, the boy had not followed the directions carefully; Severus knew exactly where the idiot had erred. He was getting ready to deduct precious House points when the sounds erupted through the dungeon walls.

"DAMN YOU, SEVERUS SNAPE! YOU LOUSY, SLYTHERIN BASTARD! I HOPE YOU ROT..."

Severus had heard enough. *What the hell is going on?* He cast a Silencing Charm on the walls and shouted at his students. "Bottle up a sample of your pathetic excuses for this potion and get out of my sight!"

The students knew better than to mess with their irate Potions master, and they completed their tasks rapidly. None of them wanted to be the last one left alone in the classroom to have to face their teacher's wrath. Needless to say, Mr. Cobblepot was the first student to exit the room.

What the hell was wrong with the girl this time? Had he not been polite this afternoon? Did he not refrain from screaming at her over the vomiting incident that morning? He was bloody well livid that she would even think to scream so loudly.

Severus stormed through his classroom into his office, slammed the door shut, and proceeded towards the door leading to his living quarters. He dropped the wards and entered to find Hermione standing in the living room clad in nothing but an emerald green towel. A glimmer of triumph flashed across his black eyes, but he kept his mask firmly in place. He knew, of course, exactly what had transpired.

Hermione was fuming with anger. It was radiating off of her as the heat off of a burning inferno.

Unsheathing his wand and pointing it at her he yelled, *Quietus!* "What the bloody hell do you think you are doing shouting like that throughout the school?" He narrowed his eyes, and then hissed, "Do not ever do something as childish as using the Sonorus Charm to amplify your voice to get my attention again."

"What do you expect me to do when you do things like *this* to me?" she spat back.

Severus began circling, as a hungry tiger circling its prey. He eyed her carefully as he paced. When he became fully aware of her lack of dress, his anger ebbed slightly. He saw small beads of glistening water on her shoulders and chest. Her hair was still pulled back in the braid with only the ends of stray tendrils damp from, what he assumed had been, her bath.

He stopped in front of her and lifted her chin with his finger. "I did not do anything to you, Mi...Hermione."

"You did something to my bathroom! I've been complaining for weeks that the hot water always seemed to run out rather quickly during my showers, and you brushed it off. But, **you** did it!"

"And, what precisely did I *do*?" he asked in his silkiest tones.

"I'm not sure," she replied feebly.

"So," he said, dropping his finger from her chin. "You are not sure? How can you accuse me of something when you are not even sure what it was you are accusing me of?"

She narrowed her eyes and glared coldly at him. "What did you do, Severus?"

He met her glare, but refused to answer. He was rather enjoying watching her work through this.

After a few minutes of tense silence, Hermione spoke again. "My showers for weeks have gone cold shortly after I start them. Then today..." Hermione paused and gritted her teeth. "Today, I try to take a nice hot bath. Do you have any idea what happened while I was taking my bath, Severus?"

"Although it is blatantly obvious that you wish to share all of the *intimate* details of your bathing rituals, Hermione, it is of no interest to me." A feral grin grew on his face as he watched a blush start from her bare chest and slowly creep up to the tips of her ears. "Despite what you may think, the trivial details of your day to day activities are of no interest to me. If you have a point to make, then make it. Now!" The redness of her face went from embarrassment to anger in a flash. *So easily manipulated*, he mused inwardly.

"I have a point, and you know it!" She took a deep breath in a futile attempt to regain her composure. "As I was saying, I was taking a bath when suddenly all of the taps began discharging copious amounts of ice cold water! I couldn't shut them off! I couldn't reheat the water magically! Nothing worked! I was forced to get out!" Her piercing eyes shot daggers at him. "Now, tell me. What did you do?"

Severus stepped back and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Are you certain that it was I? Could it have not been Peeves that tampered with your water supply?"

"Peeves? Peeves? PEEVES?" she screamed, her voice becoming louder with each word. "Damn you! No, it wasn't Peeves!" She took a step closer to him and dangerously hissed, "Tell me what you did, Severus."

"Why, my dear Hermione, I only did the same thing that I have been doing all along." He paused and leant down closer to her so that their faces were mere inches apart, and he whispered, "I am protecting my investment."

Hermione stepped back, her eyes wide as she attempted to figure out the meaning of his words.

Severus stood tall once more, regaining his stance of dominance. "Idiot girl! Did you not know that elevated body temperatures of the carrier during gestation can cause brain damage to the fetus?"

Hermione's mouth gaped open in shock. Once she found her words, they came forth with renewed vindictiveness and anger. "Why you arrogant, ruddy git! Who the bloody hell do you think you are? You are controlling every aspect of my life! What I eat, where I eat, when I eat! You tell me what to do, where I can go...EVERY DAMN THING!"

Severus did nothing but passively watch her as she steadied herself to begin the *discussion* again.

Gathering her strength, Hermione began the conversation once again. "What was it that you *specifically* did to my bathroom?"

She hated the way he seemed so damned sure of himself, assuming his nonchalant stance and appearing bored. "I merely set a charm to monitor your internal body temperature. The charm is designed so that when your temperature reaches 37.8 degrees Celsius, the water taps will...shall we say...effectively cool you down."

Hermione noticed a victorious gleam in his eyes as he said the last few words. *Evil greasy git!* She fought an internal struggle to keep her voice calm and controlled. "Severus Snape, that is the most asinine thing that I have ever heard."

Hermione watched him as he walked towards his chair and began passively drumming his fingers on the back of his chair. It was a sheer battle of wills between them, one in which Hermione was determined to win. She wanted him to speak next. It was several long agonizing minutes before he finally spoke.

"Surely you have read the data of which I speak, Hermione. That prolonged elevated temperatures in the *carrier* can cause brain damage to a growing fetus?"

The word 'carrier' grated on her more than she let on. *I am not some sort of incubator!* Hermione bit the inside of her lip to keep her angry thoughts from spilling out of her. She carefully organized her thoughts before speaking. "Yes, I have. However, the data, of which you speak, is inconclusive. I have also read that if a *mother* is uncomfortable during pregnancy that she should take a long bath and relax," she answered firmly. *Did your mum take too many cold showers, Professor? Is that your problem?* she added to herself.

"A *long bath*, Hermione, not a steaming sauna. I daresay that if you were to take a *warm* bath, you would find that you could soak much longer before suffering the ill effects of the charm. Besides, it is much safer for the child."

"Oh, bugger!" she snarled in frustration. "You do realize that this is completely ridiculous, don't you?"

He looked at her, but made no reply.

Hermione paced the room before she decided to approach the subject politely, once more. "If I attempt to limit my time, will you release the charm on my faucets?"

"No," Severus simply replied.

"DAMNED, RUDDY, INSUFFERABLE, BLOODY BASTARD!" Hermione hollered.

Severus watched her rage at him. *Ruddy hormones*, he thought with a mixture of disgust and amusement. He brought his fingers up to pinch the bridge of his nose, as if this single act could shield him from the onslaught of a pregnant woman's temper.

Severus snapped his attention instantly back to her when in the midst of her tantrum she raised both hands up to clutch the sides of her head in frustration, thus causing her towel to drop to the floor and gather at her feet.

Hermione was quick to retrieve her coverings, but not before Severus had a good look at her. *Wizarding robes certainly hide a great many things*/he decided. She had pale, pink skin, youthfully perky breasts, and soft curves. She was neither overly thin nor did she carry excessive weight. Severus found himself admiring the young woman's form.

In light of her obvious embarrassment and his boredom with the current line of discussion, Severus decided to take advantage of her distraction.

"I am finished with this discussion, Hermione. I will not compromise," he said firmly.

Out of embarrassment and fury, she swiftly disappeared with a huff into her rooms. She completely missed the amused grin that played about Severus' lips as she left the room.

Severus reveled in the moment of silence and threw himself into his favorite leather armchair. What had he been thinking when he had insisted that this girl...*no, you cannot think of her as a girl any longer, not after seeing that figure...*live with him? He knew that hormonal teenagers were enough trouble to deal with on a day to day basis, but he now decided that a pregnant witch was far worse.

He closed his eyes and brought forth her image once more. Severus fruitlessly attempted to convince himself that his only interest in Hermione's body was due to his impending child's genetic traits. A great part of him was now hoping that the child inherited far more of her physical traits than his. *Except for that ruddy, unkempt hair! I really do not wish to have a boy with a mass of frizzy hair.* Severus shuddered at the mere thought.

He began spinning thoughts of his child in his mind. When he had first set out to do this, he had not given much thought to what it actually meant to have a child around. After spending the last month sharing his living space with Hermione, however, he was beginning to see that it could take some getting used to. He had always led a solitary life and spending so much of his free time in another person's company was not something he was used to doing. What would it actually be like with an infant? He was not overly concerned. That was where house-elves and nannies came in handy. He would be present in the child's life, but he did not have any intention of changing nappies or singing lullabies. He would hire someone to attend to those meager tasks.

Severus had always assumed that the child would be a boy, a true heir. However, the possibility of a female child crept upon him. He wondered quickly if the gender of the child would affect his father's will. *It should make no difference*, he told himself hastily. In the Wizarding world, if there is a female child that is the last of a bloodline, then when that child marries, she and her spouse have the option of taking either her familial name or his. If, of course, she married into another line that was dying out, preference went to her husband's bloodline. This decision had to be made prior to the marriage, however, and it was the only thing that was causing Severus any concern. Severus was only planning on one child, and he could not afford to have any problems crop up. He decided that he should write to his solicitor to clarify his father's will, so he could prepare for all contingencies.

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Hermione went into her rooms. She was a mixture of emotion, all of them out of control. She took her few moments of privacy and began to try to compose herself, though little could keep her from being furious with the man. He was nothing more than a domineering control freak. *There are way too many days of this that I have left. I don't think I'll last that long.*

In the privacy of her room, she could admit that her reaction had been rather harsh. It actually was rather foolish of her to cast the voice Amplifying Charm on herself while her magic was behaving so awkwardly at times. *But, that was a lousy thing to do to a person*, she thought to herself.

"Yes, it definitely was," Hermione agreed aloud to the room.

The next morning and each morning following Hermione would wake up to a small plate filled with cream crackers, Melba toast, and water biscuits. There would also be a piping hot cup of peppermint or lemon tea. The first morning it sat accompanied with a small note in a spidery scrawl, which read:

*Eat and drink before rising. It will aid in settling the nausea.*

It did seem to help a little, but nothing stopped the morning sickness completely. Hermione still spent more than one morning sitting on the floor of her bathroom willing herself not to continue dry heaving once the contents of her stomach had been thoroughly expelled. Severus would always come looking for her. Although he never issued words of comfort, he did always gather fresh, cold-water dampened facecloths for her face and neck, and he would then help her to the living room.

Neither spoke of the 'loo' incident. Hermione resigned herself to taking shorter showers. However, she silently vowed that nothing was going to interfere the next time she truly felt the need for a long soak in the tub.

The days and eventually weeks of October slowly passed. Hermione remembered the month as nothing but a mixture of nausea, sleepiness, and an emotional roller coaster. When she was feeling up to it, she would still spend her afternoons visiting with old friends and professors, and she started spending two evenings a week with Professor Flitwick. She spent those evenings marking essays for the small wizard and often wondered if any of the students ever bothered to open a textbook.

When October turned into early November, Hermione felt that she was nearing a milestone. The first trimester would be over near the end of the month. She was looking forward to a time when she did not feel the urge to expel her last meal and when her emotions were again under her own control. She did not broach the subject of Severus' impending departure from Hogwarts at the end of the year yet. She wanted more information on his plans, and as of yet, he was not all that forthcoming with information.

One morning during their breakfast, Severus informed Hermione that she was to see Madame Pomfrey that afternoon.

"Okay. Are you accompanying me to see her?" Hermione asked carefully.

"I will see to it that you arrive to the hospital wing without incident, but no, there is no need for me to stay. If something is amiss, Poppy will make sure that I am informed," he said complacently.

Hermione had breathed a sigh of relief at this. The last thing she wanted when being poked and prodded was for Severus Snape to be standing over and watching.

When she was finally sitting on the hospital bed, dressed in nothing but a hospital gown, she was extremely grateful that Severus wasn't there. Even though this was a familiar setting, it still reminded Hermione of the unease she had felt while at the fertility clinic several weeks prior. Odd really, it seemed like it was so much longer than it actually was. Her life had certainly taken quite the turn since the summer.

Madame Pomfrey opened the divider that had Hermione sectioned off from the rest of the ward just enough to allow herself in and closed it again.

"Good afternoon, Hermione," she said smiling.

Hermione nodded and attempted to match the broad smile but failed miserably. "Good afternoon, Poppy."

"Well, I need to check you all the way out, top to bottom," the older witch said. "I'll be as quick and as gentle as possible. Okay?"

"Yes."

Hermione lay back as Poppy began the careful scrutiny of her body. Finally, the Mediwitch pronounced, "Well dear, everything seems to be fine. The size of your uterus is right in line with your dates. Right about twelve weeks, I'd say. Are you still feeling ill?"

"Yes, terribly," she replied.

"We'll give it two more weeks; it should pass by then. If it doesn't, then we can try to do something about it. Just try to eat a little something before you get up in the morning and eat foods high in vitamin B6. Anything else, my dear?"

"Yes, actually, the Healer at the clinic said something about a spell to hear the baby's heartbeat," replied Hermione in a questioning tone.

Poppy smiled. "Yes, I was getting ready to do that. However, it is really recommended that you don't try it yourself until your hormones are more stabilized. Casting spells on yourself can be dangerous," she warned.

Hermione nodded.

"All right, you hold your wand over the abdomen and say *Fetus Sonorus Maximus*. If there is nothing there, then the wand tip will not change. If there is a viable fetus, it will burn turquoise. No doubt this is the test that Healer White performed to confirm the pregnancy. Once a heartbeat can be detected, the wand tip will amplify the sounds from the fetus." Madame Pomfrey paused, held her wand over Hermione's abdomen, and cast the charm. Soon Hermione could hear a "whoosh-whoosh-whoosh" sound coming from the tip of the Mediwitch's wand. It sounded to her much like rushing water, but it was the most glorious sound she had ever heard.

Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon thinking of the sound and the life that *she* was growing inside of her. Frequently placing her hand on her belly, she wondered about the child's sex and features. Would she look like her? What would he sound like? Will she share the same passion for learning? How many of his father's snarky habits would he possess? Those and so many more questions swam through her mind, and the joy from her meeting with Poppy quickly faded into sorrow as she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. *Oh, God. Will I ever know the answer to those questions?*

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**Southern's Notes:** I'm certainly glad she stood up to him about that bath (though I wish she'd told him aloud what she thought of him) business, but I think I would sneak off to the prefect's tub myself. I feel sorry for Hermione here, and I hope that arse hears her crying and feels a tinge of guilt at least. Ah, well, off to wait on my cliff for the next chapter.

**A/N:** Oh come on now! I was nice in this chapter...that's not an evil cliffie! A little angst maybe, but it needs a little angst, sorry. Thanks for reading!

## VIII

### Chapter 8 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I amnot JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69, and to my wonderful muse, Meredith!**

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Severus had seen her walk out of the hospital wing with one of the seventh year Hufflepuffs. She looked surprisingly happy for a change. He thanked God briefly for this small miracle. Severus' visit with Poppy had been short. She informed him that all was well with his child, and Hermione had been quite excited about hearing the heartbeat. Reassured, he walked back to his living quarters.

Seeing an empty living room, he went to go knock on Hermione's door. His hand stilled just before it made contact with the wood. He could barely hear odd mumblings, sobs, and words that were barely discernable were intermittently placed. He heard little phrases sounding suspiciously like "not mine" and "never see".

Stepping away from the door swiftly, Severus moved to his desk. Pulling out parchment and quill, he jotted a brief letter. Closing it with the school seal, he arose again and left for the Owlery. All the while telling himself, *It is one thing to live with a pregnant witch, but it is quite another to have to live with one who would never see the child and seemed to be already regretting it.* This was not territory he wished to be in.

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Hermione had spent the remainder of *that* day in her room. The next morning she'd attempted to pull herself out of the depression that she had somehow found herself in. Her initial reaction had been to busy herself so that she could not dwell on the inevitable, which was the loss that she had realized she would be facing. *Just like when my parents died*, she'd mused often.

She'd ended up placing herself in the one area where she was always the most comfortable...the library. Unfortunately, this had inevitably led her right back to various books on pregnancy. She'd switched her focus, however, from the hormones and had begun to view some of the many photographs of the fetuses during various stages of development. Although she'd marveled at them, she'd soon realized that it was nothing more than a bit of Spellotape on a wound that was deepening with each word that she read and each picture that she viewed.

Snape had begun to avoid her more than usual. Hermione had actually awoken the past few mornings wishing that she were horribly nauseous so that he would come looking for her. However, that was not to be. As with the current day, she consumed her cream crackers and peppermint tea and arose without difficulty.

She was sitting on the chesterfield after breakfast; it had been nearly two weeks since the visit with Madame Pomfrey. Hermione had just selected a book to read from Severus' large library and began searching the well-worn pages for her favorite passages. She was jolted from the wonderful world of Middle Earth with a knock on the door.

"Ginny! What are you doing here?" Hermione exclaimed when she opened the door to her fiery red-headed friend.

"Well, I've come to take you shopping, my dear," replied Ginny with a smile.

"What?" asked Hermione while gesturing the younger witch into the room and to have a seat with her.

Ginny giggled as she sat on the sofa. "Well, from what I hear, you've been moping about in a foul mood for a few weeks now. Neville wrote to tell me about a rumored screaming match between you and Snape regarding his lack of bathing or something. He didn't go into much detail. He just said that you disrupted an entire Potions class for this row."

Hermione smiled. She had only told Neville that the argument had involved shower water when he had confronted her because of the insatiable gossip that had been floating about as a result of her fury. Talking to Neville had been Hermione's futile attempt at diffusing the now rumored torrid affair and lovers' quarrel between her and Professor Snape down to a mere spat between roommates.

"That was a several weeks ago, Gin," Hermione said.

"Yes, I know. I got another letter a nearly two weeks ago asking me to come up on the weekend and take you out for the day. I would've come up last weekend, but I couldn't get away."

When Hermione neglected to ask who sent the owl, Ginny continued. "The letter said that you've seemed rather down lately and that a shopping excursion may cheer you up."

Now that piqued her curiosity. *Who would write to Ginny and suggest that she take me shopping to cheer me up?*

Ginny smiled while watching her friend's attempt to decipher the mystery that plagued her for days. Finally she answered with a furtive smirk, "I think that it was Neville that sent the note, Mione. It seemed that he figured that it wouldn't hurt for me to come spend some time with you. I am surprised that he can manage to teach! The berk even forgot to sign that last letter."

Hermione rolled her eyes, admitting to herself that her friend was probably right. Neville was awfully sweet, but the poor bloke was hopeless when it came to anything other than Herbology. She knew that he had previously had a crush on her when they were students and with the time that she had been spending with him since the beginning of the school year, she wondered if it was possible he was having these feelings towards her again.

Deciding that this was not a topic she wanted to dwell on, Hermione asked, "Where are we going shopping, Gin?"

Ginny stifled a devious grin at Hermione's obvious desire to ignore Neville's obvious interest in her and responded, "Diagon Alley...are you ready to go?"

"Oh, yes, please! Anything to get me out of here," said Hermione with a smile.

As it was nearing the ides of November, the Christmas season was fast approaching. Hermione had always prided herself on being very organized and having her shopping done with no later than October. This year was the exception to that rule. With the money issues and then the pregnancy, Hermione had little time to prepare for the holidays.

Hermione found Snape sitting in his office, marking papers. He waved her off without a second glance, only requesting that the two women return to the castle by supper.

"Wow, that was easy," mused Hermione aloud as she and Ginny set out.

Ginny had secured them a Portkey to use for traveling during the day, and after feeling that familiar tug behind their navel signaling their transfer of locations, they set about exploring the shops of Diagon Alley.

Shopping was never one of Hermione's favorite tasks, but she was so relieved to be out of the castle for the first time since she had arrived in September. Ginny and Hermione passed the time with idle chatter as they browsed. Ginny was telling Hermione about her latest report at the Ministry. It was the most recent reports on the rise of Squib births among pureblood families. Such information was of no news to Hermione; according to many renowned Healers, the rise in Squibs was due to pureblood witches becoming lazier and relying on house-elves to perform magic for them. However, since the Ministry was obviously ignoring this bit of information, Hermione silently wondered if they weren't attempting to spin this information to their benefit. It would be fruitless, of course, for Ginny to attempt to influence the Ministry of Magic to see the truth.

Ginny then went on to tell about Ron's latest girlfriend a recent graduate of Beauxbatons and some cousin of the Delacours. Ginny's main complaint was that this young blonde was practically living at Grimmauld Place and talked non-stop about the most useless and annoying things.

"It's always about the latest rubbish on beauty charms, the newest hair care potions, or other such nonsense," said Ginny with an obvious air of disgust.

"So, are you seeing anyone?" asked Hermione with a curious glint in her eyes.

Ginny laughed. "You're joking, right?" she asked in response. "You know me; I'm too busy to date."

"Ginny," Hermione paused and pulled her friend's attention away from the window in which the two had been browsing, needing to look directly at her. "Ginevra, Harry's not coming back. You need to let him go."

Ginny's hazel eyes began to shine from the tears now welling up in them. "I know," she replied simply. Appearing to gain resolve, she went on. "It's just so hard to think of him as truly being gone. His lifeless body is just laying there, four floors below my office, Mione. His soul is waiting in that ruddy Pensieve in the room next door, trapped there for eternity with that horrible monster."

"I know, Gin, I know," came Hermione's comforting words. It hurt Hermione, too. Harry had been like a brother to her, her best friend since she had been eleven years old. Losing him had been devastating; it had been the first in the long line of losses, which seemed to plague Hermione from that moment on in her life. First there was Harry and Dumbledore, then she had lost Ron to one of the Patil twins, then McGonagall had been carted off to a locked ward at St. Mungo's, and then her parents had died, followed by the loss of all of her career prospects. Hermione had lost everything.

As if sensing Hermione's mental review, Ginny spoke again. "I know you've had losses too, Mione. Things will get better. They already have started to, haven't they?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders in response as the pair began walking again amongst the various Wizarding shops. In a vain attempt to bring the conversation back to her friend's obsolete love-life, Hermione asked, "What about Neville?" Seeing the stunned look on the redhead, she continued, "He could be good for you. He can be very thoughtful, you know?"

"Umm, no thanks," Ginny replied with a laugh. "He's a sweet guy and all, but come on! He didn't even remember to sign his last letter."

"Too right," said Hermione with a grin and wink.

"So, how are things with you and Snape?" the younger witch asked with a sheepish grin on her face.

"I'm sorry?" asked Hermione taken by surprise at her friend's sudden change in conversation.

"I asked how things were going between you and the mysteriously sexy Potions master." The grin on the young witch's face now reached her eyes.

"Did I hear you right? *Mysteriously sexy*? Are we talking about the same greasy, arrogant bastard?"

The younger witch laughed. "Well, you must admit it, Hermione. That voice can flow like fine Chinese silk."

Hermione couldn't hold back the inevitable eye roll, although her face did relax into a small grin and a chuckle.

The girls found themselves in Flourish & Blotts where Hermione began thumbing through her favorite childhood tomes. After much inner debate, Hermione finally settled on purchasing a copy of *Cinderella* for the child. This act did not go unnoticed by Ginny.

"Blimey! Who is that book for?" she asked cautiously.

"Well, it was my favorite story when I was a girl. My mum used to read it to me every night before bed," answered Hermione evasively.

Ginny grabbed her best friend's arm and led her to an out of the way bench. "Hermione," started the younger witch before hesitating. She rested her hand upon Hermione's knee and took a deep breath before asking tentatively, "How are you feeling about...about the baby?"

Hermione couldn't meet her gaze. "I don't know what you mean, Gin," she replied as casually as possible.

"Oh, don't give me that rubbish, Mione," she snapped. "I know you! You bought that book for the baby."

Hermione began biting her lower lip and closed her eyes, unwilling to face her friend's accusations.

"Are you doing okay with all of this?"

Hermione's face was sullen, but for the first time she felt like she could almost talk about it all...almost. "I'm doing all right. It is just suddenly becoming real to me," she said while bringing her hand to rest on the slight bulge of her abdomen. "I know what I have to do, and the thought of it is becoming harder with each day."

"It's not your baby, Hermione," came Ginny's voice. Hermione mused that Ginny's voice was in the same clinical tone that her own had been a couple of months prior. "The baby is not yours. It belongs to Professor Snape and some unknown donor witch. She's probably some fancy pureblood that wouldn't soil the Snape line. You are just a carrier. The baby isn't yours."

Hermione wanted to do nothing but scream and tell Ginny how wrong she was. Every time that Ginny stated that the baby wasn't hers broke her heart. She wanted to tell Ginny the truth. Her mind screamed in her defense. *It is mine! That's why this is becoming so bloody hard. I haven't even felt her move, and I want nothing more than to hold her and care for her.*

Hermione said nothing, only allowing the tears to form and silently stream down her face. Ginny brought a comforting arm around Hermione's shoulder and pulled her into a tight embrace. They sat in silence for several minutes. "It will be all right, Hermione," she muttered into her friend's long, brown hair.

Hermione had wept before. The tears flowed when she heard the baby's heartbeat. She had cried when she had been unable to button her Muggle jeans just two days ago. She'd even cried when the kitchens were out of her favorite types of chocolate. Normally, Hermione kept her emotions wrangled in by a tight leash. The pregnancy had made her emotions flow from her like a sieve. Now, she felt that she could no longer cope with any of them. Ginny was giving her the comfort that she had yearned for.

One thought kept creeping to the surface. *How am I going to face the day when I have to relinquish this baby in less than 26 weeks?*

After her tears were spent, Ginny released her from the firm grip that she must have learned from her mother. Hermione looked at the young woman and pleaded with her. "Please, don't tell anyone about the book."

Ginevra brought her arm from around Hermione's shoulders, reached forward, and squeezed her hand. "I won't, Mione. Just promise me," she said meeting her gaze and looking directly into her brown eyes, "that you will try not to become too attached."

Hermione nodded, but both women knew that it was already too late for that.

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**Southern's Notes:** What a sad little chapter! I think that I would become attached as well. It's a very hard situation that she's in here. Dang! I hoped that Ginny would know it was Snape that sent the letter. Ah, well.

**A/N:** Okay, next up is Christmas...it should be a little happier...should be! And no, the way Ginny was describing the anonymous letter was not the way the letter was written, she changed the wording. Who said that Ginny didn't know who sent the letter? ;-)

## IX

### Chapter 9 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.



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**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, who puts up with an amazing amount of garbage from me. She truly is priceless!**

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"That did not have the desired result," Severus muttered.

"I'm sorry, sir," replied Ginny. She was leaning against the wall next to the main entry into his living quarters.

She and Hermione had returned from their excursion a few minutes before. Upon arrival, Hermione had turned to the Weasley girl, hugged her, and expressed her gratitude before walking quickly to her room and shutting herself inside. Severus had noted the puffy, red eyes and that accursed sniffing sound she was making. She did not even look him in the eyes to acknowledge him.

"She has been crying again," he stated.

"Yes, sir," she replied, even though she knew it had not been a question. Severus watched the girl as she fidgeted with her hands and stared at the drapes, which covered the windows.

*Let her be uncomfortable*, he thought. *There is no way that I am going to invite her to sit down.* Severus was suddenly surprised when the redhead looked directly at him with a smug smirk on her face and said, "Thank you for writing me and telling me that she needed someone to talk to and to get out of the castle."

Narrowing his gaze at the young witch, Severus maintained a face void of emotion, never giving away that he had been taken aback by her brazen accusation. "Yes, well, it does not appear that her reunion with you has done any good."

"I wouldn't say that, Professor. I think you may be surprised. Give her a little more time. She just needs someone to confide in." Miss Weasley stood up tall and stepped closer to the exit. "I will be back in another two weeks to take her out again. I need to do a little more shopping, and I think she's due for some clothes. Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

Not even waiting for him to answer, she left. Severus was stuck between his anger at the girl practically *telling* him to buy Hermione some new clothes, a small bit of satisfaction that she had figured out who had written the letter to her, and frustration that Hermione appeared to be just as upset this evening upon her return as she had been for the last couple of weeks. It was all very trying on him.

However, the girl was correct, Hermione did need a new wardrobe. He had noticed just the other evening whilst wearing her Muggle clothes that she had a ribbon looped through the buttonhole of her jeans. When he had questioned her about it she had said something about the Wizarding world not having elastics...whatever they were. That was when her eyes began to tear up again, and he had left the room to avoid the flood of seawater that was sure to follow. He hated being around blubbing women. It was almost worse than having to deal with a homicidal megalomaniac.

Severus let out a small chuckle as he sat himself in his usual armchair in front of the fire. He found it to be rather amusing that he was comparing living with Hermione Granger to working for the Dark Lord. Even more humorous was that for the briefest of moments, he had thought that dealing with Voldemort was easier. That was not true, of course. Hermione may be trying on the nerves, but she was not an evil person.

What did he think of the young witch now? She had been living in his space, under his care...so to speak...for ten weeks. He had not despised his time with the girl...erm, woman. She could be rather pleasant, and he enjoyed having someone around that he could hold an intelligent conversation with. *Yes, when she is not inundating the sitting room with tears!* Severus scowled. *That was currently the biggest thorn in his side.*

According to the pregnancy pamphlets and books provided by Wilhelm Wigworthy's Wombs for Went, however, the time of the worst mood swings should soon be ending. Hermione was nearly entering into the second trimester...depending on which book he read or which medical authority he spoke to. *It is a wonder they even know where a baby comes out!* *The experts cannot seem to agree on the simplest of matters!* Severus groused internally.

He summoned his copy of *Pregnancy and Confinement for Witches*, opened it, and began to research what *wonderful delights* he had to look forward to in the coming months.

*The Second Trimester*

1) Nausea is usually gone.

*Thank God!*

2) Breasts become less tender.

*Had Hermione experienced tender breasts?*

3) Fetal movement should become noticeable.

*Will this be something that she care about?*

4) Linea nigra and/or chloasma may appear.

*A dark line and a mask? What the bloody hell did that mean?*

*I'll have to look that up.*

5) May have difficulty with constipation.

*That is really information that I do not need to know about. Nonetheless, I can see what sort of potions would be acceptable for her to ingest whilst pregnant.*

6) May have food cravings.

*If she thinks that I am going to succumb to her every whim when it comes to food, then that witch has another thing coming!*

7) May have nasal congestion.

*Likely a little Pepperup Potion could take care of this.*

8) Bleeding from the gums or nose.

9) Headaches.

10) Leg cramps.

*Likely caused by an inadequate intake of calcium.*

11) Round ligament pain.

12) Emotions become more stabilized. Most witches begin to accept the pregnancy, and their thoughts become more introspective. The pregnant witches also tend to daydream more, and their nocturnal dreams become more active. Legend states that this is due to an ancient spell placed by Vesta Gero. The purpose of this ancient magic was to help the witch prepare for the impending birth and child rearing.

*I wonder what sort of dreams plague a surrogate mother.*

13) Due to the balancing of emotions, it is safe for witches to once again use their magic on themselves. However, it is important to note that most Charms, spell work, as well as Potions, may be ineffective for a limited time. The most common charm is the Fetal Sonorus Charm. This spell allows the impending parents to hear the fetal heartbeat for a short period of time. Also common, is the Puer-Puella Cerno Potion, most accurate when performed after twenty weeks gestation, can be used to determine the gender of the fetus.

*Poppy has already used the Sonorus Charm. It will be curious to see if Hermione chooses to cast this charm on herself even when it is not necessary to check on the well-being of the child.*

Though it is fairly common, Severus had never brewed the Puer-Puella Cerno Potion, as it is not commonly stocked in the Hogwarts infirmary. He made a mental note to investigate the potion and its properties before deciding to insist that Hermione take it. He had received a letter from his solicitor a couple of weeks prior, and he had been correct in assuming that his father's will did not specify a gender for the child. So, the gender of the child did not matter much to Severus, although he had pictured a son since the ordeal began.

14) Many witches in the second trimester of pregnancy find an increased sexual desire. It is important for both parents to acknowledge the need for continued communication and sexual intimacy...as long as there are no extenuating circumstances.

*Communication? Sexual Intimacy?*

Severus laughed at this. Ever since he had overheard her breakdown, over what he was nearly certain was regret over having signed over her child to him, he had tried to avoid her as much as possible. The last thing that he wanted to do was pretend to sympathize with her. He did not feel sorry for her. She had been fully aware of the choice that she'd been making when she'd signed the contract. He still believed that his stipulations were reasonable. Nothing in the contract was unfair. *Hermione will be well compensated for her contribution. She should be thankful that she does not have to be strapped with the child for the next eleven years!*

To say that her reaction was a surprise would be a lie, however. He had just hoped that this issue would not present itself so soon. He was expecting it to be something that came about at the end of the pregnancy. Preferably, after the birth! That way he could just take his son and disappear.

Severus scoffed as he thought about the part on sexual intimacy. He was quite certain that their situation counted as an 'extenuating circumstance.' Not that the idea was appalling to him. *Wait! Why am I even thinking along these lines?*

He snapped the book shut and tossed it to the floor. He looked at the place where Hermione had been standing when she'd absently dropped her towel to the floor due to the tantrum about the bath water. That was an image that had permanently ingrained itself into his mind. She had a youthful, sensual body and an intelligent mind. Truly, there was nothing more that he required in a witch. Though, it was not as if he was *looking* for a relationship with anyone. Relationships were dangerous things that he'd spent most of his life avoiding.

One reason that he had elected to find a surrogate to carry his heir was because it was a simple transaction. There were no strings attached. The time and energy involved in having an intimate relationship with a witch was tremendous, and where was the guarantee that such a commitment was worth it?

Though it pained him to admit it, if he were interested in a witch, a woman like Hermione would be what he was looking for. She was not a classic beauty, but she was not repulsive by any means. Besides, there was so much more to beauty than appearances...the person behind the face was just as important. Over the last few months, Severus had slowly begun to *know* Hermione. She was a smart, bossy, courageous, curious, tenacious, kind, caring, compassionate, young woman. *Since when are any of those qualities important to you, Severus?* he asked himself.

True, Severus was not known for his emotions, more for his lack of them, but this was not truly the case. Despite popular belief, he did have feelings. He just did not wear his heart on his sleeve like a Hufflepuff! He did care about some things and certain people, and he did feel remorse for his past crimes. He had been grateful to Dumbledore for taking mercy on him and accepting the repentance of his sins. He was a good man, Albus...whom he had loved like a father; whose loss had been devastating to Severus. He would have died in Azkaban after the first fall of Lord Voldemort had it not been for that old man.

Severus had loved his mother, as well, and she in turn had loved him. He still mourned the woman that had fallen by her husband's own hands. She had been a beautiful and intelligent young witch. The sentence that had befallen her by such a hateful man had been a pity. It was something that he did not wish to think about.

Severus hoped that one day he could learn to love his child. His father had never loved him. The man had only seen him as an heir to carry on the Snape line. Other than that, a son was nothing more than a nuisance to the old bastard. He did not wish for *his* son to feel that way.

*But how do you make a child feel loved without spoiling them?*

He did not want his son to become like Draco Malfoy. Though the younger Malfoy had eventually seen the error of his ways, he had spent much of his youth as a spoilt brat. It had taken his father's imprisonment and Narcissa's death for the Malfoy heir to recognize the dangerous path that he was on and change. Severus did not wish for his son to lead that life. He wondered if all parents' wished that for their children...that the child not make their parents' mistakes.

He truly was not a stranger to raising children. Head of House for Slytherin, for over twenty years, gave him experience. Somehow, though, Severus had the feeling that having your own child and raising it from infancy was different than frightening a group of impudent, eleven-year-old children and scaring them into submission.

A small chuckle escaped his lips. Never would he have envisioned himself sitting in his living room pondering the finer aspects of child-rearing. However, it was slowly becoming a reality that he would be faced with this experience soon. That coupled with the dawning realization that being a single parent may not be as easy as he had originally thought it to be was slowly beginning to worry him.

*Perhaps there is a benefit to having another parent around,* he silently wondered.

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Hermione had spent the remainder of the weekend by herself. She only ventured from her rooms for meals, and even on those occasions, she was only out for the briefest amount of time, having elected to eat all of those meals in Severus' quarters.

By Monday morning, he was contemplating doing something drastic...like actually talking to the girl about her *feelings*...when she emerged for breakfast. Severus was momentarily shocked as he stared at the young woman. She was fully groomed and dressed for the day.

Severus hid a smirk. "Good morning, Hermione," he said whilst taking a sip of coffee.

"Morning, Severus," she said with a small smile. She sat in her customary chair at the small dining table and prepared her food.

He watched her ready her plate and was pleased to see the generous portions she was filling it with. He looked closer at her face. The dark circles and ghostly pale skin that had faced him every morning for well over a month was disappearing, to be replaced by a youthful face with creamy, healthy tones. He was inwardly pleased at this and could not stop the small expression of satisfaction from appearing on his face. "You look well today," he commented.

"I *feel* well this morning," she said gleefully. "It's amazing how wonderful such a simple thing can be." He watched as she immediately began shoveling food in her mouth.

"I am curious, Hermione. What changed?" It took every ounce of willpower to keep from asking more. *What is wrong with you?* he inwardly chided.

"I think that the chocolate that I bought on Saturday helped," she answered slyly.

Severus smirked at her cheeky reply. He took another sip of his coffee and attempted another approach. "I know that you have not been feeling as nauseas lately. Was it just that, or is there something more?" he pressed.

"This, the pregnancy, is harder than I anticipated. You're right. My stomach is not as queasy anymore...which I'm very thankful for, by the way" she added with a smile. "I just did not expect my emotions to be hit so hard."

"Indeed," he replied with a quirk of his eyebrow. "Yes, I think I could do without the emotional outbursts as well."

Hermione chuckled. This was the most pleasant conversation she'd ever had with him. She was truly feeling better than she had in weeks. It was not only physical but emotional as well. Upon returning with Ginny on Saturday, she had not felt any better, but by the next morning, she'd felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted. It was simply more bearable knowing that Ginny knew how she felt.

What had been the biggest help for her had been the book that she'd bought in Diagon Alley. When she'd returned, she'd shut herself in her room and had cast a Silencing Charm. She'd climbed up on the bed to sit back against the headboard. She'd then cast the Fetus Sonorous Charm and had listened to the sounds of life from her child as she'd begun reading the fairy tale aloud. The words had melodiously flowed with the beat set by the child's heart. It had brought forth tears, as she'd known it would, but it'd all felt so right. She'd wished at that moment that she could change the circumstances, change the outcome, although she knew that it was all out of her control.

By Sunday morning, Hermione had felt at peace. Not that anything had changed, only that she had now allowed herself the chance to grieve, and she knew that she could continue to do so if she needed, though she was also able to see that mourning for the next several months would not help either. Life had not stood still, and she needed to catch up with it.

"What are your plans for today?" asked the professor, trying to bring her attention back to her breakfast.

"I would like to go to the library this morning," she said thoughtfully. "After that, I am meeting Neville following lunch."

Hermione received a low grumble in response, and she had to hold back another laugh. Although Severus was being rather talkative, it did not hide the fact that the man was definitely not a *morning person*.

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The morning flew by for Hermione. At noontime, she was seated in her usual place at the Head Table when she was greeted with a Post Owl. She hurriedly removed the small package attached to its claw, gave it a bit of biscuit, and sent it on its way as quickly as possible. Hermione opened the package under the table to avoid the curious stares from around the Great Hall. There was no note, but the opening of the box revealed a bar of Honeyduke's best chocolate. Hermione smiled and tucked it away in her robes.

When she was finished with her meal, Neville approached her and led her out of the Great Hall. He walked her down to greenhouse two where they sat on a bench and began another friendly discussion.

"Neville, I wanted to thank you for what you did," said Hermione. The young man blushed at her words. "I am glad that someone realized that I needed to speak with someone. Writing to Ginny to ask her to come see me was perfect."

The look of embarrassment was replaced by confusion on the young wizard. "What letter?" he asked.

"The letter where you asked Ginny to come visit and take me shopping," giggled Hermione as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I wrote to Ginny," said Neville, "but only once. I never said anything about her coming to visit you or anything."

Hermione was slightly taken aback by his comment. "That's odd. Ginny told me that she figured it was you. Whomever it was forgot to sign their name."

Neville let out a small laugh. "I know that you remember me as being, well, forgetful when we were in school, but have you ever known me to forget to write my own name?"

It was Hermione's turn to be slightly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Neville. Ginny just assumed, I guess, and well," she looked down at the dirt floor, "I just thought that she must've been right."

"It's all right," he answered assuredly. Neville began shuffling his feet and fiddling with his hands. "Umm, Hermione," began Neville tentatively, "I was wondering...that is to say..." He blushed slightly. "What are your plans for the Christmas Holidays?"

"Oh," replied Hermione. This was unexpected. "Well, I haven't spoken to Professor Snape about it, but I think that I'll be spending the holidays here."

Neville nodded his understanding and endeavored to change the subject.

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The next fortnight seemed to pass in a blur. Severus did indeed ask Hermione to stay at Hogwarts for the Yule. She had agreed, although, it would have been nice to spend the holiday's with someone who actually *enjoyed* the season. She truly did not loathe the idea of spending the time with Snape, her other options would be spending it with Neville or with the Weasleys. She would rather spend her time in peace rather than listen to Mrs. Weasley prattle on about the pregnancy or remain under the constant scrutiny of Mrs. Longbottom.

Hermione was endowed with another gift during one of her lunches at the Head Table. This being a slightly larger package, she discreetly stuffed it within her robes and opened it later in the privacy of her room. This time she had received a beautiful white quill with a single emerald embedded in it. She smiled at the simplistic beauty. The quill was obviously a stork feather, the symbolism was plain, and she appreciated the consideration. She wondered what gift the surreptitious professor would bestow upon her next.

On the first Saturday of December, Hermione was again greeted by the smiling face of the youngest Weasley.

"Wow, Hermione!" she exclaimed. "Look at you!"

Hermione smiled. "Good morning, Gin."

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, just let me go find the overprotective professor before we leave." Hermione exited the room via Professor Snape's office. He was sitting behind his desk marking essays, just as he usually did on Saturday mornings.

He looked up when she entered the room. "I thought that you were going shopping with Miss Weasley again today."

"I am going shopping. Ginny just got here. I came in to tell you that we're leaving now," she stated.

Severus stared at her for a few moments and waved her off. "Oh, Hermione," he said before she left the room. "Whilst you are in Diagon Alley today, I have made arrangements for you at Gefjon's Gravity Garments. Just go in, inform Madame Gefjon of your identity, and she will outfit you with an acceptable wardrobe on my account. She is expecting you at eleven o'clock this morning, so you best be on your way."

He leant back over his desk and the essay he was marking, plainly telling Hermione that the conversation was over. She left and told Ginny of their added errand. The redhead put on a triumphant smile as the pair activated the Portkey to the Leaky Cauldron in London.

They entered Diagon Alley and began their careful scrutiny of the local shops.

"So, Mione, how are you feeling?" asked Ginny casually.

Hermione smiled. "I'm feeling pretty good, actually. Nothing like I was on our last outing."

"You seem...well, you seem happier," stated the younger friend. "It's nice to see you happy again," she added.

The brunette nodded and gestured towards a shop. "Here. Let's go in this one. I need to find something for Professor Flitwick." They entered the small shop and perused the items for sale.

"So, how are things with you and Professor Snape?" asked Ginny as if she was talking about the weather.

"Oh!" replied a surprised Hermione. She was suspecting that her young friend had some interesting notions regarding Professor Snape. "Going quite well, to be honest."

"Really?" asked Ginny slyly. "In what way?"

Hermione considered her carefully words before she answered. In one way, this was territory that she was uncertain of herself, and she was not sure what Ginny was thinking about. Though, she did truly value an honest, outside opinion on the matter. "First of all, it definitely was not Neville who sent you the letter." Hermione did not miss the redhead's sheepish grin and nod. "I think it was Severus," she continued.

"I know," answered Ginny with a smirk.

"For some reason, I'm not surprised," mumbled Hermione. "So you like making me feel like a complete berk for asking poor Neville?" she accused.

"No! I just didn't know how you'd react if you knew it was Snape!" Ginny countered. "I mean, look at you now!"

"Oh."

"Better now?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just not terribly happy that you knew and led me to believe something else."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just didn't think that you needed anything else to worry about at the time," replied Ginny calmly.

"Oh, well, I guess I can understand that," as she picked up a small figurine and examined it closely. "Do you want to know the really odd thing? He has started sending me gifts."

Ginny smiled victoriously. "Really? What sort of gifts?"

"Oh, nothing big," answered Hermione quickly. "The first one was some chocolate. I had made some comment that morning about my mood improving due to some chocolate. I think it was his way of telling me that he wanted me to stay in a good mood." The memory made her giggle. "The second gift was really sweet. It was a beautiful new quill."

"A quill! That's perfect for you!" shrieked the younger witch with glee. "What sort of quill is it?"

"A long, white feather with an emerald embedded into it. I think it's a stork quill."

"Oh, how sweet! An emerald, eh? That sounds very Slytherin to me."

"My thoughts exactly." Hermione laughed as she took to the figurine to the shopkeeper to purchase the item so they could be on their way. It was getting close to eleven o'clock, and the girls did not wish to be late.

Hermione had never felt so pampered in her life. Madame Gefjon had treated her as if she were an important patron. When they first arrived, the matron had taken the girl's cloaks and escorted them to a private room in the back of the store where she provided them with tea and biscuits as Hermione stood while the charmed tape measure moved around her to take her measurements. By the time they left, Hermione had been outfitted with an entire winter wardrobe, including a few lighter items for spring. Each time that Hermione insisted that she had more clothes than she could ever hope to wear, Madame Gefjon said that she had been given specific instructions by Professor Snape not to allow her to leave until she had everything that she could possibly need. Before leaving the shop, Hermione had purchased several new lounging robes, several casual robes, a couple of robes suitable for visiting and travel, a winter cloak, a spring cloak, several pairs of pajamas, knickers, and bras. There were so many boxes that Hermione had to request that the items be sent along to Hogwarts separately.

As they exited the shop, Hermione turned to Ginny and told her that she needed to stop at her Gringotts vault to retrieve a gift.

"Fine, but after that we stop for lunch, I think that Professor Snape would not be pleased with me if I only let you get away with biscuits and tea as your noon meal."

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Hermione returned to the castle shortly before supper. She hugged Ginny, thanked her for another pleasant outing, and told her that she'd see her after Christmas. Entering the sitting room, Hermione saw that Severus was seated in his armchair in front of the fire reading a text on Potions.

Hermione took her things to her room where she found the stack of Gefjon boxes sitting on her bed. Depositing her other items, she returned to the sitting room to pass through on her way to the Great Hall.

She walked over to stand next to the professor's chair. "I just wanted to tell you thanks." When he looked up at her quizzically, she added, "for the clothes. I appreciate it."

"It was nothing," he muttered as he turned his attentions back to his book.

She took a step closer to him. "Well, I truly appreciate it," she said as she leaned down. Hermione carefully tucked his dark hair back behind his ear and kissed him softly on the cheek.

Severus was momentarily stunned by her actions, but before he could respond to the young witch, she turned and exited the room for supper.

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The first part of the month flew by rather quickly. During Hermione's meetings with Professor Flitwick, the pair began decorating the castle for the Yuletide. Hermione charmed everlasting icicles to adorn the ceilings of the school corridors and placed heaps of enchanted snow in spare corners and along the walls of infrequently used hallways.

Hermione spent countless hours attempting to teach the suits of armor to sing "Les Anges dans nos campagnes" in its traditional French. It appeared that whenever she finished with one row of the armor and went to work on the next, she would return to the first set to hear various swear words being thrown in periodically.

She finally gave up when Filch confided that Peeves was the cause, and it was the primary reason that the only Christmas in the last forty years that they had charmed the armor to sing was when the other Wizarding schools had visited during the Triwizard Tournament. Hermione silently vowed that she was going to think of a way to prevent the meddlesome poltergeist from being able to tamper with her charms by the following year.

A week before Christmas, while doing her nightly bedtime ritual in which she read the fairy tale and listened to her daughter's steady heartbeat, Hermione felt the first flutters of a kick. She could sometimes hear the tiny movements of active limbs, but before this, she had been unable to discern the feeling of the movements. She placed the storybook aside and lay back against the pillows. Concentrating on her belly, she closed her eyes and waited. She was soon rewarded with what felt like the rustling of fairy wings followed by a light tapping. A single tear began to trickle down her cheek as she waited and was again rewarded with the slight, fluttery movements.

The castle was quiet. Only five students stayed over through the holidays, and most members of the teaching staff went home to spend the time with their families. Severus was not overly pleased with the decorations that Hermione had invaded his quarters with for the festive season. She would only smile and tell him that he was going to have to get used to celebrating what he considered to be a frilly and useless holiday once he was a father. He would simply tell her that he would do no such thing, and his son would not even know what Christmas was if he had any say in the matter. Hermione noticed, however, that he said this with little conviction.

Christmas morning arrived, and Hermione was up earlier than was normal. She was as excited as a child awaiting Saint Nicolas. She was up, dressed, showered, and curled up in her chair in the sitting room sipping her morning cup of tea when Severus finally emerged from his chambers.

"Happy Christmas!" she proclaimed in a voice that Severus was quite certain belonged to a bubbly teenager.

He merely grumbled in reply as he trudged over to his chair at the dining table and grabbed his morning coffee.

"Oh hurry up, Severus!" Hermione exclaimed. He glared daggers at her, but unfortunately for the cranky and surly Potions masters, it did little to curb her youthful enthusiasm.

"Are you going to behave in this childish manner all day, *Miss Granger*?" he asked after taking his first sip of liquid energy.

"That is quite possible," she replied with a smile and from the safety of her chair.

Severus glowered at his coffee. *Why the bloody hell did people have to act like this on Christmas?* he wondered.

"Come on. Hurry up so you can open presents!" she prodded.

"Miss Granger...", he started.

"Severus, we've been on a friendly first name basis for months now. Don't start calling me *Miss Granger* just to emphasize that you're in a sour mood."

He quirked a black eyebrow at her and inclined his head. "As I was saying, *Hermione*, since Albus has been gone and Minerva has been *indisposed*, I have not received any Christmas presents. I never enjoyed this *holiday* much to begin with, and I have never thought that there was anything worth celebrating." His voice was soft and low, and Hermione knew from experience that he was in a dangerous mood.

"Nothing worth celebrating, Severus?" she asked. "Curious you should say that. Ever since the fall of the Voldemort, I thought there has been plenty cause for celebration."

"You really think that, Hermione?" he asked whilst setting his coffee on the table and locking his gaze upon her large brown eyes. "Do you not remember the hovel that you were living in only a few short months ago? One of the finest young Wizarding minds being wasted at two dead end jobs because of some egotistical and greedy politicians that decided to make the should be *war heroes* into *war criminals*? You lost your family as a result of this war, Hermione! The world has been denied the *pleasure* of knowing your friend Potter! That is not even mentioning another great Wizarding mind that is rotting away in St. Mungo's as we speak! She is slowly awaiting death, Hermione! Do you think she has anything worth celebrating?"

Hermione was startled by his attacking words. The giddy mood that she'd been feeling since she had awoken that morning was slowly washing away leaving a deepening sorrow in its wake. She felt a small protest from below her navel and a small smile returned to grace her face.

"I happen to know that you have some Christmas present over here, Severus," she said as she rose from her chair and walked over towards him.

"But first..." she continued as she stopped in front of him and very slowly unbuttoned the lower buttons of her shirt.

Severus was stunned. *What the bloody hell is she doing?* He was very uncertain as to what he truly felt about this newly brazened young woman. He realized that she had stopped opening her shirt...she had only unbuttoned the bottom three and was currently folding down the top of her loose maternity pants. He stared at her bulging midsection. There were a few thin, vertical, pink lines marring a small portion of the taut, creamy, white skin. His mind was whirring with confusion. He felt every range of emotion from nervousness to yearning desire to anger that this girl was toying with him in such a way.

She slowly and deliberately reached down and grabbed his hand. Severus' stomach clenched. For the briefest of moments, he felt as if she was going to attempt to kiss him again. *Only this time, maybe she would chose a more meaningful location to place her lips.* Severus shook his head rapidly to expel these unbidden thoughts.

Hermione quirked a questioning eyebrow at him, but when he did not seem to notice, she continued with what she was doing.

He heard her mutter some words under her breath. Severus barely had time to wonder if the words had been a spell when the hand that she was holding began to thrum with a warm glow of magic. The magic pulsed from his fingertips down to his wrist and then stopped. Severus clenched his hand on impulse, and his fingers unclenched by reflex nearly immediately. The sensory receptors on his hands felt about ten times more sensitive than normal.

He looked up at her quizzically and was met with a calm reassuring smile. "Before you open your gifts, Severus, someone has been wanting to say *hello* to you since you walked into the sitting room this morning." She proceeded to place his sensitized hand over her swollen belly. He was uncertain what it was that he should have been

expecting to feel. Hermione seemed to be concentrating when suddenly she moved his hand over to the left side of her stomach. "There," she said.

Severus barely had time to register that his hand was resting just above her knickers when he felt it. The sensation was a soft gentle tapping. He pressed firmer and flattened his hand against her belly so that he could feel more. He was completely enthralled with the sensation. After another five minutes of chasing the tapping movements across Hermione's abdomen, he looked up at her face. It held an angelic look. A look that portrayed sweetness, innocence, and pure joy.

She noticed him loosening his grip on her body and looked down to see his eyes studying her. "Oh, did the charm wear off? I can cast it again if you'd like."

Severus regained his composure as he took his eyes off of her and quickly removed his hands from her. "No, that will not be necessary." He attempted to look disinterested in what had just occurred, and he nearly wanted to kick himself when he heard himself ask, "What was that spell?" Hermione's face lit up more. *Was it even possible for her to look more happy?* Severus wondered.

"Oh, it's fairly simple. I found it in a Charms textbook when I was working with Professor Flitwick last week. It's very easy. *Sensus Maximus*."

"You found it in a Charms textbook? Not one of the pregnancy texts?" Severus asked accusingly. "Are you certain it's safe?"

"Oh, bloody hell!" she snapped. "You know, you really are the most overprotective, overbearing git that I know, Severus!" she fumed. "Yes, the spell is fine. I checked with Poppy. It's not in the texts because most witches don't use it anymore. They usually just listen to the heartbeat since that tells more accurate information, and the mother can usually start feeling the baby move by the time that she's allowed to cast the spell on herself so there is really no point in it." She stormed back over to the armchair and sat herself down as she grabbed her small pile of gifts to open. *God, that man can be impossible sometimes!*

"I see," he grumbled quietly from the table. *God, I hope that someone gave her some chocolate for Christmas and that it calms her back down.* Severus silently pleaded as he attempted to ignore the feelings of care and concern that were venturing to invade his heart.

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**A/N:** Okay, see...I told you Hermione would be a little bit happier! There is more to Christmas day coming up in the next chapter and more of the Severus' thoughts.

The most excellent Averygoodun has been kind enough to do some artwork for this chapter. (We participated in the SS/HG Gift Exchange and I squeed with delight when I got my gift!) Anyhow, to see art for this scene go here:

<http://sshgexchange.serpentsstratagem.com/gallery/displayimage.php?album=3&pos=9>

**Southern's Notes:** Why that ruddy...! I'm glad that he seems to be thinking of her a bit differently these days. I can't wait to see what happens next. Will he continue to be a sourpuss? Will he appreciate his gifts, though he claims to hate the holiday? I'll be waiting on my cliff for those answers. All are welcome to join me.

The spell with sensitized hands comes from Southern Witch 69's "[The Succubus](#)," which was in turn inspired by Ramos' "Hinge of Fate." (Both are excellent stories, by the way!) Now for a brief lesson in butchered Latin and where some of the names came from in this chapter:

Vesta: Roman Goddess of Fertility

Gero: Latin for give birth to

puella : Latin for girl.

puer : Latin for boy.

Cerno: Latin for decide, discern

Gefjon: Germanic Goddess of Fertility

<http://www.lowchensaustralia.com/names/godslove.htm>

## X

### Chapter 10 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge. \*Please note the warning for this chapter\*

*\*Please be aware of the character death warning for this chapter.\**

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, who puts up with an amazing amount of garbage from me. She truly is priceless! And, of course, thanks go to Meredith.**

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Hermione remained curled up in the armchair, a small pile of opened packages sitting on the floor in front of her. She could barely bring herself to look up at the man that was so intent on pushing her away and ignoring her. *What the bloody hell is the matter with him?* After the two thoughtful gifts that she had received over the last few weeks, she thought that he was reaching out, attempting to make amends for his surly nature. However, the moment that she reaches out to him...*he's a frustrating, miserable wanker!*

She looked at the gifts that she had received from her friends. Mrs. Weasley had sent the typical mince pies and an emerald green jumper. Hermione swore that it was large enough in the middle to hold three people. From Ginny, she received a large bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate. The girl definitely knew what Hermione needed. Ron had sent her vanilla and cinnamon scented body lotion. She was quite certain that it was his version of a peace offering.

She had two packages left unopened in her lap. One was wrapped eloquently in simple silver wrap, the other in plain brown paper. She knew the one in silver was from Severus. The brown-papered wrap was not marked and wrapped in the same fashion as the other anonymous gifts that she had received. *Also from Severus*, she thought while hiding the amused smirk from her face. Hermione was not certain that she wished to open either of these in front of him. She glanced up at him and saw him staring intently at the open box in his lap. His eyes met hers. "What is this supposed to be?" he asked.

"It's a wood carving set," she replied simply.

"A wood carving set," he repeated. He did not even try to hide the disgust dripping from his voice as he continued to look at her.

"Yes, to carve wood," she said sarcastically. Hermione rolled her eyes. "If you don't like it, then fine. I just thought..." Her voice trailed off. There was no point. If the man didn't want it, then it didn't matter.

"You just thought what, Hermione? This looks like it's been used before! What sort of gift is this?"

She rose to her feet, nearly dropping the two packages that had been sitting on her lap. She tossed them both down in the chair haphazardly and stepped towards the man that was currently fueling her anger. "I just thought that since you were so intent on playing the role of *father* that I would try to give you something that I thought was *fatherly!* If you don't want it, FINE! I'll gladly take it back!" She reached for the box that sat in his lap, but before she could reach it, he snapped the lid closed and held it out of her reach.

His black eyes watched her fury grow. She was obviously quite passionate about the gift, and that piqued his curiosity. "Fatherly, you say? Where did you get it?" he asked calmly with a small show of interest.

She calmed slightly at his words. Well, calmed enough to prevent her from ripping the ruddy box out of his ungrateful hands anyway. "Yes, *fatherly!* If you must know, I picked it up from my vault at Gringotts. I'm sorry it's not *new* if that's so bloody important to you! I'll take it back and give you something simple, like silk handkerchiefs or a book." She held out her hand to accept the box back from him.

Severus stared at her for several minutes and slowly mulled over the words that she had thrown at him. He carefully opened the box again, out of the reach of her outstretched hand, and examined the contents more carefully. He was not certain what each piece was specifically designed for, but he looked at each in turn. He could see that some were used for shaving and smoothing, two pieces that looked like chisels, one larger than the other. The remaining items were either u-shaped or v-shaped in a variety of sizes and looked as if they were used for applying intricate design and detail to the yielding wood. The instruments were well cared for; he would almost say that they were loved. He carefully closed the lid again and placed it on his lap. He quietly regarded the girl still standing in front of him, glaring daggers. He realized that it must have been hard for her to part with the gift in the first place.

Severus broke the silence. "I apologize, Hermione. It is a very thoughtful gift." He regarded her as she dropped her arms down to her sides, though the girl still looked braced for another scathing remark. "It belonged to your father, did it not?" he asked.

"Yes, it did. It was in the shed; it was not consumed by the fire."

He nodded his understanding and silently regarded Hermione as she relaxed and stepped back to her armchair, carefully picking up the discarded packages. He abruptly tore his eyes away and began staring into the consuming flames of the fire.

She again looked at him cautiously as she settled in to attend to the boxes in her hands. She could almost see the gears whirling in his mind as he sat there with his arms resting casually on both arms of the chair. She picked up the brown paper wrapped package and opened it. A smile crossed her lips as she ran her hands down the cover of the small leather bound book. It had a small emerald in the shape of diamond embedded on the cover. The lettering on the front was in gold-leaf and read: *Hermione Jane Granger*. She thumbed through the blank book. On the inside front cover was a printed inscription:

For your thoughts while you go through this emotional and life-changing event. December 2002

She closed the book with a smile playing about her mouth. It was truly one of the most thoughtful things that anyone had ever done for her. She looked up at the man in front of her; her anger completely dissipated, and she smiled genuinely, saying nothing. *If he wishes to remain anonymous about his thoughtfulness, then so be it.* Hermione then turned her attention to her final package. This one, at least, was admittedly from Severus.

She carefully opened the silver wrapped box and lifted the lid. There were two items. The first was a necklace. She carefully lifted it out of the box. It was a simple, thin, silver chain with a small pendant in the shape of a butterfly. She had to examine it carefully to discern the stone, but she realized quickly that it was jade. It was an intricately hand-carved piece with tiny rubies on the antennae and diamonds down the center. She carefully set it back in the box and turned her interests to the second item. It was a small crystal phial with a small tag tied around it that read: *Do Not Drink*. She picked it up and looked at the contents closely. It was a transparent, reddish substance...not something she readily recognized. She looked at the man sitting across from her. "Severus, what is this?" she asked holding the phial up so that he could see it.

His facial expression remained blank, giving nothing away to the thoughts that were swirling behind the mask. "It is a potion," he replied, voice dripping in sarcasm.

"I can see that," she replied in exasperation. *God, he's impossible sometimes!* "It says not to drink it. What am I supposed to do with it then?"

"You are supposed to put it in the pockets of your robes that you will be wearing when we go traveling this afternoon," he said in a voice that indicated he was speaking to a three-year-old child.

Hermione quirked a questioning eyebrow at him, but she said nothing. *Since when were we planning on going anywhere this afternoon?* Obviously, he was not going to tell her a bloody thing until he was damn well ready.

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They had spent the midday meal in the Great Hall for the Christmas feast with the few professors and students that had remained for the holidays. It had been a quiet, almost somber affair. Hermione remembered the few occasions during her school days when she had spent her Christmas holidays at Hogwarts, and Dumbledore had made them cheery and memorable. These were quiet. There were no Christmas crackers, no games, no cheer. Hermione had looked to Professor Flitwick in silent inquiry at the nature of the dismal feast, and he had smiled pleasantly while patting her hand and whispering that things would be much better the following year when he was the headmaster.

Now, it was nearly five o'clock, and Severus had just announced that it was time to leave. Hermione quickly grabbed her traveling cloak, which contained the small phial that he had given her that morning. "Please tell me that we are traveling some way other than by Portkey," she stated, with a slight bit of pleading in her voice.

"We are traveling by Portkey, Hermione, because it is the safest way for someone in your condition to travel," Severus drawled.

She rolled her eyes as she held out her hand to touch whatever object he'd charmed this time. *The ruddy git still hasn't told me where we're going! I wonder if this is his way of surprising someone!* Hermione closed her eyes as she felt the all too familiar tug at her navel, and the world began spinning around her. When she was certain that she was not going to lose her last meal all over said git, she slowly opened her eyes. She was momentarily confused by her surroundings. She was in a room full of people, most appeared to be suffering from a veridus of jinxes or hexes. She looked up at Severus as he took her hand and began to lead her towards the stairs. He quickly dropped her hand once they began ascending the stairs.

"Why did you bring me to St. Mungo's?" she asked.

"You have someone to call upon," he stated.

She looked at him curiously as they began to traverse the stairs. They stopped at the fourth floor. *Fourth floor, Spell Damage*, remembered Hermione silently as she followed him through the doors of the stairwell. The last time she had been here was on Christmas during her fifth year. That day the whole lot of them had accidentally wound up visiting the befuddled Professor Lockhart. Today, Hermione and Severus walked past the Janus Thickety Ward where he'd been and continued down the corridor to another one. Outside of ward fifty-two, Severus took her hand, once again, and turned her towards him.

"She is not well, Hermione. However, I know that speaking with you is something that she desperately wishes to do. Just as I see that it may ease your burdens to speak with someone that you consider to be a mentor." Severus reached into the pocket of her traveling cloak and pulled out the phial. "You must give her the entire bottle. She does not like it, but she will drink it. After a few minutes, she will become lucid. It will last approximately one hour." Severus placed the phial carefully in her hands, closing her fingers tightly around it. "The Healer cannot see this," he hissed in her ear.

Hermione nodded carefully, as she realized who she was going to be meeting.

"I will be back to collect you in nearly an hour." He began to walk back towards the stairwell and was nearly there when he turned again. "And, Hermione...tell her *anything* you wish." His eyes widened as if to stress his words.

A thousand questions swirled through Hermione's mind. She wanted to know about the potion that was safely hidden in her hand and what exactly had happened to put her mentor in a critical care unit at St. Mungo's.

She carefully opened the door to the ward. It was quiet, and she closed the door carefully behind her. A small, round woman rose from a desk near the door, upon her arrival, waddling over to meet Hermione. "I'm Healer Astley. Who are you here for, dear?"

Hermione looked around the dimly lit room. There were beds lining each wall. She quickly noted that the majority of the beds were empty. *How am I supposed to slip her the potion and have her talk in such a quiet dismal place?* Hermione spied her target at the far end of the room, back in the corner. "I'm here to see Minerva McGonagall," she said quietly, nodding towards her old professor.

The Healer smiled as she led Hermione towards Professor McGonagall's bed. "Oh, that's wonderful, dear. I so hoped someone would come along and visit her today." Hermione had to fight the tears when she saw her. The once vibrant woman simply sat lifelessly upon the bed. Her open eyes were staring unblinkingly at the blank wall in front of her. She was dressed in a dusty rose dressing gown and had a ghostly pale complexion with a shockingly hollow face. The hair that Hermione had remembered as being so neat and tightly tamed was now gray, brittle, and limp. To the average Muggle, the elderly woman appeared every bit of her 77 years.

"Minerva, dear, you have a visitor!" yelled Healer Astley as she roughly patted the bed coverings. Turning to Hermione, she said, "I don't know why I bother. She mumbles sometimes, but it's not like she really has any idea what's going on anymore. She's just here awaiting death...they all are in this ward. Sad really. Death can be a right pain in the arse when he wants to be. Never comes when you're waiting for it. Always shows up right when you're in the middle of something. Ahhh, well, no use crying over spilt potions. Nothing to be done about it. I'll give you some privacy, go up and get me some supper or the like. It's not like any of the rest of these blokes are going anywhere fast."

Hermione stood there feeling numb. Her immediate desire had been to punch the woman for her crass insensitivity. On the other hand, she was grateful that the annoying biddy was leaving her alone with McGonagall for a time. She opted for keeping her mouth shut for the time being while making a mental note to give the horrid Healer a piece of her mind before she left. As soon as the door clicked shut behind her, Hermione checked to make certain that she was the only one not catatonic in the room.

She opened her hand and spoke to the woman in the bed. "Professor McGonagall, it's me, Hermione Granger. I need you to drink this," she said as she held the now opened phial up to her lips. Hermione jumped as Minerva turned her head away from the proffered drink. "Please," urged Hermione. "It's from Professor Snape." The elderly woman calmed and accepted the phial to her lips.

After the potion was consumed, Professor McGonagall's eyes drifted closed, and she collapsed onto the bed. Hermione sat down on a chair by the side of the bed and waited. After several minutes, the woman in the bed began to stir.

"Professor?" she asked hesitantly.

"Please, get me some water," the raspy voice responded.

Hermione complied, conjuring a glass of water with her wand and presenting it to the frail patient. After several swallows, the woman spoke again. "Thank you, child. Severus told me that he would try to bring you by for a visit."

"Professor, what is going on? Why are you here like this? What was that potion? What's the matter?"

The old woman opened her eyes and smiled at the inquisitive former student seated in front of her. "Hermione, do you mean to tell me that Severus told you nothing before bringing you here?"

She sat there dumbly and shook her head. "He never once told me where we were going or whom I was going to be seeing. I only deduced the whom portion of the equation when I was just outside of the ward. Until then, I didn't even know what the phial was that he so *thoughtfully* presented to me as a Christmas gift."

"Are you telling me that he gave you the potion as a Christmas gift?" Minerva asked in a disgusted tone. "That arrogant Slytherin! You would think that he would be a little more generous to the mother of his child."

Hermione chuckled; it was nice to hear someone speak on her behalf. She was rather surprised, however, when she realized that her mentor had just acknowledged her as the mother of the child she was carrying. "Professor, what has Severus told you about the child?" she asked carefully.

"It's Minerva, my dear, and Severus has kept me abreast of everything, as far as I know." She rested her eyes again. "Now, I wish to know your intentions towards him and that child that you are carrying," came the old woman's voice calmly.

Hermione sat back in the chair and tried to relax, weaving her hands along her slightly protruding abdomen. *Professor McGonagall always was rather direct*, she mused. "My intentions are to give him exactly what he has asked for. I cannot hope or expect for anything more in return."

The frail looking woman quirked a small smile and opened her eyes again. "What do you think that he wants, Hermione?"

"That's easy. He wants me to carry a child for him, give it up to him freely, and leave his life just as quickly and as quietly as I entered it. He is going to quit teaching and hide himself away...keeping everyone and everything out of his and *my* child's life," answered the younger witch in bitter tones.

"Do you honestly believe that you have had no impact on his life?" asked the professor in an amused voice. "Do you think that you entered his life in a quiet manner and can leave just as quietly?"

Hermione was stunned by this. She had never really thought about the impact she had made on the elusive Potions master. She pondered the implications of this before she answered. "I guess that I never really thought about it before," she finally answered truthfully. "Most of the time, I get the impression that he can't wait for me to be gone, but other times I find myself wishing that I had learned Legilimency."



Minerva laughed again. "He truly can be an enigma. What is it that he's done to confuse you, my dear?" Hermione could almost swear that she saw a small twinkle in the elder witch's eyes.

Hermione sat herself up straight, as she had begun to fidget in her chair. She moved one hand to her neck and pulled at the chain that was attached, revealing the small charm she had received that morning. "Well, there was this. He gave this to me for Christmas." Her cheeks reddened, but she knew she could explain it without being thought of as silly. "I know that jade can mean several different things, but it is often a gift indicating love or the union of souls while butterflies are representative of a transformation."

Minerva sat up and leaned in to examine the jade trinket carefully. "Well, thank heaven for that," she muttered. "I was afraid that the ruddy arse only gave you my draught for Christmas. It is quite lovely." She smiled reassuringly. "As to the meaning, knowing Severus the way that I do, I think that he is more secretive than that. There is an old legend about a butterfly that says that if you have a secret wish, capture a butterfly, and whisper your wish to it. Since butterflies cannot speak, your secret is ever safe in their keeping. Release the butterfly, and it will carry your wish to God...who alone knows the thoughts of butterflies. By setting the butterfly free, you are helping to restore the balance of nature, and your wish will surely be granted." Minerva appeared lost in thought for a few moments. "Ah well, maybe that is too sappy for a Slytherin," she said in retrospect as she let the charm drop back onto Hermione's neck. "Nonetheless, I like the story, and a few wishes would not go amiss," she said with a wink.

"I think it is lovely, too. It was just rather unexpected that he'd give it to me openly, especially after the way he handled the other gifts." She thought about the legend. "Maybe a few wishes would not be amiss," Hermione echoed softly.

"Other gifts?"

"Well, yes, I've received three gifts over the last month. They come by Owl Post and are anonymous. Chocolate, first, and next, I received a beautiful quill with an emerald encased within. Then, this morning, I received a journal. It is obviously the mate to the quill and was just so perfect."

Minerva was quiet for a few moments. "Hermione, dear...that does not sound like Severus." She took a deep breath and sighed. "You must think; he is a Slytherin. What Slytherin do you know that does not want credit for something that they have done? He hasn't mentioned this to me at all."

Hermione felt almost chided by the elder witch. She sat dumbstruck by her mentor's frankness. She truly had never thought of it that way. *But, didn't Severus send that letter to Ginny anonymously?* she reasoned with herself. *Yes, but that was purely selfish on his part.* She didn't even have time to attempt to figure out who else would have spent the time and energy to send her such things.

This sudden realization left her wondering one other important thing. She had come to a point where she thought that he was beginning to have feelings for her. Had she imagined all of that? Hermione was more confused now than she ever had been before.

"Oh, come now. Don't fret. I've known Severus for a very long time, and although I really don't know what he's thinking or feeling right now, I can say with all certainty that he wouldn't ask just anyone to be the mother of his child."

"What has he told you about that, Minerva?" asked Hermione.

The old woman smiled and closed her eyes, again resting her head back on the pillow. She was becoming very tired again. "I know that the child in which you are carrying is truly yours and that you will be forced to deny the child. I know that you were in no position to argue his terms, and once you deliver, Severus will disappear to go live a solitary life raising his son."

Tears began to glisten in Hermione's brown eyes. "Son?" she heard herself asking.

"Well, that should be of no surprise to you. Severus already thinks of the child as a son. I take it from your question that you have not taken the draught that detects the gender?" She opened her eyes again and watched the young witch as she shook her head. A sly smirk grew on Minerva's face as she asked, "What do you desire, Hermione...a boy or a girl?"

"I, well..." Hermione stammered. She had not really admitted her desires to anyone. Somehow admitting that she thought of the baby often and of dressing her in pink robes was the same as admitting that she desperately wanted to be a real mother to her child. Hermione felt a thin, wrinkled hand squeeze her own. She closed her eyes and recited the vision that had been plaguing her for weeks. "I never realized how small a newborn was before. She is so tiny as she rests in the crook of my arm. Her skin is creamy white, and she has beautiful black eyes, onyx, like her father's. Her smooth locks of curly, black hair frame her angelic face. I sit in the armchair by the fire and hold her each night as I calm her to sleep while reading to her."

"What is her name?"

"Diana Grace," answered Hermione without thinking. *Where did that come from?*

"It's quite alright, child. I won't tell anyone," said the professor in grandmotherly tones while lightly squeezing her hand again. "I just wanted to know how you really felt about the baby. It is quite obvious to me that you care for her greatly." She paused as she took a slow ragged breath. Her energy was waning. "I am so pleased by that Hermione. I would worry if you didn't care. The only thing left is the small matter of your feelings for the father."

Suddenly, the room began to feel very small to Hermione. She had to stand up and begin pacing in small circles to be able to feel like she had any control.

"I know you're not comfortable with this, Hermione, but you really need to look at this from another perspective. I love Severus like he was my own son. I want what is best for him, and there are times when he truly has no idea what is good for him. Do you know what his motives for this endeavor were?"

"No, I don't. He refuses to answer my questions."

"Money...at least that was the initiating factor. From my understanding, that was what coerced you to be in the position that you're in now, as well."

Though she loathed admitting it, it was the truth. Money! She had done this whole thing for money, so she could hardly blame Snape there. However, Hermione knew that the money was only a secondary consideration for her now. *Hang on! If he needed money, how could he have offered her such a healthy amount? Does that mean that he is getting money for having this baby also?* She'd need to think about the implications of that later.

"I have seen Severus several times since hiring you, and I firmly believe that whether he realizes it or not. He now sees this child as his redemption." Minerva paused and spoke the next words in just barely a whisper. "And, I think that you may be his redemption as well."

Hermione eyed the woman closely and was ready to question her further when she heard the clomping of boots coming towards her. Hermione turned around to face the approaching Potions master.

"Hermione," he said in acknowledgement. He looked at the bed and saw the frail form of his friend. "Happy Christmas, Minerva," he said to her. The old woman managed a faint smile in reply. Severus turned his attention back to Hermione. "The Healer is returning. I trust that you can keep her occupied for a few minutes whilst I finish up with the visit."

Hermione nodded. "Minerva, thank you, for everything. Happy Christmas!" she said with a smile. Minerva reached up, grabbed her hands, and squeezed them tightly. "Remember what I said, Hermione. Take care of the *both* of you."

Hermione heard the woman walking towards them, and she stepped forward to hide the conscious form of Professor McGonagall and walked towards the Healer. "Healer Astley, perhaps you could enlighten me on the important work that you do here," she said, motioning the Healer towards the desk at the front of the ward.

Severus sat next to his friend. He knew that he didn't have much time. "I trust that you had a pleasant visit with Miss Granger."

"Miss Granger?" she choked out behind a chuckle. "Yes, Hermione and I had a very nice visit, Severus. Too bad I will not be able to see her again. I would have liked to have spent more time with her."

"We do not have to do this now, Minerva."

"Yes, we do. I can't continue existing like this. It is painful, Severus. Even with this brief respite that you give me from time to time, it is too much. I think even without your help I would only last a few more weeks. Please help me to end this now."

He looked long and hard at her. The implications of what she was asking of him, it was more than he had thought that he would be able to do for anyone. The only consolation was how very dear to him she was. He could not bear to see her in pain. Severus nodded and withdrew a small phial filled with a clear liquid from his robe pocket. He moved his wand to touch the phial and whispered a few quick words. He met her eyes again. "The phial will disappear in five minutes."

Minerva reached forward, grabbed his hands, and nodded towards Hermione. "She truly is a remarkable young woman, Severus. Do not deny yourself the possibilities that she holds."

He narrowed his gaze upon her. He truly did not want the last words he heard from his friend to be nothing more than romantic notions about a Gryffindor and him. "Minerva..." he began.

"Don't waste time arguing with me...and don't dawdle in regards to her, or I daresay, you will be too late."

Severus quirked an eyebrow to question what she was referring to *Has Hermione admitted to feeling something more?*

"Do not play stupid, Severus Snape. The girl has been receiving gifts from a secret admirer for nearly a month. I suggest that you quit wasting time. Now, give me my phial so that I may take the potion before I become trapped in that ruddy catatonic state again, and I am unable to drink it myself."

Severus placed the phial in her open hands and strode back towards the door to leave the ward and the horrid hospital. He felt little comfort knowing that this would likely be the last time that he'd visit his friend. He walked past Hermione who was speaking with the Healer about her opinion of the poor quality of care that the patients seemed to be receiving.

"Come along, Hermione," he said somberly as he moved past her. Nodding, she rose and followed him out the door. Each of them shot a last glance back at the woman who now lay motionless at the other end of the room. "Goodbye," muttered Severus as he closed the door to the ward behind them. He walked Hermione down to the main lobby of the hospital and escorted her to the fireplaces. She looked at him questioningly. "I believe you are familiar with the Floo, Hermione," he drawled.

"Yes, of course I am. Need I remind you of the short speech that you gave me prior to our arrival here?" she replied with a hint of a smile.

Severus refused to meet her eyes as he answered the mouthy girl. "Yes, however, I spent my time this evening thinking on some issues and decided that traveling once by Floo would indeed be more pleasurable and is very unlikely to cause any problems. Now, I wish to leave this horrid facility as quickly as possible. So, if you would?" he asked whilst indicating the small jar of Floo powder on the mantle.

Hermione allowed her smile to grow as she grabbed a handful of the powder, tossing it into the hearth and disappearing from London.

Upon the pair arriving in Severus' quarters at Hogwarts, Hermione looked at him and smiled. "Thank you for taking me to see her. It was truly wonderful." Hermione leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. It had been a pleasant surprise indeed. "When do you think we can do that again?" she asked as she quickly, turning away to remove her traveling cloak and to hide her blush.

"We will not be making that same trip again," he answered. Severus was slightly taken aback by her kiss. *Do not be stupid. This is not the first time that she has kissed you in thanks for something,* he chided himself.

"We won't be going again? Why?" asked Hermione.

"These trips were always hard on her, Hermione." Severus sighed as he unbuttoned his outer cloak and removed it. He sat in his armchair by the fire and watched the young witch. Her hair was windswept and messier than usual from their trip through the Floo, and she had smudges of ash on her face. "Have a seat," he said, indicating to what he now thought of as *her* chair. Severus unsheathed his wand and waved it, summoning a tea service for them.

"You know that Minerva was badly injured. It took me nearly two years to figure out the array of curses and hexes that she had been hit with. She was not young, and with the damage done by all of those Stunners a few years prior, her immune system was already weak. By the time we discovered which curses she had been hit with, it was too late to help her. She lives in a constant state of exhaustion and pain. The catatonic state which you witnessed upon your arrival is the only way that she can exist, and that state is brought on by no less than a dozen potions." Severus poured himself some tea and slowly began sipping from the cup. "Trust me, Hermione, *exist* is the most appropriate word here. She does not live; she merely survives. The potion which I gave you today counteracts the potions which the Healers give her on a daily basis. It exhausts her to do it, and each time I give her the potion, it ebbs away days from her life." He held up a hand to stop the questions that she had just leant forward to ask. "I give her the potion at her request. There is something to be said about quality of life versus the quantity of it. Minerva has wished that her time be quality time. I took you today because the last few times that I visited her, she requested that I bring you along."

Severus sipped from his tea some more and stared into the blazing fire. He was thankful that Hermione had figured out it was best to wait rather than jump in with more questions. He looked at the woman sitting across from him as she was also gazing in the fire. Was she looking for comfort and solace there as well? He watched as tears formed in her eyes and traversed her cheeks. Wordlessly he removed a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to her. She dabbed at her cheeks, and after several long minutes, he spoke again.

"Her life, such that it is, was likely only going to be a few weeks longer. You have to understand how much pain she is in, constantly, and visits like today only make her condition worse...so very much worse," he muttered, more to himself than to her. Severus took a breath and looked back at the young witch. He saw concern and understanding dancing behind her brown eyes. "Last time that I was there, she requested that I bring her the Draft of Peace as a Christmas gift. As a potion that in normal circumstances would just relax a person, I am sure that you know what the potion will do to Minerva."

Hermione did not know what to say. There was a sick churning in her stomach, but it was not out of anger or fear. It was simply from knowing that Snape was right and that there was nothing more that could be done for her mentor. She wished that she had known while she had been visiting with her today. *What would I have said differently?* Maybe how important she had been to her, she decided. Hermione ran her fingers over her belly and closed her eyes concentrating on the fluttering movements that were distracting her. She thought on Minerva's words to her that evening and vowed that she would do everything in her power to follow the woman's parting advice.

Severus watched her. He thought of his hands on her abdomen, as they had been that morning. He had enjoyed that closeness with her, the awe in the life that was growing. A part of him. *I must not do this right now,* he told himself. He placed the empty cup back on the tray and rose from his chair. "I am going to go make my rounds," he announced as he summoned his teaching robes and exited the room.

Hermione continued to sit there and wondered about his hasty exit. "He has to go patrol the halls for five students?" she asked aloud before laughing loudly. That was what she needed; she needed to laugh. *Oh Lord, if Ron could hear me now, he would likely point out that laughing at such a time was a clear sign of going mental* What was it her mother had always said when she was a child? *People laugh when they hurt too much to cry.*

She placed her empty teacup on the service and walked to her room. Hermione felt sad, tired, and a little confused, but she finally decided that this was definitely an

appropriate way to christen her new journal...from her mysterious admirer. *I'll have to ponder that issue tomorrow!* Once there, however, she noted that her bed seemed inviting. She lay down with one hand on her stomach and the other wiping the occasional tear until she drifted off into a much-needed sleep.

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**A/N:** I am sorry that it took so long for that update, but it took me a long time to get the scene with Minerva to work right. Yes, here is the character death I warned about. I wanted to show that the aftermath of Voldemort is unpleasant. Even survivors don't all get a happy ending, as with any war.

I realize that this borders on assisted suicide. I'm not trying to support or hinder that argument. I have seen many cases in terminal care units where patients are purely drugged to the point of comfort. The fact that comfort equals death is beside the point. I see this as a similar situation.

These sites are purely for information and to cite sources for my information. They are not affiliated with The Petulant Poetess.

Information for jade butterflies found here:

<http://www.crystal-cure.com/symbol-butterflyjade.html>

<http://www.likeacat.com>

McGonagall's age was per estimation by the HP-Lexicon.

**Southern's Notes:** I am sorry to see Minerva go, but I do like the way she planted little seedlings in their minds. Sort of sounds like Snape had some thoughts already, eh? Muahahaha

## XI

### Chapter 11 of 19

Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it. Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69. Her input is invaluable to me. I don't know what I'd do without her.**

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Severus took long, silent strides down the deserted hallway. Since the rest of the student body returned, he was back to making his ritualistic tour through the school. He was begrudged to admit it, but he was actually grateful for the return of students...it gave him fresh fodder during his evening jaunts.

The students that had stayed over for the Yuletide were much too well behaved to satisfy his building desire to torment and terrorize. He had been left with nothing to occupy his time but grading essays and stocking a few supplies for the infirmary. Severus had been looking for anything constructive to take his frustrations out on. Since the visit to St. Mungo's, he had felt almost lost. He stopped in a small, hidden alcove and leant against the wall in the protective blackness and recalled events from the last two weeks.

On the morning of Boxing Day, St. Mungo's had sent him a letter to inform him that Minerva had passed away in her sleep the previous evening. She'd had no surviving relatives and had named Severus as her next of kin some time prior. The memory was vivid.

*The letter appeared on the table with his breakfast, so he had assumed that it had just arrived in the Great Hall. When Hermione saw the scroll's waxed seal...a wand and bone, crossed...it was obvious that she knew what it was concerning. Under the young woman's scrutiny, he quickly read the letter. He placed the scroll gently on the breakfast table and confirmed her suspicions. "She died peacefully in her sleep last night." He casually went back to drinking his coffee and pretending to read the Daily Prophet. His feigned interest in the tabloid faltered when he heard soft snuffles coming from across the small table.*

*Severus let out a disgruntled sigh and looked up at the woman. "Hermione, we went over this last night. This was what she wanted."*

*Hermione attempted to stifle the sobs and quickly grabbed a serviette from the table to wipe her eyes. "I know. I just...I don't know. I guess talking about it was one thing, but actually knowing that she is really and truly gone is something entirely different," she whimpered.*

*Severus was feeling increasingly uncomfortable. He had already been forced to deal with this girl's emotions on more than one occasion over the last few months, and he was truly in no mood to have to deal with them now. He unceremoniously rose from the table, fully intending to seek sanctuary in his office, his lab, or the staff room...hell, anywhere but there!*

*Before he could take two steps, Hermione was at her feet, and Severus could almost swear that she was lunging herself at him. He nearly took a step back in an attempt to protect himself and avoid her touch. However, he was afraid that doing such a thing would cause her to fall. Therefore, he firmly held his ground and resigned himself to her assault. Her arms enveloped themselves through his voluminous robes and around his waist. She buried her head in his chest whilst she unleashed the dam of tears.*

*Severus' breath hitched, but he remained stock-still, keeping his hands rigidly at his sides. He had the uncharacteristic desire to comfort the witch, but he did not know how to do that. He sighed heavily as she continued to cry whilst voicing unintelligible words into the black fabric of his frock coat. He slowly brought his arms up to rest loosely around her back. She obviously took this as a positive sign for in the next moment he felt her squeeze him more firmly. Soon, he found himself with a hand running its way soothingly down her hair, holding her nearly as tightly as she clung to him.*

Severus had held her for undeterminable length of time. The only thing he was thankful for was that he had refrained from stooping to the point of whispering soft words of comfort into her ear. *At least you haven't turned into a total sap,* he reassured himself. He felt the welling desire to blast the nearest tapestry and watch the small strands of fabric float silently to the ground.

Six days following Christmas, he'd had the *pleasure* of attending Minerva's memorial service. The service had taken place during the morning in Firenze's classroom, as it was too cold to do a graveside service. Severus had stood silently out of the way and watched as Hermione and her friends supported and comforted one another. He'd felt a small pang of regret that he was not a part of it. Not that he had any desire to be comforted by Longbottom or the Weasleys, but it had felt right to hold Hermione the day they received the notice. It was because of this that he'd watched with no small amount of envy whilst Neville Longbottom and Ronald Weasley stood on either side of the young witch, each with a protective arm around her.

Following the service, there had been a small gathering. Hermione had approached Severus and asked if he minded if she went back to Grimmauld Place with Miss Weasley and her brother. Apparently, they'd planned a get together to acknowledge the New Year. Severus had relented even though initially he'd not wished to allow it. It wasn't as if she was going to a party. The small group of friends was planning nothing more than sitting around and nattering for the evening. Hermione had beamed at him when he'd consented. In what he was quite certain was a moment of idiocy, she had, at that moment, invited him to join her. He had, of course, declined the invitation, choosing instead to spend the evening in what he was sure would be blissful solitude.

It had been anything but. New Year's Eve had been a night of complete and utter loneliness. *What has happened to me?* Severus was a man that had spent well over twenty years immersed in solitude. That same man had spent the last few months growing accustomed to living with a bright, young, beautiful witch. The results had left him unable to function without her.

He stood himself back upright and began stalking the dark halls once again. It was nothing more than a vain attempt to quell the stirring sensations that were now emerging somewhere in the vicinity of his chest. He turned the next corner and heard some soft moans coming from a nearby abandoned classroom. He approached the door and silently entered the room. *Bloody hormonal teenagers*, he thought with disgust. Sure enough, the soft glow of his wand revealed two seventh years in the midst of divesting their clothing.

Severus felt better when he was able to rob both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff from one hundred combined points. He involuntarily shuddered as he neared the completion of his nightly circuit. The sight of lust-ridden teens was an image that most anyone would desire to eliminate from their memory.

He entered his quarters to find Hermione emerging from her room whilst pulling a dressing gown over her nightdress. He found himself gawking at her. For a nightgown, it was rather revealing...silken, burgundy fabric hugged her arms, accentuated her breasts, and flowed to just above her knees, leaving ample room for her ever expanding waist. The image before him immediately caused him to remember another incident, in the very same room, when the young witch had dropped her towel to the floor. More alluring images replaced that memory to include her now exquisite and gravid figure. A slight smirk threatened to emerge on his face. "What are you still doing up?" he finally managed to ask. He was in the midst of trying to dispel the images that his mind was bringing forth and seeing so much of her before she managed to pull on the dressing gown on completely. Obviously, she had not been expecting him to enter when he did.

He was jostled from his musings by an insistent voice. "Severus, are you even listening to me?"

He shook his head in an attempt to clear it and placed his attentions to her...well, to what she was saying anyway. "What was that, Hermione?" he asked.

"I said I was on my way to the kitchens to get something to eat," she answered in what sounded like near exasperated tones. "I can't sleep."

"Why would you wander off to the kitchens? Just summon a house-elf. They will bring you a suitable snack."

"No, they will bring me whatever *they* deem to be suitable, thanks to your meddling no doubt! If I actually go to the kitchens, I at least have half a chance of getting what I want."

"You do not need to be padding off down the hallways at this hour of the night, Hermione. What is it that you so desperately need to have?" He became slightly intrigued when she would no longer meet his gaze and mumbled her answer. The corners of his mouth twitched in amusement.

He quirked a questioning eyebrow at her when she had once again met his gaze and Hermione sighed. "I said that I would like a bit of laverbread, a small Jaffa cake, and a cup of sliced gherkins."

"With what else?" It took all of his control to prevent himself from vomiting at her choice of foods.

She looked at him curiously. "With nothing else...just that. Why?"

"Are you planning on eating that all together?" he asked her in a clearly disgusted tone. *Oh, that is just repulsive*, he thought.

Hermione crossed her arms across her chest and mimicked his quirked eyebrow. "Do you really want the answer to that question?"

"No, I do not." Hermione began to walk towards the door exiting their quarters, and he stopped her. "You stay here. I will see what the house-elves can do for you."

It was obvious that she wondered about the motives behind his gesture, but she simply nodded in acceptance as he swept out of the room. During his journey towards the kitchens, his dear friend's words began echoing in his head, as they had done many times over the last couple of weeks. *She truly is a remarkable young woman, Severus. Do not deny yourself the possibilities that she holds.* Not for the first time, he found himself pondering exactly what those possibilities included...even if her current food tastes were questionable.

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During the first weeks of January, Hermione pondered Minerva's last words to her. She missed the elderly woman terribly. The most upsetting part being that she had not seen the older witch since Voldemort's downfall, and now, when she finally had the chance to reconnect with her, Minerva was taken away permanently. Hermione had loved the legend of the butterfly that she'd been told of by her mentor and had whispered her desires to the jade trinket on more than one occasion. Each time the wishes grew. First, it was simply to be allowed to see and hold her daughter after she was born. Next, she wished that Severus might change his mind and allow her to be a part of her child's life. After that, she supplicated having a more than amicable relationship with the surly man. Minerva McGonagall's parting words had reverberated through Hermione's mind. *He now sees this child as his redemption, and I think that you may be his redemption as well.*

By the third week in January, Hermione was not sure what to make of the man. Her evenings and time with Professor Snape had remained fairly uneventful. Although, she was becoming more and more uncertain as to what it was he was thinking. There were times when he was in his typical cross mood, but at other times, he was calm and accommodating. There were even times when one might say that he was being *nice*. That included the night that he traveled to the kitchens for her to obtain her odd request of foods; however, he had refused to watch her eat any of the delectable treats that he had acquired for her.

Then, there had been the past Saturday afternoon when she had happened upon him. Hermione had spied him sitting on a stool at one of the lab tables in the Potions classroom, slightly hunched over the desk. The small box of wood carving tools was sitting on the tabletop next to him, a long plank of smooth, dark wood stood in front of him, and an instruction book was levitating at eye level. Hermione had watched silently for nearly an hour, as the man before her had attempted to carve intricate design on the wielding canvas. Each time he'd used meticulous precision and care, and if he made a mistake, then he would wave his wand over that part of the wood and start again. *My dad would've loved to have had that trick*, Hermione mused.

During the midday meal, Hermione sat in solitude at the Head Table picking at the remains of her meal. A Post Owl swooped down, interrupting her introspection, and presented her with a small package wrapped in brown paper. She smiled at the package labeled on with her name. She had not received any gifts since Christmas and found herself milling over Professor McGonagall's words that the gifts were not from Severus. She tucked the package into the pocket in her robes and continued with her meal. As soon as it was feasible for her to leave, she excused herself and made her way swiftly down to the dungeons. She did not notice that she was being followed.

Hermione entered the suite of rooms and sat in a chair by the fire. She withdrew the package, and with a grin, she quickly began to open it. Inside, she found a small crystal bottle, and in gold etching, it was labeled with the word *Hermione*. She began to open the bottle when a flurry of black robes entered the corner of her vision. Before she could acknowledge his presence, his hand swept down and grabbed the bottle from her hands. "What are you doing?" she asked without even trying to hide her frustration.

"Hermione, you know better than to open bottles of unknown substances and smell them," he spat. "Especially in your condition."

She rolled her eyes, though she knew that he likely had a point. She crossed her arms and leaned back into the chair. She looked up at the man looming over her. His ever-present mask was firmly in place, but she thought she saw a glimmer of something flash behind his eyes. "So, the gifts really aren't from you?" she asked after a few minutes. "Never mind," she bit out. "Stupid question." Severus scoffed. After a pregnant pause, Hermione prodded him. "Aren't you going to open it and finish your obsessive scrutiny? I would like to have that back."

A scowl appeared on his face and grew as he opened the bottle and brought it to his nose. After several whiffs, the scowl deepened as he put the cap back on and thrust it back at her.

"I take it that you found nothing wrong with it," Hermione asked in sassy tones.

"Obviously," he quipped. "You mentioned other gifts, Hermione. Exactly how many others?"

"Only three others," she saw a glimmer of emotion streak across his face, but it was gone as quickly as it had arrived. Interpreting the expression, she continued. "There was nothing wrong with the gifts, Severus. Don't worry."

"I am not *worried*," he spat. "Just show some common sense before you open anymore anonymous packages."

She had to concede that the miserable wanker was right. Hermione felt duly chastised. "Of course."

With his characteristic swirl of billowing robes, Severus left her as swiftly as he had arrived. She opened the bottle and smelled the contents. It was perfume. That much was clear immediately. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the aromas that were impaling her senses. Jasmine and rose were clearly evident...*what else is there?* She sniffed again, detecting jonquil, rosemary, and neroli. The combination of scents was intoxicating and nearly peaceful. They blended together exquisitely. Whoever it was that put this together and created the *Hermione* perfume knew what they were doing. She began thinking about each of the gifts, contemplating each in turn, and trying to decipher exactly who her mysterious admirer could be.

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Severus began storming off to the greenhouses. He knew exactly where to find Professor Longbottom. The whelp did not even have the guts to show up for lunch today in the Great Hall. Halfway on his trek, he came to his senses, realizing that he, in his current state of mind, would come off as nothing more than a jealous lover. Which, of course, he most emphatically was not!

He had to admit that it did take quite a bit of ingenuity for the miserable little tosser to create a signature perfume for someone he was mooning over...*Why didn't I notice his infatuation before?* he wondered. It had not been enough to realize that it was a delicately blended perfume...one that only a skilled Potions master or Herbology master could create...but Severus had rapidly been able to decipher the main scents used. He knew that Longbottom was no fool, and not only had he chosen scents that complimented and blended with one another, but each flower possessed an adamant declaration of beauty, affection, and desire.

It was the jonquil that had upset him the most. It tells of desire, but it also asks the recipient if they will return the affection. He let out an audible growl in frustration, blood boiling beneath the surface. Severus would have to think more on this and determine the best course of action.

Realization dawned on him suddenly. *Bloody hell! I don't even know what it is that I want!* He decided that solving that particular riddle needed to be a top priority.

He turned around and noticed two first years were standing on the step preparing to ascend the stairs back into the castle...standing and gawking at him. "Five points apiece for loitering!" he snapped. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get moving!" he bellowed. The frightened Hufflepuffs scurried like mice into the castle.

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Nearly two weeks later, Hermione was still trying to decipher Severus' behavior. He had been moodier lately, lashing out unnecessarily at anyone who crossed his path, including her. He had also become very withdrawn. She had been set to meet with Neville the week before. Severus had come up to her five minutes before her meeting to inform her that her appointment with Poppy had been changed, and she needed to head to the infirmary posthaste. Poppy had verified Severus' claim, but Hermione had the vague impression that the elder witch was withholding information from her.

So, she changed her meeting with Neville to the following Saturday evening. Hermione had deduced that it was Neville that Severus was upset with. He glared at him during meals, and he did his best to intimidate the younger man at every turn. Hermione had been impressed that her friend did not appear to be cowering down at the domineering man's every move. As a result of this, Hermione decided not to inform the fractious and dour man of her plans until she was grabbing her cloak and heading out the door.

"Where do you think you are going?" snarled Severus.

"I'm going to go meet Neville," she replied without even looking at him. There was really no point. The man had done the equivalent of ignoring her for nearly a fortnight. She pulled her cloak around her to protect her from the biting cold of the first days of February.

"That still does not answer my question, Hermione. Where are you going?" he bit back.

"I am meeting Neville upstairs, and we are walking into Hogsmeade."

"Why is *now* the first that I have heard of this?"

Hermione looked up from buttoning her cloak and met his gaze. Ensuring that she inflicted the appropriate amount of malice in her tone, she answered him. "Because, Severus, I figured you would pull the same shite that you did last time I had a meeting scheduled with Neville and change my plans for me." For a brief moment, Hermione thought that she saw a shadow of surprise grace his features as he stood from his chair. It was replaced by his typical stony mask, just as quickly as it had appeared.

"So you intend to go traipsing all through Hogsmeade this evening because you are angry with me?"

"Damn you! No! We are going to the Three Broomsticks for a bite to eat. That's all. What is your problem anyway?" she asked searching his face for more clues. "You sound like..."

"I sound like what?" he asked. His icy glare was fixed directly into her eyes.

"Never mind," she mumbled as she grabbed her gloves and scarf. She quickly exited the room before he could express his *opinions* any more than he already had. Fuming, she stormed up to the entrance hall to greet her friend. All the while she pondered the ever changing enigma named Severus Snape.

She smiled warmly at the face that greeted her. Neville was not handsome, but he was pleasant and even through all of the horrible ordeals of his life, his eyes still shone

with nothing less than innocence and joy. Willing herself to calm down and enjoy her evening, Hermione put her current puzzle behind her.

In hindsight, she could understand Severus' temper with her. This is the first time that she had ever actually attempted to deceive him. She always asked him before she went anywhere outside of the castle. Bloody hell, with most everything that she did *inside* of the castle, she sought his permission. *It's only because of the sense of duty I seem to feel for him regarding our baby*, she assured herself. Lately, however, she felt as if he was treating her more like his property. She wanted the opportunity to actually do something that she chose rather than sit around idly and watch him brood.

Neville grinned and extended his arm to her. Hermione hesitated slightly as her stomach began to churn. She suddenly realized that all of *this* was beginning to feel like...like a real date. Hermione had the sudden urge to hide her face in her hands and run back down to the dungeons. The only thing holding her back was the man currently occupying the domain. She had no desire to face *him* so soon after their little row.

She hid her shock and took her companion's arm, very grateful when he led the way out of the castle into the dark night. It gave her a chance to think about what she should say or do. Neville obviously didn't think anything unusual about her silence. The roiling in her stomach did not decrease, and she soon began to feel like she was...*Oh God! I feel like I'm cheating!* Hermione tried to discreetly hold a hand to her mouth and prayed that the wave of nausea that was ready to overtake her would dissipate as quickly as it had started.

"Hermione, are you all right?" asked Neville.

She realized then that they had stopped walking. She looked at him, that sweetness beaming right back at her. Hermione took several deep breaths. When she was certain that the tea and crumpets she'd had earlier would remain within the confines of her stomach, she removed her hand from her mouth and nodded at her friend. "I'm sorry, Neville. Sometimes it just overtakes me for no reason." She offered him a smile when she shrugged innocently and added, "Ruddy hormones."

He grinned at her remark while steadfastly holding onto a look of marked concern when he asked, "Are you sure you're up to this? We can go back." He looked down as his cheeks flushed. "It's just supper at the Three Broomsticks."

*Is he really embarrassed about where we are having supper?* she wondered. "I am really fine; trust me. I think I could really use some pub food. I've been craving some of the greasiest food, and there is nowhere else that I can get any good cherry syrup and soda." She hoped that this would please him. Though she had no romantic inclinations towards her friend, that didn't mean that she wanted to ruin her one evening out and quash his hopes in one stride. She only hoped that she could let him down easy without any messy or uncomfortable situations. Unfortunately, God did not listen to her pleas.

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*I cannot believe that she left! How could she leave like that? So eager to run off with Longbottom? Playing me like a fool!*

As Severus paced his sitting room, his anger grew. He was half tempted to pull out a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky. However, he was out of Hangover Potion, and it took too long to brew. Besides, he wanted to see the look on the witch's face when she returned from her *date*. The sickening feeling that had developed in the pit of his stomach when she had told him of her plans was not relinquishing its hold. He kicked the foot of her chair and watched as the wood caved, and the corner of the chair hit the floor. Unfortunately, it did not improve his mood. He unsheathed his wand and cast a quick *Reparo*.

The thing that upset him the most was that she had hidden it from him. She had never done that before. Anytime she did anything, made any plans, she either asked him or told him about it in advance. This was blatantly defiant. Almost what one would expect from a teenager. A small voice inside of his head chided him.

*She's not acting like a spoilt child, Severus. Hermione has always been strong-willed and independent. Just because she's been accommodating to your whims these last few months does not mean that it's in her nature. She is likely just trying to let you know that she does not appreciate you controlling every aspect of her life. Back off!*

Severus felt as if he was going slightly insane. He had, on occasion, wondered how Minerva or Albus would counsel him. However, having Minerva's Scottish brogue ringing through his ears, whilst chastising him, was quite unsettling. The fact that he knew that the voice was right was even more disconcerting.

He tried to sit and patiently wait her out. He lasted all of five minutes before the caged tiger within had him stalking the small confines of the room once again. Making his decision, he grabbed his cloak near the door and exited the dungeons in a flurry.

Severus made his through the snow-covered ground to Hogsmeade in the same speed as a Death Eater hurrying along to meet the Dark Lord. He had done that more than enough times. There was no point in taking a leisurely stroll to the town.

He arrived at the Three Broomsticks and surveyed the crowded room before he fully entered. It took him only a few moments to spot his prey and discreetly find a nearby table that left him safely back in the shadows.

Severus studied Hermione. He shuddered as he watched her consume grease laden chips, her sandwich, and sip on the red fizzy drink. All of which were a far cry from the comfort food of Hogwarts.

As he first watched her, the jealousy that he had been feeling earlier peaked. He wanted nothing more than to hex Longbottom for even going near her. The longer that he resisted the urge, he began to notice minute details about her demeanor. She was fidgeting, either her hands were moving or her feet...she could not seem to sit still. He observed her playing with the pink umbrella from her drink as she worried her bottom lip. What had initially appeared to be a friendly conversation now looked to be awkward. For a brief moment, Severus considered going over and assisting the annoying chit in a speedy and graceful exit. Common sense told him it was best to hold off, however. She would likely take it as further interference from him and swiftly seek retaliation. The very last thing that Severus wanted to do was to drive Hermione into another man's arms.

He wished that he had some of those contraptions that the Weasley twin's had invented *Extendable Ears*, was it? *Something like that*. With such a contraption, he would have been able to eavesdrop on the conversation. He especially wished for such a device when he saw, even from this distance, that Hermione's eyes had begun to glisten with unshed tears. She began suckling on her bottom lip more fervidly whilst staring intently at the Herbology professor. Within only a few minutes, the young man dropped a few Galleons on the table, stood up, and helped Hermione to her feet before he fastened her cloak for her. Then, Longbottom quickly escorted her out of the pub.

Severus followed with the stealth of a veteran spy. The pair walked slowly back towards the castle, and Severus continued to follow at a safe distance. As the couple disappeared inside the castle, Severus cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and continued on his trek. He sped up his journey as he approached the steps to the dungeons. Even though he did not see which direction they went, he knew that Longbottom was honorable enough to escort Hermione back to her quarters.

As he descended the staircase, he began to hear a soft voice. He continued to move towards them as he tried to find a better vantage point. They were standing outside the entry to his rooms, and Severus watched as Hermione fidgeted with her scarf.

"Hermione, please. You haven't said anything since we left the pub. I just want to know what you are thinking. Do I even stand a chance here?" The tone in Neville's voice was almost pleading. If Severus had not already felt the overwhelming desire to hex the man, he would have felt some pity for him. He was certainly putting himself on the line.

Severus could see the tears reforming in Hermione's eyes. Before she had a chance to speak, Longbottom lowered his head to her and placed his lips to hers. Just as the younger wizard appeared to be attempting to intensify the kiss, Hermione pulled away. Her brown eyes were wide with surprise. It was none too soon, as Severus was ready to hex the bollocks off of the man. "No, Neville." A tear fell from her eye as she spoke. "I'm sorry. I didn't know the gifts were from you. They were all so very sweet." Hermione shook her head. "I don't feel that way about you. I'm so sorry."

The young man looked as if a dragon had traipsed through his prized greenhouses. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he mumbled and left her standing there in the corridor. For Hermione's part, she looked as if she wanted nothing more than to crumble to the floor in a heap, but she managed to speak the password and enter their living quarters.

Severus removed the Disillusionment Charm and went in shortly after her. He entered the room to see Hermione sitting in front of the fire staring at the flames, her face red and damp from tears. He was at a loss for what to say to her. She did not seem to have heard him come in. He had been overjoyed at her dismissal of Longbottom's affections, but it was a short-lived victory as he now saw the distraught woman before him.

"I take it that your evening did not go exactly as you had planned," he spoke in biting tones.

She did not move. She did not even turn around to look at him. "No, it didn't."

He stood, looming over her, waiting for her to speak or even to look at him. She did neither. Finally, he broke the stony silence. "And what, pray tell, is the sniffing about?" he sneered.

Hermione shot a look at him, her eyes burying into him like a dagger. "Drop the smug, arrogant attitude, Professor. I am in no mood to deal with your childish temper tantrums tonight." She turned her attentions back to the fire and ignored him completely.

The anger burning within him again began to overtake him. What on this earth could he have been thinking in regards to this whip of a girl? She did not deserve his friendship or concern. Hell, she barely deserved the privilege of carrying his child for him. True, his first words to her had not been the apology for his earlier behavior like he had intended them to be, but that was no excuse for her nasty retort. "Professor?" he asked her, his voice laden with detest. "Fine, Miss Granger, if that is what you prefer." He turned to walk away from her when he heard a small sniff from her again. He looked down his long nose at her with disdain as he watched her wipe away her tears.

Hermione got to her feet as if to flee the room, but Severus saw a small sway in her stance as it appeared that her legs were about to buckle. He swept upon her and grabbed her before she toppled to the floor. She fell into him and clutched at his robes as if they were the only thing that could sustain her. She mumbled into his robes.

"What did you say?" he asked her as he held her close to him.

"I didn't know," she said as she looked up at him. "How could I be so blind? It was staring me right in the face, and I didn't know."

"It is all right, Hermione," he soothed as his deft fingers began running through her curly mane. "I am sorry for my behavior earlier," he muttered into her hair.

She quizzically looked up at him upon hearing his words. Severus stared down into her mesmerizing brown eyes. He marveled at all of the intricate shades in the brown and gold flecked irises. Her eyes did not leave his, each enraptured by the other's gaze. "I am sorry, too. I was upset. I had no right to say the things I did."

Severus quirked his eyebrow. "Is that all?" he asked.

"No, I shouldn't have lied about my plans this evening. I was frustrated, and after last week, I was certain that you had changed my appointment with Poppy just to keep me from seeing Neville."

Severus neither confirmed nor denied her accusations. However, he was certain that she took his silence as confirmation of his guilt. His eyes narrowed at her whilst she remained tightly ensconced in his arms.

"You can't blame me for wanting something that I can make a decision about," she whinged. "You are just as controlling as you were a few months ago. I still can't take a bath without the ruddy taps turning on and spewing icy water after only fifteen minutes! Do you know how much my body aches, how much my back hurts?"

He still stood staring at her, refusing to respond to her inane rant. She opened her mouth to speak again, and Severus could think of no other way to silence her. His mouth descended upon her rapidly. He crushed his lips onto hers as strong feelings of something akin to desire overcame him. He noted that she did not push him away, so he firmly nipped at her upper lip. She moaned in reply, pulling her arms around him more tightly. He tasted her lips, and as she slowly parted them, he savored the taste of her tongue and her teeth. He wanted to taste of every part of her. He moved his mouth from her succulent lips and traversed kisses across her cheek and down the side of her neck. Just as he began to suckle on her collarbone, she tensed and seemed to find her voice.

"No, Severus, I'm sorry. I can't do this right now," she said as she gently pushed him back.

Severus stopped to look at her in disbelief. He silently berated himself for exposing himself like that to her, for opening up to allow her the opportunity to humiliate him. He firmly replaced a scowl on his face and stormed out of the room. Her pleas for him to stay and talk to her were given the same regard as his ill-placed affections.

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**A/N:** Oh, I know, so evil. The chapter wasn't supposed to end there, but the story screamed at me to stop. Unfortunately, I was compelled to oblige. What can I say, I learned the noble art of writing evil cliffies from the best...eh, Sun?

**Southern's Notes:** Grrrr, I say! She was whinging about it feeling like she was cheating on him, and then she won't kiss *hirthoroughly* without immediately voicing why. Sigh. Moving off to my ruddy cliff. Scones, anyone? Tea?

<http://www.vietfun.com/flowers/>

Jasmine: Grace; Elegance Amiability.

Jonquil: Desire; Love me; Can you return my love?; I desire a return of your affection.

Rose: I Love You; Perfect Happiness; Always; Desire; Friendship; Unity; Warmth of heart; Love at first sight; Joy; Gladness; Please believe me; Passion.

Rosemary: Fidelity; Love; Remembrance; Your Presence Revives Me.

Neroli: Purity

Laverbread is an edible seaweed. Typically it is not eaten by itself. In this story, it was eaten with the Jaffa Cakes.

<http://www.laverbread.org/>

Hermione finally forces Severus to listen to her, she visits Ginny, and she brings up the bath situation again.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I am not JK Rowling. No money is being made from this.

**Special thanks to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, who puts up with an amazing amount of garbage from me. She truly is priceless!**

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Hermione stood in the center of the room, unable to move. How could her life take such a drastic turn in one evening? Tonight she had learned that it had been Neville that had been sending her gifts and interested in a relationship with her. Not only that, but Neville had told her how deeply he cared for her. He even went so far as to say that he was in love with her. Hermione groaned. That had completely caught her off guard. She had expected the culprit to be Severus...an idea that Ginny had cultivated. Hermione had only begun having doubts to that fact after speaking with Minerva. When she learned that it was Neville, she had begun to doubt the feelings that she had thought Snape had for her.

To say the very least, it had been overwhelming. Her evening with Neville had quickly gone from two friends going to the pub together to an actual *date*. That was not what was supposed to have happened. *He was just supposed to be my friend!* Hermione thought angrily. They had talked about her plans after the baby was born. She had found it very uncomfortable to speak of Severus in Neville's presence. Instead of honestly telling Neville how much she wished to stay and be a part of Severus' and the baby's life, she told him that she was intending to stay at Hogwarts while Severus was planning on leaving. In hindsight, she thought that Neville had taken that as a point in his favor without noting the regret that Hermione had actually felt. *Maybe love really is blind!* She shuddered at the mere thought of the word *love*.

Neville's kiss had been sweet, but it reminded Hermione terribly of the one time she had kissed Harry. Just like kissing a brother. One of those occasions where the warning flags go up instantly and tells you that it's *wrong*. Whether it was from the sheer fact that Neville had taken her by surprise or that she had hoped it had been someone else that had kissed her, she didn't know.

Turning Neville down had been one of the hardest things that she had ever had to do. She cared for him; she truly did. He was sweet, caring, kind, compassionate, and brave...a Gryffindor through and through. The same slip of a boy that had actually stood up to his friends during their first year at Hogwarts. He had grown into a competent young wizard that had spent the better part of the evening telling Hermione how she shouldn't be putting up with Snape's attitude and that it was time she stood up to him. He went so far as to say that he would stand up to Snape for her since she was in the precarious position of having to live with the surly man. She had, naturally, told Neville no. She tried to explain that she and Severus had an amicable relationship, but she didn't think that Neville understood. Neville wanted to protect her. However, what he needed to realize was that Hermione didn't need or want to be protected.

After Neville had left her there in the corridor, she had entered Severus' living quarters to think over what had just occurred. When Severus came in shortly after her, she had suddenly felt relaxed. It had felt safe and right to be shrouded within his arms. Then to have him kiss her like *that*...to say that it had taken her by surprise would be an understatement. Hermione sat in the nearest chair and closed her eyes. She could still feel his breath on her neck, his lips against her skin.

Her shock and overall anguish evaporated soon after and was quickly replaced by anger. She wanted to scream at him! She had been on the cusp of tears, trying to tell him about her disastrous evening with Neville, and Severus' idea of comfort was to kiss her! What kind of a man thinks that he can make things better by confusing a woman even further?

Stupid question, she decided. Unsurprisingly, a Slytherin *would* attempt to take full advantage of such a situation.

She sat back and stared into the fire. Why did Severus have to storm out like that? She wanted to talk to him, find out what he was thinking before they wound up rushing into something that they weren't ready for. Bloody hell, she was quite certain that the man was already regretting that he even kissed her. *Right, Hermione*, she thought. *Does he regret it because there is no way that he'd ever kiss you if he was in his right mind? Or because you pushed him away and rejected him?* Hermione felt a twinge of guilt realizing that no matter the answer to that question, pushing him away had been precisely the wrong thing to do.

She stood up and began pacing the room. In her frustration, she kicked the leg of her chair and was surprised at how easily it caved, causing the corner of the chair to hit the floor. She had never taken less satisfaction in damaging anything before. She did not even have the desire to repair it. Hermione set herself on the settee and rested her head on the arm, deciding that she was going to wait up for Severus' return.

She did not remember falling asleep. She awoke hearing the mantle clock tick, and she groggily opened her eyes. The fire had long since gone out, and there was only the faintest of red glowing embers visible in the hearth. She was cold. Hermione pulled out her wand and muttered, "*Incendio!*" The fire came back to life once again. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the light. It was six o'clock in the morning according to the clock. She hadn't heard Severus return. She had a feeling that if she dared to open the door to his bedchambers that she would find a bed that had not been slept in. She felt another pang of guilt at her behavior the night before.

She really needed to find Severus and explain. Hermione sat up and stretched, feeling a shot of pain down the side of her belly. She hated that! Stretching led to the pulling of these ligaments that preferred not to *do* anything. She had come to the conclusion that it would be during the last week of pregnancy that she would remember not to do it. She pulled herself up and padded off to her room to freshen up before seeking out her roommate.

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Searching for Severus had been a fruitless effort. The man was nowhere to be found. As the day wore on, Hermione found herself becoming more and more frustrated, both with her response to him and with his subsequent reaction to her. *Things definitely could've gone better*, she found herself thinking again.

At midday, she had stormed back to her room and pulled out a quill and parchment to write Ginny a letter. She had always been a good friend, even if she felt that the girl had led her astray in more than one instance over the last few months. *Do I really think that?* No, Hermione had to admit that she didn't. She knew that Ginny had lied about Neville sending her the Owl back in October, but she didn't think that her friend lied about not knowing whom the gifts were from. Even Ginny wouldn't do that. Ginny seemed to be operating on the same assumption that Professor McGonagall had been...the assumption that Severus was having more than friendly feelings for Hermione, although Professor McGonagall didn't think that the gifts were from Severus.

This roundabout thinking was beginning to make her head hurt.

After last night, she was certain that they were both right, even after she had learned that the gifts weren't from him. She had asked Neville about the gifts. It was the emeralds in the quill and the journal that had truly perplexed her. *What Gryffindor gives emeralds?* she'd wondered. Neville had been all too happy to answer her questions, and she'd regretted her inquiry almost instantly.

Apparently, emeralds symbolize a deep sense of love, peace, fidelity, and patience. Also, their energetic properties are supposed to help with the process of labor and delivery. The quill, along with the matching journal, was given to her to help her remember the pregnancy that Neville knew would be nothing more than a memory for her in mere months.

The gesture was very sweet, but it had made her extremely uncomfortable. That had been both the high point and low point of her *date*. She had wanted nothing more than to hide her face from the sweet wizard and to forget about the entire evening.



*Snape! I really need to find Snape!*she reminded herself. No matter how much she continued to replay the events of that evening, it didn't change the outcome. *Where is that man?*

She had wandered through most of the school looking for him. He wasn't in all of the usual places, and she eventually gave up, deciding that he would turn up eventually. She avoided entering his bedchambers, but she had pounded on the door for a good hour before she decided that the chances of him being in there were very slim.

He did not return until Monday morning. The only reason that she knew that he had returned was because she peered into his Potions classroom just to ensure that he was teaching. Sure enough, there he was. She immediately pitied the students that were forced to suffer through the class. In the first five minutes, she heard him deduct no fewer than two hundred House points, and a good portion had come from his own House. She shuddered at the implications of his behavior, but she vowed that as soon as she could she would talk to him. Possibly they would be able to work everything out quickly.

Hermione had never been more wrong in her life.

That evening, Severus had returned to his...their...quarters, but he had not stayed. Hermione had attempted to talk to him, but he would have nothing to do with her. He simply waved her off and stormed out of the room, carefully warding the door to his office to prevent her from following him. Although she knew it would have been better to get everything out in the open sooner rather than later, she allowed him his space.

It was a mistake. It would only allow him to brood more. A knarl quill embedded in the skin and left unattended will fester and lead to infection. Whereas if it is removed and the affected area cleaned, it can heal. She felt that she had no choice in the matter. He would not even acknowledge her presence. As a result, Hermione's time in the castle became increasingly lonely. The only thing that she was able to do to occupy most of her time was to spend her evenings with Professor Flitwick. As she progressed in her pregnancy, he was insisting that she spend more time taking care of herself and less time assisting him. Filius maintained that Hermione already knew everything that she needed to be able to do his job. He thought that she should spend what little time she had left enjoying her freedom from teaching.

Hermione had not been able to peg Severus down. She searched the castle for him, and after two weeks, she came upon him working in his classroom. Where he had been hiding before then, she did not know because he certainly hadn't been spending all of his free time here.

She finally found him, much the way she had a few weeks past. He was sitting on one of the stools leaning over the high table with a long piece of dark wood laid out before him. His black hair was hanging down, partly covering his face, and he did not seem to notice Hermione entering the room and watching him. As soon she was in the confines of the classroom, the acrobat occupying part of her body began making its presence known. She rested her hand over the movements and absently began rubbing her hand in soothing motions. *This is the most active you've been in days, Little One.*She was curious if the baby sensed its father and was excited or was just sensing Hermione's rising stress level. Most likely it was the latter.

Just as before, she stood near the doorway and watched Severus for quite some time as he labored over the wood with the carving tools in hand. She wondered what it was he was so diligently working on. She watched as the skilled hands slowly worked intricate patterns over its canvas and thought about how those same hands had held her two weeks prior.

Her daughter chose that moment to make a sharp kick between one of her ribs causing Hermione to yelp. This, in turn, caused Severus to jump. "Damn!" he yelled as the tool slipped and placed a sizable scratch along the wood. Hermione observed his demeanor change from that of someone focused to a man on guard. She sighed as she resigned herself to the inevitable barrage of retorts and scathing remarks.

"I'm sorry," she muttered as she braved forward. Severus grabbed his wand and spoke a quick incantation over the scratch, leaving a fresh patch of unmarred wood, but he did not respond to Hermione. After several long minutes, she broke the silence again. "What are you making?" she asked, indicating the wood lying on the table before him.

Severus simply ignored her.

She only lasted a few moments before the silence was too unbearable for her. "I've been trying to talk to you for two weeks, Severus."

Snape merely growled in reply as he grabbed the v-shaped tool and began to work on the wood again. Hermione sat on the stool on the opposite side of the lab table from him. She was becoming irritated as he still would not look up at her. "We really need to discuss this."

Severus tossed the tool down on the table, gritted his teeth together, and raised his eyes to look at her through his curtain of black hair. "There ~~is~~ *nothing* to discuss, Hermione. Now, kindly get out," he hissed.

She stubbornly crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at him.

He eyed her closely. How is it that in only two short weeks that she looked vastly more pregnant than she had before? It had ~~had~~ *only* been two weeks! He couldn't peel his eyes away from the protruding belly, which was being accentuated by the placement of her arms. Her womanly figure was intoxicating to him. When had he become so enamored with pregnant women? It was killing him sitting this close to her and knowing that she did not reciprocate his feelings. He tore his eyes away from her bulge and met her piercing gaze.

"I take your current stance to mean that you are not leaving then? Well, don't just sit there all day wasting my time," he spat. "Either speak your peace or leave...now!"

She sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, Severus."

Of all things she could have said, that was the most predictable. He scowled. "And what precisely are you sorry for? For making me look the fool? For toying with Longbottom? For turning him away that night? Or are you actually sorry for the way you treated me?" he asked her in deathly quiet tones. He did not stop in his torment. *She deserves this*, he thought. "Did it make you feel important for once to have more than one man show an interest in you in one evening? Did you gain great pleasure in turning us both down? Or are you actually sorry that you stopped the kiss...my kiss?" He had leant close to her and asked the last question whilst only a few millimeters away from her face.

Hermione was taken aback, and instantly, her brown eyes filled with tears. "No, I mean, yes!" she cried as she slouched back from him and vehemently shaking her head. "Severus, how could you think...you don't understand." The young witch continued to speak incoherently, apparently unable to form a complete thought. The more she rambled aimlessly, the more Severus' temper grew.

"You are trying my patience. Come back and talk to me when you've figured out what you want," he spat. "Now, leave so that I may get back to my work in peace."

He was still holding her gaze when he saw her eyes flash. She took a deep breath and stilled herself, brushing aside her tears, and sitting herself up straight on her stool. *Apparently, stealing herself to do battle*, he mused. As much as he loathed admitting it right now, he really admired her strength of character.

"I'm not leaving, Severus, we need to discuss this," she said as firm as possible with her hoarse voice.

Snape was infuriated. Strength of character or not, he did not wish to deal with the wench now. *Perhaps after another two weeks has past*. He arose from his stool and went around the worktable to her. He grabbed her gently but steadfastly about the wrist and pulled her from the stool. After he removed her from where she had been perched, she wrenched her hand out of his grip and glared at him defiantly. As his hand fell free to his side, his fingers brushed her belly, and once again, he ran his eyes along her ever-protruding midsection. This simple action seemed to calm him instantly to his core. He desired to place his hand firmly on her abdomen and feel his child squirming beneath the skin. He squelched the urge and turned away from her, deciding to distract himself with his project again.

Hermione looked at him with a puzzled expression. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop, as it were, and was surprised to see him simply go back to his work. "Well, don't just stand there like a gaping goldfish," he snapped. "*Discuss away!*"

"I am sorry..." She held up her hand and glared daggers at him to stop the sarcastic remark that was sitting on the tip of his tongue. "I am sorry for a lot of things, Severus. Most importantly, I'm sorry that I did not adequately explain why I stopped kissing you. It wasn't that I didn't want it."

He simply narrowed his eyes. *Damn her! Bloody hell, damn me! She just proved that my affections were ill placed!* Severus was so wrapped up in his own self-loathing that he missed what she said next.

"...overwhelmed," she ended, somewhat lamely.

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her. "Overwhelmed? That is your excuse?" He was silently hoping that she'd elaborate, so that he had some clue what she was talking about.

"Yes. I think that was reasonable. Don't you?" Hermione began pacing in front of the classroom. "I mean it's not every day that a friend professes their love for you. I didn't know what to do."

*Bloody Hell! Since when was a kiss considered professing one's love?* Severus began to feel angry at her presumptions. How dare she take such a thing and twist it around to *love!*

"Then, you kiss me, and it sent my head spinning," she continued.

He barely registered the slight wistful smile now playing upon her lips as he digested her words *Wait...then you kissed me?*

"Severus, are you all right?" she asked as she sat back on the stool and leaned over the worktable towards him.

"Yes, fine. Continue," he clipped. Severus dropped his head allowing the curtain of hair to cover his face as he tried to focus his attention on his work. Somehow hoping that if it appeared that it didn't matter to him what she had to say, then he truly wouldn't care. Despite his attempt, he found himself hanging on her every word.

"I was confused," she said. At this, she noticed that Severus looked up from the cherry wood and watched her as she played with an errant curl, twisting it around her finger, and not able to look at him. "I don't feel *that* way about Neville, but I didn't wish to hurt his feelings either. That was the only reason that it was so hard to turn him down. It wasn't like when I was with Ron. Dumping him was easy, as a matter of fact. Not that I didn't care for him, mind..." Hermione stopped midstream and looked up at Severus, who was still watching her closely. "Sorry, I have a tendency to ramble when I'm anxious."

"Really? I never would have guessed that," he sneered, although Hermione was certain she saw the corner rise on one side of his mouth. He brushed the hair out of his face and studied her. "You also chew on your lower lip or the ends of your hair when you're nervous." This time, the corners of his mouth did quirk up as Hermione abruptly stopped worrying her bottom lip and smiled shyly.

In a soft voice, she said, "Severus, I only stopped because I needed to first sort out my disastrous evening with Neville. I wanted so much to talk to you, but you didn't give me a chance."

He narrowed his eyes and continued to listen, although just listening to her recount the events, his anger was again growing.

"Please, hear me out," she begged. She watched him for a moment, and when he didn't snap at her or attempt to leave, she continued. "I wanted nothing more than to fall into your arms, Severus. I just want to make sure that my feelings were genuine. I want to be sure that *when* we are together it is because of what we feel for each other and for no other reason."

Tears were welling up behind her eyes as she prepared for him to laugh or sneer at her openness. The remarks didn't come. Before she regained the strength to rise from her stool, Severus came down upon her. He pulled her from her seat and up into his arms where he wiped her eyes and kissed her forehead. "Hermione, you can rest assured that what I feel for you is *genuine*," he whispered into her hair.

"Really?" she asked.

He moved his hands to grasp the sides of her head and tilted her head up towards his. His black eyes were boring into her own. "Maybe I should show you rather than tell you," he said as he brought his mouth to hers. He pressed his lips gently to hers, and she felt a tremor spark through her soul.

After several lingering minutes, he pulled back, and Hermione gazed at his face to look for any clues to his emotions. Though his features were stern and masked, she could see something behind his eyes. *Warmth*, she finally decided. It might not be love, but it was feeling. To her, it was hope.

Severus brushed a thumb across her cheek and cupped her face. "Does that answer your question?"

"Yes," she whispered as his hands dropped back down to her sides.

Severus pulled her as close to him as he could, allowing her head to rest against his chest. She snuggled her head against him and sighed. She breathed in the aroma of the array of spices and potions ingredients that she had become accustomed to smelling around him. Another scent was accosting her this time. It reminded her of her father, the smell of the freshly shaved wood. She kept her head in its place and asked, "What is it that you're making, Severus?"

He stopped the comforting movements of his hands and pulled her away to watch her reaction to his reply. "I thought you would be pleased, Hermione, that I am using your gift."

She smiled. "I am. I just wondered what it is that you were working on. I've seen you work with two separate pieces of wood so far."

He looked down at the wood on the table and brushed one hand across the etchings he had made. "When I am finished, it will be a cradle," he finally answered.

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"Wow, Hermione!" exclaimed Ginny Weasley. "Snape is really making something with his hands? A cradle, no less?"

Hermione laughed and leaned back in her chair at the Three Broomsticks. "I was surprised, too. Trust me."

"How long ago was that?"

"A month."

"A month? What's happened since? Have you kissed him since?"

*Ginny truly is her mother's daughter*, mused Hermione. *Always looking for the gossip.* "Not much has happened actually," Hermione began. "Severus began spending more time back in our quarters. He spends most of his free time in my company. I think we are trying to become comfortable in an odd situation." She looked her friend directly in the eyes. "It's not like I planned this, so don't you go getting any ideas."

Ginny smirked. "No, you wouldn't do that. I know you well enough." Searching for a something else to discuss, she watched her friend as she had absently begun to rub her stomach. "How far along are you?" she asked.

"Oh, it was thirty-two weeks as of yesterday," Hermione replied proudly. "I can't believe that it has already been that long."

"What's it like?" asked Ginny curiously.

"Being pregnant?"

"Yeah, I've wondered. I really don't see it as something that I will do anytime in the near future." Ginny sighed as she set her drink back on the table.

"It's very different," replied Hermione noting her friend's smile at her vague response. "Don't misunderstand me; it truly is amazing. It's a whole new life that is growing in here, and I get to be a part of it. It is honestly the most amazing magic I've ever experienced, but there are things that I wish I could change." She stopped to think. There were many things that she wished she could change, but she was unsure exactly what she should voice to her confidant. "The backaches, the headaches, the pulling ligaments, the itchy skin. The list can definitely go on," she said with a smile. "Then, there is still the bath issue," she muttered, only half-hoping that her friend would hear.

"The bath issue?"

"Didn't I tell you about that? That man has read one too many books on pregnancy, I swear." Hermione smirked as she leaned over the table as much as her large midsection would allow her. "He read somewhere that it is hazardous to the fetus if the internal body temperature of the mother exceeds 37.8 degrees Celsius. So he put some Charm on the pipes to my shower and tub where it monitors my internal body temperature, and once I reach that temperature, the water turns ice cold." She shook her head. "Trust me when I say that the last thing that you want when you are taking a nice a relaxing bath is for all of the spouts to suddenly turn on and begin issuing copious amounts of icy water."

The redhead couldn't hold back her amusement at the story. "Oh, I can't believe that! That's just cruel!" she exclaimed while attempting to reign in her laughter. "Wait! Was that the bathing incident that disrupted an entire Potions class?" she asked.

Hermione joined her friend in laughter. "Yes, it was actually."

"And he still hasn't caved on it?" she asked in a much calmer manner.

After several minutes, Hermione calmed as well. "No, he hasn't. It's frustrating. I know that he didn't mean for it to be vindictive, but he should've told me about the charm. I got the impression that he enjoyed my confusion when I first questioned him about my hot shower water running out rather quickly." She heaved another heavy sigh. "It's all of those little things that like that are making this more uncomfortable than it should be. I would always expect Severus Snape to be a somewhat controlling, but I think it would be different if this was a marriage. For some reason, I always thought that if I had a husband with whom I chose to have a child, then he would be caring and supportive, not so...controlling."

Ginny raised a questioning eyebrow. "Controlling I can definitely see. He's not supportive though?" She did not look pleased when she asked this.

"Oh," Hermione rushed to answer. "Yes, of course he is, but it's different. I told you that we've become closer. We just haven't worked through the kinks yet. For some reason, I think if he caved on a few of these little things, like what I eat, how long I bathe, and so forth, that we could truly build a long-lasting relationship."

"But you said that his feelings for you are real! What do you think he is up to?" Before Hermione could even think to answer, Ginny continued her rant. "I'll tell you what! He is just trying to keep you calm through the remainder of this to make *his* life easier! He doesn't give a damn about you!" she shouted.

"Hush! Damn it, Gin! The entire pub can hear you hollering," Hermione hissed. "Now relax, will you?" She took another sip of her drink before she continued speaking, watching the redness of her friend's cheeks continue to flare up to her ears. *Exactly like her brother*, she thought. "I believe his intentions are real. He said they were, and I believe him," she stated firmly. "I also think that we shouldn't rush into a relationship; things are too complicated right now."

"Yeah, I'll say they're complicated," muttered Ginny, who was obviously still seething.

"Oh, stop that," scolded Hermione. "I like him even though he's not always nice, but he is a good person."

"Not always nice? Well, congratulations, Mione, *that* is the understatement of the year."

"Ginny, stop it, please." She sat back and sighed, again placing her hand on her belly. "Come over here," she said.

"Why?"

"Just get up and move over to this chair next to me, Ginevra," Hermione said through gritted teeth.

Ginny slowly stood from her chair and took the seat next to Hermione. "What?" she asked in a tone that indicated she was becoming increasingly exasperated with her friend.

Without words, Hermione took the younger witch's hand and placed it on her stomach. "This child is *good*, and no matter what I, or Severus, intended at the beginning of this whole fiasco. She deserves a chance. I owe it to her to try, but I can't say that even if it weren't for this child that I wouldn't want to become involved with him. There are a lot of good things about him. Oh, don't give me that look, Gin. I already told you. It's not like I planned this. I really care for him. I know that you don't understand." Hermione shook her head and released her grip on the other girl's hand.

"I just don't want to see you get hurt, Hermione." The words were spoken with open sincerity.

"I know you don't. Just trust me on this," she pleaded.

"Don't forget that the stakes are high here. I know that despite my warnings you've become attached to that baby that you're carrying." Hermione flushed guiltily at Ginny's words. "I am afraid that you are getting your feelings for that baby confused with your feelings for Snape."

"I'm not confused. I know exactly what I'm doing and exactly what I'm getting myself into. Don't worry," reassured Hermione.

"I will stay out of it, Hermione, but I will not promise you that I won't worry," stated Ginny begrudgingly.

Hermione grabbed the other woman's hand again and squeezed it. "Thank you," she whispered.

Two hours later, Ginny escorted her back up to the castle entrance and said her good-byes. Hermione walked down to the dungeons and peered into the Potions classroom. Severus was there, as he had been every Saturday, working on the carvings. She watched from the doorway for several long minutes before she quietly walked back down the hallway to the portrait entrance to their living quarters.

Hermione thought constantly about her discussion with Ginny. *Nothing like a sounding board to make you carefully analyze your feelings*, she thought wryly. What were her feelings truthfully? He really was a good man. Although, she did worry that in her constant repeating of this mantra, she was actually trying to convince herself. She knew that wasn't true, but sometimes it felt like it. She had seen what he'd done for Minerva. Where others would condemn him for his actions, Hermione admired him for them. She knew that it had not been an act of murder, but an act of compassion and duty.

She knew what her feelings were. She was falling in love with him. She'd already realized that her feelings for him were not just related to her raging hormones or to the ever-growing attachment she had for her baby. She ultimately decided that she would confront Severus on some of the more minor issues that he was still maintaining control over and relay the importance of trust and understanding. She hoped that he would see the importance of a trusting relationship. She wanted to work past these issues before the baby was born. Even though she knew that after the pregnancy he would not control the temperature of her bath water, she knew that he was the sort of man to attempt to control other things about her if she didn't put her foot down. She wanted their relationship to grow and hopefully allow them to become a family.

This was easier said than done. Severus was busy the remainder of the weekend, both in his duties as Head of House and in overseeing various detentions that he had assigned during the past week. Monday evening came, and thankfully, he was no longer busy with work.

After supper in the Great Hall, Severus escorted Hermione back to their rooms where she steeled herself and prepared for the inevitable argument that was to ensue. She grabbed the book that she had been reading off of the end table near her chair in the sitting room and sat down once they had arrived back at their rooms. She watched Severus as he sat behind his desk in the corner and began working through his marking.

"Would you like any help with that?" she offered.

"That is...erm," he paused searching for the appropriate word. "Thoughtful," he finally responded. "Don't you have your own marking to be doing?" he countered.

"I wish. Filius wouldn't allow me to take any of it this afternoon when classes had finished. He was quite insistent that I not go back for a few days, as well," she said in frustrated tones.

"Why would he do that? He is a busy man. I would think that he would welcome any assistance. Especially assistance from the person he is expecting to take over teaching his classes next year." Severus put down his quill that he had been using to mark the papers on his desk and turned all of his attention to Hermione.

"I think it was because of my constant backache today. He seemed to think that I need to rest."

"Is there any validity to his concern?" asked Snape with narrowed eyes.

"Of course not! I've just been on my feet quite a bit as of late, and with the shift in gravity, it's becoming rather uncomfortable, which brings me to another issue." She began absently chewing on her lower lip. When she noticed him watching her, she remembered their discussion several weeks prior and stopped. "Severus, I'm uncomfortable, and I'm quite certain that it's only going to get worse. Will you please release the charm that you have on the pipes in my bathroom?"

He narrowed his gaze once again and looked back down at the offending parchment in front of him. "You know my position on that, Hermione. I will not alter my decision," he stated rigidly.

Hermione attempted to keep the sudden surge of anger that she felt forming as a result of his unwavering mindset. She tossed the book that was resting on her lap back onto the nearby table. "Severus, you told me that you cared for me. Over the last few weeks, you have told me that you wish to get past some of the peculiarities in this relationship and try to build it to something more substantial. How can you expect to allow things to *move beyond the peculiarities* if you are still insisting on controlling me because of that ruddy contract?" Hermione had not intended to raise her voice to him. However, she found herself not only yelling by the end of her question but also standing.

"Hermione, I have told you my *feelings*, though I loathe to discuss them unless I am forced to. Do you truly doubt me?" he countered in a deathly tone. Severus rose from his chair and walked towards her, stopping inches from her. "Just so we are clear on this issue, I will have you know that my concern is not only for you but also for this child that you are carrying. I made my decision based on research. It is not like I was viciously looking for a way to punish you."

"I've read the research. It's inconclusive. My back hurts, and I want a bath!"

"Then, by all means, go take a bath. I do not care. However, bear in mind that after a time, the charm will kick in," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone that bore weight that the discussion was off the table.

Hermione's temper flared. "You are insufferable!"

"That I am." He reached his hands up and unfastened the clip that was holding her outer cloak and removed it. "Now, sit down," he said indicating a spot on the chesterfield. He could see the conflict on her face as to whether she would acquiesce to his request or whether she was going to storm off to the room. He hid his relief when she, albeit begrudgingly, sat where he had specified. Severus sat down beside her and requested that she turn her back towards him. He placed his hands on her lower back and asked, "Here?"

"Yes," she was obviously still upset, though he could tell that she was now trying to relax.

He began rubbing the area that she was complaining about. After several minutes, he started to massage the tight muscles, kneading away the aches that had been plaguing her for days. Hermione soon found herself relaxing into his touch. She closed her eyes and let out a small moan as he hit a spot that had become increasingly bothersome.

Severus' hands moved as low as they could with her in a sitting position, and after a time, he slowly moved them up her back. He brushed the plait of hair over her shoulder to get it out of his way as he began to work the muscles in her shoulders and neck. His deft fingers were easing her discomfort and causing her to relax as they charted her body. He wanted to see the pale pink skin hiding beneath the flimsy fabric that was covering her. Her soft whimpers and moans were nearly his undoing. He had wanted nothing more than to devour her, than to claim her since the time he had made his professions to her. He had thought it best not to push her until she was ready. *Let her make the first move*, Severus, he reminded himself. He did not want to push her into an intimate relationship when her emotions were already in an uproar. If she came to him, then fine. Otherwise, he would wait.

Hermione completely relaxed into his careful ministrations on her body, and when he finally finished, she leaned into him as he wrapped his arms around to her stomach and softly rubbed her belly before his hands finally stilled when she brought her own hands to rest above his. They sat like that for nearly an hour. Severus thought that she had fallen asleep until he heard her softly say, "Thank you."

"You are welcome," he muttered.

She turned her head up to look at him. "I still think that you're incredibly stubborn."

He raised an eyebrow. "As are you."

She ignored his jibe. "I also still think that you're being unreasonable, Severus."

"I disagree. I am merely looking out for my interests." He kissed the top of her head, and she leaned her head back into his chest.

"I wish you could understand," she murmured. "If you understood, I think you would change your mind that an occasional bath would be beneficial."

"Perhaps, but seeing as how I can not be with child, the chance of me truly understanding is slim. Now, it is getting late, and I have duties that I must attend to."

He slid out from behind her and offered a hand to help her up from her seat. "It is only eight more weeks, Hermione. You will survive. I'm quite certain," he said softly as he kissed her forehead.

Hermione barely realized that she was nodding in reply. *Only eight weeks?* She walked into her room and shut the door. Tonight, instead of reading aloud to the growing baby, she pulled down all of the Charms books that she had either purchased or borrowed from Professor Flitwick and began researching. There was a charm that could help her. She knew it had to be in there. Though she was quite sure that she could not reverse the charm that Severus placed on the pipes, there was something else that she was looking for.

She searched well into the night and finally found what she was looking for. With a triumphant smile, she put the other books back away on the shelves and reviewed the steps that she needed to take to perform the proper spell. She was now positive that she would be victorious in this battle. She fell into a restless sleep. The backache that had been tormenting her for the last few days was once again growing worse, despite Severus' attentions that evening.

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**A/N:** Sorry that chapter took so long, it wound up being much longer than I had anticipated. Not to mention that HBP was released last weekend. This story will not be abandoned, there are only a couple of chapters left, and I hope to have it all wrapped up soon. Thanks!

**Southern's Notes:** Dang right it won't be abandoned. LOL...You would be hunted. I'd lead the hunt of course, as I must know what happens to the stubborn arse next.

## XIII

### Chapter 13 of 19

Hermione teaches Severus a lesson that he won't soon forget.

*This story is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge issued on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Huge thanks go out to Charmed Nay! She graciously stepped in to beta this chapter!**

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Hermione awoke the following morning with the open book lying on the bed next to her. She had practiced the incantation and wand movements well into the night. Now, she was ready to use the spell if necessary, of course. She wasn't going to cast any spells on him just because she *could*. She only wished to arm herself with something that could ultimately help her.

Severus, though, had been a spy. She couldn't just pull her wand on him and try to cast the Charm; she would have to wait for the right time. *Wait for the right time, and only cast it if he forces my hand*, she reminded herself. She allowed a small groan to escape her lips. Maybe this wasn't the best idea.

She dropped her face in her hands. He had thrust this contract on her, and then set about controlling every aspect of her life. She could not allow herself to fall into a serious relationship with him if he was going to attempt to maintain that amount of control. She was her own person. She was not the type to blindly follow anyone.

She lifted her head and let out an audible sigh. Closing the book, she rose from her bed and padded to her bathroom to perform her morning ablutions. Her back was aching incessantly this morning. All evidence from last night's massage was absent. She soaked under the hot shower spray until the soothing water was replaced, all too soon, by an icy bite.

Hermione joined Severus at the breakfast table and slowly savored her breakfast. "How is your back, this morning, Hermione?" he asked while still reading his morning paper.

"Truthfully, it's not much better. I spent every moment of my time in the shower attempting to coax the water to ease some of the discomfort, but it was not accommodating," she said as she buttered her muffin. "Severus, will you please reconsider and allow me to use your bathroom."

"No, I will not budge on this issue, Hermione," he replied simply. "However, I would like you to promise me that you will seek out Madam Pomfrey's help in coping with your pains if they are still bothersome by tomorrow." With that said he arose from his chair and placed his paper back on the table. "I'm afraid that it is getting late. I must get to class," he said as he leaned over and kissed Hermione on her forehead.

She glowered at him as he bent his head towards her and growled into her pumpkin juice as soon as his lips left her skin. "You really are a stubborn git sometimes," she muttered.

He leaned back down and whispered into her ear. "Yes, I really am, however, when you are looking for stubbornness you truly have to look no further than your own reflection, my dear."

Hermione felt her cheeks flush. Before she could turn towards him and respond, however, he was gone from the room. She finished her breakfast, still growling at his words. She wanted nothing more than to have hexed him this morning; however, she had told herself she'd only use it when trying to actually take a bath.

She stood from her chair and carefully stretched. The dull aching in her back was slowly getting worse. Hermione silently prayed that the pains would not continue to get worse on a daily basis. She didn't know how much longer she could tolerate it. Walking into her room, she undressed, pulled on her terrycloth bathrobe, piled her hair atop of her head, and gathered the things that she needed for her bath. After another quick glance at the book she had been reading the night before, she left her room and headed for Severus'.

Outside of his door, Hermione waved her wand over it, checking for any sensory or secrecy spells. It was clear. She was uncertain how to feel about that. On the one side, she hoped that meant that he trusted her. *And Miss Granger, how do you repay that trust?* She asked herself. A small wave of guilt washed over her and she hesitated with her hand over the knob. Just as she was ready to pull her hand away, another wave overcame her, this one in the form of her never-ending, ever-worsening backache. Her pains won out.

Hermione slowly opened the door. She took a step in and at that precise moment, she felt something brush past her leg. She looked down to see a black creature run by. Slightly confused, Hermione ignored it and looked at the room that she had just entered. Her mouth dropped open as she took in the sights around her.

The room was larger than the sitting room that they shared by nearly twice. There was a large armoire against one wall, and next to that a tall chest of drawers, both made from a deep cherry wood. The bed was the same style as the one in her room, but much larger. The wood was a deep cherry, and it had an intricately carved headboard. It was adorned in deep blues and accented with silver. Hermione could not help but to walk up to the bed and brush her hand along the soft eiderdown covering. She moved

her hand along it again, only this time more slowly and firmer. She closed her eyes, imagining her body strewn across it, and sighed.

Remembering what she was there for, she resisted the urge to sit on the bed and instead opened her eyes. The remaining walls were lined in bookcases. After seeing his sitting room and his office, this came as no surprise to her. There were three doors. The slightly ajar door leading to the sitting room, another which she hoped led to the loo, and a third which she assumed led to his wardrobe. Looking at the third door, she noted that the bottom portion of it appeared rather odd; almost like it wasn't real. Brushing off her suspicions, she moved towards the bathroom.

She smiled when she opened the door. An excited feeling of triumph began to overwhelm her, though she kept making frequent glances to the door exiting the room. It was almost as if she expected to get caught. Like a child caught by his mother with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. The room was made of black marble. The sink, the counters, the tub, even the cupboards were a sea of black. She pitied the house-elves that had to keep the water spots from marring the black stone.

Hermione moved forward to turn on the taps to fill the tub with steamy hot water. She moved her hands to her back and rubbed the pains. The constant ache seemed to be relenting some. Now it came more in waves, though she did not understand why. If she were further along she would almost worry that they were contractions, but she still had a couple of months to go. *Besides, contractions are cramping, this feels like nothing more than a dull ache,* she assured herself.

The tub filled quickly, despite its vastness, and Hermione shut off the taps. She untied her robe. Before she could remove it fully, however, she heard a deep "ahem" coming from behind her. She steeled her resolve and firmly gripped the wand that she had stashed up her sleeve. Hermione slowly turned around to face him. The ever-present scowl was more noticeable than normal, she thought. She felt another small wave of guilt crash against her, she had betrayed his trust, and she knew that. The question was, how was he going to react to this?

"Erm, hi, Severus," she said casually, to break the silence.

Severus closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. He had spent the better part of last night and this morning thinking about Hermione's arguments when it came to taking a bath. He had admitted to himself that he had been irrational in setting such limits and if he would have approached her as an adult, things would never have developed to this point. He had massaged her aches and pains in an attempt to apologize, without giving into her demands, last night. This morning he had even contemplated releasing the Charm on her water supply; however this blatant disregard for his wishes quickly changed his mind back. He had already realized that the way that he had gone about ensuring her compliance, a few months back, had been somewhat childish. At the time, he had taken great pleasure in watching her rant and rave about something so pointless. Irregardless of that occurrence, though, she was challenging him now. He had set a rule and she purposefully set out to oppose him.

He became angry that he had begun to think of her in terms of a companion, as a wife. He could not spend his life with someone that purposefully tried to defy him! "What do you think that you are doing, Hermione?"

"I think that I am getting ready to take a bath, actually," she responded.

"Interesting," he said as he folded his arms across his chest, giving him a stance of power. *I think that you are getting ready to leave my bathroom.*"

"Severus, you are being completely unreasonable about this!" she snapped at him.

"Unreasonable?" he asked with a quirk of his eyebrow. "And sneaking into my bathroom..." He leaned close to her and softened his voice to a hiss, "breaking my trust..." He backed away again seeing that his tone had the desired effect. "That was not unreasonable?"

"God, Severus! You act as if I've committed some vile act of treason! All I want is a ruddy bath!" Hermione yelled. She threw an arm up in disgust with her ranting, causing her untied robe to open.

Severus swiftly became distracted by the sudden vision of her skin; the way that her creamy flesh covered the swell of her abdomen and breasts. He focused on the dark color of the areola and mused that it was much darker than the last time she had dropped her coverings in front of him so many weeks back.

He barely heard her next words of disgust. The vision of her had instantly reminded him of who she truly was. When he had first hired her she had been nothing more than an egg and a womb. He had selected her because she was the best out of the batch of pitiful women he had the unfortunate task to interview. Somehow, throughout the course of their time together he had grown to see her for who she really was. She was a woman. A woman that he had found comfort and solace in over these last few months. Hermione was a kind, thoughtful, caring, intelligent, independent, and...he inwardly grouched...very stubborn witch. She was the woman that was carrying his child and the woman that...

He was pulled from his thoughts when he felt a breeze of *something* brush past him. His eyes shot up to meet hers in a deadly gaze. Had she just hit him with a spell? Severus was not certain. He mentally cursed at himself for dropping his guard, though the mere fact that he should be on guard in her presence was ridiculous.

Hermione met his glare with equal intensity. She still looked angry, though, he decided that she didn't look *guilty*. *Besides,* he reasoned with himself. *I don't feel any different.* Though the softening feelings that he was having towards the situation had also vanished with the sense of being attacked.

Hermione was standing as though stunned. She was waiting for the onslaught of swearing and scathing remarks from the man she had just cursed *Did he not notice?* Her wand had remained, for the most part, hidden up the sleeve of her robe. It was only after she fired the spell that she had realized that he seemed oblivious to her ranting. She broke his gaze and looked down to where his eyes had been focused before. She quickly saw the reason why he had been so quiet before. A deep blush crossed her face as she closed her robe.

This act seemed to break Severus of his silence. His emotions were in turmoil, he was stuck somewhere between anger and understanding, and uncertain which way to lean. "I am needed in my classroom, Hermione," he said. His gaze softened slightly. "We will continue this discussion this evening, but for now, please leave."

Hermione nodded. She didn't know if she was going to cry due to frustration or if she was relieved that he hadn't mentioned the spell. "Ummm, Severus. I'm sorry, I..." she started to say hesitantly.

He held up his hand to stop her. "We can discuss it all this evening," he said calmly.

Hermione nodded. "How did you know I was here?" she asked with a little more sureness in her voice.

Severus pointed to the floor where there was a sleek black cat circling his legs. Comprehension dawned on Hermione's face. "I didn't know that you had a cat," she said.

Severus nodded. "Her job is to keep an eye on the Slytherin common room. She goes through that door," he said pointing to the other door in his bedroom. "There are doors leading from the common room both to my bedchambers and to my office that contain a charmed panel to open for her."

"Oh," Hermione replied. *And to think that we were always worried about Mrs. Norris stalking the halls when we were students* she thought. She was beginning to realize that she'd been living with this man for such a long time and there were still so many things that she didn't know.

Snape waved his hand, motioning for her to leave. She took a deep breath and exited the bathroom, and once she knew he was following her, she went on to the sitting room. She was still awaiting the queries and the reprimand for her spell, but none came.

He followed her as she left his rooms. Once in the sitting room, he walked up to her. Hermione's body stiffened slightly. He brought his hand up to her cheek and cupped her face. "I know you are frustrated," he said in an almost pleading tone. "We will talk later, I promise." Hermione nodded her head in acquiescence and he left to return to his classes.

Once he had left the rooms, Hermione slowly dropped to her knees in front of the settee. She leaned her arms and head forward onto the cushion. The overwhelming emotions from the morning's events finally overtook her, causing her to breakdown into sobs. Her bloody emotions were taking over and they were anything but stable. She could barely even sort out how she really did feel. It was an odd mixture of disappointment of not getting any relief, guilt mixed with pleasure at her revenge, and apprehension at how Severus would handle what she had done to him. All of this coupled with the fact that for some unknown reason she still loved the git. That was the worst part, what if he never forgave her for what she had done to him.

Her tears slowed until she was gradually able to compose herself. Emotionally spent, she finally was able to realize that what was done was done. It would do no good to tell him what she'd done. It would only serve to make him more upset with her. Besides it truly *could* still benefit her. Though, she did finally reason that she should inform Madam Pomfrey; just in case Severus began harassing her for remedies when he found himself taking numerous anti-emetic and pain-relieving potions. *It's very unfair that those potions will actually help him today, when I can't go near them*, she thought as she rose to go prepare herself for the day.

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"You did what?" asked the stern faced Mediwitch, though the dancing light behind her eyes betrayed her true thoughts.

Hermione tried to hide a smile. "I cursed him with an Empathy Charm. Honestly," she continued as Madam Pomfrey now attempted to hold back her snickers. "I feel horrible about it."

"How did Severus take the news when you told him?"

Hermione looked down at the floor, a slight tinge of red rising up to color her cheeks. "I don't think he knows."

Poppy could no longer hold back her laughter. "Oh my!" she exclaimed. "Oh, this will be a priceless day, Hermione, dear!"

"How long do you think it will be before he figures it out?" the younger witch asked.

"Oh, well, you hexed him at about half-past nine, you say?"

Hermione nodded.

"Well then, I would daresay that by noontime when he's experiencing full-blown morning sickness he'll begin to put the pieces together," replied the Mediwitch with a chuckle.

Hermione put her face in her hands and sighed. "Is there *any* way to reverse it, Poppy?" she asked in a final plea, as she lifted her head.

The elder witch stood up and patted Hermione on the shoulder. "I'm afraid there's not much I can do except to sedate him for the day, but he has classes to teach. Though, I don't think that Severus would back down from a challenge like a coward. The man is anything but."

"What about the last couple of hours of the spell? Isn't that the worst?" asked Hermione with a marked tone of worry.

"The curse only lasts twelve hours and it is not nearly as bad as what you will be experiencing, my dear. It will only go through mild contractions. Don't worry yourself. It's nothing that a pain-relieving potion and a good bath won't help." Poppy smiled sympathetically at the younger witch. "Or a good bottle of liquor, I will have to see what I have in my stores."

Hermione visibly blanched at the word *bath* at the same time her back began to remind her that it didn't appreciate her sitting on hard wooden chairs.

"Are you all right?" asked Madam Pomfrey with a concerned hand on the young witch's shoulder. "You're looking a little peaked."

A small voice in Hermione's head tried to tell her to ask Poppy about her worsening back pain, but another part knew that Madam Pomfrey would likely have enough to be getting on with in dealing with Severus this afternoon and evening, her trivial problems could wait. Her minor aches and pains could wait. "I'm fine, Poppy. Really. I think that you had best be preparing for a surly Potions master and I had best have a lie down so I can properly deal with the aftermath." She told herself that she would come back to see Poppy tomorrow if she was still not feeling up to par.

As she left, she silently prayed that Severus would avoid coming near her until the curse had worn off...and hopefully he will have calmed down.

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Severus was not having the best of mornings. For one thing, he could not get the image of Hermione standing half-naked in his bathroom, out of his mind. For another, he was feeling out of sorts. He shook his head in frustration. *It's because I can't stop thinking about her*, he told himself.

He had told himself quite early on in this budding *relationship*, that he would not push her into anything too quickly. But, parading around in next to nothing in front of him was going to be his undoing. He was only a man, after all.

By midday he was not feeling well at all. After three doses of Vomiting Vanquisher, he was feeling better, although he was worried that he'd have to take another. He was also more tired than he had been in years. He never even made it up to the Great Hall for the noon meal, instead he fell asleep at his desk in his office.

Severus awoke with his head on his desk only ten minutes before his afternoon class was due to arrive. As he sat up, he felt a strange tingling across his chest. He began righting his clothes, and noted that every time the fabric brushed across his nipples, it was an irritation that seemed to shoot directly to his core. This was coupled with his lingering fatigue, and a monster headache that had developed. *Thank God the nausea seems to have abated*, he thought as he grabbed a phial of Headache and Hangover Healer from his desk drawer and downed it quickly. He readied himself for his Advanced Potions class.

Later, that afternoon, he vowed that his sixth year Advanced Potions class from this afternoon was to go down in the Hogwarts' history books as the worst ever. Severus had never felt more out of control in his life. *This is worse than any time I ever had to deal with Black or Potte* he thought with a deep level of disgust.

After two hours, Severus had snapped, barked, or roared at every student in his classroom. Each one of the obnoxious brats earned a detention with Filch. He allowed a small smile to grace his lips at this.

Once the last student scurried out of the classroom, Severus warded the room, stalked off to his office, and sat himself unceremoniously behind his desk. Resting his head between his hands, he sat there and tried to figure out what was *wrong* with him.

Over the course of the day he had been nauseated, achy, edgy, and tired. Just those symptoms alone, and he would've decided that he had a cold or a case of the flu; either of which were easily cured with a simple Pepperup Potion. However, those were not the only symptoms. He had never before felt like he had been on such an emotional roller coaster. One minute he was calm, the next he was ready to kill someone, the next he would feel particularly *gentle*, and the next weepy. He shuddered at the mere memory of feeling *weepy*. Plus, there was the odd sensation that he had experienced with his nipples earlier today. Add that to the...

"What the hell was that?" he screamed as he jumped out of his chair. He had felt something firmly tap *thánside* of his stomach. How is that possible? And then the pieces all fell into place.

Severus gripped his arm tightly in his hand and kicked the leg of his desk as hard as he could. He felt another firm beat from inside of his body and looked down at his

stomach. There was nothing different. He *felt* as if there were, but his body was the same as it always was. He ran his hand from his chest down. As his hand lowered, it began to round up into a slight...bulge? He was perplexed by this. It *felt* rounded, much the same size that Hermione's belly had been about two months ago.

It was obvious that she had cast a spell on him, but it was nothing like anything he had ever experienced before. By his best guess as to what he had watched her go through, he could assume that he was about half-way through. He looked up at the clock on the wall. Noting that it was a quarter past three he figured he was six hours into whatever it was that had taken over his body. *Logically, that would mean that there are six hours left*, he reasoned. Severus let out a small groan at this implication.

He decided it was best for both of them if he avoided her, at least for the time being. He was still rather *emotional* and he really didn't wish to hex her and risk hurting his child. He had a few choices of what he could do. He could try to look for a counter-charm, go to Madam Pomfrey for help, or he could just ignore the entire thing and get some of his grading done.

Severus ultimately chose the latter option. He hoped that if he was distracted he wouldn't think about Hermione.

He sat down brusquely and grabbed the nearest pile of essays to mark, ensuring to take out all of his frustrations of the young, brunette witch, currently residing in his chambers.

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Hermione was quite relieved when Severus did not appear in the Great Hall during lunch. She kept waiting for him to sweep in and take his, sure to be, anger out on her in front of the entire school. She was barely able to eat as she moved the food around her plate and kept exchanging nervous glances with Poppy.

After meeting with Madam Pomfrey, she had gone back to her room to rest, but she was such a bundle of nerves that she could not seem to relax. She wound up sorting all of her books, first by topic, then in alphabetical order. When she had finished with her room, she had gone to the sitting room to begin tackling Severus' books. It was busy work, but at least it kept her from thinking about her aches and pains. She was still rather frustrated that Filius had insisted that she not help him for the next couple of days. She never was one to idly sit around and do nothing.

After the last of the classes were done for the day, she kept looking to Severus' office door, expecting him to barge in at any moment. Every sound that she heard caused her to stiffen, anticipating his anger. By six, she was not certain what she should do. She was mildly hungry, but as with the noon meal, she was not anxious to go to the Great Hall. *Maybe he won't be there, again*, she reasoned as she trudged up the stairs, thankful that she was no longer flanked by bodyguards for doing something as simple as walking the halls.

Snape did not appear at supper, either. Hermione again found that her appetite had vanished while she was nervously sitting at the Head Table awaiting his arrival. She swirled the food around her plate with her fork and groaned. She briefly looked up the table and noted that Madam Pomfrey was not present either. Hermione wondered if she was attending to Severus or if there were other patients in the hospital wing requiring her attentions.

She startled when a soft voice spoke in her ear. "Are you all right?" came the voice of Neville Longbottom.

Hermione smiled slightly, turned to face him, and indicated for him to take the seat next to her. "I'm fine, Neville, thank you."

"You don't look fine. You've been out of sorts for a few days and none of us has seen Snape all day."

She could not stop a small groan from escaping her. "I am doing okay, Neville," she replied unconvincingly. "I'm just tired, it's been *anerve-wracking* day."

"Hermione, I just wanted to tell you that...well, that I hope that you can forgive me for...you know...before. I just want you to be happy." Neville beamed a smile at her as he squeezed her hand and stood up to leave.

"Thank you," she replied softly as he left her. Tired of feigning to eat, she pushed her plate aside and made her way back to the dungeons.

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It was half-past eight before Severus decided that his potions were no longer helping him completely. Besides, he had depleted most of his stores in the course of the day. Torn between seeking out the aid of Madam Pomfrey and going to talk with Hermione; he decided it best to see the hospital matron. He was still quite the wreck both emotionally and physically, and he knew that he would lash out his frustrations on Hermione if he confronted her now.

He quietly left his office and made his way to the corridor. Carefully checking that no students were about to see him, he headed up the stairs towards the hospital, ignoring the sniggers of the portraits that he passed by. He may not look pregnant to anyone else, but there was a definite shift of balance in his frame and he found himself waddling as he walked. He growled at a pair of fifth year Prefects that he passed by once he reached the second floor, causing them to quickly divert their curious gazes and choose another pathway to their common room.

He stopped just three steps short of the door to the hospital wing, finding it rather hard to focus on anything but the dull cramping in his abdomen. He leaned his head against the cold stone wall and muttered, "I'm going to kill that bloody Gryffindor." Granted, it wasn't *that* bad, it didn't last *that* long, and the pains only occurred about every twenty minutes or so.

He regained his composure and entered the hospital wing to find it empty. Hearing giggles coming from Poppy's office he made his way there and knocked on the door.

"Why Severus, I daresay I've been expecting you," greeted the matron with an unconcealed grin as she opened the door to her office and invited him in.

"Indeed."

"Here, have a seat. I've got just the thing for you." Poppy brushed past him and was back in just a few minutes holding a bottle and two glasses.

She poured the brandy into each glass and handed one to Severus. Her grin only grew as Snape consumed the contents at record speed, set the glass down, and looked to Poppy for a refill. "I take it, from your greeting, that you know what has happened," he drawled.

"Yes, Hermione came to see me at about ten o'clock this morning. The poor girl was a mess." She looked up and met Snape's gaze. "She really feels horrible about it."

"Quite. I'm sure if she truly felt *that* bad about it she would have approached me and performed the counter-spell."

The aged witch shook her head. "There is no counter-spell, Severus."

His face showed no sign of his surprise at Poppy's statement. He took a slow drink of his liquor before he answered, "I see."

"Oh, do stop your glowering, Severus. It's very unbecoming of you," admonished the elder woman. She smiled again as Severus' face contorted briefly, indicating another pain. "From the looks of things you only have an hour left."

When the cramping had passed, he looked at the clock. "It's only been fifteen minutes since the last time that happened," he noted.

"Yes, you didn't think they'd stay spaced so far apart did you? Oh, stop it, you're getting off easy. Hermione is the one that's really going to have to suffer."

Severus sat back in his seat and tried to relax. Grimacing when he realized the inevitable, there was no comfortable position. "What exactly did she tell you?" he asked in a



detached tone, trying to seem uninterested.

"Not much. She seemed to feel rather guilty, actually. She said something about a spat and how she somehow managed to catch you off guard. She didn't think that you even noticed being hexed."

"Hmmm," was his only response.

"So...when *did* you notice?" she asked curiously.

Snape groaned, he did not like to admit any weakness, and not noticing a hex was a definite weakness. "I did not have much time to think about the symptoms whilst I was teaching, Poppy. All of my focus was on my job. Unlike you, I don't have time to waste nattering throughout the day," he replied smoothly.

A chuckle was the reply. "So, I take that to mean that you were well into it before you noticed anything." She held up her hand. "You don't need to answer that, I can tell by the snarl on your face."

Madam Pomfrey refilled her now empty snifter as another, deeper sounding, chuckle filled the room.

"I see that you cannot manage to stay in your own portrait. Who is it that you're pushing out of the way just so you can harass me?" drawled the grouchy Potions master.

"You know I can't stand sitting in that office with that crazy, old wizard unless I have to. As for whose portrait, my boy, Glover Hipworth typically spends his evenings perusing the halls of St. Mungo's so, I'm not pushing anyone out," he said with a smile. "Poppy and I have the loveliest conversations in the evenings. I daresay she knows more about what's going on around here than that old man up there."

"Indeed." Severus took another drink of his brandy and set it on the desk between him and Madam Pomfrey. She refilled it for him as he asked, "So, Albus, how long have you been listening?"

"Long enough, Severus," replied the former headmaster with a twinkle in his eye. "Exactly how has your day been?"

"I can honestly say that this has been one of the worst days of my life," groused Snape.

"Oh, come now, I doubt that. You did live through two fallings of a very dark wizard, after all."

Severus closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as another cramp hit him. They were getting worse. The tightening and cramping began at his lower back and wrapped around to his stomach. This was followed by shooting and aching pains that went down to his thighs. The *contractions* had both increased in intensity and duration in the last ninety minutes.

The portrait and Poppy exchanged sly smirks as Snape grabbed the brandy off of the desk and took another large swig. The only sign given that the torment had ended was Severus heaving a deep sigh of relief.

After he was able to regain his composure he spoke. "I have suffered through nausea, headaches, leg cramps, heartburn, and *breast* tenderness," he said with an air of disdain. "I was so exhausted this afternoon that I fell asleep at my desk! I've eaten more chocolate in the last four hours than I ever have in my entire adult life! My back hurts, my legs hurt, my hips hurt, and it feels like something is kicking at my diaphragm so I cannot even take a decent breath!"

"Really, now, Severus. Please calm yourself," chided Madam Pomfrey.

Snape sat in the chair, gripping the arms until his knuckles turned white. As soon as that girl delivered, he was going to hex her into the next week. This was entirely her fault!

"Severus?" queried Professor Dumbledore. "What exactly are you going to say to Miss Granger when you confront her about this?"

He turned his black gaze to the portrait and spoke through gritted teeth. "I will handle her. Rest assured, she will learn not to ever cross me again," he seethed.

"You wouldn't dare," said Madam Pomfrey with surprise.

"And why shouldn't I?" hissed Severus. "That woman, who has claimed *tocare* for me, has made my life a living hell! She proved to me today that she is just as childish and immature as she ever was when she was a student stealing Boomslang skin from my private stores."

"Think about what you're saying!" snapped Poppy. "That girl feels horribly guilty about what she did! You will not suffer any long term repercussions! This was merely twelve hours out of your life. Think about what *she* has been suffering through for the last seven months!"

Another pain overcame him before he could respond. Severus gritted his teeth and rode it out. He glanced at the clock. *Ten minutes to go*, he thought. When the pains had ceased, he spoke again. "She is being compensated for her troubles," he said. "And I highly doubt that she has suffered this badly."

"You have no idea what that girl has suffered, Snape!" spat Poppy. "And as far as being *compensated*, well, that's not enough." She sat back and tried to calm herself, looking to the former headmaster for help.

"You said yourself that you care for the woman, Severus," added Dumbledore. "And, I can tell by the way that you talk about her that you have feelings for her. Don't throw that all away on some little tiff."

Severus bit back a growl.

"Listen to Albus," pleaded the witch. "Hermione didn't tell me what you two fought about, but knowing the two of you, I would wager that it was a battle of wills. Damn, I've lived in this castle with you for over twenty years, and trust me on this, you are not the easiest wizard to get along with."

Severus glared daggers at her as another cramp overcame him. It was the worst one so far, and he silently prayed that it was the last. Bloody hell, not only did he have to endure this torture, he was being lectured on relationships through it. He thought about what Poppy had just said and remembered his experiences with Hermione over the last several months. Her vomiting on his shoes, her raging hormones, and her complaints of various aches and pains...he tried to hide the ripple of guilt that hit him.

"That woman has done everything that you've asked of her, Severus. Sit back and look at how much she's given to you, especially in the state that she's in."

The Potions professor slowly nodded his head. No matter how much he loathed admitting it, the witch was right. He looked up at the portrait to see Albus looking at him with concern. Damn, he hated it when they were right.

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Severus stalked back down to the dungeons. The curse had finally lifted and though a part of him was emotionally drained, another part of him felt ... exhilarated. He was still upset that Hermione had actually pulled a wand on him. He hated that she would openly defy him that way.

*Do you really Severus?* he asked himself. He imagined Hermione acting like his mother. Did he really want a woman that cowered at his every word? His father had dominated over his mother from his earliest memory. His mother, even though she was a powerful witch, did not defend herself. It ultimately led to an early death.

Aside from that, the only other relationships that Severus had ever been in, were those where he served the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. In both cases, they were the masters and Severus was but a pawn in their game. He never had any control. Is that what he wanted for Hermione? For her to not have any control?

Hermione was intelligent, strong-willed, and determined. Those were the things that made her stand out over all of the other women he'd known. *That is why you've never had a real relationship with a woman, Severus. You couldn't tolerate them any longer than it took for a quick shag.* It was these aspects which set her apart from all of the others.

The sight that greeted him when he arrived at his quarters caused his anger to slink to the background of his thoughts. He'd silently appeared at the door from his office and entered to find Hermione pacing the floor in front of the fire.

Her brown hair hung long and loose, framing her face. She was staring at the floor and chewing on that accursed lower lip as she worried her hands in front of her. She stopped pacing and closed her eyes, moving her hands to her lower back and stretching her gravid belly in front of her.

Severus' breath caught somewhere in his throat at the vision of her. It was then that he noticed the wet streaks on her cheeks and he began to feel nearly as guilty as he knew she did. Something deep in his chest lurched and yearned to reach out for her. He heaved a deep breath and quickly strode towards her.

Hermione's eyes flew open when she heard the rustle of fabric. Dropping her hands to her sides, she instantly recoiled as he approached her. His black fathomless eyes bored into her as she backed herself up against the bookcase. "S-severus," she stammered. "I've been so worried." Her own eyes held a pleading desperation. "I'm so very sorry," she went on. "I..."

He felt a lurch in the pit of his stomach; the woman that appeared to be quailing before him was not the same woman he'd left earlier that day. Not that he could blame her, she'd seen his wrath on more than one occasion for much smaller infractions. At that moment, he vowed never to give her reason to do so again. His lips descended upon hers, catching her by surprise.

Hermione was instantly engulfed in his intimate embrace. The fear, frustration, nervousness, and guilt began to get washed away by an overwhelming sense of desire. There was something different about his kiss. Before, they had always been soft and Hermione had always felt as if he were holding something back. This time all of his emotions were pouring out to her.

His kiss was strong, speaking untold words of apologies, remorse, and passion. Hermione returned those sentiments in kind as she brought her hands up to run through his shiny black hair. She let out a soft moan as she parted her lips, allowing his tongue entry into her mouth.

He placed his hands on her hips and pulled her so that her belly was pressed firmly against him. His kisses became fevered as the urge to devour her overwhelmed him. He'd never yearned for anyone this much before. *To hell with waiting for her to make the first move* he thought.

Severus glided his hands up her non-existent waist to cup her breasts, as he moved his kisses down her throat.

"Oh," murmured Hermione in response. At this he gradually pulled back eliciting a small groan of protest from the witch in his arms. Severus leaned his forehead firmly against hers. "Apology accepted," he said in a near whisper.

She looked at him expectantly, he'd accepted her apology, but she felt due one as well. When the silence remained, she narrowed her eyes slightly. "Hermione, I..." he began. He stopped, stepped back, and grasped her hand, as he led her out of the room.

He escorted her to his bedroom, where he waved his wand to light the many candles along the walls. Hermione quickly surveyed the room, looking for the same black cat from earlier. Severus answered her silent question, "She's not here, she'll be in the Slytherin common room."

As he'd guided her into the room, she became rapidly annoyed that he had yet to apologize to her. She was surprised that he did not stop their trek and he next led her into the loo where, with another quick flick of his wand the tub began to fill.

"I believe that I owe you a bath," he said simply as he turned to leave. His demeanor had suddenly changed, as if the walls that had been down were being re-erected.

Hermione looked around the black room and then after his retreating form curiously. "Excuse me. Where do you think you're going?"

He turned back to face her, his face void of emotion. Hermione wondered what she'd done to upset him again. "I think that I'm giving you some privacy. Take as long as you would like."

She took two steps towards him. "I would prefer it if you stayed." He quirked up his eyebrow at her. For Hermione, this was a bold response. She had known that some of his reserve had been concern for her relative sexual inexperience. She hoped that she was reading him correctly in this instance that his closing off had been a way of giving her an out. She had been waiting for him to make a move for quite some time now and frankly, his hesitance was becoming rather frustrating. Feeling emboldened, she closed the gap between them and reached her hands for the top button on his outer robe.

Severus allowed a small smirk to appear on his lips, as he again seemed to relax in front of her. Her fingers deftly worked down the front of his robes. She finished unfastening his first layer of clothing and slid her hands up the face of his shirt to his shoulders, and pushed the robe off of him. He leaned his head down to her ear. "Though, I enjoy the prospect of having you undress me, there are much quicker ways to do this, Hermione," he whispered, his hot breath tickling directly below her ear.

Hermione felt a shiver go up her spine as he waved his wand, yet again, and divested both of them of their clothing. She met his pleased smirk with her own. Though, inside her stomach now felt like nothing more than a jumble of nerves. She raked her eyes appraisingly over the man before her, placing her hands upon his chest and running them down the smooth muscles. He was thin and pale, that was unsurprising, but the well-defined muscle covering his scrawny frame, was. She ran her hands back up to the sparse hairs upon his chest as he brought his hand to her chin and tilted it up to his face.

His black eyes were usually devoid of emotion, but she could almost swear that she could see light dancing behind them now. He leaned towards her and kissed her gently on the mouth. "I believe you wanted to take a bath," he prodded. He could almost see her processing her options through her head. It seemed that the obsession with having a bath, did win out over more *pleasurable* options as she nodded and walked over to the tub, which was now nearly full of steamy, hot water.

She quickly pulled up her hair, shut off the taps, and stepped into the water. Looking back over her shoulder, she was amused to find him standing in the same spot, staring at her. "Please, come join me, Severus," she said as she sat down.

The bath had been one of the most magnificent things for Hermione. A bath is a simple pleasure that for years she'd taken for granted. Though, tonight, the meaning seemed to stretch beyond the plainness of merely a tub full of water. The heat from the water had not only temporarily soothed the aching muscles in her back, but it had healed something that until that morning she hadn't realized was broken. This relationship, for lack of a better word, that she and Severus seemed to be struggling to build, had been on unequal footing. Part of her had thought that he still viewed her as a student or subordinate and treated her thusly. However, as time was wearing on, she wondered if the contract was what was getting in the way of his seeing her differently.

Then she found herself thinking about the other things that she knew about him, and in her talks with friends, and with Poppy, she figured that Severus never really knew what a true partnership was. When he did not verbally attack her this evening, upon arriving in his chambers, she began to hope that he was realizing this. Next, to relent and allow her the one thing that she had been begging for, well...that was as close to an apology as Severus Snape was likely ever to get.

The time actually spent in the water was far from the relaxing soak she had been imagining for months. Nor was it the passionate one that she was envisioning after she invited him to stay.

Severus sat up against the side of the tub. Hermione sat between his spread legs and rested her back up against his chest. His hands traced soft gentle circles over her

taut skin as they talked. He related, uncensored, the events of his day to her. The guilt that she'd felt earlier, resurfaced, though she also felt a twinge of humor. No one would ever believe that she had forced Snape to suffer through the pains of pregnancy and childbirth. Though, she had to admit, from his recount, that he still missed some of the symptoms that she'd had to suffer on a daily basis. And, despite his assurances that he fully understood now, he still never had to go much further than a few contractions. After all, she was the one that still needed to squeeze the beach ball out of her.

She wanted desperately to confront him on his plans at the end of term, but she was concerned that *this* was too sensitive of a subject to broach when things were still so new and fragile. Hermione wasn't a coward, but she also wasn't dumb...she knew when to bide her time and wait. Though, she was beginning to feel pressured by Professor Flitwick. He was still hoping that Hermione could convince Severus to stay on at the school next year.

*Now is not the time to be thinking about this*, she chided herself. *You are naked and practically sitting on this man's lap and you're worried about what you're going to do next year.*

She brought her hands up to still his movements on her stomach, pulling him tightly around her. The feel of his body against her instantly changed at this small change. The laziness from his body vanished. He hissed into her ear, "What do you want, Hermione?"

"You. Just all of you," she whispered. As soon as the words left her mouth, she felt him lean her forward and stand up behind her. He stepped out of the pool and reached out a hand to help her up. She eyed the sight before her, whatever romantic notions she may have had previously were now definitely gone as her thoughts had gone well beyond that.

She stepped out of the tub as he reached for his wand from the countertop and cast a quick Drying Charm on them. Next, he led her out of the bathroom. She'd felt rather exposed in front of him before, but now, in his bedroom, she felt her cheeks begin to flush at their lack of coverings.

Severus was amused by her embarrassment, and he briefly wondered at the level of her innocence. They had seemed to 'clear the air', as it were, with their conversation. There were still many things to discuss, though he had no desire to do any of that now. The only thing that he wanted to think about now was how good it would feel to be between her legs.

He reached out a hand and brushed it along a breast, cupping it, and pinching the nipple firmly, eliciting a soft whimper from her. He snaked his other arm around her and pulled her close, enjoying the feeling of her belly against his jutting erection.

Hermione closed her eyes as he kissed her. It was raw desire, and nothing else, that he gave her this time, quickly deepening the kiss to a flurry of tangled tongues. Her hands roamed his back as they kissed. One of his hands continued to massage and tease her breast, while the other firmly grasped her bum.

He bit and suckled on her lower lip, before trailing kisses to her throat. He slowly broke his mouth away from her skin and carefully led her back to the bed. He guided her to lie down on her side and climbed up on the bed beside her. She grabbed a pillow to prop her head and tucked her arm up under her head. She then brought her other hand up to his cheek and kissed him softly before trailing the same hand down his body to his erection.

She ran her fingers across the tip, smearing the clear fluid, and then ran her hand down, grasping him firmly. She allowed a pleased grin to cross her face at his sudden intake of breath as her hand gently squeezed and rubbed him.

This was nearly his undoing. He pushed her onto her back and leaned down. He traced his tongue around her nipple and enjoyed her moan when he took the firm peak into his mouth. She removed her hands from him, however and he stopped to look at her questioningly.

"Sorry," she said, her face flushing, again. "I need a pillow or something."

Severus looked at her lying there and suddenly realized that he would need to make some concessions with her this way. Perhaps she was right, just because he'd spent twelve hours today suffering through many of the aspects of pregnancy, he truly couldn't fully understand.

He grabbed two pillows from the bed. He pulled her to her side and placed one under her back and the other under her belly. "I wasn't thinking," he said as he leant down, kissing her fully. He ran his fingers down to her tuft of dark curls. She spread her legs in response, giving him access. He smoothed two fingers along the folds of skin and into her channel. Severus was pleasantly surprised to find ample moisture within her; he slid his fingers out and brought them up to his mouth.

Hermione watched with desire and wonder as he sucked his fingers clean of her essence. Her previous sexual experience could be summed up as 'unsatisfactory', even this small amount far surpassed anything she'd experienced before.

Severus could not wait any longer, it had felt like an eternity of kisses, touching, and teasing. She responded tenfold to everything that he did to her and he wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her. He lifted her top leg and straddled the lower, pulling the upper leg over him, and quickly sheathed himself within her. He paused to allow her to adjust to his girth before he began rocking into her. Her hand now firmly on his back. He slipped a hand down to rub her clit.

Hermione felt a completeness that she'd never known before. He filled her fully, but there was an emotional completeness that made her feel that nothing was more right than *this*. It was not long before a tingling in her toes traveled up to her center and shot out through her body with the cry of his name on her lips.

It had been his intent to pleasure her more, he wanted to see her meet her peak again and again. That plan was quickly lost as soon as he felt the gripping of her walls around his cock. Severus followed her into orgasmic bliss, leaving him gratified and sated.

After catching his breath, he noted the pleased look on her face. He gently removed her leg from his back and eased out of her. Pulling the pillow out from behind her back, he moved up to lay down behind her. Severus pulled covers over the both of them and smirked at Hermione's sigh when he cuddled up tightly against her backside and nuzzled her neck. "I take it that you are satisfied," he muttered into her neck as he moved to rest a hand on her hip.

"Yes," she said with another sigh, pulling his hand over her belly. Hermione felt more content, within his arms, than she had in many years. She knew that he had fallen asleep behind her very quickly. She was just coming down off of her euphoric high, allowing her to join him in slumber when she felt a strong cramp in her back. She winced at the pain, it was similar to the aches she had been having since yesterday, though this seemed much stronger. Her heart began to race as the ache slowly wrapped to the top of her belly.

She breathed slowly and tried to force herself to relax. *It's just one, Hermione. This wasn't like the aches from earlier today; those weren't contractions. Besides, this can be normal after sex. It was only one...it was only one.* She lay there in the room, her eyes wide as she waited to see if the pain would repeat.

It was barely five minutes later when the pain started again. It started as before, as she forced herself to breathe. The pain was more than bearable, but her nerves jumbled in her stomach and she could not fight the feeling that she had failed. She needed to get to Poppy. She pressed her hand against her belly as the contraction hit its peak. A tear began to trickle down her cheek as she analyzed what she was feeling. It felt hard. *Hard as what, though?* She tried to remember the many books that she'd read. *Nose, chin, forehead...soft, medium, hard*, she repeated to herself as she touched each in turn. *Chin*, she decided. That did not bode well.

As the pain subsided, she carefully eased Severus' hand off of her and tried to move away. She moved slowly to the edge of the bed and rolled herself out. She did not wish to wake him until she figured out what was happening. She would use the loo and get dressed, maybe by then they will have stopped. She stood up tall and immediately she felt a warm gush of fluid flood out from her, followed instantly by the most intense pain she'd felt thus far. "No!" she screamed. Besides the pain, there was *something else* not right; Hermione felt something between her thighs that she knew shouldn't be there.

Her tears began to flow freely as the pain increased and the only thing that she could think was *failed, oh God, I failed*

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**A/N:** Oh, that was so mean! I'm sorry...well, not really! ;-) The components for this chapter have been around since the stories conception. I want to mention 'loonyluna' in regards to the Empathy Curse. We could not decide if we'd seen it used before or not, but if you want to read another story where someone uses an Empathy Curse then read hers, titled "Unforgettable" over on Ashwinder and AFF.net .

Many of you know that my beta, Southern\_Witch69, lives down in Louisiana. She is fine, just without Internet service. However, our thoughts and prayers go out to all of those who are struggling down there.

10 House points go to the one that can tell me the name of Severus' cat.

Does anyone know what the *something else* that's wrong...aside from the blatantly obvious? ;-)

Glover Hipworth was the inventor of Pepperup Potion.

## XIV

### Chapter 14 of 19

It is *the morning after*, as it were. Hermione has to deal with her feelings and come to terms with the decision that she has already made.

*This story is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge issued on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my wonderful beta, Southern\_Witch\_69! I'm so glad that she's back! :-)**

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*Breathe*, she told herself. *Just breathe. Get through this, and then we'll figure out what to do.*

Hermione hoped that the scream had been enough to awaken Snape. Not that this was the best situation to wake up to, but it was better that he was here than her being off in another room, alone. She just hoped that he wouldn't hate her for this.

As the contraction relinquished its hold, Hermione opened her eyes to see Severus step into, and very quickly out of, the puddle of fluid on the floor. In a flash, he was wielding his wand and pointed it at her abdomen. Whatever spell he cast caused another flood of warm fluid to gush from her.

"I had to do that," he said, pointing his wand at the additional mess on the floor. She looked at him questioningly, and he nodded towards the junction between her thighs. She had forgotten how odd she had felt just a few minutes prior. But, at his indication, she again noticed the peculiar feeling that there was something between her legs.

Unable to actually see that part of her body with the bulge in her line of sight, she reached her hand down and felt the thick, warm, smooth, pulsating, wet cord. "Oh my God," she whispered, a sickly nausea settling in her stomach. "We need to do something," she said worriedly. She barely noticed that Severus was quickly covering her with a robe and trying to help her up onto the bed.

"We have to hurry, Hermione," he snapped at her. "The Levitation Charm that I cast will keep the baby from crushing the cord, but it will not last very long."

Hermione fought to keep herself in control of her faculties as she climbed onto the bed and got on her hands and knees. She could not deal with the feelings, but she could deal with this in a detached, textbook-like manner and leave the emotions for later. "I need a wet flannel, Severus," she said as calmly as she could manage. He looked at her oddly before he summoned one for her.

While he quickly dressed, she gently wrapped the protruding cord with the moist cloth. She then laid her head and chest onto the bed while her bum remained firmly in the air. If it wasn't for the fear and worry passing through her, she would have felt very embarrassed at her current position. However, she felt anything but embarrassed...she had never been more frightened or felt more helpless in her life. *That includes having to face Voldemort*, she thought.

There was nothing that she could do in this situation but pray and wait for the Healer to deliver the baby. She just hoped that they would make it to the Healer in time.

The minute that it took for Severus to dress seemed like an eternity to Hermione. However, even she knew that dressing with a wand was always more complicated than to do it by hand. In a way, she was grateful for his calm façade, but a small part of her brain to scream that he was truly the uncaring git that they had grown up believing him to be. Though she knew this wasn't true, she couldn't stop that small fear from sneaking into her mind and trying to root itself there. She tried to relax and ignore that tiny twinge of worry.

She jumped when she felt his hand rest on her back. "Tell me when you feel the next contraction, Hermione," came his quiet voice. The silkiness of his tone washed over her. Soothing her more than mere words ever could and ebbing away any small doubts that she had previously.

"Why?" she asked.

"I am going to move you then. The contraction will already cause a decrease in circulation no matter what we do. I may as well transfer you at the same time, just in case the Levitation Charm fails or something else occurs to cause more problems. I suspect that it won't be long; if it would be, I would just move you now."

"All right," she replied. There was something in his voice. It was off from his typical matter-of-fact or his snarky retorts...he was worried. As they waited, there was only the sound of their breathing to fill the room. His hand never left her, but tenderly slid up from the small of her back to her shoulder where he gave her an affectionate squeeze.

During the next minutes of surreal calm, Hermione forced herself not to think about what was happening. She tried to only focus on what she was feeling physically, as Severus had asked her to. She felt the baby squirm, as if trying to become more comfortable and could not help but feel a slight bit of relief that it was okay...at least for now. Soon, Hermione began to feel the, now, familiar tightening of her abdomen.

"Now," she said firmly, as she reached down with one hand and cradled the moist cloth to the cord.

With the aid of his wand, Severus quickly brought her up to cradle in his arms. Hermione tucked herself up tightly against his chest, gripping his shirt with her free hand as she tried to tell herself to breathe and relax with the increasing pain and pressure that she was feeling in her midsection. She barely noticed as Severus carried her from

the bedroom to the fireplace in the sitting room. As the grip on his shirt increased and her knuckles whitened, he carried her through the green flames and into the hospital wing of Hogwarts. She tried to focus on nothing but keeping her breath slow and steady and the sound his heartbeat beneath his chest.

She started slightly when he bellowed once stepping them out of the fireplace. "Poppy!" The contraction was releasing, and as it eased, she felt her body relax. Severus laid her on the nearest bed, and she rolled to her side and back up to her hands and knees. He brought another reassuring hand to her back. "The Charm will hold; she'll be right here," he said calmly.

"Poppy!" he hollered again with an edge of irritation and frustration in his voice. He removed his hand from her and strode to the end of the bed as if he were going to search for the Mediwitch.

Hermione looked around the room at the few stirring bodies in the other beds. She thought that the only reason that none of them were sitting bolt upright was out of fear of what the Potions master might say to them if they made their presence known.

A candle lit at the far end of the room as the older witch emerged from her office. Even in the dim light, it was not hard for Hermione to make out the witch's disapproving look in Severus' direction.

"What the bloody hell is the matter with you? There are students...ill students...sleeping in here!" she hissed at him as soon as she was close enough to be heard. "I realize that you had a miserable day, Severus. That does not give you just cause to come storming into my hospital just because you ran out of Headache and Hangover Healer, and that brandy is catching up with..."

Madam Pomfrey's rant was cut short by Hermione harshly sucking in her breath as another pain started. The older witch turned her attention from the man she had been approaching to the bed he was standing beside. She took in the form of Hermione Granger and muttered, "Sweet Merlin," as she finally reached the bedside. She waved her wand, which pulled up a privacy screen, illuminated the bedside lanterns, and lit nearby wall sconces.

Madam Pomfrey coaxed Hermione back on to her side, and the younger witch watched with worried eyes as Poppy ran diagnostic spells over her abdomen. As soon as her wand ran over Hermione once, she had all of the information that she needed. Hermione let out an audible sigh of relief when Poppy cast the Fetus Sonorus Charm, and she could hear the baby's healthy and strong heartbeat. "It's all right for the time being, but I don't know for how much longer. We have to move quickly," she finally said.

The hospital matron began summoning items from her office. She looked up at Severus. "I need you to Floo St. Mungo's. Ask for Healer Thalna Thorne. She is the Head of the Midwifery Department. Tell her it's an emergency, and we need her here now. There is no time to transfer Hermione." If Severus was worried, he gave no indication as he went on the other side of the privacy screen towards the hospital fireplace.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" asked Poppy, her voice laden with concern. A dozen different responses flew across her mind at such a simple question. In truth, Hermione hadn't had the time to figure out the huge jumble of emotions that she was feeling. To say that the last hour had been a roller coaster of emotion would be an understatement. She had felt such joy with Severus. She had the horrible feeling that *this* was going to ruin whatever relationship they had built. He was sure to blame her as much as she blamed herself.

"I'd be lying if I said yes," answered Hermione with a faint smile. "Please, just promise me that you'll do anything you need to do in order to save her." Hermione's eyes were rimming with tears as she tried to maintain her composure. Despite the calmness of their conversation, she knew that they were skating on the thin line between life and death. She felt the rays of reassurance flowing from the older witch as Poppy squeezed her hand before grabbing one of the summoned phials and placing it to Hermione's lips. "Drink this, and we'll get started."

Hermione drank the slick and sweet orange liquid and felt the near instant relief in pain as her brain began to shut down. She kept trying to cling to the idea of the baby being okay, of everything being done well, and safely... it was the only thing that she could still think of. She was no longer able to string together a complete thought and soon found herself slipping into a deep sleep.

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Hermione felt as if she were a bear emerging from a winter of hibernating. She was groggy, and the events of the evening were a string of clips that she was trying desperately to view and place into their proper order. Nothing was making much sense. She fought to crack her eyes open.

The room was dark. She could make out the shadow of two other beds that were empty. At the far end of the room was a desk with a lone lit lantern. An older looking witch was seated at the desk pouring over piles of parchments and periodically humming to herself.

Hermione tried to turn over to glimpse the other side of the room. Her body protested the movement. She wasn't in pain, per se, but it was more as if she had overworked the muscles during an intense workout. She groaned as she tried to force her protesting body to move. She barely made it onto her back when she first felt it: an odd emptiness that she'd not felt for months. Before she could let out a cry for help, a hand came to rest on the shoulder. "Shhhh," hissed a stern voice.

Hermione looked up into the face of the old witch looking down upon her. The woman pulled out her wand and flicked it once to conjure herself a chair and to light Hermione's bedside oil lamp.

"Sorry, dear, I'm used to having a room full. It's a rarity to have such a quiet night on these wards. I'm Gladys Munch. I'm the midwife in charge of this ward tonight."

Hermione tried to prop herself up, and the woman arose to help her, stuffing pillows behind Hermione's back and head. She took a deep breath *Where to begin?* She ran her hands down her belly. "Where's my baby?" she finally asked.

Gladys quirked a questioning eyebrow at Hermione, and she thought that she could almost hear the admonishment passing from the older witch. It reminded her very much of Snape.

"Now, that is an interesting choice of words for a *surrogate*," she chided in a voice that spoke volumes as to what she truly thought of Hermione. "The baby is doing as well as can be expected. It is being cared for in our *Wee Wizard Ward*. Now about you..." she went on in a tone that clearly made the previous topic closed.

"Wait a minute. Can't you even tell me if it was a boy or a girl? Where's Severus? What is going on?" Hermione voice was raised and held a definite note of panic. She was not going to be shut out now.

"Come now, Miss Granger. You need to calm yourself. Professor Snape went home to sleep. I daresay that Healer Thorne had to nearly threaten the man to leave."

Hermione took several deep breaths. However, all she could feel was a burgeoning anger that she still didn't know the baby's gender, and she was being treated like a horrible person because of some contract she'd signed months ago.

"It seems, my dear," continued the midwife, "that *you* walked around in labor for nearly two days before the dam broke as it were. If you simply would've told someone about it, we could have put a stop to it, and you would still be pregnant now. Or is this what you wanted? Did you find that being a surrogate was harder than you had thought? Was it that once you'd started feeling contractions you thought that your hardship was nearly over, and you'd chose to allow them to continue? Or perhaps your mindset was such that you were sick of having to carry someone else's baby, and that was what kicked you into labor to begin with?" asked the accusing the old witch. Hermione sat there with her mouth hanging open, aghast at the horrible things that this woman had just said to her. Gladys' smile never left her face and the saccharine sweet tone reminded Hermione very much of Delores Umbridge.

"I didn't know I was in labor," she snapped back. "My back hurt, and I was uncomfortable. I thought that was **normal!**"

The midwife tutted in disgust. "You need your rest, Miss Granger. I suggest that you go back to sleep. The representative from Wilhelm Wigworthy's will be here in the morning to discuss the closing of your contract. You will be able to speak with them about anything else."

Hermione held her face in her hands. *Get a grip, Hermione*, she chided herself. She tried to think the situation through clearly. The midwife obviously didn't like that Hermione had chosen to be a surrogate. Hermione decided that cruel and hateful people were best dealt with by ignoring them. It was best not to snap back to the witch. She took a deep breath and raised her head.

"Please, what happened? The last thing I remember was arriving in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. My water had broken, and the cord had come down."

Gladys seemed to relax some at Hermione's feigned calm demeanor. She took on an arrogant air and told the story.

"Professor Snape called here for Healer Thorne. She was in the midst of another emergency, so she was delayed. Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey started the cesarean section without her. I think she arrived just as the baby was delivered. They quickly stabilized the both of you and brought you both to St. Mungo's.

"That's about all I know. It was all quite exciting, mind. We don't get too many births like that around here. Healer Thorne usually just oversees the midwives; she rarely has to get involved. However, she was called out twice last night and practically both at the same time." The midwife stood up next to the bed and placed her hand on Hermione's stomach. She pressed lightly with her fingers, and then, once she found her target, she pushed down...HARD!

"Bloody hell! What was that for?" Hermione asked indignantly.

"Sorry 'bout that," replied the midwife in a singsong voice, but her sneer said she clearly that she wasn't sorry. Hermione was quite sure that if the woman were given the opportunity, she'd gladly smash her stomach again. "It's a bit boggy. Nothing compared to what you'd be feeling after a Muggle delivery. With magic and potions, you've been pretty well healed up. The only thing we don't mess with much is your uterus. Yours is all sealed up, but it still needs to go through expulsion of the now useless lining and involution back down to normal size and to its normal place. It will take about six weeks." The woman flashed Hermione a hideous smile and reefered on her stomach again, causing a tight and painful cramp. "You can do that next time, put your hand down here and feel."

Hermione did so, feeling a tight ball under the thin layer of fat and skin on her stomach. "Keep it firm and tight, and I won't have to hurt you anymore," said Gladys in a more professional tone. "Though it would be easier for you to keep it firm if you were to empty your bladder."

"Where's the loo?" asked Hermione. She dreaded getting out of bed, but was already sick of this woman and was willing to do anything to get out of her presence.

Hermione's trip to the toilet was the furthest thing from private than she could have ever imagined. She felt like she was relearning how to properly use her muscles. The midwife had explained that this was a combination of adrenaline, hormones, and magic coursing through her body. By the time she was able to get back in bed, she no longer had the strength to be angry with the nasty witch for her thoughtless and hurtful remarks.

"I feel like I've been run over by a Hippogriff," she muttered as she crawled back into bed.

"That's pretty typical. I do have a potion for you once you're settled." She scurried back up to her desk and returned with two phials.

She handed Hermione the first potion. "Here, this one will help work on those muscles for you. It'll help you sleep as well. By the time you wake up in the morning, you should feel good as new."

"And hopefully you'll be gone," Hermione muttered under her breath. She drank down the brown sludge quickly. She gave the empty phial back to Gladys and was given another phial. "What's this one?"

"It's to dry you up. We give it to all of our surrogates. I daresay that you will appreciate it," came Gladys' disgusted sounding retort.

"Dry me up? What? You mean..."

"You won't have to worry about lactating, dearie," the midwife finished before Hermione had the chance.

"I don't want it," she Hermione sternly as she set the phial back in Gladys' outstretched hand.

"Miss Granger," snapped the midwife. She stopped herself and took several seething breaths before she continued. "I'm sure you know that most witches deliver and recover at home, we only get the complicated women...like you...and those that aren't keeping their babies...again, like you. So, it's best that you listen to what we have to tell you. You have no reason to lactate, and if you don't take the potion soon, then it will not work. You'll be stuck doing something ridiculous like using cabbages. I will place this potion here on your bedside table. You can take it when you are more awake in the morning and have had time to think things through. Don't think too long; it'll just be a waste of potion." The witch slammed the phial on the table and stormed off to her desk, not giving Hermione a second look.

Hermione glared at the retreating woman's backside as she settled back down to bed. The potion she had taken was making her feel drowsy, and she was having a hard time sifting through her thoughts. She was confused.

She still didn't know much of anything about the baby. She was worried, as any mother would be, but she knew that she was in no condition to go storming up and down the halls. It bothered her a great deal that Severus wasn't there. She wanted to know what he was thinking now. She couldn't help but to feel guilty by the things that the midwife had said to her.

She'd been in labor for nearly two days. Two days! How could she not have known? It just reiterated the initial feeling of failing that she'd had. She had set out to do something, and she'd failed. Now, someone else was paying for her shortcomings. An innocent life that, though she knew very little about, she loved very much.

She could not keep her eyes open anymore and slipped once more into the sea of unconsciousness with the vision of her child on her mind.

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Hermione was sitting at a table in the front row of the Potions classroom, adding ingredients to a simmering cauldron. She added a dram of finely chopped gingerroot to the milky-white substance bubbling within.

"And just what do you think that you are doing, Miss Granger?" hissed Professor Snape. "This is the fifth batch of potion that you have insisted upon ruining with your inane experiments. It would seem that you have failed yet again." He raised his wand to vanish the brew, but Hermione caught his hand.

"I haven't failed yet; let me finish this attempt, please."

"And why wouldn't you fail yet again, Miss Granger? I never should've chosen a Gryffindor for such an important assignment. You even failed at producing a child for me. Such a waste of time," he seethed.

Hermione knew she was dreaming. She knew it, but it didn't help her to dismiss the hateful words that her dream-Snape was saying to her. She closed her eyes and tried to make her old Potions master go away. When she opened them, she was still standing in the Potions classroom. Her cauldron was again happily bubbling. It was time to add the next ingredient. She slowly poured in half of a bottle of brandy and jumped, nearly dropping the bottle, when someone tapped on her shoulder.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! Are you hoping that making him drunk will make him any less disappointed in you when he wakes up?" asked her redheaded ex-boyfriend.

"When who wakes up, Ron?"

"Why Harry, of course. Mind, you should've done something about him ages ago. The only reason he's still trapped down in the Department of Mysteries is because of you. It's all your fault."

"I didn't know the spell would trap him in the Pensieve like that!"

"It doesn't matter. You were the brains of the group, Hermione. We trusted you. We counted on you to figure out all of that stuff. And even when the spell *did* backfire like that...you should have known what to do to get him out!"

"How could I have known, Ron?" Hermione ranted. "I only knew that reversing the spell would release Voldemort, too! We can't risk that! Harry wouldn't want us to risk that! Despite your stupid opinions, you need to realize that I don't know everything!"

"Obviously," he snorted. "You let us down. You failed us. Why else do you think I ran off with Parvati after You-Know-Who fell? It's because I was disappointed in you. You let down Harry! You let *me* down!" With those final words, the image of Ron disappeared with a soft *pop*.

His words hurt, but Hermione was beginning to feel numb from her guilt. She focused back on her cauldron. It was time to add the knarl quills. Six whole quills would be added to the potion one at a time, allowing it to simmer for one day in between the addition of each quill. "Time consuming," muttered Hermione.

As with all dreams, the next thing she knew, she had finished adding the quills and was again staring into the newly purple mixture. She still had no idea why she was brewing the potion. She knew that this was only a dream. She just wished that she had more control over the dream, but she did not. She only seemed to glean information when she needed it. Something told her that this was important, but she could not help dreading who she would be seeing next.

As if on cue, "Miss Granger!" snapped the clipped voice of Professor McGonagall.

Hermione jumped at the strong brogue of her former Head of House. She looked around to see Minerva McGonagall walking through the classroom door in her old emerald green teaching robes. She stepped aside to reveal tiny Professor Flitwick standing with her.

"Good morning," replied Hermione.

"Hmmm," answered Minerva. "It may be a good morning to you, Miss Granger, but not to me. I just got the result of your exams," she said waving a stack of parchments. "I am afraid that I will have to Owl your parents immediately. You have failed everything. I am very disappointed in you."

"My parents are dead, Professor," answered Hermione simply. Minerva plowed on as if Hermione had not said anything. "You let me down, Miss Granger. You let your parents down. I am sure that you realize that they would not be dead now if it weren't for your involvement with Mr. Potter. Those that attacked your parents were only trying to hurt you." The papers that she was waving around vanished and were replaced with her walking cane. "All this time has passed, and you have done nothing to help Mr. Potter. And it just kills me to think what you've now done to poor Severus and that innocent baby," she *tsked*.

"I don't know how to help Harry!" Hermione shouted. "As far as Professor Snape is concerned...well...it wasn't my fault! I didn't know! I didn't try to do anything wrong," cried Hermione, tears were beginning to streak her face.

"You also failed to convince Severus to stay on at Hogwarts, Miss Granger," chimed in the squeaky Charms Professor.

Hermione put her elbows on the table and her face in her hands. *Come on mind...tell me...what else am I no good at?* She sighed hoping that the image of her mentors, past and present, were gone.

She moved her hands and found that she was, thankfully, alone. She lifted her wand and poked at the contents of the cauldron. After the stewing, it was now a deep maroon, reminding Hermione of blood.

She grabbed at the flint blade on the table and began slicing the mandrake roots into perfect one-inch cubes. She was thankful that the roots were parboiled so that she didn't have to worry about wearing earmuffs or, even worse, looking at their human-like faces contorting as they were cut up. She finished with the root and carefully added it to the compound, careful not to cause splashing.

She peered into the now silvery depths; it reminded Hermione of a Pensieve. Her head was joined by another. "Harry!" she cried as his head bumped her own. "What are you doing here? I've missed you terribly you know."

"If you missed me so badly, you wouldn't be leaving me to rot with that old megalomaniac like you are now," said Harry, his brilliant green eyes flashing as he rubbed his head.

"I didn't know what to do, Harry. I'm sorry, I really am. It's not like I up and left you. They shoved you off in the Department of Mysteries. Besides, things haven't exactly been easy for me since the war ended," she defended.

"Don't give me that, Hermione! You were the one that knew everything! What happened to you?" queried Harry in an accusing tone.

"I don't know how to help you, Harry! If I did, I would, but I don't know how. I've looked and looked. I know Charms, Harry, but I don't think that it's a Charm that can help you."

Harry stopped and looked contemplatively at Hermione. After several long minutes of silence, a slow smile began to grow on his face. He took his wand and poked it into the cauldron drawing up a string of golden light. "Not *just* a Charm, Hermione," he said. Before she could reply, Harry and the cauldron were gone, leaving Hermione standing alone in an empty room. The sounds of a screaming baby coming from the direction of Severus' office seemed to pull her away from the thoughts about her visitors.

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Hermione awoke with the urge to dart out of bed and soothe the wails that she still heard on the other side of the door to Severus' office. The images from her dream were swiftly slipping away from her grasp. The harder she tried to remember the image the further out of reach it danced, taunting her. The only thing that she was left with was a resounding sense that her childhood boggart had come to life. She had effectively failed at *everything*.

She was curled up on her side, and she wiped the tears off of her face. Light was shining in the room now; for that, she was thankful. She moved to sit up. Her stirrings caused the residing midwife to approach her bed. Hermione groaned. She was not in the mood to listen to someone else telling her how she'd fucked up.

"Good morning, Hermione" came the chipper voice.

Hermione looked up to the familiar face of Lavender Brown. She didn't know whether to feel relieved or more on edge. At least she knew Lavender, and she was unlikely to demoralize or degrade her. "Hi, Lavender. I wasn't expecting you. Last I saw you, well, I'd say that you were about ready to deliver."

The brown-haired witch smiled and sat on the edge of Hermione's bed. "Well, I did really soon after that. After that, I was able to grease a couple of pockets, and I decided that this was what I wanted to do. There is something really amazing about childbirth. I just can't describe it," she gushed.

Hermione tried to smile. "Oh," she managed to say. "I'm happy for you, Lavender. I really am."

The new midwife patted Hermione's hand. "Oh, I didn't think about that," she blushed. "Well, don't worry about it. It'll get better. Honest. Here, turn around. Let me braid

your hair."

"You know that there are spells for that," Hermione said as she dutifully turned to the side.

"I know, but there's something therapeutic about using your hands. Well, I wish that I could've been there when you delivered. I need to attend two more and do one assisted cesarean section before I'm no longer considered a trainee." Her old roommate conjured a hairbrush and pulled the few pins that were still in Hermione's hair, but were now doing a miserable job of keeping her hair off of her neck. Soon, Lavender was working through the bushy mass of curls with the brush and sectioning off Hermione's hair.

"Sorry, I couldn't oblige," mumbled Hermione half-heartedly.

"Oh, no, I wasn't meaning it that way," giggled Lavender. "Oh, never mind."

Hermione took advantage of the laughter and began testing the waters. "That other woman, Gladys, I think her name was...she wasn't very nice."

"No, that's one nasty old biddy. I agree. I met her after I delivered. She was one of the reasons that I decided to do this actually," she replied as she tugged a section of hair. "She was the perfect example of how not to treat other people. Now I admit to being shallow at times, but I really found my passion, Hermione."

"Lavender," Hermione started tentatively. "Please tell me about the baby."

The pulling on her hair stopped for a moment and then began again. "It's a little girl," she said simply. "Hermione, take this from someone who understands. You just need to get on with it. I mean, it's not like she's really yours. You did your job, and now you need to take a step back. It will get easier. I promise. I think that we are supposed to have that inborn *mothering* thing. Makes you want to take care of it or something. Really, though, it will go away. Try not to think on it too much."

"It's not the same, Lavender," she muttered, though she didn't know how much more she wanted to divulge to her former dorm mate. The baby *was* hers, but no one seemed to know here. Hermione wasn't *allowed* to say anything either. She would never refer to Lavender as a friend. They had lived in the same room for years while attending Hogwarts and had tolerated each other's company. Some times, of course, was better than other times.

Silence settled between them as Lavender finished working on her hair. She finished and tied the hair in a ribbon.

"Professor Snape was by earlier. He said that he didn't wish to wake you, but he wanted to make sure that you got everything that you needed."

"Did he say anything else?"

"No," Lavender stood up from the bed, gathering her hairbrush and hairpins. "But you don't have to worry about seeing him again. I was surprised when they said he was the one that you are, I mean, were working for." The young midwife shuddered. "Anyhow, a representative from Wilhelm Wigworthy's will be by to see you today and finalize everything." Lavender paused and looked like she was thinking hard before finally saying, "Look, Hermione, if you'd like I will try to get you in to see *her* for a few minutes. Okay? She's holding her own. For being so early, she's actually doing surprisingly well."

Hermione gave her a smile and nodded her head. "Thank you, I would really appreciate it."

The trainee midwife beamed brightly. "Now, you go use the loo, and get cleaned up a bit before I pay you back for years of making me study by pushing on your belly."

Hermione grimaced. "Fine."

Hermione emerged from the loo to find a familiar looking witch sitting in the chair next to her bed. She had a friendly yet business-like demeanor about her. Hermione grabbed the robe tightly around her and went back over to the bed. "Good morning," she said in an attempt to be polite. She was not in the mood to deal with much else this morning. "I'm sorry. I don't remember your name."

"It's Hazel, my dear. Oh, Miss Granger," she said enthusiastically. "How are you? You had an exciting evening, I hear."

"You could say that," replied Hermione dryly.

"Well, we received word this morning from the solicitors that the contract had been fulfilled on your end and that the rest of it was being taken care of. We just wanted to make sure that you were well."

"Yes," Hermione replied automatically. *The contract had been fulfilled.* It all sounded so impersonal, so formal, so...*legal.*

"Did you have any questions, Miss Granger?" asked Hazel with a concerned voice. "According to the contract, Professor Snape has two weeks to fulfill the rest of the contract, and I have been assured that most of it has been taken care of all ready. If he doesn't come through with the rest of the contract, you have grounds for recourse."

The words of the Wilhelm Wigworthy's representative fell on deaf ears. Hermione could not get past the blatantly obvious truth that there had been a contract between them, a contract in which she had sold a part of herself. She had told Professor Snape that she was selling a piece of her body for her soul. She had been deluding herself. She had sold the most precious part of her being for nothing.

Nothing.

It was in that moment that Hermione learned what it was that her mother had once said, but she had never fully understood. She would do anything for her daughter. Whatever it took, she would do it. If it meant that she needed to live in poverty and work as a whore, she would do it. If she needed to die, she would do it. Her daughter was the only thing worth living for or dying for.

She did not really hear when Hazel politely shook her hand, wished her well, and said goodbye. She did not notice as Lavender came over and began assaulting her body to ensure that she was healed as well as could be expected. Hermione barely noticed when Ginny appeared shortly before lunchtime. How could she not notice? Ginny sat there forcing food into her mouth, insisting that she needed to eat and that her mother told her that she'd always been famished after having a baby and that she needed her strength after such an ordeal.

"What is your plan?" Ginny finally asked once the lunch tray had been cleared away.

"I don't know," mumbled Hermione. "I guess I don't have a plan. I need..." she trailed off and began staring out the window. Hermione sighed deeply. "I need to talk to Severus. I thought that things had moved beyond talk of contracts and clauses. We just never discussed it; I don't know why. It just never seemed to be the right time."

"Well, I think you're on the right track. I mean, from what you've said and what's happened, I don't think he'd turn you out now. Even Snape's *not* that cold," agreed Ginny. "But, if you decide that you aren't sure what to do yet or something, you can come stay with me. Just for a little bit. I've made Ron promise to be nice," she added with a teasing grin.

"Thanks, Gin. I think I'll be going back to the castle. We'll see." She bit her bottom lip and looked over to where Lavender was sitting, reading a trashy romance novel. "Lavender?" she called.

The bubbly, brown-haired girl came over to the bed to see her charge.



"What do you think about getting me over to the *Wee Wizard Ward* now while Ginny is here to help me if I have trouble?" she asked hesitantly.

Lavender looked around the empty ward and thought. After several minutes and several checks of her watch, she nodded her head. "I think that you're right; now would be the best. Most everyone is at lunch. It's possible that you can go in, and no one will notice."

Hermione smiled.

Lavender checked her schedule of lunch hours and verified that the Healer for the W.W.W. should have gone to eat about ten minutes prior. She led Hermione and Ginny down the hall and showed them the door to enter. In most any other scenario, Hermione had every right to go in and visit her own child; in fact, it would be encouraged. However, in this situation, there was a magical contract that stated that she would not acknowledge the child as her own, and St. Mungo's staff obviously knew about it.

"Watch out for the Healer. She's Gladys' sister, and I really wouldn't want to get on her bad side," warned Lavender as she left the other two women there.

They entered the ward. The lights were dim, and the atmosphere was quieter and more relaxed. There was no rustling of papers or sounds of idle nattering. Hermione listened closely, and she could make out the soft sounds of a stream and the steady beat of a heart. There were three bubbles around the room. Each bubble held a tiny baby.

Hermione walked up to the nearest one and saw a name written underneath it *Duncan*. Whether that was the first name or the last name, it was irrelevant. Severus would not use the name Duncan for a baby girl. Hermione's stomach was in knots as she walked over to the next wall and the next bubble. The tag *Snape* was clearly written on the card below the bubble. The infant within what looked to be a modified version of the Bubblehead Charm was smaller than the one that she had just looked at. She was lying on her stomach on a soft pink blanket, and she appeared to be sucking her thumb. Hermione grinned. She had sucked her thumb as a child, and being the child of dentists, she had been scolded on it more times than she could remember.

Hermione reached her hand out to touch the bubble and was surprised when her hand slipped through it easily. She tentatively moved her hand and touched the little foot that was nearest to her. Hermione moved her hand away, knowing that it was best not to touch the baby, at least not now. She was too small; there was a reason why the room had minimal stimuli. Hermione looked at the fine black hair that adorned the child's head and wondered what it would look like when the baby hair fell out in a few months. She let out a small shudder when she noted that the babe barely had any fat over her lean structure. She had to be less than two kilograms.

"Hermione," whispered Ginny. "I think we need to go."

"Just a minute more," murmured Hermione absently. "She seems all right. This is nothing like what I've seen on Muggle movies or on the tele." She looked up at the redhead for an opinion.

"We're wizards, Hermione. You know that by now." Ginny was shaking her head.

"I promise I haven't gone loony...a little emotional maybe, but not loony." Hermione winked at her friend.

Ginny sighed, but she couldn't help smiling when she came forward and looked at the small infant. "Do you know her name?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, we never discussed it. I never took the potion to determine the gender. Severus had mumbled something about one of the ingredients being harmful or something. Last time we discussed anything about the baby, he referred to her as a boy. I don't think he thought about a little girl." Hermione brought her finger up along the baby's leg. "When I saw Minerva before she died, she asked me. I told her Diana Grace, but I don't think that she looks like a Diana. Perhaps an Ella, maybe?"

Ginny leaned towards the bubble and grinned at Hermione. "Yeah, I'd say that she looks like an Ella," she agreed. "Now, I think we should leave."

"Excuse me," came a simpering voice from behind them. "How did you two get in here?"

Both girls jumped and turned to face a woman that Hermione would swear was Gladys Munch's twin. She had a sickening grin of a toad that had just caught a juicy fly. "I was just out for a walk," Hermione explained.

"You're not allowed in here; only family is allowed," replied the woman sternly.

"I am sure that Severus Snape will allow me to be here," replied Hermione with just as much force.

"Really? You think so?" replied the carbon copy. "I happen to have papers here that say the contrary, Miss Granger. They state quite plainly that you gave up all rights months ago," was the nasty woman's smug reply.

Hermione felt as if someone had struck her. Her stomach began to churn and bile slowly began to creep up her throat. "When did the papers arrive?" she asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"They arrived by Owl Post, first thing this morning, Miss Granger." The simpering, too pleased with herself smile was again prevalent on the woman's face. "If you would kindly get out now before I have to call security..." The threat lingered in the air between them.

Hermione took one more glance at the bubble holding her child and turned to Ginny, nodding her head. The two women quickly left the ward. Once out in the hall, Hermione leaned up against the wall and grabbed her arms tightly around her. The tears began to fall freely and for what seemed like the hundredth time in just the last twenty-four hours. Her emotions had never felt this out of control before. Though, she must admit that she'd never felt this hurt, alone, and utterly *stupid* before. She had been foolish, very foolish, in more ways than one.

Ginny's arm came up around her and pulled her against her chest tight. "It'll be all right, Hermione," she cooed. "I'm sure you can talk to Snape later and get this all cleared up."

Hermione sniffed and pulled back. "I need to go."

"Okay, let's get you back to your room."

"No, Ginny, I need to leave. You said I could stay with you? I don't want to go back to the castle. I need to get these ruddy emotions under control, first." She looked into her friend's eyes. "Please."

"Yes, of course, Hermione. I told you that whatever you need will be done. Are you sure they'll let you leave now?"

Hermione swallowed and started to walk back towards the room. "Yeah, I think so. I'll insist. They can't really say no."

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It had been a long day full of meetings and ensuring that everything was done, all on the equivalent of two hours of sleep. He stormed down the halls of St. Mungo's to finish with the rest of his business. Then, perhaps he would actually be able to sleep tonight.

He approached Hermione's room and opened the door. It was empty. There were four perfectly made beds and a cleaned off desk at the far end of the room. He relinquished his grip on the doorknob and found Healer Thorne's office down the hall. Without preamble, he opened the door.

The Healer was hunched over her desk working on paperwork. A long plait of salt and pepper gray hair hung down her back, and she kept stopping to push up her thin wire-framed glasses. She looked up a moment after Severus entered the room.

"Oh, good afternoon, Professor. I trust that you were able to get some sleep. I know that I did. Thankfully, it was a slow morning," she said with a smile.

His face was a stony mask. "Where is Hermione Granger?"

"Oh, Miss Granger," she said thumbing through her papers and pulling out a sheet of parchment. "She left this afternoon. The midwife tried to talk her into staying another night. But physically Miss Granger was fine and healing nicely; plus, she was quite insistent, so they let her leave." She looked down at the parchment that she was holding. "It says here that she went home with a Miss Ginevra Weasley."

Severus did not bother answering. He left the Healer's office and walked silently down the corridor in the direction of the *Wee Wizard Ward*.

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**A/N:** Poor Hermione, I feel sorry for her. Who wants to join me in lynching the Munch sisters? If you can't remember what it was that Severus' promised to do for her in the contract, it is in chapter 2.

**Southern's Notes:** Lynch? I can think of some better things to do with the bit...er...women. You know... Why am I not surprised that Hermione would take off without talking to Snape? This was a very sad chapter for me to read. I hope the next is brighter.

Now, I'm switching to bookish mode. Premature Rupture of Membranes can always be a problem, but it CAN occur without labor, allowing some women to go on to deliver closer to term. (Though, I feel I should tell you that the biggest risk to these women is infection.) In this case, Hermione was already 'in labor' when her water broke. One of the biggest concerns with PROM is that there are times when the baby is not engaged in the pelvis, allowing room for the cord to slip out. The mother should get into a hands and knees position to get the pressure of the baby off of the cord, and the purpose of wrapping the cord in a wet cloth is to keep it from drying out. A prolapsed cord can happen at any point, it doesn't have to be pre-term, it's just more likely then.

Oh, and someone did ask about surfactant. Surfactant is given to babies when their lungs are not matured. It is basically a fluid/oil that allows the infants to be able to breathe, without it the lungs, essentially, stick together. This baby didn't need it. Lungs mature at varying rates for all fetuses. Though, if she did need it, I would see it as a potion that needed to be consumed.

YAY to gardengrr13 who figured out what was wrong! :-)

Oh, and I nearly forgot...in the US and likely in the UK, the birthmother has rights and would likely not be denied access to her newborn. This is a different world with magical contracts...enough said.

## XV

### Chapter 15 of 19

Severus has arrived at St. Mungo's to find that Hermione has left.

*This story is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge issued on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my wonderful beta, Southern\_Witch\_69!**

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Severus made his way to the Wee Wizard Ward. His thoughts consumed with what could've been going through Hermione's head *Damn her!* The only thing that he could think of was that she must have realized what sort of commitment she'd be getting herself into. Strapped with a child she had not... His train of thought stilled. *That couldn't really be it...could it?*

The only other idea that seemed logical to him was that she blamed him. It was, after all, largely *his* fault that she'd delivered early. He had not told her that many of his ancestors had bore children well before their due dates. It was one reason that he'd been so overly cautious with her. Then, he'd gone and coerced her into having sex with him.

His own damn fault.

However, the child had proven her worth and served her purpose that morning. The sole reason for her conception had been to secure his inheritance. He'd met with the solicitors first thing, and the paperwork had all been finalized.

At the time, he'd thought that Hermione would actually wish to be part of his...their...daughter's life. Because of this, he'd gone to the trouble of drawing up a new contract stating that fact, though it was not binding until she signed it.

He fingered the rolled up parchment, which was presently resting in the pocket of his robes, and he wondered if he should even bother presenting it to her. He was not a man that desired putting himself out for rejection.

After the meeting with the solicitors, he'd deposited the appropriate amount of funds into Hermione's account at Gringotts, gone out and settled her old debts that had been haunting her since the death of her parents, and after that, he'd made his way to the Ministry of Magic. *That* had taken the longest of all.

He had gone through the process for himself a few years back, but it seemed that it took more money and more time to get Miss Granger back into good standing with the Ministry of Magic...among the hurdles of Dolores Umbridge. That horrible toad had still been holding a grudge against Hermione since she taught the girl during her fifth year and was one of the key instigators in the ruddy *War Criminal Decree*. Umbridge was simply one of the many selfish and arrogant idiots who were nothing but jealous of those that *did* something for the war effort.

Eventually, it had taken Severus' threatening the ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts professor that he would bring Firenze down to the Ministry of Magic to get her to sign the papers releasing Hermione of her work and education restrictions. She quickly gave in of course.

When *that* final task was done, Severus had felt free to go back to St. Mungo's. She'd fulfilled her end of the bargain and he his. It was his hope that it had meant that they could pick up their lives and start over with a clean slate...nothing to get in the way.

Losing his train of thoughts, he looked up at the door before him. He'd finally reached the W.W.W. and opened the door uncertainly. The sight that greeted him was not the same one that he'd left the night before. The room was a bustle of activity. There were three people hovering over his daughter's bubble. Next to where his daughter was, there was a small table containing a barrage of potions and various types of wands in numerous sizes. An unexpected feeling of *concern* began to rise up within him.

He strode into the room and approached the small cluster of women. "What is going on in here?" he hissed in his most threatening Potion master's voice.

"Oh, Professor Snape," replied a bulky witch. "I'm so glad that you're here. I just tried the Floo to reach you, and I was getting ready to send you an urgent owl," she prattled. "I'm Healer Munch, by the way..."

"Get on with it," Snape interrupted, clearly irritated that the woman had yet to get to the point.

She looked slightly taken aback by his brusque tone. "Well, yes, well, you see there was been a bit of a setback with your daughter," she began. The Healer was obviously having a difficult time getting the words out while under the intimidating glare of Severus Snape. "She is losing her strength, as it were, and having trouble sustaining the most basic of functions. We're helping as best as we can, but we can only do so much for so long, you see. This can happen in these pre-term babes. It's the loss of magic that's affecting her the most. Otherwise some of the Muggle remedies that we're familiar with might work."

"Well, what needs to be done?" he snapped.

"That's where we're having trouble, Professor," she answered. "You see, we typically give Elixir Corroboro to these young ones that struggle."

"Then give her the bloody potion!" he snarled.

The Healer jumped back. "We did, Professor Snape!" she cried. "It didn't work. That happens from time to time."

"Then, tell me, Healer Munch, what do you do *in those* circumstances?" he bit out.

"The potion, sir, it's made with mother's milk. So, we re-brew it with another donor or preferably *themother*," she said though as she spoke the word 'mother' there was a definite bit of distaste in her mouth. "But after Miss Granger's very unprofessional display this afternoon, I really don't suggest that you get *her* involved," she added in a self-righteous tone.

Severus took a step to close the gap between him and Healer Munch. He leant down close to her chubby face and intoned dangerously, "So, you think it would be better to let my child die than allow her *mother* to help her?" He took another step, backing the stout witch into the wall behind her.

"We're trying another brew with another donor," she replied in a near pleading sound.

"And if that brew fails? What do you intend to do then, Healer Munch?"

"We'll try something else, sir. Really, it...it's best not to involve the Granger girl. It will only complicate things for you in the long run," she said in a near pleading tone. A nasty smirk suddenly appeared on the Healer's face and she piously added, "Besides, we give all of our surrogates and adoptive witches a potion to dry up their milk. Miss Granger will have received that before she left today."

"I get the impression that you greatly misunderstand my relationship with Miss Granger. Hermione would not have taken such an elixir," he replied. He was still uncertain as to Hermione's exact reasons for leaving, though he had a feeling that if the women who had cared for Hermione had been anything like this hag, it would explain quite a bit. Severus wondered if she truly would have taken such a potion under those circumstances. He decided that a different tactic might provide him with more information.

Severus took a small step back, giving the woman back some of her personal space in order to encourage her to speak. However, he kept his voice soft and dangerous to maintain some level of fear. "What is it that makes you think that things could become complicated by involving Miss Granger in a necessary but relatively benign way?"

"Sh-she was here, sir," the Healer stammered. "She was all teary eyed and other such rot over the baby." When Severus didn't say anything, she went on. "Well, after the papers arrived his morning stating that she'd already given up her rights, I knew that I had to put a stop to her visiting...to help stop her from developing an *attachment*." Severus' features still remained schooled, giving the Healer more confidence in the telling of her tale. "Can you believe it? The girl was actually discussing names that she thought suited *your* child."

Severus got the impression that this witch...and he used that term lightly...didn't think that Hermione was worthy of licking her boots. However, this small anecdote certainly explained Hermione's frame of mind somewhat better. His anger with Hermione ebbed as those emotions were transposed to the arrogant harpy in front of him. The only thing that kept him from throttling her was that he knew his daughter's life was hanging in the balance.

"How long does the child have?" he asked.

"If the brew doesn't work, a couple of hours," replied the Healer, her voice of quiet and fearful. "We'll try another donor after that of course."

"I am going to retrieve her mother," he leant in towards the woman, startling her again. "Don't let any harm come to her in my absence, or I will personally rip every limb from your body *without magic*," he threatened. He turned on his boot heel and began to leave the room.

Healer Munch gulped, she caught her breath just before he left, still foolishly determined to voice her opinion. "Professor Snape," she called. "If you involv**er** then you will likely find it very difficult to get rid of her. It would be best if..."

He was hovering over her, his smooth black wand jabbing into her throat in an instant. "Don't talk to me about what is best regarding *my* family," he sneered. Just as quickly, he removed his wand from her and left the ward before she could utter another word.

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Hermione and Ginny had arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and her friend had promptly taken her down to the kitchen to feed her. Hermione still didn't have much of an appetite...despite all of the books she'd read telling her that she should be famished. She had simply wanted to be alone to think. Following a quick supper, Ginny had escorted Hermione upstairs. Now that only Ron and Ginny stayed in the dumpy old house, they had picked the nicest of the rooms. When Ginny asked Hermione where she'd wanted to sleep, she had told her she wished to be in the old room that the pair had shared several summers ago when the house had first been taken over by the Order of the Phoenix.

Ginny fussed over her nearly as badly as Hermione would've expected Mrs. Weasley to. She was glad that the older Weasley woman wasn't there with them. She could just hear the woman's nattering in her ear, and it certainly wasn't what she would need. Silence... all she wanted was blissful, peaceful, silence.

Hermione rolled over in the bed and faced the wall. It was nothing fancy, nothing glamorous...not much of anything really...but it was... comfortable. It gave her the same feeling that she would get from eating a steamy bowl of homemade chicken soup. That was what she needed...a place where she could feel safe. It was nothing but a dimly lit room with the peeling paint on the walls and a simple handmade quilt covering the bed.

Grateful that the doting Weasley submitted to Hermione's wishes and left her alone, the tired and weak woman had crawled onto her old bed, curled up under the covers,

and remained there since. She still felt empty inside; although now, she had the horrible feeling that the deep crevasse would never again be filled. The final blow had been that horrible Healer telling her that Snape had sent the papers to the hospital first thing that morning. The ruddy bastard wanted to make sure that there was no mistake that she had no rights, no involvement, nothing.

Her eyes again began to brim with tears. She gripped the quilt within her hands, causing her knuckles to whiten in frustration. The one thing that would fill the void was outside of her reach. "Damn you, Snape," she muttered as she wiped away a lone droplet that had slid down her face with her other hand.

The door behind her clicked open softly. Hermione sniffed. "Go away, Ginny, please." She waited until she heard the door softly shut again behind her and closed her eyes to allow herself to be alone in her own misery. She'd never felt this desolate before, as if filled with only a loneliness that consumed her and told her that the only way she'd be at peace would be if she were to die.

Hermione felt the bed dip next to her. "I told you to leave," she mumbled. "I just want to be alone."

"It may be what you want, Hermione, but I do not believe that it is truly what is best for you," came the rich, velvety baritone voice which belonged to him.

Her grip on the coverlet tightened even more as she willed herself not to breakdown any further in front of him. She squeezed her eyes even tighter and prayed that he would get out of the room and not belittle her any further than he already had that day. She flinched when she felt his hand rest on her shoulder. In the next moment, she regretted this action as she suddenly felt more alone when he removed his hand.

"Look at me, Hermione," he said brusquely.

Against her better judgment, she slowly opened her eyes and rolled to her back to look at the man who had betrayed her. His face was ever cold, ever distant. After all of the time she had spent working on getting to know him, he was completely closing himself off to her. "Why are you here?" she finally brought herself to ask.

"Several reasons," he replied vaguely. When she narrowed her gaze and felt the coldness radiating from her, he continued. "You ran off today before I could talk to you."

"Why would I need to talk to you, Severus?" she challenged, suddenly feeling more alive than she had since she'd first woken up to find herself in this horrible nightmare. She pushed herself up onto her elbows. "So you could tell me to my face to *sod off*? I don't need that, thank you very much. Just go away."

"No. I'm not leaving," Severus said firmly. "I cannot believe that after all of the time that we have spent together these last few months that you would take the words of a two-bit Healer to heart. Do you really have so little faith in me?" The words came off harsher than he had intended, but he was not about to take them back now. How dare she run off and sulk like a small child?

Hermione shook her head at a loss for words. "I-I don't know," she stammered. She took a deep breath. "Wait a minute. You can't blame this on me. What was I supposed to think when you are gone and all I got was a barrage of people telling me that *the contract has been fulfilled* and that I was nothing more than an *asurrogate*. The way they spoke, it made me feel disposable!" Her anger and frustration began to take over the emotional upheaval, giving her sorrow a rest.

"Hermione, have you forgotten how this entire endeavor began? That was what you were hired for," he snapped. It was when he saw the horror on her face at his statement that he regretted the words that he had used. Severus sighed. "I'm not saying this right," he muttered as he pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He took another breath, dropped his hand, and examined the young woman before him. She appeared tired and weary. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed from what he was certain was a recent bout of tears. Fine wisps of hair, that had escaped the neat plait that ran down her back, framed her face. He brought his hand out to cup her cheek. The confusion in her eyes from this simple act spurred him to speak again.

"Hermione, when this began several months ago, you were simply to have this child and walk away." She inhaled sharply and began to open her mouth. Severus moved his hand from her cheek to her chin and gently closed her mouth, placing his thumb softly over her lips. "Let me finish," he said simply and brushed his thumb over her lips and to her jaw. "That was before we began spending so much of our free time together. In these last few months, I have learnt what an intelligent, enchanting, intriguing, and beautiful young woman that you are."

Hermione was uncertain how to respond to him; it was yet another dimension to add to her already confused jumble of emotions. "Then where were you?" she demanded as she struggled to fight back the sobs. "Why did that Healer throw me out, spouting off that the contract had arrived this morning and that I wasn't allowed there?"

Severus removed his hand from her. "I am sorry," he replied, staring into her eyes and allowing her to see the mixture of emotion lurking in his gaze. "The contract that went out this morning was the original contract we both signed in August. The solicitors did not know that anything had changed, and truthfully, I did not consider that it would affect anything immediately. You must admit, Hermione, that things did not go as planned. You were not supposed to deliver for another two months."

She slowly nodded, conceding to his reasoning.

"As to where I was," he continued, as he pulled a scroll of parchment from his robe pocket. "I had business that I needed to finish today. I felt, Hermione, that it would be best to get all of *this* behind us. I ensured that the remainder of the old contract was fulfilled and had this drawn up."

Hermione sat herself up all of the way and took the proffered scroll from his hand. She unrolled it and quickly read through it twice. "Is this...? Are you serious?" she asked.

"Quite," Though a plain answer, he allowed a slight smirk to grace his face.

Hermione closed her eyes. She wanted to smile, but she could not quite bring herself to do so. She had fallen to the deepest depths that she'd ever experienced, and here he was quietly and patiently offering her a lifeline. Unable to stop herself from asking, she allowed the question to fall from her lips, "Do you have any idea the hell I've been through today?"

"Only an inkling," Severus answered honestly. "I had a short discussion with Healer Munch before arriving here. That left enough distaste in my mouth to show me some of what drove you to leave. Then, once I arrived here, your friend, Miss Weasley, barraged me with questions and told me some of your trials before she finally consented to let me up here to see you. Now, sign that thing so that I can escort you back to St. Mungo's."

"What exactly are you offering me, Severus?" she asked, holding the parchment up.

"I thought the contract was simple. All of the rights that you surrendered in the original contract are reinstated. What don't you understand?"

"I want to know what you expect. This is just reinstating my rights. What else do you want?" Hermione felt she was being explicit enough, but at his continued puzzled look, she went on, "Where does this take *us*? What does this say about *our* relationship?"

He narrowed his eyes as her words washed over him. "I thought that was obvious, Hermione." Severus began fidgeting uncomfortably; this was not an easy discussion for him. "If I wanted you gone, I would have left the old contract unchanged, and I would not be here right now." He grabbed her chin. "I know that you've had a rough day, so I'm not going to ask you to do anything but think about this...I want you to stay in my life."

Her gaze met his, and she saw the honesty swirling behind his black eyes. She did not move as he leant towards her and kissed her softly on the mouth. Hermione closed her eyes and felt his thin lips press against hers. Severus pulled away all too quickly, and she opened her eyes. "Sign the parchment, and we will leave. There is more that must be attended to this evening."

Hermione looked at him questioningly as she took a quill from him and quickly signed her name to the contract. Next, she allowed him to pull her up, escort her out of the room, and down to the foyer where Ginny stood waiting for them.

The redheaded young woman genuinely smiled at Hermione and asked if she was all right. When Hermione responded that she was doing better, Ginny squeezed her arm and promised she would check on her in the morning. With that, Severus led Hermione outside and Disapparated with her back to St. Mungo's.

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Outside the Wee Wizard Ward, Hermione grabbed onto Severus' sleeve. Regardless of what he'd said before, she could not help but feel unwelcome there. Reassuringly, he grasped her hand. "I did not tell you this before," he began somewhat uneasily. "But there was another reason for bringing you back here so quickly."

"What? Is everything all right?" Hermione asked in a fruitless attempt to keep the worry out of her voice.

"No. The baby is not doing well. Her system is overtaxed. They have been giving her potions to try to help, but thus far, nothing has worked." She looked up and saw the worry and concern plastered plainly on his face. "Hermione, one of the potions that they wish to use has failed once and likely a second time. It's brewed with mother's milk. They have tried two separate donors, but they may need you for a third attempt. I do not wish for you to think that was the singular reason that I came to retrieve you this evening." He briefly paused to assess her reaction to his words. "Healer Munch informed me that they administered a potion to you to prevent you from lactating. Regardless of that, I believe you should be here."

"No," she said shaking her head. "I didn't take the potion, Severus. Besides, I wouldn't think that you would only bring me here for that singular reason. I would do anything to help; you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." Severus opened the door to the ward and motioned for Hermione to enter.

Severus noted that the room was just as busy now as it had been when he'd been there earlier. He guided Hermione over to a small huddle of Healers that were gathered around their baby. The medical staff moved aside to allow them to come forward. Hermione looked at the small infant and leaned back into her Severus' chest. He wrapped an arm around her and turned his gaze to the nearest attendant and asked, "Is there any change?"

From behind them came a voice. "Professor Snape, sir. I am glad that you've returned."

Severus turned to find Healer Munch again there to do the talking. The stout woman stopped short and scowled when she spied the young brunette in his arms. To her credit, Hermione gave the woman nothing more than a cursory glance and turned her attention back to the newborn. The infant was turned on her back, and Hermione watched with concern as she noted that with each rapid intake of breath her small chest retracted in slightly. She turned her attention back to the horrid Healer to find out what was going on. Hermione jumped when Severus snapped at the older witch. "Get on with it, woman! What is her status?"

"This brew doesn't seem to be working either, Professor. Her heart rate and respiratory rate are way too fast for her to be able to maintain them for long," replied the woman. "I was thinking of trying..."

Severus cut her off before she could utter another sound. "You will re-brew the potion, Healer Munch, with Miss Granger's colostrum. Thankfully, she showed more sense than you gave her credit for, and she did not consume your potion."

The gray-haired old woman looked at Hermione with no small level of disgust present in her face. "Professor Snape, as I'm sure you are somewhat familiar with the Elixir Corroboro, it will likely make no difference if *this* woman does anything. The other donors didn't help, and *she* will be no different. She was nothing more than your brood mare."

Severus swiftly released his protective hold on Hermione and grabbed the short Healer by the collar. "You know nothing, you vile excuse for skin. Do not ever say anything like that about Hermione again. Do I make myself clear?" he asked, hissing hatefully. "She is worth more than a dozen of you." He slowly relinquished his hold on the older witch. It was then that Hermione realized that he had actually lifted the short woman slightly off of the floor and was only now setting her down. "Now," he said a little more calmly, as the Healer righted herself. "We will go brew the Elixir Corroboro for *our*," Severus indicated between himself and Hermione, "daughter. You, Healer Munch, are going to help us, and you had best pray to whatever Deity that you believe in that she can be helped."

Hermione glanced around the room to see that the other attendants were pretending to ignore this byplay between the legendary Hogwarts dreaded Potions master and this nasty woman that shared a horrible reputation with her sister. She thought that she even saw a couple of quick glances and sly grins, though she could not be sure.

"Y-y-yes, Professor Snape," came the stuttered reply of the Healer.

Hermione held back a small smirk at the terror in the Healer's voice. For the first time ever, Hermione truly appreciated Severus' downright frightening way with people.

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It had been the longest night of Hermione's life. They'd successfully brewed the elixir and administered it to her child. Now, they were again waiting. Severus had explained the properties of the potion. There were two theories on what made it effective: one was similar genetics, and the other was the love of the donor for the recipient. If it were simply a matter of genetics, then it would be very seldom that a donor's milk helped if they weren't family. None of it truly mattered; all that she was waiting for now was to see if it had worked.

She sat in a chair next to the bubble while others scurried around to examine the baby, taking notes and watching. Hermione was tired. She was beyond tired...completely exhausted. Regardless of that, she couldn't sleep. She had to know if everything was going to be all right.

She looked at the women bustling around; each seemed to have their own job to do. She wondered how she'd been able to come into the room undisturbed earlier that day, but she then realized that it had been only when her daughter was stable and none of the infants had required this level of attention. Lavender had told her that there was always someone present on the unit, but during lunchtime, most of the staff was gone while the main Healer typically sat in her office...watching things from afar. Hermione was grateful that since Severus had put the old harpy in her place, she'd pretty much ignored Hermione.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she noted that it was just over twenty-four hours since this entire mess had begun. It felt like it had been weeks, not just a simple day. Her emotions had been in such turmoil...now, that was an understatement...both due to her raging hormones and the extenuating circumstances. She wondered absently if she would have been able to hold up to her end of the original contract had things been different. After actually experiencing pregnancy and feeling a life grow inside of her, she knew that it would have been very hard to give up that life, but she also knew that she would have held up her end of the contract regardless. No matter how much it would have been bound to hurt, she would have done as she had agreed to do.

Simply put, she had already allowed herself to become attached to the baby. It happened very early on when she had first begun reading the storybook to her womb. Then, it quickly snowballed when she'd begun feeling the subtle taps and later jabs from the ever-active fetus. As soon as she'd realized that her feelings for the Potions master were deeper than she had originally thought, all hope was lost. She had found a quiet, compelling, nearly passionate soul lurking beneath the grumpy, surly exterior, and she had known that despite the baby, she'd fallen for the father.

Her gaze fell to where he currently stood, as foreboding as ever, watching the activity in the room with the same masked look of indifference that he typically wore. Hermione knew it was an act, and she was grateful for that. Severus was a very private man, and few ever saw past the brusque exterior. She was thankful for the time that they'd spent growing to truly know one another over the last few months. It had been a slowly growing and moving relationship...one that she felt had the potential to last. If someone would've asked her that a few hours ago, she would have said the same thing, save that she'd been floored when he'd left her with no explanation. Hermione knew him better than that. Therefore, it was just another case where she'd let her out of control hormones get the better of her.

Her eyes fell back on the sleeping infant. The small child's breathing had slowed, and she seemed to be breathing easier. Hermione was grateful for that and just seeing the more relaxed form caused her to calm down some. She felt confident in her heart that this meant that the potion was taking effect. Leaning her head back against the chair, she closed her eyes and let out a small sigh, at last releasing some of the tension that she had pent up within her body.

In what felt like only a few seconds later, she was jostled awake by one of the attendants. "Miss Granger," came the soft voice. Hermione opened her eyes and fought to focus on the woman. "I'm sorry to wake you. I just thought that you'd like to know that she's out of danger."

It took a moment for the words to register in her fogged brain. "She's all right?" she asked.

The young woman smiled. "Yes, quite strong, actually. Healer Munch doesn't think that it will be long before she'll be able to leave. Honestly, the potion used works at varying degrees; we never know how it will work...in this case, it seems to have exceeded all expectations."

Hermione smiled and looked around the room for Snape. "Where did Severus go?" she asked. A small part of her was worried that he'd left her there.

"He just went to go speak with the Head of the Department." The woman glanced conspiratorially about the room and leaned in closer to Hermione. "Personally, I think that now that his daughter is out of danger he went to complain about Healer Munch's behavior. I say that it's high time somebody did, and I have a feeling that man's complaints won't fall on deaf ears, not with the way he commands attention and dares someone to defy him."

Hermione could not help but to chuckle slightly at that. She looked to the infant sleeping in front of her. "Can I hold her yet?" she asked tentatively.

"Normally, the answer would be *no*. However, she's come such a long way these last few hours, you would never guess she was so early. Thankfully for you, she's strong enough to handle it." Hermione began to stand up, and the woman stopped her. "No, stay there. I'll get her for you."

The woman pulled out her wand and conjured a pillow, which she placed on Hermione's lap. Next, she dispelled the bubble away to be replaced by what looked like a bassinet. The attendant swaddled the infant tightly in a fresh blanket and carried her the short distance to Hermione's waiting arms.

She looked in the sleeping face of the tiny being in her arms, tears welling up in her eyes. Hermione marveled at the soft pink skin and began to slowly examine everything about her. She carefully unwrapped her so that she could look at the tiny fingers and toes. Again, she noted how tiny she was; nothing like the chubby looking cherubs in the countless books she'd read. The baby had black hair adorning her head and a soft downy hair across her shoulders, arms, and back. Hermione was amazed that the child stayed asleep during her close scrutiny. She ran her fingers along her baby's chest, having them stop to feel the rapid thumping of her heart beneath the tiny ribs.

Not wanting her daughter to catch cold, she carefully wrapped her back up. Holding her close to her body, Hermione watched her breathe. She was quickly enthralled by the cadenced inhales and exhales of the small body in her arms. Her own cheeks became damp for the countless time that day.

Hermione did not notice the dark figure of Professor Snape that had entered the room and was now standing just inside the doorway, mesmerized by the touching interaction he was witnessing.

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**A/N:** Well, I hope that this was satisfying for you. It was for me, though it was very difficult to actually get it all down. I'm glad that it finally is, though. There is more to come, but we're winding down. Not too much left. :)

Corroboro is Latin meaning *to strengthen*.

**Southern's Notes:** I'm quite happy that things seem to be looking up and that Snape put that funky Healer in her place. I hated the last chapter, but this makes up for it.

## XVI

### Chapter 16 of 19

Hermione and Severus are adjusting to ?family life? and life at home. Then, Hermione has another dream.

*This story is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge issued on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks to my wonderful beta, [Southern\\_Witch\\_69!](#)**

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Severus stood in the doorway and watched as their child was placed safely in her mother's arms. An unexpected surge of pride welled up inside of him as he witnessed the pair. Hermione's eyes began to sparkle with tears as she softly spoke to the newborn. He knew at that moment that he could never let either of them go.

He stayed at the entryway until his back and feet began to protest from the long day. His legs carried him to a chair that was next to the rocker that held Hermione. She startled slightly when she saw him. Though she tried to appear relaxed, she instinctively pulled the babe closer to her chest as if she feared him taking her away. Severus did not expect the gut-wrenching pain and guilt that this tiny act caused. *She still doesn't trust me.* "I am not going to take her away from you, Hermione," he reassured her.

The young brunette had the grace to appear abashed at her action. "I'm sorry," she said softly. She relaxed and looked up at him, meeting his gaze for the first time since he'd entered the room. "I'm just tired, and after the other events of the last day or so..." She averted her eyes again as her voice trailed off.

"I understand," Severus found himself saying. "You need to believe me when I tell you that I wish for us to be a... family."

Hermione nodded her head, though her eyes showed a bit of surprise at his word choice. "I didn't expect this, Severus," she said, looking back down at the bundle in her arms. "The way I feel about her, I mean. There aren't words to describe...I do believe that I would have died if I'd been kept from her."

"Yes," he replied in a neutral tone as he leant forward in his chair, enabling him a better view of his daughter. "I can understand that, as well." Although his voice was calm and unfeeling, a small smirk formed on his face, betraying his true emotions.

*This was not the way that this was supposed to be,* he mused. Originally, Hermione was supposed to be gone at this point in the game, a nanny hired, and the child carefully ensconced within the latter woman's care. She had been conceived to secure his family monies. He had not expected to care for the child, nor had he anticipated the deep affection that he now felt for the woman holding that child. He was not complaining.

She'd entered his life and changed a great deal of things about his view *orrelationships*. (He was hardly able to contain the shudder even while thinking of the word.) The way that he now felt about her had seemed to slowly creep upon him. It had begun as a subtle concern for her well-being and had ended up with him not wanting to let her

go. He was baffled at how that had happened. The woman that she'd become was a far cry from the obnoxious student and Potter partisan that he'd known a few years prior.

He sat back in his chair and had to restrain himself from chuckling at the memory of the gall Hermione had shown in cursing him the way she had. That had been only two days prior, yet it seemed like a lifetime had passed since.

"What is her name?" came Hermione's voice, pulling him out of his reverie.

"I was expecting you to tell me," he replied, amused. "That Healer said that when you and Miss Weasley were here, you were discussing it."

A small smile appeared on his companion's face. "Oh, well," she started, looking back down at the little girl's face, "I had told Ginny that I thought that she looked more like an Ella than a Diana... Don't you have a name already picked out?" she asked, turning her gaze back to him.

"I did, but I wanted to hear what you were thinking." He thought for several long moments before he spoke again. "I had thought of Sophia. Although looking at her, that does not appear to suit. I am not overly fond of Ella...perhaps Elina?"

Hermione peered at the infant's face, contemplating his words. She adjusted the babe in her arms. "Elina Grace," she said softly.

"Grace?"

"Yes, I think it suits. It was the first name that I'd thought of, but something Minerva said to me on Christmas made it more poignant. She told me that she thought that this child was your redemption, your salvation. I agree with her." Hermione smiled, seemingly looking for approval, though she also held that look in her eyes that Severus was beginning to know well. It was the look that shouted, *Just try to argue with me, because I'm not backing down.*

He allowed another small smirk to appear on his face, which she took for his endorsement. He sat back and relaxed into the chair. He would not argue over a middle name. It was inconsequential and obviously quite important to her. Besides, he was rather pleased to see such strong determination back in her again... a small glimmer of fire. Despite the way it could irritate him, her fiery personality was one of the things that drew him to her.

They sat in peaceful silence, both finally content after the tumultuous events of the last few days.

~~~~~  
Hermione stepped out of the hearth in Severus' living room. She was grateful that he was able to have the Floo connected from St. Mungo's to Hogwarts for a brief period today. She hadn't thought about the finagling that he'd had to do on Christmas when he'd taken her home from visiting Minerva by Floo after she'd whinged about having to Portkey everywhere. She was allowed to Apparate again, but the approval was only for short distances while she built up her strength. She had been doing so back and forth between St. Mungo's and Grimmauld Place where she'd been staying for the last two weeks. It was easier to travel between those two locations to see her daughter. Until this ordeal, she'd not realized that it was part of Hogwarts' security to only allow the in-house Floo connections for travel unless in unique circumstances.

Severus had been staying with her, at least part of the time, during the last two weeks. He would Apparate to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, in the mornings and fetch her. They would Apparate together to St. Mungo's where together they would spend the better part of the day. The baby was doing well now and required little more than to be fed and to sleep. The new Healer, who had been brought in to replace Healer Munch, had referred to the babies in this stage as *Feeders and Growers*. Hermione just couldn't bear to be away from her daughter for very long, so they spent as much time in the Wee Wizard Ward as possible. They would usually leave at midday for lunch and browse the nearby shops in Muggle London, occasionally picking up newborn-sized jumpers or other items that they would need. Next, they would return for a few more hours before going up to the fifth floor for afternoon tea. Finally, Severus would take Hermione out for supper and escort her back to Ginny and Ron's house. There, he would take her up to her room and stay with her until she fell asleep...sometimes sitting in a chair beside the bed and talking while other times he'd lie down beside her and hold her. When she'd wake up in the mornings, he would be gone, but he would return shortly after breakfast.

He was not teaching. Professor Tofty had taught Severus' classes the first day that he'd missed them, and following that, he had the good sense to hire a substitute. Severus was already complaining about going back to his classes. In his mind, once he got his classroom back, the dunderheads would likely have to be taught basic skills all over again. Needless to say, he was not looking forward to returning.

Hermione was pleased that he had been staying with her. The awkwardness that had set in with the baby's early arrival had quickly dissipated, throwing them back into an old routine of pleasant conversation and serene quiet. The only topic that she'd not yet been brave enough to broach was their future plans. It was only determined that very morning that she'd be returning to the castle with him, as Elina was being discharged later in the afternoon.

He'd been very protective of both of them the last couple of weeks, even more so than he had been while Hermione had been pregnant. She tried not to complain. He obviously cared about her. Severus seemed very concerned with her eating habits, the amount of rest she received, and that she was recovering satisfactorily.

She dusted off her robes and reoriented herself with the room. It felt odd to be back. She walked to her room and opened the door. It took her a few moments to realize that this was **not** the same room that she'd left. "What the bloody hell...?" Hermione asked aloud, tone incredulous. Her wardrobe was gone, the things she kept on the vanity were gone, and even her shoes were gone. "Where does he get off moving my things?" She then realized that the baby's things were now where her belongings had been.

In their places were an elegantly carved cradle, a few shelves containing nappies and small blankets, and her bookcase containing a vast array of children's books and a few small stuffed toys. There was also a comfortable looking rocker with a small table next to it.

Hermione carefully walked over to it and found, placed on the table, the fairytale book that she'd purchased in Diagon Alley back in November. She ran her hand across the cover and wondered briefly how Severus had run across it. A light smile replaced her frown. She appreciated that he'd gone through the trouble to make a nursery, but she wished that he'd consulted her about it first. Where was she to sleep now? Were her things in his room? The jumbled confusion soon died down to one conclusive thought: *He really wants to be a family, doesn't he?*

She walked over to the shelf and grabbed a small blanket and began fumbling through the drawers, looking for suitable clothes to dress her daughter in to bring her home. Severus had told her to look in there to find something for her, but this was *not* what she'd expected. Hermione heard something behind her and saw him lingering in the doorway. "Severus, when did you do all this? Why?"

"When I came in last night, I realized that our daughter hadn't a proper room or a place for her things... I meant it as a surprise, however, if you don't like..."

"No," she said as she walked towards him and stopped him from completing his sentence. "It's all right. *was* surprised." She smiled warmly and surprised him when she stood up on the tips of her toes and kissed him softly. Looking back up at him, she spoke again, "Erm, where are my things at?"

He looked down at her, quirking his eyebrow and smirking in amusement. "I should think that would be obvious. However, if you prefer to sleep on the settee, I believe it can be arranged."

"I think I'll pass on sleeping in the sitting room, thanks," she quipped.

"Good," came his simple reply as he leant down and kissed her more soundly. Eliciting a small whimper from Hermione when he pulled away in what she considered was too brief of a time. "I believe we have some place to be very soon," he said, a slight hint of regret in his tone. Taking a step back, he looked at the contents in her arms. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes. I am surprised that you found time to put all of these things away."

"Who said that I did any of this? That, my dear, is what house-elves love to do."

Hermione scowled at him, not pleased with casual use of house-elves as labor. She quickly pushed it aside, however, in lieu of a more pertinent question. "Why did you do this?"

He eyed her curiously, contemplating what exactly she was asking. "You mean that you still do not believe my assertions that I wish for us to be a family?" he questioned accusingly.

Hermione instantly regretted her query. "I'm sorry. Of course, I believe you," she replied quickly. "I was just surprised. We've not discussed the future." Her brown eyes looked searchingly into his eyes.

Severus held her gaze. "Simply stated, I do not ever intend to let either of you out of my sight for long." Allowing his aloof façade to slip, he showed her some of the emotion swirling behind his eyes.

Catching a glimmer of his feelings, which were suddenly staring out at her through dark orbs, she suddenly felt overwhelmed. She could see longing, desire, passion, caring, and something more. *Love, maybe?* Perhaps it was. However, she rapidly decided that it was best not to try to push things. He would say and do things at his own pace.

One additional chaste kiss...soft, sweet, and inlaid with her own emotions...and they were off to retrieve their daughter.

~~~~~  
Hermione sat in the rocking chair in Elina's room, her little one bundled in her arms and suckling at her breast. It was late. Idly, she wished that there was a clock in the room. The three of them had been home for nearly two weeks, and Hermione was surprised to see how quickly she'd been thrown for a loop...she'd not expected to be so tired.

Severus was helping, surprisingly enough, as were a few select house-elves. Ginny had been by a couple of times to also ensure that Hermione got some much needed sleep, as well. However, since she was insisting on nursing, she still was up and needed the bulk of the time...until Severus demanded that she attempt to store breast milk. Only then was she able to sleep in longer interludes. Severus still berated her because, more often than not, Hermione still insisted on attending to their daughter, even though it wasn't always necessary.

Thinking about Severus, she smiled. He had been...*surprising*. Since giving birth, she'd found herself with occasional odd thoughts. One was the idea of Filius berating her for not speaking with Severus about staying on at Hogwarts at the end of the year. She thought the image rather amusing. The very idea of tiny Professor Flitwick speaking to her like that was very unlikely. However, that did not stop her from feeling slightly guilty that she'd not spoken to Severus about it.

Taking the first opportunity she could, once things had settled themselves down, she broached the subject. After a lengthy discussion, Severus confessed to having hired her to produce a child solely for the family fortune, which would enable him to have some freedom over his life. To say that Hermione had been somewhat stunned by this revelation would be an understatement. Even though it was a very selfish reason, she did not think any less of him. Hermione was grateful that he'd actually told her the truth. She was in no position to judge. She'd signed the contract for the very same reason.

It took some convincing, but Hermione was finally able to convince Severus to stay on for at least one more year. Explaining that she had spent the last several months working towards becoming a professor and that she did not wish to let Professor Flitwick down. She felt that it was too late to try to hire someone else and that it wasn't fair, considering all of the time the Charms professor had spent on mentoring her. Also, she did not wish for Severus to take off to one of his homes with their daughter.

Eventually, he conceded that he'd really felt trapped by the prospect of never being able to retire due to his previously tight finances. Perhaps, with the monies now available to him, he'd feel more comfortable about his time at school. Hermione had been smart enough to point out that he would not be happy sitting idly about; he was a person who loved knowledge and desired learning. He would grow bored if left to laze about, though she was sure that he was simply placating her. There were certainly plenty of things he could do if he wasn't teaching...independent research for one.

Hermione smiled into the semidarkness. He was certainly holding to his words, she realized. They'd been sharing a room, sharing a bed, though nothing much transpired between them save a few kisses and shy caresses. Not for a lack of trying. It was simply a lack of energy...mostly on Hermione's part. Sleep came whenever possible. She was positive that if she were to document all of the time that Elina slept, it would total over fifteen hours. However, all of the baby's sleep was broken up throughout a twenty-four hour day, and Hermione just couldn't fall asleep that often or that easily.

Feeling a pinching at her nipple, Hermione adjusted the position and latch of the baby. Once again comfortable, she began staring at the cradle in front of her. Hermione could just make out the designs in the dim candlelight. Severus had obviously put in many hours of time and love into the project. She was impressed with his dedication to such a *Muggle* task.

It had taken an intense amount of precision and patience for him to create the images that he had. The scene on the wood was of a small forest glade filled with various creatures...both from the Muggle world and the Wizarding world. A large tree was carved near the head of the cradle. Upon the tree, coiled around a branch was a small snake. In the rest of the scene, it was easy to pick out a thestral, a couple of faeries, a Runespoor, which was hiding behind a patch of tall grass, a unicorn, and a small lion cub. Hermione found it to be rather curious that he had included both a snake and a lion on something he was making. It just proved to her that he'd been thinking that she would be part of their lives for longer than just a few weeks.

The simple fact that Severus had used the tools that her father had used touched her greatly. Severus had a skill that she'd not known, but she figured that being a wizard had helped. Severus had the distinct advantage of being able to *erase* his mistakes and retry while her father had not had that luxury.

Thinking about her father brought tears to her eyes again. Silently cursing her overactive hormones, she thought about her parents and what they would say about her current situation, about their grandchild. It is unlikely that her parents ever would have approved of the way and the reason that the child was conceived. Regardless, Hermione could picture the gleam in her mother's eyes when holding Elina for the first time...all would have been forgiven at that moment. Smiling sadly, she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Sniffing again?" came a silky voice from the doorway.

"I feel like a human hosepipe," Hermione answered. "I can't imagine what you must think of me. I'm really not usually like this."

Severus approached her. "I *think* that you have more hormones raging through your system than that of the entire lot of first and second year females at this school," he said dryly. "I also believe that you are still not getting enough sleep and that you need to be taking better care of yourself."

Hermione snorted.

"Now," Severus continued. "You've been up with her for over an hour. I'm sure that she's eaten plenty." Before Hermione could protest, he reached down to take the baby from her arms. Breaking her daughter's latch from her nipple, Hermione gave in. She was tired and had no energy or desire to argue with him.

Severus carefully took the infant and placed her in her cradle. He then summoned one of the house-elves that had been helping them. Giving the creature instructions to watch over the sleeping babe, he escorted Hermione back to bed.

Hermione felt a cross between frustration at being told what to do and intense comfort. It was a pleasant feeling to be cared for, fussed over, and worried about. Whether he ever said it or not, she could tell that he cared by the way that he fussed over her well-being.



Removing her robe, she crawled into bed. She sighed when he climbed in after her and rolled up behind her. Her body molded into his as he pulled her body close to his and kissed the top of her head. Allowing herself to relax, she fell into a contented sleep.

~~~~~  
Hermione found herself in what appeared to be the nursery of a very large house. She spun around looking at the room. A beautiful, ornate child's bed sat against the far wall. Walking over to it, she found that the bed was empty. Suddenly, she could hear giggling coming from outside.

She went to the window and peered out to look down on a bright and sunny afternoon. Down below, she could see the blooming flower garden. The laughter of a small girl floated up to her again. Opening the window so that she could peer out a bit farther, Hermione leaned over the ledge and saw a young girl no more than three years old chasing after an enchanted ball.

Watching her, stiff and overdressed as ever, was Severus. Hermione noted that though he was not smiling, his features were soft. As if sensing her gaze, he turned his head up to look at her. He quirked one corner of his lips as he caught Hermione's eyes. Smiling back, Hermione stepped back from the window and went towards the door to make her way down to join the pair outside.

She opened the door exiting the nursery and stepped out into the hallway. Suddenly, she found herself back in the Potions classroom in Hogwarts. *Damn dreams*, she mentally cursed. Abruptly, she recalled another dream she'd had right after Elina had been born; it took place in this very classroom.

Upon inspection, she noticed a simmering cauldron on one of the worktables near the front of the room. Flashes from the previous dream invaded her brain, and she remembered brewing it. The silver mist that was swirling above the cauldron had a glittering quality about it, reminding Hermione of twinkling stars.

A voice from behind her made her jump. "It's about time you came back."

Hermione whipped her head around to see a dark-haired, bespectacled young man leaning against Snape's desk with a saucy grin on his face. "Harry," she said, pleased to see him smiling.

"Do you remember now?" he asked simply.

"My dream? Yes, I remember, but I don't know what it means. You need to tell me."

Harry chuckled and walked over towards her. "Where is the clever girl that I knew?" he asked teasingly.

"Honestly, Harry. I've looked, I've read, and I still don't know what it is that I'm supposed to do."

"Just remember the dream, Hermione. You'll know what to do then," he reassured.

She looked carefully at him and then back at the cauldron. The words *Not just a Charm, Hermione*, echoed through her head. Her eyes snapped back to Harry. "This potion, Harry?" she asked. "I didn't recognize the base," she muttered, mostly to herself.

"You didn't know the base before," he said simply. "You do now."

Before she could say anything else, he was gone. She sat in the desk before the steaming cauldron, the last bit of information niggling at her mind and pulling at her memories. Comprehension suddenly fell upon her.

Hermione snapped her eyes open and sat up in bed.

"What is it?" came the groggy voice of her sleeping companion.

"I know how to help Harry," she said determinedly.

---

**A/N:** Now we're getting somewhere. Next up, Hermione will involve a few of her friends and they will work on a way to help Harry.

**Southern's Notes:** I love how things are progressing and am glad that they've gone home as a family. I am likely most excited that there is hope for Harry.

## XVII

### Chapter 17 of 19

Hermione begins to work through how best to help Harry.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks go out to both JuneW and SnarkyRoxy, both of whom are very quick and have splendid ideas. Thank you, gals!**

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"I know how to help Harry," Hermione cried.

Severus was pulled instantly from his sleep, as he tried to comprehend her words.

*Potter!* Severus tried to hide his agitation and disgust. He audibly sighed and wiped the blur of sleep from his eyes as he sat up. "Explain," he snapped, as his eyes adjusted to the dark room.

Hermione seemed to be trying to clear her thoughts before she spoke. "It was a dream, but not. I experienced something similar before... a few weeks ago. I didn't remember the other dream until just now." She clambered out of bed. "I need to write this down," she said, as she made her way to the sitting room.

Severus shook his head lightly in a combination of frustration, tiredness, and slight amusement. She certainly had regained some of her previous zeal. Warily, he wondered what she was talking about, though if she was truly back to form he expected that she'd be back once she got her thoughts in order. Then he wouldn't be able to get her to shut up.

A small thump next to him in the bed drew him out of his reverie. He regarded the black-haired cat as she walked over the entire area where Hermione had been, occasionally stopping to hiss at one spot or another. After several minutes his familiar began to paw at Hermione's pillow, as if wiping all remnants of her from the fabric. She circled the very place where Hermione's head had lain just minutes prior and eventually curled up there. Somehow, Severus got the impression that the feline was not doing this to be close to Hermione, but rather to claim ownership of her master. "Are you jealous, Nyx?" Severus asked, amused. The creature's yellow eyes narrowed for a few moments before she closed them.

Smirking at the now softly purring creature next to him, Severus laid his head back down. He fell back into a light slumber, knowing that Hermione would likely wake him as soon as she finished whatever she was now working on.

~~~~~  
Hermione wrote down every detail she could remember from the dream that she'd had involving Harry. She wondered how she'd forgotten so much of the dream before, but then recalled the emotional state she'd been in at the time and quickly forgave herself. Finding herself listing a potion recipe, the only thing missing was the base potion that she was supposed to start with.

Absently, she began to chew on the end of her quill as she tried to remember the attributes of the base potion. When she had first awoken, she had thought she knew exactly which potion it was, but the memory flittered away almost as quickly as it had surfaced and was now only tickling the back of her brain. She decided, instead, to concentrate on the other ingredients she'd added to the brew in her dream.

Some of them were not what could be considered as *traditional* potion ingredients. Brandy, for instance, though on a few occasions liquors were beneficial to potions. She wasn't certain what the usage would be in this particular potion. Next to the words *half a bottle of brandy*, she wrote down: calming agent or inebriation. Hermione doubted that its usage would be for inebriation, as surely the alcohol would be entirely cooked out of it in the several days it took for the potion to brew. *Though*, she conceded, *you never can tell with potions. It's certainly not the same as cooking.*

The next item on the short list was *six knarl quills, added one per day*. She wracked her brain over that ingredient for nearly two hours, going through various potions journals and books that Severus had in the sitting room. The only instance she could find where knarl quills had been successfully used in potion-making was when the Weasley twins used them for making Fainting Fancies.

Tiny cries could be heard from the nursery before she had a chance to write down the attributes of the twins' skiving candy, and Hermione went in to feed her daughter. As she nursed the babe, Hermione's thoughts remained engrossed in the potential uses of the knarl quills. By the time she put the infant back to sleep in the cradle, she felt that she had figured out their purpose. Making her way back to the desk in the sitting room, she jotted down her theories.

The final ingredient that she remembered adding to the brew in her dream was the parboiled mandrake. *Cut into perfect one-inch cubes with a flint blade*, she reminded herself. It was a restorative, and would help revive Harry, bringing him back to his normal state.

Still at a loss for what the base potion would be, she glanced at the clock above the mantel. It was shortly after seven. Discouraged with her lack of progress on her notes, she decided to tackle the other portion of the puzzle. She looked over her appearance and realized she was still wandering around in her nighttime attire. Hermione pulled her wand from her pocket; with a few quick swishes, her hair was tidy and she was dressed in something more appropriate.

Knowing that Severus was likely already up, Hermione Summoned the house-elf who was watching over Elina and gave the small creature instructions to let Severus know where she was going and that she would return shortly. Hermione went over to the fireplace and grabbed a small handful of the glittering powder. "Professor Flitwick's office," she said clearly as she stuck her head through the fire.

"Good morning," she said to the man sitting behind the desk. She was glad that she knew his schedule well enough to know he was an early riser, usually in his office by six every morning.

"Oh, Hermione, please come through," replied the short wizard.

She smiled and quickly stood up. Adding a touch more Floo powder, she stepped through the green flames.

"Good morning to you," Professor Flitwick greeted when she entered his office. "Please have a seat. I've been meaning to come down to see you, but things have been quite busy. You may be pleased to know that I received the formal declaration from the Ministry stating that you are officially my apprentice. No questions asked regarding how it was that I felt you'd be ready to teach by September," he said with a cheeky smile. "Whatever it was that Severus did down at the Ministry for you, he did it well."

Hermione smiled as she sat in the squashy armchair facing his desk. "I'm glad to hear it. I know that I should've come up to speak with you sooner, but I've just felt very overwhelmed lately."

"Not to worry, not to worry," he squeaked. "Though, I do need you to start back with me soon. There are less than two months before the end of term, and we need to get you some teaching experience before I unleash you to the wolves next year."

Suddenly Hermione began to feel more than a bit weighed down. It finally sank in that it was nearly May. *How did time run away from me like that?* "Yes, I agree," she answered. "Not that this has been the best of circumstances, but the fact that I delivered Elina so early seems to have helped. I mean, I wasn't due until the end of May. I don't know how I would've had the chance for any teaching experience before next year, otherwise."

"True, true." Professor Flitwick pulled his wand from his sleeve and conjured two glasses of pumpkin juice. "Here, you need something this morning," he said with a kind smile.

Taking the proffered goblet of juice, Hermione slowly sipped as she listened to the Charms professor outline his plans for his classes from now until the end of the school year. She hadn't come up to his office with the primary intent of discussing her apprenticeship and her job come September. Though, she'd known that the conversation was necessary and inevitable... she truly had been putting it off. No matter how much she wanted to spend every waking moment with Elina, she needed to get back to work. At least she would still be in the castle, and close to her daughter. She listened intently and threw in her opinions where needed.

After nearly thirty minutes of conversation, the professor asked, "Now that we got that out of the way, Hermione, what is it that really brought you here this morning?"

"I must be really transparent if you were able to see through me," she remarked.

"Well, not fully. After all of the time I've spent with you over these last six months, I'd like to think that I know you relatively well. This is typically not the sort of thing for which you would come by for an early morning chat. Something is bothering you," he finished. It was a statement, not a question.

"You're right. I had a dream about Harry last night and I haven't been able to sleep since. I think that there is a way to help him," she stated cautiously, gauging his reaction.

Filius sat back in his chair and began rubbing his chin. "I was under the impression that he was being studied in the Department of Mysteries."

Hermione snorted with disgust. "Studied? He's a person, a great wizard, and he was one of my closest friends, not to mention the fact that he's still alive!" She slammed

her empty goblet onto the desk. Only when Professor Flitwick jumped slightly did she realize that she'd lost her temper. Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, sir. I..." Heaving a heavy sigh, she slumped in her chair and rested her face in her hands.

"It's quite all right," soothed Professor Flitwick. "It was my understanding, however, that there was nothing to be done for Mr. Potter. The spell that he used to trap the last remnants of You-Know-Who's soul in the Pensieve wound up taking *his* soul as well. If Potter's soul is released, You-Know-Who's will be as well. Besides, it is very unlikely that Mr. Potter would be able to hold onto his soul even if you were able to get it to reenter his body."

Hermione dropped her hands to her lap and looked at the older man. "Yes, that's what I've been told. But I've been thinking about this, and I believe that there is a way." Sitting up straight in her chair, she elaborated. "I need to know if there is a way to modify the Adligo Memoria Charm."

The tiny professor tapped his chin lightly before wielding his wand and Summoning three books from his shelves. "I take it you wish to modify it from binding memories to actually binding the soul?"

"Yes, exactly. We... rather, *he* used a modified charm to pull the soul out with Dumbledore's wand. It was just as Harry was pulling Voldemort's soul into the Pensieve that Voldemort was somehow able to pull Harry's in as well. I don't know what went wrong." Hermione stood up and began pacing as she talked. "I think that it had to do with Harry not pulling out the soul in a steady stream. It wasn't the same as pulling out a memory. The soul fought, jerked..." She shuddered at the vision.

"Yes, yes, I read some of the file," replied the Charms professor. "I believe you're right, it was the way that he removed it." He sat quietly while Hermione continued to pace, lost in thought. "I think that it's possible to adapt the charm, Hermione. However, I must caution you against trying such a thing. There is no guarantee that you'll be able to pull out just Harry's soul, and you would likely need something stronger to bind it. Not to mention the condition of Harry's body. It's just been lying there for the last three years. Really think long and hard about this before you attempt it."

She stopped pacing and began chewing on her lower lip as she processed Professor Flitwick's warning. "Yes, sir, of course. I don't want to cause any more harm. I... I just want to do everything that I can to help him. I feel like it's my fault that anything happened to him. I should've anticipated... I should've known what could happen."

"That wouldn't have changed a thing, and you know it. Mr. Potter wasn't going to go down without a fight, and you gave him the ability to take down You-Know-Who so that the rest of us could go on with our lives. So you could go on with *your* life. When this first began, Hermione, I thought that you had resigned yourself to live the life of a criminal all too quickly. You never fought, you never tried..." He rested his hands on his desk. "Now, I believe that I know why. You blamed yourself for what happened to Harry and felt that you deserved to be punished. Happens all the time... all the time."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment, willing herself not to cry. She hated to admit that he was right. Though she couldn't imagine things playing out in her life any differently than they had. *Everything happens for a reason*, her mother had always said. Perhaps this was just the course that Fate had meant for her life to go. As calmly as she could she said, "Thank you for your help, Filius. I need to get back to my room. Elina will be up soon. I will be ready to start back to work on Monday." She gave him a warm smile.

"Not a problem, Hermione. Take these books. I think you'll find something usable in them. I'll think on it as well. I look forward to Monday; we'll start you off easy with first through third years," he said with a cheeky grin. "Now, go enjoy some time with that little girl of yours."

Hermione returned to her quarters, expecting Severus to be sitting at the small table with his usual morning coffee. She went over to the desk and dropped the books she carried and picked up the list she'd worked on earlier. Shaking her head, she dropped the list again, deciding it would be best to speak with Severus about the potion that she'd dreamt about.

She had felt a tiny weight lift from her after talking with Professor Flitwick... there was hope. It was a small hope, but there it was. Hermione walked into Elina's room to feed her, after which she planned on putting herself back to bed where she was certain that she would finally be able to find sleep.

The sight that greeted her was not what she'd expected. There, dressed in a simple white dress shirt and black trousers, was Severus, holding a bottle to the small bundle in his arms. There was no smile on his face, nor did he wear a scowl. *That's something*, Hermione decided as she quietly watched him.

Severus had been helpful the last few weeks, but mostly he did things for Hermione. He rarely did much with the baby, aside from moving her. There was nothing that would strike any person as being "heart-warming" about the scene before her, but it melted Hermione's heart, nonetheless.

"I'll take her," she said as she stepped into the room and moved towards the chair.

He looked up at her, nodded, and held out the child to her.

Hermione readily took the baby into her arms. "The house-elf would've fed her, you know."

"I am aware of that," he replied simply, as he stood from the chair.

Biting back another smile, Hermione sat in the chair that he'd just vacated.

Severus continued to regard her for several minutes as she resumed caring for their daughter. When she said nothing more, he asked, "Now, would you care to tell me why you bolted out of bed so early?"

"I dreamt about Harry last night," she began.

When her story was retold for the second time that morning, she waited for Severus to tell her how foolish she was being. The scathing remark never came, however.

"What?" she finally asked, when he continued to remain silent.

"I am just thinking about all that you've said. Surely, you don't believe this to be some sort of premonition?"

"No, of course not," she huffed indignantly. "I just think that my brain has finally thought of a possible solution."

"Indeed," was Severus' only reply.

When he made no move to leave, Hermione responded, "I have notes in the other room, on the desk, if you'd like to have a look."

Severus nodded. "I will take a look at them when my classes are finished for the day," he said. "Get some sleep, Hermione. You need more rest than you are getting." With that last comment, he left the pair in the nursery.

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Severus watched Hermione over the next few weeks. She fretted over everything ceaselessly. Not only was she taking on every responsibility that she could manage with the baby, but she had gone back to assisting Flitwick, including teaching some of his classes, and now she was doing research for Harry Bloody Potter during every spare minute of her days. It was already late May, and he found little consolation in the fact that the term would be finished in just over a month.

Normally, Severus would spend the summer in the school dungeons, ensconced in research. He had planned to take Hermione to his home in Tuscany, but with her new obsession with Potter, he was afraid that she would not wish to go. With the releasing of his father's estate came several of the homes that Severus grew up in; most of them he'd not seen since before he attended Hogwarts. The Tuscany home had belonged to his grandmother, and was a place that held his fondest childhood memories.

Sitting in the Potions lab, Severus leaned over a steaming cauldron and with great trepidation he slowly began adding the half of a bottle of brandy, as he softly muttered, "This is the second case of brandy I have used in the last several weeks for this potion base. I would much rather be drinking the stuff than using it to melt cauldrons."

This step that Hermione had thought could be a common potion ingredient was truly a telltale indicator as to whether or not they had the correct base. He added the first dram, noting that only a few small bubbles issued forth. The next dram, the potion began to hiss and protest the addition of the alcohol. By the fourth dram, the mixture was violently boiling and hissing. Severus knew that if he dared to add any more the cauldron would be worthless. He extinguished the flame and walked away from the now useless concoction, all the while trying to maintain his calm.

Hermione chose that inopportune moment to enter the laboratory.

"Severus, I..." she stopped when she saw him grumbling and pacing away from the table. "I take it that the base is not Baruffio's Brain Elixir, then?" she asked.

"No, it most definitely is not," he snapped. "Hermione, do you not think it possible that it was just a dream?"

It was not the first time that the words had been thought or spoken by either of them. However, they both knew that she would never forgive herself if she gave up so soon.

At the somber look on her face, he simply waved his wand, Summoning yet another book from his worn shelves for her to peruse.

Hermione pulled up a stool and settled herself next to him. She began thumbing through the ancient tome, looking for something familiar, although at this point she was willing to brew every single concoction in the damned book if she had to. During the hour that followed as Hermione poured over the volume, Severus brought his hand up to knead the tense muscles in her neck and shoulders.

It was sheer curiosity that caused her to pause on a particular potion. Then with a startled gasp, she jumped up, exclaiming, "I'm a complete dunderhead! I am a complete and utter, bumbling fool, Severus!"

"What in the world are you nattering on about, woman?"

"This," she said, pointing to the potion in the book. Her finger rested on the potion's title *Elixir Corroboro*.

"You aren't serious? Are you?" Severus asked, recognizing the potion immediately as the one that they had brewed to save Elina shortly after her birth.

"Yes, I'm serious. I recognize it," Hermione insisted. "This is the one, Severus. I have to brew *this* as the base for Harry's potion." She reached for a clean cauldron and began gathering supplies, then stopped and looked pleadingly at him. "Please, if I'm wrong, it's just one more wasted potion base. If I'm right, then we can go on from there."

Deciding it best to acquiesce and knowing that at least for part of the potion, Hermione must be the brewer, Severus inclined his head slightly. "What can I do to help?"

Pausing a moment to think, she stated, "You could go in and feed Elina. I usually feed and hold her this time of day. I hate to leave her in anyone else's care when I don't have to."

"I know, Hermione. You do well with her," he said softly as he came up behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist, which was still shrinking. Placing a quick kiss to her temple, he added, "I will go tend to her while you work on the potion," before quickly leaving the room.

Severus made his way into the nursery. The house-elf conjured Elina a bottle at his request, before leaving him alone. Although Severus grouched outwardly, he did not wholly mind this time alone with the infant.

Carefully lifting up the alert bundle from her bed, he carried her to the rocking chair where he sat himself down and settled her comfortably into the crook of his arm. Black eyes looked up at him expectantly, and he placed the bottle nipple in the waiting mouth.

His daughter's eyes were still watching him, though he was certain that he could see a questioning quality behind them. He wondered how perceptive the infant was and thought about exactly what it was Hermione was currently doing. "Those hormones must still be in an uproar and causing your mother to be going slightly mental," he finally said. "She is currently brewing a potion...the same potion, I might add, that saved your life. It uses breast milk or colostrum, and she has some inane idea that it's going to cure the ruddy Boy-Who-Is-Still-Catatonic."

Severus nearly jumped when he felt what seemed like an empathetic squeezing of his finger. He looked down at the tiny fingers and then the small face that seemed to be saying, "I completely understand."

Allowing the corner of his mouth to quirk slightly, he waited several more minutes before he finally spoke again, "Just promise me that you will not be sorted into Gryffindor."

Elina blinked her eyes at his question and a small scowl of distaste seemed to appear on her face, giving the impression...to Severus, at least...that the very mention of Hermione's House was not appealing to the baby at all. The quirk of his lips grew to a smirk. He thought that perhaps he would enjoy having "father-daughter" discussions with Elina.

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16 June 2003

Ginny,

*The end of term is the last day of the month, as you well know. I need to meet with both you and Ron here at the school the following morning. I can't say much else through the post, but please trust me when I tell you that this is very important.*

All my love,

Hermione

Handing the missive to the house-elf to take up to the Owlery for her, she settled back in her chair and said a silent prayer that she was not wrong. It was all theory, of course. *Theory based on nothing more than a ruddy dream*, she silently chided. Not that she needed to remind herself. Miraculously the potion had been stable. She had been correct. The *Elixir Corroboro* had been the base potion that they had needed, and it had successfully held stable after adding all of the brandy for Harry's potion exactly as it had in her dream. Then the remainder of the potion had been brewed exactly as it had in her dream as well, retaining the same qualities, to both her and Severus' utter amazement.

The next step was ensuring that the charm she had worked on was correct. The spell needed to pull out *only* Harry's soul and then help bind Harry's soul to his body. Of course the potion aided in that process, but not entirely. The potion aided in the body's healing and magical regeneration, as well as aided in clinging to the soul in some way, according to their research. She prayed that it all worked.

Eyeing the stacks of third year essays she still had to grade before the weekend was over, Hermione pulled them in front of her and dutifully began working. Elina had just gone to sleep, and Severus was out patrolling the corridors, as he often did on Saturday nights.

Hermione was not certain how long she had been working when she felt a brush of fingertips at her neck. Barely jumping at the contact, she sighed, "I have to finish these."

"You have all day tomorrow to finish," came the deep, velvety voice in her ear, as his fingertips traveled down to her shoulders. He gently began to massage her shoulders causing her to drop her quill, eliciting a small moan. "It's time for bed, Hermione," he whispered to her.

"Yes," she softly agreed. Severus helped her to stand. The moment she was on her feet, his mouth descended upon hers. She found herself instantly lost in his embrace. Arms encircled her body and pulled her tight against him. They broke the kiss only long enough for him to lead her to bed.

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**A/N:** I apologize greatly for the lengthy delay. At first I got caught-up in the Holidays, than real life became more than just a little bit over-bearing. Things are ~~starting~~ starting to settle-down now, though. I actually broke my arm just below the wrist back in early January and that really affected my ability to write much of anything. It is still very sore, although I can handle small spurts now. So, writing this chapter took longer than normal for me. (I won't even mention the surgery I had in early February or the rest of the real life drama that's going on... grrrrr.)

The remainder of the story is mostly written. Just the filler needs to be added in, so the updates will be coming in much quicker from here on out. Thanks so much for your patience everyone and sticking through everything! We're nearly there, I promise!

## XVIII

### Chapter 18 of 19

Hermione meets with Ginny and Ron and later they go to the Ministry to try to help Harry.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks go out to both JuneW and SnarkyRoxy, both of whom are very quick and have splendid ideas. Thank you, gals!**

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The morning that Ginny and Ron were due to arrive, Hermione was anxious. She wasn't quite exactly *sure* what to tell them, or exactly *how* to go about telling them she planned to awaken Harry ... or at least attempt to awaken him. Her research into the spells and charms had gone well, and she felt that she had achieved all that she possibly could.

"You look like someone is threatening to break your wand in half," came the sardonic voice from across the breakfast table as she was sipping her morning coffee.

"I was just thinking about Ginny and her reaction to my plans for Harry. I'm not sure what to tell her when she gets here today," she hummed over her cup.

"You never told me that Miss Weasley would be coming to the castle today," Severus replied with veiled interest.

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew," Hermione replied as she set her cup back in its saucer. "Both Ginny and Ron will be here later this morning."

Severus' dark penetrating eyes stared at her for several long minutes as she continued with her breakfast, before he finally spoke what was on his mind. "Why, pray tell, am I to be graced with their presence this morning?"

"I want to tell them about Harry and the progress that we've made," she replied with a small smile, only hesitating slightly before plowing forward. "I think it's time that we set some sort of plan into motion to try to get into the Department of Mysteries and deliver the potion to him. I've been working with Filius on the charms, and I think that I've finally figured out how to effectively rebind Harry's soul. I am sure that if"

Before she could finish her rehearsed speech, Severus interrupted with a resounding, "No."

"Pardon?"

"I said no, Hermione. I will not allow you to go traipsing off through the bowels of the Ministry of Magic in an attempt to save the Bloody-Boy-Who-Lived, one last time."

She openly stared at him, stunned into silence.

"It is not simply a matter of not permitting it, I simply *cannot* allow it. Not only do you have yourself to think of, but you also have a child to consider. It would be extremely childish and selfish for you to go running off to go rescue Harry *Effing* Potter again! Let the Weasleys do it by themselves this time; I'm quite certain they are more than capable. They do not require your know-it-all self to run the show and tell them what to do at every turn. I am positive that they can figure things out on their own for a change. They too have been in the Department of Mysteries before, you remember."

Hermione wasn't sure what was twisting her stomach more, the fact that he was once again putting his foot down and trying to control her life over something that she felt so strongly about and she knew ... she *KNEW* ... she had to be present for the attempt. Or if it was because he likely didn't realize how much he had just praised both Ron and Ginny in his small tirade. Gripping the handle of her fork, she speared a piece of fruit, but could not even force herself to bring it to her lips. She tossed the cutlery down and instead drank the remaining dregs from her cup before speaking her mind ... all the while refusing to meet his watchful gaze.

"You're doing it again, Severus," she said as calm a voice as she could manage. "I love you, but that does not give you permission to go around trying to run my life and tell me what to do at each and every turn. I don't know everything, but I *do* know this ... I need to be there. I helped Harry cast the initial spell. It's my fault he wound up where he is." Her tears began to flow as she finally brought her eyes up to meet his. "How would you feel knowing you had done that to your friend? Did you know that was the wedge that ultimately drove Ron and me apart? We had problems, we were likely doomed from the beginning, but Ron blamed me. Bloody hell, I blamed myself for what happened to Harry."

"Think, for a moment, about what you just said, Hermione. I know better than anyone what it is like to lose one's friend due to war. I know what it is like to take a friend's life. I should; seeing I've done it more than once."

Hermione's face grew suddenly pale as comprehension dawned. "I didn't think of that," she stammered.

"Obviously," he sneered as he stood from his chair. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I would rather not be here when your guests arrive." He walked swiftly towards the door to his office, pausing just before exiting the room. "Oh, and the next time you wish to make such an important profession of love, try doing so at a more appropriate moment." He swept out of the room, snapping the door shut behind him.

Calmly composing herself, Hermione wiped the moisture from her cheeks with her serviette. She reached for the chain that she kept securely around her neck and pulled out the jade butterfly Severus had given her for Christmas, which she wore tucked under her robes. She spoke softly to the small charm., "I didn't mean to hurt him. Please help me to find a way to show him how important this is to me. I need him to understand." Dropping the pendant back to its usual resting place, she said a silent prayer that maybe Minerva hadn't been wrong and that the butterfly really would carry her wishes up to God.

Pushing back from the table, Hermione rose and made her way to the bedroom door. Halfway there, the words Severus had left her with finally sunk into her mind and her stomach began to roil. "Oh, God! I can't believe I just blurted out that I love him!"

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Severus was unable to settle himself down after his earlier confrontation with Hermione over the Weasleys' visit and her plot to "rescue" Potter. He wasn't sure which had troubled him more. The fact that she was so determined about wanting to go and help Potter was annoying him now. Although he wasn't truly sure if it was her blatant disregard for the danger involved, or because she made a confession that he did not feel like he was ready to hear.

There were no essays or tests to mark, so he went about taking inventory of his potions stores, which was mindless work. Even with that, however, he had difficulty concentrating.

Severus spent the next two hours ensconced within his office and laboratory, trying to avoid thinking about Hermione and what she and her cohorts were planning. When he was no longer able to let the issue rest, he approached the door to their quarters and quietly turned the knob. Upon opening the door, he saw Hermione seated in the armchair by the fire holding their daughter, with Ginny seated across from her talking animatedly. Severus growled slightly when he looked at the settee and saw not only Mr. Ron Weasley sitting there, but also Professor Longbottom. Despite the fact that Hermione had definitely been by Severus' side these last few months, he could not help but feel twinges of jealousy whenever Neville Longbottom was around. Severus instantly began wondering, as he strode into the room to make his presence known, why Hermione had not mentioned that he would be visiting this morning along with the Weasleys.

Hermione looked up from her conversation with the youngest redhead as Severus neared the group.

Although she was not smiling, Severus noticed her face no longer held the look of hurt and anger that it had held earlier this morning when he'd left her. He felt a small amount of relief from this realization.

"Good morning, Severus."

Severus gave a quick glance to those present in the room and a curt nod before his eyes settled back on Hermione. "Is all of your plotting and scheming done for the morning?" he asked sarcastically.

"Nearly," she answered shortly.

Crossing his arms over his chest and towering over her, he retorted back, "And did you tell them exactly *how* you came up with this plan to save Potter?"

Hermione blushed furiously, and Severus felt a slight twinge of guilt, which he quickly squashed.

"No," she said softly.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said. "I didn't hear you."

"No," she said more firmly, her anger flaring. Turning to her friends she spat, "All right, fine. I had a dream. I brewed the potion all from a dream, and researched the charm because of the same dream." Next, bringing her pleading eyes back to Severus, she said, "But you can't deny that the potion was brewed correctly! I know I'm right about this!"

He searched her eyes and saw the desperation behind them. He began to remember what Filius had told him a few weeks before, about a conversation Filius'd had with Hermione when the dream had awoken her the first time. She'd finally admitted that she'd taken the abuse of the Wizengamot lying down out of guilt for Potter's condition. Severus felt his heart wrench for her and inwardly grimaced. He didn't want anyone to think that he was growing soft.

The others in the room knew enough of both Severus and Hermione's tempers to hold their tongues throughout this discussion, even with the surprising revelation that Hermione was acting through nothing more than Divination. Relaxing his stance only slightly, Severus inclined his head slightly briefly at Hermione. "I will admit that the potion was brewed correctly, but you must admit that this is all solely based on theory. There is nothing to say that it will work in application."

Holding his intense gaze, unwavering, Hermione's voice softened as she spoke her final words, "I have to try, Severus. Please try to understand."

Without responding to her last plea, he leant down and carefully plucked the baby out of her arms. "I will go put her to bed for you so you can finish with your guests."

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Hermione stared after Severus for a few minutes before the sound of a clearing throat caught her attention and brought her back to her friends. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Was it really a dream that started all of this?" asked Ginny with clear skepticism.

Hermione told them of the visions that she'd had after the birth of Elina and again a few weeks later, and how that had led her to brew the potion that now sat bottled on a shelf in her wardrobe. She then went on to tell them how she'd worked with Filius on developing the charm to complete the soul-binding. When her story was completely retold, she waited for them to ridicule her.

They did not.

Instead, they all stared at her pensively. After what seemed like an eternity of waiting to Hermione, Ron broke the silence. "I'm in, Hermione."

Smiling, she looked to the other two, who were both nodding their heads in acquiescence. She sat back in the chair, relieved that she did not have to convince her friends... she only had to deal with the surly man in the other room.

The four friends finalized their plans and agreed to meet the following weekend for their rescue attempt; this would give them enough time to set their plans into motion.

After another half-hour of discussion, Hermione bid her friends goodbye and sought out Snape. She quickly found him in his Potions laboratory, leaning over a piece of freshly sanded wood. Severus had her father's carving tools laid out on the table before him. She watched him reach over, grab a V-shaped instrument, and begin etching the tablet laid out before him.

Hermione knew from experience not to sneak up on him when he was working like this, so she waited until he stopped his hand movement to speak. "I thought I'd find you in here," she finally said.

"Indeed, there are so many places that one would have to look to find me," he quipped back without looking up from his project.

Hermione smiled lightly and walked into the room. "Well, you never know, Severus. I have found you in Elina's rooms, talking to yourself."

"I was *not* talking to myself, Hermione. I was having a discussion *with* my daughter. A discussion implies two people, not just one."

Hermione continued to grin, pleased that he was at the very least speaking with her. Pulling out the stool and settling herself next to him, she sighed. "I'm sorry about my thoughtless comments this morning. Obviously you understand why I feel responsible. I never should've stated otherwise."

"Does that mean that you understand why I must insist that you stay home?" he asked, looking up from his project.

"Severus," Hermione huffed. "You don't understand. I NEED to go. They can't do this without me. Neither Ron nor Ginny can cast the charms."

"Then you damn well better teach them," he bit out.

"I can't, Severus," Hermione snapped. "It's well beyond their abilities. It would take another year or more for them to learn the complexities of the spellwork. I am the one who needs to go."

Severus growled as he went back to work on the carving. He gouged his yielding canvas carefully as he thought through the dilemma. After a pregnant pause, he responded. "How do you intend to get into the Department of Mysteries? When you all snuck in there as children, it was only because the Death Eaters had taken care of the nighttime security for you."

"We have a way around that, actually. We were going to use Harry's old cloak, although we don't all fit underneath it well anymore. However, today when Ron and Ginny were on their way down here, they ran into Neville. Ron invited him to come along. That's why you didn't know Neville was coming. I didn't invite him, Severus. But it was a stroke of luck that he came along."

Snape put down the tool he was wielding and looked at her, encouraging her to continue.

"Neville has started seeing a woman who just so happens to work in the Department of Mysteries, and he is pretty sure that he can get us in there without it appearing suspicious. Neville will make arrangements to pick her up from work on Friday afternoon around the time that everyone else is getting ready to leave for the day; we'll just happen to be tagging along, as if we were all going to dinner together. Once all the Ministry workers are gone, we'll go into the room where the Pensieve is and take it into the room where Harry is. We'll give him the potion, cast the spell, and then we can get out of there. It's that easy."

Severus fought the urge to roll his eyes. "That easy, eh? I do not think that I've ever heard of a more ill-begotten plan in all of my life, which just reiterates the idea that you really need to rethink this." Peering into her eyes and seeing that her mind was unwavering, he heaved a heavy sigh and conceded ... there was no way that Hermione was going to relent. "Fine," he bit out. "Go. On one stipulation."

"What's that?"

"That I accompany you."

Hermione leapt from her stool and tangled her arms around his neck, causing Severus to drop the wood and tools he was holding. She would've gone to the Ministry with or without his permission, of course, but to have him concede was a victory in and of itself. Running her fingers through his hair, she said, "I really do love you, you know. I want you to know that for certain, and not have you think that I said something by accident and never thought about it again. I mean, yes, it was an accident, but I..." She was unable to finish her statement as he hushed her with his mouth covering her own, a mess and tangle of lips, tongues, and teeth.

"You are loyal... brave... honest... intelligent... and daring. I admire... your... fortitude... and your... ability to... survive... at almost... any cost," Hermione gasped out as his mouth moved along her neck and up to her ear, where he slowly began suckling and licking the lobe.

"Shush," he whispered into her ear. "I know how you feel, Hermione. I have known for months."

Hermione sighed as he pulled her even tighter against him.

"I love you as well," he muttered softly as his lips began to devour hers again. His hands, which had been resting on the table on either side of her, slowly worked their way to her breasts and they kneaded them through her robes, causing a moan to erupt from her mouth.

Gracefully, Hermione untangled a hand from his hair and unbuttoned her robes, granting him easier access. She shrugged out of the garment, causing it to fall into a heap onto the floor beneath her.

Severus removed a hand from her body, causing her to grumble in protest, but before she could say much more he wielded his wand and with a quick spell cleared the work table next to them. In a swift movement, he lifted Hermione up onto the table, seating her at eye level. Grinning deviously, he continued with his ministrations, much to her delight and pleasure, and before she even realized what was occurring, her shirt and bra were gone. He plucked at her erect, rosy nipple, pinching it firmly between his fingers, before he brought his mouth down to greedily consume it.

Hermione squeaked and frantically began unbuttoning the thin white shirt that Severus was wearing. Her hands roamed over his newly exposed chest, raking her nails across his skin and eliciting equal sounds of pleasure from his throat.

As he let her nipple fall from his mouth, he kissed his way back up her chest and throat, eagerly making his way to her open mouth. Neither one remembered discarding the remainder of their clothing, only that it was quick and could hardly happen fast enough. With another swift movement, Severus lifted Hermione up and settled her entrance over his erect shaft. At his urging, she wrapped her legs around his waist and eased herself down until she was completely filled. Both groaned in pleasure as they began to move together.

"Oh, God," Hermione cried after they had been pleasing one another for several minutes. Her inner walls clamped down around his penis, causing Severus to come undone and follow her into orgasmic bliss.

Sated, Hermione rested her head against his shoulder and tried to catch her breath.

Severus ran his hands down her hair, cradling her head to him. "I love you, Hermione," he whispered into her hair.

Her breath caught in her chest when she heard him say those words to her. It wasn't what she had been expecting. She hadn't thought that she would ever hear those words cross his lips; she couldn't help but allow a contented smile to grow upon her face at the words.

Severus carefully set her back up on the table behind her. Grabbing his wand that he'd left there, he used it to Summon her discarded robes to cover her from the cool dungeon air. His mind quickly began thinking about the next order of business ... their trip to the Department of Mysteries; however, they still had a few days to sort out the details, and right now he was more interested in taking Hermione to bed and continuing with their marital activities.

~~~~~

Friday afternoon found the most unlikely group gathered together in front of the newly commissioned fountain in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Many had thought that since the old fountain had been destroyed in a battle against Voldemort in Harry's fifth year, that it would be replaced with one of Harry defeating Lord Voldemort. However, since the Ministry had tried to downplay Harry's crucial part in the war effort, that was not the case. The Ministry had done nothing more than recreate the fountain that stood in the Atrium the first time that Hermione had been there.

She was standing there with Severus, Ron, Ginny, and Neville. In Severus' pocket was the phial of the Soul Binding and Reviving Potion. Nervously, she looked to Neville. "Are you sure that your friend is going to be okay with this?" she whispered. "I mean, she knows what we're planning and she's not going to do anything, right?"

"Oh, no. Maddy is fine with everything, Hermione. Don't worry, I spoke with her a bit this morning, and I'll fill her in on the details when we go in to see her," replied Neville, a bit louder than Hermione was comfortable with.

Looking around uneasily, Hermione met Severus' gaze, who seemed to bear the look of a man saying, "I told you so." Inwardly growling, Hermione led the group towards the security check, where they had their wands inspected and were sent on their way with nary a cursory glance.

From there, they took the lift to level nine of the Ministry, encountering very few Ministry employees this time of day. The majority had left a half-hour earlier on this Friday afternoon to go home and enjoy the weekend with their families. Once on level nine, they went down the corridor and then down the stairs to level ten... again, down the long narrow corridor to the door at the end of the hall.

Neville knocked firmly when they reached the door, and Hermione nervously fingered her wand when it was opened by a young woman. Madeline Bagnold wore the typical black robes that denoted an Unspeakable; most notably, she had straight, long brown hair and wore glasses. When she saw Neville she smiled warmly. Madeline quickly acknowledged his guests with a nod, flicking her eyes twice over the figure of the dour Potions master, then quickly ushering them inside before they were seen by anyone who happened to be coming by.

"Perfect timing," Madeline said. "Mr. Abercrombe has just left for the day, and I was left to lock everything up." Looking back at Neville's guests, she eyed Severus intently. "Erm... Neville, you didn't tell me that you were bringing our old Potions professor," she whispered.

"Well, I didn't know until he showed up and refused to leave just a bit ago. Hermione didn't tell us," Neville muttered back.

"What is it that you need to do?"

"We... erm..." Neville stammered.

"You mean to tell me," Severus said as he stepped forward, "that Mr. Longbottom has not yet told you why we are here?"

"Well," Neville said, cowering from the towering figure. "I told her some. She knows that we were hoping to... erm... *pay our respects to Harry*..."

Severus growled. "Pay our respects?" he mocked. "I assure you, *Professor* Longbottom, that it will be a cold day in Hell before I ever 'pay my respects' to Harry Potter." He felt a calming hand on his arm and bit back his next retort, choosing instead to cross his arms in front of his chest and try to intimidate the young man.

The young woman appeared at a loss for words after Severus' sudden outburst, as if she wasn't sure how to respond to him. "You mean, you don't want to see Harry Potter?" Madeline asked hesitantly.

The look in her eyes showed clearly that she thought that she knew exactly who the former Death Eater would wish to see in lieu of Mr. Potter. Severus shuddered inwardly at the thought of seeing his former master.

Hermione stepped forward. "Yes, we want to see Harry. All of us need to see him," she said, looking meaningfully at Severus, daring him to contradict her.

The young Unspeakable glanced suspiciously at Snape before nodding her head.

"I'm only doing this because it just hurts to see him lying there like that. H-he was nice to me in school, not like we were friends or anything, but we spoke a few times. He doesn't deserve to be treated like that. I like my job," Madeline said quietly, "but I think that everyone should be allowed to have a proper burial and remembrance service. He should be laid to rest and left alone."

Hermione nodded her head and looked to Neville, silently pleading with him to fill Madeline in on the details while they were in with Harry and not a moment before. "We'd also like to have the Pensieve brought in," Hermione said.

Maddy's eyes narrowed.

"Well, after all, that is where Harry's soul is currently residing. His body is nothing more than a shell," Hermione supplied easily.

This seemed to satisfy the woman, and she nodded her head.

Maddy went directly to one of the identical doors in the circular room in which they were still standing, unlocked the door, and led them inside. There, in the center of the room lying on a table like he was sleeping, was Harry. Other than the fact that he was wearing what appeared to be nothing more than a white robe, he looked exactly as he had on the day that Voldemort fell.

Hermione's eyes wandered over to Ginny and Ron, who were barely managing to hold each other up. Tears were rolling down the youngest Weasley's face and Hermione's heart wrenched. For a brief moment she wondered where Voldemort's body was, until she realized that Madeline (or someone else) must have moved him to another room so they could see their friend. She looked to Maddy. "The Pensieve," she said softly.

"Yes, just a moment," Madeline replied, shuffling out of the room, Neville closely on her heels.

As soon as they left the room, Hermione moved to the body and remove the Stasis Charm that was preserving Harry's body. Next, Severus pulled out one of the phials of potion, uncorked it, and emptied the contents into Harry's mouth. He palmed the empty container just before Maddy and Neville returned. Taking a step back from the body, he gave Hermione a minute nod.

Maddy placed the Pensieve on the table closest to Harry and turned to the group. "I'll give you a few minutes alone. I wish it could be longer, but I'm not allowed to have people in here." She turned to leave the room, Neville again following closely behind her.

Hermione trusted that Neville would give them as much time as he possibly could. Turning to Ginny, she motioned to Harry and said, "Start massaging his arms and legs. Get the circulation moving. The potion will have restarted his heart and lungs by now." While Ginny worked on Harry, Hermione walked over to the Pensieve. Wielding her wand, she began a complex series of wand movements arcing forward and back, flicking, swishing, with broad strokes and short strokes. She began chanting the incantation to Summon out Harry's soul.

Her stomach began to tighten with excitement as she saw the pure soul of her friend rising from the Pensieve. It was shimmering silver and gold, but just as she thought that she had the entire soul out she saw the sickly green hand of another soul grab onto Harry's feet and try to pull him back in. Increasing her concentration and the volume at which she spoke the words, she tried to pull harder on the soul. Suddenly feeling a reassuring hand on her shoulders, she noticed that Severus had pulled his wand and he now had it pointed at the Pensieve as well. He may not have learned the spells and incantations with Hermione, but he certainly could add his magical strength to hers. Then, within moments, Ron's wand was also out and pointed at the Pensieve, aiding her magic.

After what seemed like an eternity to them, the greasy-looking hand finally released its grip on Harry's soul, allowing it to float across the room into its rightful place. Once out of the Rune-encrusted bowl, Severus began warding the Pensieve against Voldemort's escape. Next, Hermione began the next step in the spellwork to rebind Harry's soul permanently, with the added help of Ron's magical strength.

It took fifteen minutes for the Soul Binding to finalize. When it did, there was a soft *cracking* sound to notify them all that the rift was finally closed. Exhausted from the hard work that she'd done, Hermione found the nearest chair and collapsed into it.



"How long until we know if it works?"

"It's hard to say," answered Hermione honestly. "Truthfully, I don't know." Severus' hand slipped into hers for comfort as she spoke the words, but then Hermione jumped up from her seat as Harry let out a soft moan and opened his eyes.

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**A/N:** Ahhhh, another evil cliffie. Don't you just love it? :) I know that I do. It encourages me to write. Seriously, the next chapter is almost completely written, so it should be up very soon. Thanks so much for your patience!

## Epilogue

*Chapter 19 of 19*

~\*COMPLETE\*~ Hermione and Severus are both after one thing, money. There is one way that they can both get it.  
Based on the WIKTT Surrogate Mother Challenge.

*This is based on the Surrogate Mother Challenge on WIKTT. For full description of this challenge, please see the author's notes at the end of the first chapter.*

**Disclaimer:** I looked in the mirror this morning and was stunned to discover that I am not JK Rowling. Shocking, I know.

**Special thanks go out to both SnarkyRoxy and JuneW, both of whom are very quick and have splendid ideas. Thank you, gals!**

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The grip on her hand was crushing and becoming worse by the minute. She wasn't sure why she'd agreed to do this. Certainly there were people who were better suited. Ginny's own mother, perhaps? No, instead Hermione was here as her friend lovingly crushed her hand with the onset and gradual progression of each contraction.

The viselike grip slowly began to lessen as Ginny's contraction seemed to ease. "Harry, shouldn't you be doing something?" Hermione stated plainly as she shook her hand out.

"Oh yeah, right. Sorry, Hermione," Harry said, a winning smile gracing his face. "When am I supposed to call Lavender?"

"She said she'd stop by after another twenty minutes, just to check on how you were doing, but she said she wouldn't do much until the contractions were more frequent," Hermione stated matter-of-factly.

"They are more frequent! How come you didn't tell me this hurt this bad?" Ginny bit out at the older witch.

"Because I honestly don't remember that much of my labor, Ginevra. Or have you forgotten how Elina was born?" Hermione snapped back.

"Bloody hell!" the redhead yelled as she stopped mid-waddle and grabbed onto her husband for support.

"Oh, they really are coming faster," Hermione said in awe as she left the room to Floo the midwife.

It had been just over two years since they had rescued Harry from his entrapment in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic. It had been a long road to recovery for Harry. The potions that they had given him had helped, but they were in no way a cure-all. There were times when it had been touch-and-go. He had spent over four months recuperating at St. Mungo's.

It was disgusting how quickly the Ministry's opinion on the events of the war had changed once Harry Potter was alive and well and able to speak his piece. Harry Potter was once again dubbed the "Savior of the Wizarding World," the "Chosen One," and the "Boy-Who-Lived-Again." However, it had taken nearly a year beyond his resurrection for the rulings against the *war criminals* to be overturned. The wheels of government definitely turned slowly, unless heavily greased.

Harry had been appalled to hear what had happened to his friends while he'd been incapacitated. It had taken time for all of them to rebuild their friendships with him and for him to adapt to their new lives. It had also taken a bit of time for Harry to accept the fact that Severus Snape had helped in his rescue and recovery (not to mention his relationship with Hermione), but while the two men would never be close friends, they had eventually declared something of a truce.

Once Harry had been released from St. Mungo's, Ginny brought him home to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, where he continued to recuperate, and gradually became involved in the goings on in the wizarding world once more. The couple was married one year to the day after Harry's reawakening.

Ron had moved to France before Harry was released from the hospital. He was now first-string Keeper for the Quiberon Quafflepunchers. Hermione had always thought that the orange uniforms of the Chudley Cannons clashed horribly with his flaming red hair. To her horror, the Cannons' uniforms were nothing compared to the shocking pink robes of the Quafflepunchers.

They still kept in touch with Ron, by Floo and by Owl Post, but as it had been with Hermione for the past several years, the relationship was strained. Harry never understood Ron's treatment of Hermione after the fall of Voldemort, and an even larger rift grew between the best friends.

Neville seemed to replace the prong that had once been held by Ron. He was still seeing Madeline, though with their timid personalities, it had taken each of them time to work up the courage to progress their relationship ... both required prodding from outside sources ... the pair announced their engagement just two weeks ago.

Hermione heard a scream from upstairs and quickened her pace to the kitchen fireplace, where she threw in a handful of Floo powder and called Lavender. The young midwife stepped through the grate at Hermione's call, and the pair walked back upstairs to where Ginny was laboring.

Lavender brought up the topic first, taking Hermione slightly off-guard. She wasn't sure if her old roommate was baiting her, or just making conversation. "Oh, Hermione, wait until you hear what happened to Gladys Munch," Lavender exclaimed as soon as a contraction had ended. "You remember, she was just a horrid piece of work."

"Yes, I think I remember her," Hermione replied cautiously.

"It was the most amazing thing," Lavender said, with a playful glint in her eyes.

Hermione sat there trying to avoid Lavender's curious gaze.

"Well, she came down mysteriously ill about six weeks ago. It was the strangest thi..." The midwife cut-off her sentence mid-word as Ginny began to groan. Hermione watched as Lavender crouched on the floor in front of the laboring witch. "Ginny, look at me. No, open your eyes. Look at me. Good girl. Now, breathe... slower... in, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. No, open your eyes. That's a girl. Breathe. In, two, three, four. That's it. Out, two, three, four. And again."

Hermione was awed at the calmness suddenly present in the room. Ginny's frantic moans were stilled with the presence of Miss Brown. The midwife took control of the mania and relaxed everyone as she took Ginny through her pain.

As soon as the contraction was finished, Ginny nodded her head and slumped into the armchair she was now sitting in. "Thank you," she muttered.

Lavender smiled and stood up, turning to Hermione. "It was the strangest thing. Gladys started off just all achy and nauseated and they sent her home. Well, she came back that evening, waddling as if she were nine months pregnant, and screaming as if she were in labor. Nothing helped alleviate the pain for her; I almost felt sorry for the woman," she admitted. "Then she started bleeding. Hermione, you wouldn't believe how hard I had to smash on her stomach, I thought that she was hemorrhaging. I've never seen a woman's menses that bad. Next thing you know, she quit moaning and the blood vanished... just vanished, like that! It was as if someone had cast an *Evanesco*. So, we tucked Gladys away in bed, and the next morning when she woke up, the whole thing started all over again."

"Really?" asked Hermione with a small smirk. "How long did it last?"

"Oh, it took them nearly three weeks to figure out what was wrong with her," replied Lavender.

"Three weeks?" Hermione almost felt guilty. The key word being *almost*. After her life had settled down, she had tried owling the hospital administrators to get the midwife fired, but it had not worked as well with midwife Munch as it had with Healer Munch. The advisors had informed Hermione that she truly had no basis to judge the care that Gladys gave her patients as Hermione was only in the woman's care for a few hours, and then it was when Hermione was immediately post-partum and very emotional. After several correspondences with them, Hermione gave up and decided to think of something else she could do to Gladys Munch.

It had been Severus' idea to modify the Empathy Curse. Grinning like a fool, Hermione now knew that she'd been successful with the modifications in the charm *Severus will be pleased as well*.

Lavender was, once again, in front of Mrs. Potter and helping her through her latest pains. When the midwife returned to conversing with Hermione, she went on to say that, after spending a week recuperating, Gladys had decided to come back to work. Though it had only been two weeks since her return, Lavender said that the once uncaring midwife was now one of the most compassionate women there. Somehow between the time the curse was first cast and Ms. Munch returning to work, the woman learned how to actually be caring.

Granted, empathy for a pregnant and laboring witch was the original intended side-effect of the curse. However, Hermione had not expected anything to change the cold-hearted woman. Hermione actually felt pleased with the outcome... the vile woman had suffered, and had learned from the experience.

Hermione rubbed her hand thoughtfully over her own slightly protruding abdomen, and hoped that she would have a much better experience with her own labor and delivery this time around. She and Severus had decided, for propriety's sake, to be married before the start of the school term the summer that they had rescued Harry. After that next year of teaching at Hogwarts, Severus had agreed to another year, and Hermione had just convinced him to teach at least one more.

There had been no repercussions for any of them for rescuing Harry; the only person that had suffered any consequences had been Maddy. She had lost her position in the Department of Mysteries the moment that her superiors had discovered her role in Harry's recovery. However, because the rest of the wizarding community saw it as a great boon, Madeline had no trouble finding herself a new job.

"Ginny, pant. That's the way," Lavender muttered softly as she mopped Ginny's brow with a facecloth, interrupting Hermione's train of thought.

"Is there something I should be doing?" asked Hermione.

"No," answered the midwife. "Just be ready to help her push soon."

"Ginny, are you sure you don't want your mum in here instead?" Hermione asked. Truth be told, she was beginning to feel like *he* would much rather be almost anywhere else. She wanted to be a supportive friend, however she was worried that if she saw how much this process truly hurt, she'd be more afraid of going through the entire process herself in a few months.

The fiery redhead met her gaze with a look of uncertainty.

Hermione stood up from the chair she was currently residing in. "I'll go fetch her for you. It will be all right, Gin," she said with a reassuring squeeze to the younger witch's shoulder.

She walked back down the stairs to Floo Mrs. Weasley for the birth.

Later that evening, Hermione entered the sitting room at her home back at Hogwarts to see her husband sitting in an armchair, sipping on a glass of liquor, and staring into the flame. Over the last two years things had slowly settled to a quiet calm between them. Severus still had his fits of pique where he tried to control certain aspects of Hermione's life, although with time he was learning that she was not going to allow that to happen. She had only ever allowed it to happen during the first pregnancy because she had felt bound through the contract.

She smiled as she walked up to the chair, then ran her hands through his hair and down along his cheek.

Severus smirked at her appreciatively. "And how are the *Potters* this evening?" he asked. He was still unable to say Harry's surname without a sneer.

"They had a little boy and named him Henry James after Harry's grandfather," Hermione said with a smile.

Severus muttered something under his breath, and Hermione caressed his cheek to soothe him. "Oh, don't grouse. It will be eleven years before he comes along to darken the halls here. I'm sure you'll have retired by then."

Severus merely glared at her without remark, causing Hermione's smile to grow. She leaned down and kissed him lightly on the tip of his nose. "Am I to assume that Elina is sleeping?"

"Of course."

Hermione bent over again and grazed her lips across his. "Good," she whispered in his ear before standing back up and making her way towards the door to the bedroom. As she neared the door, she turned back around and looked at the dark man who was now making his way towards her. Severus was so much more than she had ever expected or ever thought she deserved. However, after all of this time, she was rarely ever able to catch him off guard, which only served to endear him to her all the more.

Hermione was grateful for the undeniable rouse set by the Fates for bringing them together, all in the guise of Severus begetting his heir...or heiress, as it were.

Severus approached her, placing his outstretched hand on her belly, with just a hint of a smirk ghosting his lips.

"What do you think this one will be, Severus?" she asked him as she looked hopefully into his eyes.

"A boy, certainly," he replied with assuredly.

"You know," said Hermione thoughtfully, "it took Molly Weasley seven tries before she had a girl. I realize that her family history is really inconsequential to us. However, boys don't run in my family. On my mother's side they all have girls. I wonder how many times we will have to try for a boy?"

Severus' face paled instantly, just as Hermione predicted. He had never wished to have a Quidditch team, although he had expressed a desire to have a son to carry on the Snape name.

Turning to the bedroom again, she allowed herself to smile at her quip. She wondered briefly how long she should wait before she told him that she'd decided to take the potion that morning that confirmed they were indeed having a son. Perhaps she should let him off the hook now...

Looking back over her shoulder at his still-stunned look, she giggled to herself slightly. Or perhaps she'd make him stew a bit longer. It was nice to have the upper hand once in awhile. I mean, how often did one have the upper hand when living with Severus Snape?

~Fin~

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**A/N:** To answer the question... yes, this story is really over. However, it is left open intentionally and I may revisit it at some point.

This story has taken just over a year to write and has been a wonderful journey for me. I have thoroughly enjoyed it. I have been motivated, encouraged, and inspired by so many different people. Thanks to: Southern\_witch\_69, cocoachristy, Meredith, Nyx, JuneW, SnarkyRoxy, Betz, Candace, Pickles, charmed nay, and the wonderful admins here at The Petulant Poetess.

Thanks also to all of those that have read the story and reviewed. I have cherished each and every comment and review, both critique and praise. They have both motivated and helped me to improve my writing, and ultimately this has helped to improve this story.

If you missed it before, Averygoodun has done a piece of art for this story. It's from chapter 9 and was a gift to me in the SS/HG Gift Exchange. Thanks Avery! The link is here:

<http://sshgexchange.serpentsstratagem.com/gallery/displayimage.php?album=3&pos=9>

Cheers!

~Ginny