

The Succubus

by Southern_Witch_69

Snape starts having nightly visits from a Succubus. Soon after, an Incubus starts visiting Hermione. They will have to come together to beat their nightly visitors and get past their sensual dreams. This is set in Hermione's seventh year at Hogwarts after her 18th birthday.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 32

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Author's Notes: I did some research and saw that Merlin was supposed to have been created through the coupling of a nun and an Incubus. I looked up a bit more, and I decided to twist the details some to fit this story. I think it works well.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big Thanks to my original beta, Charmed Nay. I have another beta working with me for this round--GinnyW (thanks, doll). And, I have a special thanks for the lovely Corazon for the encouragement. Otherwise, I would not have posted this story.

A/N: This story is completed. I'm going to be uploading one chapter every two days (51 chapters total) to allow some people time to read it before I start posting the sequel. To make things easier, I think I will likely combine some chapters--less clutter that way..teehee.

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"Albus, I can't explain it. It's...it's unbearable," Severus said darkly. He hated admitting that he was weak, but he knew of nobody else that he could talk to about this. He had to tell someone.

The headmaster bowed his head in thought. "How long has this gone on, Severus?"

"The past two nights. I feel as though I am awake, but I know I am not. I can't rouse myself. It's like I want to see her. To feel her. My loins burn even now just thinking about her. When she comes to me, I feel as though my magic is being sucked away slowly," he replied savagely. "Both times I only woke because something else woke me. The first night it was Fawkes. He popped into my room, and the burst of flames brought me out of it. Last night, it was you in the fireplace calling out to me. Did you know?"

"I felt something was amiss, and I had to check on you. I did not know it was this though. So, you have yet to see her face?" There was no twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes. This was a serious matter.

"No, I see her materialize near the fireplace. She stalks forward slowly. Her head is down with her long mass of brown hair falling over it. I hear her calling to me. My given name. She says she has come for me. Each time it was the same. Her long, blood-colored nails begin to slowly peel away her black dress. Just as her dress is pulled down

near her waist, I have woken." Severus shuddered. He had a Succubus.

"If only we knew her face, we could take steps to change this. You must fight her, Severus. You can't succumb to the desire to mate with her, no matter how tempting she may be. I feel you would be lost to us."

"Albus, why would her face matter?"

"We need to know what type of Succubus this is. In the past, a Succubus has been known to take on the appearance of someone that the man knows. Someone that she knows he cannot resist due to his innermost feelings. It's possible that the only way she will stop coming is if he does indeed mate with this woman that he desires. Because then she knows that you would know the difference, and no matter whom she could turn herself into, you would not want her. You could resist her fully." Dumbledore mentally sighed. This was something that happened only once in a while. It had been ages since he'd heard tales of a Succubus. Sometimes the Succubus had a generic face, but most of the time the sneaky spirits took on the form of a loved one. The latter type of Succubus was the worst. They were harder to resist.

"I desire no woman, Albus. Maybe it is why I cannot see her face. What can I do besides resist the temptation?" he asked, hating the feeling of paranoia setting in. He'd always heard that if a man mated with a Succubus she could drain all of his life force, and then she would use his magical energies to produce the darkest of spawn. He loathed feeling like a randy teen waking from wet dreams.

"There has to be someone, Severus. I fear you will see her face soon. Maybe you don't realize it, but someone is well suited for you. Think, man. Whom do you know that could suit you?" Dumbledore pleaded. "Other than by taking the most powerful dreamless draught, I think you will face her more times than not whilst you sleep. Lucky for you, she can only plague you once per night."

"I desire no woman that lives," he said softly. "And, even so, no longer do I desire the one that died. I have a potent sleeping draught, and I have used it before. However, it is very addicting. I'd not like to take it regularly. If I could somehow wake up each time before..."

Dumbledore nodded when he trailed off. "I think it may be someone here at this school, Severus."

Severus' mouth gaped open. He mentally listed all the female professors and staff. He shuddered at the thought of Trelawny with her bug like eyes. He smirked at the thought of Madame Pince. That would be the day! The slag! Minerva appealed to him on an intellectual level, but he had no physical attraction to her. She had been one of his professors when he was a student. Hmmm...Sinistra...no, he'd never thought of her that way. She was quite boring, took forever to piece her sentences together, and only talked about the stars. Sprout...too dumpty. He didn't relish the thought of a woman with dirty fingernails groping him. Pomfrey...too motherly. Hooch, hell no. He'd been there and done that. She only left him questioning which of them were more of a man. Vector was married. He continued to click through them mentally. "Headmaster, I have thought on the staff. No one interests me that way. I assure you."

"Perhaps then, Severus, it is a student," Dumbledore said wisely.

Snape jumped back. "I would never-"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "I know that, Severus. You are a man of integrity, but I fear that if nobody on the staff appeals to you at all then it must be a student. I think that you subconsciously have these feelings, and the Succubus is pulling that from within. You are a very powerful wizard, my boy. She must really want to bear a child conceived of your magic. Is there no student that appeals to you?"

Severus sat down, and immediately summoned a tumbler filled with Scotch to his hand. He sipped while thinking. Who? What student? Damn dunderheads, most of them. He thought about his older Slytherins. Bullstrode...he shuddered. Not in this lifetime. Parkinson...too flaky. Though he liked an experienced woman, she'd had way too many lovers for such a young age. He thought of them all, and not one projected any feelings from him. His thoughts moved on to Gryffindor. Brown...too fake. Parvati...too giggly. Granger... damn know-it-all! Never! "This is absurd, Albus. Students! I just don't feel that way about any of them."

"Whom were you just thinking about?"

"That damn Granger," he said immediately. He didn't like the look in Albus' eyes. "No...no, I can guarantee that had I intended to pick a lover from amongst the students, that girl would be the last on my list."

"Yet, she invokes passion in you," Albus said, popping a sherbet lemon into his mouth. "I saw your eyes. They were blank as you went through the students. When you got to her, your eyes came to life. She challenges you, and I think she might be the one."

Snape sneered at his mentor. "There is no way in hell I will ever be attracted to that Potter groupie!"

"Ah, so that is it. Harry. Always comes down to him, doesn't it? It's time to let the past go, Severus. He is not his father, nor has he asked for his lot in life. He has lived all of his life to fulfill a prophecy. Now that he has done that, he can finally be free. He is not as much like James as you thought." Albus looked over his half-moon spectacles at Severus. He could see that his Potions master was scowling. Even though Harry and Severus fought along side each other, they still couldn't come to terms. Harry would if only Severus would make the first move. Dumbledore knew that. He had seen how Harry almost yearned for it, for someone who had been in school with his parents. The last of the Marauders went down when Lupin killed Wormtail, and was, in return, killed by Voldemort.

"I respect him as a wizard, Albus," Severus spat. "Be that as it may, I still feel that the past he and I have shared will never enable us to be as close as you would like. I tolerate him, but that is all."

"Forget about Harry. Let's talk about Hermione. Does the Succubus' body resemble hers? I think the long, brown hair is one thing they have in common already."

Damn that man! He was always trying to insinuate things. "Yes, the hair is a near likeness; however, this body belongs to a woman- not a child."

"Have you seen Hermione's body then?" Dumbledore asked, eyes twinkling.

"I most certainly have not," he retorted hotly. *Not that the damn school robes allowed you to truly see anything.* Granger had turned into an attractive young woman. He'd give her that much. She was no seductress, however. "After the evening meal, I would like to come here to sleep on your couch. I will try to get a look at her face...to prove you wrong if nothing else. I will need you to wake me just in case I cannot resist." Being unable to have control was the worst part.

Dumbledore nodded. "Let's go down then. It's mealtime already."

~~~~~SS~~~~~HG~~~~~

Harry sighed. "Mione, you are going to drive yourself crazy with all this studying. I fell asleep at 3 this morning, and you were studying. I woke up at 7:30, and you were still studying. Can't you just take a break? It's Saturday for Merlin's sake! You've not slept all day either."

Hermione smiled softly while stifling a yawn. "I promise to sleep after I eat something. I am a bit tired."

Ron snorted. "Tired, are you? Getting up at 4 on a Friday morning, and staying awake until 6 on Saturday is a bit rough, is it? Honestly, I always thought you were mental, but this just proves it."

Hermione glared at Ron. He never was one for subtlety, was he? "Eat, will you?" she spat out as they sat at the table. She was starving. She hadn't eaten all day. The mashed potatoes seemed to be practically calling her name. She scooped up a large helping onto her plate and ate with gusto. Once she had finished that, she decided to wait just a minute to let it go down before digging in again. She rested her head on one hand, allowing her eyes to close.

Sleep overtook her. She dreamt that she was in the Great Hall, but there was no one else around. The ceiling reflected a stormy night. She could hear hard rain splattering around her, hear the thunder crackling, and see the lighting flashing brutally. "Hello?" she called out. Her only reply was a faint echo. The doors to the hall slammed open a moment later, and someone walked in slowly. It was a wizard; she could see that much. He was walking straight towards her.

"Hermione..." he whispered once he drew nearer. Fear tore at her heart. Who was this man? How did he know her name? She couldn't see his face. He was in the shadows, and his cloak's hood was covering most of his face.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice etched in fear. Something didn't feel right. Where was Harry? Where was Ron?

"I've come for you, Hermione." His voice was deep, scary, mesmerizing, and yet, familiar. She scooted back as he came closer. He finally stopped when he was nearly five feet from her. With his head bent forward, he slowly pulled back his hood. This man had dark, silky, shoulder-length hair that hung about his face. His head tilted to the side, and the hair littered his face so much that she could only see one of his black piercing eyes. "You're mine," he rasped. She screamed as he lunged forward.

"Hermione!" She heard someone yelling. "Mione!" It was Harry. She opened her eyes, and to her horror, she was lying on her back near her table. Harry, Ron, and the others were all around her staring as if she had gone crazy. "You had a nightmare!"

"I...I fell asleep," she mumbled. She shivered remembering what had happened. Something about her dream was not right. It felt real somehow. What was it about that man?

"I'll say," Ron said thickly, mouth full of potatoes. "You fell backwards, and then you were scooting away yelling for someone to stay away. After that, you just fell back screaming."

She turned red with embarrassment. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up into the worried, blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore. "Do you have nightmares often?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't. I've just been up too long I think. Some man was here in the hall. It was just a bad dream. That's all." She watched as he turned to look at Snape and McGonagall. Both had come to stand next to him. She saw Snape sneering, and McGonagall looking worried.

"Severus, I may need you to give her some of your draught for tonight, but not until I speak to her. Bring her down to your chambers until I can meet you there," Dumbledore said firmly.

"Surely, Minerva could..." Snape began, but he quieted at the look on the headmaster's face.

"Go with Professor Snape, Hermione," Dumbledore said, helping her up.

"I...I don't need a draught. I'll fall asleep straight away. I have just been up nearly two days is all." She knew it did no good to protest. Snape was already walking forward to lead the way. Harry and Ron just shrugged, giving her sympathizing looks. They hated that she had to be alone with the old bat, but it was better her than them.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said. "If we could have a word..." She saw her nod, and they left in the opposite direction. Hermione glanced around the hall. Everyone was staring at her and whispering. She'd really made a scene this time.

"Miss Granger, if you don't mind, I do believe the dungeons are this way," Snape hissed when she didn't follow him. She nodded, setting off behind him. Once they were out in the corridor, she tried to talk.

Her voice sounded weak. "Sir, I really don't feel that I need to take a draught. It was just a simple nightmare. Honestly."

If Snape heard her, he made no effort to let her know. He kept walking briskly, and she nearly had to run to keep up with him. The dungeons were freezing this time of year, and too late she had realized that her cloak was in the hall still. Hopefully, Harry or Ron would think to bring it. Her teeth began chattering just as they reached the Potions' classroom. He unwarded his door, pointing for her to go in. She brushed past him to wait for instruction. "In my office," he said. She followed him in, and she sat on a chair near his desk. Her teeth were still clinking together horribly, and she was shivering uncontrollably. He smirked at her for showing her weakness, but nonetheless, he conjured up a blanket to put around her. After she was covered, he muttered a chant to spring his fire to life. She began to rock herself back and forth in the chair to aid in warming herself. He shook his head in annoyance, and he summoned a house-elf. "Tea for four." The elf nodded once before popping away. Moments later, he was back, and Snape shoved a cup into her hands.

She sipped gratefully. Her insides were finally warming. "Thank you, sir," she said softly. He nodded while bringing his own cup to his lips. She felt uneasy. He seemed to be studying her. She lowered her eyes for a moment, but when she looked back, his gaze was still upon her just as intently. Feeling extremely self-conscious, she bowed her head down to look into the cup on her lap, letting her hair hang low to hide her face. She heard a sharp intake of air as his chair scraped back. Hermione looked up again to see him backing away from her uneasily. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"It's you," he said incredulously. "Good Lord! He was right."

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**A/N:** The next chapter will explain a bit more about the Succubus.

# Chapter One

*Chapter 2 of 32*

We find out about legends of a Succubus and an Incubus.

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**A big thanks to my original beta, Charmed Nay, but I'd always like to thank my second beta, GinnyW, for taking the time to help me make this better.**

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"Professor!" she exclaimed, feeling strange. "Who was right? What have I done?" He was backed into a bookshelf looking at her with an expression of mixed emotions. Disgust, anger, and realization were only a few she could discern. She stood up quickly as if to go to him.

"You stay right where you are, witch," he hissed coldly, holding out his hand to halt her. "Take one more step, and I shall hex you!" It was at this point that Dumbledore and McGonagall walked in.

"Severus!" McGonagall said admonished sternly. "What is your problem?" She went to Hermione to sit her down, and she placed the blanket back over her. Summoning a chair, she took a seat next to her, holding her hand. Dumbledore went to his speechless Potions master, guiding him back to his chair. He conjured his own comfortable seat and sat near him. Everyone took turns looking at each other. McGonagall looked as if she'd been deeply upset by something. Dumbledore looked to the floor thoughtfully. Snape looked as if he had been accosted. Hermione didn't know what to make of this. Apparently, she was being accused of something.

A couple of minutes passed. Finally, after mumbling to himself, Dumbledore spoke to his friend. "Severus, what was going on just now? Is it as I fear?"

Crossing his arms and looking away, Hermione feared he would not answer. Suddenly, an exasperated growl sounded. "It's her, Albus," Snape said through clenched teeth. "You were right as always. I made the connection before you came in."

McGonagall took in a sharp breath. Dumbledore nodded knowingly. Snape glared at Hermione as if daring her to deny his accusation. She would gladly admit to anything she had done wrong, but she had no idea what connection he had made. This brought tears to Hermione's eyes. The strain of studying so deeply, the lack of sleep, and the finger pointing pushed her over the edge. "I...I didn't do anything wrong. I just fell asleep. I thought I could use the time off this weekend to study." Her voice was barely a whisper. The tears began spilling down her cheeks.

McGonagall put an arm around her to scoop her into a motherly embrace. "Of course, you didn't, Hermione. It's not your fault," she said soothingly. "Albus? She is distraught. I suggest one of you explain this to her!"

Snape snorted. Albus placed a hand on his shoulder to silence any rebuke he may have made before speaking to his Head Girl. "Hermione, I need you to tell me about your nightmare. Please do not leave anything out. I think I may know what has caused it." He seemed so serious about it all. When had he taken an interest in students' dreams? Students besides Harry, that is?

"I've been awake too long...trying to get in enough studying for my exams after the holidays. I only closed my eyes for a moment at the table. When I opened my eyes again, it was dark. There was a terrible storm raging. I was alone until the doors opened, and a dark wizard came in." She bit her lip. McGonagall put a hand over hers in reassurance. After the scene she had made in the hall, this was a little embarrassing. Surely they would think she was nothing more than an easily frightened child. "This man knew my name, and he said that he had come for me. I tried to back away, but he kept coming. He pulled back his hood, and he had dark hair that hid his face. He said I was his. I had the feeling that he meant to harm me. He pulled down his hood, glancing at me with the only part of his face I could actually see in the shadowed lighting. A cold, black eye seemed to penetrate through me. Sort of like..." Hermione gasped, and would have balked if McGonagall hadn't held her steady. It was Professor Snape she had dreamed about, and the worst part was that they seemed to know already! A deep feeling of unease washed over her.

"Hermione," Dumbledore began. "I need you to calm yourself. This doesn't seem to be a normal dream. I fear that this is an Incubus who has visited you. Do you know what that is?" Good grief! Is this why Dumbledore seemed so concerned about her dream?

"An Incubus is a male spirit. Some claim he is a demonic spirit who visits chaste women in the form of an attractive man or a lover to try to seduce her. If he can successfully impregnate the woman, their child would grow to be a powerful, dark wizard. Though he can only visit once per night, he is able to feed on her magical power to add to his own, and he will normally only choose someone powerful as his consort..." Her voice trailed off. If her Incubus was taking the appearance of her professor, then that meant they thought... "Sir! I swear that I have never..." She couldn't voice it, but pointed towards Professor Snape. Did Dumbledore think they were together in that way? Did he believe that she fancied him? No wonder they were acting this way!

The headmaster held up a hand. "I know you haven't. However, I fear we have a more serious matter at hand here. Do you know of a Succubus?"

"She's the female form of an Incubus...only she is the one seeking to bear a child, and in turn, she feeds on the wizard's magic either leaving him with none or very little. Sometimes death occurs if the man gives in to her," Hermione stated promptly, sounding much like a textbook.

"Hermione, I can only say this bluntly. Severus here is suffering from the visits of a Succubus. As he stated earlier, she has taken on your form. Apparently, your Incubus has taken on his form. Do you know what happens when this occurs between two people, and they are visited by each other's forms?" Dumbledore inquired as if giving her a test.

"Legend says that the forms are the same entity. It marks them as two people who are likely to produce children together. The spirit wants to get to them first, foreseeing powerful offspring. It keeps trying in both forms until it succeeds with one or the other. Each time it visits one, it feeds from their desires, allowing it to build up, slowly draining them through their arousal." Hermione took a breath, careful not to meet anyone's eyes. "Dual visits are extremely rare. It is said that our Merlin himself was born from the union of an Incubus and a nun enabling him to be a most powerful wizard. A wizard had fallen in love with the nun and was trying to get her to run away with him. The wizard, whose form the Incubus took, died the night Merlin was conceived. His counterpart had drained the man's magical essence to add his magic to the seed on prior visits. The nun died in childbirth leaving Merlin to be raised by the Succubus form and the elements. Oh no!" More silent tears fell as she spoke. She looked to McGonagall for comfort, but no one spoke right away. Each dwelling on what she had said.

Severus narrowed his eyes. *Just like a pathetic, little witch!* She had the nerve to cry! Did she think that he liked this any better? Certainly not! He would never in a million years have thought that this would have happened. He wanted to rage about his office and throw things. Dumbledore finally broke the silence as Granger wiped the last of her tears away. "Do you know how to rid oneself from this entity?"

"Legend said that if Merlin's mum would have made love to her suitor, then the spirit's visits would have ceased. So, I'd say you have to...give in to the person whose form it takes. Either that or learn to fight it though that is futile. Your own inner feelings are hard to resist. I would suppose powerful, dreamless draughts keep the visions at bay. I...I don't really know. It's really rare," she said softly. Severus began to admire her courage, slightly. This could be worse. At least she wasn't wailing like an emotional child, and she now seemed to accept this albeit reluctantly. "Why us, Professor Dumbledore? We don't even like each other much. I harbor no feelings for him, and I am sure that sentiment is reciprocated."

Severus smirked at the girl, longing to give her a biting remark. McGonagall glared daggers at him though, and he looked away. Dumbledore spoke once again. "I think that perhaps at this moment you may not, but this proves that at some point in the future, you both shall have feelings enough to start a family. There would be no need for it to visit you both otherwise. This spirit is trying to intervene your creating of powerfully magical offspring. I think there is an explanation. The Transfiguration Assistantship perhaps?" Hermione's eyes went wide.

"What Transfiguration Assistantship?" Snape thundered.

"She has taken up the idea to go into teaching, and as I will be retiring within the next couple of years, we have offered for her to study under Minerva to learn the trade. Minerva, of course, will be assuming the headmistress role. That will leave her class open. She recommended Hermione." Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling again. *Damn that man!* "After the Christmas holidays, she is to start her training. She has enough credits to graduate early due to the extra credits she took the year she used the time turner. She is to take her N.E.W.T.s upon return. I daresay, it is why she has been pushing herself to her limit as of late."

Snape took all of this in. So, she was to become part of the staff in a mere few weeks. He had not been told of this! Not that his feelings on the matter would mean anything. One of the damn Golden Trio would be here to torment him even after the year was out! Just when he thought he'd be rid of them! He could see it now. Weasley and Potter would always be hanging about the castle visiting! Damn! Abruptly his miserable thoughts ceased as realization set in. He thought about all he'd just heard from his mentor and *her*. "Albus, do you mean to say that...." For the first time, his mouth gaped open.

"Yes, Severus. I do believe that you and she would have likely become a couple. The entity is trying to intercede that before it happens as your...union...would likely bring about potent offspring. It wants to mold someone of such magical prowess to follow its own beliefs. Someone like our Merlin." Dumbledore looked from one to the other. Severus was now glaring in disbelief. Hermione was looking straight ahead with a horrified expression. He held back a chuckle. This would be quite interesting.

Hermione broke the silence. "Well...what do we do?" She searched the eyes of everyone present.

No one had any answers that would actually help. There was no counter curse this time that would save the day. No magical potion that would chase away the blasted demon!

Snape began pacing, looking extremely unhappy. There was no way he'd have coupled with her. Children indeed *Codswallow!* Damn Succubus. He'd fight this. He wouldn't be goaded into sleeping with anyone. *Granger at that!* She was too innocent. Too irritating. Too insufferable. He sighed as Dumbledore spoke.

"I think that is something for you and Severus to discuss. You both now know what it is that will try to haunt you each night. If you can use that knowledge to resist temptation, then you must do so. I am afraid that it is hard to wake from a Succubus or Incubus induced dream. You will know it's a dream, but its pull will be hard to awaken from. Your desire will only fuel it. It was I who woke Severus the past two nights. You woke because of your friends calling to you. The entity only tries once per night as you said. I believe you will be safe for the rest of this night, Hermione. It's Severus who will be tempted next. He and I have already decided that he will try to sleep in my office. He was going to try to see the face of his Succubus, but we now know that it is you." Dumbledore smiled kindly at Hermione. "If no one is with you to wake you, I fear it will be too hard to resist. You will each have to be sure that someone is near when you sleep, or you may have no choice but to resort to a powerful potion, Dreamless Draught, each night to block out the entrance. As Severus pointed out, a potion of that strength becomes addicting over time."

Severus took in Hermione's determined expression. He understood that, like him, she thought the chance of them being the next super couple of the future was slim indeed. They had only classes, detentions, and Order meetings between them. It wasn't as if they'd been friends. He respected her intelligence to some degree, but he hated the way she flouted it to everyone. She was a definite plus to have in a battle. Their defeat of Voldemort had shown him that. Would he have seen her as a potential equal after she became part of the staff here? It was unlikely. He couldn't see her without thinking of Potter. That alone would have always been enough to turn him the other way. He almost smiled at her next words.

"I will not let some *spirit* tell me how to live my life. I will go on as I have before. If indeed he and I were ever meant to be, then it will come in time. I will fight this for now. If I have to sleep with someone watching me each night, then I shall do it. No Incubus will destroy my plans for the future. I have a purpose in life. I intend to give back to our community all that I have learned, and I hope that no other student who comes through under my care will turn out like damned Voldemort!" She looked to Severus, meeting his amused eyes evenly. They both blinked after a moment.

*Damn*, he thought. *An attraction*. He could tell she felt it as well. Fates be damned, he would fight this as well. He had research to complete. He would never father children, marry, nor succumb to a damn nightly seductress. Unlike Miss Granger, he knew there would be no chance for them in the future. He'd see to that. She had her whole life ahead of her. He was about eighteen years older, a man of needs, and very experienced in the ways of the world. She was an innocent. He knew that. Just the wide-eyed shock of it all told him that much. Plus, hadn't she said that an Incubus usually approaches a virtuous woman? *Ha!* She would be no match for him intellectually or physically. *Virgin, indeed!* He finally spoke as all eyes rested on him. "I, too, shall fight this. I have other plans for my future. I'll find a way to not give in to this dream induced temptation."

Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged knowing smirks. These two were meant to be. They could see that now. Fight as they might, they would be together. It was a mutual hope that they could fight their nightly demons though. To succumb to them would be disastrous for both of them. "Well, Hermione, I think it is safe to say you won't need the draught tonight after all since your Incubus has paid a visit already. I will see you back to Gryffindor Tower," Minerva said softly. "You will not try to study tonight. You have this week and the whole holidays to do so. You won't take your N.E.W.T.s until everyone returns again. Then you can become my apprentice."

Hermione allowed herself to be led back to her common room where she met up with Harry and Ron. They tried to bombard her with questions when they saw that their Head of House was escorting her. She told them she would explain everything in the morning. McGonagall made sure she went into her private Head Girl dormitory before warning the boys to not bother her for the night under any circumstances.

Down in the dungeons, Albus and Severus were still eyeing each other. "Severus, don't feel ashamed. You may not be attracted to her now, but I do feel that in the near future you would have been. Don't deny fate, Severus, as I can feel you intend to."

"I can barely stand to be around her, Albus, much less think of...bedding her. I will not give in to this. I'll do what I must to avoid it," he said firmly.

Albus nodded. "Of course, you will. Of course. Like it or not Severus, she will become part of our staff in a few weeks. That makes her your equal at least on some level. You will treat her with respect, and I believe you will eventually begin to see her in a new light. Shall we go to my office then? We could stay here if you'd prefer."

Severus nodded. "I don't want to keep you from your work. I am unsure how long it will take the wench to come. At least you can work while I sleep. They Flooded to the headmaster's office where Severus settled down for his slumber. Within moments, Severus was asleep.

Dumbledore watched him for any changes while silently contemplating on the evening's events. Severus and Hermione. He had always sensed some friction there. In the meetings, they had always both been very vocal, each expressing their views for or against discussion. He always chalked it up to a battle of wills. Both were intelligent beings, each passionate in their own way, and neither would back down from a challenge. They were well suited. A child from their union would, without a doubt, be an advantage for the Wizarding world. However, if their demon had its way, it would use such a union to dark advantages. He'd have to help them along the way to make certain that would not happen. He grinned to himself as he popped a sherbet lemon into his mouth.

Severus dreamt he was in his bed when he saw her. How the hell did he get here? Wasn't he in Albus' office? "Severus...I want you," she whispered seductively. She was not looking at him, but she was looking down at her body as she raked her nails along her cleavage line. Her hair was down again hiding her face. He wanted to tell her to get out, but he couldn't find his voice. He wanted to see her face. He wanted to see her body. He needed to be sure it was his sweet Hermione. *What the hell?* He growled. That would not do. "I know you want me...." She was peeling her strapless, black dress down to reveal her ample breasts.

"Look at me," he said through a ragged breath. He felt his desire coming alive. The temptress sighed in pleasure while a long nail circled an erect nipple. He felt as if a piece of himself was slipping away with his need for her.

She was at the foot of his bed now, and finally, she looked up at him *Granger!* But, it was a different Granger. She was full of confidence and sensuality. Her desire-lidded eyes watched him intently. "Beautiful," he murmured.

She ran a hand down her stomach, nearing her partially discarded dress. Her other fingers were occupied with her peaked nipples. "Do you want me?"

"Yes, I do," he breathed, feeling himself harden further at the thought of being within her. She reached out to rake a long nail up his bare leg, nearing his thigh. "No," he groaned, finally realizing that this wasn't right. This was not the Granger he knew. She began to pout, but her fingers continued to inch up. He felt someone shaking his shoulder.

He smelled lemons. Albus. He awoke with a start on the headmaster's chesterfield. "It's her," he panted. "Damn her."

Albus nodded. "I thought as much. Severus, were you able to fight her at all?"

"I couldn't at first. I wanted...to see her. Then I wanted to have her. But, when she touched me, I knew it wasn't right. I said no, but I don't know if I could have put her off. It was then that you woke me," Severus said, wiping sweat from his brow. Damn! His lower body was aching for release.

"I think it is safe to say that you can return to your chambers this night since she has come already. We will talk more on this tomorrow. While you might be able to fight off the seduction for now, I don't know if Hermione will be able to. She is an innocent, Severus," Dumbledore said knowingly. "I think in this instance...maybe you two..."

Severus held up a hand. "She is a child. I will not."

"She is an adult Severus. Hermione became of age at seventeen, which was last year. She made eighteen this past September, so she is now of age also in her Muggle world. Younger than you, yes, but that doesn't really matter now, does it? Minerva is fifty years younger than I am." Dumbledore waited for Severus to think it over. No

words came forth. "If a Succubus knows that you will become one in the future, why wait? Get to know her. You may find, as Minerva and I see, that she suits you."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Ever the matchmakers! I have things to do," he said curtly, and swept out of the headmaster's office. He couldn't believe this. He was thirty-seven years old. He did not intend to look for someone...ever. And, here was the news that he would supposedly have someone. Children? *Preposterous!* He loathed children. He loathed the idea of having someone disrupting his privacy. Why now? *Why her?* She could not meet his needs on any level. Then he thought of her as his Succubus. Damn, but she was lovely. He'd been with numerous women. Mostly concubines that the Dark Lord brought for his followers at a number of their meetings, some women that he'd raped, though they seemed to be begging before he ended it, and some women he had hired as well. The temptress he wouldn't mind having in his bed, but it wouldn't do to have a frightened virgin grace his sheets! "Never!"

~~~~~ hg ~~~~~ ss ~~~~~

Harry and Ron sat with their mouths open as Hermione finished her story from the night before. "Please, don't tell anyone about this. It is rather embarrassing."

"The greasy git! He is probably waiting around a corner now for the chance to ravish you. I'll kill him!" Ron was raging now. "He probably cooked all of this up to get his slimy paws on you! Drank anything in his class lately?"

Harry was thinking, not saying anything. Hermione tried to calm Ron. "Dumbledore and McGonagall both agree on this, Ron. It's true. There hasn't been a double encounter since Merlin...that we know of. I just don't know how I can fight this without becoming addicted to dreamless draught. Unless I have someone to wake me once the dream starts, I think I might be doomed," she said sorrowfully. "Or, I could always make a visit to the dungeons to try to beg him to sleep with me." She laughed bitterly.

"Ha! Be playing right into his hands then, wouldn't you? I'd wager he's counting on it! Dirty, rotten--"

"Ron!" Hermione interrupted. "Trust me. He doesn't want me. You should have seen his face. He even threatened to hex me. I've never seen him so out of sorts before."

"Well..." Ron began, seeming unsure of a come back. "Well, maybe he didn't, but I bet now he's had time to think on it, he'll be waiting around the corners for you. You can't go down to him!"

"Sit down," Hermione commanded. "Of course, he won't be. The only reason he'd be waiting around a corner is to hex me. He didn't even like the news that I would be working with Professor McGonagall soon."

Ron finally sat down, but was still glowering. It was then that Harry spoke. "We'll stay with you at night, Hermione. We can wake you if we notice you shifting about in your sleep. Once that passes, we'll go up to our room. And, if you...if you and he ever...you know, do get together...we'll support you."

"Like bloody hell! She doesn't deserve to be locked away in some dungeon with that bastard! It would ruin her life!" Ron was up again, pacing angrily. Harry smiled apologetically for his friend's outburst. "Sod it all!" Ron yelled to nobody in particular.

"Ron, I have already made my decision to spend my life at Hogwarts teaching if you'll remember. I don't... I could never have imagined being with...him, but what if that is what fate intended? Maybe...maybe my destiny is to bring him some joy after all he has endured." *Where the hell had that come from?*

Ron's mouth gaped open. "I'm sure of it now," he said incredulously. "He's given her a potion. For all I know, he's given the entire bloody staff one!" Ron stood up again. "Bring him some joy," he mimicked. "Ludicrous! You don't even believe in Divination!"

"This is a bit different than wretched Trelawney's classes, Ron!" Hermione shouted, becoming angry. She knew that out of her two friends, Ron would be the one to lose control.

Harry stood up to put a hand on Ron's shoulder. "Stop. You think you're making her feel better? We have to support her in this. We can help her. Her life is her own."

"I knew we should have had sex when we dated!" Ron blurted suddenly. "Then you wouldn't be all chaste, and that...that arse wouldn't be stalking you in the night!" He slapped a hand over his mouth. Harry started laughing, and then Hermione started laughing as well. That eased everyone up. Ron finally spoke with reason. "We'll be here for you, Mione. We'll help you get through this, but I just hate to think of you and Snape."

"Ron," she said softly. "I never thought of him either, but apparently, as Dumbledore said, in the future I would have eventually been with him...*that way*."

"Will you be staying in here still after you start your apprenticeship?" Harry inquired, hoping to change the subject.

"I don't know. I didn't think to ask any details. I just knew it was what I wanted and accepted."

"Right mental, she is. Finally able to get out of school, yet she chooses to stay on," Ron shuddered. Harry just grinned. "Let's go down for a spot of breakfast then."

"Harry, thanks. You always seem to know what to say," she said. "I do appreciate the help. I've only had that one dream, so I'm not sure what any others will be like. All I know is that it honestly frightened me."

"And, don't forget me," Ron said. "I'm here to help as well."

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione said with a grin. "You always help as well. After you've had your say of course!"

The trio made their way down to the hall where they met up with Malfoy. "Oi, Granger! Been screaming any more since last night?" He threw his hands up and twisted his face in mock fright.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "You wish, Malfoy."

Draco grinned. "Damn right, I do."

Ron made a rude gesture at him, but he didn't stop to do their usual ritual of passing insults. Draco had been a big help to them toward the end of the battles with Voldemort. He'd gotten his father to change sides, and with Snape, they were finally able to get a location for the Dark Lord where Harry brought him down. They still argued with the Slytherin, but it was more affectionate now. House rivalries would always be there.

Almost at once, when seated in the Great Hall, Hermione felt the hair at the back of her neck prickling. Someone was watching her. She looked up, and she met Snape's dark, piercing eyes. He was studying her. She felt her cheeks heat as she lowered her head to look at her plate. Why did he have to look at her so intently? Was he trying to discern any likenesses between the Succubus and herself? What did his Succubus do when she visited? Hermione's cheeks heated again. She pushed the images out of her mind. Although she continued to feel his eyes on her, she did not dare to look at him again.

Just as the meal was nearly done, Dumbledore stood up. "May I have your attention please?" He waited for the hall to become silent, and then he began. "This Friday will be your last day of classes before term ends for the Christmas holidays. We've decided to have a party here not only to celebrate the holidays, but also to celebrate the early graduation of one of our own. Miss Hermione Granger has completed her studies early, and after the holidays, she will become an apprentice to Professor McGonagall." Applause sounded as he paused. "We will also be inducting a new Head Girl for the remainder of the school year. She will be Miss Susan Bones." More applause. "Please wear whatever you would like to our holiday party. It's not a formal after all." Shouts of cheer rang out in the hall.

Hermione was clapped on the shoulder, hugged, and congratulated for the next ten minutes before she was able to make her escape from the hall. Harry and Ron had stayed behind to talk to Ginny and Luna. Hermione needed fresh air. She didn't feel like walking out in the snow, so she made her way to the Astronomy Tower. Once there, she stood near the ledge on the far left where she could see the best view. It was glorious. The icy wind was hitting her cheeks, filling her lungs with life, and

whipping her hair about wildly. The snow-covered grounds were beautiful. She would always love Hogwarts. It was a place she could always call home. It's one of the reasons she decided to stay on. Security was here. Though Voldemort was no more, she no longer desired to be an Auror, and she wanted to teach more than anything. She would try to befriend all that passed through her classes. She would give those with no hope something to live by. She would never let them feel that their only means to survive would be to turn to the Dark Arts. Those thoughts made her think of Professor Snape.

Had he felt he was alone? What had pushed him to the service of the Dark Lord initially? She shuddered. He was such a private, cold, demanding man. Could he ever warm up? Why would the Incubus think that they would mate one day? Could they possibly have so much in common that they would have fallen in love? A particularly large gust of wind passed by and nearly knocked her off her feet. Her cloak was once again forgotten, and her robes swayed violently. Perhaps she should go retrieve it. At that moment, she turned around. Severus Snape was standing only a few feet away with an intense expression in his eyes. His dark hair was flitting wildly, and his black cloak billowed about his person making him appear all the more menacing. She took a step away from him as he took one step forward.

Good Lord! Not again! "I'm asleep!" she yelled in panic. She pinched her arm and stared at the man in fear. He took another step closer. "No, I'm...stay right there, you...Incubus!" She saw the eyes soften, and then the corners of his lips quirked up slightly.

"Miss Granger, I assure you that you are indeed awake," he drawled. "Your Head of House saw fit that I bring this to you though I believe the task should have fallen to one of your friends." He produced her cloak from inside his own. She felt like an idiot. The Incubus that had visited her was definitely in the form of Severus Snape. They resembled each other so well: dark, menacing, possessive. She felt an unfamiliar tingle in her stomach as he moved closer. In three strides he was at her side handing her the cloak. She took it, and pulled it on quickly, instantly warming as it protected her from the icy fingers that had made their way around her.

"I'm sorry. I just..." She didn't know what to say.

"Say nothing. Go inside," he said in a soft voice, unlike his own. She scrambled to leave quickly, not daring to look back. His eyes followed her to the outer door. She had taken his breath away when he saw her. She undeniably looked much like his fallen angel that had taken to visiting him nightly. The wind had been weaving her hair in wild patterns, and her flying robe made her appear weightless. She had had a soft yet determined expression on her face. One of passion mingled with confidence. What had she been thinking about? He had felt something when he was studying her before she realized he was there. He found himself drawn to her. When she turned around, he saw how skittish she was though, and he didn't like that. He chuckled now that he was alone. She had gone as far as to pinch herself thinking that he was her Incubus. She at least had the decency to look embarrassed after her outburst, but he would not taunt her. She was a pawn in this just as much as he was. They would find a way to coexist.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the wind that was brutally battering his face and person. He never felt more alive than when he stood out here especially in the midst of a storm...be it one of rain or wind. He felt as if all he had to do was extend a hand, and power would blast its way out. Severus allowed himself to think of his Succubus' visit once again. She was alluring, provocative, and seductive. He wanted her. He hardened now thinking of her. *Damn! What the hell?* It wasn't exactly the face of the Succubus that had aroused him. It was the one he'd just seen. The fear and the innocence mingled with curiosity. He'd never been drawn to innocence before. Ever. It was everything that he was not.

Late that night, Hermione finally placed her book on the table beside the bed. She looked to the floor where Ron was snoring loudly. Harry was still awake with some of his own studying. "I'm going to try to sleep now, Harry."

"All right then. I'll be awake. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. Not with you here." Before he could reply, she turned over. Ron had fallen asleep early on, but Harry was determined to see this through. He patiently studied allowing her time to do some reading. It was unfair to make him stay up so late. She should have tried to nap earlier to get her visit over with. At least then her friends could have gone off to sleep in their own comfortable beds.

Before long, Hermione opened her eyes. Harry must have turned off the lamp. The room was littered in darkness save for one soft ray of moonlight filtering in from her window. THUD! "Harry, are you all right?" She leaned over, squinting her eyes to find the sleeping forms of her friends. They weren't there. A chill crept up her spine. She was not alone. There was a figure moving towards her bed. It was Professor Snape! "Sir?" she asked timidly. Why had he made Harry and Ron leave? Didn't he want her to be safe from the Incubus?

"Hermione, I want to be with you for a little while," he said softly. "I want to hold you. I want to love you. Will you let me?"

"You want to love me? But...you don't even like me," she protested. What had gotten into him? One day he loathed her, and the next day he wanted to be with her? In what way? "Sir, I don't understand."

"We will be good together. Let me love you," he insisted as he began unbuttoning his shirt. His robes must have already been discarded. Hermione's heart began racing. Something was odd. Had he been drinking?

"You don't need to take off your shirt, Professor!" she exclaimed, as his hands were now pulling away the fabric.

"You're mine. Do not deny me, girl," he hissed. *Shit!* The Incubus!

"You're not really my professor! Get away," she said, scooting back as one of his knees sank onto her mattress. His only reply was an evil chuckle as his hands pinned her arms to the bed. "Please stop," she begged.

"You want me. I can smell your desire for me. Let me be good to you," he said in a deeply seductive voice. His mouth found her neck, and his tongue glided over her collarbone. "Yes, that's it. Give in to me." Hermione felt warm all over. What was this sensation? She didn't want this man to have her, but what would it hurt to allow him just this small kiss on her neck? Ron had certainly never made her feel like this. In fact, she didn't know a tongue could do such wicked things. "Do you like this?"

"Will you stop if I ask you to?" she managed.

"No, but I can go slowly," he murmured before his lips began suckling a sensitive spot below her ear. She had to stop this, but the pull was too great. Her body was igniting under his ministrations. And, just when had he released her arms? How did her hands find their way to his hair?

"Mione! Wake up! Fight the lout!" She heard Harry say. She closed her eyes tightly, not wanting to lose this building feeling. "Mione! The Incubus! Wake up! He's evil! He's not Snape!"

"Bloody hell!" Ron's voice exclaimed. "Look at her!"

At this, her eyes popped open. Her phantom was gone, and her two friends were in bed with her. Harry had his hands on her shoulders trying to shake her awake while Ron was staring dumbly. She felt only a moment of loss, but then gratitude filled her. "Oh my! Harry, I wanted him. I knew it was wrong, but he..." Frustrated tears filled her eyes.

"Sssh," he soothed, pulling her into a tight embrace. "I'm here. It's all right now. He won't come back tonight. You were only sleeping for a few minutes, Mione. Nothing happened."

"But, something did happen, Harry," she said miserably. "I was letting him kiss my neck, and I liked it! I knew it was wrong, and I didn't want him to stop."

Ron took in a sharp breath before moving closer to hug her from behind. "It's a ruddy fantasy, Mione. You can hardly control those. It's over." Ron's hands were sliding along her sides. "We all have them at times. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Feeling uncomfortable, she pulled away from both of them. Harry didn't seem to mind, but Ron looked put out. "It's only my second visit from him, and I am already caving in. I guess it was arousal I felt. I'm not sure."

"What do you mean you're not sure? Didn't I ever arouse you?" Ron asked indignantly. "You should know if you're aroused or not!"

"Ron," Harry bellowed. "Shush! Let her talk."

"It was completely different than anything I felt before," Hermione said in a dry voice. Why did Ron always have to make things worse? "It was as if my body came to life. Well, I got warm all over, and the places that he kissed..." She shivered. "I felt tingling sensations. Even though I was warm, I could feel goose bumps rising on my skin. The wrongness made it all the more alluring. Isn't that horrible?"

This time Ron had nothing to say. Harry smiled. "I know the feeling. I've had bad experiences with dreams as well. You know you shouldn't be doing something, but you can't help it. It's a thrill." He took Hermione's hand. "We will do this each night for as long as it takes. As I said, you were only out for a little while. You can fight this, Hermione."

She smiled softly. "I will! Tomorrow night, I will just tell him to...to bugger off!"

"That's the spirit," Ron said cheerfully. "Tell his greasiness to go hound someone else!"

"Go on, you two. I think you can return to your own rooms now. I'll be fine the rest of the night."

"Er, don't you think maybe we should stay?" Ron asked.

"No. It's fine. Remember? He only comes once per night," she said, pushing her friends off of her bed. They didn't deserve to sleep on the floor any longer than they had to. Sleep didn't come as easily as she thought it would once she was alone again. Her mind kept going over the dream. Would Professor Snape's mouth feel that way on her skin? Would his hair really feel that good between her fingers? Why hadn't the Incubus kissed her lips?

~~~~~ hg ~~~~~ ss ~~~~~

Severus Snape loathed Hermione Granger. Why did she want to remain at Hogwarts? If she had chosen to go into any other field, this would never have happened to them! Some future attraction, although highly unlikely, would never have occurred! He'd had the worst sleep in months the night before. First, the temptress came to taunt him. The next time he went to sleep, he dreamt of her as a student. The two were molting together in his mind. Innocence clashed with experience. Curiosity clashed with blatant need. Even when he woke, he felt some pang of need spark through him. He had seriously debated on Flooing to Knockturn Alley for a romp with one of the whores. Before the urge became too much of a burden, he opted to relieve himself. This was a most unacceptable occurrence.

How many nights would he have to endure this embarrassment? Why, he was no better than some young wizard panting after a fellow student *No, not a student. A seductress*. Bloody hell! "I hope that Miss Granger had a rough night as well," he said aloud. Severus took his place at the table for breakfast.

He snarled at anyone who tried to make conversation with him. Of course this did not deter Rolanda one bit. "What's gotten your knickers in a bunch, Severus?" she asked, yellow eyes full of amusement.

"Knickers?" The witch never knew when to quit. He glared at her. "I don't know if I like you wondering about my underclothes, Madame Hooch."

"That's right, mate. I had forgotten that you don't wear any most days." She chuckled and clapped him on the back. "Come on down to the field later. Maybe a good flight would do you good. Loosen you up some." She winked before sauntering off.

The woman was a menace! This only soured his mood further. Yes, he would definitely have to take points from Gryffindor over this somehow. That would make him feel a little better at least. His eyes narrowed as the trio made their way to their table. Potter and Weasley seemed normal, but Granger seemed to be moving slowly. Ha! *Had a rough night, did you?* He smirked smugly.

Severus watched as she ate. He wondered if her body looked anything like that of the Succubus' sexy shape. Could it be? Or, did the temptress simply use her voice, face, and hair? Surely, a child such as this would not be as filled out. Appalled at the line of thoughts he'd taken, he mentally shook his head to clear them away. Perhaps he should venture to the library. Maybe there were some books with more information. There had to be another way to send this creature away! If he could barely resist it, how could she? Did Minerva sit with her while she slept? He wanted to ask, but then it would appear that he was interested. Was he? Well, only for logical reasoning. He didn't care if she had a bad night or not. In fact, he hoped that she did. It would serve her right, as this was somehow her fault. Just because he didn't care, it didn't mean that he wanted anything extremely uncomfortable to happen to her...such as death. He gulped. He could meet his death over this as well. *Right! Time to research. There must be something that can be done.*

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**Southern's Notes:** Sigh...Such a restless night. Hope you enjoyed this chapter.

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 3 of 32*

We get to see a different side of our Potions master. They come to a decision. Why fight things?

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and another big thanks to GinnyW for doing the beta work this time around.**

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The next few days were pure torture for Severus. Each night at some point she would come to him. Twice she had gotten as far as being completely naked, and had begun to stroke him before he had the strength to try to turn her away. The Succubus was just too alluring. When she became angered, her eyes would flash dangerously, and it looked as though she meant to take him anyway. Fawkes or Dumbledore had been coming to his rescue. He couldn't keep imposing on the headmaster that way though. Some nights he would just have to take the damn Dreamless Sleep Potion and be done with it. He wondered how Granger was faring.



It looked to him as if Weasley and Potter had named themselves her champions, as if they were trying to keep her from the clutches of the evil Potions master of Hogwarts. He'd caught Potter staring a few times, and Weasley always scowled at him. It was no doubt that she'd told them about the situation. They were her best friends after all. *Damn Golden Trio!* As long as nobody else knew, he supposed he could live with it. Tomorrow night there would be that stupid party Dumbledore had put together. He was told that he had to attend as part of the staff to oversee the students. Severus wondered briefly if Albus had told the staff about his problem. When he walked into the staff meeting the previous evening, it seemed all conversation stopped. He even thought that he detected a hint of amusement on Hooch's face. She'd tried to corner him afterwards, but he had fled as quickly as possible.

Now he was beginning to feel like a stalker. Every time they were in the hall, a corridor, or in class, he couldn't stop himself from looking at her. He even patrolled the halls out of his way for a momentary look at her. His eyes, even now, moved of their own accord to where she was sitting with her friends. She looked up at that moment, blushing slightly. Could this shy girl actually become an enticing temptress? It was a question that had been haunting his mind as of late. He resisted the urge to walk over to them. What would he say if he did talk to her? It wouldn't be safe for either of them. The urge to slap her and kiss her would be at war. No, he'd just stay away. For now.

He watched Hermione fixedly as she picked up her book bag and was led away by Potter. Weasley sauntered behind them glowering back every few moments. Severus sprung up, suddenly remembering an important potion that he could be brewing. He was able to catch a single glimpse of her as she made her way up the staircase. Feeling daft, he made his way down to the dungeons.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione sighed. "I can't believe it! Tomorrow is my last day of regular class. I hope I am ready for this," she said softly. Her tests wouldn't be a problem to pass. She'd always been studious. She would pass everything easily enough. Her concern was with her upcoming apprenticeship. Would the students respect her? Would Severus...er...Professor Snape respect her? Over the last few days, she'd continually pondered the future. How would it have been for them if *this* hadn't occurred? How many years would it have taken for him to notice her as a colleague? A woman?

Harry grinned. "I think you would have been ready last year, Mione. You're the most brilliant witch I have ever met. I think that you are doing the right thing. Staying here at Hogwarts. I...I wouldn't mind it myself in all honesty." Ron, who had caught up with them, snorted.

"What would you like to do? You're not going for Aurors now, are you?" She knew they weren't, but she was trying to get them to decide what they would do. It had been their dream to fight the injustices of the world, but after the battles they had been in, the job had lost its luster for them. The boys never wanted to talk to her about what they had decided on since then.

Harry and Ron exchanged glances. "We intend to play Quidditch of course. We'll see what there is to do after that," Ron said happily. *Damn! Didn't they know there was more to life than playing Quidditch, and just how did they know they would be accepted on a team?* She only nodded, not wanting to hurt their feelings.

"I think I will get to sleep early tonight if you don't mind. I have a lot to do tomorrow, it being my last day and all. I Owled Mum and told her to not bother coming for me since you invited me to the Burrow, Ron. She hasn't replied yet. I just hope she's not disappointed. I just figured it would be best not to...you know...go home while this is going on until I can research further." Hermione's brow was gathered in thought. "I wonder how he is doing with all of this."

Ron laughed evilly. "I hope he's being tormented."

Harry just shook his head. "It looks like he is managing all right as far as I can see."

Ron guffawed. "Don't you see how he looks at her? A bit creepy if you ask me about it. It's like he's studying her or something. Git doesn't take his eyes off of her the whole time we are in the hall. Haven't you noticed?"

Hermione shrugged. She had noticed that he looked at her often, but it was no more than she looked at him...surely. Those dark eyes. That penetrating stare. His graceful hands. His seductive voice. She shook herself. *Where had that come from?* Damn, must be after effects of the erotic dreams she'd had of late with the Incubus. Ron and Harry would wake her as soon as she began thrashing about, but each time he'd gotten closer. He'd say all the things that she longed to hear. He would completely disrobe now, but she would avert her eyes. It didn't seem to be right to actually see her professor's body without his permission. She could feel every part of his skin against hers, though as his hands and mouth began their seduction.

"Couldn't you just...make love to someone else? I mean wouldn't that help?" Ron questioned.

"I don't think so. I mean, I would no longer be a virgin, but it's already coming to me. I don't know if that would stop it. And, besides, no one interests me that way," she said softly. "If it was a normal Incubus, maybe that would work, but I don't see that helping here. Not when it's *him*."

Ron was silent for a moment. "Well, Harry or I would do it. Let one of us try. You never know. It might just work. I mean, it's just us. We wouldn't tell anyone. It might blast the git's Incubus off its course. It's not like you'd regret being with us, as we're your best mates."

"Ron!" Harry admonished, but the damage was done. "Could you shut your mouth for once? Don't speak for me either!"

"You imbecile!" Hermione shouted. "How dare you?" She jumped up, pushed him down onto the chair, and ran to her room, warding the door behind her. Wouldn't regret it, would she? How could he even suggest that? She heard them knocking at her door. She knew she needed them to watch her sleep, but she couldn't let them in yet. Besides, she could always read for a bit. Harry would have sense enough to wait her out. How dare he say that! They were like...brothers. She couldn't do that. She pulled her book from her bag and lay down to read. Within moments though, she was fast asleep.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus Snape was just adding the last ingredient to his potion when he felt suddenly aroused. What in the world? He could hear someone whispering his name. He looked around wildly. He was awake. There was no Succubus here. What was going on? Then he realized. The Incubus must be with Hermione. *Damn her!* He chanted a Suspension Spell on his potion, so as not to interrupt its progress, and ran for Gryffindor Tower. He could feel desire building within himself. It was her desire for him. They were linked somehow. He must not have noticed it before because he was more than likely sleeping by the time her Incubus visited. Unless those small tremors of arousal he felt were her feelings. They didn't last long. He chalked it up to desire that stemmed from his personal thoughts. This feeling, though, this was the feeling of someone on the edge of oblivion. She would likely have an orgasm soon.

He reached the portrait of Gryffindor's Fat Lady. "Open," he bellowed. All portraits were instructed to open for professors, so she didn't question him. He walked in quickly, robes billowing menacingly behind him. He saw Potter and Weasley outside her door, looking dejected. Both were sitting against the wall, but they stood quickly when they saw him enter. The remaining room of students gasped at the sight of their wicked Potions master in their safe house.

He walked purposefully towards her door. "How long has she been in there?"

"Ten minutes, sir," Potter answered quickly. "She's warded us out." He noted that Weasley looked guilty. "Can you get in?" Snape nodded, already beginning to test her wards. *Simple enough to break.*

"Stay here," he commanded. They nodded and moved out of his way. He broke her wards after only a moment. He entered her room, slamming the door shut behind him. The loud noise didn't rouse her as he had planned. She was asleep on her bed with a book loosely held in one hand. Nothing seemed amiss even though his body still felt her arousal. Was he too late? Had his mind been playing tricks on him? He had apparently made a fool of himself by coming here to save her from her Incubus, but as he turned to go, she moaned. He froze, turning back slowly. She was squirming now, and she had even started mumbling incoherently. Only a few words were decipherable.

"I can't...." she was saying. "I'm not ready. Oh, my..." He went to her and shook her roughly. *That voice.* It was the husky voice his Succubus used, and he immediately

reacted to it. He wanted nothing more than to climb in bed with her, but he could not...would not...do that.

"Hermione, wake up," he said softly. "Wake up." She grabbed the hand on her shoulder in a death grip before bringing it to her lips for a kiss. He tried to extract it, but she held it firm, sliding her tongue on his palm.

"I do want you..." she said softly, "but not like this." That almost made him lose himself. He snatched his hand away forcefully.

"Miss Granger," he barked. "Wake up this instant!"

She shot up into a sitting position. "Wh-what?" He watched as her face took in her surroundings and landed on him. She began wildly feeling for her clothing, which consisted only of her school skirt and blouse. Her robes and cloak lay on the chair next to her bed. Looking around the room, he noticed two pillows and blankets on the side of her bed.

"Your Incubus was here," he informed her. "I am not he, so do not be alarmed."

"How did...what are you doing here?" she asked, dazed.

"I just...knew. What's the meaning of this?" he asked, pointing to the makeshift pallets on side of her bed. He narrowed his eyes. What exactly had been going on in here?

"You knew? I mean to say, thank you, Professor," she said nervously, drawing her knees up below her chin. A flash of white, lacy panties startled him, and he jumped back. Did she not know what she did to men? Loathing his visible reaction to her, he masked his desire.

"Explain this," he bellowed, pointing once again to the side of her bed.

"Harry and Ron...they wake me usually when....when you come for me," she said, voice full of fear. She seemed nervous.

Something unleashed within him. Those two idiots had taken to sleeping in here with her? He would not have it! Fate said that she belonged to him...or would at some point. If they witnessed anything like he had just seen, they would be coming all over themselves, and one would be most tempted to take advantage of her. "You dare to bring boys into this dorm room? Alone?" Why was he feeling so...jealous?

"But, it's just Harry and Ron. They are like brothers to me. Honestly, I didn't know what else to do. Once it's gone...the Incubus...they go on to their own rooms." She was pushing back against her headboard now, trying to get as far back as she could. She seemed to think he was going to lash out at her.

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger, I don't think you fully realize what they have to endure when you are having an encounter. The moaning, the twisting of your body! I have been here for one minute, and it makes me want to dive in with you!" he yelled. *What?* Why had he told her that? Damn! "We'll have to find another solution for you. You don't expect them to stay with you in your new chambers once you become a member of the staff, do you?"

She was near tears. Why was he doing this to her? "Professor, I swear, I didn't know what else to do. I told you I would fight it. I just thought it best to be awakened. I never thought about having my own chambers after the holidays. I just...I am confused." A few tears escaped, making their way down her cheeks.

Snape resisted the impulse to wipe her tears away. Little chit! "Where are you spending the holidays?"

"The Weasleys have invited Harry and me," she said, wiping her tears off her face.

Weasley! Probably just trying to get her alone. Or, was it Potter? Bloody bastards! "I must insist that you take the Dreamless Draught with you. You will be too far away, and I don't believe I will be able to rescue you from your Incubus. It's the only guarantee we will be safe until we can find another way around this."

"I don't want to become addicted," she said indignantly. "I'll be gone for nearly three weeks! And, besides, I room with Ginny while I am there. I promise you, she will wake me. I will just have to confide in her about what is going on, but she won't breathe a word of it," she pleaded. "Please don't make me take it." He couldn't make her take it, could he?

"Why have you not asked her before now? Surely, it would be more appropriate to have a girl in here than two boys. Boys who could easily be turned on by your...outbursts!" He was ranting again. She stood up on the other side of the bed and faced him squarely.

"Harry would never..." She took a deep breath. "And, Ron...he wouldn't...he...Oh." He watched as her face fell. So, Weasley had tried something, had he? That damn prat! He would tear him apart.

"Has he tried to..."? He didn't finish the question. If he voiced it, he would lose all control. How dare the boy try to take advantage of her!

"No, he just said that maybe...maybe if I wasn't..." her face went red.

"If you weren't a virgin?" he questioned, knowing full well it was what she meant.

"Yes, he said that maybe it would go away since I would no longer be chaste." Her soft, wet, brown eyes met his black, cold eyes.

"I think it is a bit late for that, Miss Granger. You are bound to me in this. You will not be with Weasley. Do you understand?" he asked menacingly, taking a step closer to her side of the bed. "You will not allow him in here again. He desires you, and he will take advantage of that."

She nodded. "It's why I locked them out. I won't do such a thing. They are like brothers to me. I won't betray you," she said so softly that he almost didn't hear it.

He blanched. Won't betray me, he thought. What the hell? Why that insolent little witch! She was implying that they had some sort of...relationship. Which they did, of sorts, but she didn't need to be voicing it! "Miss Granger, there is nothing to betray between us. We have nothing except this damn...curse, as I would call it for lack of a better word. Feel free to bed whomever you wish...just don't waste yourself on Weasley. Be with someone who actually wants you without knowing how needy you truly are! In any event, I think you should perhaps be with someone not so close to you. It may ruin your little friendship!" With that, he angrily spun on his heel to vacate her room. Potter stood his ground near the door, but Weasley slinked back a few steps when Snape glared his way.

"You," he spat, pointing to Weasley. "I better not hear of you being in there again. If you go in, I shall personally make you pay." Weasley's eyes went wide, and his mouth gaped open in shock! "Potter, see to her." Snape eyed everyone coldly before sweeping out of the portrait hole. Ron made for Hermione's door, but Harry stopped him.

"Ron, you heard him. He doesn't want you in there," Harry said, eyes pleading with Ron.

"Why can you go, but I can't?" he asked incredulously. "She and I have been broken up for a year now, and I am sort of seeing Luna!"

"But, he must know...what you said...about ...you know," Harry hinted, not wanting the others lurking nearby to hear.

Ron's face fell. "I didn't mean that though, Harry. I was just...I don't know what I was about. I just want to help. I can't stand that he's always watching her...waiting for her to go to him. I hate it! She's too good for the likes of him, she is!"

"It's her life, Ron. Let me go to her." Ron nodded, and Harry entered her room to find her crumpled next to her bed, crying wildly. He immediately went to her to hold her close. *Poor Hermione*, he thought bitterly. He didn't like what was happening any more than Ron did, but he wouldn't add to her grief by saying the things that went through his mind as Ron did. That was the last thing she needed.

Hermione whimpered in Harry's arms. Why had she said that? She would never betray him. How ridiculous she had been! She wasn't thinking clearly. Deep down, she truly believed that they would be together one day as The Fates had meant them to. Because of that thought, along with her nightly visits from the Incubus, she had taken to thinking of him as sort of her betrothed. Clearly, he wanted no part of it. He had even told her to go and bed someone else!

But, before that, he was enraged to think that another man had propositioned her. The professor had even made sure to demand that she ~~not~~ sleep with Ron. He had gone as far as to forbid Ron from coming in here. Harry seemed to be no threat to him though. He was such a cruel man. His eyes had been filled with something dark. Most likely it was disgust. What a ridiculous girl she must seem to him! Well, he was right. She could still be with other people even though her Incubus took his form! They had no *relationship* to obstruct a fling or two. He obviously didn't care, did he? *I'll show you that I can find someone, Professor.*

"Do you want to talk about it, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I don't know, Harry. I think that I just made things worse between us. If Ron was right about him always looking at me, I think it's only because he is daydreaming about my demise. He loathes me, I think." She sighed. "I only hoped..."

"That he would be interested in you?" Harry offered.

"Yes. I'm going to be a part of the staff here. After learning all of this, it's been on my mind constantly. I've found myself thinking that he's attractive, that I could see myself with him, and that I could love him eventually. My nightly dreams are so real that when I see him in the flesh, my heart and body ache for him. It's almost as if we really are sharing intimate moments." She pulled away from Harry. "But, he told me to go shag someone as long as it isn't Ron! I guess he's been doing the same thing. Maybe it eases the frustration."

"He seemed concerned when he came into the common room. When he left, he acted like a jealous lover," Harry said with a grin. "I think maybe the professor feels more than he is letting on. Don't do anything you might regret, Mione."

"Oh, I'll not regret anything, Harry. I'm frustrated. I'm annoyed. I'm hurt. Whatever it is that I do, I can guarantee that I won't regret it. As he said, there is no reason not to indulge myself. I want to feel those things that I feel in my dreams. So, why not?"

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

While getting ready for the party, a wicked thought occurred to Hermione. She would take a lover tonight and lose this blasted virginity! Who knew? Maybe it really would break this...curse as he had called it. That's right. She would get dressed in a Muggle dress that she had bought over the summer. It hugged her every curve. It was only by chance she had brought it here. They didn't get to wear Muggle clothes often, but she would show herself off tonight, as she knew she was capable of being seen. She would look...seductive. That would show the old bat! How dare he! She set about getting ready.

She got out her wand and went to work. Her hair was properly curled and scooped up in a glorious crown on her head, and she allowed a few wisps to escape near her face and neck. She thought that looked sexy. She applied dark, red nail polish to her nails before she lengthened them just a tad. She put on matching lipstick as well. Carefully, she applied Muggle make-up as her cousin had instructed her over the summer. She used light brown, tan, dark brown, and olive colors to bring out her eyes. She finished up with black eyeliner and mascara. She applied a bit more powder to her face, and then took a good look in the mirror. She did not recognize herself. She looked more mature. Older than eighteen. Pretty even. With a flick of her wand, her large shirt disappeared, and a black strapless dress took its place. She had matching lacy, black panties. There was no need for a bra. The dress cupped her breasts perfectly, adding to her already ample cleavage. There was no need for stockings either, as her legs were tanned and smooth already from her earlier ministrations. There was a knock on her door. It was Harry.

"I'll meet you there. I'm not ready," she called. She was actually ready, but she didn't want him or the others to see her until she was there. She put on her Muggle high heels, feeling more confident being able to stand two inches taller. She turned slightly before the mirror. There was a slit on one side, but you couldn't really see much of her thigh. Hermione hoped Snape would eat his words! That arrogant git! Bed whomever she wanted indeed! Now, she only needed to pick someone out who would have her.

She loved the way the dress clung to her body, though her stomach was not exactly flat, it looked perfect in the dress. She felt...confident...sensual. She could do this. She took another sip of her firewhisky. It was her second glass. She had smuggled it from Ron's dorm earlier, and he never knew the difference. Just a tad of blush, and she was ready. It was her last night at Hogwarts as a student. Well, was she a student still? *Who cares!* She walked to the door and opened it cautiously. She didn't bother with a cloak since the firewhisky had warmed her immensely.

Easily, she glided down to the Great Hall, and she stood outside for a moment before entering. She heard Dumbledore wishing everyone a good time, and then she heard voices chattering as whatever band he had hired was ready to begin. She took this moment to walk in. Enter Hermione Granger...on a mission to be deflowered. The moment she walked in, all talking ceased as she made her way toward Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Luna. Her two best friends were gazing at her in a less than pleasant manner. She noted that Ginny stamped on Harry's foot. She looked at no one but her friends. She knew the entire hall was staring at her. She...liked it. She had finally come out. She was now finished with school. She would come back as part of the staff. She felt... superior to all students. She smiled at her friends when she got close. They were almost too stunned to talk.

Severus watched her walk in. It was his Succubus. *I have fallen asleep at this dreadful party!* But, why was everyone still here? He was usually alone in his bed when she would come for him in his dreams. He looked to Albus. Those damn twinkling eyes met his. "Am I awake?" he asked cautiously. Minerva answered before the headmaster could.

"I would say so, Severus. Doesn't she look ravishing?" He didn't reply. His eyes followed her. She would be the death of him. What was she playing at coming in here looking like that? Her soft curves were completely visible now; her breasts were hidden, yet visible enough to make him want to touch them. He couldn't explain away his reaction to her this time. His Succubus had come to life. She made no attempt to search him out in the crowd, and this angered him. He had been mulling over her words since he'd heard them. *I will not betray you*, she had said softly. And, he as much as told her to go on with it as long as it wasn't Weasley! *Damn! She was here tonight to find someone.* It was the only thing he could think of. She never worried about her appearance. He would be sure that she kept to her vow whether he wanted her or not. She would not betray him. He glared hatefully at everyone.

Albus and Minerva exchanged glances when they saw the dark look on Severus' face. "This could be quite entertaining," she whispered conspiratorially to her lover.

"Yes, Minnie, I do believe this party was a great idea after all," Dumbledore said, whisking her away to the dance floor to break the ice. No one was attempting to dance yet. He was glad that Minerva had told the staff about the goings on. No one would interfere if something did happen between the pair.

Ron whispered in Hermione's ear, "Don't look now, but the greasy git can't take his eyes off of you. He seemed shocked at first, but now he seems angry. Good luck." Ron's expression told her that he feared the man. She wondered briefly exactly what it was that the professor had told him.

She smiled, but didn't let it affect her. Why should she? He probably realized that she was just following his advice to search for someone to shag while she still could. Once she was an apprentice and part of the staff, all students would likely be off limits for her. This was her last night. She'd make it worthwhile. Someone tapped her on her shoulder. Draco.

"Want to dance, Mione?" he asked, looking almost shy. She could see that he liked her new look. Any positive appraisal coming from a Slytherin could only be a good sign. Her heart pounded.

"Of course, Draco," she said softly, taking his hand. He led her out near Harry and Ginny. It was a slow song that was playing, and he pulled her extremely close.

"You look and smell...delicious," he purred in her ear. She didn't reply, but only smiled at him. They danced through that song and the next one. He didn't seem to want to let her go. "I can't get over this. I never saw you as a woman before. You were always just...Granger. Wow."

"Well, that, my dear Malfoy, is your fault, now isn't it?" she asked coyly. They made their way to the refreshment table. "Oh! I had two shots of firewhisky earlier. I would like to keep the giddy feeling I have. Do you know if the punch is spiked?"

He grinned evilly. "Just so happens, the red one there is spiked nicely thanks to yours truly." She took the cup he gave her. "I need to use the loo. Don't move."

"I'll be right here waiting for you," she said softly. So, Draco was interested. She never imagined that would happen. Well, hopefully Snape would approve that her attention was on one of his own and not on any other House's students. Suddenly, she had the sensation that she was being watched. Many eyes were upon her, but this was different. It felt like...a piercing pair of eyes was trying to penetrate her. Only one man made her feel that way. She turned around slowly and saw him. Her nightly nemesis. "Professor," she said coolly.

"Miss Granger," he said, moving forward. He watched as she drank her spiked drink, and he said nothing as she filled it again. Her calculated expression had his heart racing. "What are you playing at, Succubus?" he hissed finally.

She blanched at the name. How dare he! She was not here dressed up for him after all. She was dressed to shag someone else just as he graciously told her to do. "I know not what you mean, sir."

"Oh, I think you do, *Hermione*. This is no game," he said, his voice low and husky. "Don't you know what seeing you like this does to me? It's like she's come to life." It had taken a lot for him to admit that to her, but he didn't know what else to say.

She stepped closer. "Sorry, sir, but as you said, there is nothing between us. You are only my Incubus after all. Good evening," she bid curtly before turning on her heel. He would have reached out to grab her, but Draco chose that moment to return.

Draco eyed his Head of House uneasily, and noted the daggers glaring his way. He pulled Hermione away nonetheless. "What was going on just then?"

"It's a long story, Draco. I'll tell you about it someday," she said, biting her lip *Damn that man!* He knew just how to deflate a woman's ego. Hang on! Deflate it? Why he did nothing of the sort! He as much as told her she was driving him mad. He had called her Hermione. He wanted her. It had to be why he was acting so strange the day before! As Draco put an arm around her waist, she looked back to see her professor scowling deeply. Her Incubus. Something stirred within her, and she almost pulled away from Malfoy to go to him. From the look on his face, it seemed to be exactly what he wanted her to do. Sadly she put that thought away. He would be mortified if she approached him in front of the entire school. Yes, he wanted her, but it was only because she resembled the Succubus dressed as she was. *He'd never appreciate the real me, would he?* She was determined to push thoughts of him away for the rest of the night.

They went to sit at a table with Harry and the others. Ron asked her for a dance next, and she accepted. It was funny dancing with him to the quick paced song. Ron was so uncoordinated. She didn't know how he managed to stay upright on his broom! When the music slowed, Draco came forward, and he spun her out of Ron's grasp. They danced the entire song closely. She was feeling the effects of her liquor quite nicely. Just how many cups had she had anyway?

"Hermione, would you want to go for a walk maybe?" Draco asked hopefully, his lips grazing her ear. Hermione couldn't believe it. Draco Malfoy was asking her for a walk. It was clear he wanted to snog her and possibly something else. Could she be with him in that way? Though she felt no *loving* feelings for him, he might be exactly what she needed to put her priorities straight. The one man that had been clouding her mind for the past week didn't want her. Besides, this might help with the Incubus.

Just as she was about to answer, she was pulled away. Severus Snape held her roughly by the arm. "She'll not go any place with you, Draco. As you were," he said dismissively. Draco's eyes widened, and he backed away. She saw that Ron was watching through narrowed eyes, but he dared not speak out on her behalf. The staff seemed to have turned a blind eye to this. Did they all know? "Come with me." Snape's voice was dark and low. She had no choice but to allow him to lead her out of the hall. She was well aware that everyone present had witnessed this, and she was humiliated. She felt as if she was a naughty girl caught doing something wrong by her father. Once out of the hall, she wrenched her arm free. "How dare you!" she hissed. "You gave me permission! You wanted me to do this!"

"Oh, but I do dare," he said silkily, and with that, he picked her up roughly, placing her over his shoulder. He set off toward the dungeons. She hit his back a few times to tell him to put her down, but he didn't budge. Along the way, they met up with two younger Hufflepuffs. "Ten points from each for meddling in the halls!" Snape growled at them, and they scattered quickly. Now it would be known how he was carrying her around. Surely, Dumbledore wouldn't stand for this. Before she realized it, they were in his office, and he was slamming her down on his couch.

"What in the bloody hell do you think you are doing, *Professor?*" she asked, her liquor giving her a tad more courage than she truly felt. He smirked at her unemotionally before turning to ward his door.

"I told you it was no game, Succubus. Now we have just changed the scenery a little." He was closer to her now, and he was throwing off his black dress robes.

She jumped up and ran for the doors. He just chuckled at her attempts to open it. *Accio wand!* he said. To her horror, her wand flew directly into his hand. "Let me out of here," she said, unable to mask her fear. What was he going to do?

"I do believe we have much to discuss, Hermione," he said edging closer to her, pressing her to his door. She could smell liquor on his breath as well, and a cold chill gripped her heart. His crisp black trousers did nothing to disguise just what he wanted to discuss. She felt his midsection digging into her stomach. When he put a hand on either side of the door and brought his lips to hers, she inhaled his aroma. Such a scent as this would turn any woman on. No wonder he attracted a Succubus to his bed. She didn't open her mouth for his probing tongue, so he moved to kiss her neck softly. She moaned, and he looked up to search her face. Before she realized it, his mouth was on hers again, and this time hers was open. She felt his tongue expertly invading her mouth, and then with a mind of its own, her tongue began mingling with his erotically. Her hands found their way to his waist and pulled him closer. They broke apart panting minutes later.

The dark glint in his eyes frightened her again. "I have to go," she whispered. "Please let me go."

"Why? I thought you wanted to be deflowered tonight? Why not let me do it? It would save us much trouble," he purred in her ear. She trembled as his teeth nicked her lobe.

"I...I have changed my mind," she said weakly.

"Is that so?" he asked, putting his hand on her chin to make her look into his eyes. She nodded. "I'm afraid I don't trust you, Little One. I can't have my woman going about as she was just now searching for a lover."

His woman, was she? Why that...dirty, rotten, arrogant...! "Now, see here, Professor. I am not yours. You told me..."

"Silence!" he spat out before backing away from her. "I know what I said." She allowed confusion to take over as she watched him pace. "I don't want to be attracted to you in any way."

Anger flowed through her. "Not good enough for you, am I? Is that why you are alone? Because nobody is good enough!"

"In a way, yes, that is why I am alone," he said, smirking evilly. "Until now."

"Professor, stop it, please. What are you saying?" Her head was about to burst. So many thoughts were taking place at once, she couldn't bear it any longer. He was toying with her mentally. This would not do. So, he really didn't want her to have a lover then? *He* wanted to be her lover?

"I am saying that you will desist in all of your little fantasies about finding a lover. I will be the only one you will have, but I won't do it until we are both ready!" he said angrily. Then he kicked his desk. Everything on top shifted. "You think I like feeling something? Anything at all? It has been years. Years! I keep hearing those words-I'll not

betray you, and it undoes me!"

She flinched as he made his way back to her. "I didn't mean to up-"

"Will you hold your tongue for once?" he asked wildly. "I don't want this, but I need this. Can you understand me?" He hated sounding so desperate. And, especially to her of all people. It wasn't her fault. Any of this, but he had to blame someone. "You are turning my world as I know it inside out, and I hate it. Yet, I like it." It took every ounce of restraint that he had to not pounce on her.

She bit her lip and watched the expressions go through Snape's face. He had never sounded so...confused in all her time that she had known him. He didn't want to want her, and he was trying to fight it. But, he, like she, had been thinking of it as well. Just the mere fact that a spirit chose them to terrorize meant that they would have been together eventually. They were both powerful in their own right, both intelligent, both loners, and it would have been inevitable for them to spend time together with her joining the staff. She had been thinking of the future so much lately that it began to seem natural to her. She did want this.

They were just shocked by it all at first. Never in the past seven years had they thought of each other in this way, and then it was thrown at them suddenly. She put a shaky hand on his arm, taking one step closer. He looked down at her hand, and then back at her questioningly, raising an eyebrow. She pressed her lips to his for another intoxicating kiss. Why fight it? He pulled her to him and dropped down to the floor with her. Her hair had begun unraveling from its place at the top of her head, and now the long locks were curling about his office floor.

He pulled back from her mouth and stared into her eyes. Did she really want him? How did she really feel? He had to know. He couldn't do this ...with her and not know. She had made him feel again, and though it was not love...it was something. He wanted to possess her, own her, ravish her. She belonged to him. *Innocence be damned!* That belonged to him too. He smirked wickedly knowing he would be the first and the last to ever enter her intimately. Her eyes were filled with shock, and if they were half drooping from the liquor or desire, he could not tell. He ran a finger from her chin down to her cleavage. She trembled under his touch.

It would be so easy to take advantage of her, but he wouldn't. He only meant to bring her here to scare her, but something deeper had taken place. She had allowed him to dominate her, and she took in all that he said. She wanted him. She was his. His. But, he wanted her to come to him on her own. Not because he forced her to. He had told her of his weakness for her, now it was up to her to make the move. If they would have been together in the future at some point, he would bet that their first time wouldn't have been on his office floor. Quickly, he got up to move away from her.

Severus watched through hard eyes as first she looked surprised then hurt. Her eyes filled with tears. "What did I do wrong?" she asked. It tore at his soul.

"Nothing, Little One. I just think we need time to deal with this," he said, pointing at her and then to him. He unwarded his door and went to his lab to retrieve a large bottle of Dreamless Draught. Summoning a small cup, he poured a small amount into it, and he handed it to her. "Your Incubus will not come to you this night. Drink," he said. She took the cup and brought it to her now swollen, much kissed lips. "Be sure to bring this with you. If Ginny is not there to wake you for any reason, be sure to take some."

"How can you stand it?" she asked softly. "Does it not tear you apart as it does me?" Those words affected him deeply. She had been pining for him. Him. Not the Incubus. Before he could answer, her eyes were closing. She leaned into him as sleep took over. Relishing the feeling of holding her, he stood there thinking for a long time.

"It has been tearing me apart," he admitted, knowing she couldn't hear. "I need and want you, but I loathe desiring someone and feeling needy. I don't think you could ever truly understand that."

He picked her up into his arms easily, and he made his way to Gryffindor Tower. "Open," he instructed the portrait. As he walked in, all life within the common room froze. He cradled his sleeping Succubus to him and made his way toward her room. *Let them stare*, he thought. She's no longer a student! She is now a member of the staff. An adult. He sneered at those he passed, reveling in the fact that their eyes darted elsewhere. Amazingly enough, neither Potter nor Weasley were there yet. As he entered her dorm and closed the door, he heard them begin to whisper. No doubt all about how the evil Potions master had drugged their Head Girl and taken advantage of her. He smirked down to the sleeping girl...woman ...in his arms.

"You're mine," he whispered. And, he knew it to be true. Pulling back her blanket, he laid her on the bed gently. He pulled off her shoes and placed them on the floor. With a flick of his wand, her dress was removed, and a long nightshirt replaced it. He covered her and kissed her forehead. "Sleep, Little One." Biting back the urge to run his fingers along her plump little thighs, he decided to leave her room.

This was the second time that the students of Gryffindor had seen him come into her personal room. There was sure to be talk especially after what he'd done in the hall. What an idiot he had been! He smirked while remembering the look on Draco's face. No one would dare challenge him. He walked out of her door and looked around. Everyone scattered. He scowled hatefully at all those who dared to look at him as he stalked out of the dorm. They probably noted that he was no longer wearing his robes. Damn! He'd forgotten that he was only in his trousers and shirt. Bugger them!

Albus was waiting for him in his office when he returned. "Well?" he asked questioningly.

"Nothing happened, Albus. I gave her some draught, and I gave her enough to take with her if need be. Your resident know-it-all is still safe from me," he snarled *And, good thing I didn't take her on my office floor. We would have had an audience.*

"She is no longer a student, Severus. Nor is she a child. What you do is of no concern to me now, so long as you won't be making too many scenes like the one earlier," he said, chuckling.

"I don't know what came over me," Severus admitted. "I guess the gossip mongers will start now, won't they?" Great. Just what he needed. He could see it now. He'd be the laughing stock of the staff meetings.

Albus' eyes were twinkling. "The staff already knew of course, but the students, apart from her two friends, had no idea. They still don't know. I think I heard a snippet of conversation from someone that you were in her rooms the night before, and now you were jealous because she was dancing with another. I think you two are believed to be in the midst of some sordid, love affair."

"Ha! If they only knew, Headmaster! I didn't ask for this. None of it. But, now...I have the audacity to dare to hope for something..." Snape sighed. "I'll try to sleep now. Will you stay for a few minutes?" Dumbledore smiled. The party was a success. The two had finally realized that a joining was inevitable. Ah, it was so nice when things went according to plan. Severus was asleep and in no time, he was writhing uncomfortably. Albus woke him easily before Flooing to Minerva's quarters. He couldn't wait to tell her the news!

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus made his way to the train station the next morning with the rest of the staff. Albus had started a new tradition as of last year that they would see the students off each time they left. He had many better things to do, but this morning, he didn't particularly mind. He wanted to see her again. He took his seat next to Hooch in the staff box, and sat quietly searching through all the heads for his bushy-haired Succubus.

"Looking for someone in particular, are we?" Hooch teased. "I must say it's about time too." He glared at her, but she grinned as if it didn't bother her. "What? I think it's grand."

He rolled his eyes, looking to the other woman next to him. A giggly Madame Sprout. Great! Just what he needed. "So, Sev, old boy, how's the head this morning?" she asked.

Hooch leaned forward. "You might need to specify which one, Pomona." Both women started laughing. He turned back to look at Albus. The man just smiled softly. Damn him! Minerva was even smirking. What in the world had he gotten himself into?

"Well, look who it is! It's Harry Potter and company," Hooch declared deviously. Snape's head whipped around to search for his girl. There she was. She was trailing along behind Potter and Weasley. She seemed to be stifling a yawn. Perhaps he had given her too much draught. As they passed the staff box, Potter gave a half salute to them and kept on. Ron just nodded. Hermione though stopped and smiled softly. His heart melted. She was not angry with him. He nodded curtly as if to tell her all was well, and she moved on. He could hear the silent sniggering from amongst the staff.

He growled at them in an exasperated manner. "What? What do you want to know?" Most of the women broke out in giggles. What a sight he must have been the night before! Dragging Hermione Granger out of the great hall. Glaring down Draco Malfoy. Speak of the devil! Malfoy was just approaching Hermione as she was about to board the train. Something stirred within him again. That damn little git dares to talk to her after he saw her leave with him?

"Don't look now, mate, but I do believe that you've gotten a little competition. Doesn't give up easy, that one," Hooch goaded. Severus didn't even bother to look at her. He knew she was trying to bait him. The damn biddies wanted to see him make a fool of himself yet again. Then he noticed that Hermione had boarded. Draco gave a thumbs up sign to Crabbe. Why that insolent.... Before he realized what he was doing, he stood up and made his way toward the train. Hooch called out, "Be gentle, old boy!" Draco was probably trying to get her into a compartment alone.

"Stand aside," he hissed to all in his way. He began walking through while looking into each compartment. Most students were too shocked to speak once seeing him on the train. He finally found her. She was sitting back on her seat holding her cat in her lap with her eyes closed tightly. Draco was sitting next to her as was Ginny Weasley. Lovegood, Weasley, and Potter were sitting across from her. He watched as Draco pushed at her shoulder. She opened an eye and swatted his hand away. She wouldn't be talked into anything on this train ride. He was satisfied with what he saw, but before he could leave, Draco looked up at him through the glass.

"Prof...essor Snape," he acknowledged. He saw that both Weasleys threw hostile glares his way while Potter and Lovegood sat quietly. Hermione opened her sleepy eyes, taking in the sight of him. Of her own volition, she stood, came to the door, and opened it.

They just stared into each other's eyes for a moment before he spoke, feeling like a lovesick schoolboy in front of the students. How embarrassing. "If you should need anything, my Floo is open." He lifted a finger to her cheek. In a bold move, she grabbed it with her fingers to place a kiss on it.

"I have the draught. Don't worry. Happy Christmas, Severus," she whispered. He gave her his first genuine smile in ages. He hated Christmas, but he loved the words that came from her mouth. On instinct, he pulled her forward and kissed her lips chastely.

"And, you, Hermione," he said softly. *Crack!* He Disapparated back onto the platform, and left her there longing for him to kiss her deeply as he had the night before. She felt her heart stir slightly. She wanted him, but now it seemed for different reasons. How would it feel to wake up with him every morning? Life would never be dull. Who would have guessed that his normally cruelly, thinned lips could bestow such magic on a lover's mouth?

"Holy shit!" Seamus said from down the aisle. "Was that Snape? Did he snog you?" She blinked in surprise, noting for the first time that many heads were out of their compartments looking at her. She smiled bashfully and closed the door to her compartment. Draco had narrowed eyes. Ginny had a goofy grin, Luna had a dreamy look about her face, Harry's expression was blank, and Ron's expression was mutinous.

"Sorry," she said, not knowing what else to say. She felt unexplainably happy. He had come to her in front of the students. She looked nothing like a Succubus today in her dumpy winter clothes, so it could be that it was actually her that he wanted.

"Falling for the git, are you?" Ron asked.

"Yes," she said softly.

"No wonder he looks at me like he wants to kill me," Draco said with a grin. "He thinks I am the competition. Hell, I'll stay away. Wow! How'd you ever hook him, Mione? He's always been so cold."

"I think it's romantic," Luna said with a sigh.

"Yes, it kind of is, I mean, even though it is Snape. He came here in front of all of us and snogged you," Ginny agreed, giggling.

"We didn't snog!" Hermione said hotly. "We just wished each other a Happy Christmas."

Draco raised an eyebrow and sneered in imitation of Snape. "Granger! My Floo is open should you need it." Everyone started laughing. Even Ron eased up and made some jokes. For the entire trip back, fellow students were putting their heads in and making comments. Ginny was bursting to tell Molly first thing about Snape and Hermione, but Ron elbowed her saying to keep it quiet. Draco bid them farewell as Lucius walked up to collect him. Luna and Ron had a long snog before parting ways, and then they were off to the Burrow.

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**Southern's Notes:** Well, I hope Sev didn't seem too soft in here. Up next...a few days apart.

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 4 of 32*

How does our couple fare this holiday with time apart? Can they even remain apart?

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and also to GinnyW. She's doing the beta job this time around.**

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The first night was particularly hard for Hermione. Once the lights had been turned down, she kept remembering him...his heated kisses and his fingers on her skin. Severus Snape was actually quite warm under his cool exterior. She remembered the heated words he'd said to her. She was wanted...by a man. He wasn't just any man either. He was a Potions master, and a man of extremely high intellect. She'd read much of his published research. One question nagged her. Did he truly see her for what she was, or was it the Succubus he wanted to possess? If their future was any indication, she knew he would have grown to love *her*. Thanks to this ruddy spirit, she knew it would have come. The fallen angel was trying shamelessly to step in, to pick away at fate.

What would their children look like? His straight, black hair contrasted her brown, wavy hair. His black, menacing eyes contrasted her soft, brown eyes. He was a hard,

private man while she was a soft, semi-private woman. She had a few friends that took care of her. Who took care of Severus? From what she could tell, he kept his distance with the staff. She would see him and Madame Hooch chatting amicably at times, but mostly it would be Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall that he took council with. Would he want to lock her away in the dungeons like Ron had said? She doubted it. He knew how she was, but then his words came back to her again.

He said that she was his woman. Her words of not betraying him had touched him, and they caused him to feel emotions that he hadn't felt in years. Though he didn't want her now, it was likely that he could grow to love her just as she could grow to love him. In fact, she felt that she already did on some level. No one had ever made her shiver on the inside the way he had. It was while thinking these thoughts that she fell asleep. Her Incubus came right away.

Hermione opened her eyes. She saw Ginny's sleeping form in the bed next to her while Severus kneeled down and kissed her wrist. "I want you now," he whispered. "I couldn't wait any longer." She allowed him to pull her up from the bed. How did he know how to get through the Burrow's wards, and how did he know which room she'd be in? "Do you want me?"

"Yes," she whispered. He put his hands below her nightgown and stroked his way up to her inner thighs. "I think I love you," she said softly. She hoped he would take her out of Ginny's room. She didn't want her friend to wake up while he touched her.

"And, I love you, Hermione Granger, bearer of my child," he said. Something about what he had said and how he said it made her eyes open wide. Her professor would never have told her that.

"You are my Incubus," she blurted. "Stop!" His grin turned evil, but his hand was relentless in its quest to pull down her panties. "No, don't..." His lips began an assault on her neck that she couldn't resist. She moaned loudly. It felt like Severus' mouth on her. Perhaps he had come for her.

"You want me in any form. Just relax. It's your lover that is here with you," he soothed between kisses.

"Hermione!" *Damn...of all the times for Ginny to wake up.*

"Hmmm?" she said sleepily.

"Hermione! Wake up! It's the Incubus!" Ginny cried.

Hermione sprung up, looking about in a daze. "But...Severus..."

"No, Hermione. It was just the two of us in here. You were dreaming. Are you all right?" Ginny asked with a worried expression. There were voices from the hallway and knocks on the door now. Ginny told them to enter.

Ron, Harry, and Molly walked in together. "Are you all right, Mione?" Harry asked quickly. "We...we heard you from up there."

"Yeah, you'd think the Incubus would soundproof the room. Ha Ha Ha..." Ron said, beginning to laugh.

"Incubus? What is going on here?" Molly questioned. "My God, Hermione, are you plagued by one?"

Hermione swallowed. "Yes. It's a bit complicated though."

"Come on then. When there's talk needed, it's always a good time for a cuppa," Molly said softly. Hermione followed her down to the kitchen glumly, and she spilled all the sordid details to a gossip hungry Molly. Ron had fallen asleep again on the table by the time Hermione's tale was told. Harry and Ginny had disappeared for some snogging, no doubt.

"Hermione, I know this may sound like something horrible, but Severus is a good man underneath all that hard exterior. We've known him for many years, and all the work he did in the Order just proves what kind of man he truly is. I think that if you choose to be with him, it would be wise. In fact, you should be with him sooner than later to rid yourselves of this horrid entity," Molly said softly.

"I know. He wants to as well. At least I think he does, but I think he wants it to be on his terms. I get the feeling that he doesn't like being pushed into this. I want to. It's just...odd. I always thought that I would marry for love or at least love whom I slept with, you know? I know that I could love him...easily. I've seen him in a different light. I know he is good. I saw first hand what he did for the Order. The risks he took. The times he saved our lives." Hermione sighed. "And, like the legend says, the fallen angel is trying to stop us from having a child together because the combining of our powers would bring forth magically powerful children. So, there is no doubt, at least to me, that we would have been together eventually since it's trying to intervene."

"Well, dear, I think you have some choices to make, and some things to talk about amongst yourselves." Molly hugged her tightly. "Did he say if...if he intends to marry you?"

"He didn't exactly say that," Hermione admitted.

"Well, what did he say?" Molly prodded.

"He said things like I was his woman, and I made him feel again even though he didn't want to. He said that he wants me." Hermione looked away in shame. Those were not words of love. Spoken aloud it made her feel like a scarlet woman, as Ron called them.

Molly grinned. "I think those small words are close enough, dear, knowing Severus."

Hermione smiled hopefully. "He did come on the train to tell me his Floo was open if I needed him, and he gave me a small kiss in front of everyone."

"Sometimes actions speak louder than words, Mione. Just think on that. Well, it's safe to say your Incubus won't be reappearing this night. Off you go now."

"Thanks for talking to me. My mum would never have understood any of this," Hermione said gratefully.

"I think of you as a daughter, Hermione. I'm always here for you if you need me. Night, dear."

Hermione crawled back into bed only vaguely noticing Ginny's absence. She must be off with Harry in some corner. She hoped Ginny was on The Potion. Thoughts of Professor Snape came back to her, as she lay back with her eyes closed. Molly had a point. He didn't seem to be a man of many words. Well, she supposed he was, but just not when it concerned something like this. His Floo was open for her in case she needed it. Did he want her to just pop in then? Perhaps it was his way to apologize for his behavior the night before. She didn't remember getting back to her dorm, but the others had told her that he came in carrying her. He had forgotten his robes to hear Parvati tell it. They were going on about how sexy he looked without them. She smiled softly, thinking they were right. And, her nightclothes had been on when she awoke? Did he sneak a look? No, she knew he would do no such thing. For some reason, she trusted him. Sleep came for her again.

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Albus had been watching Severus for the last hour. He hadn't moved a muscle. This was odd. Why hadn't the Succubus come yet? Had she come already then? Was Severus able to send her off before anything happened? Just as he reached out to wake his friend, Albus heard him utter one name. Hermione.

Severus had been dreaming about Hermione. It started with him following her up to the Astronomy Tower. Each time he would call out to her, she would giggle and speed up. Once he searched each corner of the tower's roof, he looked out toward the lake. He could see her down there holding hands with Weasley. Fuming that she would dare lead him on a chase, he went back to his chambers. Once there, he saw that she was in his bed waiting for him.

"What are you doing here?" he barked. "Shouldn't you be off with Weasley?"

"I told you I don't feel that way about Ron. Why don't you come have a little lie in with me?" Her voice had turned husky, and she appeared to be naked under the duvet. Ha! It was the Succubus trying to get one over on him. He'd see about that.

"Miss Granger, I think you ought to leave straightaway whilst you still can. I'm not above hexing harlots that find their way into my chambers." He sneered as hatefully as he could, and was quite proud that his insult seemed to hit home.

"Please, sir, I've only come to talk. Nothing more," she pleaded, a flush seeping out over her cheeks.

"Oh, that takes the biscuit, Succubus! Get out! I'd rather sit down for a good hour with noughts and crosses before talking to you. Go on," he bellowed, patting himself triumphantly as she sprung up from the bed. His internal victory was short lived, however, as he noticed something wasn't quite right. "What are those clothes you are wearing?" So, she had been dressed then!

"Don't worry about it, sir, and please, don't let me keep you from your ruddy game!" Were those tears in her eyes? He'd never know because as he moved forward to have a closer look, she vanished. In fact, to his puzzlement, his entire room began to darken. *What the hell?*

He blinked when firelight suddenly flooded his vision. "Sherbet lemon?" Albus asked from the side of the bed. Damn! It had been a dream. All of it. Of course, he knew it was a dream, but who was that?

"Of course not!" he hissed. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Quite a while, Severus. I dare say, you finally just had your visit? It's the only time you've moved or spoken since you've gone down," Albus said, fumbling in his pocket for a candy.

"I'm not quite sure what I just had to be honest. I felt as if Hermione was in my dream at first, and then when I came back to my room, I thought it to be the Succubus. However, as I told her to get out, she acted completely opposite to any previous visit," he said softly as he pulled down his twisted, gray nightshirt. "I think I may have thrown the wrong woman out. She didn't try to advance on me unless she was about to when you woke me."

Albus looked at him thoughtfully. "Indeed?"

"Yes," he bit back slightly annoyed. Would he have said it if he didn't mean it?

"Severus, I only called your name to wake you. I didn't have to shake you or say your name more than once as normal. I was unsure. You acted as if in normal sleep. To be honest, I didn't see proof that a Succubus may be visiting you until you said Hermione's name just now. Perhaps, as you said, it was not the Succubus."

"Great! What the hell is taking her so long to visit?" Severus said, bringing his fingers to his temples as if to massage away a nonexistent headache. "It could be that she was trying a new tactic. I don't know. I can't be sure, but it feels as if that was not her."

"Very well, my boy. I have nothing to do tonight. Try to go back to sleep. I'll wait here if need be," Albus offered kindly.

"No, Albus, I can't keep you here half the night. I think maybe I will succumb to the urge of drinking a bit of the Draught," he said firmly. At least both witches, temptress one and now temptress two, would not be able to visit. "Just for tonight of course."

His friend smiled. "I'll see you take it before I go, Severus. Not that I don't trust you. I just want to be sure you don't doze off again before you do. Just in case."

Severus got up to retrieve his phial and took a healthy dose. "There! Good enough?" he asked saucily. As if he would fall asleep without taking it! He was more careful than that. What did Albus take him for? A doddering fool? An imb...

Shaking his head in amusement, Albus held out a hand to magically arrest his Potions Master's fall. He'd been in such a snit that he'd taken a good bit too far from his bed. He should definitely be more careful than that. Ever so gently, he glided him over to the bed. He looked down at the sleeping face before him for a few moments. Had the Succubus changed tactics? Why did she wait so long to come here? It would do to think about this for a while. Vaguely he wondered how Miss Granger's visits were coming. He couldn't just come out and ask her, but maybe Molly would have some insight. Molly usually, pardon the pun, weaseled out any information she wanted from someone.

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"Psst, Mione," Harry whispered from his seat across the table.

She looked up to see him nodding towards the door and widening his eyes. Only Harry, Ron, and Ginny sat at the table with her still. Ron and Ginny were arguing over the Chudley Cannons' last game. "Er...I think I'll be back in a moment."

"All right, fine," Ron said, waving her away without really noticing. Ginny didn't say a word. She was too busy throwing a slice of toast out of the window. "Eh! Watch it! You don't want to waste that!"

"The gnomes will eat it, you lout! And, Starley is the better Seeker, I tell you! Why, if they had only put him in..."

Her angry words faded as Hermione slipped outside. She only had to wait a moment before Harry found her out back. "Thought I'd never get away. Just as I stood up, Ron asked my opinion!"

"How'd you sneak out then?" she asked with a grin.

"Grabbed my stomach and said I had to make way for the loo or else," he said smugly.

"I talked to Molly, and she said that it would be all right to go to Diagon Alley today. I know what I would like to get for Ginny for Christmas, but I'll need your honest opinion. I know she's not picky like most girls, but I still don't want to disappoint her. Would you suggest that we all part for private shopping, and then double back to meet me at Vablatsky's Magical Devices?" She never saw Harry this nervous before.

"Of course, Harry," she agreed. Something she'd only thought on briefly before came to mind. "Wait," she put a hand on his arm. "I'd like to maybe get Professor Snape something. Do you think...I mean, would that be too...forward?"

Harry gave her a lopsided grin. "I think that would be nice of you. The worst he can do is lug it back at you!" He ducked as she swatted at him. "Just joking. From what I've seen, Hermione, I think it would be all right. It would let him know that you are interested."

"I guess you're right. It was a silly dilemma for me really. I mean he's not just the kind of guy that would allow warm words or nice gifts to impress him. I'll just get something, and if he likes it, fine." Hermione would do this. She knew he would not get her anything in return, but she didn't care. It was the season to give, not receive. If he used her gift, then that would be good enough for her.

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Severus had just stepped through from The Leaky Cauldron when he saw her. *With Potter*. He had braved the streets of London for a gift that he thought she might like.

Why did he do this? Apparently, he was an idiot. Here she was without a care in the world, walking hand in hand with Potter. Exactly why in the hell did he even get her a Christmas gift? Christmas was nothing to him. It was Albus and Minerva! When he'd finally drug himself to breakfast, they were saying what a nice gesture it would be. *Fool!* She obviously wasn't worried about him one bit. Not that he was worried about her, mind. He just thought it would be courteous. She would understand that he was interested, somewhat. If nothing else, it would just say that he could understand what she was enduring each night, and that he hoped his gift would bring about some appeasement. After making a fool of himself on the Hogwarts Express and at the party, he was sure that she knew he was interested...in something. Not a relationship, no. Not a heated bedding either. Just something. Exactly what? He'd think on that later.

Debating on whether or not to throw his new purchase in the dustbin, he crept forward to Vablatsky's where he'd last seen them. Making sure that no prying eyes were watching, he whispered a quick Disillusionment Spell. Feeling much like a sneaky chameleon, he made his way to the store. It was easy enough to remain in a corner while they talked to the saleswitch. There weren't that many people about.

"So, what do you think? Will she like it?" Potter asked hopefully.

"Oh, Harry! Yes. If I know Ginny, she will love it! I think it's brilliant!" Hermione was holding up some sort of chain. It appeared to be a Golden Snitch with a magical lightning bolt flashing through it ever so often. What kind of gift to a woman is that? Hang on! Ginny's gift. Not Hermione's. A smug smile broke over his face. She'd not betray him. *What?* Blimey! As much as he wanted to stay, he had to leave. He needed to go back to his personal domain to clear his thoughts. That was just part of the reason. The Disillusionment Spell only lasted a ruddy ten minutes at best! That would be just perfect! He'd never live down the shame of materializing in front of them. They'd think he was some sort of...spy! Blast! *CRACK!*

Out of instinct, Harry pulled Hermione behind him. "Did you hear that?"

"I did. Sounding like someone Disapparating," Hermione said, looking around in puzzlement. "You don't think someone was trying to spy on us? To see what you've gotten Ginny, do you?"

"I doubt that," Harry said suspiciously. "I didn't see anyone over there though. Do you think they were under an invisibility cloak?"

"Maybe," Hermione shrugged.

"Ah, don' worry my lit'l dears. 'Appens all the time, it does. Ye get used ter it," the saleswitch said in a bored voice.

"We'll be off now, thanks," Harry said with distaste, pulling Hermione behind him. Once they were back on the street, he felt more relaxed. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that witch was really a hag in disguise. Did she not make you feel...strange?"

"I admit that my hair prickled on the back of my neck once. Odd place, Vablatsky's. Come on now. I want to show you an idea I have for Professor Snape's gift. Do you mind?"

"Lead the way," Harry said with a smile. Though he and Snape hadn't gotten on well for the past near seven years, he wouldn't mind putting the past behind them. Snape was the only one left near him that knew his parents from their days at Hogwarts. Snape had mellowed out some since the final battle, but he did still appear to have a wand stuck up his arse on most days. Maybe this situation with Mione would change things. Maybe she was onto something that night when she said that fate might want her to bring him some joy after all he'd had to endure. *Sod it!* Time would tell.

"Blast! Ron has spotted us!"

Harry chuckled at her dismay. "Oi! What've you got there, Ron?"

"None of your bloody business, Harry!" His eyes narrowed. "What are you two doing here together? I thought we were all off for a bit of private shopping!"

"We are! I just met up with Harry as I came out of a shop down the way. Now, if you'll excuse me, I do believe I have a few more shops to visit," Hermione said haughtily.

"Reckon we ought to follow her and see what she gets us?" Ron asked slyly.

Harry's eyes glinted for a moment, but then he remembered that she was off for Snape's gift. "Christmas isn't that far off, you lout. Come on then. Let's see what they have in stock in the way of Quidditch supplies." He knew this would mollify Ron.

"You've got it, mate. I wouldn't mind a broomstick servicing kit, meself. I wonder how many Galleons a second hand set would cost?" Ron asked, brow furrowing.

"I have some extra if you need it, Ron," Harry offered, but he knew his proud friend would never accept.

"No, it's all right. Doesn't hurt to window shop, does it?" Harry hated the wistful expression that passed over Ron's face, and in that moment, he knew just what to get his mate for a gift. Before they entered the shop, he would have sworn that he'd seen Snape down the way walking into an alley with Lucius Malfoy. What were they doing there? He shrugged. Wasn't his business, really. Why worry on it?

~~~~~ hg ~~~~~ ss ~~~~~

Hermione had just finished wrapping Severus' Christmas gift. It was a set of silver phials. She knew he could always use these for some of his more complicated potions that could only be handled in silver. She hoped he wouldn't mind terribly. Of course, he wouldn't return it. After all, he had practically told her that one-day soon they would share a bed. She hoped though that maybe this Christmas could be the start of something special. Over time they could become compatible, and their feelings would grow.

She yawned again. It was getting late. Ron had already gone up to bed. Ginny and Harry were up in her room. She had just taken a shower to kill time, and they still weren't out of the room. She didn't want to interrupt anything, but she dared not go to sleep without taking her draught if no one was around. The only problem was that her draught was in the room with Ginny. Suddenly, she felt a tingling in her stomach. A burst of heat swept through her as if her Incubus had touched her! Severus had known when she was being visited. Maybe these are the feelings he felt. He must be experiencing it at this moment. Dumbledore would wake him soon, wouldn't he?

Worry flooded her thoughts. The feelings had not subsided yet. If anything, they had intensified. She felt...aroused. Many minutes had gone by, and she was beginning to feel damp in her knickers. There was no time to waste. She had to get to him. She ran to the fireplace and scooped up some Floo powder. She threw it in and said, "Severus Snape's Chambers." When the fire turned green, she jumped in. Moments later she tumbled out onto the floor of his bedroom. There was one candle lit across the room to her right. She had to let her eyes adjust to the light. She could just make out his form in the bed. He appeared to be moving and...moaning. For a brief moment, she felt embarrassed. He might have someone here! But, no, she could see no other shape in the bed. She pointed her wand at herself, and chanted a cleaning spell to get the soot off her body. Approaching the bed slowly, a wave of heat rolled over her body, and she almost moaned herself just as Severus did.

"Severus?" she called to him. No response. "Professor?" She placed a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. "Please wake up. It's the Succubus."

"I can withstand you," he whispered. "I'll send you away in just a moment, wench!"

"Professor, no! It's her! Wake up," she said, forcefully shaking his shoulders.

He sprang up, sweeping her onto the bed in one smooth motion. His fingers bit into her skin painfully. "Wait," she murmured.

"Why do you torment me?" he asked between clenched teeth, and maneuvered her until she was pinned beneath him.

"It's me, Hermione," she squeaked. *He must still think that he is with the Succubus in the dream.*"Professor, I'm not her. I swear it."

He chuckled evilly. "Hermione, indeed. She is at her friends' home this night. I want you out of my bed. NOW!"

"Professor, it's me. I came to...to check on you," she cried. His hands were squeezing her wrists painfully. "You said the Floo would be open to me should I need it. I just thought you needed me to rescue you from the Succubus." Recognition passed through his dark eyes from what she could make out. He glanced down to her body beneath him, likely realizing that she had on different clothes than the Succubus. She was still wearing the short, white cotton nightgown that she liked to sleep in. She'd had it for a couple of years, and it was comfortable. He loosened his grip on her wrists, but did not let her go.

"Why are you here? How?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

"I felt you. I had to come. The Succubus..." She swallowed. "You said I could come through the Floo. I didn't mean to intrude on you."

"Silly girl," he said through a relieved grin. "You are welcome in my chambers." Realizing he still had her wrists extended above her head, he let her go, and slowly moved off her. "I apologize. That was most inappropriate though you can understand why I felt the need to use such force."

She sat up touching her wrists gingerly. "It's all right. I shouldn't have startled you. I didn't know what else to do." She could still see the imprints of his fingers. He was an extremely strong man. Aside from the slight throb on her wrists, she was pained by the expression on his face. If she didn't know better, she would think that he was disappointed that his dream with the Succubus was over. Well, of course, he wasn't, but the dream had obviously been one that was...enjoyable. "Professor, did you...?"

He looked at her oddly. "No." He got up and went through a door. When she heard water running, she realized it must be the bathroom. Oh! Severus Snape had apologized to her! Things had changed between them, and she could almost see the longing in his gaze just before he went to his bathroom. The door opened suddenly, and he was back next to her in an instant. "Hermione, what are you doing up so late?"

Her face turned bright red. "Well, I couldn't very well sleep, now could I? Harry and Ginny were locked in her room, and my Sleeping Draught is in there. And, well, you told me not to be alone with Ron. His parents were over at a function for the Ministry. I was just killing time until Harry and Ginny finished...er...talking."

"Talking indeed." Severus smirked. "So, you've not slept then?" She shook her head. "I have some draught I can give you. Hold on." He stood up to leave the room, and she stopped him.

"Wait, sir. Do you think that maybe we could talk? We've never been alone. Not really. I mean to say..." Hermione didn't know how to explain that she would like a few moments with him to talk about a possible future. She had been over Molly's words nearly a hundred times over the last few days. She was a Gryffindor. She was brave. She could do this. What had she to lose? "About us."

"Us?" he questioned through narrow eyes. "I suppose that would not be out of order. Cover yourself," he said shortly, not wanting to see those legs. He almost smiled at the thought of her not being too thin. He liked a woman he could feel comfortable jostling about with in the bed. He wouldn't have to fear breaking her when the time came. *Damn! Get out of my head!*

"Sorry, I couldn't change before I came," she said slipping his duvet up over her. "Have a seat, sir. I won't...I won't bite you know." She was trying to tease him to lighten his tense mood. It seemed to work as he sat on the edge of the bed. She wanted to giggle now that she realized what he was wearing. It was a long, gray nightshirt. She was used to seeing Ron and Harry in their pajamas, so this was just a bit of a different sight.

"Very well. Go on. How would you like to start this...conversation?" he asked formally.

"Well, sir, this entity. It only proves, at least to me, that in time you and I would have... well, we would have fancied each other. Do you still find the idea unpleasant?" She bit her lip nervously. Who would have thought she could have mustered up this much courage on such short notice?

He thought over his answer before saying it. Was it unpleasant? The situation could have been better. That much was true. He didn't like being goaded into something. In fact, any other woman would have been acceptable. Now that wasn't entirely true. This Succubus had opened his eyes to the possibilities with the young witch before him. However, the more he thought on it, the more he realized that she was appealing to him. He'd enjoyed their past debates in Order meetings somewhat, though most nights he could have throttled her. Her occasional company might not be all that distasteful. How would she do as a lover? The time he saw her writhing under her dream trance had him craving to have her. She could be taught. Yes, he could see this going on and not being objectionable in the least. "I think that since time has passed, I have gotten over the shock of it. It doesn't appear to be as farfetched as when I first learned of it." There that didn't sound too dreadful, now did it?

To his amazement, she smiled. "That's good then, right? I...I have been thinking on it often, and I tend to believe that I wouldn't mind getting to know you better, Professor. I won't try to intrude on you, of course, but I wouldn't object to having tea or talks with you on occasion."

He gave her a tight smile. "That doesn't sound appalling. Would you...care for some now? Is it too late?" he asked unsure of how to proceed. He'd not ever entertained a woman in his chambers before. Nor had he felt compelled to be as cordial to one before. What exactly was going on here? What was this...excitement?

"I've nothing else to do, sir. So, yes, I accept your offer."

"I'll be back shortly," he said, nodding to her. Pointing his wand to the grate, a cozy fire sprang to life. He went into his other rooms to summon some tea, she supposed. She glanced around his bedchamber. It was tastefully decorated from what she could see. His bed was large. What did he need all this room for anyway? It was not exactly sparse in furniture, but it wasn't cluttered either. She saw a bookshelf near a table in the corner. Her eyes lit up. *Wonder what he's got hidden in there?* She'd have to check on that once she was accustomed to being here with him. *Bloody hell!* They'd only had a brief chat, and she could already see herself spending plenty of time here...with him.

"Here we are," he said, handing her a cup. She saw that he had put on a bathrobe. Gingerly he sat back on the bed, this time she noticed that he was nearer to her. That was a good sign.

"Thanks. So, Professor, how are the holidays treating you?" It was as good a place to start as any.

"I enjoy any time that I have when the castle isn't filled with dunderh...er...students. I am much more relaxed, and there isn't much patrolling needed. That is to say, at least when Potter doesn't stay for the holidays," he added with a small, knowing grin. He relished that she had the graciousness to blush. Truth be known, she was as much of a rule breaker as Potter and Weasley. Well, that wasn't exactly fair. "What of your holiday? Done anything yet?"

"Well, we did go to Diagon Alley a few days ago. Everyone wanted to do a last bit of shopping for Christmas." Was that a blush? "I even saw what Harry got for Ginny. He was a bit worried that it might not be a fitting gift for a girl at this time of year, but I believe she will like it."

*That gift was hideous! Who would want a Snitch and lightning bolt on their neck?* Well, that was nice of you to put him at ease about it. Is the tea to your liking, Miss Granger?"

"Quite. So, have you done any research while you've been on break, sir?" she asked, not wanting the conversation to die down. She felt...special, having him all to herself in this way.

"Only some. I admit that I have been in the library browsing on information about our current situation. It seems there is not much else to add to what you already told us. I guess we'll just have to..." This was dangerous conversation. The erotic vision that flitted through his mind had something stirring within.

She cleared her throat. "I think so, sir. Do you not...feel odd during the day as well? I mean, do you think about it?"

"Yes," he breathed. He'd not elaborate. She couldn't exactly know the things that he thought about. She'd run off in fear.

"Sometimes I feel overtaken by thoughts. Memories, I guess, of my dreams...and that night, you know... in your office," she admitted, not meeting his eyes.

"Did I not frighten you?"

"A little, I admit, but I think it knocked some sense into me. It made me realize that I should take a more mature approach to this, though I'm still bushwhacked at times with so many conflicting emotions." She swallowed deeply. "Is it wrong of me to be attracted to you, sir? I mean, how do I know if I truly really am, or if it's the Incubus?"

"An intelligent question. One, I'm afraid, that you will have to find the answer to within yourself. I should like to think that maybe it might have something to do with it," he said softly. He was trying to bait her. He wanted to hear her voice her feelings.

"Well, I have held you in high regards for some time now. All of the things that you have done for us, all the risks, the research you publish...I mean, you are brilliant. What's not to respect?" She smiled, meeting his eyes again. "Sometimes you are a great ruddy prat about things, but I suppose it's only in your nature. I find you attractive in your own way. That night...in the office, I would have..."

He nodded after a moment, knowing she would not continue. Those words sparked that warm feeling again. The excitement *It's not just the Incubus*. "Do you truly read my research?"

"Of course, I do. Though it has been a while, I also read the minutes from the last conference you attended just before your birthday. I saw how you tore apart that lousy presentation. It was a bri..."

"How do you know when my birthday is?" he questioned, eyes narrowed. Had she been checking up on his personal information? Who had she been questioning?

"Well, I heard Professor McGonagall tell Madame Hooch that she would not put up with any rude surprises in the staff meeting even if it was your birthday. That was January 9th of last year. It wasn't intentional. I only overheard them in passing," she said, hoping he'd not become angry. This seemed to appease him though. He relaxed a bit.

"It's fine. I was just wondering if perhaps you had been asking questions about me. I don't know if I would have liked that," he said, clearing his throat. "Now that we are...talking, I would request that you ask me anything you should want to know. Not that I would answer all of your questions," he added, raising an eyebrow.

She giggled. She loved that eyebrow. That was...sexy. Even the devilish smirk he was sporting was sexy. His dark eyes didn't seem to be penetrating her this night. They seemed to be simply looking on her as if she was a woman, a friend, or a colleague. "Sir, where is the Headmaster this night? Is he not usually with you?"

"He and Minerva decided to spend the evening with her niece's family. I was to take the Draught." He should have taken it the moment he began to feel tired, but he'd been having pleasant thoughts, and he didn't want to get up for the phial.

"Mistakes happen," she said with a shrug. Suddenly, she yawned. "What time has it gotten to?"

He looked toward the table where his empty cup sat. "It's just past midnight," he said, seemingly reluctant. Did he wish for her to stay? To continue their visit?

"It's been pleasant. Thank you for allowing me this time, sir. And, if you don't mind me saying, Happy Christmas."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" He smiled at her, allowing the smile to reach his eyes. "Here let me get you a phial to take along with you. Your friends may not be finished with their...talk."

"Please, I would rather not take it if I didn't have to. Could I just...? I mean to say...I could just...you know...stay."

He was shocked! She meant to stay here with him. She wanted to sleep next to him, so that he could wake her when her Incubus came. An evil thought occurred. He'd be able to hear those luscious little moans again. "Are you sure you want to stay?" *Please say yes!* What would Albus say? To hell with Albus; he had touched upon this subject often enough. Hermione was eighteen. She was a colleague, sort of. Yes, she could stay.

"Of course." She was biting her lip. Did she not know that added to her innocent little look? Here she was in a white, short virginal nightgown in his bed looking wide-eyed and innocent. He had never been attracted to things pure for fear he would taint them, but he wanted to taint her. He wanted to mold her and make her his own. He wanted to break her maidenhead, delve into her depths, and make her call out his name. Damn! *Where had this flood of possessiveness come from?*

Why at this moment? She'd been here for a long while, and he'd kept these thoughts at bay. Well, mostly anyway. It was an after effect of the Succubus perhaps, but then again, it could be her. *Stop lying to yourself! It is her!* His groin was already stirring. "Do you want me to stoke the fire? It's dying out." She nodded. A little concentration and a wave of his hand saw flames renewed in the fireplace. He usually only lit it enough to heat the room comfortably for a bit, but then he would extinguish it, liking the cold. His small candle had finally met its end and burnt out. There was only the firelight now. He slid into his bed beside her after removing his bathrobe. She didn't move. She had gone rigid. Afraid, was she? He suppressed an evil chuckle. She had nothing to be afraid of. Not just yet anyway. "Sleep, Little One. I'm here for you."

She smiled softly and loosened up, snuggling closer to him. He lay on his side, looking down at her relaxed face until she fell asleep. Her breathing had finally deepened, and he knew she was gone. Astonishingly, it was only moments before she started writhing in bed. So, her visitor took the first opportunity to come to her as his did most nights? It didn't waste any time, did it? He'd only had a reprieve that one night when he was unsure if she had come or not. A little gasp escaped her lips, and he hardened a little in response. "I can't..." she murmured. *Oh, but she could. And, she would.* He brought down his hand to cradle the side of her face. She moaned. Was it from his touch or from her Incubus? Severus couldn't help but to place a small kiss on her cheek. She smiled in her sleep at that. "I want you," she purred.

If he thought he could get no harder, he had a surprise; he was rock hard. Damn! He'd have to wake her, or he'd find that he was making love to a dreaming girl without her consent. "Hermione, wake up. It's Severus." At that, she laughed, and pulled his hand from her face down between her thighs. Her nightgown had eased up, and his palm was now pressed over a hot, white, lacy mound of panties. He groaned. When he tried to move his hand, she held it there. "Hermione...please," he said, completely exasperated. Holding his hand tightly between her thighs, she reached her other free hand up to pull his face down to hers for a scorching kiss. *Sweet Merlin!* She was a right little vixen! She started moving provocatively against his hand. He could feel the slightest traces of wetness seeping through. All he had to do was...No! He wouldn't. He snatched his hand away, and he tore his lips away from hers. He could see that she was pouting, eyes still closed though. "Miss Granger!" he barked. She shot straight up, gasping for breath.

"Oh, my," she murmured. "I almost...wow..." She wasn't looking at him, but she was looking straight ahead of her. He watched as she shook her head slightly. Then she turned to look at him, completely embarrassed. "Sorry." He could take no more. He wanted her. He sat up and pulled her into his arms. His Succubus.

"I want to kiss you, Hermione," he told her so as not to frighten her. Before she could reply, he pressed his lips to hers. She opened her mouth, welcoming him. He felt a strangled groan rumble in his throat. Their tongues were dancing, slowly mesmerizing each of them. When he felt her hands in his hair, groping, pulling him closer, he knew that she was his this night. As gently as he could without breaking their kiss, he eased her back on the bed. Her first time. His first virgin. He would make it memorable for her. Finally, he pulled away to search her face for signs of submission. He prayed he wouldn't find disgust there. All he saw was a welcoming smile that warmed his soul. "I'm going to kiss you again," he stated hotly, noticing how strained his own voice sounded.

"Please..." she begged, as her eager lips searched for his again. She tasted faintly of the tea they'd had and something minty. He suckled on her lower lip for a moment, then her top lip, and then his tongue plunged in to find hers enthusiastically waiting. After a long moment, he placed small, butterfly kisses along her jaw until he reached her throat. *Such soft flesh!* He resisted the urge to actually bite into her, settling for a sensual tongue assault. Each gasp and whimper that escaped her lips, let him know that he was pleasing her. This only encouraged him further as he moved his mouth to her ear, nibbling, licking, and suckling her lobe.

"Little One, you taste so good to me," he breathed into her ear. At his words, her body arched into his as her hands found their way once again into his hair. He closed his eyes at the sensation she was causing. Who would have thought that she could make him feel so welcome? So wanted? So needed? Finding her mouth again, he placed a demanding kiss on her lips. He would have her.

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**A/N:** Just gotta love/hate evil cliffies! That only heightens anticipation though...hehe. Thanks, all!

## Chapter Four

*Chapter 5 of 32*

Christmas time is here. We see what happens when they finally get together alone and what they do for the holiday.

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, but kudos go to GinnyW for being my second beta.**

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"Are you real?" she asked softly. Her clouded eyes bore into his. What was she searching for?

"Yes." He smiled shyly, hoping she wouldn't change her mind now that he'd made up his. If that happened to be the case, he'd simply change it back again. He would have her this night.

"Good. You are making me feel so much right now. I can't explain it. I can't stand much more of this Incubus to be honest. I would like to..." she began, but then he saw her biting her lip. Her cheeks turned a shade redder.

"As would I." It was all he had to say. He bent down and began nuzzling her neck, using his tongue to taste and taunt her. Again, she began twisting and whimpering under his kisses and caresses. His free hand moved down, lazily stroking her inner thighs. His other hand was reaching for his wand. With a quick incantation, his nightshirt was gone. He was only in his boxers. He saw her eyes widen for a moment, but then she smiled faintly. He'd have to thank Hooch for poking fun that he didn't wear underpants most of the time. Since then, he'd been wearing them each day. If he had a lack of them now, his little one may have lost her nerve. She reached out with both hands to move over his chest. Her fingers were burning his flesh. He had never felt like he needed someone so much. Thoughts of Hooch and underpants were forgotten.

He groaned at the sensation she was giving him. He moved away from her hands to keep from losing himself through her mere touch. Kneeling up next to her, he placed his hands on her ankles and slowly felt his way up. At her thighs, he caught the hem of her nightgown with his hands and slid it up as well. When he neared her hips, she froze slightly. "Do not be afraid," he said silkily. He felt her relax under his hands. He pulled her nightgown up over her head and threw it on the floor. His breath caught in his throat. She did have the body of the Succubus. Feminine. Soft. Rounded. No flat planes or angles. "You are beautiful, Hermione." He saw that his words eased her. She had no bra on, and her breasts were begging to be kissed.

Dipping his head, he kissed a trail from one to the other before finally taking a nipple in his mouth. "Oh!" she gasped. His fingers dipped into the hem of her knickers, and he began to lower them. Sensing tension, he brought his lips to hers. As she lost herself in his kiss, he removed the last of her garments. He broke away from the kiss to gaze at her now completely naked body. He saw fear of rejection wash over her. She had nothing to fear. He wanted to kiss and feel every inch of her. All of her belonged to him now.

"Gods, Hermione, do you not know what you do to me?" He kissed her softly. "I want to make love to you this night. Will you let me?" Make love. He'd never called it that before. Words like sex, shag, and fuck didn't seem appropriate. Not with her. Not at this moment.

"Yes," she murmured. It was the only answer he needed. He pulled off his boxers, and she gasped when she saw his erection. Suddenly, she was scooting back on the bed away from him, and her face was full of fright.

He reached out to steady her. "What's wrong?"

"It's...that won't fit in here," she said in awe, eyes still looking at him. "It will hurt."

"Fit it will, Hermione. Easily. I'm going to get you ready for me first. As far as the hurt, it will only be for a moment, and then you will feel only pleasure, I assure you," he said seductively. She allowed him to pull her back down, and he went to work. His lips, hands, fingers, and body pressed over her expertly. He went down to kiss her between her thighs, and she tried to move away. He nearly groaned in frustration. He had to taste her. This had been one of his fantasies. He would have this.

"What are you doing?" She was panting raggedly. "That's...hey..."

"Shhh, Little One," he replied. "I want this. Let me." Before she could protest further, he parted her legs, and his tongue met her inner-flesh. She gasped, tensed, and then relaxed. He'd never get enough of her. Her completely innocent reactions were branding themselves into his memory. Her first experiences at becoming a woman belonged to him. She belonged to him. He let a finger replace his tongue as he lapped at her nub. She was moaning in an instant and convulsed right away! He felt her wetness wash over his finger and mouth. She had shrieked like a banshee, and it turned him on even more, if that was possible. She was wet enough for him to take her now. Kissing a trail to her face, he cupped her chin in his hand before kissing her. She didn't seem to mind where his lips had just been one bit. Or, did she even notice? Using his knee, he spread her legs even farther apart, moving into position. "You're mine, Hermione. My Mione."

"Is...are you going to...?" she tried to ask, moaning as his fingers slithered over her erect nipples.

"Yes, it's time that we become one. Are you ready for me?" he asked softly, licking her breasts one last time as a finger worked her wet sex.

"Yes," she panted. He kissed her neck, brutally sucking on her. He was marking her. Anyone who saw it would know that he had been there. Not to prolong the inevitable, he began pushing in completely, reveling in her tightness, and cringing at her pained cry. He had felt her body give way to him, but he hated that he had caused her pain.

"Shhh...it will be all right," he said after a moment. He kissed her deeply and began moving again within her. She was extremely tight; hell, almost too tight; so wet, just extremely slippery, and smoldering hot. The heat was driving him insane. "Gods, woman, but I want you always," he growled possessively. "You are mine." He began thrusting into her harder and faster. He grinned when he felt her arms wrap around him to pull him closer. He took this moment to pull her legs around his waist, and she began to move with him. He could tell by her breathing and gasping that she was building up again for release. "That's it," he whispered in her ear. "Feel me. Come to life for me, Little One."

"Oh... I... my God!" She screamed, "Professor!" That one word had him climaxing along with her. He grunted his release, and let his seed fill her. How erotic. No one had ever called him professor while having an orgasm. He felt particularly...naughty, and he liked it. He collapsed onto her for a few moments to catch his breath before moving aside. He pulled her to him, draping a leg over both of hers, placing a hand on her waist. They stared into each other's eyes without speaking. His only regret was that it had not lasted longer. Pent up need, desire built up from the Succubus' visits, the memories from the night of the party, the small kiss on the train...they had all collided, melded, and pooled into desire for her. It was inevitable that he wouldn't last as long as he had planned. Hopefully, she wouldn't mind. It was likely she wouldn't know any better. In fact, he wondered if she'd ever had an orgasm before. Surely a woman of eighteen would know how to pleasure herself?

He kissed her lips softly. Then he kissed her forehead and moved back a long lock of hair that had fallen into her face. A feeling of peace intruded his being. This is how he would always like to be before he slept at night. Sated and looking into the eyes of the woman he loved. No...not love. Not yet, but some day. He had no doubt about that. He'd never be rid of her. "You are perfection."

"As are you," she said meekly. He smiled. This smile thing wasn't so bad after all. He'd smile for her, but for her only. "I've never felt that way. Something just...came over me." She smiled shyly. "Professor..."

"Please, call me Severus. I think we can say that we are more than acquaintances," he murmured sleepily. She giggled, and it made him grin. "You little imp!" He kissed her until she was breathless again, and he realized that he wanted her once more before he'd let sleep take him. After snogging her senseless, he rolled her over again. "I need you once more," he murmured against her lips.

"Already?" she asked shyly. "I didn't know that it could be so fast."

"Most definitely, especially with a woman such as you. I just..." Forget words. Show her. He entered her again without giving her any warning. She cried out immediately, but he could tell it was a welcoming call. He was home.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione felt like purring. Though the fire had long burned out in the grate, the heated body enfolding her possessively had kept her warm and content. Her back was to his chest, so she couldn't see his face. She took the time to touch the hands holding her. She traced every long, tapered finger as softly as possible. These hands had touched every part of her body. They had been inside of her as well. She had never imagined such fulfillment before. The Incubus had aroused her, had made her feel things, but Severus Snape was no Incubus. He was her...what? Lover? He was immaculate. Everything he did was done with such precision, such patience, and such desire. Though the night before had been a foggy, dreamlike quality to it, she cherished every moment. Every caress. Every kiss.

She was glad that he had an illusion window. It gave her fake sunlight in which to view his room. She could just make out her wand on the floor near the fireplace. She'd never realized that she had dropped it. After removing the soot from her nightgown, her only purpose was to get to him.

"Can I take a bath?" she asked timidly once she noticed he was awake. His fingers had begun to tentatively touch hers back. She felt his lips on her bare back for a moment.

"Just through there," he said pointing to the door with one free finger. She sat up, wondering how she could get from the bed to the door without him seeing her nakedness. Damn! He'd seen her anyway. He'd been with her twice the night before and once at some point earlier. He seemed to sense her dilemma and chuckled wickedly. "Nothing I haven't seen before." It was then that she turned to meet his eyes. He seemed younger, softer. She liked it.

She swatted his chest and laughed. To hell with it. With all the dignity she could muster, she got up, and speedily made way to the loo, picking up her wand from the floor on the way. She felt sticky and sweaty. Yes, she was in definite need of a bath. She set the faucets to the hottest temperature she could stand before getting in. She felt immediately relaxed. Laying back, she closed her eyes to remember what had happened the night before.

He had made love to her. His words. He said she belonged to him now. At some point in the past such a declaration would have made her bristle, but coming from him, she didn't mind. She wanted him to own her. Would things always be as they were the previous night? Would their nightly visitors stop now that they had been together? It would probably still try, but there was no way she would succumb to its seduction. She would definitely know the difference.

Deep inside her, she burned with a new emotion. She loved him. This man. Severus Snape...Snarky Potions master of Hogwarts. There was no turning back. She would not pressure him to return the feelings. Those would come in time she knew. Harry and Ron would die if they witnessed this side of him. Hmmm...that would never happen. As far as she knew, they were all straight, and she seriously doubted they would ever be in the same room naked. Giggling, she went about washing away all evidence of the night before. Only briefly did the dried smears of blood shock her. It was only natural. Her hymen had been broken with his first thrust into her. Her body quivered with remembrance.

After she got out, she chanted a drying spell on her body and hair. Damn! She had no clothes in here. A black shirt caught her eye. The house-elves had obviously not come in yet. She pulled it over her head without having to unbutton it. It smelled of man and spices...delicious...just like him. She felt arousal building, but bid it to go away. Her stomach was rumbling. She was hungry. She washed out her mouth and chanted a breath freshening charm. Looking into the mirror, she gasped. She had three passion marks on her neck. She was about to charm them away, but she decided she would leave them. It would be a reminder that he was her man. Her lover. She smiled brightly and opened the door. He was still in bed.

She jumped on the bed and startled him awake. "Happy Christmas!" She loved the grin he gave her. It was undoubtedly something that not many people witnessed. It made him appear so touchable.

He kissed her nose after he sat up. "Happy Christmas indeed, but only because you are here with me." Without another word, he made his way to the bathroom. Unlike her, he took his time, not minding that he was naked. She took a moment to admire his bum. Just like the rest of him, it was perfect. She had to resist the urge to sneak behind him for a pinch. His skin was smooth, unblemished, and pale, but not undesirably so. His dark hair on his chest and legs had been a favorable feature. She loved running her fingers through them. He came out about fifteen minutes later, and she had transfigured her nightgown into a long, warm dress. She wasn't able to find her knickers anywhere, and she was not going to ask him if he'd seen them. She would look around again before she left.

"I have no underclothes! Nor socks or shoes! What a sight I must be," she said nervously, as she took in his flawlessly dressed form. He was dressed head to toe in black as usual with only a splash of white near his neck and at the cuff of his sleeves.

He grinned evilly. "I think I saw your knickers under my pillow."

"Scamp!" She shouted, but laughed all the same. This relieved some of the trepidation she had begun to feel. They would have to have a talk, but what if she didn't like what he had to say? She pulled her knickers out and transfigured them into a pair of soft, slippers. He raised an eyebrow. "Well," she grinned. "Nobody will know I have no underclothes, but they will see I have no shoes."

"Are you...tender?" he asked awkwardly.

"Only just. It's not unbearable. The bath seemed to have soothed me. Thanks for asking," she said, glad that he cared.

Severus nodded, seeming to want to say something else. He looked at his dresser. "Ah, Christmas gifts. I wonder what I could have gotten this year," he said dryly. He always got the same gifts. Socks, candies, Scotch... He noticed a package on his dresser, immediately recognizing Hermione's small, loopy writing. "This one is from you."

"Oh! How did it get here? I mean...I didn't send it," she wondered aloud. She grinned as he took his time opening the gift as if he didn't want to rumple the paper. She saw his eyes widen before he gave her a smile.

"Hermione! You shouldn't have. These must have cost a fortune!" he exclaimed.

"Sorry. I saw that you only had a few left and figured you could always use a few more," she said softly.

"Don't be sorry, Little One. I love them. I just hate that you spent such an amount on me," he said. Her gift meant more to him than he was willing to let on. They would come in handy, and he was pleased that she had gotten him a gift in the first place, let alone one he could actually use. No *love* interest ever had. The staff would send him gifts, but they were never personal. Always generic. "Someone knows you are here. This is from Dumbledore. Doesn't miss a thing, does he?"

She noticed a slight tension in his face when he said that. He almost seemed bitter. Was he embarrassed? He couldn't get into trouble at this point. She was no longer a student.

He threw the package to her, and she unwrapped it. Giggling, she took off her newly transfigured slippers and pulled on a pair of the most ugly socks he'd ever seen. They were orange socks with purple fuzz balls scattered throughout. "Oh, look. There is a note. It says to please meet them for breakfast. How do you feel about that? I am hungry, but I'm not above staying here with only you." She hoped her words would ease the tension in him.

His eyes met hers. "Do you feel up to it? Meeting them all for breakfast, I mean." She noticed that he seemed to be hoping that she would. Was he ready for them to know? Really know. Because if she went to breakfast with him, they would know that she had spent the night with him.

"Severus, what is between us now? What is going to happen?" she asked suddenly.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I would like...I'm not sure. What do you expect from me?" He wanted to tell her that she would remain with him until his dying day, but he was afraid to voice such a thing in the light of day. Saying what you felt during a heated moment was something entirely different.

Hermione was slightly disappointed. After the things he'd told her the night before, she thought that he would see her as more than a fling. "I suppose I thought we would start seeing each other more regularly. It wasn't just one night for me. I hope you don't mind, but it's just how I feel."

He took the steps needed to kneel in front of her. "I had hoped you felt that way. I would like that as well." He kissed her lips softly before moving back to the gifts.

"If you wouldn't mind then. I'd like to go to breakfast. There is no pressure, I promise. I'm not embarrassed about us," she offered. It was up to him. He put another gift in front of her. She looked down, noting the spiky scrawl. It was from him. She read the inscription and tears sprang to her eyes. "I love it!" She exclaimed. "It's an original! Over a hundred years old! I can't believe it."

"I've made you cry. Why?" he asked incredulously. Were his scant words on the inside cover so harsh? What had he put anyway? Oh, right. Something to the effect of Happy reading, SS. That wasn't too bad.

She smiled easily. "They are happy tears. The gift is very thoughtful, and it overwhelmed me with feeling. Have you not ever felt that way about anything?"

"Almost," he whispered, thinking about how he'd felt after he'd made love to her. The gift of virginity. The gift of acceptance. He could have wept. Wept? No. But, there was that overwhelming feeling that brought forth such emotion. He hadn't known how to display it except to make love to her that second time.

"Well, then, please don't be offended. A book of poetry such as this is a magnificent gift, Severus. I love it. Honestly."

He kissed her. "I'm glad you like it, and I would be honored if you joined me this day." He meant every word. It would be his first Christmas spent with a lover. The staff would be surprised to see her, but he didn't care. They all knew what the Succubus and Incubus visits implicated. Why not start this now? It felt right somehow.

"Can I borrow some clothes to transfigure then?" She grinned with excitement. He went to his wardrobe and pulled out a couple of black pieces of clothing. Did he only own black clothes? She transfigured one into a black dress robe and the other into a black cloak. She pulled them on over her attire. Then she went to the mirror over his dresser. She brushed her hair out and let it fall over her shoulders.

"You are beautiful to me, you know," he whispered, coming up behind her to hold her to him. She met his eyes in the mirror and saw his honesty there. He had slight red splotches on his cheeks as if admitting that had discomfited him. She'd not tease him. Instead, she'd pretend not to notice.

"I feel like it today for some reason. Usually, I don't, but I think maybe you make me feel good about myself," she admitted. "Does that sound silly?"

He thought for a long moment before answering. "No, it's exactly how I feel. Shall we?" he asked, extending his arm to her. She took it and smiled. "Wait," he said, pausing at the door. "I feel I must warn you. The staff..."

She looked to him as if to say 'go on' when his voice trailed off, but no words came forth. She could feel that his palms were sweaty. "Pr...Severus, we don't have to do this today. I don't mind. We can stay here. Just the two of us."

"No, I want to do this, but I...the staff are very... Damn! How can I say this?" She could sense he was becoming very agitated.

"Just say it. Don't sugarcoat it for me. I think I've proved that I'm a big girl," she said with a smile, hoping to put him at ease.

"Well, they'll likely try to humiliate me...and you. I don't mind the things they tell me. Really, I don't," he said with a sigh. "That's a lie. I can't stand the things some of them say. Hooch for one!"

"That does it. We'll stay here. Dumbledore will understand. I don't want to upset you." Her stomach growled loudly. "Oh! Sorry," she said, laughing loudly.

"Was that you or me?" he asked. She could see he was fighting a grin.

"Definitely me. Come on. Summon an elf. We'll eat here," she said, pulling his arm back.

"No, we'll go to the hall," he said firmly. After a moment of fidgeting with the cuticles of his nails on one hand, he met her gaze evenly. "I didn't mean that you humiliate me. I only meant that they may find a way to joke about our situation. I only meant to save you from the shame."

"I told you already. I am not ashamed of this. We...it feels right. To hell with them. And, anyone else for that matter. All right?" she asked softly, realizing she meant it. What did she care what her new colleagues thought? What did she care what her friends and family thought? Her future was standing before her.

Severus interlaced his fingers with hers and stared at them for a moment. Her lightly tanned, smooth hands seemed to fit perfectly in his large, pale pair. She contradicted him in everything, but it wasn't bad at all. What he lacked, she made up for. If he didn't have the words, she spoke them. If she didn't have the know how to act on her words, he led the way. He was venom laced with subtle kindnesses. She was complete gentleness laced with just enough sauce to never actually be considered rude. She was a compliment to him. How is it that he had never noticed this? All those times that he had wanted to throttle her in the past...was he just frustrated that she would never be his own?

"What are you thinking, Severus?" she asked softly.

"I...we seem to go well together," he said quickly, not meeting her eyes.

She brought the hands to her mouth for numerous, tender kisses. "I agree with that. I think we are the right mix, you and I. Isn't it just strange? I mean, that we never noticed before?"

"Indeed," he agreed. He pulled his hands from her. "Shall we?"

"Let's."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Together they walked to the Great Hall. Hermione felt as if butterflies were taking flight in her stomach. The entire staff was present this morning along with a couple of younger students who had not gone home for the holidays. She felt Severus stiffen momentarily before relaxing. She glanced up at him only to notice that he seemed...proud. He was proud to have her with him. This gave her the strength to face those present. Everyone seemed to be smiling at them knowingly. Had everyone known she was here the previous night?

"Ah," Dumbledore greeted. "Professor Snape. Instructor Granger. Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas," she said, feeling suddenly embarrassed all over again. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Severus pulled out a chair for her, and she sat quickly. He took the seat next to her before mumbling his greetings to all. Hermione noticed how the three students were ogling. They couldn't believe she had shown up with their evil Professor Snape.

Madame Hooch was sitting across from her grinning slyly. "So...slept well, did you?"

Hermione blinked. She didn't know what to say. "Er...yes." She hadn't held many conversations with this woman. In fact, she hadn't had a class with her since her first year's flying lessons. The woman was always roughly edged and never minced her words. She could only wonder what she would say next.

"Dungeons not too cold for you this time of year? You know, this Scottish air and all," she said in a conspiratorial voice.

"It was fine," Hermione said briskly, not wanting to meet the woman's yellow eyes. She knew. They all knew. Damn. How embarrassing. Not that she minded, but she didn't know how Severus was taking this. When he spoke, she was relieved.

"How she kept warm is none of your concern, Rolanda," he drawled. Hermione thought that he sounded a tad smug. Was he enjoying this bantering? Perhaps the sneaky Slytherin was glad that all eyes were now on her instead of him.

Professor Sprout began giggling, and Flitwick chuckled loudly. "How indeed," Hooch said. "Well, what are you waiting for? Spill it for us now." They were having a laugh at her expense, and she found that she didn't mind if Severus didn't. It seemed that they all accepted it. Minerva, who was sitting to her right, patted her hand.

"Don't worry about them, Hermione. They are just trying to get some good gossip," her former Head of House said softly. "You have to answer nothing. However, you can always visit me privately in my chambers to disclose any information." The smile she gave Hermione made her feel much more relaxed. Looking at Dumbledore, she saw that his eyes were twinkling. So, this was to be the way of her first meal with the staff. They seemed to be trying to make her feel welcome...even though she was the butt of their jokes.

"You're Harry Potter's best friend," a young Hufflepuff stated.

"That's right," she agreed proudly, and she was flashed a toothy smile in return. She heard Severus groan. He leaned over to whisper to her.

"Always known as one of the Golden Trio, aren't you? I shall guarantee that I will never see you that way again," he murmured, nicking her ear softly. She giggled and looked down. She knew she was blushing. "What are you all gawking at?" Severus bellowed after a few moments. She looked up and saw them all grinning. Severus seemed momentarily mortified that he'd shown her such affection in front of them, but he pushed the expression away.

"Why, Sev, we've just never seen you so positively beaming," Vector said deeply. "I'd say this is the first Christmas breakfast you've ever been to."

"And, what, pray tell, are you doing here? Don't you have a husband at home?" he asked with a sneer. "Or, is it, Professor, that you would rather sit about the castle to intrude on my private business like the rest of them?"

Vector looked away quickly without answering. Madame Pomfrey decided to speak. "So, er, Hermione, having a nice holiday, then?"

"Yes, it's very pleasant. I've had a stay at the Weasleys' so far. How is your holiday so far?" She'd always liked the mediwitch. Poppy was straightforward and efficient in her duties.

"It's quite nice. And, I might add that it's simply endearing to see Severus with a guest."

"Blimey!" Hagrid bellowed suddenly, sloshing his mug about. "Are ye here wit' Severus, 'Ermione?"

"Well, where the hell have you been for the past fifteen minutes, you oaf?" Hooch asked. "Haven't you been paying attention?"

"Tha's uncalled for, that is," he said indignantly. "Sibyll here was telling me..."

"I was telling him," Trelawney said in her airy voice, "that I foresee a new creature coming to him."

"Well, there is a surprise," McGonagall snorted. "Took a lot of insight to see that, did it?" The Scottish brogue seemed to take new life as she directed a scandalized glare at the Divinations teacher.

Flitwick squeaked with laughter. "Well, that's nice, Hagrid. Always nice to know things to come, isn't it?"

"Too righ' you are, Filius," Hagrid said happily, returning to his private chat with Trelawney.

There was a momentary lull in the conversation before Madame Sprout finally spoke to Severus. "You two going to be sharing a room then?"

"Oh, honestly!" Hermione began. She wanted to tell the herbologist to mind her own business, but she didn't want to alienate anyone. She smiled when her lover came to her rescue.

"Madame Sprout!" Severus roared suddenly, throwing his napkin in his plate. "This has gone on long enough." He sneered in distaste at everyone present. "I bit my tongue at first, but I have had it. We have younger students present. Would it bode well for us to have the rest of the school knowing how you biddies carry on? I think it would be prudent for you all to mind your own affairs."

"Here, here," said Hooch. "Jolly good. But, first, let me ask a question."

Dumbledore cut in when he noticed Severus' severe glare. "I told Molly that you were here, Hermione. I hope you don't mind. She was particularly worried when she found Harry in Ginny's room instead of you. After searching the house, she thought maybe you were out for a visit."

"Oh! I forgot to leave a note," Hermione said. Damn! Poor Molly! She'd probably been worried sick all night. Poor Harry and Ginny! Molly had strict rules about that. She grinned all the same though. Serve them right for forgetting about her.

"Oh, so...you left in a hurry, did you?" Hooch's eyes were glinting. "Old Sev here tell you to hurry on over?"

"That's none of your concern, Madame," Severus answered for her. "Though if we are asking personal questions, tell us, did you keep company with a witch or wizard last night?" Hermione held a gasp in check. Surely, Madame Hooch would not let such a comment pass.

"Ah, but wouldn't you like to know, Sev," she said with a wink. "I could always give your mate some pointers on the way of things. Why, to be quite honest, the best pa..."

"That will be all," Severus said curtly. "I'll not have her young mind tainted with your stories. Enough."

Hooch winked at Hermione anyway. "Come find me any day, Granger. He doesn't scare me, the bully."

Feeling bold, Hermione agreed. "I might do that."

Severus smiled uncertainly. He had hoped that they wouldn't be too rough on her, but she seemed to be taking things in stride. The staff was rowdy at times though some students never witnessed this side to them. Was she putting on a show? Did she feel comfortable? He'd not openly admit it, but having her on his arm as he entered the hall had made him feel particularly conceited. Here was a lovely, young witch that wanted to spend the day with him. One that had spent the night with him. She had come to him. She had given herself to him. No other. Did he say young? Yes, he didn't care much about the age difference, truth be known. That only added to his pride.

Breakfast went on pleasantly, and before long, they bid their farewell to the still smiling staff. She was back down in the dungeons with Severus. They sat near the fire in his office, simply holding each other and talking.

"Do you think my Incubus will be gone now?" she asked softly.

"I think it might try to come back, but it will see it has no chance. Just tell him to leave, and hopefully he will. I shall do the same with my Succubus." He pulled her close for a kiss. It was getting easier to touch her with each minute she spent with him. He found that he wanted to know everything about her. He felt the need to maintain a physical link with her so as not to lose her.

"Yes, there is no way that I'd not know the difference now. He never made me feel the way that you do. What of you? Am I...different?" she asked hoping he'd share her sentiments.

"I hated the feeling of being stalked by a temptress. It was a new experience, and new things take time." She wondered if he was trying to give her a hint about their newfound relationship. His voice seemed so cautious. Why did he feel the need to withhold things? "I wanted to have her. She seduced me fairly early on. I then found myself...thinking of you as well. At some point, the two of you became the same to me."

Was this good? She wondered. "I see."

"You don't see. Let me think for a moment of how I should like to explain this," he said in an irritated manner. Finally, he said, "I've realized lately that I know the difference. You are what I like. You don't need to be as you were the night of the party for me. You appeal to me in your natural state. There is no need for glammers or tamed hair."

Hermione was touched. So, he did want her. He had meant all of the things that he'd told her. She would never want for any other words again. Those were enough. He cared for her. He desired her as she was. She would never have to worry about putting on a show to impress him. She needed only to be herself when with him. What more could a woman ask for? "I...thank you. I think those are the kindest words I've ever heard. You, Severus, are amazing. Do you know that?" She snuggled closer, not wanting to let go.

He made a noncommittal noise. A long moment of silence passed before he spoke. "Are you ready to go back to the Weasley home?" She felt a bit hurt. She was being dismissed. He didn't really want her here after all. Well, he did, but maybe it was just too much at once. He had said that it took a while to get used to new things.

"I suppose so," she said frostily. She hadn't meant to allow her bitterness to seep through, but there it was. This didn't go unnoticed by him.

"Hermione, don't be that way. I just thought maybe you'd rather spend the day with your friends." His voice sounded apologetic, yet hopeful. He was hoping she'd want to stay.

"I want to be with you," she said, not looking at him. That brought him more joy than he wanted to admit.

"Do you want to stay for the remainder of the holidays?" he blurted suddenly. "We could get you settled into your new chambers if you'd like," he offered as an excuse for her to stay in case he had misread what she'd said.

"I think that I would like that, Severus. I wonder where my chambers are going to be? I suppose that I don't exactly have to stay in them just yet," she said, hoping he would offer for her to stay with him in his chambers.

"No, I don't suppose you would have to," he replied, raising an eyebrow. "Are you getting at something?"

"If you'll let me, I would like to stay in here. I promise that I will be quiet while you work. I have to study for my N.E.W.T.s anyway. Would you mind?" she asked hopefully. "Besides, if the Incubus comes back, I mean...it would be safer to have you near me, wouldn't it?"

He smiled. "I think I would like that. Good point, by the way. The Succubus will likely make another appearance as well. Shall we go get your things?" She jumped up, pulling him up with her.

"You, sir, have just made my day. I didn't want to face the wrath of Molly Weasley alone!" They laughed. He knew full well that Molly Weasley was prone to not stop once she got started.

"Do you think they will mind if I accompany you?" he questioned. Actually, he didn't care if they minded or not. No, he wanted to know if she would want to be seen with him by her friends so soon. She had faced the staff with him, but what of her mates?

"Not in the least," she said waving her hand. "They may be a little surprised, but I think it will be fine. If you'd rather stay behind, I would understand."

"Not at all," he murmured. He wondered briefly if Potter had given his atrocious gift to the Weasley girl yet. He thought back to that day in Diagon Alley. Before he had been able to Apparate to Hogwarts' gates, he had met up with Lucius. His old friend had asked if he was truly interested in Potter's young associate. Never lying to Lucius, save for his years as a spy, he told him the entire truth of the Succubus visits. Draco had apparently told him as much as he knew, which hadn't been detailed. He only thought they were just beginning to have an affair. Lucius merely nodded, saying that he hoped he had luck, and he had felt it was time for him to settle down. If Lucius could accept a possible relationship, then the Weasleys could as well. "Ladies first," he offered, handing her a jar of Floo powder.

Hermione Flooded in first. She tumbled out of the fireplace, but she steadied herself. No one was in the kitchen. Severus came out behind her. She made her way to the living area.

"Happy Christmas," she called. Molly, Arthur, Fred, George, Ginny, Ron, and Harry all looked up in surprise.

"Young lady!" Molly exclaimed. "We were very worried about you. Why, I was beside myself when I Flooded the headmaster. I must say that I wish you would have stayed here. These two," she growled, pointing fingers at Harry and Ginny, "seemed to have taken advantage of your absence. Why did you feel the need to go to Hogwarts?"

"I just needed to see someone," she said mysteriously.

"You went to visit the great bat, didn't you?" Ron asked incredulously.

Severus stepped into view, and everyone looked at him in shock. "She was cared for, Molly, and she regrets not leaving a note." Severus raised an eyebrow. "She will be coming back as well. We are going to...get her chambers and studies in order." He then smirked at Ron. "Great bat?"



Ron blanched, shrugging sheepishly. "Well, uh, you know. I thought maybe Hagrid had something new for class that Hermione went to check on. She's always worried about poor Hagrid, she is." It was a lame cover up. Everyone could see through it, and even Severus seemed to grin.

"Oh," Molly said, realizing that the two had most likely coupled. "Well, of course, you will be going back then. Please stay for Christmas lunch. We have more than enough." Severus met Hermione's eyes and knew she wanted to stay.

"I think that would be nice," he offered as acceptance. He hadn't planned on visiting for that long. He'd had ideas of grabbing her things, going back to his chambers, and talking her into something entertaining.

"Hermione," Ron said suddenly. "Did something bite you? What the bloody hell are those...Holy shite!"

"Ronald Weasley!" Molly exclaimed. Ron went pink and looked away. Damn! She'd forgotten about his love marks. No wonder everyone at breakfast kept looking at her with knowing smirks. Severus looked at her with a smug expression. She elbowed him, and he swatted at her hand. Everyone took in this playful exchange before laughing after another shocked silence.

"Never thought we'd see the day when old Snape here acted like a normal man," Fred piped up.

"I'd say they would much like to skip lunch and be off back to their rooms," George said.

"Enough," Arthur said, coming to shake Severus' hand. "Sorry 'bout those two. Jokers, they are."

"Indeed," he agreed. "I had them in my classes long enough to know them."

"So, Professor Snape," a twin said, taking his arm to lead him to the couch. "What would you think of an ingredient that we made that would change a potion to be the opposite of what it was supposed to be?"

"Yeah, a person may be brewing a sleeping draught, but we add in a little something. Instead of sleeping, they end up awake for a few days," the other twin finished with a grin.

"I'd say that would be absurd! Why would you want to do that?" Severus asked, clearly appalled.

"Because it would be funny of course. We've not yet been able to create it, but it's our newest idea. Right funny, that is."

"Well, I hope you shan't figure out how to create it. I believe it would cause more harm than good," he replied tersely, pushing up from the couch. He made his way back to Hermione. "Those two are not right in the head," he whispered.

"At times, I agree," she whispered back, squeezing his hand in hers. They were interrupted by Ginny.

"Mione! Look what Harry gave me!" she said excitedly, holding up her chain.

"Oh, that's adorable, Gin," Hermione said as if she'd not seen it before.

"Yes! He is the most brilliant Seeker we've had in ages, and the lightning bolt! Doesn't that just scream Harry?"

"Definitely," Hermione said with a smile. "I'm glad you two are getting on so well. I hope your mum wasn't too mad about me being gone."

"Oh, just worried. She doesn't bother me. I think Harry was a bit upset, but he'll live," she said with a shrug.

Severus watched the exchange uneasily. He'd never had friends like this. His friends had always been restrained. One never gave something without seeking something in return. Had any of them ever been true friends? No. Never. Not even Lucius. There was always a price or a favor required. His Hermione was teaching him something new each minute this day. He was learning to smile. Learning to touch. Daring to hope for a bright future.

The meal was a long affair. Each of them talking amicably about something or other. Even Ron had cozied up to Severus at one point. "Sir, is it true that you and Dumbledore have a chess game going on that you've been playing for nearly four months?"

"That's right," Severus said. "He's a quite worthy opponent."

"If it's all the same, I think I'd like to challenge you one day, sir. I'm not too bad myself," Ron said proudly. Dumbledore had once told him that he played the greatest game of chess that he'd seen in a while. Of course, he could have only meant the reality of humans playing with the chess pieces.

"That might not be out of the question," Severus said, choosing not to readily agree. It would be prudent to not allow his students to become too friendly with him. After all, he was still their professor even if he wasn't Hermione's. He looked to his Succubus. She appeared tired. He smirked. *Late night a bit much for you?* "Are you ready to get your things?" he asked quietly.

"I think so. I am feeling a bit sluggish. Would you mind terribly if I had a nap once back at the castle?" She stifled a yawn.

"Certainly not," he replied. A nap meant she would be in his bed, wrapped in his arms again. He spoke to Arthur and Molly while she went off with Ginny to get her belongings.

Severus was surprised when Potter approached him, holding out a hand. "Sir, Happy Christmas."

He took the hand uncertainly. "Same to you, Potter."

The younger wizard grinned. "She means a lot to me, you know. I wouldn't allow her to go with you if I didn't trust you. Take care of her."

Severus was taken aback by these words. First, he wanted to give a scathing remark. Who did he think he was anyway? Wouldn't allow her to go? Second, he was surprised. Potter trusted him with her. "Of course. It's not as if you'll not see her again, Potter. She's just coming to settle in."

"Right," Potter said with a smirk. "I think you fancy her more than you let on, sir. That's all right though because I know she fancies you as well." Before Severus could respond, Hermione walked up.

"I'm ready. My trunk is just there. Care to shrink it?" she asked, looking between Harry and Severus. Harry had a broad smile on his face while Severus had narrowed eyes. Perhaps it was good that she had come back when she did.

"Ready?" Severus asked after a moment.

"Yes," she said, turning to wave at everyone. "Thanks for letting me stay over. I'll see you all soon."

"All right, dear," Molly said kindly. "Have you any thoughts on visiting your parents?"

Hermione paled for a moment. "Not just yet, no."

Molly nodded in understanding. "Go when you are ready. Hope the rest of your holidays are pleasant. Thanks for coming over, Severus. It was nice to see you again."

"It was pleasing," he agreed, nodding farewell. He stepped into the fire to Floo away. Hermione followed immediately.

"Well? How'd you fare?" she asked timidly.

"I daresay, I fared a sight better than you did for breakfast. At least there, no one dared question me or make light of our situation."

"Right. Can we have that nap now? I feel lightheaded," she said apologetically.

"Not at all. Come along, love," he said, guiding her to the room. She smiled to herself. He had called her love. She doubted that he even noticed the endearment that he'd used. It seemed to have slipped out. She vowed to not mention it. Severus would come around in his own time. There would be no pressure from her. It was enough that she was allowed to stay in his chambers. It was definitely the start of something great.

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**Southern's Notes:** Everyone seems to be accepting them so far. I guess now we need to see what their nightly visitors have to say about the new union.

## Chapter Five

*Chapter 6 of 32*

Hermione's Incubus learns that she knows the difference. Our couple begin their relationship. Severus brings her to his home.

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay. Also, thanks to GinnyW. She is doing the beta work for me this time round.**

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"Do you mind if I keep my trunk just there near the bookshelf?" Hermione asked, not wanting to clutter his personal space. It wouldn't do to annoy him after only just returning.

"I don't see that to be a problem. In fact, I can summon an elf to bring a wardrobe for you. It would be easier for you to manage your things," he offered.

"Oh, I've just thought on something. I have my things in my room still. Perhaps, they could just bring that wardrobe here. For now," she added when he looked surprised. She stretched tiredly.

"All right. I will take care of it. Go have a rest," he said, taking in her appearance.

"Will you come have a lie with me?" she asked hopefully.

"I could use a rest," he agreed with a smirk. "After our...late night." There. He'd broached the subject. Severus decided to let her make of it what she would. If she chose to talk about it, then he wouldn't mind.

"About last night...", she began as she slipped off her shoes. "...does that happen often? Between lovers, I mean." She bit her lip nervously as she slid beneath his warm duvet. He seemed to look amused with her question. Was her inexperience something he found distasteful? "I'm sorry."

"No, no. Don't be." He slid in next to her, only hesitating briefly before pulling her to him. "I suppose it happens as often as desired by both parties."

"But how does one know if the other desires it to be?" She felt thick for asking the questions, but these were things that she needed to know. She'd not want to place unwanted attentions on Severus.

"Perhaps they grow to learn each other's habits enough to know if the need is mutual." He closed his eyes at the feel of her back pressed tightly against his chest. Emotion began stirring again. There were so many things that he wanted to say, but he could not. It was still too early in their *relationship* for that. "Do you feel that?" he asked silkily, pressing his groin into her backside. He heard her gasp. Chuckling softly, he said, "I think that I would always crave an interlude with you."

"Even during the day?" she asked, astonished by this bit of information. Her parents never went off to their room during the day. Nor did any of her friends sneak off to their rooms or corners of the castle for love sessions.

"Any time. I am not an Incubus, Hermione. I won't only come at night," he said slyly. She didn't comment for a long while. Instead, she ran her fingers along his arms, sighed contentedly, and snaked her legs more snugly with his.

"Severus?"

"Mmmm?"

"I would always welcome your attentions," she said, sounding much like an innocent maiden. "All you would have to do is ask."

Such an offer. Dare he play on this? *Indeed.* "Even now," he asked, bringing his lips to her ear. "During the day?" he mocked.

"Yes," she breathed, pressing back against him, digging her nails into his hands. "Even now." She didn't realize that her body had responded to his words until she felt herself moving against him again. She could feel his desire for her. It was pressed firmly to her bum.

Allowing him to turn her over, she looked into his eyes expectantly. He saw the light lust and curiosity that her eyes held, but he noted the dark shadows under her eyes. "Are you not too tired?" he asked before thinking. He hadn't meant to give her an easy way out. He wanted her, but the words were said.

"There would be time enough to sleep after," she said, biting her lip again.

He brought his lips down to hers. She was likely to be tender still, so he would still not do everything that he'd like to do to her. He'd take his time with her, allowing her to

get comfortable with his body and the idea of lovemaking. The kiss was lazy at best. Each taking their time to taste the other. A woman in his bed had never had an appeal to him before. Not in this way. Hermione wasn't an intrusion. She was a companion. "Your suggestion is acceptable, Little One."

"Sev...Severus, can I undress you?" she asked, feeling a flare of courage. He nodded once, sitting up to allow her access. Shaky hands reached for the buttons on his finely woven white shirt. He resisted the urge to help her with the buttons. She needed to do this if she was to learn. Once the shirt was completely unbuttoned, she pressed both palms to his chest and slowly worked her way down to his stomach. Hermione ran her nails in the thickening thatch of hair near his trousers' waistband before following the trail back up to his chest. She leaned in to place a soft kiss on his chest.

His eyes closed tightly. Such a tentative gesture had him hardening. She was doing this of her own volition. She wanted to taste him. She wanted to touch him. He sucked in a deep breath as her tongue traced one of his flat nipples. "Is...is this all right?" she asked. He didn't open his eyes, only grunted his approval. Hermione had the lightest touch he'd ever felt. Only a small amount of pressure was put into the contact, yet he could feel it through to his bones. Her mouth found his other nipple. It was an odd but not unwelcome sensation. Biting back the urge to pull her mouth to his, he tipped his head back slightly.

She took this as an invitation to explore his neck. Without realizing it, he unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt and shrugged out of it. Her mouth continued to burn into his flesh until he could take no more. He brought her mouth to his for a demanding kiss. Mindlessly her fingers worked on his belt, finally opening the buttons on his fly. He stopped the kiss abruptly to look into her eyes. She seemed only slightly afraid. Something else was driving her. He would allow her this exploration. Laying back, he placed her fingers in the waistband of his trousers, lifting his pelvis slightly as he guided her hands down. He released her fingers as instinct took over. In a timely fashion, she pulled his pants away, throwing them to the floor.

Taking a page from his book, she glided her hands along his skin from his ankles until she reached the top of his boxers. His eyes never left her face as she began pulling them down as well. He contained a chuckle as her eyes widened slightly once his hard form was completely revealed to her. Ridding him of the underpants, she began softly kissing her way back up. Once she reached his groin again, she looked into his eyes. He nodded encouragingly, and her tongue reached out to taste the tip of his member. She smiled faintly as one finger traced his length before bringing the entire head into her mouth. He groaned in an instant as she gently pulled him further into her warm, wet mouth. One hand reached down to grasp her hair. He'd not push himself further into her mouth, nor would he push her head down. Severus only wanted to feel for himself, the slight bobbing of her head. Untrained as she was, she had his blood boiling. If she kept this up, it would not take long. He wanted this to last.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered hoarsely, hoping she'd not think he was disappointed in her attentions. He saw no trace of it in her eyes as she slithered up his body. Their lips met and locked fiercely. Both began removing her transfigured dress at the same time, nearly tearing it in their haste. Without pretense, his hand found her core and delved into the liquid heat. She was nearly ready for him already.

She moaned and pressed into his hand provocatively. "Don't stop," she murmured against his lips. Happy to oblige, he slipped a second finger into her, pumping firmly in time to their kiss. Sliding the fingers out, he circled her nub a couple of times. "Oh my," she shrieked. He growled his approval, flipping her onto her back. He wanted to taste her again. He wanted her to reach her peak by his oral stimulation. This time when his tongue imposed on her folds, she made no protests. Instead she arched into his mouth and wove her fingers into his hair. "Don't stop, Severussss," she hissed as he began lapping frantically. Before long, she cried out in bliss and convulsed in orgasmic delight. He rested his face against her as her breathing slowed again.

Severus had nearly followed her to bliss without even being in her. He took these moments to fight for control. No woman had ever sounded so good in ecstasy. Lifting his head, he looked at her gleeful expression. Her eyes were closed, but she had a contented smile on her face. The fingers in his hair had gone lax. Was she asleep? He lightly brushed one of her erect nipples. No change. *This will not do, Hermione. You'll not be falling asleep until I have been fulfilled.* He kneed her legs further apart, placing himself at her entrance. Careful to keep his eyes trained on her face, he plunged in deeply. "Oh!" she gasped, eyes opening wide.

He smirked as she realized her blunder. Nonetheless, her legs snaked around his waist, pulling him closer. She tried to move with him at first, but she couldn't keep his pace. He drove in with rapid, deep upward thrusts trying to bring her back with him. "You...feel...so...good...to...me," he hissed with each thrust.

"I'm...it's not long," she said, raking her nails into his shoulders. "God...Severus!" Her walls clamped down onto him, pulling his seed out. He could feel the waves of heated fluid enveloping him. His seed eagerly mingled with her juices as he finally collapsed on top of her. The strange sentiment was back again. There were things that he wanted to say, mostly unvoiced even in his own mind. He kissed everything within reach to show her how he felt. She had pleased him again. She'd made him...feel.

"I love you," she whispered. He stilled. Not knowing how to reply, he kissed her lips softly, moving to lie beside her. How could she love him already? Was this the emotion he felt? No. It was too soon. Severus prayed he'd not offended her by not repeating her words, but he couldn't say that. He'd never say it. Not unless he meant it. Surely she would understand.

As these thoughts flew through his mind, Hermione was smiling softly. She hadn't meant to tell him that she loved him. The words had slipped out. She saw the surprise in his expression, but she didn't care. He might as well know the complete truth. The tender kiss he'd given her after her proclamation had spoken volumes to her. He felt it too. The connection. The deep feeling of something finally being right. She rested her head on his chest as his chin rested on top of her head. Sliding one knee between his legs to rest at the juncture of his thighs, she drifted off to sleep.

It seemed like only moments later that he woke her again. "Hermione, you are mine. Do you realize that?" his voice asked. It was suddenly dark in the chamber. She could barely make out his form standing near the side of the bed.

"Of course, Severus," she said sleepily, wanting to doze back off.

"I demand you make love with me now," he said sharply.

"Again?" she asked, turning more to his voice. "Why are you dressed?" How much time had passed?

"Come here, you stupid girl," he barked, pulling her by the wrists out of the bed.

She smirked realizing this was the Incubus. She could finally tell him exactly what she thought of him. "Oh, please, you don't think that you can tempt me any longer, do you?" she asked wryly. "I've made love to the real Severus Snape. He'd not be so rough with me."

His lips found her throat. "You like this. You want this. You want me. I love you," he said, trying to find the right words to convince her. She felt no pangs of desire flow through her veins at his touch.

"I do not. Be gone. I only want the man of flesh. The man whom I know to be sleeping beside me at this moment. You will never arouse me. I do not desire you," she said boldly, folding her arms over her chest.

Suddenly every lamp in the room lit in his fury. She could feel the anger flowing from his body. He was still in Severus' form, but his face was twisted in rage. "I will have you, girl," he said in a menacing voice.

"You cannot force me, Incubus! I will not give in. To force me would not bring about arousal or desire. I'll never be with you. Ever. Think you I'd not recognize my lover's touch? Off with you, spirit," she said, facing him squarely.

His black eyes molted into a shimmering green. His body reduced in height as the dark, straight hair shortened into messy hair that looked suspiciously like Harry's. Before her eyes, a lightning bolt scar appeared on the forehead. "How about now? Deny you, your best friend? Come on, Mione. Just this once. No one need know." It was Harry's voice she heard as clearly as she could see him standing before her. Had the shock not been so quick to fuddle her mind, she would have laughed before he attempted to kiss her.

"Fool," she said, removing herself from his hands. "I would never be with Harry."

The face contorted with Harry-like anger. She'd seen this expression as he faced down Voldemort. The scar began disappearing, the hair grew out into red locks, and the green faded from his eyes. "I'll always love you, Mione. Snape'll never know. How bout a quick tumble with me for old times sake?" It was Ron's pleading voice this time.

This time laughter shook her body. "Had I wanted to be with Ron, I would have. You've tried your last, haven't you?" she asked saucily. "You may as well be off, tosser!" When the Incubus lunged forward, still in Ron's form, she pulled her wand from the nightstand. "I dare you."

Shying away from her wand, with one last howl, the entity popped away. Hermione Granger bolted straight up in bed. She'd done it! She'd refused him! He'd not come back for her ever again, and if he did, she knew she could be rid of him. Severus was breathing deeply, lightly snoring actually. She smiled as she brushed a strand of his dark hair from his face. He would have a visit as well. They had been sleeping for a good while. The illusion window showed that night had indeed fallen upon them. The fire was nearly burned out. She sat patiently to watch Severus for signs of distress.

Severus was oblivious to his lover's watchful gaze. He was entranced by another vision of her dancing seductively. "I've always wanted to do this, you know," she breathed excitedly. "After I am completely undressed, I want you to take me. Take me hard."

Hang on! Hermione didn't talk that way, and she certainly wouldn't be dancing like this. He sneered at the entity before him. *Succubus!* Though her words and actions were most appealing, his lover hadn't gotten comfortable enough to attempt things such as these. "Is that so?" he drawled lazily. "Allow me to help you." He slid from the duvet and glided over to her.

"Yes, Severus. Yes, help me out of this dress," she purred, licking her lips.

He lowered his mouth to her ear. "Tell me, temptress, do you think that I would fall for such a seduction? You are quite amusing at best, but you've seemed to have lost the touch to make my blood boil. What could be different, I wonder?" he asked, voice full of contempt.

"I know not what you mean, Severus. I've come to pleasure you. Surely you won't turn me down. I can smell your need for me," she said with a slight snicker.

"Tell me," he hissed, "why would I want a harlot in my bed when a perfectly good maiden lay sleeping there already?" He cocked his head to the side while waiting for her reply. She appeared nervous.

"What would a man such as you find appealing about a maiden. I can do things to you that she would never dream of doing. Let me show you, Severus," she begged.

"I think not. I know the difference, and I fear that you are seriously lacking. Just the stitch of a dress that you wear, the falsely made up face, and the perfectly groomed hair is a bit of a turn off." He scoffed. "I like my Hermione as she is. You'll never be her." He flicked his hand dismissively. "Be gone before I hex you into oblivion."

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, hoping she'd be gone when he reopened them. *What the...?* Bellatrix Lestrange stood before him, clad in leather, her wild, glassy eyes boring into him. She was twirling a small paddle in her hand. "Come now, Sev," she said wickedly. "Did wittle Sevvie Wevvie think that lovely Bella had forgotten him? Awww...You've been a bad boy to bring that girl to your bed. I think you need to be punished."

"What game is this?" he asked disbelievingly. "This tactic never worked in all the years we served the Dark Lord. What, pray tell, makes you think this would work now. Bellatrix has never appealed to me. I like to remain in control during my coupling. Try again, if you will, Succubus. Surely, you can do better?" he asked.

A frustrated growl left her lips. He watched in fascination as her eyes began molting from black to piercing yellow. Severus began barking with laughter. "You don't think Rolanda does a thing for me?" The face before him, half Bellatrix and half Rolanda, contorted evilly.

Suddenly, the room grew very cold and breezy. The fire turned an eerie blue color. He took one step back as a piercing howl vibrated his chambers. The entity before him began molting into a new form. It was one he'd never seen. Her eyes became completely white, a shock of thick white hair grew out nearly reaching her thighs. What appeared to be wings began protruding from her back. Blood red lips smacked maliciously as if she was eyeing her next meal. Her body changed into that of a perfectly sized woman though her fingers were more like claws. Clad only in the sparsest of lingerie, she stalked forward threateningly. "I will not be denied. If there is no form you will willingly allow me to take, I shall take you in my own form."

"Good lord," he breathed. He knew a moment of fear as she pounced on him, sprawling him back to his bed. "You will never have my arousal. It's what you need, is it not?" He managed to say.

"I can easily arouse you, Severusss," she hissed, reminding him of the Dark Lord. "You are but a man, after all." A long snake-like tongue slithered from her mouth, licking the side of his face. "I taste not only your fear, but also your curiosity. You are wondering how it would feel if I impaled myself upon your thick shaft."

He shook his head vehemently. "Never, spirit. I do not desire vile, loathsome, ugly creatures," he spat. "Get off of me now, or I shall be forced to..."

"To what, Severus? You've never met a woman like me. I can overpower you easily. Just say the word, and you will know the feeling of being sheathed inside something not of this world. It's a pleasure all too sinful to not crave." He moved his head to the side as her long tongue lapped at his face.

With his lips curled in character sneer, he said distastefully, "I want no part of you. You disgust me. Leave off!" He was itching to strangle her, but he was unable to move.

"Fight her, my love," he heard Hermione saying. He could feel her light touch on his brow. "I'm here for you. I am all you need." He closed his eyes at the sound of her voice and the faint feel of her touch. His Hermione. She loved him. He knew that. She'd told him so.

"Do not listen to the child," his Succubus growled. "Resistance is futile. I will have you, willing or no."

He still could not move, save the ability to press his face closer to the invisible hand stroking his brow. "Severus, I love you. Don't let her have you. She has to have permission. You have to want her and accept her for it to work to her advantage. I love you. Come back to me."

Those words strengthened his resolve. He opened his eyes and pierced the phantom sprawled lazily above him. "Get off. I do not want you. I shall never want you. Nothing you can become would arouse me. I will not desire you in any form." The entity's teeth gnashed violently as she heard his words.

"I can force your arousal," she said confidently.

"None save for the woman I love can tempt me now. Off you go," he said, feeling the pressure of the horrid creature loosening. She was moving off of him. White, lifeless eyes met furious black ones. "You are repulsive." The last thing he saw before she spun away was a skinny, spiked tail. It lashed at his leg, cutting into his flesh painfully. With a loud pop, he was awake once again with Hermione cradling him to her.

"Severus, please wake up," she was saying softly.

"I am awake," he managed, cringing in pain. "My leg..." Hermione moved the duvet away to examine his leg.

"There is nothing," she said. "What happened?"

"She lashed out at me...with her tail before she fled. It left a large gash. I still feel the pain," he said, touching his smooth flesh. "It's...gone."

"Perhaps, since it seemed so real in the dream, your mind thinks you should still feel it," she guessed. "I have been worried. The Incubus came to me. I was able to send him away. I knew you would be visited next. For so long, you've been moving and thrashing. I was afraid that you were giving in."

"No, but I never hope to see anything so hideous again in this life," he admitted, relieved to be done with the Succubus.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Hermione asked. "I'd like to know."

He nodded, pulling her down to lay with him again. Severus began his tale from start to finish. He left out no part except for when he told the Succubus that no woman except for the one he loved would spark his desire. He was not ready to say this yet. He needed time to think over it first. Why had he said that? Was it a reflexive reaction to the words he had been hearing? Did he truly love her? So soon?

Hermione listened attentively to his entire dream before beginning her own story. He was shocked that the creature hadn't changed into its true form with Hermione, but it did make sense. The entity fully believed that he, Severus Snape, would be the weaker party. It thought he would give in. *You are but a man.* He smiled wryly. A man with a wonderful woman at his side. She had given him hope where he almost had none. For that he would be eternally grateful.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus eased out of bed to go to the loo. He'd not dare admit it, but his leg was still sore from the Succubus' lashing the night before. Feeling the need to keep the weight off of his *injured* leg, he limped to the bathroom. Once there, he ran his hands along his leg. Nothing appeared on the surface, but he could feel a tinge of pain from the kneading of his hands. What had the creature done to him? Was it in his mind as Hermione suggested? He would have to talk to Albus about this. Though this was from a rare creature, there were sure to be other reported wounds that occurred from dreams. Yes, there would be a little research needed, but he'd be back to form in no time.

Meanwhile his thoughts drifted to Hermione. This was the second night that he'd spent with her, and he could only look forward to many more. How had he slept alone for so many years? It seemed comforting to have a soft body pressed tightly to his own. He smiled suddenly. She loved him. How did he feel about her? He cared. Startled by this honest thought, he sat down to think further. He'd never allow anything to harm her, nor would he be willing to allow her to leave him now that he knew what it was like to be loved by her. He did like her. She was infuriatingly compatible to him. All it would take would be a little more time, and he'd likely love her.

Unexpectedly, he frowned. He was a hard man to live with, not that he had experience cohabiting with anyone. Things needed to be a certain way-his way. Could she handle that? Would she soon be scurrying back to Potter and Weasley? No, she was strong. She had faced an incubus and won. She had seeped in through the cracks in his defenses. Hermione made him feel again. They would have to make the most of the time they had left until the students came back to get to know each other. He vowed to try his best to be more of a pleasant man in her company. His Slytherin nature took over as a smirk slid to replace his smile. Should she not find his lifestyle adequate, he knew exactly how to keep her with him. She could deny an Incubus her body, but she would never be able to deny him. *All I need to do is ask.* He went off to drink a mild, pain relieving potion for the ache in his leg before ordering breakfast for two.

Hermione woke to the smell of bangers and toast. "Mmmm. I am famished!"

"I thought you might be, as we seemed to have missed dinner last evening," Severus said softly. "Here you are," he said, handing her a robe that he'd found amongst her things in the wardrobe that had been delivered. He hadn't been sifting through her clothing. No, he'd only been searching for something to set out for her. Never mind the interesting little nightie that he'd seen. Who had she bought that for? Had anyone seen her in it save her dorm mates? It was highly unlikely, but he wondered all the same. Had she ever wanted to sleep with someone? Had she intended to be with Weasley at some point? What were her dreams for the future before she found out that he was her future? These were all things that he longed to know.

"Thanks," she said, accepting the robe. "Oh, I see my things are here. I'll go through and organize them later."

"There is no rush, Hermione. Come," he said smoothly, holding out a hand to her after she bashfully donned her clothing. They ate with gusto in companionable silence. Each had thoughts invading their minds.

Hermione noted that he seemed troubled by something. She hoped it wasn't her presence. Certainly now that they were rid of their nightly stalkers he would not begin to wish her gone, would he? "Is something amiss?" she asked after drinking her juice.

"And, why, may I ask, would you think that?" he countered, sipping coffee.

"You seem...distant."

"I do not wish to be distant. I am only taking time to savor my morning silence. I-"

She interrupted. "Point taken, Severus. I'll shush until you want to talk."

He raised an eyebrow. "If I may finish?" he asked acridly. She nodded. "As I was trying to say, I shall need to get used to having another person here for the time being though it's not quite displeasing."

"Oh," she said blushing prettily. "Sorry. I just assumed that you meant for me to keep quiet. How do you feel this morning?"

Feel. *I feel many things.* "Rested to be honest. Sated as well. I am glad that we are rid of our foes. You?"

"Sated would be an understatement. I feel triumphant as well. It's as if I could take on the world at this moment." She smiled beatifically. "I feel so free."

He gave her a small smile in return. "I feel lighter as well." After a pause, "Hermione, about this," he waggled a finger between the two, "are you prepared to deal with the repercussions? The students will be returning soon. Due to my actions prior to the holiday break, I fear there may be distasteful rumors about us."

She thought for a moment. "Severus, I don't care. The lot can think what they'd like. The only ones who truly matter to me know the truth. Can...can you handle any accusations?"

"Indeed," he said smugly. "I've never worried on what the students think of me. In fact, the more immoral they believe me to be, the better. Fear brings with it obedience. A lesson you will do well to remember once you've begun instructing."

"I think you get more flies with honey if you know what I mean."

"No. Explain."

"It's a Muggle expression. The nicer you are, the more they'll respond to you," she explained.

"You think so?" he questioned, not waiting for an answer. "Hermione, you aren't experienced enough to see it yet, but you shall once you've gained years. These students, not much unlike your own friends, try what they can to skive off of their studies. Any excuse is acceptable if it entails getting out of work. If you demand their attention and completed assignments ruthlessly, they have no choice. If you coddle them, you will not be helping them. In the end, you will be trampled on, and no one will appreciate your hard work."

"I'd not thought of that before," she admitted.

"Minerva teaches by this method as well. Have you not noticed that she commands her class much in the fashion that I do?" he prodded.

"Well, she's not as...rude about it, and she doesn't exactly show favoritism to only Gryffindor as I've seen you do with Slytherin. I think you are unfair in some things," she said softly, hoping she hadn't angered him too greatly.

He simply smirked. "Since the defeat of the Dark Lord have I been as unfair to other Houses?"

"Not exactly, now that I think of it."

"My methods in the classroom shall not change, but I will now take points where I see fit from any House, including my own. There is no need for favoring my House." He put down his cup, reached over to take her hand. "It's only advice. You do not have to follow it."

"I've always respected you, even though you've been unfair. Perhaps I should rethink my planned instructing methods now that I've seen your point," she said thoughtfully.

They began a long talk about her plans. He questioned her on things, and she answered honestly. He gave her honest opinions, never sugarcoating anything, and she, in turn, bluntly told him what she thought. Before they were through, he had a new respect for her ideas. He could understand now where he may have intimidated Longbottom too much in class. Perhaps in the future, he may try not to be so harsh, but when a student was as inept as that one, it was hard to have patience. Extra detention should suffice as a means for those types to practice their less than desirable potions making skills. As he stood to seek his shower, Hermione called to him.

"Yes?"

"Severus, I...I am not on The Potion, you know," she admitted, lowering her lashes. "I've only just thought about it. Shouldn't we be careful?"

Bloody hell! He'd thought of nothing along the lines of precaution either. His mind had been firmly set on getting into her knickers. He'd only just gotten used to the idea of possibly sharing his life with someone, he didn't need the added worry of having another little someone intruding on his life. "I think it would be wise for us to take the necessary precautions. I apologize, Hermione. As the experienced party, I should have thought of this matter before."

"No, it's happened so fast for us. I don't blame you. Perhaps I should be off to see Madame Pomfrey all the same," she said, relieved that he'd not accused her of purposely forgetting to take a potion.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" he asked, hoping she'd decline.

"No, it's not necessary. I'll stop in on Madame Pince as well. I'd like to check out a few books," she said with a smile. She could access all books in the library now. There was no Restricted Section to be had for her!

"I would like to speak with Albus about our encounters last night. I can do that whilst you are out," he said, brushing a finger along her cheek.

"How is your leg? All thoughts of it gone?" she asked, feeling guilty about not remembering sooner. She'd been privately pleased in her ability to dispel her stalker, and in the role she had played with Severus' encounter. He'd admitted that her voice and touches had soothed him, enabling him to thwart the advances.

"It's..." He didn't want to lie to her. "Well, I would like to speak with Albus about it. I did still feel something this morning. Don't worry on it," he said softly.

She watched him go and noted that he had a slight hobble to his gait. He was trying to cover up his pain! The Restricted Section took on an entirely different meaning for her. Muttering cleaning charms on her body, she dressed quickly. She hadn't time to waste on a real bath. She had some reading to do.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Ah, Severus," Albus greeted. "I wondered when you would turn up. How are you and our young Hermione faring? Neither of you have been to see Poppy yet for battle wounds. I take that as a good sign."

The jovial voice had Severus smirking. The man could find entertainment in anything, couldn't he? "We are as fine as can be, Albus. I came to talk to you about our visitors. Mostly, it is the Succubus form that I think may interest you."

Albus' eyes lost their twinkle, noting the younger wizard's grave expression. "Leave nothing out then, my boy. What's happened?"

Severus relayed what Hermione had told him first. Albus nodded, figuring that the entity would try to take on other forms to coerce her if Severus' form ultimately provoked no response from her. He was inwardly proud of the young witch's ability to stand on her own in the face of such dreadfulness. Unease settled over him as he began listening to Severus' tale. The Succubus had showed her true form! She sounded much like men had described in the past. He blinked rapidly at what he'd just heard. "Her tail sliced into your leg, you say?"

"Yes," Severus said, pulling up his robes. "Just there," he said, pointing to the shin of his left leg. "Upon checking this morning, I've noticed no irritation. No abrasion of any kind. But, what does plague me is that it still pains me. I have taken a pain relieving potion, of course, but I still tend to favor the leg."

"Curious," Albus commented. This did not bode well for his young friend. He'd heard of injuries caused in dreams, but most of those had been visible even after the person woke. There was nothing on Severus' leg to show that anything had happened. Normal healing salves, counter hexes, and other methods had been used to repair the wounds. How does one heal what one cannot see? "I shall have to consult with someone on this, Severus. I am afraid that I do not have an answer for you. Is it unbearable?"

"No, it feels like a normal cut to me though nothing is visible. In my dream, the pain was much worse, but it's not so bad now," he stated dryly. "I will do some reading on this as well. I had only hoped you may have had an idea about it."

"A few thoughts are coming to mind, but I'd like not to disclose them until I can speak with an old friend," Albus said mysteriously, giving Severus a small smile.

"Very well, Headmaster, I shall leave you to your own devices." Severus strode towards the door before stopping. "Hermione and I may not be at lunch or dinner this evening. I'd like to show her something, so we may be out of the castle."

"Not a problem, Severus. Enjoy the holiday. We'll handle what's here, my boy," Albus said heartily. Once the door was closed, he called for Fawkes. After scribbling a short note, he told his faithful phoenix, "Bring this to our old friend, Paracelsus. He'll have an idea of what we are dealing with. I'm sure of it." Fawkes nodded in understanding before disappearing in a burst of flames.

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"Where can she be?" Severus asked aloud for the tenth time. She had been gone since that morning. He'd been back in his chambers for nearly two hours. He checked his bedroom again to be sure that none of her personal effects were missing and began pacing anew. Did Poppy have unwelcome news for her? There was no way to be sure that she was with child so soon, so that couldn't be it. Ah! Of course! The ruddy library. Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? She was likely to be lost in some tome or another. Should he approach her? No. He didn't want to appear too clingy. He would wait her out. There were things he could be doing in his laboratory after all.

A breathless Hermione met him at the door. "Severus," she panted. "I have something to show you." She was clutching an old book to her chest while trying to steady her breathing. "Your leg..." She pointed to the book.

"You've been using your free time to find information about the injury I sustained?" he asked in disbelief. The thoughtfulness of it was disconcerting. He should have been doing the same, yet he'd taken to worrying on her whereabouts. It was amazing, however, that she cared so much for him.

"Of course. I haven't found out much except for a few things. There is much here about magical injuries from dreams, but most have visible lacerations, burn marks, welts, and the like. There is a small section just here," she said opening the book to the back section, "which shows documentation of those occurring with no visible proof of it having transpired."

Severus took the book from her to read the meager information. "Ludicrous," he bellowed suddenly. "This entry says that the wounded witch had previous mental anxiety."

They dared to believe it was all in her mind?"

"Well, that's only one entry. Read on," Hermione said, slightly stung that he'd not read into it as she had.

Reading over the remaining entries, he closed the book. "They suggest I treat it as a normal wound until it disappears. Either that or seek council about my misfortunate nightmares." He scoffed. "These were not normal dreams. Why, it sounds here as if they believe some of these to have been only hallucinations!"

"I only thought these would be some things to think on. Some are not so far fetched, you know!" Hermione said heatedly.

"Well, I, for one, have never been an Oneirophobic person. Dreams do not scare me, my dear. The only fear I have, should you decide to call it that, is of the unknown. These suggestions are not mental, nor are they hallucinations," he reiterated hotly.

"Good grief, Severus. I am not accusing you of anything here. I was only trying to help. This is the only book that had such entries that I could find. If you'd like I could go back, to check more stacks," she said quickly, hoping to calm his temper. Quite touchy about his situation, he was!

He stilled momentarily. "I am not angry with you, Hermione. It's the bloody situation that I do not like. It's quite possible that I am making something out of nothing."

That was all the apology and thanks that she would receive. She dared not ask for anything further. "Coming from Muggle parents, I have read about these things before. Sometimes a mind can be a nasty, little bugger. Hopefully, that's not the case here." She smiled warmly. "I didn't mean to imply that you were mentally weak. I only meant to show you what others did to help. Does your leg still hurt?"

"It's fine for the moment."

"How so? Did the ache just vanish then?"

"Well, no. I've taken two doses of a pain relieving potion." He paused mid stride as a smug smile tugged at her lips. "What is it?"

"Severus, you are treating it even though it's not there. That is not far off from some of what we've read here. Perhaps we should go as far as to apply some healing salve," she said, backing away as his eyes narrowed.

"We shall see. For now, I have something to attend to in my laboratory," he said curtly, not glancing back. If he had, he would have seen the broad grin on his young lover's face. He knew she was right! He just wouldn't admit it. She went off to take a hot bath.

A knock on the door woke her from a light doze. She had more than enough bubbles still to cover her body, so she felt no qualms about having him enter. "Come in," she called.

"Are you all right? You've been in here for a long time," he said with mild concern.

"I had a bit of a nap I'm afraid. What've you got there?" she asked, nodding to the tumbler in his hand.

He looked down to the glass. "I thought that perhaps you would like some pumpkin juice. I've taken the liberty to order a late lunch. After we've eaten, I'd like to show you something."

"That's very thoughtful of you. I'll have it then," she said, reaching for the tumbler. Before she clasped it firmly in her hand, he kissed her lips quickly.

"I'll be in the study," he said, making a hasty retreat.

She sipped on her juice while sweet thoughts passed through her mind. This was his idea of making up with her. He'd likely wanted to yell at her earlier, but he had restrained from doing so. Now that time had passed, he was hoping that this small gesture would make amends for their little misunderstanding. She'd have to explain to him that she was not put out by his temper, and though she appreciated the gesture, he need not feel as though he can't be himself with her. She had walked into this with her eyes wide open. She loved his snarky attitude as much as she loved his softer side. She'd not like to see either overpower the other. Both mingled made for a most impressive man. A man she loved more than she'd ever thought possible.

As quickly as possible, she made her way to the study. Walking up behind him, she put her arms around his neck and placed a kiss on his head. "Thanks for the juice, but you didn't have to do that," she murmured.

"It was nothing," he said quietly.

"Thanks all the same. Please don't feel the need to coddle me, Severus. I love you as you are. Temper included." Not giving him a chance to speak, she deftly changed the subject. "I felt like having fruits. Wise choice!"

"At this hour, I didn't think we should have our appetites for dinner spoilt," he said. "You should dress warmly. We'll be leaving the castle for what I'd like to show you."

"Where are we going?" she asked eagerly.

"You will see, Little One," he said mysteriously.

After eating and dressing as instructed, they walked, holding hands to her delight, to the front gates. "I'll Apparate us," he said, pulling her close. She snuggled to him as they cracked away. Feeling slightly disoriented, she held onto him for an extra moment when they appeared at their destination. "All right?" he asked. She nodded.

"We're in Britain?" she questioned.

"Yes," he said with a reticent smile.

She looked around. They were in the front yard of a modest home. The grounds were well kempt. Large trees loomed about at strategic points. "It's beautiful. Whom are we visiting?"

"It's my home," he said softly. "This is what I have left from my family after my father drank away most of my inheritance. He lost the title to the manor house I grew up in, but he couldn't lose this one. This was willed to me by my mother's family."

She could see that it had cost him a great deal to admit this to her. "Well, I'm glad that he couldn't touch what was rightfully yours. It's lovely."

He nodded. "Yes, it's fine when I feel the need to leave the castle. Hogwarts, though, is more of a home to me now. This is not what I wanted to show you, Hermione. There is something that I think you would appreciate more than this pile of stone." She was about to protest, but he pulled her forward on a small path near the side of the house. They walked in silence.

Hermione sensed he needed this time to think about what he had told her. Severus was a very private man. The conversation they'd had that morning had proved that to her. He asked her many questions about her plans, her family, and even her friends, but he had skirted most of her inquiries. She didn't mind much. He'd come around in time when he felt more comfortable with her. Only a short time had passed since they'd been sprung together after all.

After walking up a steep incline, they reached the crest of a hill. "Close your eyes for a moment," he said softly. She obeyed and felt him guide her a short way. "Ah, they are still here." She felt his lips on hers briefly before he said, "You may open them now."

She peered around. In a clearing below, she saw the most amazing creatures grazing languidly. "Severus! Is this a herd of Aethonons?"

He smiled broadly. "I thought you would like them. They have been here for as long as I can remember. My grandparents have protective wards so that no one can happen upon them. They live here in peace from the prying eyes of Muggles and poachers."

"I've never seen one before. I never thought that I would. There was a picture of a foal in a book that I had read, but this is breathtaking." She gazed adoringly at a group of nearly thirty winged horses. Each having a coat of chestnut in color, and their wings were made of some furry yet feathery mixture. They didn't look very sturdy. "How can those wings keep an Aethonon up in flight?"

"They can't make long flights. They are mainly used to ease them from one spot in a pasture to another. In some cases, I suppose it helps them out of a tight spot when a predator lurks nearby."

Without warning, she pounced on Severus, nearly toppling him over. Hugging him tightly, she kissed him thoroughly. Breaking away after a few dizzying moments, she said softly, "They are beautiful. Thank you for sharing them with me. I love this."

"I am enjoying myself as well." He swallowed. "What did Poppy have to say this morning?"

She grinned. "We are safe. She could tell that I've already ovulated this month. I'm afraid it's nearly time for...another type of visitor."

Severus grinned at her choice of words. "I daresay, a more welcome one than the one you've been having?"

"Very much so. I'm not ready for our children just yet. I want to enjoy my time alone with you first," she said happily, kissing him deeply.

His mind began to work in overtime. Children?*Just yet!* She was planning on having a brood from the sound of it! He'd have to talk to her about that later. He'd never expected to become a...father. He shuddered involuntarily.

"I know. I feel it too," she murmured, kissing his neck gently. He allowed her to think that an emotion had caused him to shudder. This was not the time to set her straight. As she said, he wanted to enjoy time alone with her.

Southern's Notes: We'll find out more on Severus' leg, Hermione's parents, and see a chat with friends.

Chapter Six

Chapter 7 of 32

Hermione and Severus talk at his home, and they go out for dinner. It's time for Severus to meet the parents and face his fears.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and a special thanks to GinnyW for helping me go through it a second time.

Hermione wondered what she'd said wrong. For the entire walk back to the house, he'd seemed withdrawn. She picked through her mind to find the offending bit of conversation. He'd been relieved that it was nearly her time of the month. Severus was no more ready for children than she was, truth be told. Blast! *I'm not ready for our children just yet. I want to enjoy my time alone with you first!* So, that was it. It would definitely do to be more careful on how she stated things.

At the moment, something more pressing was bothering her. "Severus, are you all right? I see you are beginning to limp a bit."

"I'm fine, Hermione," he said scathingly. Hopefully she wouldn't be turning into the next Poppy. One mother hen hovering about was enough. "Stop your mollycoddling!"

"Well, pardon me for caring," she said crossly. "I'd like to use the loo. Are we to go into your home or not?"

He stopped abruptly, and she walked right into his back. He smirked slightly upon hearing her, "oof." Served her right. Severus hadn't wanted her to see his home. Not indoors anyway. What would she think? He could do with a little salve he supposed. She would certainly be smug about that. And, just what was that insolent tone she was daring to use with him? Had he not been courteous this afternoon? "I suppose it wouldn't be appalling to go in for a few moments." He resumed his quick paced gait to the back of his home, making sure he didn't favor his leg any.

"Here we are," he said after unwarding the door, opening it for her. Severus placed a mask of indifference on his face. He waited for whatever derisive remarks she'd have. "Go through that door to the left," he said after a moment. In disbelief, he watched as she sauntered off. He called out for the house's only inhabitants. "Zim? Zenka?" Two simultaneous pops later, and his house elves had appeared. "Good evening," he said with a small smile.

"Master is visiting us," Zenka said.

"We is welcoming you home, master," Zim said.

"I'll not be in for long. I'm here with my...a friend. She is in the loo at the moment, and I am in need of a medicated salve for an abrasion. I suppose we could do for some refreshments," he said kindly. These two elves had been a part of his life since he was a young child. They'd often attended to his mother after his father had gone on a drunken rage. Quickly they scurried off to do his bidding.

"You have house-elves?" Hermione questioned. "Who tends to them for the year? Do they stay here alone?"

"They can take care of themselves, and they've always lived here. Well, mostly. They have served my mother's family for generations. What of it?" he asked, unsure as to why this would bother her.

"Well, you seem kind to them," she offered. "I overheard you with them."

He scoffed. "Did you think I would beat them? Hex them?"

"Not exactly, Severus. I've just seen firsthand how some purebloods treat their inferiors. I'm not meaning to put you in their category at all. I just think it's valiant of you to treat them with kindness. It's commendable." Hermione reached out to put a hand on his shoulder.

He shrugged it away. "Look around, Hermione. I may be a pureblood, but I am not in their category, now am I? This pitiful excuse for a family home should prove that to you now that you've seen it."

Hermione hadn't seen him so bitter. Was he embarrassed of his home? That had to be it. "Severus, you have a lovely home. I've only seen three rooms so far, and I think it's quite cozy. It's perfect for your needs. Yes, you are a pureblood, and I am a Mudblood. In some people's eyes, I am rubbish, undeserving of a chance to make a go of it like everyone else. That's never gotten me down. I don't think you should let this get you down. Your family manor was lost, from what you've said, due to your father's bad practices. Whatever you may think, please don't assume I'd feel that you are lacking in any way."

"You...think no less of me now that you've seen all that I have to offer you?" he asked quietly. He'd not mentioned the future in such a way before. Hermione's words had touched him though, and he wanted her to know that though he hadn't all that much, he would gladly share what he did have with her.

She smiled softly, taking his hands into hers. "Oh, Severus! I wouldn't care if you didn't even have this. To be honest, I never thought of your home before. I just imagined you lived at Hogwarts. Silly, isn't it?"

He pulled her to him for a hug. "You silly girl," he murmured, placing a kiss on top her head. "I suppose you think me shallow now? I...I am just not used to someone being so accepting. Lucius, he thinks I should sell it, but I've kept it anyway. It's only some of what I have left of my mother's memory."

"But, look at Lucius, Severus. Really see him. He's been pampered all of his life, never having to really work. I'd bet that if he'd loved his mother as you so obviously loved yours, he'd have kept anything that was hers as well. No matter its value or grandeur." She squeezed him tightly. "I feel the same as you do. I'd not let go of something precious of my parents' either. No matter how trivial they might seem to someone else."

Severus pulled away to look at her. "Hermione? What of your parents? How are you going to explain me to them?"

Hermione sighed. "Well, I can't exactly tell them the truth. They'd never understand. Being Muggles, they don't tend to understand much from our world, apart from what Mr. Weasley tries to explain, but he hasn't a clue most of the time either." She kissed his cheek. "I will simply tell them that I've had a crush on you, and the moment I finished my last class, I asked if you'd possibly ever see me as anything more than a student. Then, I'll say that we've begun to date to get to know each other."

"This will be acceptable?" he asked solemnly. That seemed too easy.

"Yes, of course. They do trust in my judgment. They'll see you for the brilliant man that you are. Just as I see you," she said with a smile. "Now enough of them. Why not give me a tour of your home?" Feeling at ease, he guided her through his home. She had been gracious with the elves, and he could see that they liked her. Zenka had made a fuss over his invisible wound, and he could see that Hermione would have liked to have applied the salve. She'd been raised to show kindness. He wondered briefly what her family home looked like. He'd never been in many Muggle homes. Mostly he'd gone on raids for the Dark Lord, and he hadn't the time to really look around. Parents! Meeting parents at his age!

"This was the...er...the nursery," he said, wondering if she was envisioning a brood of Snapes flouting about the room. "It connects to the master bedroom just through that door there."

She smiled, turning to him. This was her chance to put away his fears. "Well, if all goes well for us, maybe one day we'll use this room for our child." She saw him pale. "Now, Severus, you act as if I'm going to be begging for a few tykes within the next couple of months. I have no desire to start changing nappies nor putting my career on hold."

He could have wiped imaginary sweat from his brow at that moment. "Why, Hermione, I assumed no such thing. I've no desire for...nappy changing either. We have...there is time for that kind of talk later." Much later. Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief. It would do well to not try to read more into her words in the future. It had put him in an odd frame of mind!

Hermione smiled. She knew he had been worried about that, but she'd not point it out. "Madame Pomfrey says the potion she gave me this morning should last for three months. I'll just take my doses at the regular intervals until we are ready for that talk."

"Very well." He tried to sound nonchalant. "Would you care to take dinner in London?"

"Of course," she said. "I'll go any place with you. Am I dressed well enough?"

"Perfectly," he said, giving her another affectionate smile. They bid farewell to the elves, warded his home, and Apparated to Diagon Alley. He led her to one of his favorite spots. "Have you been to The Greengrass Pub before?"

"No, I can't say that I have. I've never walked this far past Gringott's to be honest. I haven't seen many of these establishments before now," Hermione said, taking in the large, classy building before her. "Are you sure that I am dressed appropriately, Severus? I've only a plain cloak and robes."

"You are fine. Come along," he said, ushering her forward. "This family has had this pub for a long time. They have excellent food and drink here. You may know Daphne Greengrass from my house? It's her uncle's business."

Hermione nodded as they went inside. She waited quietly while Severus spoke to a man about a private table. This was a huge contrast to The Leaky Cauldron. The patrons here were impeccably dressed, the decorum was stylish, and the building reeked of wealth. She supposed her plain robes were fine, but she wished that he had told her they'd be coming to such a place. She might have tried to tame her hair at least. Severus returned with a smile. "It will be only a moment."

"Why, Severus, Miss Granger, good evening," came a drawling salutation. "I expect you've had a nice holiday?"

Hermione smiled timidly. This man always intimidated her even though he'd changed. Some part of her mind always remembered the past. Knowing this was wrong, knowing he was a friend to Severus, she said, "It was nice, thanks."

Severus extended a hand to Lucius. "You've just finished?"

"Only just," Lucius smiled. "Narcissa, this is Miss Hermione Granger. I think you've not had a chance to meet her."

She nodded as the woman flashed a small smile her way. "Pleasure."

"Draco has told me about you," the woman ventured. What was Hermione to say to that? She was sure he'd told her all about her being a Mudblood in the past when they were not on friendly terms. Had he told her that they were now mates?

"It's nice to finally meet his mother," Hermione said uneasily. The woman seemed to be sizing her up. Lucius interceded.

"Is Severus treating you nicely then?" he asked politely.

Severus spoke. "Now, now, Lucius. We'll not be discussing anything personal. We are—"

"Jolly good!" A loud voice exclaimed. Suddenly flashes were going off. "Quite lucky, I say! The front page, this will make!"

"Good lord," Lucius said incredulously, as the short wizard fled. "Who the bloody hell was that?"

Hermione said, "I've seen him about at the *Daily Prophet*!"

Narcissa smiled brightly. "Well, any publicity is good publicity, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Severus said dryly. "Oh, here's our man. Lucius, Narcissa. Have a nice evening." Hermione smiled, hurrying to follow her lover. Once they were seated, and their orders were taken, he spoke again. "Forgive Narcissa. She's a... superficial woman at times. I hope you didn't feel too uncomfortable."

"Not at all," she lied. She felt as if she had been sized up by the woman and found lacking, but it was to be expected. She'd led a pampered life, never working, never dirtying her hands in the battles.

Dinner was a pleasant affair. Severus was taken aback once again by her refreshing honesty and brilliant insight. How had he not noticed this about her before? He'd always seen her as the type to flout her knowledge to others, but he realized that hadn't been the case. At least, not lately. He found out that she had made study groups for those in her House, and she'd even written study plans for her doddering friends to follow. A minor debate even ensued over something she'd read recently in *Transfiguration Today*. He felt content, and he found that the repartee was quite entertaining. She could give as good as he at times. After leaving the pub, they Apparated to Hogwarts only to find that they were tired. His leg could probably use a good rest. As he held her to him that night, he wondered if she would have accepted any sexual advances that he would have made.

Yes, she would have, but she seemed tired. He'd not press her on the issue for now. They would grow used to each other before long, and these things would happen naturally. She was still fairly new to a sexual relationship, and he didn't want to make her experience too much too soon. Severus smiled as her breathing evened out. No ungodly visitor would seek her out this night. Or, any other night. A small jolt of apprehension hit him in the gut. What would be waiting for him in his slumber? Was the Succubus gone for good? Unquestionably, she should be. He'd denied her after all. Several minutes passed. He could not get to sleep. Summoning a phial of a fairly light sleeping draught, he took a few drops and was finally able to fall into a fitful sleep. He'd had many dreams, but once he'd woken in the morning, he couldn't recollect any of them. For some reason, he felt uneasy. Perhaps he shouldn't have taken the sleeping draught then, he thought.

~~~~~ HQ ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione eased out of bed first. Severus had been mumbling and turning for a good bit of the night. She had tried to wake him once, but he'd not be nudged from his sleep. There had to be something in the library that would have some information about his leg. She adamantly refused to accept that some book didn't hold the answer. Sneaking to her wardrobe, she took out a set of clothes and a book that she had shrunk the day before. Once warded in the bathroom, she quickly tidied for the day, and then opened her treasure. *A Guide to Pleasing Your Wizard* was a great book. Chapter one had helped her yesterday by explaining how to approach a sore subject. She'd found it whilst perusing the shelves. It was as if it jumped out at her.

Quickly turning to chapter two, she found that wizards didn't like witches that nagged. Apparently the author was a man! Who was this S. H. Bigworth anyway? And, just how could she have found the book agreeable? According to the book, if they were in an argument of sorts, she was to pretend to agree, even if she didn't, for a moment to allow him time to think about her views. But, why not just explain straightaway about how she felt? Skipping over the rest of the offending chapter, she found chapter three to be more to her liking. It gave hints on how to make a man feel loved by doing little things. Showing signs of affections such as small caresses and light kisses without appearing too clingy were a definite plus. She could do that, but her brow furrowed over the next section. She couldn't cook any meals for him, not here with the elves! Damn. She couldn't tidy nor press his clothes to perfection either. Blasted house-elves! It did say that a normal wizard liked his witch to have his clothes set out for him each day, but Hermione didn't agree that Severus would like this.

Sighing, she skipped to the next chapter. Ah! Methods to a great massage seemed worthy of a read. Hearing movement in the bedroom, she skimmed over the main points as quickly as possible, learning of hand movements, the amount of pressure to apply, and ideal times to carry on with it. It appeared that even though the wizard would say he didn't need one, she should be persistent anyway. In the end, the result would be pleasing to both parties. "All right then," she muttered, shrinking the book once again. Feeling the need for a change, she pulled her hair up with an elastic. "There," she said, "that'll keep the mess out of the way."

"Good morning, Severus," she said brightly upon exiting. He had been leaning against the bedpost waiting for her to get out. He grunted and moved past her. Thinking about the book, she asked, "Would you like me to get out some clothes for you today?"

"What?" he asked, giving her an odd look.

"Only joking," she said with a grin. "I'll just order breakfast then." He nodded and slammed the door behind him. Good grief! Ruddy book. She vowed to not read more of it. Her instincts were working fine up until that point. She summoned a house-elf quickly, and by the time Severus came out, the meal was waiting for them. Remembering that he hadn't much sleep, she remained quiet as he sipped on his coffee. He'd had a rough night after all.

"Must you do that?" he asked sardonically.

"Sorry?" she asked politely. She'd not been doing anything that she knew of.

"You're shaking your leg. Haven't you noticed that the entire table is shaking along with it?"

"Really," she scoffed. "I think I'll be off for a quick walk!" He was right incorrigible in the mornings!

"Don't allow me to chase you away," he said dryly, downing the rest of his cup. Thinking of the wretched book again, she sat back down.

"Quite right. I should desist in my nervous jittering." She picked up another slice of toast and began eating silently.

"What is this?" he asked with mock astonishment. "Hermione Granger being, dare I say, docile?"

"Now, see here, Severus. I'm only trying to get on with you without ending up in a row. Just because you had a rough night doesn't mean you should be so sour to me," she admonished. "Furthermore, I am not docile! I was only trying to agree with you to keep the peace." She sat back, folding her arms over her chest. Severus barked with laughter. "Eh? Think that's funny, do you?"

"Undeniably," he said once his laughter stilled. "As you told me yesterday, there is no need to try to, what was it? Ah, yes, coddle me. I can fend for myself as I know you can. I wouldn't be attracted to a passive woman, Hermione. Speak your mind as you always have. In fact, I welcome your sharp tongue."

"Very well then," she said, feeling foolish. "I think I need to return that ruddy book to the library! Either that or throw it in the dustbin!"

"What book?" he asked curiously. She pulled the offending bit from her pocket, waved her wand to return it to its normal size, and handed it to him. He began laughing once again.

*Well, this is a change*, she thought sourly. "Glad you find that amusing, Severus."

"This book is older than you and I combined, Hermione! I want a wife not a house-elf," he said, full of amusement.

"A wife?"

*Damn!* Where the bloody hell had that come from? "Well...", he said, trying to think of something. "Eventually, you know, as the entity led us to believe."

"Right," she said, not able to hold back a smile. She decided to change the subject. He was looking peaked. "Oh, let's have a look at the paper. It's just here. Ah, BLOODY

HELL!"

"What is it?" he asked quickly, leaning forward.

"Oh, no," she mumbled, handing the paper to him. What would he make of this?

Severus took the paper and eyed it curiously. There, on the front page, was a picture of Lucius, Narcissa, Hermione, and himself as they were the previous evening at Greengrass' Pub. In the picture, he was scowling at the photographer, pulling Hermione close protectively. Hermione was moving closer of her own accord looking surprised. Lucius looked scandalized while Narcissa gave a flashy smile. The caption read, **"War Heroes Meet for Dinner"**. The story went on to say a bit about their parts in the battles, and then the writer dared to tell the readers that it had been rumored that the Potions Master of Hogwarts had fallen in love with the newest addition to the staff, one of Harry Potter's right hands, Hermione Granger. *Of all the...!* He cleared his throat. "We should have known with that fellow taking those photos last night."

"Hmph," replied Hermione, taking the paper back. She read further. "That scoundrel! That waiter gave an interview saying that we requested privacy!"

"That is the truth though," he pointed out, enjoying her discomfort. He didn't care what people thought of him, but that bit about him falling in love shouldn't be in there. He'd not let Hermione know how peeved he was about it. She had been trying so hard to make him content and had even been reading in that rubbish for hints on how to go about it. No, Severus would not let her know that any part of the article bothered him at all. "Think nothing of it. Gossipmongers, the lot of them. They're just looking for a fresh scoop."

"All right then. I don't care if you don't, but they could have warned us," she said, throwing the paper to the side.

The fireplace began sputtering, burning a green color. Dumbledore's head appeared. "Good morning, you two. I had hoped to see you at breakfast. I wanted to speak with each of you. I trust you've seen this morning's paper?"

"Yes, Headmaster," Hermione said glumly. She could see the man's smile and knew that he found it amusing.

"Good then. Come along after you've finished there. I've news on Severus' injury." That said, his head vanished from the fire.

"I am anxious to see what Albus has to say about this," Severus said. "Are you done?"

"As am I. Shall we?" she asked with a worried look on her face.

"Come now, Hermione. I'm not going to die," he said to reassure her, taking her arm. They opted for a walk to the Headmaster's offices. Along the way, they encountered the Hufflepuffs that had remained for the holidays. They each nodded and grinned before scurrying off. "I suppose they've been reading the paper as well."

She giggled and caressed his hand lightly. He paused suddenly. Severus looked about first, and then slowly lowered his head to hers for a kiss. After a few moments, he pulled away. "Good morning." She smiled in reply.

The gargoyle opened for them just as they approached it. "Guess he knew we were here," Hermione commented unnecessarily. She hoped that they were not about to find out any bad news. They'd suffered enough, what with the visitors and all.

"Have a seat," Albus said softly. "Sherbet lemon? Tea?"

"I'll have a sherbet lemon," Hermione said. Severus gave her a scathing look. "What? They are good. You should try one." He merely sneered while the Headmaster arranged himself in his chair.

"After you left yesterday, Severus, I sent Fawkes off to Paracelsus. I thought he might have an idea about the situation." Dumbledore paused to look at the two before him. Hermione was worried. Severus's face was blank. Before he could continue, the witch spoke.

"Paracelsus you say? Why, isn't there a bust of him just down from the Gryffindor common room?"

"Yes. He's one and the same. Paracelsus is an accomplished alchemist. He, Nicholas, and I have been friends for most of my life, and we've worked together on many things in the past," Albus said with a smile. "Just so happens, I remembered that in our youth, he told us of a story about an ancestor of his. The man was a priest in training I believe. A reformed wizard, if you will. He had visits from a Succubus as well. He'd told us about a bite that the fellow suffered as he fended off the creature, and as far as I could recall, the man was able to treat it. Here is the parchment that Paracelsus sent." Severus took the letter.

*Albus,*

*It's been a while old friend. I was quite shocked to hear of a dual visit. There haven't been many of those reported. I daresay, Merlin was the last documented for all we know, though I have always wondered about Grindelwald. As far as my ancestor, I have taken a look at some of the family scrolls. It says that he was inflicted with a bite as punishment for being able to deny the advances of the Succubus. As with your Potions master, he could feel the pain even in his waking hours though no visible bite mark could be seen.*

*Tell your man to treat it as he would any wound during his waking hours, but I'm afraid the next part won't be easy to hear. Apparently, his nightly haunts will not be over with. Agdronomy stated that he began having night terrors. The Succubus never returned, but in his dreams, he turned into all the things he hated most. I believe in his case, he was a demon that terrorized fellow members of the clergy. After weeks of restless, horrible nights, he and some mates developed a potion that would allow them to access his dreams with him. Together, they tended to the wound, which was still visible in the dream, and they helped him fight his inner demons so to speak. In the end, his faith was what saved him. Faith and the help of his trusted friends, that is.*

*I hope that this can be of some help to you. This should have been documented for the public long ago. It would perhaps save some other wizards from the trouble. I have enclosed a list of ingredients and instructions should you want to try to help your young friend with the same method. I give permission to him to document this as he sees fit. You must come for a holiday soon, Albus. It's been far too long.*

*Paracelsus*

Noting that Severus had finished reading, Albus spoke gently. "I think that you should do this. Hermione, of course, should be the one to assist you."

"Absolutely not, Albus. She'll do no such thing. Furthermore, I do not see the need to go through such lengths when I've not experienced anything such as this," Severus bit out immediately.

"Hang on! I will do what I can. What's the letter say?" Hermione asked indignantly, not wanting to miss the chance to help her man.

"Read over it once more, Severus. Think hard on what he has to say on the matter," Dumbledore urged.

"Interesting," Severus commented, handing the parchment to Hermione. He perused over the second page to see which ingredients he had in stock and what process would be needed. "Moonstone, hellebore, holly, dried Billywig stings...these are simple enough to come by. The potion itself can be prepared easily, but it has to simmer for thirty hours."

"Severus," Hermione began, "last night you had a really restless night. Did you dream anything such as this?"

"I can't remember. I know I had dreams, and I even felt uneasy when I awoke this morning. For some reason, I took a sleeping draught last night. I felt the need for it." This plagued Severus. What would he become in his dreams? Had he subconsciously known that he would be facing more horrors? How could he let Hermione go through this with him when she might be hurt in the process? "About you coming into my dreams with me, I don't feel that would."

"I will do it," she said firmly. "Who else could? I'll help you. You said that my voice helped last time. And, I was right in my guess about you needing to treat the wound as a normal one. Let me help you."

He smirked. "Insufferable Guess-it-all! I suppose you should be the one. That doesn't mean that I like it. Albus, do you think there is a chance that she could be harmed?"

"I do not know, Severus, but I don't think that any terror you would become would see her hurt. I think she is the key to putting an end to this. Oh, what's this?"

"Hedwig!" Hermione exclaimed as the snow white owl flew in through the window. She landed with a hoot on Hermione's lap. Hermione quickly untied the parchment. "Just great!"

"What is it?" Severus mocked immediately. "Potter needs advice on his relationship?"

"Hush you," she said saucily. "It seems that the twins thought it would be funny to send a copy of the *Daily Prophet* to my mum and dad. They sent Pig earlier this morning with it. Ron just wanted to warn me and let me know that he had nothing to do with it."

Albus chuckled. "I expect you'll be hearing from them soon enough then. You should have written to them yourself, dear."

"I know. I just wasn't ready." She sighed. "Perhaps we should go for a visit then? Should I just send a letter to them?"

"Let's go back to our chambers. We'll go over this list thoroughly and discuss it," Severus offered. "Thanks, Albus."

Albus watched the pair leave with a smile. What Severus had said was not lost on him. *Our chambers*. He'd come a long way in a short period of time, hadn't he? Practically skipping to the fireplace, he Flooed to Minerva's quarters.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Forget about my parents for a moment please," Hermione pleaded. "I'll write to them shortly. I think we should deal with this first. Your health is more important to me than explaining to my mum that I've fallen in love."

"Very well. I have everything required for the potion in my personal stores. It's not very complicated at all. I'm sure even Potter or Weasley could brew this without incident," he said sarcastically.

"Now that was uncalled for. Really," she said, rolling her eyes. "I've got us each a mortar and pestle so that we can set about working. It says here that the holly must be mashed finely. What has holly to do with this potion?"

"Perhaps because it gives protection for many things including poisons inflicted through witchcraft. I expect that's what these men had in mind when they included the ingredient in the first place. They lived in the old times. Beliefs were a bit different back then. We will not alter from their specifications," Severus said, using the tone he used in class. There would be no room for error here.

"Right then. So, the cut is undoubtedly laced with some sort of magical poison. What of these Billywig stings?" she asked, holding up a container.

"I would think that this is the key ingredient that allows your thoughts to lift up from your body and meld with mine. According to the description, my dream will appear as if in a cloud above us. Each of us will be levitated into it somehow. We'll likely feel lightheaded at first," he stated.

She smiled. "I was wondering about that. And, we just set them in whole? How many?"

"There are two of us. We need three each, so place six aside." Severus looked over the paper once again. "Hellebore." He rubbed his chin for a moment in thought.

"Though dangerous, it will work with the other ingredients to help purge your body from the poison of her slash. Purge your mental anguish as well. That must be the reason for this one. How need we prepare it?"

Severus smiled. She would have made a fair apprentice for him as well. "It must be diced in perfect half inch cubes. Have you a sharp knife?"

"I do. What's next?" she asked eagerly.

"The moonstone. We will have to mash it to powder as well. It will serve to balance our emotions in our dream state. According to Paracelsus here, it was what made his relative more approachable by the friends that went in with him," Severus said with a smirk. "Let's hope your voice has the same effect on me as it did with that spirit."

"I'll start in on the holly while you prepare the first portion," Hermione said, winking at her lover. He furrowed his brow at first but smiled smugly.

"As you wish, Instructor Granger," he teased. He began setting up the cauldron, adding the liquids needed, and producing a powerfully hot flame. Once done, he began with the moonstone. They then split up the hellebore and began dicing. After an hour, all ingredients were prepared, and the correct amount of liquid had evaporated out of the cauldron. "It's ready for the first set. Hand me the moonstone," he ordered. She placed the mortar in his hand and watched as he expertly distributed the correct amount. His fingers were so graceful. Pleasing...her stomach tingled in remembrance of what they were capable of. She shook her head before handing him a stirring rod.

"Stir it very slowly, six times counterclockwise," she said, knowing it was unnecessary, but feeling the need to talk. This was no time to be fantasizing about lovemaking. He merely raised an eyebrow before starting his task.

"I need only a cup of hellebore for this go round," he said, holding out his hand. She placed the cup in his hand and watched again as he distributed it in the cauldron. "All the Billywig stings, if you will," he said, voice sounding as silky as ever. He threw the small stems in one at a time. "How many times need I stir?"

She wasn't sure if he was serious or not, but she answered anyway. "Six times, quickly, and clockwise." Hermione grinned when she realized he had been toying with her. She caught the smirk on his face before he began stirring.

"I'll have the other cup of hellebore now." He added the cubed ingredients before requesting the final one. "All of the holly now." Putting the last of the ingredients in, he stirred a dozen times slowly in counterclockwise movements before reversing to stir a dozen more times. "Now we wait for it to boil. Then we set it to simmer for thirty hours. It should begin producing a bluish haze shortly. Once it's completed, it will have turned purple, and the steam should be thick."

Without knowing how she got there, she pressed her back to his chest, and his arms came around her. Together they watched the cauldron, waiting for it to boil. Before long, big bubbles began surfacing, and as he predicted, a slight blue mist drifted from the boiling liquid. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked in a whisper.

She felt his lips press onto the top of her head. "You, my dear, are one of the few people that I believe sees the attractiveness of potion making." He produced his wand, setting the flame very low. "Thirty hours."

Hermione turned around in his arms. "Thirty hours," she agreed. "Kiss me." He bent his head to claim her lips. The kiss was dizzying and left her feeling giddy. "I love the way you kiss me." He growled, lifting her in his arms.

Walking slowly over to their table, he sat her on the edge. Severus stared into her eyes as his hands lowered to caress her breasts. She sighed in welcome. Her hands found his shoulders, pulling him closer. His lips made their way to her neck. He began savagely marking her, sucking hard, licking frantically. Her body was aglow with the sensuous blue light cast in the room. Her hands found their way to his trousers and began unbuckling his belt. Mirroring her actions, he lowered one hand from her breast to snake under her dress up between her thighs, ripping away her knickers. She was wet, aroused for him, needing him. He plunged one finger in and felt her readiness. Vaguely noticing that his trousers had been dropped, he pushed her back onto the table, scattering the contents to the floor before climbing half over her. His hard shaft was throbbing at her entrance for only a moment before Hermione's legs wrapped around him, pulling his body closer, pushing him into her opening.

They both cried out in satisfaction at the feel of him sheathed inside. His lips found hers again as they began a frantic grinding and pumping against each other. Her nails clawed at his back, his arse, anything they could reach. His teeth grazed her shoulders, and the hand that wasn't balancing him over her began an assault anew on her breasts. Eliciting moans from his actions, he was turned on more than he'd ever been, and he felt the familiar burning in his scrotum. It would not take long. She protested as his hand left her breast, but moaned when it found her essence. Working on the sensitive nub, he could feel her beginning to tighten and clamping down on his shaft. "Severus!" she wailed, half plea, half bliss. He closed his eyes in welcome to the flow of hot juices that washed over him. Only a few moments later, he grunted a final, "Hermione," before collapsing on top of her.

When he came back down from his cloud, he felt her lips kissing his head and her hands caressing his hair and back. *Good Lord!* He'd taken her like a rutting animal. They were both still dressed save for the only parts that needed exposing. On a lab table! He sheepishly moved to meet her eyes. She smiled cheekily. "I wonder if those fumes worked on us like an aphrodisiac would. I just had to have you."

So, she had wanted it then. Just as he'd given it to her. He resisted a smug smile. *Hell, yes, she wanted it. She started it.* "I don't think I could have made it to the bedchamber," he said as way of apology.

"No matter. This has suited us just as well. Don't you think, love?"

The feeling was back. Warmth. A flowing emotion. He did love her. He would tell her later. "Indeed," he said, moving back to pull up his clothes. She smoothed down her dress. Feeling a sting on his shoulders, he knew that her nails had dug into his flesh even through the fabric. The little minx!

"I'm off for a bath, I think," she said, standing up. She placed a final kiss on his lips before hurrying off. He was left standing there, grinning like an oaf. He'd met his match in that witch. She was his. Always would be. "*Scourgify*," he muttered at the table, cleaning up any liquid that may have flowed out. He manually put back all that had been thrown askew in their frantic coupling. It was good to have a lover with him. He'd never feel lonely again. Had he been lonely though? Somehow he couldn't think of things as they were before she began her stay with him.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione lowered her book when she heard Severus' angry voice. "What is the meaning of this?" She saw that he was pointing wildly to and dodging a hyperactive Pigwidgeon. He looked extremely harassed.

"That's Ron's owl," she said, laughing at the scene before her. "Come here, Pig." The small owl flew to her, twittering excitedly all the while. She barely had the parchment off before the bird flew out the door. Severus was brushing off his clothes as if he had owl droppings on them.

"That owl is a menace!" he bellowed once more before flashing a small grin. "The owl does suit Mr. Weasley though, doesn't it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, prolonging the inevitable. Her mum's handwriting was on the Muggle envelope in her hands.

"Flitting about, seemingly not knowing its purpose, pestering me, unable to contain its excitement over being in a place it shouldn't be...is that from your parents?" he asked suddenly, realizing that Ron had told her of this owl's last errand.

"Yes, it is." He gestured for her to open the letter as he took a seat. With only a slight amount of trepidation, she tore into it. The letter was short but direct. "She says they've read about my new beau and me. They are disappointed that I lied to them on my whereabouts for this holiday. They insist that we go to meet them at home this evening, or she'll be contacting the Headmaster to force us. How embarrassing," she moaned, shoving the letter to him.

"Well, I suppose we'll make arrangements to eat out this evening again. I do think we should go down for a bit of lunch. We've not had a meal with the staff since Christmas morning. What say you?" he asked softly.

"Yes, all right," she said absently. Why was this meeting with her parents bothering her? They always followed her judgment on things. If she felt Severus was the one, then they should agree on it. Right? "It's not too late for lunch now?"

"Not at all. Most will be finished, but some will probably still be about. We should show ourselves though," he said, pulling her up. He followed her sulking form up to the hall. He didn't like the expression on her face. Did she feel that her parents would turn her out if she remained at his side? Bugger them. She was of age, and she was just beginning her own career. Her life was to be spent with him. He'd not let them influence her in any case. Parents or no, Hermione was his.

"Well, all right then. They are alive. Been having a nice break?" Hooch called right away. Hermione grinned. This woman was exactly what she needed to pull her out of her mood.

"Very nice," Hermione said warmly.

"Pomona and I have been debating on paying a visit, but we decided to let you all carry on for a while," Hooch said slyly with a wink. "Say, what say you to a few shots? The little pests have gone now. It's just us adults here as it is."

"It seems that you've already had a few shots, Rolanda," Severus said dryly. It was true. The witch's face was alight with intoxicated merriment. Even Pomona's round face was reddened jovially. Her flyaway mop of hair was even more of a mess today than normal.

"It's a game you see," tiny Filius offered. "Someone pretends to be someone through expression only. If you guess it correctly, you take a shot. If you guess it incorrectly, you take two shots. I told them to use butterbeer, but they've insisted on firewhisky."

"Where is everyone else?" Hermione asked, wondering about Minerva and Albus.

"Pah! Worry not on them," Pomona said with a giggle. "They're not the fun sort."

"We've come to have lunch," Severus said. "Shouldn't you be doing the same?" He nodded toward their plates that had been pushed aside.

"Oi, there, Sev! This is my second plate. I've already had my first. It takes a good lot to keep a healthy witch going," Pomona said cheerily.

"I imagine so," he said dryly. Rolanda and Filius had busied themselves with new shots while Hermione began filling her plate lightly. Severus began to do the same when he noticed that the trio had resumed their game. It was Pomona's turn as the one acting as someone else. The herbologist sprung from her chair and began a menacing walk around the table, scowling at everyone. She wagged her finger angrily at her mates before sitting down again in a fit of giggles.

"Go on then! Who was it, Rolanda?" she asked.

"It had to have been Poppy," Hooch declared.

Flitwick simply shook his head. "Severus."

"Right you are, Filius! That's one shot for you, and two for Rolanda. Say, how could you have not guessed that one?" she inquired, arching both brows.

"I knew very well exactly who that was!" she said indignantly. "I just fancied the extra shot is all."

Hermione burst with laughter as Severus shook his head in disdain. He tsked a few times before returning to his food. It was Hooch who jumped up this time. She began stomping about near the table, looking like a great clumsy fool. She held onto her belly in a fit of silent, fake laughter before wiping nonexistent tears from her eyes. When Hermione howled with laughter, Severus broke a smile. Rolanda sat down. "Right then. You first, Hermione. Who was that?"

"Hagrid!" she said immediately. A shot glass materialized in front of her.

"Severus? Did you think it was Hagrid as well?" she asked cautiously.

"I did," he replied. A shot glass materialized in front of him.

"We didn't consent to play, Rolanda," he said smugly. "Keep your liquor."

"Sorry, mate," she said with a grin. "The moment you answered my questions you were bound to play."

Casting her a dirty look, he threw back his glass. "So be it." Hermione followed suit, choking slightly on her drink. Severus had noted that his young lover seemed to be enjoying herself. He didn't want to take the fun out of things. It was a small sacrifice to make to allow her these moments of merriment. They still had to face her parents that evening.

An hour later, Albus and Minerva entered the hall. They had been on their way out to have a walk around the lake when they heard howls of laughter. The scene before them had them gaping in shock. Five of their professors were drunk off their arses. At this moment, Hermione was parading around the table like a proud peacock. She would pause, look to one side, place her hands on her hips, and flash a bright, toothy smile. She did this a few times before she sat down.

Shouts of Potter, Fudge, and Lockhart rang out. "It's Lockhart!" she shrieked, giggling madly. "Sh-everus! How could you think that to be Harry?" The Potions Master grunted before drinking his two shots. Hermione downed her shot as well.

"Hang on! Wha' choo drinkin' for?" Hooch accused, voice mangled with intoxication.

"I guesh...ssed it right," Hermione said in a puzzled voice.

"But, choo were the one charadin'," Hooch said tartly. Everyone began cackling in peals of laughter at this point.

"I think you've all had quite enough," Minerva said sternly, summoning five tumblers of clear liquid. "Drink this!"

Dumbly, most downed the new liquid in hopes it was something to add to their inebriated states. Hooch was defiant. "Oh, come now, Minnie. Get smashed, I say!"

"Drink up, Rolanda," Albus said, holding a chuckle back.

At once they all began looking around soberly. "Sneaky Gryffindor," Hooch bellowed. "That was Sober Up Potion, that was!"

"Quite right," Minerva said. "We still have a few students on these grounds. You must act responsibly. Come along, Albus." She began her walk to the entrance while Albus smiled at the others. He followed closely behind not wanting Minerva to think he condoned their actions.

Severus stood up extending a hand to Hermione. "Well, I must admit that was interesting. Good day." Laughing all the way back to the dungeons, Hermione swatted Severus' arm.

"Oh, come on. Don't look like that. You know you had a good time," she said.

The corners of his lips quirked up slightly. "I think it was an acceptable pastime, but I am afraid that Minerva was right. The students could have come in at any moment." He kissed her head. He noted her disappointed frown. "Next time we shall be sure to carry on in the staff room."

With that, she brightened. "I feel much better! Maybe I needed that. A great stress reliever, firewhisky shots."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione rang the doorbell. This was something she'd never done before at her own home. Somehow it seemed the right thing to do at this moment. Severus patted her back reassuringly. Her insides twisted about as she waited for the door to open. Finally it swung forward.

"Well, honey, you don't have to ring the doorbell," her mother said, pulling her in for an embrace. "We've missed you so much." At this moment, her mother glanced up to Severus. "Hello," she said stiffly. "Come on, you two."

Severus sneered at the woman's retreating back. *So, that's how it's going to be, eh?* He could handle a pair of Muggles. He followed Hermione in. Her home was very nice. In fact, more so than any other Muggle home he'd been in. They were escorted to the living area while her mum disappeared to another part of the house. Instead of taking a seat, he went to have a closer look at all of the odd gadgets on the shelves. He saw pictures of Hermione on the walls and was painfully reminded of exactly how young she truly was compared to him. She had changed so much since she had first come to Hogwarts. He glanced sideways to his beauty sitting on the couch nervously. *No one will take you from me.* He glided to her side and seated himself just as both parents came into the room.

"Don't get up," her father commanded when they both made to stand. He and his wife sat in chairs facing them. "I must admit we were quite stunned this morning when that ruddy bird brought that paper."

"Disappointed," her mother interjected.

"Mum, Dad, I can explain. See, what hap..." Hermione began.

"I'll have my say, young lady," her father said sternly, reminding Severus of Minerva. Severus bristled. How dare he speak to her like a child? He remained silent only out of respect, but if this carried on, he'd say his own piece. Hermione leaned in to Severus for support as he took her hand. Severus noticed that her mother's eyes softened at the action. "You lied to us. You said that you were to stay with Arthur and Molly. Then, we see this paper, and we've caught you in an outright lie! A scandal with one of your professors at that!"

"A scandal!" Hermione raged, springing up so quickly Severus was pushed back against the cushions. "It's your turn to listen, Dad! You will hear me out, or I will leave. Never speak against Severus that way again. There was no scandal! He is honorable!"

"Calm down now," her father was saying, gesturing for her to take a seat.

"I am eighteen years old. I have been of age for well over a year. Since my last class, Severus and I have been talking often. I've fallen for him, and we are taking time to get to know one another. Nothing ever happened when I was a student!" Hermione huffed. "We've been getting on well. As far as the Weasleys, yes, I was there until Christmas. Then, I went to see Severus, and I've been staying at the castle since. If you will remember, I will be working there. It's my home!"

Severus wanted to clap. Her father had been shocked into silence, and her mother was smiling softly. "Well, you could have sent an owl to us at least," her mother said.

"I suppose I could have, but I wanted to be sure we would get on well first. This is private to me, and I had no intention of letting someone else tell you. I just wanted to do it on my own time," she said, finally sitting again.

"Mr. Granger, I never made any inappropriate advances on your daughter whilst she was still a student," Severus said honestly. They didn't need to know exact details. He took a page from Hermione's book and skirted about the more sordid details.

"Well, I'd say you wouldn't," her father said sharply. "Isn't this the fellow that made fun of your teeth a few years ago? Doesn't he always give you less than acceptable marks when you know you've done better?"

"Teeth?" Severus asked, clearly puzzled.

"Later," Hermione hissed. "That's enough, Dad. Do you think that if I let the past bother me I would have gone to him? Do you think I would respect him if he wasn't a fine professor? Do you think I would love him if I thought he didn't care for me? Don't make your own judgments on him until you've come to know him for yourselves."

Her father opened his mouth to speak, but her mother cut him off. "I didn't share your father's view of a scandal. I was just disappointed because I thought you had lied about your whereabouts. Of course we will welcome your young man into our home."

Severus' mouth nearly dropped open. *Young man*? The woman couldn't be more than five years older than he was himself. "Thanks, Mum," Hermione said, looking at her father pointedly.

He cleared his throat. "Right. I should have thought better of you." He extended a hand to Severus, which Severus shook, half wishing that he could crush the man's hand. "Well, shall we get on with getting to know each other then?"

The group began talking, and before long, they were all on good terms. Her father tried to broach the subject of future plans, but Severus skirted those questions. Her mother had taken her on the side to offer advice to what she still assumed was her virginal daughter. "Now, he's not one of those boys that you run around with. He's a mature man. They have needs. Don't be pressured into anything, and be sure to get on the pill."

"Mum, I'm on the potion already," Hermione said absently. When her mother gasped, she added, "You know. Just in case." Her mother nodded with approval. Even though they tried to leave, her parents insisted that they stay for dinner. Dinner turned out to be delivered pizza. Severus ate his with a fork to the amusement of her parents.

"What is it?" he asked, checking to see if he'd dropped anything on his frock coat.

"Nothing," Hermione smiled. "We eat this with our hands, but go on. Some people use forks." He shrugged slightly and finished his meal in what he felt was the proper way. They were finally able to leave near midnight. Her parents were reassured that their daughter had made a proper choice in a boyfriend. Hermione was relieved that they had accepted him with minimal objections. Severus left feeling good about himself. Though they clearly hadn't thought the situation was tolerable at first, he'd proved to them that he could get on with their daughter and keep her content. Ultimately, he had been accepted as part of the family. Once he would have wished that his father would have been like that with his friends. When he brought someone around, his father would question their bloodlines, family history, and worth as wizards. More than once, he'd been embarrassed by his sire. Hermione's family cared nothing about that. They just wanted her to be happy. He'd see to it.

"I'm going to go to the loo," Severus said, as they entered their bedchamber.

Hermione yawned. "I think I'm going to crawl into bed."

Once he was finished, he came out, clad in his boxers only, to find that his lover was fast asleep. She had pleased him earlier in his laboratory, but he hungered for her once again. Hermione looked too comfortable to wake though, so he simply curled in with her, placing soft kisses on her face. If she had woken, then he would have initiated the lovemaking. She didn't move an inch. He smiled anyway and curled up to her. Sleep pounced on him straightaway.

At some point, he began dreaming that he was walking down the dark corridors of the castle. "Where are the little bastards?" he said to himself. "I know they came this way." He hated them. They talked about him constantly behind his back. He couldn't do anything to them during the day and under the watchful eyes of the Headmaster, but the night belonged to him. How could they blame a little accident or two on him? Obliviates went a long way and enabled him to get out of many tight spots in the past.

What was that smell? Jasmine. Granger's shampoo. He recognized it from class. How many times had he stood behind her to check over her perfect potions and smelled that scent? He began stalking forward quickly. He'd find her. She'd never laugh at him again. There! A sound just to his left. "Lumos," he hissed. A flood of light from the tip of his wand. Hermione Granger stood huddled against the wall with two of her friends. "Potter, Weasley, and Granger! Tell me. What would three young Gryffindors be doing out of bed at this time of night?"

"Er..." Potter began.

"Save it," he said, voice merely an angry whisper. "You two! Back to your common room. Miss Granger, you will stay behind."

The two boys fled without a backward glance. "Please, sir, we were just on our way to the infirmary," she said, voice pleading.

"Do you know what I am going to do with you?" he asked, smirking hatefully. "No? How disappointing. I thought you knew everything." He could see she was trembling with fear, and he loved it. Her fear fed his hate. It flowed through his veins bringing him much satisfaction. "*Silencio*," he said, pointing his wand at her throat when she opened her mouth to speak. "*Expelliarmus*," he said lazily as she reached for her wand. It flew into his outstretched hand, and her body slammed against the corridor's rough wall.

She slid down the wall for only a moment before bounding up to storm past him. When he grabbed her by the wrist, she began pummeling him wildly. "Hold still, creature of dirt," he said scathingly. "No?" he asked when she continued to try to hit him. "*Stupefy*!"

He grinned wickedly as her body crumpled to the floor. Grabbing her by the hair, he dragged her toward an empty classroom. Warding the door closed, he turned on her. "*Ennervate*." He began unfastening his robes while she watched. He thrived on the terror in her eyes. "Welcome back, Miss Granger," he said in mock sweetness. "Let me tell you what I am going to do with you, you little Mudblood whore! I'm going to part your thighs, bury my cock so deeply inside of you that you'll feel it for days, and then I'm going to Oblivate you. You'll be walking around stiffly tomorrow, and you'll have no idea why." He chuckled as she tried to scoot away. He unfastened his pants. "Come now, Miss Granger. It should be nothing new. Weren't you just allowing Potter and Weasley the same pleasures. Why shouldn't I partake in what you've offered all of Gryffindor. Certainly, I would please you more than Longbottom!" He reached down to grip her legs tightly, pulling her forward.

"Severus, I love you. Stop it!" she said through tears.

"How did you speak? I've-"

"Come back to me," she said through gasps for air. What the hell? He was choking her. Filthy, dirty, little whore! It was a mind trick. "Severus, stop!" Her hand reached up and raked four deep lines across his bare chest.

Bare chest? He wasn't naked. He was...! "I'm in my chambers!" Realization set in. He had been dreaming. In horror, he looked beneath him. "Hermione!" he cried in panic. He released her immediately. He could see fingerprints around her throat. "Merlin's beard! What have I done?" He jumped up from the bed. "Oh my God! Hermione, I'm sorry!" He began backing away from her, not sure of what to do next.

She was sitting up now, touching her throat tentatively. "Severus, wait," she choked. "It was your dream. Come here."

He backed himself into his bookshelf. "No, I've...Hermione!" He ran his fingers through his hair in disbelief. She got out of bed and padded to him.

"Severus, it's the dream. The Succubus' wound. I know you would never hurt me. Did you not take anything to ensure that you would not have dreams tonight?"

He shook his head, evading her arms. "Hermione," he choked. He'd nearly killed her. He would have raped her. He remembered exactly what he'd done and said to her. He was a monster. He had to get out of there.

"Stop!" she yelled as he tried to flee. "*Locomotor Mortis!*" She cringed as Severus fell under her deftly administered Leg Locker Curse. "Severus, I'm sorry. Please stop struggling to get away from me. I forgive you."

Southern's Notes: Sorry to bore you with the potion making, but hopefully the little romp made up for it. Her parents accepted them quickly, but I think is fine. Had other things to move on to! LOL... I know Severus is a bit wicked here, but I had to portray him that way. The dream stuff is a bit freaky. More on that next.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 8 of 32

We see Severus' reaction after the dream. Hermione and Harry have a plan.

Disclaimer: Not for me. Dang.

A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and another thanks goes to GinnyW, who is kindly helping me go back through it in search of funkies and enabling me to combine the chapters.

"Let me up right now, Hermione!" Snape bellowed, trying to crawl, even though his legs were locked.

"Not until you stop, Severus! We have to talk about this," she said as loudly as possible, voice still scratchy. She went to kneel by him. "Please stop." Tears were brimming in her eyes.

"I am a monster! That was unforgivable, Hermione," he said in a low, deadly voice. "... look at your throat!" She saw tears well up in his eyes, and she couldn't stand it any more.

Her tears spilled over, and she began wailing loudly. "Sev...erus, just st...op." He pushed her outstretched hands away again.

"Release me, woman!" he choked, not wanting her to see him cry. How could he have hurt her? The woman he loved. He was not worthy. Good Lord! "I need to think. Away from you."

"No, Sev," hiccup, "erus, if you go, you won't come back. I can't be without you."

"You stupid, girl! If you stay, I will hurt you. RELEASE ME!" he bellowed. She was putting her arms around him again while sobbing. He allowed them this time, but he dared not touch her back. As her tears leaked onto his chest, his own spilled silently down his face. Why? Why did he become that? He would never harm a student much less her. He'd not had such feelings of hate or acted with such callousness since his own time as a follower of the Dark Lord. So easily, he had overpowered her. It only proved to him how fragile she actually was. "Hermione," he began, voice hoarse from the strain of holding back his own wails of anguish, "I need time to think."

For a long moment, she just sniffed, holding him tightly. "I know you. You are going to make me leave. You're not going to let me help you with this."

His arms enclosed around her body tightly. "You cannot help me with this. I can't let any harm come to you, especially not any inflicted by me. I...care too much about you, Hermione. Just give me some time."

"The potion will be done by this evening, Severus. We can beat this," she pleaded.

"Release me, Hermione."

"Wait. Just listen to me. Will you?" she asked, her puffy eyes meeting his own. He nodded with an exasperated sigh. "I love you, Severus. The dream made you do this. The only reason it went so far is because I was caught unawares. I'm not so daft that I wouldn't be able to fend for myself. Trust me."

He wanted to believe in her, but his dream had been so real. He had easily overpowered her, and nothing could have stopped him. To make things worse, he had somehow become entangled with her in the bed and attempted to throttle her. How many times had he wanted to do that in the past? *You never really did, Severus.* He couldn't relieve himself of her pained, hurt, shocked expression. "You have no idea what I did in my dream. I...you couldn't handle me." He'd not tell her. Severus would let her leave thinking he was a weak man, but he would not let her know all that he had done to her in his dream. All that he had said to her. He brought his hands up to rest on his forehead as if thinking.

She moved away. "I'll Obliviate you if I have to. I won't let one dream come between us. Everyone accepts us, Severus. My parents. The staff. My friends. You can't make me leave. I've been happy since I've come here. I *work* here now! I want you in my life. We can get through this. Let me take the potion with you this evening. I can help you."

His eyes narrowed. Did she just threaten to Obliviate him? "Hermione, you don't know what I've done...in my dream. My fingers gripped tightly around your neck were nothing compared to what I was saying and doing. You cannot be allowed into my dream. Not whilst I am like that. I would have hurt you."

"The potion makes you more approachable, Severus, and I'll be able to defend myself if I am fully aware of what is going on. I'm not some scared child! Stop trying to be so fucking noble, will you? I, along with the rest of the Order, held my own against Death Eaters and Voldemort. Never forget that," she hissed formidably.

It was true. The potion would make him more reachable as per the letter Paracelsus sent. She was a clever witch. What was she called? Yes, the cleverest witch of the age. Potter's right hand. In his dream, she had been a younger version of herself. That would not be the witch she would be if she came into his dream with him. She

would be as she was now before him. His tough, kind, clever Hermione. But, by Merlin's beard! He'd wanted to harm her. He'd felt his hate for her. He'd thrived on her fear of him. Severus couldn't risk harming her. Feeling very Slytherin, he said, "All right. We'll work something out." He reached up one hand to caress her jawbone tenderly. "I just need some time to think about this. To deal with this."

Hermione looked into his eyes, searching for honesty. *"Finite Incantatem,"* she said softly. "Don't make me regret that."

He sat up quickly, rubbing his legs. Blasted wench! She was too brilliant for her own good. Unsteadily, he got up and made his way to the bed. He sat on the edge, flexing the muscles in his legs to loosen them up. After a few minutes, he summoned his salve and applied it to his aching invisible gash. In no time, the pain subsided, and he felt at ease. Hermione was still sitting on the floor, grasping her wand, and watching him intently. There was so much that he wanted to say to her, but he couldn't. He glanced behind him to the rumpled sheets and could have cried anew. *I almost killed her.* Severus quickly put on some clothes, and at Hermione's protest, he held up a hand. "I demand some time to myself." With that said, he swept out of his chambers.

"I'm not as daft as you think, Severus," she muttered to herself. He wasn't going to let her help, was he? Well, like it or not, she would help him. She'd get backup if she had to. She would force him to take the potion if need be. Somehow. It was nearly dawn now. She might as well get dressed as well. There was no way she would be able to get back to sleep. Today would be a long, hard day. She wiped the last of her tears away as she looked into the mirror. Pointing her wand at her throat, she soothed any bruises that would have been left by his hands. If he did deny her access to his dream, she needed to have a plan. She began forming one in her mind.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus was standing on top of the Astronomy Tower as he had been for the last two hours. The chilly late December morning was doing a splendid job in numbing his body as well as giving him the strength he needed to numb his mind. He couldn't think of his needs or wants. He had to think of hers as well. No matter what they had been sharing or hoped to share in the future, he had to do something. This could not take place any longer. There were only a few options that he could explore.

The first option would be to send her back to Potter and Weasley. They would mend her eventually and be there for her until she found someone else more worthy of her. Yes, they would gladly tell her that it was a passing phase, her feelings would fade, and time would move on. She would of course teach here, but he'd treat her as he did the others. There would be no private time. He would just live with the night terrors until he couldn't any longer. At least she would be safe.

The second option would be to allow her to stay with him as she had been. He could take a sleeping draught each night. She would be safe bodily and safe in his dreams. The fear in her eyes, the repulsion he'd sensed, and her struggling against him would never come to pass again. She would still be safe. But, damn it, he would know. Deep in his mind, it would always be there. How could he live that way?

The third option, the most unlikely, would be to allow her to come into the dream with him. The things she had said had made sense to him, but how could he risk her? He would either say or do too many unforgivable things before they could defeat the remnants from the Succubus, or he would harm her irreparably. By all that was in him, he'd rather leave her only wondering what horrors he'd done than to have her experience them firsthand.

"Still here, Severus?"

He looked to his side. How long had his mentor been standing there? He'd been in such deep thought that he'd not noticed. "I've nowhere to go, Albus," he said brokenly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked softly.

"I think that you probably already know," Severus bit back. "Not much gets by you."

"I can only speculate, my boy," Albus said. "Talk."

"I...last night," he began, "I didn't take any potion to have a restful sleep. I had a dream. It was horrible. There was so much rage, hate, and bitterness. I felt as if I'd gone back twenty years. Hermione was there," he said, voice cracking. "I said and did unspeakable things to her. I only awoke when she began struggling against me...in bed. It seems that I had somehow began choking her. I...", his voice trailed off as his eyes began brimming with tears again. He ground them out savagely. "I can't hurt her, Albus. She's grown too important to me."

"Severus, if I thought that Hermione couldn't handle this, I wouldn't have suggested that she help you. It was Hermione that enabled you to ultimately deny the Succubus. The whole point to this potion is to have her enter your dreams to help you. Don't push her away now when you're so close," Albus admonished. "Everything you have ever dreamed of, no matter how remotely, is within your grasp."

"And, everything I used to be is back as well," Severus said scathingly. "Think you that she wants to be saddled with ~~that~~?"

"I think she accepts you in any form. A woman's arms and heart are sometimes the only things that save us from ourselves. If she can forgive your past, why can't you?" He remained thoughtfully quiet for a moment. "Severus, you have more than made up for your past. Have you not ever realized that?"

"I thought I had, Albus. I thought I had," he said sadly. "This just proves what I was, and what I'll probably always be deep down inside. No one could ever truly love or want me the way I was. It was what made...*her*...push me away."

Albus shook his head sadly. "No, Severus. This will hurt, but I will say it. You became what you were ~~because~~ she pushed you away." Severus' head turned sharply upon his friend, and his eyes narrowed dangerously. Albus held up a hand. "I'm not saying it was her fault, Severus. I'm saying that the years under your father's tyranny, the solitude here at Hogwarts, the ridicule you endured, the peer pressure you endured, and a number of things made you a bitter person. Your last hope of keeping on the right path came to you in the form of a white, trumpet-shaped flower. Once you lost that last thread of hope, you gave in. You let your friends lead you where they would."

"That's no excuse. Look where it got me. Look where it got her!" Severus said bitterly.

"She lives on, Severus. The green lushness of that flower remains, the vitality and vibrancy have lived on. It has been here all the while. You just chose not to see it that way." Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder affectionately. "Fate has seen fit to send another flower your way, or it's sent you a plant in any event. This one is not a fragile one, Severus. I daresay, she could be most likened to a sprig of Devil's Snare. She loves the dark Potions master. She has become comfortable in the dark, damp dungeons. She has laced herself around your body and soul, hasn't she? The more you try to wriggle free, the more she will resolve to keep you with her." Dumbledore chuckled at his own analogy. He was quite brilliant at times, wasn't he?

"I know what you are trying to do, Albus. Enough," Severus said dismissively. "All forenoon I've been thinking things through. I will have to let her go."

"Severus, my boy, I don't think it will be that easy. Are you prepared for a bitter row? Are you prepared for another twenty years of *what ifs*? I think you should go down to find her. I do believe she was down near the lake not long ago," he said casually.

"The Lake? In this chill? I'll see to her," he said before striding off briskly. What was she thinking? Roaming about in the snow! Devil's Snare indeed. The plant hated sunlight. Hermione was everything sunlight, everything pure, and everything he would want in a woman. He had never realized that before. He used to hate innocence. He used to begrudge those that grew up pampered in happy homes, those that never had to fight for their beliefs, and those that wallowed in self-importance without proving themselves.

Yes, he had cared for a woman once. Fancied himself as loving her, but it was nothing like this. Hermione made him feel so much. Was Albus right? Could he truly live with the long years ahead? He pushed the thoughts out of his mind as he rushed out toward the lake. He paused as she came into sight. She was breathtaking. Her wild hair was carried softly in the breeze, her cloak was flapping slightly, and her expression was priceless. She had that look of righteous determination about her. Turning slightly, she smiled at him. "Had enough time alone then?"

"Not nearly," he commented dryly, standing at her side to look out at the frozen lake.

"Then go on. Be alone, Severus." He sensed her bitterness, but he also detected hope.

"I suppose we should talk about this."

"Yes, I suppose."

"Hermione, come back home. We need to talk where it's comfortable," he said suddenly.

"Is it home, Severus? For how long?" she asked, meeting his gaze defiantly.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "That's the point of a talk, isn't it?" he asked, suddenly dripping with sarcasm. He'd not be reduced to begging. Spinning on his heel, he began trekking back to the castle, hoping she would follow him. As he reached the side entrance, he stopped. This was not the time to be hateful to her. What was wrong with him? He'd tried to choke the life out of her in his sleep, and here he was being an arse. He turned and felt immediate relief. She was slowly making her way towards him. He put his arm around her and led her the rest of the way. He could have sighed when her cold form leaned into his warmth. He knew then what he had to do.

After establishing a nice fire, he ordered up some tea. He had no appetite and was sure that she wouldn't either. Sipping on the tea for a few moments, he allowed his thoughts to gather. "Hermione, we are not going to go through with the potion this evening." He let those words sink in. She merely looked at him expectantly. "I don't want to be without you either, but I can't let *that* happen again. I want to see no harm befall you. I'll take a dreamless draught each night."

She shook her head. "That's ridiculous!" She had found her voice again. "You would become addicted to it, Severus. You would eventually ruin yourself. We must do this together. It's the only way."

"Hermione, no, you don't under..."

"Stop!" she interjected. "I understand perfectly. We have a chance at a normal happy life. This is the only way. Have you so little faith in me?"

"I have little faith in myself, Hermione. I once was a very hard man. What you've seen for the past seven years is nothing compared to who I used to be."

"No! I won't give up this chance at happiness. I'd rather be brutalized in a dream than live with a man that allowed his fears to eat away at him until the only thing that was left was someone else entirely!" Hermione had to make him understand. He would do this. She would force him if need be. "What do you fear, Severus?"

"Myself, damn it! I fear myself!" He exploded in fury, throwing the table over. "Do you know what I did to you? I hexed you more than once. I intended to rape you. I hated you. I wanted to hurt you. If you hadn't woken up when you did, I would not be here right now, and you wouldn't be either! I called you a Gryffindor whore. I thought of you as a Mudblood!"

She flinched for a moment. She'd not expected such an outburst. She took a deep, steadying breath as he poured himself a glass of the Scotch that he'd received for Christmas. "Severus, you are not that person anymore. It's only natural that you would fear yourself as you used to be. It's also natural that you would fear any harm coming to me, and worst of all, that harm coming from you. I do not hold it against you."

He took a long sip and stared at the woman sitting before him. Why did she have to be so damn forgiving? "Hermione, I will not allow you to enter that dream. I was horrible. Even only the words would hurt you, much less the actions."

"The first time I heard the word Mudblood was in my second year. Malfoy called me that. I had no clue as to what it was. I knew it must have been bad for Gryffindor's Quidditch team to react the way they did. Ron even tried to hex Malfoy over it. It wasn't until later, at Hagrid's hut, that I found out exactly what it meant. Yes, that did hurt, but I was only thirteen at the time, Severus. I am five years older now. I have heard and experienced many horrible things. Please don't think that some wretched things you could say would have me broken like some trampled flower!"

His drink stopped midway to his mouth. Trampled flower. Had she been talking to Albus? He shook his head. Unlikely. "But, Hermione..."

"No! Enough! I will know that it's not really you saying those things to me. Don't you see? Those are things that you would be afraid for me to hear you say. I know you aren't perfect, and I am not either. No one is. Harry, Ron, and I found out many things about you a long time ago. If I was so worried about that, do you think I would be here now?" she asked, finally losing the heat in her voice. "I've fallen in love with you no matter how you've treated me in the past. We have our whole lives ahead of us, Severus. We will make new memories."

Severus threw his glass at the fireplace. "ENOUGH!" He walked purposefully to her chair. He gripped her shoulders tightly before hissing. "You will not accompany me in my dream this night or ever. We can still have those things, but this will be done my way."

She shrugged out of his grasp. "Fine, Severus. You do what you've got to do. For now, I have something that I need to do. I will be back in a few hours." She escaped his arms, quickly threw some Floo powder into the fire, and stepped in. "The Burrow!"

He watched in stunned silence as she disappeared into the green flame. What the bloody hell did she need to do at Weasley's house? He started to follow her, but he thought better of it in the end. Perhaps she just needed time to think as he had. The Weasleys were like family to her. Pah! Let her go to them then.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione stepped out of the fire to everyone's shock. Her eyes were wild, and she seemed extremely upset. "Sorry to barge in," she said through false cheer. "I just needed to come for a visit."

"You're just in time for some lunch. We were about to tuck in," Molly said kindly, steering her to the table.

"Oh, I don't know if I could eat right now. I just wanted to talk to Harry for a minute."

"Nonsense. You'll do better to have a full stomach," Molly said easily. Ginny smiled uncertainly. Ron seemed confused by her presence. Harry's eyes were narrowed.

"You're right, of course," she said, wishing she hadn't blurted that out. The last thing she needed was a raging Harry Potter on her hands. "I've just had a tough morning."

"All right there, Hermione?" Ron asked, eyes beginning to narrow as well. "How tough of a morning?"

She waved her hand dismissively as she accepted the plate Molly placed before her. Why had she come here like this? She should have waited until she had composed herself. Of course they would think the worst. Molly was eyeing her curiously, but to her good sense, she wasn't asking questions.

"You look terrible, Mione," Ginny said once the dishes began putting themselves into the sink. "Out with it. What's happened?"

She watched as her three friends and the Weasley matriarch leaned forward expectantly. "All right. I'll tell you, but please don't pass any judgment until you've heard it all."

"Get to it," Harry demanded. She didn't like the glint in his eyes.

"You all know, of course, that Severus and I have taken our relationship to the next level." She smirked at Ron's groan. "Anyway, I was able to dispel my Incubus easily. It even went as far as to turn into Harry and Ron before it gave up. Severus, though, he had a harder time. It tried a couple of other people before showing itself in true form. To make a long tale short, he was able to deny her as well, but in a fit of rage, she punished him by slicing his leg with her tail."

"Wicked," Ron said, eyes big. "What did she look like? A tail, you say?"

Hermione found herself giving the details of the Succubus' appearance to the group. She didn't mind. It prolonged the hard part. "Now, his leg has no visible sign that he was cut, but he can still feel it. In his dreams, the wound is still open and fresh. The Succubus had some magical poison that infected him. During waking hours, he treats it as if it is a normal wound, but in the night, it does something completely different to him. It gives him night terrors. Terrors in which he becomes his worst fear. In this case, it's himself he fears more than anything else. That and the fear that I will be hurt."

"I don't like the sound of this," Harry stated gravely.

Molly nodded. "I could see where Severus could fear that. What's happened, dear?"

She explained about Dumbledore's friend, Paracelsus. Then, she told them about the potion that they had brewed together, and then she told him that he'd not taken anything to sleep with the prior night.

"Go on then," Ron urged. "Did he have a wicked dream? I'll bet he was stalking about in his ruddy Death Eater robes." He quieted at Molly's scornful look. "Sorry."

Hermione told them about everything that had happened from the moment she woke up until before she came there to see them. Ron looked angry, but uncharacteristically, held back any sharp comments.

Ginny had tears in her eyes. "Oh, Mione, I am so sorry. Just let him take the potion. You'll both be safe then."

Molly smiled and took her hand in hers. "You can't do that, Hermione. You'd never be happy that way." She then looked to Ginny as if to shut her up.

Harry stood up. "I'll do it."

"Do what?" Ron asked.

"Hermione is here because she needs me to help. I think I know what she has planned. Nobody will ever harm anyone I love. Dream phantom or no," he said determinedly. "Let's have a walk in the garden. I'm sure Crookshanks will be glad to have a distraction from chasing the pesky gnomes. We can talk privately there." He gave the others a scathing look. "Don't follow us."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Hi, Crooks!" Hermione exclaimed as her pet pounced into her arms. "I've missed you! I hope you've not been causing too much mischief for Molly."

Harry watched as his friend cuddled her cat closely. What exactly did she want from him? He had his suspicions, and if he had his way, he'd definitely have a talk with Snape about a few things. "Out with it, Mione. What do you need me to do?"

She released Crooks and turned sad eyes his way. He held out his arms, and she practically fell into them. "Harry, I love him. I want to be with him for always. My place is at Hogwarts. I've known that for a while now, but thinking of being there with him, it makes it so much better. We get on really well though we have a go at each other now and then, but it's comfortable. I can't lose him, Harry."

He soothed her hair down. "I can see it in your eyes when you talk about him. I can hear it in your voice. I never told you how I honestly felt about this. I think it's time I do so now." He pulled back to look into her eyes. "I've never gotten on with him. I blamed him for Sirius' death until I realized that it was mostly my fault. It was just easier to blame him. Last year, when Draco and I became friendly, I was taken into the fold. I conversed long and often with both Malfoys, Dumbledore, and Snape. They trained me hard in certain things that even you and Ron don't know about. I started grudgingly respecting him. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears firsthand about the things that he endured when he went off to spy."

"What things did they train you for?" she asked.

"Shush. Not now, Mione." He grinned. "When Lupin killed Pettigrew, it was Snape that had set the trap. When Lupin was caught and killed, I was with Snape and Malfoy when they brought back his body. He grieved. It may not have been tears, but it was grief just the same. That touched me on some level. He's always been an arse to me, but on the same note, I've not always been nice to him. When you first told us about it, I was thinking it was crazy. Hell no, I thought to myself. But, then I realized that he was a man under that hard exterior. He grieved for Lupin. Grieved for someone that he used to hate. If he was capable of that, then he was capable to look out for my best girl."

"I never knew about that," she said with regret.

"I trust him to always keep you safe, and even though Voldemort is dead now, there are always those out there that are still up to no good. Besides, who would be more perfect for you than someone else that teaches? Someone else that is interested in research? Someone else who shares your lust for reading? There are many things that I could say. If you can give him the time of day, then I can too."

"Thanks, Harry," she said with a smile, hugging him again.

"That night he stormed into the common room only made me believe what I'm saying even more. He looked like he cared, and that was enough for me. If he even looked the tiniest bit concerned about you, then I knew there had to be something else underneath. I'll do what I can to see you happy, Hermione. You're my family."

"He does care about me. He told me this morning. Severus, well, he's just complicated. I've not even begun to delve into his feelings on certain things, but I would like the rest of my life to be able to try. Do you understand what I mean? I don't care that in his dream he is this horrible person. I feel that I can reach him. He won't listen that the potion makes him more approachable, and it offers protection to me. It offers a chance to purge his body of the poison that *thing* put in it!" Hermione was gesturing wildly with her hands.

Harry laughed. "What are you suggesting?"

"Well, I just knew I needed backup, and I knew that I could count on you. Ron would want to help, but it's not the same. Severus doesn't respect him as he does you." Harry scoffed. "No, really, Harry. Why else would he trust you to come into my dorm? I can tell, you know. Just some things that he lets slip give it away."

"So, you've got a plan then?"

"All right. I have one, but it's totally barbaric!"

Harry smiled. "That, my dear, I think we can manage quite nicely. Come this way toward the brook. We'll work things out."

Hermione smiled. She was right to come to Harry. He'd help her make things right between Severus and her. She'd only just found him, and she wasn't ready to give up on him just yet.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus was sitting back in his chair holding onto his now empty bottle of Scotch. "Well, I guess she might not come back after all. Perhaps Weasley has talked some sense into her," he grumbled to himself. It was nearly nightfall. Their potion was nearly finished with its allotted simmering time. He would bottle it for research purposes. This should be documented to save some other sod one day. Wouldn't hurt to have a batch handy in any event. "I wonder how long it lasts?" he asked himself. He could

feel a headache coming on. *Damn! Why did I drink all of this?* The worst part was that it had not intoxicated him as he had hoped. No. His mood was just too sour, and he'd had too much to speculate on.

His fireplace began to sputter, and the flames turned green. To his great displeasure, Harry Bloody Potter stepped out. "Potter!" he spat the name. "What are you doing here?"

He narrowed his eyes as Potter nonchalantly dusted the soot from his robes before even looking at him. Potter then took his time strutting across to the chair next to him to have a seat. "I don't remember inviting you to come here," he hissed.

"Hermione gave me permission, sorry. I've just come from talking to her," Potter said blandly, smoothing out his dark green robes.

"Is that so?" Severus said, leaning forward.

"Yes," came the defiant reply.

"Well, get on with it, so that you can GET OUT!" He stood menacingly, towering over the seated Potter. To his horror, the boy started laughing. His vibrant green eyes were filled with amusement. "What, pray tell, is so bloody funny?"

"You may as well have a seat, sir. I'll not leave until I've had my say," he said firmly.

Severus sneered at the menace. "You dare think I won't throw you out?"

Harry's smile faded, and the green in his eyes clouded over. "You can try, Snape."

Why that insolent little blaggard! In a rage, he reached for his wand, but before he could point it firmly at his nemesis, the boy had sprung up and pointed his own wand at him. *Damn Scotch.* In a whisper, he asked, "What do you think you are going to do with that boy?"

"*Accio Snape's wand,*" Harry said in an eerie voice. Severus tried to grab his wand, but it flew to Harry's open palm. "You've taught me well, you know. Do sit down."

Seething, Severus stood his ground. "I am going to take so many points from Gryffindor that you're dreadful progeny will still be trying to make up for it. I'll see you expelled for this, Potter!"

Harry's eyes flashed with anger. With a silent word and a flick of his wand, Severus was seated in his chair once again. "Come now, Snape. You don't think Dumbledore would allow that, do you?"

"I know he has not condoned this, boy. Vengeance will be sweet once I get my wand back."

Harry laughed again. "Constant Vigilance! You should have been expecting that I would take your wand from you. Or, did you prefer a bit of a Muggle duel? Want to take your frustrations out on someone else, Snape? Dare to tangle with me? I'm a sight stronger than Hermione is. Wouldn't I be more of a challenge?"

"Fuck off, Potter! I would never purposely hurt her!" Severus yelled, losing all control. "Were I able to move right now, I would tear you apart. You are so like your father. Bloody fool of a wiz..."

Harry's wand had moved again, and Severus started sputtering. "Feels good to be choked, Snape? You shut up about my dad. I'm not here because of that. I'm here about Hermione." The hold on his throat was released quickly, and Severus gasped for air. "Sorry. I just hate when you go on about him."

Severus quickly thought over the situation while he regained his breath. It would be prudent to play along with Potter. Obviously, he didn't really want to hurt him. Perhaps if he let him have his say, he would leave. He felt a slight pang of betrayal. Potter was here for Hermione. Had she told them what a monster he had become? She had fled and gone to Potter. History repeats itself. "You know, the Imperio is an Unforgivable Curse, Potter."

"And, just who says that is what I am using? Do you hear my voice in your head asking you to sit? Of course you don't. Besides, I'm not stupid. I know you can throw that off. I wouldn't use it." Harry grinned. "This is just a bit of something that Dumbledore taught me. Didn't you ever wonder why Voldemort fumbled for a moment with his wand?" Realization dawned on Severus' face. "That's right. I'm using Dark Magic, Snape. It only worked for a moment on Voldemort though. He recognized it for what it was. He threw it off straightaway, but those few seconds were all we needed to defeat him."

Potter sat back in his chair, but he kept his wand aimed on Severus. After a moment, Severus felt something lift from his body. The only thing keeping him from ripping Potter to shreds was the wand pointed at him. "Have your say, boy," he bit out between clenched teeth.

"Glad you'd like to listen then," he said. "Hermione loves you. I think you are good for her, and I am here to ask you to give her a chance in this. I've known her for nearly the past seven years of my life. I *know* she can handle what you've got to throw at her in this dream, Snape. Will you not give her the chance?"

"No, and it would bode well for you to mind your own business, Potter. You don't know what she's up against," he said quickly. Maybe he could talk some sense into the little brat. "I think it best that we try another avenue."

"What? Draught? That won't work in the long run. You'll be doing yourself more harm than good. Wouldn't you rather be sneaking about the corridors taking points off of other Houses? That would change, you know. You'd end up sneaking off to your personal stores for a swig every so often. You'd end up sacked!" Harry said, not budging.

"Damn it, Harry! I can control the urges to drink a ruddy bit of draught, but I can't control the urges in my dream. I will hurt her!" he said, completely annoyed.

"You've only called me Harry once before," the boy said softly.

"What? What are you going on about?" Severus asked. Damn! He had said Harry, hadn't he? Bugger! "What does it matter what I call you? I call you a damn pest more than anything. Why don't you just get the hell out of here? I will not change my mind."

As if he hadn't heard what Snape said, Harry continued, "It was right after I fell once I killed Voldemort. When his spirit was sucked out of this world, and it tried to take mine with it, that was when you called me Harry. You thought I was dying. The way you looked at me. I saw it before my eyes closed. You do care, don't you?" Severus stilled and looked at the young wizard across from him. "I've never told anyone. Not even Mione."

"I...anyone would have worried if you'd died. You didn't deserve it after what you'd been through." Severus said quietly. "Not that I haven't thought of your demise many times!" He narrowed his eyes. "What is this really about, Harry?" *Blast!* He'd said it again.

"I want us to start over. I love Hermione too, and that means you'll be seeing a lot of me. You'll be seeing a lot of my 'dreadful progeny' as well. We don't have to be best mates, but maybe I could talk to you sometimes like I used to talk to Lupin," Harry said, voice suddenly sad with regret.

Severus softened. Poor Remus. He'd finally killed the bastard that betrayed Lily and Potter. He'd avenged his friends only to have the favor returned. Why would Potter want to talk to him about things? He knew that he loathed the sight of him. "Be that as it may, there are others that you can turn to."

"Who? Dumbledore won't always be here for me. As far as Arthur, well, it's just not the same. You though...you knew my parents. Even if you hated my mum and dad, you're still their age. You lived," Harry said, voice quavering. "I don't begrudge you that, Snape. I know you tried to save them. Dumbledore told me that you converted when you found out they were on Voldemort's hit list. I just...to hell with it!"

He could see that it had taken a lot for the boy to say what he had. Quietly, looking away from those damn green eyes, he said, "I didn't hate them, Harry. I just...your mother, she always tried to be a friend to me even when I didn't appreciate it. I was sorry to see her die."

"What about my dad?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Him too," Severus replied. "I still had a debt to repay, you know." Harry grinned, understanding that Snape could never admit to anything else. "You and I? Well, we'll have to see. I don't know how to let go of some things. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"One step at a time, sir," Harry said hopefully. "Now, are you going to let Hermione help you tonight?"

"No, I will not. I have made my decision, and no matter what you think has occurred here between us, I shall not change my mind," Severus said firmly.

"Pity," Harry said softly.

"What is?"

"This," Harry said pointing his wand at Severus. Harry began speaking in what Snape now clearly recognized as Parseltongue, and he was bound to the chair by thin, smoky snakes.

"Just WHAT is the meaning of this, POTTER?" Snape bellowed.

"I'm sorry, sir, but this is for your own good." Harry ignored Snape's hateful glare and made his way to the fireplace. He threw in a bit of powder, and said, "The Burrow." A moment later Potter stuck his head into the fire. Severus could hear him speaking to Hermione. He was telling her to come through.

A moment after Potter moved away, a sheepish Hermione came through. "Severus! Are you all right?" she asked, moving toward him. "Harry! What are these snakes doing?"

"Keeping his stubborn arse in the chair," Harry replied, removing his robes.

"How could you?" Severus asked his lover in a hurt voice. "How could you do this to me? You knew what he was about!"

"More or less," she said, lifting her chin defiantly. "Harry's going to help us. You don't want to hurt me, and I've figured out how to ease your mind on it."

"How so?" he asked coldly.

"Harry," she said in a word, brushing back a lock of hair from his face. "He won't let you hurt me."

"He won't be able to stop it. There is only enough potion here for the two of us! This plan is absurd! I would have expected better from you," Severus said, anger taking over. "Whose idiotic idea is this?"

"That's enough, Snape, unless you want to lose the ability to speak for a little while," Harry warned. "Just listen to her. She's brilliant."

Hermione placed a small kiss on Severus' cheek. "It's because I love you. You and I are going to take the potion. Harry is going to watch."

"This isn't a bloody show like you watch at home on your Muggle contraptions, Hermione! How is he going to know if I am causing you harm? Hmmm?" Severus couldn't believe this lame idea of hers. Ridiculous!

"Severus, if you had paid more attention to the notes on the page with the potion instructions, you'd have read that one bloke stayed behind to be sure that all was well with his mates. The dream, as you said yourself, will be put forth above our sleeping bodies as if in a cloud. Harry will see us," she said softly.

"No. I don't want two of you witnessing that! Absolutely not! You won't force me to take the potion. I refuse to cooperate, and as such, I want the both of you out of here now," he hissed angrily. She had gone too far. He didn't want Potter to see that! Of all people!

"We can make you take it, Severus. You have no choice, and if you can't forgive me once we come through this, then I will have to accept that. Harry and I have made a safe word. If I use it, then he will wake me. If I can't talk for some reason, we even have a safe method of determining distress through my eyes. It's a good plan." Her voice was soft and pleading, but he didn't want to hear it at the moment.

"Get away from me," he said coldly.

"All right then. Come on, Harry. I have to bottle the potion now. It's about time for it." Hermione began walking to the door. "Hang on. Harry, can I have a minute alone?"

"Sure, I'll be just through there then."

After Harry walked out, Hermione went back to kneel in front of Severus. "I am doing this for you, you know. Trust me please."

This was his last chance to plead his case. "Hermione, you won't like what you see. Just me telling you about it is not the same as experiencing it. Even if we work through the dream, you will come out with a bad taste in your mouth. I was the monster in the dream, and I've relived the horror all day long."

"Then, we shall work through this together. You'll see," she said.

"There will be no together, Hermione, if you go through with this," he warned. "You should have heeded my word. Now that damn boy is in the mix!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way then, Severus, but Harry and I are going to do this whether you like it or not. I'll still love you after all this is said and done. If you can ever find it in your heart to forgive me, then I'm sure you'll be able to locate my chambers." She kissed his lips softly. "I will never be with anyone else. Ever. I've had the best. No one shall ever compare to you, love."

Without a backwards glance, she made her way to Harry and the laboratory. "Just in time." She put out the flame. Silently, she poured half into one goblet and half into another. Tears began burning in her eyelids.

"That great prat will see reason, Hermione," Harry said, sensing her indecision. "He loves you. I can tell. We've got to do this."

She nodded. "You're right. We have to do this. I'm just afraid, Harry."

"Of the dream?"

"That he won't come back to me after we do this. What if he never forgives me?" A couple of tears fell free before she wiped them away.

"Don't even think on it, Mione. You're the best thing he's ever had going for him. Besides, you are going to be living and working here. He'll have to come around, and one day, it'll get through his thick skull that this was meant to be. That you are his destiny."

She smiled softly in thanks. "Let's do it then. Once we drink the potion, we'll not take long to fall asleep. If I say Lily Evans Potter, wake me up straightaway. Don't do it otherwise, no matter what you see, Harry. Promise me!"

"I won't, Mione. I know what you're made of," he said, taking Snape's Goblet from her. "Shall we get to it?"

"Right," she agreed. With some trepidation, she made her way to the bedchamber and waited for Harry to bring Severus. Shortly after, Severus stiffly walked towards the bed. She could tell that Harry was forcing him. "Down next to her, sir," Harry commanded. Severus stiffly sat next to Hermione. "Open your mouth and drink this." Severus did as he was bid, but Hermione could see the loathing in his eyes. He hated being forced into something. "There's a good bloke."

Severus turned to look at Hermione. She was drinking down the vile potion. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I know," he replied. He hated that she and Potter had bushwhacked him this way, but he knew she meant well. He could only pray now that he wouldn't hurt her or kill her. Grudgingly, he admitted to himself that having Potter about was a plus. At least, he wouldn't be able to move in his sleep to harm her. Even as the thought passed through his mind, Potter began binding them both with his phantom snakes. The last coherent thought that entered his mind before sleep came was that Harry reminded him of a Voldemort with Lily's eyes. Heaven help them all if this boy ever turned into a dark wizard.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry sat back in the chair he'd conjured next to the bed. He propped his feet up next to Snape's still form. All he could do now was wait. He thought back to the conversation that he and Snape had earlier. He could sense that Snape wanted to accept his plea for friendship, but he was too proud to do so. Harry grinned. He'd just have to pester him until he gave in of course. A burst of flames signaled Fawkes' presence. Turning in his chair he saw the Phoenix. "Hello, my friend. Come to watch the show, have you?" Fawkes sang a relaxing song for a few minutes before flying to sit on Harry's lap.

He knew that Dumbledore had sent the bird to keep him company. Perhaps if something went wrong, Fawkes could help out. Severus didn't know it, but the Headmaster knew exactly what had transpired. In fact, he seemed relieved when Harry told him of his plans. This was for the man's own good after all. At that moment, a lofty mist began forming near the top of Snape's canopy. The denser it became, the more soundly the pair on the bed seemed to be sleeping. Before his eyes, a yellow light drifted from Snape's temple and floated into the cloud. Harry could immediately make out the scowling Potions master's form walking through what appeared to be Hogwarts' lower corridors. "Good Lord!" He'd never seen the man looking so menacing. Another yellow light lifted from Hermione's temple and made its way to the cloud. He saw her look around uncertainly and begin to make her way in the direction that Snape had gone.

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**Southern's Notes:** next up...dream time

## Chapter Eight

*Chapter 9 of 32*

Severus? dream can be found here.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and cheers go to the lovely GinnyW, who is kindly going through this for me to catch any stray funkies!

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Where were the little bastards? Someone was always out of bed, mostly the insolent little Gryffindors. Damn Weasley and his two sidekicks. He hoped to run into someone tonight, what with the mood he was in. There is a thought. It would do well for a quick torture to those most deserving. Ha! To those not deserving as well. There was always something to pay for, wasn't there? "What is this ache in my leg?" he asked aloud. He stopped to put his leg against the wall and slid back his trousers. A long, deep, gaping slash that was still lazily bleeding lay open on his shin. "How the fuck did this happen?" he asked, clearly puzzled.

Then a thought occurred to him. The last thing he remembered was Granger. He was about to take her, to drive his cock into her, and then she was gone. The witch! How did she escape? And, she was more than likely responsible for this wound on his leg. He'd make her pay for this, but how to get her out of Gryffindor Tower? He'd have to make a plan. The first thing he needed was to heal this up. Severus quickly made his way towards his chambers. He met up with Mrs. Norris on the way. "Bloody bitch," he said, trying to lay a kick on her. The cat hissed, dodged the blow, and scurried off. "That's right. Go get Argus. Bring him back here." He momentarily contemplated on waiting the filthy squib out. The cat was sure to lure him back here. He could always accidentally hex him, claiming that he thought he was an intruder near his passage, but then how would he explain that he'd hexed first and asked questions later?

No matter! This leg was bothering him. Blasted bitch! "I'll get you, Granger," he hissed between clinched teeth. As quickly as possible, he made his way to his personal storeroom. Once there, he found a thick salve to clot the oozing, and then he bandaged it. "Now on to better things," he hissed, envisioning a beaten and naked Granger. His Lord wouldn't mind if he had just a little fun before he brought her to him. Chuckling, he stealthily made his way towards Gryffindor Tower.

Once near the second landing on the stairwell, he heard someone approaching from above. He pressed into the shadows against the wall. The ugly face of Argus Filch came out of the darkness. He was holding a lamp up, looking about. His pesky cat was staring in the direction of Snape's hiding spot. "I don't see anyone, my sweet." The man began to descend the stairs in the opposite direction. Severus crept forward easily. Just as he reached out a hand, Mrs. Norris hissed. "What is it, my love? Is there a student out of bed?" As if the cat feared him, she began sprinting down the stairway to lead Filch away.

Severus leaned back into the shadows. Perhaps he could let the fool go on. If some idiot student was out of bed, the simpleton could keep them occupied. As soon as the lamplight faded down the stairwell, Snape resumed his journey up. He was nearing Gryffindor Tower when he heard something. Crouching down near a bust of someone named Paracelsus, he waited to see who was happening by. *Paracelsus*. Why did that name sound familiar? He closed his eyes, savoring the scent that wafted up to his nose. Jasmine. Granger was near. She would be his this night! No escaping!

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry felt a bit like Dudley. Dudley had taken to the practice of watching two programs at once ever since he got his second television set in his room. The scenes before Harry now were much like that. On one portion of the cloud, he could see what Snape was doing. On the other portion, he could see what Hermione was doing. Odd, really. He'd been watching Snape's progress and nearly cheered him on when he saw him take a swipe at that ruddy cat of Filch's. Who hadn't dreamt of doing the very same thing to that informer? Snape was looking very sour, and he seemed to have nothing but the worst on his mind. He looked very much like the spy slithering along the corridors, remaining mostly in the shadows. It would make for a good training show for aspiring firebrands.

Hermione's progress puzzled him at first. She had started off following in Snape's direction, but then she doubled back to their common room. Once there, she had crept up into his dorm room. She took Ron's wand from the bedside table and slipped it into her side pocket. Harry was a little disconcerted about the lay of the dorm room. There were only four beds. He noticed that Hermione was puzzled about this as well. The sleeping forms were Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Ron. Where was his bed?

Hermione seemed to stare directly out at him for a moment before smiling. She had her wits about her, that one. She knew to prepare herself, and to not let a little thing like the lay of the dorm room bother her. He watched absordedly as she made her way back out through the Fat Lady's portrait hole. Harry noticed that Snape was nearly upon her, and he resisted the urge to yell something. Fawkes was eyeing the dream so intently, he wondered if Dumbledore was seeing the dream's progress through the bird's eyes.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione sensed his presence before she saw him. He was somewhere near, probably enclosed by shadows just watching her. She decided to put the thoughts of Harry's missing bed out of her mind. It was time to deal with the situation at hand. Her fearsome lover would be pouncing on her at any minute. "Oh, dear, it's so dark. *Lumos*," she said in a bored voice. Her wand lit up as she continued her forward trek. She had just passed by the bust of Dumbledore's friend when a hand clamped around her mouth.

"Miss Granger," a low, deadly voice purred in her ear. "Is there any reason why you are out of your bed this night?" He licked her lobe suggestively before whispering, "I think a naughty girl such as yourself should be punished. Don't you agree?"

Not knowing exactly what to do, she shrugged. She couldn't speak with his hand pressed so tightly upon her mouth. In fact, she could barely move as she was now firmly pressed against his body. She nearly moaned passionately at the feel of him, but that might not be wise. Hermione bit back the emotion and played the part of frightened student. She silently prayed that no matter what Harry saw, he wouldn't wake her.

"Tsk, Tsk, Miss Granger. I would have thought you'd know the correct answer." He dipped his head to bite her shoulder sharply. She flinched as real pain shot through her shoulder. "You will be punished tonight. I am going to do so many things to you that you will wish you were dead, but before I allow that mercy, I will bring you before my Lord so that he can have a taste of you. I don't know why, but he's always had a thing for Mudblood filth such as you. You remember that, don't you? The way he used to look at you? Well, no, I don't guess you would know about that. Oh, but I do. I know so many things, Miss Granger." He moved slightly and bit her other shoulder just as firmly. She winced again.

Damn! This really did hurt. Not wanting to lose her resolve, she concentrated on keeping her goal in mind *Let him have his way for now*. She could handle this. She had to prove it to him. It was the only way that they could get past this once it was over. A voice inside her head wondered if she would get through this for a moment, but then she remembered Harry. With Harry on her side, nothing could go wrong. She allowed a shiver to pass through her body, much to Severus' delight.

"If I didn't know better, Miss Granger, I would say you are anticipating this. There is no need to prolong the inevitable, now is there?" he asked silkily, while taking her wand from her hand. "There's a good girl. Come along quietly." He roughly pushed her forward. "We are going down to the dungeons. Make one move to run or one sound, and I'll make you pay dearly." She gasped and flinched as if to deflect a blow.

*Sweet Merlin, but he sounded so cold.* This was not the Severus that she knew. He was in his worst Potions master form imaginable. Gods! He intended to bring her to ruddy Voldemort. This was Death Eater Snape. The Snape before he defected over to Dumbledore. Maybe that was something she could play upon. If he changed sides back then, even after being this Snape, then it was possible he could do it again.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry's eyes narrowed. When Snape had bit her, both times, the Hermione on the bed whimpered in pain. What was she feeling? Damn, how he wished he could just jump in there to help out. He looked down to Snape's sleeping face. He had stirred a bit, but he couldn't move much with the bindings. He had the gall to smile in his sleep, as if he were having pleasant dreams. If one thing Harry was full of, that was confidence in Hermione's ability to do the cleverest works of magic. Not only magic, but she also had her own way of getting herself out of bad situations. She was already one up on Snape as it is. He thought that she was totally disarmed. Harry chuckled. Didn't know she'd already thought to get a second wand, did he?

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus could feel the uncertainty and fear rising up in the tart. He bit back the urge to take her there in the hall, but it wouldn't do for someone to happen upon them. No. There would be no escaping him this time. His private chambers would do nicely for what he had in mind. He'd have to transfigure his couch into a makeshift bed of course. It wouldn't do to let the filthy little whore onto his own bed. Snape smirked. She would tell him exactly what she had done to his leg and how she had escaped before the night was over. He guaranteed that much.

"Why have you stopped?" he asked quietly when she paused.

"Sir, I think I heard someone. Should we say I am to be punished for being out after curfew?" she asked softly. He noted the fright in her voice. She was nervous. Did she hope to be rescued?

"You will say nothing. I will deal with whomever it is that is gallivanting about tonight. If you make one wrong move, you will have a death on your hands. Do you understand? I am not above ridding the world of any unworthy little whelps!"

"Yes, sir," she replied obediently.

"Good girl. Now move along," he commanded. She began walking again. Pity she had to die. She was quite obedient. He could break her so easily and likely have her beg him before he was through with her. That's what they all did. He sneered in remembrance of his last woman. She had clawed at him fiercely before finally succumbing to the pleasures his tongue had wrought on her body. He hardened instantly at the thought. There was nothing more pleasing than breaking a willing woman's spirit. Granger had enough spunk in her to try to stop him. How he relished the impending battle!

Just as they reached the final corridor near his chambers, someone came into view. He pointed his wand in their direction, throwing light on the person. "Draco! What are you doing out tonight?"

The young Malfoy smirked at him before raising an eyebrow at Hermione. "I suppose, not much unlike yourself, I'm out for a bit of fun. You know how our Lord likes us to use these students at any chance we get. I was nearly upon that Bones wench when ruddy Filch accosted me."

Severus sighed. "Yes, I ran into him as well. Do keep quiet, and try not to attract attention to yourself, boy! We could hear you from just down the way. That stupid caretaker would just love the chance to punish you."

Draco eyed Hermione suggestively. "Our Lord will be pleased, sir. Should you need any help with this one, I'll be back in my dorms within the hour."

"I'll need no help with this whore. I think I can slide my cock in easy enough. I have a few hexes up my sleeves still," Severus said dryly. "Get out of here!" Draco hurried on to wherever his new destination was, and Severus leered at the girl before him. She had turned around to face him. His words had hurt her.

"What's wrong, little creature of dirt? Didn't you think that I knew you were a whore?" he asked menacingly as he grabbed her arm, flinging her into the wall. He smirked as she shrunk back in fear. "The last time I caught you out, I know you were going off to have a secret session with both Weasley and Longbottom! You will pay for escaping me that night, and you will pay for this wound on my leg. What sort of magic did you use? Hmmm?"

He saw that she was puzzled for a moment. "Neville? He never goes out with me at night. It's always just Ron and Harry that-

"Do not speak his name," Severus hissed, pulling her forward by her hair the rest of the way. He took pleasure in her cries of pain. She'd be doing more than whining before long. How dare she say Harry in front of him? She'd pay for that! That was a name he and his Lord loathed. There was no Harry any longer. The memory of the boy would need to be beaten out of her.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry looked into sleeping Hermione's face. She was grimacing with pain. Snape was yanking her by the hair at the moment. Bastard! Harry stared at the dream cloud, beginning to feel his insides start to boil. The fire in the grate began roaring angrily, and each lit lamp in the room began to flicker with his building rage. Snape had better not harm her, or else he'd...! He'd what? He couldn't enter the dream. No, but he could blast his arse from the bed! He turned suspicious green eyes to the man sleeping contentedly on the bed. He took one step towards that side of the bed. Just as an unnatural breeze began flowing through the room, Fawkes began to sing.

As always, the song of the Phoenix relaxed him, told him that things would be all right, gave him hope in dark times. He had made a promise to Hermione, and he would keep it. He wouldn't wake her or do anything unless she uttered their safe word. His mother's name. "You're right, Fawkes. I need to keep my feelings out of this. Can't always play the hero, now can I?" The intelligent creature seemed to nod, but he didn't break his song until Harry sat back in his chair to watch what was occurring above them. He wondered why Snape would see Draco as a companion? Didn't he have any recollection of the good that had happened? Didn't he know that the Malfoys defected as well? Harry supposed not. One thing was apparent. He hated Harry even in his dreams. He looked like he could have done the Killing Curse on her just now when she'd uttered his name.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione bid her welling tears not to fall. She'd not let him see her cry. He would likely remember everything that had happened here, and if he thought that he'd caused her much pain, he would not forgive himself or her for making him do this. He roughly threw her onto the floor as he placed strong wards on his door. Severus then transfigured his couch into a bed.

He turned around to eye her coldly. "First thing I need to do is get a little revenge." He grinned wickedly before hissing, *Diffindo!*

"Owww!" she cried out, clutching her leg. She could see the big tear in her jeans and the bloody rip in her skin.

"There. Now we're even. You should have learnt your lesson last time, Mudblood. You can never win against me. Where were we? Ah, yes, you can start by telling me exactly what you've done to my leg," he hissed. "Speak quickly now, or I shall be forced to give you a matching slice on your other supply limb."

She had to think fast. She had him talking. Maybe this was her chance. "I...you told me to do it, sir. Don't you remember?" She knew from the exchange with Draco that he had no respect for Filch. She decided to play on that here.

Hermione saw his eyes narrow. "Why," he spat, "would I have you cut me in such a way?" She could tell that he didn't believe her at all, but she would have to sound convincing. And, since he didn't remember how he truly received the cut or how she escaped, she would use that as well.

"Sir, Filch came nosing about. You told me to do it where he could see it, and it was the reason you were going to punish me," she said quickly. "He forced me back to Gryffindor Tower where I have been awaiting word of punishment for my actions."

Severus seemed to think this over and nodded slightly. "Very well," he said. "Fix it now. I have applied salve to it, but it's already not helping. I can feel the bandage beginning to soak anew with fresh blood. Do this, and I will make your pain more sufferable."

"Yes, sir," she said promptly. The only problem was that she had no idea what to do. "Er...could you sit down and disrobe that portion?"

"Anxious to see me out of my robes again, Granger?" he asked with a smirk.

"I only want to do your bidding, sir," she said respectfully. She could see that he thrived not only on her fear, but also on her obedience. She dropped her eyes to her own bleeding leg as he began taking off his robe and lowering his trousers. She hoped Harry wasn't thinking of doing anything reckless at the moment. No. He'd not ruin this. She had faith in her friend. He was her rock, her steady force over the years that guided her, accepted her, and befriended her when no others had.

Once he sat back on the bed, clad in only his shirt and boxers, she moved forward tentatively. What could she do now? An epiphany occurred. Her touch. Her voice. Her love for him would undo this. "Sir? I require my wand for only a moment."

He barked with laughter. "Think you that I would trust you with a weapon, Miss Granger?"

"If you please, sir, I need it for only a moment," she said softly as she undid his bandage. It was oozing with clumpy blood and sticky puss. "I need to create a bluebell flame."

"I think not, Miss Granger. Get to work!"

"All right then, but it's needed to sterilize my hands to fix your wounds. It won't help if you are the one to cast it though because only the caster is protected from its flames," she said. "I'd hate to cause further infection."

"Very well," he spat. "I shall place my wand against your neck. Give me one reason, and I will kill you." He handed her wand to her slowly as he dug his own into her neck painfully. She bit her lip to keep from crying out as she created her small fire. The enticing blue flames reminded her of the potion they'd brewed together before making love on the laboratory table. She dared a glance at him and saw that, the flame too, mesmerized him.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she asked, handing the wand back to him. He took it from her, looking at her oddly.

"Do your task," he said finally, keeping his wand on her.

She passed her hands around and through the magical fire and felt her hands heat immensely. She'd not receive burns or scars for this, but she could feel the pain just as well. She tried a little conversation as she began to work. "These flames are my specialty. Do you know that I can place mine inside a jar, and it won't burn out?"

"I do not care," he said with a sneer. "One last time, Miss Granger. If you don't get on with it, I shall twist your scrawny little neck."

She nodded and placed her hands near the bottom of his cut, pressing slightly. She heard him wince and felt the pain in her neck subside as his wand moved away. "It will only hurt for a bit. I am drawing out the infection and sanitizing the wound." He gave a sharp nod and leaned back some. As she applied slight pressure and pushed the open skin upward, she saw more puss and a venom like substance, along with blood, begin to ooze out. She paused halfway to heat her hands once again. After she was finished getting all of the poisons possible to spew out of the wound, she got him to summon a fresh bandage to wrap the wound again. He hissed an extinguishing spell to still the flames of her fire.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"What the bloody hell is she thinking?" Harry asked Fawkes. "She could have overpowered him right there while he was in pain. Now look! The lout is half dressed and back up again!"

Harry had to sit on his hands when Snape had sent a slicing hex at her. Sometimes his emotions got the better of him, and he wanted to be sure he'd have a few seconds to think things through before trying to hex Snape. He knew he wouldn't, but the urge had still been there.

"I know, Fawkes," Harry said. "It's not his fault. It's still hard to stand by and watch when Mione is hurting like that. She seems all right though." Fawkes chirped a few notes of a song as Harry patted his feathers. A thought occurred to him. Dumbledore had sent the Phoenix here because he knew that its presence would relax him. Did this mean the headmaster didn't truly trust him to sit back and watch? No, that wasn't right. "He trusts me."

He noticed a bit of blood seeping through Hermione's pant leg. "She's really got a cut then?" he asked, making his way to her side of the bed. Using his wand, he cut through the jean material and saw the cut. It looked just as it did in the dream. "Fawkes?" he questioned. The Phoenix flew over to land near Hermione's leg. It leaned over and dropped a few tears in the wound. Harry smiled with satisfaction as the skin began healing. "Thanks. As always, you're brilliant."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"My leg feels much better, Granger, I thank you," he said silkily. *Quite the clever witch for a Mudblood, this one.* "I suppose I should return the favor to you, but I won't. Take off your shirt." He hated the soft touch of her hands on his skin. If he hadn't felt the pain, he would have hexed her for her soothing gentleness. He would rather her to be writhing, moaning, crying, and pummeling him.

He saw her swallow heavily. Ah, here he would get his much craved resistance. "Professor, I want to tell you something before we go any further."

"Off with your blouse, girl," he demanded. "NOW!"

She began unbuttoning the flimsy blouse with unsteady fingers. Yes, she was getting nervous now. The protest would begin soon, wouldn't it? He could feel himself hardening at the thought of entering unwilling flesh. "Professor, I just want to let you know that I have always respected you. Over the years, that respect has grown. As of late, I find myself wanting you. I love you."

What? What the fuck? He backhanded her deftly, sending her sprawling onto the makeshift bed. "Your words of love are lost on me, you stupid girl. Do you think I care what Gryffindor's little whore has to say? I know you are just trying to get out of this. It won't work."

She brought a hand to her face as if to dampen the pain of the blow. He smirked as he slid out of his frock coat. "I forgive you. I know this is not whom you truly are. I love you," she said, her voice was choked with emotion.

"Love?" he asked incredulously. "Forgiveness?" He began chuckling. "Two things that I do not desire, Miss Granger." She was scooting back, but he caught her half unbuttoned blouse to rip it off. "There we are," he said in mock sweetness. "Why, Miss Granger? Slytherin Green for that skimpy contraption hugging your breasts? I believe you do have a soft spot for me after all."

"Severus, I love you. This is not who you are. Please stop this. I will let you make love to me if that is what you wish, but you have to not be this way," she implored, her soft brown eyes pleading with his.

Something in the tone of her voice touched him. Why would she love him? He'd always hated her. He wanted to hurt her, even now. The bitch had used his given name without permission! "How dare you use my name in such a way, harlot?"

"Severus, listen to me, I love you. I forgive all that you've done in the past. You've changed. Your future is with me," she said, even as he pulled her forward by her bra.

He gripped one breast roughly, bruising the flesh. "Your words of love are lost on me, Miss Granger. There is no returning from what I have become. I kill, rape, and torture people for kicks. I like what I do. Other peoples' pain brings me great pleasure. It is then that I know that not everyone is exempt to this wretched, soulless, haunted feeling that I've always carried within me. Now, I will have you. *Silen...*"

"*Expelliarmus!*" she yelled, pulling Ron's wand from her side pocket. Severus' wand, and her own, flew into her hand as his body was slung back against his table.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry jumped for joy! "You get him, Hermione! Show him what Gryffindor is made of!" He patted Fawkes excitedly. "See that, did you?"

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

She couldn't afford to let him put the Silencing Charm on her. She needed to be able to talk, should she have to call to Harry. Sliding his wand into her pocket, she pointed her newly returned wand at him. Ron's wand had a little pep to it. Well, it probably just wasn't used to anyone other than Ron using it. It flung her lover harder than she had wanted. She put Ron's wand in her other pocket and moved forward.

Severus was getting up slowly, rubbing his head. If the situation hadn't been so serious, she would have laughed. They were both only half dressed and seething with anger. He glared at her hatefully, but this had to be done. "Severus, I love you. Don't you remember that you care for me as well? You took my virginity. I am no whore. I gave myself to you willingly on the night of Christmas Eve. Think. Remember."

He narrowed his eyes and scoffed. "You never gave me anything, and you're no virgin. I know what you and Weasley AND countless others have been doing. When I get my wand back, I am personally going to slice every inch of your flesh open before I lap up your blood. Then as you lay in agony, I am going to take my cock," he emphasized this by grabbing himself, "and drive it into the resisting flesh of your cunt. The last thing that your ugly, dirty blooded mind will see before you pass out from lack of blood and pain, will be my face etched in the glory of knowing I have caused you such damage."

She shuddered involuntarily as she imagined what he'd said. *Good Lord!* Had he truly been this man once? Something must have made him change. Even so, what had kept him from reverting over the years? Dumbledore's trust. "I welcome your advances, Severus, though I do not like the thought of being in such pain. Let me love you. I trust you to be easy with me. I know you will not hurt me. This is not who you are anymore."

He seemed to fidget for a moment. "My Lord would kill me if I did not do my duty."

"You don't have to *serve* anyone, Severus. You are above that."

"I am no servant!" he yelled. "We are called associates. He doesn't make us bow down like simpering fools. He treats us with the respect we deserve so long as we do his bidding, which is what we want to do."

Hermione laughed at this. "What? Voldemort has tired of making you kiss the hem of his robes like lap dogs? He will never respect you, Severus. He is using you!"

"Voldemort?" Severus asked incredulously. "Where have you been, girl? He is dead! I have a new Lord now."

"What?" she asked, taken aback by this bit of information. "What new Lord?"

"Lord Potter, of course," he said proudly.

"Oh, my God! Harry...you think that..."

"Do not say that name! He is Lord Potter!" Severus said passionately as he lunged for Hermione's wand. They toppled over, and it was Severus who emerged with the wands. All three of them.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry sat gobsmacked. What the bloody hell was this? He looked over to Fawkes, and if the bird had shoulders, they would have shrugged. He ran his fingers through his untidy hair while looking down to the sleeping forms on the bed. What was going on in Snape's head? Where had this come from?

"Any minute now, Hermione. Call my mother's name, and I will wake you," Harry breathed out between clinched teeth. Sensing the boy was brimming with emotion, the

Phoenix began a new tune.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"It appears, my dear, that our roles have been reversed. Say good-bye now," he said coldly, as he stood above her.

"Wait! Before you do it, may I please ask some questions?" Hermione asked, trying to buy some time.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Well, I've listened to your mouth all of these years. Why not give in to your last request? Do hurry this up."

"Can't we talk to Dumbledore about this?" she asked, hoping the headmaster's name would do something to the man.

Severus chuckled. "Who do you think encouraged my Lord? Who do you think wanted him trained in the ways of the Dark Arts? He knows what it is we do, and he allows it."

"Since when?" she asked hotly.

"Since the Ministry tried to interfere with things one too many times," he replied in a bored voice. "Are you quite finished?"

"I have something to tell you. I didn't know it would be important at the time, but I think you need to hear it," she said quickly.

"Go on," he said, intrigued nonetheless.

"Neville and Ron overheard Draco and a few mates talking about an uprising with their Lord against someone. Mind, I hadn't realized who their Lord was, but now that I do, I thought you should know."

"And, just who would they be uprising against? There is no one to stop Lord Potter or any of his associates," Snape said in disbelief. Draco and Lord Potter would have included him in this. It wouldn't be prudent to just kill her now. He needed more information, just in case these weren't lies.

"They plan to get rid of Dumbledore. They said he is a meddling fool," she said, lowering her eyes. "They didn't want you to know in case you would side with the headmaster."

"WHAT? You think I would believe such a...preposterous lie? I helped train the new Lord with the headmaster's blessings. I had a hand in molding him to become what he is today. He would not think that I would betray him, and he would never harm Albus!" Snape itched to choke the life out of her until her lips turned blue, until her eyes glazed over in that lovely death glare.

"Wh-why do you think I snuck out of my common room tonight? I'm on a mission for the headmaster. He gave me the second wand should I need it. He wanted me to talk to you. He wants us to love each other," she said, her voice taking on that annoying pleading tone again.

"I do not believe you," he said.

"Believe in me, Severus. The headmaster said to tell you that he trusts you to do the right thing. He said that your loyalty to him has never wavered, and he knows that you will now take my outstretched hand to become what you were before...the new Lord came to power." She held out her hand. "I love you. Have faith in that. Everything cruel that you've ever done is forgiven, Severus. Look at your leg. If I didn't want a life with you, I would not have healed you. The Succubus' poisons should be gone by now."

He lowered his wand to look down at the bandage. There was no fluid soaking through. He peeled away the bandage to see his skin had closed up and been smoothly sealed. *Succubus*. A lone tear made its way from one of his black eyes as he met her gaze. "Hermione," he choked roughly. "This is not real, is it?" This was a dream. He could feel it.

"No, Severus," she said, opening her arms. He went to her and held her closely. "Severus, I meant everything I said. I trust you. I love you so much it hurts. I will do anything for you. Your past is nothing, my love. Yes, it happened, and it can't be changed. You have atoned for any sins you have committed by all of the good you have done since. We have to look to the future now."

"I...can't forget," he said, voice choking with raw emotion. "It's always there, Hermione. It will never leave. No matter how hard I try to bury it, I know that I have caused too much pain. I'm no better than my father, Tom Riddle, or any of the others."

"Severus, the world has not condemned you. You have to find it in your heart to forgive yourself. You have to take the time to look into your soul. What you will see is not who you were in this dream, you will see the man that I love. Don't ever leave me, Severus," she pleaded suddenly. "You are my life. I want to have you with me always."

He pulled back to kiss her softly before looking into her eyes. "I am in love with you, Hermione Granger. No matter what happens when we awaken, please never doubt that." She nodded and kissed him again.

A few moments later, she muttered, "Lily Evans Potter." Severus flinched.

"Why do you speak of her?"

"It was my safe word with Harry. He's going to try to wake us now."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"That's my cue," Harry said through a small smile. He was glad that things worked out as they had. It was touch and go there for a bit, but he knew Hermione would talk her way out of it. She was sneaky that way. She'd tricked old Umbridge the same way a couple of years earlier. Mione was definitely a match for Slytherin's Head of House. Fawkes disappeared in a burst of flame. Harry shrugged. "Guess he's off to tell Dumbledore that we are through."

Harry gently prodded Hermione and Snape at the same time. Both moaned a bit as if stirring. He saw the dream cloud begin to become lighter. Two yellow streams of light made their way back down to the bodies below. One seeped into Snape's temple, and the other seeped into Hermione's. The dream cloud was gone. Hissing a few words, their bindings evaporated. He sat down in his chair to wait.

Hermione rolled over to cuddle against Snape, and Snape's arm came up to hold her close. He supposed they might have a normal sleep now, but he wouldn't leave. Just in case. He'd sit there all night if need be. Propping his feet back up on the bed, he thought about what he'd seen in the dream. Snape feared becoming what he once was, feared that he would hurt Hermione, feared being someone's follower again apparently, and the last thought flustered Harry. *Why would he fear that I would become a Dark Lord?*

"Should I be appalled or flattered?" Harry asked aloud, knowing he'd probably never have an answer to that. Snape would surely be embarrassed that he'd witnessed the dream, and he was certain to be angry with them. But, it had bloody well worked out, hadn't it? He smiled smugly as he interlaced his fingers behind his head. It might prove to be a long night.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

**Southern's Notes:** Now then. That was Snape's worst fears all in one dream! I hope you've enjoyed it. :)

# Chapter Nine

Chapter 10 of 32

Severus and Hermione deal with their feelings now that the dream has past. What does Dumbledore have to say? Can Harry and Snape patch up the past?

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and cheers go to the lovely GinnyW, who is kindly going through this for me to catch any stray funkies!**

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"Harry?" Hermione called to her sleeping friend as she sat up wiping the sleep away from her eyes. He had one leg propped up on the bed near Severus, the other sprawled lazily on the floor, and his head was lying oddly on the back of the chair. "Harry," she whispered a little louder.

He sprung up with his wand drawn. "Where is he?" he asked, looking about wildly.

"Harry, calm down. I'm awake, but Severus is still sleeping. Are you all right? Did everything go on well here?" she asked, moving out of the bed. She glanced down at the hole in her jeans and looked up questioningly.

He stretched lazily before nodding to her leg. "You were bleeding from Snape's Slicing Hex. I cut your jeans so that Fawkes could heal you." He gave her a lopsided grin. "You did it, Hermione. It was brilliant!"

"Fawkes? Was Dumbledore here?" she questioned.

"No, but he sent Fawkes to keep me in...er...to keep me company. Good thing, as you needed him. How do you feel?" he asked, moving her shirt aside to get a view of one of her shoulders. No marks of any kind.

"I feel very tired. It's like last night really happened. I could really feel everything in the dream," she said regretfully. "I hadn't expected that part. Do you think he will be very upset with us?"

Harry looked over to Snape's sleeping form, now curled on his side. "I think, Hermione," he said with a sigh, "that Snape will have a few things to deal with before he'll see reason. I mean, we did ambush him, and I reckon there are a few things in that dream that he'll have to deal with. Don't push him too much."

"Harry!" she huffed. "I would never push him. I will let him ta...I would, wouldn't I?"

He hugged her. "It's only because you care, and it's in your nature to try to make things right. He loves you. He even told you. Remember? He'll come around."

"He told me in the dream, Harry. That doesn't mean he'll say that now. I've only been here with him for five nights, but it feels like a lot longer than that. So much has happened in the past week, I don't know what I'll do if he chooses to hate me over this." She cast a worried glance towards her lover. "I need him."

"Was I the only one paying attention? He told you that no matter what happens when you both wake to remember that he fell in love with you. I think it would do well for you to think on that. Besides..."

A loud crash from the next room startled them. Harry quickly had his wand drawn and placed himself in front of Hermione. They heard a muttered, "Bloody hell." Harry put away his wand and threw a grin back to Hermione before walking forward. She followed him with a grin of her own.

"Ronald Weasley," she said, laughing at the sight before her. "Just what are you doing here?" Ron had apparently tumbled from the grate and tripped over the chair, toppling it and Severus' lamp table as well.

"Right stupid place to put a chair. I'm telling you," he said cheekily as he stood up. He had soot in his hair, on his face, and all over his robes. He made no move to wipe it off. "Couldn't wait another minute. Thought I'd come to see if you all needed some help."

Harry said, "We're all done here, mate. Snape's still sleeping." He nodded towards the bedchamber. "He might be waking up now though with all this ruckus."

Laughing, Hermione said, "Thanks for coming, I suppose. You two might need to clear off. I expect he'll be getting up soon."

Ron nodded and made his way back to the grate. "Just wanted to be sure you were all right, Mione." He looked along the mantle for a moment before making rude gestures with his hands. "Where is the ruddy Floo powder?"

"Just there," Harry said, pointing to the floor where he'd left it. "My fault, that."

"Never puts anything where it goes," Ron mumbled as he threw a bit in. "The Burrow."

"Right then. I'll be off as well. Come see us if you need us." Harry said, hugging her tightly. "Owl me either way, if you don't mind. If all goes well, I guess I'll see you in a week when we're back for classes."

"Harry, I really appreciate what you've done for us. Thanks."

"Any time," he said, throwing a handful of powder into the fireplace. "Albus Dumbledore's Office." In a flash of brilliant green flames, he was gone. She fixed the table and chair back as they were before Ron had his visit. Noticing Harry's robes in the opposite chair, she sat down. She pulled the robes into her lap and smiled. Dark green to match his eyes. This had been a Christmas present from Ginny. She'd saved all year to get it. Harry seemed to think that everything would be all right, but she had a niggling feeling that things wouldn't be.

She thought back to the things Severus had said before he was forced to drink the potion. He said there would be no together if she forced him to follow through with ~~Get~~ *away from me*, he had said. *There will be no together, Hermione, if you go through with this* she had said. The only thing that made her feel better was the last look he had given her before they'd fallen asleep, and the soft words he'd said. *I know*. Well, that was a start, wasn't it? If he understood that she meant well, then they were already on the road to recovery.

Hermione got up to check on him. He was still sleeping. Pulling the covers up over him, she noticed that he was smiling in his sleep. She bent down to kiss his cheek softly. "I love you," she whispered. "I hope those are good dreams you're having." She went to the bathroom for a bath.

Severus opened one eye as she closed the door behind her. How could she love him still after what she had seen? After all that he had said and done to her? Merlin, he had bit her, cut her, hit her, verbally abused her... This was just too much! He had seen her honest fear, the repulsion, and the desperation in her face. Why couldn't he control it? It wasn't like he'd remembered anything about the past week they had shared together either. He'd thought of her, and he'd thought of her in the most horrible way. How could he ever get those thoughts out of his mind? How could he forgive himself as easily as she had forgiven him? It wasn't just how he'd treated her, but how he had treated so many in the past.

And, *Good Lord*, Potter! Potter a Dark Lord? Preposterous! Then he remembered the confident ability with which Harry had subdued him the night before. The powerful gleam in those green eyes. Lily's eyes. Dumbledore was right. The most vibrant part of her had lived on, and because of those eyes, he would eventually give Harry that which he had requested. If nobody was there to guide him, he might turn astray at some point. He was right. Albus wouldn't be alive forever, and then where would that leave the boy?

It was embarrassing though. Would they truly believe that he feared Potter? He smirked to himself. That would be the day. Hermione and Harry had both now seen him at his truly worst. Before he could deal with either of them, he needed to deal with himself. Sliding from the bed, he quickly put on his robes and boots. He made his way to the headmaster's office. He needed to tell him about what had happened. Maybe he could help him make some sense of things. He always had a way of explaining things.

Just as he was approaching the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the office, it opened. Out walked Harry Potter. He tried to dodge into a corridor, but the boy called out to him. "Professor! It's good to see that you are up."

He strode forward, wondering what to say first. "So it would seem, Potter." His words lacked his normal acid. He just hadn't the energy to compete in a row yet.

"I left just a bit ago myself. I came here to see the headmaster. I've forgotten my robes in your chambers, but I didn't want to Floo back down in case I'd wake you. I figured you'd need your sleep. I was just off to my own dorm for a spare set." Harry said with a slight smile. "Er...is Mione still awake?"

Choosing his words carefully, he said, "She is having a bath."

"I'm glad then. Rough night, you two had. Right glad it's done with. After a bit of time and some talk, I'm sure things will be well," Harry said, surprising Severus by clapping him affectionately on the shoulder. Severus looked down at the boy's hand as if it was tainted.

"What are you about, Potter? Haven't come to gloat?" he asked suspiciously.

"You know, that's just like you. No matter what someone tries to do for you, you just can't accept that there's nothing behind it," Harry said sternly. "Some people actually care, Snape. It would do well for you to remember that. And, before you go off and blame Hermione on all that's happened, I think you ought to at least try to think of this from her point."

Harry brushed past him, looking irritated. "Potter," Severus called. Harry turned back to face him. "I'd never blame her *for that*. It's hard, at times, to think of things from any point of view other than a Slytherin one. I...it was good of you to help her even though the method you used was not exactly appropriate."

Harry nodded. "Sir, I...just so you know, I won't tell anyone what I saw. Well, the headmaster knows a little, but those details are yours to share."

"That's...kind," Snape allowed, turning to go up the open entranceway.

"Professor?"

"Yes?"

"You won't ever have to worry about me, you know. It would take a rotten lot to turn me into an arse like that. I care too much about people to ever become...that." Harry smiled. "Just because you had a hand in training me, doesn't mean you have soiled me. I've learned a lot from you, from a lot of people. I appreciated the time you took to try. I just...maybe I never had the bollocks to say so. Good day, sir." Potter turned on his heel and made his way down the corridor.

Feeling slightly relieved, Severus allowed the staircase to raise him to the headmaster's door. So, Potter wasn't going to be an arrogant brat about this. For some reason, he trusted Potter to keep his word. It seemed that the boy had finally become a man. Those words of thanks and apparent respect made Severus feel like a better man. If there was hope that any part of the elder Potter could live to grow into what Harry had become, then perhaps there was something worth looking forward to in this world. There was hope.

"Severus, it is good to see you. Have a seat," Albus greeted.

"I trust Potter has told you the gist of what's happened then?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, Severus, I am well aware of what went on, but I am here if you would like to talk about things," he said kindly. "I think it's safe to say that you faced a lot of your inner fears last night. Would you want to discuss it? Maybe make sense of things?"

"I think so, Headmaster," Severus said with a resigned voice. He may as well tell him everything. It would be the only way to get a logical opinion from him. He began his tale from the exact moment he walked into the corridor, and he finished when Hermione spoke Lily's name. He even told the headmaster what he'd said to her.

After a thoughtful moment, Albus smiled. "If you don't mind my saying so, I think that you feared never being able to find redemption for mistakes you've made in the past. You survived this war for a reason, Severus. I think that if you were meant to be swept off to the afterlife to do an additional penance then that would have been the case." Albus handed him a cup of tea that he'd summoned. "Hermione's love and faith in you and her forgiveness of your past should enable you to put away this fear of the earlier period in which you lived in such confusion. Your realization that you love her is a form of release for you. If you can express that emotion, then you have already begun the process of rebuilding yourself."

"It has been so long since I have felt anything inside."

"Yes, I know. I was there for you, if you'll remember," Dumbledore said wisely. "Severus, everyone has a soul. You once said that you felt as if a dementor had sucked all emotions from you. You felt your only reason for living was to see Harry live to fulfill the prophecy as a final payment to his parents. You couldn't save them, my boy. I know you tried, and now you fear that you won't be able to save Harry from himself."

Severus smirked. "He's made of good stock...from Lily's side. I don't think I'll have to worry on that any longer. No need to give me the lecture of how I should try to befriend the boy, Albus. I think we are on some sort of path in that direction already. I accepted his mother's fate long ago. I harbor no ill feelings about his...about Potters' part in his parentage. It's not Harry's fault who his father was, nor who his father wasn't."

Dumbledore chuckled. "If you excuse her sister, then yes, Lily's family would be good stock, but I don't think it would bode well to speak ill of James to the boy. No matter your feelings, past or present, on the matter." Dumbledore smiled. "Now, on to other things, Hermione for one, she will be helping you fill what you claim to be an empty shell with happy memories. You still have things to deal with amongst yourselves, but I would hope that you wouldn't take too long to come to terms with what has happened."

"Thank you, Albus. I think I shall need to go have a talk with her now. She is probably wondering where I am," Severus said, extending a hand.

"I'm glad they decided to make you go through with it. I don't think it could have turned out any better. Don't think on the horrors of the nightmare, Severus. It would eat

away at you and be the Succubus' last act of revenge. Your young woman deserves better than that. So do you." His mentor smiled. "Good luck."

He used the Floo to return to his chambers, not wanting to prolong his talk with Hermione. As soon as he stepped in, he knew something was wrong. Something just didn't feel right. He heard her small sobs coming from the bedchamber. He looked in without her noticing that he had returned. His heart ached at the sight. She was in a fetal position on the bed, hugging his pillow to her. He had no idea how long she had been crying, but he had to stop it. This was not her fault. She shouldn't have to pay for what had happened.

"Hermione," he said after he reached the bedside.

She picked up her head and stared at him. "You...you're back?"

"I am," he said, sitting down next to her. He soothed down her damp hair. "Don't cry because of me."

"Severus, I can't help it. I came out, and you'd left me. I thought...can you just hold me?" she pleaded. He held out his arms and scooped her to him. "I didn't know when you would be back. I thought you hated me for what I have done." She sniffed. "D-do you?"

"No," he said softly. Why could he feel so much, yet say so little? He knew it was soothing words that she needed to hear, but they wouldn't form on his lips. "I think you only did what you thought best though I didn't agree at the time."

"Do you think it was the right thing now?"

"Perhaps it was." He sighed. "Yes, I do."

Her hold on him tightened. "I just love you so much. How did I ever live without you before? It's unreal to me."

He smiled at that. He'd had the same thoughts. "Hermione, I...I know just what you mean," he said, wanting to kick himself for not giving her the words she needed to hear.

"Severus, would you make love to me? I need to feel you. I need you to show me that you forgive me," she asking, pulling back to look into his eyes.

"Hermione, I don't think that we should right now. I think we should take things slowly. We have only jus-"

His words were cut off by her kiss. She pressed him back onto the bed smoothly and rested her body over his, deepening their kiss. He closed his eyes and relaxed. Her hands were unfastening his robes, delving in to unbutton his shirt. His hands began stroking her back and bum in encouragement. If she could do this so soon, then so could he. *Let the healing begin.* He groaned as her lips began nipping at his neck. He sat up, forcing her to sit astride him. Severus pulled her shirt over her head and threw it to the side. As her lips found his neck again, his lips searched out her shoulders. He took the time to lick and sooth each with his tongue before bringing his lips to hers again. Hermione's fingers grazed his flat nipples, and her fingernails caressed the hair on his chest. *Merlin, but he wanted her.*

With great care he unfastened her bra, pulling it away from her body. He kissed her lips as his fingers found her already hardened peaks. Dipping his head a moment later, his mouth found and suckled a rosy bud. She moaned and he opened his eyes to try to look up into her face. He noticed a bruise. He pulled away in shock.

"Hermione...what?" There were five perfectly rounded, bluish bruises on her left breast.

She looked at him with a confused expression. "Why did you stop?"

He nodded. A sinking feeling hit his gut soundly. *Bloody hell* "I...is that from...?"

"Oh, I forgot to spell them away. It's nothing. They don't hurt, Severus." She smiled and tried to kiss him again. He stilled her movements.

"I can't," he choked, pushing her off of him. He had marred her flesh. He had done that to her in his dreaming stupor. "I need some time."

"Wait," she panicked, as he put her to the side of him. "Please don't leave. It's all right. If you would just make love to me, everything would be okay. I need you, Severus."

"Hermione, just please...I need to deal with what I have done. It's too soon," he said as he began buttoning the few free buttons. He clasped his robes, kissed her cheek, and walked toward the door.

"Severus...please," she cried. "Don't do this."

"I'm not leaving you, Hermione," he said, after he paused, not turning back. "I just...if you love me, you will give me this time."

"I do," she said firmly. "Do what you must." He couldn't see her face, but he could imagine her determined expression.

"Do you remember the dream? The last bit...about no matter what happens after we woke?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, I remember everything."

"I meant what I said." He walked out the door. She stared after him in shock.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione was stunned. He'd just left her lying there in need. Yes, she understood that he needed time to deal with what had happened, but she needed him to show her that he wanted her still. She wasn't so thick that she didn't get the gist of what he had just told her. It was his way of saying that he did love her. Why could he not say the words aloud in reality that she desperately needed to hear? In many ways she felt like a burden to him. One day, he was alone, feeling empty, despising those who were happy, and never thinking about love. The next day, he was saddled with her, feeling crowded, still despising those who were happy, and beginning to feel tinges of love. How would she feel if the tables were turned?

She supposed it was a lot to deal with in such a short period of time. He was what? Thirty-seven years old? Going from being alone all of his life to having someone practically move themselves into his personal living space would be drastic. He had never been in love before. It must be hard for him to voice that, even if he wanted to. Hang on! He...he had been in love, hadn't he? What was it he had said? He had never said that he never loved anyone, but he did say that he had felt something again after years of feeling nothing. So, who was the woman that had captured his heart? Where was she? Had she died? Left him? Spurned any advances he had made? Good grief! Was she a damned Death Eater?

This was a lot to think about. Whose shoes do I have to fill? She supposed in comparison to Severus she was but a child. This woman was likely Severus' age or at least near it. Think. She gasped! Madame Hooch! That had to be it. She was a bit older than Severus, but he didn't really talk to anyone else, did he? And, just whom else did she know that could snap, poke fun, or fuss at Severus without so much as a blandly scathing retort? No one could! No matter what Severus would say to her, she would just laugh as if she knew he didn't mean it. That spoke volumes. Only a lover or loved one would get away with such things, and Hooch did take interest in Hermione's stay at Hogwarts from the beginning. Why, on Christmas morning she was going on about the Scottish chill and the dungeons being cold. How could I have been so blind? Hang the hell on just a minute! She couldn't even get away with some of the stuff that Hooch pulled. And, he supposedly loves me!

"Hmph!" Hermione grumbled. "We'll just see about this. I can be everything that woman is and more!" She dressed quickly and decided she'd start her day by owling Harry to let him know that all was well. Or, sort of well anyway. Harry! His parents went to school with Severus. Maybe Sirius or Remus had let something slip to him about Snape's past love life. It wouldn't be farfetched. They were all in the same year after all. Maybe she could make a quiet inquiry about it. Harry would understand, and he wouldn't think she was being daft by having curiosity of her lover's past.

Harry,

I just want to let you know that everything is as well as could be expected. So far. I am ready to get through this, and I would like to move on. Severus is having a bit of a rough go at it so far. He feels very guilty about it all, and I am not pressuring him as you warned me. Well, maybe I did push a bit far this morning. I needed something that he wasn't ready to give me just yet, but not that we should discuss that here. He's gone off now to who knows where to have some time to dwell on this.

Harry, I need to be prepared. When he comes back, he may tell me to just go. I certainly hope that isn't the case, but who knows? He is so damned stubborn. Have Remus or Sirius ever told you anything about his past? I mean to say, do you know if he had a lady friend at some point in the past? If you know anything, please let me know. I would very much like to know exactly who I should strive to be more like in order to become more appealing to him. Damn! I'm rattling again. A quick reply would be appreciated.

Love from,

Hermione

There. That sounded good. She briskly made her way up to the owlery to have a school owl dispatch her parchment. It shouldn't take long for a reply. Harry was great that way. As she rounded the corner near the bottom of the stairway, she ran smack into Madame Hooch. How bloody convenient!

"Watch it!" Hooch exclaimed with a laugh. "Where are you off to looking like a thunder cloud? Has the snake got you down?"

Hermione lost the glare in her eyes and pushed the swell of jealousy away. Why couldn't she be as comfortable with herself as this woman so clearly was? She reeked of confidence and was never afraid to say exactly what she meant. Not even at the risk of hurting one's feelings. "Just a bit. I don't exactly know where I am off to. Maybe the library."

Hooch scoffed. "The library! On a day such as this? Term will be starting next week. There's time for reading and studying then!"

"Damn! I've not been studying for my N.E.W.T.s! Sorry, Madame Hooch, but I have to go," she said, trying to glide past the woman.

"Hang on there," she replied, grabbing Hermione by the elbow. "I think you can call me Rolanda, Hermione. You're one of us now, what with being initiated with the game the other day. To hear Minerva tell it, you could have passed your exams months ago. Come along. I think I should spirit you off to Hogsmeade for a drink."

"Really, Mada...er...Rolanda. I'm not much of a drinker. It's nearly lunchtime as it is. I don't think this would be very responsible of me," Hermione said, hoping to be excluded from the yellow-eyed witch's plans.

Rolanda threw her head back in a loud chuckle. "I say! You've spent too much time with Minerva. That stern expression looked just like hers!"

Before Hermione could speak, someone cleared her throat. "I am glad you find my stern expression so amusing, Rolanda. I was just off to find Miss Granger to help her prepare her new rooms."

"New rooms?" Hermione and Rolanda asked in unison. Each witch looked at each other with surprised laughter.

"Well, of course, you should at least keep up the pretense of staying in your own chambers, Hermione. To be unmarried and staying with Severus would be inappropriate in the eyes of the students' parents," Minerva huffed.

"Oh, go on!" Rolanda exclaimed. "Everyone saw Severus going after her. They all read the papers! Think you that they won't know where she sleeps at night whether she has her own chambers or not?"

"Be that as it may, she will have her own chambers. I insist upon it." McGonagall's eyes softened. "Don't worry, Hermione. Albus and I have done this for years. It won't harm your relationship in the least, and sometimes a place of your own to retreat to isn't a bad thing to have."

"Well, you have time to get her rooms together tomorrow then," Hooch persisted. "She and Severus have had some sort of row. I am about to escort her to Hogsmeade and make a day of it. Of course, if you don't trust me with your new apprentice, you could always come along."

Hermione was about to protest, but she saw the faint glow of interest in McGonagall's eyes. Did her mentor want a day out as well? "Well, I am not sure. Perhaps a few tumblers in a private room at The Three Broomsticks wouldn't be an ill idea. Should we invite the others and make a go of it?" McGonagall smiled, losing years with the release of the stern expression.

"What say you, Hermione? This is your day after all. Should we include the others?" Hooch asked.

"I'm not sure. I suppose whatever you would like," Hermione said. How did she know who would be fun to have along? The only ones she truly had encounters with were Flitwick, Hooch, and Sprout. They were fun enough. Hagrid was always fun as well.

"Good deal! Sinistra is out. She's a boring biddy, that one. Vector's gone off to her own home for a bit. Sibyll has been into the sherry already today. I'm sure she's off prophesizing in her tower. I saw Hagrid off for the forest earlier." Hooch grinned. "Guess that leaves Pomona, Filius, and Albus. The others are right bland. No fun at all."

Minerva laughed. "Surely we can invite Poppy."

"What? And, hear all about the latest in mediwitching? I've enough of that at mealtime, thanks," Hooch said. "Jolly well then. What are you waiting for then? Go fetch her. Ask Albus along as well. I'll see for Filius and Pomona."

"Er...thanks," Hermione said after Minerva left hurriedly.

"Pah! All is well. I'm always in the mood for a row, a drink, or some fun. This is as good a reason as any. Say, where is Sevvie? Should we force him to come along? It would be great fun to harass him a bit."

"I...I am not sure. He's gone off for a bit," Hermione stammered, looking away. Why did she admit this to his...other lover?

"Well, sod him then. We don't need his snarking about to ruin our day. I tell you. He's great in the sack, but I've never wanted to spend more time than I needed to with him," Hooch said bluntly. "Meet us in the front entrance in about ten then."

Hermione watched through narrowed eyes as the woman happily made her way down the hall. She had just admitted to having been his lover! Hang on, though. If they never spent time together other than that, it couldn't be her that Severus had felt something for, could it? Who the bloody hell was it then? Hermione scoffed suddenly. That was quite rude! Just coming out and saying it like that! The woman should really mind her manners! Pulling her cloak around her, Hermione made her way to the entrance.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus was sitting in front of the fire in his personal study at his home. Zenka popped in. "Is master needing something?"

"No, thank you. I think I will have a walk." He made his way out towards the path behind his home. He looked around at the trees along the passageway. Most of them had lost their leaves, but some of them were still as green as they were in the summer. Each spring they would come back and bud to become just as vibrant as before. Before

the deathly chill of winter had set in. Before life had nearly been extinguished from them forever. Dead or dying things, such as trees, had always held appeal to him. He mostly likened them to himself. He felt that his body was the trunk, ever present, always aging, but his soul was like the leaves.

He had once been alive with hope for the future. That had been when he was a very small child. He had hoped his father would change. He had hoped his mother would find a way to leave the man and take him with her. He had hoped to find a woman. He had hoped to find friends and find a place in the world. He had hoped to find respect. He supposed that could have been the summer of his life.

As he grew older, though, fall began to set in. His hopes began fading. His father would never be an honorable man. How often had he seen him yelling and hitting his mother? How often had he seen him with one of his mistresses? His mother had withered away and died. She had found an escape, but she hadn't taken him along for the journey. He found friends, but they were not the sort he had once hoped for. He had found a woman, but before he could accept her as she was, she had turned to someone else. He had found a place in the world at the side of a madman, and he was able to obtain respect, but that was only yielded through fear. Yes, his early years of manhood could be seen as the fall season of his life. The beginning of the decline, the descent to death.

For most of his adult life, he'd been alive but only just. He had been in his winter season for nearly the past twenty years. He'd always felt as if he belonged in the dark. He looked at his students and saw them mostly as pests. He loathed most of them for many reasons. He had never cared. He figured there was no reason. Why should he have cared? Hell, he hated Potter merely because of who his father was. He never took the time to really notice them. He was mostly dead and any softness within, any life, had slowly began to decay long before he'd met any of the brats. The only times, as an adult, that he felt as if he belonged or was cared for was in the presence of a choice few. Albus, Minerva, Filius, even Hooch. He sighed. Bloody woman! She should have been born a wizard. He chuckled. Hermione was now added to that list.

This time with Hermione had been...wonderful. Mostly. From the moment he dared to hope for anything, it felt as if the winter winds had died down. The ice inside his veins began to melt away slowly. Was spring coming for him finally? Was it indeed time to live again? To let grow again the emotions that had been dampened out by the arctic blast of past experiences? Finding himself sitting on the hilltop, looking down at the grazing herd of Aethonons, he saw them through her excited eyes. He finally recaptured the beauty and wonder of the beasts that he had seen in his youth. Yes, it was time for spring to make its journey into his life. With Hermione's help, he would learn to live again, to be more...personable, to enjoy things.

He watched the group for a while as thoughts of the future flitted through his mind. He'd have to let go of the past. All of it. It was time to start over. He'd paid his penance for the wrongs he had committed. She was right. Why wallow in depression? Why wonder what could have been? And, this succubus business. He'd put that behind him as well. Her heart was big enough to forgive him. She loved him completely. He had fallen for her as well, but how to tell her? She had wanted him to show her earlier. Damn! Her hurt expression came to mind. He hoped he'd not done any damage. But, no, he hadn't. She had agreed to give him time about it all, and she obviously caught the gist of what he tried to tell her when he referred to what he'd said in the dream.

After he had returned to his house, he saw it through her eyes. It was cozy. Her own home was much like this one. It wasn't the size that mattered. It was the people that made the house. The house didn't make the people. He could have kept that large mausoleum of a manor, and it still would not have changed who he was on the inside. Severus walked through each room in the two-story home. The lower floors consisted of the kitchen, a bathroom, a small dining room, the living area, his study, and a room he'd turned into a makeshift laboratory. He walked up the stairs. There were three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and the small nursery. The attic space was refurbished and inhabited by his two house elves. They wouldn't accept rooms of their own. It would be cozy for a family. He looked in on the nursery with wistful eyes. Walking over to the small crib in the center of the room, he smiled. He imagined a dark-haired little one laying there, looking up at him with Hermione-like, inquisitive eyes.

His thoughts strayed from the possible future child to his little one waiting for him back at Hogwarts. How would she look with her belly swollen with his child? She would be beautiful of course. He quickly tidied up things, he'd broken a few glasses, and made his way back to Hogwarts. Back to her. Back to life.

He frowned at once when he entered his quarters. She was gone. The fire in the grate had long died out. The chill in his rooms was nearly unbearable. A quick perusal of her belongings showed that her things were still here. Had she gone off to the Weasleys'? Was she in the castle still? The library perhaps? He decided it would be in his best interest to find her. He went to the library first. He checked all the aisles, stacks, tables, and secluded spots before finally realizing she was not there. On his way out, Irma called to him.

"Good afternoon, Madame Pince," he said smoothly. "Slow day today?"

"Most definitely, Severus. No students about to muddle with things, now is there? Did you need something in particular?" she asked, eyeing him warily.

They'd never particularly gotten on well. The witch had been there in his days at Hogwarts, and she had shooed him away more than once. "No, I was searching for someone in particular. I see that she isn't here though. I bid you a good day," he said curtly, taking his leave.

"She's in Hogsmeade," the librarian said promptly.

"Whom?"

"Your wee little lass. Rolanda has taken her for a binge of drinking," she said, eyes sparkling with amusement.

"I see. Thank you," he said.

"The lot of them went. I'd wager things are well underway by now if you wanted to go on and catch up with them."

"Perhaps I shall," he said silkily, finally able to retreat.

So. What was Rolanda up to? His scowl darkened. It would not do to have Hermione under that woman's influence. She'd come back trying to order him about and have her way with him. Hmmm...his groin tingled. Why hadn't he taken her up on her offer at reconciliation this morning? He now regretted his hasty withdrawal from their bed. Surely Rolanda wouldn't give Hermione any tips about a relationship? Bloody hell! It was probably on her to do list to have Hermione sway her way. Hadn't she mentioned more than once that she would have liked some sort of ménage trios? He needed to get to Hogsmeade. Just who else had gone with them though? Smirking, he mentally listed them: Filius, Pomona, perhaps Sibyll, and Hagrid. No, she was definitely not in good hands. He showered and changed his clothes before venturing out.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"What the hell do you mean Gryffindor won't take the cup this year?" Minerva thundered loudly. "We've had it for the past two years running and well on our way. What with Potter and the team he's built, it's a sure thing."

"I think it will be Hufflepuff, I say! Pah! My new keeper will show you," Pomona said heatedly. "Just because you barely beat us in the first game of the season, doesn't mean we are out yet! You'll see!"

Hooch laughed loudly. "Barely beat you? Why, they won by three hundred points. Have another one!"

"If I do say so myself, I think Ravenclaw has a fair chance. We held our own against Slytherin. If that Malfoy hadn't cheated, we would have won!" Filius said, joining the dispute.

"CHEATED?" Hooch roared. "Nobody cheats in my games, you little sot! They rolled over your team fair and square! It was a clean game!"

Hermione was grinning drunkenly at her fellow colleagues. She would never have known the lot could get so rowdy. Most seemed all prim and proper, especially Minerva. Good Lord, but the woman had a temper! She noticed that Albus just sat back and watched the proceedings with amusement. Poppy even got her digs in now and again.

"That's a load of hogwash!" Minerva was saying. "I think you let Slytherin get by with too much, you do! I've seen time and again where those thugs have flouted rules back to back, and you've flown the other way!"

"Yeah," Pomona spat. "Keen to turning a yellow eye to Severus' bunch, she is!"

"I am a fair referee, I tell you! If I see any of the little bastards doing something wrong, I give them a penalty. The bloody field is big you know! I'd like to see one of you able to do it better, I would!" Rolanda retorted testily. Suddenly she smiled. "Another round then?"

Everyone started laughing. Rosmerta wandered over as if on cue with another tray. "Having a good time, are we?"

"Jolly good."

"Certainly."

More mumbled affirmatives could be heard when Rosmerta added, "These are from Severus. He's gone to the loo and says he'll be out shortly." She placed an extra drink in the available seat next to Rolanda. Hermione tried not to get jealous, but she couldn't help it. Just knowing that they had been...in that way...well, it bothered her some. She'd not try to show it though. Pushing the roiling emotions in her stomach down, she sipped on her drink.

Her gaze drifted to the tall, dark figure making his way to the table. She sighed mentally at the sight of him. He seemed unsure for a moment, but then placed that damn expressionless mask upon his face. "Good evening," he said to everyone, eyeing each in turn. His eyes settled on Hermione. He seemed to be questioning if all was okay between them. She smiled to let him know she held no grudge. He nodded, picked up his drink from the table and made his way around to her. "Budge up, you lot."

"Bout time you carry your arse to join us, Severus. Why you've just missed what they've been saying!" Hooch said, feeling like she had an ally at the table. "They are accusing Slytherin of cheating at Quidditch, they are!"

Severus smirked as he took his seat next to his young lover. "Is that so?" He looked around to see the exasperating affirming nods. "Well, I'll have you know that we play no more underhandedly than any of the other teams," he roared suddenly. He looked pointedly at Minerva. "Especially Gryffindor."

That set her mentor going once again. Everything resumed to right where it had been before he had come. Hermione leaned closer to him, and whispered, "Welcome back."

He gave her a small smile and after a moment's hesitation, he brought his arm around the back of her chair possessively.

This did not go unnoticed by anyone at the table, but none spoke of it. Albus patted Minerva on the hand, and they shared a small smile. Two of their closest friends would find a way to work through the mischief as of late and share a life together.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Pomona was now passed out and leaning more towards Filius with each passing minute. Hermione could detect alarm in the small man, as he kept edging away ever so often. Severus and Albus were talking quietly about something or other, but Hermione's eyes were watching Poppy, Minerva, and Rolanda. Poppy was dabbing tears from her eyes over something Rolanda had said, and Minerva all but went wild.

Hermione looked on in awe. Here was her stern Head of House. The proper Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. Here was a formidable foe. Scottish brogue in full force was flung at Rolanda. "You ridiculous tart! How dare you talk to Poppy that way? I'll have you know that she is not becoming a spinster! Just because she's not keen on inviting every witch and wizard about for a little ride on her broom doesn't mean she is a prude!"

"Ah, Minnie! She's only crying because she can't hold her cups! It's always the same every time. Poppy cries. Pomona passes out. Filius gets a right side quiet. Albus just watches. Severus gets either bored or angry." She took a long drink from her cup. "And, you, my dear, end up in some righteous rage or other. You'd do well to keep your wand lowered, I say," Rolanda goaded, yellow eyes shining.

Hermione heard Severus tell Albus to grab Minerva, and he would handle Rolanda. Before either made a move, her mentor sprung up, deftly pulling her wand on a still seated and a quite honestly stunned Hooch. With a most frightful expression on her face, she got off about five hexes before Albus lifted a hand to still her. Severus had come around to stop any retaliation on Hooch's part, but there was no need. The witch couldn't move. She'd been completely immobilized. Her spiky, frosty-colored hair was now vibrantly blue and resembled feathers. Her yellow eyes were now a deep red. Her robes and clothing had been transfigured into a bright pink, frilly dress. "Now you look the part!" Minerva said angrily. "I hope Poppy doesn't take the time to set you right either! I certainly won't be doing the deed!"

"Minerva!" Albus admonished. "Put her back."

"I will not! She deserved it, the rude witch. Why, I should have done that hours ago!" Minerva said, her face flushed in anger.

Albus sent a plea to Severus. "Will you clean this up? I need to have a word with Professor McGonagall." The headmaster's voice was frightfully serious. The few patrons that remained in the pub had all gathered round curiously. Hermione wondered why he had called her by her title, but she thought maybe he was trying to play his role due to the observing eyes of the public.

"Good show," someone said.

Severus spun in their direction and after casting a menacing glare, the crowd began to disperse. "Finite Incantatem," he said dryly, pointing his wand at Rolanda. She began moving and seemed on the verge of tears. She eyed her reflection with the shiny goblet in front of her.

"Minerva! How could you!" she yelled, jumping up. "A bloody PINK dress!"

"I think not," Severus said quietly as she made to run after the retreating forms of the headmaster and Minerva. She began struggling against him wildly. He took her wand niftily before looking over to the table. "Poppy? Filius? Can you see Pomona back?" The smirking charms professor and grinning mediwitch agreed. Severus began leading Rolanda out of the pub. Hermione just sat in a daze. What the hell? As if finally remembering she was there, he paused. "Well?" he asked in an annoyed voice. "Are you coming or not?"

Hermione's intoxicated state had slacked greatly when that scuffle had ensued, and now her anger ebbed it away completely. "Yes, I suppose so. Wouldn't do for me to stay here, would it? Unless you'd like time alone with your friend there!"

Hooch laughed loudly. "Feisty one, that. I say, that brings to mind--"

"Silencio," he said, pointing his wand at Rolanda, dragging her roughly behind him. Rolanda's lips were still moving, but no one would ever know what she was going on about. At Severus' nod to the door, Hermione strode out briskly. "We will be Apparating."

"I can't Apparate yet!" she said angrily. He had treated her abominably for no reason in front of everyone. This was not her fault.

"Stand here for a moment," he said through clenched teeth, as he pulled the other witch into his arms. CRACK! They vanished. Fighting back what she knew to be immature tears, she began running towards the path to Hogwarts on her own. She'd not be treated like a child. Everything had been fine all evening until Minerva went mental on Rolanda. Severus would touch her hair softly every so often, pat her leg beneath the table, and even kissed her palm once. She would not stand there in front of the pub in the snow like an idiot waiting to freeze to death while he went off to put Madame Hooch to bed.

She nodded a brisk hello to a well-cloaked wizard before venturing down the final path that turned towards the castle. She couldn't do this. She would always be wondering what Rolanda had up her sleeve. Hermione trusted Severus, but what if in anger he tried to punish her by going for a visit to the older witch? What...? No, he was respectable. That idea was ludicrous. It was just a lot to deal with. If she'd ever made love to anyone before, and they happened to live near, he would worry of the same



thing. Blast! Even before he had made love to her, he was jealous about Ron. Harry had told her that.

Hermione paused. Where in the bloody hell was she? This didn't seem right. She pulled out her wand. "Point me." It swung in a direction to her left. She'd taken another wrong turn in the midst of her fuming thoughts. Feeling childish for running off into the cold night, she turned back and went down the correct trail. She heard a twig snap somewhere behind her. "Nox," she said calmly, extinguishing the light on her wand. Silently, she stepped off the path and hid behind a tree. Sure enough, moments later, a dark figure walked by at a hurried pace. A slight pang of fear gripped her heart. It could very well be that wizard that she had seen a good ways back. Why didn't I wait for Severus? Though she thought herself completely sober, she sensed that her mind was still muddled. She vowed to not go on a binge such as this again. Please just let me get home.

She was unsure if she should wait the person out or not. There was nothing in that direction except the castle and the train's platform. If she went along the path, she would meet up with him once he realized that she had gone off the path and doubled back. There was no train coming in for a while yet, so it was unlikely that he was awaiting the arrival of one. If she waited him out, he may come back with his wand lit and spy her anyway. Coming out from her hiding place, she started back the way she had come. She needed to slow her pace because she couldn't see and wasn't all that familiar with the path, but she needed to put space between them. Cursing to herself about the situation she was in, she tried to listen for sounds of footsteps behind her. The only thing she could hear, though, were the sounds of her own pounding steps, twigs breaking, and small rocks crunching about under her boots. Finally, she recognized the fork in the trail and broke out at a run for town.

"What's wrong there? All okay?" the same well-cloaked wizard asked her. He was standing at the same spot.

She halted suddenly. If it wasn't him that was following her, then who was it? She bent down for a moment to catch her breath. "I thought someone was following me. I...I was frightened," she said through breaths.

"Nothing to fear out here, Granger," he said easily.

"D-do I know you?" she asked, feeling uncertain. She couldn't see his face. He was bundled tightly against the elements.

"Went to Hogwarts a while back. I saw you pass. Someone passed right behind you. I didn't think it my business to interfere with a lover's brawl," he said sharply. "It was Professor Snape that was chasing you down. I had heard amongst the mill that you two were an item."

"Yes, he's my...!" What was the word? "We are an item. I should go back to talk to him. I don't want him to worry when he sees that I am not at Hogwarts. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't," he said, taking a few steps forward. "You know, I could escort you if you'd like." He pulled back his hood, and she nearly fainted. Terence Higgs! He was the Slytherin seeker in their first year at Hogwarts. He'd always been quiet, but she remembered the glares he threw their way after Harry out maneuvered him. Draco Malfoy had taken over the position of seeker the following year. "I see you recognize me. Shall we?" he asked innocently, holding out his arm.

"She will not," came an angry voice.

"Hello there, Professor Snape," the man said easily, stepping back. "She seemed in such distress. I thought to be honorable and give assistance."

Severus was at her side in an instant and pulled her possessively to him. "I'll see to her," he said curtly. Hermione noticed that his eyes narrowed, and he took in every detail about the wizard. "What are you doing about at this time of night? Alone?"

"Waiting on a friend," came the simple reply.

"Indeed?" Severus cocked his head to the side. "I wonder, Higgs. If I didn't know any better I would think you are up to something."

"Oh, I am just that, but that's not really your concern now, is it?" The boy smiled sweetly while pulling his hood back up. When Severus stepped forward, he said, "Well, Professor Snape! I didn't know you bothered yourself with trivial matters. If I choose to meet a paid woman discreetly, it should be my business alone."

"Very well. Good evening," Severus said, putting his arms around her. Before they Apparated, she heard Higgs speak again.

"I'll give my father your regards."

Severus didn't reply. They Apparated near the front gates of the castle. She could feel the tension in him, and she felt suddenly afraid when he looked at her. "Hermione! What the bloody hell did you think you were doing just now? You could have been accosted! Any number of things could have gone wrong!"

He would not make her cry. None of this was her fault. Well, except for the fact that she acted immaturely and ran off. "What was I to do? Wait to freeze while you put her to bed? You were so worried about her that you only remembered that I was there at the last bloody minute, and you treated me horribly in front of those people. It wasn't my fault that Minerva put her in her place!"

"Damn Gryffindors! You are much like your Head of House, girl!" he thundered, stepping away from her. "And, what is it you keep alluding to? Why do you think that I didn't think of you when I was commanded to escort Rolanda home? Your place is with me! I was merely surprised that you hadn't followed when I made to leave!"

"She told me that you two sleep together at times!" Hermione blurted hotly. "How was I to know you wouldn't stay in her rooms for a nightcap!"

"WHAT?" he roared, looking angry and hurt at the same time. Then quietly, "I have eyes only for you. How could you think such a thing?"

"Severus, I'm sorry. It's just. I...I am jealous. This is something I have never felt before. I never cared enough about anyone to worry. I don't know much in the way of things, but I do know that she is apparently experienced, and I was afraid...that you would rather that," she said, wishing she could hex herself.

He looked away for a moment. She watched in fascination as the warm breath seeped out of his mouth to hit the cold air. She had to strain to hear his words. "It was once. Long ago after a night such as this. Minerva and she often come to dueling before the night is over for some reason or another. Usually it's over Quidditch, but that one time...I had found myself well into a number of cups. I tried to calm her down, and it just happened."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Severus. It's the past. I am just being...childish."

"No, Hermione," he held up a hand. "It's not unreasonable to feel this way. I can understand that, but you should know that now that you belong to me, no others could ever coerce me to their beds."

"I do know that. I was just emotional."

He smiled tightly. "If you must know, it was horrible. That night. I vowed to never do that again. She's a strange witch, that Rolanda. Just don't ever think that you are lacking in any way. You are perfection. All of you."

Hermione snorted. "I could do to lose a few stones."

"No. I said perfection, and I meant it. I desire you as you are." He cupped her cheek softly for a moment before casting an icy glare at her. "However, this was no excuse to go running off into the night. I simply brought her here and dumped her down. She made her own way inside sans wand of course. I don't trust her to be able to withstand the urge to seek out Minerva. When I went back, the others were coming out. I just caught sight of you running off."

"I'm sorry, Severus." She didn't know what more she could say. It was ridiculous. She should have known better. Her own jealousy had gotten the better of her. She vowed to not let it happen again. His words were very reassuring, and from the distaste in his expression, it appeared that he hadn't liked his session with Rolanda.

His eyes softened for a moment. "Hermione, I..." His voice trailed off. She thought he would say it. The words of love. "I worry for your safety. There are still supporters of the Dark Lord who have not been brought to justice. Most see Lucius and I as the traitors we truly are, and they would not be above hurting anyone we cared for to get to us."

"Was he one? That Higgs?" She gasped when he nodded. "I didn't know. I've never heard of the family name as being followers of Voldemort."

"They were silent supporters. There are many of those. The Dark Lord's Death Eaters weren't always active, and they didn't always bear his mark, Hermione. The Higgs family was always eager to help out in the way of funds. It kept them safe in the end though. There wasn't enough evidence to do anything to any of them."

"I'll be more careful in the future, Severus. I'm sorry to have worried you," she said, hiding her disappointment. She felt that he had been very close to saying he loved her. She knew it was superficial, but she desperately wanted to hear the words.

"Come," he said, taking her hand. "We need to get in to thaw out. I think you could do for a snack as well. It'll help soak up the liquor."

She went obediently, thinking of his arms being around her. They still needed to have a talk about things, but it could wait until the morning. Should she try to initiate something? In all honesty, she was really tired, and it was likely best that she wait until he made the move. She didn't want a repeat of what had happened that morning. Even though he had done it for honorable reasons, the rejection still smarted just the same.

Try as he might, he could only get her to nibble on a roll of bread. He had hoped that she would eat something in the condition she was in. She stood up to make her way to the bedroom. "I'm just so tired," she said through a yawn. Severus quickly summoned a nightgown for her and began helping her slip out of her clothes. He checked the urge to pull her into a heated embrace once she was scantily attired. He remembered all too well the bruises that had been on her milky flesh. The bruises he had put on her.

Where he had a ferocious sexual appetite and enjoyed a bit of rough play, he doubted he would ever truly be able to feel comfortable doing that with her. It would only remind him of the thoughts he'd had, the intentions that were his while in the dream. Hermione leaned forward and placed the lightest of kisses on his lips. He opened his mouth to allow her soft tongue entrance and reveled in the light moan that rumbled in her throat. He lifted his hand to caress her breast, but he stopped it before it touched her skin. Pulling away from the kiss, he pressed her body against his in a tight embrace. It was still too soon for him.

As he pondered over this, she fell into a light sleep in his arms. As quietly as he could, he lifted her into his arms to place her on their bed. Their bed. That's what it was now, wasn't it? Their chambers. Their things. He'd never be rid of her, nor did he want to be. They would have to have a talk about everything. "I love you," he whispered softly. "You mean more to me than anything."

He was glad that he had been able to put her worries about Rolanda away. He could see her frustration on such a thing, and he intended to give that yellow-eyed, er...red-eyed witch a few harsh words. How dare she tell Hermione about their past? How dare she make it sound like it was something more than what it was? Severus smirked. He'd have to congratulate Minerva on a job well done.

Severus left the bedchamber to write a quick letter to Lucius. They would have to have a talk soon about Higgs. What had that wretch been up to? He could have hexed him for his insolence. If Hermione hadn't been there, he would have, and he would have said a lot more. Out of respect for her, he didn't, and there was no telling whom the boy was meeting. He had walked up on them and cringed at the sight. The boy was no innocent. After he'd left Hogwarts, he'd taken to doing a lot of 'clean' dirty work for his father and the Dark Lord. He could see it in his eyes that he was up to something indeed, and there was no way that he would believe the wizard was meeting a woman. It would do to start a little spying just to learn what he and his friends were about. He went into his classroom to fetch a fresh bottle of ink when Potter's owl swooped in. Hesitantly, she landed on his desk and put forth a leg that had a letter attached to it.

Severus took the roll from her leg. The owl hooted disdainfully. "She's asleep! I will see that she gets it," he told the bird. She seemed to dither a moment before flying off as if she intended to peck at his hand. "Impertinent bird! Just like Pott-" He caught himself. Old habits would die hard. Harry wasn't as arrogant and self-absorbed as he'd once believed. He had truly come a long way in the past couple of years. At the beginning of term when they had finally brought the fight to the Dark Lord, he'd begun to have a grudging respect for the boy. He'd seen the way he'd tried to get his two best mates to stay out of the thick of things. It was the first time that Severus realized that he wasn't trying to be a hero or take all the credit for something. It was genuine worry for his friends' lives.

When Potter, no, Harry, had seen Ginevra cornered by Bellatrix, he'd gone mad. For a moment, Severus had paused to watch the fury unleash in the boy. He'd banished the youngest Weasley away with a flick of his wand while beginning to engage the offensive witch in a duel. It lasted only a few moments before Bella was in a heap, writhing in pain. Severus had come up on Harry at that moment. The boy had spun around, wild-eyed, looking to maim whoever approached.

"I'll handle this, Potter," Severus had told him. "The fight is that way." The boy nodded and ran off in search of the Dark Lord. Why did I never question what magic he had used? He'd done something so harsh to Bellatrix that she was even now, barely alive, in a muddled state over at Azkaban's mental ward. He should have sensed that it was Dark Magic then, but he simply bound the woman before sprinting off to help Lucius. He'd not call Harry by the name of Potter any longer. It made him think of James Potter too much. Lily's son was no longer in that man's category, nor would he be again.

Severus looked down at the parchment in his hands. He smirked at the messy writing. What could Harry want with Hermione at this hour? It was tied loosely, only with a slight ribbon in fact. He supposed he could easily give it a once over before fastening it back. No. He couldn't do that. If he wanted Hermione to have faith in him, he would have to do things the right way, but it was hard to resist his instincts. Years of spying had done many things. It was like part of him. Grabbing a bottle of ink and holding the offending parchment away from him, he made his way back to his study to write his own letter.

After a quick walk up to the Owlery, he was ready for bed. He glanced at her letter once more before forcing himself to go to bed. While he changed into his nightshirt, he wondered again about the letter. Why did it intrigue him so? Well, he would simply ask her about it when she read it. Surely there was nothing to hide. Was there? He smiled as he slid in next to the sleeping witch that had captured his heart. He drifted off to sleep feeling more content than he had in years.

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**Southern's Notes:** Ok, hope that cleared up the Hooch questions. I love her! Too funny, I say. I've made a little mini movie as a companion to this story. It's just over six minutes long and has mainly clips and pictures of SS/HG together. They are set to Randy Edelman's Promontory.

The quality isn't the best, and I've noticed that on some of my transfigured pix I can see where I've messed with them. I'll be happy to email it to anyone. It may take a while to load depending on your net connection, but I think it's worth the wait. I'm biased though! Lol

## Chapter Ten

*Chapter 11 of 32*

Severus and Hermione continue to work through things and spend time together while they can before the students

return. However, trouble is brewing.

**Disclaimer:** I don't own the characters, but I wish that I did!

**A big thanks goes to my original beta, Charmed Nay, and cheers go to the lovely GinnyW, who is kindly going through this for me to catch any stray funkies!**

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"Come along, or we'll be late," Severus urged with an evil glint in his eye. He wanted to attend breakfast in case Rolanda made an appearance. He wondered if she'd figured out a way to transfigure her hair and eyes back. There was no telling what hexes Minerva had used. If she was anything, it was a brilliant, inventive Transfiguration Mistress.

"I'm ready. Have you seen my cloak?" Hermione asked. She was glad to be going to breakfast as well. Her stomach was rumbling something fierce.

"Yes, it's just there on the chair," he said pointing towards the table. "Harry sent a letter to you last night." He paused. "Would you like to take a moment to read it? It must have been important to have sent his owl out so late." He hoped she would. As much as he wanted to witness the morning's happenings, he wanted to know what was in her letter. He saw that she looked guilty for a moment before pocketing the letter.

"No, I'll read it later. I'm famished," she replied, taking his hand in hers.

"Very well," he said. He noted the look of pure agony on Pomona's face when they sat at the table. Filius was humming happily to himself. Minerva had a somber expression on her face while Albus was merrily chatting with Hagrid. Poppy came in with a small vial and handed it to Pomona.

"There you are, Mona. You should learn to measure out your cups," she admonished.

"And, you, Poppy! Filius told me in bed... uh... just earlier, that you were well into your cups and in tears over a bit of insult." She downed the contents quickly. "Thanks all the same."

The two began to bicker, but Hagrid's booming greeting drowned out their voices. "Good morning, Severus, Hermione! Had a nice outin' did ya?"

"Eventful," Severus said while Hermione nodded. It was at this moment that blue-haired, red-eyed Rolanda flounced up to the table.

"Good morning all! Slept well, I assume?" she asked jovially.

Everyone held their breaths as Minerva spoke. "I had a quite restful sleep."

"I did as well. Forgotten about all that happened until I passed by the mirror." She chuckled. "It told me that I should get back in bed for a bit more of beauty rest. Can you believe it?" She patted the mass on top of her head with one hand while stirring her cup with the other. "Good conversation piece, this."

Minerva's eyes narrowed for a moment, but then she mumbled a few counter hexes. "There you are. It would be inappropriate for the students to find out what occurred. I'm sure there will be some talk. No need showing them the proof of it." Severus noticed that she gave Hermione a slight wink. "I should learn to mind my impulses."

"Pah! Think nothing on it," Rolanda said dismissively. "But, if you ever put me in *pink* clothes again, I'll put cat nip all about the castle." The two witches shared a grin over this. Other staff started coming in, as well as the young students that had stayed over the holidays. After breakfast, they all chatted amicably for a while until one by one they began dispersing.

"We'll have a small get together tomorrow night for a New Year celebration," Albus said. Hermione paled. Good grief, but she was not ready for another get together. She could have kissed Severus when he replied.

"I think not, Headmaster. We've had enough merriment for the time being. In fact," he said, eyeing Hermione softly for a moment, "I shall take Hermione home for a few days before the start of term. She could do with a little quiet time in which to study. I fear I have been keeping her from that."

"Oh, very nice," Albus said.

Hermione smiled. Did he mean take her to his home? Their home? She'd not ask, but she would pretend he thought of it that way. She began thinking of the possibilities for the master bedroom. It would need a few feminine touches, but she wouldn't overstep her bounds. She would do it subtly, and she would check to see if he approved. It really wasn't her home yet after all.

"Hold on, Severus. I need to get Hermione situated in her new quarters. I was going to do that yesterday, but then I was coerced into going into Hogsmeade," Minerva said strictly. Hermione knew that it hadn't taken much to talk her into anything, but she kept quiet.

"New quarters?" Severus asked dully. He eyed Hermione for a moment before speaking again. "Did you request... that?"

"No, she thinks..."

"Oh, calm down, man," Minerva retorted. "Nobody need know where she sleeps, but she will have her own chambers nonetheless."

"Of course," Severus said, standing suddenly. "I would hate to give anyone any cause to gossip." Hermione could tell that this didn't sit well with him. She mentally sighed, as it would likely be another thing to talk about.

"It won't take long," Hermione soothed. "I'll only bring over a few personal effects to make it look as though it's lived in."

"Oh, come now," Albus said. "You two go off to your house for a visit. This can wait until just before the students return."

"Thank you, sir," Hermione said swiftly, pulling Severus away with her before Minerva had a chance to rebuff their plans. Inwardly, she was thrilled. They'd get to spend quality time alone for the first time. She would let him see how it could be for two lovers to share a home together. A real home. "She sprung that on me yesterday before Rolanda spirited us away. I hadn't thought to tell you."

"Well, you didn't have the chance. It's all right, Hermione." He looped her arm with his. He realized how comfortable it felt having her with him. It was as if she were made specifically for him. He'd take this time to learn everything that he could about her. He'd show her that life could be great for them. Severus only worried that she could learn to deal with his less than desirable attributes. He was prone to work well into the night on research or on rebuttals of others' research. With a smirk, he admitted to himself that he was quite cynical at times. They just needed time to learn how to cope with their differences and enjoy the things for which they held the same passion.

~~~~~ HQ ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"That feels good," Severus murmured, setting his glass of wine onto the floor next to him. "Where did you learn to do this?"

"That ruddy book on pleasing wizards," she said through laughter. "I've never actually done it before, but it explained the procedure so well. I'm glad you are enjoying it. Lie on your stomach."

Severus smiled and did as he was told, using his robes and shirt as a temporary pillow. He replayed the evening in his mind over again. It had been so perfect that it was unsettling. It was as if something was going so well that there had to be something that would ruin it. Yes, it was in his Slytherin nature to always be on the look out for himself, but if he continued to worry on trivial matters and always waited for fate to step in to play a cruel trick, they would never get any place. They had popped into town to pick up a few provisions. She studied while he read. The elves prepared an excellent meal before disappearing. They talked for a couple of hours before the fire whilst sipping, only moderately, on some wine she had suggested. She said that her parents had a bit after dinner sometimes. When he complained of having a crick in his neck, she began to timidly massage his neck and shoulders. Somehow his robes came off, as did his shirt, and here they were.

Hermione was now straddled over Severus while kneading his pale, firm flesh. In the firelight, she could see little scars here and there, but the skin was still smooth. He had tensed up when she first began touching him, so she knew better than to try to suggest anything further than this. It was just nice to be able to touch him in such a way. She'd enjoyed the wonderful day with him. *This is how it always should be.* Hermione continued to caress his flesh until her hands began to hurt. It was only then that she heard his slight snore. She hated to wake him, but they needed to go up to bed. She didn't want to sleep on the floor. "Severus, let's go to bed, love."

He stirred languidly. "What time is it?"

"I'm not sure, but you've fallen asleep. Should we go up?" she asked softly, moving off of him. Stretching as he sat, he yawned lightly.

"Yes, I think we should. I'm very relaxed now. I think the bed would be more satisfying at this point," he said, pulling her up with him. "We should have used a cushioning spell." He led her up the stairs and into the room. The elves had stoked the fire, and the room was comfortably warm. Each readied themselves for bed quietly. After holding each other for a while, Severus kissed her softly. "Good night," he said.

"Night," she replied, snuggling closer.

A moment later, he said, "Hermione, please don't be offended by my... lack of advances. It's not that I don't want to make love to you. I do, but I am still dealing with this for now. We both are. I think it wise..."

"Enough," she whispered. "It's fine. Pleasant dreams."

"Only if you are in them," he replied immediately, tightening his hold. What had he done to deserve such a forgiving woman? Dryly, he commented, "The real you, in any event." She giggled lightly and let the silence lull her into sleep.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione woke first with horrible cramping. "Sod it all," she muttered, making her way to the loo. After completing her toilette, she made her way downstairs.

"Good morning, Miss," Zenka greeted. "I is having your breakfast ready."

"Thanks," she said kindly, pouring some juice into a cup. She grabbed a couple of scones and made her way to the living area. There was a slight chill in the air still, so she draped her cloak over her legs. She felt the bulk in her pocket and remembered Harry's letter. Blast! How could she have forgotten about it? She quickly opened it.

Mione,

*Sorry I didn't reply sooner. I hope you weren't moping about waiting for a reply. I guess Snape didn't tell you about it, but we had a little chat. He seemed fine to me, so I don't think he'll be throwing you out. Stop this worrying nonsense. He was a right side more amicable than I even thought he'd be, what with the stunt we pulled.*

*As far as anyone mentioning anything about any past relationship that he may have had, no. There is nothing that I recall about it. I fished around a bit with Mrs. Weasley, but she wasn't biting. Said something like his business was his own. So, I think there was someone, but maybe she is right. We shouldn't be prying about. Ask him if you'd like.*

*The only woman I ever heard him speak fondly of was my mother. We had a little talk about that as well. He said that he was sorry that she had died as she had always tried to befriend him though he didn't appreciate it at the time. Now, that's nothing to go by since he and I haven't exactly shared many conversations. Truth be known, he probably just never bothered with anyone.*

*I left for a bit. Ginny had a nightmare. I went up to see what was going on, but her mother shooed me away. Ron said that sometimes she still has bad dreams about Tom Riddle and Bellatrix Lestrange. She hides it well I tell you. I might try to talk to her on it tomorrow. If anyone understands about that, then it would be me. That's why we get on so well, us. We've both been tainted by that arse. Good luck, Mione. I'll see you next week. Ron sends his hellos and wants me to say that Luna has accepted to wear his house ring. Hope it disturbs the Ravenclaws! Gryffindor plays them next!*

Love,

Harry

Well, that was no help. Harry was right though. Why worry about it? It was apparent where his loyalties were now. That was nice of Harry's mum to try to be nice to him, even back then. Hermione thought for a moment. What had Severus been like so long ago? In his school days? Was he yet the man she had met in his dream? Not likely, as they were still in school.

Harry's mum. Hermione remembered the way Severus had stiffened in her arms in the dream when she spoke her name. He'd gotten an odd, wary look in his eyes. *Why do you speak of her? Why indeed?* "Bloody hell," she said, standing up. It was Harry's mum. She was the one that he'd felt something for. She had spurned him for James Potter. That had to be why he hated Harry so much. It was no secret that Severus loathed Harry's dad. This explained everything. She sat on the lumpy chesterfield, mentally recalling all that she could remember about his mum.

Lily was sort of like a martyr to them. She had given her life for Harry's. She was brilliant in her own right, and she wasn't beyond using a bit of old, darker magic to ensure that Harry lived. She always heard that Lily was pleasant, but she had a no nonsense approach about things. Hermione secretly thought that Ginny resembled her, and she believed that likeness was what attracted Harry eventually. That and, now apparently, the connection they each had to Voldemort.

How could she compete with such a woman? "Stop, Hermione! This is what got you into trouble the last time. Talk to him," she said aloud.

"To me?" a silky voice asked from the doorway.

She startled and dropped the parchment. "You look smashing, Severus." He was wearing a light green, silk shirt and navy trousers. "Are we off somewhere?"

"I thought you might like an excursion into town for lunch. I've just had an Owl from Lucius, and he wants to meet with me. I thought you might like to do a little shopping while he and I talk," he said mysteriously.

She bit back the instinct to ask what they were meeting about. "Could we visit my vault at Gringott's? I haven't all that much left, what after my Christmas shopping." He threw a small coin purse to her. She looked at it oddly, feeling coins inside. "What's this?"

"I thought you might like a little spending money. We'll not be going to Diagon Alley, so we won't be near Gringotts."

"Severus, I can't spend your money. I wouldn't feel right about it. Besides, I'm not for buying all that much anyway. I'm not above window shopping," she said with a smile. It was sweet of him to offer it to her.

"Hermione, you are welcome to it. Perhaps...maybe you would like to buy a few things for the house. Didn't I hear you mumble something about needing an arrangement on the table?" he asked slyly, raising an eyebrow.

"Would you mind terribly? I don't want to impose," she said, standing to go to him.

He gave her a decisive look before answering cautiously. "Hermione, if you'd like, you could think of this as *our* home. That being the case, it's your right to decorate or arrange as you see fit," he said, folding his hands in front of him as he spoke.

"Well, thank you," she said, rubbing his arm lightly. "That means a lot to me. I promise to consult with you on things of course."

He nodded. "Have you eaten? Feeling well?"

"Some scones a bit ago. They were delicious. I do have a bout of spasms today."

"Take something for that then. Did you get any more studying done?" he asked, moving into the kitchen.

"Only a little. I'm feeling a bit rebellious right now," she said with a grin. "Maybe I'll put it off until we get back."

"We're not leaving for a while yet," he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"You're right. I'll just go and have a read then," she said, backing away.

"I'm not dismissing you, Hermione. I just mentioned that you had extra time. I know it means a lot to you to do your best on the examinations."

"Honestly! It's okay. I'll reserve my rebelliousness for later," she said, blowing him a kiss before exiting.

His mouth gaped open for a moment, and then he chuckled. Girls didn't blow kisses at men like him often. It was a sweet and completely innocent gesture. Once again, he was reminded of her youth. He shrugged. Apparently it didn't bother her. Why should he dwell on it?

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus raised an eyebrow when he saw Draco with Lucius. Nevertheless, he greeted both Malfoys. Hermione smiled brightly at Draco. "Fancy meeting you here," she joked.

"Father thought I could keep you company while the old men have their chat," he said with a wink.

"How nice," she said easily.

"Indeed," Severus said, not liking the charismatic boy with his woman. He was sure that Lucius had his reasons. "Meet us here in say, an hour?"

"Sure," Draco drawled. "We'll just be about on this street and not take any alleys."

"Fair enough," Lucius said, urging Severus to follow him. Severus watched the young pair amble off and noticed that they were having a relaxed conversation already. "Oh, come now, Severus. Draco is here to make sure she is safe. Hurry up."

"Tell me what you know," Severus said as soon as they sat down.

"Old man Higgs has been making small inquiries around town, trying to see where everyone's interests are. My contacts within the ministry said that he's been there many times in the past couple of weeks. Mostly he's been having meetings with Fudge, Percy Weasley, Umbridge, and Edgecombe. My source tells me that he overheard a plan to reinstate charges on us for crimes prior to our turning."

"Ludicrous! Bones pardoned us as soon as the Dark Lord was taken down. They can't reverse a pardon. We've received Orders of Merlin for our work," Severus said hotly.

"Exactly. However, it'll never pass. That just shows that they are up to something. They will want to pay us back somehow." Lucius looked around before whispering conspiratorially. "Young Terrence Higgs has Owled Draco this morning asking him to meet him for a party over at the Parkinsons' later. Either he is trying to get to Draco, or he's trying to work through him to get to me."

"Well, he's not going, is he?" Severus asked.

"Of course. It's only polite to accept an invitation. Pansy still fancies him, in any event. I think it wise to let him go." Lucius raised an eyebrow. "I think it wise that you keep a close eye on your little friend, Severus. I would be glad that you intercepted her when she met with Higgs night before last. The family still considers a Muggle-born to be unworthy. I think this may have given them an idea. Why else would he be associating with the seventh years?"

"And, Draco can find out for us if he plays his cards right," Severus summarized. "I shall have to explain to Hermione. Does Draco know everything?"

"He does," Lucius said. "One last thing, Severus. About Percy Weasley. I think he is easily swayed, that one. He worships the ground that Fudge walks on, even if he is a lowly worker in a subordinate department. I know you won't like this, but perhaps Potter and his lot could do something to feel him out."

"I'll talk to Harry about it, but as far as I know, they've not associated with that boy since that bitch Umbridge took over at Hogwarts."

Lucius smirked. "Harry, is it?"

"I've...things have happened. We are on friendlier terms. That is all you need to know," Severus said blandly.

"Severus, I think it's grand that you have found someone to share your time with these last couple of weeks." Lucius accepted a fresh glass from the waiter. "Is it permanent, you think?"

Nodding slightly, Severus said, "I do."

"Excellent. Perhaps you should come over for dinner one evening," Lucius offered politely.

"I don't know. I didn't like the way Narcissa treated her last time. I could tell Hermione was uncomfortable even though she didn't say it," he said with a sour look.

"To be quite blunt, she was tickled that the paper published that picture and story about the four of us. She now firmly believes that you have gained us another connection." Lucius laughed lightly. "She'll never change I'm afraid, but at least we know she won't mistreat her again. She wouldn't stake our newfound...association." Severus shook his head and chuckled.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"So, you were right then," Hermione said. "They are still trying to find ways to punish you for turning. Well, I'm not afraid. Not really. I'll be at Hogwarts with you. Let them try something!"

Severus smiled. "Suffice it to say, Hermione, you still need to be aware of your surroundings and those in it at all times. It's better to be protected than regretful."

"Percy, that dolt! I can't believe he is still trying to be Fudge's lapdog after all this time! You'd think since Fudge was removed from office and since his own father has been promoted, he would put his loyalty with his family, where it belongs." Hermione pulled at her hair in exasperation. "The only one he still Ows now is Ginny. I'll talk to her. I'll talk to the lot of them."

"Very well," Severus said, pulling her to him for a kiss. *I don't kiss her often enough.* As her lips and tongue worked their magic on his mouth, he was overcome with feeling. Not lust, but love. "Little One... I am enjoying our time here together."

"As am I, Severus. It's glorious!" She kissed him again. "Bloody hell! I have to go to the loo. Sorry!"

Severus laughed. She'd had some cramping earlier. He hoped it was nothing she had eaten. He sat down to take off his boots when he noticed a bit of parchment sticking out from under the lamp table. "What have we here?"

He opened it and immediately realized it was from Harry. She had finally read the letter. She hadn't mentioned it to him. Why? He looked around and cocked his head to listen for her footsteps. Quickly he read the letter. So. She had worried that he would kick her out, and then she began to wonder whom he held affections for previously. No wonder she was all wrapped up in emotion where Hooch was concerned. She probably thought that he fancied her at one time.

Severus said a silent thanks to Molly for not gossiping about his past, especially not to Harry. Not about that. Harry had not caught on to anything he had said that night when they talked. So much the better, but if Hermione mulled over this then she was sure to figure it out. He would have to talk to her. He was disappointed that she was trying to find out information on his past without asking him. He'd told her that first night that they had made love that he would suggest that she ask him any questions. He even told her that he might not answer them. The least she could have done was tried to ask. They'd been alone for the better part of two days here, and she'd not mentioned it once.

That must have been why she was talking to herself this morning then. So she had only read her letter this morning. He smirked thinking of her words. She had said she should just talk to him. He glanced at the letter again. "What's that?" Hermione asked, walking into the room.

Embarrassed that he'd been caught reading her personal letter, he replied with acid. "I've found this. Would you care to explain just why you and Harry are nosing about for information on my past dating habits?"

Hermione's face heated. "I...I'm sorry?"

"You should be. Did I not tell you to ask me things if you had questions? I do not like when people try to pry into my personal life, Hermione. Not even you. Here is proof that you have." He stood up to thrust the letter at her. "As such, I..."

"Hang on! You talk of prying, eh? What are you doing reading my personal letter?"

He paused. "If you wish to hide things from me, I suggest you do a better job of it. The parchment was laid out on the floor, just there. I read it mistakenly thinking that it was mine."

"Severus, I wrote to him after you'd left me that morning. I just thought if I knew who it was that you used to care about, well, then maybe I could groom myself to be like her. I thought maybe you wouldn't throw me out. I meant well," she said, biting her lip and looking away.

*It's now or never, Severus.* "You are more like her than you know," he began softly. He sat down and motioned for her to join him. "You are both intelligent. You are both Muggle-born witches. You each have your own way to look at the world. You analyze everything and try to fix what's broken. You are both kindhearted by nature. You both took the time to try to get to know me." He kissed her hand. "I was just a little younger than you when I took a liking to her, but by the time I realized that I did fancy her, it was too late. She began seeing someone else. I hated myself for never giving her a chance. Back in those days, I most likely would have been disowned by my father and the few friends that I had if I would have dated a Muggle-born. When I looked inside and realized that I didn't care, she had forgotten her feelings for me."

"Is she..."

"Let me finish. It ate me up inside. I hated her boyfriend who later became her husband, and I hated her child because he could have been mine. I just gave up on hope. I never allowed myself to feel again, until you. Now that I do feel...this," he gestured to the both of them, "I know that I have never felt this way before. What I felt for her pales in comparison. I'm a grown man now, and I am hoping to be able to share a life with the woman I...feel this way for."

"Severus, where is she now?" Hermione asked. She had a feeling that it was Harry's mum, but he spoke of her in the present tense.

"She died the night the Dark Lord's curse backfired when he tried to kill Harry. I have long since been over any feelings that I had for her. Do not think I still harbor some torch," he said with a rueful expression. "I only stopped to wonder how things could have been every so often."

"Lily."

"Yes, Lily. Hermione, the reason I feel this way about you, it's not because you remind me of her. There are so many reasons that I wish to spend the time I have left with you. Do not ever think again that you have to groom yourself to mimic another." He kissed her hand again. "You would change too much, and I wouldn't like it."

Hermione hugged him, feeling extremely relieved. *I love this man so much.* They began kissing passionately, hands caressing, tongues mingling, bodies melding. He pulled back some time later to look into her eyes questioningly. "I can't," she said sorrowfully.

"I understand," he said with disappointment.

"No, I want to. It's... now is not a good time," she said gesturing to her midsection.

He grinned. "I do, indeed, understand then. No reason I can't take you to bed and kiss you to sleep though, is there?"

"Definitely not. I'd be upset if you didn't."

"I could think of nothing more I would want to be doing when the New Year rings in."

"Severus, I could...you know," she said, nodding to his lower body.

"No, Hermione. That is not necessary. I would hate to not be able to return the favor," he said, leading her to the bedroom. "I think I can survive a few days without. Just having you near is enough."

She remained quiet while she slipped into her nightclothes. A wicked grin broke out over her face as she noticed Severus pulling his nightshirt over his head. "I'll Nox the candles when I get out of the bathroom." She brushed her teeth and mentally prepared herself. There would be no denying her. He was too damned honorable at times! Why shouldn't she be allowed to please him? She padded back to the bed, extinguished the lights, and crawled in on his side to sit right next to his knees.

"Hermione?"

"I want to touch you," she said softly. She felt his body relax as she put her hand on his calf. As softly as she could, she inched it up further until it slipped under his nightshirt. She made an innocently timid grope over his bulging under shorts. Hearing his slight intake of breath, she caressed more firmly, palming his hard length. Again, he sucked in air, but there was a slight rumble of sound that reached her ears. Emboldened, she used more force with her fingers to create a circular path up and down his length. This time he groaned aloud and tried to still her hand with his own. She pushed it away.

Using both hands she eased down his under pants, allowing her nails to scratch along his flesh. He kicked them off impatiently as she brought both hands to his thick shaft. She could practically feel it throbbing in her palms. One hand lowered to explore his scrotum, and the other slightly pumped his length. Severus enclosed her hand with one of his to guide her. She had been afraid to grip him too tightly, but apparently he didn't mind. His hand moved away as her ministrations grew steady.

She could feel his body starting to move and grind against her hands. Instinctively, she increased her speed. She was compelled suddenly to lower her head and lick his tip. "Hermione!" he exclaimed sharply. She felt his body lurch forward, and she suckled the head with her lips and stroked it with her tongue in time with her hand movements. Her other hand was still caressing his scrotum. Suddenly he began to move frantically against her. His hand came up to push her face away, and a moment later she felt warm liquid dripping out over both hands and forearms. He hissed out a final, "Yesssss," as he climaxed.

"*Scourgify*," she said softly, cleaning the mess from each of them. She placed her wand on the end table at the foot of the bed and crawled up his body for a kiss. "Sleep well, love."

He flipped her over onto her back. "I wish I could be within you right now." He began kissing her lips and throat. "I want you so badly, Hermione."

"I wish it as well," she agreed. "Happy New Year."

"It shall be," he whispered. "I promise." After a long session of kissing, they fell into a contented sleep.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"It feels odd being back in the castle, doesn't it?" Hermione asked, breaking the silence that had ensued since they began unpacking their things. Severus had been very thoughtful from the moment they had returned. This was the third day after the New Year began. *A new year indeed!* Hermione smiled, knowing this year would be the start of the rest of her life. Her life with Severus.

Severus paused to look at her. "Yes. I fear I'd grown comfortable at home. This is the first time that I regret being back at Hogwarts after a trip home." He busied himself with some papers on his table. "I'll need to read over some of these." She nodded and watched him sweep away to his office.

What was it that was bothering him? Did he think things would change between them since the students would be returning the next evening? *Of course!* Minerva would be down to fetch her soon to help her get settled in to her new quarters. They'd talked about so many things over the last few days, but they hadn't talked about that! She'd assumed that she would keep up the pretense of having her own set of rooms, but she would Floo down to be with him in the evenings. Who would have thought that the man could be so insecure?

As if right on cue, Minerva's head appeared in the fireplace. "Hermione, Albus said that you two had returned. Would you mind meeting with me? We need to go over a few things. I'll be in my office in about ten minutes."

"That's fine. Good to see you. I'll just let Severus know," Hermione said promptly. This was to be her new boss after all. It wouldn't do to show her how disappointed this made her. Minerva was right though. What kind of message would it send to the students?

"That'll do." Minerva's head disappeared.

Hermione went to Severus' office. She noticed that he was frowning over a parchment. "Are you all right?" she asked quietly.

"I need to leave the castle for a few hours," he said, standing up to throw his cloak over him. "I'll not be able to take lunch with you. Will you be all right today?"

"Yes, I was coming to tell you that Minerva wants me to go over a few things with her, so I will be occupied while you are gone. I suppose we'll have to set up my quarters," she said, gauging his reaction. He just stared at her impassively waiting for her to continue. "Even though I will have my own quarters, I still intend to come here as often as possible. You don't think to be rid of me so easily, do you?" she asked with a grin.

He cupped her cheek. "Not at all. Hermione, I just think things will change for us. The students will be back. After you take your N.E.W.T.s, you'll start to work, and Minerva is no slacker. You'll be very busy, as will I. I wonder at how much time we will actually have together."

"Each evening, after our work is done and dinner has been eaten, I'll be here. Then you will have me all night until just before breakfast the next morning. We'll have weekends together as well," she said, bringing her lips closer with each sentence. He pulled her face to his until their lips were nearly grazing.

"And, I *will* have you each night. You *are* mine." With that whispered fiercely, he took her lips with his in a passionate kiss. "I'll search you out upon my return." With one last quick kiss, he strode out of his door, robes billowing behind him. She wondered what he had been reading and where he was off to. She would bet it was something to do with Lucius. They had been exchanging Owls over the last couple of days. Severus had told her that he would explain it all to her as soon as he knew for certain what was going on. She didn't push him, but she resented being left out in the dark. Shrugging the thoughts away, she made her way to Minerva's office.

"Hello, dear. Have a nice stay with Severus?" Minerva asked, pouring a cup of tea.

"Yes, it was nice," Hermione said, giving her mentor a shy smile.

"Excellent! I know that you may not fully understand why I insist on you having your own quarters, but I assure you it is for the best. Our business is our own, and there is no need for the entire school knowing. Some things would just be deemed inappropriate," she said softly. "I'm sorry, but that's my final word on the matter."

"I do understand, and I think on some level, Severus does as well. Our relationship is so new; we just want to spend all the time together that we possibly can. We'll work it out," she said.

"Very well. On to our discussion then. As I have just said, our business is our own. I know you are still at an age where you might like to gossip with your young friends, but it would not be prudent to share any personal information about us." Minerva gave her a pointed look. "Where Potter and Weasley know many things that go on already, the rest of the school remains in the dark. I'd like to see them stay that way." She gave a small smile. "I don't think you would spread gossip, but things such as...my small conflict with Rolanda need not be repeated."

"Of course not, Professor," she said quickly.

"It's always Minerva, Hermione. We are colleagues now. Now I need to ask you something, and I need a very honest answer."

Hermione sat up straighter. The woman seemed so serious. "All right."

"With all of the extra effort you put into everything, I would almost believe you capable of taking over the first through fifth year classes already. But, I must ask you. Do you think that by the end of term you will have learned enough to start off on your own with all classes next year?" Minerva's voice had taken on a very somber note.

"Yes. I am sure I will learn what needs to be done and fall into a pattern. Would your notes be available to me?" she asked, feeling excited and dismayed at the same time. She wasn't supposed to teach all classes on her own until year after next. Something must be wrong.

"Certainly. I've taught in precisely the same manner for each class each year for most of my career. You are welcome to carry on in the same way if you'd like. After you take your exams on Monday, I will give you all of my notes for the first through third years. You can take the rest of the week to become familiar with where we are, and then I will oversee you teaching those classes." Minerva smirked. "I will sit at the back and watch, much like that cow Umbridge did. I will make notes on everything that I approve of and disapprove of. Don't be disheartened about that though. You will need my professional opinion on things and critiquing is always a positive thing to new instructors."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Indeed it does. Now, this will go on until I feel you are capable of having those classes on your own without my presence. You will come to all of my other classes whilst I am instructing and watch me. You and I will go over all assignments together. I will show you my ways of looking for things and grading. I have the utmost confidence in you, but I will say that this will move at your pace. The faster you take your classes at hand, then the faster you will be able to teach all classes. I dare not rush you. We have nearly six months. I think we shall set an even pace with this, but I will not be able to help you come next year." Hermione noticed her slight frown at those words.

"Minerva, what has happened? Why has my apprenticeship been shortened?"

Minerva looked down for a moment. "Albus...he has decided to retire at the end of this year. I will be instated as Hogwarts Headmistress."

"So soon? I thought..."

"As did I. He has only recently made this decision. He'd like to take some time off sooner, visit old friends such as Paracelsus, and be able to finally relax. His life has been long and much of it has been filled with battles against Dark Lords. I am sorry to see him go," she said, tears forming in her eyes.

"Will he... not be around at all?" Hermione gulped. Did this mean that their relationship was now over? Poor Minerva!

"Yes, he will," she said with a tight smile. "But, it's not really the same, is it?"

"No, I suppose not. I'll not let you down, Minerva. This will be one less worry for you. I will do my job, and being a fast learner, perhaps you will be able to have a break before the end of term," Hermione said determinedly.

"I think having to take over the Defense classes this year has brought him down. It's why I know that once I take over the duties required of the headmistress, I won't be able to teach at all. I'm very efficient and astute, but I am no Albus Dumbledore. If that incompetent Willows had remained, this retirement may have been delayed for another year, but I suppose I can't begrudge Albus some relaxation. He's earned it after all he's accomplished."

Remembering that Severus always wanted the Dark Arts position, Hermione asked, "Why did he not just allow Severus or someone to help? Will you be appointing someone new for next year?"

"Albus has his own reasons for wanting Severus where he is. I will not question his judgment on it, but no, I will not be appointing a new Defense professor. Albus said that he will make that his last act as Headmaster," Minerva said with a smile. "Even I have no idea what goes on in that head of his at most times. Now. Let me show you to your quarters." Hermione followed her mentor down the corridor to a portrait of a hag who cackled at them as they approached. "Animagus," she stated.

"Stupid password, that," the hag stated with a shrill laugh, but the portrait swung forward to allow them access.

Once inside, Minerva said, "You can change the password to whatever you'd like, and don't mind her snide remarks. No one would think to look for you behind a portrait of her. Well, this is your study I suppose. It's quite roomy. You have a small spare room just there. Your bedchamber and bath are just through here."

Hermione loved her chambers. They were much smaller than Severus', but they were hers. Quaint, feminine, and cozy are words she would use to describe them. It prided her that she had accomplished something so soon in her young life. She had a job. She had her own place to stay should she need it. Her income was considerable considering the salary they could have started her out at. Her goals were all being realized before her eyes. "They are very nice," she said.

"These will do for now. You will be able to have mine next year until you and Severus decide to marry." Hermione blushed. "Hermione, I am certain that he will ask. I've never seen Severus this attentive to anyone before. He's even snippy with Albus at times, but with you, well, I can just see it."

"Thanks," she replied, not knowing what else to say. She noted that the bed was only slightly smaller than the one in Severus' chambers, but the bathroom mimicked his almost exactly. The color scheme was different and more feminine.

"You can decorate to your tastes of course. This chamber hasn't been used since my own time as an apprentice. It's near the class and sufficient for what you need. Will you have your cat back? I'm sure he would like it," Minerva said with a smile.

"He's taken to staying at the Weasleys. Molly has become attached to him. I suppose that I will have to eventually bring him though. I haven't missed him all that much lately because of all of this with Severus, and I will be very busy soon with work. Perhaps though." Hermione gave her mentor a sly smile. "My Floo...is it open to all rooms?"

"Not likely. I will have the Headmaster open it up," Minerva replied with her own sly smile. "I'm sure you will need a direct link to Severus' rooms and he to yours."

"Definitely," she said sweetly. "Pro...er...Minerva, about Harry and Ron. Are they allowed here? Is that inappropriate?"

Minerva thought for a moment. "We usually see students only in our offices unless we have other good reason for them to be in our chambers. Since you have no office, and I am sure you will be working from your study, I don't see where it would be amiss to have them come for a visit with you. I understand that the transition from student to instructor will be a little rough at first. They are still your peers, only your roles have been reversed. I would not suggest you invite too many. You may, of course, still visit the Gryffindor common room at any time you would like. You are also welcome in the staff room."

"I appreciate that so much," she said happily. Things wouldn't have to change too much. She could still enjoy her friends while they were still at Hogwarts. Starting next year, she would only have a few that were still sort of close to her. Ginny, for one. Luna another. She continued to chat with Minerva until it was time for lunch.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"So all was going nicely, Higgs hadn't really talked to me all that much, and then suddenly he pulls me to the side. Asks for a private word," Draco was explaining. "I said sure. Once we were alone, he began to ask about my father, wanted to know if he had truly defected or if it was all just a front to stay out of Azkaban. Hell, I told him there was no doubt in my mind that father would do what he had to do to stay out of that place. I even implied that perhaps father was only seemingly disloyal."

"Crafty, isn't he?" Lucius asked, pride seeping into his voice.

"Indeed. Did Higgs fall for it though?" Severus asked, clearly suspicious.

Draco's expression turned dark. "At first, yes, but a bloke named Douglas Bradley showed up. I barely remember him from school. He was a Ravenclaw."

"I remember him. Very adept at potions. His girlfriend was killed by Jugson, if I remember correctly, prior to being captured after the Ministry of Magic fiasco," Severus said.

"Indeed. I am afraid that I was present when that happened," Lucius said, face filled with regret. "She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We made it look like a Muggle murder after."

"Anyway," Draco said pointedly. "He comes out to talk to Higgs. Says he thinks that my loyalty lies with Potter, and that I cannot be trusted. I told him that while I respected



Potter, I didn't like him, but it was in my best interest to appear that I did. He didn't buy it. He tried to put an Imperius curse on me. I heard his voice in my head telling me to go back to school and be sure to remain friendly with Hermione Granger until further notice."

Severus sucked in a deep breath. "Go on."

"Well, I couldn't let them know that I had been trained to throw it off, so I stood there blankly for a minute. I heard him whisper something to Higgs about two birds with one stone. Higgs seemed regretful, but he nodded. I then said that I had the urge to be off. They laughed as I Apparated home. I don't know what instructions I will have next, but I can pretend to go along." Draco frowned. "And, so my stint as a brilliant spy ends."

"Now, son, you did a fine job. Even if we hadn't truly turned, this Bradley would still want revenge for his lost love. I think it is a plus for us that they believe you to be controllable. What are your thoughts, Severus?" Lucius asked gazing at his friend.

"I think they will try to harm Hermione and Draco to get to us or to draw us out where they can harm us as well." Severus shook his head. "Interesting instructions, don't you think? Go back to Hogwarts and continue to be friendly with Hermione until further notice. This leads me to believe that there is a mole in the castle."

Lucius nodded. "I thought as much. Draco, it appears you will have to try to follow around Potter and friends to keep up appearances."

"She is part of the staff, Lucius. She won't be with Harry and Weasley as she was before. We'll have to meet. All of us once classes resume to think of something." Severus darkened. "If I find out who is the traitor in our midst, I will kill him...or her. They will not threaten Hermione or Draco only to get away with it whilst I still breathe."

"Sir, you would be no better than these people if you do that. We'll find a way to bring them to justice somehow," Draco said. "Like last year. Those two were lucky they got off before the Aurors showed up! The ones that attacked us."

Lucius and Severus exchanged knowing glances. They would do what must be done for the sake of their loved ones. "Draco, we will talk more on this back at school. Lucius, I thank you for all of the information you have been sending me. I will speak with Harry on the Percy situation."

"Pleasure as always, Severus. I hope lunch was to your liking," he drawled.

"Indeed. My compliments to your elves. Send my greetings to Narcissa," he said, walking to the door. Draco waved and sprinted up the stairway. Severus lowered his voice. "We shall handle this. I will, of course, let Albus know what is happening. I'll find out who it is at Hogwarts."

"I am with you. We will do as we deem necessary," Lucius said darkly.

"I know, old friend," Severus said, clapping the man on the shoulder. He made his way out to Apparate back to Hogwarts' front gate. Instead of going down to the dungeons or seeking out Hermione, he made his way to the Astronomy Tower. The fools' plans to have old charges brought up against them had failed miserably, so now they were trying to do the next best thing. Hit them where it would hurt the most; in this case, Lucius' heir and his beloved.

Severus thought back to when Lucius had turned over. Lucius wasn't trusted by most at first, but Severus never doubted him. He reflected on his friend's transition from dark to light. It was amazing how easily money could get you out of prison. After he had been arrested a couple of years back, he had kept low, visiting the Dark Lord privately. He had refused to do some things that would tip off the Aurors to his true loyalties. Lucius really wouldn't risk Azkaban, not if he could avoid it. The Dark Lord had been angered. If Severus hadn't heard Bella's comment about being short a Malfoy heir, Draco may have been killed as punishment for Lucius' denial of his master's wishes. On a whim, he visited Lucius to tell him. The man didn't believe it at first, but decided to keep the information to himself. They made plans to ensure Draco's safety at the castle and off the grounds. Lucius used his own invisibility cloak to follow Draco into Hogsmeade on the students' weekend last year. Severus used a Disillusionment Spell to stand watch with his friend as well.

Harry and Draco had an argument after Draco had tripped Hermione. It was near an alley, and they chuckled at Draco's ferociousness. Without his two usual followers, he had approached the trio on his own. It was only after he and Harry had ended their scuffle that two cloaked figures approached Draco. Hermione had noticed them dragging Draco into the very alley that he and Lucius were standing in. As if in slow motion, Severus watched as she pulled Harry and Weasley around. They bolted after them and took the two Death Eaters by surprise, yelling for them to release 'ruddy Malfoy' or else. Severus had to hold Lucius still whilst the fracas played out. It ended with Harry pushing Draco to the side to keep him out of the line of a Cruciatus. The four students joined together sending a slew of hexes at their foes. In actuality, they were lucky that the pair the Dark Lord sent were fairly young, new recruits. They began retreating quickly enough.

Draco had hurt his ankle somehow, and Hermione tried to help him while Weasley ran out for help. Harry had chased after the Death Eaters. When Severus heard the rustling of Lucius' cloak pass, he made chase as well. Harry was dueling with one again, and he was gaining ground. He hadn't noticed that the other had doubled back. Just as the man raised his wand to hex Harry, Lucius sent out a Disarming Hex. All three lost their wands and looked about wildly to see who had done it. When Lucius threw off his cloak, Severus ended his charm as well. Harry looked at Lucius warily, but once he had realized that Severus was there, he moved toward them. Trusting instinctively that he was safe. "I'll take it from here, Potter," Lucius had said coldly before turning to look at the two would-be murderers. "You dare try to kill my son?"

The two young men began sputtering and lying to save themselves, but it was no use. Parental instinct had kicked in. Lucius looked to Severus questioningly. Severus knew what he was asking, so he looked to Harry and said, "Potter, you never saw us. Those two got away as far as you know." Harry only nodded, took his wand from Lucius, and made his way back to the others. Thanks to Severus and Lucius the Dark Lord never saw those two followers again. Albus later explained to Harry that it was necessary to dispose of them, and he told Harry that Lucius would be joining the fight against the man that would have had his only son killed. Sometimes one had to do what he would to ensure that his loved ones would be safe. This was no different.

Severus made his way to Albus' chambers and told him everything that he had been told at the Malfoy's home. His mentor had never looked older to him, and Severus felt a pang of guilt at giving him something else to worry about. Albus agreed with his plans to include Harry, Weasley, and Draco. Before he left, Albus told him, "Keep what is precious to you safe, Severus. It would be a tragedy to lose something meant to be yours over something as trivial as an old vendetta."

Feeling wildly possessive of what was now his, he made his way to find Hermione. He would have to tell her everything now. It was more important than ever that she be careful. Severus vowed to always follow her when possible to be sure nothing happened, and knowing that he couldn't always be with her, he knew someone who was just as fiercely protective of Hermione that wouldn't mind the job. Harry. They'd have to have a private talk. It was time to begin guiding him further.

He found her with her nose buried in a book on their bed. Throwing off his cloak and robes as he approached the bed, he waylaid her before she realized what he was doing. In a flurry of kisses and caresses, he tried to convey how he felt. "Severus, what is it?" she asked, the moment he gave her the chance to breathe on her own.

"I need to be inside of you, Hermione," he growled. "Let me."

"Well, I can't... it's still that time of the mo..."

"I don't care about that," he said, nipping her neck. "I need you. I want to feel you."

"But, we can't. Can we?" she asked in shock.

With a great deal of restraint, he pulled himself away. "Go run a bath. I'll be right there." He could see that she was slightly repulsed by the idea, but in her desire to please him, she scampered to do as he bid. He didn't care. He had to have her. He had to show her how he felt. The words that wouldn't come needed to find their way out. He stripped his remaining garments away before entering the lavatory completely naked. Hermione was just sitting down in jasmine scented water as he went through the door.

He saw a moment of shock pass over her face before she smiled shyly. Severus slid into the water of the large tub and splashed towards her quickly. "I am sorry if you are uncomfortable with this, but I have to have you."

She nodded her consent and opened her arms to him. He pounced on her straightaway, holding nothing back. His feelings were at a high point and needed to be released. Frantically, he began fondling her body and licking her exposed breasts. She moaned and ran her lovely fingers through his hair. He'd never get enough of that feeling. Someone who loved him. Someone wanting him as much as he wanted them. "I'm yours," she whispered. Without any further ado, he plunged into her. She cried out slightly, but he felt her stretching to accommodate his girth.

"I'm sorry, sorry, sorry," he whispered as he pumped wildly. She began kissing his neck and face to let him know that it was all right. After only a couple of minutes, he climaxed, but remained within her. His head dropped to rest on her shoulder. "I...I am sorry."

"Don't be. I rather liked it," she said softly. "What brought this on? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, for now," he said. He began to harden slightly as he felt her changing positions beneath him. "We need to talk about some things, but right now, I just want to make love with you. I should have waited just now." She moved again, and he hardened nearly completely. God, but would he ever have enough of her? Smoothly, he flipped them over in the water to where she now straddled him. "Show me."

Puzzled, she looked at him. She was about to speak when he guided her hips up and down once. He saw the realization flash in her eyes and then... lust? He let her set her own pace as he lazily began to nip at her breasts and throat. They both groaned when she ground down on him in a rough circular movement. Leaning back, he guided her hips faster as he began thrusting deeply into her from below. Feeling himself nearing climax yet again, he reached one hand down to allow his thumb access to her. Her movements became erratic and wild before long, and she cried out, "Severus... oh... my... God... Severus!" When her movements became slower, he placed a few well-marked thrusts into her and followed her into climatic pleasure. She collapsed down on top of him, her head resting on his shoulder. "I love you," he heard her whisper.

"I know," he replied softly, kissing her head lightly.

After a long silence, she began speaking. "It feels odd, water. Good, just different."

"I've never done this in a tub before, but yes, it's definitely good," he murmured. She pulled away from him to lather a washcloth with soap. "What are you doing?"

"I'm giving you a bath, lover." She began lathering his body, and it felt so good to have her scrubbing on him that he decided to return the favor. Summoning his own washcloth, he went about lathering her body. After their bodies were sparkling clean, they began washing each other's hair with her Muggle shampoo. He was amazed by the texture of the mixture, and he could actually feel his scalp tingling. Once they rinsed themselves off, she began placing small kisses along his chest. "Thank you for this."

"Trust me. It was my pleasure," he replied silkily. After drying and dressing, he left her to tidy herself while he opened a bottle of the wine they had bought. When she came out, he handed her a glass. "Would you sit with me before the fire for a little while? I'd like to talk to you about some things."

"Anything for you," she said with a smile, accepting the glass.

He rethought his decision for a moment. "Hermione, I would like to hear about your day. How did it go with Minerva?"

"Well, she showed me my quarters. She used to use them when she was an apprentice here," Hermione said excitedly. "She is going to have Albus connect my rooms to the Floo so that I can come here! She also said that it wouldn't be inappropriate for Harry and Ron to visit me in my..., " her voice trailed off. "Wi-will you allow them to visit me?"

Severus smiled softly, hiding the distaste of Weasley being in her rooms. "I think that it should be all right. They are only your friends after all." He warmed at her bright smile. She continued to rattle on about Minerva's plans, and then she told him something that shocked him. Albus would be retiring at the end of the year. He'd not known. He cursed himself inwardly for now causing the man more trouble to contend with. Why hadn't his friend told him about this? He would have to find out later. For now, he wanted to spend this last night alone with her before the students returned for their next term.

"So, love, what is it that had you so randy a bit ago?" she asked lightly.

He took in a deep breath and began his tale of what he had learned at Lucius' house. He enlightened her on some of the plan that included Harry and the others. She listened attentively, but he could see she was slightly worried. "Hermione, I will protect you at all costs. No matter the price. You will be safe."

"You won't do anything brash, will you, Severus?" she asked suddenly. "Please don't say you mean to go after them on your own."

"I do not know exactly how, but they will be destroyed." She nearly gasped at his dark expression. She was taken back to the night she had encountered him in his dream. He had the same surly expression on his face. She snuggled closer.

"Don't ever leave me, Severus."

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**Southern's Notes:** So! Sev still has that bit of darkness lurking about then, doesn't he?

Thanks to Ancientgirl for the "shower" idea...muahahahaha

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 12 of 32*

The students come back to Hogwarts, and things start getting complicated. Someone is a spy at Hogwarts, planning a series of unfortunate events.

**Disclaimer:** Not mine! Belongs to a most brilliant woman.

**Thanks go to Charmed Nay for being my beta, and I'd like to thank GinnyW for going through this a second time and helping me find any things missed on the first run.**

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Hermione ran at full speed into the arms of her two best friends. "Welcome back!" she squealed excitedly.

"It's good being back and all, but I could do without the bloody classes," Ron grumbled. "Did Harry tell you the news? Luna's taken my ring!"

"Yes! I'm happy for you," Hermione replied promptly. "Where is she?"

"Oh, she's back with Ginny. Says they have some women talking to do." Ron rubbed his stomach. "I'm ready for the feast meself. Come on then." Harry and Hermione grinned.

"He ate a load of stuff on the way, and he's ready for more!" Harry laughed. "All right, Hermione?"

She knew that he was referring to her relationship with Severus. "Extremely."

"Good to hear then," he said, putting an arm around her.

Suddenly Draco appeared. "Oi! I'll escort Granger in. Sod off, Potter." He winked at both before happily taking her arm. "Want to sit with Slytherin this evening?"

"No, Ferret. I think I'll stick with Gryffindor, thanks," she said, shaking her head with laughter.

"Suit yourself then. I'll be just here should you need anything," he said with a smile to her before scowling at everyone around. Hermione thought he was playing the part just fine. It could be anyone at the castle that would be watching them to see if he appeared friendly. As she approached Harry and Ron, she noticed that Severus was still watching. His eyes had followed her through the hall. Minerva had told her that for tonight she could remain at her House table with her friends. Her lover had said that he didn't mind, but she could sense that he did. He was now walking stiffly towards the Head Table.

"I think I'll go on and sit with Severus, but don't leave before talking to me. I want to show you my new quarters!"

"You're not able to stay on with us in the tower?" Ron asked, nicking a roll.

"Well, no. I have to stay in my own chambers," she said. "I can still visit, and you can come over."

"Oh, sure, except that you'll be busy working after hours," Ron said glumly.

"Come on, Ron," Harry said. "It won't change much. We'll still make our visits to Hagrid and do the usual." He nodded towards the table. "Looks like they left a chair available next to him, just in case."

"See you," she called, making her way to the table. For a moment, she saw Severus' eyes light up, but then he masked his face.

"You could have sat with them," he said quietly as she took her seat next to him.

"No, it's all right. I told them they can meet me after the meal. We'll go up to my chambers for a bit, and you can come in to have that talk with them," she replied, patting him on the leg. As she ate, she noticed that there were a lot of eyes on her, and she could see the whispering. She shrugged mentally. Who cared what they thought? "I think we are the topic of many conversations."

"Dunderheads," he snorted. A look of fierce pride passed through his face as he looked her way. "Let them talk. I'm not ashamed, Little One."

"Nor am I," she agreed. "If you call me Little One, what shall I call you?" She elbowed him playfully, but immediately regretted it as she noticed he looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Perhaps, he was not ashamed of her, but apparently too much of a public display wasn't his thing. Well, not in front of the entire school at any rate.

"I don't like nicknames," he grouched.

"Well, I have heard the staff call you Sevvie and Sev on occasion. Does that bother you?" she asked, trying to keep the conversation light.

"About as much as you like Mione, I imagine," he retorted dryly, taking a bite of his stewed beef.

"What's wrong with Mione?" she asked.

"Do you really like that?" he asked incredulously.

"Severus, you have called me Mione before. In fact, I remember the very first time you said it," she said, jutting her chin upward.

"I did not," he denied. "When?"

"You know." She widened her eyes. "That first...time."

"Certainly not," he scoffed.

"You said my Mione," she pursued.

He seemed thoughtful for a moment before giving her a devious grin. "Perhaps there was a slip of tongue." He tipped his tongue out to lick his fork innocently before filling it for another bite.

"Bloody hell, don't start that again," she whined. "You teased me enough yesterday."

He chuckled slightly for a moment before casting a glare at some nearby students that were spying on them. They all turned away quickly. He then ignored Hermione completely for a while as he turned to talk to Albus. *I should have just eaten with my friends.* She looked down to find them at the table. How odd it was to be sitting up at the Head Table! She almost felt as if she didn't belong. The new Muggle Studies professor seemed sour. He'd not even greeted her as she sat down. She decided to try to talk to him.

"How are you this evening?" she asked politely, reaching for another roll.

"Dazzling," came the sharp reply. The large man was shoveling his food into his mouth quickly. Hermione turned away from him and snuck a glance at Severus. He seemed upset about something. She caught the words 'don't worry about it for now' before he turned to look away from the headmaster.

"Are you nearly done?" he asked after a moment.

"Not quite, but I could be. Do you need something?" she asked immediately, wondering why he wasn't looking directly at her.

"I'm going to go down to our chambers for a little while. What time will you have your friends in your rooms?" he asked, finally eyeing her. She could tell that he seemed saddened. She glanced down to see that Harry and Ron were nearly done.

"I could go there now, if you'd like," she offered.

"That's not necessary. I'll Floo in about twenty minutes from now," he said, nodding to her once before he stood.

She watched him walk stiffly out of the hall. She noticed that Albus also seemed to have a sad look about his face*What now?* She wondered if they had found something else out. Sighing, she pushed her plate away. She took another sip of pumpkin juice. Before she stood, the brute on her left put a hand on her arm.

"What's your first name?" he asked, sounding pompous.

"Hermione," she replied, trying to smile. He had a dab of cream on his cheek, and she fought not to eye it openly.

"My name is Stuart," he said, bowing his head. She tried not to crack a smile. The man's name was Stuart Steward. What had his mum been thinking?

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," she said politely.

"Right nice to have someone to talk to as well. No one here seems to believe in friendliness. Had I known the staff would be so hostile, I'd have not accepted the job," he said, puffing his chest out. "I had three other offers."

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way. I think everyone is pleasant enough," she said with a smile. She remembered something Rolanda had said about him. He walked around like he owned the place half of the time, and the other half, if he was around, he seemed to be in his own private world. She couldn't imagine this man having a night out with the rest of the staff. He suddenly started talking in a boring tone that reminded her of Professor Binns. Ron and Harry were waving at her to indicate that they were done, so she had to interrupt. "Sorry, Stuart, but I am to meet with my friends for a little while. I'm glad we had this talk."

He nodded and turned back to his plate. She unexpectedly felt guilty about leaving him there without anyone to talk to. She knew how it felt to not have a mate to converse with. Hell, she knew firsthand how it felt to have no friends. She hadn't any until Harry and Ron took her in back in their first year. "Er...do you always sit here?" she asked kindly. She hadn't paid all that much attention to the seating arrangement, but it did appear that everyone had shifted.

"I suppose it's my new seat. Everyone changed places, so I sat here. I left that chair open because I didn't want to sit next to that rude man!" he said, sounding indignant.

She smiled. "He's not all that bad. I don't mind sitting next to him. We'll be able to chat again then."

Stuart smiled gratefully. "Thanks, Hermione."

"See you," she said, hurrying to meet her friends. She felt as if she had just done a big deed. She wondered though why the man would speak of Severus that way. As far as she knew, the entire staff had known what had occurred between them. Just as she reached the Gryffindor table, Draco stepped up next to her.

"Where are you off to, Granger?" he asked with a devilish grin, holding out his arm. She shook her head and took it.

"Come on then," she called to Harry and Ron. Ginny seemed put out that she hadn't been invited, but she didn't know if Severus was ready to talk to her yet or not. She hated being rude.

"Hang on!" Harry said. "Why does Malfoy get to escort you about?" She knew that he was teasing, but faked a horrified expression.

"I've no idea!"

"Yeah, Ferret. Why don't you leave off?" Ron asked, ruffling Draco's hair.

Draco in turn sneered. "Keep your filthy hands off, Weasel." Hermione released Draco's arm as he and Ron began their normal bout of insult exchanging.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

A pair of dark eyes watched the quartet steadily as they left the hall. It appeared that Bradley's hex was working properly. Malfoy never sniffed up Granger's arse that much. Higgs would be glad to relay the message to Bradley. Leaving the hall discreetly, the informant hurried to the Owlery to send word of the good news. They just had to make sure that when things went down, Potter wouldn't be about. It wouldn't do to have that one finding out. They'd just have to make sure he was otherwise occupied.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Right nice set of rooms you have here, Mione. This here will be my spot," Ron said plopping down in the chair nearest the fireplace. Draco took the chair nearest him and hexed a candle to spill its wax on Ron's head. "Dirty, rotten arse! Shove off, Malfoy!" At a flick of Ron's wand, the candle then flew towards Draco.

"Enough," Harry said, waving his hand. The candle promptly flew to the wall. Harry sat on the couch. "Have a seat, Mione. What is it you want us to know?"

"How can you always tell, Harry?" Hermione asked warmly.

"I just can," came the reply.

"Tell what?" Ron asked, glaring menacingly at Draco. Draco sneered and made a rude gesture with his hand.

"Mione has something to say," Harry said.

"Actually, it's Severus who will do the explaining. There is some trouble coming it seems," she said glumly.

"Bloody hell! Always happens!" Ron exclaimed. "Can't go a couple of months without something happening! I'm telling ya!"

The portrait opened, and Severus walked in. "Good evening," he said blandly. "I need to talk to all of you for a few minutes. I trust this will go no further?" He looked pointedly to Ron who was busying himself trying to hex Draco's laces to tie together in knots. "If you will kindly control yourself, Mr. Weasley."

"S-sorry, Professor," Ron said immediately.

Severus conjured a chair to have a seat facing them all. "Lucius and I have been working on trying to uncover information concerning the goings on of the Higgs family. Senior Higgs has been visiting the Ministry, attempting to bend the right ear so to speak. It appears that he is holding a grudge against Lucius and I for being pardoned. He and others in the past have always been silent supporters of the Dark Lord. His son came to school here. Terence Higgs. He was the Seeker for my House when you were all in your first year."

"Yeah, a worthless one at that!" Ron bellowed.

"Yes, that's why I took over," Draco said, puffing out his chest.

"You call yourself a Seeker? More like the Seaked if you ask me. Never see the Snitch til someone else does, you don't," Ron said heatedly. "Never can get past Harry, can you?"

"You can sho-"

"That will be enough, boys," Severus hissed. Both sat straight and looked to Severus repentantly. "It appears that young Higgs is doing some work for his father, and with a few associates, they may have found a way to pay Lucius and I back for being traitors."

"Mione and Draco," Harry said promptly.

"That's right, Harry," Severus said. Ron's mouth gaped open at hearing Snape call Harry by his first name. "For certain, we know that he is fraternizing with one Douglas Bradley. They sought out Dr-"

"But, he was a Ravenclaw!" Ron interrupted.

"Why do people think it's only a Slytherin that is up to no good?" Draco asked indignantly. "Your lot turns out idiots as well. Pettigrew. Your brother Percy!"

"My brother is an idiot, but he's no follower of the Dark Lord!" Ron said whipping out his wand once again.

"Put that away, Mr. Weasley, or you will find yourself thrown out of here. Do you want to listen?" Severus asked. "If the task is too great, then I suggest you to be off to your common room."

"Ron, I think you should listen to what Severus has to say," Hermione urged. Ron put up his wand, but she could tell that he was furious.

"As I was saying," Severus continued, glaring at Ron. "Higgs sought out Draco at a party over the holidays. He seemed to be trying to feel him out. Draco pretended to think that his father only changed sides to save his own skin. The boy was accepting the theory when this Bradley came out. He wouldn't have it. He proceeded to put the Imperius on Draco, telling him to go home and to be sure to remain friendly with Hermione."

"I recognized the feeling right away, and I heard his voice in my head." Draco looked disappointed. "I knew I couldn't let them know that I had been trained to throw it off, so I stood there for a moment before Apparating home. They said something about getting two at once. We believe that they will eventually try to get me to lure out Hermione. That way they can do us both in to get to them." He jerked his head towards Severus. "It's why I have to now act like a ruddy fool, chasing Granger around."

"Well, they won't know if you do or not. No need to wear out your welcome," Ron said with a grin.

"Someone is here," Harry said suddenly. "Someone else will give Draco further instructions. He'll have to keep up the act."

"Right again, Harry. Pity you don't put more efforts into your Potions assignments," Severus said dryly. Harry just grinned. "We don't know if it is a student or a staff member, nor do we know if there is more than one. We will have to use extra care. Draco will come to me the moment something happens. I'll tell Hermione, and she'll let you know when we are to meet. However, if Draco is instructed to do something at the spur of the moment, do not, by any means, interfere. Act as you normally would, but be mindful of who is about. They will likely be watching."

"Bloody hell," Ron murmured.

"There's more," Draco said.

"What else is there?" Harry questioned.

"The people that old Higgs has been meeting with are sketchy at best. Fudge, Edgecombe, Umbridge, and Percy Weasley." Ron sucked in a sharp breath. "They were overheard at some point discussing a plausible way to have our pardons overturned. It will never pass. Bones wields a fair, unwavering hand in her position. It is likely why they have moved on to this."

"Ginny," Ron said. "She's the only one Percy owls now. Maybe she could do something."

"Well, well, Mr. Weasley," Severus said with a nod. "That's the first smart thing you've said all evening. Do you believe she could be inconspicuous?"

"You can say what you like about me, but she's not one to mess with," Ron said. "She can do anything to anyone. She's not above underhandedness, that one. Ask Harry. Great couple, they make."

"Tell me about it! Put a damn Bat-Bogey Hex on me already! I never saw it coming," Draco said with a grin.

"I trust you can fill her in then," Severus said. "A simple owl to him will do. Perhaps she can complain about Harry somehow to gain a sympathetic ear. The dunderhead might let something slip when he writes back. Miss Weasley is very bright. I'm sure she'll think of something."

"I'm right sure she can accidentally-on-purpose say the right thing," Ron said with pride.

Harry spoke next. "Fudge? He has no power over anyone there! He's back down to the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes now. Umbridge lost her standing as well. Hang the hell on!" Harry said heatedly. "Edgecombe! Marietta, her daughter, is here. The sneak from fifth year. Cho's friend! She graduated last year, but came back in November, remember? Once that incompetent lout Willows left, the Headmaster took over his classes and pulled Michael Corner out from Professor Steward over in Muggle Studies to help with the younger students' essays and such."

"Right! I can't believe I didn't think of that witch!" Hermione said. "She is now helping Professor Steward out for training to work in the Department of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. I heard Mandy Brocklehurst telling Terry Boot about it last term. Why was she not here over the holidays? Why didn't she eat with the staff tonight?"

Severus seemed thoughtful for a moment. "She is not really a staff member. Steward, that twit, needed an extra pair of hands, and Madame Bones sent her over. She only stays a couple of days out of the week. It was a mutual deal between the Headmaster and the Minister. He didn't exactly have anyone whom he would want to take over the Defense classes permanently, so that is why he is instructing them. I only help on occasion. It makes sense. Higgs has been associating with her mother."

"Yes! She and Umbridge were pretty close back then. Her mum was the one helping to police our Floo Network!" Ron said excitedly. "Bet the dirty, rotten, sneak is just waiting for a chance to get back at Mione for that hex she put on her."

"I'll think on this new bit of information. We should keep an eye on her," Severus said solemnly. "All suspicious people should be taken into account. Hermione perhaps you can feel out Brocklehurst. Listen around to everything, you lot! Even trivial things could help us. Let me know what Miss Weasley decides. I think we can call this meeting to a close." Severus stood up, straightening out his robes. "Harry, a private word."

"I'll go on then. See you," Ron said, making way for the portrait hole.

"Guess I'm dismissed as well. Until tomorrow, my dear Granger," Draco said with a smirk and bowed lowly.

"That's rich," she said. "Off with you!"

Severus went to the bedroom and motioned for Harry to follow him. Hermione felt left out, but smiled anyway. She supposed one of them would explain later. Damn! Why hadn't she thought about that Marietta before!

Severus closed the door and placed a Soundproofing Spell on it. "Harry, we need to have a talk about Hermione. You know how I feel about her. I will do everything in my power to see her safe. I would do anything it takes to see that no harm comes to her. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I do," Harry said. Severus could see the glint in the boy's eyes and knew that he felt the same. "I'll keep an eye out as well, sir. It's the same as what you and Lucius did last year, isn't it? You did it because they attacked Draco."

"Yes, it was mostly because of Draco. I would not have allowed harm to come to you or your friends either, Harry, no matter what you thought of me then. We couldn't be

seen and risk that getting back to the Dark Lord. They had to...we had to make sure he never knew that we had foiled his plans."

"When I saw Lucius, I thought for a moment that he was with them, but then I saw you. I knew that wasn't the case. I saw that fierce look in his eyes, and I just knew." Harry cleared his throat. "Should I tell Ron to keep an eye out then?"

"While Weasley is loyal to her as well, he is a blubbering fool at times. I would only trust you with this task. If I cannot be with her for some reason, you need to be. Draco will be on the lookout as well, but I worry about his safety also. He is as much a target as she." Severus began pacing. "Lucius agrees that we will do what we must to ensure that what is ours is not harmed. I would kill for her, Harry. I would die in her stead. I ask that if something happens to me, that you see for her protection."

Severus looked about uneasily as he felt a cold chill creep up his spine. The lit candles in Hermione's chambers were flickering eerily. He slowly turned to face Potter and had he been anyone else he would have gasped. It was the boy's emotions that were emitting the magic crackling through the room. The voice Harry used was ungodly. "I will not allow a hair on her head to be harmed. I would kill for her as well, Professor. For Ron, too. They are my family."

After a moment, Severus walked to the boy and clapped him soundly on the shoulder. "I trust you, Harry, but this," he gestured to the room, "needs to be controlled. What were you thinking just now? What caused this display of energy?" He made sure to keep his voice calm, showing no wonder, no fear, and no admonishment. He would have to show Harry how to contain his emotions.

"When you said that you would kill or die for her and asked for me to protect her in your stead, I imagined someone trying to harm her. It made me angry, and I felt the overpowering need to destroy something," Harry admitted. Severus noticed that the unholy breeze had gone and the candles were no longer flickering, but Harry's eyes were still stormy.

"I think you and I should get together once per week, Harry. There are things yet that I can teach you. It would help to control this. It wouldn't do for you to become so angry one day that you might hurt someone without thinking," Severus said cautiously. "Would you be willing to spend an evening with me each week?"

"I would," Harry said easily. "But, sir? Why are you being nice to me?"

"I would think that you knew the answer to that by now," Severus said softly. "We had that talk after all." Then in a rough voice, "The night you and Hermione accosted me!"

Harry looked shamefaced for a moment, but then he grinned. "Worked out, didn't it? I still want to know what it is that changed your mind. You always made me feel like you were forced to take me on with my training in the past, but here you are offering it freely."

"I told you once that your mother was...a friend to me at a time when I had none. She was a good woman, Harry. I think it would make her happy to know that I have put aside some of my less than honorable feelings to try to make amends with you. For her memory, if nothing else." Severus could have cursed. Why had he said that?

"Professor? Di-did you fancy my mum?" Harry asked, searching the older wizard's eyes.

"I did," he said simply.

"Is that why you hated my dad so much? Still hate him?"

"I never did like your father, Harry. I won't lie to you. I always saw him as exceedingly arrogant. You know that already. He and Black did unforgivable things to me which I tried to pay back tenfold." Severus sighed. "But, when he and Lily...enough about that!"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, but Severus could see that his expression had changed. He was looking at him with...admiration? "What nights should I put aside?"

"We'll meet on Wednesdays."

"Good night," Harry said. Severus watched as the boy left and heard him tell Hermione that he would see her the next day. He had said too much to the boy! Why the fuck was he feeling these odd emotions towards the boy now? He supposed it wasn't too bad. Harry had seemed to accept it well. There was no tantrum. No harsh words. If this would have come out the year before, there likely would have been some exchange over the matter.

"Severus? Are you all right?" Hermione asked, bringing her arms around him from behind. He leaned into her embrace and softly caressed her hands.

"I am."

"Whatever you said to Harry must have been good. I haven't seen him smiling like that since he overcame the dragon in the first task back in fourth year," she said, hinting that she wanted to know what they had talked about.

"Was he smiling *that* broadly?" Severus asked, turning in her arms.

"Yes. He seemed happy. What went on in here?"

Curious. The boy truly didn't mind. Come to think of it, it almost seemed as if he had hoped for it. Was he hoping now that he would make some sort ~~parental~~ bond? Was the boy so longing for affection that he would take it where he could get it? "I admitted that I fancied Lily once."

"I'm glad," she whispered, kissing him.

"Should we be off to my quarters? I dare say, that you would like to study a little more," he teased. "I doubt you feel you are prepared enough."

"On the contrary, I think that there is nothing left to review, and besides, I've got the job anyway whether I fail miserably or not," she chided softly. "I thought maybe I could help you prepare for your classes tomorrow. Is there anything that I can do?"

Severus smiled genuinely. "Yes, there is, and I thank you for thinking of it. It won't take long. I've just gone over my notes. Then, I want to return a favor to you."

"What favor?" she asked, brow furrowing slightly.

"If I recall, you gave me a nice massage a few days back. I think you could do for one as well." He bent down to bring his lips to her ear. "I am going to use my hands to knead your soft flesh. You will be deeply relaxed once I am done." He licked her lobe lightly. "Come with me," he whispered.

She shook her head to release the vivid fantasy that had sprouted there. Not much longer and this ruddy time of the month would be over. She would then be able to comfortably take pleasure with him. Unless...a wicked thought occurred. "Perhaps we could have a shower then."

He smiled. "My thoughts exactly, love."

"Are we Flooing?"

"Yes."

"Severus, why did you not Floo in earlier?" she asked, suddenly remembering his entrance.

"I admit that I wanted to check the corridors to be sure that you and your friends hadn't attracted anyone. There was no one about though," he said softly, attacking her lips with a rough kiss. "Come with me, woman!"

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Higgs read over the note once again. He wanted to be sure before he told Bradley about it. Privately, he wished that he'd never mentioned anything to the man. One moment, he was trying to feel out his loyalties, and the next he was learning of a plan to use Malfoy's own son against him. Once Higgs told his father about it, he was commanded to bring the boy into the fold, but he was not to let Bradley know that they were once cohorts to the fallen Lord. His father said that Bradley hated all Death Eaters and their friends. They were going to use him to execute their own plans to make the blood traitors pay for abandoning the old master.

As of late though, Bradley had been throwing his weight around and trying to run things. This bristled Higgs, but his father told him to keep quiet. They would bide their time, and after the blood traitors were destroyed, they would rid themselves of Bradley. It wouldn't do for Bradley to later uncover the truth of their loyalties and try to make a go at them. The only thing that didn't sit well with Higgs was the way Bradley was trying to use Draco Malfoy in this.

Hell, Higgs had been in Slytherin with Malfoy. He knew first hand how much the boy loathed Harry Potter. He and his mates used to sit around all the time talking about the things they would like to do to him. He fully believed that Draco could be turned into an ally. He even believed that Lucius Malfoy was only out for his own interests, and his loyalty had never really wavered from the Dark Lord. The confused man sighed. His father believed Bradley's assumption. He felt the Malfoys were blood traitors in full. Higgs would not go against his father. Pity that Granger would suffer for the likes of Snape, that bastard. She'd tried to smile at him a few times, and she'd seemed pleasantly surprised to see him the other night. Until ruddy Snape showed up. He had thrown him off the team when he only had one year left just because he couldn't *compete with Potter* on the field. Truth be known, the bastard just didn't like him. He eagerly allowed Draco onto the team for the next season. And, it was Lucius who had bought the team brand new brooms.

He nodded savagely to himself. Yes, they all should pay for that. He should have been allowed to remain as the team's Seeker in his final year. His father was right. When the time came, they would get Draco to lure Granger away. They would dispose of Draco quickly and try to lure his father out on the pretense of wanting a ransom. He could take pleasure in Granger though. Snape would never need to know what happened to her, save for a few locks of bloodied hair to be owled anonymously. The Malfoys weren't the only family with secret dungeons in their manor after all. This could work. His father could have revenge on the men he hated. Bradley would have momentary happiness knowing that the last man that had been present when his girl had been butchered was dead. And, he? Well, he would have a live-in sex slave. Great Potter's right hand, wasn't she? Ha! Not only Snape would be hurt over her apparent *demise*, but Potter would be crushed as well, the dolt!

He tossed some Floo powder into the grate. "Bradley?"

A moment later, Bradley's head appeared. "I'm here. What has our friend sent to us?"

"It appears the plan is working. The moment Draco saw Granger he was glued to her side. To hear it, he even asked her to sit with Slytherin, but she ended up at the High Table with *Snape*. On her way out, Draco followed her out to escort her. Therefore, I think the Imperius is still working," Terence Higgs said importantly.

"Excellent. We'll give it a test soon. If he succumbed that easily to my mind prodding, then he'll be easily susceptible to fall into it again. I'll tell you when I want it done." Douglas Bradley leered wickedly. "I think this is going better than we first thought. The Malfoys will pay for what they have done to me."

"Yes, and Snape will find his punishment as well."

"Until later."

"All right."

Terence smiled to himself as he imagined Snape's horrified face. He would plan the owl to swoop in while the man was at the High Table eating his meal. The whole school would witness his distress. He would open the envelope to find some of Granger's hair laced with blood. He'd be sure to put a note saying that she had been extremely satisfying before she met her death. The man would likely kill himself and save them the trouble, but if not, they would deal with that as well. As far as Mudblood Granger, well, she would have a different fate. He would keep her locked under his home and use her body until he tired of her. Then, he would dispose of her. If Snape was still around at that point, he could always take to owling pieces of her to him. He paled for a moment. When had he become so evil? No, not evil. It was just one last act of vengeance for his late master. His father had explained this already numerous times.

But, why were they instructed not to tamper with Potter? It seemed like that would be the ultimate revenge. To kill the one who destroyed their world. The one who had taken down their master. He would mention this to his father in the morning when he told him how things were going. If all went well, their Ministry alliance would come through for them as well. Bradley was working on a potion that could possibly restore Bellatrix Lestrange's mind. Whatever Potter had done to her had muddled the woman completely. If their ties came through, they could spirit her away from Azkaban. Bradley had a potion in mind that he'd read about in a Dark Arts book. The fool thought they were going to revive her just so that he could torture and kill her for being a Death Eater, but they had other plans. There never was a woman more wicked than Bellatrix. She would be an asset to have.

Southern's Notes: A little more back story there for you. What a tangled web we weave!

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 13 of 32

Draco is forced to do something that he doesn't want to do. Severus and Harry have an intense chat.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big Thanks to my brilliant beta, Charmed Nay. She gets everything back to me so quickly, and she is always glad to fix my muck ups.

Thanks to GinnyW for giving this a second run through and helping me find funkies that were missed on the first round!

Hermione grinned as they made their way from Hagrid's hut. They were on their way to the infirmary. Ron had chipped a tooth on one of Hagrid's hard cakes. She had offered to try to fix it for him, but he wouldn't have it. She had been enjoying her week off before she was to start with Minerva. She felt comfortable that she had done an outstanding job on her N.E.W.T.s a couple of days earlier. Just having that over with had taken a lot off her chest. Now she simply took to looking over Minerva's articulate notes for the Transfiguration classes.

"Don't know how he eats those things! Did you see him chomping away like nothing was wrong?" Ron groused.

Draco scoffed. "Well, at least you actually wanted to visit the oaf. I am stuck as a damn tagalong! Do you think I really care about his problems with Aragog's wife, Mosag? Or Aragog's cataracts? They are bloody spiders for Merlin's sake!"

"Not just a spider! A blasted Acromantula! The lot almost had Harry and me for dinner, they did! If my dad's car hadn't shown up, we'd have been done for I tell you," Ron said, turning green.

"Pity," Draco said with a grin. "Would have been nice and quiet the past few years."

"And, Voldemort would still be alive. You could possibly be dead. Many things would have been different. Everything happens for a reason," Hermione chided.

"Right. Didn't think about that," Draco said.

"Harry blasted one that was trying to rip me apart with some spell he had learned. Say, Harry, where did you learn that spell anyway?" Ron asked, looking at his friend.

"Voldemort," Harry said simply. Hermione could tell something was wrong. They'd need to ditch the others to have a private talk. As much as she had grown to like Draco, he was a thorn to have around at times. He always tried to provoke Ron, but it seemed that Ron loved it.

"Bloody hell! What? He just told you, 'Oh, by the way, *Potter*, before Quirrell does you in tonight, I want you to know this spell that kills spiders?'" Ron asked incredulously. Harry had never told him that part!

"The diary, dolt."

"Oh. Right."

"What diary?" Draco asked.

Ron's face turned thunderous. "The ruddy diary that *your* father put in my sister's cauldron! Back in our second year. You remember when Harry defeated the Basilisk?"

Draco stopped. "What?"

"They had a Basilisk in the Chamber of Se..."

"No shit, Ron. What are you on about my father?" Draco asked heatedly.

"You didn't know?" Hermione asked quietly, hoping not to cause a rift between Draco and his father. "He planted a diary in Ginny's cauldron right before he and Mr. Weasley had their fight in the bookstore. It's how Voldemort did his dirty work that year. Through her."

Draco's face dropped. He hadn't known that it was his father that had done it. In fact, when he saw the destroyed book in his family home, his father claimed Potter was trying to blame it on him, and he had used the book to trick him into freeing their servant, Dobby. Draco felt sick. Back then, he had enjoyed the knowledge that unworthy students could have been petrified or killed. He hadn't really wanted them killed, but he wouldn't have stopped it. Had his father really changed? How can you go from a man that would try to use an eleven-year-old girl to a man that would fight to save the same girl years later? "I'll see you."

"Draco, wait," Harry said. "Come here. See you later, Mione, Ron."

"Guess we're dismissed then," Ron muttered. Hermione just nodded and took his arm. Poor Malfoy! He really hadn't known. She could see it in his eyes. Harry would know what to say. She felt bad for wishing that he'd shove off for a bit. Maybe he actually enjoyed their company more than he let on.

"I'll see you to the infirmary."

Ron seemed thoughtful for a while. "I didn't know, Mione. I feel sort of bad about it really. Had I known, I wouldn't have said it like that. It's just that it was my sister his father used, and I'll not forget that no matter what he's done for us. You know?"

"I know what you mean, Ron. Draco I can manage, but his father makes me feel uneasy as well. I trust him because Severus does. That doesn't mean that I have forgotten all the shite he's done to us," she said, thinking about their early run-ins with Malfoy Senior. "I think he has changed though. I feel he has. That is good enough for me, but as long as I live, I think he will always intimidate me on some level."

Ron grinned impishly. "Glad my dad whipped his arse that day!" They shared a laugh.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Terence Higgs looked over at Douglas Bradley. They were in the private dungeons at Higgs Manor. "I've nearly got it. I just wish we could test it out on someone," Bradley said longingly. "It doesn't matter though. Once we have that bitch here, we'll do it. If it works, then great. If not, who cares? Let it kill the whore. Death Eater bitch."

Higgs longed to strike the bastard. How dare he talk about the Dark Lord's followers that way? They were superior to all, and if Bradley had kept his woman on a leash, she wouldn't have been in the wrong place at the right time. He chuckled wickedly. Bravo to the lot that did it! And, kudos to Malfoy as well. To hear the others tell it, he had been the one to hack away on her for a bit. *NO!* Malfoy is a blood traitor. Right. "Father says that they have a plan. We are going to get her out this weekend. You are not to do anything to her if the potion works. Not at first," he added quickly when Bradley looked to him oddly. "We are going to use our own methods for a while to get information from her. We'll keep her locked down here of course. You can do what you like after we are sure there aren't any others that we may have missed."

Bradley nodded in agreement. "That's not a problem. I've waited a long time to get complete revenge on the bastards. A little more time won't kill me."

*Oh, but it will.* "Exactly," Higgs said with a false smile. "What shall I owl to our informant at Hogwarts? They are expecting word this night."

"Just say it's time to test out Malfoy." Bradley grinned broadly. "I wonder if Snape would like to witness his woman being ravished? That would prove entertaining. I would love to see it though." The man laughed loudly. "I've the perfect plan."

Higgs listened half-heartedly. *Snape*. The tosser! Blood traitor. As the plan unfolded, he had another twinge of regret at using Draco for it. He would have proved to be a great Death Eater had the Dark Lord lived. Higgs had only been with him in school for two years, but in those two years, he'd admired the boy's determination, and at times, he'd wished that he could have been as vocal about things. Nevertheless, that could never be. His father always told him to keep his mouth shut. *Never let on what you are feeling, Terence. Never let them know what you have in mind. Never doubt your gut instinct.* Well, bloody hell, his gut instinct was saying that Draco could easily become an ally. He might even kill his own father for them. He'd keep those thoughts in mind.

"Ugh! Why does you father keep all of these snakes in there? I can see them slithering about. Nasty little buggers," Bradley complained.

Higgs almost slipped by saying that it was out of affection to the Dark Lord that he kept Nagini and her offspring, but that would have given their loyalties away. "He's got some experiments in the works, and he needs a good deal of snake skin."

"Well that one big bloke in the center is huge! There must be fifteen all together," he said with disgust. "I hate snakes." Higgs smiled thinking he might have found a way for



Bradley to suffer when he met his death.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Severus, please understand, my boy. It's not very easy for me to do this, but I feel the need. I am tired," Dumbledore said quietly. "I think it's best. Harry is graduating. Voldemort is gone. I'll take the summer to myself, and then come back in the fall to be with Minerva."

Severus felt a twinge of jealousy. Albus was like a father to him. He would miss his council terribly, and despite the fact he would still be around, somewhat, it felt like he was losing the only man that had truly thought upon him fondly. Had he only been caring about Harry all this time? "So, now that Harry is safe, you feel that your work is done? You've many years left in you, Albus; surely you could stick around for a few more. I...I know I sound selfish, but it seems like this is the beginning of the end. Is there something you aren't telling me? Telling us?"

"I do still have a few years left in me, and I shall still spend them here. You'll not be rid of me in the least, but I will just not be headmaster any longer. That job falls to Minerva now," Dumbledore said softly. He hated to see Severus show emotion of this kind. He could see that his young friend was hurting. He could also sense that Severus believed that he only cared for Harry. "Do you know why I call you *my boy*, much of the time?"

Severus grunted. "It's fine, Albus. I didn't like it at first, but it grew on me. I won't have a go at you about it now after all these years." He was trying to lighten their conversation. He hadn't meant to sound so selfish just then. The last thing Severus wanted was to give Albus anymore to dwell on, and he did look his age more so now than ever.

"It's because I care for you, Severus. You have been like a son to me. When it will finally be my time, I will go without a fight to my next destination, and many years down the road when you come to join me, I will embrace you as a son who has come to see his father after a long time apart," Albus said softly, feeling relieved that he'd finally told the man how he felt. He knew these were the words that Severus needed to hear. "I love you, my boy. If I had ever had a son, I would have wanted him to be just like you."

There were many things that Severus wanted to say, but he couldn't. Those words meant a lot to him and caused him to feel ridiculous about thinking that Albus only cared for Harry. "I wish that my father...could have cared as you do, Albus. This...thank you." He didn't stiffen as the older wizard hugged him in an ardent show of affection. It felt good to feel cared for by his mentor. He could almost pretend that Albus was his father though they were nothing alike. Had he been so starved for affection all these years? Longing for fatherly pride?

Severus paused. Harry. He'd never had that either, had he? His father had died trying to save him in a last act of Gryffindor courage and fatherly instinct. Harry could hear many tales about Potter Senior and still never know how it felt to be embraced by him, to hear words of pride, to know the man. From what he'd seen in Harry's memories, his ruddy uncle had been a bastard to him. They had grown up with similar childhoods, hadn't they? Though Severus hated Black, even now, he was glad that he'd been able to give Harry at least two years of care. Remus had tried to step in after Black died, but he was taken as well. Harry only had Albus now. Harry's pleading eyes came back to him then. Lily's eyes. He was reaching out. Needing a mentor near his dad's age. Severus knew in his heart that Lily would have wanted that. Overcome by an odd emotion, he said, "I will take care of Harry for you. I will guide him."

"I never doubted that, my boy," Albus said, his eyes twinkling. Things had come full circle. Severus was now as he should have been all those years ago. He had finally gotten the girl, and the Potter this time would come to be a friend, perhaps like a nephew of sorts. With Severus' last words, it felt that Albus' last worries had been lifted. Of course, he now had to worry about young Malfoy and Miss Granger, but that wasn't anything they couldn't handle. After all that had happened, who could really go against them and win? No one. Not with Severus and Harry teamed together. Not even Voldemort had been able to stop them. These new foes would pay a terrible price for their misconceptions.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Dark eyes tried to locate their mark. *Ah, there he is.* Draco Malfoy walked by and was chiding one of the fat lugs that followed him around about something. Pompous little prick! With a quick flick of the wand and a whispered spell, the informant gave the boy his next set of instructions. This would be entertaining.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Good Lord, but I want to kiss Hermione so badly. Draco mentally shook his head. No, he did not want to. He shook off the hazy feeling and listened intently. A voice was whispering that he should go kiss Hermione in front of the entire school. In front of Snape! Shit! How the hell could he pull that off? He knew he had to do it though. It would let them think that their plans were working, the idiots! They were dealing with a Malfoy here. Didn't they know whom they were messing with? Draco grinned. The voice didn't say when he had to do it, just so it was during the meal. He sat down with his mates and let his face take on a momentary blank expression. Draco tried to look around to see if he saw anything amiss, but there was nothing. Nobody had been in the corridor at all when they'd come through. After Severus killed him for what he had to do, he'd come back as a ghost to explain. He smirked to himself.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Oh, hello there, Stuart," Hermione greeted as the man sat next to her. He seemed to be out of breath. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, thanks," he panted. "I didn't want to be late, but time got away from me. My assistant is leaving tomorrow and won't be back until Monday. I had to get her to do a few extra things."

Hermione smiled. This would be easy. "How is she working out? She was here last year, wasn't she?"

"Yes, I believe so. She is an all right help, I suppose, but she always seems to be drifting off. In fact, just tonight she was supposed to be grading the essays on knowing the correct way to work a telephone, but she didn't even get through half of them. Now we'll have to work late," he said in an annoyed voice. "I had hoped to go into Hogsmeade. If she keeps this up, I'm afraid she'll be no good in her position at the Ministry."

Ha! The backstabbing bitch! Hermione hoped she would fail miserably at all she did in the future. Well, that was a little harsh. She just shouldn't have betrayed them back in the days of Umbridge. It was possible she was once again betraying them. Severus elbowed her. She looked to him. He lowered his mouth to her ear. "A bit friendly, aren't we?"

She made a face. "Trust me. Friendly is all it is." She squeezed his leg firmly. "You know, Severus, I..." Blast! How could she say this?

"Yes?"

She blushed deeply. "I feel a bit randy."

"Indeed?"

"Definitely. Have you any suggestions?" she asked, winking at him.

She saw his wicked grin. "I have many, Little One, but where to start?" He brought a finger to his lips as if thinking.

"Start any place you'd like." She nearly kissed him! She'd have to control herself. The students were always watching in wait of gossip. "What's Draco about?" She noticed that Draco was slowly walking towards them. He had a blank expression on his face, and his eyes had gone wide. "Oh no," she breathed as he neared.

"Something must be up," Severus whispered. "Just go with it." He turned to Albus to begin a quick chat. He didn't want to appear too interested in Malfoy just yet.

"Hello, Hermione," Draco said, giving her a warm smile.

"Hi, Draco. Er... what's up? We can talk after the meal if you'd like," she said.

"No. I have to do this now. I feel this overpowering need, Hermione," he said seductively. "You don't know what you do to me, do you?"

This caught Severus' attention. Most of the students nearby had heard as well. Hell the brat was talking loudly. Even the staff stopped conversing to look. Severus heard Hooch pass the comment that Draco's owl had left his Owlery if he thought he'd get away with that. "What are you on about, *boy*?" Severus asked, narrowing his eyes. In the back of his mind, he knew that this was likely an instruction, but he didn't like it. The mole would be watching his reaction closely no doubt.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I cannot fight this urge." With that, Draco leaned across the table towards Hermione.

"Dr-Draco?" she managed before the boy's lips pressed against hers roughly. He'd grabbed her head to keep her in place, and Severus could see his tongue sliding along her tightly closed mouth. She was struggling to pull away, but the boy held fast.

Severus stood up so quickly that his chair fell back. He grabbed Draco and flung him back across the table *You will die, boy!* "You dirty little bastard!" Severus lunged across the table flinging plates and food in every direction, but before he could get his hands on Draco, an outside force stopped him. "Let me go," he yelled trying to struggle.

"*Silencio*," Rolanda said. "Sorry, old boy, but they don't need to hear you right now."

Hermione sat back in horror. Draco had kissed her. Tried to anyway. Severus was trying to attack him for it! Albus had Immobilized him quickly enough. All of the students were now looking on with interest. They were talking excitedly and grinning at the spectacle. McGonagall came around to lead a puzzled and horrified looking Draco away. Harry and Ron made their way towards the table. Dumbledore motioned for them to return to their seats. Reluctantly, they did so.

The headmaster slowly made his way to a livid Severus. "I think we should have a word, Severus." He released the hold on him, and it looked like Severus wanted to make for Draco and Minerva, but Rolanda shook her head while placing a hand on his arm.

"Go with Albus," she said. "I'll see to Hermione."

Severus nodded tersely, brushing the various pieces of food from his robes. He would maim and torture the person that just forced Draco to do that. He had had to act like a fool in front of the school. Now, they would call him the jealous Potions master. Hell, he hadn't been acting. He was outraged. He would have pounded a fist into Draco over the ordeal even though he knew it wasn't his fault. But, sod it all! Those were his lips! That was his woman. Severus looked to Hermione. She seemed as if she would burst into tears at any moment. Rolanda was making her way to her, and that fat arse Steward was talking to her. He nodded to her and followed the headmaster out.

"Here," Stuart said, handing Hermione a handkerchief. "What was all that about? Snape has a thing for you, does he? Who was that young boy?"

She sniffed and took the cloth. "Severus and I are involved." The man seemed to pale.

"I... I did not know. I must have offended you by saying that he was rude. I apologize," he said, looking properly abashed.

"It's a quite confusing and long story. Perhaps I will tell you one day. Draco is a good friend to me. We've never... I don't know why he did that! Severus is his Head of House. This won't do." A tear spilled down her cheek.

"Come along, Hermione," Rolanda said softly. Hermione nodded and patted Stuart in thanks before following her out. "What are you looking at?" Hooch questioned some students sharply. "Mind your meal."

Hermione could hear snippets of conversation. "I told you they were fucking." "What would Malfoy want with that?" "Malfoy wishes he could get in her knickers." "She's probably sleeping with both of them." "Snape was going to kill that idiot." "He should have done that in private."

"Don't listen to the little bastards," Hooch coached. "First rule of advice, never care what other people think. Second rule of advice, hold your head high and pretend like everything that happens is nothing to you. Third rule of advice, when things get sticky, joke about it as well. That way they don't think they have something on you."

Hermione pondered over this. So, this was why Rolanda acted as she did. Some things, like blue-feathery hair, probably did bother her, but she just pretended to not care. And, it worked! Minerva saw that it was nothing to the woman and fixed it back. Nobody said much about it after because there was no chance of goading Rolanda for a reaction. "I'll keep that in mind," Hermione said.

"It works. Trust me," she said. "To be quite blunt, I find that after a while you begin to not really care. You just do as you wish, and it is very satisfying to know that nobody can hold anything over your head at any point. You might have to handle things differently since you have a man in your life though."

"Why have you never gotten married?"

Rolanda paused for a minute. "I almost did. He died. No one has quite ever been able to match me since, but I'm not in mourning. No ma'am I am not. If I ever meet someone who could handle me, then I'm all for it. I just doubt I'll ever find that person."

"Sorry," Hermione said softly.

"Don't be. It was twenty-five years ago."

"How did he die?" Hermione asked quietly. She hated to pry, but for some reason, she wanted to know.

"Voldemort," Hooch said stiffly. "Here we are." She opened the door to the staff room. A stormy Severus and a somber Dumbledore were already there. There was a smashed chair, broken glass, and a table overturned. She dared not question what had gone on. Not yet anyway. His hard expression softened slightly when his eyes met hers.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, walking to him. "I didn't know."

He held up a hand. "It was not your fault."

"I'd say," Hooch commented. "He's an imbecile! What was the bloody idiot thinking? You would have ripped him apart if Albus hadn't stopped you."

"Rolanda," Albus said, trying to quiet her.

Severus pulled Hermione to him possessively. "There is more going on here than that, Rolanda. I think we should tell her." Albus nodded and took her to the side to explain. Severus looked back to his young lover. "I shouldn't have reacted so badly. I know that I have likely embarrassed you, but I had no choice."

"I know you had to. The informant could have been watching. Probably was watching."

"Hermione, my reaction was a natural one. I would have... done that to anyone," he admitted. "The thought of someone else... we need to get out of here."

Minerva came in. "Draco is in your office, Severus. I think it best that you handle him since he is in your House. He's pretty shaken up about it, and he says that he hopes

you won't hold it against him. He was instructed to do it." She scoffed at the mess that Severus had left. She began repairing things quickly.

Severus nodded. "I know that. I'll see to him."

Minerva smirked. "I took the liberty of taking fifty points from Slytherin for lewd conduct."

"Sneaky witch," Severus said, his eyes glowing. "I shall have to harden up against your cubs then."

"Ha!" Minerva scoffed. "I'd say we're not nearly even. All the points you take for no reason at times."

"Now you know that is no longer true," Severus retorted.

"Bloody hell!" Rolanda exclaimed. "I wish I had known. I can be of some help you know. Bastards!"

"All that we can ask, Rolanda," Dumbledore said, "is to keep an eye out for anyone suspicious. Keep your ears open, and if you hear something, let us know."

"You betcha." Her yellow eyes took on a vivid glow. "Always ready for a row, I am. Let me in on it when the time comes."

Hermione smiled. The woman was definitely something else. She was glad to have been able to push back the slightly ill feelings for her. There was no reason why she couldn't consider her as a friend. "I think I would like to have a long bath," Hermione said. "This was just... uncomfortable."

"I'll escort you to your rooms," Severus said softly. "I have to meet with Harry in a while. I will need to work out the details with Draco and hand out his detention. I intend to make him serve it with Minerva." His eyes took on an amused look as the woman went off in a slew of Scottish obscenities. "Sorry, Minerva, but my plate is full at the moment. Since you saw fit to deduct points, you've become involved."

"You can give him detention with Filch! That would be the most likely thing to do! Nobody wants to suffer through that!" Minerva shook her finger at him in a sinister way.

"Point taken," Severus said with a smirk. "Come along, Hermione." He led her to her chambers and told her that he would collect her after he and Harry had their session. As he entered his office, he could see Draco was deeply upset. Severus sneered automatically at the remembrance of seeing Draco's lips on Hermione's. His tongue prodding for entry. Little bastard. *Stop Severus. Think. Calm yourself.* He glared at the young wizard before him for a moment before he was able to speak. "Don't worry, boy. I won't kill you... today."

Draco smiled tightly, as if uncertain that he wouldn't be throttled. "They made me do it. The bastards!"

"I know. Tell me everything you can." Severus had tried to not sound so cold, but he couldn't help it.

"I was talking to Goyle on my way into the hall when I suddenly wanted to kiss Hermione. It took a moment, but then I realized what the feeling was. I could hear a voice whispering to me. It said that I had to kiss her in front of everyone and to be sure that you saw it." Draco ran his fingers through his hair. "I knew I had to do it, sir."

"Draco, I understand. Was it a male or female voice? Did you recognize it?"

"No. It could have been either. All I heard was a whisper. I was unprepared for it, I tell you. If I hadn't have been trained, I would never have noticed. It was so subtle."

Severus nodded. "Did you see anyone about?"

"That's just it. No one was in the corridors save us. Maybe they were hiding or disillusioned. I don't know. I'm sorry," he said. "For doing it and for failing to see anyone."

"You've not failed, Draco. As far as we know, they believe that they have succeeded. I'm sure my reaction was much anticipated. You did well," Severus said with a nod. "I will have to give you detention with Filch though to keep up pretenses, and I know that Minerva has taken House points already. That should do."

"Not a problem. I guess I still need to follow her around? How do I explain that? I mean, they will know that you probably won't want me around her now, and she wouldn't likely want me around after I've tried to kiss her. Where do we go from here?"

"Good point. Perhaps you should appear repentant. Tell anyone who will listen that Hermione shunned you for me, and that the only reason I allow you to continue to be friendly with her is because she insists. They all know she is willful. I will keep up the pretense of being angry with you, snide remarks, glaring eyes, and the like." Severus smiled tightly. "That should suffice."

"Thanks, sir. For a moment there, I thought you were going to kill me," he said.

"For a moment there, I thought I was too," Severus said evenly. "Off you go."

Draco gulped. "Yes, sir." As he made his way to his own common room, he thought over what had happened. Snape had been a wild man, throwing him down, and then slamming across the table. He gulped again. *Poor sod that tried to take her away would likely end up dying by Snape's bare hands.*

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Professor?"

"Come in, Harry." Severus indicated for Harry to take a seat. "I trust you enjoyed the show in the hall?"

"Ron and I figure that he was following instructions. What happened?" Harry asked.

Where once Severus would have told him to mind his own business, he sat down and told him all that had taken place. "You think I'm right about the advice I gave?"

"Yeah, it would be like Hermione to forgive him. I'll make a show of telling people that Hermione was upset, but after all Draco has done to change, he should be given another chance. Ron and I will act suspicious of course." Harry grinned. "Look, if you aren't up to this, we can make it another time."

"No, it's all right. Are you doing any private training at the moment?" Severus asked.

"Albus and I talked last night, and we decided to continue my wandless magic training. I've been practicing a bit. It's getting easier," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders.

"He gave me a book to study over the next couple of weeks as well. *The Blurred Line of Dark Meeting Light*, it's called."

Severus raised an eyebrow. What the hell was he giving this to Harry for? "Have you begun reading?"

"Not just yet. I thought to get to it this weekend."

"Fair enough. I think that I shall like to have discussions with you concerning the book as well. I read it long ago of course, and it has information pertinent to some of what you and I will be going over," Severus stated. "Bring it next Wednesday."

"Yes, sir."

"For tonight, I think we won't meet for long. We need to talk about your emotions. I have noticed that when you are extremely angry, odd things happen around you. It's as if

you emit a magical energy to the things around you." Severus poured a glass of water for each of them.

"Odd?"

"Yes, the other night when you were angry over the thought of someone harming Hermione, you said you felt the need to destroy something. It showed around you. A breeze came through her room. Your eyes, they looked different," Severus said, taking a sip. "We need to learn to control that."

"Sir, do you think that one day I will snap? What's this about? Earlier tonight I saw that you didn't control yourself very well either. You were not acting. You would have hit Malfoy if you'd had the opportunity," Harry said firmly. "I'm not going to hurt anyone."

"You are right. I didn't have to pretend earlier. I was livid. I wanted to lash out at him even though somewhere deep inside of me I knew that he had no choice, but I knew better. I should have controlled that. Even after I went off with Albus to the staff room, I found it hard to control my rage. I kept seeing *that* over again in my mind. I... destroyed a few items. See my point then?" he asked. "He is a friend of sorts, yet I still had the urge to harm him."

"I suppose. Be honest. What's this really about?"

Severus thought for a moment. "Harry, you have learnt many things in a short time. Some wizards take years to learn just some things that you know. You have not had the best life. You have been abused. People that you love have been taken from you. You have had to kill at such a young age. Sometimes you will experience feelings that you shouldn't. You will think that you are powerful and can do what you'd like, but then something will always keep you from doing so."

"Are you also talking about yourself, sir?"

"Yes. I speak from experience. At times, I felt like I could do what I liked and even thought about it. Then, I would think of Albus' kind eyes. Your mother's bright eyes. Minerva's stern expression. Different things. There was always a reason to stay on the right path. Now I can add Hermione to that list... and you."

"Me, sir?"

Thinking of his conversation with Albus, he said, "I...I am proud of you, Harry. You are not even eighteen yet, and you have proved yourself time and again. I think...no, I know...your parents would have been proud of you as well. She didn't die in vain, Harry. You've avenged her, hell, you've avenged so many others as well."

Harry looked down for a moment. "I'm tired of it all sometimes. Everyone looks at me and tries to talk to me, but it's because of what I have done. Nobody, save a few friends here, really cares to know me. Hell, I walk into a crowded room sometimes, like in Hogsmeade, and the room parts to give me passage. Half of them are scared of me, and the other half are in awe of me."

"How does that make you feel, Harry? When they show respect to you that way?"

"Mostly alone."

"What else?"

"Powerful."

Severus nodded. "Exactly. Harry fame isn't everything it's cracked up to be, is it?"

"No. I've never wanted it. I just wanted a real family and friends."

"If you lost, your friends, Harry. What would you do?"

Harry met his eyes. "I would... be lost."

"I doubt that will ever come to pass, but there are always chances that some things may happen. Being lost isn't a good thing, Harry. That is when someone is at his most vulnerable. The seemingly right words said by the wrong person will sway you in a direction you may not truly want to go." Severus reached over and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You and I are going to work together on this. I will show you all that I have learnt in the past. You will never be influenced as I have been. We are going to work on channeling your emotions."

"I really needed this. Sometimes it's just overwhelming. All of it," Harry admitted.

"It's all right, Harry, and it's very understandable. Read on Albus' book this weekend. Next time I will show you a calming method." Severus smirked. "One, I daresay, that I should have used earlier."

Harry smiled. "Thanks, sir."

"You may call me Severus in private, Harry. I think that will be fine," he said softly, wondering why he had the urge to help the boy so much. Hermione's influence? He was unsure what was motivating him, but it seemed right.

"Thanks, sir. Er... Se-Severus," Harry said. "Hell, that sounds too weird."

Severus laughed. "Off with you, my boy. I shall see you tomorrow."

"Night," Harry called as he made his way out.

Severus froze. *My boy*. How easily that had fallen out! Blast! He was turning into a younger version of a barmy old man that he knew all too well! Harry needed this. They both did. He would repay Lily for her kindness in the past, and maybe this was his own way to still be close to her. He tried to recall Lily's face, but he couldn't. He could envision her eyes, but not her face. It was Hermione's face that came to mind. Mione. He shook his head brusquely, remembering their conversation about nicknames. She need not know, but when he heard her friends call her this, he was a little jealous about it. It showed the intimacy of their relationship. Severus wanted to be able to be that way with her as well. He'd never live it down now though if he said that again.

Making his way to the grate, he Flooed to her rooms. He stepped out and noticed that she wasn't going over Minerva's notes as he'd thought she would be. He made his way to the bedroom, and he saw her. She was curled up, fast asleep. Severus sighed. "So much for feeling randy," he muttered. He peeled off all of his clothes save his underpants, and he crawled in with her. She cuddled against him in her sleep and seemed to smile. "I love you," he whispered. He'd let her sleep...for now, but come morning, nothing would keep him from having her.

Southern's Notes: I hope that puts some of you at ease about Minerva/Albus. I noticed some concerns voiced. On a lighter note (Hehe) about Draco, poor sod, he'll be okay! As always, thanks for the reviews. They are appreciated.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 14 of 32

Hermione decides to seduce Severus. The plan for Bella is revealed, and we find out who the spy at Hogwarts is. Harry and Snape have another long talk.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay. Also, three cheers to GinnyW for going through this a second time and helping to catch any funkies!

Severus opened his eyes and had an uneasy feeling of déjà vu. What the hell was going on? He was not in his chamber. Jasmine. He was in Hermione's bed, but something wasn't right. The fire in the grate was fairly low, but he could just make out the silhouette of a woman standing near it. The heavy draperies on her window were closed tightly, but there was definitely no sunlight out. It must be some time during the night. He reached out a hand uneasily to the empty bed beside him. Where was Hermione? Was this a dream? "Hello, Severusss," she hissed in a near whisper.

It sounded like Hermione, but he could not be sure. She seemed taller. The figure inched forward slowly, allowing the low flames to silhouette her. The long, thick, wavy hair seemed to be flowing about her head eerily. "Hermione?" he questioned.

"Sssshh," came the reply. She lifted her arms above her, and he could see that she was swaying slightly in time with the small blaze behind her. Sitting up and peering closer, he could see that her hands were gloved. In continuance with her seductive dance, she moved one gloved hand down her other arm. She peeled the glove off as her fingers made their way back up. The minx before him was only clad in something dark that snugly covered the essential portions on her body. She brought the ungloved hand to her other arm in the same manner, discarding the glove onto the floor near the other one. She turned to face the fire with her back to him.

"He-Hermione, what are you doing?" Severus was uneasy. He'd had too many experiences with that ruddy Succubus to be sure what was going on. He groaned slightly as she began lowering the clingy garment from her sexy *derrière*.

"I'm trying to seduce you," she said lightly.

A shocked expression passed over his face. His little witch was full of surprises, and to think that she had decided to do this *fohim*, made him feel... wanted. As she lifted first one leg and then the other, he noted she had some spiky shoes resembling the ones she had worn to the Christmas party. He longed to go to her to firmly grasp her arse. Damn, but he would love to light some more candles. The only reason he didn't was because this was *her* attempt at seduction. If she had wanted more lighting, she would have lit some herself. Hermione turned back to face him, moving forward a little more before stopping. She reached her hands up to begin untying the laces holding the fabric covering her breasts. Shrugging first out of one strap and then the other, she pulled it away from her body.

Severus' mouth went dry as one hand gently circled her left breast only to pinch her nipple. Her other hand came up to mimic the movements on her right breast. Both hands palmed their way down her soft stomach to her thighs, and then they moved back up to the womanly juncture betwixt her legs. "You've not even touched me yet, and I am already wet for you. My body is on fire with anticipation."

"Good Lord, Hermione, come here," he said in a low voice. He was completely seduced. Did she not know that she didn't have to go through all of this to make him yearn to be within her? Kicking off one shoe and then the other, she crawled onto the foot of the bed. Slowly working her way to him on all fours, he was reminded of a cat crouched down stalking its prey. Now that she was only inches from him, she placed her palms on his shoulders to push him back down onto the pillows. She looked into his eyes for a long moment before slowly descending her lips to brush against his softly.

"I want this to be for you. You told me to show you how I felt; the way you show me. Let me," she murmured. With that said, she pressed her lips to his more firmly, sliding her tongue along his lower lip while grinding her naked body through the duvet against his. She had likely spelled off his underpants, as they were now missing. He welcomed her lips and tongue with a nearly inaudible sigh. He dared not close his eyes to lose the contact with hers. It was like seeing into her soul. *My Hermione*. Hermione Granger... Snape. At that thought, his solid erection jutted up firmly to meet her sensual grind. Her lips moved along his jawbone, trailing wet, open-mouthed kisses as they went. Finally reaching his ear, she whispered seductively, "Do you want me?"

"Woman," he growled, "you have no idea what you do to me. I want to slam into your flesh and possess you." She nibbled on his lobe and suckled his neck while her hand traced down his bare chest and disappeared between them. *Was she frigging herself?*

She pulled away from him for a moment to look into his eyes. "Severus, this is what only you can do to me." She placed her damp fingers onto his lips. His tongue eased out to lick his lower lip. He growled deeply with approval. She then placed her index finger into his mouth. He sucked and licked until it was clean. She placed her middle finger into his mouth, and he eagerly slurped it clean. Hermione removed her fingers and captured his lips in an equally arousing kiss. "Oh," she murmured into his mouth when he roughly pressed himself more firmly to her.

"You... little... Succubus," he whispered. Feeling a burst of confidence in herself, she began slowly licking a trail down his neck, across his chest, and over each of his flat nipples. One fingernail followed the path of hair down to his groin, giving him gooseflesh. He sucked in a shaky breath as it circled his length lazily. Not to be outdone, her mouth followed the same path, but it came to rest on his inner thigh. She nipped and sucked his flesh gently for the briefest of moments before moving to the other thigh to replicate her actions. He felt like pulling her lips to his aching element, but he knew he had to restrain himself... somehow. *She's driving me insane*. "Yesssss," he hissed finally as her lips lapped at the droplet of excitement working its way out of his tip. She took as much of him into her mouth as she could before slowly pulling back.

As if in slow motion, she moved above him, took him in her hands, and guided him into her. Ever so slowly she slid down, moaning softly as he filled her. He could see that her eyes were closed, and she was biting that luscious lip. Severus placed his hands on her waist to help steady her, allowing her to set her own pace. She leaned forward to place both hands on his chest and began moving. Her eyes were still closed, and he watched her shamelessly. He couldn't believe his good fortune of having found such a treasure. Her wild hair was moving in time with her. Her body was mesmerizing. Up and down, back and forth.

Severus felt the burning need to release, and to help things along, he helped her pick up the pace somewhat. His upward thrusts and the pulling of her body against him led them to a fast, frantic pace. He could feel that he was nearing climax. Wanting her to feel it with him, he dropped a hand down to caress her sensitive spot. "No," she breathed. "Don't wait. Just move with me."

"Hermione," he groaned as she slapped his hand away. "Come with me." This time as his fingers grazed her, she moved farther back. The change in position had him filling her more profoundly. Thrusting deeply into her tight folds, he began his climax. "Hermione... I... oh, God."

She began reducing her movements until she knew he was done. Panting, she looked down at him through heavy lidded eyes. Her legs were trembling, and she felt the odd sensation of fluids trickling down from her onto him. "Severus... *that* is how I feel."

He pulled her to him for a kiss. While she was distracted, a hand crept to her crux, and he began rolling his finger firmly to stimulate her. In no time at all, she began bucking against him and moaning cries into his mouth. After a final shudder passed through her body, he stilled his movements. Her clamping convulsions had brought his

half hard cock back to life within her, but she slid off of him to fall into a contented sleep. He wanted nothing more than to flip her onto her back and pound into her, but she had earned her rest. Her plump legs were still trembling with overexertion. He pressed a kiss onto the top of her head that was pressed into his neck. Tightening one arm around her body, he brought his free hand down to his shaft to begin stroking himself. Drawing from the feel of her naked body crammed closely to his and the memory of what she had just done to him, he brought himself to a second climax.

Severus had never felt so complete before in his life. If the real Succubus hadn't been such a pain in the arse, he would have sent a silent thanks to her for opening his eyes where his Little One was concerned. Pulling his wand from the nightstand, he muttered a cleaning charm on both of them. Hermione mumbled slightly in her sleep as he moved her to reach for the duvet. He pulled tendrils of hair away from her face and smiled. Someone loved him. Extremely. He felt like he had touched her soul this night...his Hermione.

Everything that was Hermione belonged to him. His thoughts darkened as he imagined bashing a faceless foe over an attempt to harm her. They would find out exactly what was going on, who was behind it, and bring them to justice...one way or another.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Potter! Weasley!" Draco called. "Have you read the paper?"

"We don't subscribe to that rubbish," Ron said. He was glad that Draco hadn't held what he'd said about his father against him. The day after had felt a little odd, and he could tell Draco wanted to say something, but he didn't. The bloke could have been putting up an act, what with someone spying and all.

"What's so important, Malfoy?" Harry asked, noting the worried expression on Malfoy's face. "The Friday edition has something we should know?"

"Hell, yes!" Draco said, looking around to see if anyone was about. "Bellatrix LeStrange! She's gone! They went to give her some early morning treatments this morning, and she wasn't there. They don't know what happened!"

"But, the wards... the guards...?" Ron couldn't believe it.

"It's as if she just vanished." Draco nodded. "This is bad. We should try to see Snape today at some point."

"Talk to him after double Potions," Harry said. Turning away from his friends, he made his way out of the front entrance onto the grounds.

"Where is he off to?" Draco questioned.

"They have a lot of history, Harry and Bellatrix," Ron said, feeling uneasy. Harry wouldn't leave the grounds, would he?

"Go get him. I'll go find Hermione."

"All right, mate," Ron said, making his way in Harry's direction. Instinctively, he went in the direction of Hagrid's hut. Sure enough, Harry was prodding down the path. "Wait, Harry!" Harry waited rigidly while his friend caught up.

"I just need to be alone," Harry said decisively. "I'll be all right."

"Look, mate. I know what you are feeling right now. I'd like a go at her meself for..."

"You have NO idea how I feel about *her*! I should have killed her!" Harry yelled. "I thought I would do one better and destroy her mind, but now look where it's got me. So much for that!"

"She's got a muddled mind still. Far as anyone knows. Who's to say that someone didn't take her to just kill her?" Ron's expression turned hopeful.

"How thick are you?" Harry asked hatefully. "The bastards have been up to something. They're to get Mione and the others. Think they were having tea with Percy, Fudge, and the others?"

"Now, hang on, Harry. There's no reason to go off like that on me. I've done nothing exce..."

"Shove off for now, Ron. I have to think about this."

"What for, Harry? You think you can find her on your own?" Ron asked hotly. "You need me, mate. You aren't a one man show."

Harry's rage distorted face eased some. "I'm not going after her. Not yet! I just have to be alone to calm myself! All right? Understand now? I have to get away from everyone! Just shove off!"

Ron shook his head sadly as his friend continued on his way. He'd better go find Mione. Maybe she could talk to him. She always seemed to calm him down some. The last time he'd seen Harry that upset was before he had killed Voldemort! On his way to the castle, he met up with Snape.

"Weasley," Snape snarled with disgust. "Where is he?"

"Doesn't pay to talk to that one. He's off to calm himself and doesn't want to be bothered," Ron said with a pointed glance behind him, stepping away from the angry man. *What's he mad at me for? I've not done a thing!* Snape brushed past him without another word. "Git," Ron muttered before continuing on.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Look at her! The bitch!" Bradley spat venomously. "I'd like to shake Potter's hand for this, I would. I've a mind to leave her this way, and let her body starve to death, I do!"

Higgs looked over to his father, and he could see that the old man wanted to say something. If they didn't need the arse's potion to revive Bella, they would likely feed him to the snakes now. "Think you it shall work?" his father wheezed.

"Yes, I do. I'll start tonight. I'd say by this time Sunday, she'll be lucid." Bradley cackled excitedly. "And, then you can question her all you want. After that, I'll have my revenge."

Father and son exchanged smirks before the younger spoke. "Yes, vengeance will be ours to all that have wronged us. I think by this time on the next weekend, we can go ahead and lure the two we need to commence our grand plan."

Bradley nodded. "Our contact says that Potter is always glued to Granger. We need to make sure that he won't be about when our little Malfoy spirits her off. Are we prepared to make the sacrifice though?"

The old man spoke this time. "Yes, my contact says that the girl will be there. He'll see to it."

"Seems a pity to have to kill her," Terrence said softly, thinking of the petite girl.

"It was a pity that *my* girl had to die as well," Bradley spat.

Old man Higgs soured. "She is tied with Potter. That'll keep him away. As long as we sacrifice her, he'll be in no shape to watch Granger like a hawk. Snape can't be

everywhere at once, can he? It's our only guarantee."

"Father, what if something goes wrong? If they suspect anything, then..."

"Terence," his father said as sternly as he could. "Our contact at Hogwarts tells us that the young Malfoy takes easily to the Imperius. Nothing can go wrong."

"Yes, father," the boy replied. *Bastard*. It all seemed too easy. Ginevra Weasley would likely be dead by next weekend to ensure that Potter was occupied enough to not watch his little right hand like a hawk. Snape would get an urgent owl from Malfoy, taking him from the castle, and then Draco would lead Granger away. It was simple enough, but things that were too easy didn't sit well with him. *Who am I to question my father?*

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Not now, Professor," Harry said, sitting near the edge of the forest on an old log.

"It's times like these that you need to talk, Harry," Severus said. To relax the boy, he added, "We are alone. You may call me Severus."

"I *hate* her," Harry bit out. "I should have KILLED her." The boy's explosion did not surprise Severus. He merely sat down waiting for the rest of it. "I never liked that I would have to be a murderer one day. It was kill, or be killed. Kill, and you may be killed anyway. Then things changed. I knew it had to be done. I had to defend us."

"And yourself."

"Yes, but that didn't matter near the end. So long as everyone was safe!" Harry shook his head. "I gave in to the desire to see Bellatrix suffer! I thought I did one better, and now she is out. There is no telling what they have planned now."

"Harry, what did you do to her exactly?" Severus asked cautiously. He didn't want to press him too much. Not yet.

"A Mind-Bewitching Confundus Charm," Harry said promptly. "The part of her mind that functions properly is locked away while another part of the subconscious takes over, leaving her in a catatonic state until her body dies. Unless there are people that force feed and treat her. It's only what she deserved, the batty bitch!"

Severus nodded. "I thought it was something to that effect. Harry, who taught you that?"

"Dumbledore gave me some books to read. I talked to him about it some, and he helped just a bit."

"This is Dark Magic, Harry," Severus said, trying to not sound as if he was reprimanding him. He privately wondered just how much more the boy knew. Weasley looked shaken up, but he'd had the sense to not provoke his friend further. Harry would not likely hurt his friend, but that didn't mean a row wouldn't occur. Harry needed his friends, especially after all that had happened.

"No shit, sir!" Harry said, jumping up to move away.

"Sit back here, boy," Severus chided. "I am not trying to lecture you. I am just trying to make a point. If you would have a seat." He motioned to the vacated spot on the log. Harry sat back down, looking as if he didn't know if he should yell or cry.

"I'll listen."

"How considerate." Severus put a hand on his shoulder. "Sometimes we do things without thinking of the consequences. I admit freely that sometimes we have no other choice but to do things that we may regret later. But, those circumstances occur few and far between." Severus thought for a moment. "When you hexed her, what went through your mind?"

Harry faced Severus squarely. "I remember thinking death was too good for her."

"So, there were choices: the hex, a murder, and binding her. She was wounded when you cast the final hex. I saw that much." Severus stood to pace. Why wouldn't he speak? "Explain."

Harry looked away for a moment. "Death was too easy. I wanted her to pay. If I had bound her, she may have gotten away. I chose punishment and the improbable chance that she would get away."

"Do you know the counter curse for this?"

"There isn't one." Harry sighed. "There is a potion. It was listed as well."

"All right. That doesn't matter for now." Severus sat back and pulled Harry to face him. "Your choice was justified by your feelings. You had the choices there, and that is what you picked. In the eyes of the Ministry, you should have bound or killed her. No one faults what you've done. It was war. These times, however, are not."

"I can see what you mean, Se-Severus, but not really. I mean to say, was that bad?"

"Yes and no. Each fork in the path will bring you to a choice. A few minutes ago, Weasley seemed disconcerted. What happened?"

"I... I yelled at him. I acted like a prat, I guess. I took it out on him," Harry admitted. "I just wanted to be left alone."

"Did your friend deserve this?"

"No, I don't think so." Harry smiled loosely. "So, I chose the wrong path. I should have realized that he was only being supportive. My... emotions have done it again. If I had an idea where she was... I would have gone. I need to learn to control my impulses and take a moment to relax."

"Name one thing that relaxes you, and tell me why," Severus prodded, smug about the progress he was gaining with the boy.

"The Phoenix song," Harry said promptly. "It's always makes me feel better. It reminds me of Dumbledore."

"What does Albus remind you of?"

"Everything that is good in the world. Hope for the future. Strength. The reason to fight and for the right reason."

Severus smirked. How like him Harry was! He'd had similar thoughts. One steady force for him had been Albus, as well. He hadn't needed a Phoenix song though. "In what instances has this helped?"

"When I was down in the Chamber, Fawkes came to me. He helped me. Later, when I heard the Phoenix song, it enchanted me. It was as if I could feel it inside of me." Harry stood up. "When Voldemort dueled with me back in fourth year, I heard that same song. I felt safe. I knew things would turn out. Well, I had hoped. Many things since then. That night with you and Mione...Fawkes came. I had thoughts. They... were not exactly proper. I think I would have hexed you."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He would have liked to hex himself as well. "And, Fawkes did what?"

"Every time I would feel angry or uncomfortable, he would sing for me. I calmed down. It made me think clearly."

Why would Fawkes have been there? "Did Albus know what you and Hermione were about? Did he send Fawkes to assist?"

"Fawkes did heal Hermione's slicing hex, but I think... I felt as if Dumbledore may have known that the song would calm me if I began thinking about intervening." Harry ran his hands through his hair. "He doesn't trust me fully, does he?"

"I don't think there is a question whether or not he trusts you. He does. I would stake my life on it." Severus wondered as well, but he would not tell Harry this. "Perhaps he knows of the urge you have to *help* others. He must know how you feel about the song. Hell, it will relax most anyone. The book you are reading now. It's much the same, I would say."

"What do you suggest?"

"I think we use this to help calm you when something gets to be too much. Try it. When you are upset, hear the song of the Phoenix. Think of Albus. Think of all things good. Think of choices." Severus could see that the boy was mulling it over. "What do you feel now?"

"Relaxed. I also owe Ron an apology." Harry smiled genuinely. "Thanks."

"It's nothing," Severus said. "Let's get back. I am missing my class right now. I sent Hermione to ask Albus to cover for me until I returned. I don't trust him to not give away too many undeserving points."

Harry laughed. "Er... sorry that I just took off without a thought to your class."

"I think for the moment it will do. However, in the future, you will lose points and face a possible detention." They made the rest of the way quietly. Severus had just been about to leave Hermione's chambers when he heard someone arguing with her portrait. He'd drawn his wand, not taking a chance that it was a friend on the other side. When he saw Draco, he was both relieved and annoyed. He chided him about entering her chambers alone before even listening to what he had to say. Perhaps it would be prudent to follow his own advice. He smirked.

They walked into the class. Albus was rambling on about some joke Hooch had told him the night before. Severus shook his head. "Thank you, Headmaster. I shall continue the lesson from here."

Albus smiled kindly. "Anytime, Severus." His old eyes sought out those of Harry for a moment. "I shall speak with you this evening."

"Very well," Severus commented. "Turn to page 410. Who can tell me the ingredients of an Invigoration Draught?" He looked around the class and noted that the students were searching for the answer. Shaking his head, he said, "Why am I not surprised? As an antidote to your lack of preparation for class, you will write two rolls of parchment on the uses of the ingredients in this particular potion. I want to know why they have to be used in precise order, and what happens if you place even a minute amount too much or too little. Turn this in on Monday!"

The students grumbled for a few moments, but none dared to speak out. *That will teach them to not read their chapters!* As you can see, in the first paragraph it is explained that the Invigoration Draught is an extremely dangerous potion. This is not to be used in conjunction with any other potion, or the user may meet an untimely death. Bullstrode! Copy this down, girl!" His class proceeded on without a hitch. He could see that Draco was worried. Severus would have to contact Lucius...and soon. Maybe something else had slipped out about the disappearance that *The Prophet* hadn't printed for the public's prying eyes.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Hi. Nice night, isn't it?" a feminine voice asked.

"It's fine," Draco replied. "I came out here to think in private. Do you mind?"

"Sorry, I guess you don't remember me," she said.

"Well, come where I can see you at least," he said moodily. "Ah, yes, Edgecombe, is it?"

She smiled warmly. "That's right. So, Malfoy, what brings you up here on a Friday night? No parties in your common room?"

"There are a few games in progress. I've other things on my mind," he said, trying to remember the exact sound of her voice. He would try to appear troubled. Perhaps she would talk to him more freely. Maybe even fall under the Malfoy charm. *Know your enemy*, his father always said.

"Anything you would like to talk about?" she asked sweetly.

Here is my chance. "Yes, actually, I have been thinking about a girl as of late. I always thought of her as unworthy of my attention, then I came to like her as a person, mostly, and now... well, I just don't know. I am confused." He tried to sound perplexed.

"Well, does this girl feel anything for you?"

"No. She has a lover, and she considers me to be a friend. It's as if the moment I noticed her, she was swept away by someone else." Draco tried to smile brokenly. "I suppose it's fine. My *father* wouldn't approve anyway."

"Can't you talk to him?" she questioned, seemingly sincere, moving closer.

"I suppose I could, but there are some things that he won't change his mind about. I guess if it would look good in the public's eye, he might think on it. I guess it's not really worth the trouble. It would just cause a row, and I can't guarantee she would have me," Draco said glumly.

"Her loss then," she purred.

"Ahem," a male voice said.

She rolled her eyes. "Hello, Professor Steward. Have you finished with your personal business then?"

"Why, yes, I have, Miss Edgecombe. Care to accompany me into town?" he asked with an air of arrogance.

She took his arm. "Good night, Draco."

"Good evening, young fellow," the man said.

Draco allowed them a long head start before he made his way down to Snape's chambers. He hated to show up again, but this was important. Their primary suspect had just tried to come on to him. Wait. Had she? Hell, yes. He'd seen the look in her eyes, the sound in her voice. Even bad girls were intrigued by the Malfoy charm it seemed. This could be an advantage. Yes, he had her feeling sorry for him already. As he entered the dungeons, a thought occurred to him. It was pretty late. They were probably going at it. This information could wait until morning. He decided instead to go to his common room. At least no jealous lover would be tempted to accost him for no reason. That would wait until forenoon.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~



"What did you talk with the Headmaster about?" she asked, rubbing his tense shoulders.

"Harry mostly. I told him about his reaction earlier, and we are discussing further training for him. I simply wanted to be sure that he approved of my ideas," Severus said, telling only a half-truth. She didn't need to know everything that they had talked about. She didn't need to know that each time he saw the old man now, he began to have a pang of loss despite the fact that the man hadn't left yet. *He'll still be around*, he told himself over and over. But, why did it feel like life would be changing forever once Albus' era at Hogwarts came to an end?

"He'll be fine," she said easily. "Harry has come a long way."

"He still has things to deal with. Something is burning just beneath the surface in him. I feel that I should attempt to point him in the right direction," Severus stated.

"Severus, what has made your attitude change where Harry is concerned?"

"A number of things." *Lily. You. Albus.* "Mostly because I see myself in him, as I had been in my youth. Also, I have come to respect him. I'd always seen him as the type to strut about the castle like he owned it. Like he owned the world for accidentally defeating the Dark Lord as a baby." Severus turned to smile. "I see now, thanks to you and real talks with him, that he is not that boy. He never asked for any of this. It's not his fault that *James Potter* sired him instead of..." His voice trailed off, and he looked away guiltily.

Hermione saw the look of horror pass through his eyes before he tried to find the words to explain what he meant. "Instead of you."

"No." Yes. He smiled. "Instead of anyone." To lighten the mood, he tried to joke. "I guess it was better Potter than Black!"

She smiled and laughed, but she knew. Could she compete with a ghost? Well, hell yes. Why let a small slip of the tongue bother her? He had explained things to her thoroughly. *She*, not *Lily*, had made him feel things he'd never felt before. The next morning after she had seduced him in the middle of the night, they'd shared a long talk. He had said that he felt as though she was part of him somehow, and he would never be without her. Couldn't live without her. *He lived without Lily, didn't he?* She was sorry that the woman was dead, but a small part of her felt as though she had won something. "I'm a little nervous about Monday," she said, changing the subject.

"Well, that is understandable. What vexes you the most?"

"The students. What if they don't see me as an authority figure since I am so young?"

He took her hands in his. "The classes she has you starting on consist mostly of students not even in their teen years yet. To them, you are an adult. When I started teaching nearly sixteen years ago, I was only a few years older than some of my oldest students, but it didn't take long for them to see me as an authority figure." He kissed her nose. "By the time you are comfortable with these, she'll ease you into the next two years, and so on. Before you know it, you'll be handing out tests to Harry and the others."

"I suppose you're right. By the time I get to the older students, I will be more confident. I've read over her notes, lesson plans, and lectures enough this past week that I feel as though I am capable of adequately following in her footsteps." She grinned. "I'll still likely be nervous."

"You'll do fine. I'm sure Minerva will be bragging on you in the staff room by the end of the day," he said loyally. "She always has, you know. In fact, I used to get tired of hearing Miss Granger did this and Miss Granger did that."

She swatted his arm. "Severus, I would like to run in to Hogsmeade with Harry and Ron," sigh, "and, I guess, Draco. Would you mind terribly? I have a couple of things I need to pick up."

"Would you like for me to accompany you?" he asked, feeling excluded.

"Er... well, you can't. I have something to pick up that needs to be a surprise. All right?"

"A surprise, you say? Yet, *those* boys can see it?" His eyes narrowed slightly. "I think you had better explain."

She pulled away. "After the long talk that we had, you would dare have the gall to feel jealous about this? Can't you just trust me? I told you and showed you how I feel about you. How you make me feel as a... woman. I thought you understood completely that NO other man could do that to me?" She shook her head and went to their room. Sometimes he really aggravated her! Hell, if she could accept his one night fling with Hooch, his past feelings for Harry's mum, then he could understand this. "They are my friends," she grumbled, flinging herself onto the bed.

"I just don't see why you can't either allow me to accompany you, or explain what this is about. They are still classified as students and shouldn't be off the grounds without a member of the staff! Can you not see my point?" he asked, standing at the foot of the bed with his hands crossed in front of him. His lecture stance.

"I am a member of the staff. The Deputy *Headmistress* has given her approval!"

"It's not the same," he barked.

"Fine! Come then!" she blurted.

"This is ridiculous! You are behaving like a..." He stopped. "I have rounds to make."

"A what?" she goaded. "Go on, say it."

"A Slytherin!"

Her jaw dropped open. Trying hard not to laugh, she managed, "You are a liar! You were going to say a child, weren't you?"

"Never crossed my mind," he said blandly. "I'll be back later." He slammed out of their quarters in a pretended fury. After he made his way down the hall, he stopped. Laughter shook his body. She was very perceptive. He had been about to call her a child, but then he realized that he could nearly say the same for himself. It had suddenly dawned on him, as well, that she was probably trying to sneak into town for a gift. For him. He would be thirty-eight the following day. He had forgotten about his own birthday. No wonder she was trying to go without him. Feeling like a dolt, he began his patrol of the corridors. Pity the students he caught out of bed this night. They would have to pay for his serious lack of judgment. He smiled smugly. He'd just have to wake her up pleasantly when he got back if she happened to have gone to sleep.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Sorry, I'm late," Draco said, walking in slowly. "It's too early on a Saturday to be getting up to go off into Hogsmeade."

"Didn't have to really come though, did you?" Ron asked saucily, moving over to make room for the boy on the couch.

"I've got to keep up appearances," Draco said through a yawn.

Harry had been quiet since he and Ron had come in. Severus was sipping on some coffee, lost in his own thoughts. Ron had been chattering about a song Luna had written about him. Hermione smiled at the unlikely band of collaborators. Before last year, she never would have believed that Draco would have turned out to be such a friend. It wasn't all that long ago that she would have thought the idea of Severus Snape willingly sitting in the same room with them to be preposterous. Some things

changed for the best, didn't they?

"Severus, are you sure you don't want to come?" she asked, feeling guilty. He had come back to their rooms in a better temperament and kissed her until she smiled. Then he'd made love to her so gently that she thought she would float away.

"I believe I will seek out Lucius before long. We have things to discuss," he said quickly.

"Oi! That reminds me!" Draco said suddenly. "Last night, I made for the Astronomy Tower to get away from the common room for a bit. Guess who I ran into?" He looked around as they all shrugged. "Marietta Edgecombe!"

"What?" Hermione asked, completely surprised.

"That's right. Looked like she was interested in me. I accidentally-on-purpose led her to believe I was there pondering why a girl I used to hate would be so important to me," he glanced nervously at Severus, "and that it didn't matter anyway as she loved another. I even added that my father wouldn't likely approve unless she could bring something to the family name."

Severus sneered. "Well, I am sure that if she is their informant, she will relay the message, and I am sure they will know that you meant Hermione!"

"Wait!" Hermione said quickly. "She isn't supposed to be here. Stuart told me that they had extra work to do the other day because she would be leaving for a few days. Either he lied, or something changed her plans."

"That fat bloke came upon us as we were talking! He took her arm, and they said something about going into Hogsmeade." He squinted his eyes as if in thought. "She asked if he was finished attending to personal business. Wonder what that was about?"

"Odd," Ron commented.

"It's strange," Hermione said.

"Indeed," Severus agreed. "I'll see what Lucius and Albus think about it." He stood up and moved towards Hermione. For a moment, she thought he would kiss her, but he only squeezed her shoulder affectionately. Without a backwards glance, he Flooed to his quarters.

Southern's Notes: Moving right along. Next up, we'll have a bit of a set back, jealous Sev returns, and more info on Bella. We'll also see how 'others' are involved with the plot. Had a bit of lemon in the beginning here... Woohoo! It was time, I say.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 15 of 32

Severus gets his birthday gifts, and Harry does something to cause trouble between our couple.

Disclaimer: Not mine! Belongs to a most brilliant woman.

A round of thanks goes to Charmed Nay for being my original beta and also to GinnyW for going through it with me a second time in search of funkies.

"I don't like this, Lucius. Not at all. They are planning something more. Why else would they need Bella?" Severus asked suspiciously.

Lucius had been pacing the entire time. "Do you know what the last thing she said to me was?" His cool eyes met dark ones. "She said if it was the last thing she did, she would see to it that I watched as she ripped Draco's heart out of his chest. They must know."

"When was this?"

"Right after the fighting began. I was trying to work my way over near Draco, and I saw her. She disarmed me and laughed. I thought she was going to kill me. She said that to me, threw my wand down, and ran towards my son." Lucius shuddered. "She happened upon Ginny Weasley, and you know the rest."

"If they are successful in returning her mind to her, then I'm afraid that she may indeed try to complete the task. She'll also go after Harry for revenge." Severus stood to pace along with his friend. "I've looked over the antidote potion for her problem. There is a series of things that have to be done along with it. If my calculations are correct, by as early as tomorrow night, she could be revived."

"That long? What did Potter do to her?" Lucius asked in amazement.

"A Mind-Bewitching Confundus Charm."

"What has that old man been teaching him? How could he manage that? He's only a boy," Lucius said incredulously.

"He's more than he seems, and I don't think he has been a boy for many years now. He has learnt a few things on his own, and he has been guided by Albus. Hell, we even trained him."

"Potter always was a right little ball-ache! Each time I met him, he'd look at me as if he could see right through me. When we got together on those training sessions, I always wondered where he got the bollocks to stand up to us, time and again." Lucius grinned. "It was that determination that cemented what I had already known. The Dark Lord was going to lose. Some of him lives on in Potter even now. How do we know..."

"Don't even think it," Severus said. "I am personally seeing to Harry's training. I will guide him."

Lucius waved a hand, not wanting to hear anymore about Potter. "Fudge has done this. I just know it. Umbridge has had a hand in it as well. No doubt she's been having a go at his beaver lever all this time! I wonder if she knows he was always ready for a little back scuttle with anyone our berk of a Lord sent his way."

"Enough, Lucius. You need to prepare your house. We've both been slack as of late where our own protection is concerned. You need to start by screening your Floo. Set

your Apparition wards farther back from the house." Severus grinned. "Put some of your old traps in place. The brilliant Ministry of Magic hasn't been sniffing about lately, and if they do, I'd say this is a just cause."

"Severus, this has to be the end, once and for all. Bella must be taken down. I'll not spend the rest of my life wondering if she will come for my only son," Lucius spat venomously.

"It shall be done," Severus said with a nod. "If... if one of us is unable, then the other shall see it done. Agreed?"

"Indeed," Lucius said. "What of the school's security?"

"Albus had Filius charm the doors to recognize Bellatrix on sight. The wards are impregnable as ever. More patrols have been set up. The house-elves and portraits have been told to be on the look out as well." Severus stopped his friend's nervous pacing. "Lucius, Draco will be safe. I will look out for him."

"But, Severus, you are not always there. Even at this moment, he is off to Hogsmeade with you*girl*," Lucius said accusingly.

"It should be safe! He's had no instructions as of late. Bellatrix is still under as far as we know, and he is keeping with good company," Severus defended. "Had I thought they were in danger, I would have followed them myself."

"Oh, yes, the good company is a plus," he said sarcastically. "Three other youngsters!"

"It would do well to remind you that Harry could hold his own against damn near anyone. He is quite formidable. Have you forgotten that even when he hated your son, he rushed to his defense? He'll not let anything go amiss. Hermione is no slacker either. Hell, even Weasley can fight his way out of a brawl if need be." Severus watched as Lucius accepted this information.

"You are right, of course. I think it is time for a visit to Fudge. He's always been interested in deals on the sly. I'll throw out some crumbs to see if he is biting. Perhaps if he thinks I have more galleons to throw out, he'll be inclined to talk," Lucius said, sneering at the thought of the great lug.

"Don't ruin this," Severus said quietly. "We don't want him to think that we suspect his involvement in this."

"He will suspect nothing. I'll give you my findings."

"Fair enough. I'll see myself out," Severus said.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Come on, Malfoy, budge up," Ron complained.

Hermione looked at Harry as their two friends bickered over the seating arrangement. "Harry," she said softly. "Let's have a walk." He nodded. She turned to the others. "We won't be long."

"Sure," Ron said sarcastically. "Just leave me with the blag artist!"

Harry shook his head, showing that he too had had enough of the bantering. Once they made their way out of the pub, she pulled him to the nearest alley. "Out with it. You've been just too quiet!"

He seemed to be studying her. "Stand still," he said, suddenly pointing his wand at her. "Ssssyethssss Ssykasheessss." Stiff with fright, Hermione watched as a serpent like smoke emanated from the tip of his wand and swirled around her eerily from head to toe before resting at her feet. "Sssythkasss Ssssyethssss."

"Harry," she said, swallowing back her fear. This was Harry after all. "What did you just do to me? I felt as if part of that... that snake seeped into my skin."

"It did," he said simply. "You will never be any place that I can't find you. I've been thinking on it, and I feel as if I have just made a good choice."

She smiled slightly at his proud expression. Apparently he felt like he had accomplished a great task. "What kind of spell was that? I mean, it's odd that you are using Parseltongue on a tracking spell."

"It's no tracking spell, Mione," he said. "Now, I feel much better. For some reason, I just feel uneasy about things, what with Bellatrix vanishing and all. If somehow we are ever separated, hang on as long as you can, and I'll be right there."

This made sense to Hermione, but she wondered where he had studied such things. She would have to mention this to Severus later. He would likely give her answers where apparently Harry wouldn't. "Thanks, Harry. Let's go back in before those two kill each other."

"I've about had enough of them both. It's hard to think with them going at it every few minutes. Did you get what you needed at the last stop?"

"Yes, we can head back to the castle after we've eaten," she said with a smile.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

A knock on his door brought Severus out of his reverie. "Enter," he bellowed. Who would be about on a Saturday needing to speak with him? Harry entered and seemed uncertain.

"What is it, Harry?"

"I just wanted to tell you... I just wanted to say Happy Birthday, sir." The boy placed a small package on his desk and began backing away. Severus was momentarily stunned.

"What is this?" He gestured to the small box.

"It's for you."

"Why?" he asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "Bin it then." He immediately left, even though Severus had called for him to come back. It wasn't that he wanted to turn the boy away, but he had taken him by surprise. A birthday gift. Looking down at the offending package with reluctance, he smiled faintly. What would Harry have gotten for him? He unwrapped it slowly and saw that it was a plain, brown book. He opened the cover.

Severus,

I hope you don't mind this, but I just wanted to thank you for giving some of your time to me. I buy Ron and Mione things on their birthday, so I thought it fitting that I get you something as well. I haven't many close friends, but maybe I can now add you to that list. Please don't be upset with this. I didn't know what else to give you. The first few pages are just some I put together. The rest is blank. You and Mione can fill those.

Harry

Severus sucked in a breath when he turned the page. There smiling up at him with her dazzling green, almond-shaped eyes was Lily. Underneath Harry had scrawled *Lily Evans Potter 1960-1981*. The picture waved a few times before he closed the book. How could the boy give this to him? Didn't he know the types of feelings it would evoke? Regret. Lots of it. He had failed her. He had given information to Albus that enabled her and James to get away from the Dark Lord's clutches on three separate occasions, and yet he had still failed her. He'd thought her safe and whilst out on a raid, the Dark Lord made his way to Godric's Hollow. He had found out too late of what was happening, and by the time he could alert Albus, the deed had been done. She was gone from the world forever. Lost. When she died, he believed he'd never have anyone that would have faith in him again. The world had been robbed of a kind heart, a brilliant witch, and a good woman when she sacrificed herself for Harry.

He hadn't been able to recall her face since he'd been with Hermione. Only her eyes came to mind, but he knew that was because he had been staring at their likeness for the past seven years. Severus had never had a picture of her before. He had never thought about trying to get one. He opened the book again, sucking in another sharp breath. She was laughing at him. Quickly he turned the page only to see the same green eyes. This time it was Harry looking up at him uncertainly. Severus vowed, "I will not fail you too."

Once more he turned the page, and his heart melted. It was a picture that had been taken of Hermione at the Christmas party. He had forever burned that image of her in his mind, but in this picture she was walking around with her head held high, smiling at him shyly every now and then. Severus lowered his lips to kiss the picture. Picture Hermione didn't seem to notice. He turned the page and smirked. Draco and Weasley were in that photo. They were bickering back and forth, trying to hex each other. He turned the page again. It was blank, as was the rest of the book. *You and Mione can fill those*.

Severus had to talk to Harry. He strode out of his class and made his way towards Gryffindor Tower. On his way there, he was nearly toppled over by Professor Steward. "Good God, man. What are you scurrying about so quickly for?"

"Pardon me, good sir," the man replied. "I'm just out for a stroll." Severus glared at the man until he was out of sight. He shouldn't be in this section of the castle unless he had business here. He filed that information away for later use. "Open," he said to the Fat Lady.

"Yes, fine," she said through a yawn.

Severus entered the common room and looked around for the boy. He saw a thick patch of red hair near the fire and ventured that way. Sure enough, Harry was sitting just next to him on the floor. "A word, Harry," he said smoothly.

Harry stood up. "All right."

Severus made his way back out of the portrait, not bothering to look at the other students. It was likely that they believed Harry to be in trouble. As soon as they made a little progress down the corridor, Severus stopped. "I wanted to say... that I appreciated the gift. That was very thoughtful of you."

"You aren't mad?"

"No. I am not. You just caught me off guard." Severus saw the boy's eyes light up.

"I'm glad. I thought maybe I overstepped my bounds," he admitted. "I didn't tell anyone that I gave it to you if you're wondering. Not even Ron."

"That's fine. I just wanted you to know that I shall enjoy making use of the gift. Have a good day," he said curtly.

"You also, Severus," the boy called after him.

Severus went to Hermione's chambers. It was dark inside. Only the fire from her study's grate allowed him any perceptive visual. *Lumos*," he said softly, walking to her bedchamber. "*Nox*," he said upon entering. The windows were wide open and the sunlight was pouring in. A cold breeze was filing in from the chilly outdoors.

Hermione walked out of her bathroom at that moment. "Oh! You startled me!"

"Did you have a nice morning?" he asked, watching her adjust the towel in her hair. Her bathrobe was partially opened, and he found himself trying to see her flesh through it.

"Yes, it was very nice," she said with a grin. She strode forward and kissed him. "Happy birthday, love," she whispered as her lips were released.

"I... thank you," he said softly, touched that she had remembered. This was the first birthday that he'd ever had a woman at his side. So many firsts were shared with her. "Is that why you wished to go into town without me?" He knew the answer, but he wanted her to admit it.

"Of course, it is. Just there on the bed I have a bag with something in it. I'll go spell my hair and be back in a moment," she said exiting quickly. When she came back out again, she paused at the look on his face. "What's wrong?"

"What the hell is this?" he asked, holding up a pair of lacy panties. "You expect me to wear this?" She wanted to laugh at the incredulous expression on his face.

"Severus, that bag contains my shreds! Sorry! Your bag is just here," she said, grinning openly. She supposed they were his in way, as she had bought them in hopes that he would like them.

He nearly sighed in relief. Severus would never put on such... feminine apparel! He raised an eyebrow. "You intend to wear those for me?"

"Yes, at some point. Do you like them?" she asked, pulling her hair up as she spoke.

"I approve immensely, though it is a pity."

"What is?" she asked, noting the sorrowful expression that passed through his face.

"You won't have them on long enough to get much usage out of them." He took a step to her. "Much like anything else you have on, I can only imagine myself ripping any under things off of your body."

She shivered with delight as a lone finger traced a path from her cheek down to her cleavage. "I..." she stammered, sucking in a breath as the finger traced a circle around her nipple through her blouse.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he mocked, using his lecture voice. "Words have not often failed you. Is there a problem?"

"No, Professor," she answered in what she hoped to be a nervous schoolgirl's voice.

"For your lack of ability to comment on your current situation, I see fit to give you a punishment, Miss Granger." He pretended to think things over for a moment. "This will do quite nicely." He leaned forward and brought his mouth to her hardened nipple that was trying desperately to poke its way through her blouse. She closed her eyes as jolts of desire swept through her body.

Hermione whimpered in frustration. She could feel the movements through the fabric, but she yearned to feel his lips on her bare skin. His mouth pulled away quickly. She opened her eyes and saw the wet spot on her shirt where his mouth had been. Bringing her eyes to his, she said, "Sir, I don't think I have learned my lesson."

"Impertinence," he hissed. "That has earned you another punishment, little girl. You will serve detention with me tonight in the dungeons directly after the evening meal. Do not be late."

She swallowed for a moment, nearly believing he was serious. There was no smile, no softness in his eyes. Was he joking? She decided to go on with it to be safe. One could never tell where Severus' thoughts were at times. "Yes, Professor."

He smirked and backed away from her. She watched as he opened the gift bag and extracted the first of his two gifts. It was a book. "I've never read this," he commented, opening the book quickly to skim the table of contents. "*Sonnets of a Sorcerer* second edition? Where did you get the Galleons for this, Hermione?"

Her cheeks reddened slightly. "I didn't use yours, Severus. I gave that back to you after I bought those things for your house."

Severus nearly growled. "Our house."

"All right! I borrowed the money from Harry. I didn't have leave to go to Diagon Alley to Gringott's for my own. Please don't be upset. I'll pay him back as soon as I can," she said quickly, not wanting him to think the gift was more from Harry than from her.

He perused the book further without comment purposely to let her wonder if he was angry with her. Severus didn't mind that Harry had loaned her the Galleons, but he hated that she had spent so much on him. Again. "This is a very valuable book. I thank you. I shall enjoy reading through it."

"I am glad." She smiled brightly. "There is something else in the bag also." She hoped he would be pleased and nearly crossed her fingers as she had done as a child when hoping for luck.

"I haven't seen one of these in a long time," he commented with a smile. She noted that his eyes looked suspiciously bright. "Where... how did you come by this?" His voice had taken a rough edge.

"We were walking by a second hand place. Ron buys things there sometimes. We decided to have a look. While Ron was looking over some items with Draco, Harry pointed this out," she said quickly. "He met with a Sphinx in the maze back in fourth year."

"My mother," Severus said softly, "used to always try to find a way to make up for my father's rages and binges. She used to come in with a miniature Sphinx. We would sit together for hours sometimes trying to solve her riddles. My father began to hate our private time together. He said she was softening me up with *foolhardy games* when I should be studying more important things, such as Dark Arts. He took to yelling each time we would have a sit to solve a riddle."

"Severus, I am sorry. I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories. I just thought it to be something that we might like to do together," Hermione said softly. Severus didn't comment for a while. He seemed to be lost in memories. She dared not move lest she upset him more.

Finally, he said, "My father, near the end before we lost most of our possessions, took our Sphinx. He went into town and traded it for a few bottles of Ogden's Old Firewhisky. I was an older student by then, and things had changed considerably. My mother and I hadn't used it that much once I was older. I took my studies very seriously even whilst on holiday." Severus flipped the Sphinx over and smiled ruefully. "I felt as though I lost a piece of my mother that day. We were both upset when we'd found out what he'd done. He laughed at us. He said he had hoped it would be worth more, but it wasn't. It was as worthless as she was... and as I was."

"You are not worthless," Hermione said emotionally. "You are everything to me."

Severus strode forward and cupped her cheek. He opened his mouth to say something, but decided to bring his lips to hers instead. When he pulled away he placed the small Sphinx in her hands. "Flip it over."

She did so and gasped. How could she not have noticed this before? Carved on the belly of the Sphinx were the initials S.S.S. "You mean to say... that this...?"

"Is the very same Sphinx," he finished for her. "You've brought a piece of her back to me, Hermione. I don't know how you managed it, but you've found a part of me that was lost. I feel... fulfilled." He held up a hand when she moved to hold him. "I'll be a moment." She watched through tears in her eyes as Severus went into the loo, closing the door tightly behind him. Was he going to cry? Think? She didn't like that she had brought painful memories back to him, but she loved that a part of his past that he obviously remembered fondly was given back to him. *She* gave it back to him.

He was likely dealing with the bad memories as well. His wretched father had obviously harmed him more than he'd previously let on. What type of monster would taunt his only child for finding a bit of joy in his mother's presence? What type of father would Severus be? Hermione knew he was not the same man that his father was, but sometimes people only acted on what they knew. She'd read about it. It was like a vicious cycle that some had to work hard to break. One parent abused a child; later, that child would become the abusing parent and so on. Severus has changed since she had come to him. Surely everyone could see it.

Well, all right. So, he had tried to attack Draco in front of the entire school, but, well, he was provoked into it. He had made amends with Harry. There. That was a start. Another thing was the way he treated her. He loved her. Love? He never said it exactly, but he showed her his feelings on so many levels. The warmth of his kiss, the gentleness of his touch, the possessiveness in his eyes... just everything. She knew he loved her. Right? *Yes, Hermione. You know he loves you.* Right, then. But, why couldn't he say it? They were merely three simple words. I. Love. You. Why the bloody hell was it so hard for a thirty-eight year old man to say? She frowned. Had he heard those words at home? His mother must have told him, but it was highly unlikely his father had ever said those words to him. Hermione was pondering if she told him enough when he came out of the bathroom.

"Hermione?"

"I love you," she said fiercely, practically jumping into his arms. She showered his face with eager kisses. "I promise to you, Severus, that we will be together for always. Our children will never know a day of sadness in *our* home." His lips possessed hers brutally in return.

Their children. Their home. His future wife. He pulled away to look at her. "This gift," he pointed to her, "is the best gift that I could have ever gotten. You are my light at the end of the tunnel, Hermione. I... I hope you know that." He kissed her again, less harshly. Pulling away, "I thank you also for the Sphinx. I can't believe it's been so near all this time, and I never knew it."

"What's done is done, love. You have it now, and one day, perhaps, you and I will be able to share time with our son or daughter. We can spend hours trying to solve whatever riddles she has for us," she said softly. He swallowed and nodded.

It was like a dream, wasn't it? A real family. Father and mother both doting on their offspring. He could envision himself in the living area of their home contentedly spending time near the fire. Hermione's belly swollen with child. He could see himself sitting next to her reading with their firstborn on his lap. *This* was what he wanted. He would have it. He'd not dared to hope in so long. Now there was more than hope. The odds were most definitely in their favor. *No harm shall befall you whilst I still breathe.* He kissed his future wife passionately again, releasing all he felt into the kiss, leaving her breathless. He inhaled her jasmine scented hair and smiled... only for a moment.

"What is different about you?" he asked curiously. There was jasmine, but also a touch of... something. What the hell was it?

"Nothing that I know of," she said, wondering what he was playing at.

"Your scent has changed."

"Er... is this... bad?" she asked, feeling suddenly self-conscious. She had used the same shampoo and soap in her bath. She sniffed her hand slightly, not noticing anything other than a clean fragrance.

"No, not bad. Just... different. It reminds me a little of... my God!" He stepped away from her and eyed her warily. "Where all did you go today? Did you drink or eat anything? Did someone spill something on you?"

"Severus? What is it?" Her eyes widened in fright. "We ate at The Three Broomsticks. All of us. No one spilled anything on me. What do you notice on me?" She was extremely worried now. He had a look of horror upon his face.

"Hermione, your scent is one I can recall all too well. It's as if someone doused you with a Dark potion or spell. The... Dark Lord... he reeked of this at times. Mostly after he had to bond with Nagini to be able to access her or find her from great lengths. I can't exactly name it, but it reminds me of Dark Arts and reptiles." He pulled her closer and narrowed his eyes. "Tell me everything, girl! Quickly!"

"A Dark spell?" She groaned. "Oh, no! I was going to tell you, but it slipped my mind with all of this happening." Severus shook her roughly when she paused.

"Speak!"

"Harry... he said something in Parseltongue. He said that if I found myself lost that I should just hold on, and he would come for me. I asked if it was a tracking spell, but he said that it wasn't. He didn't say exactly what, but I thought I would talk to you abo..."

"This is no tracking spell! He has marked you. Scented you, if you will." Severus' eyes flashed dangerously. Just what was that boy thinking! "You carry Potter's scent! How dare he think to mark *my* woman and get away with it?"

"Severus, wait," she said, grasping at the back of his cloak as he made to leave. "He didn't mean any harm by it. He said something about making the right choice. Stop!"

He turned on her and pulled her roughly to him. "You are MINE! I will not have a POTTER marking what is MINE! You are not to leave these rooms until I return," he growled angrily.

"You can't lock me in here!" she yelled. "Severus, what are you going to do?" Oh this was horrible. Why hadn't she told him when she first saw him? She doubted he would have taken it well anyway. Blast! Just as he and Harry had been friendlier with each other. The use of the word *Potter* was not lost on her. He'd been calling Harry by his given name. It seemed they had taken a step back.

"I am going to him to fight for what is mine. How dare he stake a claim on you?" Severus was pulling from her grasp, and when she refused to let go, he picked her up roughly and threw her onto the bed. He felt only a moment of regret as she began crying. "Stop your whinging! It's your honor I am defending!"

"Severus," she said through sobs. "You can't hurt Harry. He is only thinking about if I get snatched. I can't let you go like this." She was scooting up again to get off of the bed.

"Stay there, Hermione. I am warning you." He had never been angrier. He could feel his body trembling with rage. After all he had done for Harry, no Potter Junior, the boy dared to go behind his back on this. Hermione belonged to him.

"Warning me? Are... you going to hurt me?" she asked, recoiling in fear to the other side of the bed.

"Never!" he bellowed, backing towards the door. "You will be warded to remain here. I will collect you once I have done what I aim to do."

"NO!" She ran to him. "Severus, you can't hurt Harry. Please stop. Stay with me."

"It's for you that I go," he whispered fiercely, pushing her away. He slammed out of her door and warded it expertly. She'd not be able to get out of there. He could still hear her sobbing, but he fought the urge to go to her. There would be time to soothe her fears later. After he dealt with Potter. His vision of his future family was now tainted! If the boy didn't remove it, there would always be the smell of *Potter* about her. His fist grasped his wand in anger.

"Ah, Sev, old boy! Just the man I wanted to see," Hooch said, striding to meet him. "I need to know which hours Slytherin needs for the rest of the month on the field. I've just been with Minerva, and..." She eyed him warily, reaching a hand to halt him.

He shrugged away from her and tried to continue on. "Out of my way, Rolanda."

"Severus? What's going on? Who are you about to kill? Has something happened? It's not Malfoy, is it?" She fired questions continuously until he finally heard the last one. "You've not hurt Hermione, have you?"

"I would never hurt her. I'll never lay a hand on her," he said angrily.

"There are other ways to hurt a woman, Severus," she chided, equally angry. "What have you done? What are you about?"

"I have someone to deal with, Rolanda," he said curtly.

"Severus! If it's a row you want, then have one right here with me." She pulled her wand. "I can't let you carry on as you are. You are a professor here, and you shan't be allowed to harm a student. No matter if the little bastard tried to kiss her."

"This is not about Malfoy!" he barked. "It's about Potter."

"What? He's done nothing. He's been out on the field with me since he came back from Hogsmeade with Herm..." She gulped. Good Lord. Had Potter been stupid enough to try something? "I'll go to the Headmaster, Severus."

"I don't care," he growled. He stared at the floor for a moment. The headmaster. Albus. Albus' trust. Hermione. Hermione was sobbing. He put away his wand and made his way back to her chambers ignoring Rolanda's attempts to talk to him. As quickly as he could, he unwarded her door, and he stood in the doorway looking at the crumbled form on the floor. Still sobbing. "Hermione... I'm sorry."

He knelt down next to her when she hadn't responded to his words. Severus' heart broke. What had he done? He was no better than his father after all. Words hurt just as much as fists. Rolanda was right. There were other ways to hurt a woman. A lone tear streaked down his face. "Hermione." He reached out to touch her shoulder, and he felt her flinch. Another tear found its way out. He'd not lose her now. Not after all she had come to mean to him. Severus picked her up, and he made his way to the bed with her. She immediately curled away from him, but her sobbing had stopped. He slid in behind her and pulled her body to his to hold her.

Hermione felt her lover's body shuddering as if he was crying or attempting to stop a flow of tears. Good! He deserved to be upset as well, after what he'd done. He'd been so angry, and he'd taken it out on her. No matter how she had pleaded he'd left to go maim Harry, and he had warded her in like a child. He had yelled, grabbed her roughly, threw her on her bed, and pushed her away. How could she be sure he wouldn't do that again? To her? To their children? *No, this is Severus.* Indeed. That was what made it so scary. One minute he had been on the verge of saying he loved her, and the next minute he was shouting about something that she really didn't know anything about.

She hadn't asked Harry to do this to her, and she believed deeply that Harry had meant no harm. She thought back to his proud smile. There was no ulterior motive there. He had done it for her protection. How dare Severus not see that? What had stopped him? What had brought him back to her? She felt something wet glide down her neck and realized it was a tear. His. Hermione turned to face him, and his hold tightened on her as if he feared she was trying to get away. She took in his broken expression and new tears sprung to her eyes. His cheeks were wet, his eyes were filled with sorrow and horror, and his lower lip was trembling slightly.

Hermione wiped his cheeks softly and snuggled closer to him, burying her head under his. She felt his body rock with tremors again. She could feel a slight dampness in

her hair. If not for those two things, she would never have known that he was crying. How could someone be so silent with such pain? She tightened her free arm around him. After a few moments, he began to speak. "I thought I would never hurt you. The thought of another man... daring to place his scent on you. I just... lost it. Can we work through this?"

"I think that you should try harder to contain your anger. You didn't even try to see my point before you were rushing off to hurt him for something he only meant as a way to help us," she said softly.

"You didn't answer me, Hermione. Can we work through this? I can't be without you. I would be... lost." Severus shuddered. What had he done? He had been having a good day. The first birthday that had ever meant something to him, and he had ruined it. "I need you," he whispered.

"I'm not going any place. You still have me. I just think that... I worry that it may happen again," she admitted.

"It won't. I assure you. I will do what I have to do to be sure of it." He kissed her head softly. "I need your forgiveness, Hermione. I just... I'm protective. You belong to me. I felt that my happiness was threatened. My future family was threatened."

This softened Hermione more than anything. So, he thought about their future family as well. This only proved how insecure he truly was. "Severus, what could I do to make you believe in me? To trust me unconditionally?"

"I do trust you."

"No, that's not what I intended. I mean to say, what would make you feel more secure about our future? What can I do or say? Please tell me, and it shall be done," she whispered.

"Consent to be my wife," he said after a moment. She felt his arms tighten for a moment. Wife? Wife! So soon?

She chose her words carefully. "Severus, there is nothing I want more than to eventually become your wife, but are you sure about this? We've not been together all that long."

"I don't care," he said firmly. "We can have a long betrothal if you'd like, but I want the world to know you belong to me. I want you to wear my mother's ring. You are the only one worthy of it."

She pulled away to search for the truth in his eyes. It was there. She had never seen his expression so open, so readable. "Severus, please don't feel that you have to go this far to keep my love for you alive. I've not stopped loving you. Don't do this because you feel you have to."

"I want to."

She knew it to be true. This was certainly a turn of events. "And, the outburst?"

"We will deal with it together. I will never allow you to see that side of me again." He smiled uncertainly. "At least not directed at you. Hermione, I... I adore you. I would die before I saw anything or anyone harm you or our family. I would kill for you." He sighed. "I just associated it with the Dark Lord. I was brought back to a time in the past that I didn't want to be in. Then, the thought of someone else marking you as if he desired you to be his. Well, it was just too much. I shall still talk to the boy about this matter. He should have talked to me first or explained to you, at least, what he was about."

"Yes, I know that, Severus, but this is Harry we are talking about. We've never been involved. Never even thought about it. He loves Ginny, as far as I know. He's the brother that I've never had." She swallowed at his odd expression. "Severus, listen to me, and don't you dare misunderstand what I am about to say. We love each other as strongly as any siblings could. We would also fight to the end for each other. He's my family, Severus. You should have seen how proud he was. He was going on about finally making a right choice on something. I think he did it to ease his worry and yours. He... he wants to prove something to you, Severus. I'm sure of it. He said he felt uneasy about that *witch* getting out of Azkaban."

Severus nodded. He'd still have a word with him about this. He'd find out exactly what he had done, why, and how it could be removed. And, he would definitely let him know that he didn't appreciate it one bit.

"Severus, I was so happy when I saw that you had finally taken a liking to Harry. Do you know that I think it's exactly what he needs. He has no one else aside from Albus. What with Albus retiring, I think you two need to be here for each other," she said softly.

"I have the need to get something. I will be back shortly," he said kissing her forehead.

"Severus? Where are you going?"

"It's a surprise," he said, raising his eyebrow in challenge. Hadn't she done much of the same to him?

She smiled softly. "Understood. Am I commanded to stay in my rooms? Should I search out Harry to be sure he is still breathing?"

He smirked. "I never made it to the boy. I came back before. Go where you would like, love. I shan't be long."

"I'll stay here and read in your book then. Is that all right?"

"Yes," he said, kissing her lips softly before standing. At that moment, a wild-eyed Professor McGonagall came storming in, followed by Madame Hooch.

"What has been going on here?" she demanded stormily.

"Everything is fine," Severus said immediately. Hermione caught the glare he sent to Rolanda, but also noticed that Rolanda glared back. She'd have to ask him about that.

"Hermione?" Minerva asked, brushing past Severus.

"It's fine," she said with a small smile. "Just a little disagreement."

Minerva turned around to eye Rolanda for a moment, but then said, "Very well."

"I assure you, the both of you, that all is well here," Severus said, taking on an annoyed tone. How dare Rolanda run off for Minerva when she saw he hadn't gone after Harry. He supposed she meant well, but that was being a tad interfering.

"Sorry for the disruption," she said curtly. "Hermione, I will be in my office for a few hours. I would like you to come down to go over a few things for Monday."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be right over," she said quickly. Minerva nodded and left.

"Sorry, old boy, but I had to," Rolanda said unflinchingly. Severus nodded.

"She stopped you from going after Harry, didn't she?" Hermione asked when they were alone.

"Yes, in a way. I'd like to think I stopped myself," he said softly. "I shall return shortly. You can find me in my chambers once you and Minerva have finished up."

"I'll be down to you as soon as she allows it," she vowed. He kissed her once more and was gone.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Ron looked at his sister with an expression of horror on his face. "What is it?" Luna asked worriedly, dropping her dreamy-eyed act.

"This just doesn't sound right," Ron said. "Oi! Harry! Come here. Read this. The prat is at it again."

Harry put his broomstick down and took the parchment from Ron's hand.

*Ginevra,*

*I am glad that you contacted me. There has been something that I have been meaning to talk to you about anyway. I'd much rather explain that to you in person, however. I know that our brother, Ronald, sometimes goes through your things. I'm to understand that a Hogsmeade visit is scheduled for next weekend. I would like for you to meet me in town around noon.*

*About your problems with Harry's possessiveness, I can just imagine the bloke staring down any male friends who would like to keep company with you. That is just unacceptable. Do you honestly want to spend the rest of your life at his side? You will lose your identity. You will no longer be Ginevra Weasley, but you'll become Harry Potter's wife. That is how they will all see you. Your future could be so much better than that. There are better things out there besides Harry.*

*We'll talk more on this in town. Let's say that we shall meet at The Three Broomsticks? From there we can have a walk away from prying eyes. I would not like to talk to you with either Harry or Ron there. Please leave them behind.*

*Your Loving Brother,*

*Percy*

"Prat," Harry muttered. "We'll be in town as well. Maybe. I don't know if Dumbledore will be canceling our visit or not. You know, since Bellatrix is out."

"Bloody hell! Why do things always have to ruin our fun?" Ron grumbled.

"I think I should meet with him. Maybe I can find out some more," Ginny offered, looking to Harry for approval.

"Maybe. He won't talk in front of us though," Ron said thoughtfully. "Would you mind if Luna went with you? He'd not mind so much."

"I'll go with you, Ginny," Luna said, kissing Ron's cheek. "Ron knows I'd do anything for him. He's my Weasley King after all." Ron's face and ears turned red, but Harry could see he was pleased.

"It's settled then. We'll wait for you in town while you meet with the dolt! I'll have to let Se-Snape know about this," Harry said. "Mind if I keep it?"

"No," Ginny said, squeezing his hand. "Would you like a walk first maybe?"

Harry gave her a lopsided grin. "I would like that."

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**Southern's Notes:** Ok. Hope I didn't freak anyone out with Sev's actions, but I think that turned out well in the end. He and Harry will have 'words' in the next chapter, but it won't be too bad. Also, we'll see what SEV went to get, and Bella will be up.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Chapter 16 of 32*

Severus and Harry have a confrontation. Bella is back. There is an engagement.

**Disclaimer:** Not mine! Belongs to a most brilliant woman.

**Thanks go to Charmed Nay for being my original beta, and I want to thank GinnyW for going through this a second time.**

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"Hermione, I know that your affairs are your own, but I would like to know exactly what transpired between the two of you. Rolanda was beside herself with anger and worry. She'd thought that Severus had done something, and he was on his way to assault Harry," Minerva said in a rush.

"It is rather private, but I am sure you will find out from the headmaster anyway." Hermione sighed. It felt like a betrayal to Severus to discuss their problems with her mentor, but what she said had been the truth. She would find out anyway. Hermione decided to give her a small story, leaving out the harsh details. "Severus and I had a row over Harry. In town this morning, on a whim, Harry said a spell in Parseltongue. It put some sort of scent on me. He said it was to ensure that should I be taken, he would be able to find me, no matter where I was being held. This didn't sit well with Severus of course. He became upset that another had dared to mark me. He intended to... talk to Harry about it."

"Talk, you say? To hear Rolanda tell it, he was off to battle. I am glad that he came to his senses." Minerva smiled kindly. "I would like to know if he... did he strike you?"

"No, of course not," she said immediately. She noted that Minerva's features softened. "We just had a row. That's it. We've made up since he has come back."

"Very well. I am glad to hear it. If you ever have a need to talk to someone, Hermione, I am here for you in any way you need it. Remember that. Now, let's see. Ah, yes. Are you prepared for Monday then?"

"Yes, I am. Professor, I feel very comfortable with this, but when I move on to the third years, I have noticed that they are learning a bit about being an Animagus. How can I properly teach them if I cannot transform?" This had been worrying her for a couple of days. Minerva had been able to dazzle them all with her transforming into a cat. What could she do?



"We are nearly done with that and on to the next bit. You needn't worry on it until next year. I do suggest that we give you some training on it. I think that being a Transfiguration mistress, you would need to learn it."

"Oh! Could you? I would love it!" Hermione could feel the excitement bubbling within. An Animagus! What would she be? She wouldn't mind being a cat like her mentor. They could stalk about the castle together.

"Excellent. We'll worry on that at a later time. Give me a run through of what you are to do in your classes Monday." Minerva sat back with a smile. The young witch had been the best decision for her replacement that she could have made. She would master this in no time. She had worried some when Rolanda came barging in earlier. Severus could be quite the fiend when he was angry. It appeared, however, that Hermione Granger was able to calm him some.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Hey, Granger. Care for a word?" Draco asked with a smile.

"Sure," she said breathlessly. She'd just been down to the dungeons to look for Severus, and he was nowhere to be found. "Let's move to the corner there."

Draco sat down on the floor and gestured for her to do the same. "Come on. Floor too good for you?"

She smirked. "Of course not. I just... have you seen Severus?" She took a seat next to him and straightened her robes to cover her legs.

"Earlier. He looked to be heading to his rooms as far as I could see. All right?" She could see that he genuinely cared. Things had changed so much between them. All of them.

"Yes. I think it's never been stronger between us. We had a bit of a row earlier, but the talk we had after more than made up for it. He's... everything. It's happened so fast, but it feels like forever. Odd, isn't it?"

Draco grinned. "You sound like Weasley now. He was just going on about Luna. I, uh, did something. He was saying how he wished he could afford a nice gift for her, so I left a pouch with a few Galleons in it, asked him to have a talk with me, and he found it. Thick bloke wanted to ask anyone if they'd dropped it, but I told him he might as well keep it. A person who claimed it may be lying after all."

"That was very kind of you, Draco. What about you? Has nobody caught your eye?" Hermione asked. She knew that he didn't really care for Pansy though the girl panted after him at times.

"I don't know. I'm still young. I think I would like to have a few practices before I start the game. Is that wrong?" he asked quickly. "Father says that I should try to find someone with respectable ties, but I am not ready really."

"Draco, do you like wizards?"

"Only some. I say, there are a lot I could do without knowing," he said with a grin.

"What I mean to say... do you bat for both teams?" She didn't know how else to put it. It seemed that sometimes he looked at Ron oddly. Like he was thinking of something else... more than friendly.

"Hermione!" Draco squealed, sounding like an angry witch. "Of course not! Why? Do I look like I do?"

She giggled when he began inspecting his attire and smoothing his hair. "No! I was just wondering. I see the way the girls look at you, and you could have your pick."

"Good Lord! I said I wasn't ready for the big game. That doesn't mean I haven't been getting my time at play in. Now. The real reason I needed to talk to you." He gave her a devilish grin. "Ron's girl, Luna. He has something planned for tonight with her up near the Astronomy Tower, and, uh, well, we've noticed that Snape has patrol this night. Do you think that you could...?"

"Keep him occupied?" She raised an eyebrow in imitation of Severus.

"Why, yes, Miss Granger! Ten points to Gryffindor," he said in a mock Severus voice, complete with a smirk.

"What time?" She wanted Ron to be happy, and hell yes, she could do something to help him along. She saw the way the pair had been with each other since they came back from the Christmas holiday.

"He's going to take Potter's cloak bout midnight I think. He's been practicing his warming charms and cushioning charms all day long."

"I don't need to know that much, Draco." Apparently Ron was planning on more than a snogging session. Well, good for him then. Good for Luna as well. They were old enough to make their own decisions.

"Here's the bloke now." Draco waved at Ron, who came over to sit with them.

"What the bloody hell are we sitting on the floor for?" Ron asked. "There are benches just back there."

"We can see everyone from here," Hermione said, widening her eyes to give him a hint.

"Oh, right," he said nodding, but she could see he had no idea what she meant.

"If someone tries to cast something on Draco, we shall be able to see who is in the hall with us." She shook her head when he began looking about uneasily.

"Right then. Er, did you... you know?" he asked Draco, nodding to Hermione.

"Sure did. It's covered, mate," Draco said with a grin. "My work here is done. I think I'll go have a chat with some Slytherins before your lot influences me too much." He stood, and they heard him mutter on his way out. "Batting for the other team. Bloody hell."

"What's he on about?" Ron asked, face scrunched up.

"I think maybe I offended his Malfoy pride. I asked if he fancied blokes," Hermione said, giggling at Ron's odd expression.

"Does he?"

She could see he was horrified. "Of course not! I had to ask though." She touched his hand softly. "And, you, Ron? All right with Luna? Is it love then?"

"It is, Mione. I never thought anybody would really care about me, but she does, you know. She doesn't care I don't have a lot of Galleons. Tonight... well, we've decided to get a bit closer." Ron coughed uncomfortably.

"Don't worry. Severus won't be patrolling about. I'll see to it."

"Thanks, Mione." Ron stood up. "About us. I'm right sorry we didn't work out, but it all happens for a reason I think. I was meant for Luna, and you were meant for," he

shuddered, "Snape."

She stood and hugged him. "Good luck, Ronald. Be happy."

"I will. I am. I'm off to let her know things are set. See you," he called as he walked away. She smiled at his retreating back. He'd grown so tall and had finally filled out. He wore his hair long now. Hermione sighed. Ron and Luna would make a handsome couple, and they would have beautiful children together.

~~~~~ HQ ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry grinned as he saw Severus walking his way. Just the man he wanted to see! "Severus!" he called. "Look at this!" Harry walked towards the Potions master across the snow-covered grounds of the Quidditch pitch. For a moment, he thought the man meant to attack him, but he just shrugged. He paused to point his hand to the snow. "Syysssethssykaasssss." There was a slight quiver in the snow for a moment, and then nothing happened. Harry looked at his hand through narrowed eyes. This time he repeated the action indomitably.

Severus paused in mid stride. Good Lord! The boy's face was contorted with a mixture of anger, determination, and confidence. The snow suddenly buckled up and a portion seemed to be slithering to a nearby twig. Severus watched in amazement as the snow-like snake coiled around the twig and began making its way back to the boy.

"Brilliant! Isn't it? I think I've finally got it!" Harry said with a grin. He took the twig, waved his hand, and the snow once again fell flat on the earth.

"What did you do?" Severus asked as he stopped in front of the boy. His lip curled slightly with distaste. What was his bloody fascination with snakes? And, how dare he mark Hermione!

"I've told you that I've been practicing up on my Wandless Magic."

"Why the snakes? Why the Parseltongue?" Severus could only imagine it was the tie with Voldemort, but that didn't mean the boy should have those tastes.

"It's part of me. I've decided to not feel discomfort in the fact that I am a Parselmouth, and that the blood of Salazar Slytherin is in my veins. You just can't imagine what books I've found on it, and the things that I have learned." Harry eyed his friend warily. Something was wrong. "Er... is this a bad choice? It's not Dark Arts you know."

Severus smirked. "That remains to be seen."

"What is it, Severus?" Harry asked uneasily. The man looked like he was about to draw his wand on him. Perhaps this wasn't the best time to let him read Percy's letter to Ginny. It seemed the man wanted to clear up something.

"I want to know what made you think you had the right to mark my woman without my consent?" Severus' voice was deadly soft. His eyes narrowed as if searching for something in Harry's expression.

"She will be safe. I'll be able to find her," Harry said firmly. It's not like he was marking her as his own. The man really had a problem with trust, didn't he?

"You should have sought my permission... and hers. You did it without explaining what you did. Think you that I couldn't put a tracking spell of my own on her person?" Severus was moving closer. He'd not harm the boy, but he would scare him. He had not been drinking this day, nor was he unprepared. If the boy should strike, he would be ready.

Harry laughed. "This is no tracking spell, Severus. It's something only a Parselmouth can do. Besides, you are always saying I should make the right choices. After thinking on it, I did it. I figured you would agree. Should something happen, I can be there right away. There is no place she can be spirited off to that I wouldn't find her."

"She is my responsibility first, boy. MINE. I want you to remove it," Severus said suddenly. He knew that he was being juvenile, but the boy should have asked. They should have reached this decision together. Hermione was his wife, not Harry's. Well, almost a wife.

"I will not," Harry said. Severus saw his eyes narrow, and he saw the defiant look pass over his features. Was he challenging him? Insolent brat!

"After all I have been trying to do for you, this is how you dare repay me?" Severus asked incredulously. "I will not have my woman marked by another man. She carries your scent. I want it off."

"It is out of respect for you that I have done this, and out of love for Hermione. I'll not have her taken away too," Harry said hotly. "I appreciate all that you are doing for me, and I really like the thought that we could be close, sir. I'll not remove it until Bellatrix is dead and the others brought to justice."

Severus knew this made sense, but he felt as if his honor was at stake. He had shamelessly allowed Hermione to believe that he wouldn't retaliate. That he would only have a word. He had truly meant it. He thought the boy would see reason. "I will ask one last time, Potter..."

At the word, Harry pulled his wand. "Wand at the ready!"

"You think you can take me in a duel?" Severus asked, smirking evilly.

"I know I can," Harry said quietly.

"Very well," Severus said, bowing to Harry. Each turned and paced away. Once they stood again looking at each other, Severus counted down. Immediately after he called out the last digit, he yelled, "*Expelliarmus!*"

"*Protego!*" Harry said with a laugh. "Still using that old trick, are we? *Accio Snape's wand!*"

"*Protego!*" That won't work this time, Potter," Severus jeered. "*Impedimenta!*"

Harry neatly sidestepped the jet of light forced his way. "*Petrificus Totalis!*"

Severus dodged the hex just in time. "*Diffindo!*"

Harry stopped to look at the light shooting to him. The hex caught him in the leg, but he didn't usher a sound of pain. He merely looked at Severus. For a moment, it looked as if the man felt bad for actually sending such a hex his way. "You are trying to harm me?" Harry asked. He couldn't believe it.

"I'm dueling, Potter," the man taunted, regaining his sneer. "Do you yield?"

Harry's answer was a forceful, "*Mobiliarbus!*" A tree behind his opponent just near the edge of the pitch uprooted and flew towards Severus. The man had to sprint to his far left to not be hit with the bulk of it, only a branch hitting his face slightly. "*Incendio!*" The tree caught fire suddenly. "*Engorgio!*" The flames sprung to enormous heights. "*Stupefy!*" Harry had used the tree to distract Severus, and it nearly worked.

The man dodged the spell, shouting, "*Reducio! Finite!*" The flames minimized drastically before puffing out quickly. Severus turned angry eyes toward Harry. Had the boy meant to begin throwing flames at him with that tree? "*Immobulus!*"

Harry shook his head with a grin. *"Protego! Come on, you can do better than that!"*

*"Incarcerous!"* Snape yelled, sending ropes suddenly to subdue Harry.

Harry ran a few feet in attempt to escape, pointed his wand to himself, and said, *"Severio! Diffindo!"* Each rope was severed and sliced neatly, falling to the ground.

*"Serpensortia Maximus!"* Harry bellowed angrily, trying to catch his breath. Four snakes shot out from the tip of his wand and made way for Severus. *"Ssysshtetksheeeesss!"* Hissing and slithering at rapt speed, they were nearing striking distance.

*"Vipera Evanesco! Vipera Evanesco! Vipera Evanesco!"* Severus bellowed, as he ran to the right. Three of the snakes disappeared in a burst of flames. He tripped just as he was yelling to vanish the last one. The snake paused just near his legs and began hissing menacingly, showing its fangs.

*"Accio Snapes' Wand!"* Harry called.

*"Protego!"* Snape countered. *"Vipera Evanesco!"* The snake hadn't tried to strike him. It was merely there to distract him.

*"Ssyssstetssykaaasssss,"* Harry hissed. Severus watched as a snowy snake slithered his way.

*"Reducto,"* Snape said, getting to his feet. The snow blasted apart, and to his horror, he now had two snow-like snakes making way for him. He knew that Harry meant to bind him as he had done to the twig. He refused to be bound and dragged back to the boy's feet. *"Relashio! Relashio!"* Two streams of boiling water shot out and partially melted each. Their movements stopped. Panting, he eyed Harry. *"Tarantallegra!"* His hex found its mark as Harry began dancing wildly. Severus began laughing at the boy's surprised face.

The boy also began laughing, and said, *"Rictusempra!"* Severus was hit dead on, not expecting the boy to cast a hex through his own curse. It felt like a thousand fingers were tickling his body, and he shook with laughter falling to the ground. He couldn't hold his wand steady enough to end the hex.

*"Finite Incantatem,"* boomed the angry voice of Albus Dumbledore. Both Severus and Harry moved towards the headmaster looking sheepish. "What is the meaning of this?" The elder wizard was very angry. He looked to Harry who was bleeding profusely on his left calf to Severus who sported a bruised face. Both had been laughing and moving about wildly when he arrived.

"Er... practice?" Harry answered, looking to Severus.

"Right," Severus agreed. "He's... learning well."

"Is that so?" Albus asked, eyeing each suspiciously.

"Indeed."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, when I see a tree uprooting, flying, and catching fire, I would say it's one serious practice. However, if this is your story, I must say good show. It has been a while since I've seen that one used." Albus smiled kindly, but the twinkle was still absent in his eyes.

Severus wanted to curse himself for adding to the man's troubles. He was glad that Harry hadn't snitched on him. "Yes, well, Harry here has been kind enough to show me some of his Wandless Magic as well. He even exploited the usage of his Parseltongue."

"Er... yes, Severus here thinks I need to practice on controlling it better. My Wandless Magic that is. It still isn't as strong as I would like it to be," Harry said quickly.

Albus began laughing. "I will tidy this up. You two need to see Madame Pomfrey straightaway to deal with your wounds."

The two began a silent trek back to the castle. Once they neared the rear entrance, Severus stopped the boy. "Harry, will you not take the mark off of her?"

"No," he said, managing a smile. "Can't you stop and see it from my point?"

Severus nodded. "I suppose. Can you see my point as well?"

"Yes, I should have talked it over with you, but Severus, if you love her, it's for the best. I will remove it immediately, once I kill Bellatrix."

Severus stepped back. "What?" The boy was on a mission of murder. And, here Severus had believed that either he or Lucius would be the ones to do the deed.

"You heard me," Harry said levelly. "She'll wish I had done it last time once I'm done with her. I hate her. Don't look like that. It's my choice."

"There is no battle this time, Harry. It may be the wrong choice." *"Hypocrite!"* "I don't know if the Ministry would be so understanding this time; no matter how they feel."

"How are they to know it will be me? There are other ways. Not everything ends with an Avada Kedavra, you know." Harry smiled softly. "Besides, she deserves it. Better me, than you."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think I know what you've got planned? It's written all over your face. Even now. When I said that, you looked like someone had stolen your favorite set of robes," Harry said with a smirk.

"We shall talk more of this on Wednesday, Harry. There are choices you must make. I don't think that this is a wise one. It would be murder," Snape said, trying to convince the boy.

"Murder? Think you that she won't be trying to hex me as well?"

Damn! He had a point. "If it is in self-defense, that is another matter."

"Exactly," Harry said, swooning slightly. He grabbed Severus' shoulder. "Sorry."

"What is it, boy?" Severus asked, sincerely worried.

"Blood loss," Harry said, nodding to his pant leg. "I never thought you would really try to hurt me. When I heard you say it, I just stopped to watch it come. I couldn't believe it."

"I didn't mean for this, Harry. I..." he paused. Hell, what had he meant? "It was a reflex, Harry. I am... sorry. For now, I have to get you to the infirmary. You need a Blood-Replenishing Potion straightaway, and I dare say, some rest."

"Right," Harry agreed and promptly passed out. Snape caught him easily.

Damn! "Mobilicorpus," he whispered. He levitated Harry's unconscious body as quickly as he could to Poppy. The Mediwitch gave him the evil eye the entire time she was caring for the passed out boy. He should have felt smug about being left standing, but he didn't. He felt strangely guilty. Harry had been so excited not realizing that anything had changed between them. He had been proud of his latest accomplishments, and he thought he'd done something good for Hermione...and him.

Severus knew that he shouldn't always be so suspicious, but it was hard. He felt so protective and possessive where Hermione was concerned that it angered him beyond belief. He had calmed some, and he'd decided that he could approach Harry again. Ginny Weasley had said that he went back down to the grounds near the pitch to practice. He thought he could handle a conversation with the boy. Get him to see reason. It was he that should have seen reason. Harry wasn't marking Hermione for any other reason, but to be sure that she was safe if something should go wrong. Severus would accept this. For now.

"He'll be fine. I'll keep him here for now though." Poppy looked at him oddly. "Want me to have a go at that?"

"No, thank you," he said curtly, moving to Harry's sleeping form. Poppy didn't pry any further, knowing that Severus' tone was final. He looked into Harry's face. So young, yet so old for a boy. No one should have to live through the things that he had lived through. "Get some rest, my boy," he said softly, patting his hand. Now for the rough part. How would he explain this to Hermione? It was surely all over the school by now. Several students had met up with them on the way and eyed them curiously. He had even seen some faces pressed against their windows looking down at them as they made their way into the castle. He wondered how much they had seen.

As he glided across the entrance hall, he met up with Hermione, Ron, and Draco. They were running full speed. All three stopped just short of him. "Severus, what's happened? The students! They said you and Harry were dueling."

He reached out to touch his lover's face. "We were... practicing." Why not stick to Potter's story?

Her eyes narrowed, as did Weasley's. "Practicing, eh? Luna says that she saw Harry use a tree to attack you. I think it's a bit more than that!" Weasley yelled.

"Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley. He's resting in the infirmary now. Never question me again," Severus said acridly.

"Come on, Ron," Draco said, pulling his fuming friend away. "I'm sure it's as the Professor says. Let's go see if Madame Pomfrey will let us in. Are you coming, Mione?"

"Not now. I need to see to this one," she said, not taking her eyes from Severus. Once the pair was gone, she brought a hand to his face. "You've a bruise. Why didn't you let her fix this?"

"Is it bad? I haven't seen it myself. I thought it to be a mere scratch," he commented, taking her hand in his. "Let's go back to our chambers. It seems we are drawing a crowd here."

Hermione looked around, noticing that a number of students had gathered about here and there, looking at them oddly. Nosey wretches! She allowed Severus to lead her to the dungeons. What had he and Harry truly been doing? She would bet all her Galleons that they'd had a row over Harry's spell. Severus just couldn't let it go, could he? She didn't mind much. It meant that he cared, but what would this do to his and Harry's relationship? Blast! *Poor Severus is having a ruddy birthday!*

"What's wrong?" he asked, after they got into the rooms. "He will be fine."

"It's not that. It's you."

"I have seen myself looking worse than this," he said, eyeing his reflection in the mirror. "You can repair it if you'd like." She smiled and pulled her wand. After a few moments, his skin smoothed over nicely, but now he was beginning to smart from the blow.

"Out with it. What really happened?" she asked, leading him to the settee.

"There's no getting past you, is there?" he said dryly. "His young friend told me where to find him, and I went to have a talk with him. We had a disagreement about the spell he incanted, and then it led to a bit of a duel. We are both fine. Albus came out and questioned us. We told him we were practicing with Potter's training."

"Severus! What did you do to Harry to have him in the infirmary?"

"He lost some blood and became lightheaded is all. He'll be fine," Severus said.

"Blood! What did you do?" she asked, face filled with despair.

"Slicing hex," he said, looking away. "Not on purpose! It just came out. Mind, he sent a tree and ruddy snakes to attack me as well. Don't go feeling too sorry for him."

Hermione began laughing. "Have you two come to an agreement then?"

"Yes. The damn spell stays. For now. I admit that it was a good idea on his part. I only wish that he had consulted with us first. I don't like things to just be sprung on me like that."

Hermione leaned over to kiss him softly. "We'll be fine. I think it's for the best. It's just another precaution. Are you going to remain friendly?"

"Yes, I would say so. It seemed that we might have needed the bout to clear the air. I feel much better now, having felt like I defended my lady's honor," he said softly, cupping her cheek. "Hermione... I... wait." He knelt before her and pulled a beautiful ring out of his coat pocket. "This ring was my mother's, and it belonged to her mother before her. I would like for you to wear it to prove to all that you are my intended. That you are to be my wife one day. That we are forever bound. Will you do me this honor?"

"Of course, I will, Severus. It's beautiful. Are you sure you want me to wear it now?" she asked cautiously. She'd never had something so fine before. It must be worth a fortune.

"Yes."

"It is an honor to wear this ring, Severus. I promise to treasure it and you for all my days," she said softly, allowing him to place the ring on her finger. He chanted a small sizing spell to enlarge it slightly. It made her hands look so dainty, feminine. "I do love you. Always. We'll be fine."

"I... yes, we will. Always," he said in a choked voice. He'd done it. All of those who looked upon her would know she was taken. That she belonged to him. "I want to make love with you, Hermione. Let me show you how I feel."

"I want that as well, my love," she said softly, pulling him up to make way to the bedchamber. Once there, they undressed each other slowly, kissed each other languidly, and caressed each other's bodies as if learning secrets for the first time. When he finally thrust into her an hour later, she marveled at the feel of him on her, in her. Every time felt like the first time. The unhurried pace quickened, and they both exploded together in heated bliss. She closed her eyes and began falling into a slumber. She could have sworn that she heard him whisper of his love for her, but he'd not say that. Would he? It was a dream. Had to be.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Dark eyes danced merrily as they watched Malfoy and Weasley leaving the infirmary. So, it was true! Snape and Potter had had a duel over the little bitch. This worked well. Whatever Potter had done to the bastard made things that much easier for the plan. Come this time next weekend, things would finally be falling into place. Revenge would be so sweet.

Weasley's sister would die, leaving Potter and Weasley broken. A flick of the wand would have Malfoy bringing Granger off for a walk. The others would be waiting for them. Ah. Things were so smashing when she fell into place without a hitch. Time to send off an owl with this new bit of information. This could be good for a few more Galleons.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Hello, lover," Luna said dreamily as Ron placed the cloak over her. He kissed her cheek nervously. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," he squeaked. They made their way to the Astronomy Tower. On the way there, they saw a figure walking towards them. Pressing tightly against the hard, cold wall, they waited for the person to pass and tried to breathe lightly in order to not be heard.

Another person was coming from the other direction. They met close to them. It was that Steward bloke and that bitch Edgecombe. "Hi," the chit said softly. "I didn't think you would be about at this time."

"Went off to see the stars?" the man asked lowly, apparently trying to sound seductive.

"I did. Would you... care for company tonight?"

"Of course, my lady," he said easily. Luna and Ron watched the pair head in the opposite direction. Ron wondered what Snape might have found out as to why the wench was still here when the bloke had told Mione she would be gone.

"Well, at least we know that nobody is there now," Luna commented.

"Right," Ron said, nervousness coming back in full force. He was about to have sex! Wow. Luna had been the one to suggest it. "Hope nobody else comes."

"We can put a Soundproofing charm and a Cloaking spell. No worries. Are you ready?"

"Oh, yeah. I am definitely ready. Are you... sure about it?" he swallowed anxiously. "I mean... to you know."

"I have been ready for a year now. You have just never known it," she said, kissing him eagerly. He grinned smugly and made way to their spot. It felt right good to be wanted, it did. Snape wouldn't be about this night to catch them, thanks to Mione. He'd tell Harry about those two in the morning. For now, he had to think of nothing but the brilliant girl with him.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"This is working out much better than we had hoped," Bradley was saying excitedly. "Potter gave that arse, Snape, a duel over something. It begins." The boy pointed to the woman lying on the bed. "She is rousing. Should you get your father? He might need to be here."

"Right," Terence agreed. "I'll get father. Don't do anything to her until we are back." Terence left the room. He was beginning to hate that boy more and more. He was always getting in his snide remarks about the Dark Lord and his followers. He'd be quite surprised once he found out exactly whom he had been cavorting with.

Douglas Bradley looked down more closely to the sleeping woman. Terence would be gone for a while. It was a long way up to his father's study. Why not have a little playtime? He deftly warded the door before leering at the bitch. It was no more than what she deserved. He bound her hands magically and unbuttoned his trousers. Pushing up her shift, he spread her legs. He closed his eyes to conjure up the face of his lost beloved. This was for her. Another act of vengeance. He would rape this bitch, and once the Higgs' finished questioning her, he would beat her, rape her, and kill her. It was no more than she deserved. *Death Eater trash*. He prodded her folds to open them slightly before plowing into her. His eyes opened narrowly to see if she had woken. He could see her eyelids moving rapidly. He grinned evilly, hoping she would wake up in terror. Not caring if he bruised her, he began roughly slamming into her over and over. He closed his eyes as he felt his climax building. "Yes... you bitch. I'm fucking you like the whore you are," he said. To his horror, when he grunted his release, he felt the woman convulsing around him as well.

"You should have fucked me harder," she moaned. He opened his eyes and met the dark hollow eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange. She had an evil smile upon her face and was licking her lips. "To what do I owe this pleasure, little boy?"

He slapped her soundly on the face, making her head snap to the side. "You filthy whore. You will get yours." He jumped away, pulling his trousers back up. She wasn't supposed to like it! The bitch! "You are going to be tortured. Killed. And, you will be begging for mercy once I am done with you."

"I think you'll have to do better than this," she hissed, winking at him. "Where am I, little boy?"

A pounding on the door saved him from answering. He flicked his wand to unward it. Old man Higgs and young Terence walked in, shocked at the display before them. Bellatrix had her arms bound, her sex was showing for all the world to see, and Bradley seemed flustered. "What have you done?" the old man rasped.

"Gave her a taste of what she deserves. The Death Eater trash!" Bradley said defiantly, not liking the look of annoyance in the man's expression. Even the young Terence seemed angry. He watched as the old man approached the smiling woman in the bed. He pulled down her shift to cover her sex.

"Welcome back, Bella," he said.

"How long? Where am I? Who is that kid?" she asked nodding towards Bradley.

"You've been out for a few months. Do you not remember what happened? You are in my home. This kid," he gestured to Bradley, "has created the potion that reversed the hex placed upon you."

"Months? Where is my master?" she asked, eyes filling with tears.

"He has fallen," Higgs Senior answered sorrowfully.

"POTTER!" she screeched. "He did this! He will pay for this! Untie me!"

"No," Bradley said, moving forward. "You are going to answer their questions, and then I will have my revenge. You will die, you whore! Death Eater trash!"

Bellatrix began laughing. "Have you no idea of the company that you keep?"

"What are you saying?" Bradley asked, clinching his fists tightly.

Terence knew what needed to be done. "*Expelliarmus*," he called, knocking the wand from the unsuspecting tosser. He saw the surprise on his face, and he quickly pocketed Bradley's wand.

"What's going on here? We had a deal!" Bradley said, making his way towards the door. Terence warded the door quickly. There would be no escaping for the bloke. Next he unbound the woman in the bed. She sat up to stretch like a cat.

Terence's father began talking. "Yes, you see now that you have been used, don't you? You were a means to an end I am afraid. We needed you to create that potion to wake our Bella."

"You... you're Death Eaters as well?" he asked, completely taken aback.

"Yes," both Higgs answered proudly.

Bradley lunged for Terence, but was nimbly immobilized. "Father? He is afraid of snakes. He saw Nagini, and the others."

"Nagini is here?" Bella asked with a smile. "I shall like to see her. First, tell me everything. What of Lucius? Severus? Potter? Who is left?"

"There are too few of us now," Higgs replied. "We have a plan underway to make the traitors pay." The old man quickly told her the way of things, and the woman mesmerized Terence. He'd seen her in action so many times. She was ruthless and loyal. Something they all should have tried more to be. Their master may have lived if more had been as she.

"Very well," she growled. "That plan is acceptable, but I want to be the one to kill the Weasley bitch. We have unfinished business. Are you sure Fudge is to be trusted? He's been known to back down from promises in the past."

"He and a couple of others are what made your rescue possible. Once you are fully healed, we will try to get to a couple of the others that remain in Azkaban. We will come to power once again. All we need is a new master to guide us," Higgs said, a slanted smile twisting his old face. "The Weasley girl is yours, of course."

"Excellent. Now, I believe this boy here has promised me a few things. What were they? Yes, rape, torture, death." She gleamed over in Terence's direction. "Would you like to do the honors?"

Terence swallowed roughly. He wanted the bloke to die, but he didn't want to be the one to do it. How to answer without bringing shame on his family? "Would you not rather do it, Bella? I'd think it a justice if you did. He had great plans for you."

She smiled wickedly. "I think I might have other plans for this evening." She licked her lips. "You've grown into a handsome young man. Let's bring our friend here for a visit to Nagini. He can join his lost love in the next life."

Bradley could see and hear everything that was being said. In the past couple of years, he had become a person that he didn't truly recognize when he looked into the mirror. It was as if he was finally being paid back for the ill he'd done, and the ill he'd been planning. He should have known better than to trust the Higgs family. The plans had been too good to be true. Why didn't he contact Potter? He was the only one that could truly be trusted to fight against the Death Eaters... except his friendship with ruddy Lucius Malfoy and that Snape would have ruined the plan. Perhaps he had been looking at them in the wrong way the entire time. No matter now. The end was near. He blanked his mind of all but the face of his lost love. *I'll see you soon.*

Relieved, Terence levitated Bradley to Nagini's chamber. He watched as Bellatrix used his father's wand to bring him out of his hexed state. She used some hex to sever his left hand. Bradley screamed horribly while Bellatrix laughed. The crazy witch even waved good-bye to him with his own hand before pushing him onto the floor amongst the snakes. The pure horror in his eyes could be seen though no sound could be heard once the chamber door was sealed. He decided that he could not watch after all. The last thing he saw was a couple of the snakes curling around his legs as Nagini moved forward. It had been a while since they'd been fed a human.

"Where is the nearest bath?" Bella asked, eyes gleaming with merriment as she continued to watch what was going on inside the chamber. "I'd like a good wash. Oh, and we will need to mail this hand with a note to his parents. Seal the parchment with our Lord's mark."

"You have your own set of rooms readied just down from mine," the old man answered. "We've taken care to have it warded properly. No one will know you are here."

"Excellent. You, come give Auntie Bella a bath," she said, pointing to Terence. He dared not disobey her, so he followed behind his father and the woman. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad thing. He only hoped that he could satisfy the woman. He was good in bed according to his occasional lover. She was jealous at times and need not know about this.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

The group had been talking for over an hour since the evening meal. They had discussed in detail Percy's letter and what it could mean. Simply believing he was trying to get information on Harry and the others, they left it at that. He'd taken to writing snide remarks, and this was nothing new. He had jumped on the chance to influence Ginny when she'd owed him. The more pressing issue was Marietta Edgecombe. It was hard to go about business as normal knowing that someone was watching your every move. She was rarely about the castle though. Not once had she had a meal inside the Great Hall since she had come to work under Steward. She was mostly seen wondering about at night. First by Draco, and then by Ron. Both times, Steward had shown up as if following her. Could there be something going on with the couple?

"I think that ruddy Steward is involved somehow," Ron said firmly. "The bloke is always sniffing about that Edgecombe's arse."

"No way," Hermione said. "He seems too proper."

"It could be an act," Harry said bluntly. "Truth is we don't know. We don't know that Edgecombe is involved either. Until we have solid proof, we can't just point fingers. All we can do is watch them."

Draco grinned. "How about I ask her to come with me to Hogsmeade this weekend? I could talk to her some more. Lay it on real thick."

"But, you're supposed to be following Mione about," Ron protested.

"Albus inquired as to why Miss Edgecombe was still in the castle. He said that the man seemed puzzled at first, but he finally answered that they had more things to go over. It doesn't add up to what he told Hermione," Severus said calmly. "Rolanda has a plan to sit with us at all times now to strike up conversation with the fellow. I'll stage it with her to make it look inconspicuous."

"Ginny and Luna are all set for next weekend. She replied to Percy saying that she'll meet him, as I said before. Perhaps she can pick something up from him," Harry said. "It's likely that he'll just be trying to talk her into casting me off."

"That's enough for tonight then," Severus said. "Hermione needs to get some rest. It's her first day in class tomorrow."

"Night," Ron called, hurrying out to find Luna.

"See you," Draco said. "Ron wait!"

Harry smiled at Hermione. "Good luck tomorrow, Mione. You'll be brilliant."

"Thanks, Harry. I do admit that I am nervous," she said, hugging him.

"I don't know if the others noticed, but I see you are wearing a ring. Does this mean that you two have decided on something?"

Hermione looked to Severus before speaking. "We've decided to be married, but we've not set a date yet. This was his mum's ring," she said proudly, bringing her hand up to admire her treasure.

"Good for you, Mione. And, you, Severus," Harry said. "I think it will be grand. I think you are lucky. I want a wife, home, and family one day as well. I've found that with Ginny, maybe it's possible to hope for it. She's always stood by me, and she understands what it's like... you know, Tom. That whole thing."

"I think you are perfect for each other, Harry. Keep things as they are. There is no rush. She has a whole other year of classes after this one," Hermione said easily, smiling

at her friend. Harry hugged her again. Mione had never wavered from his side either. Not once.

Harry released her and extended a hand to Severus. "Good night, Severus. I'm glad we've gotten it all cleared up." Harry hadn't even told Ron or Draco the truth about what had happened. He'd gone along with what he'd told the headmaster about it being practice. To his relief, Severus had said the same thing.

Severus nodded, taking the hand for a firm shake. "Good night, Harry." He picked up Hermione the moment the door was warded. "I think you need a relaxing massage and bath."

"So much for a good night's rest!" she squealed.

"Oh, you'll be rested. I guarantee it, Little One," Severus said seductively.

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**Southern's Notes:** Well, Bradley is out of here! Fitting little good bye, I say. Bella is just bad news though. Sigh. At least our little lovers are engaged now. One step closer to where we want them! Next up: Hermione's classes, more Bella, and new information

## Chapter Sixteen

*Chapter 17 of 32*

Hermione begins her classes, Severus decides to play a game, Rolanda starts getting closer to Steward for information, and we find out more about the plans for revenge.

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I'd also like to thank GinnyW for running through this a second time.**

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"Relax, Hermione. You'll do fine," Minerva said, handing the notes back to her. "These will do nicely for the start of today's classes. You have Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, a double class, this morning, and this afternoon, you will merely be watching me."

"I offered to give her a Calming Draught, but she wouldn't hear of it," Severus said softly. "She's a little worried that they won't see her as an authoritative figure."

Minerva smiled. "Just use my motto, dear. Each year I let them know that I will put up with no nonsense. Do you know what I start all my classes out with?"

Hermione nodded, and said, "You always let the students know that Transfiguration is one of the most complex and dangerous subjects taught here. You tell them that if they choose to mess around, they will be removed from your class and not return."

"Exactly. You show them that you mean business, and they will accept your authority," Minerva said. She had full confidence in young Hermione.

"I've told her that already," Severus said quietly. "I told her to not let them pull one over on her, or she'd never run her class properly."

"I'm sure that she will do fine, Severus. There is no need for her to be harsh, only show that she is in control of the class. We're off now. Good day," she called, walking off towards the classroom.

"This is it," Hermione said nervously. "Wish me luck."

Severus suddenly kissed her deeply, oblivious to the nearing students. "Good luck, Little One. Show them who is in charge."

She touched her lips after he walked off, smiling to herself. He'd kissed her in front of students. She eyed the students warily for a moment, but then strengthened her resolve. She cut their sniggers short by saying, "Get in class." The tone of her voice and the look on her face had the lot scampering inside. She took a deep breath before following them in.

After everyone became settled, she checked over her attendance list. Being first year students from other Houses, she wasn't familiar with all of them. "I am Instructor Granger, and I will be taking over your class for the rest of the year. I'm going to go over attendance to familiarize myself with you all. Please answer when I call your name." She was proud that her apprehension didn't show in her voice. For a moment she made eye contact with Minerva. When her mentor smiled and nodded, she knew that she was doing the right thing. After she had taken the role, she made a note of the one girl who was absent. The girl's Housemates said that she had been ill, but Hermione knew to check into it. Her friends had pulled such stunts before to get out of class.

"All right, I'm going to let you know upfront that I will not tolerate any foolishness or pranks. Should anyone think to get away with any trickery in this class, you will find yourself lacking House points and having a possible detention. Further disruptions will find you out of this class permanently." Hermione made eye contact with each student before lightening her voice. "Excellent. Who can tell me about Switching Spells?"

Hermione smiled as a young boy raised his hand. She beamed with pleasure as the boy gave a perfect explanation. It was that moment in which she knew she had made the correct career choice. She would be stern like Minerva, but there was no need to be as harsh as Severus. The rest of the class passed quickly as the students began to practice their switching. "I'll have twelve inches on Wednesday on the proper incantations used when switching small, like items, such as a matchstick to a needle. I want you to state how long the enchantment lasts, and you need to tell me the reverse incantations. Class dismissed."

Minerva came to her, and in a brief show of affection, hugged her tightly. "That was a superb class, Hermione. Keep that up, and you shall be handling this class on your own in no time. I want you to take notes in my two classes this afternoon on anything you feel relevant. After the evening meal tonight, I will go over what I have here, and you can ask questions."

"That sounds good. I really enjoyed it. This is the best decision that I've ever made," Hermione said with a bright smile. "I will go down and search out Severus. He should have a little time before lunch."

"I'll see you in the hall," Minerva said, waving her off. Hermione walked down towards the dungeons, but paused near a corner to listen to some students that had just been in her class. She'd heard her name and knew they were talking about her.

"She's not so bad," one said. "Our assignment is only twelve inches. We just have to write what we learned in class."

"I don't know. She looked like Professor Snape when she gave us that lecture about not acting up in her class. The old bat has rubbed off on her," another said.

Yet another said, "No way, mate. She's Harry Potter's right hand, she is. We'll have a good class with her over the next few years."

She smiled before moving on. They all started and looked guilty when they saw her. She nodded and kept moving along. Severus was still in his class when she got there. He was sitting behind his desk rubbing his fingers on his temples. "Bad class?"

"Fifth years, Slytherin and *Gryffindor*," he said, spitting her old house's name. "It seems that none had read the chapter as they were supposed to. Two cauldron explosions prove that simple instructions cannot be followed. The students were very cheeky today. I had to give out three detentions."

Hermione leaned over his desk, reached across to pull him closer, and kissed his lips. "Is there anything that I can do?"

He pulled back to look at her. "Why, yes, I think there is. Don't move an inch," he said so quietly that she almost hadn't heard him. She stayed still, draped over his desk. She wondered what he had planned. He warded the door and placed a soundproofing spell. She felt him move behind her.

"This is a lovely little position you are in," he whispered in her ear. "I wonder how it would feel to slide into you from behind. We've not tried this."

"What?" she asked in disbelief. What the bloody hell was he going to do to her? After a rustle of his clothing, she felt the back of her cloak, robes, and skirt being lifted. "Severus, I'm not sure... Oh!" He was now pulling down her knickers.

"Relax," he said softly. "Lean back and spread just a little." She did as commanded. Surely he wasn't about to do what she thought. She felt a finger probing her sex lightly, before delving in. "My, we are wet, aren't we? Tell me. Have you been thinking of me?"

To be quite honest, she hadn't been thinking of anything sexual. She wondered as well about her dampness. Just being near him possibly? "It's... there is a lot of light in here," she commented.

"Shhh... you're beautiful. Don't worry about it. I'll be leaning forward and only seeing the part of you that is clothed." She felt him move away for a moment. "Miss Granger!" His voice was so loud she jumped. "Stay put, girl. You missed a detention with me two nights ago. What do you have to say for yourself?"

She grinned for a moment and breathed a sigh of relief. "I was otherwise engaged, sir." She could have sworn that he meant to have her arse. Perhaps he would only give her a little spanking.

"Indeed? Do you know the punishment for naughty little girls that miss their detentions, Miss Granger?" he asked in a low, deadly voice.

"No." He rammed a second finger into her. "Ooh!"

"No? You will address me as sir or Professor at all times, Miss Granger!"

She could barely think straight with his fingers delving into her and his thumb caressing her core. "N-no, Professor Snape. I... I don't know." She began moving back against his hand, and he immediately pulled away. She whimpered in frustration. "Sir?" He moved back to her, and she felt his erection pressing against her bottom. "No! Not in there!" He chuckled loudly for a moment before pressing deeply into her. "Oh!"

"Don't worry, love," he said, bringing his mouth to her ear. "That part of you is safe from me... for now." This position felt different than the other two that they'd done. The angle was different. Each stroke seemed to bring him further into her. She moved back against him with ease, stroke for stroke. Just as she was beginning to feel herself rising towards a climax, he shuddered behind her, spilling his seed into her. His strokes slowed until he stopped completely. Severus remained over her until his breathing slowed. She was about to protest in dismay when he spoke softly. "Tell me, Miss Granger. Will you be missing any other detentions?"

"No, Professor Snape," she said, her slight annoyance sounding in her voice.

"Tsk. Tsk. Has someone been left unsatisfied?" he mocked.

"I would say so, sir." She couldn't believe that he was actually going to leave her all worked up for nothing. He backed away from her, cleaning himself. She pulled her wand to clean herself and then tidied her clothing. "See that it doesn't happen again." With that said, she stormed out of his class.

Severus grinned wickedly. "Well, that was refreshing." All the symptoms of the headache he'd felt coming on had disappeared. She'd be upset for a little while, but when they got together later, she would be a wild little lioness. Humming, he made his way to the Great Hall. She was sitting there, looking flushed, and having a talk with Steward. Severus' eyes narrowed at the companionship the two seemed to share. The man never publicly paid any attention to anyone but Hermione. That would change soon. Rolanda would make her move today. He took his seat next to her. "Feeling all right?"

"Never better," she said icily before turning back to Steward. He caught a snippet of conversation. They seemed to be talking about something from the Muggle world. His peripheral vision showed Rolanda walking in their direction.

"Rolanda, where are the Galleons that you owe me? If the paper is to be believed, the Ballycastle Bats were winners in yesterday's match." Severus smirked, holding out his hand.

"You said they would win by more than one hundred fifty points, you did. They only won by one hundred thirty." She pushed his hand aside. "I'd think you are lucky that I don't make you pay up."

"Ha! We agreed on no such scoring! It was a straight bet. You're just backing out," Severus said, looking extremely disgruntled. "Have a seat. We shall discuss this weekend's match and have witnesses! You'll not get out of it this time."

Rolanda plopped down into a chair next to Steward's. "Pardon me, mate, but I'm going to have a seat here. He's worried about the blasted Ballycastle Bats when he should be worried about Appleby Arrows! No wonder he stalks about with his robes flaring! He's trying to be a bat like his favorite ruddy team!"

At this, Steward chuckled deeply. Severus looked at the man scornfully. "What do you find so funny, Professor Steward?" He noted that Hermione inched back warily, not wanting to be caught in the crossfire.

The man seemed uncertain. "Well, she just said about the bats and your robes. I thought it quite amusing. I thought it to be a joke, good fellow."

"Pah! Worry not on him. He's just mad that he didn't set the right point spread, is all. Mind your manners, Sev," Rolanda said, placing a hand on the man's shoulder to turn him towards her. "You like Quidditch, do you?"

"Why, yes, I am quite partial to the Pride of Portree. What say you on them?" Steward asked, taking interest in Rolanda.

"They are a right side better than the blasted Bats, I'll say that much. They have to play against the Harpies this weekend. I think they'll sweep the game," Rolanda said brightly. Quidditch talk had never actually been one of Severus' favorite pastimes, but it seemed the Muggle Professor enjoyed it. Bringing Rolanda into the mix seemed to be a positive idea. If anyone could get someone to cozy up, it was Hooch.

"Hermione, why aren't you eating?" Severus asked coyly. "Have you no appetite, dear?"

She shot him a glare almost as effective as his own. She took a bite of her chicken and chewed brutally. "Something vexes you?"



"Yes," she hissed. "I didn't appreciate your little game, Severus. Don't think about playing that one again. Had you done things differently, then perhaps, but mark my words, *sir*, I won't be playing along."

Good Lord. She was really angry. Hell, he was just having a bit of fun. He'd have to teach her the ways of the game. "Really, Hermione. I meant no harm. I'd had a rough morning, and you did ask if there was anything you could do to help," he said reproachfully, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, I am aware of my folly. I had come down to tell you about my first class, and you... you took advantage of me. You didn't even care. I didn't mind the sex," she whispered, "but I would have enjoyed some pleasure."

"Did you not have any?"

"Yes, but that is beside the point."

"Well, no. If we both found pleasure, then what could possibly be wrong?" he asked innocently. He was enjoying the fresh flush of anger seeping into her cheeks.

"I would have liked to have climaxed as well," she said, clearly frustrated.

"Ah, but just think about tonight. You will be ready to have a go for many hours. I've actually done you a favor." He whispered into her ear. "It will haunt you all day long. Each time you think of me taking you against my desk, your knickers will dampen, and your heart will race. You'll be ready to tear me apart by the time we are able to be alone tonight."

Hermione bit her lip for a moment before whispering, "Bastard."

"Indeed," he said with a chuckle, tucking in to his own lunch. He made sure to press his thigh against hers and touch her at every moment possible throughout the meal. When he was finally done, he said, "Until tonight." She simply nodded, and he detected a small trace of a smile. Yes, she would learn to play the game well.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Stuart made his way back to his office, humming slightly. That Rolanda woman was a great load of fun. He was glad that the bat had the little confrontation with her. It had brought her to sit next to him. He hoped that she would continue to sit with him. Hermione was nice to talk to, but her brooding lover always seemed to vie for her attention. Stuart frowned. What did a pretty young thing such as Hermione want with that foul man? She could have anyone she desired.

He shrugged. Well, it wasn't his business, was it? Marietta had told him that she knew of a man that also loved Hermione, but he didn't want to compete with Snape. Hell, if he were in love with someone, he would fight for her! The girl did deserve better. It was the only reason that he had agreed to help Marietta with her little game. She gave him owls to deliver to the young fellow that adored her. Higgs was it? Yes, that was it. Poor sod. He was constantly owling for any information on the girl. "If I would be him, I would come here straightaway and demand a duel."

"Talking to yourself, Stuart?" Marietta asked, coming to take his cloak from him.

"Yes, I was pondering the situation with that Snape fellow and poor Hermione. Is your friend feeling any better about losing her?" he asked, placing a kiss on her cheek.

"He's still distressed. Tell me. Were you able to find out if she is going into Hogsmeade this weekend? Terence would love to have an accidental run in with her, but it won't help if she isn't going. Nor if Snape will be tagging along."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't get as far as to ask her. Madame Hooch had a seat with us, and we talked about Quidditch. Lovely woman, that," he said, seating himself at his desk.

Marietta scoffed. "That woman is a menace. I wouldn't get too close to her if I were you. I've seen her make grown men cry with a few sharp words. You are far too sweet to be mixed up with the likes of her. Besides, don't you think I am satisfying enough?" She began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Now, see here, Marietta, I don't exactly feel right about..."

"Shush, Stuart. You want this. I'll do this for you, and you will find out what Hermione will be up to this weekend?" She saw that he was about to refuse her, so she lifted her wand. "*Imperio*." He would come out of it thinking that he wanted her and would do what was requested of him. She detested his meaty hands fondling her, but this was for Terence. She'd do anything for him. Even lure that Mudblood whore out to the forest. It was a pity that little Malfoy had become messed up in the mix. That was one that would likely be a good lover. Perhaps she could stage a run in with him. Just once.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus had just finished marking some essays when his Floo roared to life. Out stepped Lucius, looking extremely worried. "How did you get through my grate?" Severus asked quickly.

"I was with the headmaster. We have problems, Severus. I came as soon as I read this evening's edition. Look," he said, thrusting the paper at him.

On the front page, there was a picture of Douglas Bradley. The caption read, "Local Man Presumed Dead." Severus read over the article and paled considerably. The boy's parents had received his hand in an Owl Post earlier. His ring was on it, and the tests were conclusive. It was definitely a part of his body. There had been a note, sealed with the fallen Dark Lord's mark. It told the parents that their son would never return, and that he had been the meal of a pet. The parents were asking for any information leading to the capture and conviction of the party responsible.

"Good Lord," Severus said in horror. "Bella."

"Yes, Bella. This is her work. Who else did such horrible things to the surviving family? At least I never stooped so low. Either of us," Lucius said. "This is not good, Severus. They must have felt that the boy was no longer needed, so they did away with him. I say we storm Higgs' home. We can find answers."

"That would not be prudent, Lucius. We would be trespassers, and the law would be against us. What of Fudge?"

"You sound just like that old fool Dumbledore! He suggests that we sit and wait. How can I just wait for her to find Draco? You know what she told me she would do to him! To hell with laws," Lucius hissed.

"What of Fudge?" Severus asked again, hoping the man had learned something.

"That bastard! He's not biting. I had a small meeting with him under the pretense of wanting a license to place an Unplottable Spell on my new property out near the Isle of Dread." Lucius snarled. "The greedy blighter took my Galleons to have it available immediately, but when I asked about Bella's escape, he choked up. Told me I've no need to worry about it, and he was quite certain that all was being done to find her."

"He must be afraid. Could it be that they are monitoring him?"

"I have no idea, but Umbridge walked in just after I had asked a couple of questions. It was as if she could sense his distress, the toad! I still say we storm Higgs' Manor!"

Severus offered his friend a tumbler of firewhisky. "Let's talk about this first. If we do that, then Bella will never be found. We don't know for sure that she is there. We have no positive proof that Bradley's remains would be there. The old man is smarter than that. The only thing we would accomplish is allowing them to know that we are suspicious. This would jeopardize Draco more. They might figure out that we got our information from him."

Lucius took a long sip. "You are right. I just hate this. I don't know what to expect. From what you say, that Percy will be meeting with his sister this weekend during the Hogsmeade visit. I've just spoken to the headmaster, and he does not intend to cancel the outing, even in light of what has happened! It would be safer! I can only hope that the dolt will spill something of what he knows. He looked at me oddly when I made to see Fudge."

"We can only hope. I think we should be in town this weekend. You can use your cloak, and I will borrow Harry's. We'll keep an eye on them, and we'll defend them if need be. Surely, Bella wouldn't make her recovery known to the public. Not just yet."

"All right, Severus. Is your Granger going as well?" Lucius asked, eyeing him oddly.

"Well, I suppose she will. Even though she is on the staff, she still likes to enjoy her friends. That means Draco will be with her, along with Harry and Weasley. We'll follow them about. It will be fine, Lucius," Severus soothed. He was worried as well, but if he showed that emotion to his friend, there was no telling what the man might end up doing. "Let's go talk to Albus about having more staff present this weekend. Perhaps he could request some of the Order members to keep a watch as well."

"Right then," Lucius agreed.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Minerva's last class had been her seventh year Gryffindor and Slytherin students. Hermione had a quick word with her mentor, made arrangements for a proper time after the meal to come together, and hurried to meet her waiting friends. "How was your first class today?" Harry asked quickly.

"It was great!" She went on to tell them about it as they made their way towards the library. "I'm just so happy," she said, putting her notes down on the table.

"Well, that's good, I guess," Ron said. "I don't get why someone would want to stay in school even to teach, but I suppose it's your call, mate."

"I think it's brilliant," Harry said. "I wish I never had to leave Hogwarts either. It's the only place that ever felt like home to me."

"Maybe Dumbledore can keep you on then, mate," Draco said. "They could always weasel you in somehow. He has that oaf Hagrid here, doesn't he?"

"Shut it, you!" Ron said, swatting Draco behind his head. "Right pest, this one."

"Eh! Look here," Draco said, pulling Hermione's hand to his face to inspect. "Snape has gone and proposed! This has to be his mum's ring!"

"It is," Hermione said softly, smiling at the ring. "He and I have decided to be married. We've not set a date yet."

"All right, Granger. Got yourself a good man there, and a Slytherin to boot," Draco said approvingly. "You lot should all do with a quick dip into our dormitory."

"I've all I need in Gryffindor," Harry said, shaking his head with laughter.

"Ravenclaw has the only girl I'm interested in," Ron said dreamily.

"Good Lord! He looks just like her," Draco teased.

"I don't see you with a girlfriend! Nothing wrong with me loving my girl," Ron said hotly, ears turning red.

"No, there isn't," Hermione said, touching his hand. "Did everything... turn out all right?"

Ron nodded, smiling broadly. "It's nice to have someone that cares, you know? Doesn't matter that I don't have much to offer. By the time she graduates, I hope to have a good job and maybe a flat on my own."

"That's good, Ron," Harry said. "Hopefully, we'll find a team to pick us up. There's money in that. You can always room with me over on Grimmauld if you'd like."

"Or, I am thinking of getting a flat as well. You are welcome with me, mate," Draco said quickly. "If you'd dare room with a lowly Slytherin."

"Oi! Why don't you stay with Harry and me then?" Ron asked brightly. "We could all save our wages that way."

"Sure," Harry said. "You're welcome. Mione would have been with us as well, but I think she's likely to go with Snape this summer."

She grinned. "Definitely, but we'll be by to visit."

"I'll think on that," Draco said thoughtfully.

"Snape! What's he need to visit for? I'm not sure he'd be interested in the fun we'd like to have. You can leave his arse home," Ron whined.

"I think you'd be surprised, Ron. Did I not tell you about that drinking game the staff had?" The boys all shook their heads. She grinned, and she began telling them all about it.

"Speaking of staff, I was telling Harry about that bloke Steward and that Marietta. When we met up with them on the way to the Astronomy Tower, they were right chummy, those two. I think more is going on if you ask me," Ron said.

"Yeah, sounded like she meant to sleep with him, according to Ron," Harry said. "We were thinking this could be something for Draco to follow up on."

"I wonder if she goes out there each night. Maybe I'll venture up there tonight for a look. She might want to have a little talk with me," Draco said. "I'll see what I can find out about her and Steward."

"Sounds like a plan," Hermione said. "You lot might want to go over your notes from today's class. You heard what she said. She's going to test you on it next class."

"Mione, can you explain about bringing a statue to life? I know the incantation to use, but I just don't understand the how and why of it," Harry said, frowning his brow. "If you have time."

"Of course. It's my area of expertise now, isn't it?" she asked brightly, glad that things hadn't changed between them. She wondered what her lover was doing at that moment. She knew what she would like to be doing. With that, she felt her knickers dampen.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Bella look at the younger Higgs as he wiped his mouth. "That was better," she said approvingly. *Why did Lucius have to become a traitor? He was always most agreeable to kinky sex!* She supposed she could always use the Imperius on him, but to what purpose? No, he would need to be punished for betraying their master. She would first kill her nephew and be sure that he watched it happen. Poor Narcissa would lose son and husband on the same day. *Too bad, sister dear.* To be nice, she would send Draco's heart to her with a nice little note about Lucius as well. That would do.

"Thanks," the boy said.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Terence?" she asked brazenly. "Does she please you the way that Auntie Bella does?"

"She is a young girl, and she doesn't compare to the woman that you are," he said immediately. He did like Marietta though, but to keep her from harm, he would never let this woman know that.

"Good answer. Is she loyal to you? Are we going to get rid of her once her job is done? She could end up being our downfall, you know," Bella said, grinning wickedly at the boy's sour expression.

"She has her uses. I don't think it wise to dispose of her," he replied evenly. Bella wanted to congratulate him on a lie well told. He loved the girl it seemed. Perhaps she would come in handy, but if it looked as though she could spell out trouble for them, the girl would need to be killed. If only she had Severus' skills at Legilimency, she could find out all she needed. She sighed. Severus. That had been heartbreaking to know that he was a traitor. What with his disposition, she'd never dreamt it could be true. He would meet his fate, as would his filthy Mudblood whore.

"Has she told us if the Mudblood and little Draco will be in Hogsmeade this weekend?"

"Not as of yet," he replied. "I expect an owl tonight. I shall let you know straightaway.

"That is acceptable. I can't wait to see the look on Potter's face once he realizes that I have made a full recovery and survived to kill his beloved. It will be delicious." Bella licked her lips. "Why has your father not made any moves against the brat?"

Terence wondered if she was just testing him. Surely his father had gone over this with her already. "Father thinks he is too strong and too well protected. He thinks that he might have other uses."

Bella mulled this over. Yes, it was the same thing that the old man had said. But, why would they want to allow him to live? "What other uses?"

"Well, as father said, after we get the others out, we will need a powerful wizard to follow. Potter did defeat our master, and he has done things that we've seen only our master do. We hope to convert him or eventually kill him," Terence said quickly. If his father hadn't mentioned this to the woman, she showed no signs of it.

"I see his point, but I, for one, would enjoy seeing the brat die for the pain he has caused us all. For our master. I will speak to your father about this at a later time. What says Fudge?" she asked.

"He says that Lucius paid him a visit. Malfoy gave him a bit of a bribe to rush a request through the process above all the others already waiting. The man has only changed in the light of the public, I would say," Terence said, pulling up his trousers. "He also said that he was curious as to the steps the Ministry was taking on finding out about your escape. Umbridge interrupted the conversation, but he said it looks as though Malfoy Senior is worried."

"And, he should be," Bella said slowly. "I trust that he's seen the paper by now. He will know that I am coming for them. I wouldn't be surprised if he tries to take his heir out of Hogwarts. I so hope he does. It would be easier to get to them both."

"We'll have them this weekend. Both Draco and the Mudblood will be brought to our dungeons, and I have requested to keep the Mudblood alive for a bit of sport. Father has agreed. Do you think that is to your liking?" He hoped that she would agree. "We could have a good bit of fun with her. Nobody will ever find her here. Once we tire of her, we can discard her."

"As long as I get to play with Draco, you can play with your little dirty creature," she said with a nod. "Get out. I want to take a nap."

"Call if you need something, Bella. I shall let you know what Marietta has to say," he said curtly. As he left the woman's room, he had the feeling that he was also not as indispensable as he would have liked to think. He would have to be very careful where this woman was concerned. If Marietta had to die, well, better her than him. Same thing for the Mudblood and Draco.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Marietta made her way to the Astronomy Tower in a fury. Steward had failed her again, the fat lug! She had sex with him, used the Imperius, and it was for nothing! That damn Madame Hooch had waylaid him, and he hadn't much time to talk to Granger. Terence would be disappointed in her. She'd promised to send him an owl this evening with news.

Her luck had just changed. Draco Malfoy stood silhouetted in the moonlight. "Hello," she said easily. She knew that he was here probably thinking about Granger again, but that was exactly what she meant to talk to him about. She tried to summon a few tears to her eyes. It wasn't hard to do, what with the life she was leading. Terence seemed to care for her some days, but on other days, he was so distant. She was going to be working at a boring job, following in her mum's footsteps, and she didn't want to. She was bedding that fat Steward often to keep him under her eyes. If he ever threatened to tell anything, she would have plenty to talk to the headmaster and the School Governors about.

"Hi," Draco said. "I was just wondering how you were. I haven't seen you since that night. All okay?"

"Not really," she sniffed. "I feel so alone. I could use someone to hold me. Would you?" She allowed a few tears to flow down her cheeks, and she smiled warmly when she felt his arms encircle her body.

"There, there," he said. "It can't be as bad as all that."

"Sometimes it is. I am just so lonely. I was only supposed to be here a few nights each week, but I find that there is a lot more work that needs to be done. I've been staying more often than I should," she said, wiping away her fake tears. "You? Are you over your little problem?"

"I don't know. I'm a bit confused still. She seems happy, so I guess it's best to just let her be. I can always hope that one day there may be a chance."

Well, this wouldn't do. Marietta knew she had to keep him interested in Granger, and why not have a little fun as well? "Draco, would you fuck me?"

She saw his look of surprise. "Er... now? Here?"

"Yes. We both need it," she said easily. "It would soothe us."

"I... I don't know. Someone may come up. Maybe we shouldn't," he said, stammering.

"Very well," she said quietly, lifting her wand. *Imperio* She smiled as he stood there timidly, waiting for her instructions. "You will not recall that I am putting you under this spell, Draco. You will continue to stay close to Granger, and you will honestly believe to have some feelings for her. You will make sure that she is seen with you in Hogsmeade this weekend. Do you understand?" He nodded. "You will now allow me to perform fellatio on you, and you will think of me fondly. If I should have need for intimacy with you again, you will allow it." He nodded and began unbuttoning his trousers. She smirked. The boy was just too easy. She put away her wand and lowered to her knees. Oh, yes, his cock was impressive. Terence seemed to be lacking, even wretched Stuart had him beat in this department.

She put her lips on his hardening tip and felt him spring to life under her fingers. With practiced licks, sucks, and movements, he was soon pushing his cock all the way into her mouth. He came with a deep growl of pleasure, and she licked him clean. She stood and looked at him expectantly. "Thanks. That was exactly what I needed. You're good you know," he said as he fastened his trousers.

"Of course. We'll have to meet again," she said softly.

"Marietta, who had you crying?" he asked, brushing her hair from her face gently. He brought his soft lips to hers for a sweet kiss.

What would it hurt to give him a name? "Do you remember Terence Higgs?"

"Yes, I saw him over at Pansy's house for a New Year's celebration. He was the Slytherin Seeker before me," he said, kissing her again. "Has he hurt you?"

"Sometimes I feel as though he uses me. I miss him while I am stuck here," she admitted. "I suppose he'll be waiting for me once I have my training and begin my career, but there are nights when I could use this closeness that we have just shared. What say you?"

"I accept, and if you want me to set that idiot straight, you just let me know. He doesn't know what he's got right in front of him," he said, pulling her into a tender embrace. She sighed contentedly. Draco Malfoy always seemed so cold, but he did have a tender spot, didn't he? She wished things could be different. Perhaps he would be a better choice.

"I need to owl him now to say hello. Meet me here on Wednesday night please."

"I will, Marietta. Thanks again," he said, watching her walk away.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione ripped off Severus' shirt and began placing eager kisses on his bare chest. "What's the rush?" Severus asked cheekily. "We've all night." She had already removed his trousers forcefully after disrobing herself.

"I demand you to do your duty to me, husband-to-be," she said austere.

Severus growled and picked her up quickly, moving to the bed. "Oh, I will definitely do my duty, wife-to-be," he said seductively. "How do you want it?"

"Like earlier," she panted, bucking against the palm molding her sex. "Only better."

"Better?" he scoffed. "I found it to be quite acceptable."

She glared at him icily. "Make me... you know."

"No, I don't know. Whatever do you mean?" he asked innocently.

"I want to... have an orgasm with you in me... that way," she said, writhing against his fingers. He lazily licked her nipples, but she pulled his head away. "Please."

He neatly flipped her over. "Tell me exactly what you want," he purred. He began to maneuver her into position. "I want to hear it, Hermione."

"I... I want to come with you inside of me," she said after a moment. "I love the way you feel within me. You fill me so deeply this way."

Completely provoked, Severus slammed into her brutally. "Tell me," he shouted. "Say it. What do you want me to do, Succubus?"

"I want you to do it hard," she screeched.

"Do... what... hard?" he managed between delicious thrusts.

"Fuck me," she said softly.

"Sorry?"

"Fuck me," she yelled. He grunted his approval, and they fell into a rapid series of strokes. "I can feel it!"

"What... do... you... feel?" he demanded.

"I'm... coming," she moaned, bucking against him wildly.

"Me too," he groaned. "Good Lord, I'm coming with you." Each shook involuntarily for long moments after. He silently slipped out of her and lay next to her. "You feel so good to me, Hermione."

She smiled dreamily. "I can't believe you made me say all that."

"There is nothing wrong with heated words between lovers, my dear. I find those words to be a turn on. It lets me know that you want me, need me inside of you," he said, scooping her into his arms.

"It's just a little embarrassing. I feel like a... scarlet woman," she admitted. He saw the deep flush in her cheeks and was, once again, amazed at her innocence.

"As far as I am concerned, it was magic. Never hold yourself back, love. Not with me," he whispered, before kissing her softly. A sudden pounding on his outer doors made them each groan. "What the hell?"

"I'll go for a bath," she said. "It's likely one of your Slytherin students with a problem."

"I hope," he replied, hastily putting on his clothes.

"You hope? What's happened?" she asked warily. She didn't like the grim look in his eyes. "Severus?"

"It's Bella. I had a meeting with Albus and Lucius earlier. I was going to tell you, but you waylaid me as you came in," he said, smoothing his robes. "Bradley was killed. It was in the *Prophet* today."

Hermione was left with her mouth agape! They had killed the prat? He was one of their own! Good grief! She dressed as quickly as possible, not wanting to be left out of the conversation. She wondered if Harry and the others had found out.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus opened the door to find a red faced Draco, panting and holding his side. "What is it?" he asked immediately, motioning for the boy to enter.

"Sir, it's her. Marietta. She's the one that's been doing Higgs' dirty work here. She's the spy," Draco gushed. "Where is Granger?"

"I'm here," Hermione said, walking into the room. "Did I hear you correctly? You have proof that it's her?"

"Hell, yes. She came out to the Astronomy Tower tonight. Eyes full of tears, saying she needed someone to hold her. Next thing I know she is asking me to f-shag her. It took me by surprise. I didn't know what to say, so I told her that someone might happen along. She takes out her wand, and she tries to use the Imperius curse on me." Draco sat down, running his fingers through his hair. "She told me to keep believing I had feelings for Hermione, and I had to be sure to bring her to Hogsmeade this weekend. She said we had to be seen together. Then she... well, she told me that I had to allow her to... you know." He pointed to his nether regions. "Let her... go down on me, and I had to still think of her fondly afterwards. Well, I allowed it, of course," he said with a smirk. "But, now she wants to meet with me Wednesday night, and I just

don't know if I want to have sex with her. She as much as told me that she is definitely Terence Higgs' girlfriend. She said that sometimes it feels like he is using her, and she could use the closeness that I can give her."

"I'm so sorry, Draco," Hermione said, patting his shoulder. "That must have been horrible for you."

He grinned wickedly. "Well, not exactly. She was actually pret..."

"Enough. We do not need details, Draco," Severus said, interrupting the boy's story.

"She told me she was off to owl him, so I gave her some time to have a head start. I went to the Owlery just to see. She wasn't there yet, so I hid to wait. I stayed hidden for about twenty minutes. Still nothing. Just as I was about to leave, I heard a loud ruckus. In walks that Steward bloke. He was mumbling to himself, hair all poking out." Draco accepted a glass of water from Severus and took a sip. "He tells an owl to deliver the letter to Terence Higgs and to keep it safe, as it's from the lovely Marietta."

"Stuart?" Hermione was shocked. He was involved? But, he was so... nice. "I can't believe that he is involved."

"I will rip them both apart," Severus said darkly.

"I don't know," Draco said. "The berk seemed under a spell. I'd say she uses the Imperius on his arse as well; only he can't fight it off. What say you on that?"

"It's possible," Hermione said, looking to Severus.

"Rolanda. I'll need to talk to her. She can find out." Severus paced for a moment. "Why must you be seen in Hogsmeade this weekend? I wonder if they are going to try to do something with the two of you, or if this is simply another test. Lucius and I plan to be there, and Albus is sending others in. I still don't like it."

"We have to go," Hermione insisted. "It's the only way to tie in the others. We have to be bait, Draco and I."

"We have enough to take Marietta now. She as much as told me about Higgs. It wouldn't take much to get her to confess to everything else," Draco said.

"If I know Higgs, neither he nor his son has told her everything that is going on. For all we know, she doesn't really know. Her attempt at directing you, Draco, is our only true connection to the others. We have to catch them all. We have to find out where Bella is hiding." Severus downed his amber liquid. "I must speak with the headmaster. We'll all meet in Hermione's chambers after classes tomorrow."

"Right then," Draco agreed, taking his leave.

Severus pulled Hermione to him for a tight embrace. "I'll not let anything happen to you, Little One. I can't be sure, but it feels as though this will be coming to an end soon. Then, we can get on with our lives as we were meant to."

She kissed him on the cheek. "I won't let anything happen to you either, Severus." He raised an eyebrow and chuckled.

"Wench." They shared a long kiss. "Hermione, if anything should happen to me, you know that I... care deeply for you, right?"

"Oh, rubbish. Don't talk like that. You'll be fine." She held him fiercely nonetheless. Hoping to lighten the subject, she cheekily said, "If you care so much, why did you pull that stunt on me today?"

He pulled away to look into her eyes. "Are you still on about that?"

"I didn't appreciate it. I was almost there, and then... nothing."

"But, this evening, we..."

"That is not the point. What would it have hurt for you to wait or touch me for a few more seconds today? I could have been as satisfied as you were. Instead, I had to wait until this evening. I don't know that I like that. I didn't mind the little student and teacher game, but I just felt... used," she said honestly. "Then, tonight you made me say those foul things."

"Hold on, Hermione. I didn't make you say those foul things. You could have said other things. I just wanted you to be vocal about what you were wanting and feeling. I loved hearing you say those things, but if you feel that uncomfortable about it, well, don't." He pushed back a stray hair from her face. "As far as my game today, well, the other night you woke me in the middle of the night to play Succubus, so I thought it was my turn to retaliate. If you didn't like it, it won't happen again."

"I just explained what part of it I didn't like, and I think there is a big difference. The other night when I pretended to be the Succubus, well, it was all about you, if you'll remember. I wanted you to enjoy it. I didn't care to have an orgasm. Today was all about you. Do you not see my point?" she asked softly. "I'm not angry. Not anymore, but I just thought you should know how I feel."

Severus looked at the woman before him. So open and honest. How did he not realize that she would be affected negatively by his idea of fun? "I am sorry."

"It's all right. Really. Don't look so dejected." She kissed him and giggled. "You're not punished, you know. I just thought I would tell you how I felt."

"What else is there?" he asked, noticing she was holding something back.

"To be honest, I had come here to share my first teaching experience with you. After that happened, it just left me feeling sour, and I left upset."

"Hermione," he purred, holding her closely. "I do care about your first day. You stormed away so quickly, and then we hadn't the time just yet to really talk." Now she had him feeling guilty. Why hadn't he asked her about her class? He supposed that he had been rather selfish. "I promise to never leave you unfulfilled purposely again. Deal?"

She smiled. "Deal. Now, I'm going to go have a bath. Are you going to see Albus?"

"Yes. I shan't be long."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Severus sighed. They had been talking for nearly an hour. Albus had decided to call in Rolanda, Harry, Draco, Weasley, and Lucius. Rolanda was to convince Steward to have a walk on the Quidditch pitch and take a flight. She would then find out exactly what he knew by whatever means necessary, and if it was found that he knowingly aided Edgecombe and the others, then he would be punished as well.

It was a unanimous agreement that Draco needed to meet with Marietta to see what she had to say, and if he wanted to allow things to progress, he could without worry of being brought up on charges by the staff for lewd misconduct. Harry would be present on the rooftop in case things got out of hand. If Draco gave him a signal that he felt uncomfortable, Harry would appear to have just come upon them. Thus, thwarting her plans.

Another decision on Hogsmeade was made. Choice Aurors and Order members would be present, as well as staff members. Severus and Lucius would use Invisibility Cloaks to watch over Draco and Hermione. Harry and Ron would try to keep an eye on Ginevra and Luna as they met with Percy Weasley. Harry also decided to enchant the necklace that he'd given Ginevra for Christmas. It would be an emergency Portkey. There would only be a five second delay from the first moment she activated it to when it would pull her to Harry's side.

"Well, I must say, I do feel more confident now that we've talked about it. Our plan seems solid," Lucius said.

Albus nodded. "We will get what we can out of Steward and Edgcombe. If it seems enough evidence to move on the Higgs family, then our trusted Aurors will follow through with it. If not, we will have to await their next move. I am afraid we won't know more until young Draco and Rolanda have talks with their *friends*."

"Hermione will document everything that we have so far. I will let her know once back in our chambers." Severus smirked at Lucius' raised eyebrow. "If these talks prove fruitless, and they take too long to make a move, then Lucius and I plan to do some investigating on our own. He has a spy in the Ministry who is now watching Fudge, Umbridge, Weasley, and Edgcombe."

"It seems that Madame Edgcombe is clean. She rarely converses with Umbridge as she once used to. Umbridge is always with or near Fudge, while Weasley follows Fudge about. Hopefully, the fool will make a mistake with his sister this weekend," Lucius said.

Ron's eyes narrowed, but Draco put a hand on his shoulder. "Father, does this spy know anything about Weasley's plans for this weekend?"

"Nothing more than he's heard. As I said before, he heard Fudge tell Weasley to be sure to have the talk with his sister. Once Weasley went back to his office, Umbridge asked what talk he was referring to, and Fudge laughed. He said something about Weasley having a message for her. We are unclear if it's family related, a threat, or a warning, but I guess we shall see."

"I just wish this would be over," Ron murmured.

"We all do, Ron," Harry said, smiling softly. "Looks like there will always be something happening. We'll just have to do as we've always done. Deal with it as it comes."

"We've done as much as we can here for tonight," Rolanda said, yawning loudly. "I aim to start out with Steward tomorrow early, so I'll be off to find my bed. Good night all. You too, Barney." She patted Severus on the head before leaving.

He sneered scornfully at the witch's retreating back. "Barney?" Lucius asked dubiously. "Why would she call you such a name?" Snape just shook his head refusing to answer.

"Only Barney I know is Barney the Fruitbat. He's the mascot for the Ballycastle Bats, you know," Ron said promptly. "Team has been lucking up all season, if you ask me."

"They have not! With the addition of their newest Keeper, they have earned their wins," Severus hissed immediately. "Now you sound just like Rolanda, boy!"

"Hang on," Harry said with a grin. "Barney the Fruitbat?" Everyone in the office began chuckling, realizing what Harry was getting at. "She thinks you're a bat."

"Good night," Severus said blandly, leaving Albus' office. He'd have to seek revenge on Rolanda for that one. The only reason he followed the damn team was because his mother's family had always supported them. They had relations in Ballycastle. He'd been there only once with his mum as a child. Northern Ireland's coast had left an impression upon his mind. It was beauty and peace all rolled into one. Had he been a child of nature, he would have found his way back there to live as one with the world. He snorted at the thought. Actually, he found the team's uniforms fetching. Solid black, aside from one scarlet bat on the chest area. Impeccable.

Upon entering his chambers, he found his lover curled up before the fire with her notes, intently going over her procedures for her classes the next day. Instead of interrupting her, he lay behind her and ran a hand along her back. "Tell me about your class today."

He couldn't see her face, but he knew she was smiling proudly. "It was brilliant. I was nervous, mind, but it didn't convey in my voice. I told them firmly that we'd not have any nonsense, and they accepted it. We only did Switching Spells today, and I assigned my first bit of homework. I heard some students talking after class, and they seemed to approve, though one did say that he thought maybe you had influenced me some."

Severus chuckled. "Threaten to send them to Filch or to me for detentions, the twits. They'll learn their place. How do you feel?"

"I feel as though I'm doing what I was meant to do. I'm actually teaching, sharing knowledge. I have almost everything that I've always dreamed about," she said softly, flipping her parchment over to examine a diagram.

"Almost?" He wondered what other dreams she'd had that he didn't know about.

"Yes, almost. We're not married yet, and we're still a bit away from having children. After that, I'll be complete," she said confidently, brushing an absent kiss on his hand whilst she read over the next parchment.

Severus snuggled closer to her back and allowed his hand to drift down to her soft stomach. He closed his eyes, almost longingly, wishing to feel her round and hard with his child growing inside of her. Perhaps he shouldn't remind her to take her potion again when it would be due. Hermione's hand closed over his, and she turned back to kiss him lightly. "Love you."

He nodded. "Only you would." She simply shook her head disbelievingly and went back to read over her notes once more. Why could he never just say it? She longed to hear it. Those words that he'd said only in their dream. Sighing, she threw down the parchment. She'd read them enough to know them perfectly.

"I'm tired, lover. Bring me to bed," she whispered. "You can tell me what Albus had to say on things."

"As you wish," he purred smoothly.

~~~~~ HQ ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Oh, come on! You've not got any classes this afternoon," Rolanda said, pulling Stuart forward. "I want to see that dive you've been bragging about for the last ten minutes."

"Well, I suppose we could have a small flight," Stuart agreed, allowing her to escort him to the pitch. He inhaled the fresh, woodsy scent of the chipper woman holding his arm. As of late, he'd found himself looking forward to mealtimes. Not to eat or to chat with Hermione, but to see this woman. She rattled on continuously, sounding much like one of his old friends that had passed on. It was pleasant. Some part of his mind seemed to not want him to talk to her, but the rest of him overrode that idiotic thought. Why ever not talk to her? She treated him nicely.

"School broom fine?" she asked with an evil smirk. "Hate to leave you behind."

"Certainly," he agreed. "And, you won't be leaving me behind."

The pair flew about, each showing off flying skills to the other, and eventually Rolanda led the man towards a mountain peak across from Hogwarts. "Nice flying, Stuart," she said, smiling jovially as they dismounted. "Look at this view, mate."

"It's nice to have someone to talk to. I've been so lonely. If it hadn't been for Hermione, I might have considered leaving." Stuart smiled genuinely.

"Well, Stuart, while we are here, we have to talk. I have always been a blunt woman, and that isn't about to change now," Rolanda said, yellow eyes twinkling. "I want to know what is going on between you and that Edgcombe witch."

"Marietta is my assistant," he said immediately. "There is nothing..." He rubbed his head slightly. "Good Lord."

"What is it?"

"Did the headmaster ask you to befriend me? To find out if I have been taking advantage of my assistant?" He hoped that wasn't the case. It would be for naught. He would never use a young woman in such a way. A flash of Marietta's leering face and naked body passed through his mind. He stood up suddenly, running his fingers through his hair.

"Eh? What are you on about? I saw the way she was looking at us as I left the castle with you a bit ago. Didn't seem too happy," Rolanda lied.

"I apologize for jumping to conclusions. I admit that I would have been disappointed," Stuart said, sitting back down. "Truth of the matter is, I like Marietta, but sometimes it feels as if pieces of my evenings are missing. I often find myself thinking oddly about things. I suppose I don't feel right acting as her errand boy, but I also feel as if I am meddling in little Hermione's affairs as well."

"Hermione? What's she to do with your assistant?" Hooch asked with a shrug, seemingly confused. The man may have had his memories modified with an Obliviate, but why would he still remember certain things?

"Well, seeing as you and that Snape fellow aren't exactly best mates, I will tell you. Marietta is in touch with a fellow, er... Terence Higgs. Well, he fancies little Hermione and lost her affections to Snape." Stuart chuckled. "I don't know what she sees in him, but Marietta has been having me to send notes to Higgs. I do not read them, but she says he is always asking if she's happy and what not. Poor bloke."

"Stuart, I'm going to be straight with you. Severus Snape is a good friend to me. He always will be. Hermione is in love with him, and she has never been involved with Terence Higgs. That boy is either lying to Marietta, or she is lying to you," Rolanda said firmly. "I think I would like to find out which, don't you?"

"Well, yes, but I thought for sure..."

"Trust me, Stuart. I know each of them personally. Higgs isn't exactly a good guy, and well, to be honest, Marietta isn't as nice as one would think. I wonder if she hasn't tampered with your mind. Pieces of your evenings have gone missing, you say?"

He nodded. "What can we do about that?"

"Do you trust me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then, I need you to speak with Severus."

"Oh, well, he's never been pleasant to me. I doubt that he'll agree to it." He hoped anyway. The man's glare was enough to turn him in the opposite direction most days.

"He will. Trust me. Come," Rolanda insisted, pulling him up with her. "Race you back." Both scrambled to mount their brooms and fly back as quickly as possible towards the castle. Rolanda made it back first, but only just. "Not bad at all!"

She led Stuart down to the dungeons where they found Severus in his office. "What brings you two here?" he asked through narrowed eyes.

"I think Stuart has had some Memory Charms placed on him. I would like you to have a look. See if you can detect any," Rolanda stated without preamble.

"Well, couldn't you have done that?" Stuart asked her quickly, backing away from the menacing looking dark man that was approaching him as if he was the main course of a meal.

"I'm not as good as Severus. No. Sorry," she said, warding the doors. "Have a seat."

Stuart obeyed nervously, and Severus swooped down on him. "*Legilimens*," he purred, staring into the eyes and delving into the mind of the man before him. Severus saw flashes of the man's childhood, memories of a woman, a sexual encounter with Edgcombe, and Edgcombe lifting her wand to the man. He could feel the man's disgust and sudden loss of willpower once the girl spoke to him. He pulled away. "Not a Memory Charm. I think she used the Imperius to will what she has done to not surface in his mind. Quite clever. Most don't think to do that."

"The wench," Hooch commented.

Stuart had paled considerably. "Did you... did you see what I just saw?" Severus nodded. "... inappropriate behavior... I will be sacked. My reputation will be ruined. Seeing it now, I realize that I have had relations with her, but I never pursued it. You must believe me." The man's last plea was directed to Rolanda.

"She probably forced you like she did young Malfoy," Rolanda bellowed, grabbing her wand. Purple sparks were shooting from the tip precariously.

"Settle down, Ro, and put that wand away," Severus commanded. "She will be punished. And, you," he looked to Stuart. "I fear that you have been assaulted by your assistant. We will have to seek the headmaster's council on this, but there are other things at risk here. You will not be allowed to repeat anything. Do you understand?" The disappointed man simply nodded.

"Buck up, Stuart. We shall see that she is punished. This is not your fault. Tell Severus everything that you told me!"

Severus held up a hand. "Let's do this with Albus. Come on. We'll Floo up."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Marietta approached Draco just as he exited his last class. "Can I have a word?"

"Well, I was on my way to see if Hermione needs anything," Draco said coyly. "Being a new Instructor and all."

"This won't take long," she said softly, pulling him by the arm.

"Who the hell is this?" Pansy asked, voice molten with acid. "I remember you. What are you trying to dig into Draco for?" She pulled Draco away. "You don't have to listen to that trash."

"Now, now, Pansy. That is uncalled for. She and I have become friendly." Draco pulled away from Pansy, ignoring her sour expression. "Sorry. Where do you want to talk?"

"What have I done for her to talk to me that way?"

"Ah, she's just mad because Sinistra gave her detention for sleeping in class. I tried to wake her," he said innocently. "Come into this room here."

She hugged him tightly once the door was closed behind them. "Thanks. I just wanted to be sure."

"Be sure?" he asked, scrunching his face in puzzlement.

"That... uh... things were still all right," she said carefully.

"Well, of course, Marietta. Do you still want to meet tomorrow night?"

"My mum owed me earlier. I am to meet her tomorrow evening for dinner. Did you mean what you said the other night?" she asked softly.

"What part?"

"The part where you said Terence didn't realize what he had right in front of him."

"Of course. Look at you. You're brilliant and beautiful. He shouldn't make you so sad," Draco said, trying to sound concerned.

"Well, this weekend when you're in Hogsmeade, prove it. Buy something for me," she said boldly. "I'm partial to silver trinkets."

"All right," he agreed. "Shall we meet Sunday at some point, so that I may give you the gift?"

"If nothing changes, let us meet at the Astronomy Tower Sunday afternoon. Maybe around two. All right?"

"I'll be there," he said firmly. "With your gift." He watched as she smiled excitedly and fled from the room. Only then did his heart begin to return to its normal rate. He was afraid that she would try to have him. Draco just didn't feel right about being pressured into sex with someone he found repulsive. The girl wasn't ugly, but something just within made her undesirable. Her foul nature most likely. He snorted. This would reassure Snape and his father.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione was describing everything as quickly as she could to a Dictation Quill. Severus had put her in charge of keeping all of their findings in order. These would be what they handed over to the Aurors once things were ready.

Severus and Albus had found out from poor Stuart that Marietta Edgecombe had used his mind and body numerous times over the last few months. Each time she needed something to go her way, she would place him under the Imperius if he didn't agree to help her. She always only left enough information for him to not get suspicious about things, and for them to carry on a conversation about Higgs and Hermione.

They'd pulled those memories to the forefront and had him place them in a Pensieve to make a record. From what Severus said, Stuart requested a few days off from teaching to deal with all he'd found out. Rolanda offered for him to stay in her quarters. To everyone, including Marietta, Stuart will have gone home to handle personal problems. The Muggle Studies classes would just resume the following Monday.

Ginny's necklace had been charmed. All she needed to do, if her situation became uncomfortable, was to touch it and say Harry's full name. She would then have five seconds to hold onto Luna before it activated and sent them to Harry. It was just a precaution. Nobody believed that they would need it, as Percy was likely just taking the opportunity to put down his family and Harry.

Draco's information had been the most reassuring. According to what Edgecombe had said, it seemed that getting Draco and Hermione both into Hogsmeade was another test to be sure he was still susceptible to following instructions without question. Marietta had even requested a gift and made arrangements to meet on Sunday. With Bellatrix Lestrange on the loose, they would keep the extra security in town whilst the students were there. Things seemed to be going well.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Tell me one more time," Bella said in her mock sweet voice.

"Saturday," Terence stated again, "Weasley will lure his sister out towards the Shrieking Shack where you, Warrington, and I will be waiting. You get to do what you've got to do to the girl while we take care of Weasley's memory."

"Don't forget about our late master's glorious Dark Mark floating in the air above her mangled body. Potter will come running and know that vengeance has been mine," Bella said with a squeal. "What of my wittle bitty nephew Draco and Severus' Muddblood?"

"They will be in Hogsmeade. We won't have them called to the forest until after Potter and Weasley are lost in grief over the girl's death. Sunday, early, Fudge and Umbridge will enable us to get Rabastan and Antonin out of Azkaban. This will unnerve both Snape and Malfoy. We'll send a message to Snape claiming Lucius needs him to visit. At this time, Marietta will have Draco and Granger enter the forest where we will be waiting for them to bring them back here," Terence said proudly.

His father smiled. "Very good, son. A plan well thought out. Once we have what they want here, we will have the leverage we need to get them away from Dumbledore's protection. Our late Dark Lord will be revenged. His loss will not be forgotten. The traitors responsible shall pay."

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**Southern's Notes:** The next chapter will be very long, as it is the weekend finally. We will see how the plans come together and which sides fail. Cheers.

I don't know if I should warn you about this now or not, but there will be Character Death in the next chapter. Don't worry. It's not one of our main characters, but that is all I will say.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Chapter 18 of 32*

The trip to Hogsmeade doesn't turn out as planned. Plans are made to find Bella and the others.

**Disclaimer:** All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I own nothing here except the plot. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I'd also like to thank GinnyW for running through this a second time.**

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"Let's see you try, Devon. One large swish and three short jabs. Your rabbit should turn into a book. Remember: elocution must be precise," Hermione said, standing back so that the young boy had room to try his transfiguration. BAM! Several students screamed and bolted to the side of the classroom near Minerva.

A large, menacing tiger was crouched atop Devon's desk hissing furiously for a moment and then emitting a loud roar. Devon backed away but was laughing loudly. It appeared that he'd done this on purpose. Hermione's eyes narrowed. A flick of her wand turned the tiger into a large Augurey. The vulture like bird opened his massive wingspan and began flapping wildly, but it didn't fly. The loud, wail emitted from his beak had Devon screaming in panic. "Fear not, Devon," Hermione said saucily. "It's not



foreshadowing death. Only rain." She flicked her wand, and the rabbit once again returned. "Everyone back to your seats." She waited for Devon to sit before eyeing him thoughtfully. "I cannot prove it, but I do believe you did that purposely. Thirty points from Slytherin and detention with your Head of House, Professor Snape, two days next week. He will contact you to let you know which days." She stooped down to say in a low voice. "Ever pull a stunt like that again, child, and you will fail this class. Understood?"

"Yes. Sorry, Instructor Granger," the boy said regretfully.

"Back to work, class. You are not dismissed just yet. You have fifteen minutes to practice." Hermione hoped that she hadn't gone too far by changing the boy's tiger into something that might scare him. An Augurey was quite harmless, except to insects and fairies. She had hoped its wail and appearance would frighten the little twit. She nervously eyed Minerva and saw her scribbling on her parchment. Blast! She'd been doing so well all week. It was just today that Devon had begun trying her patience. She'd be sure to have Severus talk with the boy.

She waited patiently as Minerva made her way to the front of the class after she finally dismissed the students. "Shall we?" Minerva asked, indicating two desks. Hermione nodded and sat silently. "Let's see. Lectures. You are doing well in your lecturing. You move at a precise pace, not too slow or too quick. The students keep up with you easily. Not one student has missed an assignment this week. I daresay, you go over things thoroughly enough in class that they feel confident when they set about doing their homework."

"Thanks."

Minerva nodded curtly. "Your examples are excellent. You explain the wand motions and pronounce the incantations perfectly. I like how you have them practice the spell itself without wands a few times first. Walking amongst them as they are attempting to Transfigure their objects is also something I approve of. It shows you are interested in what they are doing, and it lets them know that you are available should they need help."

"I've learnt that from you," Hermione beamed.

Minerva smiled and nodded. "Control. You've shown control in your class at all times. I am glad that young Mr. Ausbrooks felt the need to show his arse today. It proved to me that, as always, you will keep your cool and take the situation in hand. I think that no one in this class shall ever try something such as that again. Hermione, next week, you will have the first year classes on your own. How do you feel about that?"

Hermione blinked with surprise. "Really?" Minerva nodded proudly. "Oh, yes! I feel confident that I can handle them. I am happy you have faith in me."

"Very well. I will allow you to have them all to yourself going forward. I still expect your presence in all of my other classes, however, and after next week, you will take over my second year classes whilst I sit in the back as I have been doing here. When I feel you are ready, I shall let you have those on your own as well. Have you been able to keep up with the grading?"

"Yes. I do my planning and marking each night. I have them all here, if you'd like to look over them." She picked up a large folder holding a number of assignments that had been turned in for marking the last couple of days.

"I will look over them this weekend to be sure that you aren't too lenient and have not missed anything. Job well done," Minerva said, hugging her slightly. "I am quite proud of you."

"That means a lot to me," Hermione admitted.

"Off you go then. It's Friday afternoon. I'm sure you'd like to relax after the week you've had," Minerva said softly, taking the parchments. "As for me, I'm off to the staff room for a bit of spiked Gillywater. I wonder if Rolanda is about." Hermione shook her head. For the school's sake, she hoped not. Those two were dangerous together when having a friendly drink.

She made her way to Severus' class. To her surprise, Wayne Hopkins and Megan Jones, both of Hufflepuff, were still sitting at their stations while Severus stood in front of them with his arms crossed. "...despicable," he was saying. "I shall tell Madame Sprout everything that I have read on this confiscated parchment, and she will most likely be writing to your parents. Twenty points each and detentions with Filch tonight. Dismissed," he hissed hatefully.

Hermione stepped in and stood against the wall to wait for the pair to leave. Jones was crying openly, and Hopkins appeared afraid. Once they scuttled past her, she closed the door. "What's happened? Are you all right?" She noted that Severus seemed upset.

"I'm fine. Just disgusted," he spat. "Those two lovebirds were playing a game right under my nose, and I nearly didn't catch them!"

"A game?" Well, that didn't sound so bad. He held up a piece of parchment.

"Read it." He shoved it into her hands, and she followed him to his office. They had been playing a form of a dare game. One would scribble a dare, and the other would either do it or owe a sexual favor to the other. The dares included sticking a tongue out at Severus, spitting at a student, groping private parts of the body and even caressing bare skin underneath their robes. They had a whole list of sexual favors owed to each other. It was rather disturbing that they would do that in class.

"How did you catch them?" she asked.

"I was looking over Miss Bones' potion when I noticed Hopkins' hand was under Jones' robe. When I glared at him, he jumped, and the parchment fell onto the floor." He sighed. "I told them both to remain after class so as not to embarrass them further, but I should have. I think I was just shocked. They are acceptable students. I could see Weasley or Draco pulling this, but not those two."

"Would you like a massage, love?" Severus nodded. "Let's go to our rooms. We'll have a quiet night together. Tomorrow will be a big day for us. I know I'll be nervous, and you are worried as well. I don't think Bellatrix will show though."

"For our sake, I should hope not. Come," he said, leading her away.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Fudge swallowed uneasily, watching the woman slowly advance on him. "I pr-promise," he said shakily. "It will be done."

"Good boy," Bella purred. "I would hate to have to kill you, Cornelius." She sighed. "I should anyway, you know. I mean, you did disappoint my Lord more than once."

"I made my peace with him," he said quickly. "Sometimes I couldn't act as he would have liked, and he understood that."

"Very well," she relented. "But, only because we need you. It is always nice having a lapdog in the Ministry. My brother-in-law and friend had better be freed tonight as planned. Good day."

Fudge nodded and scrambled away from the Higgs estate to Apparate to safety. What the bloody hell had he gotten himself into? It was too late to get out of it now. He would be killed if he disobeyed. He never actually supported the Dark Lord, but after his go at Dumbledore, he'd found a way to make easy money by doing certain favors. It had gotten carried away, and when he lost his position as Minister, he feared for his life. It was a relief when Potter finally killed the man! To his dismay, there was always someone, such as Higgs or Malfoy, who came around wanting favors. To turn them down was to bring about the death of his person or what was left of his career.

"Weasley," he barked. The eager boy jumped to follow him into his office. "I think you'd better get going. It's time to meet your sister. Be sure to have her out by the Shrieking Shack at our arranged time."

"Sure, but I don't see why I have to trek way out there. I'm sure we could easily talk at an esta..."

"It is the only place that my associate will meet with the girl. Don't fail me, Percy." Fudge noticed long ago that using the boy's given name would ensure that he'd do anything. The poor sod had followed Crouch around loyally in hopes of advancing, and Crouch didn't even take the time to learn his true name or to appreciate the many uses the boy was good for.

"You will not be disappointed, sir." Percy left to venture off to Hogsmeade with hopes of a future raise. Once he was powerful in the Ministry, without his ruddy father's help, he'd go back to his mum with a lot of money and buy her all the things that his father seemed to think unnecessary. It would prove that he, of all their sons, had the most ambition to make something of himself. He may not be famous Harry Potter's sidekick, a curse breaker, a dragon tamer, or the class clown, but he was a wizard that had climbed the ladder to success on his own. She would be proud.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Nervous, beautiful?" Draco asked smartly. Someone, likely Severus, cleared his throat. *Good grief! Can't even compliment the girl without the man going mental!* Hell, he wasn't that thick. If he wanted to really seek out Hermione's affections, he wouldn't do it while her man was hidden under an Invisibility Cloak and only a few feet away. His father was about as well. Draco felt safe. Nothing could possibly happen today.

"A little," Hermione said, looking around uneasily. "I'm scared she'll just Apparate in front of us suddenly, and then just Avada us before anyone can react."

They heard Lucius chuckle. "That is not Bella's style. She wants you to know what she is doing. Hell, she'll even draw a diagram if need be. She's proud of the havoc she wreaks."

"Look, there is Harry and the others," Draco said, pointing ahead. "Let's go see what they've bought."

Ron was grinning evilly. "Look! Lemon flavored Hiccup Sweets! I bet Dumbledore would have a field day with this."

Luna grinned. "I tried one, and it only worked for a minute."

"All right there, Ginny?" Hermione asked, noting the girl's forlorn expression.

"Yes. I just don't want to have to hear all of the bad stuff he'll surely be saying about Harry and our family." She noticed Ginny's hands were firmly held in Harry's.

"Er... Harry? Are you all right?" she asked.

"No," he said bluntly. "Something isn't right."

"It'll be fine, mate. Percy is just a prat. She'll live," Ron said with a chuckle. "Very well can't bore her to death, can he?"

"It's something else." Harry let go of one hand and pulled her forward. They all watched as he shook his head. *\$ssykasheethsss.* A faint bit of smoke flowed from his hand to hers, encircling them. "This will last for a few hours. Your feelings will be mixed with mine. If you are afraid or worried, I shall know it. I will come for you."

"Good Lord," Lucius' voice said. "Bloody Parselmouth!"

"Shush," they heard Severus say.

Ginny kissed his lips softly. "I think it's sexy. Thank you, Harry. I feel better. I'm sure you'll be feeling how bored I am today."

"It's time," Luna said, pulling her wand from behind her ear. *'Orchideous,*" she whispered. A beautiful bouquet of flowers popped into view at her wand's tip. She gave them to Ron. "Love you, Ronald." Grinning madly, she pulled Ginny away towards the Three Broomsticks.

"Well, what now?" Draco asked. "Should we follow at a distance or something?"

"No. If I know Percy, he won't like to feel as if we are spying on him. It would just mess things up." Ron minimized his flowers and shoved them into his pocket. "Let's go back to Zonko's."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Well? Did you see them?" Terence asked impatiently.

Warrington nodded. "Yeah. Potter, Weasley, Granger, and Draco just went into Zonko's. The other Weasley and Lovegood are just now meeting with Percy Weasley outside of Rosmerta's place. They'll be coming this way shortly."

"Oooh!" Bella squealed. "Two wittle girls to play with! They are mine."

Warrington nodded. "Can I have one to play with when you are done?"

Bella smirked. "I don't know how much time we'll have, but I'm sure we could work something out. Let's get into our positions. Remember we made arrangements to Oblivate Percy Weasley only. Don't get wand happy."

Terence scoffed. She was one to talk about getting wand happy. The woman was a maniac at times. Well, he would finally be proving his worth to her and to his father today. He hoped that this would show him that he could have been a true follower of the Dark Lord.

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"Hello, Percy," Ginny said, hugging him. "It's been a while."

"Who is this?" He nodded to Luna.

"This will be your sister-in-law one day. Luna Lovegood. Her father owns *The Quibbler*. Ron's girlfriend," Ginny said brightly. "This is Percy."

"Nice to meet you, Percy," Luna said warmly.

Percy grinned. So, Ronald had found someone then? Well, that was good news. He was glad to hear it. She seemed nice enough. She was wearing some odd necklace that appeared to be made of Butterbeer caps, and her wand was tucked behind her ear. "You also." He supposed it would be fine if she came along. Fudge didn't say nobody could come. He just wanted his friend to meet with Ginny privately to ask a few questions about Harry. "Come for a walk, you two. How is everyone?"

They made their way towards the Shrieking Shack slowly. He listened as Ginny told him about everyone. The twins' shop was a success. They were making many Galleons on their own, and they were putting some of it away. Unfortunately, it seemed that Potter had a share in their venture. He'd given them the Galleons to start it off. "You should stop by to see them one day, Percy," Ginny urged. "It'd be nice to have you at Sunday dinner once in a while as well."

"I've thought about it," he admitted. He missed his mum most of all, but he had things to prove to them all before he went back. "I'm working on a raise right now according

to Fudge," he said importantly, puffing out his chest. "I imagine I will get a promotion soon as well. Madame Edgecombe has taken a liking to me as of late. I think she's been talking to some of the elders about my work habits and dedication to the job."

They neared the Shack. "Oh, I wonder if the ghouls are in today," Luna said with a laugh. Ron had told her all about the Shack, but she still hoped there was really some phantom within. It was nice to pretend in any event. She couldn't wait until the summer holidays to meet the ghoul in the Weasley family's attic.

"Hmmm," Percy said, looking confused. "The fellow was supposed to meet us here."

"What fellow?" Ginny asked, feeling uneasy for the first time.

"Oh, Fudge has a friend that would like to talk to you. I imagine it's a top secret Auror who is investigating Harry," Percy said pompously. "Wouldn't trust anyone but me to see that you talked to him either."

"Oh, my! Luna, I don't like this," Ginny said, easing closer to her friend.

"Nor do I," Luna admitted, grasping Ginny's hand.

"Come now," Percy said. "I'm sure he is a nice fellow. It won't take long." A twig cracked. "Here comes someone now."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry Potter felt a shiver of anxiety wave through his body. Poor Ginny. He looked out toward the Three Broomsticks. They'd been finished for a few minutes and had stepped back out onto the street. Percy was probably trying to talk her into ending things. "Ginny feels uneasy. Wonder what that berk is playing at," Harry commented. Suddenly, he felt a wave of sheer terror tremor through his body. "Fucking hell! Something is wrong." He didn't know how he knew, but he felt the need to head to the Shrieking Shack. He didn't care if the others were following or not. He heard the pounding of feet behind him, but he dared not pause for a look. He had to get to her. Why didn't she Portkey to him?

As he passed the last building in town, he saw Tonks running to his side. She didn't say a word. She merely ran with him. He heard Hermione scream, and that's when he noticed it. The Dark Mark was shining brightly in all its green glory over a patch of trees near where the Shrieking Shack was located.

"Oof!" Harry said as Ginny, half cradling Luna, Portkeyed into him.

"Harry!" Ginny was shaking. "It's horrible! Help Percy, Harry! They ambushed us. Bellatrix is there!" Harry Disapparated without a word.

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"Come now," Percy said. "I'm sure he is a nice fellow. It won't take long." A twig cracked. "Here comes someone now." A jet of purple light hit Luna Lovegood before they had a chance to see who had come. The girl flew back and landed in a heap near Percy's feet. "What the hell?"

Ginny screamed. "Bellatrix Lestrange!" She wanted to Portkey to Harry, but she had to get to Luna first. She couldn't leave her. God! Was Luna still alive?

"What?" Percy couldn't believe it. "What are you doing here?" The evil woman had escaped Azkaban, and she was completely cured. He moved to step in front of his sister.

"That's not your concern. Stand aside," the woman said, her dark eyes flashing imperiously. "You are not meant to be harmed, boy. Stand aside."

"But, Fudge said someone had to question Ginny about Harry," Percy still couldn't believe it. Two young wizards came into view. One was leering at Luna while the other smirked hatefully. Terence Higgs! Carlton Warrington! "What is going on here?"

"What did you do to Luna?" Ginny asked, peeking from behind her brother.

"Not that I need to explain anything to you," Bella began, "but I feel the irony is just too sweet to pass up. I've created my own little curse. It is similar to the one Potter put on me. There is no easy fix for this one though. She'll be in an indefinite Bewitched Sleep, slowly dying as her worst nightmares replay over and over in her mind. That and a bit of a Blasting Curse. She should have a nice wound."

"You bitch!" Ginny wanted to tear her eyes out; instead, she pulled her wand. She'd blast the psychotic witch!

"*Expelliarmus*," Warrington bellowed. Ginny lost her wand just as Percy lost his. "*Stupefy*," Ginny cried out as Percy slumped down in front of her.

"Leave him alone!" She began inching back towards Luna. She would try to touch both of them, and Portkey to Harry.

"Warrington! You will not throw any hexes unless they are approved by me," Bella said scathingly. "Higgs bring Weasley back. I want him to see the horror that I am going to bestow upon his sister before he is Obliviated. I always love to watch someone as they see a loved one being tortured."

Higgs moved forward. "*Ennervate*," Percy sat up, shaking his head slightly. Higgs quickly moved his body to the side and restrained him to make him watch Bella at her best.

"You may play with that one," Bella said, nodding towards Luna. "*Diffindo*!" A large gash appeared in Ginny's face. Both Percy and Ginny screamed. One in pain, one in terror. "Awww, does that hurt?" Bella cackled. "I just love this! Long live my master!" She pointed her wand to the sky. "*Morsmordre*!"

Warrington gave a cheer, seeing Voldemort's sign proudly displayed in the sky. "May the Dark Lord live on!" He reached down to pull Lovegood's legs apart when Ginny Weasley kicked him viciously.

"Harry James Potter," she screamed. All present looked about wildly, wondering where Potter was lurking.

"What are you talking about?" Bella asked, kicking the girl in the side.

Ginny touched Luna. "I'll send Harry back for you, Percy." Her Portkey activated, and she felt the slight pull behind her navel. In less than a second, she slammed into Harry. She told him as quickly as she could that Percy needed him, and he was gone.

"Potter!" Tonks screamed. "Are you all right, Ginny, Luna?"

Ginny began wailing loudly. This wasn't supposed to be happening. She felt solid arms hold her tightly. *Ron. Oh, no!* "Ron! Luna... she's dying. I'm sorry, Ron. I'm so sorry!"

Hermione looked into Luna's vacant eyes and knew that the girl would never be the same again. There was a big spot of blood on her side. Someone had done a number on her. "Who did this?"

"Lestrange. Two others. Percy tried to stop them."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry Apparated right in front of Warrington. With a quick flick of his wand, the lug's arm broke, and his wand fell. The anguished screams brought the other three heads to face them.

"Shit!" Higgs screamed, fumbling with his wand. He aimed at Harry, but Bella hit his arm. His hex flew astray and blasted Percy in the chest.

"He's mine!" Bella could taste the excitement.

"*Syysssethssykaasssss*," Harry said, directing his gaze to the snow at his feet. Immediately, two snakelike creatures rose from the snow. *Reducto!*" He remembered the way Severus had tried to blast them apart. It only created more. Now there were four. Two headed towards Warrington while two made way for Higgs.

"What is this magic?" Bellatrix asked uneasily.

"*Expelliarmus*," he bellowed.

"*Prot...*" She screamed as her wand flew out of her hand. She had been caught off guard. "You are nothing, Potter! Nothing! Higgs! Stun him." Higgs wasn't paying attention, as he was trying to get away from the snow snakes. Each time he cursed them, more would appear. It would have been funny if Harry had time to watch. Warrington was tied up with his set already. They were sliding him near Percy. Bella felt a chill grip her spine as Potter began chanting something in Parseltongue. A wild breeze began blowing, nearly knocking her down.

Harry looked at the Dark Mark floating above while chanting. The mark exploded in a crimson flash as the song of a Phoenix was heard throughout the forest. The Mark of a Phoenix now replaced Voldemort's mark. The Mark of Harry. He narrowed his eyes and let his rage build. She would die. She deserved to die. "*Serpensortia*!" A snake flew from the tip of his wand. "*Engorgio*!" The snake grew into a size that rivaled Nagini. As he began directing it to kill her in Parseltongue, the witch fell to her knees.

"Master! I didn't know it was you. I can see you now. I am sorry, Master. Forgive me," she was pleading, crawling forward. Harry couldn't believe it.

"Rise, Bella," Harry said, cackling wickedly, quite amused. "Your time here is done. How could you dare touch what is mine?"

To his amazement, the woman stood, bowing her head in acceptance of her fate. Harry's viper moved forward, seeing its dinner standing in wait. Higgs plowed into Bellatrix in an attempt to get away from his chasers. *CRACK!* They were both gone. He'd Disapparated them. At that moment, the others reached the clearing.

Severus, Lucius, and Tonks moved to him while checking that the area was secure. Harry closed his eyes, letting the Phoenix song calm him. The forceful wind died down, and Harry opened his eyes. "I almost had her."

Lucius fell to his knees. "... the Mark..." He clutched at his arm. Severus did the same, falling to his knees as well. "What have you done, Potter?"

Severus rolled up his sleeve. Instead of the faded Mark of his old master, he saw a bright new Mark. The colorful head of a Phoenix surrounded by two intertwining snakes had taken the place of the old Mark. It was the same glittering Mark that now shined brightly above them.

"I didn't do this!" Harry ran his fingers through his hair! "I just wanted to get rid of Voldemort's Dark Mark once and for all! I didn't realize *this* would happen!"

Severus and Lucius exchanged glances, but neither said a word. Harry had manipulated a most powerful magic that no others had been able to change. Not even Dumbledore. "Percy!" Harry had just noticed the boy was bleeding.

He ran to him and knelted down. "You showed them, didn't you?" Percy's voice was weak, and some blood was trickling out of his mouth.

"Just rest, Percy. We'll get you to St. Mungo's," Harry soothed.

"Tell my mum I never stopped loving them, Harry. I have papers... in my flat that will explain everything," he said weakly. "Is my sister all right?"

"Yes. I had given her a Portkey to find me should she ever need it," Harry said.

"Brilliant. I was..." cough, "wrong about you. Take care of her."

"I always will," Harry said firmly. Percy's chest stilled, and one last breath escaped the boy's mouth. His eyes dulled immediately. Percy Weasley was dead. Harry bowed his head and began crying silently. When would it stop? He was in this position when Hermione and Draco bounded upon the scene. Both immediately sank to hold him.

"Help," a voice called. Warrington.

Harry's viper had rounded on the bloke when his prey had vanished. Tonks hated to help that arse, but she knew he would go to prison for his deeds today. Perhaps they would get some information from him. "*Vipera Evanesco!*"

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione paced the corridor, waiting for the mediwitch to come out with news. All of the others sat there glumly, hoping for news as well. Luna had been swept away. Her father had been Flooed, and he was the only one allowed to follow. Molly was holding Ron to her chest like a lifeline, crying all the while. Arthur and the twins were trying to get Ginny to keep still. She kept trying to break free to get to Harry. A mediwitch finally brought a phial and forced her to drink it. She drifted off into a deep sleep. The rest of their family had been notified, but they hadn't made it in yet.

Draco sat in shock next to Tonks. He still had some of Percy's blood on his cloak. The day had gone far worse than they had planned. Nobody had thought much of Percy's meeting with Ginny. They figured all would be well since Luna was with the pair. Harry was the only one that had been suspicious, and even then, he hadn't been able to save Percy in time. Hermione hoped he would be fine. For the first time in a long time, he just went numb. He made not a sound, but he cried. Hermione knew it was high time that it happened. Harry was bound to have locked away some emotions. Ginny didn't understand why he wouldn't talk to her, and she had worked herself up into a fit.

Dumbledore, Lucius, and Severus had ushered a stunned Harry and a Healer into a room as soon as they had brought Luna and poor Percy here.

A tall man with thinning hair and a sad smile made his way to the Weasleys. "I'm sorry for your loss. The curse that hit him caused severe damage to his organs. Had he been here sooner, maybe we could have saved him. He just lost too much blood, too quickly."

Minerva pulled Ron into her arms as Arthur took Molly into his. They knew Percy was dead before they brought him here, but they had needed to know exactly what had killed him. They had their answer now.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when Harry and the others made their way back into the room. She ran to him, flinging her arms about him tightly. He held her closely. "Oh, Harry! I am glad to see you back. I was worried."

"I just got caught up in the moment," Harry said, sounding drained. "Where's Mrs. Weasley? Never mind." Hermione released him and watched as he approached the only family that had accepted him into their home without caring about his *fame*. Severus' arms came around Hermione as they watched silently. Lucius went to sit with Draco and Tonks while Dumbledore walked behind Harry.

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry began. "I talked to him before he passed. He said that he never stopped loving any of you. He said there are papers in his flat that will explain everything to you. For what it's worth, I am sorry. I should have Disapparated him away as soon as I saw that he was hurt. The truth is, I didn't realize it until it was too late. I'm sorry."

Molly walked forward and pulled Harry to her. "You did what you could. You saved my little girl, Harry, and you held my boy as he died. I love you as I would one of my own. There is nothing to forgive here. Don't you be sorry, Harry. It's not your fault. It's that ruddy lot of Voldemort followers!" Mr. Weasley embraced Harry as well. The twins came forward to thank Harry.

After he finished talking to them, Harry made his way to Ron. "Mate?"

"Percy is dead, Harry," Ron said brokenly. Harry nodded. "Luna... Something is wrong with her. I've lost her as well, mate. Ginny? Where is she?"

"She's sleeping," his mother said. "I think you could do with a bit of a draught as well. Arthur, see to it."

"We'll get through this, Ron," Harry said firmly. "Dumbledore said they'd give us some time. School is going to be out a few days while an investigation takes place." Ron just nodded, finding his mother's arms again.

A couple of Healers came out to talk to them. "There is nothing that we can do for her. We've never seen anything like it. From what Ginevra was able to tell us, the witch created it on her own. Her body will live. We have patched up her wound, but there is no response mentally. We don't even detect magic in her."

Ron collapsed. Luna's father came out to talk to the Weasleys. Hermione turned to Severus. "I think we should leave. We have to regroup. Tell Lucius to meet us tonight." He nodded, releasing his hold on her.

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"Why did you Disapparate us?" Bella screeched. "Our Lord was there. He lives within Potter now. Didn't you see him?"

"Father! Talk to her," Terence said. His father moved forward.

"What are you talking about, Bella?"

"The Dark Lord lives within Potter. He is the only one that could have changed the Dark Mark. When Potter stood before me and spoke in Parseltongue, it changed. My arm burned as he punished me. He had a snake like Nagini. No one held a fondness for vipers like our Lord. It was his way of alerting me," Bella said. "He was going to punish me for trying to destroy what was his. I suppose he meant the Weasley girl. We have to get our master back!"

The old man looked to his son. "Did you see the Dark Lord's symbol change?"

"Yes, and she's right. Potter had fucking snakes crawling out of the snow coming after us. A group of the buggers got Warrington, some tried to take me, and a big bloke was after Bella when I saved her. Potter had obviously commanded it to kill her," Terence said quickly, the awe showing in his eyes. "He completely changed our Lord's symbol. The head of a Phoenix surrounded by snakes now takes its place." He pulled his wand. "Look. *Morsmordre!*"

Sure enough, Potter's sign shot from the wand onto the ceiling. The old man turned to Bella. "What do you mean he punished you through your Mark?"

She lifted the sleeve to her shirt. The same symbol was scarred into her skin where her previous Lord's mark was. "Only our master could have instructed him on how to change it. Our master lives within Potter."

The old man nodded. He had wondered about that as well. The first time the Lord had tried to dispose of the boy when he was a babe, there had been a power transfer. It was possible that it could have happened again. The Dark Lord was good at living inside of people. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before he could find a way to surface. "We still move on with our plans. If anything can get Potter here, along with the traitors, it'll be to keep that Mudblood and Malfoy as prisoners. Tonight, however, two of our brethren shall be returned to us. We must make haste in preparation." The old man signaled to his son. "You and Bella will have to hide below at all times. Our dungeons are undetectable. They will not know that you are here. I am sure some Aurors may come nosing about."

"Agreed," Terence said. "I wonder if Warrington will open his mouth."

"He will be silenced," the old man answered. He turned to look at Bella. The witch had an oddly happy expression on her face. Hell, she was even humming! He shook his head. "Go with Terence, Bella. I will let you know when it's time." She nodded and skipped down to the dungeons.

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Dumbledore stood sadly before the entire school in the Great Hall. "It saddens me to have to bear this bad news unto you." He paused to look at the student body. Minerva and Pomona were comforting a grief stricken Filius. "One of our own, from the House of Ravenclaw, has met a horrible fate today. Escaped Death Eater, Bellatrix Lestrange, attacked Luna Lovegood, known affectionately to some of us as Loony. I am afraid that she will not likely ever regain her mental capabilities or any of her magical abilities. She was the girlfriend to Ronald Weasley of Gryffindor, and a true friend to anyone in any House here at Hogwarts. Her father owns and edits *The Quibbler*. Any condolences may be sent to him there. Her mother died when she was only nine. There is no other close family."

He paused again as most students began sobbing and talking amongst themselves. Most of the Slytherins also seemed subdued. The staff was very solemn. One person in particular caught his attention. Marietta Edgecombe. She was standing near the back of the hall with an expression of horror on her face. She was only two years older than Luna, and she had been in the same House. Hopefully, this news would scare her into a confession.

"On another sad note, Percy Weasley was killed today as well. He was Head Boy here and a faithful prefect. Percy was employed at the Ministry of Magic. His siblings, Ronald and Ginevra, are still students here. Any condolences or donations can be owed to his father at the Ministry or their family home. Classes will not resume until next Thursday. Please use this time as a time of reflection and attempt to catch up on your studies. Any students wishing to attend the Weasley funeral will need permission slips from their parents. See your Head of House for more information." Dumbledore sat down, feeling older than he'd felt in years. Two young, brilliant minds had been lost this afternoon. More damage had been done to those close to them. It was a pitiful sight indeed.

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"Talk to me, Severus. What is it?" Hermione asked softly. She began massaging his tense shoulders. "I mean, I know we've had a horrible day, but there is something else, isn't there?"

He put his hands over hers to still her movements. "Lucius and I... We could have split up. One of us should have gone with the girls. We were both blinded by the need to protect our loved ones that we didn't worry on the others. Now, Miss Lovegood is as good as dead, and Percy Weasley is gone. Both acts were senseless."

"Ginny said that Luna never knew what hit her," Hermione said sadly. "They heard someone coming, and a stream of light knocked Luna off her feet. Bellatrix says she came up with it on her own."

Severus shook his head. "Bitch. She's always been off her broomstick, and to think that at one time, I actually... I was one of those people, Hermione. What are you doing with me?" He stood up to move away from her. She followed him and pulled him into an embrace.

"Not this again?" she teased. "I don't want to talk about that unless you need to talk about that. I've told you how I feel about it, and I thought you understood that I love you. Always. Past. Present. Future."

"You are my spring," he murmured.

"What?" she asked, creasing her brow.

"Nothing. Just something I thought about one day. Lucius will be here at any moment. Do you mind if we have a few minutes alone once he arrives?"

"I don't mind, but what are you hiding from me?" She could only imagine what the pair would cook up if left to their own devices. "I want to be involved in anything you decide to do, Severus. I don't want you going off to get hurt."

"Get hurt? Do you realize to whom you are speaking?" he asked indignantly.

"Yes. That's the problem. You just rush right in and don't care about the consequences." She hugged him tighter. This was her life, right here. Hogwarts and Severus.

"Rushing right in is more of the Golden Trio's style," Severus said cheekily. "Speaking of which, I know that Weasley isn't here tonight, but, perhaps, Harry would like to come down. He can't stay cooped up with Albus all night. You can do that once Lucius gets here. Bring Draco along as well."

Feeling dismissed, Hermione pouted a little. "What are you and Lucius planning, Severus? I have a right to know."

"I just want to be able to speak openly with Lucius. Where as you know my business, I don't think he will feel comfortable speaking freely about his in front of you. Understand now?"

Hermione nodded. It did make sense. "You're right. I'll go to try to fetch Harry and Draco then." She kissed his shoulder. "Be back later."

"Come here," he whispered, pulling her back to him. He kissed her long and hard before pulling away. "You don't have to go now. Lucius is not here yet." She smiled and allowed him to pull her down to the floor. "I need to hold you." Severus had the overpowering desire to suddenly show her how he felt. The need to protect her. To possess her. His hands cupped a breast through her blouse while his mouth claimed hers again.

"Severus, I'm ready to come throu... Good Lord, man!" Lucius' head had appeared in the fire. "I didn't expect to find you sprawled about on your floor."

Severus didn't rush his final kiss, slowly moving aside to let her up. "Hurry back," he said softly. She nodded and hurried out of the room before Lucius could come in from the grate. "Come on. Impeccable timing as always."

"Yes," the man said with a smirk after he entered. "Pity I didn't wait a little longer. I may have been able to get an eyeful."

"I would have blinded and Obliviated you," Severus said quietly. "Want a drink?"

"No, I am already well into my cups. After I leave tonight, I am going to seal my Floo back. I suggest you do the same, friend. We don't want Bella showing up whilst we are sleeping." Lucius smirked. "What do you think? Will the Aurors find anything at the Higgs Manor?"

Severus shook his head. "Highly unlikely. That is why it wouldn't be prudent for us to storm in. Not yet."

"Draco wants to go to the Weasley home tomorrow with Potter and Granger. I don't want to allow it, but how can I deny him? He seems to not care for his own safety," Lucius spat. "He should have been sorted into Hufflepuff!"

"Now, Lucius," Severus chided. "Draco is one of my best Slytherin students. Trust me. He's one of us by nature, not accident. If Hermione is to go to the Burrow, then I shall accompany her."

"That place is called the Burrow?" Lucius grinned evilly. "I had forgotten that."

"No snide remarks at a time like this, Lucius. Don't be petty. What do you want to do? Are you going to sit back for a while?" Severus had to ask. The man was likely going to try to sneak into Higgs' home.

"I say it's time to put my Invisibility Cloak to better use." He raised an eyebrow. "At the Ministry, in Fudge's office. He knows something. Percy Weasley was his right hand. There is sure to be some talk. I would say that they will be there tomorrow, what with the employee death and the *intense* search for Bella taking place."

"They are likely to have Dark Detectors up, Lucius. I wouldn't go there under that Invisibility Cloak. They might try to say that you were there because of Bella or Warrington," Severus urged. "Don't put yourself at risk. Kingsley, Tonks, and the others will let us know what is going on. What of your personal spy? Nothing?"

"Illness. Has missed two days of work, and he may well be on his way to St. Mungo's," Lucius admitted grudgingly. "I think someone was suspicious and tried to oust him."

Severus nodded. "It is possible. We will need to speak about security for the Weasley funeral. I'm sure it will be full, but I think we should be prepared, just in case."

"Yes, it would be like Bella to send a parting gift, the whore." Lucius sneered. "When I sat at St. Mungo's today, I looked at everyone. I really saw how hard people's families and friends are hit when something goes wrong. Severus, I did this to countless families. How can I now walk around like nothing is wrong?"

"That is what people see on the outside, Lucius, but if you are anything like me, and I know you are, well, then the inside is what wars with the guilt. It never stops lingering in your mind, but it does get easier," Severus said, thinking of Hermione's words.

"We're back," Hermione said, walking in with Harry and Draco. All three seemed to have been crying over the events that had happened. Severus sensed something else.

"What is it?" he asked Hermione. She shook her head sadly and nodded to Harry. "Harry? Care to enlighten me?"

"I've got a plan," the boy said, green eyes gleaming. "Remember your dream?"

"Yes," Severus said, feeling uncomfortable. Surely Harry wouldn't talk about that in front of the Malfoys.

"Today, like I mentioned before, Bellatrix thought I was her master. To test a theory, I cackled the way Voldemort used to. I told her she needed to be punished for daring to try to harm what was mine. She accepted that fate. Stood there waiting for my viper to attack." Harry smirked. "I say we use this to our advantage."

"How so?" Lucius asked, incredulously polished.

"I say the three of us go to Higgs Manor, and I demand to be obeyed," Harry said calmly. "You two can be my first two... associates."

"Absolutely not," Severus roared.

"Now hold on, Severus," Lucius said, moving to stand by Potter. He lifted the sleeve of his tailored shirt to eye the new mark. With a raised eyebrow, he looked to Severus. "It's crazy enough to work."

"Hang on! The three of you? Make that four," Draco said hotly.

"You have to stay here with Mione," Harry replied immediately.

"Well, I think Mione should come, too," Draco pushed.

"No," Harry roared. "Enough people that I love have been harmed today. You and Mione will stay behind."

"I don't want you to come either, son," Lucius said seriously. "I'm sure Severus would appreciate it if you stayed with his betrothed."

"Indeed," Severus said. "I still don't like this plan."

Harry smirked, looking years older than his seventeen years. "It will work. You didn't see her, and if she is running around with a bumbling idiot like Terence Higgs or that stupid Carlton Warrington, then she isn't as bright as we have given her credit for. They will be easy to manipulate."

"What do you suggest?" Severus asked, giving in.

"Well, it's about time you listen to reason," Lucius commented dryly.

"We are not children, you know," Hermione interjected hotly.

Severus shook his head firmly. "The discussion is closed. You have no Dark Mark, neither of you. We have to deal with our own kind."

"Right then," Harry said, interrupting the pending argument. "I say that tomorrow, we go to the Burrow. All of us. Only us three leave after a while. If anyone is spying or hears anything, they will believe us to be there. We get Albus to put Aurors about for protection. Meanwhile, we go to Higgs Manor. We search until we find what we are looking for. The old man will crack. We won't leave until we have something. No matter what."

"Jolly good," Lucius said. "Some action. Finally."

"Blood thirsty, are we?" Severus asked sourly.

"After today, I would see retaliation; debts are to be paid in full. It will stop all future reprisals, and it may help to clear our consciences." Lucius sat down and smiled cheekily. "Should we bow down before you, Potter?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "There is something you should know. I overheard two Aurors talking below. They have already searched the Higgs Manor. Only the old man and servants there. Nobody knew anything. They said that Higgs Senior put on a show of not believing his son was involved."

Severus shook his head in disgust. "And, that's it? They should have workers waiting to ambush them at first sight. They can't get away with this. Harry is right. The old man will know. We'll force him to talk."

"As I remember, Severus, you were a grand interrogator once. Were you not?" Lucius asked wryly.

"Undeniably."

"So," Harry continued, "I say tomorrow night we do it. Just go show, and do the job that the fucking Ministry should be doing for us. We can only depend on ourselves."

"Let's meet tomorrow. Here. Just after the noon meal?" Severus asked, looking between the two. Both nodded.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"The Aurors have left. There is no trace of them anywhere near the property," the old man wheezed. "They are a stupid lot, I say. No idea that I have these dungeons, nor did they try to poke about too much."

"Good," Bella purred. "What of Fudge?"

"It's nearly time. Are you two ready?"

"Yes," Terence answered nervously.

"Always," Bella hissed. "We must get our master's followers back. It is a pity that only two more will join us this night. He will still be pleased."

"And, by tomorrow, we will have the Mudblood and young Malfoy. The traitors will try to save them, and we will hand them over to our Lord," Higgs Senior said with a fanatical smile.

"What if... what if Potter doesn't want them hurt. They are his friends," Terence said. What he had witnessed earlier had been replaying over and over in his mind.

"It's not Potter that we really care about. It's the greatest wizard of all time that lives within. He will not let Potter harm us. If anything, this will prove to him our allegiance," Bella said firmly. "He may allow me to live for my misguided attempt to end the Weasley girl's life."

"I did not misguide you," the old man defended.

"You know our Lord had a bond with her years ago. The diary. It seems he has allowed Potter to keep this attachment. We will not interfere or harm our master's own," Bella said fervently.

"We just need to get the others. Terence, you will need to owl your girl, and you be sure she is ready."

"Not a problem, father," the boy agreed. He led Bella towards the secret exit in the rear room of the dungeon. From there, they Apparated to the shadows of Azkaban prison. He felt the woman next to him shiver. "We'll be in and out." She nodded. They waited for the signal. A blue light flickered. Bella and Terence sprinted forward to meet Fudge and Umbridge.

"What is wrong with her?" Terence asked, eyeing the woman with Fudge.

"Imperius. If we get caught, it will be Dolores that takes the fall. It's her pass that we are using to get access," Fudge said. "Come on."

They slipped into a backdoor. The lights had already been dimmed. There were only a few flickering candles now. Bellatrix was glad that the days of the dementors were gone. They would have made this much more difficult. "Here," the other woman mumbled, placing her wand against the lock on the door. In a series of taps and one palm verification later, the door opened.

"Rabastan?" Bella called. "Are you here, my husband's brother?"

"Here," a weak voice called. "Is that you, Bella?"

"Yes, no time to talk for now. Terence, get him." The boy moved forward to get the man while they followed Umbridge and Fudge to the next door. The same thing happened this time.

Antonin was not as weak as his mate. He walked out on his own steam. "What took so long?" he asked with a wicked smirk.

"Later. We must go," Bella said. The group began making a hasty retreat back through the door they had come in.

Fudge seemed near panic suddenly. "Where is Dolores' clearance pass? We must search for it."

"Find it on your own," Bella said scornfully. "We have to get out of here. Terence?"

"Ready," the boy said, holding onto Rabastan. Bella held Antonin. The four Disapparated away, leaving Fudge and Umbridge behind.

Fudge had already had a horrible day, losing Weasley for nothing. Then, having to use an Imperius on Dolores had been horrible. She'd wanted no part in tonight's breakouts. He had had to Obliviate her first. She'd been so eager to help with Bella's release, but he knew that was only because she'd thought the woman would be killed. "Fuck it," he muttered, hearing voices being raised inside. He Apparated them back to his flat where they could begin a night of passion. They would each have an alibi. Dolores would think they'd been at his home the entire time, and she would swear to it even under Veritaserum.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Stuart may be a Muggles Studies Professor, but that didn't mean that he hadn't any tricks up his sleeve. He was very good with Disillusionment Charms. His enchantments could last for an hour without fading or needing renewal. He and Rolanda had made a decision to keep an eye on Marietta. So far, the tart had remained in her quarters since Dumbledore's announcement about the Weasley death and the Lovegood tragedy. For some reason, she seemed troubled by it.

He understood that she had been in the same House with the young girl, but she should have thought about something like that before she became involved with a wizard like Higgs. Stuart had been appalled to find out everything that had been going on. He'd sent his apologies to Hermione through her brooding lover, but he only hoped that one day she could forgive him. He'd thought he was helping her. Honestly.

Sighing, he flexed the fingers that had gone numb. A small owl fluttered by before squawking at Marietta's door. The door was nearly immediately flung open. Stuart realized that she must have been waiting for news from her lover. Whore. It appeared that she had many lovers. Him. Higgs. Nearly the younger Malfoy. No telling what other wizards. He watched as the girl read the note before gasping.

"I'll do it," she told the owl. "Go on." The last thing Stuart saw before her door closed was the parchment being tossed into the fire. Damn! He'd not be able to sneak in a read now. He simply slid down the wall to wait for Rolanda to come and relieve him.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus looked at the sleeping woman beside him. He loved her. He knew that. He would die before allowing harm to come to her. For this reason, he'd stayed up most of the night after she'd fallen asleep, finally. They'd had a slight row. She felt that he didn't have faith in her abilities to stand and fight with them by leaving her behind with Draco and the others. He explained that he had confidence in her, but all the same, he wanted to know she was safe at Hogwarts. She had finally relented, realizing that if he had to worry about her on top of the others he might endanger himself.

He had three parchments that he'd written on while she slept. One was a letter to her, one was a letter to Harry, and the last had been a letter to Albus, holding instructions on what to do with his possessions. Most of everything would go to Hermione while a few things would go to Harry and Draco. Hopefully, those parchments would never have to see the light of day again for a long time. It wasn't that he feared to be killed in some duel with Bella or one of the Higgs men, but something just didn't feel right. Severus hated that she had fallen asleep upset.

Rolling her sleeping form onto her back tenderly, he allowed his hand to glide down her nearly naked body. Just in case things didn't work out for the best, he wanted to have her one last time. His wand soundlessly removed all of her clothing, and Severus positioned himself between her parted legs. He decided to *kiss* her awake. Parting the flesh between her thighs gently with his fingers, his tongue tasted her tentatively. The scent and taste of Hermione would always be embedded in his soul. No other would be so right for him. Inserting one finger to work her feminine juices, he moved his tongue to her nub and began to lap slowly. He felt her shift beneath him, so he reached up one hand to help hold her down while lazily toying with an exposed nipple.

It hardened instantly under his touch. *So responsive. Even in a dead sleep.* Her head moved to the side as a small whimper escaped her partially parted lips. The finger exploring her body was now silken with bodily moisture. He added a second finger, and his tongue flicked harder and faster against her. Hermione's legs tensed, and her eyes finally opened. "Oh," she gasped, realizing what was happening. "Severus..." She moaned, bringing her hands to his hair. A few moments later, she was panting excitedly. "Please, don't stop."

Her orgasm hit, and she moved wildly beneath him, grinding herself into his fingers and face. After she began slowing down, he moved to plunge into her. With one loud groan, he was completely sheathed within her. Her legs came up around him, and her arms wrapped around him tightly. He set his own rapid, jabbing pace to bring him to his climax. Surprisingly, she had brought her own hand between them to allow herself to more easily join him in his ecstasy. Slowing his pumps to a near stop, he pressed his sweat-drenched brow to hers. Their eyes locked. "I'll never stop," he whispered. He kissed her deeply before moving to Scourgify their bodies and the sheet.

Snuggling closer to him, she asked, "And what did I do to deserve such a sweet awakening?" Hermione placed a small kiss on his bare chest.

"I had the need. You seemed so... beautiful. The feeling just overcame me. I felt as if I had to have you," he admitted.

"Well, trust me. I loved it. Any time you want to wake me up that way, you will be most welcome," she said softly. Severus pulled her close and finally drifted off into a restful sleep.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Most of the castle is still asleep, Ron. We'll be able to talk in private. It's just Draco here with me. Mione is down below in Severus' rooms," Harry said, trying to coax his friend to visit.

"All right, mate," Ron said glumly, stepping through the grate. Dumbledore had opened up Hermione's Floo to the Weasleys' Floo. Ron went to sit in his chair. Harry and Draco sat at his feet, not talking. "It's my fault, you know," Ron said finally.

"How so, mate?" Draco asked softly.

"I asked her to go with Ginny to meet with Percy. I never really thought Percy and Ginny would have trouble, I just felt better for Luna to be with her," Ron said, wiping a tear away. "I sent her to her... fate."

Harry shook his head. "No, Ron. Luna loved Ginny like a sister-in-law. She wanted to go. Be glad that you had the time with her that you've had. I'll try to talk to Bella. I'll find out what she did. There may be a cure."

"Going to bring Percy back as well, Harry? You that powerful yet?" Ron asked acidly.

"I wish I could, Ron. That's my fault. If I had noticed the severity of his wound, maybe I would have thought to Apparate him in time," Harry said.

"Bollocks!" Draco said. "This is not your fault, Harry. Nor yours, Ron. It's life, I'm afraid, and the ones that are truly responsible, will pay." Ron nodded, wiping more tears away.

"I love her." His voice was broken. "She didn't care that I was poor, so long as I didn't care that she was weird," Ron said with a sad smile. He pulled her necklace from his pocket. "Lost one butterbeer cap back in Hogsmeade."

"She... didn't suffer," Harry offered.

"I know, mate. I just had plans. We loved each other. She was my first lover, and she should have been my last," Ron said sadly. "I would have worked really hard to give her a home that we could have been proud of."

Draco moved to sit on the arm of Ron's chair, clapping him on the back. "You can still have those things, Ron. I'll donate money in a fund for research if Harry can't find out anything. Smart people like Granger and Snape can work on it. Things will be fine."

Ron nodded. "Sure, but what of her magic? They say she is nothing more than a Squib as it is right now. Would she want to come back to that?"

"Would you take her back like that?" Harry asked.

"Damn right," he said fiercely.

"Then, she would want to come back," Harry said. "We'll do what we can."

"If... if nothing can be done, I will never be with another girl again. That was the one." Ron nodded and leaned back to cry silently. Harry shrugged at Draco's lost expression. Draco leaned back and hugged Ron awkwardly.

"Er... We're here for you, Ron. I know that doesn't mean a whole lot right now, but it's true," he said.

"Family, Harry, Mione, and you... all I've got now. I appreciate it," Ron said through dry sobs. "One day at a time my Mum said. First, we deal with Percy. Then, we try to support Luna. We'll get counseling for Ginny and me. Whatever it takes."

The fireplace roared to life. Hermione came through. "Oh, thank the Lord! Have you seen the paper?"

"No," the three boys said in unison.

"There has been a break out from Azkaban. The two remaining Death Eaters: Lestrangle and Dolohov! They're gone!" Hermione's voice was a shrill screech. "And, worst, Warrington was being checked at St. Mungo's overnight. They were to question him today, but he smothered in his sleep last night. Murder is suspected."

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "Those blokes are out. Something is being planned. Someone didn't want that Warrington bastard to talk. I wish that they had let me at him."

"I wonder who killed him?" Draco asked. "We need to talk to my father!"

"Severus just got an owl from him. Instead of waiting for lunch, he wants Severus to go over now. He feels that other plans should be made since they've with their escaped. He is leaving in a moment," Hermione said uneasily. "Something is going on. I don't like it."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Ron said, looking green.

"We'll take you home," Harry offered. "I want to see Ginny anyway. Just for a moment."

"We can't," Hermione complained. "I promised Severus that we'd not leave the grounds. We're to wait here for his return."

"Damn," Draco said scornfully.

"Well, I'll go and be back before anyone notices," Harry said. "Dumbledore won't mind if I'm helping Ron anyway. You two go down to breakfast. If you're not still there when I am finished, I'll come to find you here. All right?"

"Fair enough," Hermione said, moving to hug Ron. "Ron, I am here for you if you need me. Please, don't forget that."

"Thanks, Mione. We'll talk more later. You are coming tonight, right?" he asked hopefully. She nodded and kissed his cheek. "Good."

After both Ron and Harry disappeared through the Floo, she turned to Draco. "Want to go have a spot of breakfast?"

"I'm not exactly hungry. It's a bit early still," he said sourly. "I hate this waiting around."

"We still need to try. I know. Why don't we just grab a stack of toast then? We can go out by the lake to eat and talk. Severus won't mind if we go there. It's not leaving the grounds, after all," she said.

"Always witty, aren't you?" he asked cheekily. "Come on." He pulled her out towards the Great Hall. The pair each took a stack of toast and a goblet of juice. They ate their breakfast in companionable silence out near the lake. Suddenly, Draco's brow furrowed.

"You hear something, Mione?" he asked cautiously. She looked around.

"No," she said. "What is it?"

"It seems like we should move into the forest. Just there," he said, pointing to the nearby tree line. "Bloody hell. I'm under the Imperius. Do you see Marietta? Try not to look around too much."

"There is nobody out here, Draco. She must be hiding," Hermione said, uneasily. "We can't just go into the forest either. Severus isn't here. Neither is Harry. There is no way to warn anyone. What should we do?"

"Let's act like I am trying to pull you to the forest, and you don't want to go. Let's stage a fight," he said. "Starting now. Bloody hell."

"What?" Hermione was completely alarmed now.

"It's hard to fight. There are two voices. Someone else is here, calling me closer. Calling us closer," he said softly. "Come on. Let's stage it quickly."

"All right," she said softly. Then, loudly, "I don't want to go for a walk in the ruddy forest, Draco. It's too cold, and I haven't my boots!"

"Oh, come on! You don't need boots! We won't be long," he said, pulling her towards the forest. She struggled convincingly before he allowed her to slip away from his grasp. He staged a fall as he ran after her.

"Wait, Mione!"

Just as Hermione took a few steps, a jolt of red light made its way towards her. She plopped down with a yelp. "Someone is trying to hex us!" Marietta came into view, brandishing her wand.

They watched her walk up. "Forgot my gift, Draco?" she asked saucily.

"Of course not," he said. "We're supposed to meet after lunch."

"Plans have changed. Let's all have a walk. Just there," she said angrily. "Get up, Mudblood."

"Oh, shove off, you dirty sneak!" Hermione squealed, pushing herself up.

"*Stupefy*," Marietta said suddenly. Hermione fell into the snow.

"What are you doing, Marietta," Draco asked nervously. "She'll tell Snape!"

"She won't," the other girl said. "Nor will you." She hovered Hermione above the ground. "Come along quietly. Someone would like a word." He watched as she took Hermione's wand. He slowly eased his from his pocket. Just as he was about to hex the girl, someone disarmed him. Someone hiding just in the brush of the forest. Marietta laughed.

Suddenly, Professor Steward materialized in front of them. He disarmed Marietta and revived Hermione. Draco yelled, "There are others. Look out."

Four shapes were quickly emerging from the forest. Draco's insides went cold. His father's old associates and Terence Higgs. This was it. They had come for him. No plan that they'd made included this.

"Run," Steward yelled, trying to put himself between them and those after them. Flurries of curses were chanted. Marietta fell down, then Steward, and finally, Draco and Hermione.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Calm down, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I have to owl Severus. Lucius' Floo has been disconnected from the Network. Madame Edgecombe's doing, over at the Ministry, no doubt."

"I can find them. Just give me leave to go," Harry said. He ran his hands through his hair angrily. "Fuck, Headmaster! I was only gone for ten bloody minutes! Ten!"

The candles in the office began to flicker, and Albus said, "Harry! Calm yourself." Fawkes burst into a Phoenix song. Harry simply nodded, looking dejected.

Rolanda burst in, closely followed by Minerva. "Stuart and Marietta both live. The Aurors are back. They want to talk to us now. I told them we would go to them in the Infirmary."

Minerva pulled Harry to her for a hug. "Harry, I am so sorry. We realized at the last moment that they had gone out."

"I will meet you at the Infirmary," Harry said suddenly. He saw Dumbledore scrutinizing his defiant expression. "I want to send Hedwig to Ron. I need to clear my mind."

"Very well," Minerva said, pulling Albus towards the door.

"Harry," the headmaster began, "you need to wait for Severus and Lucius."

"Don't worry. I won't go anywhere they can't come to," Harry said honestly. He wouldn't explain what he meant, and he was thankful that the women were trying to get the headmaster to meet with the Aurors.

Harry knew how to find Hermione, thanks to his brilliant foresight. He hadn't the time to wait for Severus or Lucius. Someone had tampered with his Floo at Malfoy Manor personally. Someone had arranged for Severus to be away. Harry knew how to call them to him... after he found his friends. "So it begins," Harry said furiously as he made his way for his dormitory.

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**Southern's Notes:** Who else besides Harry would just charge off without waiting for others? Bella and company are just nuts, I say! The berks! Hope you enjoyed. Character deaths are always hard for me to write. I always hate to disappoint the readers! Ah, well... it needed to be done.

Also, if any of you have live journal, I've just started messing with mine. Add me if you'd like.

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/southernwitch69/>

## Chapter Eighteen

*Chapter 19 of 32*

The remaining Death Eaters gather, but their new Master pays them a visit. We see what happens to Fudge, Umbridge, and Stuart here. there is a small portion that lets us know what is going on in Luna's mind, and we see Molly and her family while thinking of Percy. The Incubus returns.

**Disclaimer:** J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot and that blasted Stuart Steward, teehee. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I would also like to thank GinnyW for helping me go through this a second time and dusting it off.**

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"Glad you could join us, Mudblood," Bella said hatefully.

Hermione rubbed her eyes and tried to sit up. Her side was aching terribly. She didn't remember anything happening to her other than falling into the snow when she was hexed. "Where... am I?" she was able to ask. Her throat and mouth were very dry, and it took a moment to form the words.

"You're in my home," Terence said. "Remember me, do you?"

Hermione nodded. "That night... just out of Hogsmeade."

"Oh, who cares?" Bella screeched. "You are going to die, little creature of dirt. We are going to have some fun with you first though. Tell me. Does Sevvie treat you well?"

"Leave Severus out of this! He'll come for me, you know," she said, sneering hatefully.

"I hope Severus does come," Bella said. "That is the point."

"I am talking about Harry," Hermione said defiantly. "He'll kill you all." Bella slapped her soundly.

"Our new Master will be happy to have rid the world of someone of dirtied blood. The traitors shall die as well," Bella said, slapping her once more.

Terence spoke nervously. "Bella? You saw how mad Potter was earlier. What if she's right? What if this just angers him further? He'll never forgive us."

"What are you? A man or a child? You don't understand how it works, I suppose," Antonin said, clearly aggravated. "You have to prove yourself to your Master. This is the way for us all to do that."

"Yeah," Rabastan chimed in. "The Mudblood, young Malfoy, and the two traitors. We sacrifice them for our Lord, and he will accept us. He'll know that we are prepared to do what has to be done for him."

"Why do you want Harry to be your new Dark Lord? You all hate him for killing Voldemort," Hermione said, determined to hit a nerve. If she kept them talking, perhaps they wouldn't kill her just yet. Harry had told her to just hold on, and he would be on his way.

Antonin kicked Hermione in her side. Pain flared throughout her body. "I should have killed this one two bloody years ago, but the bitch silenced me. Don't say our Lord's name, Mudblood."

"The Dark Lord lives within Potter," Bella said, eyes wildly gleeful. "Our Lord hated all those not of pureblood. All dirty creatures. I saw it in Potter's eyes today. My Master is there, living with him, living through him."

Something struck Hermione suddenly. "Where is Draco?"

"He's a little out of it at the moment," Rabastan said coldly. "I have an idea on what to do with him though. Ought to prove right entertaining, it should." He moved to the corner of the room. "*Ennervate*." Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Draco was still alive. "Hello, baby Lucius. Come and join the party."

"Oh, leave that scum there," Bella said.

"Why? He is friendly with Potter. Marietta has told me about it. I think he might be an asset if he joined us. Why can't we give him a chance to prove himself? Wouldn't it be harder on Lucius to know that he changed sides for naught? That his son still followed our Lord's path?" Terence pleaded. He'd had two years to know Draco, and he always thought him worthy of becoming a Death Eater. Why not give him one chance?

"No," Bella said immediately. "I made a promise to Lucius that I would rip the boy's heart out before his eyes. I will keep that promise."

"So, do that by ripping Lucius' heart out. Seeing his son join us and dying while knowing he failed his child will be a worst fate," Antonin agreed. "I've always liked Lucius. If it would be up to me, I would see if he wanted to join us again. He probably just switched to save his own hide. It's no more than we would have done, given the chance."

"He's a traitor," Bella hissed. "Severus as well."

"I've always liked Severus. He played a good game of chess," Rabastan murmured. "It was Lucius I had a problem with. Always flaunting his money about as if he were better than us. Hell, we did the dirty work most of the time."

"Enough!" Bella turned to Draco. "*Imperio*. Draco, you will come assault the Mudblood sexually. You will fuck her, and we shall watch."

To Hermione's horror, Draco stood up and began to fumble with his pants. "No!" Terence called. "I want first taste at her. We agreed that she would be my Mudblood."

"Very well," Bella said. "Stop, young Malfoy." Draco paused just before he would unbutton his last button on his trousers. He eyed Hermione intently. Hermione wished that she could read minds. She knew that Draco had to play along. They had to do what they had to do in order to survive. Harry would come for them. Severus and Lucius would come for them.

"Well, I can't do it if you're watching," Terence said uneasily.

"You aren't planning something, are you?" Rabastan asked. "Have you fallen for the girl, and are trying to save her?"

"I'm not fucking thick, you know," Terence said indignantly. "If I wanted to protect her, she wouldn't be here, would she? I want her to ~~be~~ my Mudblood whore." He stalked over to Hermione. She flinched away, but he pulled her up by the hair. Deftly pulling a knife from his boot, he severed a large strand of hair. He then took his blade and sliced a cut in her arm.

"Owww," Hermione complained. It only smarted slightly. He hadn't put much pressure on the knife. It seemed that he just wanted to draw blood.

"Were you two engaged?" he asked incredulously, pulling the ring off of her finger.

"We are," she said defiantly. "We will be married."

Terence smirked. "In the next world maybe. Not this one, Granger." He took a strip of leather from an old coat that had been lying on the floor. After smearing Hermione's blood all over the thick lock of hair and ring, he rolled them inside the material. "I'm going to be back in a moment. I'll mail a little parchment to your lover saying what a good fuck you were, and it was a pity that I had to kill you."

"No," Hermione said, launching at the boy. He merely threw her back against the wall. The pain in her side increased, so she simply let herself slide down. Antonin crouched down next to her, groping at her breasts for a moment.

"I think I'll have some of you as well. I've thought of you every fucking day for the last couple of years, Mudblood. Payback has always been on my agenda where you're concerned," he said, squeezing her breast painfully. Hermione whimpered and looked to Draco. She could see that his breathing had quickened, and his knuckles were white with his rage. She prayed that he would keep his cool. If she could put up with this, then he should be able to.

The aching in her side was nothing like the aching in her heart. When Severus saw that ring, her hair, and the blood, he would think that she had died. What if Harry's magic didn't work? What if they never found her or Draco? She said a silent prayer to hurry Harry and Severus along. If Severus lost control, who would control Harry? She closed her eyes to pray for sleep, for a dulling of the pain and worry, for Severus.

Draco wanted to fight the bastard that was pawing on Hermione, but he knew that he could do nothing if he wanted to buy some time. If he wanted to live. If Hermione was to live. The others would be coming. His eyes widened as Rabastan moved towards him, groping his own cock. "I've always wanted to fuck Lucius over, you know. He was a right bastard to most of us. Prison is such a lonely place." The man sighed dramatically before glinting at Draco evilly. "On your knees, boy."

~~~~~SS~~~~~HG~~~~~

Dawlish, Shackbolt, and Tonks entered the office of Cornelius Fudge near noon. With a broad grin on his face, Shackbolt said, "You have to come with us, sir. You are being incarcerated, pending an investigation. There is substantial evidence that links you and Dolores Umbridge to a break out from Azkaban last night."

"That's absurd! We were at my place all evening. You can't just barge in here. I have work to be getting on with," Fudge said indignantly. Sweat began pouring from his brow. This was it. They'd found out somehow.

"You can come quietly," Tonks said.

"Or we'll take you by force," Dawlish finished.

Fudge stood up abruptly. "You will pay for this. I will prove you all wrong."

"Actually, sir, it's a closed case already. We're just going to detain you until you can get a full trial in front of the Wizengamot." Shacklebolt smirked as he magically bound the man's hands.

"Preposterous! What are the charges?" Fudge said, clearly worried.

"Aiding known criminals, assisting with two counts of jail breaking from Azkaban, the use of an Unforgivable Curse, the clearing of one's memories without just cause or permission, and the list goes on. We also have reason to believe that you are involved in the escape of Bellatrix Lestrange and the murder of Carlton Warrington," Dawlish said, reciting from a list.

"Dawlish, you and I have worked together for many years. You know I wouldn't do those things," Fudge said uneasily.

"You will have a chance to rebuff the charges during your trial," Dawlish responded, tight lipped. "Come along. Minister Bones would like a word with you as soon as she has finished her conversation with Madame Edgecombe. Madame Umbridge has already been taken in."

A dejected Fudge followed Dawlish out of the room. Tonks and Shacklebolt exchanged happy glances. For the first time in months, it seemed the Ministry had caught the inside infiltrators with enough proof to lock them away for a long time.

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Harry threw on his Invisibility Cloak and placed his extra wand in its pocket, just in case he'd have a need for it. His plan would work. He whispered the spell that would bring him to Hermione. A faint green smoke materialized in front of him and snaked off in the direction of the lake. He followed at a quick gait. If his calculations were correct, Hermione and Draco had been gone for about forty minutes. There was no time to leave a trail for Severus, Lucius, or Dumbledore. He had to act fast. He knew how to let them know where he was once he found his mates.

The snaky smoke circled the spot where Hermione had lain after they'd hit her with a hex. It then slithered towards the forest. After walking for nearly ten minutes, his magical guide stopped. "They must have Apparated from here." He began testing for traces of their Apparition, but he found nothing. Too much time had passed. He held out his hand towards the smoke and grinned as it curled around his arm. "Ssssyethssss Ssykasheesssss." *Crack!*

Harry found himself outside of a large estate home. So, the idiot had brought Hermione to his house. Why was it that the Aurors had not found a trace of Bellatrix or Terence? There must be a secret chamber or dungeon here. Digging into the back of his mind, he pulled up every memory of Voldemort that he had, everything that he'd seen in the man's mind, and everything that he'd ever heard about him. He let anger seep into his body, he let the darkness fog his mind, and he placed an evil smirk on his face. Voldemort would be like a fresh dessert compared to what he would do to them if they'd harmed a hair on Hermione's head... or Draco's.

He approached the front door, and without bothering to knock, he magically unlocked it. No wards? Harry laughed. The old fool thought he was safe, eh? Harry walked in easily, warding the door to seal behind him. Nobody in this house would get out without his knowledge. Ambling down the hall, he noticed a door, slightly ajar, to his left that caught his attention. He whispered for the smoky snake to precede him into the room. Harry held back a snigger at the old wizard's expression.

It must have looked odd to see the door open with only a smoky, greenish snake gliding in the air come through. "Good Lord," the man rasped. Harry saw him clutch at his chest. "Who are you?"

Harry thought this would be a good moment to remove the hood on his cloak. He did so slowly, glaring at the man hatefully. "You have something that belongs to me," he said in a low deadly voice that would have made Severus proud. "I do not appreciate you taking what is mine."

"Potter," the man said firmly, though Harry noted the fear in his eyes. "I have nothing of yours. There has been a mistake."

"No mistake. I smell her," he said, cackling at the man's sharp intake of breath. "I have marked her. She is here Ssssyethssss." The smoky snake began circling the room slowly and made for the door. "I am going to follow my guide, and if I find what I already know is here without your cooperation, I will kill you and everyone here."

"Wait," the man said, standing slowly. "She is here. I... I will bring you to her, my Lord." Harry narrowed his eyes as the man approached him and kneeled before him. A sudden surge of feeling his power flowed through Harry's veins. This man was paying his respects to him. This man would do anything he asked. Was this how Voldemort felt? Harry growled derisively. "Get up, old man. Show me." The man walked out of the room slowly with the smoky snake following him. Harry pulled his hood back on to remain invisible. For their sakes, and his own, Hermione and Draco had better be alive.

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Severus wiped his weary eyes before standing. "So, we will just stick to the plan then. We all go to the Burrow tonight, and after a while, the three of us sneak away to go to Higgs Manor."

"Yes, yes. There is no way they can hide Bella and the others. I just hope the Ministry does their part in this. There has to be some way to prove that Fudge and the others were involved." Lucius put his tumbler aside. "You've been here for just over an hour, Severus. We've been talking in circles."

"Who is your spy? Why can't you just tell me?" Severus asked for the third time.

"I don't want to say, Severus. If he had anything to do with Warrington's death, then the less people who know, the better," Lucius said.

Severus sneered. "I think Bella had him killed, so as to not tell anyone of their plans."

"Likely," Lucius agreed. "All the same. I swore on my wand to not tell anyone the nature of our association unless I positively had to. I don't think that this warrants that."

"Understood," Severus said. "If we are sticking to the same plan, why was it so urgent for me to come over? You could have just waited a couple of hours. I thought maybe your spy had found out something important that would help us."

"Hang on, Severus. What are you on about? I didn't ask you to come here?"

"Yes. I got the owl from you saying..." Severus' face paled considerably. "We've been set up. They are making their move!" He strode quickly to the Floo and threw in some powder. Nothing happened. "Unward this!"

"It's not warded from within," Lucius said, heading for the door. "It's been jammed."

Both men scrambled to get outside, past Lucius' Apparition wards. Once in the clear, they Apparated to the front gates of Hogwarts. Neither spoke as they ran to the front entrance. Two smug men were shaking hands with Albus, Minerva, and Rolanda. "We've tried to contact you numerous times," Rolanda said. "These two blokes are here about what happened yesterday and last night. They've just told us that Fudge, Edgecombe, and Umbridge have all been arrested for involvement."

"Bout time the Ministry does its job," Severus said with a sneer. The two young men shuffled uncomfortably, remembering their old Potions master's ire. "Headmaster, I must talk to you."

Albus nodded. "If you will excuse us, gentlemen, I shall allow the ladies to see you off the grounds. We appreciate the information that you have given us. Poppy will be waiting for someone from the Ministry to come for Miss Edgecombe within the hour."

"Thank you, Headmaster." Minerva and Rolanda ushered the men away before they could question either Severus or Lucius.

Once they were out of earshot, Lucius spoke, "Headmaster, we have been duped, Severus and I. We think they are planning to do something with Granger and Draco today. They wanted Severus out of the castle."

A large, black eagle owl swooped down on Severus. "What the bloody fuck is this owl about?" It was trying to peck him as he tried to take the parcel.

"Severus, Lucius," the headmaster began, "they have already come. Hermione and Draco were taken. They were out by the lake. Professor Steward tried to intervene, but he is now in the infirmary alongside Miss Edgecombe. They were both hexed."

"Shit," Lucius bellowed. "My son is gone." Albus noticed the man looked broken and furious at the same time.

"Hermione," Severus whispered. "Where is Harry? He can track her. He put a spell on her." Severus had hope and thanked Merlin that the boy had gone on his own to place that enchantment on her.

"He is in his dormitory," Albus said. "We'll go get him. Don't you want to open your package?" Dumbledore nodded to the small box in Severus' hand.

Numbly, Severus opened the box. There was a bundle of leather, he unwrapped it easily and nearly vomited. Matted hair and his mother's ring were inside, soaked with blood. Blood that had to be Hermione's.

"Good Lord," Lucius said, stooping to pick up a fallen piece of parchment. "Oh, Severus," he said sadly, handing the page to the man. Severus couldn't believe what he read. She was dead. They'd killed her. They had killed his Hermione.

"Find Harry. Meet me in the dungeons," he said, throwing the parchment down. He hoped that Lucius would stay with the headmaster. He needed a few moments to compose himself. By the time he made it to his chambers, tears were flowing down his cheeks. She was gone. All he had left of her were her things that were in his room, a long lock of her hair, and a bit of her blood. He went to his bedroom and stared at his bed. Without thinking, he laid down on her side and pulled her pillow to his face. He had never told her that he loved her. She died not knowing how he felt. *She knew, Severus. You told her in the dream. You showed her each day.*

"I didn't say it," he said miserably, trying to inhale the remnants of her scent. Jasmine. He could not live without her. Hermione was his life. He would assist Harry in finding her, what was left of her, and they would destroy the bastards that took her. Maybe there was still some hope for Draco though that was highly unlikely. He would do what he could to avenge her, and then he would join her. There was no future for him if Hermione wasn't in it.

Lucius barged in. "Potter is gone!"

"What?" Severus asked, jumping up.

Albus walked in, looking solemn. "I'm afraid that Harry has left. I fear that he has gone after them."

"Let's go to Higgs Manor. It's the only place we can start. We will force that old bastard to talk to us," Severus said angrily. "Damn it, Harry!" Lucius flinched with Severus' sudden outburst. Without warning, Severus began blasting things and kicking furniture. Lucius went to stop him, but Albus placed a hand on his shoulder. Severus pushed over his table, and the little sphinx that Hermione had given him for his birthday tumbled onto the floor. He kneeled down to cradle the figurine to him and wept, openly and loudly. He wept for his mother, his lost love, and for life itself. He'd finally dreamt of living again, only to have it snatched away. They would die for destroying what was his.

Suddenly, something began to burn in his flesh. His eyes met those of Lucius' briefly. Both men began rolling up their sleeves to see their Marks. The Mark was glowing bright crimson and felt as if it were aflame. "We are being summoned," Lucius said incredulously. "What the fuck is going on here?"

For the first time in a couple of days, Albus' eyes were twinkling. "I think your new Dark Lord is having his first meeting. I would imagine he wants to see all of his members and see who are loyal to him. I suggest you go, and we will send people to Higgs Manor to investigate. I expect to know where you are as soon as you can."

"They might still be alive yet, Severus," Lucius said, a new hope in his voice. "Let's go."

"Right then. Stick to the plan we discussed."

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"Hem, hem," Umbridge said with a false smile. "If you would allow me to speak, I could tell you that I have no idea what you are talking about. Cornelius and I were at his flat all evening. There was no Flooing, no owling, and no leaving."

"Look, Dolores," Minister Bones said coldly, "we have a statement from Madame Edgecombe. She claims that you ordered her to stop all Floo traces in Fudge's home, your home, both offices here, Percy Weasley's flat, and you told her that Malfoy Manor's Floo needed to be disconnected as of this morning. So, if there happened to be Floo activity, we wouldn't know about it. The jig is up. We know you were at Azkaban last night."

"Give me Veritaserum if you must. I am telling the truth," the toad-like woman replied sweetly. "This is a big misunderstanding."

Arthur Weasley moved forward. "Madame, you were Obliviased last night. We have found your security pass on the grounds of Azkaban, and we have proof that you were there. We know your codes opened those doors. Your palm print was used. You may have no recollection, but you are guilty."

Dolores couldn't speak. She honestly had no remembrance of what he was saying. Well, that would mean that Fudge had done this to her. Maybe. "Has Cornelius been Obliviased as well?"

"He was the one that Obliviased you. He didn't think to clear his wand, the berk," Tonks said snidely. "Where were you the night that Bellatrix Lestrange escaped from Azkaban?" The woman before them seemed to shrink away. She did have recollection of that. How they had put that together, she would never know. As far as she knew, the witch was supposed to have been disposed of. It was no more than what she deserved, the trash.

"I refuse to speak until my representation is present," she said sweetly, smiling softly.

"Fair enough," Minister Bones said. "Take her to the holding room."

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Hermione was pulled roughly to the corner, opposite of the one that Draco had been dragged to. Terence was unbuckling his trousers. He lowered his voice to a whisper, "Look, I won't be rough with you. I promise, but I need you to cry and moan as if I am. If you want to live for a while, play my game. Being my personal slut is better than being dead. Only when others are around will I mistreat you like this... unless you give me a reason."

Hermione nodded numbly. She was going to be raped. Someone other than Severus was going to enter her. Would he even want her after she was used? She couldn't

bring her eyes up to see what was happening to Draco. She had heard a scream and some blows being exchanged, but she couldn't bring herself to look. She only hoped that he would not watch what Terence was about to do to her. At that moment, the old man came back into the room.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Higgs?" Bella asked, pushing Antonin aside.

"He knows," the old man said.

"He?" Bella asked with a sneer. "What is that green smoke?"

Hermione felt a tremor pass through the room. The candles began flickering as an eerie breeze began flowing through the room. There was a sudden hissing and murmuring all around them. Terence flew away from her with a scream and slammed into a wall. In the other corner, Hermione saw Rabastan fly away from Draco. To her relief, Draco was still dressed, but his face was slightly bruised. Hopefully, he hadn't been compromised. It felt as if Harry was there. Hermione stood up quickly and made for the smoky greenish mist in the middle of the room. "Sit down, Mudblood," Antonin yelled.

"Terence! Rabastan! What is going on?" Bella asked, looking around wildly. "Explain your wards, old man!"

"He is here," the old man said. The old man kneeled down and bowed his head. The smoky snake circled Hermione's waist protectively. It was then that Harry threw off his Invisibility Cloak. His face had never been so distorted with rage. Hermione nearly backed away, but he held out his hand to her. She stepped into his embrace and began crying.

"Who has touched her?" he asked icily. Terence, Bella, Antonin, and Rabastan all moved forward. Bella dropped to her knees next to old man Higgs, but the others eyed Harry defiantly. Terence seemed indecisive. His father pleaded with him to kneel down.

"Why should we kneel to a child?" Antonin asked scornfully. "I'm surprised at you, Bella."

"It's our Master. He lives in Potter," she said, bowing her head.

"Who has touched her?" Harry repeated, eyeing Terence. The prat had been standing over her, unfastening his trousers. It had to have been him. "Someone cut her hair and assaulted her."

"We don't have to tell you anything. Prove that our Lord lives within you," Rabastan said, going for his wand.

Harry's anger was rising. Hermione could feel him shaking. The temperature in the room seemed to be dropping. He flicked his wand, and the other man's wand flew into his hand. Harry snapped it in half. "Who has touched her?"

Rabastan kneeled down next to Bellatrix, warily watching Harry. Draco made his way to the others. "Harry, you made it," he said with a smirk. His face was bruised worse than Hermione had thought. His lip was bloodied, and he had finger marks along his neck.

"Of course I did," Harry said coldly. "Kneel down with the others." Draco smirked even more and took a knee next to the old man. *Serpensortia!* A snake flew out of Harry's wand. "Engorgio." The snake grew to a larger size. "Ssssyethhssshkaa." Harry watched as the snake slithered towards the two standing men. Antonin kneeled down quickly while Terence backed away. "Who touched her?"

"It was me," Terence said. "I only cut a lock of her hair and made one small flesh wound for blood. I didn't hurt her. You can ask her." The boy was stammering and full of fear as the large viper languidly moved to him.

"My Lord, please, spare my son," the old man said. Harry turned blazing green eyes in his direction.

"He would not have spared *her*. Why should I? What good is he to me?" Harry asked. "Speak."

"He is an asset. He will live to do your bidding. Anything, my Lord," the old man pleaded.

A whisper of Parseltongue halted the snake's progress. "Come here, boy," Harry said. "Mione have a seat." Hermione moved to a chair and watched this new side of Harry as he walked forward. He whispered to the snake, and it made its way back to coil near the others. Terence unsteadily made his way to Harry. "I have her Marked. There is no place that she can be that I couldn't find her. She belongs to me."

"But, she is a Mudblood. You... you have the Weasley girl," the boy said, flinching.

"Yes, that's right. I have the Weasley girl. This girl, though," he said, eyeing Hermione, "is my right hand. She will never be harmed. Ever. She is to be for Severus only. No sharing."

"That traitor!" Bella said. Harry flashed his eyes in her direction.

"A traitor with no secrets from me. He has always been loyal to me." Harry grinned wickedly, forming a plan. "You think just because I share my body with Tom Riddle that I can't make my own decisions? Riddle... Voldemort, you decide what to call him. I destroyed him. Join me or die. Kneel," he directed to Terence. The boy wasted no time kneeling. Harry drew his wand, and the door to the far left banged open. Hermione gasped as she saw a large snake slither out. Nagini.

Harry began conversing with Nagini in Parselmouth. The snake seemed to affectionately rub her head against Harry's leg as she made her way to the other large snake. Harry directed numerous other snakes to remain in the room. They had been filing out after Nagini. Harry then walked back to the group of kneeling people. "Nagini says that she has been well cared for. I thank you," Harry said to the old man. "She is loyal to me, and she will kill anyone who tries to do me ill." He cackled in perfect imitation of the old Dark Lord. "Malfoy, what was occurring between the two of you when I came in?"

"I was being assaulted, my Lord. They tried to use the Imperius on me to assault Hermione." Draco's eyes never left Harry's face as he spoke.

"Rise." Harry walked around the group once. "Rabastan Lestrangle, do you refute these charges?"

"I do not, my Lord. How was I to know who was loyal to you? How was I to know that I was even loyal to you? This is something new to me," the man admitted. "I've had only one Master for all my life, mostly, and here is a new one ready to take his place. I just needed proof."

"An honest answer," Harry moved forward. *Legilimens!* Harry saw numerous flashes of the man's life. Mostly scenes from Azkaban. He had been abused whilst a prisoner. Harry sensed no guilt for any past deeds the man committed. He also sensed that the man would attempt to harm him when his back was turned.

"My Lord?" the man queried, uncertainly as Harry backed away.

"Malfoy, you may seek revenge on Rabastan Lestrangle for the wrongs he committed against you." Harry dared the man to move. Draco moved forward and kicked the man in the stomach. He moved back to his position. "Is that all, Malfoy?"

"For now, my Lord. I request permission to kill him if he ever steps out of line."

"If I deem it necessary, yes," Harry answered smoothly. "Hermione, I will not allow you to seek retribution against Terence for the wrongs he committed to you." Hermione gave him a puzzled look. "That will be for Severus to do."

"Thank you," Hermione said softly. "My Lord," she added as an after thought.

Harry walked forward and grabbed Antonin's arm. He pulled the sleeve back and saw the Mark. It was his Mark: a phoenix and snakes. He traced his thumb along the mark and felt powerful magic simmering there. It was a heady feeling, knowing that he could be someone of position and power. "We shall see who it is that answers my call," Harry said, digging his thumb into the Mark. Bellatrix and Rabastan began cradling their forearms as if to relieve the pressure.

Smirking, Harry stepped back. Severus and Lucius would be coming. He was glad. He was having too many ill thoughts. The power, the urge, the rage, and the darkness seemed to want to take hold. He almost enjoyed acting like a Master. There was one thing that he didn't like about this. If they did the right thing, who would guarantee that they wouldn't escape again to come after them in the future? Harry longed to end all of their lives. He longed to let Nagini feast. Absently, he patted Nagini's head. He reached over to pat his conjured snake's head as well. "I think I shall call you Loony. That's an honor, you know." Harry's eyes met those of Bella's. "We must have a little chat, you and I."

"Yes, my Lord," she murmured, lowering her head.

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Molly sat on her son's bed holding a set of robes in her arms. She could still smell the scent of his cologne on the fabric. Percy had tried to sever ties with them a couple of years ago, and it had hurt every day since then. To know that he'd never stopped loving them, according to Harry, mollified her a little. Wasted time! So much of it. Why hadn't she tried harder to make amends with him? He was her third child, and being quite honest, her most ambitious son.

"Mum," Ginny said softly, "I've found his journal. It's just here. It won't open, so he must have warded it."

"Give it to me, dear," the older witch said with a sad smile. "Go check on Ronald for me, love. He didn't look all right."

"You don't look all right either, Mum," Ginny said, handing the journal containing her brother's last thoughts to her.

"None of us do," the woman whispered. "Go on while I box up some more things."

Ginny nodded and left the room. Ron was still sitting in the corner, slouched against the wall. "Ron? I know this is hard for you, but you have to shake this. Things will get better. They have to."

"Shake this? You just don't understand," Ron said miserably. "I hated Percy. Own brother and all! Then, Luna, she's down because of me as well. It just doesn't sit right with me, is all."

"Ron, we all had mixed emotions where Percy is concerned. He chose to walk out on us. You might have thought that you hated him, but you didn't. Not deep down. As far as Luna, Merlin, that was terrible, but that is not your fault, Ron. Those berks did this. They will pay for what they've done. Harry will see to it. In fact, he's doing it now."

"What?"

"I feel... something. Remember the spell he put on me? It seems like it is still working. I was feeling extra sorrow, not my own, you know? Now, I feel righteous rage, and there is such a flow of power. I think he's doing something," Ginny said.

Ron sprung up. "Not without me!" She grabbed his arm.

"You don't even know where he is or what is happening, Ron! Stay with us! How do you think Mum would feel if another son was hurt? Or, worse, killed? He'll be all right, Ron," Ginny said, pulling her brother to her for a tight hug.

Ron nodded. "After we box some of Percy's things, want to go to St. Mungo's for a bit to see Luna?" Ginny simply nodded in agreement. To be honest, she didn't feel like seeing Luna's pale face or blank eyes. It was too much. The curse felt like her fault more than anything. She pushed the memories from the previous day away. There were more important things that needed to be done. No time to wallow in self-pity.

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Rolanda smiled at the hexed man once more. "Drink up. That's a boy." She was holding a glass of water for him. "Enough?"

"Thanks," he said, voice barely audible. "Why have I not been healed yet? Is there something more?"

Yellow eyes looked away for a moment. "Poppy says three different things hit you at once. It's been a slight bit difficult to heal you up easily. When the Aurors come to take the bitch over there away, they are also taking you with them. You will be transferred to St. Mungo's. After what happened to that Warrington kid, they are going to have a guard on duty with you at all times. No chances now."

Stuart smiled. He didn't like the sad look on the usually spunky witch's face, but he wouldn't let on that he noticed anything. "Well, I'm sure they will fix me right up. I'll be back here to race you in no time. I think we should use our own," cough, "brooms this time. The school brooms just do nothing for a person."

"You're on, old boy!" Rolanda said excitedly. "Never can turn down a challenge." The tired man drifted back to sleep. For a brief moment, Hooch debated on going to smother that Edgecombe tart, but alas, they would likely know that she did it. There had to be something more that she could do though. Why sit around at Hogwarts? Rolanda determinedly made her way to the entryway. Lucius and Severus were running out of the castle without a backward glance. Albus came walking up swiftly. "Where are they off to? Did they find them?"

"Harry is summoning them. I think that Harry has found Hermione and Draco, but I'm not sure what state they will be in. They've made a plan, and I believe that this plan will end things once and for all." Albus looked around. "Where is Minerva?"

"Well, after we saw those blokes off the grounds, we came in. She picked up a parchment just over there. Said she had to go to her chambers. Haven't seen her since," Rolanda said. "Stuart is sleeping again. Poor bloke. I do hope they can heal his... er... problem." With a slight chuckle, she added, "With his bits."

"I think I need to see to Minerva. I can only imagine what parchment she found. I hadn't noticed it being dropped." The old wizard shook his head sadly. "I thought Severus still had it."

"All right, but I want to do something. No action for me? Sitting here seems like torture."

"Meet me in the hall in about twenty minutes. I need to see to Minerva," Albus said softly. "If I'm correct, the parchment she found was the one that told Severus that Hermione had been tortured and killed." Rolanda gasped. "Yes, they sent a lock of her hair and his mother's ring back. Covered in blood. I fear Severus will not get past this, Rolanda. We shall have to take extra care with him to ensure that he doesn't harm himself."

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Travers and Mulciber eyed each other fearfully. They had been on the run since their Master had fallen. Some strange things had been happening. The previous day, they each fell to their knees with the old, burning pain from the Dark Lord's Mark. Upon further investigation, they'd realized that the Mark had changed! Now today, they were clearly being summoned. Each knew that if they didn't go, it would only throb and get worse until they would black out from the pain.

Mulciber said, "I don't know if we should go or not. This could be a trap designed by the Ministry."

Travers shook his head. "Nobody but our Lord could have altered our Marks. He must have found a way to come back. We have no choice. Bloody Potter brat must have failed in defeating him again, the little bastard."

"Perhaps we don't. I am tired of being on the run, living in hovels, stealing food to survive. If our Master is back, we need him. If it's a trap, at least we'll have a cozy cell with meals each day," Mulciber said thoughtfully. "I'm right glad they did away with the dementors in Azkaban."

"Let's go to our fate."

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Jonas Stebbins, former Hufflepuff, felt his Mark burning as he sat with his family for their lunch. He'd read that some of his old mates had escaped from Azkaban: first Bellatrix and then Rabastan and Antonin. He'd read about the goings on from the previous day. His Mark had burned and changed quickly at one point, and his new wife had nearly seen the Mark.

He'd been taking special care to never let her see his Mark. When it changed slightly, he had been relieved. He could always claim that he had some Phoenix and snake fetish. After his friend Cedric had been killed, he'd been fascinated with the Dark Lord. He had wanted to learn how a destroyed man could come back and orchestrate such horrific deeds as if he hadn't missed a beat.

Purposely, he'd begun hanging out in some dodgy spots, hoping to come across any Death Eaters that might allow him to join and take the powerful man's mark. His first intentions had been to help bring them down. To spy. To avenge his best mate's death. It was too late when he realized that he'd gone too far by accepting the Mark. He was mostly a behind the scenes follower. Nobody suspected him, so he, like Terence Higgs, was able to go out in the community to get things that his Master needed. They needed more people like him after Potter and his friends ousted a good portion of the followers. Even after they'd broken out, they couldn't show their faces in public.

Stebbins sighed regretfully. He'd never killed, raped, or tortured anyone. Once he got in, he couldn't get back out without risking death to himself or his family. Nobody would ever believe him. "I have to go out for a little while. I've just remembered something that I need to do."

"All right, love," his pregnant wife said, leaning over to kiss him softly.

His mum said, "Could you pick up some sweets while you are out, son?"

"Sure," he said with a false smile. He was going to answer the summons, but he didn't know what to expect. If the Dark Lord had found a way to come back, he had no choice. His wife, mum, and unborn child would not suffer.

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Harry circled the kneeling followers before him. Draco was the only one that he'd allowed to stand. It might be prudent to allow another to stand. It would cement to them that he was willing to accept them. "Higgs Senior, you may rise." The old man proudly stood next to Draco. Harry could have slapped the smile off of his face. He looked to Hermione. She was holding her side as if in pain. He strode to her. She had a few bruises on her, but aside from the minor cut and huge chunk of hair missing from her head, she seemed fine.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly. Her eyes were dulled. Harry needed to get her out of here. He pulled off his class ring, pointed his wand at it, and whispered, *Portus*. His ring glowed blue for a moment before returning to normal. "Take this. Tell Albus what you know. Pomfrey needs to see to you."

"No, Harry, I want to stay with you," she said, but accepted the ring that was shoved onto her finger.

"Three, two, one," Harry counted. Hermione suddenly vanished. If one good thing had occurred, it was his ability to get her to safety.

"Where did you send the Mudblood?" Antonin asked. "She'll bring back Aurors, she will!" They all looked at each other uneasily.

Harry smirked and whispered something in Parseltongue. Nagini glided over to the nervous man and hissed menacingly. "I've sent her to get medical attention. Some of you seem to have worked her over. Severus will be along shortly to avenge her. After everyone is accounted for, and scores are settled, we will have to decide where to go from here." Harry patted the old man on the back. "Higgs, here, has a perfect hiding place. His dungeon is nearly impossible to find. Well, for most," he said arrogantly. "But, not to me. However, I think that they will be doing a more thorough search soon. We will have to find another place to hide you perhaps."

Conjuring a plush chair, Harry sat down. Thinking things over in his mind, he decided to take a page from what he'd witnessed in Severus' nightmare. "You can all get up." When Antonin tried to stand, Nagini struck his leg in two rapid successions. Harry shook his head and cackled. "*Ssheekkayyssssteess*." The snake moved away to coil by Harry's left side. The other snake, Loony, slithered over to coil by his right side. "Someone heal the blighter." Both Higgs moved forward to administer healing spells to the man's wounds. Harry knew that Nagini hadn't projected any poison in her bite. She was nearly putting pain and fear into them. She wasn't so bad, Nagini. Not once you had a decent conversation with her. She was brilliant!

*Crack! Crack!* Two men Apparated into the room and looked around wildly. They greeted their mates jovially before noticing an irate Harry Potter glaring at them intently. "I know you, Mulciber, but who is your companion?"

The confused wizard looked to the others. Bella spoke, "Potter is our new Lord. Our old Master lives within. Pay your respects."

The man kneeled down quickly and made to crawl to Harry's feet. Harry lifted a hand. "Stop. There is no robe kissing here. You are a man, aren't you?" He glared at the man still standing. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes," the man said tartly. "I'm not kneeling down to a child. I hate you. Hated you since you was a baby and all. Prayed you'd die."

Harry sneered. "It appears that your prayers have not been answered." The eerie wind began blowing through the room again. Harry whispered to Nagini and Loony. Both sprang forward. The man was knocked to his feet. Both vipers wrapped around his body tightly. One on his lower body, and the other around his torso. Harry shook his head. "It's really too bad about him, isn't it?" Harry suddenly realized who the man was. Some flash of memory that was once Voldemort's came through. Travers was the bloke's name. "It appears that Travers has never learned to clip that saucy tongue of his. I told him that if a Crucio wouldn't stop it, Nagini would." He saw the odd exchange between the others. His plan was working perfectly. They believed that the words he'd just spoken were those of Voldemort.

*Crack! Crack!* A wild-eyed Severus Snape and a livid Lucius Malfoy Apparated before them. "You may rise, Mulciber. Take your place among the circle." The man scrambled away to join the others. "Severus, Lucius, good to see you."

Lucius glanced to Draco to be sure that he was still alive and filled with relief. His son and heir still lived. Thanks again to Potter no doubt. Blast! He'd owe the boy so much. "Thank you, Lord Potter." Lucius wasn't exactly sure what to call Harry, but that seemed adequate.

Severus eyed everyone with his normal sneer. Harry noticed that he was looking around for Hermione. "She is safe, Severus. I've Portkeyed her to Hogwarts." The man let out a ragged breath, and Harry could see that his eyes were shining brightly. To save him from humiliation, he said, "I wonder who else will be coming? Is someone missing? Someone that is still alive that I don't know about? Someone I can't remember?"

Bellatrix spoke. "We have been in Azkaban, Master. We are unsure who died and who is running. I thought Travers to be long dead," she said, eyeing the twitching man uneasily. "I only knew of Antonin and Rabastan through Higgs."

"Higgs?" Harry questioned.



Before the old man could speak, there was another Apparition. *Crack!* A young boy, not much older than Harry, appeared before them. Blast! Stebbins! Harry had no idea. Anger boiled in his veins. This boy was a friend to Cedric! How could he have joined the bastard that had his mate killed? "So-sorry I'm late," the scared boy muttered. "My wife..." The boy swallowed hard, seeing two snakes squeezing the life out of one of their own.

"Take your places amongst the circle," Harry said quickly. "I suppose there is nobody else. I shall begin. Higgs, you can get with me after to discuss some that may be in hiding." The old man nodded. "Time to settle old scores." He walked to stand in the middle of the circle. "Severus, Lucius, and Draco have been loyal to me. I will not accept any bitterness towards them at any rate. I will also not accept any rubbish about someone's blood. I am a Half-blood just as Voldemort was before me." A couple of those present gasped. Harry scoffed. "Please, let me know if there is a problem." Harry eyed them all quickly. "Agreed that we will all put the past behind us and start anew after this day?"

"If I may speak?" Bella asked. Harry nodded. "If they betrayed our Lord, how do you know they won't betray you?"

"Good question, Bella," Harry said. She beamed brightly and looked smugly to the others. "We have the same beliefs. I delve into their minds easily and see their secrets. We've been working together for a long while. I trust them. I ask that you accept that."

"I do, Master," she said, nodding once.

"Very well. Rabastan has assaulted Draco." Harry heard Lucius' indignant growl. "I have given Draco the chance to take revenge. He has done so, and he requests the task of killing the man should he try to do us ill." Harry stared at the man coldly. "I have sensed that he plans to do just that, so I will keep a very close eye on him. Very close indeed."

"Sorry, Lord Potter," the man said quickly.

"Enough. On to Hermione," Harry said loudly, casting accusing glares to those present. "From what I gathered, she was hurt when she was hexed. She was roughed up a bit here by more than one of you, and Terence Higgs did the worst of it. He admitted to cutting her hair, slicing her arm..."

"What?" Severus yelled angrily. "He did what?"

"One moment, Severus," Harry said chidingly. Damn! He'd forgotten that Severus didn't know the details. "I found him towered over Hermione when I came. It seemed that he was considering an attempt to take pleasure. Severus, as punishment for his damage and attempted damage to your property, I leave this up to you."

Severus pounced on the boy before him, pounding him with his fists before wrapping his fingers around his throat. "You touched ~~my~~ Hermione! I will kill you." Harry gaped at the scene before him. He'd never known that his friend was so powerful. His hands were around the boy's neck, and he was holding him off of the floor to look into his eyes as the life began to drain away.

"My Lord?" Old man Higgs questioned. "My son. Please spare him."

Hell, Harry had been mesmerized by the bulging, fearful eyes and the feeble attempts to claw at the hands on his throat. Harry didn't want Severus to go to Azkaban. He conjured his Mark and manipulated it so that the song of the Phoenix could be heard. Not only would this calm his anger, but it would also quell the odd emotions he was feeling. It would also bring sense to Severus.

Severus watched as the boy under his hands wiggled desperately. Suddenly, he heard the song of a Phoenix. Said to relax most men and drive fear into the heart of the evil. Phoenix. Fawkes. Dumbledore. Trust. Hermione. Severus dropped the boy to the floor. As much as he wanted to kill him, he would have to allow him to live. If he killed him, he would go to Azkaban. Where would that leave his Hermione? Gods! Hermione was alive! Harry had saved her. As soon as this was over, he would kiss the boy. Well, no, he wouldn't, but he would find a way to show his appreciation. He turned his eyes away from the boy gasping on the floor to Harry. He nodded in acknowledgement. Sometimes it was hard to not answer the call of darker emotions.

Harry watched as Severus moved back into place. The Phoenix song was slowly ending. The reactions of the others had him puzzled. Rabastan, Antonin, Bellatrix, and Mulciber seemed deathly afraid. Old man Higgs seemed anxious about his writhing son. Travers was now dead. Harry felt no pang of remorse, but he knew that he would likely feel it later. Stebbins had tears in his eyes. *Interesting!* "Tend to your son, Higgs." The old man hurried forward. "Lucius, do you wish to take further action against Rabastan?"

The blond man sneered. "I will accept that my son has made the right decision."

"Very well," Harry said. "As only these three know, I have been researching a new spell that would combine the Imperius and the Cruciatus. My main researcher was Luna Lovegood." Harry sneered and stepped closely to the hollow-eyed witch before him. "Tell me. What's happened to her?"

"I have no countercurse, Master. It was something that I had been working on before... for you... er... for our old Lord. All of my papers were confiscated, so I went on what I had from memory. I am afraid that there is nothing that we can do for your... researcher." She dropped to her knees. "Please forgive me. Had I known, I would never have destroyed someone eager to help in our cause."

"We will find your papers. You will write down everything, and you will attempt to restore her. Only you can since you created it." Harry touched his chin for a moment. "In fact, we shall utilize this spell also. It's brilliant. Rise." Bella stood proudly.

Harry wondered how long they could actually keep up this charade before the Aurors came. He needed Bellatrix to figure out a cure for Luna. After that, then there would be hell to pay. He approached the young Stebbins. "Do you remember me?" Harry asked. The wizard nodded warily. Harry really wasn't all that much of a Legilimens, so he called Severus forward. "Check into his mind. I want to know why we don't know much about him." Severus pulled the nervous Stebbins to the side.

Draco winked at Harry. "My Lord?"

"Yes?"

"I need to use the loo." Harry chuckled at Draco's pained expression.

"Higgs, leave your boy alone. He is fine. Show Draco where the loo is." The old man sneered at Draco for a moment, but he led him away. Harry whispered for Loony to follow the pair. Just in case.

Severus motioned for Harry to come back. "A word."

"All right," Harry said, pulling Severus to the side. "What of him?"

"He's never really been involved in things. I felt a great deal of anger towards the Dark Lord for his friend's death. I believe he joined to seek revenge, but he became caught up in the mix of things." Severus eyed the boy again. "I will talk to Lucius, but I truly do not remember much about him. He was one of the newest berks to have joined up."

"Good deal," Harry said. "I shouldn't have let this happen." He nodded to the body of Travers, which Nagini was still wrapped around. "I... don't know. I just ordered it, and it was done."

"We will talk on that later, Harry. We have other issues to work with now." Severus gave him an anxious look. "Was Hermione all right?"

Harry nodded. "Frightened. Roughed up a bit. She'll be all right. I'm sure she can magic her hair to grow back quickly. Are you all right? You seemed... broken when you

came. As if all was lost."

"I thought it was, Harry. I thought it was."

~~~~~SS~~~~~HG~~~~~

Hermione appeared in the Infirmary. "Madame Pomfrey? Poppy? Are you here?"

She stopped as she saw the sleeping form of Stuart Steward before her. Poor fellow had tried to save them. She wondered what was wrong, and if his wounds were very serious, why was he still here? It was then that she noticed Marietta. That bitch! Hermione slowly made her way to the girl's bed. Her hands and feet had been magically bound to the railings on the bed. She didn't look like she had any serious wounds, so Hermione imagined that she was simply in a Bewitched Sleep until they decided what to do with her.

The urge to reach out and smother the girl scared Hermione. She backed away from her quickly. What had she been about to do? Holding her aching side, she made for the Great Hall. Surely, someone would be about.

Oddly enough, no students were in the hall, but three staff members were present. Professors McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Hooch all looked at her with surprise. Minerva ran forward and clutched her tightly. "My sweet girl! I thought I had lost you." Hermione had never seen the normally stern woman so riddled with emotion. "It was horrible to find that note! Are you really here?"

"I am. Where is Severus?"

Albus spoke quickly. "Did you not see him? Lucius and he left as soon as Harry summoned them." She shook her head. "You need to see Poppy." She was holding her side again. "Something is wrong."

"I just left from the Infirmary. Harry made me a Portkey to get in. Poppy isn't there," she said, wincing suddenly. It felt as if something was bursting. Rolanda reached over to help Minerva steady her.

"Calm down, girl. We'll see you there," the yellow-eyed witch said confidently. "We'll get you in to rest near Stuart. He'd like to know that you are all right before he goes."

"Go where?" Hermione inquired as they led her forward.

"St. Mungo's," came the reply. "They will be able to help him better."

They made their way back to the Infirmary. Hermione answered as many questions as she could about Harry's arrival, the brilliance of his control, and about Draco's welfare. Poppy tended to her as soon as she came back in. She had been in the back in her personal stores, finding potions. "I will have to give you three doses of this Hermione. I warn you that any medications that you are taking may be tampered with due to the potency. Understand?" Poppy asked firmly.

"Sure," she whispered. She wasn't taking any ongoing medications anyway. She needn't worry. She just wanted some relief. She wanted some rest. She wanted Severus. According to Dumbledore, he had been beside himself with grief. She trusted that he knew she was alive by now, but hoped that he wouldn't do anything brash. Harry needed his help more than ever.

As sleep began to overtake her, she heard Dumbledore telling Minerva that she was in charge. He and Rolanda had business at Higgs Manor. She also heard him telling her to see to Stuart and Marietta. He wanted them both transported quickly before they could ask too many questions about Hermione's condition. She remembered Poppy pulling a screen around her bed and feeling Minerva's hand holding hers.

"I think of you as a daughter, Hermione," the witch admitted. "I really do." Hermione wanted to reply, but she couldn't. Darkness came to her and with it, an unsettling dream.

"Hermione, why have you not called on me to come for you? You don't miss me?" a silky voice asked. She opened her eyes to see Severus standing over her bed.

"Severus, is everyone all right?" she asked softly. He nodded. She noticed that Professor McGonagall had dozed off. She moved over so that Severus could lay with her. "Hold me, Severus."

"With pleasure, love," he said, slipping in next to her. "I have missed you so much. This past month has been hard not being able to see you."

"Month? Good Lord! How long have I been out? Has Minerva been sitting here the entire time?" she asked incredulously. "Where is Harry? Draco? Ron?"

"Forget about them. Think about me. I want to love you. It's been so long." He kissed her cheek as he pulled her half on top of him. "Show me that you love me."

"You know I love you," she whispered fiercely. She pulled the short nightgown over her head and smiled at his appreciative glance. She had no clothing underneath. Minerva must have magically clothed her for bed. Severus' hands and mouth found their way to Hermione's breasts. She arched against his lips and fingers. Merlin! He always felt so good to her. She began unbuttoning his shirt eagerly, wanting to place kisses on his chest as well.

She could feel his erection pressed tightly to her bum. She wished that his pants would just vanish so that she could take him inside of her and show him how much she loved him. "I love you, Hermione." Her eyes met his for a moment, and something clicked. A month? Love? This was a dream. Severus was not real. He was here in dream form only, but he felt so good to her. So real. So much like the Incubus. Shit!

Hermione pulled away to look at the man under her. "Incubus?" she asked uneasily. The man simply smirked and vanished. What the hell was going on? They had defeated that spirit already, and it usually only left after it put up a fight. She snuggled down into her covers and gave the room a once over, one more time. The dream Severus was gone. Odd. She'd have to think about that later. For now, she was exhausted.

~~~~~SS~~~~~HG~~~~~

Luna's unblinking eyes were still seeing all that happened around her. She couldn't communicate at all. The only thing she could do was lay there and listen to everyone. There was nothing that could be done. She might as well give up. The moment she drifted into sleep the most horrible night terrors would take over. She wanted to die. She didn't even feel as if there was magic within. It felt as if she was only a burden to those who cared for her. They all had lives, but she could just imagine them wasting away next to her bed. She'd only been here since the day before, and it felt like eternity.

Her father would come and cry. All he would talk about was her mum and how things could have been. Ron was the worst. He would come and say how he'd had all these plans for them. Ginny would just sigh and wish things had turned out differently. So did she. She wanted a life with Ronald and a bunch of little Weasley babies. She wanted to write for her dad. She wanted to look into her mum's failed experiments. There was so much she wanted to do.

It seemed that all she had to look forward to was days upon days of nothing and nightmare after nightmare of the most horrible things. The worst part was that she couldn't even cope properly. It would feel so good to have a big cry over the situation. She couldn't even do that. Her eyes were so dry that they burned. She would love to taste cold water on her tongue. Hell, she couldn't even feel it when they touched her skin, fingered her hair, or placed small kisses on her cheeks. She prayed for death to come. It was the only answer.

~~~~~SS~~~~~HG~~~~~

Tonks, Kingsley, and Moody met Albus and Rolanda outside of Higgs Manor. He quickly brought them up to date on all that Hermione had told them. He explained most of Harry's plan to them. They decided to make a plan of their own. The situation was critical. If they went barging in at the wrong moment, things could go terribly wrong. As far as they all knew, Harry was pretending to be the new Dark Lord, and the others were following him. That was from what Hermione had seen, but since Severus and Lucius were summoned, there was no way to be sure what was happening.

"Hermione has kept a log of everything that's been going on. I'll hand that over to you as soon as we are back to the castle. For now, let's help finish this," Dumbledore said. All twinkling disappeared from his eyes. "Rolanda, I need you to stay just in the brush near the gate. If someone comes, activate this Portkey. It will bring you straight to me. It will be our only warning."

She hated missing the action, but someone did have to keep a lookout. It was best that the experienced blokes went in, she supposed. "Finish it then" Rolanda agreed. "Always ready for a good row. Someone tries to pull something out here, it'll be a bad day for them, it will! I'm tired of losing people I care about for ruddy Voldemort's cause!"

"Keep a sharp eye, you lot," Moody grouched. "CONSTANT VIGILANCE! We don't know who is in there, or what we are dealing with."

Kingsley whispered Disillusion Enchantments on everyone. Tonks said, "Watcher! Here we come!"

Southern's Notes: I do adore Harry this way. It'll get interesting soon! We'll see everything that happens inside the house in the next chapter.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 20 of 32

The Incubus returns. Things finally end at the Higgs Manor, and Severus goes back to Hogwarts to see his lover.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I would also like to thank GinnyW for helping me go through this a second time and dusting it off.

Draco finished using the loo and buttoned his trousers only to find that the elder Higgs had come in. "I don't like you, boy," the old man rasped. "Your father isn't worthy of the title Death Eater, and you aren't either. I would be very careful if I were you."

"I don't really give a damn what you think of me, and I believe that you, Higgs, should be the one that is watching his back," Draco said with a sneer. The audacity of the old bloke trying to intimidate him! "Your new Lord looks upon the Malfoys with favor. Same as your last Lord. Idiotic Voldemort!"

The old man lashed out swiftly, bringing the back of his hand across Draco's face. Draco pushed the old man back. Before he realized what was happening, the old man began hopping back wildly, trying to avoid Harry's snake, Loony. Higgs fell hard, hitting his head on the wall. The snake slid over as if to inspect. Its face was right in the old man's when he opened his eyes. Draco laughed at the old man's expression of extreme horror. The snake's forked tongue tickled the man's nose as if tasting him. Suddenly, the man began to twitch violently, and he clasped a hand to his chest. "What the fuck? It's not going to eat you," Draco said incredulously. The old man stopped moving, eyes open but unseeing. Draco couldn't believe it. The man was dead. "Shit." How would he explain this to Harry? He prodded the man's body with his foot. Nothing.

"He's gone, Draco," said an all too familiar voice.

"Tonks?" he asked, looking around. Then he noticed that the wall seemed to be moving. With a whispered spell, the woman appeared before him.

"Watcher, Draco. Had a Disillusionment Spell on. Saw and heard the whole thing. What are you doing here? Where is everyone?" she asked, checking the old man to be sure he was actually dead. The snake seemed to not care about the sudden appearance at that moment. It began slithering back in the direction they had come from.

"Down low in some secret dungeon," Draco said quickly. "Harry is pretending to be the new Dark Lord. He's gaining their trust. I think that he wants Bella to come up with a counter hex for Luna's problem. He's sent Hermione back to Hogwarts."

"I've seen to Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, taking his charm off.

"How many are here?" came Moody's gruff voice. Draco flinched. The man didn't lift his Disillusionment Charm, but it appeared that the wall was breathing just to his left.

"There is Snape, my father, Harry, Bellatrix, Rabastan, Mulciber, Antonin, Stebbins, and Travers' body is there. Nagini and this other snake took him down." Draco hoped that this admission would not get Harry in trouble. "I think he tried to attack Harry, so the snakes attacked when nobody was looking."

"Is that right?" Moody asked.

"Er... yes," Draco answered.

"Leave him be," another voice said. Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared after he broke his enchantment. "The others will be suspicious if they don't return. What should we do?"

"I won't risk Draco. They won't come quietly." Dumbledore seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Are they all armed?"

"Yes, except for Rabastan. Harry broke his wand."

Moody growled. "Why didn't he disarm the others? That makes no sense!"

"I think he is trying to gain their trust. Bellatrix really believes that Voldemort is inside Harry. She'll do anything to please him," Draco said. "I think you should let him talk to them for a while."

"Where is the entrance?" Tonks asked, looking around. "We've searched this place and never found anything."

"It's that way. I was knocked out when we came in, but we just exited through the wall just there around the corner." Draco started to walk forward, but Shacklebolt stopped

him.

"I must agree with Albus. You shouldn't go back down. I think you should show us the entrance, and then take a Portkey to Hogwarts with the old man's body. Madame Pomfrey will know what to do with him until we return," the black wizard said.

To be honest, Draco didn't care to go back down. He nodded and moved forward. He wondered why Moody didn't show himself. *Paranoid old tosser!* Draco had never forgotten that 'Moody' had turned him into a ferret back in his fourth year. He knew it wasn't the real Professor Moody, but hell, the man gave him the creeps anyway. Chunk missing out of nose, magical eye, scars all over, stuffed up leg, and just many things that were horrible. *Poor bloke probably never gets laid.* "It was just here that we came out. I don't see any way in," Draco said, truly mystified.

Shacklebolt turned to Tonks, "Look, take the boy back. We'll try to figure a way in. Maybe someone will come up looking for them. Get Hooch to go back with him and the boy. You take Hooch's place outside."

"All right. Come along, Draco," she said, pulling him away.

Moody's gruff voice broke the silence. "There is an entrance beyond here. Very heavily warded. Only a family member can get in. If we blasted the wall, we still might find nothing. These are very Dark wards here. I say we sit and wait. Someone will come looking for the pair."

"I hate waiting, but you're probably right. I wonder how the snake got back through?" Shacklebolt asked, touching the wall gingerly.

"Perhaps the snake is elsewhere," Dumbledore offered. "Disillusion yourselves."

"Now, we wait," Moody said, pointing out the obvious.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione awoke to a cold washcloth being pressed to her head. She was in a small, private room. She could see the Infirmary beds through the open door, so she knew she was still at Hogwarts. "Minerva," she croaked. Her throat was dry. "Water."

"Here you are," the older witch said, bringing a glass to her lips. "Just a little at a time."

"How long have I been sleeping?" she asked tiredly. It seemed that she would doze off at any moment again. What the hell had Poppy given her?

"It's only been two hours since you came back. You were having bad dreams almost the entire time." Minerva gave her another drink. "Is there anything you wish to talk about?"

"Just... what's wrong? Why do I feel this way?" she asked.

"You had a nasty hex to your abdomen. It caused your appendix to burst. You also had two broken ribs. Poppy has you all fixed up. There was a slight tear in your uterus, but it was minor. She sealed that up," Minerva said softly. "In fact, you are ovulating. I wouldn't worry that it did any lasting damage."

"Did Severus not come back?"

Her mentor shook her head. "We moved you in here to keep the Aurors from questioning you about anything just yet. Stuart has been taken to St. Mungo's for the night. Miss Edgecombe will go to join her mother, Umbridge, and Fudge at the Ministry. They've all been taken into custody."

"I need to sleep," Hermione said. Hopefully, Severus would be with her when she awoke again. She was worried. If something happened to him, she wouldn't know what to do.

"Rest, Hermione. Rest," Minerva said. After the girl went to sleep, she went to find Poppy. The mediwitch was tending to a sick first year, so Minerva waited in her office until she was done. "Well?"

"I just did a scan. Her bones have healed. Her wounds are mended completely. There is no sign of sexual assault, but she was actively involved with Severus. If someone did rape her, it is possible they took extra care or had her Stunned. There is no tearing, no bruising, and I would say no. It will be up to her to let us know." Poppy sat down hard. "I hate knowing that they have to go through this again. The lot of them. All of us. When will this ever end, Minnie?"

"Hopefully, Albus and the others will see it end today. There can't be many left. Imagine, Poppy, if they can round up the last few, it will truly be a new era in our lives." Minerva smiled. "Albus deserves to be able to retire without worrying about everyone else for once."

"Too right you are," Poppy agreed.

"Poppy!"

"Rolanda is back. Oh, dear," the woman replied, hurrying out with Minerva on her heels. "What's happened?"

"Bloke keeled over for no reason," Rolanda said, hovering the body of old man Higgs. "The boy needs some healing." She nodded to a numb looking Draco. "And, some Sleeping Draught, if you ask my opinion."

"What news do you bring?" Minerva asked quickly, as they placed the dead man in a bed. Poppy was seeing to Draco behind a privacy screen.

"Well, Draco and the old man went upstairs. They argued a bit, the man tripped over a snake, and fell down, hitting his head. When he came to, the snake was hovering in his face. Draco says that it looked as though he died from fright." Rolanda shook her head. "He's not all that old. Just doesn't seem right."

"Go on, woman. What else?" Minerva urged impatiently.

"Oh, sorry. Albus, Alastor, and Kingsley are unsure of how to enter the dungeons where all of the others are. The men down there either went in with one of the Higgs or Apparated when Harry summoned them." Rolanda closed the man's eyes. "They've been waiting for a while now, hoping someone will come out to see what has happened to Draco and the old man."

"So, you know nothing?"

"No, Draco says that Harry is playing the part of the new Dark Lord quite well. Gave us the whole story whilst retching a few times before we Portkeyed in. Poor little blighter."

"Well, come on then. Tell all you know, woman. You are so damn infuriating," Minerva scoffed.

"How is Stuart?"

"He's gone. Poppy says he'll be fine. Now, if you don't want to end up in a pink dress, I suggest you sit down and tell me all you know." Rolanda grinned and sat on the bed with the dead man laying in it. Minerva looked around uneasily. "Er... perhaps we should go in Poppy's office. She'll want to hear it as well, as soon as she puts Draco down."

"Someone needs to Floo Ronald Weasley. Draco seems to think he would want to be with Hermione and him at a time like this. You do that, and I'll go fetch us some drinks," Rolanda said, walking off towards the exit.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

The evil spirit walked up to Hermione's bed. She was dreaming that she was sleeping in her old quarters, the one from her days as a student. The Incubus remembered those days fondly. Spirited one, this, he thought snidely. She had been too strong and was able to rebuff his advances. He'd then tried to seduce the man in the form of the Succubus, but he was able to deny the desire to mate as well.

Something different would have to be done this time. The Incubus had felt her spirit weaken as she resigned herself to the fate of a raped woman. Even though she wasn't raped, she had momentarily believed that she would be worthless and unloved by her mate. She had thought that all was lost and had gone numb inside. Her soul had called out for help. The Incubus knew that her resolve had weakened. She would be off her guard now.

His job would be easier. If she conceived a child from a union with the Incubus, the child would grow to rule the world. Her magic was immense, more than she even realized. If he could mold the child with his beliefs, the possibilities would be limitless. They could rise up against those that had scorned the many wayward spirits of the world. They would prevail where Merlin had failed.

The old woman had given her a healing potion to dissolve a wounded body part from within. It nullified her Contraceptive Potion. The Incubus placed a hand over her stomach. He could feel her fertile little body preparing to produce an egg. She would be ripe for the next couple of days. This would need to be done delicately though. If he just did as he used to do, forcefully approaching her, she would rebuff him.

Hermione Granger was no fool. On his earlier visit, it had only taken her a few moments, but she had realized that she was dreaming. She had known he was her Incubus. He had left her without a fuss because he had a plan. He would slowly convince her that she was having erotic dreams about her lover. By this time next month, when she was ripe again, she would be ready for his magical seed to fertilize her womb. No Contraceptive Potion that she could take now would work. The medicine that the old witch had given her would stay in her body for a long period of time.

"Hermione," Incubus Severus whispered. "Let me hold you." Her little dreamy eyes opened slowly. When she held out her arms, he laid next to her. Patiently biding his time. He knew that in order to succeed he would have to trick her. Take away her suspicions. Let her think she was having sweet little dreams. Build up to a bedding. He only wished he could figure out what seemed so off about her.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Well, that's all that's happened since I came by this morning," Ron said sadly, hoping to see a glimmer of recognition in Luna's eyes. There was nothing. "Ginny, do you want to talk to her?"

"No, Ron. They said she couldn't hear us anyway. Talking to her just... makes me sad," his sister replied, wrapping her arms around her body. "I'm really worried about Harry. He's very angry right now. I can still feel his emotions. If I didn't know any better, I would say that he was mad enough to kill someone." She shivered. There had to be something more that was going on. She needed to find out exactly what.

"Kids," Molly said, entering the room. "I've come to tell you that Professor McGonagall Flooed a few moments ago. Something has happened to Hermione and Draco. They are at the Hogwarts Infirmary now. You have permission to Floo in, Ronald."

"I want to go as well," Ginny protested.

"No, you don't, young lady! I don't even want him to go. Not if... something is happening." Molly put her hands on her hips. "Besides, they said only Ron."

Ginny pouted. Ron nodded. "Goodbye, Luna. I'll come back tomorrow." He kissed her cheek softly, wishing again that some flicker in her eyes would clue him in that she knew he was there. Nothing. No time to dwell on it. Apparently, he had the rest of his life to try, but for now, Mione needed him. Draco needed him. He had to go.

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Harry wanted to choke the witch before him. She was rambling on about so many things that he didn't give a flying fuck on a broomstick about. "Bella, if you fail me in this, I shall be very angry. She was in the midst of my research. Imagine what we could do with such knowledge! If the Ministry keeps creating its restricting decrees, we may need to take action."

"I know, Master, but I am just telling you everything that led up to my researching the spell. I know I should have mentioned it before, when... well, before, but I wanted to perfect it before presenting it. If I could just get my notes, I know that I could figure out a reversal." She nodded. "It feels good to have a master again."

Harry smirked and leaned forward. "Between you and me, I think that Antonin and Rabastan will try to overturn me. I saw Rabastan's mind. He doesn't feel loyal to me."

"Should I kill him?" she asked, eyes lighting up. "To prove my loyalty?"

"No. He may have his uses yet," Harry said, trying to appear thoughtful. "Say, what of that young boy over there? I don't remember much about him. How long had he joined us before the final battle?" Harry bit the inside of his mouth. He'd almost said some biting remarks.

"You never did trust him, Master. You made him take the Mark, but you only sent him to get necessities. We were going to destroy him because you'd read in his thoughts that he initially planned to attack you," Bella said proudly, smiling adoringly at Harry. Harry sneered at the woman. She was talking to him like he truly did have Voldemort living inside of him. The dumb woman!

"That's right," Harry said, turning wicked eyes to the boy. "Diggory. He wanted to avenge his death."

"Oh, my Lord, you've remembered!"

Harry nodded. "You stay here, and you gather your thoughts. See what you can come up with about your damn hex. I think I shall have a talk with this Stebbins." Bella nodded as Harry walked away. A quick look around the room, told him that Draco had never come back. He asked Nagini if she'd been able to hear Loony, but she couldn't hear anything. There were heavy Silencing Wards on the rooms.

Mulciber had been talking to Lucius about the places he and Travers had been staying. Rabastan and Antonin were talking quietly in a corner. Terence was sitting against the wall with his head down on his knees. Stebbins was sitting next to a silent Severus. Harry decided to approach his brooding friend. "She's going to be fine, mate. You'll get your revenge. Soon. Bella is trying to get some ideas together."

"It's not only that," Severus said. "There is something wrong. Draco has been gone nearly an hour I would estimate. What would the old fool want with him?"

"I have been wondering as well. Loony was with them though. There was no way that the man would get away with trying to harm Draco. Perhaps we should send Lucius, but I don't want to be outnumbered, if something goes wrong." Harry nodded towards Stebbins. "Severus, I think that he should be set free. If the Aurors see his Mark or find out that he was here, he'll be punished for having good intentions. I think he deserves a second chance."

"How do you propose that we do that, Harry? The Mark is embedded in him forever. They are likely on their way here, if they aren't here already." Severus' eyes lit up.

"Perhaps that is why Draco has not returned. Maybe the Order is here, waiting for some sign from us."

"It's a thought." Harry patted Severus' shoulder. "I can change his Mark."

Severus merely nodded and watched as the boy approached the nervous Stebbins. Harry smiled kindly at the boy, taking care that nobody else was looking. "You joined to avenge Cedric, didn't you?" he asked bluntly.

The boy met his gaze evenly. "Mostly. Yes. I thought I could make a difference."

"You may have made a difference on some things. We'll never know though. Give me your arm," Harry commanded. Then, in a low voice, he said, "I am going to get you out of here. I think you deserve a second chance without the name of Death Eater tarnishing you or your family. I will act as though I am angry with you, and I will pretend to think that you are not worthy to have my Mark. Feign disappointment. Beg me to let you prove yourself. After I alter your Mark, I will hand you a Portkey. It will take you to Hogwarts. I want you to stay there until I come to talk to you." The boy nodded, hope shining in his eyes. "Tell the headmaster and anyone there what is going on, where we are, and check on my mates."

As if on cue, Stebbins said, "Please, Lord Potter, I can prove myself. Just give me a chance. I will obey you at all costs."

"You have never been anything other than a lapdog, Stebbins! You have no right to wear my Mark." Harry grabbed the boy's arm, pulling off a button as he yanked up the sleeve. "My Mark. Only for those who are worthy." Harry dug his thumb into the boy's mark and concentrated on changing it. He could feel the flesh under his thumb heating. After a few moments, he checked. The Phoenix remained, but the snakes had disappeared. On top of the Phoenix were the words, in memory of, and then underneath had the words, Cedric Diggory. Tears showed in Stebbins' eyes.

"Master, please. Do not banish me," he pleaded. Harry saw the tears spilling from Stebbins' eyes. Tears of gratitude, remembrance, and hope were present. There were no tears of regret, pain, or fear.

"*Portus*," Harry whispered, pointing his wand at the button. "You will get out of my sight. For all time." He shoved the button in the boy's hand and mentally counted down. When he knew the boy would disappear, he whispered something in Parseltongue and waved his wand. A large puff of green smoke and a bang sounded. To anyone watching, it would have looked like he'd destroyed the boy. Harry turned to face everyone. "Let that be a lesson to you all."

"My Lord," Lucius said, sneering openly. "I request permission to check on my son. I suspect foul play. They have been gone much longer than they should have been gone."

"Very well," Harry said with a nod. "Mulciber, accompany Lucius." Harry knew that Lucius would likely subdue the man if anything happened. By sending a foe with Lucius, it evened up things here. Young Higgs seemed to not be noticing anything that was happening around him. Since he'd been able to breathe again after Severus' attack, he'd backed against the wall in fear. That only left Antonin, Rabastan, and Bella to deal with. Rabastan had no wand, but the other two each had wands. Higgs had a wand as well. If something happened and he came out of his stupor, he might cause trouble. "Severus, take that berk's wand. We don't want him going mental and hexing us all."

"Good point," Severus muttered. When the boy realized who had come for his wand, he shrunk into a fetal position. "Good Lord, child. Hand over your wand." The boy didn't move. Severus had to reach down to bodily search for the wand. He snapped it in half angrily, throwing it back down at him. This bastard had touched Hermione. He had cut a lock of her hair, cut her body, and he had intended to take pleasure. Severus decided that as soon as nobody could witness him, he would take his revenge. "No wand here," he called out.

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Lucius nudged the man to step out into the hallway. "Go on, man. I need to search out my son. What is it?"

Mulciber was sniffing the air wildly, as if he was a dog. "You smell that?"

The blonde man raised an eyebrow and looked around. "It smells like a stuffy old manor house. I can also smell... something lemony."

"Lemon Drop?" Albus Dumbledore asked, materializing suddenly. Lucius began laughing as Mulciber's face turned white. The man didn't even attempt to go for his wand. He merely slumped his shoulders. He had the look of a worn man that was tired of running.

"I'll have one," the man said, reaching out towards the headmaster. Shacklebolt appeared and pulled the man's wand from his pocket. Mulciber accepted the candy from an amused Albus and allowed Shacklebolt to bind him magically.

"We should get Tonks to take him and keep watch," Moody's voice said gruffly. Lucius looked around. "Don't worry about where I am, Malfoy. Tell us quickly what's going on down there. Leave nothing out."

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Stebbins appeared in the Infirmary. Three distraught witches eyed him momentarily before recognizing him. "Explain yourself," Minerva said, pursing her lips shrewdly.

"Harry Potter sent me here to wait for him. They are still at Higgs Manor," he replied. "Hello, Professors, Madame Pomfrey. It feels strange to be back here."

Rolanda moved forward. "Well, Stebbins, I remember you were a right little flyer. Why didn't you try to play after you finished school?" The two chatted about Quidditch for a couple of minutes before Minerva became impatient and demanded to know all that had happened.

Just as the boy was finishing his tale, Ron Weasley came out of Hermione's private room. "She's just asked for some water. Is it all right for me to give her some?"

"Of course," Poppy said, standing up. "I'll go run a few checks on her. You can stay here for a moment."

"I think I'll go sit with Draco for a moment," Ron said, eyes brimming with tears.

Minerva shook her head as the boy slowly made his way to Draco's bedside. He'd lost a brother, as much as lost a girlfriend, two of his mates had been assaulted, and he had to worry about how his other mate was faring against a group of mentally challenged dolts. *From what this Stebbins bloke said, there has been no sign of Albus or the others. It is possible that they still haven't found their way into the dungeons at the manor. Someone will likely go looking for Draco at some point.*

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"Fuck, it's a set up!" Antonin yelled, pointing towards the door. He swiftly pulled his wand and aimed it at Harry.

Bella jumped in front of Harry. "What are you doing? Our Lord will save us," she shrieked.

"Move, Bella! It's a trap. Aurors are here! The Mudblood whore has sent them after us!" Antonin yelled.

Severus began striding purposefully towards the man with his wand drawn. *Diffindo!* A large cut appeared in the man's chest. *Severio!* This time the man's wand hand was nearly severed. His wand dropped to the floor. Rabastan picked it up just as Severus tackled the man.

Harry hissed to Nagini who came slithering towards the men. He instructed her to be sure Higgs didn't get up to help his mates. Harry had his arm around Bella's waist. He whispered into her ear. "I will not betray you. Somehow they have found us. We need to go easily with them. Pretend to allow them to arrest you. I will come for you." The

woman turned to search his eyes quickly.

She nodded and smiled wildly. "Yes, Master." She pulled out her wand and pointed it towards Rabastan. *Avada Kedavra!* The man's surprised face tinged with the green glow of the Killing Curse would forever be etched in Harry's mind. "That was for you, Master. It proves I will do your bidding." She spun at the Aurors, but a Disillusioned Moody immediately disarmed her bodily. Lucius had to pull Severus away from the bloodied Antonin.

"Well, it appears that we really weren't needed here," Albus said, patting Harry on his back. Moody finally appeared. He had the wand that Bella had used in his hand.

"This is evidence. She just killed Rabastan! Her own brother-in-law! Bloody bitch," Moody said with his magical eye roaming about the room.

Shacklebolt magically bound the young Higgs while Albus looked down to the body of Travers. "Harry?" he questioned.

"Er... snake accident?" It sounded more like a question than an answer. Albus merely nodded. He suddenly hissed for Nagini to go to find Loony. He looked down to the now bound Bella and winked. She simply closed her eyes and smiled as if she hadn't a care in the world. Harry could have kicked the bitch. "I need to banish that room of snakes. They should live freely." He moved away to the room with Nagini's family.

As he banished the snakes, he heard a scuffle break out behind him. Before he could pull his wand, Antonin had snatched Lucius' wand from his hand. The man had been trying to calm Severus and keep him away from the bleeding Death Eater on the floor. With the wand aimed at Severus, he shouted a Blasting Curse! As if in slow motion, Lucius twisted around to push Severus out of the way. Unfortunately for him, the hex hit him in the lower back. It was at this moment that Harry's hex hit the man on the floor, dead in the chest. He didn't know what he'd said exactly, but the man fell back immediately. His body began twitching wildly as large boils began forming over his skin.

Severus was horrified. Lucius had tried to get him out of the way and had taken a hex for him. It was a Blasting Curse that the bastard had sent. From Lucius' initial scream, the blood, and the loud crunching noise, Severus imagined that good portions of the man's insides were blasted to bits. He would die if he weren't taken to St. Mungo's immediately. "Harry, I have to bring him."

"I'll do it," Shacklebolt said, running over. "I'll meet you at Hogwarts." With a firm grip on the unconscious blond's arm, they Disapparated from the manor.

"I think we all need to get back to Hogwarts, and we need to do it soon. I've got all the snakes out of here, aside from Nagini and Loony. Let me talk to Dumbledore," Harry said, leaving the man to deal with the dying Antonin. The boils had begun popping, and disgusting fluids were oozing out. He would not be saved. Harry pointed his wand to Bella. "Sleep, Bella. *Stupefy*." The Stunned woman dropped down immediately. He shrugged at Moody's odd expression. "If she thinks that I am her Lord, she will work with me to get Luna's hex reversed! I have to keep up the act... for now."

"Travers, old man Higgs, and Rabastan are all dead. One by a snake accident, one by what appears to have been fright, and the other by his own mate's curse." Moody looked at Severus. "Antonin is dead now as well. Compliments of a mix of Potter and Snape curses."

Albus sighed. "Lucius has been harmed terribly. Let's hope Kingsley gets him there in time."

"How is Mione?" Harry asked quickly.

"We left before Poppy could make a diagnosis, but I think she will be just fine. We've sent off young Draco to the castle as well. It appears that your snake frightened the old man so badly that he just died, to hear Draco tell it." Albus looked around sadly. "I think we have finally rounded up the last of the resistance, Harry."

"Hell, I hope so," Harry said darkly. Nagini slid back into the room. She and Harry had a conversation in Parseltongue as if nothing was amiss. Moody scrunched up his face in disgust. He never did sit well with bloody snakes. They reminded him of Dark Wizards. Severus smirked at Harry while Dumbledore popped a lemon drop into his mouth. "Holy shit!"

"What is it?" Severus asked quickly, noting the shock on Harry's face.

"Nagini says that Loony found a man in a secret room, chained to the wall. She says he's a dark man from a foreign land. I'll bet it's Karkaroff!" Harry moved forward. Nagini hissed some more. "Shit. We won't be able to get through. They went in through some vent. The room is warded like this place was. It's no wonder the Aurors never saw it."

Dumbledore spoke. "I'll get Terence Higgs to open the room for us. For now, Alastor and Harry, I think you need to bring the two dead men back to Hogwarts. Severus and I will handle Higgs and this man. Be sure to let Tonks know that all is well, and we will likely need her assistance. Take Nagini with you."

Severus rolled his eyes and followed the headmaster to the young boy. "Get up, Higgs," he hissed coldly. "You have something to do for us." The boy's wide eyes looked between the men. He nodded slightly to Dumbledore.

Albus smiled. "We need to get into your family's secret room. The one with the man trapped inside. Will you unward the door for us?"

The boy found his voice. "Will you see to it that I am not put to death?"

Albus nodded, and Snape shook his head. Albus narrowed his eyes at Severus before answering. "We will not seek that your life be destroyed if you should help us save someone now." The boy stood up shakily and guided them to a wall.

He chanted a few words and the wall opened up. Sure enough, they found a severely tortured, frightfully thin Igor Karkaroff inside. Severus unbound the man immediately. The poor sod never even opened his eyes. "We should have Tonks bring him to St. Mungo's," Severus said. "I think this is also beyond Poppy's means."

Dumbledore agreed. "Come on, Loony," he said to the snake that had been standing guard near the man. "It's time to go back to Hogwarts. We have to straighten this mess out and put everything together."

Snape smirked. "Been hanging out with your little Parselmouth so long that you now believe that you have the talent as well?"

Albus simply smiled. For the first time in his life, it felt as if everything would be all right. Well, at least until the next Dark Lord rose up and tried to take over. Thankfully, he would not be a part of that fight. Those battles would fall to Harry, Severus, and all of the others.

Severus and Albus Apparated just outside of the gates of the castle after they'd help seal the house and property until they were ready for the Ministry to send all of their teams over. The Order had its own investigation to perform first. There would be no loose ends this time. Albus had brought the snake along for Harry. Severus wryly hoped that the boy wouldn't be bringing his new pets to all of his classes with him.

Wasting no time, he hurried to the Infirmary. Harry was talking to Weasley, but he took a moment to point to a small door. Severus nodded and went to the room. He closed the door behind him. In the dim light, he could see his sleeping witch. Tears burned his eyes and demanded release. She was fine! She would live! In a couple of long strides, he was at her bed and crawling in to hold her. "Hermione," he said softly.

She sat up as quickly as she could, looking around oddly. "Severus?"

"I'm here," he said, pulling her against him. As soon as her body pressed into his, he began weeping openly, not caring if she thought him a weaker man because of it. "I was so afraid that I had lost you, Hermione." He caressed her hair, running his fingers through the portion that had been cut off.

Hermione said weakly, "It's going to be hard to get rid of me. Is everyone all right?"

He shook his head. "Lucius has been taken to St. Mungo's. I am still not sure how he fares. We had to tidy up some loose ends. There is more to do, but I couldn't stay away from you. God, Hermione, I thought I lost you."

The lost tone and the tears took Hermione aback. He really had been upset and had truly believed her to be dead. "You'll never lose me, Severus. I love you."

"Hermione, you are my life. I didn't want to be in this world without you. I would follow you anywhere, even to death." He kissed her head softly while tightening his hold on her. "The only thing that I could think of at first was that I had never told you exactly what you meant to me. What you mean to me."

"Severus, I know you care deeply for me. I feel the same. If I would have died, I would have died a contented woman," she said firmly, kissing the wet cheek near her mouth. "Honestly."

"I honestly love you deeply and completely. There will never be anyone else for me. Ever." Severus looked into her eyes. "I mean that, Hermione. I love you. I just wanted you to know."

Hermione's heart leaped with joy! He'd said it. Finally. He'd declared what he never could before. She knew that she would never leave this man. He had become her life in a matter of five weeks. Impossible? Certainly not. "That makes me happy, Severus. I will be proud to call you husband one day. I'm afraid that I lost your mum's ring earlier."

He dug into his pocket and pulled out the blood-crusted ring. Severus found his wand, cleaned it off, and slipped it back onto her finger. "This is where it belongs. Hermione, I want to marry you soon. Today just proved... I just need you so much. I've waited thirty-eight years for you. Don't make me wait any longer."

"Yes. I will." She kissed him on his lips, inviting him to taste her lips thoroughly. They quickly sealed their agreement with a long kiss. "Hold me."

"Always," he whispered, lowering them back down onto her pillows. "I love you," he said minutes later, unsure if she was awake or not. "I can't stop saying it."

"Good," she murmured sleepily. "I don't want you to stop."

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**Southern's Notes:** Finally. I'm glad that he was able to voice his feelings! We have a bit of a ride left though. Muahahaha...

## Chapter Twenty

*Chapter 21 of 32*

Everyone gets sorted out, and we see a funeral and a wedding.

**Disclaimer:** J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I would also like to thank GinnyW for helping me go through this a second time and dusting it off.**

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Hermione awoke with a smile on her face. Severus' hard body was pressed against hers. His warmth cocooned her and made her feel safe. She could feel that they were cramped up. Why? Had their bed shrank? She opened her eyes. What the...? They were in the Infirmary. Blast! It all came back to her in a rush. She sat up as quickly as possible without disturbing her sleeping lover. He'd finally told her how he felt! He'd said he wanted to marry her sooner than later. When? It appeared they had many things to talk about, but there were more serious matters at hand. What all had happened after Harry Portkeyed her out of there? Leaning over to kiss her lover's lips softly, she heard him murmur in his sleep. "I lost her."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. He'd been so worried that she had been killed. She could only imagine the pain and regret he must have felt. It was likely to be what prompted him to speak of his feelings. The Incubus! Her dream! Had that been the Incubus? She seemed to have remembered two dreams though. The Incubus used to only come once per night. Had it been two visits? Well, hell, it wasn't an Incubus! She'd been dreaming about her beloved. Hermione shook her head and stifled a giggle. How absurd. She had defeated him by ultimately refusing his sexual advances. That was why the spirit switched to Succubus mode and tried to force Severus. She pushed thoughts of the Incubus away.

Her body felt healed. She wondered what time it was? What day it was? The medicine Poppy had administered had her feeling very distorted for a while. Should she wake Severus or let him sleep? Knowing that his day had probably been tougher than hers, she crept away from the bed towards the door. She opened it and walked out. Right away she saw Albus and Harry chatting quietly in a corner near Poppy's office. She could just make out Ron sleeping in a chair by a bed that had privacy screens drawn around it. She walked forward to see who was in the bed.

As she neared the screen, she saw it was Draco. He was awake, looking at Ron's sleeping form. Hermione saw that neither Harry nor the headmaster had seen her, so she went to the other side of Draco's bed. "All right?"

He nodded, but she could see that his eyes looked haunted. "Ron is having a pretty few buggered up days here."

"You as well," she said softly, not wanting to wake up their sleeping friend. "How is your father?"

"He's having a portion of his hips and lower back repaired. They don't know if he'll be able to walk for a long while. Tonks left a bit ago to go get an update. I haven't seen her since." Draco sighed and nestled into his covers. "Hermione, about today... did anything happen? You know... when you were in that corner?"

"No, he was blabbering most of the time, and Harry came just in time to stop anything further. He would have raped me though. He told me as much. Said he wanted me to pretend that he was hurting me to keep me alive. I thought that he would do it," Hermione said with a shudder.

"I... Rabastan... Things happened. Not much, mind." Draco swallowed hard. "I'm right glad Harry came when he did. You can only bite and fight back for so long, you know? I, too, thought it was inevitable. I don't know how I could have dealt with that."

"Well, if you'd like to talk, I'll always be here to listen," Hermione said. "I'm thinking that we are lucky that Harry came when he did. If he had waited like the headmaster requested, we'd be... compromised."

Draco shuddered this time. "I don't want to think about that right now. I guess I'll just try to get back to sleep. Poppy gave me some medicine. Has me going in and out. Er... should we let Ron have a lay down here?"



"He's probably all right where he is. I'd hate to wake him. He looks so content."

"Night, Hermione," Draco said sleepily.

"Sleep well."

Hermione made her way to Harry and Albus. They were still in their corner talking slowly. Just as she approached, she heard a snake's hissing. Odd. "Harry?" She had stopped, unsure if the hiss had been a warning or just a hiss. He held out his hand to her, and she took it. He stood to hug her.

"Mione? What are you doing up again? Poppy said you really needed to sleep." Harry looked her over. "Anything hurting?"

"No, not right now. I just wanted to find out what's happened. I couldn't stay awake long enough for Severus to tell me everything."

"Here, sit down." Harry pulled his chair over while getting another for himself. "I'll just go over everything. I'm not sure what you know or don't know. Old man Higgs died. Can you believe his heart sort of burst with fright? Poppy said that it looked like he had problems before, but he hadn't tried to seek treatment as far as she could see. There were no medicinal potions in his system. I think I nearly scared him to death as well when I first went in. He was holding his chest."

"Wow. Seems like he could have had that taken care of."

"I know." He grinned. "Who cares? One less arse for us to deal with, I say. The only bad thing about that is Draco. He saw it happen, and it seems to be really disturbing him. Well, that and his... er... problem."

"Yeah, he seemed quite upset when we talked just now, but he seems to be trying to keep up a brave front. Maybe he and Ron can get together and talk. They've both had much to deal with as of late," Hermione said softly.

"I was thinking that as well." Harry took her hand. "The little berk that tried to assault you... well, Severus nearly strangled the life out of him. He's been a bit shaken since. Seems like he is willing to cooperate, so long as he's not put in some Bewitched Sleep or killed by anyone. What do you feel on that?"

"To be honest, I'm glad Severus got a hold of him. I bet he didn't like being on the receiving end. When he was about to, you know, do that, he had been... I can't really explain it. Nice? But not nice. He was saying how he'd be gentle with me, but he wanted me to cry out to pretend that he wasn't. He said that would enable me to live."

"He was going to try to help you escape?" Harry asked incredulously, looking at Dumbledore.

"No," Hermione whispered. "No, he wanted me alive to be his sex slave. He wasn't mean to me, but he wasn't good to me either. In front of the others, he put on a good display of being a cold bastard."

"I should have..."

"No, Harry," Dumbledore interrupted. "Things happened perfectly."

"Right then. Two other wizards Apparated in. Travers and Mulciber. Mulciber was quite subdued. He bowed down and took Bella's word about me. Travers though, he was really adamant about not bowing to me. Going on about how he hated me and would never serve me. It seems that Nagini and Loony have taken a liking to me. They, uh, squeezed the life out of him. Didn't even try to eat him. Just killed him."

"Served him right," Hermione mumbled. "Where is this Mulciber?"

"Well, Draco and Higgs Senior had gone up for Draco to use the loo. They never came back, so Lucius and Mulciber went looking for them. They ran into the Order. Mulciber has been cooperating since. Said he's tired of running. Just wants a warm cell in Azkaban and a few meals each day."

"Oh, how quaint," Hermione said sarcastically.

"I'll see that he gets it," Harry said firmly. "He's given us a lot of information and directed us to certain things and places we didn't know about. When I peeked into Rabastan's mind, I saw how he was mistreated in Azkaban. We are going to demand that prisoners be treated fairly. If we don't, then we are no better than they are."

Albus beamed brightly. "That's right, Harry. I see *you* have been reading in the book that I gave you."

"Yes, sir," he said with a smile. He turned back to Hermione. "So, anyway, back to the others. Antonin noticed Lucius and the Order members coming in. He realized it was a trap. He went off calling you names and saying you'd led them in. He and Severus dueled. Severus got the better of him. Rabastan grabbed Antonin's wand, but he didn't do anything. Bella killed him to prove her loyalty to me. Antonin grabbed his wand again and went to place a hex on Severus, but Lucius was able to pull Severus away. Unfortunately, he wasn't fast enough. He caught a blast in the lower back. I then hexed Antonin. He died not long after."

"Right. I hope Lucius will be able to walk again. Draco said they were unsure," she said softly. Silently, she thanked the arrogant, blond man for saving her lover from that fate.

"We're sure that they will do what they can. Before Bella killed Rabastan to prove her loyalty to me, I told her that I had not betrayed her, and I would find a way to get her out. She believed me and allowed me to Stupefy her." Harry chuckled. "Quite a believing performance though, if I do say so myself. It was like I just knew what to say. A bit unnerving if you ask me."

"Harry, we'll talk more on that another time," Albus said softly. He reached over to squeeze Hermione's hand. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you and young Draco alive. I fear Severus would not have fared well, and he would have tried to follow you to the other side. Harry was right to go off when he did. Things worked out for the best."

"Oh, there was another Death Eater that Apparated when I called," Harry said quietly. "Remember Jonas Stebbins?" Hermione squinted her eyes in thought and finally nodded. "Cedric's best mate. He had the Dark Mark as well."

"What?"

Harry held up a hand. "It's not what you think. Severus looked into his mind, and I had a talk with Bella about him. It seems the bloke joined to try to avenge his friend's death. Voldemort was using him and planned to have him killed."

"So, what happened to him?"

"I changed his Dark Mark again. Now it looks like a tattoo. I sent him here, so that the Aurors couldn't see him there. Just in case they'd be questioned thoroughly, I didn't want them to know, at all. He didn't deserve to have his name tarnished. I let him go."

"Just like that? How do you really know he never did anything? Or won't try to break them out?"

"Because I know," Harry said with finality. "My next step, as the headmaster and I have decided, is to pretend to break Bella out."

Hermione gasped. "Harry! You can't be serious. She's a menace. What if she comes after us?"

Harry laughed. "She won't. I'm her Lord, remember? I'm going to have all of the things that were confiscated, and she's going to try to come up with a way to break Luna's

curse. Once we have something to go on, well, then it's back off to Azkaban for her."

Hermione nodded. "What was the talk about the Edgecombes, Fudge, and Umbridge that I heard earlier?"

It was the headmaster that explained this. "After Bella broke out, Arthur Weasley and a couple of others secretly had a few Muggle devices installed. Video cameras?" Hermione grinned. "They work by magic of course, but they've shown everything that happened that night. They also put magical tracers on all the doors. Whomever uses their specific magic code and handprint to get in, well, it's recorded."

"Yeah," Harry put in. "That night, Fudge did the Imperio on Umbridge to make her use her codes to get Rabastan and Antonin out. Bella and Terence were with them. The cameras can pick up sound. Heard everything they said. Fudge was searching for her pass card, and he was going on the entire time about how she'd gone along with Bella's escape because she thought Bella was being taken to be killed. He told the others he used the Imperio on her, and he would be sure she had no recollection of the night. You'd have to see it to appreciate it. It's quite funny, seeing him down on his hands and knees mumbling. The guards on duty had heard something, and he Apparated them away quickly."

"So those two blighters are finally going to get what they deserve!" Hermione said happily. It was about time. Ruddy Fudge! Bitchy Umbridge! "What of Marietta and her mum?"

"Well, her mum was only following orders from someone higher up, but she still didn't turn her in. She will likely have some minor charges. She blocked the Floo at Malfoy Manor so that nobody could alert Lucius as to what was happening. She also manipulated Fudge's Floo, both office and home, so that his departures and arrivals couldn't be tracked. She did Percy's and Umbridge's as well."

"Young Marietta, I'm afraid," Dumbledore began, "will have more charges. She used an Unforgivable many times. She purposely led the two of you to be snatched. The list goes on. Their trials are set later this week. We figured Percy's funeral is more important right now."

"Oi! I didn't tell you," Harry said with a laugh. "Remember Karkaroff? Viktor's headmaster? Well, Loony found him in a room at Higgs Manor. Bloke had been there for nearly the past two years. They tortured him horribly at Voldemort's command. He didn't even know that the Dark Lord had been defeated. They never mentioned that to him. They kept up his torture though. He's barely alive to be honest. He's over at St. Mungo's right now. He only rasped out a few things before he'd used up what little energy he had."

"Good grief!" Hermione couldn't believe it. There was one question she wanted to ask. "Harry? What of these snakes?"

"Well, I told Nagini she could decide what she wanted to do. I could send her home and let Loony go with her." Harry wriggled his eyebrows. "Or I can keep her here with me. She knows I won't be feeding her humans or anything. She is undecided. Loony will just do whatever she does."

Hermione shook her head. She hoped they were sent away. Both snakes were very creepy. "How are Ron and the Weasleys?"

"The same. It's hard for them. Arthur has been out and about though. He had a hand with the arrests at the Ministry. They found Percy's journal when they went to his flat to get his things. Molly took all of his stuff and had it placed at the Burrow in his old room. Ron said it's a bit junky, but he was sure she would fix it up nice." Harry yawned. "He went to check on them earlier. Percy really wasn't all that bad. Fudge had him brainwashed in a lot of things. I think that the journal is a bit of closure for them all. He has every detail about his life from the time he left their house to now. Even stuff from before."

"When will Percy's funeral be?" Hermione asked softly.

"Tomorrow. They want it done with quickly. Guess we ought to try for bed," Harry said. "So much has happened. I might sleep for a week. Be sure I'm alive when you wake."

She laughed at her friend's joke, hugging both Harry and the headmaster before retreating to her private room. She found Severus sitting up in the bed, holding her pillow. "Severus?"

"Hermione," he breathed. "I... come here." She went to him, and he pulled her to him tightly. "I didn't like waking up with you gone. I had to wonder if it was a dream. I need you with me."

"I'm here, Severus. I'll never leave. I just went to check on my friends." She kissed his cheek. "I didn't want to wake you. Lay with me."

"I would like to make love to you," he said quietly. "Just to know that we really are here and alive and well. Is it too soon? Do you hurt?"

"Let's just be slow about it. I'm sure what Poppy doesn't know won't hurt." Hermione smiled, guiding his face to hers. "Truth be known. I need you to be close to me as well, Severus. I love you, and I need you. Always."

"I know," Severus said kissing her lightly. "I meant what I said earlier."

"Say it."

"I want to marry you right away. Now. Tomorrow. Soon."

"Not that."

"Er?"

"You know, how you feel about me."

"Hermione, I'm in love with you. You've worked your way into my life and my heart, and I shall never let go." This time their kiss was deeper...one that seemed to seal their feelings. Finding his wand, he warded the door. He removed their clothes with a few flicks of his wand as well. There was no rush as they leisurely kissed and caressed each other. Gradually, after nearly an hour of simple snogging, Severus slid into Hermione. "Hermione, you feel so good to me."

"Likewise," she whispered, moving to meet his soft strokes. Feeling heady and overwhelmed with emotion, she said, "Severus, let's do it tomorrow. Just a small little ceremony. Albus can bind us."

"Yes," he agreed, picking up the pace. He muffled their cries by kissing her passionately as they both came together. It was only at the last minute that he realized he'd not put a Soundproofing Spell on the door. "Hope they didn't hear much," he said, grinning wickedly.

"I don't care," she murmured. He went to move off of her. "No, stay. Stay in me."

He hated to crush her, but he did love to fall asleep still buried within her soft, moist flesh. He shifted his weight so that it was mostly on his legs and arms. His head rested on her chest above her breasts. He kissed one softly before drifting off into a contented sleep. Hermione's soft hands were rubbing his back and sifting through his hair. He could sleep forever with her loving hands upon him.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Molly reached down into the open casket once more, cradling her son's cold, stiff cheek in her hand. It seemed unreal. His body felt unreal. Everything was unreal. Her new favorite word was unreal. It's how life felt at the moment. Her son was dead, and she'd never had the chance to tell him that she still loved him, that he was forgiven, and that he didn't have to prove anything to her. He would have been welcome in their home again. She leaned over to kiss his colorless lips one last time, allowing her tears to

continue without shame. When she pulled away, she noticed that a couple of her tears had fallen onto his cheek. It made him look as if he were silently crying. "I will miss you, my son. I will see you again," she said sadly, wiping her tears from his face.

"Come on, dear," said Arthur grasping her shoulders. He'd had to keep her away all morning. After a few people would come up to pay their respects, she would rush up and just stand there grieving. It was understandable, but her eyes had taken on such a hollow look. He was glad they'd decided to do this early on. He didn't know if his wife would be able to take it any longer. "We have to let him go, love. It's time to get things going." He was able to guide her back to their seats as the presiding wizard had his say.

Ron sat behind his parents with Ginny and Harry on one side and with Draco and Hermione on the other side. Snape was on Hermione's other side, holding her hand in a death grip. Ron wondered idly how the man had come to care about her so quickly. He shrugged his shoulders. Wasn't his concern after all! He looked at Draco and noticed that his eyes were red-rimmed. He knew that Draco had never really liked Percy, but he thought the gesture was nice. He was showing his support for those of the Weasley family that he actually did like. Ron wished that he hadn't let Luna accompany Ginny. This was his fault.

Shit! He was glad that Ginny hadn't been hit with the spell. It would have been too much. Percy and Ginny both lost to the family? His only sister gone? No, he supposed it turned out for the best. Even as he thought that, he wanted to kick himself. How could you choose between two people that way? If Merlin himself would have come to him and asked how he would have wanted it, what would he have said? Allowing things to happen as they did, well, that was like betraying Luna. He loved her. He would have waited for her and married her. Maybe Harry would be able to get through to that bitch Bellatrix. Things could be fine again. He'd had more hope knowing that his mate was trying. As soon as the funeral was over, he would go to Luna to tell her all that had happened. He didn't care what the bloody Healer said! She had to still be trapped inside her body somehow, listening to all that was said. Could her soul be gone, truly? No, he wouldn't believe it. Maybe he would need that counseling Professor McGonagall had mentioned. He squeezed his sister's hand. Her tears were overflowing.

Ginny couldn't believe that her brother was gone. She eyed the rest of her family evilly. Bastards! They didn't even try to owl him or go see him. She was the only one that actually had contact with him. They dared to all come here to pretend to grieve? It just didn't seem right. *Ginny, what is wrong with you?* She'd been thinking some of the most horrible things since everything had happened. She secretly wished that Percy were in the bed at St. Mungo's while Luna was the one being buried here. At least then, her brother would have a chance to come back. She was confused. She didn't know what to think. The only thing that made sense was Harry. Harry had tried to save Percy. He'd held him as he died, forgiving him, even though Percy had said all those bad things. Percy had blessed their relationship. She would never let go of Harry Potter, not for any reason. Even Percy knew, before he died, that Harry was the right man for her.

She suddenly felt guilty about what she'd been thinking towards the rest of her family. Percy wouldn't want her to resent them. His journal spoke volumes of his own regret at not coming home. Her mum did seem horribly put out. Ginny had been unfair when she assessed everyone's attempts to get Percy back in the fold. Her mum had always sent him sweets and jumpers, but he would send them back. Her other brothers and father didn't try though. Maybe if they'd put a little more effort into things, this wouldn't have happened. Ginny was confused. Maybe she would seek out that counseling eventually. Her mind was filled with too many things. She looked over to Harry. He'd grown so much since she'd first seen him: inside and out. She loved him with all of her heart. He turned to smile at her, adoration showing in his eyes.

Harry couldn't help himself. He leaned over and kissed his witch on the cheek. "Love you," he whispered. She turned shocked eyes back to his. He'd never told her that before. The tears seemed to suddenly be tears of joy as her eyes lit up, and her smiled widened.

"Love you, Harry," she whispered back, timidly kissing his cheek.

He eased his arm around her, pulling her close. He looked around at the gathering. So many people had shown up for Percy's funeral, even though it was such short notice. Harry didn't recognize more than half of them. Most looked like distinguished people. More than likely, they were people he'd met through work or simply pureblood families coming to pay respects to one of their own. One thing was for certain, it seemed that they were all eager to talk to or look at Harry. When would that stop? He'd likely never get to live a normal life, would he? If he went out to play Quidditch for a team, he knew he would be accepted, and he knew he was good at being a Seeker. But it would always be in his mind that they wanted him for his name, not his skills. He'd have to tell Ron soon that he'd changed his mind about their choice of career. He pushed all thoughts out of his mind as he tried to pay attention to what was being said.

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A large amount of food and drink had been brought to the Weasleys' after the funeral. Hermione eyed everyone and came to the conclusion that most people were here simply for details or to say they had been there. She heard snippets of conversation as she walked through the crowd. Severus had gone to talk to Albus while she sought out Harry and Draco.

Ginny and Ron were off talking by the brook. Harry and Draco were standing back, watching them quietly. "What's going on?" Hermione asked.

Draco said, "They both have really big issues. I think they nearly had a row just now. They needed to talk privately."

"Listen," Hermione said uneasily. "What are you doing after things finish up here?"

"I'll be staying tonight," Harry said. "Why?"

"I'm for Hogwarts," Draco murmured sulkily.

"Well, Severus and I have decided to have a small and quick binding ceremony. We don't see any real reason to wait. I guess it's our little way to declare to each other and the world that we are in love and belong together," she said softly. "I know it may seem tacky to do this after the funeral, but we really want this. We will have a larger one later, Muggle style, where my mum and dad can witness, but for now, this is what we've decided. I would like it if you two could come."

"What of Ron? Ginny?" Harry asked.

"They need to be with their family, Harry. If you can't, I understand completely. They need you more than I do." She would never let him know how disappointed she would be if he refused her. He'd always been her strength.

"I think I might have to stay. Looks like it's not going well." Harry kissed her cheek. "But I won't miss the next one."

"All right," she said with a sad smile. He hurried off to break up Ron and Ginny. They were arguing again. Draco and Hermione watched in silence as the three talked for a moment and hugged tightly. She wiped a few tears away. How silly to be upset that Harry wouldn't make her small ceremony.

"Come on, Hermione," Draco said, pulling her away. "We're not really needed here. Let's go find Snape."

"How is your father, Draco?"

"The same. Doesn't want to see anyone. Not even me. Mum isn't allowed either," Draco said quietly. "I think he's embarrassed by his body now. He can't walk right now. All of his bones had to be restructured and bound magically. He'll have to learn to do everything again. They said he might be a bit stooped. I think he's just so proud that he doesn't want anyone to see him disheveled."

"You're probably right," she replied. "There is Severus."

He waved them over. "Albus has agreed, and he thinks we are making an excellent decision." He kissed her cheek. "Minerva has agreed to stand in. Draco?"

"I will," the young boy said immediately.

"Where is Harry?" Severus questioned.

"He's with Ron and Ginny. They need him more at a time such as this. I suppose, it's all right. I don't blame him." Hermione's voice hadn't wavered, but Severus could see the disappointment in her eyes. He simply nodded.

"Guess we ought to Floo back then," Draco said, feeling very tired. His eyes sought for Ron and Harry. He found them in the same spot. Ginny had gone though. He wondered what was really going on. He wished that he could talk to them, but Hermione needed him, too. So did Severus. It was actually an honor to be included in such an intimate setting.

The headmaster spoke. "We will give our condolences once more and meet you in my office, say an hour from now? That should give you time to make ready for the ceremony."

"Very well," Severus agreed. "Draco, we will see you there. I will Apparate us. You will take the Floo?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tell everyone that you said goodbye."

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"She never moves. See how her eyes are? Same as always." Ron's voice was soaked with disappointment. "Thanks for coming with me Harry. I just wanted to tell her about everything that's happened. I wanted her to know that you are working on getting her all fixed up."

"Not a problem," Harry said glumly.

"What's wrong, mate?"

"This," he said, pointing his hand to Luna. "I hate that this happened. If only we'd just..."

"I've been going through that time and again. Doesn't do any good now, does it?"

"I suppose not," Harry said sadly. "What's even worse is that Hermione and Severus have decided to have a short binding ceremony tonight. She didn't think that you'd feel up to going, but she asked if I'd go. I told her no because you and Ginny needed me. I feel horrible about it."

"She's really going to do it, isn't she? Snape is the one for her."

"Yes," Harry said simply. "He is."

"Well, let's go, Harry. We might still have time. She's been our best friend for all this time. We can't just let her do something this important on her own," Ron said, finally smiling."

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"All right. Draco has gone as well. He said that they'd be meeting in the headmaster's office. In about... Blast! Come on! They are about to start!"

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Luna wished that she could smile. Hermione and Severus had decided to marry. Beautiful. She wished that she could have married Ron. It would have been much like Hermione's wedding sounded. Small and intimate. No need for a large crowd. She had heard all that Ron had told her about the events that had taken place since she'd been cursed.

If she did die now, at least she could die knowing that justice had been handed out to all parties involved. Percy's funeral sounded horribly sad. She wished that she could have been there for Ron. Poor thing. Dare she dream that Harry truly could get Bella to make a counter hex to bring her out of this? She'd spent most of the last couple of days wishing that she'd just die, but now perhaps there was something to live for. There was hope. Luna would love to cry with joy. She could feel her mind tiring.

She'd been trying to not sleep for a long time. She hated to sleep because sleep brought dreams. Dreams were nightmares. She was unsure how much longer she could deal with the demons and creatures that came for her. Over and over she'd been tortured, raped, beaten, and killed in her nightmares. She'd had to watch her loved ones go through the same as well. Each time she slept, they would get worse.

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Albus smiled at the young couple before him. "I am so happy that you two have decided to join together. If your love is in your hearts now, truly, it will remain there for all time. Being such a small ceremony, we will have to double up on everyone's role. Minerva will double as your maid and my assistant. She has prepared the altar for us tonight. That's where she is now. We have decided on a ceremony witnessed by the celestial bodies of the night sky. It will be held on the top of the Astronomy Tower to bring us closer to our observers."

Draco walked up at that moment. "I've just finished talking to Professor McGonagall. She went over the roles I am to play in the ceremony. I'm ready. She said that Professor Sinistra wants to start her speech and has agreed to help with the couple's blessing."

"Shall we?" Severus asked, holding out his arm for Hermione.

She intertwined her arm in his. "Yes."

They decided to not have a lengthy traditional ceremony. Not this time around. Each wanted to be bound and have it done without much fuss. It seemed to both that such frivolities meant nothing; it was only the binding that mattered to either. Before Rolanda went off for a visit to Stuart at St. Mungo's, she had given Hermione her white satin wedding set of robes and dress, complete with a stunning veil. After a little sizing, Hermione and Minerva had her dressed and ready. Minerva insisted on having Pomona put together a lovely bouquet of flowers. The women had decided on orange blossoms accented with lemon leaves.

Hermione wasn't enthusiastic about the look and citrus smell emanating from the arrangement, but when they told her the flowers' meanings, she didn't mind. Orange blossoms represented innocence, marriage, and fruitfulness. The lemon leaves represented everlasting love. It wasn't the prettiest arrangement, but knowing that the staff had tried to do something for her made her feel welcome amongst them. Filius had charmed the bouquet with a Lasting Spell so that they might live longer. Pomona explained as much as she could before she sauntered off. Trelawny had donated some of her personal incense for the altar. It was Hagrid that wanted to be in charge of the bread and drinks for the bride and groom. He opted to give them Elderflower Wine. Hermione smiled when she was told this. It reminded her of the Weasleys.

On their walk towards the Astronomy Tower, they heard pounding footsteps as someone was running their way. To Hermione's delight, it was Harry... and Ron! She met them eagerly, hugging them. "I'm so glad that you've come!"

"Couldn't let you jump into a pit of snakes without us being around to bail you out, could we?" Ron said saucily, blanching at Severus' sour expression. "Er... you know... figure of speech and all that."

"I can't believe I was going to miss this. We would have been here sooner, but I had to go to my vault. Can I talk to you in private for a moment, Mione?" Harry asked, eyeing the others.

"All right," she agreed, allowing him to lead her away.

Once they were far enough, he stopped. "What token do you have for Snape? You are using rings, right?"

"Yes," she said. "I hadn't the time to get him one as of yet, but I am going to use my House ring for now."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You don't think he'd want a Gryffindor ring?" He chuckled at her put out expression. "I have this. I want to give it to you." Harry took a small box out of his pocket. "Please. I would be honored. It was in my parents' vault. I think it suits him. Nothing flashy, and it is platinum."

"Harry, I don't think he would want to wear your Dad's ring. No offense," Hermione said kindly.

"It wasn't for my dad. It was for my mum's dad. She was saving it for me. Well, I've had it, and this is what I want to do with it. I have my own dad's ring should I have need for it. I think... I think she wouldn't mind for Severus and his kids to have it," Harry said thoughtfully.

Hermione smiled. He was right. Lily wouldn't have minded at all. But did Hermione mind? Sort of, but not really, if that makes sense! She didn't like that it was Lily's, but the fact that it was Harry's won her over. "Thank you, Harry." She kissed his cheek softly. "Hold this one." She took his ring and handed her House ring to him.

"Shit. He saw that, and he looks as if he'd like to come skin me alive. Let's get back," Harry said, laughing lightly.

Draco pulled both boys on the side as everyone began traveling up again. "Look, they've got me doing all the dirty work in the wedding. I think you two should share in the chore. It would probably mean a lot to her. And, every time the headmaster or McGonagall says something that is addressed to all of us you have to say, so mote it be."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's what I was told."

"Tell us what we need to know."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Lucius Malfoy used magic to lift himself as they had instructed. He glided over to a mirror. He didn't look too bad off, and if he didn't know that a good portion of his bones and some nerves had been blasted to bits, he wouldn't be able to tell. Not in this position anyway. The Healer said that he might have a slight stoop in his posture since some minor bits were not replaced. The man had said he'd probably have to use a cane. What irony! For years, he'd walked with a cane because it was fashionable, but now he'd have to walk with one, as soon as he learned to walk again.

How does one learn to do what he knows how to do already? He wondered if he should try it. Damn! He knew better. It was better to wait whilst others were present, just in case. He hated feeling this way. He'd not been afraid of anything since before the Dark Lord had fallen. What would Narcissa say? She was so damned conceited about herself and the family that she might see him as tarnished goods. He would no longer be the impeccable, arrogant Lucius Malfoy that she'd married, but a slightly stooped, older, more humble, Lucius. Could she handle that? It was one of the reasons he'd not allowed her in. He didn't want her to see him until he was on his way to recovery. It might be less of a blow to her.

He floated back to the bed and was just settling down as a Mediwitch entered. "Hello, Miss," he called. "I was just practicing my hovering."

The woman didn't reply. She pulled up his covers over his body and fluffed his pillows. She poured some water into a glass and handed it to him. "Drink." He did as he was ordered. She put the glass away and summoned a brush.

"What do you think you are doing?" he asked in amazement, reaching out to still her hand. She dared to think that he would allow her to brush his hair. He'd seen this particular witch a few times. Odd one, this.

"I just wanted to brush it. It looks a bit tatty in the back, being knotted and all that."

"Only my wife is allowed to touch my hair, other than myself." He sneered hatefully at the woman hoping she would go away. He noted tears in her eyes.

"You ought to let her come to see you then. Maybe she could tidy you up some," she said, rising to leave.

"And allow her to see me this way? No, I don't think so, thanks," he said dryly.

"Why not?" she screeched. "Think you she doesn't love you no matter what? Think you that she isn't proud of you and all that you've done? You are a hero in her eyes Lucius Malfoy. Always."

Lucius pointed his wand at the pest. "*Finite Incantatem.*" Sure enough, her Unrecognizable Charm had been lifted. No wonder she only stayed a few minutes at a time. Those charms didn't last long at all. "So... Narcissa, why?"

"Because you wouldn't let me in! I had to come, and this was the only way," she said, wiping at her face angrily. "You don't give me as much credit as I should receive, Lucius. You just don't want anyone to see you because you are ashamed. We don't care about this." She pointed to his body. "We are just grateful that you are alive."

He was speechless. Narcissa was right of course. He hadn't even given her a chance to see him. He'd been so sure that she would look upon him with repulsion that he'd kept her away. Everyone away. He saw what his back looked like now. It looked burnt and had nasty blisters all over. There would be untreatable scars once it was healed. Perhaps he should have trusted in her loyalty and... love? They'd spoken of love already of course, but hadn't that all been a part of the wedded bliss act? He did love her, but he always wondered about her feelings for him. Now, it seemed, he honestly knew.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione smiled when she saw the beautiful altar that Minerva had made. The incense sticks were burning, and the pleasant scent of Jasmine wafted about. Perhaps Trelawny wasn't as dense as she let on. A beautifully decorated bottle held Hagrid's wine while a decorative metal plate held sliced bread and a matching chalice rested in wait of its use. On a tiered candleholder, there were three candles: gold, silver, and black. Hermione noticed a few small dishes with some unknown contents inside. There were three cords on the altar as well: white, black, and red. A circle made of what looked to be soil and salt surrounded the altar. There was also a need-fire built. Hermione could see several shiny stones surrounding the small magical blaze. Before they could enter the circle and take their places before the altar, Pomona came forth again to explain her flower scheme on the altar.

There was a flower arrangement in the center with a shock of odd colors. The smiling witch explained what each flower meant. There was a mixture of Peony, representing happy marriage and prosperity, Ivy, representing wedded love, fidelity, affection, and friendship, and Lavender, representing loyalty. "She didn't say it had to be beautiful. Just that it had to have meaning. Can't think of better meaning than that, eh?"

"Right. Thanks," Hermione said softly. Severus simply nodded. She looked around at the guests and wedding participants: Hagrid, Trelawny, Filius, Pomona, Sinistra, Ron, Harry, Minerva, Albus, and Draco. Voices behind them drew her attention. She waved when she saw who it was. Rolanda and Stuart! He was well enough to be dismissed from the hospital! They quickly slid over to the side to have a seat in conjured chairs. Everything seemed complete now; although she wished the Weasleys and her parents could be there with them.

"Enter the circle, Hermione and Severus," Albus instructed. They did so. "This altar has been prepared for you and the infinite circle has been drawn. Do you accept its significance to your rite of binding?"

"I accept."

"I accept."

"So mote it be," Dumbledore said. Everyone present repeated the words. He continued, "Your vows shall be witnessed not only by all present, but also by the celestial bodies of the night sky. Do you accept?"

"I accept," said each.

"I stand aside to allow my associate a chance to call upon our witnesses." He stepped back as Sinistra made her way forward. In her drawling, bored sounding voice, she began to speak. "We will enlist the help of Pleiades this night. Pleiades, which we will henceforth call the Seven Sisters, is found nestled in the constellation of Taurus. Taurus itself represents strength and power. A union such as this could band together nothing less." Sinistra paused while she lifted her wand above. She gave the illusion of circling the stars and pulling them closer. "From the Seven Sisters we ask for seven things. We ask this union to be blessed with security, loyalty, love, fidelity, prosperity, fertility, and longevity." She held up a crystal and seemed to present it to the sky. She began a slight incantation, and Hermione would have sworn that she saw small jets of lights coming from Sinistra's illusion. After she finished, the woman placed the crystal on the altar, where it continued to glow softly. "Your union has been accepted, and you shall be bound. So mote it be."

"So mote it be," everyone repeated.

Sinistra stepped aside to allow Dumbledore to reclaim his position. "Hermione and Severus please interlace your right hands and your left hands."

Minerva spoke. "Welcome all to the rite of binding between Severus Snape and Hermione Granger. They have met here to become bound, and together they seek security, loyalty, love, fidelity, prosperity, fertility, and longevity. If any should not believe this union to be true, please state your reasoning." Minerva scowled at everyone present. If anyone had anything to say, they certainly would dare not speak out against the stern witch. "We continue then."

Albus beamed at the couple. "I request the moon to keep an ever watchful eye on the two standing in the circle before me. May the lunar body be the gravitating force that guides the pair to always pull together. Please kneel and keep your hands together."

Hermione's hands trembled slightly as they kneeled down. Severus couldn't believe that she had agreed to bind with him so quickly. What had he done to deserve such a loving witch? He wanted to lean forward to kiss her, but he knew now was not the time. *I'm getting married. How the fuck did this happen?* He smiled goofily as he looked into his intended's eyes.

Albus continued. "Severus Snape, what do you offer to Hermione Granger?"

"I offer security, loyalty, love, fidelity, prosperity, fertility, and longevity."

"Hermione Granger, do you accept the offering of Severus Snape?" Albus asked.

"I accept."

"Hermione Granger, what do you offer to Severus Snape?"

"I offer security, loyalty, love, fidelity, prosperity, fertility, and longevity."

"Severus Snape, do you accept the offering of Hermione Granger?" he asked.

"I accept."

"So mote it be." Everyone repeated the phrase. "Please rise." The pair rose quickly, remaining linked with their hands.

Minerva moved forward. She took the three cords from the altar. "Keep only your left hands together." She wrapped the black cord around each. "Black is for the absorption of all negativity around you." She wrapped the white cord around each. "White is for projecting peace and bliss into your lives." She wrapped the red cord around each. "Red is for passion and the strength of your relationship." The three cords were left dangling beneath their hands.

Draco stepped forward. He took a dish from the altar. "I soak your cords with anointing oil that has been blessed to ensure that your marital requests are met." He began dabbing oil onto the cords and the dangling bits. He placed the dish back on the altar and stepped aside.

Ron stepped forth. He took a dish from the altar. "I sprinkle salt on your cords to ensure that all negativity is warded away and only positive influences remain." The salt clung to the soaked cords. He placed the dish back on the altar and stepped aside.

Harry stepped forward. He took the last dish from the altar. "I add a bit of soil to your union so that your relationship may always be grounded solidly together. May the Earth bless your union so long as you both shall live." He dusted their cords quickly before moving aside.

Minerva came forward again to tie the three dangling cords together in an intricate knot. She nodded to Draco. He took the black candle and tilted it so that the hot wax would fall upon a portion of the cord, molding it into Minerva's knot. "I use this black candle to seal your vows. Its wax will to repel negativity and protect you." Draco replaced the candle in its tier and moved back.

Ron came forward next. He took the silver candle and repeated Draco's steps. "I use this silver candle to seal your vows. Its wax will encourage stability in your relationship and help to simplify complex problems." Ron replaced the candle and moved aside.

Harry came to them after taking the gold candle from its tier. He poured hot wax on the final cord. "I use this gold candle to seal your vows. Its wax will help you to foster understanding, heal inner wounds, and bring forth prosperity." Harry replaced the candle before moving aside.

Minerva spoke. "These cords have been bound to you and sealed properly. We have done our duty to participate in the rite of binding. We stand aside to witness, along with those present and the celestial bodies above."

Albus then stepped forward again. "I offer you each a sip of this wine." He filled the chalice, first offering it to Severus, then to Hermione. "May thirst never come for you." He set down the chalice and picked up the plate of bread. He gave one slice to Severus, and then one to Hermione. "May hunger never come for you." He put the plate back on the altar. "The spiritual union has begun. So mote it be."

"So mote it be," came the chorus of voices.

"It is time to begin the physical union. Severus Sydney Snape, if you will initiate the next phase by bestowing physical affection to your intended, Hermione Jane Granger." Severus immediately lowered his head to kiss Hermione. While they lost themselves in each other, Sinistra, Dumbledore, and McGonagall all began chanting charms on the circle surrounding them. The magical enchantments began mingling around the circle and created a dome of light that surrounded the couple. After a moment, the color changed from blue, representing love and devotion, to green, representing stability, endurance, and life.

When the color completely faded, McGonagall said, "So mote it be." Everyone replied in unison. She summoned one parchment and quill. "Severus, Hermione, once the rings are placed, you will need only to sign this parchment to seal your vows and become one." The couple nodded.

Albus said, "Severus, place your token on Hermione's finger." Severus took out his mother's ring and placed it where it belonged on his lover's finger. Hermione took the ring that Harry had given her and placed it on Severus' finger. It was a simple platinum band with three small diamonds and druid crosses engraved on either side. She could see that her lover seemed pleased, and she mentally thanked Harry. Severus leaned forward to sign the parchment. Hermione repeated the action. Albus smiled. "I

now have the pleasure to proclaim you properly bound. May I present Hermione and Severus Snape?"

Everyone began clapping. Minerva used magic to lift the glowing embers from the need-fire and kept them hovering above the ground. "I shall accompany you, and I shall start a fire in your grate. Your binding magic has blessed these embers, and in turn, they shall warm you and light you in your first days as a bound couple."

Albus picked up the crystal. "This crystal shall glow brightly once your union is consummated. We shall all stay here to see it done, and once it's done, we shall celebrate by sharing your wine and bread. You may now leave and finish your physical stage of binding, thus completing your union."

"You must stay bound by your cords until you have fulfilled the physical union by consummating the binding. After that, you may magic them off to save with your crystal as a keepsake."

Hermione couldn't believe it. She was married! Married to Severus Snape! She was a wife. It was the only good thing that had come out of the past few days, aside from the destruction of the last remnants of Voldemort's followers. This was a time to move forward and build upon what they had. As if sensing her thoughts, Severus gave her a light smile and kissed her hand as they followed Minerva to their chambers.

After she lit their grate with the wedding embers, she said, "Well, classes won't resume for three more days. I suppose we won't be seeing much of you."

"In light of what has happened, I'm sure you will be seeing us; however, that doesn't mean you'll be seeing us much." Severus smirked. "I intend to make sure my wife is properly acquainted with every inch of our quarters."

"Oh, Severus," Minerva said, blushing slightly. "I'll be off!" Hermione grinned as her mentor disappeared from their doorway in a flash of tartan robes. Severus' eyes met hers.

"Well, my wife, however do you want to begin our consummation?" His eyes were gleaming mischievously, and his lips curled into an evil smirk. Damn, but he loved being able to call her his wife.

"I'll leave that up to you, my husband." She grabbed the front of his robes to pull him to her for a kiss. "Incubus," she murmured.

"Succubus," he replied before picking her up and beginning the walk to their bed.

Southern's Notes: Lemons up first in next chapter. The reason I chose Sydney for Severus' middle name is because that is Alan Rickman's first middle name. I just thought that was a bit fitting.

Chapter Twenty One

Chapter 22 of 32

Harry begins to behave oddly. Hermione and Severus seal their binding. We also find out what happens to all of the others. Draco and Ron grow closer.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I would also like to thank GinnyW for helping me go through this a second time and dusting it off.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, noting the odd look on Severus' face.

"Nothing is wrong. Everything is right. I'm about to make love to my wife. That sounds strangely nice," he said honestly.

"Who would have thought, eh?"

He kissed her softly. "Well, we have to start this soon. They are all waiting for our crystal to confirm that consummation has been achieved. I think I would like for you to decide what you would like tonight, Hermione. Let this be your night."

"Undress me," she commanded softly. He began to unfasten her robes. "It was really nice of Rolanda to give me this. She would have been married in this if her beau had lived."

"It looks as if it were made for you, love," he said seductively, eyeing her dress. "It hugs your breasts, flares with your hips, and clings to your shapely legs. Elegantly perfect for you."

"Well, we did a bit of magical alteration, so if it looks as though it were made for me, I suppose it was." She sighed. "What is with all of these buttons? It's damned hard to do with one hand." She was trying to quickly get him out of his clothing.

"Good Lord," he said. "I could ask the same of you. There must be fifty back here."

She slid his wand out of his pocket. "Fix this," she demanded.

"My pleasure," he said. With a flick of his wand, their clothes disappeared, leaving them with nothing on their bodies save the binding cords.

Hermione pulled him to the bed. "Sit up against the headboard, love. Oh? What's this? Not quite ready for me, are you?" She reached down and caressed his nearly erect penis. It rose to attention quickly.

"It was getting there. I think my emotions are just extreme right now, and that is interfering with our more pleasurable marital duties." He sat down and scooted back against the headboard. "Are you ready for me?"

"What do you think?" she asked, sliding up with him. Severus idly dipped a finger into her and smirked.

"I would say so."

She straddled him. "I want to make love to you just like this, with our eyes level, with our hands bound, with me on top."

"I would say that is most acceptable," he said quietly.

"Hopefully, this will be better than my last attempt at being on top," she said, blushing slightly. "I think with you sitting up with me, it won't be as wearing on me."

"Last time was great," he commented. "Never think that anything you do for, to, or with me is not good enough for me. It's more than I ever thought I'd have." He sucked in a jagged breath as she began to lower herself onto him. "That's right," he coaxed softly, "all the way in. Lord, yes."

"Severus, it's like I can feel you all the way inside of me. I love this. I love you. I love becoming one with you," she said, tears brimming in her eyes. "Tonight was just, well, I loved it." Why the hell was she getting so emotional? She needed to get a grip on herself before she ruined things. The others would wonder what was taking so long for the consummation.

"I feel it too," he said softly, leaning forward to kiss her and to weave his free hand in her mass of hair. "Everything will be fine for us love." He dropped his lips to nibble upon her neck while his hand slid down to fondle her breasts tenderly. Hermione began to timidly move. She rested her chin on top of his head for a moment before kissing her way down the side of his face. His lips met hers, and they began moving together in slow, steady strokes.

It was hard for her to describe how she felt being in this position. He was allowing her to lead the way. If she would speed up, he would as well. If she would slow down and just snog for a bit, he would let her. No pressure. She felt powerful, as she could sense that he'd do anything for her. Hermione wondered if this was how he felt when she was writhing and moaning beneath him. "Severus, I love you."

"I know."

"Say it."

He smirked. "I love you." He nipped at her breasts. The more his tongue flicked over and around her perky nipple, the faster and harder she rode him. Severus loved the feel of her body on his, her legs curling back under his calves, locking her feet around him to better steady herself. It was difficult to continue to lave her breasts. They were jiggling about with her quickening strokes. His hand, which had made its way to cup her arse, came back around to massage her core. He could feel himself building, but from her sudden frantic movements, there was no way that he would come in time with her. She was already there.

"Severus! Oh, yes!" Hermione screeched as tremors began from within and made their way out. He allowed her movements to slow and come to a complete halt as she came down. "So-sorry," she said. He was about to tell her it was all right when she moved her legs a bit and leaned back, taking her with him. He found himself laying over her, still buried within. "Fin...ish it," she breathed erratically.

"Hell yes," he mumbled, beginning the rise to his own climax. He pounded into her drained, partially responsive body, boring his eyes into hers. "L'egilimens," he whispered. He didn't know why he did it, but it slipped out. He wanted to feel what she felt. What he saw and felt had him calling out to her. The very first memory that accosted him was the one of her climax. He could feel her love, excitement, and pleasure. It flowed through into him. "My Mione," he exclaimed possessively as the waves of pleasure slowly receded.

The eye contact didn't break. Another flash came through to him. It was of Harry and Hermione. He felt a wave of jealousy flow from her. It was so forceful that he was nearly blown away. Then, he realized that more feelings were flowing through. Harry was giving her a ring, his ring. This was right before their binding. He could feel love, not their kind, but love of friendship, emanating from her. He could feel acceptance, excitement, gratitude, and so many things mixed together. He pulled away.

"Why, Severus?" she asked softly.

"I think that is something that I could ask you. Where did my wedding band come from, and what does Harry have to do with it?" He watched her expression closely.

"What made you delve into my mind that way?" she asked again.

"I wanted to feel how you felt, and I wanted to combine it with my feelings. I wasn't searching for anything. This flashed before my eyes just as I was about to pull away." He raised an eyebrow. "Explain."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Well, that's it then," Draco said, seeing the crystal blazing brightly. "Wonder why it's so bright. Good grief."

Trelawny leaned over, hearing what he'd said. "The inner eye feels that such a light represents strength of relationship."

Draco snorted. "It does, does it?"

"You should have more faith in what I say, Mr. Malfoy," she said airily, blinking her eyes rapidly behind her large glasses.

"Give me one reason," he said quietly, hoping no other staff members would hear.

"You are undecided about something, aren't you? Not sure how or why you feel a certain way when you've never flown down that path before. Am I not right?"

Draco gaped. "Er... Well, that could be a lucky guess! That could go along with anything."

She shook her head and looked past him to his two mates. "I think not," she murmured. "Believe what you will, boy. I know what you all think of me, but remember, I have given great warnings in the past."

Draco turned away from the breezy witch to face his friends. They were both looking at him oddly. "What?"

"Nothing," Harry said, grinning slightly.

"Never did like her class," Ron said grouchy. "If it wasn't so easy to make up things to pass, I would have taken a page out of Mione's book and dropped it." He shuddered. "Wonder if she actually likes sleeping with Snape."

"I'd say so. She married him, didn't she?" Harry said, irritated. "Shouldn't matter to us, should it?"

"I guess it doesn't matter," Ron admitted. "Just the thought. Why him? Ruddy Incubus. I think he just passed by the castle one night and said, 'Oi, guess I'll mess with these two people.'"

Harry laughed, and Draco said, "Bet Snape's just like he is in class too." He raised an eyebrow and scowled in imitation of Snape. "Granger, can you tell me the difference between vaginal and anal sex? No? How disappointing! One hundred points from Gryffindor! I want three feet of parchment on this subject, and be ready for a thorough demonstration."

The boys laughed. Ron nodded. "I bet Mione doesn't take that shit. She probably tells him to go sod himself." The redhead broke into the first laugh that he'd had in days. Harry smiled at his two mates. He wondered if Ron realized that Draco had somehow become attracted to him. He doubted it, as Ron only had eyes for Luna. On that note, he wondered if Draco realized it even. "What do you think, Harry?" Ron asked mischievously.

"Well," Harry began, "I'd say he probably tried to pull that dominating nonsense on her, and she let him know quickly that wouldn't work. Now, I imagine he still dominates



her, but he's right sneaky about it. She probably doesn't realize that he's steering her in the direction he wants her to go." He grinned. "Or, is that she realizes, but he's too smug to know she's only pretending to let him get away with it?"

"Good call," Ron said, laughing again. "I guess we should go on."

"I suppose," Harry said. "Looks like they aren't going to let us have any of that wine and bread. I'll tell them." As soon as Harry told them they would be leaving, wine and bread were shoved into their hands. "Guess I spoke too soon," Harry murmured. After about twenty minutes, the crystal lost its eerie glow, and everyone began clapping. The boys shrugged, but they clapped as well.

"Hermione and Severus Snape," Hagrid said shakily, suddenly breaking into a loud wail.

Draco shook his head in distaste. "Always blubbering, isn't he?"

"Shut it, you," Harry rebuked. "He's a good man. Just a bit emotional."

"A bit?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Malfoy, why don't you come back to the Burrow with us. When we go to see Luna in the morning, we can barge in on your dad," Ron said.

Draco brightened. "All right. I'm sure the headmaster would allow it."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione locked her legs around him, so that he could not pull away. "Stay and look into my eyes. I will explain." She tried to kiss his lips, but he pulled back. Stung, she began to tell him about what had happened. "I didn't have a chance to get a ring for you. I was going to let you have my House ring as a token until I could purchase one for you that I wanted. Harry showed up with a ring from his family's vault. He said--"

"I will not wear anything that belonged to that bastard, James Potter!" Severus bellowed, trying to pull at his ring.

"Stop," she said, grabbing his wrist. "It was never for James."

"But, you said it came from their vault. I thought there was something familiar about the ring when I put it on. Must have seen it on his finger," he said angrily. "I will have a word with Harry about this. He should have known better. I would have taken your House ring gladly, just so I had you. The token didn't matter."

"Severus, it mattered to me. This ring is beautiful. It was for Lily's father, and James Potter never wore it. It was intended for Harry. He said that he's sure his mum would have not minded if it came to you or our children. Please, understand, I don't like that it's from Lily, but I can live with it. Do you know why?" she asked. He remained silent. "Because of Harry."

The dark man regarded her carefully. So the jealousy he had sensed from her had been what she felt towards Lily. That would not do. "Hermione, there is no reason to be jealous of Lily. She is in the past. You are my present, and you are my future. Whether Harry likes it or not, we will give this ring back. I don't want any problems between us."

"The only problem will be if you don't accept it, Severus. I won't think of it as Lily's ring. I will think of it as Harry's grandfather's ring which Harry wanted us to have as a wedding gift." She smiled. "You can think of it however you'd like, but please, let's keep it. I can still get you another as well."

He nodded in understanding. "You don't have to get another for me, Hermione. I will accept this, but it's only because you do. I just... I don't want you to think that I like it because of Lily. You are my wife and my life. Never forget that."

"I won't," she whispered. "I love you with all of my heart. I am so glad that wretched spirit brought us together sooner than later. Think of all the time we'd have missed out on?" She giggled. "That sounds horrible, doesn't it? Thanking a demon for its pain."

"Actually, I know exactly what you mean. I've done it myself. Come. Let me hold you," he said, moving to the side. "All right?"

"Mmmm hmmm," she said softly.

"No pains?"

"All healed. Just suddenly sleepy. It's been a long day."

"Rest, love."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

*The Incubus crept up slowly to watch the sleeping woman. She was, once again, dreaming of her old Head Girl dormitory. He smirked easily with the face of Severus Snape. One month and she would be under his spell. He would fill her with his seed, and their offspring would grow to take back all that had been lost. Their child would be more powerful than Merlin ever dreamed of.*

*He sniffed the air. What was different about her? Something had changed, but he couldn't really tell. He sat down on a chair to watch her sleep while he thought. The Incubus had foreseen something interesting earlier. There was another who would be an ideal mate. It was the male that was tied to the witch sleeping before him. He was much like the brooding man that she was fated to. The bastard that had denied his Succubus form. He'd even overcome his parting gift of continuous nightmares. It was the brilliance of this witch before him that did it.*

*If he moved too soon and too quickly, she would see through the charade immediately and not think him to be a simple dream of her lover. The Incubus vowed that if she was able to learn his true identity and able to push him away, he would leave her to mate with the other strong wizard. It would be easy to fool him. The thick wizard dreamt of this witch continuously. The man had nobody in his life to help him. It would be so easy to seduce him and drain his magic. Reaching out, he ran his fingers through her hair. Yes, there was something different about her. She stirred for a moment, and she opened her eyes.*

"Hi," she murmured. "What are you doing?"

*"Watching you sleep, Hermione. You are safe. Go back to sleep." She nodded sleepily and closed her eyes again. The Incubus grinned wickedly. Yes, the other wizard would be easy, but this was much more of a challenge. It would be a great conquest to have this one, and to know that he had prevailed when they thought to have completely defeated him. He stood back and began to transform into true shape. Gone was the dark hair and eyes. Gone was the manly figure. The Succubus stood looking at Hermione through white eyes, shaking her thick mass of white hair. What was it about this little witch that had these strong wizards attracted to her? Where did she get her inner strength? Had it been planned for her to become so clever? It was time to check in on her other possible victim. Flexing her long claws and relaxing her wings, she vanished.*

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Bellatrix stared at the ceiling for a long time. If she concentrated hard enough, she could see those enchanting emerald eyes shining down at her. Harry Bloody Potter had

become her Lord. Her old Lord still lived within, but it seemed that the boy was much stronger than he. His memories and actions still showed through, but it was the young wizard that now had the upper hand. She found that she didn't mind. *Bella, if you fail me in this, I shall be very angry.*

Those words were much like the old Dark Lord's words. In fact, if she hadn't been looking at Lord Potter as he spoke, she could have sworn that her old Master had been there. She knew within her heart that he would come for her. She had killed Rabastan, her own brother-in-law, to prove that she believed him. His words were much like some told to her by her old Master. He was so much like him. Pretend to allow them to arrest you. I will come for you. How many times had she heard that phrase from her old Master? Yes, she would follow Harry Potter to the ends of the Earth if need be.

Bella liked the way he'd treated them. He had been angry, but there had been no harsh, unjust punishments. He'd treated them like friends instead of servants. He'd given them respect. She, Terence, and Mulciber were the only ones left from the old gang, aside from Potter's new followers. With Potter there was no groveling at his feet or kissing the hem of his robes, there was only a little kneeling for being naughty. She shivered at the thought of his way with Nagini and that other snake. A true Parselmouth if she'd ever seen one. They did his bidding easily and had even killed for him.

She closed her eyes to better remember the feel of his arm about her waist, and the sound of his voice whispering in her ear. Bella would have him. She wanted to feel his strength combined with her old Master's. She didn't care that he'd taken to the Weasley brat or was partial to the Mudblood. Dirty Severus' whore. No. She had to think more fondly of Severus. Her new Master had spoken the truth. Severus and Lucius were on his side. It was ridiculous of the others to anger them. She would heed his words. Though she didn't like them for betraying their old Master, she would begin anew with them and serve their new Master properly. They would come for her. She slid a hand down into her knickers, pretending it was Potter's hand stroking her.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

The next few days passed quickly for Hermione. The families of the fallen Death Eaters had given their 'loved' ones proper burials. Not that she liked Karkaroff, but sadly, he'd slipped away. It seemed a shame to hold on that long, only to die when freedom came for him. His family was due to pick up his body soon. It would likely be very hard for them. They had thought he'd been dead all of this time, and to know that he'd been very much alive, yet living in misery, would be hard for them.

There was still no change in Luna. She never blinked, never moved around, and just breathed slow, rattling breaths. Hermione hoped that Harry could get Bella to work up something that would help their fallen friend. She was so young and good. It was a pity to see her taken down. She'd become their friend two years prior, and she had stuck by them no matter what. It was great that she and Ron had found each other. For Ron's sake, she hoped that the girl woke up. She feared Ron would never date again. He might never move on, and he'd always be chained to Luna's room. Draco seemed to be helping him though. What was up with Draco anyway? He'd been acting very jumpy. She wondered if it was due to being assaulted at Higgs Manor.

Lucius had finally allowed his family and friends in for a visit while he was recovering. Severus had insisted that she accompany him once. She had been completely taken aback by Lucius' humble attitude, and his wife, Narcissa, had been entirely different from the first time she had met her. She seemed much nicer, and Hermione could see her true concern for her husband in the way she'd look at him or try to comfort him. Maybe getting together with them after everything was settled wouldn't be too bad, after all.

Severus was at the Ministry with Dumbledore and the others. They were having hearings for the two Edgecombes, Umbridge, and Fudge. She'd decided to hang about St. Mungo's with her friends. The only thing that bothered her was Ginny. She'd been acting odd. Earlier when Hermione had pulled Harry on the side to ask him something about Bella, Ginny had glared at her hatefully. She'd never known Ginny to be jealous before. She didn't feel like causing any problems, so she went to sit out in the corridor to sip on some hot chocolate.

It was then that she'd seen him. Viktor Krum. It had been a long time. He was with a group of wizards from his country. Hermione recognized one as being his friend during the Tri Wizarding Tournament. "Herm-own-ninny! Hi," he said, completely surprised. "Good to see you again. Ve vill haff to talk."

"Viktor!" she said with a broad smile, setting aside her mug. "I haven't heard from you in so long. Did you just not want to respond to my letters?"

"I was not allowed owls while I trained. I haff them now. Ven I got home, they vere there." He brushed her hair back. "You look great."

"So do you."

"Viktor," a tall man, apparently his father said, "Ve haff no time to vaste. Karkaroff, remember."

"Yes," he said with a nod. "Herm-own-ninny, I vill owl you soon. Vood you mind?"

"Not at all. Please do. I miss our letters," she said brightly, squeezing his hand. His hook-nosed father was eyeing her appraisingly, making her feel rather uncomfortable. She watched the group leave. They had come for Karkaroff's body. How sad. She shook her head and went back to check on the others. Harry and Ginny were no longer in Luna's room, but Draco and Ron were both sleeping soundly on the chairs next to the bed.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist from behind, and a pair of lips found their way to her neck. "Sorry I took so long," her husband murmured. She turned around in his arms.

"It's all right. What's happened?"

He nodded towards the hall and pulled her out of the room. "Everything came out," he said. "They were forced to take Veritaserum. Marietta Edgecombe will be in Azkaban indefinitely for her uses of an Unforgivable on Draco and Stewart. Also, for her part in leading you two to your capture. Her mother has been relieved of her job at the Ministry for not reporting Umbridge, and for illegally altering the Floo Network. Umbridge has been given ten years for aiding in the breakout of Bellatrix Lestrange, and a few other things that came out whilst in trial. Fudge," he grinned evilly, "has been given life in Azkaban for a long list of things. One of them being that he purposely endangered Ginny Weasley's life by arranging for Percy to meet with her. Contributing to Percy's death. Contributing to Lovegood's state. It's good for the bastard."

Hermione nodded. "I agree. They all got what they deserved! What of Mulciber, Higgs, and Bellatrix Lestrange? When will their trials be?"

"Next week," he said shaking his head. "Harry needs to talk to Bella soon. I think this weekend will be the one." He raised his eyebrows conspiratively. "The one where he goes to get her. It's that poor girl's only chance."

Hermione nodded. "I'm glad they cancelled today's classes as well. I really wasn't ready to start up. Minerva said that Albus would like us to resume tomorrow though. On a Friday," she huffed! "Why not wait until Monday?"

Severus smiled. "Come on. Let's get back. They can all find their own way back."

"I just talked to Viktor. He and some others have come for Karkaroff's body," she said as they strode to the nearest open Floo grate. "Sad for his family."

"He has no family, Hermione. Those that are likely coming for him are past students or school supporters. His wife was killed long ago. They had no children," Severus said solemnly. "I suppose he thought of Krum as a son though. What did he have to say?"

"Not much. They seemed in a rush. His father wanted him to hurry along. He'll be writing to me soon though. We've a lot to catch up on! I wanted to tell him about my marriage!" She grinned happily, but her smile faded. "What?"

"How serious were you two?"

"Oh, come on! We were friends. A little crush, yes, but it never turned into anything. Look at the distance between us!" She kissed her lover's cheek. "Please don't worry on it. You are the only one for me. I am *your* wife, Severus."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry nodded to Arthur after the guard opened the cell for him. He'd given them his wand and requested complete privacy. Arthur knew that Harry was simply here to keep Bella believing that he was coming for her, so he made sure to silently cast a spell on the open window to her cell. Nobody, not even Arthur, would be able to honestly see what was going on. They would only see what looked like Bella and Harry having a talk. He felt he had no choice but to go along with this. If this enabled their side to get information that might help his son's girlfriend, then so be it.

He wasn't priggish to where he'd not trust in Dumbledore's plans. This needed to be done. Harry needed to do what he had to do to see it done. He had to keep Bella believing that he was the next Dark Lord. Arthur smiled kindly at the guard. "So, you grew up with Muggles?"

"Yes."

"Tell me. Did you ever use something called a phonographic?"

"Er... phonograph? Record player?" Weasley nodded. "Sure, when I was younger. There are other things people use now. Those are outdated."

"Fascinating. While we wait, er, would you mind telling me about them? I find this a captivating subject."

"Sure. Why not?" the guard said happily.

Inside the cell, Harry was looking at the sleeping witch. "I know you aren't sleeping," he said, hoping to startle her. Her hooded eyes opened slowly. He gave her a lopsided grin. "Missed me?"

"Yes. Have you come for me?"

"This weekend," he said softly. "I'll have you out of here. Then we can work on our Reversal Spell for Luna Lovegood, all right?"

"Yes, my Lord. I have an idea of what I can do. I just need to check a few things over in my notes. Were you able to retrieve them?" she asked.

"Someone is getting them for me, and they will be ready for you by the time I get you out of here," he promised. "I've been busy with a few things. It's why I haven't come sooner. Would you like to know of everyone's fates?"

"I've been allowed to read, so I have kept up to date with everything."

"Very well. I know this won't mean much to you, but I have smuggled in a little something for you," he said, digging into his robes. He pulled out a small container of Chocoballs.

"My favorite! You *do* know me so well," she said, leering wickedly. "While the allure of strawberry mousse and clotted cream is great, there is something that I want more, Master."

"What would that be?" Harry asked, wishing he could take a step away from the advancing witch. She was licking her lips *Just fucking great*, he thought snidely. *She wants to snog me.*

"I want to kiss you, Master. Is it your will that it be done?"

Harry seemed to think this over. "Will it go no farther than us?" She shook her head. "I don't think that will be a problem." He couldn't deny her, or she might become suspicious.

The woman stepped up to him, being nearly his height; she tilted her lips up to his slightly and pressed a soft kiss on his closed mouth. He was surprised. How could such a cruel and vicious witch have such a soft touch? Out of curiosity, he opened his lips to allow her invading tongue in. He was disgusted yet awestruck. Her lips and tongue were soft and welcoming. Ginny kissed nothing like this. Blast! Ginny! He was cheating on her. But, he had to do this. She would understand. He closed his eyes and went with the kiss. A vision of Bella bending over a chair as he pounded into her from behind entered his mind. He moaned subconsciously. Was this a sick fantasy? One of Voldemort's memories? What the hell was going on?

Somehow the wench's hand had slid up beneath his robes and snaked into his loose fitting trousers and briefs. She was now firmly stroking him. He moaned again. "I know," she said frantically. "It's been so long for us."

Slam her down onto the bed. Take her. You want her. It's for the good of things Harry froze. What the fuck? Why was he thinking these things? Nonetheless, he felt the urge to move to the bed, and he easily maneuvered the witch to lay with him on her single bed. They just barely fit together, but it was enough. She was unfastening his trousers now, bent on getting them down. Harry mentally shook himself. "Stop," he said, sounding weak to his own ears. "Not here."

She looked up at him. "Let me please you, Master."

He pulled her face to his. "Not today, Bella. They might look in on us and become suspicious. This Saturday night when I come for you," he said. He kissed her chastely. She nodded and buttoned his pants again. "You be a good girl for me. Tell no one of our plans."

"Never."

He stood up, adjusted his hard cock, and walked to the door. He knocked once. He turned back to face her once before the door opened. He gave her his most brilliant smile. Arthur escorted him outside, where he promptly vomited.

"All right, Harry?"

"No," he said finally. "I need to see Severus. Immediately."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry pounded on Severus' chamber door. "Severus!"

Finally, after a few minutes, a disheveled looking Snape opened the door. Harry saw that he had only a bathrobe on *Shit!* He'd probably just interrupted them. *Sod it!* "Harry, wh-?"

"I *really* need to speak with you, Severus," the boy said.

"Come in," Severus said, the annoyance leaving his voice. He could see that something had truly gone wrong. "Is Bella not buying into the act any longer?"

"Oh, she's buying into it all right," Harry said, running his fingers through his hair. "The fucking problem is, Severus, that I think I am as well."

"What?"

"You heard. I... Have a look. I won't block you. That way you can feel what I felt and see how it happened."

Severus pulled his wand out. "Harry, don't you just want to explain?"

"Please," Harry said, visibly shaken.

"Relax," Severus breathed. *"Legilimens!"* A couple of flashes from the past couple of weeks came through before the visit that had transpired. He could feel desire warring with repulsion, a sense of duty conflicted with remorse of betraying his loved one, need, hate, lust, and desire. The flash disappeared as another one appeared. Severus' eyes narrowed as he saw a naked Nymphadora Tonks straddling Harry, laughing and leaning closer to kiss him. The vision suddenly disappeared, and he felt a mental shove.

"Sorry," said Harry, blushing furiously. "Don't know how that slipped in there."

Severus couldn't believe what he'd just seen. "Harry? What the hell? When was that?"

"That's personal, sir," Harry said curtly.

"She's an Auror! She's about six years older than you are! Were you even of age?" Severus asked incredulously.

"Look, sir, with all due respect, you are older than Mione. There is no difference here, and yes, I was of age."

"Why were you filled with fear?"

"Well, I wasn't afraid of her. That's for sure. I just didn't want to die never knowing how it felt to... you know. That was before I went for Voldemort. Look," Harry said angrily.

"What do you think about that visit with Bella? You didn't see it all, but did you *feel* that?"

"I did," Severus said. "What are your thoughts?"

"I wanted to have sex with her. I didn't want to. A voice in my head told me to go on and do it while another voice was horrified that I'd even considered it." Harry shuddered. "It was almost as if I could remember having her before. I'm afraid that he truly is living within me."

"This is something we should bring to Albus. He and I have considered this already. I think it best if he gives you his opinion. Meet me there. I'll be along shortly. I just need to tell Hermione." Severus walked back to his bedchamber and smiled at the sight of his naked young wife lying on her side, crooking her finger at him. "I have some other place to be; it will have to be fast."

"Ah, well, we've been playing for an hour now. Come here and make love to me, Severus. Only then will I allow you to be off," she said huskily, still reeling from the two oral orgasms he had given her earlier. "Take your own pleasure, love; I have had enough already."

Severus slid over her, kissed her, and plunged into her depths without any further stimulation. As she had said, they'd been in bed for a long time teasing and pleasing each other. He'd never have enough of his wife. Never. "No woman in her right mind would say that to her lover."

"I felt a bit too sensitive. Just feeling you within is-Oh-enough," she said contentedly as he quickened his pace. "Good Lord," she murmured. "Keep that up."

He smirked and shook his head before strengthening his strokes. Pride with his ability to bring pleasure to his wife spread throughout his body as his wife began moaning and squirming under him. *Too sensitive, eh?* She was the best lover he'd ever had. It felt like she was made for him. Hermione had learned to move in time with him, tightly squeeze him as he was sheathed within, and how to bring him over the edge by doing little things. At the moment, she was caressing one of his arse cheeks, and her other hand had drifted down to fondle his bollocks. Grinding roughly against her, he brought them both to the climatic peak that they sought. Sadly enough, she didn't allow him to enjoy the relaxing peace that had entered his body. "You have some place to be, don't you?"

"Yes, I have to meet Harry in Albus' office. There has been a bit of a setback." Severus kissed her. "I will wake you and explain everything when I come back. For now, I must hurry off."

"I hope you're going to dress before you go," she said cheekily.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Bellatrix couldn't believe her good fortune. Her old Master was slowly finding his way back to her. She could see him and hear him within Potter so much. She would never before openly admit to thinking that the old Dark Lord had been hideous when he'd created his new body, and he'd insisted on having her anyway. Hell, she wouldn't even think that to herself in fear that he'd see it, but now things had changed. Her new Lord had a healthy, young, ready body. The possibilities were endless. She never thought that the spell her old Lord placed on himself would work. Should she tell the new Lord about it? She feared telling him in case it would change him.

She desperately wanted to stay in his good graces, but she didn't like to share what she didn't have to. The Mudblood was not a threat. That was Severus' toy, but the Weasley girl. He wanted her. How could she get rid of her without him killing her as well? Could she handle sharing with the little twit? Time would tell. Perhaps if she quickly reversed the Lovegood girl's spell he would be additionally pleased with her. Even Bella had to admit that her new Master had brilliant foresight to be working with Lovegood on such research.

Lord Potter would need to have her old papers. There were only a couple of things that she needed to go over to find the right words to reverse the girl's hex. There was only one problem. She hadn't the nerve to explain to her Lord that the girl would likely be no more than a Squib. Would this hinder his research? She didn't want to displease or fail him.

Bugger it. She needed some sort of release after the interaction they'd had earlier. Before now, she'd been remembering his hold around her waist and his voice whispering promisingly in her ear. Now, she had so much more to think about. His full lips, his practiced kiss, his hard cock, and his manly groaning were all things that would help her along to meet her next orgasm. She couldn't wait until they would have time alone together. Saturday. He would come for her. She would be free.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

*The evil spirit that was preying on Hermione took on the appearance of Severus once again as it made its way to the witch's bed. 'She's dreaming of being in his chambers tonight,' the Incubus thought, recognizing the woman's dark lover's bedchamber.*

*"Are you back already?" she asked sleepily.*

*The Incubus nodded. The girl was naked, completely. She reeked of sex and... something else. What was different about her? "I am," he answered silkily.*

*"Come back to bed, husband," the witch said lazily.*

*Husband! They'd been married! No matter. That would just make things easier. In fact, now was as good a time as any to start a seduction. Sliding into the bed beside her without bothering to disrobe, the Incubus' hand glided along her body. No human could understand what sex felt like to a fallen creature of darkness. Whether in the female form or the male form, it was the most excellent feeling imaginable. A small portion of the witch or wizard's magical power would accompany each wave of desire that would build up for the creature. When orgasmic release finally came, there was an energy exchange.*

*In the Succubus form, the creature would take more magical energy than in the Incubus form. Reason being that she needed the wizard's powers and seed to conceive and sustain a child in the womb until it was ready to be birthed. Most times, the wizard would die from over exuberance as he climaxed within the Succubus. Those that lived, and there were few, would have substantially declined magical capabilities.*

*In the Incubus form, the creature would take magical energy and mingle it with its own during the coupling. When he spilled his seed forth, all he'd taken and what he needed to add would be deposited into the woman's womb. She would carry the child to term, and when she delivered, all of the mingled magic and a large majority of the witch's would be expelled with the little one. More often than not, she would die in childbirth from exhaustion. Those that lived would have declined magical capabilities.*

*There were only a few rules that could not be broken. They could never take an unwilling lover. Only one seduction could occur with the same person per night. They could be visited twice so long as they were not disturbed. This enabled the fallen creatures to study their prey. Only one dual seduction could occur per century. There was never usually any need for it. Most of the time there was no pull to any particular witch or wizard. The witch allowing the Incubus' hand to glide over her naked body would eventually couple with her mate, conceiving a child. It was foreseen by the Chief Entity that their first child would grow to be a most powerful witch, and she would bind with the most powerful wizard of the age's son.*

*As they grew older, they would defeat a Dark Wizard that would be greater than Merlin himself. The Incubus would do what had to be done to stop this. If this witch denied the Incubus, as her husband denied the Succubus, another powerful wizard's child would have to be used. This other wizard lived in Bulgaria, and he had dealings with the witch Granger. His name was Viktor Krum. Any child sired by him and the Succubus would be connected to her because of their friendship, and it would grow to intervene with the Granger daughter's binding to the other wizard's son, whom she would eventually help to overthrow their champion.*

*There was a reason the Succubus didn't just go straight to the most powerful wizard of the age to seduce him. He was a Wizard of the Snake. The only wizard that could outright kill an Incubus or Succubus was a Parselmouth. Of all fallen beings, the Serpent Lord was the most powerful, with a Succubus being next in position. The forked tongue chants and hexes were too much to bear and ultimately drained all power from creatures such as he. His offspring would have his scent, but they wouldn't likely all inherit his gift of speaking Parseltongue.*

*"I can't believe you are getting me excited again. I'm a little tender; go slowly," she whispered, drawing the Incubus from his thoughts. He brought his lips down to lick her neck as his fingers continued to gently caress her sex.*

*"No," the Incubus said in disbelief as it backed away. She had married her lover, Snape. Why did a Wizard of the Snakes mark her? The Scent of the Serpent was all over her. "You are marked."*

*"What?" she asked, turning to look at him. "Are you just now bringing that up again?"*

*That was what had been different about her! She was scented. Her scent wasn't this strong when he'd first come upon her after her ordeal. Placing a transforming hand onto her stomach, the Incubus growled. A seed had been sown. The scent of fertilization mixed with the Scent of the Serpent was too much. He had failed. He would not be able to couple with her if he wanted to. The Chief Entity would be most disappointed, but there was always another way to get to her future child and have their work completed. Through Krum. "I must leave you now, but we shall meet again through your progeny. You have not won this time, Hermione Granger."*

*"Severus?" she asked, sitting up to get a better look at her lover. His hair was lengthening and turning white. The black was leaving his eyes as well, leaving them vacant of any color. "Oh my... Incubus?"*

*The features changed to those of a scantily dressed woman with long claws, a spiky tail, and horrid wings. "Not any longer," the creature purred. "I am a Succubus now, girl."*

*"What are you going to do to me?" Hermione asked backing away.*

*"There is nothing that I can do directly to you without bringing about the wrath of the Wizard of the Snakes. To harm you or yours would enable him to track me. I came to you because your soul called out for help, and I knew you would easily succumb to me, but now two things stand in my way." The Succubus cackled wickedly. "You have not won though. Our will shall be done." With one quick puff of smoke, the seductress that had plagued her lover for weeks was gone.*

The room temperature began returning to normal, but Hermione continued to shiver, as she began to wake. So, her first thought had been right. The Incubus had returned. Why did it leave? There was much to figure out. Hermione pulled her knees up close to her chest and rested her head on them while she waited for Severus.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Ron looked at Draco. "What's wrong, mate? Why do you keep staring at me?" He wiped at his mouth, wondering if he had any crumbs.

"Honestly?"

"Sure."

"I don't know."

"Er... all right." Ron shook his head. "Awww, come on. Tell me."

"It's just that I don't really know why, but I can't stop looking at you. I want to be around you. What's happening to me?" Draco asked, sounding like he was talking more to himself than his friend.

"Er... all right," Ron said again, sounding dumbfounded. "Bloody hell," he said minutes later. "Do you fancy me?"

"I don't think so, but it feels like it." Draco stood up. "Fuck this. I'll just stay away until it passes." He walked a few feet before stopping. "I don't like blokes in that way! I just don't know what this is."

Ron watched his friend leave. *What the bloody hell was that all about? Sounded like he fancied me, but then he denied it saying he likes girls. Odd!* If a Malfoy did fancy him, he wouldn't be horrified because he was a boy. He would feel sort of honored, he supposed. It didn't matter though. There was only one witch for him. That was Luna. She would be coming out of this soon if Harry had his way. Ron's eyes drifted down the corridor where he could still barely make out Draco's form. "Don't stay away too long, mate," he said aloud.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"So you see, Harry," Dumbledore said in conclusion, "I think that there was just another transference of power between the two of you."

"But, how could that be?"

Severus spoke. "He often worked in secret on spells. His last plan was to make proper arrangements should he be defeated. The Dark Lord knew that if anyone defeated him it would be you, thanks to Albus' guidance. He never admitted that, but I knew it. I know that his last spell that he was working on, along with Bella, was to ensure that

one of two things would happen."

"And?" Harry asked impatiently.

"Well, either you would be taken with him, or he would become part of you. Wouldn't that be the most ironic punishment?" Severus asked dryly. "To either kill you or corrupt you?"

"It would," Harry nodded. "So, it's not just a transfer of his abilities. It's him in here."

Dumbledore held up a hand to stop Severus' comment. "No, Harry. Severus and I worked through that once he told me what Tom was planning. It's why we cast that spell on you before we went to battle. We didn't want to tell you anything other than it was a Protection Spell. It was true, but we didn't mention that it was your soul we were protecting. It did appear to have helped. You may have indeed been killed when he was killed otherwise."

Severus spoke. "Unfortunately, we have been wondering if the other part of his spell worked. Is he a part of you? Well, I would say no. I think, as Albus does, that there was a transfer of powers again."

"Right, just happen to have his old memories and desires then?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"There is one who would know exactly what he did to himself," Severus said softly.

"Who?"

"Bella?"

"Always comes back to her, doesn't it?" Harry might have known. Ironic though, that he'd have to use her to find out two different things. "Speaking of her, is her room ready?"

"It is," Albus said. "No one will ever find her. I have Myrtle banned from the bathroom until next week. She hasn't seen us go in to prepare for Bella's arrival, nor will she see you bring her there."

"You'll have ample access to her, and you will be able to take your time at finding out what you need to know. The Chamber of Secrets will indeed have another secret," Severus said blandly. "What do you need for tomorrow night?"

"Have you talked to Arthur?" Harry asked.

"No, it's just Hermione and Albus that knows. We didn't want to involve any others in case the Ministry questioned them."

"What if we're questioned?"

"We're confident that they won't stoop to using Veritaserum on us, especially when we have alibis for being here," Severus said with a smirk. "I've spoken to Lucius, and he's given me his cloak to use."

"Excellent," Harry said. "I still wish that I knew how Voldemort's old memories or thoughts found their way into my mind."

Dumbledore had been sitting silently. "I think Harry that this time you may have received Tom's gift of being a nearly natural Legilimens. You might not think so, but there are things that nearly prove it to me. For one, the interaction with his followers. You felt things, saw things, knew what to say, and even 'remembered' things. What if you were feeding off of their memories and feelings? What if they are not your own?"

"So, maybe the vision of Bella and me... I mean Voldemort, might have passed through her mind, causing me to experience it?" Harry asked incredulously.

"It's possible. Maybe it is easier with people that were associated with him. It doesn't likely work well on Severus because he is a superb Occlumens. He, after years of needing to do so, automatically keeps some walls up to block stray mind probes," Dumbledore answered. "And, maybe that is why Lucius feels that you can see through him at times."

"Does he?"

"He does," Severus put in.

"I think maybe you should talk to Bellatrix to find out exactly what her old Master had planned. Be sure to pretend to think that it's brilliant, and maybe show interest in wanting to learn the curse should you ever need it," Dumbledore said slyly.

"Got it," Harry said with a smirk. "I suppose I feel a little better, although we really won't have an explanation until we talk to her." There was someone that Harry needed to have a long conversation with. Ginny. She deserved to know the truth about everything even if that meant losing her. He'd not start the next stage of their relationship based on deception. "I think I'll be off now."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus walked in to find a pale Hermione grasping her wand tightly as she stared ahead in deep thought. "Hermione?"

She jumped and pointed her wand at him. "Severus?"

"What's wrong?" he asked, moving towards her.

"Incubus... here," she said, breathing raggedly.

He'd never seen her so upset. "It was just a dream, love," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I'm here. We defeated that demon. Don't be upset."

"No, Severus," she said, pulling back. "He was here, touching me. I thought he was you. When his lips touched my skin, he went mental. The Incubus began changing from your form to the form of the Succubus. She said that I had called out for help when I was in such despair, and it answered my call. It was able to come back."

Severus didn't know if he should believe it or not. It could have just been a dream. "I think you may have been dreaming, Hermione. I defeated her when--"

"Severus! It came back to me because I called out for help when I thought all hope was lost! Don't you see? I invited it back unknowingly."

"What exactly was said?"

Hermione bit her lip in thought for a moment. "She said, and I quote, 'There is nothing that I can do directly to you without bringing about the wrath of the Wizard of the Snakes. To harm you or yours would enable him to track me. I came to you because your soul called out for help when you were with great despair, and I knew you would easily succumb to me. But, now two things stand in my way. You have not won though. Our will shall be done.' Then she was gone." Hermione stood up to fetch some water. "I'm parched."

"The Wizard of the Snakes?" Severus was confused.

After drinking an entire glass, Hermione said, "Severus, when it kissed my neck, it tasted Harry's scent upon me. Apparently, it fears a Parselmouth. I've no idea why, but I am glad that Harry didn't remove the spell yet." She took Severus' hand. "She said that she would be back and would win. She said she'd meet me again through my children."

Another ruddy reason to thank Potter for his damn insight to put his scent on Hermione. Truth be known, Severus had grown used to it, and rarely noticed it any longer. It's why he hadn't pushed to have it removed yet. Maybe it would be prudent to leave it. "I think we should let Albus look into this. Maybe he could talk to his old mate again. Perhaps there is something in the library about a Wizard of the Snake." He kissed his wife chastely on her trembling lips. "It's gone. We have time to learn and be prepared for its return."

"What two things are stopping her? Harry's scent is one, but what is the other?" she contemplated aloud.

"Our marriage perhaps?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. I think it would still try to take what it wants," she said softly.

"We will never be at peace, will we?" he asked sounding annoyed. She looked taken aback by his harsh tone. "It's not you. It's just everything. I've finally found someone that I adore. She adores me, we marry, and things still try to dampen my happiness."

"What else is there? What happened in Dumbledore's office?" she asked moving to snuggle closer to him.

"It's Harry. He fears that part of Voldemort is inside of him. We don't believe so, but we can't really be sure. Bella is the only one that knows exactly what types of spells the Dark Lord placed on himself before he was defeated. Harry now has the task of finding that out as well."

"Poor Harry," Hermione commented. "I think I remember reading something about this when I was researching the spell Harry's mom used to protect him against Voldemort the first time. I think I'll look into that as well while I'm looking up things on Parselmouths."

"Ever my little bookworm," Severus commented, placing a kiss on her head. "I think I shall talk to Albus in the morning. For now, I just want to hold you. Tomorrow night we'll have to be ready for Bella."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Ginny stared at the retreating back of Harry Potter as he slowly made his way back up to the castle. ~~Her~~ Harry had kissed another woman. She didn't know how to feel. She was angry and hurt, yet she could understand why he'd done it. Voldemort had played one last trump card in hopes of remaining alive, and it was now distorting Harry's true thoughts. Harry also had to do this to help Luna, and now to help rid himself of Voldemort's influence once and for all.

She was asked to forgive him. Could she? Yes, she could and would forgive him, but she wouldn't like what he had to do. Bellatrix would pay for this. It was her fault somehow that Percy had been hit by that stray hex. Now the woman wanted Harry! He promised that he would hide nothing from her, no matter how painful it was to tell. Ginny appreciated that, and told him that she could handle it. Well, she could. Couldn't she? *For now, yes.* "There's one thing you didn't count on, Bella dear," Ginny said aloud, still watching Harry's retreat. "Harry is mine. He's the only one that understands me after what happened with Tom. I'll not share my man longer than I have to."

The youngest Weasley smirked as she began fantasizing the many ways that she would like to torture Bellatrix Lestrange. A plan came to mind. It was simple enough. Once Harry had what he needed from the woman, she would do what needed to be done to avenge her brother's death and the molestation of Harry! "Ginny!" a voice yelled. Blast! It was Hermione. She looked at her friend and nodded a crisp hello. "Harry said that you were here."

"As you can see," she said sulkily.

Hermione had had enough. Over the past few days, since Percy's funeral, the girl had been looking at her oddly. "Out with it, Ginny. What have I done to you that has you treating me like shit?"

Ginny seemed surprised for a moment. "Nothing intentional, but you still bother me all the same."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, tell me so that we can work through this."

"I don't like that you are always included in things while I am not. He runs to do your bidding no matter what. I don't like that you carry Harry's scent. I don't like that he gave you his grandfather's ring to put on Snape's finger. The night of your wedding, he had promised me he would return as soon as he took Ron to see Luna. Where did he go instead? I always wonder if he had once fancied you, and if he still does on some level," she said hotly. "There! Is that what you want to hear? Want to gloat about my insecurities now?"

"How ridiculous!" Hermione said angrily. "You know, Ginny, Harry has enough on his mind right now to not have to worry about his girlfriend's uncalled for jealousy and selfishness. I just saw him, and he seemed so dejected. Told me to come keep you company while he and Severus go... do their thing." Harry stepped around into Ginny's line of vision when she turned away. "Harry loves *you*. He and I are only friends. Of course he would come to my wedding, Ginny. I'm like a sister to him, and both Ron and I would run off to do his bidding at any time. Yours too," she said softly, hating that she had sounded so unkind.

"You're right," Ginny said. "It's just a lot right now. Percy approved of Harry. Right before he died, he told him so. Harry held Percy as he passed on. I can never lose him, Hermione. I just don't know how to keep him. I don't know what competition I truly have. I mean, he'll be graduating soon. Where will that leave me? I'll still be here for another year. He'll be off playing Quidditch without me."

"Ginny, I don't think that Harry wants to play Quidditch any more. And I must confess, there is nobody that can compare to you. Not in Harry's eyes. I know what's going on with Bellatrix. Severus said Harry threw up because what he'd done had made him sick. Just give it some time. He'll find a way to wait for you. Trust me."

"Hermione, you are so wise. Do you know that? You always sound so logical and honest. I wish that I could be more like that," replied Ginny, wiping a lone tear from her cheeks.

"No, you don't, Gin. If you were more like me, then you wouldn't have attracted Harry," Hermione said with a sly grin. "Let's go up to my old chambers and pack some more of my things away to bring to mine and Severus' chambers. It'll pass the time for us until they return."

"Sure thing, Madame Snape," Ginny said cheekily. The girls made their way back to the castle. Each silently wondered what thoughts were going through their lovers' minds. Ron came walking up.

"Oi, either of you see Draco about?" he asked.

"He was up on top of the Astronomy Tower earlier. Said he wanted to be alone," Hermione said with a shrug. "I think he's really messed up inside. You know, from what happened with us at the Higgs' home, and then he was worried about his father as well. Maybe he'd rather talk to you, Ron, being a guy and all."

"Er... right. I guess I'll go on up then. Hate for the bloke to be alone if he's needing someone to talk to," he said quickly, turning to walk away from them. Ron hadn't seen Draco since the day before when they'd had that strange talk. He sort of missed the bugger. He quickened his pace until he was nearly at the top of the stairs. Softly, he opened the closed door before making his way out. It wasn't as cold, and it hadn't snowed lately. The air was crisp and cool, but with the sun shining so brightly, it was

quite comfortable. Draco was leaning over on the ledge with his elbows propped up in front of him to hold his head up. He seemed to be in deep thought. Ron grinned at his mate. He'd never seem his so calm before. "Draco?"

"Hi," he said, not turning to look at him.

"Why've you been hiding out, mate?"

"You know why," he said tartly, smirking at Ron finally.

"Look, you've a lot on your mind. Don't worry on it. Honestly," Ron said clapping his friend on the back. "How about we sit down, right here, right now, and we talk. You tell me everything that happened over at that Terence bloke's house, and if there is something you want to add in about your dad, well, I'll listen to that too."

Draco looked at Ron. He was right. Maybe they should talk about it. It might bring out some reasoning as to why he suddenly felt so attracted to the red head. Of any wizards at Hogwarts, a Weasley would be the last he would want. Right? Hell, he didn't want any wizards, yet for some reason, lately, when he masturbated, showered, or laid down for bed, he thought of Ronald Weasley. There were many thoughts: his big goofy grin, his idiotic outbursts, his odd logic, and his funny way with words. What the fuck did this mean? Was he gay? What about the girls he'd been with? Sighing, Draco began to speak. Might as well mention it all.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"All right. Those Muggle type devices are going to pick up anything we do or say, so you be sure to keep your mouth closed and keep your Invisibility Cloak on at all times," Severus said. "All we do is put this potion along the stones on the outside of her cell."

"You get that acidic stuff you were searching for then?" Harry asked dumbly.

"Yes, Harry," said Severus in an irritated manner. "We wouldn't be able to use it otherwise, would we?"

"Severus, how are we going to stun her and spell the wall to crumble? We can't speak aloud for fear of having our voices being caught on tape," Harry pointed out. "If I use Parseltongue, I'll be a suspect."

"We'll just do them silently. They won't have the strength that they would if we'd chant them aloud, but it'll serve its purpose. I'm going to stealthily have this pour itself in an area large enough to fit one of us in at a time. After it settles for a few moments, we'll each issue a Blasting Curse at the very spots. Both of our hexes combined should sufficiently crack open the weakened wall." Severus began pulling on his cloak. "Remember, Harry. Usher no sounds. Silently stun Bella whilst I handle any guard trying to enter from her doorway. Levitate her outside, and I will follow. We will then Disapparate to our four different spots as we've previously planned. If they are still on our trail after the fourth one, then we will have to fight. We can't let them trace us back to Hogwarts."

Right then," Harry said. They'd gone over the plan already, but it always helped to hear it again. "Let's go get our witch."

Southern's Notes: I decided to stop it here as the first portion of the next chapter all went with it.

What about Harry? Wow, huh? I think something more is going on inside of him, and that Bella is bringing it out. So, how do you all really feel about Draco? Think he likes Ron or...? There will be some Bella/ Harry interaction (you know the kind... but it won't be too much). Just a fair warning. I wonder what Ginny has planned though. Wink.

Chapter Twenty Two

Chapter 23 of 32

Harry and Severus go to get Bella. There is a small party, and Hermione finds out something interesting.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I would also like to thank GinnyW for helping me go through this a second time and dusting it off.

Harry watched as the large jar made its way across the grounds to the side of the building. He tapped Severus once on the shoulder, indicating that Bella had been just there when he'd come the day before. The potent substance that Severus had concocted slid easily along the surface. After a couple of moments, a faint smoke began to rise. They could hear a small sizzling noise. Severus placed one finger on Harry, then a second, and when he placed his third finger, they both silently sent a Blasting Curse towards the weak wall. It imploded immediately though there was no loud noise, only crumbling stone.

Severus moved in first to be ready to Stun any guards entering. Harry went in after. Bella was sitting on her bed, grinning broadly. Apparently she had been unfazed by the sudden bursting of her wall. He stunned her deftly and hovered her out behind him. Just as he made his way out, he heard her door opening and a loud thud. Other voices were coming, but he couldn't wait for Severus. He pulled her to him, and they Disapparated to their first location, an alley in London. Immediately, Harry took a few steps, and he Disapparated them again. This time they appeared in a park just down from Number 4, Privet Drive. Luckily, it was dark, and no Muggles saw a woman hovering strangely in the air for the few brief seconds he was there. The next stop was Little Hangleton, and finally, he Disapparated them out near the Shrieking Shack where Percy died.

Harry waited for only a few seconds before moving to some shrubbery. "Come on, Severus. Where are you?" he whispered to himself. Harry looked down into Bella's Stunned face. "What secrets do you hold?" Suddenly a vision came to him.

"Master, please, I want to do this. Take me," she whined.

He knew the witch would rather bed some of the others, but why not take what she was offering? He slid a hand down to grope his hard cock, which had just been in her mouth. "Turn over like the little dog you are, and take it like one."

"Yes, Master."

Slamming into her depths, he wondered what had made her so wet and ready. Apparently, on some level, she did want him. He leered wickedly at the wanton beneath him. He'd always take her when she made advances. He was in charge. She knew he had needs as well. Bella always did have a way with a cock. He remembered the

times she allowed him to watch her with the others. Even now, someone was watching them intently. Her husband never did mind sharing his treasure. Knowing he was buried in another man's wife, and there was nothing the man could or would do about it made him come with zest. He pulled away immediately. "Rodolphus," he hissed. "Come here and give your wife the pleasure that I will not."

"Yes, Master," the man said, quickly moving forward. He watched silently as the two began coupling. With a smirk, he wiped himself off with her discarded robes and happened to see himself in the mirror. He was Harry Potter.

Harry shook his head and stumbled back. "What the fuck?" He had felt what it was like to be within Bellatrix. He'd liked it. Or, at least, he remembered how it felt and how he felt about it at the time. There had to be something more to this than what Dumbledore thought. He hated these visions, memories, or whatever the hell they were. He wanted them gone. If he had to pretend to be a Dark Lord for a short while, well, so be it.

"What is it?" Severus' voice asked. He hadn't even heard him Apparate in.

"Nobody is following?"

"No," Severus said. "Be still for a bit more though. Just to be sure. Now, tell me. What happened just now?"

"I had a memory. I think anyway," Harry said. "I saw what I thought to be Voldemort rutting with Bella. When he was done, he told her husband to finish her off, and he began to watch. Then, he looked into a mirror. I saw that it was me that had been doing it. It all felt so real. It was as if I could feel the memory as if it had really been me."

"Don't worry, Harry. It's just your mind playing games with you right now. You probably just fed off Bella's thoughts for a minute, and being stressed, you imagined you were there. We'll learn all we can soon enough," Severus said confidently. He hated that Harry was going through this, but the sooner they got everything they could from Bella, the better off they would all be. He thought about his lover, no, wife. She was waiting patiently for his return. Would their lives ever be peaceful? The visit of the Incubus had bothered him more than he allowed her to believe. He thought back to the conversation he'd had with Albus that morning.

"Severus, this does not bode well. What is it about you and Hermione that it doesn't like? Why would he return to seek retribution against your children? Wouldn't he still fear the Wizard of the Snakes?" Albus asked thoughtfully. "Assuming that Hermione keeps the scent, any child born to her would likely have it as well."

"I'll make sure Harry doesn't remove it. It's quite useful," Severus said, looking away embarrassed.

"Don't be upset, my boy," he said softly, clapping the younger wizard on the back. "Sometimes we need to learn to accept and appreciate help offered by others. I will send an owl off directly to Paracelsus. Perhaps he can look further for any information that his ancestor may have left hanging about, but I doubt he will be of much help. I suggest that you look in the library for information about this Wizard of the Snakes bit."

"Yes, Hermione will begin today whilst Harry and I prepare."

"I'm glad to see that you are willingly becoming a mentor to our Harry. I'm proud of you, my boy," he said, eyes sparkling.

"Thank you, Albus," he said.

Even Albus didn't want to make any guesses as to what might be going on. Too bad they couldn't have brought Harry into their dreams when they first came. It would have saved them all the trouble. *Then I wouldn't be married to her. No. Thank Merlin the Succubus came to me.* He shook his head to clear away his thoughts. "It appears that nobody will be coming after us. I think that Erasure Spell you found has helped to hide our Apparition trail."

"On to Hogwarts then?"

"Yes, but we'll have to go by foot. I won't risk another Apparation there. Just in case." He looked at the woman's body hovering just behind them. "I think we should keep her like that until she is safely stowed in the castle, and we should keep our cloaks on for now as well."

"Right. I do agree." Harry giggled. "Think Madam Hooch will be able to behave herself?"

"Rolanda? What does she have to do with this?" Severus asked, puzzled.

"She helped Minerva and Albus with Bella's room. I only found out today, as well, when I went to close up the doors within, but I've never seen her eyes glowing so brightly. I wonder if she has some sort of trick up her robes?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"I didn't know she was involved either, but I would trust her to do what is right. At least, until we have our information, that is," replied Severus thoughtfully. Albus must have had a reason for involving Rolanda with this. He knew how the woman felt about Bellatrix. Thinking about Rolanda and Stuart, they'd been scarce lately. If he didn't know better, he would think they were up to something. Something more than friendship. Interesting, as he'd never thought a person like Stuart to be Rolanda's type. Of course, he had been cleaning himself up some since he'd been released from St. Mungo's, and he always let Rolanda lead him about. Yes, that was it. She was enjoying the hen pecking. Ah well. What did he care? It was their business.

Quickly and cautiously, they made their way to the castle. They both made sure that any tracks or evidence of their passage had been obliterated. Once at the castle, they cast a Disillusionment Spell on Bella and crept towards Moaning Myrtle's bathroom where they would bring their captive witch down to the Chamber of Secrets. Making their way there was easy enough. Harry muttered a bit of Parseltongue to open the Chamber, and after taking off their cloaks, the pair slid down the tunnel with Bella.

"Looks like someone has done a bit of cleaning," Harry said, looking around. "Used to be lots of small rodent skeletons down here. It was clear that someone had banished all the carcasses elsewhere, as he could now see the stone floor. *"Ennervate,"* he said, pointing his wand to Bella. "Welcome back, Bella," he said with a smirk.

Severus had one of her arms while Harry had the other. They steadied her as she got her bearings. "Thank you, my Lord," she said foggily. "Where are we?"

Harry let go of her, not wanting to touch her, fearing another memory. He beckoned for them to follow him as he led the way. Severus answered her question. "We are in Lord Potter's Chamber of Secrets."

"Oh," Bella squealed. "Long have I wanted to see our old Master's sanctuary! Isn't it just marvelous that our new Master feels so comfortable here?"

"Our new Lord was twelve when he defeated our old Lord for the second time, and he defeated his Basilisk. He did that in these very chambers," Severus said, sounding proud.

"I'd heard rumors of it, but I dared never to ask," she said in awe.

"Shush," Harry said, annoyed. They reached another small, circular door. This one was sealed and guarded by a small stone snake. Parseltongue had the small snake appearing to come to life as it made its way around the sealed door, unwarding it as it went. "Just through there." He directed them in. After climbing down, he led them along the walkway towards the head of Salazar Slytherin. "The rooms are just over this way to the left. See that, do you?" Harry asked sarcastically. Bella and Severus had both stopped to stare at the long dead Basilisk. It had decayed mostly, but it still had some flesh upon its bones. Apparently, the magical creature took long to leave the world completely. At least the smell was no longer foul. Harry had requested that it be left as it was, as a triumphant reminder of when all hope seemed to have fled.

"My Lord, how did you manage it?" she asked. "It's so large."

"Sword of Gryffindor," he replied, watching her reaction.

"But... you are a Parselmouth," she commented.

"Yes, but this one would only obey Tom at the time, Heir of Slytherin and all that. Come on. Let's see where you will be staying," Harry said.

"Wait. *Down here?* This is where I am hiding? In Hogwarts?"

"This is the safest place. Nobody will think about our little secret chamber, and if they did, they would need a Parselmouth to get in." Harry smirked. "Don't worry. You'll have company. Loony and Nagini have kindly accepted my request that they stay with you. They will be off to hunt for food at times, but they'll always be about. You will be able to work in peace."

"I wouldn't go wandering about either," Severus said dryly. "There is no telling what else is lurking in the shadows of secret corridors. We've not been able to check it thoroughly." The trio moved forward, but Severus looked back at the behemoth lying lifeless. How could have such a small boy defeat such a monster? For so long, he'd thought Harry to be a little brat, gloating in his lucky triumphs, but that was not the case. Pity it had taken so long to really start to appreciate him.

"These rooms are very nice my Lord. Will I be allowed to have a wand?" she asked.

"No, sorry. Dumbledore doesn't think it to be a good idea," Harry said honestly.

"*He* knows that I am here?"

"Of course, we thought this would be the perfect place for you. Now, I'll be about each day to check with you when I can. House-elves will come in to clean up for you, bring your food, get anything you'd like, and make you as comfortable as possible." Harry led her to a chair before the fire. "Here. You look cold." The woman was trembling slightly. Harry met her eyes, and moments later, he saw into her mind. It was a bit foggy, as if a fantasy. He saw himself and Bella coupling in her little cell at Azkaban. He hardened upon feeling her waves of arousal. Had she been frigging herself as she thought of this? Feelings of complete loyalty, trust, lust, and pleasure flowed through him. A growl released in his throat. How would he be able to pull this off?

"All right?" Severus asked, breaking the connection.

Harry looked up for a moment to nod. His eyes sought Bella's dark eyes out again. "Oh, brilliant," he commented. "Bella, we stole all the things that were seized as you were taken into Azkaban. Your books are on the shelves, your parchments, and your files are all just there on the work desk. I must stress upon you the importance of returning Lovegood to her normal state." Harry tilted her head up and moved closer. Instead of brushing his lips to hers, at the last minute he moved to her ear for a quick whisper. "I would be most pleased, Bella, if you would work with her after on my research."

"Yes, my Lord," she said. "I shall."

Harry straightened and called out in Parseltongue. A few moments later, his two serpent friends made their way over. Both Bella and Severus watched the exchange curiously. Severus longed to understand what they were saying out of curiosity. He wondered if Hermione had found anything about Parselmouth wizards yet. "We're going to go on now," Harry told Bella. "We have to be up in everyone's plain sight for an alibi of sorts. Relax, take a bath, or have a read," he said, nodding to her.

"My Lord? I would like to repay your kindness," she said, looking shyly towards Severus. "If you will allow it."

"Not just yet, Bella," Harry said. "Come along, Severus."

"Am I to be locked in?"

"Yes," he said briskly walking away. As they passed by the Basilisk, both paused to look at the creature.

"You must have been frightened," Severus commented.

"Frightened. All out of hope. It was horrible," he said. "I was dying when I thought about passing its tooth through the journal. If Fawkes hadn't come to me, you would have had me out of your hair."

A look of need passed through the boy's face, touching Severus deeply. The boy was just as starved for fatherly affection as he had been in his youth. He reached over to put a hand on his shoulder. "I am glad Fawkes was there, Harry. You've... done well."

Harry beamed brightly. "Let's hurry up. We should put our cloaks on again."

"Right." They made their way towards the entryway. Sure enough there were Aurors that had just arrived to speak to Dumbledore. The old wizard turned and seemingly looked in their direction, as if seeing them. Harry would have to remember to ask the headmaster how he could do that.

They heard the conversation clearly when they got a bit closer. "I am quite glad that you came over to warn us," he said dottily.

"Oh, it's not just to warn you," the stouter wizard said. "We want to talk to Potter, Snape, Granger, and Malfoy. We want to be sure they are here, as well as yourself."

The willowy witch next to him gave him a rough elbow in the side. "It's not how it sounds, Headmaster," she said quickly.

"Oh, I am sure he wouldn't think that anyone responsible for her capture would dare want her released again," Dumbledore said, motioning to them with a hand behind his back. They took their cue and scurried off to warn Draco and Hermione of their company. After they rounded the corner, they threw off their cloaks. Harry pulled out his map again. "Look, Mione and Ginny are together in your chambers. Fill them in. I'll go to... good Lord!" He looked up to Severus horrified. "What do you suppose this means? Mighty close, those two." He showed Severus the map. The dots for Ron and Draco were very close. It nearly looked as if their names were melded together. RonDracoWeasleyMalfoy.

For once Severus was speechless. He had an idea, but it couldn't be right. "Get them to my chambers. I'll set up a chess game to pretend Weasley and I have been playing. Let him know. Bring Draco."

Harry quickly made his way to the Astronomy Tower. This was where Draco had been when he and Severus had left. He knew that Draco fancied Ron. He could feel it. He stopped dry. So, this is the gift that Voldemort had given him. Why not take advantage of it? He would be able to read people so easily. It had to be how he'd picked up on Malfoy's feelings for his best mate. He just wondered what Ron was doing. He hadn't thought that he was interested in anyone but Luna.

The exit at the top of the tower was warded. Harry quickly broke the wards and made his way out onto the rooftop. He looked down at his map, and he could see the dots moving apart. Breathing a breath of deep relief, he moved towards them. "Come on, mates. We'll have to talk on the way." He saw that neither looked guilty about anything. They were both fully dressed as well. Harry shrugged. He had other things to think about. "Ron, you and Severus have been playing a mean game of chess for the past couple of hours. Draco, you've been down there hanging out with us as well. We're just enjoying a Saturday night together. Severus is filling in Ginny and Hermione right now. Bella is sprung, and the Aurors are here to 'check' on us."

The trio made their way to the Dungeons quickly where Severus and the girls were waiting. "They are on the way," Harry said. "We heard Dumbledore down the corridor explaining a couple of paintings to them. Obviously, he was buying some time for us."

Ron ran to the table and sat across from Severus. "Oi! Give me the losing side, eh?"

Severus smirked. "Of course. You don't think you'd win against me, do you?"

"I could pull this one out. I see it now," Weasley said, looking at the pieces. One of his knights grumbled as he touched him. "Settle down," he told it with a grin. Draco came over to sit next to them to watch. "Who are you betting on, mate?"

"Undecided," the boy replied with a smirk.

Hermione, Ginny, and Harry began playing a game of Exploding Snap. Hermione had spent the past couple of hours with Ginny, and what she had learned had shocked her. The girl had odd thoughts floating around in her mind. First, she'd become very possessive of Harry. Second, she resented her family for 'pushing' Percy away in the first place. Third, she was thinking about quitting school to go with Harry wherever he would be going after graduation. She felt that he could teach her whatever else she needed to learn. Fourth, she had begun to dislike Luna for living while Percy had died. She seemed to privately hope that Luna wouldn't recover as punishment for living in the first place. Hermione shuddered. The girl really needed someone to talk to. She'd have to let Severus know. Maybe he could get the headmaster to talk to her parents. A knock at the door had Hermione up quickly. She nodded to everyone.

"Albus," she said cheerfully. "Come on in. Oh! Who are these fellows?"

"Aurors, my dear. I'm afraid we have some bad news," he said, sounding grave. The twinkle in his eyes didn't go unnoticed by Hermione. She stepped aside.

"Of course! Please, come in," she said, trying to sound worried.

"Well, hello there," the stout male Auror said. "What might your name be?" He flashed her a toothy grin. Her parents would have loved his pearly whites.

"I'm Hermione Snape." She held out her hand to allow him to shake hers. She saw him blink dumbly at her statement.

"I had heard that Snape had taken a young bride, but I didn't know she would be so lovely." He cleared his throat and looked to his partner. "Or so young." The witch simply ushered him forward. Hermione took her place next to Ginny again. They all sat expectantly, except for Severus who stood to make his way over to the Aurors.

"You've met my wife," he said quietly. "What might your names be?"

"My name is Roddy Potner. This here is Doris Purkiss," he said, sneering slightly.

The witch moved forward to shake Severus' hand. "We're here to bring disappointing news. It seems that Bellatrix Lestrange has been broken out of Azkaban... again. We wanted to give you all fair warning, as you were the last in contact with her and aided in her capture."

"Yeah," Potner said in a sarcastic voice. "Odd thing is that some complex potion was used to get her out. Being that you're the only Potions master with direct connections to her, we thought we'd have a look around."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Do you dare imply something?" He raised one eyebrow when the wizard swallowed deeply and looked to his associate.

"Not yet," he finally said. "Let's see then. Show us your lab."

Hermione came forward. "Here, I'll show you around. Severus is in the midst of a game of Wizarding Chess." Harry stood up.

"I'll go with you, Mione." He smiled at the two Aurors. He didn't like the man, but the witch didn't seem too bad. "So, Doris Purkiss, eh? You the one they interviewed about being with Sirius Black on the night my parents were murdered?"

"I am," she said proudly, winking slightly. They went off after Hermione and the Potner bloke, leaving the others to look around conspiratorially.

Severus prayed that Hermione had double-checked everything. He didn't want to give them any more reason to be suspicious. Albus nodded reassuringly, as if reading his thoughts. A couple of minutes later saw the group back. "Sorry to have disturbed you," Purkiss said sweetly. "Just needed to look about. Take care, and watch your backs." Potner just grunted, flashing Hermione one last toothy leer before leaving.

"Disgusting," she muttered after they had gone off with the headmaster. Severus was in a much darker mood than he had been. She could guess that the reason was because of the man's poor taste with words and expression. She moved to his side, and he seemed slightly appeased.

"Well?" he asked Harry.

"They bought it. Both of them. Hermione showed them some Pepperup Potion for Poppy that she started earlier. I could see that they bought it. Think we've been here all night," he said happily.

"And we will continue to be," came a cheerful voice. Hermione looked up to see Rolanda and Stuart. "Brought along a bit of firewhisky to get things going. Who is up for a few games?"

"Hell, yes," Ron said, standing up. "I could use a drink. Draco could as well." He pulled up his friend and made their way forward.

Severus looked to Hermione. She could see that he didn't really like the intrusion, but he would go along with it if it were what she wished. "Oh, come on, you lot," Rolanda said jovially. "You've not had a proper celebration for your binding. We'll just do a bit of that now."

"All right," Hermione agreed, grinning madly. Her friends would finally see how the staff had fun. Too bad the others weren't about. As if they'd read her mind, Ginny opened the door again. Filius, Pomona, and Minerva were there. Pomona gave Hermione a small bouquet of flowers, Filius had charmed an old phonograph to play different songs from one record, and Minerva had a cake.

Her mentor smiled warmly. "We thought it would be appropriate to have a bit of light in such dark times." She eyed the students warily. "I suppose they can stay so long as they don't speak of this to anyone."

"Thanks," Ron said quickly, eyeing the cake.

Ginny didn't seem overly enthused about being a part of things. She looked as if she wanted to get Harry alone. She'd come up to stand next to him, and she had planted her arm around his waist.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Come on. Clear us a table," Rolanda said, pulling a smiling Stuart behind her. The game began shortly after.

During the entire game, Hermione watched her friends, old and new. They'd all been lucky to be honest. They'd lived while others had died during the war. They still had each other. Albus had come back to join them after he saw the Aurors away. Things would finally start looking up again. For them all. With Harry muddling Bella's mind, she would show him how to save Luna and perhaps a bit of himself. She wondered what they would do with her after? Would they leave her there? Exterminate her? Oblivate and return her?

"Hermione," Stuart said with a smile. "I'm glad that you've found your happiness. I cannot say how it warms me to see you smiling happily."

"Thanks," she said to her friend easily. "It looks as though maybe you've found a bit of happiness here as well. Will you stay on now?" she asked, nodding towards Rolanda who was having a small argument with Minerva about the rules.

"I am," he said grinning broadly.

Severus pulled his wife to his side, and whispered, "Always trying to steal your attention, that one."

Hermione kissed her husband on the cheek, and she was glad to see it didn't bother him in front of their friends. "I may have been talking to him, but I was thinking of you."

"What were you thinking?" he asked. His voice dropped to a low, velvety octave.

"I was thinking about what I would like to do with you as soon as everyone leaves," she whispered into his ear. She smiled faintly when she heard the low rumble of approval in his voice. "First thing I'll do is undress you slowly. I'll make sure that my hands don't miss a spot when they glide over your smooth flesh. Then, I will undress myself just as slowly and let you have a look. You won't be able to touch though. Not until I can lead you into the bathroom for a nice, warm bath."

Severus felt his prick twitch at her proclamation. *Little minx! Two can fly on that pitch.* He moved to whisper seductively, "Once I get you into the tub, I am going to kiss all the sensitive spots on your flesh. Behind the ear, along the collarbone, down in between your breasts." Her breath caught. "Like that, do you? After I nibble on both luscious nipples, I am going to trail my way lower, lift you near the surface of the water, and lap at your feminine juices. Once you cry out to me, I'll lower you back down, look into your eyes to see how I have made you feel, and I'll plunge into your welcoming depths, bringing myself and you back to a climax."

Hermione bit her lip. Wetness had begun to pool in her knickers. Blast! Why did she start something that neither could finish until later? She looked up to find that most everyone was involved in their own conversations around the table, all except Ginny and Harry. They had been watching their interaction. They couldn't hear what they'd been saying, but she could see they got the gist of it. Ginny leaned over to whisper to Harry. In a few moments, they were bidding their farewells. Minerva and Albus were the next to leave. Draco had passed out in his chair, so Ron levitated him to the davenport. "Can't hold his liquor, that one," he slurred merrily.

Pomona and Filius stumbled out, and Hermione had the distinct impression that something was going on between the pair. She'd seen a few open gropes. There was definitely something going on between Rolanda and Stuart. Ron was talking to Severus about their fake chess game, trying to explain how he would have beaten him; meanwhile, Hermione began to feel odd. The firewhisky wasn't sitting well with her. "Severus," she said softly, patting him on the leg. "I've had a bit much. I think I need to go to the loo, if you know what I mean."

"Shall I come?"

"No, I'll be fine, love. Have your drinks. I'll be back," she said, leaning to kiss his lips lightly. She excused herself from the table and with shaky legs, went to the bathroom. The moment she walked in, her stomach rumbled warningly. She needed to hurl. Hermione pulled her hair back and leaned over. "Severus, leave," she said, feeling embarrassed when she noticed he'd kneeled next to her.

"No. Let me help you," he said, pulling her hair back. Suddenly not caring if he was there or not, she let things go. He had her hair, and she steadied herself. After a few moments of dry heaving, he handed her a cup of water. "Rinse your mouth, love." As she did that, he tied her hair back with a small elastic hair band. He picked her up easily and brought her to the bed. "I think you've had your limit, Little One."

"Only had a small amount. Perhaps a bit too quickly. Doesn't matter now. I'll not drink that stuff again. It's too rough," she said through shaky breaths. He went to the bathroom for a moment and came back to place a cool washcloth on her face.

"Feel better?" he asked a few moments later. No reply. Her breathing was even. She had fallen asleep. Come to think of it, she did look a tad pale. He kissed her lips before leaving to attend their guests. What he found wasn't surprising. Weasley was sleeping already, on the floor next to the davenport no less. Rolanda and Stuart had disappeared. Severus only debated for a moment on whether or not to remove the students from his chambers, but he decided to allow them to stay. He'd be able to get back to his wife sooner that way. As he crawled in next to her, he smiled slightly. So much for their romp after the guests had left.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

The next two weeks were hard for Hermione. It almost felt as if she were still feeling the after effects of the ruddy celebration they'd had. She took to her next set of classes easily, much to Minerva's approval. After her days teaching, she would go to the library to search for information on a Wizard of the Snakes or still yet, a Succubus or Incubus. As before, facts were scarce, and the little that was found was a bit vague. There were still a few tomes to go through, so she'd made sure that Irma wouldn't mind if she kept them until she'd scanned them thoroughly. Each night now, she'd been reading until she was exhausted. Her husband would usually whisk her away to force her to eat, bathe, or make love with him, not that she minded, but she felt like something wasn't right.

She had been exchanging owls with Viktor since she had run into him at St. Mungo's that day. He and his friend, Poliakoff, had seen that their old headmaster had a proper burial, and he'd met a woman. He seemed most pleased that she resembled Hermione greatly. They had been meeting each night in a pub. Hermione secretly wished him well in his new relationship, and she felt a little special that she still meant a great deal to him.

Harry had been making great progress with Bellatrix, even though he'd never gone down alone. Most of the time, to Hermione's surprise, Ginny went with him. She even came back claiming that she and the witch had become quite friendly. Harry had been finding out more about what Voldemort had done to himself before the battle, and Bella was nearly finished with the creation of Luna's counter hex. Harry had secretly confided in Hermione and Severus that Bella felt that Luna would never regain use of her magic. They advised him not to tell Ron or Ginny anything until the healers said something. Both Ron and Ginny were emotional as of late. It seemed that Ron and Draco had grown closer. Harry and Ginny seemed consumed with each other outside of classes as well. Severus seemed to be getting along a little better with Ron. They'd had two fierce chess matches over the last two weekends.

"I love Saturday evenings," she said, opening her tome.

"Not tonight, Hermione." He closed the large book. "You've had your nose in those books far too long. You've not heard anything else from the demon. Maybe it's given up."

"Maybe, but I don't think it would say that without just cause. I know if I keep reading, I will be able to find something. Oh," she said softly. "I feel a bit light headed."

"Hermione, you did have lunch today, didn't you?"

She made a face. "Well, to be honest, Severus, I looked down into the plate, and the beef seemed to make me feel nauseated. The smell even offended me. I took an apple and had that."

"Hermione! You skipped breakfast claiming that you'd have a healthy lunch. Come on. Let's go to the Great Hall for our meal. We'll go early and have a walk to the lake after. The night is clear and quite nice," he said, hoping to interest her. She nodded and allowed him to lead her away. As they neared the hall, she saw Poppy striding towards them.

"Severus, I'd like a word with Poppy. I'll be right there," she said softly. He nodded, but she could see that he didn't like the dismissal. He was genuinely worried. "Good evening, Poppy. I was wondering if I could have a word."

"Are you feeling all right?" Poppy asked, summing up her appearance. "You look a bit worn, dear. Classes stressing you?"

"I don't know. I've been sleepy, tired, and grumpy for just over a week now. Now, for the past few days, I've had no appetite at all. Lunch nearly made me sick today. What do you suggest that I take?" Hermione asked, mentally thinking of everything possible.

The older witch smiled softly when she took out her wand. Hermione could hear her muttering a few small chants. Suddenly, the tip of Poppy's wand glowed red. "Come along, Hermione. I know just what to give you."

"Is it serious?" she asked quickly. The witch's face seemed so somber.

"You'll see," she said mysteriously. She led Hermione to a small bed, covered partially by screens for privacy. "Lie down for me. You can keep your garments on." Hermione did so as the witch began groping, caressing, and prodding her stomach.

"Ouch," Hermione grumbled. The mediwitch went off to her personal storeroom for a moment and came back.

"You can sit up, Hermione. In this box, I have two large bottles of potions. Take one dropper full each morning." She pointed to the bottle with the red label. "This is for your sickness, and the other here," she pointed to the green-labeled bottle, "is your prenatal vitamins. You still need to try to eat something, even if it tries to come back up."

"For how long do I take these?" she asked. She looked up sharply. "Prenatal? What?"

"You and Severus are expecting, Hermione. You are roughly five weeks along. Congratulations."

"But, how is that possible?"

"Conjugal acts, of course," the older witch said tartly.

"I know that, but you gave me a potion. It was to be good for another two weeks or so. I have it marked down when I need my next dose," Hermione said, shock filling her. A baby. Severus' baby. They were going to have a child.

The mediwitch sighed, obviously irritated. "Do you not remember what I told you when I healed you after your attack?"

"You said that any potions... oh," Hermione said, realizing what the witch had tried to tell her. When had she conceived? Where? Was it that night? "But that was only three weeks ago," she said, biting her lip.

"You didn't conceive five weeks ago, but only three. Your time starts from the first day of your last cycle. I would suggest you head to the library," Poppy said, giving her a small smile. New mothers were always nervous and curious about all the details.

"Oh," Hermione replied.

"Nothing more happened at Higgs' Manor than you are letting on, right?" Poppy asked, paling slightly.

"No. Honestly. Harry got there in time. Thank God," she said, smiling softly. "How do I tell him, Poppy? What if he doesn't want this? I imagined later on, but this is too soon for us."

"You have other options, but I don't think Severus will be exploring them. Just take some private time to yourselves. Be straightforward with him. He seemed worried about you when I saw you together earlier. Tell him soon," Poppy advised. "Let's go to dinner. Take a sip of each now. Before lunch tomorrow, take them again. It won't be as close to this dose if you wait a little longer. Each day after that, take your dose right when you awaken. I'll need to do an exam on you in a couple of weeks."

"All right," she said, taking her potions. "I'm a bit nervous."

"You'll be fine, dear."

They walked back towards the Great Hall. Hermione was silent as the older witch began telling tales about her own children and her grandchildren. She was relieved when she saw that Severus didn't look upset that she had taken longer than she'd planned. He had been talking with Rolanda and Stuart until she sat between them. "Hermione," he said, searching her face. "What's happened?"

"Poppy has given me some medicine. I am a bit sick, but it's nothing to worry on," she said softly. She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Eat."

The chicken didn't appeal to her, but as always, mashed potatoes called to her. She put a healthy portion on her plate. She then spied some cherry jam next to Stuart's bread. "Mind if I have some of that?" she asked him.

"Certainly not, little lady," he said, handing it to her. She added some to her plate. Before she could dig in, she noticed some sprouts. She loaded some of those on her plate as well.

She mixed the three things together and began to eat. After she had eaten half of it, she pushed her plate away. "I'm full," she said, bringing her hand to her stomach. Severus scoffed and drew her attention away from her body where his child lay nestled within her womb. "What?"

"I don't see how you could have eaten those three things mixed together in the first place. Let alone allow it to fill you up. Cherry jam?" He shook his head before he wiped his mouth. "I am done as well. Would you like to have a walk?"

"Yes," she said quickly. She followed him out of the side exit from the hall. The evening air was cool, but it was no longer bitterly cold. It was pleasant. Spring would be coming soon. "I love this place," she murmured. Tears sprang to her eyes as emotions overflowed her body. Severus paused to pull her to him. She immediately began wailing.

*What the bloody hell is wrong with her? What did Poppy tell her? Please don't let her be deathly ill. I couldn't bear to lose her now!* Hermione, please tell me what Poppy said. What is the medicine for, Little One? Don't keep anything from me." *Or I shall be forced to invade your mind to find out.*

"Well, there are so many ways that I could tell you. I'm not sure where would be the perfect time, place, or mood. I'm not sure how you will feel about it either, but here is my attempt," she said softly, looking up into his eyes. "Severus, do you see how beautiful everything is? The castle, the grounds, the lake, our love?"

"Your love for me is beautiful," he said, not sure where she was going with this. "I couldn't be without you, Hermione."

"Oh, it's nothing like that," she said softly. She pulled the hand that was holding hers to her stomach. "Severus, you and I created something more beautiful than all of this combined. I'm pregnant." He blinked in surprise. She felt the arm around her waist tighten, and the palm on her stomach applied a bit more pressure, as if trying to feel the child within. She could hear his ragged breaths. Hermione wanted him to look at her, but his eyes were gazing at her soft belly as if envisioning his little one. A tear dropped from her cheek onto his hand at her stomach. She was not sad. No. This was beautiful. She was going to be a mum. She was going to bring life into the world. Life that she'd created with her husband.

Her thoughts were dampened for only a moment as she realized she'd have two things to tell her parents now. One was her marriage, and the other was her pregnancy. She hoped they wouldn't think they'd gotten married because of the child. It was far too important that they honestly know that she loved Severus with all of her heart, body, and soul. He was meant for her and she for him.

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**Southern's Notes:** Hope you've enjoyed this chapter. Many have guessed already about Hermione's pregnancy. Hope it all looks okay. It's been over six years since I was pregnant, but I remember feeling that way a bit. I found out at five weeks as well. Big Grin.

Next chapter: We will find out Severus' reaction, learn more about Harry's curse, and Luna will awaken. Yay! Thanks so much, all. I appreciate you sticking with me on this.

## Chapter Twenty Three

*Chapter 24 of 32*

We see Severus' reaction to the news. Luna is finally back! Harry makes plans of his own. Hermione and Severus visit her parents.

**Disclaimer:** J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

**A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay, and I would also like to thank GinnyW for helping me go through this a second time and dusting it off.**

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"Severus? Are you all right?" she asked, after a moment. "Please say something." Had she been mistaken on his feelings about the baby? He'd seemed so taken with what she'd said. He slowly pulled his hand away from her stomach to look closely at the lone teardrop that had fallen from her eyes. When his dark eyes finally lifted to meet hers, she was shocked to see the emotion rumbling there.

"I love you," he whispered fiercely before assaulting her lips with his own. They kissed intensely for long minutes before he crushed her to his chest. "Hermione," he choked with emotion. "What have we done?"

"What do you mean, Severus?" she asked softly, nuzzling his neck lightly.

"Do you think that I will be all right? What if I am like my own father? What if I don't know what to do?" he asked, sounding worried.

"It will come to us, Severus. Parental instinct and all that. All first time parents probably feel this way." She placed a few butterfly kisses along his throat before saying, "I love you. We'll do this together. Our child will grow up happy with two parents that cherish him." She smiled. "Or her." She needed to make sure that he understood that she had faith in him. He would never be like his father. Together, they would rear their children to be happy and would love them unconditionally.

"I'm going to be a father, Hermione." He seemed so shocked, and it sounded as if he was telling her something that should scare her away. "I don't know if..." He tried to pull her to him again, but she wouldn't allow it.

"You don't know what, Severus?" she prodded delicately.

"I don't know if I am ready."

"I don't think that I am either. It wasn't as if we planned this. The potion that Poppy gave me to help with my healing counteracted my Contraceptive Potion. I never thought about it." She let him pull her to him when he tried again. "I would like to think that we conceived on our wedding night. We didn't plan it, and it's really soon for us, Severus, but it's meant to be. Just like fate sent you to me."

"Yes," he whispered, resting his head atop hers. "I just can't believe it. I'm having... Well, you're having my child. We're to be parents." He began to chuckle.

"What?"

"No wonder you have been so sleepy and grumpy. Your body must be changing already. Think about what you ate tonight for dinner," he said with a grimace.

"Oh, bother, you still love me anyway," she scoffed. "Let's go in."

"Yes, I do. Always." He pulled back to look into her eyes. "I have a wife and a child on the way. I've not dared to dream of having my own family in a long time. You are... thanks," he said suddenly, eyes suspiciously bright as he led her away.

Once in their chambers, he turned to her. "Would you like to...?" He nodded to her lower body. "Can we? I want you." His voice was low and steady. She could see the light gleaming in his eyes.

"Nothing needs changing. I am always yours. Same as before," she murmured, moving towards their bedchambers. "I need you."

Severus watched as his wife walked in front of him as he followed her blindly. Emotion began to consume him. He was a husband. He was a father. He'd only just begun to get used to being married and having a lovely, young wife. Was this too soon for them to have a child? His only disappointment was that he wouldn't have more time alone with her before having someone else to share her with. What if things changed after she had her child? Could he control his emotions? His temper? Things had been fine for them since his last blow up about Harry's scenting of her. He just needed to realize that she belonged to him, but she was not a possession.

She was a wife, a partner, a lover, and a most brilliant witch. How could he have never appreciated her before? *I'll not betray you.* Her words from long ago when he'd checked on her in her dorm came back to him. Those little words had undone him. He'd never forget the honesty in her eyes and in her voice as she spoke them. She would never be Lily. Lily who had betrayed him. "Hermione," he growled as she reached the bed. He took out his wand, removed both of their clothing, and waylaid her where she stood. "I have to have you." His lips met hers forcibly, parting her lips and taking what was his. They'd fallen together on the bed in a heap, limbs tangled, tongues entwined. "Mine. Both of you."

"Always," she replied when able. "Both of us."

Severus moved down to flick his tongue over her already hardened nipples while inserting a finger to feel her readiness. Hot, wet, and ready. He could feel a bit of fluid making its way out of his head, ready for action. Lifting both of her legs to set on his shoulders he pushed in with one swift movement. They both gasped at the feel of becoming one. A finger sought out her sensitive nub to bring her to a quick climax. His release would not be long. His emotions and need for her were too great. He pushed in as deeply and quickly as he could while she pushed back with the same fervor. "Are... you... there?"

"Nearly--oh! Yes," she shrieked. He closed his eyes to welcome the feel of her quivering orgasm as it shook her body. Riding through her convulsions enabled him to join her in culmination. Her shaking legs slid down unceremoniously as he threw his head back, grunting his release. As his strokes came to a halt, he looked down to study

her.

He'd never loved anything so much. Not even himself. Not his mother. His wife, Hermione, would bear a child for him. She loved him and accepted him no matter what he'd done in the past. When her lazy eyes opened, he could see her contentment, and he gave her a genuine smile. The toothy smile he received in return made him want to weep. What was this magic that she had weaved upon him? He dipped down to kiss her lips softly. Pulling away from her, he sought out his wand to perform Cleansing Charms on each of them. Once done, he pulled her to him. He loved the feel of her soft backside pressed against his groin. They'd slept this way so many nights.

This night was different for him though. His Little One, as he liked to affectionately call her, now carried another little one. He closed his eyes to try to imagine his firstborn child. Firstborn? Would there be more? Did he want more? Yes. Anything. One. Two. As long as his wife was happy, he would be as well. He thought back to his last visit to his home. He had gone in to look at the bassinet in the nursery, and he had imagined a little daughter with his hair and Hermione's eyes looking back up at him. He didn't care if he had a son or a daughter. Whatever fate saw fit would be fine. His hand slid down to cup her lower stomach. "I wonder how long until we can feel it," he pondered aloud.

"A while yet, I'm sure," she replied. Her hand slid down to cover his searching one. "I hope that he is perfect in every way. Can you believe it, Severus? It's just unreal."

A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Hermione, your dreams with the Incubus were not sexual, were they?" He could feel her body tense up.

"No, Severus. Only you. In fact, it didn't really try much. Oh! I know what it meant now," she said suddenly. "It had two reasons it couldn't touch me. One was Harry's Mark, and the other was the baby. It must have known. No wonder it threatened about coming back to me through my children."

"We need to find a way to prevent it. I'll not worry about my children's fate because of some demonic creature!" Severus said hotly. "I will make more of an effort to help you read through the tomes. We'll find something, and if we don't, well, we'll have Harry scent all of our children."

"Wouldn't they have his scent already through me?" she asked.

"I do not know. I'm not sure how it works," he said. He would speak to the boy about it the next day. There were many things that he wanted to talk to him about. For one, he didn't like that Ginevra had taken to gossiping with Bella. Something wasn't right. The girl had a sly look about her, as if planning something. She would be no match for Bella, even though she had no wand. Bella was as cunning as any Slytherin could be. The little Weasley wouldn't have a chance if she tried something. It seemed that Harry had grown comfortable with her as well. Lucius had enquired more than once as to what they would do with her and how soon. There was no question that she would have to be eradicated.

"Severus, you know that I've still not told my parents about us being married yet," Hermione mentioned, hoping he didn't hear the anxiety in her voice.

"What is troubling you?"

Damn! He knew. He always knew. "What if they think that we've only married because I am pregnant? I want them to know that I love you, and I don't care if we have a child now or later. I just wanted to be bound with you legally."

"We'll just tell them both bits at once. If they feel that we've moved too fast, then we'll let them have their say, Hermione. They are entitled to their own opinions, but they won't change how I feel for you." A moment later, he added, "Or my child."

"I know. It's such a shock to know that we'll be parents. I can't believe it." She turned her head to kiss his lips. "Nothing they can say will change how I feel either. I just hope that there won't be any trouble. I hate that they may be disappointed in me."

"I can understand. I, too, used to worry about my parents' thoughts. My father always wanted things a certain way, and my mother always dreamed of having things another way. It was hard. There was always that pull between the two of them. I, of course, got on with my mother more." He kissed her cheek absently. "Hermione, what if I become him? I would not want to burden my child the way that I was burdened."

She turned to lie on her back, holding his hand to her stomach. "Severus, nothing will change. You and I work well together. If you get a bit angry or stressed, I will be here to calm you. If I go off on one of my rants, you will be here to set me straight. Our child will be loved, Severus. Always."

He turned his hand around so that his fingers could interlace with hers. "You have such faith in me."

"I have faith in us, Severus. We were meant to be. I accepted that long before you did, but it doesn't matter now. You can feel it as well. Can't you?" she asked. He nodded easily and smiled. "Make love to me again. Show me how much you love me, love us both."

"Oh, I think I can do that," he murmured before moving over her to begin a lengthy foreplay. Everything he'd ever need was within his grasp. His wife, his child, their home. Life had never been better.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Bella could have growled. He had brought the little witch with him again. When would she have time alone with her Master? The younger witch was a pleasant enough time passer when her Lord was busy. She would chatter on and on about little things, trying to be friendly. Bella would be imagining all the ways to torture her and steal her lover from her. She could see that her Lord was annoyed with her. He would look at her in annoyance from time to time as he read over the notes she'd left. An interesting theory had sprouted in Bella's mind. She was about to test it out.

"My Lord?" she asked politely.

"Yes?" he asked, not looking up from his parchment.

"I have completed what I have promised. I would like my reward now," she said boldly.

Brilliant, young green eyes met hers. She could see the slight smirk on his face, and the curiosity in his eyes. He laid the parchment down. "And what would you be requesting?"

"I've already told you. I would like to pleasure you in any way you'd see fit," she said, darting her eyes to the red-haired witch. "Alone."

Harry simply nodded, not looking at his girlfriend to see if she'd heard or saw what Bella had implied. He looked back down to the parchment. "I will bring Severus with me to do this. Do you think that wise?"

Bella kneeled down next to his chair, placing a hand upon his thigh. Her body was blocking Ginny from seeing anything, so she moved her hand up slightly when he didn't object. "I am happy that you trust my council enough to ask my opinions once again, my Lord. I think Severus would be your best bet. He is most trustworthy."

"Will I be pleased with the results?" he asked, eyeing her oddly. She wondered if he were referring to the wakening of Lovegood or the pleasure she would give him.

"You will, Master. She will live. You will be pleased with that," she said.

"What are you not telling me, Bella?" he asked. His face took on a serious expression.

"I fear for her magic. The spell combined with the other is what caused her magic to diminish. I do not believe she will be more than a Squib or much better. There is nothing more I can do about that, my Lord," she said, bowing her head. When no angry words or threats came forth, she looked up. Her hand had inched up to the top of his thigh and was creeping to cup his groin slowly.

"Will she be able to continue to work on my research? That should not matter, should it? So long as she breathes," he said simply, eyeing Ginny for a moment. He kept his eyes on his girlfriend as the witch on her knees before him began to knead the bulge in his pants. How erotic to be stroked by another whilst your woman was sitting nearby. She was reading something and not paying any mind to them. Nevertheless, he reached down to stop the witch's fondling. "Later."

"Yes, Master," she said, glinting appreciatively. With one last squeeze, she pulled her hand back. "She will live and be as she was before, but I do not believe she will have her magic. That I cannot change. Not without a lot of research. It may take years, my Lord."

"First things first," he said with a nod. "I'm ready to go and wake her. I shall come back in the morning to let you know how we have fared. I thank you for your work. You shall be rewarded, Bella."

"Thank you," she said, moving away from him.

"We are going to go now, Ginny," he called harshly. "Come along."

Ginny got up, smiled to Bella, and followed Harry out of the witch's chambers. She remained silent as she followed her lover through the corridors and up the ladder to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom entrance. Harry closed the chamber before speaking. "Ginny, I could get someone else to come. I wouldn't have to treat you so... badly in front of her. I hate having to do that."

"It's all right, Harry. I want to be there. If I wouldn't be, I would always wonder about things," she said honestly, pulling him to her for a kiss. "When are you going to be with me again?"

"We've not got the time. I have to make arrangements with the headmaster and Severus to get to Luna. I want to tell Ron where I am going, but I'm unsure if that is wise. If he came, I wouldn't want him to overwhelm her when she woke or be disappointed if something went wrong." Harry kissed his girlfriend. "You are the one I love, Ginny. Always. I hope you don't doubt that. Nobody else understands about Tom Riddle the way that you do. Not even his own followers."

"Oh, Harry," she said, tears coming to her eyes as she allowed him to enclose her in his arms. "I've been living in hell since Percy died. There are so many things that I don't understand. I don't know what to do. I have these horrible thoughts, and sometimes I have to fight the impulse to act on them."

"We'll have a talk on it as soon as we have time," Harry said. "Let's go. Tonight we'll have a walk and a long talk. All right?"

"Right then," she said, hugging him. "I think I would like that."

Harry walked her up to Gryffindor Tower before making his way down to the dungeons. He hoped that Severus would not be indisposed. The final parchments were in the pocket of his robes. The door opened after only one knock. Hermione smiled and hugged him tightly. "Er? Nice to see you too, Hermione." Good grief. What had gotten into her? He hadn't talked to her since the day before, but it wasn't all that long.

"Harry! Come in," she said pulling him inside. A sharply dressed Severus came to shake his hand.

"Have a seat. What brings you by?" Severus asked.

Harry looked between the two. They were both smiling like crazy. It was a bit odd to see them both acting like young, happy schoolchildren. "It is done. I have the enchantments. I need another chanter, and I thought I would ask you."

"I will," the man replied quickly.

"What are you two smiling at?" he asked uneasily.

They looked at each other slyly. Hermione nodded to Severus. The older wizard spoke in the most jovial voice that Harry had ever heard him use. "Hermione is expecting."

"Expecting what?" Harry asked after a moment. He'd waited for him to finish, but he never went on. He scowled at them when they both started laughing at him. "What do you find so funny?" Hell, he had a young girl to help, and they were making jokes.

"Harry, I'm going to have a baby," Hermione said, grinning broadly.

Harry's mouth gaped open. "Oh! Er? Congratulations, Hermione, Severus."

"Thanks," they said in unison.

"We need to see Albus about taking our leave to St. Mungo's, Severus. I'm sure he will allow it, but I want to show him what we've found out," Harry said, moving to hug Hermione in the process. "I'm really happy for you, Hermione."

He shook Severus' hand. "Well done, Severus."

"Hermione," Severus said. "Would you mind Flooing Molly to do what we discussed whilst I am out?"

"Not at all," she said. "Good luck to the both of you. What of Ron? Draco?"

"I thought maybe they might be in the way," Harry said. "Just in case something isn't right. I don't want Ron to pressure her or be disappointed, and I would hate for Draco to be... upset...in front of her anyway."

"Upset?" Hermione asked. Did Harry think what she already thought?

"Maybe later," he offered, not wanting to get into a debate about Draco fancying Ron. He wasn't sure if he believed that or not anyway. It seemed like it, but he wasn't sure any longer. He'd been checking his map often for any 'signs' of the two being close, but he'd not seen it again.

"Off you go. I need to contact Molly. I hope all will be well," she said, looking mostly at Severus. Harry smiled as the man's hand drifted down to Hermione's stomach while he kissed her on the cheek.

"It will be," he whispered before telling Harry to follow him out.

Hermione married and pregnant! Who would have thought? So soon too! Pity for them. It was nice and all, but they hadn't been able to do anything alone as of yet. They wouldn't be alone, really, until the end of term.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus glared at the pacing Weasley. "I don't see why we can't go in to watch. I mean, she's my girlfriend. This concerns me."

"Silence," Severus said suddenly. "I've had enough of your sniveling. You are lucky you are even here. If anyone has a right to be in there whilst we do this, it's her father. You will stay out here with Draco, and you will not interfere unless you want me to hex you back to Hogwarts."

A solemn Draco moved forward to pull a shocked Weasley off down the corridor. "Thanks," Harry said darkly. "I was thinking of doing that as well. Wish he wouldn't have



run into us."

"I think, Harry, that you should have lied. You needn't have told him where we were going," Severus said. "It matters not. Let's get this done. The Healer has just gone. I think it's safe to say no Healer or mediwitch will be about for a while."

"Right then," Harry agreed, opening the door to Luna's private room. After they were in, Severus warded the door so that if someone came to enter, they would suddenly remember they needed to go to the loo or had something else to do.

"You don't think that Bella has tricked us, do you?" Severus asked quietly before Harry could begin his portion of the enchantment.

"Never," Harry said firmly.

"How can you be so sure?" Severus asked suspiciously.

"Because... she loves me," Harry said.

"Loves you?" he asked incredulously. "Bella loves herself, no one else."

"No, I don't mean that kind of love. I mean loyal and eager to please."

"Harry, do you not think that maybe you are becoming too friendly with Bella? You and Ginevra both spend entirely too much time with her and seem... truly comfortable with her," Severus pointed out. "I would think that you wouldn't want to be around a woman that makes you retch when she touches you."

"I don't know. Sometimes she's nice to have around. I don't mind being there with them while Bella is researching, and Ginny is helping. She seems almost normal to me, like a witch wanting to do things for the good of the world." Harry sighed. "Then, other times she turns into the Bella we all know."

"She will have to be terminated, Harry. You do realize that, don't you?"

Harry looked into the man's eyes, and after a moment, he felt Severus try to pry into his mind. Indignantly, he said, "There's nothing for you to find in there, Severus."

"You have become too well-studied for your own good," Severus huffed. "On with it. Let's get Miss Lovegood back with us."

"Right," Harry said, still glaring at the meddling wizard. He knew Bella had to be terminated, but they had better not do it until he found out what Voldemort had done to himself to cause the current bout of problems with his thoughts. Harry turned his attention to the hollow girl in the bed and began his chanting. After he'd begun his first piece and started over, Severus joined in with the secondary chant. It took ten minutes of chanting before they saw her eyes blink. They knew it was safe to start. The first signs of movement supposedly meant that it had worked.

Severus watched Harry as he watched Lovegood. He was so involved with watching for signs of her waking that he hadn't blocked his thoughts. Severus wondered idly if Harry knew he was pricking in his mind, and he was throwing random visions out for him to see. The first things Severus saw was a flash of Bella looking up at Harry adoringly, a faint smile on her lips. He could sense Harry's pity for the woman and the need to save her from herself... and others.

The next flash that accosted him nearly made him jump. It was of Bella on her knees before Harry, touching him intimately. He could feel Harry's excitement, repulsion, and fear that Ginevra would see. Severus pulled away. He'd seen enough. They would have to do something with Bellatrix soon. Harry needed to get away from her influence. The boy turned his shimmering eyes to Severus. "Find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, I think so," Severus answered, shocked that the boy had known.

"Good. Now, don't invade my privacy again, Severus. I don't invade yours," Harry said.

"You couldn't if you would try, Harry," Severus said arrogantly. "Never think that anyone can truly penetrate if I wouldn't let them."

Harry just smirked. "Wouldn't want to see you and Mione at it anyway. That's a bit too personal."

"Look!" Severus nodded to Lovegood. She was moving her head and looking at them as if she was trying to hear what they were saying.

"Luna!" Harry exclaimed. "Can you hear me?" The girl tried to smile. "Brilliant! Now, listen. This is a slow recovery at first. We are going to massage your limbs to help with any cramping that you might have for not using your muscles in so long. It's Professor Snape and I that are here with you."

She seemed to give a nod and tried to smile at Severus. He bowed his head to acknowledge her before beginning to work her right arm with his fingers. "Miss Lovegood, I know that your throat is likely to be dry. I shall give you some water as soon as I feel you can keep it down. Do you want to sit up?"

Luna's lips opened and only a grunt came out. "Welcome back," Harry whispered. The two men went to work massaging her flesh, trying to get the circulation going. When she was able to move her toes and fingers upon command, they tried to get her to speak.

"Here," Severus said, bringing the glass to her mouth. "It may feel odd to swallow after not doing it for so long. Just let it glide down your throat." With a minimum of sputtering, she got the water down. "Want to try to talk?" he asked kindly. Tears filled the young witch's eyes, and she fell back onto her pillow. She moved shaky fingers to her eyes and began crying loudly, making odd grunting noises. "Harry, should I get Weasley now?" he asked quickly.

Harry nodded and moved to pat Luna's hair down affectionately. "Cry it out, Luna. I imagine you've had it rough."

Severus made his way out of the room. He felt sorry for the witch, but he had no idea about how to comfort her. The only witch he felt comfortable with was Hermione. "Mr. Lovegood!" Severus called suddenly. "I need you to come here."

The wizard looked at him oddly. "I was just going to the loo again for the second time."

"No, it's a ward. We placed it there to be sure we had privacy. Please come in. There is something you should see," Severus said.

"What ward? Who is we?" the man asked, appearing worried. "Harry Potter!" he exclaimed as he walked into the room, seeing Harry helping his sobbing daughter. "Oh, my sweet Merlin! Luna! She's awake," he said in shock. "You two have saved her where the Healers could not!"

Harry stepped back to allow the man access to his daughter. He doubted that the man would appreciate that they'd used Dark Arts, but he would likely love that his daughter was able to communicate again. "Dad-dy," Luna said, finally finding her ability to speak.

It was too much of a private moment for both men watching. "We'll just be outside," Severus said, motioning for Harry to follow. They went out by the door and waited. Ron and Draco walked up a little while later.

"What's happened?" Ron asked, seeing their glum expressions. "She's all right, right?"

"She's awake," Harry said sadly. "Her dad showed up. He's in with her now. Gave them a bit of private time. You should as well, mate," Harry said, holding out his hand to stop Ron.

"Oi! Don't I have some say in this? I love her, too," he said hotly. Harry held up his hands in surrender as Ron passed. Draco smiled at his friend, but he didn't follow him

in. Instead, the blond had a seat across the hall in a chair.

Harry and Severus went ahead and followed Ron into the room. They hoped that they wouldn't be intruding. Her father, teary-eyed, came to them and shook their hands. "I don't care what you did or how you did it. She said it sounded like nothing she's ever heard before. Thank you both for bringing my little girl back to me."

They each shook his hand before Harry spoke uneasily. "It was all we could do. I think that the spells that hit her may have combined and diminished her magic. It may all be gone. There is no more we can do to help, but maybe the Healers should now be notified to give her a once over. They don't know what we've done."

The man's smile never faltered. "I do not care if she is magic or not. Losing her mother was hard on me. I couldn't lose her as well. Not now. I'll go and fetch a Healer."

Severus heard something that made him want to hurry to hold Hermione after the man departed. From Harry's frozen expression, he could see that he heard it as well. Ron was saying, "You can't mean that. I want to be here. I don't care how long it takes for you to get better. Just don't make any decisions just now." Severus moved out of the room quickly. Luna had told Ron that they should call things off for now because she had a lot to deal with and would need time to recuperate. She didn't want to have him put a hold on his life to wait for her.

If Hermione would ever breaks things off with Severus, he would do the same that Weasley was doing. He would beg and promise her the world to keep her. He suddenly needed to be with her. He was going to be a father! His *wife* was pregnant! It was odd how he would forget momentarily only to be pleasantly surprised again. "I hope he doesn't take long," Severus said. "I would like to get back to Hogwarts."

"To your wife and unborn child more like," Harry said, grinning broadly. "If someone would have told us last year, hell, the beginning of this past term that Hermione would be married and pregnant, none of us would have believed it."

"Neither would I," Severus agreed. "Nor would I have believed that I would look upon you as a so... friend."

Harry smiled. "Same here."

"We still need to talk about Bella," he said decisively, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

"I know," Harry agreed. "I just wish she could be changed, you know?"

"I don't think it's possible, Harry. You've a big heart. Don't let her fool you," he said softly.

Luna's father and two Healers came their way, easing into the room. Ron was pushed out a moment later while they did tests on her. "It's like I don't matter to them. Can't they see that I am worried as well?"

"Give it time, Ronald," Severus said, testing the boy's given name. He normally wouldn't call him anything other than Weasley, but he'd felt sorry for the boy when he heard what Lovegood had to say. He wouldn't want to be cast aside either, and he remembered all too well how it felt being cast aside.

"Er... right, Professor," he answered, completely stunned. "I just... I've missed her. I love her. I just want to be a part of anything she is going through." Severus nodded to the boy in understanding. He would be the same with Hermione.

Harry said, "She has been living in hell for the last few weeks, mate. I think she needs some time to come to terms with that. Let them check her over. Take things slowly. Don't pressure her. I'm sure she'll be fine."

"She told me to come by tomorrow. Guess that means I'm dismissed," Ron said, sulking. "Guess we ought to get back to school then." Draco came to put his hand on Ron's shoulder.

"Sorry, Weaselbee. It'll work out."

"I hope so," Ron said, smiling slightly. "Thanks, mate."

"Anytime."

Harry and Severus exchanged knowing looks. They each had their suspicions since they'd seen the pair together on the map. It truly didn't seem like anything other than close friendship, but Draco seemed relieved about Ron and Luna's talk. Or did he? No, perhaps not. There was genuine concern and pity in his voice and eyes. Harry shrugged. He needed to get back and get ready for Ginny.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Molly set down her teacup. "I just can't believe there is something else to worry about. When will it end, Hermione? Will things ever feel right again?"

"I can't imagine what you are going through, Molly. I'm so sorry that you are experiencing all of this. It must be so hard for you to cope with, yet I admire you for the ability to do so. I just think that Ginny needs some help," Hermione said. She'd told Molly everything that Ginny had been saying, doing, and how she'd been acting.

The Weasley matriarch smiled at Hermione. "I've always thought of you as a daughter. When Ron started talking about you, I had always imagined that you and he would end up together. I know that I was a bit misled back in your fourth year, what with all the rubbish in the *Daily Prophet*. I appreciate that you've told me about this. Everyone seems to be walking on eggshells when I'm about. It's time someone is honest with me."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley. There is something else that I would like for you to know," Hermione said. "I've only just found out yesterday that Severus and I will be parents soon."

"Oh, Hermione dear!" The woman pulled her close for a hug. "I am so happy for you. Children are little blessings. Be sure to never let them stray too far from home, or they might en..." The woman looked away. "You know what I mean. Is Severus as happy as you?"

"I am," came the silky reply from the doorway.

"Severus, congratulations," Molly said, rising to hug him. He remained stiff, but he awkwardly patted her back. "You deserve such happiness."

"Thanks, Molly. I appreciate that," he said, moving closer to Hermione. "It's done," he told her.

"What's done?" Molly asked nosily.

"Harry and I were able to devise an enchantment to help Miss Lovegood. She has come round," Severus admitted.

"Oh, bless you both," she said, tearing up. "Her father must be overjoyed to have his daughter back. I'll have to Floo him later. Ronald will be happy as well. This is just tremendous!"

"It's great," Hermione said, tearing up as well. Luna was back! She would be able to pick up the pieces of her broken life and move on. Maybe Bella had been good for something after all. Nobody else would have been able to find that countercurse.

"I'll be taking my leave now," Molly said, gathering her things. "I will think on how to approach Ginny, dear. I won't let her know that we talked about it."

"Fair enough," Hermione replied. After the woman left, Hermione and Severus settled down together on the couch. "How do you feel, love?"

"I feel sorry for Weasley," he said. He went on to explain all that had gone on. He even included his thoughts and what he'd seen in Harry's mind. She had a right to know about it. Hermione also knew the boy well, and she'd be able to form opinions on it as well.

"Poor Ron," she agreed. "And Harry seems confused, but he'll do the right thing, Severus. Trust in him."

"I do," he said honestly. "I just hope he knows what the right thing is."

Hermione grinned when his hand caressed her stomach. "I still can't believe it," she said. "A baby. I wonder if I'll make a good mum."

"I don't see you as being able to do anything less. You excel at all you do, Hermione. This will be no different. In fact, I would like to go out to have dinner this night. In Diagon Alley again. Would you mind if I made the arrangements?"

"Lovely, but don't try to force me to eat anything that I don't want to eat," she said tartly. "Oh, I sent my mum an owl to let her know we wanted to come to see her."

"Very well," he said. "Perhaps we should stop by their home tonight? We'll be out anyway."

"No," she blurted. "Not yet."

"All right. I won't push you," he said, sounding hurt. Was she embarrassed about them? *No, Severus. Stop thinking such idiotic thoughts. She's just nervous. She's only eighteen, married, and pregnant. It's a lot to explain to her parents. She loves me. She's not embarrassed by our marriage or pending family. She never will be. God, I love her.*

"Well, maybe we could," she decided after a moment. "There is nothing to hide, is there? I am a married adult. I'll be nineteen this year, and I'll have my first child a month after my birthday. Yes, it's a bit young to start a family when my career is so new, but damn it, I won't be sorry for creating something beautiful with my husband." She sounded as if she was convincing herself. "I love you, Severus. I don't care that it's all happening quickly."

"Nor do I," he agreed. "I love you." He soothed down some wild hair. "What's that parchment there?" Severus asked, nodding at the table.

"Oh, it's from Viktor. It seems he's really found someone with whom he can relate to. I'm happy for him. I don't feel guilty about telling him about the baby now," she said. "I'll owl him later though. For now, I want to just enjoy you."

"Severus, has Harry found out anything more about what Voldemort did to himself?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet, but I think that something needs to be done with Bella." He looked at his wife intently. "Soon."

"Please let her help Harry first, Severus," she implored softly. "He deserves it."

"I know he does, but I think that a lot that is wrong with him stems from her. I'll give her one more week. If Harry isn't getting anything out of her, Lucius or I will have to step in," he said resolutely. "It has to be done."

Hermione decided it was time to take matters into her own hands where that was concerned. There were some things that Severus just wouldn't budge on. She had one week to make progress. It was time to talk to Ron and Draco.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry paced back and forth. He knew what Severus was thinking. If nothing happened soon, they would find a way to get to Bella and kill her *They will not harm her until I know what Voldemort did. I will take all the time I need.* His untidy hair began blowing about in the ungodly breeze that swept through the empty classroom. He had met Ginny, and she'd left in tears. He had no fucking idea what he'd done wrong.

Things were going fine. They'd gotten in a bit of talking and snogging. Suddenly, she was in tears, and she seemed angry that Luna was recovering. She tore off like a madwoman. He should have gone after her. Really. Why though? He'd done nothing wrong! Ginny should have been happy that Luna would recover. She was practically family and a close friend. A 'memory' came to Harry suddenly.

*Ginny and Tom Riddle in his younger years were snogging heavily in the Chamber of Secrets. She was straddling his lap, grinding against him. Harry felt the urge to throw up as he yelled out for her to stop. Both looked at him wickedly and continued.*

Harry broke away from his vision as a loud thud sounded. The odd breeze was still flowing through the room. The candles had flickered out, and the large desk before him was overturned. He hadn't touched it. "To hell with this," he grumbled and swept out of the room. He made his way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Just as he opened his mouth to speak the words to enter his Chamber of Secrets, he heard the door close. He spun around, wand pulled at the intruder.

"Nice night for a walk, isn't it, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Headmaster," Harry breathed. He calmed suddenly. What the hell had he been about to do?

"Come along, Harry. I want to show you something," the old man said softly. Harry put away his wand and followed the man. He was led out into the corridor, and after a few twists and turns, they found themselves near a set of open windows. "What do you see?"

"The silhouette of the dark grounds in the moonlight."

"Look closer," the headmaster said.

As Harry began to look at everything, searching for details, he began to see shapes and things appeared to be moving. "It looks like someone the size of Hagrid is standing just there, and just beyond that, it looks like a dog or something is running back and forth."

"Yes, now that you've pointed that out, I can see that as well. Look towards that first stone statue. Doesn't it look like someone in a gray robe is crouched down?"

Harry strained. "I do see it!" His eyes turned to his old mentor's eyes. "What are you trying to tell me, Headmaster?"

"Sometimes, Harry, when we look at something or think long enough about something, our imagination takes over. Things that we may think are real truly aren't. You follow me?" he asked softly.

"So, the 'memories' or 'visions' that I get could just be part of an overactive imagination? Why can I feel it? Why does it seem so real?" Harry asked. There had to be more to it than that.

"Harry, I have no doubt that you can feel things. See that form of someone that appears to be crouching near the statue. What do you feel when you see that?" he asked Harry.

"Devious. Someone is sneaking around." Harry smiled softly. "So, I read random thoughts from people whether it is their memory, dream, or fantasy, and I envision them clearly in my mind either right then or later. I project what they felt or should feel into it, and it appears real to me. Sometimes if I think on something too long or if something

bothers me enough, I add to what they've unknowingly shown me."

"Exactly right. Care to share anything with me that you may have been feeling not long ago," the old man pried.

"Ginny and I had a row. I imagined..." Harry looked away, feeling embarrassed. "I imagined her and Tom down in the Chamber; they were being very friendly. I imagined myself walking in on them. It angered me."

"A good example then. You'd had a row. Something that you may have wondered at some point came back to you, and you mistook it as a memory." Dumbledore sighed. "I think Harry that you will have to learn to distinguish what is real and what are your own thoughts. You will also need to learn to calm yourself. You can't just let your emotions get the better of you. Severus and I have something for you. He will give it to you tomorrow. For now, I must ask that you return to your dormitory, and try to think about what we've said."

"All right. Sorry, sir, and have a good night," Harry said, taking his leave. His mentor had made a good point. He needed to be more careful and not let his emotions take him away.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione grinned at her two mates. She felt a little guilty about not having Harry join them, but this was for his own good. He couldn't know what they were about. Not yet. "Ron, Draco, I just hope you don't think I'm being ridiculous. I know how much you hate her. How much we all hate her, but I need your help to keep Bellatrix Lestrange alive."

"Bloody hell," Ron thundered. "She can rot for all I care."

"Right! That bitch would have tortured and killed us, Hermione. Don't you remember that?" Draco asked incredulously.

"It's for Harry," she said softly. "Listen, I think that Harry may have developed some friendly feelings towards her while they've been working together. I think part of him feels sorry for her."

"Yes, his Slytherin bit that he got from that blasted Voldemort," Ron said hotly.

"Hang on," Draco exclaimed. "Why are you always getting in jibes on Slytherin? Just because the old Dark Lord was a Slytherin doesn't mean that he sets an example for us all. Think of all the followers, and you'll see that not all of them were from Slytherin."

"Ha! You're just mad because no Gry..."

"Enough!" Hermione said. "I don't have much time. I've been in the library most of the day, and I have to get ready for dinner tonight. Let me just explain. Please."

"All right," Draco said, eyeing Ron angrily.

"Sure," Ron agreed, grinning at Draco.

"This can go no further." Her friends nodded their promises, so she continued. "I think we need to begin following Harry down into the Chamber and doing a bit of spying. Severus is going to give Harry only a week to find out what Voldemort did to himself to bind him to Harry in case he died. If he can't, then either he or Lucius will get rid of Bella. They don't like her influence on Harry. Have you not noticed anything odd?"

"Well, now you mention it," Ron said, "my sister seems to like the woman. She talks about her. She wanted to take some of me smuggled firewhisky to bring to her. I didn't allow it of course."

"I do notice that Harry looks distant at times. His eyes get a far away look. I just thought he was reaching out to those around him thanks to Voldemort's last magic transfer," Draco said thoughtfully.

"Well, my point is this." Hermione sat down next to them. "How do we know what is really going on down there? What if that bitch is bewitching the both of them somehow? We need to find out for sure," she stated firmly. "If it's nothing of the sort, and they truly are working to find out what's wrong with Harry, then we must buy some time for them. Look how long it took them to get the Reverse Enchantment for Luna! Maybe they will need time for this as well. I, for one, want Harry back to normal again."

"Same here," Draco said. "What do you suggest?"

"Severus still has your father's Invisibility Cloak. I was thinking to use it. Ron could use Harry's, and you could use a Disillusionment Charm on yourself. I'm not good at those," she said. "We'll go down with him and spy. We'll follow them about the castle and eavesdrop if we must. If something is amiss, we'll let Lucius and Severus do what they must, but if this is for Harry's own good, well, we need to take a stand to save her."

"When you put it like that, I can see the need for it," Ron said. "I still don't think Harry feels sorry for her though. She killed Sirius! She's done too many unforgivable things to our friends and us. If there is pity in Harry, well, it's because of Voldemort."

Draco nodded. "I can agree with that. It's not a Slytherin thing though."

"Figure of speech, brat," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "Always on about something. It just makes sense if you ask me. Voldemort was a Slytherin. Harry is a Gryffindor. Two Houses. Two halves. I wasn't trying to hit below the belt or anything."

Hermione giggled. "You two act like an old married couple sometimes." The smiles left both boys' faces.

"Why?" Ron asked bluntly.

"What?" Draco asked in disbelief.

"Good Lord! It's a figure of speech. The playful bantering? Just like couples that have been married for a long time? Forget it," she said, noting their gaping mouths.

"Oh, right," Ron said after a moment. He clearly had missed her whole point. Draco remained silent. "Thought you were saying something about us for a moment there. We're not like that, you know."

"Right then," Hermione said, unsure of what to say next. "I need to go get ready. We're having dinner out in town tonight to celebrate."

Ron began barking with laughter. "Can't believe it! A little Snape will be running about the castle!"

"Oh, honestly!" Hermione huffed. "Glad you find the thought of my child so amusing, Ronald. Cheers."

She made to walk away, but Draco called out to her. "I'm sure your kid will be great, Hermione, what with the two of you for parents."

"Well, thanks, Draco," she said, pleased with his comment. She left them sitting there.

"Why did you have to make fun of her that way?" Draco asked once alone.

"I wasn't making fun," Ron protested. "She knows that."

"Looked like you hurt her feelings to me, mate. She loves him. You can't pick who you love. It just happens," Draco said softly. "See you."

"Hang on," Ron said, placing a hand on his arm. "Why do you say things and try to run off? Stay and talk a while. We don't need to leave just yet."

Draco sighed. "Hear from Luna yet? Her father?"

"Not a word," Ron said. "I thought her dad would send an owl to me, but there hasn't been anything at all. I've been to see Dumbledore twice already to see if he'd heard anything. He said that if no news comes by the evening meal he would take me to see her. Guess he knows how important it is to me."

"Where was your sister today, Ron? I saw that she and Harry seemed to be having a stressed conversation after breakfast today. I haven't seen her since."

"Me mum came for her. Said they needed to spend the day alone together in Hogsmeade. Witch talk or something like that." Ron nodded to himself. "I think she needs it. She and I haven't been getting on well lately. Mum must have found out. She was grilling me with all sorts of bloody questions this morning. I hope that she can get through to her. My sister means a lot to me even though we've been snubbing each other lately."

"Want to have a walk down to Hagrid's then? Might take your mind off things," Draco offered.

"What the bloody hell do you want to go to Hagrid's for? You don't even like him," Ron said suspiciously. "Or, do you? Thinking about trying some of that Mulled Mead he has, eh?"

"Of course not," Draco said distastefully. "I just thought it might keep your mind off things. Let's find Harry and have a visit."

"Right."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"You look lovely," Severus commented, seeing his wife don her new dress robes that he'd ordered for her as part of his wedding gift. "I'm glad you chose to wear them." She had gone through a lot of trouble for him. Her hair was pulled up in an elegant twist, and she'd applied light make-up to accent her already beautiful features. How had he gotten so lucky as to have such a young, virile, beautiful wife?

"Thanks. You do as well," she said softly.

"Are you still nervous?" he asked, cupping her chin in his hands before kissing her lightly.

"Yes. What if they turn against me?"

Severus hated that she seemed so uncertain. "Hermione, if your parents go that far, it will be their loss. Our child is all we need to worry about. They will come around. There is no way they won't want to be a part of their grandchild's life. They love you. I saw that when I met them."

"You're good to me, you know," she murmured as she put on her cloak. "Where are we going to eat?"

"I thought that we could go to The Greengrass Pub again," he said. "I've invited Lucius and Narcissa to join us. I hope you don't mind. It will be his first public outing since his stint at St. Mungo's."

Hermione cringed, remembering the last time she had met up with them at the establishment. Would they go back to being the snobbish couple they were before? Would they be the changed couple that she'd seen in the hospital? She could only hope so. "Of course not, Severus. They are your friends."

"I would like it if you could one day consider them to be yours as well."

"My point exactly concerning you, Harry, and the Weasleys. Glad you see it my way," she said smugly. He simply smirked and escorted her to their Apparition point. Once they made their way through Diagon Alley and entered the pub, they were brought to their reserved table. The other couple was already present. Both looked disgruntled. From where he was seated, Lucius looked perfectly normal, but Hermione knew that he now had a horrible stoop to his posture from his injuries. He actually did need a cane to walk. She thought that a bit ironic. The good news was that he could walk. The Healers were actually unsure about that when he'd first been brought in.

Hermione mused that some things happened for a reason. She wondered if this 'accident' was needed to bring Lucius and Narcissa closer together. Fate had a way of bending people to its will. Unconsciously, she reached for Severus' hand and gave him a gentle squeeze. He returned the gesture idly as he instructed the waiter on what they wanted to drink.

Lucius looked at his friend and his young wife. He would have liked to have been a witness of their binding, but he had been in no fit state at the time. The young witch was good for Severus. Lucius had never seen him so affectionate towards anything or anyone before. He even smiled now. It wasn't a normal smile, but it was much more than the slight smirk he used to give people. He even looked healthier. Severus seemed to have hope, hope for the future. If he had known that this would have changed the man's outlook on life, he'd have tried to find him a witch sooner or pushed him to find one. Would he have wanted anyone but this witch? Perhaps he had been waiting his entire thirty-eight years just for her. "I apologize, Madame Snape, for not being able to attend your binding ceremony. I trust Severus has passed on our congratulations," Lucius said properly.

"He has. I thank you," she said.

Narcissa smiled. "May we call you Hermione?"

Hermione nearly dropped her glass at the request. The woman was truly trying to change, wasn't she? "Of course," she said.

"It's just rather odd to think of you as Madame Snape," she said. Narcissa's brow furrowed. "I don't mean that disrespectfully of course. I just mean that I never expected to see Severus married to such a lovely young witch." She blanched. "Well, damn. That's not what I meant either. I never thought he'd be married at all."

Lucius began to chuckle. "As you can see, she is working on her comments. Someone found her to be quite snide at the hospital. Since then, she has been making a valiant effort to say exactly what she means so as to not be misunderstood."

Severus chuckled, and Hermione smiled brightly. Severus looked at his wife. "This is not only to celebrate your being well or our wedding. There is another purpose." He smiled affectionately at his wife. "Hermione and I are expecting our first child."

"Congratulations," Lucius said immediately. He seemed a bit shocked, but he also looked pleased. "Excuse me," he called out to a waiter. He spoke quietly to the waiter while Narcissa captured the couple's attention.

"Oh, becoming a mother is one of the biggest joys that a witch can experience. I'm sure you will make excellent parents. Congratulations to the both of you," she said warmly. Hermione and she began talking about Draco's days as a baby while Severus and Lucius had a celebratory smoke and drink.

Every few moments, Hermione could hear a snippet of conversation. They were discussing Harry, Luna, and Bella. She knew they'd both agreed to step in soon if the witch didn't help Harry any longer. Hermione would not stand in their way if Ron, Draco, or she found Bella to be using Harry or poisoning his mind. It was only right. Harry deserved what time it took to be able to get well.

Dinner passed quickly, and the four exchanged their goodbyes. As they exited, they were accosted by someone taking a photo before scurrying off. It was almost a repeat of the prior time they had met outside the pub's doors. "Good Lord," Lucius said in an annoyed manner. "I would like to have just one outing where people didn't try to take notice of your every step. I find that disturbing, and I shall Floo to complain."

"Just be glad that you are a hero, Lucius. They just want to praise you," Narcissa purred and stared at her husband adoringly. "You've proved yourself yet again."

Somewhat mollified, Lucius turned to Severus, "Anytime that you two want to visit, please, let us know." He bowed to Severus and kissed Hermione's hand.

Hermione and Severus made their way to the side of the building before either spoke. Severus took both of her hands in his. He looked at her lovely face and smiled. His little pest from prior years had grown into the creature before him. "Are you ready for this?"

"Yes."

"We don't have to go, love," he said softly.

"They know we are coming. I don't want to disappoint them. Not that she won't be disappointed." She smiled sadly.

"Hermione, my mother was married two days before her sixteenth birthday, and she barely knew my father. You are not too young. Maybe some people wait a little longer these days, but I'm sure being an adult that married of her own freewill should count for something." He silently hoped they wouldn't be too hard on her.

"Might as well go on," she said. He nodded, pulled her close and Apparated both of them to her front porch. She reached out to knock. Somehow it didn't really feel like her home anymore.

Her father answered the door solemnly. "Come in," he said. Hermione knew right away that something was wrong. "Let's go to the sitting room."

They followed him in, and she saw her mother seated in a chair. However, she didn't look up to greet them. Her head was down, and she had a parchment folded in her hand. "Mum?" Hermione made to move for her, but her mother simply raised a hand to wave her away without so much as looking at her.

Fear gripped Severus' heart. Fear that his wife would be hurt. Her father had looked angry and upset when he bade them to enter. Her mother's actions didn't bode well either. "Come here, love," he said softly, pulling her back to sit next to him.

"Pedophile!" the woman spat, barely audible.

"What did you say?" Severus asked in a whisper.

"You've bewitched our daughter, and you've made her marry you!" It was then that her mother's teary eyes looked upon them. "Have you been waiting since she was twelve-years-old to do this? I should have you fired for improper conduct, lewd thoughts, or even..."

"Mum, no. We explained all of this last time. You were fine then," Hermione said, her voice unsteady. "What has changed this? Who told you?"

"We got a nice letter from Mrs. Weasley not long ago. She sent along a copy of this evening's front page," her father explained. His voice was calm, but Hermione could see his anger smoldering just under the surface.

Hermione couldn't believe it. That photo had gone through already? There was no way. It had just been taken. She reached for the parchment her mum had thrown towards her. She picked it up from the floor and leaned into Severus so that he could read along with her.

*Mrs. Granger,*

*I thought this might be a nice tidbit of information for you. I had a most pleasant talk with Hermione yesterday. You've got such a wonderfully bright daughter. She has brought something to my attention that I should have detected. I just wanted you to know how lucky you are.*

*My only daughter is having trouble right now, and if it hadn't been for Hermione, she may not have gotten help for it. Instead, my daughter and I spent the day talking and doing a little mother/daughter bonding. Things will fall into place.*

*Your son-in-law, Severus, has once again made the front page along with my future son-in-law, Harry. I just thought you might like a read.*

*Yours truly,*

*Molly Weasley*

Hermione and Severus looked at each other for a moment. Molly had unintentionally let the Kneazle out of the bag. Hermione looked at the attached paper. It was a photo of Harry and Severus that must have been taken while they were at St. Mungo's the previous day. Severus hadn't mentioned anything about having their photo snapped. They both looked pleased yet disappointed. They were standing outside of Luna's room in the corridor. Severus was scowling, but he would give Harry a half smile every now and then. Harry would cross and uncross his arms, either smiling or not.

"They must have taken this when we were unawares yesterday," he said in disbelief. "The audacity!"

Hermione read over the article. It said something about how the war heroes, Potter and Snape, helped to heal the wounded Lovegood the day before at St. Mungo's. They declined to be interviewed, but the Healers praise their efforts even though no information on what occurred was given out. It then went on to announce that Severus Snape had privately wed Potter's right hand, Hermione Granger, nearly three weeks earlier. The article didn't question any inappropriate relationship prior to her acceptance of a position at the school, but it did wonder why they secretly and hastily wed. They alluded to the fact that she may already be with child, and they speculated if Severus was simply being honorable.

"Mum, you can't believe everything you read here," Hermione said softly. "This paper has spewed so many falsehoods before. I have told you that."

"Are you married?" her father asked, voice hopeful.

Hermione held up her finger, showing them his mother's ring. She nodded down to his hand and his ring. "We are married, but we married for love. No other reason."

"Love?" her mother shrieked. "You are just starting your career! You've been waylaid by the first man to pay attention to you. Yes, he's tall, dark, mysterious, and handsome, but that does not mean you have to marry him."

"We thought we raised you better," her father added. "Hermione, what were you thinking? What did this fellow do to you? Are you sure you aren't pregnant?"

"Daddy, please," Hermione pleaded. "Let me explain."

"We are very disappointed, young lady," her mother said. "Extremely. You went behind our backs because you knew we would try to talk sense into you. It was deliberate!"

"Did you tell her to not invite us? You knew we would never allow it!" her father shouted at Severus.

"Mr. Granger," Severus said smoothly. "I have fallen in love with your daughter, and she has fallen in love with me. Would you prefer us to fornicate? Live together without

being properly wedded? Nothing could keep us apart. If you had been invited, don't dare believe that you could have pulled her away from me. She is going to be nineteen this year. That is certainly old enough to make her own decision."

"How dare you come into our home and speak to us that way," her father yelled.

"How dare you speak to my wife as if she is just a child? She's not been able to get in more than a couple of sentences at a time!" Severus said, his voice lowering even more.

"Dad! Mum! Will you stop? I... I do need to say something to you," Hermione said meekly.

"Go on," Severus urged, putting his arm around her to comfort her.

"The night of our marriage... when we..." her cheeks burned. "When our marriage was consummated, we conceived." She bit her lip and waited for the angry outbursts. Instead, her mother began crying again. Her father rushed over to comfort her. "Mum, my husband and I created a life. Isn't that wonderful?"

Her mother shook her head sadly. "My baby is having a baby. I can't believe it. She had such a future."

"I still have a future," Hermione said, becoming angry. "This will not interfere with my career. We came here to tell you our good news, not knowing that Mrs. Weasley had beaten us to it. I just wish you would understand. I *love* him. I *wanted* to marry him. I *chose* him." She smiled at Severus when she spoke the next part. "We didn't plan on children so soon, but we won't be sending this one back. He is ours to cherish." Without thinking, she leaned into him for a chaste kiss on the lips. "Love you," she whispered.

"Love you," he whispered back. His hand automatically drifted down to her belly to find her hand that was already there. Together they cradled her stomach as if their child was large enough to feel. When Severus' lips descended to hers once again, her father cleared his throat.

"You must understand that we were not ready for this. You are just a child to us, Hermione. We liked your man here when we met him, but... we had hoped it would pass. I fear you have rushed yourself," her father said, still rubbing her mother's back.

Her mother was looking at them oddly. "I think we just need some time. Please give us that. It's a bit of a shock. We will contact you when we would like to talk again."

Hermione's lip began to tremble. She should have known. Too many things had been going perfectly for them. Something would have to mar it. "Let's go, Severus." She stood and walked to the door without looking back at her parents.

Once they were at the door, Severus spoke. "I'll just be a moment."

"No, Severus, just let it be," she said sadly. "You'll not be changing their minds."

"I don't care to, but I would like to have my say without putting you through anymore rubbish. Please wait outside." It was not a question. It was a command. She could see the angry glint in his eyes.

Severus made his way back to the distressed couple. "I love her," he announced when they both looked up. "We came here hoping to share our good news with you. She loves you very much, and she worried immensely that you would turn her away. I fear that is exactly what has happened here. Do not look down upon her because of me. I am too old to beg my wife's parents for acceptance, but I will request that you not break ties with her or your grandchild. You will *not* hear from us again until you appreciate what a gem you have raised. I only hope that my children are as levelheaded as their mother." With a swish of his robes, he glided out of the room to find his wife waiting for him.

"All okay?" she asked. He could see that more tears had fallen from her sad eyes.

"It's fine. I just had my say and left. No arguing." He kissed the top of her head. "I am sorry, Hermione. If I could take some of your disappointment, I would. I would have no qualms passing it on to Harry to endure."

Hermione giggled. "Take me home. I'm a bit tired."

"Certainly," he said.

That night Hermione allowed Severus to massage her body completely, and she drifted off into a contented sleep. She awoke a bit late the next morning. He'd let her sleep in. She had just enough time to bathe, get ready, grab a biddy, and be off to her first class.

"All right class. We are going to be picking up where we left off on Friday. Please turn to page 412 of your texts." She stood at the front of her class near her demonstration table. "Remember there is a broad swish with your wand just before you speak your incantation." She pointed her wand at the class to show them. As she pointed her wand to the teapot on her table, she said, "Remember the spell to change your teapot to a tortoise is *Tort시오*. Be sure to accent the T correctly. Observe. *Tort시오!*" The teapot instantly morphed into a tortoise.

"Brilliant," one student murmured.

"Wicked," said another.

Hermione looked up and saw the pair of Ravenclaw boys sitting together in the front of the class. They reminded her of a young Harry and Ron. All they needed was a girl to follow them around to complete another trio. "All right, class. Give it a try."

She made her rounds showing some the correct wand movement, explaining again how to pronounce the enchantment correctly, and praising those that earned it. "When you are graded on this, you will be tested for many things. One would be the pattern on the shell. Be sure it doesn't resemble the design on your teapot. Another would be its legs and tail. Be sure that they are present. Another one would be to make sure that there is no steam being emitted from your tortoise's mouth. Like Talon's tortoise here." She smiled at the young, round-faced boy. "Try again," she encouraged. He completed it perfectly. "Excellent. Five points to Slytherin."

"Professor Snape?" a girl asked, raising her hand.

"Yes, Jouett?"

"Mine has a spout for a tail. I thought I'd done it correctly," she said shyly.

"Show me what you did." Hermione saw that the girl flicked her wand incorrectly. "Here. Try this." She put her hand over the girl's and moved with her. After another attempt, she had a perfect tortoise. Hermione smiled. "Five points to Gryffindor." She made her way back to the front of the class. "All right. Practice changing them back please. Do this a few times, and then finish reading the rest of the chapter. I want a roll of parchment on the wand movement, incantation, errors we look for, and how to reverse it for your class on Wednesday. Carry on."

Thoughts of her disappointment from the night before came back to her unbidden. It wasn't only she that had been disappointed. She could see that Severus was as well. That alone made her feel sad. He didn't deserve to be treated like a child snatcher or a dirty older man out for a young witch to bed. He'd married her! A fallen entity had seen that they were meant to be together. Their love was true. Pity her parents would miss out on their grandchild. She would not beg them to be a part of their lives.

She sighed. Why worry? They would come around. They loved her. It was just a shock. That was all. After a few minutes her palms began to feel sweaty, and her vision

blurred. She moved to her desk to hold herself up. She'd not felt dizzy for a long while. "Talon," she called.

"Yes, Professor?"

"I need Professor McGonagall please," she said. She heard the boy scamper off towards Minerva's office where she knew her mentor was. Hermione felt secure. She would have help in just a moment. Another voice called out to her. She turned to see who it was, and the floor seemed to come up and slap her in the face. All went dark. She could hear Minerva's sharp Scottish brogue commanding someone to get Madame Pomfrey, the other Professor Snape, and for the rest of the class to leave.

"Hermione, help is on the way," her mentor whispered, cradling her affectionately.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"What is it, Talon?" Severus asked coldly when the boy burst into his class.

"Professor Snape fell down," he panted. "Something is wrong."

"I did not fa..." It dawned on Severus that he was referring to Hermione. It was odd still to hear her referred to that way. They had been calling her Instructor Granger until they were married. After that it seemed to amuse everyone to just call her by the title of professor so as to confuse everyone. "Where?"

"Our classroom," the boy said quickly. "Just now. I ran all the way."

Severus nodded. "Malfoy, Potter, be sure that everyone turns in their vials at the end of class. Ward my classroom after. You two are in charge." Severus raced quickly to find his wife. What had happened?

Southern's Notes: I want to thank everyone that has stuck with me through this story. This went from a short fic to a long one. Cheers, my friends. If you need anything, please email me, instant message me, or find me on my live journal!

Up next: What happened to our Hermione? What did Ginny and Molly do? We see the Succubus (muahahahaha). I wonder if Hermione's parents have gotten over the shock. Were they too harsh? I just thought they might be a bit upset about it. All that news at once about their young daughter! Whew.

Chapter Twenty Four

Chapter 25 of 32

Hermione and Severus think about pending parenthood while her mother tries to make amends. Luna, Draco, and Ron show their feelings. Dark!Harry shows up.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

Many thanks go to my beta, Charmed Nay.

Severus entered Hermione's classroom in record time. "Minerva?" he questioned immediately. He was startled to see the old witch in near tears.

"She's fainted. I thought I would wait for you here. Poppy has carted her off to the infirmary." She sniffed. "Severus, do you think I put too much responsibility on her too quickly? She was teaching a small extra credits class this morning with students from all four Houses."

"Of course not. She can handle it." He beckoned for her to walk with him. "I hope she and the baby will be all right." The words came out automatically. He hadn't thought about his child at first. It was still so new to him. Was something wrong with the pregnancy?

Minerva gasped. "The baby? Why, Severus, is Hermione pregnant?"

Severus smiled faintly. "Yes, we intended to announce it to all tonight."

"Oh, dear. Let's hurry. It wasn't much of a fall. YOU there!" she bellowed suddenly. "Come here."

"Yes, ma'am," Talon said respectfully.

"What were you doing in class?"

"We were going over the correct way to turn a teapot into a tortoise and change it back. She helped us practice most of the period and gave us our assignment. She told us to work on it until the end of class." The boy eyed his Head of House warily. Severus made a gesture for him to go on. "She stood in the front of the class for a few moments, and then I saw that she seemed disoriented. Jouett noticed it as well. We were nearest, and she called out for me to get Professor McGonagall. Then, she just fell."

"Very well," Severus said. "I thank you for your help. Ten points to Slytherin."

When they moved down the hall, Minerva said, "Any excuse to give your House points is a good excuse, eh? I'll have to do the same with Jouett for fetching Poppy."

Severus smirked, but his stomach lurched as they made their way into the infirmary. He could hear Poppy having a go at someone. The old witch better hope it wasn't his wife she was having a ruckus with.

"I feel fine," his wife murmured. "I just haven't been resting and eating enough. Really."

"No extra stress then? That's very dangerous for an early pregnancy, Hermione. I am going to have a talk with Severus. He'll make you listen," Poppy admonished.

"I am right here, Poppy," he said, moving to hold his wife. "Are you all right?" He didn't want to pull her to him too tightly, but she seemed normal.

"Yes. Mostly just my pride is hurt," she said with a smile. "Sorry to disrupt your class. I'm fine really."

"Severus," Poppy began, "you need to be sure that she eats healthy portions at all meals. A nice walk about the grounds each day wouldn't be amiss either. Lots of fluids. Lots of rest. No stress. They are both fine, luckily, but this has to stop. She's got dark circles under her eyes!"

"I will be sure that she does all of that. I have been trying, so perhaps this is something that needed to happen to remind her that she is no longer thinking of just herself," he said quietly.

Minerva smiled. "Hermione, congratulations. I had no idea. I thought maybe the extra session was a bit much for you."

"No," Hermione said sadly. "I just think it's the whole situation with my parents. They aren't taking the news very well. We had a visit with them last night. I'm afraid that was what I was thinking about, and it just overwhelmed me for a moment."

"Have you been taking your medicine?" Poppy asked suspiciously.

"Yes, I have," she said honestly. "Well, I forgot this morning, but I will take them as soon as my afternoon classes are done."

"Oh, no you won't. You are going to go back down to your chambers and rest. Prop your feet up. Take the vitamins. It's for your own good. Your classes can resume tomorrow," Poppy said. She looked to Minerva. "Do you not agree?"

"I do. I will handle the rest of the day's classes, Hermione. Take care of yourself and your little one," she said fondly.

"We'll be all right," Hermione said, hand moving down instinctively to touch her stomach. She grinned at Severus when the two witches moved away. "I can't wait until I'm actually showing. Won't that be great?"

"It will," he said softly. "Let me escort you back to our chambers. I have a little time left before my next class."

"All right," she said, kissing his cheek. Though his voice and mannerisms betrayed no emotion, she could see that he was worried by the expression in his eyes. This great man loved her so much that it made her giddy to think about it. They made their way down to their chambers easily, each silent. Once there, Severus fluffed the pillows for her and pulled back the duvet. Without being asked, he retrieved her favorite white nightgown from her wardrobe. He used magic to remove and replace her robes and dress.

"Come lie down, love," he said, patting the bed.

Hermione smiled and allowed him to tuck her in. This was new. He'd never done anything like this for her, at least not while she was awake to notice. It was very touching. "Severus, you don't have to stay. Go get ready for your next class."

"I've still got some time yet," he murmured, brushing her hair back away from her face. He placed a few small kisses on her cheeks and lips before looking at her. "Are you truly fine?"

"I promise," she said. "I just... my mum and dad, it really bothered me." She pulled his hand into hers as he sat next to her. "I can understand that they would feel left out and maybe disappointed, but deep down, I really believed they would still love me and the baby."

"They do, Hermione. It's just a big shock." He squeezed her hand back. "Think about it. Almost three months ago, they learnt that you and I are an item. I am older than you, and I was once your teacher. If my daughter," he touched her stomach lightly, "brought home an ex-professor nearly nineteen years her senior, I wouldn't take it lightly either."

"I know, but why can't they see that I am old enough to make my own decisions?"

"They do. I think that is the hardest part. Their baby has grown up, and they've missed half of her life whilst she was away at school. This just made them realize that you wouldn't be going home, back to the Muggle world." He bent over to kiss her stomach. "Your place is here in the Wizarding world with your new family."

The tenderness of his gesture, the mixture of love and pride in his voice, and the look of complete adoration in his eyes told her that everything would be all right. Her parents would come around one day. It didn't bode well for her or the baby to dwell on it. "I love you," she whispered.

"And I, you," he said, kissing her lips softly. "I'll go on then. Stay in bed unless you need to use the loo. I will summon a house-elf to bring you a light broth now. Summon your vitamins from Poppy as well." He kissed her again. "I'll be back for lunch."

"Thank you, Severus."

"It's nothing." He could see that she would fall asleep soon. Severus frowned as he left his chambers. He'd thought that he'd done the right thing by letting her sleep late. She hadn't had the time to eat a full breakfast, and she'd worried herself into a fainting spell. Things would change. He would take care of his wife and unborn child. They didn't go through all of this Succubus rubbish to let hurtful words harm them. As he sat at his desk in his office, the door opened. He looked up to find Harry.

"How is she?" he asked cautiously.

"You can come in, Harry," Severus said. "She's fine. She fainted. The baby is fine, too."

"I'm glad to hear it," Harry said. "Look. I know Dumbledore probably told you about what happened two nights ago. He said that you had something for me. When I didn't hear from you, I figured you were busy. Do you still want to meet this week?"

"Harry, I need to know how close you are to figuring out exactly what Voldemort did to himself that would be causing you these visions. Albus maintains what he told you. Your natural Legilimens ability is mixing with your imagination. While it makes sense to me, I would still like to know what he did to himself." Severus moved to the small cabinet on the side of his desk to retrieve something. "Is Bella willing to help?"

"She is willing to do anything for me," Harry said. "She is looking back through her journals right now. There was a series of things done. She's trying to pinpoint exactly what."

"I think she is wasting time. Why can't we just look through the journals ourselves?"

"Severus, she is the one that helped him. We need her on this one," Harry argued. "I know you and Lucius have a plan to kill her, but I won't allow it." At Severus' raised eyebrow, he added, "Not yet."

"Harry, if I were you, I would hurry her along. Here put this on." He held out a silver ring to Harry. It resembled Harry's Dark Mark: two snakes surrounding a Phoenix.

Smiling, Harry put it on. "Brilliant. What is this for?"

Severus quickly chanted an incantation. "You will have to wear this always, Harry. I've just seen to it that it can't be removed except by me. Inside that ring is a small feather from Fawkes. Albus and I have been working on this ring since you first told me about the Phoenix song calming you."

"I feel magic flowing from it. What's it do?" he asked curiously.

"The ring will feel your emotions. If you get too angry or upset, you will hear Fawkes' Phoenix Song," Severus said simply. "What do you think about that?"

"Brilliant. Thanks, Severus. I'll go see the headmaster later to thank him as well." The boy stood up to leave. "I know what you two must think, you and Dumbledore. I'm not getting attached to her. I just wish things would have been different."

"Harry, you don't really know Bella the way that I know her. I've seen her do many horrific things," Severus said. "Just think about that."

"Right. Talk to you later," the boy said, admiring his ring as he left.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

*The hooked-nosed wizard was laying on his back, smiling broadly as Succubus Hermione began undressing next to his bed. He had taken off his clothes the moment he'd seen her enter. A large hand reached down to stroke his ready shaft. Soon his fantasy witch would lower herself down onto him as she had the night before. The feel of her was incredible.*

*When he came, he could actually feel his seed and magic leaving to mingle with hers. It was very explosive and satisfying. He'd never had an orgasm like it before, and in that moment, he knew he was lost. He'd give her anything if she kept coming back each night. Hell, whatever she wanted. "Herm-own-ninny," he whispered, reaching out to take her hand.*

"Viktor, close your eyes. I will do all the work for you," she purred.

"Vell, if you insist," he said, closing his eyes. He felt her warm mouth go down on his erection. "Yes," he hissed.

*This amazing creature had been invading his dreams often as of late. They'd had numerous talks, snogs, and even had sex once before. She would never allow him to see her face at first, but then she pulled away her hood to reveal features exactly like his Herm-own-ninny. He could not resist. As long as she remained as Hermione, he would not deny her anything. It was a dream come true for him. He'd wanted her since she was fifteen years old.*

*The swirling tongue and probing fingers elicited his moans. "Go on." She'd told him that she wanted to have a child with him. Hermione's features mixed with his, she had said. He'd agreed. She explained that she was able to take on the human form at will, but she was a magical creature. She'd never explained what exactly, but he didn't care. He guessed she was a type of Veela from the surge of arousal she produced in him.*

*His Hermione smiled up at him as she crawled up his body to position herself over him. "Give me all that you can. Come hard for me. Let me feel your essence. I shall let you live to help me raise this child. You will do as I say for always, and I'll come to you each night."*

*"Yes, okay," he agreed, never realizing what she'd said. To his ears, he heard that she would always be like this with him. His Hermione. In this world, no Snape had come along to snatch her up. For the moment, he just wanted to be sheathed inside her body. "You vill always be vith me?"*

*"Always," she purred before slamming down against him, allowing him to penetrate her fully. "Hermione is always here."*

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Hermione sat up in bed breathing heavily. "Oh, my God," she muttered and leaned over the bed to vomit the broth that she'd eaten only an hour before. ~~A~~"Accio water," she moaned miserably.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" Severus asked. "I just came in and heard you retch. Is it that morning nausea?" He cast a charm to clean the floor.

She shook her head. "I just had a most horrible dream, Severus."

"What about?" he asked, noting her pale face.

"Viktor Krum and I..." She stopped. She couldn't tell this to Severus. He would go mental, and she wouldn't put it past him to try to Apparate to Viktor's home.

"Go on," he said, coming to wipe her face with a cool, damp washcloth.

"Please don't be upset," she warned.

"Hermione, you can't control your dreams. Tell me."

"I was at Viktor's place... in his bedroom. He was naked, and I undressed. We... we had sex," she said, shuddering with revulsion. Severus went still. She could discern a jealous glint in his eyes. "Severus, I didn't like it if that's what you were thinking. I didn't feel anything. It's like I was sitting nearby just watching him and me. There was something odd about it."

"Odd?" he was able to ask finally. The thought of his wife bedding another man, even in her dreams, was unsettling. He had a mind to pay the bastard a visit, though it wasn't his fault.

"Something didn't seem right. She was saying something about having a baby, taking his essence, and letting him live." She took another sip of her water. "What a nightmare!"

"You know, you were moaning in your sleep last night. Do you not remember any dreams that you may have had?" Severus asked calmly.

"Not at all," she said.

"I heard you saying that something was 'rather disgusting' and you wished that they would 'stop acting lewdly' whilst you were around. Perhaps it was another dream," he said.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't remember any dreams from last night. I think I was just mentally exhausted though. Maybe that was just something left over from the meeting with my parents. I can't be sure."

"It reminded me of an Incubus visit," he admitted. "I know that the creature is gone, and I nearly panicked to be honest. I then realized that you were just having a dream."

"Severus, you don't think that maybe she is visiting Viktor now, do you?" Hermione asked thoughtfully. "I mean, maybe she is still trying to get to me somehow. Why me?"

"No, I wouldn't think so, love. Perhaps you could send him a letter asking after his new girlfriend that he talked about."

"Maybe. It's probably nothing. I just need to push it out of my mind. Stress. Worry. All of it. I just need to concentrate on doing right by the baby and you," she smiled. "What time is it?"

"Just past noon. I wanted to take lunch with you. Do you think you could at least try to eat? Maybe a bit of dry toast?" he asked hopefully.

"I'll try," she agreed.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Ginny, we have to talk this out," Harry said.

"I don't know where to start, Harry."

"Come with me. Let's have a private talk. Just the two of us, all right?" Harry knew that if he didn't work things out with her all would be lost. She'd been avoiding him most of the day. That she followed him into the empty classroom was a good sign. "Start from your mum's visit."

"She and I went into Hogsmeade to spend the day together. We talked about a lot of things. Mostly we talked about Percy and Luna. She made me go with her to the spot where we were attacked." Her voice cracked.

Harry reached out to put his arms around her. "Lean your head on me," he commanded. She did as requested.

"We cried for nearly an hour, each in our own world. It felt good to be held by mum again. I felt safe, like nobody could touch me," she admitted. "I didn't realize how much I had missed that."

"I'm here for you, Gin," Harry whispered.

"I know, Harry, but lately things are different for us."

"What do you mean?"

"Sssh. Let me finish, love," she said. "I have been feeling some really dark things. I've been daydreaming about everything you can imagine. Horrible things, Harry. I've also been thinking some strange things. I wished that Luna had died instead of Percy." She eyed him to see if he looked repulsed. "Don't you think that is twisted?"

He shook his head. "No. After Sirius died, I had sort of wished it had been anyone but him. Moody, Lupin, Tonks... anyone. It wasn't until later that I realized it was meant to be. I can understand that."

"Well, I started resenting my family, all of them but mum. I hated that they claimed to miss Percy when they never tried to contact him. You though, " she said with a smile. "You held him as he died...even though he'd been nasty to you. I love that you did that for him, Harry."

"I used to get angry at others as well. Like Ron and Hermione for starters. They used to say they missed Sirius so much, but I felt as if they couldn't have missed him or cared as much as I did," Harry said. "What did your mum say?"

"She read things from Percy's journal. It seemed that at some point they all did try to contact Percy. It was him that was pushing us all away. He would talk to me because I was his little sister, and he hoped that I could make something of myself. He thought I was young enough to influence," she said ruefully. "After reading some of what he said, I felt my resentment melt away. They did try. Even Ron. Ron sent him a few chocolate frogs for Christmas. It wasn't much, but it was an attempt. Percy didn't even eat them. He opened them and let them hop out of the window at his flat."

"Bugger," Harry said.

"I know. I've just been feeling so down. I didn't want Luna to recover. Petty of me, wasn't it? I'm glad that she has now, but in my mind, I thought she deserved to suffer for living while my brother died." Ginny moved away from him. "I've been fantasizing about killing Bellatrix with poisoned liquor. I've been trying to gain her trust in me. Then, I have other thoughts. Ever since we've been going back to the Chamber of Secrets, it's like Tom is trying to talk to me again. I know that's ridiculous, but the memories are overwhelming me. While I am there, I feel like Bellatrix is looking at me like she wants to sleep with you, me, or both of us."

An epiphany hit Harry. The spell he'd put on Ginny to enable him to sense how she felt that day... it was still working! No wonder he'd been having all these extra dark thoughts. His own were mingling with Ginny's. This made him feel so much better. Maybe Bella had been telling him the truth when he'd asked her about Voldemort's spells. He had kept that from Severus. Why though? Why did it matter so much to him that she wasn't hurt? He didn't particularly care for her. He had begun to pity her. That was it. He'd think about that later. He had to patch things up with the witch he did love. "Ginny, I do love you. I think we both have a few issues right now. I think that we can work through this. Just stop avoiding me."

"Well, I was embarrassed by the way I acted Friday night. I nearly ruined everything for us. I didn't want to face you," she said. "Do you forgive me?"

"Yes." He reached for her hand.

"I love you, Harry. I always will."

"Look, you don't have to come down with me any longer, all right? I'll ask Ron and Draco to come. You know they'll tell you if anything is amiss."

"No, I can handle it," she said quickly.

"End of subject, Ginny. I'll get someone else to come. It was wrong of me to not think of your feelings in the first place. I thought I could deal with my own demons, but I never thought about yours. I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right. We'll be all right, Harry." She hugged him tightly. "I just hate the thought of her being bolder with you if I'm not there. You don't think I notice the little things that she does while I am there, but I do. I see where she puts her hands and how she looks at you."

"If I don't go along with..."

Ginny cut off his words by putting her finger on his lips. She boldly reached down to touch him. "I can do anything better than she can."

He pulled away. "Ginny, please don't think you have to do this just because... Oi! Is this why you wanted to be with me?" He felt a pang of guilt for a moment, but her answer reassured him.

"I wanted to because I love you. I just want to show you how I feel," she said, leaning in to kiss him. He nodded lightly. Vaguely he heard the rustling of fabric, but he paid no mind. When their lips parted, he warded the door.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Bloody hell," Draco said, panting. "We almost got stuck in there with the brats."

"That bastard is shagging my little sister!" Ron said hotly. Draco pulled the top of Harry's cloak more securely around them as they slid to sit against a wall down the corridor. They had taken up Hermione's suggestion and went after Harry thinking he was on his way to the Chamber.

"You heard her, Ron. She wanted to. Don't go meddling in their business. It seems to me they have a lot to work out," Draco rebutted.

"Right. Just hate to think about Ginny growing up, I guess. Did you hear all that? She hated me, hated the family. Twisted," Ron grumbled. "Glad she had mum to talk to though... and Harry."

They were still huddled together near the shadowy wall. Ron said, "Luna sent me a letter today."

"That doesn't sound good," Draco said.

"I didn't read it," Ron admitted. "When Dumbledore tried to bring me for a visit, she was gone. They said she and her father went off and didn't want to be disturbed. I don't think the letter has anything good to say."

"You've got to read it," Draco said. "Where is it?"

"Here," Ron said, pulling the crumpled parchment out of his pocket. "You do it."

Draco opened the parchment uneasily. He pulled out his wand. *Lumos*." Clearing his throat, he read the letter aloud. It said:

My Dearest Ronald (Weasley King!),

Father and I have decided to take some time away to spend together. I am not trying to hurt you. I knew each time that you visited me. I heard all the words you said to me. There are terrors that happened that I couldn't even explain to you, Ronald. I need some time for myself.

I'm sure you were told that I have only a little magic left. It's really hard to even get a candle to light. Father says that he knows an old witch that might be able to help me. I think that until I can get myself together, deal with my issues, and attempt to get my magic back, we need to break things off. I'll be keeping your class ring for now to have a part of you with me.

Please write back to me. This isn't permanent unless you want it to be. I still love you, but if I can't offer you anything more than the nervous, near Squib of a woman that I have become, then I don't think you should wait for me. Just give me some time. It's all I ask. I'll be expecting a letter soon.

Always,

Your Looney Luna Lovegood

"Well, that's not too bad," Draco commented. He knew his mate would be upset.

"Sure sounded like a break up to me, mate. We need to break things off, and then this isn't permanent. How much more confusing could she have made it?" Ron asked grumpily. "I don't care if she doesn't have magic. I just want her to get back here."

"Give her some time, mate," Draco said, handing the letter back to him. "You'll be all right."

"No, I won't. Nobody cared the way she did," Ron mumbled.

"I do," Draco said softly. Ron didn't move for a moment, but when he looked at Draco, the blond leaned closer to place a chaste kiss on his lips.

"Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed, backing away. "What was that for?"

"I don't know," Draco said, clearly embarrassed. "I just wanted to make you feel better. I'm sorry. I have to go." Before Ron could stop him, he fled the corridor, hoping he hadn't alienated Ron.

Ron sat dazed for a moment. He really needed to write back to Luna. He'd wait for her. Nobody else had ever really cared about him after all *Draco does*. "Bloody hell," Ron said aloud, placing the Invisibility Cloak back about him. He had to find Draco. The bloke probably thought he hated him. Did he? No. He couldn't believe the blighter had kissed his lips! They needed to talk about this. He'd thought that everything was straightened out the last time they'd talked.

It was nice that his friend was trying to help him, but he could do without the affectionate stuff. Well, it wasn't so bad, but it wasn't the same as kissing a witch. Better to find him now and have it out with him once and for all. They needed to get things straight. He didn't want to lose Draco's friendship. It seemed that he had lost Luna, even if only temporarily. Ginny had drifted away from him, and Harry had his own issues. Mione had gone off and married. She was now pregnant. If he lost Draco, he'd be alone.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~~SS ~~~~~~

"Hermione, are you awake?" Severus asked, looking down at his wife.

"Yes," she said. "I'm just resting my eyes. What is it?"

"I have a letter here. It seems your mum sent it."

Hermione shot up to a sitting position to take the parchment from his hands. She tore it open. "It says that they went to the Leaky Cauldron and got help from Tom to send it." She read though the short letter and smiled at her husband. "They are apologizing for being so rude last night. She says that it was just a shock, and she hopes that I don't think that they hate me or love me any less. She says they do love my unborn child and me, but they will have to get used to things. She says to give her regards to you, and if any man could look at me and attend to me the way that you did, then he must be worthy of my loyalty. She says they will be in touch."

"I'm happy for you. That should take a lot off your mind," Severus said, taking the letter to read it for himself.

She smiled again. "It does, but I had already decided not to think on it. I suppose the words do make me feel better though."

"We'll just take things one day at a time. They will come around sooner or later."

"Whom were you talking to in there?" she asked, remembering voices.

"Harry was here. We've made a breakthrough and realized why he was having such odd feelings and visions. Well, part of the reason anyway." Severus placed the letter on the nightstand.

"Why?"

"Ginevra. It seems that he'd never broken the little enchantment he put on her. He was still feeling most of her emotions. In turn, she was feeling his. I think that's why they've both been down. They've been connected. He has broken the enchantment, so we shall wait and see if it makes a difference for either of them."

"Of course! Why didn't we think about this? I had totally forgotten about that. Thank goodness he remembered," Hermione said. "Severus?"

"Yes, love?"

"What is the truth behind the ring you gave to Harry?"

"It is as I told him. Fawkes donated a bit of his magic along with a bit of feather. It will serve to calm Harry in dark times," he said.

"There must be something else. It feels as though you are leaving something out," Hermione persisted.

"My ever persistent wife!" he exclaimed. "I trust this will go no further." She nodded. "Well, we have created a mirror, Albus and I. If the rim glows red, Harry is sad. If the

rim glows green, Harry is angry. There are different stages of colorings, but if they are unusually bright, that is when Fawkes is likely to be soothing him. All we have to do is say an enchantment to the mirror, and we will be able to see what Harry is about. He'll always have help from one of us: Fawkes, Albus, or me. Maybe even you, if you can keep this quiet."

"You know I will," she said brightly. For the first time all day, things seemed to be looking up. "I'll always keep your confidences, Severus. I'll not betray you. Ever."

His favorite words. *I'll not betray you.* "I believe you, Hermione. I honestly do."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Let me get this straight," Ron said incredulously. "You like me, but you don't like me. You've never kissed a bloke except for that... kiss." He shuddered. "And you say you've had sex with six girls. No blokes. I am confused." It had been two days since Draco had kissed him. For those two days, Draco had been avoiding him like the plague. He'd finally cornered Draco after dinner for a word. Harry and Ginny were spending most of their time alone. Hermione was on bed rest, and McGonagall had taken over her classes. There were the other blokes, but it wasn't the same as being with his close friends and sister.

"Ha!" Draco barked. "You're confused? How do you think/feel?"

"Well, that's what I'm bloody asking you, isn't it?" Ron retorted. He shook his head. "Look, Draco, I don't like blokes. I mean, since it's you, it's all right, I suppose." Ron blanched. "Hang on. I mean to say, if it would be any other bloke, I'd be forced to do something really bad. I just... I love Luna. I fancy witches."

"So do I," Draco said hotly.

"Love Luna?"

"Stop being thick. I've never been attracted to a male before. I have no idea why I am now or why it's you." Draco pushed back his platinum locks. "It's Hermione's fault." He nodded to himself. "That's right. She asked me about it, and she got me started on thinking about if she may have been on to something."

"She asked you about us?"

"Yes. She did. A while back," Draco drawled. "Had I known this would have happened, I would have Obliviated myself. Really. I don't want to lose your friendship, Ron, but I think maybe we should not hang out for a while."

"Hell, no," Ron said adamantly. "We can handle this. We'll just pretend it never happened."

"I don't think I can do that, Ron. I'm sorry," Draco admitted. "I just... I sort of liked it."

Ron swallowed. "Look, mate. I don't want to stop being friends. You're all I have left. Don't leave me, too."

Draco moved forward. "I'll still be about, Ron. It's just a lot to ask of me. I don't want to feel this way. I don't like wanting someone that feels wrong and right at the same time."

"Want?"

"Well, I don't know if that is the right word, but yes, want."

"Just... don't leave me," Ron pleaded. It was important that it still felt like someone cared. Why the bloody hell did Harry have to start drifting off now? Why did Ginny have to turn against him? Why did Mione have to marry Snape? "Let's just pretend nothing happened for now. Right? We... we'll think about this."

"Think about this? Us?" Draco asked, paling.

"Well, not us, but yes, us."

They both started laughing. Draco smiled. "This is ridiculous. Hermione has just messed with my mind. Everything that has happened has just added to my mental anguish." He hugged Ron quickly and pulled away. "I've never had a true friend before. I think you're the best one that I have ever had. When Hermione said that, I might have mistook my feelings for something deeper. It just feels good to have someone care and not worry about my money or what my name can do for them."

"It's nice that you don't tease me about my lack of money any longer, and you care about what goes on with Harry, Hermione, and me. I say we just put this behind us for now. We're only seventh years after all. We have a long time before we have to worry on things like that." Ron grinned. "Luna is my first priority. I want to give her a go if she'll have me, but she is right. There is no rush on things."

"Fair enough," Draco agreed.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus scowled. His wife was asleep again. He'd had no choice except to make an appearance in the Great Hall for dinner, and he'd had a detention to oversee directly after. He had hoped that she would be awake when he returned. She was taking advantage of McGonagall's insistence that she rest. He wanted her to rest as well, but he couldn't help feeling a bit... jealous. *She is carrying your child, arse.* He sighed and went to the bathroom for a quick shower. He practically ripped off his clothes in the wake of his sour thoughts.

Yes, she was carrying his child, and he loved her for that. She would be a mother soon, and he knew that things would change. He doubted if things would be too strained for them, but it would change their ability to do things at a moment's notice. They wouldn't be able to make love at their leisure either. "This pregnancy is already interfering with that," he said bitterly to his reflection in the mirror.

*Good Lord! What the fuck is wrong with me? This is my child. My little one* She was nurturing his child, and all he could do was complain because it had been a few days since they'd had sex. He didn't mean it. He wouldn't risk their child for anything, even a chance to make love to her numerous times a day for eternity. He just wanted to make the most of the short time that they had left alone. Severus hoped this sickness and tiredness wouldn't last long. He had chosen some books earlier. Perhaps tomorrow he should have a read on the subject. Maybe there was something in there that dealt with both parents' mixed emotions.

He grinned broadly to his reflection. "I am going to be a father," he said brightly.

"Yes, you are. Wonderful, isn't it?" his wife asked.

His cheeks pinked slightly as he turned to look into his wife's eyes. "It is." He figured he wouldn't show her that he was embarrassed to be caught talking to himself or grinning like an idiot. He only hoped that she hadn't heard the bit he'd said about the pregnancy interfering with things. "What are you doing up?"

"I have to use the loo."

"I'll leave," he said.

"Oh, it's fine. Stay. Just a tinkle," she said as she found the toilet.

Severus busied himself with turning on the shower. He'd never been in the bathroom as she had used it. Nor had she invaded his private bathroom time either. It was a very intimate act. Realization hit him. She had to trust him completely and love him fully. No matter what happened, she was always constant, never wavering. He would try to be the same for her. He would try to share intimacies and voice his true thoughts. It was easier to tell her that he loved her now, but he still said it much less than he thought it.

Arms reached around his waist while nails raked down his bare chest. Lips pressed to his shoulder blade and accosted him with a flurry of movements. Her tongue began gliding along his back, and he felt her shift as she stood on her toes to reach his neck and ear. "I would love to shower with you," she whispered. Her sultry voice and her hot breath invading his ear had him hardening.

"I think," he began, turning to face her, "we can arrange that." He kissed her possessively as he peeled away her unbuttoned nightshirt. Hell, that was his shirt she'd been sleeping in. He pulled back and raised an eyebrow. "Filching my shirt?"

"Well, I missed you. I wanted to have something of you to lay with me until you returned. It still smells like you from when you took it off earlier." She winked. "I couldn't resist."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

He reached down to slide her knickers down and knelt as he did so. She stepped out of them when they reached her feet. Severus simply pulled her body to him and rested his head on her stomach. "I wonder what's in here."

She giggled. "I'd like to think it's a little boy. Wouldn't you like that?"

He remembered the little vision he'd had of the bassinet and the little girl that had lain within. "I think I would prefer a daughter. She should have your eyes of course." He kissed her belly. "I would not send back a son, however." His head tilted up as her hands left his hair to cup his face. Their eyes met.

"I love you, Severus."

He paused for a moment. "I love you. I never thought I would have anyone, and you came into my life and wrecked things." His lips curved upward. "Thank you."

She kneeled down on the floor with him. "Thank you." They shared a long, lazy kiss. Severus backed them into the shower, sliding himself to sit against the wall beneath the running water and pulling her to straddle him. She gasped from the sudden spray of warm water. "Like this?" she questioned.

He nodded, knowing what she meant. She began showering his face with small kisses as she reached down to grope his nearly hard penis. A few soft caresses and squeezes had him ready for her. "I've missed this," he said roughly, sucking in a sharp breath as she slid the head of his erection along her cleft.

"So have I, Severus. Very much so," she said. "Oh, God, yes." She slowly let him slide into her. Truth be known, she had been feeling quite randy all day, and she couldn't wait for him to get back from his detention. It was a mere accident that she had fallen asleep, but luckily she had heard him grumbling in the bathroom. He must have had an annoying detention to oversee. She gave a few tentative movements before settling into a slow, unhurried rhythm. Severus nipped at her neck while his hands caressed her breasts and arse. "It always amazes me," she whispered.

"What, love?"

"You. This," she said, grinding herself in circular motions on him, enjoying the sensation it brought to her clit. Her breath caught in her throat as he thrust upwards deeply and groaned. His face was relaxed; his partially wet hair plastered to the sides of his face, and his dark eyes glinted with pleasure. "You are beautiful."

He stilled and looked into her eyes. She knew he was probably searching for truth behind her words, so she stared back, unblinkingly with a small smile. So he didn't have perfect teeth. Big deal. She hadn't had them either until she allowed Poppy to carry on with them after she had been hit by Draco's spell three years earlier. So his hair was greasy most of the time. Plenty of people had oily hair. She didn't have perfect hair either. It was mostly a bushy mess. So he didn't sport a nice tan. If she stayed in the dark dungeons as much as he did, she would never have one either. Everyone had some imperfection. The worst of his was his attitude, and that had even changed drastically in the last couple of months. He didn't treat her with disdain. Ever. He loved and respected her. He had accepted her. Married her. Chose to be with her. To know that she had reached him in a place that no other woman had, filled her with a feeling of power.

"I believe you mean that," he said finally.

"I do," she said, increasing her movements, as he seemed intent on picking up the pace as well. He dipped his head to reach her breasts. Hermione arched her back as she reached behind to steady herself on Severus' legs and threw her head back. She began riding him with abandon as he thrust into her. "Good Lord," she moaned. The man was a bloody genius. He always knew exactly where to aim his stroke, how hard to pound into her, and what speed to thrust. She felt the rising waves of orgasm threatening to overtake her. The shower spray was mostly hitting her in the face, and it had wetted her hair completely. As she flung herself forward to hold onto Severus' shoulders to ride out her orgasm, she noticed many strands of her hair had slapped him about the face and chest. Had she not been so intent at chasing down bliss, she would have laughed.

He simply shook aside the offending locks that threatened to hamper the vision before him. Severus loved to watch her climax. Her lips were parted slightly, her eyes were mere slits, and her face contorted in the most appealing expression of complete ecstasy as her climax raced through her body. He loved the way her brow furrowed just so, and he loved the soft whimpers that escaped her mouth as it built up. If he listened carefully, he could make out nearly intelligible phrases: don't stop, yes, I love you, and oh, God.

The best part of making love to her was the slight widening of her eyes as the final crest hit, and the way she began to moan before screeching out his name. "Severus," she called on cue. Then, she would close her eyes and bite her lip before slowing her movements.

He thrust into her deeply and quickly for as long as he could before he too succumbed to his culmination. "Hermione," he shouted with release. As he came down, he heard himself saying, "Always love you. Always need you. Always want you."

Severus pulled her to slump against him while they enjoyed the afterglow of their shared passion. He wondered if he always told her those sweet little nothings without realizing it, or had he only just begun to say them since her brush with possible death? Fuck it! He didn't care. She was his wife and would be a mother to his child. He tightened his arms around her possessively and let her drift into a lazy slumber until he felt the water turning cold. "We have to get to bed, love."

"All right," she said. "Ow."

"What's wrong?"

"My knees hurt," she said, trying to move off of him. He held her steady and positioned her as if she was a babe in his arms.

There was indeed redness there where she'd rubbed them too roughly against the hard shower floor. He kissed each one before getting up. "I should have remembered to put a Cushioning Charm," he said. "I'm sorry."

"My fault as well," she said with a grin. "It was worth it."

"I hope so," he said, kissing her nose. How had he never noticed what a cute little nose she had? He counted the light dusting of freckles on her nose. Six. He kissed it again as he stooped to pick up his wand. When he laid her on the bed, he charmed away her sore spots. "This should help," he said. His words were lost on her. She'd

drifted back to sleep. Grinning, he slipped in next to his wife. He would make love to her again as soon as they awoke. With that thought, he pulled the duvet up around them and held her until he too drifted into dreams.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Luna smiled as she read Ron's letter again. He did love her, didn't he?

Luna,

I am glad that you wrote to me and explained things, sort of. I was a bit miffed that you and your dad took off without telling anyone. You know, I do understand that you've been through a lot since this all happened, but I've been through a lot as well. I lost my brother, my family has had problems, and I thought I'd lost my girl forever.

Only, it feels as though I did lose her. Can't we just work through this together? I know you need your dad right now, but I just want you to know that you still have me. I'll wait for you. I do love you, and I'll never forget what we shared that night. You know... not just that night, everything. Each day. Each snog. All of it.

Good luck with whatever your dad has planned for you, Luna. I hope it works, but I don't care if you have magic or not. I would stay with you anyway and love you no matter how powerful you would be. It doesn't take all that to be a good mum and wife. Well, all right then. I'll let you go. Keep me updated. I won't write too much and try to influence you. I respect your decision.

Always,

Ron

Her father had pressured her into leaving without owing anyone. He'd become quite possessive it seemed. It was as though he believed she would disappear if he didn't see her in the same room. They were in a small Wizarding village having a visit with an old witch that was known to restore powers for a hefty fee. She only prayed that the woman could help.

Ron loved her, but she wanted to be a real witch for him, not a Squib. Her mother and Molly Weasley were examples of great women. Well, Mrs. Weasley was in any event. Her own mum had been too interested in dabbling with charms to remain safe. Maybe Ron would change his mind eventually when he realized that life would be harder living with a Squib. She wouldn't be able to get a good Wizarding job if she'd lost her magic, and she couldn't just expect to sit home and spit out babies while he worked to support them. He would simply end up like his father and mother. She knew from past talks that he didn't want to live like that. She wouldn't be the one to bring him down either.

She thought back to something Draco had said while she was under the spell. He had said something that had her thinking. If she and Ron didn't get together, Draco would take care of Ron for her. He'd said, "Luna, I doubt you can hear me, but I know Ron loves you as much as you love him. If it's any consolation, I will do what I can to see him happy. I care about him, too. He'll be okay."

Those words played over and over in her mind until the evening that Harry and Snape had come in and began their chanting to release her. She knew that Bella was hiding out and had researched to give Harry a way to help her. She appreciated that Harry put up with the woman, but if she ever crossed paths with her, she would not be able to control her anger. She had done this to her in the first place.

"Luna! Luna! Where are you, dear? Come back inside. You don't want to catch cold," her father said, seeing that she was standing outside.

"Be right there," she called. He meant well, but he was smothering her since she'd come out of her bewitchment. She sighed. He was exactly what she needed though. Family. He would always love her no matter what, magic or no. Ron said he would too, but it was a bit different to hear those words from a lover and to trust in them fully. When it came from a parent, it was more likely to stay true. She just had to have faith that she would one day have something to offer him again.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry and Draco made their way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and after entering, Harry did a quick check to make sure the ghost was elsewhere before opening the Chamber. "We can just slide down. There is a ladder just to the top, but this is easier going down."

"Will this close?" Draco asked cautiously.

"Yes, as soon as I am at the bottom and instruct it to," Harry said. "See you at the bottom." He slid down into the dark tunnel.

Draco swallowed roughly. Good grief! He felt a bit apprehensive about going down into Salazar's lair. Harry and Ron must have been shitting scared the first time they went down. That was when they knew they would be facing a Basilisk.

"Go on," Ron's voice whispered. "Me and Mione still need to get down as well. Be sure to make some noise as you go down so we can slip in. Don't forget to delay getting out as well. That way we can slip by without him knowing it."

"Right," Draco whispered. "It's just... odd."

"It's fine," Hermione said softly. Draco nodded and slid down to meet Harry. He grunted and whooped a bit, as his body was thrown from side to side quickly.

"Damn! What a rush," he said with a grin. Harry smiled and began speaking loudly in Parseltongue. They heard the opening begin to close up. Draco followed Harry forward uneasily. It was pitch dark ahead of them, but as Harry fearlessly made his way forward, lanterns lit on either side of them. One look behind him, told him that they must only light for Harry. As soon as they passed, it would darken. He knew that Ron and Hermione were following.

They reached another door, which Harry opened quickly. "I'll leave this open while we're down here since we won't be long. Be careful just on the other side. There is a ledge that's sort of slippery. Some water drainage. Just climb down the ladder that I use."

"Right," he said, following the instructions. At least he didn't have to worry about the other two getting shut out. It would have been hard for them to scramble onto the ledge noiselessly before Harry closed the door on them. He followed Harry down a long stretch of concrete, greatly dampened with water. On either side, there was a head of a snake. A lantern in the snake's open mouths would flame up as they passed. He could see different tunnels and walkways leading away from the main path. Straight ahead was the large bust of Salazar Slytherin. Draco smiled, but he nearly backed away in horror as he saw the fleshy, skeletal remains of the Basilisk. "Shit," he breathed.

Harry turned around and smirked at him. "Impressive, isn't it?"

Draco gulped. What the bloody hell was going on? Harry looked... wicked. "Er, all right there, Harry?"

"Of course," he said. He began talking in Parseltongue once more. His two large snakes ambled forward. Draco watched in distaste as his friend reached down to pat each affectionately and talk to them. A few waves of his hand brought down his wards on what was apparently Bella's room. "Here we are."

Draco followed him, noting the snakes had preceded them in. A deep sneer of hatred settled over his features as he entered. He heard an excited squeal.

"My Lord," Bella's voice shouted. "I've been so lonely."

"I've been told that you have been talking to yourself and trying to get out. Now why would you do such a thing?" Harry asked, feigning anger. "Have I not been good to

you? Have I not kept you away from Azkaban?"

"Master, I'm sorry," she said, kneeling down.

Draco watched in awe as Harry reached down with a single finger and lifted her face to look at his. This woman was a true follower. He hadn't seen someone look at someone else like that in a very long time. Since before the Dark Lord had been defeated. It was a look of utter adoration and loyalty. Hermione was right. Harry was feeling sorry for her. Draco snarled, "It stinks down here. I wonder if it's not the witch that lives here that is reeking. Do you bathe?"

"Enough," Harry commanded. "Rise, Bella." She did so, sending a hateful glare to Draco. "Tell me, Bellatrix," he hissed almost seductively. "What news have you about Voldemort's meddling."

"Only this, my Lord," she said, moving towards her desk. She handed him two parchments. "I've written and simplified all that I can remember that he had me working on for him. Most of it is fairly easy to be rid of, but some is a bit trickier. I would need resources to research them further."

"The ones you have underlined?" he asked.

"Yes. It isn't much," she said. "Have I pleased you?"

"Immensely." He reached out absently to stroke her hair while he continued reading. "Good girl," he murmured.

Draco made a face as the witch closed her eyes and began to whimper. What in the world was going on here? The witch reached down and began stroking her breasts and panting as if she was having sex. Draco looked around wildly, wondering where Ron and Hermione were. They would definitely need to see this. He didn't know how Ron would handle it though. It was almost like... cheating. Did Harry do this while Ginny was down here? Couldn't be. No, he and Ron would have overheard something.

"Oh, my Lord," she shrieked. "Potter!" Harry stopped smoothing away her hair, and he looked at her for the first time since he'd begun to touch her.

"Liked that, did you?" he asked darkly.

"Yes."

Harry moved to whisper something in her ear. The witch smiled, nodded to Draco, and she moved off to the bathroom. Harry went back to looking at the parchments as if nothing had happened.

A loud hiss from their rear had Draco spinning around. Harry's eyes narrowed, and he made his way out the door, beckoning for Draco to follow. He warded the door behind them and conversed with both snakes. "WHAT?" Harry shouted. He spun around to look at Draco questionably.

"What?" Draco asked, feeling uncomfortable. What the bloody hell was going on? A chill crept up Draco's spine as a cold breeze permeated the area. "H-Harry? Why are you angry?" He certainly hoped it wasn't anything that he'd said to Bella.

Just as Harry pulled his wand and pointed it towards the Basilisk's head, a Phoenix song broke out. He watched while Harry seemed to be fighting conflicting emotions. He lowered his wand and was looking at a ring. "What have you done, Draco?" Harry asked quietly.

"Nothing. Really. Er... Lord Potter," Draco said, uncertain as to what Harry this was and what his role should be.

"No need to call me that. She can't hear you," Harry said sarcastically. "Why have you conspired against me?"

Draco gulped. Not good. He knew. The snakes told him. Somehow they had sensed it.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Albus and Severus were in the middle of a discussion about the headmaster's plans after he left his position. Minerva would be taking his place, and it seemed, to Severus' delight, that he would become Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts. Feeling important, he couldn't wait to tell Hermione. She would be pleased as well. He would have extra duties, but they would be worth it. He would have another title to add to his name while his pay increased. He'd never cared before, but he now had a wife to think of. He wanted his child to be proud of his accomplishments.

"I still hate to think of things without you in charge. It's not Hogwarts without you, Albus. Minerva will do well in your stead, but it shan't be the same," Severus said, placing his empty teacup in his saucer.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll still be around. I can't leave Minerva for long. Not at this stage in life. She's become very dear to me, and I really don't want to be away from her for long. I'll still live here at the castle during a good part of the year." His eyes twinkled and then darkened suddenly. Severus followed the direction of his mentor's gaze. Damn! Harry's mirror.

"He's angry," Severus said, reaching for the mirror.

"And look. Sad as well," Albus pointed out, saying the enchantment that would allow them to watch Harry. "They are in the Chamber. Fawkes, go to him." In a burst of flames, the Phoenix was gone. They watched in the mirror for their friend's arrival.

"Draco, you let them come down here," Harry said. "Ron, you should know better! Spying on me, are you? Going to tell Ginny what I did?"

Without trying to keep up any false pretenses, Hermione shrugged off the Invisibility Cloak. "What did you do?" she asked striding forward."

Severus' hands clutched into fists. What the fuck was she doing down in the Chamber of Secrets? Spying on Harry? "Have a little faith, Severus," Albus said softly.

"Didn't you see?" he asked, not minding that she came to him. When Ron stepped forward, he growled, "Stay back."

"No, Harry, I didn't. You have a ward just there. I could feel it. If we had passed it, you would have been alerted to us anyway," she said. "What happened?"

The look in her eyes and the concern in her voice made Harry feel better. "I... would rather not say right now. I think I need to talk to Dumbledore and Severus about it. It came so naturally to me."

"Dark magic?" she asked in a hushed whisper.

"Yes, I'll tell you later," he whispered, nodding to the other two. Hermione reached up to wipe a tear away from Harry's confused face. "I had to do it, Hermione. It was either that or really..." He sighed. "Why did you come?" his voice rose.

"We noticed that you've taken a liking to her," Hermione admitted.

"Wanted to be sure that bitch wasn't putting any bewitchments on your mind, mate," Ron said, stepping forward again. This time Nagini hissed and slid forth menacingly. "Er... Harry?" Harry hissed at Nagini, and the snake coiled up tightly.

"She smelled my scent on Hermione, but she felt malice from you. She wanted permission to attack you." Harry smirked at Draco's yelp. "That's right. She is instructed to protect Bellatrix. She sensed that Ron wanted to harm her."

"But I don't like the bitch either," Draco admitted.

"You were with me," Harry said. He looked to Hermione. "They will always protect you as well. You will always be safe." He reached down to touch her stomach. She stepped away at his boldness. "Your children will be protected as well, Hermione."

"Why that insolent..."

"Severus, he means well. Listen to his words," Albus instructed firmly. "He needs our guidance now. Not our anger or disappointment. He is controlling it on his own."

"It's just... that was an intimate caress on my wife. I don't give a fuck if he is Lily's son or has come to be dear to me. He'll not put his hands on my wife," Severus growled.

Albus shook his head. "How will I ever trust you two together if this is how you both act? You are both impulsive. You see something without fully seeing it and try to attack. He just does something without thinking, meaning well though, and it gets him into tight spots."

"Harry, that feels odd," Hermione said.

"Don't worry. Severus knows that you are like a sister to me. His kids will be like the nieces and nephews that I've never had." Harry hugged her, but he scowled at Ron and Draco. "You two had better keep your mouths shut until I have a talk with Snape and Dumbledore. Don't tell Ginny anything. I know she will be curious. If anyone says anything to her, it will be me."

Draco nodded. "Hell, I don't care. Let's just get the hell out of here. It's creepy." He looked around. "Wait until my father hears about this," he groused playfully. They all chuckled a little.

Ron spoke after the laughter subsided. "I didn't see anything that went on in there, mate. Hermione wouldn't let me go on. I spent most of my time out here envisioning you having a go at this big bloke." Ron pointed to the carcass near him.

Harry grinned. "I'm glad ruddy Lockhart's charm backfired. I don't know if we could have both gotten away from that blasted beast." He looked up above them to the top of the Slytherin's head. "Come, Fawkes." The Phoenix flew down to land on his shoulder.

"When did he get here?" Hermione asked. "And when did the Phoenix song stop?"

"It sort of faded out when Harry started talking," Ron offered.

"Fawkes came in and perched up there. I guess he was just making sure that all was well. I suppose Dumbledore knows that I am here...unless Fawkes came on his own. Guess we'd better go," he said. "Come on." He hissed instructions to his snakes, and they made their way back through the Chamber.

"Damn right," Severus groused. "I know, Albus. Don't look at me that way. I do feel foolish for jumping to conclusions, but you have to see my point as well. This ~~is~~ my wife, and that is my child she is carrying within her womb. I'll not have someone else groping her stomach. That liberty should be mine alone. Besides, she felt uncomfortable."

"Yes, Severus," Albus said, not bothering to argue with the man. He really could be stubborn at times, couldn't he?

"For now, I intend to meet their party when they exit the Chamber. They have some explaining to do." Severus narrowed his eyes. His Hermione was supposed to be in the library with Ginny Weasley. They would have to *discuss* this.

"Don't be too hard on her, Severus," Albus said, seemingly reading his thoughts. "Once you talk with Harry, send him my way."

Severus nodded and made his way towards the bathroom as quickly as he could. He paused before he got there. Ginny Weasley was reading a parchment, humming, and walking with her head down. If he hadn't cleared his throat, she would have run into him.

Her eyes widened. "Uh oh."

"Indeed," he said. So, she knew about the sneaking around as well, did she? "What have you there?"

She grinned mischievously. "This is a note saying that I should stay in the library and avoid you until Hermione comes back from helping Ron and Draco spy on Harry." She clamped a hand over her mouth and giggled.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "In a good mood, are we?"

"Yes, I've been feeling really great. It's like I have a whole new outlook on things." She bit her lip, reminding him of Hermione. "My mum said that you and Hermione were concerned about me. Thanks, Professor."

He nodded. "Think nothing of it. I'll go check on my wife now." He stalked away feeling strangely lighthearted. That was nice of her to thank him for something that was his duty. He could see that she meant it, and from what he knew of Harry's emotions just before, it seemed that the breaking of the bond had helped the pair. She didn't feel any of Harry's anger or despair. Severus positioned himself across from the door of the bathroom. They would make their way out soon, and he'd be waiting.

As Hermione opened the bathroom door, she was laughing at something Draco had said. When she saw the boy's face freeze with fear, she turned to have a look in front of them. Before her eyes settled upon his tall frame, which was leaning lazily against the wall, she knew that he was there. His stance belied the fact that he was angry, disappointed, and annoyed with her, with all of them. She could see it in his eyes and face, though she wasn't sure any of the others noticed.

After they were all in the hall, he strode forward. He looked to Draco. "Twenty points from Slytherin, and..."

"Sir, Dumbledore gave me permission to go down with Harry," the boy protested.

Severus talked over him as if he hadn't heard. "And, I daresay, you have sorely disappointed your Head of House, Malfoy. Going along with a plot to sneak others down into the chamber? You will serve detention with Filch tomorrow night and the night after for your cheek. Off to the dungeons, boy."

Draco didn't even look at the others as he sped off to the safety of his common room. Hermione swallowed. She was glad that she wasn't a student. He was completely in his Professor Snape mode.

"Weasley, thirty points from Gryffindor," he said coldly.

"Thirty?" Ron asked incredulously. "Malfoy only got twenty!"

"I do not have to explain why I take a certain amount from one student and a different amount from another. However, suffice it to say that you have stolen that Invisibility Cloak for improper use. Be glad that I do not confiscate it." He took the offending material and threw it into Harry's arms. "Weasley, you will also serve detention tomorrow

night and the following night with Filch. Now, get out of here."

Ron sped away giving Severus and the others one last furious look before going. Hermione put her hands on her hips. /took the cloak, Severus. He didn't. That's unfair."

"Endangering the lives of students, Professor Snape?" he asked in mock shock. "Perhaps, you should really think about your position. Influencing students? Aiding them in breaking the rules? Flouting higher authority?" He stepped closer. "Endangering our child if Harry here hadn't been able to calm himself?" The last question sent a shiver down her spine. He was right. How the hell did he know her whereabouts? Had he seen Ginny? Oh! The mirror!

"But, Severus, Harry would never..."

"Not purposely, no," he said with finality. "Both of you will follow me."

Harry squeezed her hand tightly as they followed her irate husband down the corridor. *What the hell crawled inside his arse?* Harry let go of Hermione's hand, lest Severus think he was putting the moves on his wife. "I need to speak to you and Dumbledore together," Harry said urgently.

Severus stopped and eyed Harry for a moment. "Hermione and I will go down to the dungeons. I will meet you there." Harry nodded and moved on. Severus looked to Hermione. "I am not treating you like a child. I know that's what you are thinking. I couldn't say it in front of him, but I saw *everything* through the mirror. I was with Albus."

She simply nodded. He still sounded angry, and his narrowed eyes seemed to be boring into hers. When he resumed their trek down to their chambers, she couldn't help but feel like a student going for detention. Regardless of how he felt about her friends, she knew Harry would never hurt her. It never crossed her mind. However, she could see his point. He'd seen everything. What would she have thought if the tables had been turned?

"Severus," she said softly as they entered their sitting room. "I'm sorry, but I still maintain that we were safe. He wouldn't have hu..."

"Hermione, until we know what Voldemort did to himself that is affecting Harry, we aren't sure what he does at times or who he becomes. I don't have Dumbledore's unwavering faith that Harry might not accidentally explode and hurt a loved one. I've seen him angry," he said, lowering his voice.

"So have I," she said.

"Not like I have, Hermione."

He opened his arms, and she went to him. "All I can say is that I am sorry. I just don't think you've given Harry enough time with her. I wanted to see for myself if she is influencing him for no reason. He had the damn place warded to detect us."

"Did he?" Severus asked curiously. "What other security measures did he take?"

"Well, you need to be a Parselmouth to get into two openings. The lanterns are attuned to him only. If I went alone, I wouldn't know which paths to take. There is a ward that alerts him to anyone passing through, and then he has her actual chambers warded." She took a breath. "And his snakes. They are protecting her as well. He said that Nagini wanted to attack Ron."

"I heard that bit. Interesting," Severus said, rubbing his chin atop her head. "I think he is very protective of her even though he has hated her for all these years. That needs to be stopped, Hermione. She's bad news."

"But, Severus, if she's close to helping him, give him more time. I know you and Lucius plan to... kill her, and I don't think it's fair if she is helping Harry. Talk to Draco. He was in the room. I couldn't see much, but I did see that Draco looked either afraid or shocked... or both. Why don't you start going yourself to see what is happening down there?"

"I might. For now, I must see to Harry and Albus." He kissed her forehead. "Hermione, I don't like that you did this behind my back. I would like to think that I could trust my wife to not lie to me on her whereabouts. See to it that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, sir," she said tartly.

"Don't be that way. It's only because I care about you. Both of you." Severus swallowed before speaking. "I hated the way he touched you," he said quietly.

"I didn't like it either, but he really meant no harm," she said. "I told him."

"Yes, I heard. I just... you're mine. I can't explain how I feel. I suppose you've landed a jealous old man for a husband," he said with a smirk. "It looked too intimate. I wanted to hex him, I think."

She giggled. "I believe you would have, Severus! You should have seen your face. I did feel like a student again."

"Will you always get drawn into things such as this?"

"I just care about him, Severus. He would do the same for me. I should have told you, but you wouldn't listen to anything I had to say about giving him extra time. I wanted to see for myself that she wasn't doing more harm than good." She kissed his lips softly. "Go to him. Find out what happened. He seemed very upset about something, and he told me that there is something he did that he's not proud of."

"I won't be long. I have some news to share with you as well," he said mysteriously. "Do try to stay awake, or I shall be forced to take matters into my own hands."

"Really?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Perhaps I shall go to sleep accidentally-on-purpose then," she said before sashaying towards their bedchamber. "Hurry back, husband."

Severus shook his head. *That went much better than I expected. She hadn't thought about our baby when she went down there with those boys. She will not do it again. I could see the realization in her eyes that something could have gone wrong.* Ah, yes. It was always nice when things worked out. Now to see what Harry was about.

Southern's Notes: We will find out what Harry did to Bella, and we will find out what his plans for her are (even if the others won't know). Hermione finds out about The Wizard of the Snakes, and Severus finds out about parenting from a father's perspective. Another happy couple's nuptials will be announced. Any guesses?

Chapter Twenty Five

Chapter 26 of 32

Information on the Wizard of the Snakes comes out. Harry makes plans of his own. Everyone prepares for Valentine's Day.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

Many thanks to my beta, Charmed Nay.

Severus entered Albus' office and found Harry with his head in his lap. Albus' eyes looked grave. "I apologize for being late. I had to see to Hermione," he said.

Albus nodded. "It's quite all right, Severus. You've not missed anything. Harry is taking a few moments to collect himself."

Harry lifted his head. "I'm fine now. I have something to tell you though that you may not like."

Severus looked to Albus and saw that the older wizard looked older than he'd ever seen him. He hoped that his retirement would see him through peaceful years. This man had been involved in three wars with two Dark Lords. The headmaster urged Harry to go on, and Severus gave his attention to the boy.

"Every time I go down there now, I feel this rush of power. It's as if I know I'm a powerful wizard, and I know it would be hard for someone to stop me from doing anything that I want to do. A whole new confidence in myself settles in, replacing the real Harry," he said. "That doesn't sound right. I hope you can see what I mean. When I see the Basilisk, I know that I did that when I was only twelve. I defeated Voldemort all those times. Yes, most of them were luck, but I did it. I just feel... superior."

Severus nodded. "Understandable. Go on."

"When I see how Bella treats me, I feel strong, important even. I like that she practically worships me. It's... fun to play the part of the Dark Lord," Harry said, looking away from them.

Before Albus could speak, Severus did. "Harry, I went through this as well. When I began my spying for the Order, both times, I felt as if I was better than them. Why? Because I was actually out there doing what they couldn't. I felt the same surge of power when I would breeze into the meetings. I could see the awe in their eyes. Fear in some of them as well. It's a mind game. Easy enough to conquer if that is what you truly wish to do."

Harry nodded. "I do. I don't like some of the thoughts that I have. Anyway, this evening Nagini told me that Bella has been trying to find a way to explore the Chamber. She seemed so upset that she displeased me, and when she produced the parchments that she'd been working on, I felt compelled to reward her."

"How so?" Albus asked after a long pause.

"A thought occurred to me. I don't know why, but I knew how to project an image complete with feeling into her mind. All I had to do was touch her, and she saw and felt it. I let her see herself having sex with me. She nearly had an instantaneous orgasm because of it." Harry blushed deeply and looked away.

"Why did you do that?" Severus asked uneasily.

"She has been begging for rewards. Her prize being my arse. I think I'd rather give that to her than really give myself to her. I do have a girlfriend, you know," Harry said angrily.

"What happened next?" Albus asked.

"I told her to go have a shower, and I told her to think about me. That's when I found out that Hermione and Ron were spying on us," he said, eyes darkening.

"I daresay they've learned their lesson," Severus said sharply. "Draco as well."

Harry changed the subject by pulling out the parchments Bella had given him. "She's gone through all the things that she and Voldemort did or even talked about doing. There are a couple of things, just here, that she feels are tricky, and I would think she needs more time to work on them."

Albus shook his head solemnly. "I think, Harry, that it is time for Bellatrix to leave Hogwarts. We can make a go of this ourselves now that we have the information."

"I agree," Severus said firmly.

Harry eyed both for a long moment. "I disagree. I don't want her to be killed. Can't she just stay here? Can't she be Obliviated and returned to the Ministry?"

"I'm afraid the latter would be too risky, Harry. Somehow it would point to us. She must pay for her actions. She must be terminated," Severus said, crossing his arms.

"Right then," Harry said, sitting back in his chair.

Severus didn't like the look on the boy's face. Was he up to something? "Are you planning something?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "What does my bloody opinion matter anyway? It's only me that has something to lose here."

"What do you have to lose, Harry?" Albus asked softly. "We are sure that we can do all we can to fix things for you. Do you not remember who she was before this Harry?"

Harry nodded. Yes, he bloody well remembered all about Bellatrix Lestrange, but this was not that same person anymore. This was Bella. She was like a... familiar. Hermione wouldn't want Crookshanks killed. Ron hadn't wanted Scabbers to be hurt before he knew who it was. He would never let anyone harm Hedwig. He'd even grown fond of Nagini and the quickly fading Looney. An idea occurred to him. He'd play along with their game for now. They had no right deciding what was best for him. Bella was loyal to him and deserved to be given the benefit of a doubt. She deserved to live. "I remember all that she's done," Harry said. "I am simply asking for time to let her help me. What if there is something we can't figure out? She did say they were complicated. I'll support anything you'd like after we're through. I'll do it myself."

"We will talk more on it later," Albus said. "I think we will start going over this to see exactly what we are dealing with before making a decision." He looked at Harry. "What is it that is troubling you?"

"Sir?"

"There is... something else."

"Right. Nagini. She wants to stay with me. I have decided that I would like to keep her. She is safe and obeys my command only." He smiled sadly. "It appears that Looney is now fading back to nothing as the magic leaves her. I think Nagini should have a friend for when I'm not with her. I would like to acquire another familiar to cohort with her."

Albus looked at him for a moment before saying, "I don't see where that might be a problem. I would request they aren't loose about the castle. It's not long until graduation now though. You could keep them in the Chamber."

"I'd like that," Harry said. He watched as Dumbledore stood and made his way to a bookshelf.

"Here." He handed Harry a book.

This would prove to be an interesting read. It was a book about magical vipers. "Thanks, sir."

"I trust you will return it when you have read what you needed," he said, peering at Harry over his glasses.

"I will." Harry slipped the book into a pocket of his robes. "I'll be ready to talk about those parchments as soon as you are. Both of you." He looked to see Severus' glum expression. He swallowed deeply. Did he suspect anything? Surely not. The headmaster seemed to be looking at him curiously, but he seemed to think that the troubles with his fading familiar had been the gist of what was bothering him. "I've got to talk to Ginny. I guess I will see you later."

"Wait," Severus said. "In the Chamber, were you feeling any emotions? Perhaps when you mind fucked Bella?"

"Severus!" Dumbledore admonished.

Severus sneered. "It's a question I will have answered. Excuse the unnecessary vulgarity, but I have no other way of describing it. Did you feel anger with Hermione and the others? Disappointment? I'd like to know."

"I felt nothing with Bella," Harry ground out through clenched teeth. "And, yes, I was angry with them for spying on me instead of talking to me. Very angry! Very disappointed!"

"This is good news then," Severus said dryly. "I spoke with Ginevra Weasley on my way down the corridor. She was in a very cheerful mood. I think that breaking the bond was a good idea. Nothing you felt affected her at all."

Harry smiled lightly. "That is good news then. Thanks."

Severus nodded. "I'll stay and talk with Albus about this further. Have a good night." Harry left quickly. As the door closed, Severus turned to his mentor. "We have to get rid of her."

"I agree completely."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Bellatrix pulled a long nightgown over her body after she dried off. It was a gift from Lord Potter, and she wore it most nights. She hadn't expected his reward earlier, but she'd enjoyed it thoroughly nonetheless. That damn Malfoy brat was with him like a ruddy guard.

This frustrated her. She wanted him alone. Why couldn't he ever sneak away? She knew that maybe they were watching him closely to be sure that he wasn't as harsh as her old master, but she longed to really do the things in the images that he'd given her. Would it feel so good? Yes. It would. It had to.

Something wasn't right. She could sense that much. As she'd closed the door to the loo, she'd heard him shouting something at Malfoy. She didn't want to be caught spying, so she'd closed the door. Truth be known, she was actually anxious to strip and bring herself back to climax whilst thinking of what he'd shown her. She decided to write a letter to him. They had to talk. Surely he knew by now that she was his most loyal servant! She'd find out soon enough.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Two days later found Hermione entering the staff room. She quickly took a seat next to her preoccupied husband. He'd been slightly distant since he'd caught her lying about where she'd gone. He'd assured her several times that it wasn't anything in particular, but it included several things that he had to think about. She was no idiot. She knew that he had to have been thinking about what happened with Harry and Bella in the chamber. He'd only told her a quick summary, and he hadn't given her any details about their meeting. She knew that he and Harry had a meeting the next day, but that was all.

Harry had never been alone yet, so they couldn't really talk about anything that had gone on either. Ginny or Ron was always hovering about. She'd ask Severus after the staff meeting once and for all what was going on. Had he truly not forgiven her for lying? For endangering the baby? She would have to reassure him further that she would do no such thing again. "Severus?"

"Hmmm?" he asked, looking at his parchment instead of meeting her eyes.

"Can we have a walk tonight to the Astronomy Tower after we leave here?" she asked softly. His eyes finally met hers. "Please."

"All right," he agreed. She thought he might say more, but Albus stood up to speak.

"I am sorry that we had to move the meeting up a day, but I have other obligations to tend to on tomorrow evening." He smiled kindly. "We've finally entered a time of peace after a long reign of terror. Voldemort and all of his minions have been either destroyed or confined. It eases my mind to know that when I leave my position at the end of term, you will not be plagued by such mayhem."

The crowd murmured; mixed feelings about the headmaster's leaving could be detected. Some were happy for him to finally be able to relax, but others were really upset to see him leaving. It felt like the end of an era to Hermione as well. He'd still be about the castle, but it would not be the same.

Dumbledore continued, "I think that I will allow Minerva to take the reigns for the rest of the meeting. As you know, she will be succeeding me as Hogwarts Headmistress. I think it a good idea to allow her to practice a bit before I go."

"Thank you, Albus," Minerva said, smiling at everyone. "On that note, I would like to point out that Hermione will be taking over all of my Transfiguration classes upon the start of the next term. Severus will be taking over the role of Hogwarts Deputy Headmaster."

Polite applause broke out as everyone eyed the two Professor Snapes. Hermione smiled while Severus scowled slightly. Neither liked the attention. As Minerva went on to talk about other things, Hermione dwelled upon what she'd said. Severus was going to be promoted. Why hadn't he told her? It was certainly no surprise to him. Was this what he'd said that he wanted to share with her? Why hadn't he? Stung, Hermione listened to everything that was said without commenting on things as she normally did.

"Does anyone else have something they wish to say?" Minerva asked.

Rolanda stood up. "I've a bit of news. I just want you all to know that Stuart has asked to marry me. I've decided to give it a go."

Shouts of congratulations and cheeky condolences were given out. Hermione smiled slightly as did Severus. She was truly happy for Rolanda. "At least we aren't the only ones that get married quickly," she murmured. Severus nodded in agreement, but he turned his attention back to Rolanda.

She was saying, "Damn bloke is just too proper about things. I think he would've called it all off if I'd disagreed! Can you believe it?"

"Well, it would be inappropriate to carry on whilst students are here," Minerva pointed out. "He has a point."

"Eh? You have some gall, Minnie. Do you think that they don't know about you and Albus? I'll bet most of them do! Talk about inappropriate, why aren't you two hitched yet? Been together long enough! Is he going to stay in guest quarters when he comes back from his trip?" Rolanda asked.

The entire room had gone silent at the outburst. Minerva's face reddened slightly. Hermione was unsure if it was from anger or embarrassment. "Albus and I are very discreet. He will have his own quarters when he returns, yes." The two carried on for a while, and Stuart gave up at trying to calm down Rolanda.

He walked over to talk to Hermione. "Looks like I've landed a right firecracker!"

"I'll say," Hermione said sweetly. "I'm happy for you, Stuart."

"Thank you, Hermione. I appreciate that. I must say that I am glad that you seem so happy. Impending motherhood looks lovely on you," he said kindly. He nodded to Severus, but Severus was looking straight ahead. Hermione followed his line of vision, as did Stuart, and they saw that Albus was sitting quietly and looking forlorn. "Excuse me," Stuart said quickly. He made his way to Rolanda and pulled her away. They could be heard bickering as he led her out of the room.

Hermione was glad to have the ruckus over with, but the damage had been done. Dumbledore looked extremely disappointed. "That concludes our meeting," he said quietly, getting up to leave.

Minerva finally saw what the others had noticed. Albus. Something was wrong. She followed him out of the door and to his chambers. "What is it?" she asked after she closed the door.

"She's right, you know," he commented, seating himself before the fire. "Perhaps I should simply stay in a cottage in Hogsmeade."

"No, I won't have it. It's bad enough that we are going to be spending the summer apart, I would like to have you with me as much as possible, Albus," she said.

"Why did you never marry me?" he asked.

"You know why," she said, not wanting to talk about it. "I don't need a binding to know how I feel. You will, of course, have your own chambers when you come back, but no one need know they are connected to mine."

Albus smiled then. "Ah, Minnie. Where have all the years gone? It feels so long, yet it also feels so short."

She reached out to hold his hand and squeezed it tightly. "Many years have passed, but it's been a great life so far. You have many years left, Albus, and I shall be here with you for them all."

Her long time lover smiled fondly. "I am happy for Stuart and Rolanda. Surprised, but happy."

"Bah! She's probably just getting married because Severus is. I wouldn't put it past her." She sighed. "Have you seen how happy Severus and Hermione are? Tonight they seemed distracted, but lately, you don't see one without the other. I care for them both deeply. I am glad that she found her way to his heart. He deserved to be loved. And, by someone like Hermione, well, it makes it even better."

"I agree. Severus has a lot on his shoulders right now, but I think things will work themselves out." He conjured a chair for her. "Sit. Let's have a nightcap."

Elsewhere, on the Astronomy Tower's roof, Hermione wrapped her arms around Severus in an effort to draw some of his warmth into her. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked softly.

"I tried," he said.

"When?"

He looked down at her. "I intended to tell you two days ago when I found you frolicking about with your friends."

"You're still angry about that, aren't you? Severus, I apologized. I know that what I did was wrong. How long are you going to hold that against me?" she asked quietly.

"I have forgiven you, Hermione. I can even understand your reasoning, to a point, but I have not forgotten about it. I trust that it won't happen again." He rested his head atop hers for a few moments as she nestled into his chest. "I have a lot to think about right now. It seemed that my promotion took a backseat, and I apologize. I wanted to share that with you. It was not intentional that I didn't tell you."

She pulled back slightly to look at him. "What is really going on then if you aren't still angry with me? Why have you been so secluded...even in bed?"

"Harry, for one. Bellatrix is a problem as well. Another is the baby. I worry about the type of father I will be. I worry about knowing how to be a good parent. I am worried about Albus. He seems a lot older than he usually does, as odd as that sounds," he said quietly.

She detected the sorrow in his voice. Was he afraid that Albus wouldn't be around much longer? That had to be it. "He is as healthy as a Hippogriff, Severus. He'll be around for a while yet. I think retirement is exactly what he needs." She kissed his cheek. "You will be an excellent father. We will learn all the things we need to learn together. Trust me. As far as Harry, well, I have faith that it will all clear up."

"Have you had any further dreams about the Succubus? About Viktor?" he asked suddenly. Just the mention of another man's name had him tightening his hold on her.

"Only the three I told you about. They are not as vivid as the first one," she said, tightening her hold on him. "Is there anything else that is bothering you?"

"Lucius," he said immediately. "He wants to meet soon to have a discussion. In two days, to be exact. I know he'll want to move on Bella. I just need to get things in order with Albus. We need to be sure that she is expendable."

Hermione nodded, but she hoped they would wait until they were sure. She was still concerned about Harry. "I'm proud of you."

"For what?" he asked incredulously. "For turning into a rambling worrier?"

"Honestly!" she chided. "For your promotion, Severus. You deserve it. I think you will do an excellent job. I would advise that you not be partial to your Slytherin students, mind, but you exude authority. People will respect you even more so."

"Thank you," he said simply.

She smiled, realizing that he had snaked one hand between them to unconsciously caress her belly. She caught herself doing the same thing at times. "I would like to make

love with you tonight."

He grinned. "In the shower again?" he asked playfully.

"Heavens, no. My legs hurt badly after that," she said. "I think that our bed is fine...unless of course, you wanted to have a bath with me instead."

"There are many things we can do to be sure that our future showers are not... unpleasant," he said, guiding her into the castle. "I think perhaps I shall show you one of them now."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

She couldn't believe what she'd just read! Hermione looked over to see Severus scribbling purposely on his parchment. She smiled as he lifted his head up to consult with not one or even two but four books! What the bloody hell was he doing? She'd thought he was grading essays. As if sensing that she was staring, he looked over at her. "What?"

"I was just taking a break and was curious as to what you are doing," she said with a smile, forgetting her own news. When he looked guilty, she made her way over to him. He shifted uncomfortably. "Let me see."

"Very well," he said, sitting back. "Look."

She didn't like the tone that he'd taken with her, and she thought about retreating for a moment. She hated to interrupt whatever project he had going, but she was curious. She looked down at his parchment and read a few lines. "Oh, Severus, why didn't you tell me that you were reading about pregnancies? I wouldn't mind looking over this with you."

"You are busy," he said curtly.

"Not too busy for this... or you," she said softly. Damn! He'd asked her if she had a minute over an hour earlier, and she'd told him she wouldn't be long. Her own reading had consumed her. She'd simply forgotten that he'd asked for her. "I'm sorry," she said, feeling guilty.

"No matter. Did you know about the side effects? It seems that you are in for a rough time for the duration of the pregnancy." He looked at her with pity.

"Oh, come on! It's not going to be all that bad. They are just saying it's possible for these things to happen to ~~some~~ women."

"Most women," he corrected. "You do have dark circles under your eyes. Merlin knows you sleep enough. I wonder what's causing it."

"Dark circles? What? I do not," she said indignantly. She glanced across the room to a mirror. She couldn't see anything under her eyes.

"If you look closely, you can see a touch of color, and it will lead to having dark eyes," he insisted. Hermione grinned. Perhaps she should hide these books. A particular passage caught her eye. "Dealing with a moody pregnant wife can be a chore in itself, but the upside is that most pregnant women have a zealous sex drive." She flipped the book over. It was titled *Dealing With Pregnancy: A Man's Point of View*. "Er... Severus, I don't know that I would put much belief behind this man's words. He's only one man. It must vary from couple to couple."

"Didn't you just say last night that you were feeling randy more often?" Both his eyebrows rose as realization hit her. "That's right. It seems this fellow might be on to something after all."

Hermione scoffed. "Happy reading then." She picked up another book and went over a few pages before finding actual pictures of a birth. As with most Wizarding books, the pictures moved, and she could see the different stages of the child being pushed out. "Oh my... this is... did you...?" She was speechless.

"You've paled. What is it?" he asked anxiously, taking the book from her. At first glance, the book nearly dropped from his hand. He cleared his throat and tried to look at the pictures as if nothing was amiss. *Good Lord! Do they all look like... this? Poor woman was being stretched to the limit!* "I'm sure this just looks worse than it actually is. I was just reading in the red book that with the right amount of medicine, witches barely feel any pain." He was not telling the entire truth of course, but anything to make the color return to her face would do.

"Really?"

"Yes, Poppy can give you something to make you feel a little numb. In fact, I can assist her with the potion when the time is closer. There isn't likely to be any on hand as we've not had a pregnancy here for years." He tried to smile reassuringly, but he didn't think it helped. She was still glancing down at the book in his hand. He snapped it shut quickly. "We can read over these in bed. What have you been working on?"

That worked. He saw her eyes light up. "Right! You know that Muggle book that my Mum sent as a peace offering?"

"The book with collected myths and legends of maternal bonding?" he asked, not remembering the title. He wondered why she was interested now. She had scoffed at it upon arrival. "I thought you said it was rubbish?"

"Well, I was mistaken," she said.

"Really. Imagine that," he said sarcastically.

"Do you want to hear this, Severus?"

"Out with it, woman. You have my attention," he said dryly.

"Listen to this: Circe, a powerful sorceress that was able to turn people into animals, had many children. One of them was a magical man (wizard) that could talk to and charm snakes. He was one of two of the most powerful beings of the age. The other was his wife, the Sorceress of Dreams. They had been married for nearly forty years when a local farmer murdered their only daughter. This drove a wedge between the couple. The Sorceress didn't agree with her husband's punishment; he had the man locked in a dungeon and allowed his snakes to torment him through bites and near strangulations. She preferred for the man to be beaten and killed." Hermione eagerly looked up to see what Severus thought and was disappointed. "Well?"

"Is that all?" he asked.

Hermione glared at him for a moment before continuing. "The husband maintained that his slow daily punishment would drive the spirit from the man causing him to lose his mental capabilities first and then next, his will to live. The Sorceress, however, decided to take matters into her own hands. She entered into his dreams. She could never do anything in someone's dream unless they allowed it, so she knew she had to seduce him and make him worship her for her favors before she could bend him to her will."

"Succubus," Severus breathed uneasily. "This is a Muggle book?"

"Yes. Shush." Hermione smiled. "She was so consumed with seeking vengeance for her fallen daughter that her mind became addled. She began to believe that she could conceive her daughter again by coupling with the man that took her daughter's last breath. She firmly believed that part of her still lived within the man. Each time she would go to him in a dream, she would chant a spell that would allow his life essence to seep into her. It wasn't long after she had started having sex with the man that her husband noticed a change in both his prisoner and his wife."

Severus snorted. "Hmph."

"The untrusting wizard devised a potion to enable his spirit to rise out of his body and enter anyone's dream. One night as his wife slept, he took his potion and entered her dream. It was then that he saw her mating with his prisoner. Legend says that a battle ensued whilst still within her dream. The jealous husband won and cursed her to be damned as a demonic nightmare, stuck wandering for eternity wielding her appearance at will to do what needed to be done. She could mate with only those who were willing. She could only attempt to win someone over once per night. Her husband did not ban her from inflicting a wound upon a victim; however, she could never inflict harm on any of his own descendants or those under his care. The scent of the serpent would be found on those he deemed worthy of protection. A simple chant by this wizard or his progeny could destroy her forever." Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Interesting," Severus commented.

"The Sorceress left, vowing to find a way to conceive and bring her daughter back to her. She could survive by extracting the life force and magic from other beings. In life, the Sorceress of Dreams had been a prophecy speaker and a dream manipulator. In her new state, she was still able to look into someone's future. It was how she chose her victims. If they were powerful or begot powerful offspring, she could use their life force to sustain her for long periods of time, and she would try to couple with them to conceive an heir that would be more powerful than anyone, as she believes part of her long lost daughter's spirit will live within. She intended to have her heir find a way to bring her back to her body and break the husband's curse. The wizard's sons were taught his mystical skills, and his line has been referred to as the Wizards of the Snakes."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Do you believe any of this?" he asked.

"Well, there is no proof that it's true, but most legends are true on some level. Even the Muggles have a legend about Merlin, for example. We know that what they believe isn't exactly what happened, but at some point, they documented the legend, as they knew it." She took his hand in hers. "It makes sense to me, Severus. That is why she left, and that is why she didn't inflict pain on me the way she did when she left you. I have Harry's scent. Harry is a Wizard of the Snakes, and this Succubus decided to visit us because she foresaw our child as being very powerful. That's why she tried a dual visit." Hermione squeezed his hand. "Whatever she saw in our future was worth intervening. Think about what this implies. There hasn't been a documented dual visit since Merlin. Our son or daughter could be the next Merlin, Circe, or..."

"Don't get carried away, Hermione. What else have you been reading?" he asked, honestly curious. He'd have a talk with Albus about Hermione's findings. "I see you have more books."

"Well, I was looking on information about this Wizard of the Snakes. I was annoyed when I couldn't find anything, so I took a break. I pulled out that Muggle book from my mum, and you know the rest." She shoved the book into his hands. "There are many myths in here about protective mothers. Unfortunately, it appears anything worth recording ends in tragedy."

Severus took in the slight frown on her face. "Our child will be fine. These are just a few stories, Hermione. Think of the millions of happy endings that were too boring to be recorded as legend."

This extracted a broad smile. "Thanks. I'm just... emotional. It's odd, really. Over the last two days, it seems like anything could make me cry. I stepped on a small spider yesterday to keep Ron from panicking, and an hour later, I still felt horrible about it. I actually shed a few tears for it."

Severus smirked and shook his head in disbelief. "I don't know how someone so soft could be content with a hard man like me."

"I think we are well suited."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Viktor read over her brief letter once more. It always thrilled him to see news from his Hermione. He was glad to read that she had dreams about him and her. She didn't exactly admit it to him, but he sensed they were of a sexual nature. He hated that she had married that old man. She was wasting her life with him in his eyes, but if she was happy, who was he to try to convince her to leave?

When he'd found out that she was pregnant, he felt as if his heart had been torn in two. It was then that he knew he'd do anything to have her. That anything had led to his secret lover. She'd made many promises to him. Some things she told him, well, he really didn't understand them at all. What he knew was that he could have 'Hermione' a few times per week in his bed thanks to the witch's ability to shape shift. All she requested was a child.

She intended to teach the ways of the old to this child and only allow Viktor to publicly claim the child as his own. He hadn't liked that at first, but she'd explained that if he agreed to submit to her bidding it would lead him to the real Hermione eventually. He could live with pretending to his family and the world that the mother of his child had died, leaving him to care for it alone. They would never know that there was a witch in his home, molding the child in ancient beliefs and magic. Shrugging away his thoughts, he hastily scribbled a letter to Hermione, sending it back with her owl. Sleep came to him quickly.

The Succubus sat at the edge of the bed not long after her lover had drifted into sleep. She could force a dream upon him, but she decided to let him rest this night. He had been most agreeable to everything that she'd proposed. Of course, she was merely bending him to her will. In time, he would listen to all that she commanded without question. Yes, she would allow the wizard to live, draining only enough magic for the conception and to sustain her temporary life. If he ever began to question or refuse her, he would be destroyed. She knew the perfect punishment. All she had to do was wound him, and he would never sleep peacefully again. He would drive himself mad eventually, likely taking his own life. When that happened, he would become a dream stalker just as she was, and he would be under her tutelage.

Her white eyes turned a smoky gray with her fury. The man, Snape, had found a way to cleanse his wound and was free of her curse. She could never touch him again. That was the rule. She thought to have her revenge by going to the woman, Granger, again when she was at her weakest and slowly trick her into doing her bidding. That didn't work either. Somehow she had not only been impregnated, but a Wizard of the Snakes had scented her. Her unborn children would always be off limits now as well, as they too would carry the scent. She had a plan to gain vengeance on thwarting her plans. Feeling smug, she left the wizard in bed and made her way to her Chief Entity, the Sorceress of Dreams. It had been long since she'd updated her on news of the Serpent Lord marking the woman and her new acquisition. They would find a way to halt what the Chief Entity had foreseen. Halt it, and then manipulate it in their favor. Ultimately they would be restored to power and rule over all, even over a Wizard of the Snakes.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Hi. Good morning," Harry said, looking around uneasily.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, peering around also.

"I just wanted to be sure we were alone. Where is Severus?" he asked, peeking over her shoulder into the room behind her.

"He said he had to deliver a letter to the Owlery and visit with Albus. Come in," she urged, pulling him into the room. "Tell me everything." She knew when Harry needed to talk. He always got that expression on his face that said he hated to be a bother but had no choice.

"Did he tell you about what happened in the room with Bella?" he asked bluntly.

"He told me a few things, but he didn't exactly have details. Talk to me, Harry," she said. She began stacking toast onto a plate and summoned a glass of juice for each of them.

"Thanks," he said, giving her a lopsided grin. "Do you remember what I told you about Bella wanting me as a reward for loyalty?" She nodded. "Well, when I saw all the hard work that she'd done with the research, I wanted to reward her."

"Have... you know... sex?"

"No, I didn't want to, but I wanted her to be happy. I did the only thing that I knew would satisfy her. I just ~~st~~<sup>new</sup>, suddenly, how to project a vivid image of us doing that, and I even allowed her to feel real emotions." He bit into his toast and took a sip of juice before talking again. "She was pleased, and so was I. I wasn't aroused by it. In fact, I felt guilty because of Ginny, but I was pleased that she was satisfied with what little I can give her."

"Harry, it sounds as though you are a little taken with her," Hermione ventured. "How do you really feel?"

"Hermione, I really love Ginny. I don't love Bella. This is going to sound horrible, but I feel as if she is a pet. She looks at me, and I feel pity."

"Harry, look what she did in the past. Neville's parents? Sirius? Us? She was loyal to Voldemort as well. She did horrible things for him, and I believe she liked what she did. I don't think she would change a thing if she had that part of her life to do over again," Hermione said firmly. "Think of the future. You, Ginny, and Bella sitting by the fire? I don't think so, Harry."

"But they are just going to murder her!" he said furiously. "It doesn't feel right now that I know her."

"Do you honestly believe that you know her?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Well, there is Bellatrix, and there is Bella. I feel sorry for Bella while I hate Bellatrix. Do you see what I mean?" he asked desperately. "Come on, Mione. You're the only one that I hoped would understand."

"I do believe you love Ginny, and you feel nothing towards Bella in that way. I think you'd like for Bella to live, even if it's in Azkaban or the Chamber. Harry, what do you know about being a Wizard of the Snakes?" she asked smoothly, eying his reaction.

His eyes lit up for a moment. "I've never heard of it before, yet it sounds... familiar. What do you know?"

"Here," she said, reaching over to hand him the notes she'd written. "I found some interesting information that might help both of us."

She nibbled on another piece of toast while Harry read over her notes. "So, you mean to say, that I am this wizard's descendant?"

"Well, not you, but Voldemort was. But you are now a Parselmouth thanks to his transfer of power when you were a baby."

"If we had known this, I could have simply gone into your dreams and banished the bastard! You wouldn't have been forced to marry," Harry said sadly. "Why didn't I think of that? It feels like I should have known that all along."

"No, Harry, I think that things will come to you the older and more experienced you get. Like what you did with Bellatrix, for instance. That wasn't necessarily Dark magic. I think it was a part of the Wizard of the Snakes knowledge that you used on instinct. Severus is going to talk to Albus about it," she said softly. "What is it?"

"Circe. We've heard so much about the things she did, what with turning all those blokes into animals." A thoughtful look came over Harry's face again. "That's why then."

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. Just thinking," he said. "I have been doing a bit of reading as well. Dumbledore gave me a book about magical vipers and their transfiguration." He shrugged. "It's pretty interesting. I think he thought I needed it because I was a bit disappointed that Looney is fading away."

"The spell is losing energy?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you can reinforce it," she said hopefully.

"Not according to this book. The only types that stay for truly long periods of time are solid transfigurations. I made her from air, so air she will be again." He smiled. "Have you talked to Ron lately?"

"I didn't see him yesterday," she said. "Why?"

"He's down having breakfast in the hall, but he said to tell you if you want to get out for a bit, he and the others will be down by the lake. I'm going to meet them there after I'm done here," he said. "I think they miss you."

She would have refused had he not said that. Hermione felt slightly guilty that she hadn't been spending as much time with her friends, but she was still newly married. She wanted to spend more time with her husband, more time learning everything about him, loving him, and planning their future. "All right," she agreed. Her reading would just have to wait until later. An outing would be nice.

"Brilliant," he said, reaching for another slice of toast. "Ron was excited about Luna's letter. It seems that she has gained a little magic with all that old witch has been doing to her. Her dad thinks they can go home and just take a weekly trip down for her treatments."

"That's good news. He seemed so hurt when she just took off," Hermione said. "I really thought that... never mind."

"He and Draco?" Harry asked softly.

"Yes. They sort of seem like a couple sometimes. It's hard to explain," Hermione said with a giggle. "I've seen them get on like Ron's parents and like my own."

"I thought so as well. I think they've talked about it, but they decided that it wasn't what they wanted. I know Ron wants a life with Luna one day." Harry smiled. "I just hope he gets it."

The opening door startled them. Severus walked in briskly. "Harry," he said with a nod. "You're a little early."

"I wanted to talk to Hermione for a while. I assumed it would be all right to visit," he said, feeling unwanted. "Should I leave?"

"No. Come to my office with me. There is much to discuss," Severus said. "I trust you have been practicing your calming chant?"

"Some," Harry said.

"I'll go out to the lake and visit with Ron and the others," Hermione said, following them to his office.

"All right. We won't be long," Severus said.

She nodded and quickly made her way outside. The air was cool still, but there was neither a harsh breeze nor any snow falling. Ginny met her halfway to the lake as her friends came into view. "Where are you off to?" she asked.

"I wanted to send a note home to mum," Ginny said with a smile. "I'll be back."



"All right," Hermione called. "See you then."

As she neared Ron and Draco, she felt uneasy. They seemed to be quarreling. "What do you mean you have a date?" Ron asked incredulously.

"I am going to Hogsmeade with someone," Draco said. "I told you that you are welcome to come. We'll be leaving at eleven sharp."

"Don't think I'd like to go and get in the way," Ron said. Hermione could see that he was sulking slightly. What really bothered him about Draco's date?

"Who is your date, Draco?"

"Hi, Mione," Ron said.

"Daphne Greengrass. She's nice enough."

"She is," Hermione agreed. "I'm glad you asked her."

"Er... she asked me," Draco said, shifting his feet about.

"You didn't tell me that," Ron chided.

"Does it matter?" Draco countered.

"No, not really, but you could have said that it wasn't you that went after a date," Ron said. "Maybe I will go with you then. I'm sure Harry and Ginny might come as well. What about you, Mione? You and Snape have any plans for Valentine's Day?"

"Oh! I haven't even thought about it! He never said anything, so I suppose not. I will keep my day open though, just in case," she said brightly. She doubted that Severus remembered it was Valentine's Day either. If he knew, he didn't mention it. She knew better than to expect anything, but maybe he wouldn't mind receiving something. A devious idea sprang to mind. "I'll talk to you later. I need to find something to give him." They seemed disappointed that she was leaving so quickly, but she didn't care. She had plans to make.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus wondered where Hermione had gone. He'd tried to search her out at the lake, but she was not there. He had no choice but to leave without letting her know where he was going. Lucius' owl had come back quickly. He wanted to meet with him for lunch. Severus left a small note on the table to let her know that he'd be home as soon as he could. He decided to Apparate over instead of sullying his person through the Floo, which he and Lucius had opened to each other.

Once he entered Malfoy Manor, Narcissa accosted him. "Severus, where is your wife? I thought she was to come for a visit?"

"I apologize, but she was otherwise engaged," he said immediately. He would not admit that he had no idea where his wife had gone. If he hadn't seen her group of friends, he would have thought her to be sneaking about the damn Chamber again.

Narcissa sighed. "Well, I had hoped to find out how my son was truly faring at school. His letters seem distant. Do you know that he is planning to not come home? He says he wants to move into a flat in London!"

Severus nodded. "I heard him mention it once."

"It's unacceptable. He should be here with us, grooming for his duties," she said.

"That's enough, Narcissa," Lucius said from the door of his study. "Leave us."

"What have you to discuss that I cannot hear? Have you found out anything on my sister's whereabouts or who released her from Azkaban?"

"Nothing of the sort. Go on now," Lucius said gently, closing the door. He looked to Severus. "I think she is suspicious, Severus. We must end this. I want to know that Bella will never make an appearance again."

"I know," Severus said in disgust. "Too bad she can't just be locked up to rot with Mulciber and Higgs."

"Forget locked up. The bitch needs to die," Lucius said blandly. "What's keeping us from destroying her?"

"It's Harry. She's helping him with some spells that our old Lord placed upon himself. He refuses to accept that she will need to be terminated."

"So we do it anyway," Lucius said firmly. "I'll do it. Can you get me in?"

"I have found a way in," Severus said with a smirk. "It's a tad tricky, but we can get in. We won't have long to get to her before Harry is alerted to our presence. There is also Nagini and the other snake there. The second snake won't be around much longer. Nagini is going to attack anyone who wishes Bella harm."

"Why?" Lucius asked incredulously.

"Harry's orders."

"Has he gone mad?"

"No, he has a big heart, I fear. Something he should learn to control," Severus said grimly. "He will not like this, but it will be done. Albus gave me the leave to do as I must."

"Very well. When do we do it?"

"Tomorrow."

"It's Valentine's Day! I have to go to a ruddy luncheon with Narcissa. The day after perhaps?" Lucius asked eagerly. "It will give you time to be sure that we can get in."

"I hadn't thought about the holiday," Severus admitted. "Monday night will be fine."

"Severus, tsk, tsk, man!" Lucius mocked. "A newlywed forgetting a special holiday? Might I suggest jewelry or chocolates?"

"I believe that I can find a gift on my own," he returned dryly. "I shall send you a letter with the time and place to meet me."

Severus quickly made his way to Diagon Alley. What the bloody hell did a man give a woman for Valentine's Day? He looked around to see what others were doing. He noticed young men scurrying about the shops. He was even able to overhear a few of them talking and was able to come up with a few ideas. Jewelry? Chocolate? Flowers? Words of love? Clothing? He raised an eyebrow. Interesting idea, that. It was strange to care about a holiday. He'd always associated Valentine's Day with disgusting fluffy pets, candy, sweetness, and everything he despised. Now, it meant buying something for his wife, sharing an intimacy with her, and maybe getting something in return. He had a perfect plan. Hermione never was the materialistic type.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Where were you earlier, Hermione?" Severus asked, an hour later.

"I went off to Hogsmeade with Rolanda. We had a couple of things to get. Didn't you get my note?" she asked. "You were still with Harry when we left, so I put a note on the nightstand."

Severus scowled. "I saw no such note." In honesty, he hadn't looked for one. He'd just brooded over the fact that she wasn't there or anyplace he'd looked. "I left a note for you."

"I found it, thanks," she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Something most certainly is. Tell me," she pried.

"I had a meeting with Lucius."

"And?"

"It's time."

"Severus! It's time for what? Bella?"

"Yes, Hermione," he said, knowing a small disagreement would follow. "We have to do it before he gets too caught up. He pities her, and she will use that to her advantage. If she ever finds out that she's been duped, she will wreak havoc on all she comes near. We can not risk her escape."

"He's not ready yet, Severus! You need to give him time. Let him decide," Hermione pleaded. Harry was so confused about things. She did agree with Severus, but her first concern was Harry. Bellatrix couldn't escape from the Chamber. What did it matter how long she was kept there? "Give him some time. She won't escape."

"Hermione, he might end up letting her escape. We can't allow her to poison his mind," Severus said softly. "If you are his friend, Hermione, you should want what is in his best interest."

"Excuse me? Never accuse me of not having his best interest at heart! He's the reason that I'm worried." Hermione threw her robes aside angrily. "You better tell Harry what you are planning, Severus. It's only right that he knows."

"I think you need to decide where your loyalty lies," Severus said coldly, folding his arms in front of his chest. "I am your husband."

"You may be my husband, but that doesn't mean that you are always right!" Hermione backed away from him, tears in her eyes. "How dare you question my loyalty?"

Before he could say anything, she fled from the room. There was a resounding slam from the bathroom door. Perhaps he had gone too far with the loyalty comment. What should he do now? They'd never had a row such as this. Severus narrowed his eyes. He wasn't the one that had been ranting what sounded like threats. Hermione had more or less implied that if he wouldn't tell Harry, she would.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry backed away slowly. He had come to show Severus a book that he'd come across, and instead, he'd heard a plan to go behind his back to kill Bella. It sounded as if it would be soon. He had a plan of his own. He would simply have to take action sooner than he'd planned. Harry quickly made his way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Oddly enough, the ghost never seemed to be around. He opened the Chamber quickly and slipped inside. This would be the first time that he'd gone to Bella alone. The Phoenix song played lowly around him to calm him. Harry collected his emotions. He had a feeling that, if he didn't calm down, Fawkes would show up.

There was something that he had to do. This would be done on his terms. As soon as he got close, Nagini came out to greet him. He exchanged a few words with her, and to his disappointment, Looney had vanished. He told Nagini that he would soon have a companion for her. He dropped the wards to Bella's room. When he entered, he found her curled up on the davenport. She'd fallen asleep while reading.

"Wake up," he commanded. She was so startled that she nearly fell over.

"My Lord?" she asked. "What brings you here?"

"I have something to tell you," he said firmly. "You need to pay attention." A few hisses brought Nagini in to rest at Bella's feet. "I have been using you."

"It's my duty to allow it," she said.

"No, Bella, I have had every intention of using you and turning you over to the authorities of Azkaban. I simply wanted to know what you did to Luna Lovegood. There was no research. She was simply a friend that I wanted returned to the way she was. I needed you to give me that."

Bella's dark eyes lowered, and he could sense her hurt and anger. "And now that you've gotten that?"

"You will look at me when I speak to you," he said.

Her eyes lifted immediately. "Yes, Master."

"Bella, I needed you to find out what Voldemort did to himself, so I used you again."

"And now that I have done that?"

"They want to terminate you."

"What do you want?" she asked softly.

"I want you to live."

"Why? I'm a murderer. I like hurting people."

"I thought you could change given a chance," he said.

"Why are you telling me this? Why didn't you just let them kill me? Who is it? Severus? Lucius?" she asked shrilly. "I would have followed you to the end."

"Would you still?" he asked softly, twirling his wand slowly.

"Have I a reason to?"

"Life."

"With you?"

"Do you want to live, Bella?" he asked pointedly, pointing his wand at her.

"I don't know," she said honestly, swallowing. "Where could I go that you couldn't find me?"

"I could find you at any moment, in any location," he said smugly. He stepped forward, lifted her chin, and looked into her eyes. *Legilimens!* Many flashes came to Harry's eyes. He could feel everything that she felt though he couldn't hear what was being said. Bellatrix LeStrange was loyal to him, would die for him, and wanted to live. He broke eye contact with her. "I have a plan, Bella."

"I don't know why, but I trust you," she said. "Tell me." Harry sheathed his wand, sat down, and began to talk to her about his decision.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her bed. Where was Severus? Would he not come to bed? Was he so angry still? Did he truly believe that she was more loyal to Harry than to him? She sat up quickly. From Severus' point of view, she could understand how he felt. But she had a point of view as well. Why did she have to choose? Couldn't she be loyal to her husband and her friends?

She laid back roughly and suppressed a howl of exasperation. She needed him with her, but she wouldn't beg him to forgive her for her words. She would not take back her words either. Harry deserved to know. Instinctively, she reached down to caress her stomach. "Sorry, baby," she whispered. "Mummy is unsure about what to do. I should go to him, but I don't feel that I did anything wrong."

Severus was sitting in his chair reading about a pregnant woman's emotions. It seemed that they could change from happy to sad to angry all within the space of a few minutes. He'd been thinking about their argument. Perhaps he had been a bit harsh. She had always been loyal to Harry and Weasley, and since they'd found each other, she'd been equally loyal to him. He'd never really had many friends before, but he could see her point. Could she see his?

This was ridiculous. She'd not come out of their room since she'd gone in. He could tell that she was in bed. He'd planned to either sleep on the couch or slip in after she'd fallen asleep. This was his home as well. Why should he be denied his bed? Going to her didn't mean that he was giving in first, did it? Hell no! It meant that he was going to his bed. He closed his book and set it on the table next to his chair. It was time for bed. He opened the bedroom door and was surprised to find her trying to open it as well.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"Where were you up to?" he asked curiously.

"I was just going to see if you were here," she said, raising her chin defiantly. "What were you doing?"

"Going to bed. Do you mind?" he asked sarcastically.

"Not at all," she said, moving aside.

He nodded and went to the bathroom to change. Severus felt guilty suddenly. She had been trying to check on him, and he'd been rude to her. Why couldn't he just say that he might have been wrong? Why did it have to be so hard? This was his wife. She wouldn't hold anything against him. After cleansing his teeth and pulling on his nightshirt, he made his way to their bed. She was curled up on her side, and her eyes were closed.

He turned the lamp down and slid in beside her. After lying on his back for a few minutes, he turned to his side and pulled her to him. Severus could not sleep next to her without holding her. His hand slid down to cup her stomach slightly. His child was in there. The thought still amazed him. Would they have many more arguments as they had earlier? As a child, he'd witnessed far worse, but his parents' fights had to have started out small. Before he would let his child grow up in such a home, he would send Hermione and their child away.

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

He tightened his hold on her. He would never send her away. How could he think such a thing? He would never hurt her. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I may have been a little rough."

"It's all right. I can understand what you meant. Do you, in return, see what I meant? Harry has been like a brother to me for seven years."

"I do," he said, kissing the hair on the back of her head. "I do love you. Sometimes I think my love is too strong. It feels as if it will consume me with the need to possess you and protect you. I wonder if it's me that you need protection from."

"Severus," she said, turning around. "Never be ashamed of how deeply you feel. You are not the only one that feels that way. I can relate." She kissed his sealed lips softly. "Kiss me."

He pulled back to try to see into her eyes. The darkness shadowed her too much. "Hermione, why do you love me?"

"You are my everything," she whispered, bringing her lips back to his. This time he allowed the kiss to continue. Why deny what he wanted most? His felicity was in his arms. Hermione began kissing him fervently. "I *need* you." Severus sat up and pulled his nightshirt away. "Make love to me."

He helped to pull her nightgown over her head before sliding her knickers away. With both hands, he traced her stomach. "I can't wait until I can feel it moving within you." He placed a soft kiss before gliding up over her to kiss her mouth.

"It won't be long," Hermione said with a giggle. "You'll likely be saying that you wish that my big tummy was out of the way."

"Never." His fingers moved to pleasure her. "Feeling randy?" he asked cheekily.

"Yes," she said honestly. "I have no idea what's come over me. Don't bother about all that. I want you inside of me."

"Indeed," he said, guiding his hardness into her. "Little Succubus," he growled. "I cannot deny you."

She hooked one leg around one of his thighs while he slid one leg up over his shoulder. "Ah," she cried out as he thrust at the new angle. "Sev...erus?"

"Hmmm?" he asked distractedly.

"Let's not, oh, God, yes, fight again. Good Lord. Don't stop," she said with a series of moans. It felt as if he was filling her more completely than ever before. There was an odd sensation building within. She knew it to be the beginning of her climax. It never ceased to amaze her that he knew exactly what to do to make her feel good. She pushed all thoughts from her mind and began to give in to the feeling, grasping at his hair, shoulders, back, and anything within her reach.

"Sorry," he moaned, as he began spilling his seed into her.

She smiled and continued to grind against him to find her release as she was nearly there. He continued to thrust into her as long as he could, and she finally exploded around him. "I'm here!" Hermione exclaimed with a triumphant shout. A few moments later, her leg slid down, and her lover collapsed on top of her. "Love you."

"Always," he murmured sleepily, kissing her throat. "I couldn't wait. You felt too good."

"It's all right, as you noticed," she said with a small laugh.

"Hermione, I can't promise that we'll never fight again, but I do know that I shall never fall asleep angry." He suckled her collarbone and then the top of her right breast, leaving a mark on her creamy flesh. He moved to the other breast and suckled roughly, leaving another mark there as well. "Mine," he grumbled, moving to lie beside her.

"Always." She stayed on her back, slipping one leg between both of his. She was able to reach for her wand and chanted a cleaning charm on each of them before being able to comfortably relax. "Happy Valentine's Day, Severus."

"It is after midnight, isn't it?" he stated lazily. "Happy Valentine's Day to you as well. I must admit, I never thought I'd have such a gift on a day such as this."

She swatted his arm lightly. "Nor I. Good night, love."

"Pleasant dreams."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Jonas Stebbins took the parchment from the snowy, white owl. "Thanks. Want a treat?" he asked kindly, petting her feathers softly. She simply hooted and flew away.

"Who's that from, love?" his wife asked.

"I don't know," he said honestly. He nearly dropped the parchment when he saw that it was from none other than Harry Potter. "It's Harry Potter," he told his staring wife. "He wants to meet with me tomorrow."

"Oh, great! Can I go along? I would love to meet Harry Potter!"

"I'm sorry, love. He wants to talk business, but I'll ask if he'd like to get together this summer." He hoped that his wife wouldn't ask anything about his business. She normally knew better, but her eyes began gleaming at the mention of the name of the Wizarding world's hero.

"That's fine."

After his wife left, he looked down at the letter.

Jonas,

I do hate to bother you on such short notice, but I need a favor. If you could meet me in Hogsmeade tomorrow, alone, at noon out near the Shrieking Shack. I have something to talk to you about. Bring a brochure from Wanky's Familiar Outpost for me to browse through. There is no need to reply. I'll just assume that you will meet me. I do apologize for disrupting your holiday. I won't keep you long. Thanks!

Harry

Why did he want a brochure from a pet shop? He had no choice. He would have to meet Potter. He didn't mind. The boy had greatly helped him by destroying his ruddy mark. He'd been able to impress his wife with a tale of meeting Potter in London and having tattoos together in honor of Cedric. Jonas felt that he owed Harry for his new lease on life. He would definitely do what the wizard wanted.

"Jonas?" his wife called. "Could you bring me something to drink?"

"Be right there, honey." He left the note on the table so that his family could find it. They would be impressed. There was nothing that could be used against either of them. To them, they would think he needed help acquiring a familiar.

Southern's Notes: Valentine's Day is upon all our couples (time for a couples chapter). Harry's plan forms beautifully. Who will he involve? Who finds out? More up soon!

A big thanks goes to Ginny W for brainstorming with me about the Wizard of the Snakes information. She rephrased that bit for me. Thanks, Ginny!

Chapter Twenty Six

Chapter 27 of 32

Valentine's Day is upon everyone. Lucius and Narcissa wonder about their son. Severus and Hermione share an intimate gift. Bella finally meets an end.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling's stuff. I own nothing here except the plot. Alas, no money is being made. This is for entertainment purposes only. Happy reading!

A big thanks goes to my beta, Charmed Nay.

"Good morning to you, too," she said with a small smile. "How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to shower and order breakfast. Why don't you come join me?" he asked.

"I'll be right there," she said sleepily, stifling a yawn. He was already dressed impeccably, groomed, and ready for the day. How did he always just jump up and go about his normal routine as if he hadn't stayed awake most of the night talking or making love? She liked to laze around in the bed for a few minutes at least. Sighing, she made her way to the bathroom. She immediately noticed a new fleece bathrobe hanging on a hook. The color was a soft blue, and she found matching slippers propped against

the wall beneath it.

Valentine's Day! Were these her gifts? Her eyes lit up. She loved them! The dungeons were quite chilly at times; they would be very useful. Hermione quickly completed her toilette and donned her new items before making her way to Severus. "I love these, Severus. I'm glad you bought it a little bigger. I should be able to use it for most of my pregnancy without having to charm it larger."

"I thought you might like it." He smiled lightly, rising to pull a chair out for her.

"Thanks," she said with a grin. "Oh, look!" She reached to the center of the table where three roses stood in a lovely crystal vase. "You've charmed them to stay this way. Brilliant!"

He cleared his throat. "The red rose is for love, passion, and respect. Three things that I most definitely feel for you, as you know. The burgundy rose is for unconscious beauty. I would like to think that you could never know how beautiful you truly are to me. The dark pink shade represents thankfulness. I thank you for marrying me, giving me a child, and being a part of my life."

Hermione was speechless. She knew that it wasn't easy for him to express himself, but for him to say those words to her, in the light of day where he couldn't hide behind the shadows of darkness, meant more to her than she could ever relay. "Severus, I should be thanking you. You've shown me things that I never thought possible. They are beautiful."

Severus nodded slightly and poured some juice into her glass. "We've been invited to have dinner with the staff tonight. We need only make a show in the Great Hall during mealtime. Our dinner will be served privately after. Would you enjoy this?"

"I don't see why not. I would like to visit with the others. We've been keeping to ourselves lately." Hermione took a sip of her drink. "How do you feel about it?"

"I do not mind." Severus took a bite of his omelet and chewed slowly.

"About yesterday," Hermione began. Noticing his expression, she stopped. He placed his fork on his plate and looked at her expectantly. She continued, "I still believe you should talk to Harry."

"Hermione, I d..."

"Wait, Severus. Hear me out." He nodded. "It's only my opinion on the matter. I will not tell Harry if you do not wish me to, but I simply do not agree with the secrecy."

"That's fine," he said, picking his fork back up to continue eating. "I do not ask that you agree with me, only that you do not betray what I tell you in confidence. I know that you care for your friends' well being, and I shall not hold that against you. I might find myself in the same predicament one day."

"Fair enough," she said. "I have something for you as well." She blushed. "Actually, two things. One is for later when we are in bed, and one can be out of bed, if you'd like it now?"

"You didn't have to get me anything," he said, half surprised that she had. Bed, did she say? "You know, we really have no place to be right now. Would you care to go back to bed?"

She smiled at his slyness. "I've got a bit of notes to put together."

"From your latest research?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm putting together all that we know about the visit of a Succubus, Incubus, or both. Once I am finished compiling everything, I will need your help," she said proudly. "You and I are going to make this public. We need to do this to warn people. There isn't enough information out there."

"Hermione," Severus began slowly, "if you do this, people will know."

"Exactly," she said with a smile. Once she saw the horror on his face, her smile faltered. "What is it?"

"They'll know that is why you are with me. They will think that..." He looked away.

Hermione stood up to go to him. "Severus, no, they won't think that!" She took his hand in both of hers, caressing it. "I am with you because I love you. They will read about the prophecies of the Succubus and how they know whom to seek out. A dual visit just proves that we would have been together anyway. We simply decided not to wait."

He seemed slightly mollified. "People will think that I'm a dirty, old man out to take advantage of a legend." He smirked. "As such, I'd really rather not disappoint them." He stood quickly, lifted her easily, and carried her to bed.

"Really, Severus! I need to do some writing!" Hermione protested halfheartedly.

"Later," he said with a growl as he began stripping away their clothes. "I believe you were the one that brought up something about being in bed." He laid down on the bed and pulled her on top of him. "Explain."

"Really?" she asked with a giggle.

He shook his head. "I don't know what I want more. Help me decide."

She reached over to the nightstand to get her wand. "I bought a book in Hogsmeade yesterday. It's about the different stages of pregnancy. It's part of your Valentine's gift by the way, as you've taken to reading more on the subject than anyone I know of." She grinned at his smirk. "In this first trimester, it's really rare to actually feel your child because of the size." She pointed her wand at his hands. "*Sensus Maximus*." She pointed the wand to each of her own hands and repeated the spell. "This will only last a few minutes, and you have to concentrate on what you want to feel, according to the writer."

Hermione saw that Severus was staring at his hands oddly. She laid back, pulling his hands to her soft stomach. "Think of the baby and try to feel him." She watched as Severus slowly moved his hands over her skin. The wonder that suddenly passed over his face was priceless. He had an odd expression of awe mixed with happiness, and a slight smile played upon his lips. Her hands reached down to touch her stomach as well. The sensitivity in her hands was unnerving for a moment, as she felt many things at once. Then, it changed. She knew what she was feeling. Her baby. Their child. It was moving within her. It felt as if her skin had turned into a lake, and waves were rippling across the surface. "Do you feel that?" she asked in wonderment.

"Yes," he said, voice choked with emotion. "It feels like she is drifting on a gentle current."

Most of the morning was spent casting the sensitivity spell on their hands, talking about their child's future, and having slow snogs with soft words. He'd even gone as far as to laugh at her now growing lock of hair that Higgs had cut. It seemed to be straighter than the rest of her hair. When Hermione finally moved from the bed, she felt his hand close over her wrist. "What is it?" she asked, seeing his face full of swirling emotions. She'd thought that he'd fallen asleep while holding her.

"Stay a little longer," he said.

Seeing that he was fighting internally to hide his emotions, she grinned deviously. "I still have that other gift to give you. I take it that you would be interested in it now?"

"What do you have planned?" he asked curiously. He was grateful for her tact in changing the subject. When she didn't reply, blushing instead, he asked in mock horror, "Little One! Are you planning to take advantage of me?"

"Rolanda brought me to a shop." She bit her lip for a moment. "It had some things there for married couples. I bought a little something that looked interesting."

Good Lord! Rolanda brought her to a shop? There was no bloody telling what the hell she'd bought. Visions of odd gadgets flashed through his mind. "Hermione, I'm not sure that Rolanda is one to take advice from. Her tastes have always been eccentric."

"I know that *you* know, thanks," she said tartly. "She didn't tell me to buy this though. She was off with the worker while I looked about." She moved to her wardrobe and pulled out a small jar. "This, husband, should be enjoyable for you."

"Let me see what that is," he said, sitting up. She reached the bed and gently shoved him back down.

"No. This is my Valentine's Day gift to you." She winked, opened the jar, dipped her fingers in, and began smearing small amounts of gel over his flesh.

Severus watched as she rubbed the red gel over each of his flat nipples, slithered a trail down to his groin, and smeared a fair amount over his genital area. What was he supposed to like about this? He only felt sticky. "What is this supposed to be?"

Hermione smirked as she lowered her mouth to his partial erection. She blew slightly along the trail of gel. With each breath of air, he felt suddenly warm and as if he was being caressed gently. The tingly feeling was not unbearable, yet it was already driving him mad. He wanted more. She kissed his lips softly and sat astride his thighs. With no answer forthcoming, Severus closed his eyes and enjoyed her hands, mouth, and the new sensations. A simple flick of her tongue over his nipple had him arching into her. Each caress of her hand or tongue sent jolts of desire through his body and straight to his erection. The closer she came to taking him in her mouth the harder it was to remain focused on what she was doing.

"Hermione," he said roughly. "It's too much."

"It's not enough," she said saucily. "Let me. Just go with it."

Her mouth closed over his tip for a gentle suckle. "Good Lord," he said with a moan. He pushed into her mouth involuntarily. The ministrations of her mouth and tongue combined with her caressing fingers and heavy breathing had him ready for release nearly immediately. "Hermione!" She moved away just before he could climax, and the feeling crept away. It was back a few minutes later as she slid down onto him. "Damn." He'd never felt anything so incredible in his life. He was even more surprised when she began bucking wildly on top of him and screaming out his name. They both reached culmination instantaneously. Panting breathlessly, she collapsed atop him.

"I used some on me. You seemed to like it," she finally managed. "It's bloody brilliant!"

"Indeed," he replied, trying to catch his breath. "I think, however, that we shouldn't use that often. I'm a bit old for such... stimulation."

Her lips found his briefly. "I agree. I'm still tingling and good Lord! You're ready again."

He smirked. "I think we should take advantage of this vivification while it lasts."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Come on! I've never seen such a bunch of slow arses before," Ron said exasperatedly. "We need to get to the Three Broomsticks soon if we aim to have one of their lunches."

Harry grinned. "It's always about food with him." Ginny remained quiet, pulling his hand into hers. "Want to skulk away a bit and have a quick snog?"

"I think so," she said cheerfully. "See you guys in town!"

"Oi! Just gonna take off and leave us?" Ron asked incredulously. "Just bloody great!" He eyed Draco and Daphne for a moment. "I'll... uh... I'll go on to the joke shop. Meet you there."

"Wait," Draco called. "We'll come with you."

"No, it's all right. I won't be long," he said. "I'll be off to use an owl after. I want to send Luna's gift to her."

Daphne smiled lightly while Draco looked worried.

"We can go with you," he offered again.

"No, mate. It's fine. Go on." Ron left quickly, leaving Draco with his fellow Slytherin mates. It figured that Harry and Ginny would go off and leave him with them. He didn't care for Draco's other friends, and he sensed that Daphne felt he was intruding. He wished that Luna would be around. She'd sent a nice card to him, but she hadn't said much. He decided to buy her some of those sweets that she liked. He had some extra money and could buy some for her.

Before he made his way to the front of the store, he was pulled into the small alley next to it. "What the...?" Draco had pulled him in. What the hell did he want?

"We need to talk," Draco said hurriedly. "We've only a few minutes, but I need to know why you've been acting the way you have."

"Like what?"

"Jealous."

Ron started laughing loudly. "Is that what you think? I most certainly am not!"

"Laugh all you want. I know jealousy when I see it." Draco ran his fingers through his hair. "Look, Ron, I thought we agreed that this was not anything to think on."

"There is no this," Ron said, gesturing between them. "I just... Well, she's a bit quiet. Seems like you would be attracted to someone else. Why her?"

"Ron, it is just a little date. She asked me, and I figured that I might as well give her a go. If it bothers you, then you nee..."

"No," Ron interrupted with a chuckle. "Really. I was just surprised. Honest. Go on. I've got to send something to Luna for Valentine's Day."

"All right," Draco said, watching his friend scurry off. Ron had seemed jealous when he found out that he had a date with Daphne. That reaction had confused him again. Damn it! He didn't know what to think. Daphne was a really nice girl...for a Slytherin. Her family was well off, and they owned a classy place over on Diagon Alley that his father frequented. He'd have to call things off if it bothered Ron though. Ron had been really good to him this past year. When that bastard at Higgs' Manor molested him, Ron had listened and talked to him, truly concerned how he felt.

"What the bloody hell was that, Son?" asked his father, voice cold.

Draco spun around and eyed the man. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother has been really worried about you. She didn't want to owl your gift to you, so I offered to deliver it," he said, eyeing his son oddly. "Not that I minded escaping that horrid luncheon for a few minutes." They both chuckled.

He took the small parcel from his father. "Send my regards."

"You and that Weasley boy?" Lucius moved closer. "Do you know how disappointed your mother would be if she thought that her son was gay?"

"I am not!" Draco said hotly. "You saw and heard nothing. He was just concerned."

Lucius smirked. "Now, now, Draco, no need to be angry. I didn't say I don't condone your little indulgences. You will do as you wish, but I do suggest that you conduct your personal affairs in a less public place." His father smiled lightly. "Be sure to keep this private, and you be sure to not be caught up in anything unwise. It is your duty to produce an heir to carry on the Malfoy name. Find a reputable witch, we will make arrangements with her parents, and you will be married." When Draco tried to speak, his father held up one gloved hand to stop him. "Eventually. There is no rush. Take your time. Get *this* out of your system first. Understand?"

Draco knew by the tone of his father's voice that there would be no arguing with him. "Yes, sir." He looked down at the little parcel, likely sweets. "I'll go on to meet my date then."

"A very respectable young witch with a good family from what I saw. Excellent choice," Lucius said. "I suppose I need to be off. See you soon, Son."

Draco waited until his father disappeared before he breathed again. That was close. And just bloody fucking great! His father thought he fancied men! Hang on! Had his father once fancied men as well? Seemed awfully indulgent, didn't he? He shrugged the thoughts aside as he made his way towards the Three Broomsticks. Something in the window of a shop caught his eye. One quick stop wouldn't hurt. He slipped into the store, grabbed the item, and paid for it. As soon as he opened the door, he saw Ron passing by. "Oi! Wait up!"

"What have you got there?" Ron asked, eyeing the bag.

"Here. It's for you. Don't say I never gave you anything," Draco said with a smile.

"Er? What the... bloody hell! I didn't know these were out yet. Thanks, mate!" He'd given Ron a book on the Chudley Canon's latest season. "It's got everything. Their new moves are listed, all the players are here, and it has tidbits on each. I really appreciate this!"

"I thought you might like it," Draco said airily. "Come on. I could do for a drink."

"Here you are," Ron said, handing Draco a bag of Fizzing Wizzbees. "I know you like those."

"Thanks," Draco said. The pair found their friends. Ginny had joined Daphne and the others, but Harry wasn't there. "Where's Potter?"

"He wanted some time to pick up something," Ginny said, seemingly relieved that they had arrived.

"What's that?" Daphne asked, noting the parcel in Draco's hand. He'd taken it out of his pocket to make room for Ron's treats.

"Oh, here you are," he said, handing her the delicately wrapped box. He was surprised that she quickly tore open the parcel. It was a fine box of liquor-filled chocolates.

"I do love these," she said excitedly, kissing his cheek. "Thanks, Draco."

Draco cleared his throat. "Right then. Let's order something to eat."

"Best thing I've heard all day," said Ron cheekily.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry smiled as Jonas approached. "Thanks for coming."

Jones extended a hand to Harry. "Not a problem. I owe you so much."

"Have you the brochure?"

"Right here," he said, pulling it from the pocket of his robes. "Wanky's Familiar Outpost. Have you an interest in my uncle's business? Did you truly need a pet?"

Harry flipped through to the section with snakes. A broad smile broke out on his face. "Have any of these blokes in stock?"

Stebbins released a sharp breath. Snakes that size reminded him of the Dark Lord's Nagini. "Unfortunately, there is only one. It's not thriving. I give it a few days at the most to live."

"I'll take it," Harry said immediately. "Tell nobody that it's ill. That will be our secret."

"My uncle knows," he said. "Nobody else though."

"Tell him that I am able to heal snakes, as I am a Parselmouth. He'll not know any better." Harry smiled. "I would like this delivered to Hogwarts first thing in the morning. I don't have any classes until ten. Maybe eight? Have it in a large crate, if you don't mind."

"I can do that," Jonas said, pleased that he was helping Harry Potter with something. What did he want a snake for anyway? "Did you not keep the others?"

"I only have one. Nagini needs a mate. I think that I can lift her spirits. If the snake doesn't get better, Nagini will kill it anyway, sensing weakness. That alone will boost her spirits until I can find her a worthy mate. If it lives, well, then I suppose I'll not have to look any further," Harry said, smiling at the picture in the brochure. It was perfect. Everything was falling into place. He'd be sure that only Ginny was with him in the morning to receive the beast, and he'd ask her to go down with him. Brilliant!

"It's a female, so if you are interested in breeding, I don't think th..."

"No, Nagini has mothered enough. Any companion is fine," Harry said firmly. "I'm sorry to bring you here on Valentine's Day, but it's the only time I knew that I could get away alone while out of the castle. Here." He pulled a small box from his robes. "For your wife. Chocolate."

Jonas chuckled. "Thanks. My mum and my wife will enjoy these. They love sweets."

"Excellent. Who will be with you tomorrow?" Harry asked quickly.

"I could come alone, if you'd prefer."

"I would. Thanks again, mate. I'll see you in the morning." *CRACK!* Harry wasted no time getting back to the others. This was too good to be true. Perfect. He smiled at his friends as he approached the table. "Sorry it took so long. I ran into Jonas Stebbins for a bit. His uncle owns that last pet shop on Diagon Alley. I'm buying a companion for Nagini."

"Oh, well, that's good," Ron said thickly. "Now we can stop hearing about the ruddy vapor snake that disappeared."

"She was great, Ron," Harry said darkly. After they went back to Hogwarts, he'd sneak down to go over the plan with Bella once more. The snake was coming in the morning. People would see it enter. He would bring Ginny with him. He needed her if he was going to follow through with the plan. It was so lucky that he remembered about Jonas working in his uncle's business. He charmed pet toys and accessories, and he helped retrieve and deliver the animals. Harry smirked. Soon, Bella would be free to start her new life. She'd live without magic, but it was better than being dead or in Azkaban. At least she would have freedom. At least his conscience would be free. She saved Luna, mostly. Her information would help decipher what Voldemort's final revenge against him had been.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Rolanda winked at Hermione once they were seated. "How'd it go?" she asked conspiratorially.

Hermione's eyes left her friend's face for a moment to be sure that her husband was still engaged in conversation with Albus and Minerva. "Brilliant," she whispered finally. "I never imagined anything like it." She could see the gleam in Rolanda's yellow eyes.

"Is that so? Think I should try a bit that I bought on Stuart for our wedding night?"

Hermione nodded. "Definitely."

Before Rolanda could continue, Severus joined them. "What are you too looking so smug about?"

"Sev, old boy, you know how witches are. We like to talk about who's flying in what pitch. I was just telling your wife here," she nodded to Hermione, "that Sibyll has been seen leaving her tower more often lately. Would you believe that she usually ventures out to see Hagrid on these little excursions?"

Severus shuddered. "Impossible. That would be ghastly." The man would break Trelawny in half if they'd do anything like she was suggesting.

"To each his own, old boy. I always thought he'd go back after that French lass, but I suppose things change," Rolanda said cheerfully. "Now, as for me, I'm right glad that I landed this bloke." She nodded towards her intended; he was talking to Filius and Pomona. "He's a nice guy, won't ask me to change anything, eagerly accepts my preferences, I might add, and seems to really care for me. I figured that I might as well get married."

"I still have your wedding set," Hermione said quickly. "I should have returned them sooner."

"No," Rolanda said softly. "Those were meant for my wedding to another. I wouldn't dishonor Stuart that way. Keep them and do with them what you will."

"I'll always keep them," Hermione replied, smiling at Rolanda. It had been a bumpy start between the two of them, but the witch ended up being someone that she didn't mind talking to. Sure, she had her blunt tongue and odd ideas, but she was a true friend. Stuart was the perfect balance for her. "Severus," Hermione murmured quietly. "Are Filius and Pomona...?"

Severus chuckled. "If so, they would never admit it. It does appear that way, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I remember something said after that really bad row between Minerva and Rolanda. It was the next morning. She was saying that he told her something in bed. I saw when she tried to amend what she said, and I hoped that I'd misunderstood. I wonder how they... you know." She grinned at her husband's look of horror. "What?"

"Rolanda has poisoned you. First, you give me mental images of Hagrid and Trelawny, which I shall Obliviate from my memory later, and now, you give me a mental image of Filius charming Pomona to float above his bed." He smirked suddenly. "Dare we try that?"

Hermione laughed loudly, drawing a few glances toward them. "Maybe later, scamp."

"I am, aren't I?" he asked arrogantly. "But you love me."

"Yes. Hopelessly, I'm afraid."

"Good evening," Minerva slurred. "I've just wanted to wish everyone a happy Valentine's Day. Who wants to go first?"

"I'll do it," Rolanda said, standing up quickly.

"Go first?" Hermione questioned Severus.

He placed a finger over her mouth. "Listen. It's tradition."

Rolanda took a sip from her goblet before speaking. "I want to propose a toast to having a normal Valentine's Day." Most present took a drink. "The best thing about not having Lockhart here is that the Quidditch Pitch has not been affronted!" Nearly everyone laughed. "That bastard charmed pink and red ribbons to flutter in the wind on all of my hoops and the stands. He even charmed some ruddy falling hearts to continuously blow about the field!" She took another drink. "Cheers!"

Filius squeaked. "I say that the best thing about not having Lockhart here for the holiday is that the doors haven't been charmed to spurt horrible phrases such as 'Be mine,' 'I love you,' 'You're sweet,' 'Marry me,' and the like. It was funny at first, but it got old quick!" Everyone began laughing in remembrance. "I'm glad that Albus was able to limit it to Gilderoy's personal rooms only."

Madame Sprout stood up, sloshing a smoking green liquid from her glass. "The best thing about that pesky blighter not being here for the holiday is having undecorated greenhouses!" She giggled madly at her own memory for a moment before speaking. "I entered the first one to find that nearly everything had been dusted with pink, candy-smelling powder! The more I tried to charm it away, the sweeter the smell would become. That's when I noticed a ruddy banner that read, 'How sweet it is, Valentine.' I could have choked him."

Minerva laughed. "Luckily you were able to reverse it."

"Oi! He's lucky he could walk after what you did with him," Rolanda exclaimed suddenly.

"Rolanda!" Minerva chided.

"No, let's tell the new ones, shall we?" Minerva nodded her agreement reluctantly. "He walks into the staff room, starts to Transfigure some of the chairs into pink, fluffy lounges. Well, he gets to the table that Minerva and I were sitting at, and he tries to switch our chairs even though we still sat in them." Rolanda began laughing. "Minerva shot up as soon as he uttered his spell, and I've never seen her do such quick wandwork, even against me. Lockhart's arse and other bits had been Transfigured into who knows what, his ears were turned into hearts, his hair had been dyed pink, and his voice sounded like a little girl's voice. I never laughed so hard. Do you know he stayed that way for fifteen hours before Albus went to right him?"

Hermione laughed at the image the tale brought to mind. The staff really did get on well with each other, didn't they? Most took turns bashing Lockhart for his atrocities during his stint as a professor at Hogwarts. Severus told his story and maintained that even though Lockhart had enchanted some little cupid to follow him around his chambers, he hadn't meant to spill any Sleeping Draught into his tea. Nobody believed that, not even Hermione. She could see by the satisfied glint in his eyes that he'd do it over again if given the chance.

She looked around with watchful eyes. There was more going on behind the scenes than she'd ever imagined as a student. It was odd that students never really thought of their professors as having lives other than teaching. There was a kinship between the staff that no outsider could understand. Rolanda and Minerva quarreled often, but



once you got to know them both and watched them together, you could see that they truly respected each other. Valentine's Day had been one of her most memorable yet, and if each holiday with Severus would be as enjoyable, she knew she would cherish them always.

"I think we should take our leave," he said, standing next to her. "We've early classes in the morning."

"I don't mind. You seem to be having a good time," she said sweetly, eyeing his tumbler.

Severus took her hand. "I'd prefer to be somewhere private for the remainder of the evening."

"Have plans, do we?"

"Only to hold you," he said softly. "Thank you, Hermione."

She didn't have to ask what he was thanking her for. She knew already. He was happy to have someone to share holidays with. She imagined that he'd always felt alone on such gatherings even though he would never admit it.

Once they were in their chambers, he picked up the book that she had bought for him. "I'm going to the loo. I'll read on this," he said, handing her a small parchment from his pocket. "This is for you." She noticed that he seemed suddenly flustered as he sped off to the bathroom. She changed into her nightclothes and slid into bed before reading his note. It was a simple acrostic poem forming her first name. Tears of emotion flowed freely down her cheeks as she read his words.

*Higher beings sent this woman to me.*

*Emotions loosened, setting me free.*

*Regrets are now a thing of the past.*

*Matrimony ensured that we'd last.*

*I know she has helped my soul to heal.*

*Only for her could I again feel.*

*Never will I curse fate for sending my wife.*

*Each day I'll cherish her for all of my life.*

*Hermione,*

*I know that I don't always express my feelings as I should, but I will always cherish you and be grateful for having you come into my life. Do not, however, expect saccharine word declarations often, as I still have a reputation to uphold. Considering that I already appear excessively sentimental, I shall end this by saying that I love you, and I love our child.*

*Severus*

She'd thought that the roses, slippers, and the bathrobe had been her gifts for the day. This was worth more to her than anything else. His words. She hurried over to place the parchment in her chest. She would keep it for always and read over it often. Hermione lay back down and eventually drifted off to sleep, never knowing that her husband had been too embarrassed to face her after she'd read his letter. Her body instinctively spooned against his as he pulled her close and whispered his words of love.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Lucius allowed his wife to pull their duvet up over him before he spoke. "You always please me."

"I'm glad," she said, getting comfortable. "Did Draco look well?"

Damn! She'd spoke about their son the entire day. Did she have some maternal instinct alerting her to his sexual frustrations? "He was fine, Narcissa. Do stop badgering me. I've told you that he sent his appreciation for the sweets."

"Does this Greengrass girl appear worthy? Has she lost her mousy appearance?" she asked worriedly. "We still have our family image to uphold."

"She was the picture of a perfect Malfoy bride. However, I would not pressure him. I sensed that he might try to rebel if we push him too far. I think we should allow him to get his flat in London once he finishes school. He can still learn his duties with me and feel as if he is on his own. When I feel he is groomed enough, then we shall persuade him to marry the girl." Lucius kissed his wife's hand. "Sleep."

Narcissa turned away from her husband but snuggled against him. "Pleasant dreams, Lucius."

"Same to you." He hoped that she would leave well enough alone. She need not know that her son enjoyed both wizards and witches. She had been most upset when she'd found out that he, like most intelligent wizards, enjoyed sexual pleasures with either gender. It was something that most did but kept quiet. He'd have to be sure that Draco learnt the importance of subtlety.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Are you sure, Master?" Bella asked sweetly.

"I am. The snake will be delivered in the morning in a large crate. I will bring Ginny down with me. Are you sure you can handle this, Bella?" Harry asked, searching her eyes.

"I've really no other choice. If I want to stay alive, it will have to be done," she said. "If I use magic, the Ministry will only find me. You have a right to take it from me to pay for all the suffering I have caused and will never atone for."

"Good answer," Harry said. "I am glad that you have been so understanding about everything."

"I have a final request," Bella said. Her black eyes began gleaming.

Feeling uncomfortable, Harry asked, "What is it?"

"Look into my mind. I dare not voice it," she replied demurely.

Harry looked into her eyes and immediately found what he sought. He pulled his eyes away from hers. A last request. Would it be so horrible to grant? It could well be the last time that she would ever ask anything of him. *She helped you with Luna. She helped you to find information on Voldemort's curses. She adores you. She has*

*changed.* The voices in his head rambled about why he should fulfill her request. He knew that the sensible thing to do was to walk away. Ginny's face flitted through his mind. His lover was so sweet and faithful to him. *So is Bella.* "I love my girlfriend," he said, though his voice faltered.

"I know," replied the dark witch, sounding disappointed.

"Nox!"

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus woke up earlier than normal and quickly got ready for his day. Something had been plaguing him. He knew that it concerned Harry. Why was he feeling guilty for going forward with the plans to terminate Bella? Hermione's disappointed face flitted through his mind, followed closely by Harry's. Hermione did not approve of his decision. He shrugged. They would not always agree on everything. It would do well for him to have a quick talk with Harry. Maybe Hermione was right. He did have a right to know, but he didn't want the boy to do anything foolish, such as helping her to escape. He kissed Hermione's sleeping face twice before he left.

She would understand that he had things to do before it was time for breakfast. The first thing he did was to retrieve a small box from a shelf in his office. He then made his way to Gryffindor Tower. "Open," he instructed the sleepy portrait's occupant.

"Yes, fine," she murmured.

He entered the common room with narrowed eyes, looking for any signs of inappropriate behavior or improper items. Two students were already awake and sitting at a table reading over assignments. They stared openly, wide-eyed and mouths agape, at Severus as he made his way up to the boys dormitories. He could hear horrendous snoring before he even opened the door. "Good Lord," he said in disgust. Upon entering, he followed the sounds to find Longbottom! Of course, it would be that lout making such a ruckus. How did Harry and the others sleep? He quickly muttered a Silencing Charm on the brat before finding Harry's bed. "Harry, I need you to come with me."

Severus stepped back in shock as he saw the wide-awake green eyes watching him, and the wand pointing in his direction. "Sir, sorry," the boy said. "I didn't know who had come in."

"I have something to show you," Severus said. "Meet me in the corridor after you're dressed." He quickly strode from the room and made his way down the stairs. A few more students had wandered down. He heard someone whispering about him being there, but he didn't pay attention to the little gossipmongers. It didn't take long for Harry to find him.

"Morning," the boy said, sounding tired.

"This way," Severus said. He led Harry into the first available classroom, taking out his small box. "I am sure you will remember this," he said, smirking slightly. He took out his Pensieve and set it down on the desk nearest them.

"What do you want to do with that?" Harry asked curiously.

"I want to show you something, Harry. This has a memory of Bella at her best. I thought maybe you needed to see her in her glory, as we all remember her." Severus noted that Harry's face turned stony. Severus held his wand to his head, extracted a silvery strand, and placed it inside the Pensieve.

"Fine," he said shortly.

"Go on," Severus said encouragingly. "You need to see this, Harry. You need to put things into perspective." Harry nodded and leant forward to view the Pensieve. Severus sat down to wait. He knew what Harry would be seeing. He hoped it would remind Harry exactly who the woman was that he'd come to favor. The memory, slightly obscured, came back to him.

Bella was sitting in the lap of Rodolphus Lestrage, cackling madly. "It is good to have you back," she said happily. "Our Lord will be pleased to see his servants returned to him." They'd just broken out the last of the Death Eaters from Azkaban again.

"What has happened since we have been captured? They didn't tell us anything," said Rodolphus bitterly. "How has our Lord's work been fulfilled as of late? Have we lost anyone?"

"No," Bella said happily. "Do you not remember who fell at the Ministry? Sirius Black. I killed him. Poor, pitiful Potter tried to seek me out for revenge, but he's just a little baby. He couldn't even send the Cruciatus the right way."

Her husband laughed loudly. "That little brat will die. Our cause will dominate, and we shall be victorious!" He looked over his wife's body for a moment. "It has been a long time since I've had you."

Bellatrix began peeling her clothes away. "Would you not rather someplace private?" He looked around to see Lucius, Severus, Rabastan, and Antonin watching the display.

"Stay," a high-pitched, cold voice commanded. "We shall watch."

The wizard dared not disobey his Lord. He allowed his wife to disrobe completely whilst he only unbuckled his trousers. He had always hated having others watch him. Having been denied sexual pleasures for so long, it didn't take him long to find release. His wife began screaming wildly. "Is that all you can give me after so long? Is that it? You call yourself a wizard!"

Their Dark Lord spoke. "Antonin will give you pleasure." Antonin moved forward, throwing aside his robes and trousers proudly.

"On your knees, Bella," he said boldly. She smirked and did as he requested. After a few moments, it was clear that the witch was bored.

The Dark Lord stood up, went to her, and placed one hand upon her brow. Within seconds, she was panting and bucking wildly against Antonin. "Master," she began chanting frantically. She continued her intonation even after Antonin had finished his ministrations and pulled away. Finally, with a final screech, she slumped to the floor in exhaustion.

"This is how a powerful Lord rewards his faithful servants. He gives them whatever they desire, if it is within his ability to do so. Bella has developed a plan to ensure our victory. I will continue to bestow my favoritism upon her whilst she pleases me," Voldemort said, looking upon those gathered through his slitted eyes.

Severus watched as Harry stepped away from the Pensieve. The memory seemed to have the effect he'd hoped for. The boy's face was reddened with anger, and his breathing was uneven. "Do you understand now, Harry, why she must pay the ultimate price for her deeds? That is who she was and still is."

Harry nodded. "She was laughing about Sirius, her own cousin! She was laughing about me."

"Don't," Severus commanded, as Harry clutched his wand. "Let Lucius and I handle it."

"I need time to think," Harry said. "Thanks."

Severus simply nodded. He hoped that the boy would appreciate what he'd shared with him, and he hoped that the boy wouldn't share the memory with anyone else. It had cost a lot to show him any portion of the past, but Harry needed to see how Bella was again. Severus gathered his memory, picked up the Pensieve, and made his way back to his chambers. After placing his box back on the shelf, he made his way to his chambers. "What is it?" he asked with concern, seeing a pale Hermione slumped over on the bed.

"I feel terrible," she said. "I don't have class until nine this morning. Do you think you could find me a safe potion to take to cure my nausea?"

"Yes, do you need anything else?" he asked.

"No," she said, shaking her head slightly.

Severus went back to his office. He pitied her. He knew, thanks to the many books he'd read, there would likely be a few more weeks of this sickness. For one dark moment, he nearly questioned if it was worth it. How bloody horrible! Of course it was worth it. This would pass. He found the potion that he was looking for and grinned wickedly for a moment. At least if she wasn't feeling well, she couldn't question him about that ruddy poem that he'd written!

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Harry!" Ginny called. "I've been looking for you. Did you still want me to go down to the chamber this morning once your snake has arrived?" She didn't like the sad expression upon his face. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"I just have a lot on my mind. Maybe you shouldn't come down with me," he said.

"No, I want to," she pressed. "We don't have much time alone. Let's go wait for your friend."

"You're right," he said softly, taking her hand. "Ginny, lately I've not been myself. I do love you."

"I love you." She giggled. "Come on."

They only had to wait for twenty minutes. Jonas Stebbins walked up to the front gate while hovering a large rectangular crate alongside him. Ginny smiled at the boy. She barely remembered him from his time at school. He'd always seemed pleasant.

"Hello, Harry," he said easily.

"Hi," Harry said. "This is my girlfriend, Ginny Weasley. Ginny, this is Jonas Stebbins."

"Hello," Ginny said easily. "Is it in there?"

"Yep. She's a beauty. Do you want me to open it up?" he asked, looking to Harry. Harry nodded. "Right then." He allowed the crate to settle onto the ground, and with a wave of his wand, the top opened. Ginny jumped back slightly as the large viper snaked its way upward to have a look around.

Harry began conversing in Parseltongue with the snake. Ginny had always been fascinated by his ability. It was odd to remember that she once spoke the language when Tom had possessed her through the diary. She wished that she knew what was bothering Harry. He had such a disposition of melancholia this morning. Why? They'd had a nice visit to Hogsmeade the day before. He was gaining a new familiar. It just didn't make sense.

"Oi!" Ron called. "Is that the new snake?"

Ginny turned to see her brother and Draco making their way over to them. "Yes," she said since Harry was still talking to the snake. "We're going to take it down in just a minute."

"We'll come, too," Ron said eagerly. "Maybe it'll have a go at that bitch."

"We can't," Draco said, elbowing him. "Remember what Snape said."

"Oh, right. Guess we'll just have to go and have a spot of breakfast. You two going to join us after? Have you early classes?" Ron asked, eyeing Harry oddly. He made a few hissing noises to mock Harry, but they went unnoticed.

Ginny grinned. "I have one at nine. Harry doesn't go until ten."

"See you then," Draco said, turning towards the Great Hall. Ron simply waved and followed his friend.

Harry looked at Jonas. "Brilliant. I'm glad you've brought her to me. What do I need to sign?"

"Sign here, and we'll be able to charge it to your account at Gringotts." Jonas handed Harry a quill and parchment. "I really appreciate that you did business with us."

"Not a problem. If I need anything else, I will let you know." Harry shook his hand. "Did your wife enjoy the chocolates?"

"Yes, her and mum both. Thanks, mate."

"Anytime. Take care of yourself." Ginny smiled at the young wizard before he left. Harry lifted his wand to shrink the crate. After putting it in his pocket, he hissed at the snake again. He stooped to stroke it on its head. "Ready then."

For some reason, a feeling of unease washed over her. She hated going down into the chamber with Harry, but she knew that it proved to him that she could handle his past. He was the only one that could handle her past with Tom. She needed to be with him even though she didn't want anything to do with his creepy snakes or that bitch, Bella. They made their way down quickly, and after Harry unwarded the room, they entered Bella's chambers. She sat on the couch and watched. The dark-haired woman glided over to Harry immediately.

"Greetings, my Lord. What brings you here so early in the day?" she asked.

"I've brought another familiar for Nagini to have as a companion. She's out there. I'll go hunt down Nagini and introduce them," Harry said, turning away from the witch. "I won't be long," he told Ginny.

"All right." As soon as Harry left, she looked towards Bella. The witch seemed angry. "What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Do you know that the only thing between him and me... is you?" Bella looked at her nails casually. "I think, Ginny, that we should come to an agreement."

"W-what sort of agreement?" Ginny asked suspiciously as the woman came closer to her.

"Oh, you know. The kind where you share your body with me until I can be rid of you. I'll have a new life to look forward to, and it will be me that ends up with Potter, not you."

"You bitch! I knew it," Ginny said, pulling her wand. To her horror, Bellatrix was faster than she thought possible. Her wand was wrestled away from her quickly, and she found herself looking down the length of her own wand. "You wouldn't dare! He'll know."

"He won't know! You forget that I have long practiced in the ways of the dark. My old Lord taught me well." Just as Bella was about to cast a hex at her, Ginny pushed forward with all of her strength, toppling each over. The table next to the settee crashed loudly as they fell. Ginny prayed that Harry would hear and come for her. Bella was stronger than she looked.

Ginny screamed as loudly as she could, but her scream was halted as a jet of red light hit her squarely in the chest. She could feel the air slowly working its way in and out of her body. She could move no part of her body, and all she could do was watch and listen as the evil witch began chanting something. "What the fuck?" It was Harry. He'd heard her and come for her. In the next moment, she saw Harry roughly grab Bella and wrestle the wand away from her.

"Master, stop!" the witch screamed. "Stop! It is for you that I do this!"

"You are nothing but Voldemort's whore! I saw Snape's Pensieve. You laughed about Sirius! You laughed about me!" Harry had never yelled so angrily at anyone before. Ginny couldn't see anything other than a slight scuffle just out of her line of sight to her left.

Things began to get slightly fuzzy for Ginny, and the light seemed to be fading. She could hear Bella's pleas and Harry's angry retorts, but one thing she heard made her shudder mentally. Hissing. Nagini had come and had slithered over her body to get to the ruckus. In a moment of sheer panic, Ginny lost consciousness.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Thanks," Hermione said taking a scone from the offered plate. "I feel much better. Honestly. We could have even gone to the Great Hall for breakfast."

"Nonsense," Severus insisted. "You were not fine earlier. I admit you do look better now that you've taken the potion and freshened up. Are you sure that you can teach today?"

"Yes. What was in the mail?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, you've a letter from *Krum* again."

She reached over and picked up the letter. Hermione read it quickly. "Oh, look. It says that he will be here tomorrow. He's coming with his coach. They want to have a look at Harry and a few others while flying! He wants to have dinner. What do you think?" she asked.

"Dinner. With him?" Severus' mouth formed a pale line. "I think not."

"Oh, Severus, you are invited. I'm certain of it," she said, holding back a giggle. He seemed truly distraught. What was the big deal?

"Hermione, I am glad that you find humor in the situation. I assure you that I do not. How would you like for me to constantly exchange letters with a past lover? How would you like for her to invite me to dinner? Hmmm?" He raised an eyebrow.

"We were never lovers, Severus. There is a difference," she said tartly.

"But he longed to be your lover. Still does, I would think." He smirked. "You also dream about this young wizard. What am I to think?"

Hermione looked hurt. "Are you serious?"

"About him wanting you? Yes, I am." He reached over and took her hand. "I would never believe you to want him though. No, I was teasing."

"Don't tease like that, Severus. I thought you were serious. I... wanted to cry." She wiped a tear away. "Ruddy hormones!"

Severus chuckled. "I shall not deny his request for you to join him at dinner, but I will guarantee that I shall be present."

All amusement left his face, and Hermione knew that he spoke the truth. "Maybe we could mention a little about our research while he is here."

"We shall see," he said firmly. "Come here, woman."

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Ginny woke again on the cold chamber floor. The blurry image of Harry was leaning over her, chanting something in Parseltongue. "H-Harry?"

"Yes," he said excitedly, pulling her into his arms. "What is it with you and this chamber?"

She smiled weakly. "I'll be fine as long as I have you to rescue me. What did she do to me?"

"Some sort of Stunning Spell," he answered immediately. "Ginny, I love you. I am so sorry. For everything. Please believe that."

"It's not your fault, Harry. She is an evil woman," she said. Her voice still sounded weak.

"There has just been so much more," he said softly, looking towards the room. She saw his eyes narrow. "Don't you dare move, Ginny. I want to see if they are finished."

"What do you mean?" she asked, as he lowered her back to the floor.

"Bella is no more. Nagini... I ordered her to handle things." He smiled softly. "Stay here."

She tried to see what he was doing, but there wasn't much to see. She could hear some shuffling, and then she heard some cackling. Moments later, Harry spoke, sounding unlike himself. "Like that, do you, Bella? Never thought I would live to see you end this way. You should have behaved, Bella. You've been a naughty girl. I do hope you find your peace."

Ginny made out a shining purple light, and she could hear his hissing and spitting. He was communicating with his snakes. As she mustered the strength to sit up, Harry came back out to sit with her. "It was brilliant. Nagini was magically altered by Voldemort to be able to eat nearly anyone he requested. That way, he didn't have to worry about the body mass percentage and what have you. Her bottom jaw dislocated itself, and she slid Bella right in. That unhinging was bloody fucking amazing!" He chuckled, giving her gooseflesh. "She'd had the life squeezed out of her by then unfortunately. Her eyes even bul..."

"I don't want to hear it, Harry," she said, suddenly horrified at the images she was seeing. "That's disgusting." She began to cry softly. "She was going to kill me or take my body. I don't know what she was doing, but it nearly worked, Harry. Why did you leave me alone with her?"

"Gin, there is nothing I can change. I am sorry. I wanted to be sure that Nagini and my new snake got on well," he said softly, kissing her cheek. "I would never endanger you. I promise."

"You were going to set her free. Weren't you?" she asked through sobs.

"Yes, I was... until this morning, that is. I had a look at something that made me think things through," he said, before pressing his lips to hers. He pulled away a moment later. "Kiss me."

"I... can't right now. I feel horrible." She'd never let herself show such emotion to anyone, especially Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm really not weak. I just don't know what to

think right now."

"Don't worry, Gin." He stood up and pulled her up with him. "Let me carry you to Madame Pomfrey. She'll know what to do."

She nodded, feeling exhausted. Bella's nasty hex had left her feeling extremely weak. Harry guided her away, but she was able to have a glimpse into the room. She saw the new snake curled near the couch while Nagini was sprawled along the floor. There was an unmistakable bulge in her body that could only be the remains of Bellatrix Lestranger. "Oh, my God," Ginny breathed before fainting.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Severus walked his wife to her class and squeezed her shoulder lightly. "I'll meet you for lunch in the Great Hall, then?"

"Yes, I'll be there. I'm going to use my free hour before to catch up on some assignments. If you get away sooner, come back up here," she said with a smile.

"Agreed." He turned away and paused, glancing back. "I still say he fancies you."

"Severus!" she exclaimed quietly. "This again?"

"I do enjoy teasing you," he said with a chuckle before walking off.

Hermione went into the classroom, grinning broadly. She was secretly pleased that Viktor was coming for a visit. Something about his letters seemed odd, and she wanted to ask him about the dreams he had mentioned. It was such a coincidence that he would be having dreams about her as well.

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"What's wrong with her?" Madame Pomfrey exclaimed. "She looks horrible."

"She fainted," Harry replied. "There has been an accident, and I'm afraid she's received a bit of a shock. Oh, hello, Headmaster Dumbledore. I didn't see you there."

"I've only just come. I felt the need to visit Poppy. Tell me, Harry. What has happened?" he asked, looking at Harry directly over the rims of his glasses.

Harry laid Ginny onto a bed while she was checked over, and he led Dumbledore away from Pomfrey's range of hearing. "Bella tried to attack her. I fought her off, and Nagini finished her."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"I see, and how is your new familiar?" Albus asked softly.

"Nagini likes her."

"Have you picked out a name for her?"

"In hopes that I won't sound morbid, I think I should like to call her Bella."

"Interesting. No, not morbid at all, but simply a reminder," the elder man said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "This is a reminder that some people are no better than the serpent they serve, and those people deserve to live a life slithering about the feet of their betters." Albus smiled at Harry's shocked look. "Return my book to me tomorrow evening for our weekly meeting. Check on your young woman and be off to class."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said uneasily.

Albus watched as he spoke soft words to his girlfriend and fled the infirmary. "How do you feel, my dear?" he asked quietly.

"Sick," she muttered. "Better than before. Madame Pomfrey says that I just suffered a bit of shock, and they aren't sure what sort of Stun Bella used. It is likely one of her own making, but I seem fine otherwise."

"I am going to ask that you do something for me," Dumbledore said softly. "I would like to retract this memory from you, and I would like your permission to view it along with Professor Snape. Would you mind?"

"No, of course not," she agreed quickly. "What do I have to do?"

"One moment," he said. He walked to the fireplace in Poppy's office and threw in some powder. "Severus Snape's Office." A moment later, he exited the grate. He neared the door leading to the classroom.

"What kind of fool are you, Ackerley? You do not add the scales in until after it has simmered for five minutes! Ten points from Ravenclaw. Begin anew," Severus said, clearly irritated. "Who can tell me what happens when you add the scale of a dragon too soon? If I had not witnessed this *boy's* idiocy and extinguished the potion, what would have become of Mr. Ackerley and most of those surrounding him?" He looked around. Not one hand was raised. His eyes narrowed as they landed on Whitby. "Mr. Whitby? Perhaps you might want to enlighten us, as you seem to be amused."

"I don't know, sir," he replied promptly.

"Really," Severus said, sneering impatiently. "Ten points from Hufflepuff. You will all turn in an essay on the very question that I just asked. Your parchment will be no shorter than two feet, and I warn you now, I shall check for magical margins. Carry on." As he made his way back to his desk, he saw Albus waiting for him. He walked to him immediately. He heard a few whispers behind him. "Silence," he hissed.

"I need you to come with me, and I need you to bring your Pensieve. Do you think you could leave them?"

Severus really didn't like to leave fourth years alone, but he would brave these two Houses being alone together. He had the perfect plan. "Where should I meet you?"

"I'll be in the infirmary," Albus said abruptly. "You may Floo in. I will leave it open."

"All right," he agreed. He turned to face his class. Several curious heads lowered. "Baron," he called lightly. Within moments, he felt the temperature near him drop slightly.

"Yes?"

Loudly, Severus said, "I have to meet with the headmaster about something important. I would like to leave these students in your care. Do you agree?" The specter nodded once. He turned to the class and saw that most had heard. Expressions of fear were on everyone's faces. He did enjoy terrorizing the little dunderheads. "The Bloody Baron will oversee the class. If I do not return, I expect you to turn in labeled samples at the end of class. You are to remain silent. I am giving the Baron leave to do as needed. Do not forget your assignments."

"I will try not to harm anyone," the ghost said with a wink. Severus nodded. He quickly retrieved his Pensieve. Who would have thought that he'd need it twice in one day?

Within moments, he was in Poppy's office and made his way to where Albus stood. He was shocked to see Ginny Weasley lying in a bed.

"What has happened?" he asked, handing the Pensieve to Albus.

"A great deal," came the reply. He watched as his mentor instructed the witch on how to extract a memory. "Thank you, Ginevra. We do appreciate this. Now, take the potion that Madame Pomfrey has instructed, and we shall check in on you later."

Severus silently followed the headmaster to his office. Albus held up his hand to stay his questions. "Just watch with me." They both allowed themselves to be drawn into the Pensieve to see Ginny Weasley's memory of the day's events. Severus was shocked to see that she had gone with Harry down to the chamber and what had transpired. He remained silent until the memory was over. He allowed himself to be pulled back out of the Pensieve.

"What do you think?" Albus asked. His face displayed no emotion. Severus couldn't sense his feelings on it either way.

"I have to tell you something," Severus said quickly. "I allowed Potter to see a memory that I had of Bella this morning. That is true. I wanted him to see her as I remember her. I think maybe it made a difference."

"What do you think about this, Severus?"

"I am unsure," he admitted. "It seems too clean, too sudden. He seemed resigned to her fate this morning, and he was righteously angry. However, seeing him dictate her death in such a manner, I am unsure."

"I thought that you might have your doubts. Whatever the case may be, Bellatrix Lestrange is gone from our lives. She will never return. The only Bella here, as we've seen, is his snake. Is that clear?" he asked softly.

"It is. I shall send news to Lucius at once, Albus," Severus said, standing up.

"Did you give him information on how to enter the chambers via the cliffs?"

"I did not."

"Excellent." Albus stood to pat Severus on the shoulder. "Rest easy, my boy. She is gone for good."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Severus, you're late," Hermione said, turning away from Stuart and Rolanda as her husband took his seat next to her. "Has something gone wrong with your classes?"

"No, it's Harry," he said quietly. "I shall explain it to you after we have eaten. I am famished."

"Of course, love," she said softly. She eyed her husband thoughtfully. What had Harry done now? Had he and Lucius decided to put off Bella's demise to give Harry a bit more time for research? She turned to Stuart to give Severus peace as he ate. "So, do you think you will like Egypt?"

"Oh, most definitely," he said cheerfully. "I am a well-traveled man. I have skirted through only once before, purely an accident though. The wizards there have such fascinating tales. I am glad that I shall be able to stay longer."

"We'll not have much time to be hearing tales," Rolanda said suggestively. "I imagine we'll be doing a bit of bodily exploration if you know what I mean."

Hermione flushed as the witch licked her lips at her intended. Stuart swallowed heavily. "I believe I do know what you mean."

Hermione grinned as he picked up his napkin to wipe his brow. If she had to guess, she would say that they'd never had sex before, but how could that be? Rolanda surely wouldn't put up with that, would she? She shrugged slightly. How refreshing though to wait until marriage before becoming lovers! She was glad that she and Severus hadn't waited. *Not that we had any choice*, she thought bitterly. A hand drifted down to caress her stomach lightly. She would always cherish Christmas even more than before. It was their special time together.

"I'm ready," her husband's silky voice said, interrupting her memories of their first coupling. "A Knut for your thoughts."

"Are you so cheap to offer only a Knut?" she asked cheekily, following him out the side exit of the hall.

"A Galleon then," he replied, taking her hand once they were alone in the corridor.

"I'll tell you for free because I love you," she said softly. "I was remembering the first time that we made love together." She giggled. "I was so afraid. Not of you, but of the thought of doing something wrong."

"Hermione, you are nothing less than perfect for me. Never think that you can do anything wrong," he said honestly, trailing her cheeks with his index fingers. "We need to talk, Hermione."

"Is he all right?" she asked uncertainly.

Severus quickly told her everything that he'd seen in Ginny's memory. "In conclusion, I am suspicious. I wish that we could have seen it all, but unfortunately, she wasn't conscious the entire time. You know Harry as good as anyone. What do you think?"

"He was so adamant about letting her live, but I think since you allowed him to see that memory of her, he realized that she was still the same person that she's always been," she said, trying to reassure him. He seemed so doubtful. "If you are unsure, Severus, why don't you go down with him to check on things? Won't Nagini excrete some of her remains? Maybe you could check it out."

"Perhaps," he said. "I will have a talk with him, but I would like for you to also let me know if you notice anything odd. You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she answered instantly. "Of course. Why didn't you and Albus just walk through the door to see for yourselves what was going on while in the memory?"

"We can't go any farther than her memory allows. She can draw her own conclusions about what has happened, but it wouldn't be true unless she witnessed it. We merely stayed with her to view things from her perspective." He shook his head slowly. "I just wanted you to be aware of everything. I have already Flooed Lucius. He is not as skeptical as I am. He is relieved about Bella's fate." He grinned. "It's always been in my nature to disbelieve something unless I've seen proof."

"But, Severus, you have seen proof. Ginny's mem..."

"No, I did not see Nagini kill Bellatrix in that memory. I saw what appeared to be her death."

"You said that Ginny saw the body outline in Nagini's form. That is proof, Severus. I think you are just afraid to let your guard down. We are finally free. I think we owe it to Harry to work on his research, but as far as Bellatrix Lestrange is concerned, we are free."

"Mmmm," he said noncommittally. "I shall see you after classes. Go see to your friend if you'd like." He placed a small kiss on her brow before descending the stairs that led to the dungeons.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Hermione sat next to Severus in the staff box as they watched the fliers pass by quickly. They were all making a few laps around the pitch before starting. Classes had been cancelled so that the entire student body could be present. Viktor Krum flew nearby on his broom and waved at her. She waved back, happy to see her friend again. When she noticed Severus' surly glare, she put a hand upon his thigh. "You know you are the only one for me, Severus."

"Yes, I know," he said, trying to smile but failing. *That bastard doesn't know it though.* "Look at their formation." They watched as the players began showing their talents. Harry, of course, blew everyone away.

Hermione could see Krum and his coach watching him and a few others with interest. Ron seemed to impress them as well. She was happy. Ron really wanted to play Quidditch after school. Hermione was sure that Harry had changed his mind, but he wouldn't pass up the chance to fly. Maybe if he saw an interest from a professional team, he would want to go on to play professionally. He and Viktor practiced the Wronski Defensive Feint, which Harry won each time. Harry also practiced the Plumpton Pass. She found herself standing to cheer for her friends more than a few times. Severus seemed embarrassed slightly, but that changed when Stuart began jumping up to cheer for Rolanda as she would pass on her broom or direct players.

Severus whispered, "Here I thought you were the most exuberant of the staff." He nodded to Stuart. "This idiot isn't even cheering for players."

"Shush," Hermione said playfully.

"I think you are exhibiting favoritism! I don't see you cheering for Draco or any other Slytherin as enthusiastically," he said in mock anger.

"I have been cheering for Draco. The others, well, they've not been doing so well." She smirked slightly. "Besides, as their leader, I don't see you cheering very much."

The next couple of hours passed by quickly while they watched the players have a couple of mock games. When it was over, Viktor flew straight for Hermione. "Herm-own-ninny," he said in greeting. "Will you have dinner with me?" He barely glanced at Severus, intent on her face only.

"Yes, we will. Where do you want us to meet you?"

It was then that Krum flicked a surly gaze at her husband. "Ve are staying in town. I vill send an owl."

"Excellent. Great flying, Viktor!" Hermione said sweetly.

"Vell, thanks," he said with a wink before flying off to meet his coach.

"Do you see what I am talking about?" Severus asked in annoyance. "He is disappointed because you clearly told him that I would be there."

"I'll explain things," she said quickly, trying to quell his temper. "Don't be upset, Severus. I think it's just how he treats close friends. It might be some odd custom. You're coming with me. That's all that matters."

He allowed an arm to snake around her even though most of the school was still about the pitch. "I hate another man giving you attention."

Hermione sighed. "Ho, ho," she said in a bored voice. "I think it's time that we moved on from this subject, Severus. I understand how you feel, and I would likely feel the same way. I have felt that way, in fact. Rolanda? Remember that?"

Severus chuckled. "Indeed. Point taken."

"Have you talked to Harry?" Hermione asked quickly, hoping to change the subject.

"Not yet, but I shall."

"Let's go down and freshen up. Viktor will send an owl for us soon."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry reached down to stroke Nagini on the head for a moment. "Ginny, are you sure you want to be down here after what happened?"

"Yes, I just want to prove to myself that I can," she said, forcing herself to look around. "Thanks for bringing me."

"Anything for you," he said. "Are you about ready?"

"Yes," she said, looking around again. She'd never fear this place again. She had been rendered helpless here twice, and Harry had rescued her both times. She looked over to watch her lover as he moved on to stroke and fondle his new snake, Bella. She didn't like that he named the snake after that bitch, but she supposed it was ironic. Each time she saw the creature, she would remember that her nemesis had met the perfect end. *Who was she to think she deserved Harry's affections? That whore!*

Harry was talking to the snake in Parseltongue and stroking it softly. She could swear for a moment that the snake looked directly at her and smirked *Bloody hell!* She was imagining things. "You know, I am proud of you, Harry. You did so well today. Everyone was talking about your flying." She touched her temples slightly. That potion she'd taken earlier was now taking effect. She actually felt a little dizzy.

"Well," he began, "I still say that you should have been out there with us. It was for all sixth and seventh years."

"Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have. I am starting to feel odd. The medicine," she said by way of explanation. He held out a hand to her. "Thanks."

She watched as Harry looked around once, smirking evilly. "I do like this place. It makes me feel good about being me. I triumphed over something horrible here. It makes me feel alive."

Ginny didn't like the eerie breeze that blew around them suddenly. "Come on," she said. The Phoenix song sang out around them as Harry led her away.

Southern's Notes: So... what do you think about Bella? I hope I didn't confuse anyone with the Pensieve stuff.

I would like to point out that the sensibility charm that allowed them to feel the little one was not an original idea. I was greatly influenced by Ramos in her story, "Hinge of Fate." If you've not read that, please do. It's brilliant.

Up Next: Dinner with Krum, Harry's side of what happened in the Chamber, a talk with Albus, and Succubus information (Viktor's view of things). Cheers!

Chapter Twenty Seven

Chapter 28 of 32

The truth about Bella comes to light. Ron has a surprise party.

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A big thanks to my brilliant beta, Charmed Nay. She always returns anything that I send to her right away.

Severus sneered impatiently as they were finally led to a table. They had been uncomfortably standing near the entrance while Krum went on about his coach to Hermione. The hook-nosed little bastard had barely greeted Severus before trying to monopolize Hermione's attention. Severus smirked slightly. Who was he to remark on someone's conk? He looked to the window and noted his reflection. Yes, his nose was not as curved as the boy's. "Excuse me, Krum," Severus said, brushing the berk's hands away from Hermione's chair. "I think I can help my wife without the need of your assistance." He noted that Hermione smiled softly as he scooted her chair back to the table.

Krum, looking surly, seemed to shrug and move to the chair on her left. Severus sat at her right and watched the little bastard interact with his wife. Only a fool wouldn't be able to see that he had feelings for Hermione. Severus raised an eyebrow. Apparently, Hermione was one of these fools. She didn't seem to notice. His eyes narrowed. Or did she just not care? *Severus, stop being a pillock. You know better than that!*

"Severus?" Hermione's voice broke into his thoughts. "What would you like to drink tonight?"

Feeling a dark mood come over him, he replied, "I'll have Ogden's." He looked to the waiter. "Bring an entire bottle for us to share, Krum and I." The nervous man nodded and fled.

"I will not drink," Krum said.

"You jest. I think a few *friendly* drinks are in order. After all, it's not often that *my* wife and I get to visit with *her* friend, now is it?" Severus said snidely.

"Vell, I guess a couple would not hurt," the younger wizard relented.

"Indeed," Severus said. The return of their drinks captured his attention. He poured a glass for himself and one for Krum after he'd handed Hermione's juice to her. He felt a moment of triumph, as Krum seemed to choke on his first swallow. "Dear me," he said sarcastically, "are you quite all right?"

Hermione glared at Severus for a moment before speaking. "Perhaps he's just not used to having hard liquor."

Severus didn't reply. He sat silently as they spoke about Krum's Quidditch escapades. She surprised him by saying that Harry didn't really want to play on a professional team any longer. Krum seemed relieved. *He's probably afraid that our Harry Potter would be too much of an opponent to handle* He smiled at Hermione's apparent pride about Harry's skills. He also felt victorious when Krum admitted that he'd always respected Harry, and ever since he had met him nearly three years prior, he'd been amazed at the younger wizard's accomplishments. Krum then went on to spout more taradiddles, much to Severus' annoyance. He was relieved when the food appeared on their plates.

"Mmmm, this is great!" Hermione said after tasting a forkful of roast pork.

"It is excellent," Severus agreed, quirking his lips at his wife. His lips thinned as he took in Krum's narrowed gaze. "Something wrong, Krum?"

"No," he said shortly, turning his attention back to his meal.

They ate in silence for a while until Hermione spoke. "Spotted dick is great, isn't it?"

"I do like it," Krum agreed immediately.

Severus shook his head slightly. "I find there are too many currants." He pushed his plate aside, pouring another glass of firewhisky for himself. "I doubt you are ready for another?"

"I'll have one," Krum agreed, holding his glass up. Severus courteously filled it, feeling smug. The tetchy blighter easily succumbed to pressure, didn't he?

"Tell me, Krum," Severus began quietly, "how often do you dream of my wife?"

"Severus!" Hermione admonished.

Krum seemed unperturbed as he took a deep sip of his drink. He leant forward, attempting to appear ominous and said quietly, "Often. Do you always open her mail?"

"Viktor, I told Severus. I felt it was rather odd that you had dreams of me after the ones I had of you," Hermione explained. "I apologize if you feel as though he were prying."

Severus glared at his wife. Why was she trying to make it sound as if she didn't share everything with him? He most certainly had every right to read anything another man sent to his wife, the bastard! "I most certainly am concerned about a man writing to my wife!"

"We've been writing to each other for three years. You know that," Hermione said, deftly kicking Severus under the table. "Besides, as I told you, Severus, I think we need to find out more for our research. Viktor, do you remember my mentioning of a Succubus?"

He put his empty glass on the table. "Yes."

"I am compiling all of the information I have on the visits of a Succubus or an Incubus, and Severus will assist me in writing a book. I think people should be warned about their visits and how to stop them," she said softly.

"That sounds interesting," Krum said, ignoring Severus' annoyed expression. "Why would they need to stop them?"

"Because, Viktor, they only visit for their own purposes. They try to take your magic from you to sustain themselves, and they also try to bring forth conception if they feel the resulting child would benefit them somehow." She smiled and touched Severus' hand for a moment. "Our visit brought us together, and we found a way to defeat our tormentors. I just think that it is coincidental that you and I began dreaming about each other."

"I have always dreamt about you Hermione," the boy admitted with a smile. "I wanted you to come to Bulgaria after you graduated. I guess your lucky husband would not appreciate such a visit now."

"Too right, you are," Severus said through clenched teeth. "Aren't you courting someone?"

"I have a companion now, yes," Krum said mysteriously. "She and I have been getting along vell."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad to hear it, Viktor." She took one last sip of her juice. "I'm off to the loo."

Severus stood to help her scoot her chair back. When she was out of earshot, he turned his hardened stare upon Krum. "Listen to me, you miserable toerag. Hermione is my wife, and as such, I will not have *any* man, famous or no, openly vie for her attention." Severus smirked. "You would do well to remember that she is happily married." Krum nodded, but Severus didn't like the odd smile that played upon the boy's lips. "Dare you find this amusing?" Severus asked as quietly as possible. He itched to hex the brat.

"You just keep her happy, Snape," Krum said. He tried to look innocent. "It's all I can ask of you." Viktor hated the man. Yes, his old headmaster had told him all about Severus Snape of Hogwarts. He was a longtime follower of Lord Voldemort as his old headmaster had once been. Everyone thought that Snape had changed sides, but Karkaroff had disclosed that Snape was on the fence. His loyalties could easily be swayed either way. He watched the arrogant bastard rise to help Hermione back into her chair and inwardly seethed. Hermione would be his at some point in the future. He could guarantee it. He had something on his side that they didn't have.

The Succubus would not betray him. They had come to an agreement. He would impregnate her with an heir that she could train as she saw fit. She would only steal as much of his magic as she needed to solidify her form to have a normal pregnancy. She would always appear as Hermione to him, and he would never be denied sexual pleasures. The woman seemed to have her own vendetta against Snape as well. She had guaranteed that eventually the man would be out of the way, leaving Hermione ripe for the picking. It didn't matter that Hermione was pregnant with his child. He didn't care about that. Besides, the Succubus foresaw their child becoming close to Hermione's. That could only mean that once Hermione came to him after Snape was taken care of, their children would become either friends, lovers, or siblings.

Yes, he would wait for Hermione. She was worth it. He would receive sympathy from her when he told her that his lover had died in childbirth, leaving him to raise a child on his own. Snape was a fool if he thought he could break their bond. Hermione's voice brought him out of his thoughts. "Yes, I am glad we have had this time together." He waved his hand to summon the parchment to him. Just before the parchment reached his hand, a slight twitch made it falter and drop. That had happened to him earlier when he was racing Potter. Something would wave through his body causing a moment's discomfort. It was as if his magic would falter slightly. He wondered if his Succubus had taken too much of his magic the previous night? Sometimes she would forget herself, and he would be left to shudder and weep. The release of semen and magic instantaneously was a feeling that he could not describe, but he could liken it to what he'd heard of a Vampire's bite. It hurt so good that he would seek her out more often if he could.

"You must have just had a rough day," Hermione commented. "And here we are keeping you from resting. You need to take care of yourself, Viktor."

"I will, Herm-own-ninny. Don't worry about me." He smiled reassuringly. "You go on. I will stay for a while longer."

"All right then," she agreed. "I'll be in touch." She leant over and gave him a small hug. "Good night."

Viktor stood, albeit shakily, and held out a hand to her overbearing husband. He flashed a brilliant, fake smile as the man reluctantly shook it. "Good to see you as vell, Snape."

"Indeed," the man said, moving to escort the love of their lives away.

Hermione glanced back once more to smile. *She is beautiful.* He sat back down to contemplate on what they'd said to each other. Viktor noticed her napkin had been placed back on the table. She'd had it tucked into the top of her blouse. He lifted it to his nose and detected a faint scent of her perfume mingling with the aroma of the restaurant. He pocketed it quickly and left quickly, vowing that she would be his own no matter the price.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Harry sat across from the headmaster after he handed his book back to him. "Is something wrong?" The way he was being watched made him feel uneasy. *He knows.* "You want to talk about Bella, don't you?"

"I am here to listen to whatever you would like to tell me, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly, smiling at the boy. "I trust the book gave you some particularly interesting information."

"Yes," Harry replied. *Just brilliant! Albus Dumbledore knew what he'd done.* Dropping all pretenses, he said, "The transformation was simple enough to complete. After I read what your book had to say on the problems with Transfiguring reptiles, I thought about what Hermione said about the Wizard of the Snakes."

"The original being a direct descendent of Circe?"

"Yes. I had a quick read about her, what with her specialty at turning people into animals, and then it all came to me. I knew exactly what I had to do. Taking care to avoid certain situations, such as the limbs Transfiguring incorrectly, I was able to use my Parseltongue with a mixture of another spell that I'd never imagined before. It put off a blinding purple light for a moment, but the transformation went smoothly." Harry was glad to be able to voice what had truly happened to someone.

"Take me to see her," Albus said.

Harry knew it wasn't a request. It was an order. "Tonight?"

"There is no time like the present," he answered jovially. "Shall we?"

Harry nodded, and they made their way to the bathroom. Moaning Myrtle was crying near one of the faucets. "Hello, Myrtle."

She sniffed a few times and looked up. "Hello, Harry," she said and wailed even louder. When Dumbledore moved closer, she screeched and flew into a stall. They heard a loud splash and continued wailing.

Harry shrugged. "Mione says that's why they never come in here. It's hard to have a pee with her going on all the time." They both chuckled for a moment. Harry opened the entrance, and they made their way into the depths of the Chamber of Secrets.

Once they were near the Basilisk, Harry spoke again. "Hard to believe still, isn't it?"

"A remarkable feat, that," the headmaster replied. "Call her out."

"Sir, why do you really want to see her?"

"Ah, you forget, Harry, that before I was Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, I was Albus Dumbledore, Transfiguration Master of Hogwarts. I would like to see how you fared. If you are to keep this quiet, then it must be perfect. Do you understand?" he asked, peering at him kindly.

Harry nodded and called out for his snakes. Nagini was the first to appear. She slid to Harry quickly, and they conversed as a slower Bella made her way over. Albus waved his hand, and the startled viper lifted into the air before them. Harry watched intently as the headmaster walked around her and eyed her markings and body. "Excellent work, Harry. I daresay, you will receive an Outstanding for your Transfiguration N.E.W.T. if you continue with work such as this."

"Thank you, sir."

The headmaster turned to Harry after allowing Bella to fall lightly to the floor. "Tell me everything, Harry. What exactly took place?"

"Well, I didn't want them to *murder* her. I'm all for her being punished, as in living her life in Azkaban as deemed by the Wizengamot." Harry smirked for a moment. "Severus showed me a memory yesterday morning, and it put things into perspective. Bella and I had already talked. Instead of death or Azkaban, she agreed to become a familiar. It was a form of punishment that would make everyone happy. She wouldn't be locked up or killed, everyone else would be able to breathe easier thinking that she'd died, and I wouldn't have her murder on my conscience."

"I thought as much. What made you continue on with your plan even after you saw what Severus wanted to show you?"

"Well, for a little while, I wanted to come and rid the world of her myself, but then I knew that I couldn't do it. She'd held up her end of the bargain with Luna, and she compiled all the information for me. I need her to live and be able to communicate with me. I have to really find out what Voldemort did to himself that has affected me. Sometimes... I scare myself," he admitted.

"Continue."

"The plan was to have Ginny here. I was going to leave the room for a moment and hear Bella having a go at her. I was going to go in again to calm them down, accidentally Stunning Ginny in the process. Then, we were going to pretend that Nagini finished her as we've done." Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "Bella, though, thought it would be fun to rough Ginny up a bit. She claims that it made this more believable. I knew Severus and you would likely want her account of things, knowing I was opposed to her death. Anyway, Bella is jealous of her."

"What did you do?"

"When I heard Ginny scream, I lost control. She was already out, and Bella was on top of her chanting some nonsense charm to scare her. I hurt Bella badly." Harry looked away, not wanting to meet the headmaster's eyes. "I nearly killed her with my two hands." He looked down at his hands. "I let her go for a moment to check on Ginny, as Nagini told me that her breathing had gone slack. That's when Bella told me her reasoning. She'd done an odd spell on Ginny to make it seem more plausible." Harry swallowed and met Dumbledore's eyes. "When I looked back at Bella, I saw what I'd done to her. She was bleeding, swelling, and already bruising. It reminded me of something that Voldemort would have done, so instead of killing her as I'd planned, I did something that Voldemort rarely did. I chose to allow her to live."

Dumbledore nodded and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I understand that. There are far worse things than death. I have always tried to explain that to Tom."

"She's serving her penance now though," Harry said. "The new snake would have died soon. It wanted to die to be out of its misery. I gave it a peaceful death and Transfigured it to a sort of misshapen human form. Nagini did her duty and ate it. I warned Bella that the fate could easily be hers with one slight hiss." Harry smiled. "I saw to Ginny and brought her out where I knew she couldn't truly see what was going on. When she awoke, I finished what I'd set out to do in the first place, allowing her to hear me. I knew she would believe my story. I even made sure she saw how Nagini looked after she'd swallowed the imposter."

"A well-executed plan, Harry," Dumbledore said proudly. "How does Bella feel?"

"She is happy to be alive and be able to still serve me," Harry said sarcastically. He moved to her at that moment and laid a hand on her body. She hissed a few times and curled up next to him. "She doesn't like that Nagini is her superior. I've instructed Nagini to kill her immediately if she tries to escape. I've also added a Finding Spell. She'll never be any place that I can't find her. There have been restrictions put into place as with Nagini. She cannot harm anyone due to a magical binding, and if she even tries to do so, I shall know. I will immediately destroy her if Nagini hadn't already done so."

"I am proud of you, Harry. You've thought of everything," Dumbledore said with a kind smile. "I do believe that this is a worse fate for her. She has to crawl upon her belly for the rest of her existence. She seemed to always want to grovel before her Master. Here is her chance then."

Harry chuckled. "She will never harm anyone. I can promise you that. She is simply a familiar now, but she still has her knowledge. Only I can release her from her fate, and I swear, sir, that I will not do so. She knows her place in my life, and I know hers."

"Let's go back up to the castle then. I would like to discuss a few things with you, Harry," Albus said, guiding his young devotee away.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I want to thank you for still having faith in me. I know I should have told you what I was about, but I didn't know if you would approve or truly believe my reasoning," Harry said softly.

"Harry, it was I that helped to plant the idea in your mind. You are not so affected by Tom as you think. He never kept anyone around that was of no use to him."

"But, sir, that is a good portion of the reasoning behind my keeping her around. I need her knowledge of his spell work," Harry said, sounding disheartened.

Dumbledore sighed. "I think that we are all guilty of that at some point or another, and most of us were never linked to Tom Riddle. Come now. I think a spot of tea would do nicely. Perhaps I still have some of those lemony biscuits in my tin."

Harry grinned and followed his mentor towards the exit. "What of Severus?"

"I instructed Severus to believe what has happened, but I think he has his doubts. Would you like to tell him?"

"I think so," Harry said. "I would like someone to know. I mean, what if something happens to me? Someone would need to keep an eye on her or do with her as needed."

"Good thinking. We shall discuss it further. Come along."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Arrogant little bastard!" Severus bellowed as he poured a glass of firewhisky. "Should have hexed him into next week." He began mumbling other curses under his breath as he kicked off his boots. He took a sip from his glass and shrugged out of his robes. A quick spell saw the fire blazing anew. "And another thing," he roared suddenly. "How dare he request that I keep my wife happy?" He narrowed his eyes. "I'll bet he thinks that I can't."

"Oh, honestly! Are you still on about Viktor?" Hermione asked in disbelief. She'd already washed up for the night and changed into her nightclothes.

"I do not like him, Hermione. I saw the way he was looking at you," he said bitterly, taking another sip of his drink. "Ha! And that bit of pretending to act weak near the end! Just looking for pity, I'd say!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and moved next to Severus. He continued to grumble about dinner, so she decided to try something else to gain his attention. She toed off her new slippers and dropped her robe to the floor. Her disgruntled husband plopped down into his favorite chair. "Severus," she said softly.

"And another thing," he said still not looking at her, "why in the hell did he have to...?" His voice trailed off as he spotted her toying with the laces on her nightgown. "Well, I see that you feel the need to undress. Should I join you in your moment of growing dishabille?"

She nodded. He reached down to unbuckle his trousers with one hand, never taking his eyes off of hers as she lowered her knickers. Frustrated with his progress, he dropped his glass, and his free hand quickly discarded his pants. He did not wear any underpants to dinner, so his hardness sprang free immediately. "Oh," she gasped.

He looked up to see her smile. "Do I do that to you?"

"Only you," he admitted. He reached up to finish unlacing her nightgown and slid his hands inside to cup her breasts, eliciting a moan from her lips. Her hands, which had been unbuttoning his shirt, left their task and rested on his shoulders. Hermione quickly climbed onto his lap.

"To hell with all this waiting," she mumbled, as she positioned herself over him. "Guide it in."

"You are being truly deman..." Her lips cut off his words as she attacked his mouth. *Good Lord, what has gotten into her? Who cares? I am benefiting from it!* His hand helped to guide his erect girth into her. He'd intended to slide in slowly, but upon feeling his entrance, she slid down roughly. "Ah."

Her mouth left his and trailed kisses along his jaw before resting near his ear. "I need you," she murmured. Severus closed his eyes, leant his head back, put both hands upon her waist, and helped to steady her movements. "I want only you." Her lusty whispers were feeding his emotions and fueling his need for her. "I'm going to come for you." He concentrated on her words and was completely aroused. "Don't stop." She'd never been so vocal as they made love, aside from the time that he'd tried a bit of role-playing with her. That hadn't gone over too well. She'd told him that she'd felt like a wanton after, but he could get used to her sexy voice moaning and whispering in his ear as he thrust up into her.

"Hermione," he called out minutes later. The orgasm didn't seem to want to stop. It carried on while she reached her summit, and he still felt slight tremors racking his body after her cries died down. Part of him needed to rest for a moment, but part of him wanted another go. It seemed that she felt different as well. He was uncertain if it was the turn on caused by her words, if it was the way she had waylaid him, or if the pregnancy had something to do with it.

Hermione placed small kisses on her lover's jaw before lifting her eyes to meet his. Their breathing had returned to normal only a few moments before. "I love you, Severus. Please never doubt that."

"I do not," he murmured, raking his hand over her partially dressed back.

She giggled. "I can't believe we didn't make it to the bedroom. I'll never think of this chair in the same way again."

"Be silent, wanton. You started this," he pointed out. "I sat here to finish my drink. I do believe I was accosted."

"Oh, honestly. You were on about Viktor and his attempts to flirt with me. He is just being friendly. He knows that I love you and that we are starting a family." She kissed his lips softly. "Besides, one way to shut you up and get you to cheer up is to make love to you."

"A manipulating witch!"

She grinned as she felt his partial flaccidness twitch against her as if trying to find new vigor. "Insatiable witch at the moment. Dare I believe that you want to have me again?" He growled and carried her to their bed.

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Severus eyed the boy suspiciously. Why was he acting nervous? He could sense tension coming off of Harry the moment he'd stepped into his office. "Out with it."

"I want to confide something to you. I know this might not be something that you want to hear, but I would like for you to know, all the same. In fact, I will feel much better once I am able to tell someone," Harry said softly. He looked into Severus' eyes.

"Bella," Severus said finally when Harry seemed to have lost his nerve. He smirked as a twitch passed over Harry's face. Ha! He'd known that all was not as it seemed. "Tell me."

"I don't really know where to start," he said.

"Start with, 'I've lied about what happened to Bella,'" Severus said roughly. "That is what you are about to tell me, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"So, how did you get Ginevra to fake a Pensieve memory? That's quite impressive," he said, feeling the anger rising up within him. Bella had gotten away again. That bitch needed to die.

"She didn't fake anything," Harry bit out. "She doesn't know, and she won't know either."

"Everyone needs to know!"

"No, Dumbledore agrees with me. We've got to keep this quiet. Only a few of us need to know," Harry said urgently. "Just hear me out."

"Go on." This would be good. What cock-and-bull reasoning would he have this time?

"After you showed me that memory about how she truly is, well, I went into a bit of a snit after. I wanted nothing more than to have a go at her. I wanted to harm her myself, but after I thought about it, I knew that I needed to stick to my plan," Harry said.

"Which plan might that be?"

"The one that allows her to live," Harry stated defiantly. "With a good conscience, I couldn't allow you or Lucius to just murder her. Murder is one thing if it is in self-defense in the midst of a battle, but it's completely different when you just go up to someone and off them."

"I think, Harry, that I, of all, people know about murder," Severus said sarcastically.

"But that's not who you are any longer," Harry said. "Nor is Lucius. To do that would make you nearly no better or no more reformed than she is! You would belong in Azkaban as well." Harry sighed. "I don't truly believe that, but you can bet the Wizengamot would."

"So," Severus began, "you've done this to save us, Lucius and I."

"Well, yes and no, I suppose. It was for all of us. I didn't want to condone murder, I didn't want either of you to... kill her, and I wanted her to be punished," Harry said quickly. "I believe she is being punished, Severus, and I do agree that she should be imprisoned for her crimes. I don't think we can ever just turn her back over to Azkaban though."

"I see, so allowing her freedom was a way to fix things." Severus' eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"I set it up. All of it. I bought that snake as a cover. I intended to set the real snake free and turn Bella into its likeness."

"What? That won't hold," Severus said incredulously.

"You forget, Severus, that I am a Wizard of the Snakes, thanks to ruddy Voldemort. You've read what Hermione is compiling. We have had magic passed on for many generations. The original Parselmouth was a direct descendant of Circe, and her talent was..."

"Turning men into animals for sport. Quite a bitch, she was," Severus finished for him. "So, Bella will stay in form as long as you deem it necessary."

"Yes."

"I don't like it. Any number of things could happen, Harry. I shall speak to Albus on this."

Harry stood up to pace near the grate. "I need her alive and around to talk to. Trust me; this is the best possible situation for everyone. Do you think she likes being a snake? No, but she does it to retain some semblance of freedom. Can she harm anyone? Certainly not. I'm not that thick. I've got that covered," he said arrogantly. "Ginny was part of the plan, but things went a bit awry, and I... I almost did it for you. Killing her, I mean. If I hadn't been reminded about Voldemort and how he used to handle things, well, I wouldn't have spared her."

Severus moved closer to face Harry squarely. "What makes you so sure I won't still kill her as she deserves, Harry? How could it be on your conscience when you've fought against it and tried all that you could?"

"Because, Severus, you can't. I have her protected. I would know," Harry said, letting unsaid words linger between them.

Severus smirked. "Know this, Harry. I can and will," his eyebrows lifted in emphasis, "kill her if I deem it necessary."

Harry smirked in return before making his way back to his chair. "Let me tell you the entire plan." He told Severus of his planning with Bella, and he told him the real version of what had happened. "So, you see, if she so much as slithers in the wrong direction, I will know about it. If Nagini doesn't get her, then I will. It's brilliant, really. I think if Dumbledore agrees, well, you should too."

Severus had remained quiet whilst he told his tale. It did make sense, but he still didn't like it. "Just because I am loyal to Dumbledore, Harry, I don't always agree with him on everything. I am a man that can and does form his own opinions. I do not like this. I openly admit that."

"Sir, I just needed to be honest with you. I didn't want this to come between the friendship, is that the right word?" Harry grinned. "Anyway, the friendship that we've formed."

"Yes, we are *friends*," Severus said, sounding slightly displeased. "I still do not agree with what you have done. Who else knows of this?"

"Just the three of us. I would like to keep it that way," Harry said. "Should something happen to me, then I want one of you to do with her what you will."

"Can another Parselmouth release her?"

"No, but they can talk to her. I will know it if they do though," Harry said. "I've added a few things, spells and such."

"What of Hermione?"

Harry looked away for a moment. "I wanted to tell her, but I wonder if she will be disappointed in me."

Severus sighed. "I doubt she could ever be disappointed in you, Harry. She will likely agree with you on some level. If you don't mind, I will have a talk with her about this."

"Go ahead. I don't mind. That will make things easier," said Harry. "Thanks for listening, and I respect that you don't exactly agree with things."

"I am glad that you've told the truth," Severus replied. "See yourself out. I've things to catch up on."

Harry nodded and made his way to the Owlery. He'd written a letter to Luna's father. He didn't like his ~~name~~ *father* much, but he hoped that in this one instance it would be of some use. Ron's birthday was in nearly two weeks. He had a bit of planning to do.

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Luna's father watched the sleeping form of his daughter and sighed. He'd received an owl from Harry Potter only moments before. Who was he to deny the greatest wizard of the age a small favor? This was the very wizard that had brought her back to him in the first place. Well, that Snape fellow had something to do with it as well, but it was mostly Potter that had made it happen. He was requesting that Luna attend a function for her old boyfriend, Ronald Weasley. He wanted her to spend the weekend with them at the castle.

How could he deny this? She was getting stronger with each passing week. Some of her magic had come back already, but she still had a long way to go. He'd lost her mother nearly eight years before. He'd nearly lost her as well. His world had been such a void without her actively in it. He simply wanted to protect his daughter at all costs. He'd thought that his problems would be simplified by whisking her away from her friends, bringing her to the old crone for dark remedies, and coercing her to break things off with her boyfriend.

"One day I will have to let you go, sweetheart. I just can't bear to have you out of my sight after I nearly lost you," he whispered, closing her door. He had to get back to work soon. Maybe it wouldn't be amiss to allow her to go for the weekend. He could go into his office and take care of everything that had been slacking. The next edition of *The Quibbler* would have a featured article about her and the Boy Who Lived. He wanted the world to know who was responsible for saving his little girl. "That Potter will do great things. He has done great things, but I feel he will be even greater than what we've seen so far."

Quickly, he wrote back to his daughter's hero, and he told him that it would be all right for her to come for the weekend. He understood that it needed to be a surprise. He wouldn't tell her anything until they were about to leave. That should please Potter.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

When it was nearly time for her last class of the day to end, Hermione was relieved. She gave out the assignments and dismissed class. After the students left, she quickly went to use the loo. She'd already been to the loo five times. She supposed the extra water she'd been drinking was flushing her out, and she knew that the growing baby was putting a little pressure on her bladder. As she entered her office, she jumped slightly. "What are you doing here?"

Severus gave her a tight smile. "Do you always leave your class open and unattended, wife? That might not be a good practice. I have learnt from experience that some students can be quite pesky, the buggers. They wouldn't stoop to leaving a nasty surprise or two for you."

"Oh, Severus," she said with a laugh. "They would leave those things for you, but I would say that you give them reason to. As far as I can tell, everyone is pleased with my teaching." She kissed his cheek. "Even your Slytherin students."

"I know *one* Slytherin that is most pleased with you," he said cupping her arse to pull her closer. They shared a heated kiss before she pulled away slightly.

"What is it?"

"Why does something have to be amiss?"

"Well, you are here in my class, for one, and for another, you feel tense."

"Hermione, I had a talk with Harry earlier after his class. There is something that I need to tell you," Severus said

"All right," she said, sitting on his lap. She waved her wand towards the door. It closed and locked itself. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

"Certainly not," he said with a smirk. She felt a slight twitching under her arse and knew that he was moving his penis against her.

"You are terrible," she said with a laugh. "But I shall accept that as an invitation to ravish you later, love. Tell me about Harry."

"Bella is alive. The entire thing was a plan from the beginning." He held up a hand to stave off her questions. "Only Albus, Harry, and I know of this. The events that Ginevra recalled did happen, but they were manipulated for her to see them that way. His new familiar is, indeed, Bella. He's transformed her."

"Oh, my," Hermione said, stunned. She should have known that Harry would have a plan. "Tell me more," she whispered. The entire tale intrigued her. She felt a little smug knowing that the things she'd researched and told him had influenced him. She wouldn't be telling her husband though. He seemed completely displeased. "Aren't you glad that she won't be able to bother us any longer? We won't have to worry about her coming to seek revenge now."

"Hermione, that snake is still Bella. Her mind is in there. That has not changed. I do not condone this or trust her, regardless of the spells he has bound her with."

"The best that we can do is keep an eye on her and monitor things. If something happens, well..." She left the rest hanging between them.

"You don't understand, Hermione," Severus said, shifting slightly. "I will not allow my daughter..."

"Or son," Hermione interjected.

"Or son," he continued with a smirk, "to go near that bitch. That means that we will be spending less time around Harry in the future. It seems he has chosen."

"Severus! Have you given him an ultimatum?" she asked in disbelief.

"No," he said evenly. "He made that decision when he kept her. I will never trust her, and the moment I see anything out of the ordinary, she will be destroyed."

Hermione nodded. "I don't think I want our little one around her either. Hell, I don't want Nagini around our child either. There is just something... sinister about her. We'll have to deal with these issues as we get to them. We've some time left to think on that."

"Too right," he murmured, moving his lips along her neck. "What have we time for now?"

"It won't be time yet for the evening meal. Want to go down to our chambers? I could use a massage. I am a bit stiff," she suggested.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

NEARLY TWO WEEKS LATER

"Okay, I don't like to give you such a long assignment for over a weekend, but I have no choice. I want three feet of parchment on the Inanimatus Conjurus Spell." Hermione smiled as she heard a few grumbles. "Don't worry. You have extra time for this. I won't have it due until next Friday, but if you are smart, you'll start on it now." A small hand shot into the air. "Yes, Jouett?"

"Professor Snape, should we also discuss the reverse spell, the Animatus Conjurus, while we are writing?" she asked meekly.

"It is not necessary, but for anyone willing to put in an effort on an acceptable essay, I will give out extra credits. Any questions?" she asked. Seeing no new hands and faces that were eager to leave for the day, she smiled. "Class dismissed."

Minerva came through the door just as the last of the students left. "Hermione, I just want to commend you on a job well done. I do believe that you are finally ready for year seven. How do you feel about that?"

"Nervous," she answered with a grin. "I think I can handle my old mates though. I am much more confident now than I was before. I appreciate that you have the faith in me to handle it."

"Well, I will stay in the back of the class with you for a couple of weeks. You should be able to handle them well enough," Minerva said with a smile.

"Thanks."

"We do need to talk about next year. Your child is due in..."

"October."

"I thought so," she said. "I've decided that I can cover for you during the months of October, November, and December. You will return to teaching when the students return from the holidays. Is that acceptable?"

"Oh, Minerva! I hadn't even thought that far." Hermione frowned. "I didn't plan this, you know. Poppy's potion to mend me interfered with my Contraceptive Potion. I'm not unhappy that I am expecting, but I would have liked more time."

"Now, I'm not chastising you about your pending motherhood. That will give me a chance to go over my Animagus lessons."

"Oh, no!" Hermione said sadly. "You were supposed to begin my training."

"Hermione, don't be upset. I will cover those classes for you for another year. After you come back next January, we will try to fit in your training. I am only going over this now to let you know ahead of time," Minerva said kindly. "I hoped to ease your mind. It seems I've added to its worries."

"I appreciate this. You have no idea how much." She hugged the woman swiftly in a show of affection. "Thanks." To her horror, she felt like crying. "Oh... blast!"

"Why are you upset?" Minerva asked, concern etched in her face.

"Well, I just wish that my mum would try to contact me. She's sent only a couple of letters and a book, but they've not asked for us to visit yet. What if this is all I will ever have of her?" Hermione asked, grinding away the tears with shaking fingers.

"I would say that is her loss, Hermione." Minerva smiled and hugged the girl again. "I know it's not the same, but I will be here for you as long as you will allow me to be. I care deeply for you."

"Thanks," she said, choking back tears. "I really don't know who I could have turned to these past few months if it hadn't been for you."

"Don't worry about it, Hermione. It's an honor. I wish..." She turned away for a moment. "I do wish that perhaps I had taken the path that my mother chose for me, but this makes up for it. I have Albus, you, and Severus. Soon we will have the little one to worry on." She sniffed. "Oh, come now. Let's go to the staff room."

"Oh, I can't! I promised that I would go down to Hogsmeade to ready some things for Ron's surprise party. It's tonight." She furrowed her brow. "Er, you did know, didn't you?"

"Yes, Albus mentioned it. It slipped my mind." She harrumphed for a moment. "I do think it is inappropriate for select students to be able to leave the castle, but since you will be there as a staff member to oversee things, I'm sure it will be fine. The Weasleys will be there as well, so I guess they can help you."

"Why don't you come along?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"No, I've things to do, but I do thank you for the invite. Rolanda and I are going over some things for her binding ceremony," Minerva said importantly. "It's in two weeks. Why she wants to be married in the Ides of March is beside me! She has been talking nonstop about some Muggle literature that Stuart has given her to read. I think she said something about trying to wear a toga to her wedding. Imagine!"

Hermione giggled. "Too right. I truly hope that she won't go that far! I'll see you later then." She giggled remembering Rolanda saying that Ron was born on the Kalends of March. She truly had gotten into Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*. She'd been asking Hermione all sorts of oddities and been checking out books in the library about the great wizard, Romulus, who founded Rome and created their calendar.

Once she began her trek down to her chambers, she wondered if her husband had changed his mind about attending the party. He'd told her that he didn't want to partake in a surprise party for Ronald Weasley. He'd been moody for two days. She wondered what it could be. They hadn't had any disagreements about anything that she could think of. All had been going well with Harry and the Bella situation.

"Watch it!" Ron cried.

Hermione nearly ran straight into him. She'd been so lost in thought. "Sorry, Ron! Hi, Draco. Er, what are you two doing down here?" she asked eyeing them suspiciously.

"Nothing."

"Walking."

Hermione giggled slightly. "Nothing except having a walk, maybe?" Hermione suggested. They looked mighty suspicious.

"Sure."

"Right."

"Okay then," she said feeling oddly strange about the expressions on their faces.

"Oi, Mione. You're starting to show already. That's pretty soon to be showing in pregnancy," Ron said.

"WHAT?"

Draco elbowed Ron. "He's only joking."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the pair and stormed off. What the bloody hell was he on about? She could still fit into her clothes. There was nothing about her belly that was noticeable. Not yet! She slammed into their chambers and strode to the tall mirror against the wall, quickly discarding her set of robes. "Ruddy bastard," she muttered as she looked at herself in the mirror. "My profile looks the same. Well, maybe not."

"What, pray tell, are you doing, Hermione? You slammed in as if something horrid was chasing after you."

"Ron says I look pregnant!"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You are pregnant."

She narrowed her eyes and growled, "Thanks for the news flash!" Looking back at the mirror, she groaned. "I'm not supposed to look pregnant! I'm not even out of my first trimester!"

"If it's any consolation, I don't think you look pregnant," he said, walking forward to place his hands on her shoulders. He applied a little pressure and began massaging her quickly.

"It sounded as if you wanted to say something more."

"Well, not with your clothes on you don't," he added finally.

Hermione shrugged away from him. "So, I am turning into a right dumpy witch!"

"What?" he asked in disbelief. "I said no such..."

"You," she jabbed a finger into his chest, "didn't have to! It's all over your face. You're trying to not hurt my feelings. Why did you wait for someone else to tell me? No wonder you've been upset and won't come with me tonight."

"You don't look like a dum..."

"Really," she said sarcastically, pointing to her reflection in the mirror.

At that moment, the mirror decided to speak up. "You could do with losing at least a stone if you are worried, dear."

She moved to attack the mirror, and Severus pulled her back. "What the bloody hell has gotten into you, Hermione?"

"You're ashamed of me," she said, tears forming in her eyes.

"What the...?" Severus was lost. "I am not ashamed of you, Hermione. If anything, I am proud to have you as a wife. You are more than I ever dreamed of at one time." The last sentence was nearly a whisper, but she heard him.

"I'm sorry. I'm just emotional." She looked to Severus. "My clothes still fit, you know."

"When I said that I could tell that you were pregnant when you hadn't any clothes on, I didn't mean that you look any bigger, Hermione. I only meant that you are rounding a little, and when I touch you, I can feel your stomach hardening slightly."

"Why won't you come with me tonight?" she asked, moving into his arms to rest her head on his chest.

"Hermione, I have told you how I feel about it. I have been cavorting with my students too much as of late. I think it's about time I reestablish myself as a professor at this school. I don't want anyone thinking that I have... changed my views."

"Don't worry. You are still feared," she said, hoping to reassure him. She knew how much his image meant to him.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, eyeing her curiously.

"Yes."

"Why don't you lie down for a while? You have time before you have to go," he suggested, trying to guide her to the couch.

"No, I have to go to Hogsmeade to meet with Molly to be sure that all is set up."

"I will Floo her, and I'll tell her that you will be late. She has had many children. She will understand."

"All right, but just for a little while."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

Ron smiled at Draco. "Thanks, mate. You didn't have to get anything for me."

"It's not every day that your best mate turns eighteen," Draco said.

"Draco, if a bloke and another bloke dated, how do they know which one is the bloke in the relationship?" Ron asked looking around to see if anyone had heard. Draco and Harry had convinced him to sneak over to Hogsmeade for a bit of fun. Harry was waiting there already. He'd gone ahead in his cloak to be sure that nobody was about that would report them for being away from Hogwarts.

Draco looked at Ron oddly. "I suppose they are both still blokes. What are you talking about?"

"Well, wouldn't one have to act a little... witchy?"

"No, Ron, as far as I know, that's not the way it works. Why are you asking this?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just curious." Ron shrugged. They walked the rest of the way in awkward silence.

"Here," Draco said, pointing to a stairway.

"Since when do they have stairs on the side of the Three Broomsticks' building?" Ron asked in awe.

"Since Harry paid for a private room," Draco said, wriggling his eyebrows.

"All right," Ron said. "I hope he has firewhisky!"

They got to the top, and Ron opened the door. "Harry?" he asked. The room was completely dark. He reached for his wand "*Lumos!*"

"SURPRISE!"

Ron looked around in awe. His family had come to celebrate with him. Harry, Hermione, and bloody hell, even Snape was there! Ron did a double take as his gaze met a silvery-eyed gaze. "Luna!"

He stood there for a moment with his mouth open before he looked to Draco. Draco nodded and smiled. "Go to her, mate."

In a daze, Ron made his way to his former lover. "Luna, you're here. How?"

"Dad said that I could come. He and Harry talked about it. Headmaster Dumbledore is giving me a room for the weekend," she said. "Do you mind?"

"No," he whispered, pulling her into his embrace. "I've missed you, Luna."

"I've missed you, Ronald."

"Happy Birthday...", Fred began.

"...Ickle Ronniekins," George finished.

Molly and Arthur made their way over. "Our sixth and youngest son is finally eighteen," Arthur said with a smile.

"Come and open your gifts, birthday boy," Molly said, pulling him away from Luna. As he sat at the table, he saw Draco slip away from the room quietly. *Where the hell is he going?* His eyes drifted to Luna. *I wonder if it is because of Luna. Damn.* He wasn't quite sure how he felt about that. He was glad that she'd come to see him though. He had Harry to thank for this. He didn't want Draco to feel left out. He'd have to have a talk with him about it.

Hermione smiled as Ron quickly opened his presents and ate nearly half of his cake. Severus seemed bored, and she hoped that he wouldn't end up regretting his decision about accompanying her.

"Great," Severus said dryly. "He'd better not set off any of those Dungbombs in my class. If someone does, I shall know where to look first."

"Oh, come on, Severus. You know that Ron wouldn't do that," she defended.

"Indeed? I seem to recall that *someone* threw a firecracker into..."

"Sshh, let's not talk about that again." She squeezed his hand. "I do appreciate that you've come with me."

"I couldn't let you come here on your own. I thought about it, and it seemed to be the right decision. I couldn't let my wife think that I was ashamed of her," he said, giving her a slight smile.

"Thanks, Severus."

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

TWO WEEKS LATER

"Hermione, could I have a word?" Stuart asked after he'd finished eating. "Privately?"

"Of course," she said. She turned to Severus. "Do you mind?"

"No," he said. "I think that Rolanda wants a word with me. "Do you mind?"

She smiled. "Not in the least." Tapping Stuart on the shoulder to get his attention, she asked, "Want to go for a walk?"

After they'd walked in silence for some time, the seemingly nervous man finally spoke. "Hermione, I have to talk to you about something. Rolanda and I, we've not been

intimate yet. Not really. I told her that I respected her entirely too much."

Hermione swallowed uncomfortably. "Well, that's very... noble of you."

"Now don't think that we've not explored some," he offered. "Anyway, what if that is the only reason that she's agreed to marry me? To satisfy Minerva about our inappropriateness and to do things the right way?"

"Oh, Stuart, I don't think that Rolanda would allow anyone to talk her into marriage if it wasn't what she truly wanted. I would say that she loves you. That's an honest opinion," Hermione said. "You are only thinking about this because you are nervous. Tomorrow is the big event. I was nervous as well, but it was all right once I realized that my closest friends were there for me... even if my parents weren't."

"I thank you, Hermione. You are right. I do love her, you know. I don't mind that she pulls me about by my coattails. I have always been a passive fellow. I just hope that I can make her smile at me the way that Snape makes you smile for him," Stuart said thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, Severus was having a similar conversation with the bride to be. Rolanda laughed nervously. "What if he doesn't think I measure up?"

"Rolanda," Severus said, cheeks reddening slightly. "This is not an appropriate conversation to have with me."

"But, Sev, old boy, that little tart was your wife's age! I am older than you. What if he doesn't find me as attractive." Rolanda brought worried yellow eyes to meet his dark gaze.

He sighed. "Edgecombe was not attractive. The only thing that she has on you is her youth, but your experience," he raised both eyebrows to make a point, "will make up for that. The great lot is lucky that you've even accepted his bid for you."

"Severus! That's no way to talk about my man!" Rolanda laughed loudly. "Too right you are, Severus. I feel like a young girl worrying on such trivial things."

"It's just something you feel right before you are married," Severus said knowingly. "You wonder if you are making the correct decision, and you wonder if the person to whom you are binding yourself is worthy of your devotion." He gave his friend a rare smile. "It is worth it."

"I do love him, Severus. He let's me go on about things that no other man would. He's so gentlemanly. We are so opposite that we fit together. Interesting, isn't it?"

"Very. You are lucky to have found such a devoted man," Severus said. Then, he added softly, "Again."

She simply nodded her head and smiled faintly. "Let's find our companions. Shall we?"

"Of course," he murmured. "After you."

Southern's Notes: I will include the wedding, what happened when Luna stayed over, and a bit of lemon up next. Cheers.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Chapter 29 of 32

Rolanda and Stuart are married. Hermione and Snape have a tryst. We find out about a new trio and what may have happened with Harry and Bella.

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas, but I do wish they were. I just want to point out that I have been influenced by many fics and appreciate the talents of many writers.

A big thanks to my brilliant beta, Charmed Nay. Thanks for my friendly muses over at Potter Place!

Hermione looked around in shock. "Severus," she whispered, "what the hell is going on here?" She noticed that his mouth was slightly agape for a moment. "No wonder Minerva has been beside herself!"

Severus nodded and looked around. "What a set of fools! I've never seen such atrocity!"

"Sshh! They might overhear," she whispered, pulling him forward to a stone bench. "Let's sit here."

"You can't be serious."

"Severus," she urged. "Minerva is coming. Sshh."

"I don't care if she is com... Minerva, good evening," Severus said cordially.

"Good, you say? This is ridiculous. Have you not looked around?" Minerva said furiously. "I thought she was joking! If I had known that she was intending to do this, I would have never have agreed to stand in for her."

"Oh, I find it to be quite charming," Severus said sardonically. "Are you sure this wasn't your doing?" He gestured to the miniature stone semi-Roman amphitheater. "I know of nobody else with such skills in Transfiguration."

"Don't mock me, Severus Snape!" Minerva exclaimed hotly. "You know as well as I that Albus is likely behind this. I can't believe this! She told me about the things she had learned, and we had drinks about her findings. She's taken her interest in that blasted play too far!"

Hermione giggled. "Did we really expect Rolanda to do something normal?"

Minerva scoffed. "I shall return. I am to help her ready herself." She sighed. "When Sibyll commented on the decoration, I knew I had to come down to see for myself." Her eyes narrowed, and she lowered her voice. "Do you know that imbecile has weaseled her way into the wedding? She is standing in as a... soothsayer!"

Hermione started laughing. Severus shook his head. "I would imagine her to play no other part." He barked with laughter suddenly. "She is a good actress already, what

with her dozens of fake prophecies."

"She did have some that came out right," Hermione reminded him.

"I must leave," Minerva sniffed, giving the seating arrangement one last look around. She walked off, muttering in deep Scottish brogue.

Hermione looked around. She'd thought that it would be nice to have a wedding out near the lake on such a lovely day, but she'd never imagined this. She gasped! "No wonder!"

"What?"

"She went to London to have a look at the Muggle amphitheater there! I mean... there is even a stage here, as if we are going to watch some play! She confiscated Colin's camera right before she and Stuart left! I'll bet she went to take pictures and look at how things were." Hermione shook her head. "I can't believe it."

"I can. She's always wanted to do things the eccentric way. I, for one, am going to sit back and enjoy the show," he said, an evil smirk twisting his face.

Hermione chose to ignore her husband and looked at the other staff members and some people she didn't know finding their own stone seats. They all seemed amused with the seating arrangements as well. Upon the stage to the right, there were what seemed to be the remains of a crumbling building. A couple of columns, pillars, and fallen stone created an archway of sorts. Vines of laurel leaves were charmed for decorations. To the far left, there were stone tables where food and drink had been placed. She couldn't really make out what was on the tables exactly, but the one to the back seemed to have two rather large animals on top of it.

Stuart and Dumbledore came in, nearly causing Hermione to laugh outright. They both wore wool robes fashioned into togas over tunics. Dumbledore had several shades of purple while Stuart opted for white and gold coloring. Hell, they even had Roman style sandals. Both men were adorned with crowns of laurel leaves upon their heads.

"Severus, are you seeing this?" It was then she looked to her husband and burst out laughing. He had the most incredulous expression on his face.

"I've dipped into a batch of some hallucinogen! Not even Rolanda would do this! What kind of fellow would allow his wife to plan such a mockery of a wedding?" he asked. His eyes narrowed. "Or is he the one that planned this?"

Hermione saw that Filius and Pomona, who were sitting across from them, were shaking with repressed peals of laughter. Hagrid, who sat a few benches above and behind them with Fang, was crying loudly. She made out a bit of what he was saying to Fang. "Blimey... righ' beau'iful, tha' is... Grea' man Dumbledore... Married... Rolanda!"

"Oh, good Lord!" Hermione muttered. A large, skeletal Thestral walked slowly to the stage. He was pulling a chariot carrying Rolanda and Minerva behind him. When they got to the stage, Minerva jumped out first, looking extremely displeased. She was wearing her normal attire, but her hair had been pulled from its tight bun. She too had a crown made of laurel leaves. "Must be her one concession," Hermione muttered to herself. Minerva held out a hand to Rolanda to help her from the chariot. Rolanda wore sandals, a fine linen tunic the shade of blue, a wool toga colored deep gray, and her head was covered by a woolen scarf of the same color.

Once Minerva presented her to Stuart and Albus, she bowed once and went to have a seat among the guests. Stuart pulled down her scarf, and everyone gasped. She'd changed the color of her hair to be a platinum blonde. There was a long hair extension added via wooden hairpins. She too had a crown made of laurel leaves upon her head. She did look fetching, younger even.

"She's really playing the part," Severus muttered. "According to Ovid in some of his writing, they used to make those hair extensions from the captured Celts or Germans. I wonder what Rolanda used for her hairpiece. Surely she didn't stoop to coercing a student or two into giving her a few locks."

Hermione snorted in reply. She'd read much of the same, but she was sure that Rolanda's extension was merely bought or Transfigured from something else. She pulled Severus' hand into hers as the ceremony began.

Dumbledore began speaking in low tones. She had to strain to hear what he was saying. After a few moments, Stuart and Rolanda exchanged rings, signed parchments, and were bound by a single ribbon. At this moment, Sibyll, donning shabby black robes, stood up and wobbled onto the stage with the help of an old, wooden staff. Her large glasses had been exchanged for a dark pair of sunglasses. She smiled broadly at the newly bound couple. "Never again shall you be wary of the Ides of March, as it will be a day for us to all rejoice on and celebrate your binding. I foresee a long, happy future for the two of you."

"Good Lord," Severus muttered.

"I know," Hermione agreed. They could hear Minerva muttering something about hoping she wasn't actually jinxing the marriage, and Hermione could have sworn she heard the word tripe. Hagrid began clapping loudly, and the others followed suit.

Rolanda turned to the crowd. "Come on! Time to have some drinks and some food!"

Hermione had to pull Severus forward to greet the couple. "Rolanda, Stuart! I am so happy for you. Congratulations!"

"Yes, good luck," Severus muttered.

"Thanks, mates," Rolanda said jovially. "What do you think?"

"Interesting," Severus said.

"Very," Hermione agreed.

"Oh, I'd hoped everyone would like the change from a normal binding. Never did want one of those, quite boring them." She smiled. "Not that yours was, mind. I was just never cut out for normal things."

"Please, friends, have some refreshments or something to eat," Stuart said gracefully.

Hermione turned around and saw that Severus had already made his way over to one of the tables near Albus and had a glass of wine. She gave her friends an apologetic smile and quickly went to him. "Is there anything that I can drink?"

"You can have a sip of this if you'd like to have a taste. It's quite good," he said, seemingly impressed. "It's all right. I read that an occasional drink of wine helps, not harms, a pregnant woman."

"Only a sip," she said, taking the glass. "Mmmm. Quite right."

He took the glass back and handed her another. "Grape juice."

"Thanks. I'm a bit hungry. Should we go over?" He nodded, and they made their way to the food table. Hermione piled her plate with cheese, bread, and grapes. "What is this?"

"It looks to be a platter of peacock tongues. I would not recommend that," he said, smirking at her horrified expression. "They've really gone all out for this. Ah, here we are." He nodded to a medium-sized roasted pig. "If I'm not mistaken," he began, inspecting it further, "it's been stuffed with a goose. Yes, it has been. They were roasted together. It adds to the flavor." He sliced a bit of pork for Hermione, but she shook her head.

"No, thanks. I think I'm feeling a bit queasy."

Severus placed the portion on his plate and moved forward. "And, here, love, we have a fat, roasted duck. It's been stuffed with a chicken. Interesting," he said, moving past the food. "I think I shall have a bit of beef. Would you like some?"

She shook her head. "This is fine." Since there were no tables, they went back to their bench to eat their meal. She chuckled at Severus' expression. "Tastes odd?"

He nodded before taking a large drink from his glass. "It's been seasoned strangely. It's spicy, yet sweet. There is a good portion of cinnamon mixed with pepper. I'm not sure I would recommend this."

"Oh, hell, I would," Pomona said, hearing what he'd said as she passed by. "It's always fun to see someone's expression when they first taste something such as this."

"How would you know?" Severus asked blandly.

"Well, if you will remember, Poppy and I used to belong to that cooking club in Hogsmeade." Her face went blank for a moment. "Pity those large blokes ruined everything. Anyway, we used to try all types of dishes. Some of these recipes come straight from Apicius' cookbook. He was a great, Roman chef that documented his work. He was a Muggle, but he cooked for some of the wealthy Wizarding folk of the time. They were able to preserve his book with magic."

"Fascinating," Severus said sarcastically, though the woman didn't seem to notice. "I shall call on you if I ever have questions about a meal's origin."

"Oh, jolly good. I won't mind," she said, making her way to Filius.

Hermione elbowed Severus. "Can't you at least try to be nice. If that had been anyone else, that bit of rudeness might have offended her. Besides, you should really...what the hell is Poppy doing?"

Severus followed her gaze and saw their mediwitch dancing around wildly on the stage whilst throwing small flowers at Rolanda and Stuart. The couple waved at everyone and boarded the chariot. As the Thestral began pulling them back towards the castle, Rolanda shouted, "We're off to Rome. See you on Monday!"

Severus didn't bother waving, but he did feel happy for the couple. Both seemed extremely giddy and hopeful. Had he and Hermione looked as they had? For all the ridiculousness, it was a very Rolanda binding; he should have known that she'd be different. The ceremony itself didn't take long. The reception, if that was what this was called, was short indeed. There was a group of people that the couple had talked to for a few moments. He figured them to be Stuart's family. All of Rolanda's kin were either gone or lived too far away to have traveled to Hogwarts. He doubted that she had invited them anyway. Rolanda Steward. He snickered to himself. That sounded odd.

"What is it?"

"Just thinking of her new name," he said.

"Oh, she's not taking his name. She's keeping her own," Hermione stated.

"How do you know that?"

"Minerva told me."

"Well, I suppose that was smart of her. It's not like they will have any children together, so there will be no matching the children's names to worry about. Hooch sounds better anyway," Severus said, sounding biased.

"You know, Severus, if you give Stuart a chance, he'll be a really good friend," she ventured.

"Eat your meal, witch," he said, pretending to be angry. "Or I'll have to punish you."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is." He looked at her plate. Bloody hell! "I didn't realize that you'd already eaten your food. Would you like more?"

"No, but I may have a snack later," she said. "The grapes were really good."

"Imported, no doubt," he said. He was surprised that one of her hands had snaked into his lap. His plate was hiding it from anyone's gaze. He sucked in a sharp breath as she fondled him.

"I wonder," she said softly. "How long will it take for you to rise to the occasion?"

"Hermione," he chided, releasing his breath as he said her name. "Enough. Someone will," groan, "notice."

"Let's have a walk. I'm feeling randy," she said, rubbing her cheek on his shoulder and squeezing his hardening penis. "I want you."

It was a light whisper, but he'd heard it. His blood began flowing quickly through his veins, his heartbeat quickened, and his cock sprang to life. "Then, by all means, you shall have me." He moved away from her to place his plate next to him and pulled her up. As quickly as possible, he led her to the forest. "This will have to do," he murmured, looking at a nearby tree. He waved his wand about wildly to put up a Silencing Charm, a Warning Ward, and a Cushioning Charm. "Stand still," he said quickly before muttering another charm on her body.

She giggled. "This feels strange."

"Does it?" She nodded. He reached down to lift one leg up to wrap around his waist. "All right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she said.

He used magic to make her knickers vanish, leant back against the cushioned tree, and pulled her with him. Severus pointed to two small branches on either side of him. "Hold on to those to keep you steady, stand on this stump with your foot, and keep this leg propped up like this."

"It's not going anyplace. You've made it flexible, and I feel as though I could hold it here for a while." She ground her body against him. "Why are you not exposed, lover?"

His eyebrows rose at once. "Eager, are we?" She nodded. He reached down betwixt them to release his erect shaft. Lifting her clothing just enough, he guided himself inside of her. "That feels good," he said appreciatively. The angle was a different one, and he loved the new feel as he thrust into her. Had she always been so wet for him? It seemed as though she was even tighter than ever. Perhaps the one glass of wine had muddled his senses.

"Yes... it... does," she said between gasps.

Hermione's head was back, and her eyes were closed. She was holding her arms above his shoulders as she gripped the branches. She was using the leg that was snugly wrapped around him to pull him more deeply into her. Severus was amazed that she wasn't uncomfortable. He'd used a Flexibility Charm that Lucius had showed him once. It only lasted a few minutes at a time, but that was all they needed. Her small moans and barely audible words of encouragement were enough to have him antsy and ready to explode alone, not to mention the pleasant friction he was feeling with each thrust.

"I'm going to come," she announced loudly, opening her eyes wide. "Sev... er... us... don't... stop!"

"I can't. I won't. I'm with you," he began mumbling. He absorbed her heat and wetness aggressively with the next few strokes. With a triumphant shout, he reached his climax. Only one thought played repeatedly in his mind. He'd never get enough of his wife.

"Amazing," she mumbled a few minutes later, sliding her leg down and putting her arms around him. She rested her head against his chest. "I love you, Severus."

"And I, you," he said, reaching down to caress her stomach. He knew better than to mention anything to her, but he could feel the change in her even through her clothing. Their child was growing. "Both of you." If she thought that he'd noticed any enlarging of her abdomen, she might go into another snit.

"I don't know what came over me. I just needed you." She moved away to allow him to fix his trousers and clean the both of them with a couple of quick spells.

With a brief smirk, he said, "Please approach me at anytime you have such a need. I will be happy to help you." Hell, this pregnancy thing wasn't all that bad. He'd noticed that she wasn't as nauseated as she had been. Sure, she had her little fits of insanity now and again, but for the most part, she was quite *affectionate* and more *vocal* about what she wanted. Making love to her had never felt better. He wasn't exactly sure if it was the happiness of knowing that she was carrying his child or if it was the change in her confidence during sex. She didn't mind taking charge at times or speaking about what she liked.

"Would you like to go have a walk on the path around the lake? There is still a great deal of light left in the day," he said, looking through the canopy of leaves above them.

"I'd like that," she accepted, taking his hand.

After walking and talking about their classes for nearly an hour, he guided her to a small clearing just off the path. He sat down and pulled her next to him. He decided to ask her something that he'd asked twice previously. Each time, she'd changed the subject. "Why haven't I seen Weasley much for the last two weeks?" he asked, catching her off guard. He took note of her blush and knew that she knew the truth. "Don't change the subject on me this time, Hermione. Why won't you tell me?"

"Severus," she said softly. "I promised."

"You also promised me to be honest. I'm asking you a question, and I expect an honest answer."

"Will you swear to me that you will not tell the Malfoys or the Weasleys?" she asked, sounding cross.

"What does this have to do with...you don't mean...?" Good Lord! No! They hadn't. They couldn't.

She nodded. "Promise me, Severus. The Malfoys especially can't know."

"Fair enough. I'll not speak of this to either family." For now.

"Minerva and I went to my old chambers. We'd decided to let me keep it as the office I will be using permanently since we will move the class to the refurbished one near there. Well, when we entered, we were surprised to find that the fire was burning in the grate, and the room was quite cozy. Then, we heard the moaning."

"Moaning?" Severus blanched. "Oh, dear God. Why *Weasley*?"

"Oh, honestly! Don't put down Ron! I could say the same about Draco," she chided. "Anyway, we went to the bedchamber to have a look, and we were shocked. I thought Minerva was going to faint at first, but then she pulled me back. We sat on my couch and waited. Finally, all of the moaning stopped. That was wh..."

"You mean to say," he began incredulously, "that she allowed them to finish?"

"Well, to be honest, the damage had already been done, and she was trying to save everyone some extra embarrassment. I would have liked to have left, but she felt that it would be good for me to learn how to deal with those types of situations." Hermione looked away. "They came into the living area and saw us. I wanted to just melt. The three of them were speechless when Minerva took them to task."

"The *three* of them? I thought it was Weasley and Malfoy?"

"And you forget, lover, that Luna Lovegood was here," she said, facing him again. "The three of them had a go *immy* old bed."

Severus was flabbergasted! "I can't believe it."

"Minerva asked them how often they'd been making use of my old chambers, and they swore that they'd never been there before. They were simply looking for a place where the three of them could talk privately, and then something happened between them."

"Didn't she have her own chambers for the weekend?"

"They tried that. Apparently, Dumbledore charmed it so that no males could enter. Ron thought of my chambers. I don't like that they used my chambers that way, but I should have changed the password. That was irresponsible." She reddened slightly. "Minerva was kind enough to point that out. Therefore, I was a little at fault for trusting *students* to be responsible."

"So, that's why one hundred points went missing from Slytherin! I tried to find out who'd lost the points, and nobody knew what happened. I might have known, seeing how Gryffindor lost one hundred points as well. I thought it to be odd that Draco had suddenly taken an interest in Hagrid's class. He's always hated it."

"That's their detention. Each evening they have to go and help him with something. They begged and pleaded with Minerva to not tell their parents. Luna's father would have been furious. She's not allowed back at the castle until she comes back for school. Ron and Draco have detention for a month with Hagrid."

"So..." he said thoughtfully. "The three of them...?"

She grinned. "Between us, Ron told me what happened. I suppose it's all right to tell you since you know about this. Ron and Draco have feelings for each other, but they are confused about it. Ron loves Luna, but he is curious about Draco. He thought that Luna coming back had hurt Draco, so he sought him out to have a quick word with him. Luna overheard, and she decided that she wouldn't mind trying something different." Hermione closed Severus' mouth for him. "So, well, they got together. Now, Draco and Ron didn't do anything together, but they both had a bit of fun with her."

"I can't believe it. She's underage!" Severus said in disbelief. "Both boys are eighteen!"

"Severus, Luna is seventeen. She's an adult as well. It was a mutual decision. I think that they might have a go at a polyandry relationship."

"What?"

"Honestly! You know, Severus, where there is one woman with two or more male mates? There's even a binding ritual that can be done, should anyone care to make the relationship legal," she said.

"I know what it is," he said, suddenly furious. "Draco will never go along with that." How could he get involved with such rubbish? He had his family name, dignity, and appearances to keep up. Narcissa would be so hurt. Surely Lucius would disapprove as well.

"Severus, I'm not saying that he will. They are just thinking about things. Apparently, they liked the idea of being together as a trio, and from the sound of it," she said impishly, "they were having a good time."

"What all did you see?" he asked crossly. "Did you see their bodies?" He knew that it was ridiculous to worry, but what if she'd seen one of the youthful boys? What if she thought that perhaps he was lacking? *Of course not! I'm more than enough and have never had any complaints.*

"For only a moment, I saw Draco's arse, but trust me. It wasn't appealing. He was moving behind Luna." She laughed at his expression. "She was straddling Ron. His arse is not a sight I care to dwell upon," she said with a laugh. "He's got a skinny little bum. Nothing like this." She reached behind him and caressed part of his arse.

"Hermione, if you don't stop that, I shall have to have you again. Wouldn't you like to wait until we return to our chambers? The comfort of our bed?" Severus asked silkily.

"Kiss me," she said softly.

He kissed her lips chastely. Deciding that he didn't care to wait until they returned to the castle, he slowly lowered her onto the ground to kiss her thoroughly. "Hermione, we really have to get a handle on ourselves," he said cheekily. "How often can we do this without someone happening upon us?"

"You are right, but isn't it a little exciting at the same time?"

"Indeed."

"You don't even want to know about my new fantasies."

"I think that I really do want to know, Little One. Tell me."

"You, me, and an Invisibility Cloak." She nipped at this neck. "In a corridor."

"What's gotten into you?" he asked, giving her a warm smile. Her little fantasy had its appeal. Perhaps a less used corridor in the dungeons would be worth looking into.

"You." She cupped his arse to pull him tightly against her body. "I hope."

He growled in response.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Harry couldn't believe what Ron had confided in him. "The three of you?" he asked in awe. "Er, was it... you know, fun?"

"Hell, yes," Ron admitted. "I would have thought that I would have been jealous, but I wasn't. When he touched her at first, I felt my heart drop. That's when I heard her moan. It sent a jolt right down to my... er... I liked what I heard." Ron lowered his voice. "I *really* liked what I heard when she made Draco moan. That's when I got involved, and things just happened. There was no talking." Ron's face and ears became as red as his hair. "Didn't know that ruddy McGonagall and Mione were spying on us though."

Laughter overtook Harry. He could just imagine Ron, Draco, and Luna walking out of the bedchamber to hurriedly get to the hall for the evening meal only to find a furious McGonagall and an embarrassed Hermione waiting for them. "I can only imagine what a surprise that was."

"I'll say. She went mental on us, she did. She was on about morals, letters to our parents, misuse of trust, and then she turned around to have a go at Hermione."

"Why? Mione didn't approve."

"It seems she is holding her partly responsible for giving us the password to her quarters in the first place." He nodded. "She's right, you know. If we hadn't had that temptation, we would never have gone in there."

Harry shook his head. "Don't put it off on Mione. She trusted us, Ron. Besides, you'd have just gone to some abandoned classroom or unused corridor to get it done."

"Too right you are, Harry," Ron said thickly, taking a bite of his apple. "We nearly didn't get her to change her mind about owling our parents. It was Dumbledore that made the agreement with us. I didn't think he minded too much...until he told Luna she wasn't trusted to stay without a guardian, that is."

"Good Lord, Ron. Can you imagine the howler that your mum would have sent?" Harry imitated Molly Weasley's voice and said, "Ronald Weasley! How dare you have that menage a trois? I am absolutely disgusted! We now have to meet with the Board of Governors, and it's entirely your fault! If you so much as *think* about taking your bits out of your pants again, you're coming straight home!"

"Don't do that," Ron said, looking around. "You're a little scary, Harry. Your face looked just like hers. Sounded just like something she would have said!"

"Well, at least she didn't give you *the* talk," Harry said.

"Oh, no! What did she do?"

"Asked if I would wait until her daughter was out of school before moving our relationship into something more." Harry's face turned red this time. "That was the night of your party."

"What did you tell her?" Ron demanded.

"I couldn't lie, Ron."

"What did she say?"

"I told her that I love Ginny, and that I will marry her as soon as she is out of school."

"Oh, no. A Wand Wedding!"

"Eh?"

"You know, the types of weddings where the girl's parents force the poor, trapped bloke into marrying their daughter because they caught him having a bit of fun. They literally hold their wands on him until the binding is completed," Ron said gloomily.

"Well, they don't have to force me, Ron. It's what I planned on doing anyway. I love your sister, mate," Harry said. "If they asked me to do it sooner or later, it would be done."

Ron nodded. "Welcome to the family, mate. I suppose you're an honorary Weasley then."

"Thanks."

"Nah, you've always been one, you and Hermione both. Do you want something from the kitchens? I'm going down to nick a few sweets."

"Surprise me," Harry said, smiling brightly.

"Good deal." Ron walked a few feet and turned around. "Eh, Harry?"

"Yes?"

"If Draco and I would happen to have a relationship... with Luna of course, what would you think about it?"

He could see that his friend really wanted his honest opinion. "Well, I'd say that I knew you and Draco had noticed each other. Well, I saw how he started acting, and then you sort of didn't mind. I know you love Luna, and if she approves, I will support you."

"Thanks, Harry."

"I would worry more about his father," Harry pointed out.

"No, it's his mum that is pushing at him to start planning his future. She wants him to think about a more serious relationship with Daphne Greengrass."

"What does he think about that?"

"Says he's not interested in that right now. Living for the moment, he is," Ron said with a smile. "As we all are."

"That's all we can do, Ron." Harry said, giving his friend a reassuring smile.

"Right. Don't let mum worry you about Ginny. Whatever will be, will be. I know you love her." The redhead quickly turned to leave.

Harry's smile faded as his friend left through the portrait hole. He loved Ginny, but he had a few things to feel guilty about. Bella was the main thing. He'd also been dishonest with the amount of lovers that he'd had. She need not know the truth about that. Some things were personal. Hell, that was before he and she had been attracted to each other mutually. Harry wondered if part of him had always been attracted to her. He closed his eyes and conjured her image. It was the image of them together just after they'd made love the first time. Her bright eyes had been wide and curious, brimming with love. He hadn't minded that she'd had another lover before him. It actually made things a little less awkward for the both of them. She'd asked if he was disappointed, and he'd simply kissed her to reassure her. Things escalated from there. He did eye Dean Thomas scornfully for a week or so after, but he'd gotten over it. That was before him and her business, just as he had his own business. As far as he was concerned, he would be her last lover, her husband, and the only lover that mattered.

The cozy fire lulled Harry into a light sleep and into a dream.

*Ginny was looking at him with a sweet smile, and she turned to flee the room. He went to chase after her, but a movement to his left caught his attention. Bellatrix Lestrange! Starkers and walking to him slowly.*

*"Master, I have one desire. One last request."*

*"What do you want?"*

*"Look into my eyes, my Lord," she said suggestively. "Will you not reward your most faithful servant?"*

*He looked into her eyes, whispered a spell, and indeed saw what it was that she desired. He broke the contact and looked at her full breasts, bringing both hands up to caress each. "Nox!" The chamber was completely shrouded into darkness, but he could still feel her with his hands and lips. "Bella, I do grant your request. Undress me."*

*"Yes, my Lord," the witch replied obediently. She removed his clothes quickly. "May I pleasure you?"*

*"You may."*

*Harry knew that it would be easy to pretend that she was his beautiful Ginevra since he couldn't actually see her, but he would always feel the guilt. As her lips found his hardness and began suckling him, he brought his hands down to her head, willing her to feel the pleasure she was giving him. Her licks, nips, and suckling quickened frantically as her hands caressed his arse and testicles. He knew that she too was approaching release. Suddenly, she pulled away. "Fuck me, my Lord. Please," she begged. Harry kneeled down and kissed her.*

*"On your knees, Bella." He heard and felt her maneuver into position. It was then that he moved behind her, using his fingers to find her wetness. Once he positioned himself correctly, he slammed into her. She screamed with pleasure while he grunted his approval. Guilt and rage at what he was doing pooled in his gut, forcing him to slam roughly into her. It was as if he could erase the feelings by pounding into her. An eerie wind began blowing through his hair, and the song of the Phoenix began to fill the chamber around him.*

*"Lord Potter," the woman screamed in orgasm. He began cackling loudly as he thrust a few more times, finally finding his release. He pulled away from her, turned her over, and positioned himself between her thighs. "Oh, Merlin, yes," she moaned as he entered her again.*

"Mate! Wake the fuck up," Ron's voice urged.

"Wh-what?" Harry sprung up with his wand drawn. "What is it?"

"You were having a nightmare, mate. The whole damn room became breezy and cold. I thought Fawkes had come for a visit when I heard the Phoenix song start. You all right? Was it about Voldemort?" Ron asked, looking worried. Harry didn't answer right away. "Here, mate. It's chocolate cake from Dobby. That'll make you feel better." After a moment of staring at Harry, Ron asked again, "Was it about Voldemort?"

Harry looked him squarely in the eyes. "Yes, I think so. It's a bit foggy now. Nothing to worry on though."

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**Southern's Notes:** I hope this chapter ties up your questions about Draco, Ron, and Luna for now. Thanks to Betz for the polyandry idea. Most of you have been asking about Harry and Bella. This is the last bit that I will mention about that whole *Nox!* thing. You can decide if you want to think of this as a dream or as a memory/dream of what truly happened. : )

Up Next: Things will be speeding up for us a bit, as time will begin to melt away. We are going to mostly see how the couple fares through the pregnancy, living at his home during the summer months, and how the birth goes. We will also see more with Viktor and the ruddy Succubus. Only a couple of chapters left, mates. Thanks for sticking with the story.

# Chapter Twenty Nine

Chapter 30 of 32

Time passes as the pregnancy progresses. A Viktor and Succubus talk explains things further. Also, we see what happens with our main characters and plans for after the term is over.

**Disclaimer:** Not mine, alas, but I do wish they were. I just want to point out that I have been influenced by many fics and appreciate the talents of many writers.

**A big thanks to my brilliant beta, Charmed Nay. Thanks for my friendly muses over at Potter Place!**

April had come and May was creeping up on Hogwarts, leaving Hermione looking forward to the summer holidays. "I'm going to plant flowers and make a garden. What say you?"

"Mmmm?" Severus asked sleepily. "It's not even daylight yet. What are you on about so early?"

"I can't sleep. I felt you move, so I know you are awake. You can listen to me." She kissed his shoulder. "I've never felt as good as I have for the past week. I've not felt sick or dizzy at all lately, and I don't seem to need as much sleep."

"I, on the other hand," Severus began sourly, "would enjoy having a lie in on a Saturday morning."

"So cheeky!"

"Speaking of cheek," he said slyly, reaching over to pinch her arse, "I happen to enjoy these."

"Oh! Scamp!" she shrieked. "Come on, Severus. Talk to me! Will you help me with my projects?"

"What?"

"This summer? I want to take some time to do some things to make the house pretty," she said.

"Hermione, we still have over two months before we are going to go there. Aren't you being just a little eager? I can think of more appealing things to do on an early morning such as this," he said easily, touching her breast. "I can tell the difference in these."

She slapped at his hand reflexively. "Oh, sorry. Habit. Go on." He didn't move. She sighed, took his hand, and put it back upon her breast. "They aren't as tender, Severus." She closed her eyes and laid back to enjoy his tender kneading. They'd had a bit of a row the week before when he'd been a bit rough. She'd snapped and accused him of trying to test her limits. It was really ridiculous once one looked back on it. She smiled softly as she felt his wet tongue find her nipple. "I love what you do to me, you know."

"Mmmm."

And she truly did. In fact, the little jolts that he was sending through her were nothing like the fluttering in her stomach. Soft waves rolled over inside her, feeling more like a group of butterflies taking flight. Her eyes opened wide. "I can feel it!"

"Good," he said, nibbling away at her bosom. "You know, they are getting a bit darker, your peaks, not much though. Instead of rosy pink, they are more tan."

"No, not feel that. The baby! I can feel... something! It has to be the baby."

"Oh," he said sitting up. "Where?"

"Just here," she said placing a hand on her rounded belly.

Severus placed his hand where hers had been, and he frowned. "I don't feel anything."

Hermione giggled. "Don't look so put out. It's not strong enough to be felt by us like this yet without the use of magic. It felt like a few twitches. OH! There it is again!"

Severus watched his wife's face light up with delight. He felt happy and sad at the same time. On one hand, he was glad that she could feel their little one moving, but he felt a bit left out. He wanted to feel it as well. When he'd found out that she'd gone to see Poppy a couple of weeks earlier to talk about her iron intake, he'd been upset that Poppy had done a charm that allowed Hermione to hear the heartbeat. They'd gone back to Poppy directly and insisted that she do it again so that he could hear. She'd laughed, done it, and then taken the time to teach the charm to Severus.

Not wanting to feel left out again, he grabbed his wand from the nightstand. *'Sensus Maximus!'* His wife simply smiled and moved her hands to allow him access. It was a moment, and then he felt it: the wriggling beneath her flesh, the shifting about, and the sensation of floating amidst water. It was glorious.

After the sensation slowly etched away, he brought his eyes to meet those of his wife. "What's wrong, Little One?"

"I just get overwhelmed at times. I love the way you love me. Does that make sense?"

He nodded. "I suppose I could say it more."

"No," she said, bringing a finger to his lips. "You are good as you are."

"I am good, aren't I?" he asked arrogantly.

"Oh, brother," she said, moving away from him.

"Where do you think you are going, witch? Get back over here."

"I have to go the loo to have a pee."

"Bath?" he asked hopefully.

"Come along."

Severus didn't have to be told twice. He followed her into the bathroom and began filling the tub. After only a moment's deliberation, he tipped a bit of oil into the water. Who cared if he smelled like his wife? Her scent would be on his skin all day long.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"What?" he asked, annoyed that she was grumbling again. For nearly the past month, it was something different every few days. Two weeks ago she'd looked in the mirror and had talked for thirty minutes, mostly to herself, about a dark line that had begun to form just below her navel. She'd also been hinting to him about her size. He didn't know what to say. She was bigger, breasts and stomach. Hell, thighs too. For being as sick as she had been at first, she'd certainly begun making up for it at mealtime. He'd always loved her plump legs, and he certainly didn't mind the extra weight. She wore it well. But how does one explain this to an emotional wife?

"My gums are so damn sensitive!" she grouched.

He sighed with relief. It wasn't about her weight again. "Ha! I told you that! I read that in one of my books," he said smugly.

"Well, you've read a lot of incorrect things as well!" She glared at him for a moment. "Your book said that I would gain an enormous amount of weight, and I've not gained that much, thanks."

The damn weight gain talk had found its way into conversation again! What could he say without really commenting? "You are not even five months pregnant yet! It will come... eventually."

"You can say that I am five months pregnant! What's a few days?" She finished brushing her teeth and faced him squarely. "Am I still attractive?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me?"

"Always."

"For two nights you've not touched me!"

Bloody fucking hell. "Do you not remember, Hermione, that you've had me working on writing out the steps of the potion that we used to allow you to enter my dream? I've been piecing together everything from Paracelsus for our book. When I finally get to bed, you are sleeping. I have been a little tired, I admit, but would you rather that I wake you up from your much needed rest to fumble with you for a bit of quick sex?"

"Well, I see your point. I guess I'm just unsatisfied with my body, so I assumed that you would be. Do you know that I can feel a difference now? It's like I'm carrying around this whole other person," she said.

"You are," he pointed out.

She narrowed her eyes. "Severus, if you think that's fun...Oh! Feel this!" She grabbed his hand and placed it over. "Just wait." A couple of minutes passed with Hermione shifting his hand about before they were finally awarded with a small movement beneath her skin. "There!"

"Sssh."

"Why do I have to be quiet for you to sense something?"

"Maybe because I could probably sharpen my sense of touch if I wasn't trying to use my sense of hearing," he said impatiently, trying to remove his hand.

"No! Just wait."

A moment later, he felt a small twitch under his hand. "Was that you?" he asked. He couldn't really feel anything much. It could have been her breathing for all he knew. It wasn't like when they used the charm.

"It was our son." She pressed his hand more firmly against her.

"Or daughter." He truly believed that they would have a daughter. He hoped anyway. Ever since he'd had that little vision of a baby girl at his home, he'd thought of having nothing else first.

"Severus, why do you insist that we'll have a girl? I thought men always went on about male heirs to carry on their names?"

"I just feel as though I know what to expect. I've clearly imagined what a daughter would look like." He felt no further movement, so he removed his hand. "I'll call on a house-elf for a light breakfast. I want to go over what I added to our notes last night."

"You've put in the tale of Paracelsus' ancestor then?"

"Yes, I elaborated a little, but he gave me permission to embellish it as I saw fit. I just made it a little more interesting." He'd put in a lot of time on the book lately. She was adamant about warning others that Succubus and Incubus visits still occurred. She'd been working hard to put together the large puzzle of how to defeat one. She'd begun with the origin of the first Wizard of the Snakes, the exchange between he and his wife, and the effect it had on generations to come.

"I still need to find out what happened to the Incubus that impregnated Merlin's mum. The exact thing that destroyed it." She grinned. "That would be worth knowing as well."

"Legend says that Merlin destroyed it."

"Where?"

"I shall have to go through the many books we've accumulated. I'm certain that I've read that though." He chuckled. "I'm surprised that Irma hasn't come beating down the doors to get them returned."

"No, I've been going back every two weeks to sign them out again. I've promised that should anyone need them, we would be willing to relinquish them for a certain amount of time." She smiled. "I also promised that we would mention her in our credits."

"Of course! You know that old crow reminds..."

"Severus!"

"Right then. I'm going to see if an owl is fluttering about, hoping to get our attention for the morning post. I shall have breakfast waiting for you." He quickly left while she began to undress. If he remained in there, two possible things could happen. She would mention something about her stretching belly, or he'd have to have her. She didn't know how truly alluring she was becoming. Her swollen with his child was a sight to behold. It would only get better as their child grew. He shook away the thoughts. There were two owls waiting for him. He quickly took their burdens, and feeling generous, he gave them each an owl treat.

His expression soured. Krum. He'd not written in a couple of months. Why now? He thought about opening her mail and sealing it back, but he didn't. He placed it on the table and opened the other letter that had been addressed to him. Before reading, he called for breakfast. The letter was from Molly Weasley. She didn't want Hermione to know that she'd written, so she'd hired an owl to send the letter. *No wonder I didn't recognize the owl.* The read was interesting.

Severus,

I've had a visit with Hermione's parents, and it seems that there are still quite a bit of mixed feelings concerning Hermione's decision to marry you without including them or getting their opinion. Able to hold a grudge, them. I may have gotten involved where I shouldn't have, but I told them that they were not good parents if they'd turn their backs on their daughter for falling in love and marrying.

They didn't like that much, mind. I thought I'd have to hex the blighters for a moment, but then I told them that I wished that I had this chance with Percy. I would love to be able to moan about his choice of a wife, but that won't happen. I told them that anything could go wrong, and if their daughter died suddenly from complications, they would regret not saying all the things that they truly felt. Love, for one.

Well, her mum broke down, and she said that she'd exchanged letters and sent a couple of books. Her father said that he reads all the letters that Hermione sends, but he's a proud man. Says his disappointment was so great that he couldn't believe that a daughter of his would be so sneaky about things. He had wondered if there was anything that you might have done to lure her to your bed. I may have let a bit slip about the Succubus. Not all I know, mind, but some.

I apologize, really. They just made me so angry! I should have never gone to see them, but Arthur insisted. He wanted some information about their fellytones and how they work. He's trying to invent something similar to Floo communication, but it wouldn't tie up your grate or fill you with ash. The Ministry is backing him on this. They just need the information. Can you believe they are going to call it Piw communication? Do you know where they got the letters for that name? Percy's initials!

Oh, I digress. Sorry. Anyway, I couldn't have those folks thinking ill of you, so I out and told them what a good man you are. Told them all you've done for us and are still doing. Told them about the prophecy bit and the dual visits. They weren't as shocked as I'd thought they would be. Said they'd have liked the truth in the first place and not much about the Wizarding world surprises them any longer. I quite agree with them on this point. I told them that I would let you know that I let the Kneazle out of the sack! They do understand why she wouldn't want to tell them the truth, but they feel that you two rushed into marriage. I told them all about Arthur and I, how we fell in love and married in a matter of weeks as well. Anyway, they agree that you should know before Hermione.

You should be the one to tell her and decide when a good time would be to go and have a talk with them about things. I slipped and told them that she was very moody according to Ron, Ginny, and Harry. I also did a bit of bragging about her teaching. Told them that Minerva says she handles all of the classes now and that even her mates give her no lip while she's teaching.

Well, all right then. I've gone on long enough.

Molly

Damn! How could he tell her about Molly's blunder? He'd wait until she was in a perfectly good mood. Right after sex seemed to be when she was most pleasant. He chuckled, slipping the letter into his pocket. She wasn't as bad as all that. She just had her moments. As she entered, he stood to pull her chair out for her. He'd never noticed when the house-elf had brought in the breakfast, as he'd been reading Molly's letter.

"What's that?"

"A letter from Krum. I put it there for you to read... after you've eaten," he said nonchalantly. He eyed her as she tore open the letter. After a moment, she gasped. "What is it?"

"His girlfriend is pregnant! She's only two months behind me. Says he's been feeling a bit ill lately and BLOODY HELL! I didn't hear about this!"

"What?"

"He had an accident in the last Quidditch match! He caught the Snitch, winning the match for the team, but one of the Beaters from the opposing team hit him on the back with his bat! He fell fifteen feet and broke his arm. Poor Viktor," Hermione said, continuing to read.

"Pity," Severus said happily, gaining a small glare from his wife. He simply shrugged.

"Well, that's out of the question," she murmured.

"What is?"

"He wishes that we could go for a visit. It seems that his girlfriend is now bedridden, as the pregnancy is making her a bit ill. He says it's hard to tend to her and his own injuries as well. Poor bloke! That's early in a pregnancy to be tied to a bed. I wonder how they are getting on without extra help," she pondered aloud.

"Out of the question is right. We'll not do any visiting, as we have school to teach, and after the term is over, we are going to our home to spend time together and prepare it for our new addition."

"Severus, haven't you been saying that I shouldn't worry about doing things to the house?" She tried to raise an eyebrow to imitate him, but laughter overtook her. "Don't look that way. You know that I truly don't care to visit him, but I do feel sorry for him."

He grinned despite the urge to scowl at her. "I suppose you'll want our child to have play dates with theirs?" He certainly hoped not!

"Of course, along with Harry and Ginny's child if they had one."

"Don't forget about the Weasley, Lovegood, and Malfoy brood. We may as well invite them," he said sourly. "Lucius is suspicious, you know. He told me that he caught them...Weasley and Draco...talking in an alley, and he wondered if they were lovers. I told him that he'd have to ask his son that, as I am a professor here, not a student!"

"Oh, Severus! You told an outright lie?"

"I did not lie," he said, feigning being affronted. "I stated that I was not a student. That is true. I stated that I teach here. That is true also. As far as asking his son, yes, there is nothing wrong with me pointing him in that direction."

Hermione howled with laughter suddenly. "You are just too much Severus!"

Hell, now was a time as good as any. She was in a good mood. He pulled the letter out of his pocket. "Read this after you've eaten." When she began to open it, he put his hand over hers. "After you've eaten." He stared at her until she began to eat. He didn't want the letter to ruin her appetite.

"Severus," she said thickly, chewing her toast. "How have things been going with Harry? You and Dumbledore have both been meeting with him a lot."

"He is progressing greatly. I've gone over all things possible with him. We mostly just meet now to talk about Bella, Nagini, and other issues. I am not sure what all Albus is going over with him."

Hermione smiled. "He's not mentioned it."

Severus often wondered exactly what his mentor was teaching the boy. Harry had changed over the last couple of months. He'd been studying more and really trying to do well in his subjects. He'd turned down a full position with one professional Quidditch team but was supposedly considering joining another as an alternate player. "I'll get the things that I've written for our book. You seem to be nearly done."

He went to get the parchments that he'd been working on, and when he finally made his way back to the table, he saw that she had read the letter and had a few tears in her eyes. "Molly... damn."

Severus nodded. "She meant well. What do you think?"

"I think I want to see my mum," she said softly. "Do you think after we get settled in this summer that we could Portkey them over?"

He nodded. "Yes, I do. They could come to spend a few days with us. Maybe then they'd see that we are good together and that I can provide for you and our child."

"I would really like that," she said appreciatively. "I'll send a note to mum. I'll explain that we are a bit busy with the end of term coming up on us."

"Very well. Here, have a read, and please, hold nothing back. Let me know what you think. If I have need to change something around or add something, I won't mind."

He hoped she would truly appreciate the time that he'd spent on it. The book about the Succubus and Incubus experience meant so much to her that he wanted to be a part of it as well. He wanted to impress her and help her make it great.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Drink this," the Succubus hissed to Viktor. "It comes from my mistress. She said that it should help to strengthen you. She is pleased that you have been donating so much of your magic to make the child grow and to give me this temporary body."

"No worries," Viktor said tiredly before drinking the foul tasting concoction.

"I will have to drain a little more magic this night, but you will be fine. Our child is already growing strong. She says that we shall have a male. She has foreseen our child interacting with your beloved's child. We do not know if the interference will be enough to ensure that your beloved's child will not stop the new Dark Lord, but I have faith that we shall be victorious."

"I will keep my promise," he said weakly.

"Good boy. You take care of that blasted man, and you shall have your lover. We reward those who aid us. We will rise and walk the ground in our own bodies once again," the Succubus said firmly. Her offspring would see to it that her mistress' instructions would be done. They would train him to do their bidding. He would one day come between the Wizard of the Snakes' son and the Snape child, causing them to go astray. It was foretold that those two would stop the new Dark Lord. After they stopped this prophecy from being fulfilled, her mistress planned to offer to aid the new Lord with only a single request. The child that she would bear would need to be under the Lord's tutelage, gaining his confidence, trust, and loyalty. They would get him to help find a way to reunite the lost spirits with new bodies or destroy him, leaving their new heir in his place as Dark Lord.

They'd tried to aid the last Dark Lord, but he'd been a Wizard of the Snakes. He'd destroyed a good portion of their number before they'd given up finally. What were the chances of the next Dark Lord being a Wizard of the Snakes? It wasn't something that happened often, and only the most powerful witches or wizards ever reached the status of Dark Lord or Lady. The entire Succubi and Incubi nation of the dream realm depended on it. They deserved to walk the daylight as well as the moonlight. The land of the awake and living had always called to them since they had been banished to the dream world by one cursed soul or another.

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"I will not stop," Severus said angrily. "You are running yourself ragged by hosting these ongoing study groups, Hermione. You are no longer a student. You don't have to study for anything. You've taken your N.E.W.T.s already!"

"My friends need my help even though I am their teacher. I have taken mine, and I can give them pointers on how to prepare and make false tests for them."

"Absolutely not! They can study on their own just as you had to," he said firmly.

"But, Severus..."

"Hermione," he said warningly. "You are trying to do too much."

"Fine!" she said. "Only twice per week then."

"Once," he said.

"Fine! I'll tell them that even though I am a grown, married, pregnant woman, my husband feels that he can boss me about and make my decisions for me!"

"Do that," he said tiredly, "and be sure to tell them that I would be glad to explain it to them in person should they require further explanation."

"Good Lord!" Hermione said. "I feel as though you think I'm going to break. I'm pregnant, Severus, not dying. I can still do all of the same things that I used to do!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, everything!"

"Stand up straight. There you are. Now glance down. Can you see your feet?" he asked with a smirk.

"You... arse!" she said, throwing a glass at him. He caught it, set it down on the table, and advanced on her. "Stay back," she squealed. He quickly scooped her up and carted her off to their bed.

"I shall have to smother my fiery wife's flaming temper with affection," he murmured before kissing her.

Pulling away for a breath, she replied, "That's not fair, Severus. You know I... Oh, come here." She pulled his head back down to press her lips back to his. "Mmmm," she moaned. With a quick smack, she said, "Make love to me."

"What of Albus' staff meeting?" he asked, voice rough with need.

"Sod him," she said.

"No, thanks. Hmmm... sod? Not with him anyway. I would prefer to..."

"Ewww, Severus."

"What?"

"You were going to say something dirty, weren't you?"

"Don't you like it?"

She bit her lip. "Yes," she said. They quickly clawed away each other's clothes.

"You are beautiful," he said, placing one hand on her rounded stomach. "I can't explain to you what seeing you like this makes me feel."

She put her hand over his and smiled. "I thank you for saying that, Severus. I think you are beautiful as well."

"What?" he asked incredulously. "Hermione, I c..."

"Can't accept a compliment? Why not?" He looked away. "Severus, do you see these four stretch marks just here and here?"

"Yes."

"Do you still love me anyway?"

"Of course."

"Well, then you see, it's the same. We each have imperfections, yet those imperfections are part of us. They are loved as well. I love everything about you," she said.

"I... love you," he said, kissing her stomach and trailing kisses up to her face. Once he was eye level with her, he watched her expression as he slid in. He sucked in a ragged breath. "You feel so good."

She nodded. "Yes."

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"I have a few announcements to make in this staff meeting before I turn it over to Minerva," Albus said in his softest voice. "These will be difficult for me. The end of term is nearly upon us. There are only two weeks left. With the end of term comes my end of reign as the Headmaster of Hogwarts. The next in line, as you all know, is Minerva. I have reserved the right to name the next Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." He chuckled. "I must say that not having one for most of this year has been bothersome."

Severus snorted. What berk would the old man put up this time? He hadn't applied for the position. In fact, he hadn't thought about applying for it. If it were some soft idiot like that Steward fellow, Albus would hear from him personally.

Albus spoke again. "It's my decision that our newest professor will be our very own, Harry Potter."

A stunned silence swept through the room. Severus noticed that even Hermione's mouth gaped open. Her eyes met Severus' for a moment before she looked away. He knew that she hadn't known, but she probably thought that he'd be upset about not getting the position. Was he? Not really. He was satisfied in the dungeons with his potions, wife, and pending addition to his family. It would do well to have Harry around to keep an eye on him. He would have liked the position at one point, but things had changed. He loved the beauty of a simmering cauldron, and it was very rare that others truly appreciated it. When Hermione and he had first succumbed to the inevitable, they'd both shared the same beliefs about potions. She had mentioned about the lovely display of color that the potion had emitted. It had prompted them to share the moment, and they'd made love right there in the laboratory.

"No one has a comment?" Albus asked, feeling shocked.

Most eyes turned to Severus. He smirked before speaking. "I think you've made a good decision, Headmaster. We shall accept this and guide him correctly."

"I am pleased," the old wizard said. Something passed between him and Severus at that moment, and Severus suddenly felt a sense of loss.

It was time, wasn't it? Albus was retiring to live out the rest of his days as he saw fit. How many years would Albus have left? Would he get to know all of his and Hermione's children? All? *It's not like we are the Weasleys! We may have one other. Albus will know our children as they grow!* It saddened him that his daughter or son would not have Albus to turn to when they were older.

A voice broke into his mind. Albus' voice. "But she or he will have you, Severus. They will have your wife and Harry as well. It's a never ending circle." Severus looked around to see if anyone else had heard! Why that sneaky, old codger! He could read minds and project his thoughts into them! Nobody seemed the wiser about what had exchanged between the pair, but Albus did look at him knowingly over his glasses.

The old wizard continued. "I will still be about the castle when term resumes. I have plans of traveling for the summer holiday, but I will be here staying in a spare set of rooms just down from the ones I have now."

"Ha," chuckled Rolanda. "Keeping close to the new boss, eh? Wanting to make sure that things run smoothly, are you? Or, could it be that..." Loud coughing from her husband broke her sentence up, and nobody could hear the rest of it. She simply smiled and grabbed Stuart's hand.

Albus didn't seem fazed. "Too right. I want to be sure to keep an eye on Minerva." Everyone began chuckling.

An irritated and embarrassed Minerva stood up and let Albus have her chair. "Professor Stuart Steward has, of course, decided to stay on with us. Potter will be the new Defense professor. Hermione, who has already taken over my classes, will be in complete charge of the Transfiguration classes. Her office will be where her old chambers were located before her marriage, as we are moving the class near there." She cleared her throat to get everyone's attention again. Poppy and Pomona had been whispering. "I will stand in for her for three months when she has her child. Severus has been appointed as the new Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts. Does anyone have questions?" She looked around. "Let's go over the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. schedules, and I will need the final agreements on the end of year feast turned in after this meeting."

Severus and Hermione chatted with their colleagues for another hour before finally being able to break away. They found Harry waiting for them outside of their chambers. "Harry! Congratulations," Hermione said, running forward to hug her friend! She could tell that Severus was comfortable with Dumbledore's decision even though he used to long for the position. They would have to talk about it later.

"So, you know," Harry said. "Thanks." He looked to Severus. "All right?"

"It is," Severus said. "I... think it will be good to have you about. There is one thing I want to know. Why didn't you tell us?"

"He told me he wanted to be the one. He said that if I worked hard and put my priorities right, then I would prove to him that I could be dedicated. Hogwarts really has been the only home I've ever really had. I want to be here," he said. "We've been working really hard, and he figured that all of my extra spells that I know would be an asset."

"Fair enough," Severus said. "What of your pets? Surely they won't be about the castle like regular familiars?"

"I'm undecided where my chambers will be," Harry said. "I may stay in the Chamber of Secrets...redecorated of course, or I may reopen Quirrel's old quarters. If I decide to stay there, there is a really large side chamber that they can have." Harry smiled. "They are getting on well. Nagini lays down the law though. She said that I had to stop sneaking food to Bella that was already killed. Said Bella was nearly starving for a while, but she finally broke down and made a fresh kill. Good thing she doesn't have to eat often, eh?"

"Let her starve," Severus said blandly.

Harry laughed. "I suppose if that's what she chooses. She's really not that bad anymore. Dumbledore has been coming down with me to have a talk with her through me. We've been narrowing down things, and I think it comes down to a few spells. We're going to get you two and Flitwick to work with us on reversing them."

"Excellent," Hermione said. "I'm glad, Harry."

"As am I. We will be happy to help. Are you still going to let Hermione interview you for our book?" Severus asked, trying to break the silence that had settled over them.

"Yes," he said. "Actually, she wants me to write a foreword. Would you mind?"

"I think that would be good," Hermione piped up. "Him being famous and all."

"Yes, our very own celebrity having a hand in things would promote the book," Severus said cheekily. "I look forward to reading what you write up."

"Don't worry. Mione is going to help with that bit," said Harry with a smile. "I'll need to go. We're having a group study. Will you be coming?"

"No," Hermione said sourly, looking at Severus. "I can really only do one this week and another next week. I have my class assignments to critique, and we're trying to get some things squared away for the summer." She smiled. "I think that with the improvements you've made, Harry, you can run the session on your own."

"He should have *always* been trying to study instead of sleuthing about," Severus said. "Off with you now."

"Yes, sir," Harry said with a grin.

Once he was gone, Severus turned to Hermione. "I really don't resent that he got that position. I think he is a tad young, but with Albus' continued guidance, and me here, I believe that things will sort themselves out. Besides, I think having at least one of your ruddy little friends here at the castle will make you feel less alone after they've all gone."

"Hadden't thought about that," Hermione said thoughtfully. A moment later, she smiled. "Things have changed, haven't they? They'll be going off. All of them. I wonder what Ron is going to do now?"

"I suppose he'll have to make his own way. Didn't he get contacted by a professional team as well?" Severus asked, trying to lighten her mood.

"For reserves only," she said darkly. "I'll have a talk with him. He's a lot to look forward to now that Luna is gaining her magic back steadily. She's about where she was when she was hit by Bella's hex."

"Weasley never did say anything whilst we had our chess game this past weekend." Severus was wondering exactly what their plans were and how it included Draco. He had plans for lunch with Lucius the next day, and he wanted to be prepared for any questions that might be asked.

"Harry, as far as I know, is going to Grimmauld Place. He's got the room, so Ron is moving in with him. They've asked Draco to stay as well. He's agreed." Hermione turned red. "Separate rooms, I'm sure. As far as Ron says, nothing has happened since that last round when Minerva and I found them. They act the same to me."

"What of Miss Lovegood?" Severus asked curiously.

"I believe she has been invited to stay for the summer as well, but I am not sure if she accepted the invitation or not. She is still with her dad and working to get better. I think he's a bit protective after what happened."

"What of you? Are you wanting to have a break to visit your friends?" he asked cautiously.

"Only if you would come and only after everyone is settled in. I really want to plant a garden at your home, Severus. It will be beautiful. I want to sit and watch the Aethonon herd while you read a book. I want to lie around in bed all day if I feel like it. We need this time," she said softly. "After the baby comes, well, things will be different."

"Our home. You are thinking my way now, Hermione. Sometimes I can't wait for our little one to come, but then I think about things that will change. Less sleep according to the books, less everything really."

"We'll manage."

"Why are you holding your hands on your lower back?"

"It just smarts a bit. No big deal."

"Let me give you a massage," Severus suggested. "I wouldn't mind getting my hands on you."

"Again? Merlin, you're insatiable today, aren't you?"

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"Lucius, it's been a while," Severus said with a nod. "Have you ordered?"

"I have and have taken the liberty to order for you as well," he said, offering his hand to Severus for a shake. "Here. He's just brought a fresh bottle." He handed Severus a goblet.

Sniffing first, Severus took a sip. "Aged."

"The best. Severus, what do you know about my son's plans when term ends?"

Severus smirked. "Going through a lot to find out what you could ask in a letter, aren't you?"

"Just want your opinion. Is my son gay?"

"No," Severus said honestly. He hadn't any proof that the boy had been sexually interested in Weasley only. He seemed to like Weasley as a package deal *So I hope*.

"He wants to live in Muggle London, of all places, with Potter," Lucius said bitterly. "I don't mind, but I'll not have him skiving off his duties. I figure I'll not push him until the fall season. Then, I'll insist that he begins coming in with me to learn things."

"That sounds like a reasonable solution then," Severus said.

"I don't really care if he plays with the Weasley boy on the side so long as he does right by the Malfoy name. Have you seen him with Greengrass?"

"Yes," Severus said honestly. "They eat meals together at times, and they are also in a study group."

"Look," Lucius said suddenly. "I need a spot of advice. Narcissa has been thinking, and she would like to have another child. At her age!" Lucius tsked and shook his head. "I've tried talking to her, but she won't listen. How do you feel at your age having an heir?"

Severus shrugged. "I was surprised at first, but I am actually looking forward to it."

Lucius nodded. "Do you not feel tied down?"

"No."

"I have a few years on you, Severus. Would it not be odd for us to have another since our first is finally finished with his schooling? We should be handing some duties over to him and start enjoying ourselves more."

"You're not that much older, Lucius, and I think that Narcissa would do better this time."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Lucius asked in a furious whisper. "I'll have you know that my wi..."

"Lucius, you both would do better this time around. There is no Dark Lord hovering about threatening our families. If you have another child, you could do the things that you never got to do with Draco," Severus pointed out. "You might even get a daughter."

"The Dark Lord was gone most of Draco's life," Lucius said, clearly annoyed. "I do not think that we've done Draco wrong."

"You are offended. I apologize, friend." Lucius nodded acceptance. "We both knew it was a matter of time before he came back, and well, to be honest, you were not as you are now. Your views have changed somewhat. I think that you and she ought to have another child."

"Perhaps," Lucius relented. "It would give us something else in common. Our wives would have something more to talk about. Our children could be friends as we are."

"Good luck to you both," Severus said. A waiter came over with their food. They chatted amicably while eating. By the time Severus left, he was sure that Lucius had decided to give in to Narcissa. Things truly had changed, hadn't they?

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Hermione had tears in her eyes as she watched her friends get on the Hogwarts Express to leave school for the last time. Ron, Harry, and she had hugged each other for a long time before their other mates had come to them and began saying their good-byes as well. She didn't move until the train was out of sight. Severus handed her a handkerchief.

"Wipe your eyes, Madame Snape. It's just us now," he said softly. "You'll see them again. Harry is coming back. Ginevra will be here next year. If you're lucky, Miss Lovegood will be able to return as well." He took her hand and led her back towards the lake. "Fancy a walk?"

"I do." She squeezed his hand. "Where do we go from here?"

"Wherever the future may lead us." He pulled the hand to his mouth and placed a kiss on the inside of her wrist. "We have the summer to finish our book, visit your parents, visit your friends, visit my friends, prepare lessons for next term, research, or work on our home. Anything you'd like, Hermione. Please don't feel alone. I..." He swallowed. "I am still here."

"Oh, Severus, never doubt that I am happy with the path I have taken. I am just a bit overwhelmed. An era of my life is over. It's like the third part of my life is beginning."

"I felt the same when I first truly realized that I loved you and had hope for a real future. The dreams I once had long ago are finally being realized." He gave her a small smile. "I thank you."

"I love you, Severus." He nodded. She smiled. "Speaking of dreams, I had another odd one last night."

"I told you that the books say that women begin having odd dreams in this stage of the pregnancy. Don't dwell on these all that much. Agreed?"

"Okay," she said. "It was just... odd."

He sighed. "Go on."

"I was holding a small boy's hand and was trying to help him find his father when I finally saw the man walking behind a large column, something like we saw at Rolanda's wedding. Anyway, we got there, and he was gone. Suddenly a hand comes out of the darkness and closes over my mouth. I look down to tell the child to run, and it's a little girl. She's calling for me, and she's asking where her daddy is. I know in my heart that this is my child, and I am so afraid to fight the person holding me. I knew that if I went quietly, the person wouldn't harm my daughter." She looked over to Severus with a sly smile. "That's when I heard a loud rumbling. I knew the sound, but I couldn't place it at first. I woke up, realizing that you were snoring. Your noise was the loud sound from my dream!"

He snorted in disbelief. "It's some sort of anxiety about the future. Clearly you are still worried about the things in our past, and you are worried about doing the right things to be sure that our child is safe. You helping the first child just shows what you do in your everyday job. You work with children, dunderheads mostly, but children all the same."

"Well, thank you, Sibyll," Hermione said cheekily. "You are probably right."

"I usually am," he said smugly.

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**Southern's Notes:** We have one more long chapter to go. I'll take you through the last few months of the pregnancy and just past the birth. Thanks so much for staying with me.

Remember, as mentioned before, the charm they use was originally thought of by Ramos in "Hinge of Fate." I simply gave it a name.

I do have a sequel planned. We need to find out if the Succubus is successful after all. I also have a short prequel planned (SS/LE) because I want to explore Dark!Severus and why he turned.

## Chapter Thirty

*Chapter 31 of 32*

Snape starts having nightly visits from a Succubus. Soon after, an Incubus starts visiting Hermione. They will have to come together to beat their nightly visitors and get past their sensual dreams. This is set in Hermione's seventh year at Hogwarts after her 18th birthday.

**Disclaimer:** Not mine, alas, but I do wish they were. I just want to point out that I have been influenced by many fics and appreciate the talents of many writers.

**A big thanks to my brilliant beta, Charmed Nay. Thanks for my friendly muses over at Potter Place!**

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Severus was lying on his side with his sleeping wife pressed tightly into his back. As tightly as she could be, that is. Her stomach was now protruding out more than her breasts. He was thinking about how beautiful she looked, rounded with his child, when he felt a slight thump against his back. Realization dawned on him. His child had just placed a sound kick against him! Why? Was it some sort of protest for being cramped? He tried to scoot away slightly, but Hermione pressed against him again in her sleep. He felt the small thud once more. Slowly he turned to his other side and looked down to his wife. One hand reached out to palm her belly. He was rewarded for his patience some time later as his child moved again. Each time he felt it move, he was reminded of what a miracle life was, and he was reminded that Hermione was his miracle. She'd taught him to live again. Now she was giving him a precious gift, a child. His daughter. Hermione didn't want to know the sex of the baby, so they'd never tried the spell that would tell them.

He wanted to know though, and he decided it was time. He took his wand from the nightstand and placed it over her stomach. Whispering the incantation three times, Severus closed his eyes to wait. He felt the wand moving about a little and knew that it was searching. It stilled for nearly half a minute before swaying from side to side slowly. A girl! He was right! They were to have a daughter. His wand stilled again for another thirty seconds before swaying from side to side. A smile lit his face as he placed his wand back on the nightstand. If it had moved in circles, it would symbolize the birth of a son.

He maneuvered slightly to place a kiss on her stomach. Hermione shifted away from him and moved to get out of bed. "Where are you going?" he asked loudly. She'd been talking in her sleep and trying to sleepwalk lately. He wanted to be sure that she was awake.

"I need to have a pee," she said sleepily. He watched as she waddled to the bathroom and smiled again. A couple of minutes later brought her back to bed. "Ouch," she grumbled. "Ruddy legs."

"Again?" he inquired. A nod accompanied with a sigh was his reply. She turned just enough to give him access. With practiced hands, he stroked and kneaded her legs to massage away her cramps.

"Much better," she said, turning onto her back. "*Lumos*," she muttered.

"What do you need that for?" he asked curiously, moving up to rest on his elbow.

"I want to talk for a moment," she murmured. "I'd rather see your expressions than have to guess them."

Damn! What did she want now? "You have my attention."

"I'm ready to see my parents," she said.

He nodded immediately. "What brought this on? I thought you'd decided to wait until after the baby?" When they'd first come home for the summer, they'd planned to see her parents, but something had changed Hermione's mind. She'd decided that she didn't want them to see her pregnant. "You are *very* pregnant now, only eight weeks left."

"She sent another letter today. Dad wrote to me in this one. *He* wishes to see us."

"Ah, so I see," Severus said. She'd been waiting for her father to admit that she was welcome in his home. She wouldn't feel as guilty having them see her pregnant if she knew that both had wanted her to visit. "We can go tomorrow."

"All right," she agreed. "We can stop off at Grimmauld Place while we are at it. Harry says he has news for us."

"Good Lord! What now? Haven't they caused enough trouble this holiday?" he asked, annoyed instantly. "I will not be involved in any of their problems again!"

"Oh, Severus, enough. We don't know what he has to say." She smiled. "It's probably some good news."

"We shall see." He moved a hand down to cover a bare breast. Emboldened by her contented mew, he slid down to run his tongue around the nipples of each full breast while pulling down her knickers. Her hands moved to his hair.

"Love me," she whispered. "Ah!"

He slid two fingers into her and found that she was already moist. A few caresses over her nub had her arching into his hand. "On your side tonight, love," he commanded. She rolled over. "Lift," he said, nudging her leg up. He moved into position, shook on his penis slightly to ensure that it had hardened completely, and moved to her entrance. It was a little awkward, but they finally managed a steady, slow rhythm. "You feel tighter than ever."

She giggled. "I was thinking that you feel bigger than ever."

He paused. "You find me under average in size?" What? His eyes narrowed. "Whom could you compare me to? I, for one, happen to know that you were comp..."

"I don't know what average size is, mind, but I am certain you exceed it," she said. "You worry too much, and you try to read something into my words that isn't there."

"That's right," he said slyly, slamming into her roughly, eliciting a moan. "You did try to scurry off when you saw my girth that first night. I must admit that I was pleased by the reaction."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

She began moving with him and could tell that he was near climax. "Don't wait for me," she said.

"I will try," he panted.

Hermione quickened the pace and squeezed her inner muscles until he had no choice but to spill into her. She knew that she wasn't close, and she didn't want to make him suffer. He'd been going without lately, as they'd been working continuously on their efforts to edit their book and meet with publishers. Before that, they'd been working on their home. The nursery was completely remodeled to their tastes, the house had the feel of a woman's touch, and the grounds had been preened to their liking. Her lover's shudders brought her out of her thoughts. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you," he murmured. "I couldn't wait any longer. I'm sorry."

"S all right," she said softly. She reached behind her for his arm to pull around her, but he was moving away. "Severus?" A moment later, she was pulled onto her back and had his wand pointed at her lower body.

"*Scourgify*," he said calmly.

Tingles and heat spread over and within her. She giggled. "What are you about?"

"This," he said, settling betwixt her thighs. "I can't take and not give."

She sucked in a raspy breath as his mouth made contact with her labia. Her hands found their way to his hair. "Severus." His wicked tongue seemed to work with a mind of its own, flicking expertly in circular motions as it found her nub. Two fingers pumped into her steadily as another pair pebbled one of her nipples. Needing him to increase the pressure, she pushed his head down slightly. He chuckled and did as bidden. That far away tingling began causing her to buck against him. "Oh, my God," she said. "I'm nearly... yes!" She was vaguely aware of him moving over her body to her breasts.

"You'll never know how beautiful you are when you succumb to feeling the highest of pleasures. I love watching you reach culmination," her husband whispered minutes later when she returned to her senses and regained normal breathing. With one last nibble on her breast, he moved behind her again, pulling her back to his chest.

~~~~~ HG ~~~~~ SS ~~~~~

"Oh, Hermione!" Jane Granger exclaimed as she opened the door. "How I've missed you!" She threw her arms around her daughter. "My, there is a good bit more to you now, isn't there?" she asked happily, placing a palm over her daughter's swelling belly.

Relieved at her welcome, Hermione replied, "A lot more of me. And she's been active for the past hour."

Jane laughed. "Hello, Severus," she said with a small smile. "Please. Come in."

Hermione squeezed his hand as they followed her mum into the living room. "Hi, Daddy," she said, sounding much like a frightened little girl.

"Hermione," he said, rising slowly. The instant he held out his arms, she knew that all would be well. She quickly went to his embrace.

"I've missed you both so much," she said. "Thanks for writing to me."

"Is that why you've stayed away?" he asked.

She sniffed. "I didn't want to come until after I had the baby. I was afraid you'd be even more disappointed in me, and I wasn't exactly sure that you really wanted me here."

"I'm only disappointed in myself," he admitted, moving back. "Marriage and pending motherhood does you well. You look radiant."

"Thanks, Dad," she said with a smile. "Severus takes care of us." She nodded behind her to her husband, watching intently as the pair appraised each other.

"Severus," her father said finally, extending his hand.

Moving forward, Severus said, "Good evening, John." They shook hands, and unspoken words passed between them. "I trust you have been well?"

"Well enough, I suppose."

Hermione stepped back as the pair began talking about things. She moved to stand with her mum. "All okay, Mum?"

"It's good to have you here. Your father may have taken a long time to admit it, but we were wrong to question your judgment or imply anything. We are so sorry, Hermione," she said, tears forming in her eyes. "I hope that your coming here means that you may forgive us."

"There's not much to forgive, mum. I should have come sooner," she said wistfully. "Oh! She's moving! Do you want to see and feel her?"

"Yes," her mother said excitedly. "Please!"

Hermione sat on the davenport and pushed aside her outer robe. Her mother sat on one side while her father sat on the other. Severus took the chair across from them. "Severus, come with us." He furrowed his brow for a moment but moved to kneel by her nonetheless. "I've just discovered this as I was taking a bath before we came here. You might need to be... Oh! See?"

"Nothing," her mother said. All eyes went to Hermione's belly. She pulled her blouse around her tightly. After a few moments, there was a big movement. She felt the shift within her, but seeing her child move was a great thing to behold. Her entire stomach lifted on one side and seemed to roll towards the other side. "I saw!"

"As did I," Severus said, fascinated.

"Me too."

"She's active today," Hermione said.

"She? Is it a girl?" her father asked.

Hermione looked to Severus and smiled. "It is."

"And, how, might I ask, do you know?" Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Last night," she said. "I woke up as you were doing the spell. I'd been thinking of doing it as well, so I allowed you to carry on with it. Congratulations. You were right."

He smiled lightly and nodded. "I might have known."

Her parents invited them to go out for lunch, and they spent the afternoon catching up on all that they'd missed. Hermione explained about the Succubus and Incubus situation while they listened attentively. She told them that they'd just completed the last of the required edits for their book, and it was being looked over by a publishing company. Her parents were ecstatic that she'd had a part in writing a book. They were even more pleased to learn that the Muggle book that her mum had sent had played a big part in piecing things together. It was then that Hermione admitted that she wanted to write another book. It would be a book for Muggles dealing with myths. She'd become fascinated with the subject.

"I've told her that she will need to wait until after the baby is born for that," Severus said. "Once she decides to do something, it seems she puts all else on hold. I think she needs to concentrate on this pregnancy and her health."

"Too right," her father agreed. "She's always been that way, our Hermione. Never stopped until she finished something, she didn't."

Her mum smiled. "You two really are well suited. I can see that now."

"Thanks," Hermione said.

"We would like for you to come to our home. Have you plans for next weekend?" Severus asked.

"No, we don't. We would love to visit. I want to see the nursery! Perhaps I can bring a few things of Hermione's that I have stored away."

They made plans to transport them over via Port Key the following weekend, and then they bid each other good-bye. When Severus called for the Knight Bus and situated

them inside, Hermione leaned into him for a soft kiss. "Severus, I really appreciate you trying to get along with them. It makes me happy. It feels like I have my family back. My old family merging with my new family..." She sighed. "It just seems so right."

"I wasn't pretending in there. I truly do like your parents, now they've come to their senses. Your father though," he said in an amused voice, "asked if I would allow him to do something about my teeth."

"Oh, no! I am so sorry, Severus."

"He meant well, I know, but I do think that was a bit forward. He said that magic shouldn't be used on teeth, and then he went into the entire thing about your fourth year." Severus chuckled. "I doubt that will ever be forgiven."

"It is."

"Thank you."

"Oi! You two is war heroes, you are," Stan said, coming to sit across from them. "Don't see many of your types taking the time to ride with us no more." He nodded to her stomach. "But, I can see why you did. You know me and Harry Potter is great friends too, we are. That's right," he said, nodding again. "He came on here about four years ago. Me and Ern here helped him escape from Sirius Black, we did. Ain't that right, Ern?" A grumble was the reply. "Tried to say his name was Neville. I knew better, I did. I knew he wasn't no Neville."

"Interesting," Severus said blandly. "Tell me, sir, if I pay extra, could our destination possibly be next?"

"Right then. No need to pay. I'll let Ern know about it. We'll keep it quiet like, being you are Harry Potter's mates and war heroes."

With a few lurches, near misses, and bangs, they finally made it to Grimmauld Place. "Thanks," Hermione said as she exited the bus. Severus glared at the annoying boy when he shook their hands repeatedly.

"Take 'er away, Ern," Stan called. As the bus sped off, three mailboxes had to jump out of the way to avoid destruction.

"Oh, come on. It's not all that bad," Hermione said with a giggle. She pulled Severus' hand and made way to Harry's door.

"Hermione!" Ginny screeched as she opened the door. "Oh, look! It's so beautiful!" She placed two hands on Hermione's stomach causing her to squeak. "Come in! We're in the sitting room."

The portrait of Mrs. Black began screaming loudly, but this time she was saying things that surprised Hermione. "Welcome to the most Noble House of Black." Severus shrugged when Hermione looked at him questioningly.

"Oh," Ginny explained, "Harry knew some spell."

"Right," Hermione said. When they entered the room, everyone began talking at once. Luna, Ron, Draco, Harry, Neville, and Daphne were all there.

Neville smiled. "Wow, Hermione, you look really nice." His eyes met those of his old Potions master, and he paled slightly. "Hello, Professor Snape."

"Longbottom," Severus acknowledged with a nod.

Hermione was proud of him. He'd come around so much. She giggled when Ron spoke. "Oi! Snape! I just happen to have my chess set. Fancy a game?"

"Do you never tire of losing, Weasley?" Severus countered, making his way to the table.

Hermione pulled Harry to her for a hug. "I've missed you."

"Me too. We've been busy here. You should see the redecorating we've done. I've made the attic into a jungle for Nagini and Bella. Want to see?"

"Maybe before I go, thanks. How have things been around for all?" she nodded slightly towards Draco.

"Quite interesting. Look, I've got to go in the back and start up the pit. We are going to grill like Muggles do. Why don't you catch up with Ginny while we do this?" he suggested happily.

"Sure thing."

She watched as Neville, Draco, and Harry, each drinking a Muggle beer, headed out back to start up the grill. Ron and Severus were oblivious to any others. Daphne and Luna were talking quietly, so Hermione motioned for Ginny to follow her to the kitchen. Once there, Ginny put on a pot of tea. Hermione sat down and summoned some cups for them. Ginny joined her.

"So, tell me about your holiday? How is it being married with a little one on the way?" Ginny asked excitedly. "You and Snape look so happy together, and your belly is just adorable."

"It's been great," Hermione confided. "Being alone with him is just... I can't really describe it. You'll see one day."

Ginny smirked. "Maybe sooner than you think." She winked at Hermione and leaned closer. Before she could say anything, she said, "Damn it! What are you doing down here? Did he let you out?" Hermione followed her gaze and saw that she was looking at Bella. "Thinks she owns the place, this one!" She stood and opened the back door. "Go on. He's out there."

Hermione wondered how it was that Ginny never figured out that she'd been duped. Bella probably loved that Ginny still didn't know. The bitch. She summoned the pot of tea to the table. "Come on." After she poured tea for each of them, she asked, "What were you saying?"

"I was trying to tell you something, but you can't repeat it."

"All right."

"Ever since Ron's birthday back in March, my mum has been making me take a Pregnancy Potion. Harry told her how serious our relationship had turned," she muttered darkly. "Anyway, I took one then, and I took another in June. She ordered another batch for my dose at the end of this month. However, I secretly decided to take a page from your book three weeks ago. I took some of that vile medicine that Madame Pomfrey gave you. I'm making sure that my potion doesn't work!"

"Why?" Hermione asked incredulously. "You've another year of schooling left!"

"Maybe I don't," she said cheekily. "Harry had two meetings with the School Governors and Headmistress McGonagall already about our relationship. They said that they couldn't allow us to publicly carry on because Harry is on the staff while I am still a student. They don't care that we've been together all this year. McGonagall argued with them a little. She told them that she didn't condone any inappropriate business even amongst staff. She pointed out that you and Severus had separate quarters until you were married, and the same went for Hooch and Steward."

"Poor Harry. So, I don't understand. You are going to quit school? You can't do that. You have your N.E.W.T.s to take."

"Well, it's against the rules for a member of the staff to be married to a student unless approved by the School Governors. They said that being it's Harry Potter and all that, they would approve, but he would be put on standard probationary watch. Meaning that if he stepped out of line or was believed to be influencing his colleagues to give me good grades, he could be sacked. I offered to take my courses through exchange courses or to quit, but he won't have it."

"Harry's announcement is that you two are getting married?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

"No, that's about Quidditch. He doesn't want to marry me," Ginny said quickly.

"What?" What the hell? "But you just said you've gone off the potion."

Ginny sighed. "He wants to wait until I've completed school. My mum would like to see us married. You know she loves Harry like a son anyway, but she agrees that we should wait. I don't though. He doesn't know what I've done."

"Ginny, that's not thinking clearly. You could drive him away by doin..."

"Hermione, I was at those meetings. They had some good points. They said that a married Harry Potter would be best in any event. The older female students would likely always try to be near him because he is famous. I just see this as a way of reinforcing that he is *mine*. If I am pregnant, he'll have to marry me, and don't look at me that way, Mione. It's not like he doesn't want to. He does. Just not yet."

"I really wish that you hadn't told me about this. I feel tha..."

"Look. If I'm pregnant, I can marry Harry. We'll be together and be happy. I can request to take my tests early like you did. I can live at the castle with you, and we can still be best mates. I won't have to worry about Harry being influenced by any other witches." She narrowed her eyes. "It's bad enough that I feel as though something more went on between him and Bellatrix. He told me not to worry on it, but it seems like something happened that he doesn't want to talk about. And, isn't it odd that he named that snake after her? The ruddy thing follows him around like a lapdog!"

"Really, Ginny," Hermione said angrily. "This is wrong. This is trying to trap Harry. I think you should tell him the truth."

"No."

"Then, I think that I will. I can't just stand by and let you do this. It's obvious that you aren't thinking clearly."

"Oh, Hermione, I wish that I hadn't said anything. I thought you of all people would understand! I mean, it's what you did."

"WHAT?"

"Well, you knew that medicine would counteract your potion, and you didn't tell Snape. You wanted to be pregnant. I don't blame you. It seals the relationship."

"That, Ginevra, is preposterous! We were married because we chose to be. We didn't know I was pregnant until after! Even then, it was a shock to the both of us. I didn't plan anything."

"Well, that may be," Ginny conceded, "but it's too late for us. I've not had my menses yet. It was due a few days ago."

"Oh, no," Hermione said. "How could you, Ginny?"

"Easy," the redhead said. "I'm looking out for what's mine. That's something Tom taught me a long time ago. Harry is the only one that understands. He'll be upset for what I've done, but he'll understand all the same. You have to take care of what's yours, Mione, and you'll do what you've got to do to see it done."

"Too right," came Harry's voice. "You know, Ginny, I think it's time you go home to your mum's house." He walked by and made his way to the staircase. As he bounded upward, they heard the beginnings of the Phoenix song start.

"Blast! I'll see to him," Hermione said.

"No, I will." Ginny ran up after him.

Hermione shook her head sadly. Ginny had been doing so well, and here she was making a horrible mistake. Instead of building a sturdy foundation for her relationship with Harry, she was trapping him. Hermione knew that Harry loved the girl, but something like this was hard to swallow. *I can't believe she thought that I had trapped Severus!* They would have had a child eventually anyway, so it worked out well. They just moved things along quicker, thanks to the Succubus.**CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!** Hermione nearly fell back as four people Apparated into the kitchen.

"Where are they?" Molly asked furiously.

"Upstairs," Hermione answered quickly. The angry woman stomped off with her husband following closely behind. Hermione turned to face Minerva and Albus. "You know?"

"Yes," Albus answered. "I knew something wasn't right a few seconds before he Flooed me. He asked for Minerva and I to come over right away."

"He said that a complication had come up with Ginevra Weasley and his job," Minerva said, eyeing the ceiling worriedly. They could hear a bit of stomping and clipped yelling. "Oh, dear."

"It's not good," Hermione said.

"They were going to call things off for the year, publicly at least. I told them that I would not frown upon them fraternizing in a group as you have done with your own friends this year," Minerva said. "It was either that or get married. Harry wanted her to finish her classes though."

Hermione didn't want to get into what Ginny had said, as it wasn't her place. She looked to Albus. "When did you get back from holiday, sir?"

"Last week," he said happily. "I had a nice time. I've been working with Harry, going through notes from previous professors, and getting him ready to teach. We've gone to Hogwarts to expand his chambers. He will be taking Quirrell's old chambers since it is closer to his class and Gryffindor Tower." Minerva elbowed him. "Right."

There was something that they weren't saying. She was about to question it when Harry came slamming down the stairs. Draco and Neville had come in from outside at the same time.

"Where's our round of brew, mate?" Draco asked but shrunk back as Harry glared his way. Ron, Severus, Luna, and Daphne came into the room as well.

"What's all the noise?" Ron asked curiously.

Harry turned on his heel and went to the stairway. "GET DOWN HERE NOW!"

Arthur Weasley came down first. "Now, see here, Harry, while I appreciate that you..."

"That'll do," Harry said, moving to pull Ginny to his side. "Well, since you are all here, I suppose some announcements are in order." Hermione cringed. His voice was rough and emotionless. It was horrible. She felt the temperature in the room dropping slightly as a small breeze blew about. The candles began flickering slightly.

Ron began, "Harry, why ar..."

"Harry," Hermione interrupted. He looked her way. "Want some tea?" He smirked slightly and nodded. She felt the change immediately. The room breeze dissipated instantly, and the candle's flames strengthened. Hermione poured him some tea in a cup and walked over to him. "Here."

All eyes watched as he released his grip on the crying Ginny and took the cup from Hermione. "Thanks, Mione," he said calmly. As Hermione seated herself, she noted that Bella had slid up next to her, watching the events taking place. She suddenly pitied the snake and reached down to pat her on the head. "He'll be all right, Bella," she whispered offhandedly. Bella's dark eyes met her own, and she knew instantly that Bella was completely aware of things. She understood all that was happening and could decipher human language unlike any other snake. There was something in Bella's eyes that Hermione understood. Gratitude. She seemed to appreciate that Hermione wanted to take the time to comfort her.

You're right. He'll be fine., a voice hissed into her mind. It was exactly how she remembered the witch sounding *Nobody but my Master pays attention to me, thanks. Don't be alarmed. Nobody else can hear me. He told me that you would be able to since he's Marked you. I just never wanted to talk to you before.*

Hermione tore her eyes away from Bella to pay attention to Harry. He spoke calmly. "I wanted you to all know that I've worked out a deal with England to be able to be their Seeker while keeping my job at Hogwarts. I will only need to be present at the games and one weekend of practice each month." He looked at Ron. "Ron has been accepted as part of the coaching staff with them. He'll be training the Keepers and helping to recruit new ones."

Everyone seemed happy. It broke Hermione's heart that there was a tinge of sadness in Harry's voice. Ginny had truly hurt him. She wondered if their relationship would suffer for it. Ron, on the other hand, was jumping for joy. He hadn't known for sure. Hermione knew then that Harry wouldn't have accepted to play for England if they hadn't taken Ron on as well. She nodded appreciatively to Harry when he eyed her.

"I also wanted to tell everyone that I have been chosen as the new Head of House of Gryffindor for Hogwarts. Headmistress McGonagall will oversee the Gryffindors on those days that I am off practicing. Well, Severus," Harry goaded, "I suppose we'll keep the House rivalries going."

"Indeed," Severus said quietly. He looked to Hermione. Would she be upset that she hadn't been chosen? He doubted it. Minerva had told him that she was considering Harry for the job since Hermione would have to take time off and would have the little one soon. He would explain the reasoning to her later. Besides, Harry could always scare the Gryffindors into minding themselves. Hermione tended to be a little lenient.

Harry spoke again. "We decided that it was best for Ginny and I to not see each other privately this year since she was still a student, but we've changed our minds. We are going to be married instead, and Ginny will no longer be a student. She'll still keep to her studies, but she won't be attending classes. At the end of the year, she will test with the others. This will stop any rumors that I or others may give her better grades."

Minerva spoke up. "When will you be married?"

"Right now," Harry said sharply. "Care to bind us, Albus?"

Albus stood up. "I think we should do this elsewhere. The grounds near my cottage up north are nice this time of year."

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "They change their minds quickly. Don't they?"

Severus noticed that Bella was moving towards Potter. She hissed at Ginevra, but a few hisses from Potter saw her sliding upstairs quickly. He chuckled to himself. She was probably angry about the turn of events. *Serves her right.* "Hermione? Perhaps we should leave?" Everyone had begun to talk at once, and he was getting a headache from the ruckus. He simply wanted to be home in bed and holding his wife. He could guess what had changed Harry's mind, but he wouldn't speculate just yet. His wife would explain everything.

"Silence!" Albus said loudly. Then in a softer voice, once things quieted, he said, "Harry, Ginny, Molly, Arthur, Ron, and Minerva need to come with me. I'm afraid the rest of you will have to fend for yourselves until we return."

Those mentioned moved out the back exit quickly. A series of loud cracks could be heard. Neville and Draco each went to grab another Muggle beer. Luna and Daphne were speculating on what had gone on. "Draco," Severus said, "a word if you please."

"Sure."

Severus looked at Hermione. "I won't be long." She nodded and turned to talk to the others. Once Draco closed the door behind them, he said, "What is going on here? What is Greengrass doing here?"

Draco gulped. "She showed up. Saw Neville at a shop, and he told her what we were up to. She came with him."

"Are you going to start work with your father? I know he is counting on your help now that you will have a sibling at some point in the future."

"Yes, I start the first of September, but I will still be living here with Ron. Harry will be back at the castle. It's an agreement that father and I have worked out." Draco grinned. "Mother is trying to push me into a relationship with Daphne, but I don't think I'm ready for that. Not yet."

"Draco, about Lovegood and Weasley, do you three still see each other?" Severus asked uncomfortably.

The boy seemed shocked that Severus would ask such a question. "I suppose you may as well know. Yes, we do on occasion. I told father a few days ago when we reached our agreement. But, sir, it's our business."

"I'm not asking to lecture you. I do not care where you place your... interests. However, I do understand your father's views."

"Well, they're so set on trying for another child. Let's hope they get another male heir. Maybe he'll be inclined to do things their way. Hell, I have a life that I like right now. Whatever will be, will be. I'm not gay, but I enjoy a good shag with Ron and his girlfriend. So, he and I are both naked and both with the same girl. What's so bloody wrong with that?"

Severus chuckled. "Nothing. Most go through this stage. I asked out of concern for your family of course."

"You mean to say that you..." Draco's mouth gaped open.

"Of course," he said sharply. "Some choose to do things while others are forced. Most others experiment and then move on. Your father has asked me to come to lunch in a few days. I know he'll be questioning me. It will be nice to have something that I can finally tell him."

Draco laughed. "He's persistent, isn't he? What's going on with Harry? I've not seen him like that in a long time. He was really peeved about something. And, he was just saying yesterday that he was glad that Ginny and he were waiting."

"You'll have to talk to Harry about that, as I was in another room until he made his announcement." Severus smirked. "I suggest you go help Longbottom with that grill. If he cooks anything like he brews potions, it's probably already too late."

"Right then," Draco agreed. He followed the man back to the kitchen and bid the pair farewell as they left.

"Neville turned the grill off. It seems that he wanted to escort Daphne home. She's not feeling well," Luna said. "Nice girl. Says her dad wants her to marry into the Malfoy line. Seems they are hoping she'll find a pureblood family."

"Yes, that's how they are."

"I pointed out that Neville is a pureblood."

"Is that so?" Draco asked, moving to stand next to her. "What did she say?"

"Said that she liked Neville, but she hadn't really thought about that. She said you seem preoccupied all the time. It was right after that when she claimed to be ill." Luna moved to put her hands on the button of his trousers. "I think since we're alone now..." She emphasized her unfinished suggestion by reaching a hand into his trousers to fondle him.

"Er..." Draco stammered. He didn't know what to say. They'd never been alone before, even though she'd been staying there for three weeks. When they were together, Ron had always been with them. "W-we shouldn't."

"Oh, I think we should." She removed her hand and led him to the small library. She warding the door in case anyone came back and then began pulling off her clothes. She paused when she saw that he wasn't doing the same. "What is it?"

"Well, you're Ron's girl," he said, feeling uneasy. How would Ron feel about this?

"I am yours as well, Draco. Ron told you that already."

"No, he never sai..."

"He did. He wants both of us to be happy. I think this works. Undress," she commanded. When he didn't move to do it, she spelled his clothes off. His erection gave away the fact that he'd been turned on by her abrupt decision. "Come on, love. We might not have enough time."

"All right," Draco said finally, moving to sit on the settee. As the witch moved to straddle him, he knew that he was where he wanted to be. It felt odd that Ron wasn't with them, but it didn't feel wrong either. As she slid down onto him, they both moaned.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"Only three weeks left," Hermione told Harry. He was helping her down the stairs leading to the dungeons. "Sorry about this. I'm just so tired lately."

"Mione, you look really bad. Maybe you should ask Minerva to take over for you earlier. You should have at least gotten them to connect your Floo in your office to your chambers. This is ridiculous. What does Poppy say about those swollen feet? You shouldn't be on them all day," Harry said darkly. "Bella," he called. "Go forward and find Severus." The snake slithered off.

"Really, Harry. He might try to hex her," she said with an annoyed smile. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine."

"Wait," she said, huffing slightly. "I just need a moment to breathe. This is what you've got to look forward to, Harry. Ginny is going to be like this in the future."

"I can't wait to see my child," he said softly.

"Harry, haven't you forgiven her yet? It's been five weeks since we've found out about what she did. You're married with a baby on the way. She's been telling me how lonely she is. She says that after you two consummated the marriage, you sent her back to her mum's and didn't get her until you came here." Harry shrugged and looked away. "You haven't touched her since. I thought you loved her."

"I do, but I don't appreciate someone sabotaging their Contraceptive Potion to trick me into marrying her. Yes, Mione, I was going to marry her, but I was going to do things the right way." He sat down on the stairs. "Have a seat then." When she sat down, he spoke again. "Ron and I had a row over it. I am not speaking to her father or the twins. I mean, things are a mess. This is my first year out of school, and I'm trying to make a name for myself. She could have messed things up for us by doing this."

"I agree, but why keep being angry about it? The Weasleys have always treated us like family. Ginny, well, she wasn't thinking clearly, but she sees her error now, Harry. Have you not even asked how her counseling is going?"

She'd wanted to talk to Harry about his marriage, but the last couple of weeks with school resuming had them all running ragged. Ginny hadn't taken any meals in the Great Hall yet, and she never left their chambers. Hermione had had to visit her when Harry was with Severus to finally get her to open up. It was then that she'd shown Hermione her bedroom, a room separate from Harry's. She'd told Hermione the truth about everything. Whenever Hermione wrote to either, they'd always pretended that all was well.

"I don't talk to her much. I've been concentrating on doing things for my classes, preparing and assignments. You know how it is. It's a lot more work than I imagined, even after I went over things with Albus and Minerva. Then, being Gryffindor's Head of House, well, I have those extra duties as well. *This*," he said angrily, "is exactly why I wanted to wait."

"So this is her punishment then? Making her sleep in a separate room? Are you too busy to hold your wife at night? Pregnancy is a very emotional time for any woman, Harry. /know. I'm doing it now. She needs you. You could be jeopardizing your child by hurting her. Did you think of that?" Hermione sighed. "I'm not trying to be mean, Harry, really. I just want you to think of things from her perspective. You married her, slept with her, and brought her to her mum's for three weeks. You only exchanged letters with her, and when you brought her here, you sprung that room on her. She's not happy. Don't you love her any longer?"

"Of course I do. I just wanted things to be good for us. I don't like what she did," he said sourly.

"Harry," Hermione said angrily, "I believe I can think of a few things that you've done that she doesn't know about."

He laughed. "Yes, I have done things."

"That's all you have to say?"

"You're right," he said. "I'll start tonight. I'll ask her if she wants to come for dinner in the hall. I'm sure all of her mates have been wondering why she hasn't been about. They don't dare ask me though. After that, I'll have her take a walk with me near the lake where I will tell her that I've been a ruddy boyfr... er... husband. I'll ask her if she wants to try to sleep in my bed again."

"Good for you, Harry, but do look a little more sincere. Try not to keep that smirk on your face when you talk to her," Hermione chided softly. "You'll be fine."

"I suppose so," he said. "That day when I heard the two of you talking, I couldn't believe what she'd done. Her reasoning made sense to me on some level, but I felt forced into something. Do you know how happy I was when Molly Flooded over to tell me that the Healer that checked Ginny over confirmed that she was pregnant?"

"I can imagine."

"Well, I knew she likely was, but having it confirmed was a different feeling. I'm going to be a father and am going to get the chance to do the things that my dad never had the chance to do with me. I guess I just wanted things to be perfect. I wanted to propose properly, have a real wedding, and plan a family the right way." He placed a hand over Hermione's belly.

"Harry, I don't know if..."

"Severus is very lucky, you know," he said softly. "Brilliant! She just moved!" His mouth gaped open. "Good Lord! What's going on in there?"

"I don't know. It feels as though my entire...Oh! My water!" she exclaimed, pointing to the step below. Her fluids were leaking, and her muscles began to spasm. "Harry, it's too early. Something must be wrong."

He scooped her up and slowly made his way back up the stairs. "Ruddy dungeons! Damn stairs," he muttered, nearly out of breath.

"What's going on?" Severus asked, approaching them from behind. A large yelp was his answer. "Hermione!"

"She is leaking... water," Harry said awkwardly. "I think it's time."

"It's too early, Severus," Hermione said, crying. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," her husband said. "I'll take her." He took Harry's burden and moved quickly towards the infirmary with her.

Harry followed closely, calling for Bella to follow. All students jumped out of the way as their Potions master billowed by holding their Transfiguration mistress. Just as they began to relax, Harry passed by with one of his large vipers. They scattered completely. Harry chuckled to himself. Having everyone scatter when he came through wasn't all that bad. Before he entered the infirmary, he saw Luna. "Lovegood," he called.

"Yes, Professor Potter," she said respectfully.

"I need you to ask Headmistress McGonagall if she would be so kind as to meet me here. You'll find her with Madame Hooch and Professor Dumbledore in the staff room."

"Yes, sir," she said with a sly smile and made her way down the corridor.

Harry watched her hurry away. He'd made it clear to everyone that even though they were friends before there would be no special treatment. He was to be a fair professor for the school. Things really were working out well. He entered the infirmary and was met with a loud howl. He quickly summoned a parchment and quill to send a message. "Bella," he said to his friend. "I need you to bring this to Ginny. All right? It's important. Come." He went to Poppy's grate, put the letter in Bella's mouth, and threw in some Floo powder. "Potter's chambers! Be nice, Bella. Stay with Nagini." The snake slid in and was Flooed to his rooms.

He made his way to where Severus was standing. "What are you doing?" he asked the pale man.

"She's not going to try to stop it. She said that three weeks early isn't bad. It's in position already," Severus said through shock.

"Er... are you all right then?" Harry asked worriedly.

"Severus!" Hermione shouted. Both men entered. Harry went to one side, as Severus was at her other. Poppy was moving her wand along her stomach.

"Hermione," the mediwitch said, "I don't think we'll have time to give you anything to help with the pain. Your contractions are too close, and you're dilating quickly. She wants out of there." The old witch smiled. "You're about to become a mum."

"Severus," Hermione said, squirming uncomfortably.

"Right here," Severus said taking her hand.

"It hurts. Something doesn't feel right," she said.

"Harry!" Ginny said, bursting in. "Hermione! All okay?"

Harry shook his head. "She's in labor." He looked to Hermione. "We're going to wait outside and leave you two in privacy now. I just wanted you to know that I was here, and we love you."

"We'll be right outside," Ginny said.

Hermione nodded, and then began to whimper while her feet moved from side to side. "I think I have to go to the loo," she moaned loudly, crying slightly.

"No," Poppy said. "That's just how it feels. Knees up. Part your legs. I need to check you."

Harry looked to Ginny. "I wonder if we should put a Silencing Charm up. That's a little personal."

"I guess they will if they need it," she offered and looked away.

"Look, Ginny, I know I've been an arse lately, but you've not been so great either. Things were fine as they were. I just felt..."

"Stop." She pulled his hand between both of hers. "I'm sorry. It was wrong. Am I forgiven?"

"I suppose," he said giving her a lopsided grin. He placed his hand on her stomach. "I mean how could I not." Hermione howled again in the background. "You'll be going through all of what she's going through, and I did participate in the making of our baby." He kissed her nose. "I love you. I'm sorry. Sorry for all of it. I'll make it up to you."

"I love you," she said softly.

When she brought her lips to Harry's, he could have sank to the floor and made love to her. What the fuck had he been thinking? He was married! He had a child on the way! He could have been shagging her each night. He pulled away and smiled. "I've missed you."

"Likewise," she said, moving to kiss him again.

Minerva, Albus, and Rolanda came in. As Harry told them what happened, Poppy ran out, heading towards her fireplace. "What is it?" Minerva asked, noting the witch's alarm.

"I need another pair of hands. She's having problems. I was going to Floo St. Mungo's," she said. "You'll do well enough." She grabbed Minerva and pulled her into the room. "There's little time."

They heard Severus say, "Like hell I will. I'm staying with my wife." Hermione's crying was the last thing they heard before Albus put up a Silencing Charm. There was nothing to do but wait. They all sat or paced while Hermione was in there fighting to give birth to her child.

Harry hated feeling helpless. An hour passed, and nobody had emerged from the room. He stood up and made his way towards the curtains. "Harry," Albus called. "Let them be."

He nodded and made his way back to his wife. "I want you to go get something to eat. You need to take care of yourself as well. I'll be up as soon as I can."

"What room?"

He knew that she was questioning where she would be sleeping. "Mine." She smiled, kissed his cheek, and scurried off.

"How's it going?" Stuart asked a little later when he'd come in.

"We don't bloody know," Rolanda said. "I must say that I am glad that I never went this route." She took her husband's hand for a brief greeting. "I'm worried. If something happens to either of them, I don't know what Severus will do."

"They'll be fine," Harry snapped. "That's it." He lifted his wand and released the Silencing Charm. "If they had wanted it on there, they'd have put it." Albus simply shrugged, but he looked amused. They all quieted to listen.

"She's beautiful, Severus," a clearly choked Minerva said. "Hold her."

"What about Hermione?" he asked darkly.

"I'm trying to stop the bleeding, Severus. Help Minerva with the child and let me work in peace," Poppy said angrily. "NOW!"

Harry quickly put the charm back up and turned to the others. "Bloody hell!" He went to the grate, threw in some powder, and Flooded Ron. "Ron, Apparate to Hogwarts, mate. It's Mione. No, don't come through here. You know how Poppy is. All right."

He stepped away to look back. Everyone had gone silent. Severus had stepped into the room. "Severus?" He simply shook his head sadly and sank to his knees.

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

Ron looked at Draco. "It doesn't sound good."

Draco looked to his father, who had come over for a drink after a day at the office. "Want to come? Snape might need you."

"I do," Lucius said immediately. "Let's go." He hoped that his friend wouldn't lose his wife. Potter sounded stricken, and if he was calling for their other partner in mischief to come right away, it wasn't good. He wondered if the child was already lost. That would break Severus. *God, I hope they are all right. We don't want another enraged Severus Snape on our hands. He would be uncontrollable.*

"Should we tell my mum and dad?" Ron asked. "They've always loved Mione."

"Quickly," Lucius said. "Hell, I don't have to wait. I'll go on. See you there." As quickly as he could, he made his way outside to Disapparate to the Apparition site at Hogwarts. He didn't have permission to Disapparate directly out of Potter's home. He didn't blame the boy to have such precautions. He'd only lived most of his life with someone trying to kill him. He hurried onto the grounds and into the castle, making his way towards the infirmary. When he neared the door, a group of people came out. He identified them as Albus, Minerva, Hooch, and Steward. "What's happened?" he asked.

"There have been complications. The child is fine, but as far as we can tell, we've lost Hermione," Albus said brokenly. Minerva collapsed against him and wailed loudly.

"Severus?" Lucius asked.

"Destroyed. He's with Potter," Steward said, holding his wife close to him. The man must have truly adored Hermione. He was crying as much as his wife. "We left them in peace."

When he entered, he saw Severus kneeling on the floor in complete despair. Potter was with him, trying to talk to him, but it seemed that Severus wasn't paying any mind to him. Lucius nodded and made his way to his friend. He stopped when he neared them. Severus was crying. He'd never seen the man like this. "But that's impossible. I love her," he was saying.

"You've got to let me do it, Severus. You know I can," Potter said darkly.

Lucius knew what Potter was about, or he could at least imagine. There must be something he could do, but he likely needed Severus' help. Lucius moved forward, kneeled next to them, nodded to Potter, and pulled Severus to him. "He'll handle it," he told Severus.

Harry scrambled out of sight behind a set of curtains. Almost immediately the harassed looking mediwitch exited the room. She was holding the baby close to her bosom. "He took the umbilical cord. He removed me. How dare he interfere? I am trying to..." She looked at Severus sadly. She kneeled next to the broken man.

Lucius watched as she touched Severus' face and made him look at his child. The child was sleeping as if nothing was wrong in the world. Severus finally calmed enough to really see his child, likely for the first time.

Severus reached out to move one finger along her face gently. "She's like her mother." He looked to his friend. "Lucius, stop trying to have a child. You may lose Narcissa. Be glad you have Draco." He took his child from Poppy. "She didn't even see her. She let go before our daughter took her first breath."

The blond man looked at Severus firmly. "Snap out of it, man. Potter is in there." His eyes widened to try to signify what he meant. "You will see her again, my friend."

A cold chill swept through the room, and a gray blur brushed past them. Lucius spoke to the mediwitch. "Take the baby out of here, Pomfrey. Now. Speak to nobody about this. Just keep them out. Tell them Severus needs a few moments." The woman obeyed, taking the child from the stunned man. As soon as the door closed behind her, he warded it as securely as he could. It would not do for any do-gooder to come in and try to stop things. Severus didn't deserve this fate. He left Severus to grieve on the floor and mumble to himself as he made his way to Potter. The boy was passing his hands along the witch's stomach wound.

"She had to cut the baby out. The cord was wrapped around its neck. Hermione insisted that she take her no matter what," Harry said when he noticed Lucius watching. "She bled to death. It was all too fast and too much for Poppy to handle all at once. Minerva had no idea of how to help, so she mostly calmed Severus."

Three glass vials broke simultaneously, and the cold chill began anew. This time a breeze accompanied it, and the same gray mist swirled around them. Potter began spitting and hissing like a snake, and for the first time in months, Lucius was suddenly afraid. He seriously thought about getting on his knees before him. The Dark Lord had never done anything like this in front of him, but he'd often bragged about the things that a Parselmouth could do. He looked away momentarily as the boy rubbed a portion of the umbilical cord along the hastily sewn up cut. The stained sheet was sliding down her lower half. Lucius moved to make sure it remained over her. It would not do to allow Severus' wife to be seen so inappropriately. The gray mist suddenly appeared between them, hovered over the body, and seemed to seep down into it.

"Good Lord! Was that...?"

Potter, continuously chanting, moved away to plunge a needle into his arm, and siphon his blood to a large container through a short tube. Once the container was full, he added the umbilical cord to the liquid inside, shaking it, and chanting. He moved a hand over her stomach. His chant became louder, and the hissing came out longer. The blood he'd taken from his own body vanished from the container, leaving only the umbilical cord. Lucius shivered and not only from the temperature of the room. "Blankets,"

Potter said suddenly. Lucius summoned some and placed them over her. "Severus," he breathed before he leant over to place his hands on her temples and chant.

Lucius nearly tripped over his own feet in a haste to get Severus. As quickly as he could, he pulled Severus up. "Your wife needs you," he said urgently. Severus nodded and allowed his friend to lead him in.

"Potter!" he bellowed suddenly. "Get away from her!"

Lucius slapped Severus in the face lightly to draw him out of his shock. "He's helping her. He's doing what Pomfrey could not."

Severus grabbed Lucius by the collar and drew back to hit him. He paused, blinking rapidly. "Hermione," he said, pushing the man away. "Harry, what's happening?"

Weakly, Harry said, "I got her before she went beyond the veil. She's here. I just need a little more time. It just needs a little longer for the healing to be complete. I'm weak."

"He took a large portion of his own blood, and I think he gave it to her," Lucius added. "His magical chants seem to be draining him. What can we do?"

Severus moved behind Harry and helped to keep him upright. Lucius moved to keep Potter's hands on Hermione's face. All the boy had to do was chant. They could hold him up until he was finished. Nearly ten minutes later, Lucius was developing a severe backache and even Severus was slumping. Potter stopped talking all together.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath and coughed slightly. Lucius ran around to help the exhausted Potter to a chair while Severus tended to his wife. He looked back to see that her eyes were barely open, but she was looking directly at Severus. "Lily," the girl breathed.

Severus looked at her oddly. "Hush now. Save your energy. Harry did a lot to help you. I'm not quite sure what he did, but you're here. I don't care what anyone says." He rested his head against hers. "I love you," he said emotionally. "I should have told you that more."

"S all right," she murmured. "Where... Lily?" Her eyes closed, but she was still breathing. Panicking, Severus checked her pulse.

"She lives."

"So she does."

"She needs Poppy," Severus said. "They both do."

"Severus, we cannot speak of what Potter did here," Lucius warned. "We'll say that she just started breathing again. They'll not likely believe it, but that will be our story."

Severus nodded. "Get Poppy." He placed his head on the pillow next to his wife's and sobbed again.

Lucius knew that it was mostly relief, and for a moment, he thought a tear might come to his eye. He would hate to lose Narcissa as well. He quickly sped away to get the Mediwitch. As soon as he opened the door, Weasley fell in. He'd been leaning against it. "Where is she? What's going on?" he bellowed. "Why were we locked out?"

Lucius pulled his wand to level it at the boy. "Get back, boy." Draco pulled Weasley back. Lucius eyed Pomfrey. "She needs you."

"Is she alive?" Molly asked anxiously. "What's going on?"

"Only just," he said. Pomfrey ran by him. "In good conscience, I would ask that you all stay here. Severus didn't take losing... thinking he'd lost his wife well."

"But I saw it. She was gone," Minerva said emotionally. "How can this be?"

"It was a mistake. She lives," Lucius insisted. He looked around. Everyone seemed to be happy that she was alive, but he knew there would be questions later. They would find a reason to explain it. Maybe they could say that the pulse was still there, and Potter knew some chant to keep her stable while her magic began mending her body. That sounded nice. He moved back in quickly to let the others know. Pomfrey would have to be told the truth of course.

As he made his way back to his friend and his wife, he felt lighter inside. He'd just helped to bring someone back to life. Potter didn't know how lucky he was to have such a gift. Power was not something to take lightly. He'd have to give the boy a few books to read on a few things. Maybe they could be of some use since he was a fairly new professor. It would be his way of saying thanks for allowing him to help. A hand on his shoulder stopped him from entering. Dumbledore. Shit.

"How is Harry?" the old man asked. He knew. The old man knew. It had to be why he'd made everyone leave the room. He must have known that Potter would do something to help her. Why did he allow it? There was nothing darker than what the boy had just done.

Lucius shrugged. "When I came out, he was very weak and needed assistance."

Dumbledore nodded and walked ahead of him. Pomfrey was looking at Harry and moving her wand over his body. "I'll take over from here, Poppy. There is nothing more that you can do for him." With a wave of his hand, Harry lifted and floated behind the man. "I'll put him in the private room where I can attend to him. We shall not be disturbed for an entire day," he told them. Finally, he looked to Severus. They eyed each other warily. "It had to be done."

Severus nodded. "I agree. We'll work through it." Lucius watched as the old man left with the limp body of Harry Potter floating behind him. A door appeared in the wall across the room, and they disappeared inside.

"Severus, I think I should leave you two alone."

"Have Minerva bring my daughter, Lucius. Only Minerva," he added, not looking at his friend. His eyes were fixated on his wife's face. She was still breathing steadily. Pomfrey was again hovering over her. Lucius left.

Once he saw the anxious group outside, he held up his hand to halt the questions. "Severus would like for Minerva to bring his daughter to him. Madame Pomfrey is checking her over again, but she seems all right."

Minerva nodded, took the child from Molly's arms, and made her way to the couple. She began weeping as she neared the bed *Hermione is alive! She was dead. Harry did this. Harry, Lucius, and Severus brought her back.* "Severus," she said softly. "I've your lass for you."

He left the bedside to go to her. "She's all right, Minnie. She breathes again," he whispered. Minerva nodded and looked past him to her young friend, so much like the daughter she'd never had. Her heart had broken when she'd ceased to breathe. She'd seen the blood, and the blank look in the girl's eyes. She'd seen the horror in Poppy's eyes as she'd frantically tried to stop the bleeding and heal her. It had happened so fast. Severus took the child from her, placed a kiss on the small forehead, and moved to his wife's side again.

"What will you name her, Severus?" she asked.

He looked at his daughter for a moment and then to Hermione. "She was asking for Lily. I thought at first that maybe she'd seen Lily somehow, but I think that's what she wants to name our daughter. What do you think?"

"I think I would wait until your wife awakens," Minerva said with a chuckle.

Poppy cleared her throat. "It seems that Potter was able to hold her here somehow while her magic mended her body. He's a hero... again. He has been momentarily

weakened. It was a great drain on his body. Albus is tending to him." She moved to Minerva's side. "Shall we tell that story to the others? Someone must notify her parents as well."

"We'll leave them to it," Minerva said softly. "Severus, I'll be back to see about the baby. You two have gone through enough tonight. We'll take care of her while you rest." She transfigured Hermione's bed slightly, making it wider to accommodate Severus.

He nodded, eyes never leaving his daughter's face. Once they were gone, he began speaking to Hermione. "She's perfect. I think she is just as I imagined her. We have so much to give her, my love. Things will be all right soon." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "This was a close call. I don't want to go through this again. She is our first and last child, Hermione. When you died, I was broken. You could say that I was lost without you. I don't know that I could have gone on."

A small humph made him look to his wife's face. Her eyes were open slightly again and a faint smile curled her lips. "Beauti... ful."

"Just like her mother," he agreed. "Did you want to name her Lily?" She nodded slightly. "Why?"

"Harry," she explained, "did this. His mum was there. Told me come back."

"You saw Lily?" he asked incredulously.

"I heard her." She swallowed. "Water."

He gripped the baby with one hand while he used the other to get a glass of water. He helped her taste just a bit. "Lillian Elladora Snape?" he questioned his weak wife. "Elladora for my mother. Lillian as a variation of Lily's name in honor of Harry?"

"Yes," she whispered, reaching out a frail hand to touch her daughter's forehead. "Love... you... both." Her hand fell away as she drifted back off to sleep.

I love you as well, Hermione, and as much as I love Lillian, I will be sure that we have no more children. I can't lose you again. Severus looked at his daughter. She opened her eyes at just that moment. He wondered what color they would be. They seemed to be a dark blue, but he was sure that he'd read that most newborn children had similar eye coloring. "I hope you have your mother's eyes."

~~~~~ SS ~~~~~ HG ~~~~~

"The first stage of the prophecy is completed," the Succubus murmured, looking at her mistress' feet.

"Yes," came the reply.

"What is the entire prophecy, if I may be so bold? I've only heard part of it once in passing."

*"He severed his old ties and thus one day made her his own*

*Alongside the snake wizard's child will their heir be grown.*

*Separate, the progeny each possess a particular skill.*

*Bring them together and end a Dark Lord's reign, they will.*

*Balance will be had with the alliance of a lion and a snake.*

*It's the bonds of love and blood that evil cannot forsake."*

"Thank you. I have longed to hear it in its entirety. My child grows stronger each day. We shall begin preparing him as soon as you see fit," the Succubus groveled, hoping to please her mistress.

"There is more to the prophecy, but I shall not divulge that. On another note, excellent work. I would think that your host has a lot to do with this. We cannot touch Snape, nor his wife and offspring, but your host can, as can your offspring. We will gain revenge on those that have betrayed us. Your host will have his fantasy fulfilled as a reward." She faced the Succubus. "We will see that the bonds of the children are broken one way or another. They will not join together to defeat the next Dark Lord. We shall join with him when he emerges."

"How do we know who and when?"

"We do not know who, but we know when. It is all I will say for now. Rest assured that we have much time to train your child in the ways of old. He shall be the one to get into the good graces of the new Dark Lord. Either the Lord will help us, or we shall destroy him. Either way, we win. There is much to prepare for. Go. Leave us. Send word after your child is born."

"Yes," the Succubus hissed obediently. She'd promised her lover that she would be his this night. He'd been such a faithful servant thus far. She wouldn't take much of his magic as he erupted within her body. As she made her way back to his home, she wondered what his fascination was with the Granger woman. Why her? Perhaps after they'd found a way to take on permanent, solid forms, she could take the woman's likeness. Maybe her lover would be satisfied with that. Time would tell. According to the High Mistress, they had plenty of time to be ready for this. The Dark Lord was probably just now establishing himself into the Wizarding world, or he'd be doing so soon. The last Dark Lord had killed many fellow night stalkers for sport before they realized that he'd never help them. The new Lord wouldn't be so fortunate as to be a Wizard of the Snakes. Whatever the case, every Succubus and Incubus would eventually be freed from their nightmarish existence.

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**Southern's Notes:** Well, thanks for sticking with me for the ride, mates. My beta says she would like to see an epilogue, so I will likely be adding that at some point soon. I sort of like the loose ends, as it sets up the sequel.

For those of you that enjoyed this story, I will be writing a sequel and also a prequel (Severus / Lily). I'll post information about those to my Yahoo!Group, Potter\_Place. If you are interested, please join us.

I would like to thank everyone for reading. If you've read through the last thirty chapters and haven't reviewed, please do so. I'd like to know if it was worth the read.

## Epilogue

Four months have passed since the last chapter. We get to see how everyone is doing.

**Disclaimer:** The characters still don't belong to me, sigh.

**I would like to say thanks to my beta, Charmed\_Nay. She always took the time to look over my chapters for me no matter what she had going on. She's simply brilliant and quick. I couldn't have done this without her.**

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Severus kissed Hermione on the brow before slipping out of bed. He quietly made his way through the open door to the small adjoining room. The dimly lit lantern cast a comfortable, soft light upon the room. He gazed down into the crib at the sleeping face of his daughter, Lillian. She would be four months old in a couple of weeks, and not one night had passed where at some point he hadn't come to just look at his miracle. Her dark hair was already long and silky to the touch. She had Hermione's complexion though, for which he was grateful. Her little button nose resembled Hermione's own. At that moment, she opened her eyes. They'd turned to a deep shade of brown much like her mother's pair.

"Hello, Lily," he whispered softly, waving his hand at the mobile above her crib. It began playing a light tune that he'd privately dubbed the Harry Potter Theme. It was, in fact, a gift from Harry. He'd made it himself, and even though it didn't go along with the theme of the baby's nursery, they'd decided to use it without altering it. The top part appeared to be an upside down Quidditch pitch. Dangling below, a Seeker, looking suspiciously like Harry, chased a Snitch whilst a rogue Bludger chased after him. A Beater taking on the appearance of one of the Weasley twins laughed and followed. Another player, a Chaser, resembling Draco flew towards the hoops with a Quaffle where a Keeper resembling Ronald waited. A Rolanda-like referee flew amongst them all, blowing a silent whistle. The players would interact continuously until someone spoke the password or Lily fell asleep. It was quite brilliant, to be honest. It seemed that Potter took his role of godfather very seriously.

Severus had wanted to ask Lucius, but after Harry's part in Hermione's recovery, he'd felt indebted to the boy. It was just as well. Lucius was busy preparing for the birth of his second child. It felt odd that his child would be going to school with a Malfoy child and a Potter child. It was likely that the three would be great friends. Would they be the next Golden Trio? He smirked. "Good Lord, I hope not. I've had enough of those for one teaching career."

He smiled as Lily cooed slightly, shook her little legs, and smiled at him whilst trying to reach for one of the mobile's figurines. He kissed his index finger and placed it against his daughter's temple. Severus didn't move until she'd fallen back to sleep. She'd finally started sleeping most of the night. For a while, both he and Hermione had a rough time getting up with her every couple of hours. Sleep had been hard to come by. She had now settled into a pattern of falling asleep near eight, waking at midnight, and sleeping until eight again. It was rather suspicious that she'd adopted this new habit after Hermione's parents stayed with them for the last couple of weeks. They'd been able to catch up on their much-needed rest whilst the doting grandparents took over nighttime care. Whatever the woman had done, he appreciated it.

He and Hermione were finally getting back on track in the intimacy department. Severus had been afraid to touch her after Poppy deemed her healed enough to make love. He'd been so uncomfortable with their first attempt that it had failed miserably. He'd been relieved when the baby's cries had interrupted. After a long talk, Hermione agreed to take the potion again, but she claimed that she wanted to have another child eventually. She said that being an only child had left her lonely at times, and whilst he agreed, he didn't want to put her body through such torture again, put himself through such torture. He'd almost lost her. That was the second time he'd thought that she'd been taken from him. Nobody had realized it until after, but when Potter revived her, it was just after midnight on her nineteenth birthday. How many people can say that they were given life on the same date... twice?

Each year, Lily's birthday and Hermione's birthday would be an emotional time for him. The first time he'd thought he lost her had been when Higgs had snatched her from Hogwarts. When he'd seen the bloodied lock of hair and her ring, he had been devastated. That devastation had been nothing compared to the one he'd felt when she had faded before his eyes whilst delivering Lily. It would always haunt him. The feel of her fingers losing their grip against his, the light leaving her eyes, the ragged last breath that she pulled in and released... He quickly wiped at his eyes.

They'd been together over a year now, had a child, and had a solid marriage. He couldn't ask for more. Noticing the skies outside graying slightly, he decided to go down and uncloak the house. He'd found out that their book had finally been published, and he didn't want any owls delivering the paper, any congratulations, or letters from friends until he had a chance to tell her. He'd had made sure that all owls had been directed to his house-elves. He summoned Zim and Zenka to him. "I'd like a nice breakfast on the back patio this morning. A couple of flowers would not be amiss," he said. "I shall wake her up after I've gone through the post. Do you have it ready?"

"We is happy you is letting us help you," Zim said quickly. The elf snapped twice. "You is finding it in the study."

Severus nodded and went about enabling the house to receive post again. Once he made his way into the study, he nearly growled in frustration. There were letters, packages, and single parchments heaped onto his desk. He went through them, finding only the things they would want to open immediately. The rest seemed to be mail from readers, their publisher, and many others. He sighed. She would have to help him go through that lot. When he entered the kitchen, he chuckled. Through the back door, he could see that the table was already prepared. The elves were just finishing breakfast and bringing it onto the patio.

"I am going to retrieve her now," he said, moving to place the letters on the table. "I would like for you to be near the nursery in case Lily wakes earlier than usual." He quickly made his way to his wife. She was not in bed. He looked into the small nursery and found her smiling at their daughter's sleeping form. He put his arms around her. "Good morning."

"Morning," she said softly. "You're up early."

"I have something to show you," he said. "Come. Zim and Zenka will be about whilst we have breakfast." He pulled her down to the patio with him.

"Oh, Severus, this is very thoughtful," she said appreciatively. "It's not your birthday yet. I wonder what the occasion may be."

"Do I need a reason to be good to my wife?" he asked indignantly.

"Not at all," she said with a grin. "But there must be some reason that you've done all this."

"Without further ado," he said smugly, pulling a parcel from beneath the table. "Open this."

She tore into the paper and squealed with delight. "They've published it! When?"

"It's been on the shelf for four days now. I've had a hell of a time screening the Floo, the Piw, and the post. In fact, we've several letters to look at in my study along with those just to your left from our acquaintances."

"Look how beautiful this is. We've created this together! I wonder what the public's response will be?"

"As I said, we've already received letters about it," he said before sipping his coffee.

"That makes two things that we've created that are beautiful. First, Lily and now our book in all its hardbound glory! I'm rather glad that we settled on midnight blue for the color." She pulled his unoccupied hand into hers for a moment before tearing into one of the letters. "Oh, no," she said softly. She handed him the letter.

*Hermione,*

*I wanted to let you know that a couple of weeks ago my son was born. His name is Nikolai Radomil Krum. His mother, like you, had a difficult delivery. Unfortunately, she*

*was not able to pull through as you were. I've lost her now. I will do my best to raise this child as I see fit. I do hope that I can count on your help at times. There are a great many things that I am unsure of. My mother is not well, and she cannot help me much. I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Always,*

*Viktor*

Severus frowned. "I am sorry to hear about his loss," he said. He truly meant it. What he'd gone through with Hermione's delivery was not something that he would wish on anyone. "Interesting name he's picked out for his child."

"Yes, poor Viktor. I wonder if maybe we should invite him for a visit this coming summer. The Quidditch season will be over by then," she said, eyeing her husband nervously.

Feeling pity, he said, "Perhaps we could. We've extra room."

"I'll mention it in reply." She blew out a large breath before reaching for the next letter. "Minerva!" She smiled as she read. "I think we've been missed. It seems that dear Minerva and Albus now feel that teaching is no longer for them. She says that everything is caught up, and she eagerly awaits my return next week. She also says that Albus is still feeling a bit weak, what with all he did to heal Harry quickly. She says that the long days of teaching your Potions classes are taking its toll."

Severus chuckled. "I hope it's not truly been that hard on him. She could have hired another substitute for my paternity leave. It was he who insisted on pulling his weight about the castle. He doesn't say anything about it in our Floo conversations."

"True, but you saw how he looked in person before we left to come here. Maybe it was too soon for him to start taking over your classes. I don't know what he did to Harry, but for Harry to be back teaching in two days, it must have cost him something as well." She sighed sadly. "I overheard him talking to Minerva. He told her that Harry would have been in a weakened state for nearly a couple of weeks if he hadn't known how to help him."

"I thank anyone listening each day that Harry knew what to do," Severus said. "It appears that he has learnt more than even I know about the Dark Arts. There is a letter there from him. Although I have no idea why he would be writing. We've just seen him for Christmas."

She smiled and opened the letter. "Oh! He says that they can feel their baby moving. He says that Gringotts has notified him that the account he created for his unborn baby is already gaining profits from the book. I'm so glad we finally talked him into accepting something. He also says that Ginny has ended her counseling sessions, and they've been getting along better." After a long pause, her eyes lifted to look at Severus. "It's Nagini. She's resigned herself to death. She wants to go home and die in her forest in Albania. He and Bella are going to bring her there. In fact," she gasped, "they are probably there as we speak."

"Why?" Severus asked incredulously.

"He says that she's nearing thirty years. That's about the life span for her species. He's offered to keep her alive, but she's refused."

"So, Bella gets to be alone. I still don't trust her in snake form," Severus said darkly.

"I don't think she's all that bad any longer," Hermione said softly.

"What?"

"I can talk to her," she said. "I've had a few conversations with her. I can hear her in my mind because of Harry's Mark. Lily will be able to do the same when she's old enough."

"Just bloody great! Why did you not tell me about this?" he asked, feeling his anger mounting.

"So much happened. I didn't know until that day Ginny and Harry were married, and then the pregnancy was so tiring. I was waiting for a good time. Then, I had Lily, and really I've not thought of it since."

"Is it any snake or just Bella?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just Bella," she said. "Harry hears her that way as well. It's how they converse silently without Parseltongue." He stood, opened the back door, and disappeared. "Shite! Things were going so well." A moment later, he entered with a small snake. "What the hell are you doing?" she asked, leaning away from it.

"What's it saying?" he asked, eyeing her warily.

"How am I supposed..."

*It's too cold, a voice whispered. What does he want?*

"Are you talking to me?" she asked the small snake. It peeked at her curiously.

*Tell him to put me back where it's warm,* it said.

"Severus! I heard it in my mind! It wants you to put it back." She watched as her husband exited and then returned to his seat.

"You speak Parseltongue now."

"No, that's impossible," she said with a laugh. "It's as it was with Bella...in my mind."

"Hermione, you were hissing and spitting like a snake. It did the same in return."

"Oh, my God. So that's what Harry meant about speaking another language without realizing it." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I've never understood Nagini or Bella when they've hissed."

"You've not been around either since Harry... since Lily was born."

"You mean to say that his blood and magic transferred some of his powers to me. Parseltongue being one?"

"I would say so," he said, clearly annoyed. "Has anything else changed that you can note?"

"Not exactly. I've been taking things easy though. I barely use magic, wanting to do things hands on with Lily," she said softly. "We will need to meet with Harry about this."

Severus nodded and grinned slightly. "Perhaps a Parselmouth won't be so bad. You can always set other snakes to spy on Bella or spy on her conversations with Harry."

"Oh, honestly," she said, glaring at him lightly. "Let's see what Ron has to say." She read his letter and smiled sadly. "I think Ron is unhappy. Would you like to read?"

"Sure," he said, taking the letter.



Mione,

*I am still at home here for the holidays. Harry has left to go off to Albania, and he didn't want any of us to go with him. So I am stuck here with Ginny. She's a right moody witch now that she's pregnant. I don't remember you being this way. Maybe you could send her some pointers on how to be a better pregnant woman. You'd think after my mother's many pregnancies that she could sit down Ginny and give her a talking to.*

*Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I'm getting some odd feelings about Luna and Draco. It seems like I'm not wanted sometimes. Not so much by Draco, mind, but by Luna. Do you think that she fancies him more than she fancies me? We had that rift a while back when I found that they'd started carrying on without me, but we worked through that.*

*Since I've been traveling with the team lately, I don't get out to Hogwarts to see her as much. I know Draco visits her there often on the pretense of seeing Harry. Have you noticed anything? If so, I'd like to know. Draco says I just feel odd because I've been away a lot, and Luna just sort of laughs and shakes her head like I'm a right nutter. I'd like your opinion though, Mione. Ginny isn't one that I'd like to ask, and Harry seems to be all caught up in something lately. You're the only one that would give it to me straight. Cheers!*

Ron

Severus raised an eyebrow. "He has been hanging about the castle lately according to Harry and Albus. I would say that he doesn't like living at Grimmauld Place alone. He's always had someone about before. Those weeks when Ron is away, he likely wants to be around his other friends. Maybe Miss Lovegood sees this as acceptable without realizing that her first lover is now feeling left out."

"I still say Draco fancies Ron, but until I see an interaction between Draco and Luna alone for myself, I don't feel that I'd be able to give Ron a fair opinion. I'll write to him and let him know." She picked up the last letter. "This is from Daphne Greengrass. What the bloody hell does she want?" She flipped over the expensive, olive-colored envelope and broke the seal.

*Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Merton Glynnis Greengrass*

*request the pleasure of your company*

*at the marriage of their daughter*

*Daphne Perenelle*

*and*

*Mr. Neville Frank Algie Longbottom*

*On Sunday afternoon, February the fourth*

*at two o'clock*

*Greengrass Manor and grounds*

*(Reception following at the Greengrass Pub on Diagon Alley)*

*A set of wedding buses have been purchased*

*to transport any guests wishing to attend the nuptials.*

*Simply hold this parchment out, and shake it twice*

*to alert the drivers that you need a ride.*

*The buses will be picking up guests between the hours*

*of eleven and two*

*Transportation home will be provided.*

"I can't believe it! Who would have thought that those two would have hit it off so quickly? I am happy for Neville. She seems like a nice enough girl. Her parents must be proud that she landed a pureblood after all. I'd heard that they interfered with a romance she had going with Justin Finch-Fletchley last year."

Severus shook his head. "I'm not sure that is entirely true. Daphne's mother has a sister that married a Muggle-born wizard. She and her family are always welcome in their home."

Hermione smiled. "I suppose that goes to show that we can't always believe nasty little rumors."

"Too right," Severus said, leaning forward to kiss her lips lightly. "If you are finished nibbling, wife, perhaps we could slip back into bed before Lily wakes."

She giggled. "I think that would be a grand idea, husband." Hermione glanced down at their first published book and beamed brightly. "I love the sound of this *Lascivious Dreams? Sometimes they are too good to be true. Written by Severus and Hermione Snape with a foreword by Harry Potter.*" She pulled her husband back to her for a deep kiss. "Take me to bed."

Hermione held her husband's hand as they made their way to their bedroom. They dismissed the watchful little elves and had just settled down on the edge of the bed for a healthy snog when a small squeal of delight alerted them that their daughter was awake. Severus growled. "Damn."

"But you'd not change our lives for anything in the world, would you?"

"Certainly not. I'll fetch Lily." He left her there, and she prepared herself to feed her child. A feeling of completeness settled over her body as her husband came back to her, holding his child proudly. Their first year together had been full of twists and turns. Was it now time to live relaxed lives and enjoy their new family that they'd created together? What would the future hold for them? She didn't dare to guess, but she could only imagine that it wouldn't throw anything their way that they couldn't handle together.

~~~~~ Here Ends The Succubus Part One ~~~~~

Southern's Notes: I just want to say thanks again to everyone that followed this story, and I did appreciate each review that you left for me. I'm going to break from this

story line for a while to complete some other WIPs that I currently have. Hope to have you along for that adventure as well. Cheers!