

# Nineteen Years Later

*by mauvemagique*

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## Wing Mirror

*Chapter 1 of 18*

Nineteen years later, just after they left King's Cross, something happened that changed Hermione's world.

Disclaimers:

This is a post-Deathly hallows fan fiction; since J.K. killed off Snape, I could finally claim him right? Post-Mort? And do the right thing?

No? So I won't claim any of the characters, but I can still do right by him.

A.N.: This story is for everyone who did not want Severus Snape to die. The reason I am writing it in the so little English I know of instead of Bengali is, there isn't any Bengali fan fiction web site that I know of, yet I want Severus to be alive. So please pardon the unintentional mistakes.

Beta acknowledgement:

Writermerrin is behind my courage to post this story here. Thank you, Writermerrin.

CHAPTER 1: Wing mirror

"Hermione! What happened? How?" Harry Potter rushed through the hospital's corridors towards his best friend and sister-in-law, and she rose up sobbing,

"Harry! Oh, Harry! Thank God you're here. He began asking for you at the moment it happened."

"How, Hermione?" Harry repeated.

With her already sopping hankie, she wiped her face, vainly trying to keep it somewhat dry, but her tears knew no bounds. She sniffled some more. "He forgot to look at the wing mirror."

Harry felt like his world just collapsed underneath his feet. 'How could he! He just joked about it only a few hours ago when they were at King's Cross!' Twenty-seven years of friendship that started in the same station stormed through his mind: the very first day, trolley full of candies, Hermione looking for Trevor, the car ride through London's skyline, all those years of fighting an evil Dark Lord side by side, hunting for Horcruxes, the quest for hallows. Harry could have managed none of that without Hermione and him. 'After surviving all those adventures, all those Death Eaters... Now Ron is fighting death because he did not look at the wing mirror! That's just plain absurd!'

Harry's musing came to a halt by Ginny's reproach. "Don't be silly, Hermione. How would you know when an accident will occur?"

"It is my fault. I shouldn't have let him drive in Muggle London, but he was so exited about Rose's first day ..." She broke down again, and the rest of the Weasleys hurried to comfort her.

"Someone needs to check up on Mum," Bill said, and Fleur left to do just that.

"Where is Molly?" asked Harry.

"She's in the next ward. They had to admit her; she couldn't bear the knowledge," Arthur Weasley replied in a heavy tone.

"I will go and bring the kids home. I don't think they've reached the school yet," Percy said.

After what seemed to be years of waiting, the door in front of them opened, and a gloomy, guilty-looking Healer approached them. Hermione Weasley fainted upon seeing the look on his face.

A./N: The chapter title reflects on what Ron said to Harry at the station in the epilogue of D.H. about forgetting to look in the wing mirror, and the story starts just when the epilogue ended, on their way back to home.

## To Hogwarts.

*Chapter 2 of 18*

How was she to live without him? She did not know. She had never thought... It always seemed forever.

This is a post-Deathly Hallows fan fiction; none of the characters are mine.

Three cheers to my wonderful beta, Writermerrin.

Chapter: 2... To Hogwarts.

How was she to live without him? She did not know. She had never thought... It always seemed forever.

She believed it was; she'd loved him for so long, since she was a child of thirteen. Hermione didn't know how to go on without him beside her. Everybody else had gone back to their own lives; Rosie was back at school. Everywhere she looked, everything she touched was full of her memories of him. Every breath she took, she expected him to burst through the door, saying it was a very bad joke he was pulling on her, none of it was true, and to kiss her to oblivion.

However, Ron did not come back for her, and she saw no point in carrying on. Hugo was with Molly. She could not take him away from the grieving mother. Hugo was her son's last legacy. Hermione felt lonelier without him but had not had the heart to deny Molly, not when she was in such poor health. Hermione sank into a deep depression. She stopped going to work and forgot when she last ate a real meal, for she saw no point in cooking; it only reminded her how much Ron had loved good food. All her books were scattered in the study; none of the words seemed to make sense. She got up, took their wedding photo to bed, and drifted to sleep talking to her funny, cheering, charming Ron.

That was how they found her--Harry, Ginny and Professor McGonagall. Ginny took one look at her and forced Hermione to take a bath while she fixed up something to eat. Harry called Kreacher to tidy up the place. Professor McGonagall pressed her lips tight, shook her head, then set up tea for four out of nowhere with a flick of her wand.

A shock-shower, soup, and a sandwich later, Hermione found herself facing Harry Potter's rant:

"This can't go on, Hermione. Look at YOU. What are you doing to yourself? Do you think Ron would be happy to see you like this?"

"Did you even think about the kids? You're not seventeen anymore, you know," Ginny added.

Of course, she knew she was not seventeen anymore. Ron would have been with her if she were, would he not? Maybe all she needed was her old Time-Turner back, and she could have fixed it, as they had in their third year. She told them that.

The three of them shared a look, then Harry got up, knelt in front of her, took her hands in his, and said, "If it worked that way, don't you think I would have tried? I have so many to bring back, including Ron. Don't you think I would have done that all ready? I know how hard it is for you, I really do. Still, you need to be strong, if not for yourself, for Hugo and Rosie. You do remember--how hard it was for me to grow up without my mum and dad, and I had you and Ron by my side to support me through the hell and back!"

McGonagall said, "Hermione, dear, it doesn't work like that. You can not bring back the dead."

"I would have brought back Mum, Dad, Ron, Sirius, Dumbledore, Remus, Tonks..."

"Fred, Moody..." Ginny added.

"Yeah, Fred, Moody, Snape... Hell, I would've brought anyone back who wasn't Voldemort!"

"Oh shut it, Harry! How am I supposed to move on? How am I supposed to be happy without him? What have I got to look forward to?"

"Ron would've wanted you to be here for the kids, Hermione. They are his gifts to you. He loved you crazily; that love didn't die. How can he be happy if you are suffering?" Ginny explained with the patience of a Hogwarts Head Girl to a particularly stubborn first year wanting to go home in the middle of the night.

"I think you need a break from your surroundings. We'll rent out the house, and you can move away from England," Harry decided.

"What?"

"I have a post ready for you to take over at Hogwarts," the Headmistress added.

"What?"

"Poppy is leaving; her health is not what it used to be."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no... no, no, just no! I am not leaving this house. This is our house... Don't you remember, Harry, how hard Ron had worked, so we could move into it after the wedding? Ginny? No way am I letting anyone else in here."

Ginny could not help her tears anymore. Harry took over. "Then don't. Leave the house the way it is. I will take care of everything. Even if you don't want to go to Hogwarts, go someplace else. Take a vacation."

McGonagall decided to take the Slytherin approach. "Look, Hermione, we at Hogwarts need your help. Even if Ronald were alive, I would have asked you to come, both of you, if not for a long time. I have never thought you would deny your old teacher. I had approved Poppy's leave in that faith; so if you will excuse me, I have to say 'no' to my sick medi-witch. I cannot trust my students to just anybody. I would have taken any chance with my eyes closed if Severus was here..." She rose from her seat.

"Wait."

That was how Hermione Weasley ended up at Hogwarts nineteen years later.

## Neville's Secret.

*Chapter 3 of 18*

"Neville Longbottom has a secret?"

Disclaimers: Not mine, nope! Thanks for reading.

My thanks go to Writermerrin and Polly\_kay Parrott for their tireless work on this.

Chapter: 3... Neville's Secret.

Rose Weasley was mad. She was mad with her mum, her Muggle world, their Muggle means of transportation, mad at her dad for leaving her alone in the world, mad at Grandpapa Arthur for his interest in a world that took his son away, and the rest of the family for understanding whatever it was they understood. She would never understand why they wouldn't avenge him. Uncle Harry had avenged his parents' deaths, even after all those years. She decided she would, too, even if it took her longer.

*Maybe I should run away to join that group Dad and Uncle Harry talked about, the one that wanted a Muggle-free world for witches and wizards. No, it's not the same as joining the Death Eaters. They're in Azkaban; Dad and Uncle Harry made sure of that. They got rid of Voldemort together. Oh, Mum helped; so did many others, Uncle Neville, too.*

She grimaced at the thought of Uncle Neville, no, Professor Longbottom. *What does he think he's doing having all that tea with Mum? Are they in love? Has she forgotten Dad already? Al doesn't think so; he thinks they are just friends who've loads to catch up on. Oh! What would he know about love anyway; he's just a boy, and eleven on top of that!*

Her dad always said, "Rosie's got Mummy's brain," and she had barely understood what all the fuss was about love.

Rose's eyes welled up at remembering her dad's pride in her sharpness, her brilliance. She decided to make sure her dad wasn't forgotten. She would find a way.

She had seen James picking on Albus earlier, so she thought of cheering him up,

"Al! Albus, come on up here, I have chocolate frogs!" she called out to her cousin from across the common room.

HHH

Hermione noticed how preoccupied Rose seemed. She had tried talking to her, but Rose matter-of-factly avoided everything she had said. She was worried about her daughter... Ron had been a wonderful father, and Rose had always been closer to him than to her mother.

She thought to ask Neville to look into it; maybe Rose would open up to her favorite uncle. Harry and Ginny were right: she needed to be more mindful of her children.

Neville seemed too busy. Maybe he had his hands full with Head duties, along with teaching, or maybe he was doing some sort of research that needed frequent tending. Hermione noticed how he sometimes looked at his watch and ran off. She could help. It was awfully quiet in that wing of the castle. She had practically nothing to do, and maybe she wasn't in love with Herbology as Neville was, but her Healer training had included a unit on advanced Herbology.

There was a familiar knock on her office door.

"Hello, Hermione."

"Hi, Neville, come on in. How have you been?"

"Good, good." He pulled a chair across to her desk, and Hermione asked for tea from the kitchen. They had met often for an afternoon tea together.

"Could I ask you a favor, Neville?"

"Anything. That's what friends are for."

"Could you talk to Rosie and see what going on inside her brain? She is acting... well, differently. I've tried, but she won't open up to me."

"She's grieving, Hermione... We all do it differently, but I'll see what I can do. It's hard not to fall apart after losing someone like Ron. I will keep an eye on her--she's a good kid."

"I know. She's her daddy's girl, after all. Thank you, Neville. You are a great friend. I hate to impose on you; you always seem so busy. Is there a project you're working on that needs to be tended on a timely basis? Maybe I could help. I've got plenty of free time, not much to do in here--maybe I could research for you."

Neville suddenly stopped drinking his tea, looked at her oddly for a moment, then jumped to his feet, saying, "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Shrieking Shack. I'll let you in on a secret."

"You've got a secret? Neville Longbottom has a secret... A secret that he keeps in the Shrieking Shack?"

"I do."

"Honestly, Neville. I haven't been there since... since Snape's death."

Neville halted abruptly, turned around, opened his mouth and closed it, opened it again and said, "Then it's about time you do."

When they reached the shack, she was shocked again as he took down pretty complicated wards.

"What are you hiding, Neville? What could possibly..."

She was rendered speechless by the sight before her. It looked nothing like it had in her memory. The shabby shack was clinically clean with a neat bed and a small table full of potions by it, and on top of said bed lay a gaunt, pale figure with a hooked nose.

## The Truth.

*Chapter 4 of 18*

The truth came out.

Chapter 4... The Truth

Disclaimer: Everything Harry Potter belongs to J. K. Rowling. Thank you for the reviews.

Many thanks to Writermerrin for beta reading industriously.

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Hermione felt lightheaded. "It can't be. It's not possible. I saw it with my own eyes. So did Ron and Harry. He's been dead for nineteen years!"

"No, he hasn't. He wasn't dead when you saw him."

"What do you mean?" She moved toward the bed to have a better look. It definitely is Snape.

"How can that be? We saw the memories that he let Harry take just before his death. He died looking at Harry's eyes because they reminded him of Lily's eyes."

"Yes, I know that story; you don't know the rest of it. The truth is, Snape didn't die--even though everyone thought he did. Probably, he himself thought he was dying too; that's why he let Harry see his memories. None of you bothered to check his pulse, did you?" He checked his watch before injecting some potions from the table full of vials into the I.V. bag magically hanging by the bed. "Did Harry even try to save him? You left him to die lying in here." His tone was ice-cold.

The unspoken questions hung in the air. Was he not worth saving? Was he not a human being? And what are you then? How could you leave a man to die and not do anything to help and still call yourself human?

Hermione had the grace to look ashamed. She did not try to provide any of the excuses running through her mind: we had a battle to fight, Horocruxes, the Dark Lord and all that. The truth was, they believed what they had seen, and afterward they had forgotten about him, never worried about him, thought automatically that he had been buried with the others.

Neville continued as he massaged Snape's arms and feet, "No one came looking for him, even though without him there would not have been any victory. He was left to decompose in a broken shack. No one asked why there wasn't a portrait of him. Did you think he wasn't a true Headmaster even if the office had accepted him? Remember how it had denied Umbridge? I'll tell you why there's not a portrait of him--because he's not dead."

"But... Nagini?"

"It bit Arthur too, remember? I was collecting bodies with Seamus and the others; we were taking whomever we could find to the Great Hall. I found him here, lying on the floor like a broken twig--my very own childhood boggart--dreadful, formidable, fearsome Professor Snape!"

"So wrong was the picture, I had to get close. I knelt by him and touched his face to see if it was real. I'd never thought of him as... mortal, you know."

Pausing his narration, Neville let out a hollow laugh. "He was as terrifying as death himself to me once. I closed his blank eyes. As I moved to get up, I sensed a very faint pulse beat, and I jumped up in fear, as if he would take points from me for abusing his person or some such nonsense. You don't know how many times in all these years I have wished he would wake up to do just that..."

Sensing he was speaking to himself more than to her, Hermione decided to hear him out first. There would be time for questions later.

"I checked, and my wand let me know that it was poison. Irony, isn't it, Potions master of fifteen years dying by poison? I bet he could brew up loads of them blindfolded. Then it clicked in my head, and I searched him for an antidote of any kind he might have had. He was a spy in the enemy camp for so many years, dancing on Voldemort's whim, for Merlin's sake! He must have had something somewhere in those bat wings! And he did. He had a bezoar. I remembered our first lesson--where he had practically crucified Harry--as I shoved it in his mouth and waited for his sneer.

"It didn't happen all that dramatically: he opened his eyes, looked at me, said 'Longbottom!' then fell into a coma." Neville became silent.

"That was nineteen years ago! You have been caring for him all this time? Why haven't you told us? We would have helped, you know. We would have. Harry regretted how he had misjudged Snape; surely naming his son after him would give you a clue."

Neville started pacing. "You must understand, Hermione. I didn't think you would--with your perfect, happy life. So I didn't. I didn't want him to become anyone's burden. He was the closest thing to a parent I ever had whom I could care for, and nobody else would have wanted to. St. Mungo's wouldn't let me care for my parents; they won't release them to me. I have seen how their treatment works; I won't let them treat him that way."

Neville stopped pacing and suddenly became very interested in the wellbeing of his robe by smoothing it over and dusting it out from the assaults of imaginary dust

particles. "By the way, I did tell Harry."

"Harry never told me he knew Snape was alive!" She found it hard to believe.

"He didn't say because I Obliviated him," he mumbled.

"WHAT!"

"I had to! You see, he wanted to take him there."

But Neville's rationalization didn't work on Hermione. She shrieked, "That's insane, Neville! Shouldn't you want what's best for him? They've got Healers, facilities--you obviously care about him..."

"I did all the Obliviating, didn't I?"

"What do you mean by 'all the'?"

"What would you call twenty years of it? Only the Healers though. I don't make a practice of randomly altering peoples' memories."

"Neville!" Hermione sat down on the solo chair that Neville had conjured earlier and placed beside Snape's bed; she had to. Neville's crazy. She wondered if the war had made him that way.

"Well, I'm not a Healer. He needs professional care. He's high profile; who knows who will do what to him. Bringing the Healers here had not been much of a trouble as long as they couldn't remember anything about him afterwards. Besides, Hogwarts was his home; it still is, for all of us lost boys. You wouldn't know, you had a happy childhood. Harry might."

"Then why did you Oblivate him? You're not going to do the same to me are you? I am not going to let you mess up my memory. I won't lose a bit of Ron for you." Hermione had her wand out.

"I thought you wanted to help. All I need for you to do is check up on his health."

Hermione thought she should first check up Neville's head. Then again, she understood why the poor thing was so crazy about taking care of Snape. Harry might have wanted to do the same if it was Sirius. Like Snape, Neville had no one else; his grandmum had died shortly after the war, and he never truly had his parents. The only thing he had ever wanted to do for his parents was to take care of them. Somehow in his mind, Neville had substituted this vulnerable Snape in place of his helpless parents. Even if the only attention he had ever gotten from Snape was negative, he was the only adult from Neville's childhood, with exception of Professor Sprout and his grandmum, who did not ignore him or show indifference to his less than brilliant capabilities in some fields of magic.

In a way, he had adopted Snape. Hermione felt proud to be his friend, however misguided she thought his loyalty was. As she checked up on Snape, she couldn't find any fault in the facilities that were provided to him, nor could she find any reason for him to not wake up. He seemed well cared for.

Asking the necessary questions about his treatment, she told Neville that she would help, but it had to be in the hospital wing; Minerva and Harry would have to know. She promised to have their words of honor that it wouldn't involve St. Mungo's.

Hermione was saying, "When you talk to Snape next, tell him I am sorry for how he had been treated." She wanted to tell these things to Snape personally, but her sense of guilt somewhat overwhelmed her, so she said them to her friend instead. "I will do anything to rectify my mistakes, and also how proud I am of you to have done what no one else thought of doing for him."

Neville had stopped her with a raised hand. "What do you mean, 'talk to Snape'? I never talk to Snape. Why would I talk to Snape? He can hardly say any thing back."

"But you need to talk to the coma patients, read to them aloud, it helps."

"Hermione, in case you're forgetting, this is Professor Snape."

"Don't be ridiculous, Neville! You practically raised him for almost twenty years; you can't possibly still be afraid of him!"

"Trust me when I say I am." They left for Minerva's office laughing like in the old days.

## Christmas and the Three Blonds.

### *Chapter 5 of 18*

Harry had thought it would distract the kids from missing Ron too much if all the cousins were together for Christmas.

Disclaimer:

They are not mine...the characters, not the plot... Oh! Was there supposed to be a plot besides wanting SS alive? Let's hope together.

Thank you for reading.

Beta acknowledgment: Writermerrin, you rock! Also wonderful Annie Talbot, I cannot thank you enough.

It had been a long time since he'd heard a laugh; he had no idea how long. Granger's laugh was music to his ears...she always had a laugh like a zephyr blowing over a midday river. It echoed someone else's laugh. Somewhere, very distant in his past, he had heard a laugh like that. He could not remember who it was, only that that ghost of a laugh reminded him of how vacant he felt inside.

He had no idea how he had known that it was Granger who was laughing. Just the sound of it had made him, for the first time, want to open his eyes and take a peek for a moment or two. Why would the girl laugh like that? Then he drifted away again, thinking that a silly teenage girl's laugh held no reason for him to give up such a cozy dark slumber.

Nothing was there for him to wake up to...no one was waiting, carrying a torch in her hands. He had done what was required of him, in the very best way that he could, and that was all he could do.

There was a void though, as if he had been holding something very dear to his heart and it was no more. Somebody with emerald green, Atlantic-deep eyes had taken what he was missing. Why couldn't he remember any more than that? He was pretty sure whatever it was, it was not because Potter might have finally killed off the Dark Lord, was it? It did not feel like Dark Magic, just vast emptiness.

POTTER! He had remembered...the Dark Lord, Nagini, a glimpse of Hermione Granger, and Potter... Harry had his mother's eyes...

Why didn't he have those memories of his time with her? He had memories of looking into Potter's eyes...her eyes... She's the one, then. Gone forever! She's the one who took everything that was anything to him, except this blissful sleep... Ahh!

NNNNN

Since Professor Snape had quit teaching Potions, Neville Longbottom had not once wished he hadn't been born, not even when he was bugging Headmaster Snape and his merry band of torturers. He was actually having fun then, living life to the fullest for the first time, not caring that he might die at any moment.

It was a different time; everyone was ready to die for their beliefs. He wasn't so sure if he had that courage left in him anymore. Being *crucioed* by the Carrows held no candle to facing Minerva McGonagall's wrath. Lucky that Hermione was with him. After a while, she was able to convince the Headmistress to cooperate with them.

The two of them had thought it would go better with Harry if he didn't know Neville had tampered with his memory. So they had decided to withhold that part. "At least for now," they had said. Harry had matured over the years, but not enough to swallow that piece of information quietly.

It went better than having Harry know the whole truth, slightly better.

It had been decided that everything would be done in secret. Snape was not to be moved to the teachers' section as they had previously thought. He had been taken to the room adjacent to Hermione's private office, which she used to take rest if things were hectic. Seldom as it was, there had been those days. Hermione had taken over the job of Snape's daily care. She had also busied herself with magical and Muggle books about such illnesses.

Neville had concentrated upon finding any new clue to it in Herbology. Any free time he'd had in the last nineteen years, he had spent researching Potions and Herbology exhaustively. Harry had chosen to look through Potions and Dark Arts books. With all these activities, Hermione had not noticed when Halloween came and went.

HHHHH

Hermione had done everything she was supposed to do with her new patient. In the mornings, she would read the *Daily Prophet*, *London Times*, and various Potions and Dark Arts journals, as she thought he might like to keep up to date on those. She had told him, "I know how much of a torture it must be for a brilliant mind like yours to be trapped inside and not know." At night, she would read him more books...ones that she had been researching. If her afternoons were less busy, she would take her tea and talk to him about general topics. She would tell him about the war and its aftermath...the heroes, the fallen, the Malfoys, the school, her kids, her friends...but mostly she would tell him about Ron and how much she missed him.

She would tell him, "I know why you don't want to come back, Professor. You feel there's nothing to live for. I felt that way too, but unlike me, you haven't lived your life yet. Up until Ron's death, I lived my life to the fullest; you know how full of life Ron was. You did so much for our world; you should have that chance too. Please wake up. Maybe someday you will meet somebody and it will make all the difference. Please don't close your mind about it," she would plead. "I want you to be happy."

Neville had visited him every day. So did Minerva. He would read to him and she would talk. Hermione had always left and let them be themselves with him. Harry came as often as he could.

Hugo visited his mother often on the weekends through the Floo. She had wanted him to be near her but Hugo loved living at the Burrow. What nine-year-old boy wouldn't want to have uncles like George or Charlie over to dinner on a regular basis? Dinner time had always been family time at the Weasley residence, and it had not changed much; even if some of them could no longer come to dinner, the newer ones took their empty places. Even though Molly's children had not been kids for a long time and had moved out to build their own nests, somebody would always drop by, conveniently hungry, to make her eyes shine.

Rather than restricting him in a boarding school, Hermione had thought she would let him enjoy whatever spoiling he was offered. Everyone deserved a bit of spoiling at this point, especially her Hugo. Ron would have agreed with her, she thought. Not that she had really thought Molly would spoil anyone rotten, seeing how well she had raised her own kids.

At Christmas break, the school had been almost empty except for a few teachers, about thirteen students, Mr. Filch and his beloved Mrs. Norris. Hermione had allowed Rose to go with Harry. All the kids had been spending the holiday in his house. Harry had thought it would distract them from missing Ron too much if all the cousins were together. They would be at the Burrow for Christmas, and Hermione would join them Christmas eve.

RRRRR

Ginny had taken everyone for last-minute Christmas shopping, and Rose had ventured through Flourish and Blotts to see what she could find for Mum. She had reached for the *Marvelous Médicaments for Muggles' Mythical and Magical Miserable Maladies* by Malcolm Mathew McDougall, but the book had flown over her head to land on the outstretched hand of a platinum blond boy.

"Hey, I was here first!" Rose sounded indignant.

"Oh! But I was faster, you see." He waved his wand in the air, in what seemed to be foolish fashion in Rose's opinion.

"I thought you aren't suppose to use magic outside school!"

"Who says I am? This is not my wand!" His lips curled in a smug smirk. "It's a spare one I found in Grandpa's study; he said it belongs to no one."

"I know who you are, you're..."

"Of course you do, I am a Malfoy. Everyone knows who I am." He cut her off.

"I was going to say, you're the one whose tea-cozy had a turtle shell."

Malfoy turned beet-red at the mention of their last Transfiguration class. He recovered quickly with, "Well, I know you too; you are that Weasley with a Mu... gle mum."

"You were going to say the other word, weren't you? You don't like Muggles," she observed before saying, "I don't either. Mum is not Muggle though, she's a Muggle-born witch, and there is a difference. They call her 'the cleverest witch of her age'. Stay away from calling her your petty names... I am really good at hexes."

"Oh, really? My grandfather taught me loads of them too. Some of them, he said, they won't dare to teach at Hogwarts," Malfoy bragged.

"I don't need to learn Dark Arts. They are evil."

"Knowledge is neither good nor evil, and you do need them to rule over the Muggles."

"Another one from the grandfather, eh? Don't you ever think for yourself? Who says I want to rule over them? I just don't want them around us with their stupid technology to take away our lives."

"Who died?"

"My dad...in his stupid Muggle car." Rose Weasley would not cry in front of a Malfoy, she would not.

Even though they were in the same House and in the same class, Malfoy had never spoken to her before. She had thought it was because of her background that he had been looking down on her, so she had never felt any desire to speak to him.

"I'm sorry."

"No, you are not. Don't say anything you don't mean," Rose said in a chilly tone.

"How do you know I didn't mean it?"

"You blinked; your left hand twitched," she stated.

"You are very smart." This time he meant what he said.

"So I've got my mother's brain...big deal! Leave me alone, Malfoy." She had turned away.

"Hey, Weasley! Wait up! Maybe all we need is a fresh start." He stretched his hand. "Hello, I am Scorpius Lucius Malfoy, and I am very pleased to meet you."

Rose looked at the hand for a moment before shaking it lightly and saying, "I am Rosalind Weasley, and I don't need anything from you." She withdrew her hand and walked out gracefully, leaving a dumbfounded Scorpius Malfoy.

HHHHH

Christmas had been somber this year at the Weasley residence, for obvious reasons. Hermione had been sitting with a glass of eggnog and a book; suddenly an idea struck her, and she got up to look for Harry, who had been busy with a mountain of presents in front of him and beaming kids around him.

"Harry, may I speak to you for a moment in private?"

"Sure, Herms. Want some Cockroach Clusters?" He had offered the candy dish.

"Of course not! Come out in the garden."

As they walked in the garden, Hermione said, "Nothing I do works, Harry. I've tried every treatment possible, read every book I could get my hands on... Muggle or magical, but he is nowhere near responsive. I have been thinking, and I have an idea... Do you still have his memories about your mum, Harry?"

She felt kind of uncomfortable saying it..."He lived loving her for so long, what if he has nothing left to live for without those memories? Neville tried so many remedies, Potions, Spells... Nothing... nothing worked. Maybe we should give him back what had kept him going."

Hermione could not imagine how bereft she would feel if key memories of her and Ron's time together were somehow lost all of a sudden. Still, she felt awkward speaking to Harry about Snape's obsession over Harry's mother; it's not like she was reminding him that his father loved her enough to die for her and her child.

"Let's do it tomorrow, then. I will be there." Harry sounded eager to help.

"I will let Neville know; he is the one caring for Snape, now that I am here." Looking over at the bushes, she remembered how Crookshanks used to chase after these Gnomes when he was alive.

Once again, Harry broke her musing, "I thought I saw Malfoy's owl delivering Rosie a package. Are you okay with her getting mixed up with that lot?"

"Scorpius is not Draco, Harry."

"No, but he is under the influence of Lucius, who is under our constant surveillance, slyly avoiding evidence of recruiting and reorganizing their special little mask-wearing, mass-murdering, maniacal group."

"I will talk to Rosie then. She's become so tight-lipped around me lately; I am hoping this phase will pass soon." Hermione changed the subject. "Are they causing much trouble then, Malfoy and his group?"

"Trying their best, nothing out of hand yet, nothing we couldn't handle." Harry did not elaborate; he turned around to go back inside saying, "I will ask Ginny to see if she can find out anything."

Hermione had a faraway look in her eyes; she absentmindedly muttered, "Right, then."

MMMMM

Back at the book store, Scorpius Malfoy jumped at a familiar, cold voice behind him, "Who was your friend, little Scorpio?"

"Oh! Hello, Grandfather, you startled me! Hello, Father. She is just a girl from my class, no one, really."

Draco nodded silently in response.

"Really! With hair like that, I would have thought she's a..." Lucius' nose had scrunched up in a way as if he had smelt some awful potions with horribly rotten smell. "... Weasley."

But Scorpius was not looking at his grandfather. He was very busy inspecting his nails; however well manicured they might have been, to him they felt terribly inadequate to be presentable at the moment. "She is Rose Weasley. Her dad just died, and her mum is..."

"I know very well who her mother is." Another voice filled with derision had joined them, "What did she want of you?"

"Of me? Nothing!" The boy sounded mesmerized, "That's what she told me. She said...she wanted nothing from me. I am a Malfoy... I could get her anything if I wanted to, if she were my friend. Why didn't she want anything, Father?" He had asked his dad, for he could not understand how anyone could ignore a Malfoy hand stretched out in friendship. So he whined, "She just hangs around with that Potter boy."

Draco returned to his first year in his mind, smugly offering friendship to a wild-haired, scar-headed boy. It still stung him how his hand had been ignored on account of a certain redheaded blood-traitor and a bushy-haired Mudblood; he sneered at the memory saying, "You don't need to be friend with the likes of her. Blood-traitors, those Weasleys are! I thought I told you not to speak with those Gryffindors!"

"I haven't. I've not spoken to her before this day, Father, even though she is a Slytherin like the Potter brat."

His grandfather, who had been watching the conversation, had a thoughtful look in his cold, gray eyes. He spoke more to himself than to them. "Curiouser and curiouser!"

His dad asked, "What? A Slytherin Weasley?"

The aristocratic, older version of the three had smiled at the child, "Maybe you had not tried hard enough; that can be easily rectified."

The smile that hadn't touched his eyes caused a shiver to run up the little boy's spine.

A.N.: To get the next chapter quickly everyone must say, "Marvelous Medicaments for Muggle's Mythical and Magical Maladies by Malcolm Mathew McDougall. " five times, aloud! Uh!Uh! Quicker than that! Now practice again.

## Misty Water-Colored Memories.

*Chapter 6 of 18*

Yes, this is hell. Otherwise he would have met Lily again. She's not here, Granger is. Shouldn't Longbottom and Potter be included, too, if it is his hell!

Disclaimer:

None of the characters are mine. Why would I write a fanfic about my own creation? That's just silly. Wouldn't I have instead written seven novels about a boy named Severus and his conquest of the evil Dark Lord with a soppy fairy tale ending? The books are not about Severus, you say, they're about Harry? Then it's a good thing I am not J.K., never wrote any of them.

A.N.: Thanks to my reviewers for their encouragement. Thank you for reading.

Beta acknowledgment: Many thanks to Writermerrin for her hard work.

Rose found her aunt in the kitchen, preparing for dinner.

"Hey, Rosie, would you be a doll and help me with the potatoes?" she asked the girl.

"Not that I ever heard of potato-peeling dolls, but I will always help you anyway, Aunt Ginny."

"Ha-ha! Smarty."

"What are you making?"

"Shepherd's pie. Here, take them. Uh-uh! Start peeling in the Muggle way. You go to school now, you know the rule of no magic outside Hogwarts."

"I don't like the Muggle way," Rose complained about the method, even though she followed her aunt's direction.

"Why?"

"I just don't."

"Is it because of your dad? Sweetie, you can't go on blaming an entire race for an accident. It could have happened to anybody, any given day. Awful, sad and unjust things happen to good people, too—it's called life, which is hardly ever fair, if at all. "

"What is it you want to talk about, Aunt Gin? Life? Dad? Fairness?" Her tone was impassive and clipped.

"Who said I want to talk about anything in particular? We could talk about anything you like as we cook. That's what families do, they talk, they catch up...."

"What did Mum send you up to ask me?"

"Why do you think she would send me up? I can talk to my niece anytime I want, thank you very much."

Rose gave her aunt the look that told Ginny that she wasn't fooled. Ginny sighed. "Oh, well, it wasn't your mum; it was your Uncle Harry. He was worried about you receiving gifts from the Malfoys."

"Mum always whines about anything and everything I do or feel, and that she sent Uncle Nev... I mean Professor Longbottom to 'investigate' might have been my clue. But how did Uncle Harry know that the gift was from Scorpius? Oh, the owl!"

"Yes, the owl. Your mum loves you. Don't use anything of the Malfoys' before having one of us check it out for Dark magic. His grandfather slipped me a diary with Voldemort's soul inside it when I was your age. I almost died, and the racket the diary caused could be written as a novel. Harry saved the day, of course, and your mum and dad helped."

"Yeah, I know that story. Dad did most of the helping, Mum was a cat; both of them told us. Dad's versions were funnier though." The edgy rudeness veiled in cold sarcasm had left Rose, leaving an eleven-year-old child with fond memories of her lost father in its wake.

Ginny smiled sadly, remembering how goofy her brother had been. She used to pick on him for that, and now she wished she hadn't. She wished he would come back and be goofy again. Her brothers were like parts of her being, and it felt like she had lost two of the most vital parts of her by losing two of them. She could not imagine how it was for these two little kids. She could not imagine what would happen to her kids if Harry ever....

Rose broke the sudden silence. "Scorpius is not his granddad. He's in my year. He's goo... well, he is okay." Rose broke the sudden silence.

"I hope for your sake he is, if you are going to be friends with him." Ginny sounded thoughtful.

"He's arrogant, though—full of himself."



"Didn't you see the dictionary? That's what Malfoy means!"

"Who's smarty now?"

"Peel your potatoes," Ginny scolded mockingly, and Rose smiled smugly, knowing she had won the round.

SSSSSS

Something else was missing. Often he could hear a voice in his sleep...*Granger's voice*. Why the girl insisted on chattering near him, he could not fathom. Perhaps he had died and gone to Hell, and this was his punishment for having been an unfair teacher to all those children. What else would listening to the voice of the one student who annoyed him most—with her insufferable showing off by parroting out her bookish knowledge—mean?

Lately, he had heard it continuously. If he could only open his eyes to know where he was!*Is it my classroom? Am I confined to my most hated place? One would think she is reading from books, the way she cites fact after fact.* He would consider it cheating if anyone did that in his presence, in his classroom!*If only I could manage to take away a few points from Gryffindor!* Then again, perhaps he should feel thankful that whoever was controlling his punishment hadn't made him award points to that House; that could really be hurtful.

*Shouldn't Longbottom and Potter be included, too, if it is my Hell?* He would think so from his experience with them. Sometimes, he could have sworn he'd heard them, too. Maybe the underworld had decided on Granger because she had all those books to vex him eternally. She could go on and on and on....

That made sense. He hadn't paid any attention to what she was saying. Sometimes it would seem like she was pleading for something, but he'd not care. At least he no longer felt as vacant with all this chattering.

*Yes, this is Hell.* Otherwise he would have met Lily again. *She's not here, Granger is.*

Then suddenly all became very quiet, like it had been before. He couldn't hear Granger anymore. Was she dead, too? Was she suffering her Hell by reading endlessly to him? Was that the reason she was begging something of him? He regretted slightly not listening to her plea.

Probably she had moved on. He didn't think a girl like her would at all be 'hell-material' if she hadn't bothered him so much in his life. Longbottom or Potter could not read the way she did, so it would be easier to ignore them and sleep in peace again.

Even though Granger's constant voice had irritated him out of his peaceful sleep, he supposed he somewhat missed it. He could not call it memory; he didn't know what to call it, and it seemed to be gone, too. Hmm, he would do what he had meant to do all along... he would sleep some more.

HHHHHH

"Well, it's been three hours since we did it. Don't you think he would have shown any sign by now if it's working?" asked one of the faces that were hunched over a bed looking intently at an unmoving figure whose face matched the sheet on the hospital bed. There was no change in the patient's condition; they'd checked magically and manually.

"Maybe he's adjusting to it. He was without them for too long. I think I'll keep a watch on him all night. You guys go back home to your families," the other man told them.

"I could stay," the woman said gingerly. She really did not want to watch another of her failures all night long.

"No, it's all right. I'll let you know if I see any change in his condition," Neville replied.

"I hoped it would work. It seemed like the perfect solution," Harry complained.

"We'll figure something out. I am not giving up on him already," Neville said. The war had changed him, made him bold, determined and some what obsessive—at least in this case.

"I was wrong to think I could bring him back by giving him what he cherished most. Maybe it doesn't matter how much I... we want him to be alive; it is only through his wish that he can come back. Maybe it's not the memory he wanted, maybe it was the love behind it," Hermione said sadly.

"Life is not a fairy tale, Hermione. There is no true love to kiss one back to life from a deathly sleep. Let's go home." Harry let Hermione precede him and followed, after saying goodbye to Neville. He whispered only for Hermione's hearing, "Besides, I don't have the stone anymore. I can't bring Mum back anyway, neither do I like the idea of my mother kissing Snape. It had to be something else—or someone else—if your newest theory is true."

## Welcome Back, Professor Snape!

*Chapter 7 of 18*

'What did these troublemakers get themselves into this time?' Severus almost forgot about his hell and wished to get up thinking, 'Will they never leave me in peace!'

A.N.: Thanks, everyone, for reading. Thank you, Writermerrin and Annie Talbot, for beta reading.

*There it was..*he thought he heard Potter and Longbottom talking. For a moment, he thought he heard Granger, too. This time he paid attention...she was saying something about wanting someone alive very much... *What did these troublemakers get themselves into this time?*He almost forgot about his hell and wished to get up thinking, *will they never leave me in peace?*

Then a rush of memories, once lost, filled him. These were the memories he was missing that left him a hollow, shell of a man. He was whole again. Shouldn't he go after Granger and her comrades in crime?

Oh, but these were his times with Lily! He had somehow found them again...the playground, Hogwarts. Granger's reading seemed to be fading away..*Granger! Don't... don't go.* Lily again...smiling, walking with him by the lake.*Why was Granger going home with Potter?*

~\*H\*~

The next day, Hermione brought Albus and Rose to the castle, and Harry was to bring Lily and Hugo later. They would stay in the castle until Hermione's parents arrived from Melbourne, Australia. Like Hermione's own children, Lily and Albus were very fond of her parents. The Grangers thought it was wonderful that Hermione chose Australia to settle them in at the time of the war. The only thing Dan Granger complained about regarding Australia was their world champion cricket team. Hermione was smiling to herself, remembering her father's fondness for the game, as she walked down the steps towards the dungeon to seek out Rose.

Hermione needed to know about the detention Neville had assigned to Rose for talking back to him. Why Rose was becoming more and more difficult each day, she did not know. Hermione was trying her best to get to her. But in her anger, Rose was pushing back every effort her mother was making. She used to respect her elders; Hermione raised her that way. She used to like Neville as she liked her other uncles. The smile vanished from Hermione's face. She didn't think she could do it alone anymore; the most difficult thing in this world probably was being a single parent to angry and grieving children, more difficult than defeating Voldemort. She felt like Harry... he too was trapped to his duty by fate.

~\*S\*~

"Auntie Herms! Auntie Herms! Aunt Mione! This is Al, are you in here?"

*A child has lost his aunt and ventured into my hell...* That couldn't be right. He opened his eyes to see what sort of hell let a child in.

*It's not a hell after all...* Severus told himself, looking at the standard Hogwarts' issued hospital robe on his person, *Well, it is; what else would you consider to call lying on a Hogwarts' hospital bed?* Merlin, how I hate to smell the artificialities of this distilled sanitization! Poppy knew better than to... Where is Poppy by the way?

Instead of Poppy, he met the owner of the young voice...a first-year, that much was obvious, with a mop of untidy black hair and a pair of big green eyes. *Potter! Oh, God! I am back in time!*...was his first impression. Then he took a deep breath, which cooled him enough to take a second look. He was slightly reassured that it might not be the case, after all. Potter wore glasses, and there was no sign of a lightning-bolt-shaped scar on this boy's forehead.

Maybe he had slept a few more days than what he would have guessed, a few months probably! Yes, that certainly would explain why he had never met this boy before. The school year had started, and standing before him was a new first-year student. *Lots of people have green eyes and black hair; it's hardly rare, right?*

As he steadied himself, he turned his head and found that the boy was approaching the bed with a curious look on his face.

"Um... hello... who are you?" the boy asked.

"I'm Severus... water." He needed water to soothe his long unused voice before he dared to talk anymore.

"You, too? Me, too! Hello, Mr. Water. Nice to meet you."

"No, I am not Water. I want water." An annoyed Severus shook his head as he spoke in his raspy voice again.

"Sorry about that." The boy waved his wand and Conjured a glass of water.

*Pretty advanced for a first year,* Severus thought as he sipped the water, then asked, "What do you mean by 'you, too'?"

"It's just... I am named after him, too," the boy replied as if it were clear as daylight.

"Named after whom, exactly?"

"Severus Snape, the bravest headmaster my dad ever saw, he told me so."

That left more questions unanswered, so he had to ask, "I thought you were Al."

"I am. I am Albus Severus Potter, named after two of the greatest headmasters that..."

"WHAT!" He almost jumped up. Looking frantically everywhere around him, he hoarsely shouted, as much as he could manage in his condition, "What sort of joke is this? Potter! Potter!"

Albus Severus Potter was smart enough to understand that the Potter the man on the bed was looking for was not him. Even though he was frightened by Severus' antics, he was brave enough to say, "No, sir, no joke, I really am named after two of the greatest headmasters of this school...Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape. And... and my dad truly told me Severus Snape was the bravest man he had ever seen, even if he was a Slytherin like me. Why are you so angry? Don't you like Headmaster Snape?"

"I am Severus Snape," he wanted to say. He wanted to say a lot more than that, but the one particular voice from his sleep was back, now with the face of one Hermione Granger.

"What's going on in here? Al! What are you... Oh, God! Professor Snape! You're up! You woke up!" With that, she rushed towards him and hugged him fiercely in his half-sitting position, sobbing incoherently. She raised her face and said, "You are awake!"

Astonished at her behavior, he asked, "What's going on, Granger? Am I in some other reality? You look... different." He had enough presence of mind to not tell a lady that she looked older even if he had been out for quite some time. Instead, he bombarded her with questions, as she used to do in his class. "Why are you embracing me and sobbing over me? Are we married? Is this our child? You have the audacity to name him..." He pointed to the now saucer-eyed child.

"No! That would be Harry, seeing as he's the father, he named him." She looked embarrassed as she moved away from him. But he read her face wrongly, and he caught her hand firmly...well, as firmly as he could...

"What kind of world is this? You married me and had a child with Potter, who named him with a combination of my name and..." He sounded highly insulted.

"Stop saying that. It's the same world as always; I didn't marry you, nor have I ever cheated with Harry. Ew! He's like a brother to me. Albus is Harry and Ginny's youngest son; their oldest one is James and they have a daughter named Lily. Yes, he is named after you as a sign of his father's respect for you."

He snorted at that. Then looked at her again. She's not a girl anymore. He had to know. "How long?"

"Nineteen years and a few months."

"That long!" Severus was out of words. He let go of her hand. *That long!* he repeated in his mind, then asked her, "the Dark Lord?"

"Voldemort's dead forever. We destroyed all the Horcruxes, including Harry's scar. Neville got Nagini."

As he took in the information, Granger seemed to recover quickly. She sent the Potter to the Headmistress after swearing him to secrecy. Then she sent two Patronuses to who-knew-where, stating urgency.

Then she started checking his vital signs. "What are you doing? Where's Poppy?"

"She's no longer here, and I am doing my job. What else did you think I was doing here?"

"Oh, I don't know. The way you embraced me, I would have guessed, in some bizarre reality, I went out of my mind and married you. *Why do I like embarrassing her so much? Is it because how beautifully she blushes... what am I doing?*

"Stop acting delusional on purpose...you haven't married anyone..."

He cut her off. "So, you hug all your patients?" *Merlin, why can't I stop flirting with her?*

"Of course I don't! We were worried about you; I had almost given up any hope of your recovery, so I got a little carried away. It's no big deal." She flushed as she protested, and he decided that he liked the color on her for some reason unknown to himself.

He asked, "Who else is included in this 'we'?"

She told him the whole story as she knew it. When she finished, he was so overwhelmed he could only say, "Longbottom? Why?"

"I don't know, Professor. The way you scared him throughout his childhood, one would think he'd be happy to see you gone; instead, he saved your life. Neville did what he wanted to do for his own parents; he cared for you as any son would. Harry had your memories; they are the reason you're awake today. Also, Minerva provided this place so that you could have a decent treatment until you're well, in the privacy we all thought you would like."

"Where do you fit in, Granger?"

"Nowhere. I just work here, and by the way, my name is Weasley, as it has been for more than fifteen years," she replied.

He suddenly felt somehow betrayed that she had gone off and married that Weasley boy. *What a terrible waste!* He did not know why it angered him so much; he did not want to know anymore. So he did the one thing he did best, he lashed out at her.

"So where is our esteemed Mr. Weasley? Or did he come to his senses and run out on you with Lavender Brown?"

Hermione looked as if she had been slapped in the face. She looked at him for a moment, then smiled a strange smile, saying more to herself than to him, "Sometimes, I think, I would have preferred if he had done just that... he would have still been alive, then."

Then she looked in his eyes and said, "If you'll excuse me, Professor. I have some other patients to hug," and left the room.

Her strange smile, her wistful melancholy voice and the faraway look in her eyes tightened something in his chest. All of a sudden, he wanted to hold her close, comfort her, and say how extremely sorry he was for his thoughtlessness. He wanted to take away all her sorrow and erase that strange smile to put a happy one on her face instead... one that would befit the girl who used to laugh like a zephyr over a midday river.

That in itself was very strange. He didn't think he even liked Hermione Granger... um... Weasley? He couldn't possibly call her that! No matter how sorry he was.

How was he to know? He had never thought of any of his students dying, not even Ronald Weasley and his friends, not even when they were fighting the Dark Lord. They had always somehow managed to survive.

No, he did not like her any more than he used to. The only Gryffindor he liked was his Lily; he respected Dumbledore and tolerated Minerva. Then why was he thinking about her? Maybe because, just like him, she had lost the love of her life—even if it had been Ronald Weasley—and he not only had injured but also insulted her about it.

Things had changed in this world while he had been sleeping... his personality hadn't. He had lashed out in the same pettiness, showed the same immaturity, and the victim was only at fault for helping him.

Severus decided to change his ways, to be more receptive to the world of good that came with the Dark Lord's demise, to apologize to... um... his Healer!

## The Return of Ronald Weasley.

*Chapter 8 of 18*

What goes inside the mind of the Malfoy senior? Let's find out.

A/N: I am eternally grateful to amazing Annie Talbot for beta reading.

Disclaimer: I would never take a penny for telling the true story of Severus Snape; I am not Rita Skeeter!

Hermione's talk with Rose was fruitless. She needed to find some way to reach her daughter. All she could get out of Rose were a few "fines" and "okays" and some shrugs. Her detention with Hagrid was "fine"; it was "okay" to go to the Forbidden Forest and see where Voldemort thought he had killed her Uncle Harry. Hagrid told her the "same old story" and showed her how to get "stuff" for Professor Rickman's Potions class. Professor Sidney P. Rickman had replaced Professor Slughorn the same year James had started Hogwarts.

Normally, Rose would have been thrilled to see her grandparents, but this time she shrugged off all of her mum's requests to meet them, saying she had too much to catch up on at the library, so she could not leave. Hermione thought that it was a lame excuse, and she told her so. As a result, they ended up yelling at each other. Rose had inherited both of her parents' tempers. She yelled her recent usual... "You would never understand, Mum!"...and Hermione left before she could really lose her patience. Besides, it was so painful to watch her daughter sulking like Ron used to.

The only thing that the girl told her lately was that she could never understand. What about all her efforts to understand? Didn't they count? Hermione felt like crying.

She reached her office and found out that Professor Snape had woken up. She had lost her composure, run to him, and... She hugged him. She would have never done it if she were in her right mind, right?

Of course. As she said, she did not go around hugging all her patients. Never had she ever thought of hugging that tyrant!

But the insufferable man would never let it go. He started teasing her about such a silly misstep. Then he went out of his way to insult Ron. Even though he had no way to know about Ron's fate, he should not go about insulting people left and right, in Hermione's opinion.

sssSSsss

He had planned to apologize the next time he saw her, but that was impossible since she was with Minerva McGonagall, Neville Longbottom, and Harry Potter. She didn't throw a single glance towards him the whole time, at least not while he was looking at her. He could hardly stare at her, but he did look more than he would have any other time. As far as he was concerned, he was the one who did all the looking.

She did not speak to him; she spoke only to the others, and only when they asked her a direct question; then she provided the shortest possible answer in the quietest possible monotone. She was extremely angry with him, and she wanted him to know it, he supposed.

Secretly admiring how she looked when enraged, he had amusedly observed an angry Hermione before, when Potter or Weasley was the target of her wrath. But there was absolutely nothing amusing about how he felt, nor was it easy to watch her hurt because of his words. He had caused her tears before...but he had caused most of his students tears, so that hardly counted.

His visitors asked him all sorts of questions about how he was feeling, and he managed a polite and civil conversation, which was highly uncharacteristic of him given the company present. He even waved off Minerva's apologies without any well-deserved barb. He kept himself focused on his earlier promise to himself about being a better person.

The only terse thing he had said was directed to Potter, and it was..."You have done it, haven't you? In your silly sentimentality, you have tied up my name with the name of my childhood nemesis and the only man I have murdered... Was it more fun than killing off the Dark Lord?"

And the gall of the boy! ...The man! He laughed out loud until his eyes were all watery before saying, "Very much."

Severus could only shake his head when the others had joined in Potter's laughter...all except her. She didn't laugh, not even a hint of a smile. She left quietly before anyone even noticed her absence. He wanted to call out and ask her to stay, but thought it better not to embarrass himself in front of the others.

He thanked them again and again for saving him. He acknowledged his life debt to Longbottom and Potter, but they waved it off and told him that they were the ones paying some of their countless debts to him, instead. He couldn't fathom how their Gryffindor minds worked, but he let them know he was extremely grateful to them and would do anything for them.

Again, Potter said to forget about it.

"Besides, Hermione was the one who thought to put your memories back. Without her, you still wouldn't be you. She really was the one who brought you back," added Neville Longbottom.

He wondered why she had never thought to mention that part. Was it just her modesty or did she really not believe she had taken any important part in his recovery?

Minerva said, "One had your body, one had your memories, and the other thought to put them together to bring you back. They did it once again, Severus. You should be proud of them. I know that I am."

And he was.

mmmMMmmm

Lucius Malfoy was very happy about how things were progressing. Everything was proceeding according to his plan. He had been at King's Cross station with Draco and his family to see the kid off, as any doting grandfather would do. But as soon as he saw Potter and his sidekick whispering together, away from the rest of their gang, he had to Disillusion himself to know what they were on about. He knew those two were his investigating Aurors and the *Daily Prophet* wouldn't let anyone forget how skilled they were at catching Dark wizards red-handed in crimes.

One must keep one's enemies close and to be close to one's enemies...and, if they were anything like Potter...one must Disillusion oneself. So as a sensible wizard, he did just that. It was sheer luck that he had heard Weasley's aptitude for driving those Muggle transportation vehicles. A consummate Slytherin like Lucius Malfoy had never wasted an opportunity that came to sit on his lap invitingly. All he had to do was Imperio the driver of the other vehicle, and... *Voila!* Pop goes the weasel!

Potter needed to be knocked off his feet next. He might have found a thread to get to Potter through his goddaughter. To get to her, Lucius needed his own grandson's cooperation. He needed to form a foolproof plan. He didn't mind using children for his purpose; that's what they were for...a means to an end. The boy must learn the Malfoy way firsthand.

He had sent an innocent book as a Christmas present on behalf of his grandson to gain the girl's trust, just in case any of those nutters chose to check it for her safety. There would be time enough to strike when their guards eased down. They had to form sort of a friendship for his plan to work. The boy had to be trained properly about what he needed to do and how subtly it needed to be done, so he would not back out on his duty. Lucius had to see to it himself; he would not allow Draco to muck things up once again. The sour thought came back to him...*Ugh! With his near-Gryffindor subtlety and incompetence, Draco might just as well have been... any Weasley.*

Unlike Bella, Lucius disliked unnecessary bloodshed; it seemed so...*unsophisticated*. He avoided it whenever possible. Controlling others' minds was so much better and so much...less messy!

He stopped whistling the "Mulberry bush" tune and tapping his long pale fingers on his office desk as he had one of the house-elves send for his mostly incompetent, yet unquestionably obedient, son.

rrrRRrrr

Rose had found a strange stone in the forest when Hagrid took her to get ingredients for Professor Rickman. She could not really call it a detention in her mind. Would anyone call a stroll and picking up leaves, flowers, and bugs a detention? Of course, if she counted Hagrid's same old war story... Nah! Still not a detention.

Anyway, she would apologize to Uncle Neville, even if she thought him way too mismatched for her mum. She loved Uncle Neville as Uncle Neville, not as her would-be step-dad.

The only good thing that came out of that detention was the intriguing stone. She could tell it was magical. But she could not detect what sort of magic...good or bad. Maybe she should let Uncle Harry have a look at it.

She was still sitting on her bed playing with the stone...tossing and turning it. She didn't have much to do. She had lied to Mum about catching up because she did not want to go to Muggle world, and Mum wanted Rose to visit her grandparents in their Surrey home. They were coming from Australia. She liked them, just not where they lived...in the Muggle world, with all those Muggle cars.

Rose was not reading anything because she could not concentrate. She was the only Slytherin girl left in the school at the moment, so the dorm was pretty much empty. Rose had no friend here to unburden her mind; most of her classmates were so immature. Absentmindedly, she played with the stone in her hand and thought of how much she missed her dad, how much she wished he were here.

Suddenly, a shift of movement alerted her to someone's presence. Rose looked up to see her dad standing in front of her with a familiar smile on his face.

## Chapter: 9. The Redemption Song.

*Chapter 9 of 18*

Why did her anger bother him so much? Why did his chest hurt, remembering her face? When had he started seeing shadows of Lily in her? Why did he want to see her face light up as it had when she first saw him awake? He wanted to fill her big brown eyes with laughter, with life. She shouldn't mourn for a lost love like he did.

Disclaimer: Nope, not mine.

A/N.: I want to tell you guys a secret: I've got the most wonderful betas in the Fandom, and they go by the names of Writermerrin and Annie Talbot.

Wanting to hug her father, Rose ran towards him. "Daddy! Daddy! You came back!" But she could not embrace him. He did not have a solid mortal body. He came in a spiritual form. Rose could tell he was not a ghost like the Bloody Baron or Sir Nick. Dad was less substantial than living bodies but much more than ghosts.

It surprised Rose and she asked, "You are my dad, aren't you? Why can't I hug you? You are not a ghost, I've met ghosts. How did you come here? Can anybody else see you?"

"I am your dad, as always. I'm here because you wanted to see me; you're the one who brought me back, Poppet. You are in possession of a very special stone: your Uncle Harry's resurrection stone. It brings back the loved one if one wishes to see them after their death. I am not real in a sense that you are, but that does not mean I am your imagination either. Nor am I a ghost."

Her dad told her the whole story behind the legendary stone that was gifted by Death to the second Peverell brother. Harry'd had this stone and decided to let it go and not seek it anymore because one could not really bring back the dead as if nothing had happened. It only complicated things, and dead people are not really eager to come back if they were good and had a happy life like Rose's dad had had.

"Rosie, you have to move forward with your life, and your life is with your mum and your little brother. I cannot be on earth physically, but that doesn't mean I'm not watching over you."

Rose wanted to know if her dad really would have disowned her because of her house. The spirit of Ron Weasley gave a hearty laugh at that and said, "I could not have been any prouder! I'm the father of the first Weasley in nine generations to be sorted into that house. You accomplished the impossible. Don't you know, nothing you do can ever make me love you any less? You are my child; my love for you is eternal and unconditional, and so is your mum's love."

He told her that part of him always would be with her, Hugo and their mum.

Dad wasn't mad at Mum when Rose told him her suspicion about Uncle Neville, even though he thought it was highly unlikely. He told Rose that he wanted Mum to be happy as she had been before, that he did not like seeing her so sad. She and Hugo should welcome anyone who would make her happy, even if it were Neville.

He told Rose to be a good girl for Mum and mindful of her studies and Hugo. He told that her any time she needed to talk he would come back, but that she really should give the living a chance.

Rose felt much better than she had in a long time, to have her dad only a "stone-call" away.

sssSSSsss

Even though it had been more than a few days, she was still angry with him. He could tell by how stiff her shoulders were or how her eyes never met his. She had waved off his attempted apology by saying it was unnecessary and she saw "no difference," whatever that meant.

He was still weak, so she had not released him yet, but he was getting stronger by the day with her amazing care. He had to admit, no one had ever cared for him in this way, even though he had been on the verge of death many times before. He could tell she applied that 'clinical detachment' to her face forcibly. No one could take care of a person the way she did and not care.

He'd had enough. He had wanted to see some expression on her face. If she was angry, he had wanted her to scream at him, hurl some insult, as many of her friends had done before. He had wanted to see her big brown eyes raging with emotion. He'd wanted to her to... look at him.

Tonight, he had thrown the soup she had sent with the house-elf flying to the opposite wall and demanded her presence. She had come, and when she'd asked what he required of her, she had looked somewhere by his left ear.

He had really had enough.

"Look at me!" Severus thundered. Then he added in a softer tone, "I have told you, I am sorry to have wounded you. Now that I know what happened, I understand your pain, I really do. Why will you not accept my apology?"

She looked into his eyes evenly, saying, "I don't know what to do with your apology truly. I never had it before; I am used to your insults. Cruelty, thy name is Severus Snape, I used to think..."

She looked away again as she trailed off, not noticing how Severus flinched at that. Was he really as cruel to be defined by it? Then he remembered. From the first day in his class, he had ignored her fresh young mind as if she didn't count. She wasn't important enough for his attention, as a very odd little Muggle-born, in comparison with the boy who lived to remind Severus of his father's cruelty and his mother's wrong choice.

The harder she had tried, the more harshly he had berated her. The more she had wanted to please him with every bit of knowledge acquired of a world new and unknown, the more he had insulted her for being a show off, a brown nose. Nothing she did had been good enough. He'd seemed to hate her with a blind passion, never given her a chance, and never tolerated anything less than perfect from her. He remembered how he had humiliated her publicly for Rita Skeeter's dreadful lies. He remembered the teeth incident and understood why the 'no difference' comment was directed back to him.

Severus Snape felt ashamed of himself and looked up to truly beg her forgiveness. But he had been quiet for a long time, longer than what was polite. And once again, she had left.

sssSSSsss

It had been two days since she had come to him, leaving Longbottom to see to his care. Severus pretended he hadn't noticed the change. He'd never even mentioned her name.

Severus could no longer stay in that room; the walls were closing on him, he needed to get out. The students were not yet back from their holidays, but even if they had been, none of them would have been out that late at night. He was free to roam around.

Flying always was the best way to clear one's mind, but he was too weak to fly around without a proper broom, and Severus had never liked flying with a broom that much; he preferred the natural way. With that option out, he decided to take a walk by the lake instead. Walking had also helped in the past.

Lily used to walk with him sometimes. Those were the only times he had walked with someone by his side; every other step he had taken had been alone and only alone since.

He Transfigured the hospital gown to his usual winter wear and the pillows from his bed into boots. Even though that much wandless magic was a stretch for any regular wizard, Severus hardly bothered with wands when he was alone. His wand was on display at the War Museum along with one of his teaching robes, anyway.

He walked in the moonlight by the lake. He stopped, took a pebble, threw it in the water, and looked at the ripple it caused.

He needed to figure out what was going on inside his mind. What exactly was he feeling towards her? Why did her anger bother him so much? Why did his chest hurt, remembering her face? When had he started seeing shadows of Lily in her? Why did he want to see her face light up as it had when she first saw him awake? He wanted to fill her big brown eyes with laughter, with life. She shouldn't mourn for a lost love like he did.

It had been a long time since he had felt this pull towards anybody; he never thought he would feel this way for anyone after Lily.

Like Lily, she was bright, brilliant, and beautiful. He had once wanted to make Lily happy too, but Lily had chosen James Potter over him. He'd appealed to the Dark Lord to spare her for him, but Lily had chosen to die instead for the son she had with Potter. She'd never thought of him as more than her best friend, he was the one who had wanted more.

He had spent a lifetime fighting a war, secretly mourning a love he could never have, and he had died for it... only to wake up and live, a vast, empty life of more than a hundred years ahead of him. What was he to do with it, alone?

He had never thought to live through the war. He'd lived dangerously, without a care for his life. He had willingly let both sides use and misuse him.

Lily was not coming back; the memories he treasured would always be his. Could he live off memories alone? Could she? She had more memories of her husband than he had of Lily. On his way out, he had seen the wedding pictures and her family photos that showed her children. He had seen the joy on her husband's face and the adoration in her eyes. *No one ever looked at me that way; will she ever?* He asked himself.

*Never!* he answered himself bitterly, *She won't even look at me. She would probably be happy to see me gone...*

His musing was stopped by the sound of running feet.

It was her. *Why is she running at this time of the night?* The way she was looking all around her with her wand pointing forward, it looked like she was seeking something with the Point me spell. His curiosity got the better of him.

"Have you lost something?" he asked.

"Oh!" she gasped. Startled at the sudden sound of his voice, she turned around, hurried towards him, and halted just a second away from embracing him, remembering last time.

"You! You are here! THANK GOD!" She stretched her hand to touch his face. "You are okay, aren't you?" The tone of her voice betrayed how anxious and shaken she was. "I've been looking all over for you! You gave me such a scare, leaving without a word! Never, never, ever do that to me again, do you hear me?" She couldn't stop her tears as the words rushed from her mouth.

He stepped closer. "What did you think happened to me, Hermione?" he asked softly.

"I thought they had taken you...Lucius and his gangs. I thought I'd lost you to the Death Eaters." She realized as she said this how unfounded her fear had been, as Lucius had no means to know about Severus.

"What would the others think if Ms. Perfect lost her charge...was that it? Is that why you're looking for me alone? To cover up your faulty record?"

Why did he do that every time? Why did he slice her up with his words? Because the train of his earlier thought had returned at the moment she halted before hugging him. Even though he was the one who teased her for it, he didn't want her to stop this time. This time he wanted her to embrace him.

She went pale at his barb, looked away for a moment, then looked back and quietly said, "Yes, that's exactly what it was. Now that I've found you, let's go inside. You're still too weak to stay out this long, and the night is getting colder. So let's set my records..."

He put his hands on both of her shoulders saying, "Don't lie to me, Hermione. I can tell, since the troll incident, whenever you're lying. You came here because you care about me. You said, 'I thought I'd lost you.' Not we, I."

She turned her face away from him and said, "No I didn't, I don't. I never cared for you...I left you to die, remember? I didn't even check on you. Neville did. I left you to die a horrible, horrible death." She couldn't hold it inside anymore; tears were streaming from her eyes.

Severus took her in his arm, and Hermione sobbed her heart out against his chest. He gently caressed her hair and said, "Shh! Shh! It's all right. I've been terrible to you, too. It's all in the past. I forgave you a long time ago; you need to forgive yourself now." Her grip on him tightened at that, and she calmed down somewhat. Severus rested his head on top of her head.

Still not raising her face, she said, "I've wondered for a long time, you know... I've wondered, if you had seen the moment of Voldemort's death, what would have you done?"

"I would have just walked straight to the prettiest woman and kissed her breathless," Severus joked.

Now she looked up with laughter in her eyes, "Should I Floo-call Lavender Brown, then?"

She reminded him of how he had thought Ron had left her for the pretty blonde. Severus was not joking anymore. He looked down at her very seriously and said,

"No need. I have the prettiest one right here in my own arms." And he kissed her as promised.

# Second Chance.

## Chapter 10 of 18

Severus laughed out loud at the Gryffindorian attempts at manipulation. "Do you think I would jump off any bridge if you say Dumbledore would have wanted me to?"

Lily's son had apparently developed a bit of brain while he had been busy sleeping, as he said, "Didn't you do just that years ago! And also a few minutes ago!"

Disclaimer:

Mine! Mine!! All Mine! ...Not really, too bad!

A/n.: Commas are the most confusing part of writing, and if you ask me...what is the second most confusing thing? I have to say, "had"...sometimes I have plenty of them, so I spread them here and there; and in other times I hardly do... Well, you get the point.

Thank heaven for my Superb betas, Annie Talbot and Writermerrin, for picking them up and placing them properly for me and also for your sanity. So cheer for them with me.

Thanks for reading, it really is a big chapter, I hope you enjoy reading as much as I did writing it.

ssshhhss

The night had become even colder. It had started to snow lightly. The sleeping castle stood silently behind an embracing couple. How long they had stayed that way...they did not know. The man whispered into his companion's ear, "I've missed you."

"I missed you too," she answered.

"Why did you leave me? Was I that awful..."

She cut him off. "I didn't leave you. I took the kids to visit my parents. They are back from Australia; you can't possibly imagine what it's like having four magical kids in a Muggle home..."

Hermione trailed off as Severus maneuvered them to a sitting position without letting her go from his embrace, saying, "I thought you had two."

"I do, the other two were Ginny's. You've met Al; he and Lily wanted to go, too. Don't scowl; they are good kids. They even share their grandpa's passion for all things Muggle."

"I'll agree to everything if you let me kiss you once more," he bargained.

"You *are* kissing me!" she reminded him.

"So I am." He kept on doing what he had been doing all along...trailing soft kisses on any part of her which was reachable to him in the position they sat: her neck, her face, on top of her head, the lobe of her left ear, palms, knuckles and her wrist.

After a while, he suggested, "Maybe we should go inside."

"Should we?" She sounded dreamy.

"Mmmhmmmm."

"Why?"

"Because the night is getting colder, and I'm a weak, old man."

"Weak, yes. Old...you are not. Old men don't kiss the way you do."

"Been kissed by loads of old men, have you?" The corners of his lips turned upwards.

Swatting his arms, she said, "Just one if you count the present." Hermione renewed the warming charm around them, as he didn't really show any sign of going inside.

"I'm not old! Just a bit old...er than you."

"Severus?"

"Mmmm?"

"What are we doing?"

"Isn't it obvious? We are sitting down under a large tree by the lake, holding each other in the snow...occasionally kissing."

"You know what I meant." But Severus didn't reply; instead he returned his attention to kissing her neck.

"Severus, stop."

Severus stopped kissing, but was still nuzzling her neck. "I don't want to stop; your lips are so sweet. Everything is so perfect. It's so peaceful; I have never felt this peaceful in my life. Are you sure you aren't Lily?" As soon as his last words left his mouth, he understood his mistake.

Hermione had at once straightened up, tearing herself from him, saying, "That's just it! It is not perfect. Hogwarts definitely is not heaven, and I am positive that I certainly am not Lily, just as you can never be Ron. It's too soon; it's not even a year... I feel like I am betraying his memories. But I like your kisses, you see; I feel awful and wonderful, both...at the same time."

He had wanted to apologize, but she went on saying, "You just woke up. You are free for the first time in a long time to do whatever you want. You can't just fall for the first witch you lay your eyes upon. That's how you ended up under Nagini's fang the last time. You need to see the worlds of options out there."

He became angry...*how had it been Lily's fault that the Dark Lord had decided to kill him?* He forgot to ask for forgiveness in his anger. Of course, if Lily had been a little bit more forgiving towards his unwitting offense towards her or hadn't chosen James Potter in his stead, Severus might not have taken the Dark Mark in the first place. But his love towards that particular person was always blind enough to not see Hermione's logic.

"What are you saying?" he asked her coldly.

"I think you are transferring your feelings from those memories to physicality, to a face... to me. You really don't see me, you see Lily's shadow. And I can't be the shadow of a ghost of your lost love; I can't be Lily for you. I am and always will be Hermione Jane."

"Suddenly you are a psychiatrist, are you?" He had been getting angrier.*How dare she drag Lily into this!*

Knowing his temper, she remained quiet.

"So that's it then? I thought my company was enjoyable a few minutes ago! You certainly didn't mind kissing me back! What is it? Am I too old for you? Not rich enough? Or is it my face that turns you off...my infamous past? Maybe it is because I am a killer?" His voice was chillier than the night.

"You are right, Healer Weasley; it is getting colder out here." He stood up abruptly to leave.

Hermione grabbed his arm to make him stop.

"Severus, please. Don't be like that! You are no more a killer than Harry or any of us who fought that war. Please, Severus! You must have felt how I've always respected you, admired your brilliance. Besides, I would not have let you kiss me had I not found you attractive.

"This little age difference doesn't matter, we aren't Muggles. We live twice as long as they do. I have never cared for money; I chose Ron, who had practically nothing when we decided to get married. Nothing...except his love, and that's all that mattered. I don't know if I love you, I don't know if you could love me. I don't know if you could ever love anybody who's not Lily. You had almost died without her memories."

"Lily is gone, Hermione. So is your husband...all they are, are memories. We are the ones left behind to live a hundred years," he tried to reason.

"Can you close your eyes, Severus? For a moment, please close your eyes. Who do you see, Severus, when you do? Do you see my face, or will it always be Lily's?"

He did not answer that, nor did he close his eyes, for he was certain that it would not be Hermione's face he would see, had he done just that.

With eyes full of expectancy, she stood in front of him; then the hope left her big brown eyes, and she smiled that strange smile again. "Told you! It's too soon for me, too. Let's go inside. Maybe when you're all better and have sorted through all your options by kissing all the Lavender Browns... You will be able to laugh about tonight. After all, I'm only pretty when nobody else is around. If nothing else, we will always have our kisses in the moonlit snow." She sounded so tragic...had she been still his student, he would have screamed at how pathetic she sounded, like he wanted to...

"Do not ever degrade yourself. I would never kiss any Lavender Brown over you," he said in a barely controlled voice.

"Never ever? She's even prettier now...I've heard. Your loss." Attempting to lighten up the heavy air between them, she pulled his hands to go inside.

He did not want to go with her. He did not care to go inside. All the snow in Scotland wouldn't cool his rising temper.*What is she, a new Trelawney with a real inner eye? How did she come up with that 'Lily's shadow' thing?* And she was leading him as if nothing had changed between them. He was not a little boy to toy with. He would have none of her nonsense. *How many had she kissed and sent packing to see the world?* Severus had to know.

Once they reached his room, she went looking for his hospital gowns, couldn't find them, and grabbed a new set from somewhere he didn't care to know. Offering them to him, she said, "I don't know what happened to your hospital clothes. Here try this."

"Wearing them," he grumbled.

"What? How? I thought your wand... I see. Practice what you preach, eh? But no foolish wandless magic in your condition either. Don't do any unnecessary strenuous magic," she said sternly.

"How many?" Severus hissed with jealous rage. He wasn't thinking anything clearly, but visualizing Hermione kissing man after man with trunks and traveling cloaks, in the midnight snow, and... and...

"How many what? How many times should you practice wandless magic? I must say none. If you need anything, all you have to do is to ask till Harry gets your wand back from the museum, or have you decided to get a new wand?"

Ignoring her rambling and offering, he progressed towards her. Biting each word, he asked, "How. Many. Were. There. Before. Me?" Severus grabbed her shoulders to make her look at him and roared, "How many did you play this game with? Did Weasley know how his wife was betraying him?"

She looked confused at first, then mortified that he should think so lowly of her. Then she, too, became angry and stepped back from him, saying, "I have never betrayed Ronald before tonight."

He curled his lips and said, "If you say so!" clearly indicating he didn't believe a word she'd said.

"I do."

Hermione wanted to cry, to scream. She couldn't believe he would think her as such a... a... harlot! He was the one who had started kissing her; now he was accusing her? Surely he didn't believe anything he was saying. But why was he acting as if he was... jealous! He wouldn't confirm he didn't feel anything for her, nor would he admit he did, but he was blaming her for breaking up what wasn't there in the first place. *That's outrageous! The man's insane!*

They didn't have a relationship. All it was, was a few kisses, wasn't it?

Was it? Didn't she feel something in his arms? Didn't she feel content to hear his heart beating under her cheek? Didn't she want him to keep on kissing her? He had made her feel so wanted in the months when she was feeling useless and unneeded, slowly losing everything including her children.

Months! That's it! Ron's gone, and she was kissing him. No wonder he had thought of her as if she was a ... harlot... How she hated that word! He had mourned for his love for thirty-some years, wearing only black at that. She felt ashamed; what would the others think? The rest of the family? Harry? Ginny? How would her kids react?

Severus was watching her emotions playing all over her face. He didn't need Legilimency to read any Gryffindor's thoughts, and she was as Gryffindor as they came; he thanked heaven for that.

His anger had washed away his reason when he had grabbed her; something new washed away that anger...his face softened, and so did his voice. He took her hand in his and said, "Hermione, I am sorry."

She looked down at their joined hands, mistook his apology for goodbye, and sighed, then patted it with her other hand, saying, "I understand." When she started to move away, he didn't let go.



"No, you do not understand, Hermione. I'm sorry that I'd lost my temper, and in my anger, I mistrusted you; I'm sorry that I called you Lily, but I am not sorry that I kissed you. Would I have done it back then? I don't know...I wasn't there. I'm not the same person I was back then; neither are you. All of us have changed with time. I'm sorry I've insulted you. But trust me when I say I have wanted you. I still do...want you, that is. Why don't we take it slowly? Maybe we don't love each other yet, but you can't deny there is something between us."

She didn't say anything, so he continued, "I felt like I was betraying Lily, too, when I realized my affection for you, and she was never mine to betray. So I do understand what you are feeling. But we're here, Hermione, and we have miles to go... I would love to walk those miles with you by my side. I promise we will cross all the bridges together...family, friends, angry colleagues, well-wishing mobs and kids...all when the time comes. Won't you give us that chance?"

Hermione had been looking at his face the entire time; Severus was so different from the Professor Snape she thought she knew. Maybe she didn't know him at all. Standing before her was just a man: neither a dashing spy nor a cruel teacher...not even a vicious Death Eater. He was just a real, compassionate, giving, caring man in spite of all of those. Yes, he was worth knowing. Yes, against all the odds, he was worth fighting for. Yes, she would very much like to know that man...Severus.

But she could not form any words on her lips to make her feelings known. She just nodded with her eyes full of tears and lips full of smile.

And his eyes seemed to drink on her face before he decided to drink on her lips.

ssshhhss

The previous night had taken a toll on Severus; he had felt quite drained in spite of the Dreamless Sleep Hermione had fed him before she left. He had slept all morning. That afternoon, he had visitors. Harry Potter came, bringing his wand; Minerva came with signed papers from the school board and the Ministry, and Minister Shacklebolt came with Severus' Order of Merlin.

He was cleared of all charges, including euthanasia, by his memory and Harry Potter's testimony. Hermione was right; he was given hero status. There were quite a few different editions of Chocolate Frog cards in which he was either scowling fiercely, glaring menacingly, quirked eyebrows and pointing wands in a dueling stance, or taking points from anyone and everyone for not being a Slytherin. The Potter with his namesake had collected them, and that boy's father had thought it would be great fun to show them to Severus. Severus truly didn't know what to make of this new breed of the Potters!

When Minerva had once again apologized for disbelieving him and asked him to take his old job back, he had thought she was talking about Potions; but apparently they had a very efficient one Professor Rickman there now. Not only was he the best, but apparently he was very popular among the students and the staff, both. How it was that popularity and Potions would go hand in hand, Severus would never fathom, nor would he have cared, anyway. Minerva was asking for the rightful Headmaster to take his place back once he had recuperated completely. "Albus would have wanted it," she said.

With certain other members, Harry Potter wanted him to take the leading chair of the newly reorganized Order of the Phoenix, saying, "Dumbledore would have wanted it."

Severus laughed out loud at the Gryffindorian attempts at manipulation. "Do you think I would jump off any bridge if you say Dumbledore would have wanted me to?"

Lily's son had apparently developed a bit of brain while Severus had been busy sleeping, as he said, "Didn't you do just that years ago! And also a few minutes ago!"

Hermione was not here. She had left, saying something about Molly's condition not getting any better and all that. She should be back by evening with her son, Hugo. *What kind of boy is called Hugo?* he thought to himself, and then answered with, *What kind of boy is called Severus!* Maybe she just liked the author; she had also had a friend named "Viktor."

Then his thoughts came back to what Potter had said about needing his expertise. Apparently, Lucius had plenty of time and not much to do these days. So he had busied himself with building a secret army in the Dark Lord's style.

How pitiful! Lucius had never been a leader, always a follower; no original thought had ever crossed the path of the vast, empty land of that pretty blond head. He was devious, shrewd, and cruel, but never in the same caliber with Lord Voldemort. Maybe he had developed more darkness over the years; he was evading any surveillance the Aurors had him under. Potter sounded desperate.

Last night he was an unemployed, unsettled, and unhealthy man who wanted to belong somewhere after waking up from his 'Rip Van Winkle' sleep. Tonight he felt young again...afresh with lots of work and plenty of life ahead. If he was a man who had faith in Divination, he would have said that Hermione was good for his luck. Severus Snape was not a man who believed in Divination, but still he said, "Hermione is my good luck charm."

mmmmMMmmmm

"We have a problem, Father." Draco Malfoy entered his father's library with clear anxiety. "Dear Uncle Severus didn't die after all. My source at the school board said he soon would join the school once again as the Headmaster. Apparently, he was hidden because of his sickness all these years."

His father didn't look up from the book in his hand as he said, "I see no problem, Draco. Severus may have led the Order to believe that he was with them, but he could not possibly have had the Dark Lord fooled. He somehow knew he would survive my merciful Lord, and he took precautions to clear his name as any good Slytherin would do.

"He's a master at his art of manipulation; look how well he did it. The fools even gave him a medal for it... The Order of Merlin... First Class! And he's right back where the Dark Lord had placed him."

"But Potter said he was Dumbledore's man all along. He ..."

His father cut him off, "Potter was a foolish boy, an easy target to hoodwink back then. I know Severus from when he was a mere poor child of eleven. Do you think I would have made friends with a child of poverty if he wasn't worth it? He's Slytherin to the core.

"Prophecy or not...he could have taken out our Lord, had he wanted to. Taking out Dumbledore wasn't an easy job, even for the Dark Lord. Trust me, he tried it himself before. I've always doubted a wizard as powerful as Severus would die in that manner."

Draco wanted to protest that Dumbledore had been weak and frail, and Draco himself could have done it had Snape not barged in. He almost said it once again to his father, but knew Lucius would ignore it. Besides, he didn't want to remind his father of his own incompetence...once again.

Lucius was still speaking. "We don't have a problem, Draco." His smile would have made even Lucifer want to buy a cloak. "It's Potter who will have problems. We have our best ally in the best place; we just have to make ourselves known."

## Chapter: 11, Happy Birthday, Severus Snape.

Her mannerisms disturbed him. Why was she shutting herself off from him again? Would she do that often? How bumpy would these rides be? He vaguely remembered that she and Weasley used to argue more heatedly than any of his other students.

Disclaimer:

Not mine. Thanks for reading & reviewing.

Beta acknowledgment:

My betas are the best betas in the whole wide world. If you don't believe me, write something and send it to Writermerrin and Annie Talbot to see for yourself.

~\*S\*~

The sudden return of Severus Snape was sensational news for the wizarding world. The *Daily Prophet* took it upon themselves to not let the public forget about it with their continual headlines and various editorials about anything and everything Severus Snape. He had declined every attempt at interview, so Rita Skeeter had no choice but to go by herself and let everyone know once again how creative she could become.

He had stopped caring about what people thought of him long ago, but the owls with love notes and poetry from the hero-worshipping attention-seekers bothered him. People not only wanted his autograph, but some very personally offensive demands were also made. He was extremely disgusted.

Severus had moved all his books from Spinner's End to the back of the Hogwarts Library's Restricted Section and charmed them to stay hidden before the war. It was time to get them back to his quarters, the Headmaster's quarters. The new term had begun, and students had come back. He was to be released after his visit to St. Mungo's. Hermione wanted him to be checked by other Healers for confirmation of his well-being before she released him. He had argued about the necessity of it, but she remained unmoved. He had accused her of her usual bossiness.

They had decided to keep their budding relationship secret until they themselves figured out if it really was going to work out or not. She thought it would be easier this way for the kids. Severus told her that children are generally smarter than their parents gave them credit for—they might surprise her.

She came with Neville Longbottom on her tail. The word "Headmaster" sounded peculiar on her lips *couldn't possibly ask her to address me informally in front of Longbottom and not breach the agreement of secrecy with her, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.* So he didn't. He also didn't like the professional manner in which she spoke to him. She sounded very aloof when she told him that something had come up to make her *so busy* that she could not go with him. Neville would accompany him instead. As she handed him a large shopping bag with Madame Malkin's logo on it, she told him that when she had gone to get her son back from the Burrow, she had done some shopping for him. She'd had Potter measure his outfit when he was at the museum to bring Severus' wand back, and she had pre-ordered some clothing accordingly. Things in the bag resembled his usual outfit. It also included toiletries and the softest, blue Turkish towels that he'd ever felt. He assumed she had a thing for towels.

They waited in her office for him to come out fully dressed. She'd let him know that even if St. Mungo's cleared him and she had to release him from the hospital, he would stay under observation. Once again, Severus had argued she was just being too bossy; there was really no point of seeing another Healer. Thanking him very much, she'd told him she knew how to do her job.

Her mannerisms disturbed him. Why was she shutting herself off from him again? Would she do that often? How bumpy would this ride be? He vaguely remembered that she and Weasley used to argue more heatedly than any of his other students. Had anyone said anything? Had he done something? Was she remembering 'him' that much? Was she having second thoughts already? Was it her children who disliked him?

He would have gone mad with tension if the Healers hadn't made him answer all those questions and if Neville Longbottom hadn't continuously spoken about every plant and potion he'd come face to face with in his attempt to save him for all those years.

~\*R\*~

"Hello, Rose!" Rose looked behind her to find him following her from the DADA class. She narrowed her eyes. "What do you want, Malfoy? Why are you following me?"

"I'm not following you. I happened to have the same class that you do. The polite thing to do is to say 'hi' when one sees a friend."

"But I am not your friend, Mr. Politeness Incarnate."

"You could be, if I let you help me with my Transfiguration homework."

*There's that air of smugness again!* Rose really couldn't let it pass. "What did you just say?"

"Oh, come on, Weasley. You are so good, and I... umm, stink at it; you've got to help me."

"No I don't. You're right... I'm good, but you just stink period." She increased her pace.

He ran to catch up. "Please, can we be friends? We could study together. I'm really good at Divination."

"No, you're not; you just make stuff up for that class. I saw you doing homework for that in the common room. Besides, I don't even have that class anymore."

"Everybody does it."

Rose rolled her eyes. "You are hopeless, you know. Come on, I'll take pity on you. I'll help you."

"YES!" He ran after her.

~\*S\*~

The hospital visit was all right; he had nothing wrong with him. They came back around dinner time. Longbottom suggested they should get diner out of the way first.

He was not feeling particularly hungry after a whole day full of anxieties, but he'd promised to himself a few days ago to remain a changed man, a better man. As such, he thought he should not say no to this particular savior of his.

When the door to the Great Hall opened, Severus was in for the surprise of his life. The Great Hall was decorated with 'Welcome back' and 'Happy birthday' banners with his name on them. The students and faculty stood up, clapping and singing the birthday song. There was a giant cake in the middle of the room where Minerva stood with Mr. and Mrs. Potter. Hermione was walking towards him with a gorgeous smile on her face.

"Happy birthday, Severus." She led him to his cake, which he cut in a daze. So that's what "came up to make her too busy" to go with him. It was all an act. Neville Longbottom was a decoy. No wonder this lot did away with the Dark Lord.

Minerva let him know that Hermione was the organizer of the event, just in case he wanted to hex somebody. He didn't know if he wanted to hex her or kiss her right then and there.

A first-year student from each house presented him with bouquets of flowers, each representing their house color. He particularly noticed the last one. She was the Slytherin girl with white roses in her hand.

"You are a Weasley."

"Yes I am, Rosalind Lillian Weasley. Happy birthday, Headmaster Snape," said the redhead.

"Thank you. I have seen you somewhere."

"You might have seen her mum levitating herself in your class to answer your question at that age. She's our Hermione's little girl," Harry answered before Rose could say anything.

"A Weasley! In my house!"

"One hundred and fifty-nine of them in other houses before her. I checked the record book after she was sorted," Minerva told him before progressing towards Ginny.

"You must have got it from Ron. The way he played chess; I would say he had a Slytherin streak in him," Harry said.

Severus stretched out his hand. "Well, Rosalind! I must say I could not have been any prouder. You've managed to accomplish the impossible!"

The girl went white as chalk with shock, not exactly the reaction he was expecting from one of his welcoming committee.

"M—my father said the same thing to me when he came back!" Rose whispered.

"Rosalind!" Hermione screeched behind her.

Severus' eyebrow went flying to his hairline.

"Well, he did, Mum!" she pleaded.

"What do you mean by he came back?" she whispered to her daughter.

Severus gestured for Rose to not answer that and turned his attention to the crowd, thanking them for the most memorable birthday of his life. He told them that he was still recuperating, so he would be grateful if Hogwarts' Healer would graciously accompany him. He also wanted to have a chat with the Great Harry Potter. "Who wouldn't?" he asked, making Harry quite uncomfortable. He also asked for the Slytherin Weasley to escort him.

He could be charming when necessary; he once was a Slytherin spy.

They entered an empty classroom. Severus warded it from prying eyes and ears. Then he sat down on the only chair, Harry perched on top of a desk with Rose standing by him and Hermione pacing back and forth.

"Stop, Herms." Harry then turned to his niece and asked, "What's going on, Rosie?"

Hermione said, "I am sorry, Severus, all I wanted for you was to have a good birthday..."

Before Severus could say a word, Rose decided to answer Harry's question.

"I'm not lying, Uncle Harry. Dad did come back. You see, I had this stone..." She took it out of her pocket and offered it for her uncle to see, saying, "Your stone."

"The Peverall stone!" Harry said.

"The Gaunt stone!" Severus rose from his chair to look at it better.

"The Resurrection Stone!" Hermione stopped pacing.

Harry took it from her hand, saying, "I thought I'd lost it... let it go. It came back!" Before he could stop himself, he tossed it thrice, and the spirits of James and Lily Potter came out of nowhere, along with that of Ronald Weasley. They were made of memories, more substantial than ghosts, less than the living.

"Hello, Mum, Dad, Ron!" said Harry.

"Lily!" Severus couldn't believe his eyes. Faint movements made him tear his eyes from her to find Hermione swaying on her feet. He leapt to prevent her unconscious body from hitting to the stone floor.

Rose screamed, "Mummy!" and ran towards her mum. "Mummy! Mummy! You're not dead! Please tell me you're not dead!" She looked for answers in Severus' face. "Why isn't she opening her eyes?"

## Chapter: 12... Hodgepodge is Hullabaloo, Hullabaloo is Hodgepodge!

*Chapter 12 of 18*

Hodgepodge is Hullabaloo, Hullabaloo is Hodgepodge!

Disclaimer:

Only the plot is mine, nothing else. This chapter is dedicated to my reviewers, but I thank the readers with them, too.

Beta acknowledgment:

I'm eternally grateful to my wonderful betas, Writermerrin and Annie Talbot, without whom my story would be just like the chapter title here.

~\*hg\*~

Hermione opened her eyes to find four very concerned faces...Severus, Rose, Harry and Ron's faces...with worries pouring over her. She looked around confusedly to find out another somewhat concerned, beautiful face with green eyes and a mildly curious, also amused face with a mop of wild black hair...Harry's parents! Everything came back to her... She had fainted, once again!

The last thing she remembered was Ron's unearthly face...so familiar, so dear, yet so distant. The same face had a look of relief, like the others. In Harry's hand was a wet washcloth, which obviously had been conjured magically in order to tend to her. Severus was holding her in one of his arms and patting Rose's head with his other hand in an effort to comfort her. Rose was shaking with tears.

Just at that moment, Rose saw her mother's open eyes and hugged her fiercely; Hermione sat up and hugged her back. "I told you, Poppet...Mum's okay." Ron said to his daughter. Before helping her to sit up and letting her go, Severus asked if she was feeling okay, Harry asked the same thing, too. She nodded and turned her attention to her late husband.

"Hello, Ron."

"Hi, Mione. You gave them, especially her," he nodded to his daughter, "a good fright".

"Didn't mean to. I don't know what's wrong with me... anything about you, and I go like that!"

Hermione stood up straight. She was embarrassed.

"Looks like someone cares about you." He looked at Snape.

"It's really not ...not yet..."

"Relax, Hermione, I would be relieved if he did. He's more loyal than any Hufflepuff, braver than any Gryffindor, smarter than the Ravenclaws, and already a Slytherin to the core. No one could be more suitable for you." Ron added as an afterthought, "Except me of course."

Hermione followed his gaze to find a mesmerized Severus. The way he was looking at Lily Potter's spirit made Hermione feel a twinge of jealousy inside.*He would never look at me like that!* She forced her gaze to Ron. "How are you, Ron?"

"Super! Wish I could show you how fantastic things are here. Things that me and Fred do... I'm good, Hermione. I just worry about you three being alone out there. Looks like I don't have to. I want you to be happy as before, happier, if possible."

"Fred and I," she corrected automatically.

"Yeah, that." Then he looked at Harry and said, "Take care of my family, will you?" Harry nodded silently with watery eyes.

~\*hp\*~

Severus was back to reality with a mocking laugh. "Looks like Snivellus has finally managed a girl of his own."

"James!"

"What! Look how he ..." Childishness hadn't died, even if the man had.

"James Potter, I warn you again, you leave Severus alone!" said James' angry wife.

"Thank you, Lily. Though his words carry no value to me, he died foolishly, didn't he?" Severus tried to be a better man, but failed. Because he could resist rising up against Potter's baiting no more than James Potter could resist baiting him. Even after his death, this man could toy with Severus Snape's temper.

"Only because you...!"

"Stop! Both of you. That was a long time ago. He's changed since. I forgave you. You protected my Harry with your life," Lily intervened. "Since when is dying to protect one's family a foolish thing, Sev? James made no less a sacrifice than I did."

Severus pretended that he hadn't heard the last part of what Lily was saying. He said, "I missed you, Lily. I thought if I died, we could be to..."

"We were never meant to be together, Sev; even in death, my place is with James. I think it's wonderful that you've found her." Lily said nodding towards Hermione.

"Um... Mum, that's Hermione...Ron's wife and my best friend." Harry pointed to his late best friend as he corrected his mother.

"I know she was Ron's wife. He talks nonstop about his family. I think she's perfect for Severus."

His mother's post-mortal match-making astounded Harry. He'd never thought of anyone but Ron with Hermione, and he'd never thought anyone with Snape. Yes, Harry knew about Snape's fascination with his mum, but that was like some fairy tale that you knew about, but never had experienced first hand. He couldn't picture him in any romantic or domestic situation with Herm...well, with anybody.

Ron was saying something to him... Oh, about taking care of his family. Harry's eyes watered up. Of course, he would. Hermione was like his own sister, not only his best friend from when they were eleven. He would do anything for her, as would she for him; Ron should know that. He assured Ron of it.

Ron kept on telling Hermione how he wanted her to move on. He was also reassuring Rose that he wanted her mum to be happy, even if it was with Snape or Neville.

Snape, who was gawking all dopey-eyed at Harry's mum while word-fencing with Harry's dad, suddenly looked startled and asked Hermione, "You like Neville Longbottom?"

Hermione, who was religiously listening to Ron's sermons to their daughter, answered without turning her head, thus missing his facial expression, "Uhha, sure, I do. I like Neville."

Harry noticed that Snape went stiff at once, looked away from Hermione to Mum, then looked back and said, "Congratulations are in order then."

A confused Hermione asked, "What? What are you saying, Severus?"

However, Snape had already moved away with his Lily-gazing, pointedly ignoring her question. Then Harry's dad decided to put his two Knuts in,

"My mistake, Snivellus, not one of your own yet? Couldn't get out of the habit of wanting the second-hand..."

"Stop it, Dad! You're rapidly losing my respect when you disrespect my friends." Harry could not imagine how it must have been when these people were in school every day.

"You call him a friend!"

"Sure do. Mum did, too."

Ron was talking to Snape. He was saying, "She may look tough, but she's still very fragile inside. If you care for her, keep in mind not to hurt her."

Snape told him, "I care about all my students and faculty, Mr. Weasley. She is no exception, but perhaps this particular subject should be discussed with Professor Longbottom."

Hermione asked him, "What are you two talking about?" Then she turned to Ron. "No, Ron, don't... Don't go yet." But Ron blew kisses to her and Rose, waved at Harry, and slowly faded away.

Snape continued his chat with Lily until the Potters said their goodbyes to each other. Hermione kept on holding Rose tightly to herself, sniffing.

Snape said, "The Dark Lord had no idea, did he? He turned it into a Horcrux without testing it for any other powers."

Harry sent him an affirmative glance before he told Rose, "Well, Rosie, you are better off without the stone of Death. Its last-known possessor committed suicide. This stone only complicates things. We hardly need to invite more complications in our lives." He pocketed it.

"Don't you mean, 'the stone of the dead,' Potter?"

"No. It is the stone that Death himself gave to the second Peverell brother. You should read a book or two that aren't about dark magic or potions, for fun; maybe start with an easy children's book like *Tale of the Bardle Bidle...* or something."

"It's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*," Hermione corrected automatically.

And Snape sneered. "Once a know-it-all, always a know-it-all, I see. By the way, Mr. Potter, I do read for fun... we just have different understandings of said word."

Raising his hand as if surrendering, Harry laughingly said, "Whatever makes you happy. By the way, can't you simply just... talk? One might lose teeth at your age uttering the hard sentences that you do! Just wondering."

Snape didn't dignify it with an answer; instead he turned around and said, "Good night, Miss Weasley, Healer Weasley. Good-bye Mr. Potter." And he walked out, billowing his cape as dramatically as ever before anyone could say the farewell back to him.

"What was that about?" asked a puzzled Hermione.

Harry replied to Hermione, "I wouldn't know, and I am not sure I would want to know."

Harry walked Rose and Hermione to their quarters. Normally Rose would sleep in her dormitory, but after everything tonight, she wanted to be with her mum. Ginny was already there; she had put Hugo to bed. Before the Potters left, Hermione said, "Harry, may I have the stone for a while?"

Ginny did not ask anything; she would have her story later from her husband. She saw how Hermione looked and did not want to tax her anymore. However, Harry said,

"Hermione, you know how dangerous..."

"Of course I do. I just need to speak to Ron in private. You understand."

He understood and handed it to her, but he did not like it. "Don't overuse it," he warned her.

"Yeah, and Harry, could you lend me one of your mum's color photographs, too?"

"Mum's? Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just need to do some research, that's all."

Harry clearly did not get anything, but it had been a long night for him, too; so he chose to ignore any question that rose in his mind like "What kind of research?" and said, "Sure thing. I'll owl you tomorrow. G'night."

"Yeah. Good night." Hermione closed the door and took out the stone of Death. She needed to have a long chat with her late husband.

~\*S\*~

So, *she likes Longbottom!* Well, he would not be a thorn in between them. He had mistreated Longbottom all his life: thought him incompetent, and in return the boy...no, the man... had saved him from certain death, nurtured him for nearly twenty years, committed immoral acts of erasing others' memories for Severus' sake, against his own nature. The least Severus could do was not to steal his girl.

Longbottom probably was too much of a gentleman to say anything about it. And she probably thought him as a fragile patient and played along with him in the fear of him falling back into a coma again.

Yes, that could be it. She said she liked 'him.' They were not only from the same house and same age group, but they were also childhood friends who'd fought a war together. Severus remembered how once Longbottom had used to depend on her, and she had always helped him, ignoring Severus' harsh words. They must be very compatible. Severus would do the honorable thing, for once in his lifetime.

Severus' life-altering decision was brought to an abrupt halt by a familiar, near-nasal voice. "Happy birthday, Uncle Severus."

*Draco Malfoy! What is he doing here? At this hour?*

"Dad wanted to say hello, but he got busy at the last moment."

"Why are you here, Draco?"

"Well, it is your birthday. Father had a present for you, and I'm delivering." He handed the elf-made wine to Severus.

Severus knew the quality of Malfoy wine; he accepted and thanked both the Malfoys for their generosity. He would check for the poison in it later. He knew Draco had not simply come here to greet him out of the goodness of his heart. Malfoy intentions were never that simple. Every step they took was always premeditated, calculated and beneficial at the end only to them. Something was hidden behind this meeting, too.

Draco was still talking, "You should have let us know, Uncle Sev, about your illness...we could have sent you somewhere."

Yes. *The question is where would you have sent me if you only knew!* Severus thought.

"Nothing is too good for an old friend, Father always says."

Severus had never heard Lucius say that, and he had known the man even longer than Lucius' own son had.

"You must come to the Mansion. Father would love to catch up."

Severus' mind had not gathered moss just because he had been a Rip Van Winkle for a while. Bloodhounds always knew when the wind smelt of blood, so he assured his godson that he soon would find a time to meet his dear friend whose good company he had missed for nineteen years.

~\*hg\*~

Hermione could not believe that her daughter would think she and Neville could be more than friends. She had straightened out her daughter's idea about that.

Nevertheless, what was wrong with Severus? It was more than a month since his birthday. He seemed to be always too busy...either with school, or the Order; or was he avoiding her on purpose? And what was with him calling her Healer Weasley every time they had crossed paths?

Maybe when he had seen again whom he truly liked, he was embarrassed about how "plain Jane" Hermione was. She didn't have the sparkling green eyes; she had normal brown eyes. *Most of the world's population, including Muggles, have brown eyes; they are hardly interesting!* Nothing special about having a face like the one she had. *I don't have red silk for hair, I have a bushy brown bird's nest, or was it a bird's brown bushy nest? Or brown bird's bushy nest?* Any way she phrased it...she decided that she had *horrible, horrible* hair!

She had tried to talk to him before and after Order meetings, but he was always with company and had left before her. Somehow, he'd managed to avoid eating meals at the same time in the Great Hall. She had tried to make her eating schedule flexible as much as possible, but he was always a step ahead of her. He ate either before or after her, never with her.

She had gone to his office several times, but the gargoyle had told her every time that the Headmaster had just stepped out. Hermione wondered if the message was prerecorded and charmed to activate in her presence.

Something had happened that night; he'd seemed cold at the end. He even mocked her for being a know-it-all. Something had changed between them, and he didn't want her anymore. He was too gentlemanly to break it off. Maybe he was hoping she would take a hint and go away.

In her mind, Hermione knew what had happened; she'd seen how he had looked at Lily. The way he had looked at her spirit... he didn't just love her, he had worshiped her. As if to him, she was perfection personified. No one had looked at Hermione that way, not even Ron, not even when he was practicing from that *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches* book.

She had told him she would never be Lily...maybe that was her mistake. Perhaps he had been slightly interested in her before because he had thought some of their attributes were similar. That night had made it clear that that was not the case. So he had lost his interest in her.

Maybe Hermione should try to be more like her if she wanted his attention. She hated imitating others, but she had a point to make...if Severus did not want her, he should be man enough to say so in her face. She would make him. She had a plan.

She did her homework from the picture Harry had owed her. She deliberately chose not to use magic for her purpose, as she already hated herself for executing the plan, she did not want to hate magic too. She went for a little shopping...Muggle style.

As it was the third Friday of the month, Severus was scheduled to meet her for his check up *He should be in here anytime*, Hermione thought before wiping her eyes once again and pulling the shopping bag near her.

~\*S\*~

It was difficult to work against her schedule all the time. He had to adjust his mealtimes, had to make himself look busy at Order meetings. To make himself constantly unavailable was a full time job in itself... One without any betterment of his financial condition, but equally taxing on his mental status.

He had stayed inside and let the gargoyle lie for him. He had talked nonsense with the Order members he hardly cared to know. He had missed his earlier check-ups deliberately or rescheduled them for a later visit. The current one he could not avoid, though; he'd forgotten to cancel it. Anyway, it had been a while; maybe she had gotten the message and moved on to her real... um, well, whom she'd truly wanted. If not, then he had to clarify that.

He remembered, about six weeks ago, he had met her son along with George Weasley. They were saying their good-byes to the boy's mother. Hugo was animatedly describing to his mother about how his "Cool" Uncle Nev had given him a toad named "Trevor the Fifth," and his mother was all smiles as she eagerly listened to the boy. Severus had found the interaction captivating...his mother had never paid him any mind like that. It was beautiful. She was beautiful to him.

George saw him and greeted him curtly. The boy came forward, hearing his name, and said bluntly, "I don't like you. You took away my uncle's ear and never gave it back."

His uncle had laughed it off, saying, "It's nothing I didn't deserve for all the things we'd pulled off and gotten away with. Don't worry about it, Snape. Fred and I appreciate a sense of humor, even one as dark as yours." Severus uttered his condolences...no, not for the ear... For his brothers.

Hugo's mother's voice hardened as she made the child apologize.

However, that was not the point. The point was that her child had unknowingly chosen the right man over the wrong one.

It was hard for him to avoid her. Part of him didn't want to go along with his own plan. That part wanted to see her, to hold her. That part kept remembering their precious little stolen moments all the time...her smile, the sweetness of her lips. Severus had a suspicion that part of him had made him forget about this appointment so he could see her up close for a while.

He sighed and knocked on her office door.

She had done something with her hair. He didn't sense any glamour, but something had changed the color and the texture of her hair. It had made her look artificial, applied...someone else other than herself. He didn't like it. He ordered himself not to notice. Maybe it was a new fashion or Longbottom liked it that way.

She didn't look up to greet him. Still looking at the file on her desk, she said, "Hello, Headmaster Snape. Should we proceed with the check-up immediately?" Her voice was cold and professional, but there were no happy occasions left in his life to warrant a surprise party at this time.

He'd started hating everything about the meeting already. If she was that eager to rid of him, he wouldn't keep her busy for long.

She pointed her wand at him and silently said few incantations. The wand had a gray glow before the tip of it lit up in blue light, and she said, "A bit of high blood pressure, and other than that, everything is fine. You should minimize your daily salt intake and limit red meat. It will be beneficial to take a little time off to rest once in a while, even if you are a terribly busy person. I might write you the incantation should you require it, to check your blood pressure daily." Now she looked at him with a set of strange

green eyes that weren't her own.

*Green eyes! Red silky hair! How dare she mock me!* Severus whispered, "What kind of sickness is this?"

"High blood pressure is a pretty common disease among Muggles, Muggle-borns and half-bloods, especially ones with a stressful life." She pretended she did not know what he was asking.

"You know very well what I am asking. Don't play your games with me; I am no Longbottom to trifle w..."

"Why are you involving Neville into this? What's he's got to do with us?" She didn't let him finish.

"Us? There is no 'us'...there will never be any 'us,' ever! You would do well to get it in your head. Neville has everything to do with it. You said yourself that you liked him."

"I still do, as a friend, everyone does."

"That's what you're saying now; you knew very well what I had asked that night." He would not let her off the hook that easily.

"What night? The night you were enchanted by Lily Potter's ghost?" She was not one to back down.

"She. Was. Not. A. Ghost." He chewed on every word.

"Oh, wasn't she? Maybe she's more real than the living? What am I, Severus? Am I even substantial enough to be a ghost?" Her eyes were welling up.

"I haven't had my answer yet." His tone was hard enough to cut glass.

"Can't I just play dress-up to improve my appearance? I seemed to get your attention as a green-eyed redhead. I wonder what would happen if I reverse it, say, red eyes and green hair?" She looked at him expectantly, mimicking thoughtfulness in her ridiculous new eyes.

He had to say it. "That's because you look ridiculous with them on! Take them off."

"Why? These are what you have wanted, aren't they? I saw how you looked at her; you don't just love her...you worship her. Then wh..."

"Why? I will tell you why. Because, this is not you. You think a pair of contact lenses and a wig would make you Lily to me? You think I would want that?" He pointed his index finger at her. "It disgusts me... Clearly, you can see that." His face was etched with revulsion and disgust.

"You wouldn't even stand against Neville for me because I am a widow at thirty-seven with two children...a second-hand..." Her voice was sad with sudden realization.

"Don't even utter the same words that mongrel did!" If his blood pressure had been high before, it was on the fastest broom towards the moon at this point.

"Headmaster, I believe I am in need of an unavoidable and urgent personal leave right now. You must excuse me." Even though her cheeks were flooding, her tone was forcefully cold and controlled.

"You can't just get up and leave. What about the students?" He was practically shouting by that point.

"I must. Everyone else has you, don't they?" She just got up and threw some green powder in the Floo behind her before walking into it.

## Chapter: 13, Oh, Dear, Where art Thou?

### *Chapter 13 of 18*

His meeting with Lucius had a very surprising outcome. After the usual greetings and pretending that he, too, had been one of Voldemort's finest, Severus tried to get some information out of Lucius, as he had been doing for the last month. Lucius had more than his usual drink tonight, and Severus had managed to slip three tiny drops of Veritaserum for the encouragement of the truth. It resulted in a miracle.

Disclaimer: Based on borrowed characters from HP world.

Acknowledgment: Tireless hardship and dedication are the two other names that could identify my beta, Writermerrin.

~\*h\*~

Hermione came out of the Floo of Harry Potter's office. She needed the key and the password to her home. Harry was looking after it. She knew that last week's password had been "Sheriff of Nottingham."

They had decided to use Muggle terms as passwords since magical people would rarely know of any Muggle references. However, Harry and Hermione could easily remember those, as both of them were familiar with Muggle culture.

She did not know if Harry'd have had any reason to change it since they had talked. She had her keys in her bedroom, but she was not going back there looking like a complete fool to Severus just because in her anger she did not remember that she didn't have the key with her... or anything else for that matter.

She had not planned to run away like a petulant child as she had. She'd hoped against all hope that he would stop her, tell her that her assumptions were false and he had been truly busy, but that had not happened.

They were fighting once again, but this time he did not end it with kisses, he just ended it. Otherwise, Hermione would be in Severus' arms instead of a Ministry fireplace. He had said, "There is no 'us,' there will never be an 'us,' ever." And she had thought that they were to cross all the bridges together.

She'd been a fool to believe in him. He must be laughing at her naiveté. All the names he had called her! 'Ridiculous' was how she looked to him. 'Disgusted' was how he felt about her.

She would never even be on the same continent with that insufferable man again. She would wait for Harry to bring the kids home, and she would leave for Australia to

Mum and Dad. She would even raise her kids as Muggles if there wasn't a wizarding school in the Australian community. She did not want anyone to suffer her ridiculous presence and feel disgusted. *Thank you very much!*

However, Harry was not in his office. His new partner told Hermione that he had gone to the next level, so Hermione went to the lift. There was someone else in the lift, but in her distress, Hermione wasn't paying attention to her surroundings.

That was obviously another mistake, because the person behind her simply said, "Stupefy!"

~\*S\*~

Severus jumped up to catch her, but there was a table between them, and before he could reach her, she had gotten away.

*That annoying, arrogant, impossible, insufferable witch! How dare she walk out on me! How could she leave all these children unattended? What if there was an accident?*

At any time anyone could end up hexed or injured in a school full of magical teens. How could the only Healer be so irresponsible as to leave with a 'they have you' speech?

She had left...she need not come back. He could have her fired for her arrogant stunt and mockery anyway, couldn't he? He asked himself again, could he not?

Yes, he was grateful for his life, but that did not give anyone free range to mock him. Severus stormed out of the hospital wing.

Presently, he had a pre-scheduled meeting with Lucius Malfoy. He would send the termination letter when he came back from the mansion.

No, he would write the pink-parchment with his infamous red quill and owl it before his meeting.

True to his anger, he did just that. The owl and Severus left Hogwarts together.

~\*S\*~

His meeting with Lucius had a very surprising outcome. After the usual greetings and pretending that he, too, had been one of Voldemort's finest, Severus tried to get some information out of Lucius, as he had been doing for the last month.

Lucius had more than his usual drink tonight, and Severus had managed to slip three tiny drops of Veritaserum for the encouragement of the truth. It resulted in a miracle. In his moment of boasting and Potter bashing, Lucius had let loose the vital information to grant him life in Azkaban... if Harry Potter left him alive.

Severus came back to Hogwarts as soon as possible without raising any suspicion, and then he methodically preserved the memory of the conversation where Lucius told him about his hand in Ronald Weasley's murder in the Pensieve and Floo-called Mr. Potter.

Harry came in to witness the memory in the Pensieve, then said in a carefully controlled voice, "This is why I wanted you to lead the Order." And then he had left.

Severus waited until about twelve thirty-five in the morning for Potter's confirmation that they had arrested Lucius. When Potter had Flooed him, he went to the Auror office to hand in his vial of memory that would incriminate Lucius and saw the red wig in Potter's rubbish bin. *So, she'd come running here... How predictable!*

*How will she take the news?* The disobedient part of him had asked, but he ignored it.

At that moment, Potter chose show his *Legilimency* skill for the first time in his life. "I wonder what Hermione will do!"

"You will find out when you tell her the news yourself next time you see her." His anger, which he had forgotten in the excitement of the night, came back in full volume, and he rose to leave.

"Me? Why not you?" Potter asked, confused.

"Isn't that rather obvious, Potter?" He could not tolerate it any more. He left, repeating to himself, "Occlumency is the key word," over and over before his patience had a chance to leave him forever.

~\*S\*~

After Severus took off his day's clothes, put on his cozy black dressing gown, and washed the day off of his face, he reached for the towel. The soft, blue Turkish towel seemed to glare at him. She had purchased it for him! Hermione had wanted him to wipe his face on what could possibly be the softest piece of fabric in the whole world. Why?

He left the towel on the floor and went back to his office. Everything he was wearing was a gift from her; she had shopped for him before he had been released from the hospital wing. That could be easily rectifiable, he thought. He would purchase his own things in the morning and *Incendio* all of these. No, he would do better; he would *Incendio*, and then he would send the ashes to her by owl.

*The owl!* It had come back to his office. *The poor thing must be exhausted from the flight.* He had noticed the aging bird when he entered, but had not wanted to know what she had to say to him. Severus looked for something to offer it, but then again, he had never been the one to stuff his office with treats. Maybe he would read it when he was not so busy. He could make himself look busy a bit longer, *but she wouldn't know that, would she?* And the owl needed to go back to the owls, too.

Maybe she would know if he'd let her know. He decided to read her letter and send the proper answer. He took the letter and...

It was the same letter he had written earlier that evening to let her know that her services at Hogwarts were no longer required. The owl had not found her.

*How could the owl not find her? She'd received papers everyday; she was listed on the owl-post directory. Why then would this owl come back without delivering the post? Unless...*

*Unless she was in trouble!* It hit him like a bludger to the face... *Hermione is in trouble!* She had been upset when she'd abruptly left, and he had no idea what had happened to her!

He knew she'd been in Potter's office...he'd seen the wig there. Then again, Potter had not mentioned anything about having seen her, nor had he blamed him for upsetting her, which was, even in his new found admiration for Severus, highly uncharacteristic behavior for Potter. Even though they had been very excited about doing right by Weasley, as protective as Potter was of his friends, he was bound to have mentioned an upset Hermione in the face of the man who had caused her distress. Why hadn't he? Potter was supposed to confront him, not be amiable as he had been. Hadn't Potter sounded confused when Severus had told him to inform Hermione of Lucius' crime?

*Did he not see her? Had something happened to her when she went to Potter's office? Was there somebody else present who had forcibly taken her away and tossed that piece of rug in the rubbish bin?*

She probably had been crying at the time and was caught off guard. Weasley's spirit had warned him that she was fragile. Had he listened? The spirit had pleaded with



Severus to not hurt her. Had he cared? *Obviously not. I made her cry once again.*

He tried to remember what had happened in her office. When he had seen her, she had already been upset. He had ignored that fact because he had noticed she was dressing up as Lily. He had thought that she was mocking him, as James Potter used to. So he'd become angry and yelled at her.

She had said that she'd dressed like Lily to garner his attention. She had acted jealously to the fact that he still loved Lily and not her. Why would she do that if she loved Longbottom?

Why would she humiliate herself in front of him to make a point...that he should like her for herself, not as someone else's shadow, otherwise it would be this awful...if it weren't him whom she wanted?

Had she not said that she liked Longbottom as a friend? He'd chosen to ignore that fact and, without realizing that she had taken a Slytherin approach to convey her message, had berated her for her attempt to be noticed by him.

He had done the same thing he used to do when she'd wanted his attention all those years ago...he had insulted her. He had said that he was disgusted, but he had not told her it was because he could not believe that someone like Hermione would degrade herself by dressing up as somebody else.

Though he had never praised her in public like her other teachers had when she was his student, he'd always had a soft spot in his mind for her and her brilliance; and he just hadn't been in a position to show it like the others back then.

Dressing up as somebody else to get attention was a job for certain Knockturn Alley workers. She had not only insulted him but also herself.

He had said she looked ridiculous because she did. The fact that she looked different from Lily had not mattered to him. He liked her just as she was...as Hermione Jean, who was a witch in her own right... nobody's shadow.

But Severus hadn't elaborated as he had been trying to isolate... No, he had pushed her to the edge instead, and she had fled. She had fled from the sight of him because she could not take it anymore.

He had told her there could be *nous* for them, but she had wanted that *us*. Her last words to him had been "Every one else has you, don't they?" She hadn't said the students: she'd said everyone else. Everyone else except her, and she was the one who had wanted him.

The crumpled letter fell from his hand, worries rushing through his mind, *What have I done? Have I once again lost my love due to my stupidity? Before even realizing it? How is she? What are those people doing to her? Who are they? Are they hurting her? Are they casting the Unforgivables? Is she even alive?*

Severus went back to the bathroom, picked up the blue towel from where he had discarded it before, pressed it to his chest, and whispered as he sank down to the floor in his misery,

"Where are you?"

## Chapter 14, How Could You!

*Chapter 14 of 18*

What happened to Hermione? Where is she? Who has her?

Disclaimer: Not mine.

Beta Acknowledgment: Hats off to my amazing beta, WriterMerrin. She is the best!

Severus Snape was an unfortunate man in charge of a school full of magical children. He did not possess the luxury of moping about disasters in his personal life, which had once again involved foolish mishandling of his budding love towards a bright Muggle-born witch. The habit of being a responsible teacher was too prominent to die just because it had been out of practice for nineteen years. Duty towards his students came first and foremost.

Therefore, he threw the letter of dismissal in the fireplace, watched it burn, then contacted Madam Pomfrey and requested her temporary presence because the current Healer of Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry was unavoidably absent from her post.

Poppy Pomfrey had known Severus Snape since he had been just a skinny little boy...she had not asked any questions, just given her consent. She reasoned that if it were not terribly important, Severus would have never asked it of her, knowing she was recovering from poor health herself. Besides, she had missed seeing the sweet faces of hundreds of innocent children in that place.

Then Severus had woken up Minerva and told her that he needed to take an indeterminable period off to sort out urgent personal business. He was not leaving the grounds yet, but he might have to at some point. So as the Deputy Headmistress, she needed to step up once again as he would be unavailable to handle the day-to-day duties of the school.

Minerva was not as considerate as Poppy was. She had a habit of asking questions when one rather wanted to not answer them...he had known it since he had been her student. So Severus was not surprised when he saw her coming out of his Floo. He told her to wait and Floo-called number twelve, Grimmauld Place to request Harry Potter's immediate presence.

Minerva McGonagall had not stopped asking questions just because Severus Snape asked her to; she was merely allowing him to call Harry. As soon as it was done, she asked, "What's wrong, Severus? You look terrible!"

"I always look terrible, Minerva. My look has nothing to do with it. When have I not looked terrible?"

"When you were under Hermione's care, of course, I would say I saw you relaxed and almost pleasant..."

She had stopped suddenly, noticing that at the mention of Hermione's name he had slumped down to his chair and buried his face in his hands, as if the invisible weight of the world on his shoulders had doubled up to make its presence known to the others. Minerva had never seen him this vulnerable before; she had no idea what to do.

Buried behind his hands, Severus spoke softly. "I don't even know where she is!"

"Who?" asked Harry Potter, brushing off the Floo-powder and ashes from his person.

"Hermione has been taken away." Severus motioned him to sit.

Harry had started to sit, but halfway through it, changed his mind. "Taken away?"

"It's my fault entirely. We had a disagreement."

"Had a disagreement?" Harry again.

"She Flooded off to Potter's office, and someone was already there who snatched her by surprise."

"Snatched her by surprise?" Harry himself was no less surprised.

"Will you stop echoing me? This is hardly the time to select your Animagus form!" Severus was becoming more and more impatient.

"Huh?"

"He means you are parroting him, Harry." Then Minerva looked at Severus. "Speak in plain English, Severus. I have more than forty years of practice in it, and I barely understand 'Snape.'"

Severus scowled at her but said, "We had a little disagreement which got out of hand, and she fled."

"That's it?" Harry did not buy it.

"Well, I might have yelled at her at some point." Both of them gave him a disbelieving look that said, "You? No!"

Severus sighed and said, "Oh, all right! I screamed awful things at her because I thought she was ridiculing me."

"Might I ask WHY?"

"I thought Neville Longbottom and ... Does it really matter what I called her, what I thought or what I said...she is somewhere out there in danger because of me. I need your help to find her."

"Give me a reason why I should not kill you, Snape." Harry remembered what Snape had asked of Sirius when they met in the Shrieking Shack; he now understood why he had done so.

"I must beg for her forgiveness in person." He was sincere.

"Right, but that's no reason why I shouldn't hex you!" Harry drew his wand, and in a split second, there were bat bogies all over Snape. Harry's wife was famous for the hex, and he rarely got a chance to be on the other end of the wand where it was concerned.

"*Finite!* It will do Hermione no good if we fight among ourselves rather than looking for her," Professor McGonagall intervened.

"How could you think of her and Neville? She was the one who set Neville up with Luna when she came back from Merlin-knew-where after her divorce with..."

"I am not remotely interested about your peers' love life." Snape sneered.

"You should be if you decided to fall for one of them!" Harry shouted.

"What!" It came from McGonagall.

Harry sighed. "He fancies Hermione."

"Severus Snape! How could you! She is..." Minerva could not believe her own ears.

Severus raised a hand to stop her. "She is not a little girl anymore, nor is she one of the students. Nothing happened when she was one, either. It started when I woke up from my coma and ended before really starting."

"Still, how could you? You never liked her before." She was not convinced.

Severus spoke more to himself than to the company present. "Falling for Hermione was never a trial; I always had a thing for her laugh. Before I woke up, I heard her laughing, and that was the first thing that made me want to come back; then I kept hearing her voice, her plea. When I finally woke up, she didn't really feel like a stranger anymore, nor did she resemble a student I once used to teach."

"Maybe it was just empathy; you have both lost the people you loved." Harry said, then added for Minerva's benefit, "He used to like mum before he liked Herms."

"Someone like Hermione should not mourn for a lost love like I did. Yes, it may have been empathy at first; I wanted to hear her laugh, but all she did was smile a strange heart-aching smile. Suddenly, I wanted to be the one to make her laugh again."

"It seems so quick. Loving someone takes time...to build up the romance." Harry said.

"What romance? I am here all the time; I didn't see any romance between them!" Minerva sounded indignant.

"We could hardly dance around here wearing giant red hearts with proclamations of love in front of a school full of teens! We're grownups; we were... discreet."

"Stop right there, I need to get that picture out of my head!"

"Harry!" Minerva motioned for Snape to go on, and he did.

"I am sorry if it seemed too quick for you. What was my hurry? I don't know, but once I was sure of my feelings, I could not deny them as nothing. I could not case them in and throw them into the North Sea and pretend they didn't exist. I could not 'unlove' because the timing is wrong for you, Mr. Potter. There is no such thing as that. Love works in a mysterious way; for some it may take a while, for some others it could be instantaneous."

"Although I have never told her that I loved her, hadn't realized very well myself before she was gone, love felt like indigestion mostly...one that never leaves you in peace. I wanted to do right by her and Mr. Longbottom after everything they had done for me. I told her there will never be anything between us, and she left. Now she will never have me."

"You don't know that! She has a penchant for taking up hopeless causes, and right now, Severus Snape, I see nothing more hopeless than you are."

~\*H\*~

She found herself wandless and bound to a chair by invisible ropes. She looked around as far as she could, given her situation. She was kept in a dark underground room....*a cellar maybe!* She tried to see through the darkness again in vain hope of finding a way out.

At least her eyes and mouth were free, and no one was torturing her for anything. She could yell for help. No, that would be a waste of energy for now. Whoever had caught her must have made sure no help was that readily available. Maybe she should preserve her energy and concentrate on getting rid of these ropes wandlessly; she would scream for help if all else failed.

The door opened, and Hermione squinted her eyes at the sudden burst of light. She heard a familiar near-nasal drawling, "Hello, Mudblood."

"I would greet you back, but I stopped greeting cowardly little ferrets a long time ago."

"Feisty still, aren't we!"

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. Even though she was puzzled and uneasy, she was not afraid of Draco Malfoy. She asked him, "What do you want, Malfoy?"

"You're forgetting who is the captive in here. Let me clarify...*Crucio!*"

Hermione had to bite the inside of her mouth to stop herself from crying aloud in the bone-wrenching pain of the curse. She did not take her eyes off him, but the eyebrow she'd raised dropped of its own accord.

Draco lifted the curse quicker than she thought he would. Leaning on the door, he smirked at her. "I see we understand our positions better now."

"Anyone can curse an already-bound opponent or an opponent's back for that matter, but no one else would be as gleeful as you are in such cowardice." She had managed to smirk back, suppressing her hurt. "So again, why are you here?"

"Where else would I be? I own the place."

"Don't be a prat! Tell me why you kidnapped me."

"Maybe I like you. Maybe I loved you all along. All my shows of hatred towards you were only an act due to the impossibility of getting you for myself. Maybe every time I insulted you....all I wanted was to kiss you. Maybe I was head over heels for you..."

"Was Lockhart your roommate in St. Mungo's?"

"You don't believe me?" Rubbing his palm on his chest where his little ferret heart supposedly would be, he feigned heartache.

"Never did before. Why change the habit so late?"

"You're right; I would never lower myself for the likes of you."

"Go, flatter yourself in private. Neither would I...lower myself for the likes of you, that is."

In answer, Draco hurled the Cruciatus curse again and left without lifting it.

~\*M\*~

Draco Malfoy could not believe the Mudblood was talking back to him even after being Crucioed. He had thought he found an easier way to solve the Potter problem.

Draco had to visit the Ministry to reinforce the Imperius on his contact. When he saw her from the door of Potter's office with a red wig on, being his father's son, he became thirsty for more knowledge of the opponent. She was asking for Potter and tossing the wig in the dustbin. What kind of game were these two playing? Perhaps it would be faster and easier than his father's long and hectic plan with her child.

She was so involved in her misery at not finding Potter, she made herself an open target. He had brought her to his chateau, against her will, of course.

He was on his way to visit his father and boast about his accomplishment, then he remembered, 'Oh, the curse!'

He showed her he was not without mercy and lifted it before leaving France.

~\*M\*~

When Draco was at the entrance of the Malfoy Mansion, Pansy rushed towards him, screaming excitedly about his father's arrest and Snape's betrayal.

Potter had come with half of his department and charged him with Weasley's murder. Apparently, they had proof against him. When Potter had told his father that they had his confession on the record, he had yelled, "Snape! You traitorous bastard!" and Potter had laughed evilly.

Aunt Bella was right; Snape had never been on their side. Draco paced and paced all over the drawing room for the entire night until he had come up with a new plan. Instead of using the Mudblood as bait to get Potter off their back, he would use her for something more important to him.

He stopped pacing, sitting down with a parchment and quill and starting to write,

"Darling Scarhead ..."

## Chapter: 15, Le Château de Malfoy.

*Chapter 15 of 18*

Scorpius had been curious about everything that was going on lately. *Why had they moved to France, for instance? Why had he stopped going to school? Where was Grandfather? What was that noise coming from the cellar? Mum and Dad had told him not to go near that awful thing. Was it a Ghoul? How awful was it, anyway?*

Disclaimer: Not mine.

Acknowledgment: My amazing beta, Writermerrin, hats off to you.

Nine days after Hermione's disappearance, Harry had received a note from the perpetrator. He read the note and ran some regulatory tests even though he knew who had sent it. No one but Draco Malfoy had ever addressed him as "Scarhead."

He was following everything by the book. He did not want something to happen to his best friend because Harry Potter was once again suffering from a hero complex and had rushed to the rescue without thinking. The result of that could give the sneaky little snake a chance to slither away. His years at the Auror office had matured him enough to know how political the judicial system was.

That was also the reason he had taken along all those Aurors to arrest the senior Malfoy for Ron's murder...when all he wanted was to take Lucius apart with his own hands. Harry would not mess this one up, either.

He knew how restless Snape had become; he reminded Harry of caged-up Sirius in the Black house, ironically. Sirius! Harry stopped in his tracks...

His godfather, Sirius, had been an oddball in the infamous Black family. That family was not known for breeding Gryffindors. Everyone in that family was from Slytherin, except for Sirius. He was like Rose. Every other known Weasley was from Gryffindor. She ended up in the opposite house, as Sirius had. It was rare, but known to happen, not impossible at all.

The hat sorted the person it was put upon, not their background. One might possess a good combination of qualities from different houses. Hermione was almost a Ravenclaw, if she was judged by only her intelligence, yet she was so much more adventurous and brave than just a mere bookworm; she had always applied her knowledge in their crusade against Voldemort. He hoped it stayed that way for her safety's sake. Snape was braver than Gryffindor himself, in Harry's opinion. There was not any Slytherin Dumbledore could not have out-Slytherinned blindfolded. In spite of having two Gryffindors as parents, Harry himself was asked by the hat to choose his place in Hogwarts.

Thinking of Rose reminded Harry of how miserable those children were without Hermione. Snape had excused Rose from her classes and let her stay with the family; he'd even visited her and her brother there.

Snape had been eager to take the blame, but Harry was against the idea of letting everyone else know about Hermione's disagreement with Snape. Instead, he gave out the edited version that Hermione had come to see him at the office, and he was not there; when she had gone to look for him, someone had abducted her somehow. It wasn't a lie, just an omission of a few details.

He thought that Snape must stay in one piece until Hermione arrived to flay him alive, and if she desired so, Harry might join in to help her out, then.

At the moment, he needed Snape and his expertise at Dark Arts alive and in a single piece, safe from the wrath of the Weasleys. He could only imagine how the Weasleys would react if they had any idea that Snape was the reason that Hermione had fled. Snape was going through every possible way to find a location. They had not had any idea who the offender might be before the note's arrival. Still, Harry did not understand why they had not come up with a location; the Malfoy Mansion was not secret-kept.

Snape's laboratory and his library had melted together to make the place he called office these days. It actually could be called his entire residence since he took his recent occasional eating and sleeping habit up there, too. He was more obsessive than Hermione. One needed either to be a one-legged kangaroo to hop by all the scattered books on his floor or to bring a broomstick along. Harry seriously would have considered bringing one, if the room had not been filled with ongoing, self-propelled books from shelf to Snape to floor.

The door was open when Harry let himself into the Headmaster's office without knocking. Snape was in the middle of a Floo-call with McGonagall. She was saying, "You can't talk to Mr. Malfoy. His mother came and took him home for the weekend after his grandfather's arrest; he has not returned since. The school owls came back without delivering the attendance notices for him."

"And why was I not informed about it?"

"As I recall, Headmaster Snape, you had asked not to let everyday school matters interrupt your Mission." McGonagall was curt.

"THIS is about the Mission! The boy might have seen or heard something helpful from his home...if only I could slip into his mind for a second..."

"Headmaster! I cannot believe you would do such a thing to a student!"

"At this point, I would do anything to get her back. It's entirely my fault that she's gone."

"Don't go brooding now that you're on the right track." Harry let himself to be known.

"Potter! I do not brood."

"Do, too!" they said in unison, and after exchanging greetings with Harry, Minerva disconnected herself to let them talk, saying she had other matters to attend to.

"Speak, Potter."

Harry showed him the letter. "Draco has 'Mione. My team is getting ready as we speak to raid the Mansion. If you are coming with me, you must use a Disillusionment Charm and be truly discreet. I won't have anything jeopardizing my investigation."

"They are not at the Mansion; why would you think they are?" He returned the letter to Harry.

"I don't, not really. Everyone will look for them there, so it makes sense if they'd fled. So, what if the Ministry forgoes raiding the place for the obvious reason of not finding them there... In which case, the Mansion would be the perfect refuge for them." Seeing the raised eyebrow from Snape, Harry sighed and said, "It's kind of twisted logic, okay? Go along with the easy version...I am not taking any chances."

"I doubt Draco has matured as much as you did." Now Harry was the one to raise eyebrows...Snape was complimenting him! He would have pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming if not for Snape's next words.

"They have enough prejudice to not let her in the family home," Snape said matter-of-factly.

"Hermione was there before." Harry's posture changed with his anger.

"Without an open arm invitation, I suppose?"

"Does Greyback's invitation count? We were welcomed by their curses, of course. Hermione had caught Greyback's attention; he had wanted her for himself...something about her soft skin or some such thing. And Bellatrix took it upon herself to entertain her the whole time. We were locked in the cellar, couldn't help her."

Harry was too lost in that terrible nostalgia to notice how Snape's features hardened at the knowledge of her suffering at the hands of those beastly maniacs. He continued, saying, "She had nightmares about them for a long time. The way he had wanted her, the way she had screamed at Bellatrix's tortures...even I had nightmares of that, and I've faced Voldemort since I was one." Harry spoke and watched as Snape kept on stuffing various potion bottles and salves inside his robe without a word. He was not expecting Draco to be any less generous than his aunt was.

~\*H\*~

Everything had failed, even a fair amount of screaming, "HELP! SOMEBODY! ANYBODY!" in between her trial at wandless magic. Those bouts of Cruciatus had left her weak, and the Malfoys were not very hospitable towards their guest, she supposed, as they forgot to feed her... anything. The only thing she was given was a small paper cup, which filled itself with water half-way every few hours.

She complained about their treatment of her to Draco. He bowed to her in mock salute and told her "The Queen of No-Land" would be treated as she deserved and sent his wife in.

Pansy was nowhere near as good as Bellatrix, but she had tried her best. Hermione preferred Draco's Cruciatus over Pansy's simultaneous slicing, stinging, and tickling charms and her other methods of torture. She combined simple spells by putting them one after another without lifting the previous ones, which made the experience even more horrible to bear.

Hermione's cuts were not treated; she was unfed, mostly dehydrated, and dead tired. She thought about her children. She might never see their faces again. What would she tell Ron about how foolishly she had left them alone in the world? She had let her emotion rule over her when Severus...

*Severus!*

She would never see him again either, not even if she managed to live. What kind of life would it be without him in it? Once she had begun to think of him in her life, she could not think of it without him. She would have never thought it was possible to fall in love again, so quickly, with the least expected man of all.

From all the men in the world, she had to fall for the most difficult one...the one with serious issues about loving her, or was it love in general? No, he knew how to love; he had almost given away his life in the name of his one true love. Had it not been for Neville, Severus would have died for Lily Potter. Hermione had never known that anybody could love with such intensity, such dedication. She didn't think even Ron would have mourned her all that long...not that she wished he would have if the tables had been turned; she certainly had not waited long. She wouldn't wish this loneliness on anyone, let alone Ron. *Then again, wasn't that absolutely romantic! Who wouldn't want to be worshiped as such? And yet, Severus just doesn't love me.*

At first, Hermione thought what she felt was sympathy towards him. Then that night came when she thought she had lost him as she had lost Ron. Hermione had realized that people simply loved, but love was never simple.

She'd seen different sides of that man. He was not only a bitter man, as she'd thought before. She had seen him comforting Rose when she was distraught about Hermione's passing out. She had seen his responsible side all along; she'd found his merciless teasing of her flattering when he woke up. Even in all those years of marriage, Ron had never boiled her blood with a simple kiss like Severus had.

She could see him as a good father to her children in everyday life...one very different in manner, but very similar in loving care to how Ron had been.

But it was never meant to be. She was never meant to find love again; her children were meant to be orphans at this early age. Severus was never meant to love anybody who was not Harry's mum.

She remembered how hateful his words had been, how disgusted he'd been with her. She was nothing to him. He had never wanted her and never would in the future, either, *ever!* Everything she'd thought they had was merely her mistakes; she had let her post-traumatic mind create her fool's paradise on lies that she'd believed as truth. *So much for building the sand castle on the beach before the high tide!*

And these realizations broke her heart. It hurt...it hurt more than Pansy's torture, more than Draco's Unforgivables.

Hermione sobbed her heart out in the darkness of her captivity.

~\*R\*~

Rose was petrified at the news of her Mum. Her grandparents, uncles, and aunts were doing their best to comfort her and Hugo. But she wanted her mum back, so did Hugo. She remembered how poorly she had treated her mum after her dad's death, and now she was losing her, too. She promised herself never to act up again when Mum returned; she would never act disrespectfully, never hurt Mum's feelings, she would be an absolute good girl from now on.

Professor Snape had come to visit them. She didn't know why she had done it, but the moment she saw him, she had run towards him and hugged him fiercely in the middle, surprising everyone who had been present. *Maybe, it was because I know caring he'd been when Mum had fainted upon seeing Dad's spirit.*

Professor Snape had patted her head again awkwardly like the other day and told her that Mum would be found soon and she should never give up hope. He said, "You should never doubt that I will find your mother, if it is the last thing I ever do."

Hugo had not understood his wording, so he had insisted that it must be the first thing as opposed to the last thing on the professor's to-do list, as he missed his mum very much.

Professor Snape looked confused for a moment, then said "Of course" and patted his shoulder; and Hugo, too, hugged him in response.

Rose was pretty sure Professor Snape would bring Mum back. Mum had told her how honorable the man was; he would keep his word. She just hoped he would bring her home soon.

~\*M\*~

Scorpius had been curious about everything that was going on lately. Why had they moved to France, for instance? Why had he stopped going to school? *Where was Grandfather? What was that noise coming from the cellar?* Mum and Dad had told him not to go near that awful thing. *Was it a Ghoul? How awful was it, anyway?* He had to know. *I'm A Malfoy. Grandfather had taught me loads of jinxes.* Armed with his wand, he decided to take a peek.

When everyone went to sleep, Scorpius climbed down the stairs with his wand lit. He opened the door with a whispered, "Alohomora," then he looked at the thing...

"Healer Weasley! You're not an awful thing! You're Rose's mum. What happened to you? Why are you here? Who did this to you...not my parents!" He could not believe his own eyes. Quickly, he unbound her and asked what she needed.

She said, "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, I feel like an awful thing, though. Water, I need a cup full of cold water."

He conjured a decent glass and then filled it with nice cold water with a quick "*Aguamenti*." She drank it thirstily and then told him what happened and asked for his help.

Scorpius was astounded, but he decided to help. He was cunning as any Slytherin should be, so he struck a deal, "If I help you and my father kills me for that, will you tell Rose that I wasn't a bad guy?"

Hermione promised and assured him that Draco would never kill his son, but they would stick to the same story if anything went wrong. They decided on saying that Scorpius had been curious and had taken a peek, but Hermione had disarmed him wandlessly and escaped. This way he would not be in much trouble. It wasn't a total lie; the last part was just a bit of added imagination.

"You cannot escape; this place has many Dark wards against Muggle-borns...Grandfather's doing," Scorpius mumbled embarrassedly.

"In that case...I would like to send a message out. Give me your wand."

He did. Hermione sent out a Patronus...she frowned at the changed form of her Patronus, but kept on concentrating as much as possible in her weak condition. She managed up to, "Harry help Her..."

*"Expelliarmus!"*

The wand flew from her hand to the outstretched hand of a livid Draco Malfoy.

## Chapter 16. A Lead, a Letter, and a Leader.

*Chapter 16 of 18*

They sat in awkward silence until there was a sudden appearance of a Patronus in the form of a small Jack Russell Terrier. Harry turned white as a St. Mungo's bed covering. "How is that possible! That's... Ron's...!" He pointed to the happy little puppy that jumped on his lap and started relaying a message in a very faint tone, "Harry! Help her..."

Disclaimer: Nothing has changed, really; and you know, it won't...

Acknowledgment: Thanks to Writermerrin for hanging in there for me and my story.

Harry had had enough of him. "Why did you go if you knew it was a waste of time? You did for the same reason that I did...however slim it might be, there still was a chance of her being there. So stop it! Stop complaining, stop whining, stop brooding, just stop already!"

Snape felt so insulted that he just harrumphed and pretended Harry did not exist.

They had returned from their failed mission at the Mansion three hours ago. The two had been arguing ever since. Instead of going back to Hogwarts, they had decided to visit the Burrow. Even though neither of the two would admit it aloud, they had chosen this place to find the strength for not giving up hope.

They sat in awkward silence until there was a sudden appearance of a Patronus in the form of a small Jack Russell Terrier. Harry turned white as a St. Mungo's bed covering. "How is that possible? That's... Ron's...!" He pointed to the happy little puppy that jumped on his lap and started relaying a message in a very faint tone, "Harry! Help her..."

Harry was visibly shaken with despair to notice the voice of the Patronus was not Ron's.

"Ron! She must be in grave danger to have R...Ron send h...his..." Harry looked at Snape who had an inscrutable expression on his face, and he said, "Is that possible? Can dead people...?"

"No, Potter! Don't go proving me wrong when I was just beginning to think you might be in possession of an iota of intelligence."

"Right!" His sneer shook Harry from whatever state he was in, and he jumped up to his feet at once. "Tonks! Yes! That's it!"

"No, Potter! Absolutely not Tonks!" Snape was exasperated. "Not Ronald Weasley, and definitely not Nymphadora or any other Tonks..."

"No, no, you don't understand. I got it. Tonks' Patronus changed after Sirius' death...it's like that. The message is from..."

"Hermione." The softness of Snape's voice when he uttered her name reminded Harry of the clouds he passed by whenever he was on his Firebolt.

"Yes, she found a chance, and she was well enough to do it." He was proud of his friend. With eyes full of hope, he looked at Snape's face to see a flicker of emotion shining there too.

After a moment, Snape said quietly, "Something or someone must have interrupted her. The message was not complete."

At that moment, Hugo came in, yelling for his sister to come and get her Flooed "Lurve-letter."

Rose chased after him. "I said, give it to me, you little ape!"

However, the ape showed no fear of her. He just waved it from the other side of the room, keeping Harry and Snape in between them, and smirked wisely.

Rose pointed her wand at him to Accio it and remembered that she was at home in front of her headmaster, so she asked for Harry's help. At Harry's request, Hugo finally gave the letter back but did not forget to tease her as "future Mrs. Malfoy." Rose was as red as her hair when she snatched the letter, but then paled instantly after reading it quickly.

Snape became interested after hearing the boy's taunt, but Harry beat him in questioning.

"What's wrong, Rosie?"

The shivering little girl handed out the letter to him. "Scorpius knows where Mum is."

~\*Hg\*~

"Draco! Please don't be mad at him. It's all my doing. He's just a kid. Don't hurt him, please," Hermione pleaded to the very angry man who had just sent his son from the room with an "OUT! I'll deal with you when I'm done here." The child had scurried off, having never seen this dangerous side of his father before.

Draco was still proceeding towards Hermione. "You care about my son above your own safety!"

"I have been under your Crucio...I know what you can do; just don't do anything harsh to the child."

"My child! What are you trying to do, Granger? Trying to poison my child against me? Why would he want to help you?"

"Your son was trying to do the right thing. Let me go, Draco. You have a son; you know what it's like to have a child. Could he live without you? I'm sure my children miss me. Let me go, please," she pleaded.

"Let you go? I will, as soon as Potter releases my dad."

"Your dad?"

"Don't you know, dear Hermione? You're just a pawn...just like your idiot husband...EXPENDABLE!"

"What are you talking about? And stop calling him names. Ron wasn't an idiot."

Draco ignored her protest entirely by sneering, "Didn't you know? Your darling lover arrested my father."

"Severus?" Hermione was confused.

"Potter. Your... Why did you say Severus? He's not... He can't be! Snape?"

"It's not like that. I mean, he doesn't feel anything for me, nothing at all." The last part was mumbled.

Draco looked thoughtfully at her and said, "If I was your friend, I would have warned you about how traitorous that man could be."

"Then it's a good thing that you are not...not my friend. He is not a traitor anyway; he is..."

"A traitor! A traitor to the bone! I'm not even talking about the Dark Lord! He betrayed my father after a lifetime of friendship. Do you know he's the reason my father was arrested for Ron Weasley's..." He stopped abruptly.

"Ron Weasley's what? What, Draco?" She didn't want him to confirm her suspicion as a fact, but knew he might just do that.

Upon seeing her distress, for some reason unknown to even himself, he gave up and sat down by her. "Ron Weasley's murder."

"Ron was murdered?"

"My father wanted to get Potter off our back. He didn't plan on it. It was just a spur of the moment thing...a miscalculation."

She stood up, saying, "Miscalculation? My husband was just your miscalculation? We are just pawns in your big game? My children are orphans because it was convenient to your father? And you were going along with it? What happened to you, Draco? You were never kind, never nice, but you used to be a human being!"

Draco stood right in front of her and pulled her by her hair to make her face him. Staring right at her eyes, he said, "In another lifetime, we might have been friends; in another dimension, I might have loved you...married, and given my name and my life up for you... But right now, here, we are not friends. I am a Malfoy, and you are a Mudblood, a filthy little unimportant tramp of a traitor!"

Hermione's hands were free, and one of them had landed fiercely on his face. Draco didn't back off like he had in their third year. Instead he forcefully put a short but bruising kiss on her lips, then let go of her, wiped his mouth with his hand, and said, "Wanted to do that since the first time you hit me. Pity! No fireworks like I had once expected."

Hermione spat on him. He laughed, then left, saying, "See, you don't know all I can do to you."

Hermione kept on scrubbing her lips with her sleeve as if they were infected by him.

~\*hp~

"Calm down, Rosalind. It is all right. Your friend took a great risk upon himself by sending you this information. Thanks to him, we now have a lead. We will find her." Snape had consoled her before Ginny had come to take her upstairs.

"It could be a trap, you know." Harry was still skeptical about trusting a Malfoy message.

"The Chateau is secret-kept. That's why those owls came back; that's why I couldn't remember where it was, no matter how hard I'd tried."

"How could he, then...?"

"Isn't it obvious, Potter? Lucius thought it would be clever to make the boy Secret Keeper. No one would think to ask a child if the house became important to the Ministry, and the secret would live longer than Lucius would."

"Clever, but twisted."

"They often are."

"Agreed. So what are we waiting for?"

"You to bring your squad in."

"He is in France; it will take time to legally go through the proper channels. To hell with propriety! Hermione comes first. I think you should bring out your organization."

"My what?"

"You are the leader of the Order. Lead away."

~\*R\*~

Sitting on her bed, Rose was re-reading the letter from Scorpius.

*Rose,*

*How are you? I miss school and you... I meant Transfiguration studies with you, not you personally. Maybe I do that, too. How is school?*

*I have bad news; actually, it is a good news about a bad news. I saw your mum; she's with us...in our Chateau. My parents are very angry with me now. They took away all my privileges (What privileges...? I should have asked, there aren't any, except playing Exploding Snap with a house-elf. Have I mentioned I don't go to school here?), because I tried to help her. She wanted to go home to you two. I don't know why Dad thought she would be okay in our cellar instead. I wouldn't want my mum in anyone's cellar.*

Your mum tried to send someone a message. I don't know to whom, so I am writing the address of this place on a few other attached parchments and sending this note to both Hogwarts and to your grandparents' home. This place is protected by Fidelius charm. You must give these addresses to whoever can come and get your mum for you. You should hurry; Dad might move us to a different place soon.

Scorpius.

P.S. You told me to think for myself to be your friend. Are we friends now?

"Yes, we are," Rose whispered.

## Severus Snape and the Order of the Phoenix

Chapter 17 of 18

Severus did not think that the Malfoys would let a whole lot of people in to the knowledge of their secret hideout. Therefore, they kept the team small.

Disclaimer:

I don't know why I keep reminding you what you already know...not mine.

Hats off to my wonderful beta Writermerrin!

Harry went inside to speak to Ginny about the newest development while Severus contacted Minerva and told her to inform the Minister of Magic, who was a former Order member himself, about their mission in case they needed help from the French authorities.

Within fifteen minutes or so, Minerva came along with Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood through the Weasley kitchen's Floo. Bill insisted that Fleur should stay behind with the family and help Minerva to alert the other members of the Order, so that in case of emergency they could join in with the away team.

Severus did not think that the Malfoys would let a whole lot of people in to the knowledge of their secret hideout. Therefore, they kept the team small.

Before Minerva could leave, Severus stopped her, saying, "Listen, if something happens to me..."

"Yes, I know, Hermione gets all your books; it was always what you told Albus, since she was twelve. But now I think she would prefer to have you and your books." With that, she stepped into the Floo before he could say another word.

"Is that so!" George wiggled his brows with a wise grin, but seeing how uncomfortable Severus was, he sobered up and said, "Hermione is always going to be a sister to us. Welcome to the family, mate."

The Order of the Phoenix Apparated synchronously to the front yard of the current Malfoy residence, and Severus immediately started to take the dark wards down; that sent an alert inside, and the two Parkinson brothers came out to check what the matter was.

Harry joined in with Severus and took down the final ward, but before they could barge in, Draco Malfoy came out with his cronies, including Flint, Higgs, Bletchley and Goyle.

Suddenly everyone was pointing wands, shouting spells and dodging them.

Draco had sent a *Confringo* toward Severus, but Severus promptly levitated himself to avoid the blasting power of the spell; missing him, it hit the white marble statue of Aphrodite, blasting it into pieces of dust. Pansy's eldest brother, Pendelton, attacked Harry with a *Flagrate* charm that took the shape of a fiery cobra, and Ginny threw a Fire Freezing charm towards it to save her husband.

Neville threw a *Furnunculus*, and Plantgenet Parkinson caught the curse while dodging George's Inflation charm. Bill was fighting both Flint and Goyle. Draco suddenly had disappeared, confusing Severus in the middle of hurling a curse towards him.

Harry and Severus fought their way inside to find Hermione suffering under Pansy's pointed wand. Harry shouted out his signature *Expelliarmus*, but she deflected it and threw out *Impedimenta*, which slowed Harry down. Severus used the chance to throw a nonverbal stupefying charm at her.

Then he lifted the curses from Hermione and started checking what kind of damage she was suffering. As soon as he was near, she whispered, "You came!"

"Of course I've come; how can I not come, when you've got such a penchant for trouble?"

"You've come to rescue her, or to reproach her?" Harry said, finding his opponent immobilized.

"Rescue her to reproach her," Severus said as he administered a few healing charms.

"You didn't have to come." Hermione turned around. Her frail condition was too much for the emotional upheaval...but she did not want to break down again in front of him; she could not let Harry see how easily this man could humiliate her to the point of...

"Hermione." Severus touched her arm lightly; she did not turn around, but the plea in his voice made her swallow her cry with a few quick breaths.

"Why would you care? I'm not dead yet."

"Hermione... please." He moved even closer and turned her around to face him. She struggled, but he did not let go...held her to his chest and chanted in her hair, "I am so sorry, so sorry, Hermione. I am truly, truly, truly sorry, my love." Hermione trembled in tears all over his chest.

Harry felt awkward witnessing the tender moment, as if he was intruding on their privacy, but could not leave them unprotected in their emotional state. So he kept himself busy, watching the door for any sign of trouble.



He doubted if either of the two had remembered, in the forgotten world behind them, there was a fight going on between the Order and the Malfoys, which Snape was supposed to be leading.

"Don't call me love if you don't mean it," she said in her raspy, tear-stained whisper.

Severus held her tighter. "I didn't." And he lowered his lips to hers.

At that moment, Harry felt a wand on his throat, and Draco Malfoy materialized before them out of thin air, saying, "AW!... Look at the lovebirds, Potty darling, and she told me he didn't feel anything for her! Should I give them a bit of time?" he asked as if he was simply chatting with an old friend.

"Will you STOP calling me darling?" Harry did not know who he was more furious at...Malfoy or himself...for not anticipating this move from the ferret. No matter how cowardly he seemed for fleeing from the fight, Draco Malfoy was Slytherin enough to plot something. Harry should have thought of that.

As they broke apart immediately, Snape pointed his wand at Draco, only to find that Harry had become Draco's shield. Hermione was blushing furiously in spite of the situation, as she looked anywhere but at Harry.

Snape assured her, "It is all right, my sweet. Potter knows."

"Harry?" Hermione was hesitant.

"How could I not know...the way he acted after you went missing! And no, I don't have any problem with it; you know I want you to be happy."

"You must tell me about it, darling Potty-face. He calls her sweet... love... What this world is turning into!" The forgotten asperser let his existence be known, and then he ordered Snape to unfreeze his wife.

Snape reluctantly did so, as Harry once again chewed on his every word. "Stop. Calling. Me. Darling!"

Pansy cackled like the maniac she idolized as she took Snape's wand from him, "So that's how Granger got top marks! Bewitched and ensnared the professor, did you?"

"How dare you!" Hermione tried to launch towards her, but Severus held her back saying, "Don't, she's not worth it." A furious Pansy had cast a Cruciatus by pointing her wand at him, but Hermione pushed him off balance and in the process became the victim of the curse instead.

"*Expelliarmus!*" In the commotion, no one had noticed Luna slip in. The wands flew out from the Malfoys' to her outstretched hand. She let Snape and Harry take their wands.

"*Finite*. Extraordinary, Ms. Lovegood!" Snape said as he lifted a writhing Hermione from the ground.

"Thank you, Professor," Luna said as she bound Pansy magically. Harry joined her to bind Draco.

Luna told them that Neville and Ginny, along with her brothers, had taken the rest of the minions to the French Ministry.

"Good. I will take you back home, darling. Kidnapping and blackmail should assure you a good place by your daddy," Harry informed Draco.

"Why are you calling him darling, Harry?" Luna was not there before, so the pet name confused her.

"Potter fancies me, obviously."

"Yeah, you wish. Shut your smart mouth and think about Azkaban."

Apparently, Hermione decided it was a good time to drop the bombshell. "Um, Harry... I don't want to press any charges against him."

"Actually, that's the one I wished for," Draco said smugly to Harry, as if to answer his earlier jab.

"Hermione!" They were stunned without the aid of magic.

"Yeah. That one, but daddy won't let..." Draco thought they were asking him.

"What are you saying?" came in unison from Pansy, Harry and Snape, though Pansy's question was directed to her husband.

They ignored the arguing couple. Neville and George had returned in time to hear Hermione.

"What are we doing here fighting our arses off, then?" asked one furious George.

"Why on earth not, Hermione?" Neville asked.

"She liked kissing me, perhaps." Snape stiffened, and Pansy became livid at Draco's wisecracking.

"You two kissed?" she asked.

"That's low even for you, Draco. Severus, I am not going to defend my chastity to you or anyone else. I am a mother of two, not a trembling maiden in white, and this is not the middle ages, nor is it the Middle East. Harry, find something else for him which would allow him to stay at home while being punished."

"I am moving out. You want the Mudblood over me, you can have her!" Pansy yelled.

"Actually, he can't have her; the Mudblood does not want to become anyone's property." Now Hermione was getting angrier.

"Do not use that vulgar word. And I haven't doubted you, Hermione." It was Professor Snape who spoke, not just Severus.

"Yes, you did; your shoulder became stiff and your eyes hardened and narrowed," Luna observed.

"I felt angry at my incapacity to protect her from any harm, Ms. Lovegood. My anger was not directed at your friend."

"This is getting out of hand. Hermione, you know if you don't press kidnapping charges, I can't get him for blackmail, either." Harry tried to reason with her.

Snape joined in. "He wanted his father's freedom in exchange for yours. What about the torture you endured? You are barely a shadow of yourself."

"I'd rather be my own shadow than someone else's," was her haughty answer.

"I never asked that of you; that was entirely your doing. You were the one who insulted yourself, along with insulting me." The infamous Snape temper flared up. "You were the one who ran off and stepped into this trap blindly, causing everyone else to... Why did we even bother to show up if you were so content being tortured by these sociopaths?"

"Why did you come, Severus? 'Cause I worked at your school? Was it... I am a fellow Order member that obligated you? Maybe you came simply because Harry Potter

asked you to. Surely you didn't come for the tramp who dressed to insult you?"

"And Mum thought they were a match made in heaven!" Harry gave up all his hope.

Meanwhile, Severus stopped arguing and cupped her face in his hand as he said with his deep velvet voice, "I thought you knew why, Hermione: because it is your face that I see when I close my eyes. It had been your face even since before you had asked; I just didn't have the courage to test it. It might have been that way since your sixth year. I had denied that even to myself, thinking how absurd it would have been to think it aloud, never allowing myself to... I could not deny it anymore, not after almost losing you."

"They are, Harry, just not from the same one as yours and Ginny's or Neville's and mine...a different, argumentative heaven. Did I tell you we are getting married in June? He asked me last night." Luna flashed her ring to her friends, and they began to congratulate her.

Hermione even peeked out from Snape's chest to say how wonderful it was, and Luna thanked her, instead, for getting them together.

Apparently, after her globetrotting days and whimsical marriage, she was feeling out-of-sorts and Hermione had played matchmaker between them, which was another reason for her afternoon teas with Neville, besides their obvious friendship. Ginny and Bill had returned already, and they, too, joined the well-wishers' party.

Snape became irritated. *How can they forget such a serious topic and go off to gossip about rings and such* He said, "You are forgetting the problem at hand."

"We would like to know about your reason, too, Hermione." A serious George Weasley was a rarer thing than one of Luna's creatures, but definitely scarier.

"My decision has nothing to do with Draco. I can't do this to his son. You must understand. My children are growing up without their father. I cannot condemn the child who risked himself for me to a life similar to an orphan's life as a result of my action; I owe that much to Scorpius."

"Check her for Imperius, Snape. How else could she let him slip away, knowing about Ron's murder?" George was fuming. Draco kept on looking at her disbelievingly.

Hermione said, "Calm down, George. Draco Malfoy did not kill Ron; you cannot charge him for his father's crime."

"Well, let's take them to England. We can decide what to do with them in peace over there. We can call a meeting; everybody available is at the Burrow anyway," suggested Bill.

"Good idea. I need to take Hermione to St. Mungo's for a checkup, too." Severus said.

"I'm fine. I don't need to see anyone but my children," Hermione protested, then added, "Don't forget to bring Scorpius along."

"Not another word, Hermione. Someone will bring the children to see you there at once, but I must make sure you are all right, my sweet."

## In a very flowery wedding.

### Chapter 18 of 18

"Spider? But what does this have to do with your Animag... Hermione! You are not telling me what I am thinking you are telling me? Are you? Where is this stupid Muggle superstition coming from?"

Disclaimer: Severus Snape is sitting by me, and poking fun at my inadequate English, but he won't try his hand at writing. I don't know how Rita Skeeter managed to write all those novels.... Oh? Am I not supposed to talk about her real name, either? Shh! Shh, then.

A.N. : Absolutely grateful to amazing WriterMerrin for beta reading the entire story.

SSHG

Luna looked like an angel in her white wedding dress, with her soft, sweet face and her long, blond tresses styled with the whitest flowers in Neville's greenhouse. They had decided on a simple but elegant ceremony with friends and Hogwarts' staff present.

Luna wanted Hermione to be her matron of honor, but she had refused. No matter how much her friends had tried, Hermione would not touch or go near anything related to the wedding. They had argued with her, but she was adamant. At one point of the heated argument, they had found out that she had some sort of Muggle Eastern superstition, which she would not let go and would not even try to overcome.

Her misguided mind believed that as a widow her presence would bring the newlyweds bad luck. Everyone was shocked that she would believe such a pile of bullock and not participate. Luna had insisted, "We will take the chance," while Neville had scolded, "Hermione, you must stop this nonsense."

"I can't, you have to understand... I have read about it. A large portion of Muggles who live in the East abide by it, however debasing it is, I can't... not after knowing about it. You see, if anything bad happened to either one of you, I would blame myself the rest of my life."

"Something could always happen, that won't be your fault." Neville said.

"We are mortal after all," Luna added thoughtfully.

Then she said, "I will go to your wedding but stay far enough away to be on the safe side."

Nobody wanted to listen to her; Harry even threatened to 'tell Snape' about it, which made her angrier, and she threatened to boycott the wedding in response.

So, there she was: not speaking to Harry at the moment, standing far away from everyone. She had come with Severus, but once there, she had wandered off with the feeble excuse of 'needing to be excused for a bit.'

Severus did not know what had happened behind the scenes of this union, so he was expecting her back to her seat any moment. He had been surprised to not see her with Mrs. Potter and the bride. His eyes had searched for her while the ceremony was going on, to stop at the far corner where she was standing. She was looking at the soon-to-be Mister and Missus Longbottom, smiling happily standing off by herself. That puzzled him momentarily, but the more he looked at her, the more he became mesmerized by her.

'She is beautiful,' he thought, then corrected himself, 'breathtaking to be precise.' But why was she standing over there alone? Shouldn't she be with him? Following her gaze, he looked back at the wedding. The bride and groom looked ... all right--overly flowery and equally too cheerful for his taste, but happy, no doubt.

There were unmistakable worlds of joy present in new Mrs. Longbottom's large, dreamy eyes. He looked back at Hermione again. He had seen that exact look in her eyes--the night he stormed off from her office and found out that he was in love with her--in her wedding picture with Weasley. He did not remember seeing it in her eyes since.

Could he bring that light, that joy back into her eyes? In his mind, he pictured her in white, with flowers in her wild hair, smiling up to him with her face alight in joy and love for him. He found himself liking that image, loving it actually. Yes, that look on her face would make it worth dying a thousand deaths.

Hermione looked at him, sensing his gaze, and waved happily, which he acknowledged by nodding slightly with a hint of smile in his eyes, only for her to see.

While everyone was mingling and congratulating the couple, Severus had eyes only for his witch--not his yet, if one chose to be that precise about it, but he had planned to rectify that little...

"Hermione." He had reached where she was standing.

"Hello, Severus. Beautiful, isn't it? She looks like an angel."

"Breathtaking, actually. I caught myself scarcely breathing every time I looked at you."

His deep, seductive purr reminded her of melted dark chocolate. Hermione shivered unintentionally at the intensity of his gaze fixated on her face, and she blushed prettily at his compliment. "Severus!"

Severus' plan went out of the proverbial window faster than the latest addition to Harry Potter's broom collection. Looking at her blush, he had even forgotten the speech he had prepared on his way there from his seat. Severus simply said, "Marry me, Hermione."

DM

Draco Malfoy was watching the wedding from afar, too. It was not like he was invited, but the bitterness he felt was not from not being invited to Longbottom's wedding. A melancholy sigh escaped him as a very bitter and depressed Draco Malfoy contemplated what had become of his life. Since he had been brought back by the Order, he'd become miserable in every way. 'With the Dementors out of Azkaban, Father is having a better time than I am currently.'

Granger... He did not dare to call her Hermione, not even in his mind anymore, would never call her a Weasley; to him it was worse than calling her a Mudblood, for why on earth did she choose... that... that.... Never mind. She was all for the second chance and all that Mugglish, Dumbledorian bollocks.

Potter apparently had learned his elementary arithmetic at last, and he was desperate enough to prove it to the rest of the world by saying, "He had his second chance. Dumbledore gave him that chance in the Tower that night; in the last battle we gave him his third and fourth chances; the Ministry and the Order let him walk away without even a slap on his ferret face. Those were his fifth and sixth chances. Now you are giving him his chance number *lucky seven*..."

Draco could not help himself. "Good counting, Potty Darling! Now can you say what number comes after seven?"

Granger and Snape exchanged an amused look; then he scowled, and she pursed her lips tightly to stop laughing, while she waved her wand at Draco to cast a nonverbal *Silencio*.

Then, with products from Weasley's joke shop and Snape's private potions collection, they made him talk about "his daddy's little organization" as George Weasley had eloquently put it.

In exchange for his information, he would fill the empty post at Hogwarts instead of going to Azkaban. 'Wow! Snape must have really loathed teaching if he compared it with Azkaban,' Draco thought.

Potter told him, "Eager to speak, weren't you, Darling? Now you've got your chance."

He agreed to the condition gladly, even though he could not think of a single thing he was qualified or interested in teaching those dunderheads. However, life at Hogwarts was definitely more lucrative than that in Azkaban, and Slytherins were by nature survivors. So, he sang against his father... Oh, he sang better than Fawkes ever could! He knew Father would understand, for he was no less Slytherin himself. He would have done the same thing to save his own skin.

Then came the surprising twist, that he had to work pro bono, and that would be his redemption as Granger suggested. He laughed at her, at all of them. They really had no idea of the depth of the Malfoy fortune!

Draco decided to let them have their fun at the supposed victory, and he signed the agreement into voluntary service to Hogwarts without any financial gain.

The Minister of Magic supposedly came by to visit his old friends. He happened to have, in his robe pocket, the injunction to seize all Malfoy property and to freeze all Malfoy accounts, including the foreign ones, for further investigation of Mr. Lucius Malfoy's alleged Dark and seditious crimes against England. It was a good thing that he had found Mr. Draco Malfoy there because, by serving it this way, the good Minister had just saved the Ministry the cost of owl post.

'What!'

Whoever said lightning never strikes in the same place twice should never come face to face with Draco Malfoy, after uttering that total lie, if he was in his right mind.

The money, the mansions... all became out of his reach! The Headmaster had the audacity to pat him on the back. "Don't worry. Hogwarts provides meals and lodging for all its employees."

When Draco asked him what was it that he was going to teach, his godfather looked at him with those endless tunnels that he called eyes for a moment and said, "You will know about your job in due time."

As for Pansy, they made it mandatory for her, along with Draco, to take the Continuing Education course which was currently offered by Professor Rupert Radcliff of the department of Muggle Studies to build up tolerance towards Muggles.

It was mostly about how great Muggles were doing with technological magic, which was not a branch of magic at all. Apparently, they had made it to the moon when Lucius was merely a boy in Hogwarts, and not a single one of them knew the real use of a broomstick! Since then, they were busying themselves to conquer the rest of the mysteries of the night sky, stars and all.

Silly things, these Muggles, really! What was the point of diving under the deepest sea or climbing on top of the mountains or cruising deep in the jungles along with ferocious animals, and tagging, cataloging everything they could get their hands on when they could not even brew the simplest potion!

'Waste of time,' Draco would say if anyone asked him, which, of course, no one did. Taking these "Tolerant Treatment of Technology: The Muggle Magic" classes twice a week made him feel awful.

He also thought it was rude for Filch to take time off to pursue other interests, which would allow him to spend more time with that mangy cat of his. How much "more time" would they need? They were rivaling the Weasley twins--when the other one was alive.

Draco Malfoy, with his always suspicious, nagging wife by his side as Mrs. Norris with Filch, was magically bound to redeem his offenses by serving the castle, replacing Filch without any sign of getting his inheritance back or receiving any payments for his service.

Pansy did not leave as promised; Merlin knew he had tried to rid himself of her. He had admitted his feelings for Granger in public to humiliate and ridicule his tiresome wife. Perhaps she thought it would be better punishment if she stayed, and it was.

So, Pansy told him that she did not think it was prudent to let him stay alone in a castle with his dream girl.... Never mind the castle was filled with non-negligible amount of others, a few hundred pupils included, or the said dream girl was nose deep in her lovey-dovey relationship with his own godfather. Instead, Pansy tagged along with him to nag continuously about how worthless he proved himself to be, and how miserable her life turned out because of marrying him.

Draco knew who had pulled the strings to get the inheritance out of his hands. He snarled at him, "You are my godfather; you are supposed to protect me, not sell my soul out to the devil!"

The older man snarled back, "Your parents did that already, I am buying you back from the devil."

SSHG

"Are you sure, Severus?" She looked at him with surprise in her big, brown eyes. "I don't want to become your regret as a result of a momentary lapse of judgment due to sudden emotional upsurge."

He entwined a ringlet, which had freed itself from her loosely-piled updo, around his finger before saying, "You could never become my regret, even if you'd tried your best. Have I ever told you about the only thing that brought back the desire in me to wake up, even before those memories were given back to me?"

Hermione shook her head. "You wanted to come back without those memories? I never knew that."

"I did." He was still playing with her hair, and looking intently into her eyes, his voice went even lower. "Your laughter, I wanted to come back for your laughter."

"But, how did you know, I mean you can't possibly remember all your students' voices or laughter. How did you know that it was ... I mean, how did you ...?"

"Recognize? Did I not tell you that at the chateau?"

Hermione remembered he had told her that he'd denied the fact that he liked her since she was seventeen. He saw the recognition in her eyes.

"Yes, I knew. It was my most favorite sound, music to my ears, still is."

"Severus!"

He took her hand in his and kissed it softly. "You gave me back my life, Hermione, and I want you in it, always, in every moment for the rest of my life."

"I am in your life, marriage is not necessary for that." She looked away from him as if wanting to escape from something... Him?

"You don't want to be married to me." The statement was a sudden realization. "Not wanting to be tied up with my name, that is understandable." His mask dropped into its not-so-long-deserted place--on his face--his eyes and voice lost their previous open sincerity.

"Don't be like that, Severus. You must understand... what if it's true? What if I'm a black widow?" She was on the verge of tears.

"Spider? But what does this have to do with your Animag... Hermione! You are not telling me what I am thinking you are telling me? Are you? Where is this stupid Muggle superstition coming from?"

Harry was passing by them; he stopped and asked, "Why are you so insecure? Ask her, Severus, why she missed the entire wedding."

"No, you don't understand!"

"You are right, I truly don't." Harry shook his head and left without looking back.

"Why exactly?" Severus was casting a privacy charm over them.

"Harry won't even listen to me, see? You want to know why? I'll tell you why... Ron would not have died so soon if he had not married me and tried to... to... to impress me by adopting Muggle... things." She was crying desperately. "I cannot let that same thing happen to you. I cannot lose you. What if something happens to you because I was selfish enough to marry you? I can't live without you."

Severus took her in his arms and said, "Silly thing! You could never be some sort *oporte-malheur*." This definitely was his witch; no one ever would say what she did, and no one ever had. He raised her chin with one finger and smiled to her assuredly. "You don't take away life, Hermione. You gave it.... Look at the beautiful children you'll have, we'll have, if you let me into your life, we might have one or two... or ten between us if you want, none if you don't... I'm not fussy."

"You free lives. Yes, I knew about your championship movement, about SPEW, even then. Your campaign earned the house-elves the right to choose, even if it was against their wishes--you were the only one who offered them the same rights as us."

"You freed me, and not only from my coma--from myself."

"Weasley did not die because of you or for you; his death was Lucius' fault, and only he is to blame... No one else. You have that little rock of Potter's. You go ahead and ask Ronald; he will tell you the same, you could never be bad luck for anyone."

Hermione was still crying. Very gently, Severus took a droplet from her lashes and examined it with open wonder in his eyes, as if he was examining a rare potions ingredient. Smiling, he tasted it and lowered his mouth to her cheek for more as he murmured, "I may have loved before, Hermione, and it came with anger and bitterness. I have never known peace before you brought it to me."

She kissed him back full on the mouth and said, "Ask me again, Severus."

He did. He looked into her puffy red eyes and blotchy face, and all the thoughts of Slytherin subtlety, all the sonnets he ever recited escaped him once again. "Be mine, Hermione, make me yours for the rest of my life."

"Let's go, Severus." It was not the answer he was expecting from her. She lifted the privacy spell.

"Go where, exactly?"

"Over there." She pointed to the stage. "Almost everyone I would want to be here is here now, the priest is here, we are here. Let's go get married."

"Are you sure? You don't want a big wedding of your own? Lots of flowers? Big celebration with too-cheery, bubblegum-pink bridesmaids? Wouldn't you rather speak to the children first? Your parents?"

"Getting cold feet?"

"Me? Never."

"I don't want anything but to be with you forever, too, Severus."

"And the children already know." They startled at the cheery voice of Rose, standing with Hugo and Scorpius close by.

Hermione pulled him towards the stage, passing by Neville, who had no plan to ever let go of Luna's lips. She said, "I have an announcement to make. May I have your attention, please? Thank you. Hi, everyone! We are getting married next, Severus and I."

Harry jumped up and hugged his best friend, the rest of the Gryffindors following suit.

Fleur asked Hermione, "When?"

George whistled and said, "It's about time, Snape!"

Snape replied, "I believe you are correct, Mr. Weasley." He turned to the priest and said, "You heard the man, let's get on with it."

"You don't mean now!" Indignation came in unison from the crowd.

"We do!" They, too, answered in unison.

SH

A "Really Unnecessary" Epilogue:

Hermione had become Mrs. Snape for the rest of her life with Minerva's Transfigured napkin rings as hers and Severus' wedding bands. They later replaced those with real rings, but kept the original ones in the memory box. She had a platinum snake with a diamond for its body and emeralds for its eyes, and Severus had the exact same band, only his snake had sapphires for its eyes. He was all for inter-House collaboration, but thought he had had enough of red-eyed snakes to last him a lifetime, thank you very much.

With four children, only two of them were biologically Severus', but one would be hard pressed to guess which ones by the way their father had spoiled them all rotten. Hermione sometimes thought George might have been a stricter father to Annabelle than Severus would ever be to their children. Growing up, she, along with Ron and Harry, had always thought Severus hated children, but she should have known that was not a fact by the way he treated his Slytherins. Severus not only knew how to love, he loved unconditionally, with all his heart.

Anyway, with four children and a devoted husband, Hermione lived in a magical castle for the rest of her life, happily ever after.

How?

That's another story.

A. N.:

Thanks to everyone who was patient enough for my grammatical errors. Thanks to all my reviewers and whoever put this story on their favorite list....

OUCH! Honestly, Severus, you must find a better writer than I ever would be to write the...!

The writer blushed as SS winked and raised one extremely sexy eyebrow.

Oh! Severus thought that with patience like this, you would have made excellent Potions students, no adequate? What "adequate!" You said "excellent", Severus! Yes, you did!

Of course you did.

Did, too!

Did.

Hey, no one will take your story seriously if you keep on arguing with the writer. And by the way...

You did.