

Breaching the Otherworld

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Dreams and a magical book draw Hermione to seek the help of Lucius Malfoy, who has a secret of his own: Severus Snape can be brought back from the Otherworld. Will she help?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 28

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Hermione woke up, sweaty and panting, once again. The dream. It was back. Across the room, Ron slept soundly, the occasional snore escaping, and otherwise, the room was still and silent. Why was this dream haunting her? What was she to do?

It had been nearly a year since the war against Voldemort had finally ended, and she'd started putting her life back on track. However, lately, she'd been feeling uneasy and couldn't help dwelling on all that had happened and what could have been if some things had been done differently. She supposed it had a lot to do with her latest project. As far as the uneasy feeling, there was something constantly niggling at her mind, there was the uncomfortable feeling of being watched, and then there were the dreams.

Knowing that she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, she slid from beneath her warm duvet and slipped on her shoes and robe. As she padded across the floor, her gaze found Ron's sleeping form. He was curled on his side, one hand under his head and the other dangling over his bed. She grinned and felt affection flow through her body. How many men would share a room with their girlfriends but sleep in a different bed? And deep down she knew it was time to move things to the next level, but for some reason, each time she'd resolve to just do it, she couldn't carry on with it.

With a soft sigh, she left him and went down to the kitchen to fix herself a cup of tea. Once that was done, she made herself comfortable in the library while sipping it slowly and gazing at the many spines of books that graced the shelves at Harry's Grimmauld Place.

"Kreacher is hearing loud noises. Does master's friend require him?" said the elf from the doorway.

"No, not at all," she said with a smile. When the little elf turned to go, she thought of something she wanted to ask him. "Wait. Kreacher, has this house ever had a book titled *Breaching the Otherworld*?"

His eyes widened. "Kreacher remembers this book. His old mistress gave it to Mr. Malfoy many years ago."

"That figures," she muttered. "I've been..." Her voice trailed off. Why should she confide anything to him? It wasn't like he could help her. Or could he? "Was it given to him or was it loaned to him?"

"Kreacher is uncertain."

"Thanks. That will be all then."

After he left, she thought again about the dream she'd had. It was always the same...mostly. She could now fully appreciate what Harry had gone through all those years before when he'd dream about the doorway in the Ministry. It was very frustrating for her because each time her dream got to a certain point, she'd wake. Although, with each new dream came a little more that hadn't been there before.

After the first dream, she'd searched the shelves at Grimmauld Place to see if a copy of the book was there, turning up nothing. She'd searched the Restricted Section at Hogwarts as well. Nothing. No bookstores she'd gone to had a copy either...nor could they tell her if there was such a book. Kreacher, though, had finally confirmed that there was a book.

"That means," she said aloud, "that I need to find it." She set her cup aside and moved to look out the window.

Outside in the predawn light, the trees swayed as a light rain began to fall. Was someone causing her to have these dreams? How could she know about a book that she'd never seen? "There's something more going on here."

And then she saw it...a dark, shadowy figure out near the tree line behind the house. Hermione rubbed her eyes and tried to see it again, but without another strike of lightning, it was simply still too dark. She waited until it struck once again, but whatever, or whoever, she'd seen was gone. Swallowing, she stepped back from the window.

No, there wasn't anyone out there. Just a play of the shadows or her already overworked imagination. Right? Numbly, she sat down and frowned. It was almost as if a tall man in a long, dark, billowing cloak had been standing out there...likely gazing at her through her window. But it couldn't be. Harry had the place warded so that nobody could enter the grounds uninvited.

She supposed if she were honest with herself, she'd admit that the shape reminded her of Severus Snape. "No," she said firmly. It was her imagination running wild or her eyes playing tricks on her. That was all. His name came to mind simply because she'd been helping Harry sort through his things and prepare a formal request to have his painting added to the walls of the headmistress' office at Hogwarts.

But the book. The dreams.

"Maybe I should arrange a meeting with Lucius Malfoy." As she said this, she felt the odd sensation of being watched once again; forcing her eyes to focus on the window, she scanned the little she could see. Was someone out there watching her? Chills swept over her flesh, and the hair on the nape of her neck seemed to rise on end. A flick of her wand saw the curtains closed tightly.

Miss Hermione Granger,

I must admit to being surprised that you have the audacity to ask for a private meeting with me, especially after you tried to testify against me for past deeds...of which I am clearly innocent. However, it so happens that I shall be in London today. I suppose we could meet after my engagement for a few minutes, as I intended to have a drink anyway before going home. You'll find the directions on the second page of this letter.

Curiosity has always been a downfall of mine, I fear, so I'll expect you to join me after seven this evening.

Lucius A. Malfoy

"What's that?" Harry asked, eyeing the parchment in her shaky hand. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that was Malfoy's owl."

"Well, yes, it's his father's," she said, slipping the letter into her pocket.

Harry's mouth gaped open. "What the bloody hell is he writing you for?"

She pursed her lips for a moment. "I... uh... I've asked to meet with him."

"You can't be serious. What for? Does Ron know?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, and please don't say anything to him."

"I don't like being put in the middle," Harry said firmly. "What's this all about?"

"Well, remember how I told you I'd had a few recurring dreams?"

"Yes."

"They've not stopped."

"But you said..."

"I lied," she admitted. "I didn't want you two to worry about it. Well, for the last week, I haven't had it, but..." She held up her hand to stave off his response. "Harry, I think I'm being sent a message...from beyond."

"How so?"

"The dream keeps expanding and getting clearer each time, and now I can clearly see myself going for a thick tome and even reading a few things from it. I've searched for it all over, and nobody's ever heard of it." She bit her lip when his eyebrows arched.

"And that would mean it's not a real book then. If old Rickman doesn't have it on his list over at the bookstore, nobody would."

"I doubt he'd have this book. It's... it's dark obviously, and well, I don't think it was in circulation much."

"So, you think it's really out there."

"I know it is."

"How? A hunch?"

"Kreacher told me that Mrs. Black had a copy of it here, and she loaned it to someone years back. The book's called *Breaching the Otherworld*."

"Lucius Malfoy."

"Yes, he's the one she gave it to, and I intend to ask him to see it. There's got to be a reason I'm dreaming this, Harry, and if I don't do this, it will keep bothering me, haunting me."

He nodded. "I can understand how that feels." His smile faltered. "Hermione, what if something more is at work here? Is it possible that someone is causing you to have these dreams? Have you been practicing Occlumency? Making your mind vulnerable at times?"

"Well, I've only done that little bit with you and Ron, but no, it's nothing like that. I would know it." She frowned then. "I think."

"Want I should go?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I think it will be easier if it's just me." Patting her pocket, she added, "He seems shocked and a little offended that I'd dare ask to meet with him after I testified against him, but as he pointed out, curiosity needs to be sated."

"I don't like it. And I don't like lying to Ron."

"Don't think of it as lying. I'll tell him everything...after I meet with Malfoy. You know how protective of me he is. He'll insist on coming along or talking me out of it, and that won't do me any good." She wriggled her eyebrows. "Besides, you know I can take care of myself."

He nodded. "Okay, I'm going to Hogwarts for my classes. See you tonight?"

"Not until late," she said. "I won't be meeting him until after seven."

"Right then." He looked at his watch. "You'd better wake Ron. George'll be expecting him early today."

"Oh! I forgot. Thanks!"

It wasn't truly lying. She was just not mentioning it. He and George were meeting with a consultant who would consider giving them a loan to expand their business in other parts of the country. She couldn't ruin that for him by bringing him down with her problems. Part of her did fear meeting Lucius Malfoy, as she knew exactly what he'd been capable of doing in the past: giving a cursed diary to a child, trying to murder her friends, and so much more.

"Damn," she muttered. "Please don't make a mistake."

Nervously, Hermione made her way to the building (its name, The Greengrass Pub, lit in olive green) and felt relieved that she'd worn her best robes. It was obviously a high-class place. On the door was a sign stating that it was for members only, causing her already anxious stomach to clench.

He'd done this on purpose to cause her embarrassment. He knew that she'd not be able to get in and sought to humiliate her. The bastard. She should have realized he'd agreed too readily. She turned on her heel, ready to Disapparate, but stopped. She couldn't give up. He had what she needed, and if she scurried off now, she might never get another chance to speak with him again.

So, she turned around, walked purposefully to the door, and tugged it open. The maitre d' looked at her in surprise before smiling.

"May I help you?" he asked, gazing at her from top to bottom appreciatively.

"I'm supposed to be meeting Lucius Malfoy here?" she said, cringing because it came out sounding more like a question than a statement.

The man looked down at the book in front of him, his finger moving along the lines of obvious reservations and notations. "Hmmm." He looked up apologetically. "I've only just come on at seven, but I don't think that Mr. Malfoy is here."

"Could you at least check?"

The kind smile faded, and he smirked slightly. "What is your name? Perhaps the reservation is in your name instead of his?"

"I doubt it. I'm not a member."

The smirk was replaced by a sneer. "I didn't think that you were. However, you do look familiar, so I thought that maybe I was mistaken." He shook his head and nodded towards the doorway. "We can't just let people in off the streets to bother our patrons I'm afraid...no matter how well dressed they might be." He then leered at her lewdly. "Or how lovely they are."

Behind her, the door opened, and a gust of wind crept in with it, causing her hair to fly into her face. As she swatted it away, a hand slid around her waist, pulling her close to a solid body, and a cool voice whispered, "I'm surprised you've come, Miss Granger."

She went rigid and turned to face Lucius Malfoy, unable to disentangle herself from his grasp. "You're late," she blurted, unable to look away from his silver stare.

"Mr. Malfoy!" the man gasped. "I don't have your name down, but please come in."

Lucius stepped away from her and smiled a small, mocking smile. "A Malfoy is never late." He then looked over to the maitre d' haughtily. "Well? My usual table, man. Show us to it."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Malfoy," he said quickly, hurrying out from behind his host's podium. He dared not a glance at Hermione as he briskly led them down an aisle and through a door that opened into a long, dim corridor. Finally, they stopped right outside a small, private room. "Here you are, sir. Order when you are ready as always. I hope that all will be to your liking. Tonight..."

"That will be all," Lucius said, waving a dismissive hand. He then gestured for Hermione to precede him into the room.

"Here?" she questioned uneasily. She'd hoped to talk to him privately, but at the same time, she wanted other people to be in the room.

He nodded. "My usual table." After a moment, he added, "Are you coming in or not? I'm quite famished if you don't mind."

"Dinner? I thought we were only to have a drink?"

Instead of waiting for her to enter, he shrugged and made his way to the table, pulling out a chair and then walking around to the other side to seat himself. He again beckoned her forward and pointed to the chair. "Seat yourself."

She did so warily, quite aware that the door had closed with a snap behind her. What was he planning? "Look, I'll get right to it. The reason I've asked you to meet with me... Are you even listening?"

He looked up from the wine list and held up a finger to silence her. "We'll have a bottle of Chateaufort du Pape." After saying that, he tapped his wand on the wine list, the bottle appeared instantly. "I would appreciate it if you'd join me in dining. I'd feel uncomfortable eating while someone is gazing at me and not eating also." He indicated the menu in front of her.

"Well... all right." This wasn't going as she'd planned at all. And why was he being so kind? Did he want something in turn? Had he truly made an effort to change as he'd told the Wizengamot? Even Harry seemed more tolerant of Draco Malfoy and had taken to exchanging owls with him upon occasion.

"Allow me?" he finally said when she couldn't make up her mind. After she nodded in agreement, he said, "Hors d'oeuvres for starters, I think. Then, boeuf bourguignon,"

he cocked his head to the side, "with more sauce. Oh, and new potatoes." He thought a moment and said, "For afters, we'll have crème brûlée." Once again, he tapped the menu. While waiting for starters, he filled their glasses with the smooth, red wine.

"Thank you," she said. After taking a sip, she set her glass aside and gazed at him. "I do appreciate this, but I'd not intended for this to happen. I want to speak with you about something... something a little personal."

"And before you start, Miss Granger, I would like to ask you a few questions of my own."

She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. "All right." And there it was. He did indeed want something. No wonder he was being so pleasant.

"Why did you testify against me and my family?"

"I didn't set out to hurt anyone. I was called on and asked questions." She sighed. "I answered them honestly. You know they gave me Veritaserum."

He nodded. "I, too, spoke the truth."

"That you'd been Imperiused again. Blackmailed. Forced into doing what you did." Her tone held a hint of incredulity.

"Naturally."

"It's just a little hard to believe. You forget that some of your past ~~deeds~~ were aimed at my friends and me."

"When the Dark Lord raided Hogwarts, I lifted my wand to no one. Nor did my wife, who ultimately helped Potter win by hoodwinking the Dark Lord."

"If you were me, you'd be leery as well."

"And, yet," he said softly, leaning forward, "here you sit with me, all alone." His mocking smile returned. "Don't you feel frightened if you believe me to be such a terrible man? After all, I might have poisoned this wine ahead of time."

She swallowed thickly. "I think you'd be mad to do anything, especially since Harry knows I'm meeting you."

He then smirked and sat back, bringing his glass to his lips, though his teasing eyes never left hers from over its rim. After a moment, he said, "I'm not who you think me to be." He placed his glass on the table and ran his index finger along its rim. "I do appreciate that you spoke up for Draco, saying that he didn't want to give you up when you were captured by Greyback and the others...or when Crabbe attacked you with Fiendfyre."

"It's my honest opinion."

"And it's why I've agreed to meet with you."

She felt nervous again and resisted the urge to wring her hands. Instead, she took a deep sip of her wine for courage. "I've been having dreams lately."

An elegant eyebrow arched. "Indeed? However lonely I might be, Miss Granger, I am a married man."

"No!" she denied. "I don't mean that they've been about you!"

"Draco then?"

"A book."

At that moment, a tray of assorted meats, cheeses, and crackers popped onto the table. "Ah, at last," he said jovially, reaching out to add a few to his plate.

She did the same and tasted one before smiling and moaning in appreciation. "Very good."

"This is my favorite sanctuary," he said. "The privacy goes well with the service and all that's served here." His gaze met hers. "Company is always nice... when the right person joins me."

Was he flirting with her? Why was his gaze so intense? She felt the heat rising in her cheeks. "About that book, sir. I'm to understand that Mrs. Black loaned it to you."

His demeanor changed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he denied. "Nothing was ever loaned to me by her, certainly not a book."

"Kreacher told me that she did give it to you." Trying to soothe him, she added, "It's been a long while. Perhaps you've only forgotten about it *Breaching the Otherworld*?"

He stood and tossed his napkin on the table. "What is this!" he said, voice raised, clearly outraged. "Are you recording this conversation?"

"What?" she asked, startled. "... no..."

"Leave me. I don't know what you're talking about, and you can tell Potter that!"

"Harry? What do you mean?" She was truly perplexed.

He flung his long hair away from his face. "I believe we're done here."

Hermione rose and stepped towards him. "I'm not recording anything, and nobody sent me to find out anything. I swear."

"You're trying to gather new evidence against me," he accused, stepping away from her, turning to gaze out the fake window, which displayed a lovely tropical scene. "I'll be visiting my solicitor! This is harassment, entrapment even."

"I just want to know why I've been dreaming about it! I'd never heard of this book before."

He spun around to face her, grabbing her chin and gazing into her eyes. "I cannot be certain if you're lying or not. Therefore, this conversation is over."

"Please... I need your help." She felt absurd for begging him, but she was too close to possibly solving the puzzle to stop now.

"D-did Narcissa put you up to this?" His voice had lost its smooth quality and had roughened. "Is this another parting *gift*?"

"Parting gift, what? I've not talked to her since the day you all left the Ministry after your trials. I swear it."

"This is impossible. Only a select few know of this book, and I'd never thought it would reveal itself to a Mu... Muggle-born witch."

"Reveal itself to me? I don't understand." She shook her head in confusion.

He now gazed at her in a different way. Gone was the mocking smile and the air of false kindness. He was looking at her shrewdly, as if sizing her up. "Will you come with

me?"

She stepped back. "Where to?"

"My home."

"I..." She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I doubt your family would appreciate my presence." The uneasy feeling overcame her once again.

"Narcissa has gone," he said quietly. "She and her remaining sister are taking a few months to get to know each other again. Draco has gone along with them to France." He looked away from her. "We did not part well. I thought that she..." A pop behind them signaled that their dinner had arrived. The noise snapped him out of his pensive moment. "Perhaps we should discuss this over our dinner."

They began eating, an awkward silence enveloping them. "The mushrooms are divine," she said in hopes of breaking the quiet. He, however, only nodded in agreement, his mind seemingly on a faraway place. When Hermione could stand it no more, she pushed her plate away and began her tale, not looking at him as she did so. "For the last couple of months, I've been feeling strange...like I'm being watched, like something's not quite right." She smiled ruefully. "I've always hated failing at anything, and that's what this feels like: like I've failed at something and need to try to fix it."

Her eyes lifted to meet his, and she was surprised to see that he was hanging off her every word. "And then the dreams came. I'm always walking down a corridor towards a large room. It's dark, and there are only a few sconces along the way and a little moonlight from open windows to guide me. I have the urge to run before I'm grabbed from behind, but it's like my feet can't move fast enough. But I can feel a presence there, stalking, waiting for the opportune moment."

"And?"

"Sometimes I get to the room, sometimes not. It depends. For those dreams where I do get to the room, I started noticing a large desk, and then, I noticed that on the desk was a lone tome...large, dusty, unused." She nodded towards him. "The book you have."

"I've not admitted to that," he pointed out. "I simply have heard of the book."

Hermione rolled her eyes and continued her story. "I can see myself flipping through the pages of the book. There are pictures in it, all are too fuzzy to make out in the darkness, and I can't really read the text. However, sometimes a word or two comes into focus for me."

"What words?"

"Death. Life. Otherworld. Sacrifice. Rejoining." She sighed. "Different things. Last night, the dream went further than ever. I could actually hear something coming down the corridor towards me. I could feel it coming, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. I knew I had to get out of there and take the book with me." She ran a hand through her hair. "As I tried to retreat through yet another doorway, the book fell and opened to a page; it had a chapter titled *Bringing What's Gone Back: Rejoining the Living*."

Lucius wiped his mouth with his napkin, filled his glass...and hers...once again, and took a long sip before speaking. "Anything else?"

"I thought I saw someone behind our house," she admitted. "It was before dawn, and there was a rainstorm, so I couldn't see very well, but..."

He brought a hand up to his chin and grasped it in thought. "This book... it's not an ordinary book. It calls to someone who has need of it, someone it wants to read it."

"And it called for you?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

"Apparently, it thought it might be useful in my quest to bring back the Dark Lord."

She gasped. "So... you admit it then."

"I admit nothing." His voice was clipped. "What have you been doing, Miss Granger? What have you been meddling in?"

"Nothing at all!"

"There must be something that you've done that's made this book call to you. Think, girl."

"You act as if it's sentient."

He arched an eyebrow and nodded. "That's exactly what I believe. It knows what page to turn to, the words arrange themselves for you in just the right way... What have you been doing with yourself lately? Anything new at work?"

"Nothing new there, no." She tried to think of what it could mean. "Oh! I've been helping Harry put together a proposal to force the Ministry to recognize that Snape didn't abandon his post as headmaster and that his portrait deserves to be on the wall with the other headmasters, even though we've never found his body."

Lucius' eyes widened, and Hermione could tell that something she'd said had struck a chord with him. Did this have something to do with Snape, the book and dreams? She thought of the shadowy figure watching her from the darkness.

"Mr. Malfoy, do you know anything about Professor Snape's missing body?"

He shook his head. "No."

"You're lying." She could see him wiping a sweaty palm on the front of his robe before he reached for his glass. "Did you move it? Bury him?"

"His body was never found."

"I saw him die."

"Yes, Severus is dead," he said bitterly. "I as good as killed him...the one who protected my son when I could not. It was I who sent him to his death."

Hermione felt a welling of compassion for the man. "Nagini... she killed him. He died in Harry's arms, bleeding to death, her poison killing him quickly." She paused for a moment. "We went back for him, wanting to give him a place beside Dumbledore... and his body was gone." When he said nothing, she added, "Some say he lived, but I saw him die. I know he's gone. I just don't know why someone took his body like that."

"What is your theory?"

"We thought someone took it out of spite, not wanting him to have a proper burial, doing God knows what with it." She reached across the table to lay a hand over his, which twitched beneath hers. "But I now think that maybe someone took it... with only honorable intentions in mind."

He moved his hand from beneath hers quickly. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"You took his body. Where is it?"

"I... no."

"You cared about him, didn't you? Snape, I mean. I heard Umbridge say that you'd always spoken highly of him." She paused for a moment. "My dreams, what I saw, what I feel now... this has to do with him, doesn't it? What does it all mean?"

He rose and held out his hand to her. "Come with me."

This time, she didn't hesitate; she rose to take his hand. Some big pieces to the puzzle were finally falling into place, and no matter if she was making a smart decision or not, she intended to try to put them all together. The man before her could help her. She had to risk it.

"Lead the way."

His home was much like she'd remembered it, only this time, she was able to see it from the outside and was amazed at how beautiful the lawn and gardens were. It was obvious that his land was charmed to keep the cold weather at bay; else the flowers would surely be gone already. The most surprising thing, however, was that he had peacocks for pets...lovely white peacocks.

When he tried to usher her into the room that she'd been tortured in, she stopped and shook her head. "I can't."

He nodded. "How tactless of me. I apologize. Come. My private study it is then."

Gratefully, she followed him, looking on either side of the hallway at the haughty portraits of his ancestors and expensive arrangements and statues. "You have... a lovely home," she said.

"Mmmm," he replied absently as he opened a door.

There was a roaring fire in the grate, and the room was quite warm, which helped to soothe Hermione's chilled body and also her nerves. Many tall bookshelves lined the walls, and while there were many books on them, there were also other objects...some she'd never seen before. She dared not ask about any of them, uncertain she'd really want to know.

"Port?"

"Oh, I don't think I should."

"Come now. Only one?"

"All right."

"Excellent. Have a seat by the grate. I'll be right there."

She did as he requested and watched as he procured two tumblers and filled them with the dark liquid. It occurred to her then that it would have been a good thing to have Harry along with her. What the hell was she doing in his home with him? Alone? Had she gone mad? Hermione didn't believe for one minute that he'd been Imperiused to do what he did. She could believe that he'd been in over his head, but he did all that he'd been requested willingly. The only thing that kept her from fleeing was the sincere way Draco had claimed he and his family were trying to change. Even Lucius had been convincing...sort of...when extending his olive branch.

"You needn't be so nervous, you know," he said softly, moving towards her and extending the glass to her.

"Well... I'm not exactly. I mean, yes, I am, but there are many reasons."

He seated himself in the chair across from her. "Before I answer any more of your questions, I'll have an oath from you; this can go no further, not even to Potter."

She shook her head. "I don't know that I can do that. Can't I just look at this tome and see if anything comes to me?"

"There's more, and I am sorry to say, but I don't trust you to keep it quiet." He smirked a little. "Just as you don't *exactly* trust me."

"More about Professor Snape then." When he said nothing, she prodded him. "Right?"

"Perhaps," he said with a shrug. "I'll admit to nothing. Not at the present time."

She brought the glass to her lips and drank deeply, surprised at the smooth flow of liquid as it slid down her throat. It had been aged to perfection. Unable to help herself, she took another drink before looking back up at him. "I am uncertain. Can I think about it?"

"I'll have your answer now if you don't mind."

The tone of his voice put her on edge. If she refused to take a wand oath, would he do something to her? Try to Obliviate her? "Give me a moment," she snapped, feeling as though she was in over her head. Why had she ever thought she could handle Lucius Malfoy?

"The book, it doesn't like to be known," he commented, gazing at the fire. "It only goes to those it deems worthy." He sniggered a little. "I must admit that I am quite shocked that *you* have come to me requesting it. Cissy's aunt told me that one day someone would learn of it and come calling for it." His eyes met hers. "When I received your owl, I was surprised, but I thought perhaps it had something to do with the upcoming anniversary. I thought perhaps you'd wanted to involve my family in the event the Ministry is planning. However, when you mentioned you'd been dreaming about a book..." He seemed to shudder. "I, too, remember those dreams well."

"You had them?"

"I did."

Hermione bit her lip in thought. What should she do? Would it hurt to take a wand oath if it meant that she could get her hands on that book *Think of the knowledge, Hermione. The tome's text isn't common knowledge. Whatever's in there, however dark, could help many people.* And there it was. She wanted to learn. New information was hers for the taking.

"What sort of oath would you have me take? Surely you must know that I'd not take an Unbreakable Vow. We know what happened last time someone took a vow for your family."

His eyes narrowed slightly before he spoke. "Simple wand oaths will do. I won't see the inside of Azkaban ever again...not even for Severus."

"I knew it! This must all have something to do with him."

He simply shrugged and looked towards the fire. "I await your decision, Miss Granger."

Deep down she knew that she should talk it over with Harry and Ron, but if she could find out what happened to Professor Snape's body and find more out about the tome, she'd have to chance it. Besides, she could take care of herself. She'd more than proved that already during the war.

"All right. I'll do it," she said, pulling out her wand.

"There's something that I must warn you about," he said, eyes glinting. "The book, sometimes it doesn't take no for an answer, and it's definitely on the dark side." He paused. "So, you need to make certain that this is what you want before we go on. I don't want to be held responsible for anything you might have to do."

"Have to do?" she asked uncertainly. "Could you give me an example?"

"Fair enough," he said softly, gazing at her intently. "Years back after I'd started reading in the book, it suddenly gave me a message...well, more like a demand."

"What was it?"

"I had to send a diary that I had in my possession to Hogwarts." He smirked. "Of course, I thought this ridiculous and refused. However, it warned me that I would lose something dear. Having been in a similar predicament before, I thought it best not to tempt fate as it were, so I did what it said. At first chance, I sent the diary off to Hogwarts."

"By putting it in Ginny Weasley's cauldron!" Hermione accused. "I remember what happened to her after that. How could you? Why not just send it along with Draco?"

"I am a father first and foremost, Miss Granger. Do you honestly think I would send it with my child?"

"I suppose not, but still... a little girl!"

"How was I to know it would cause so much trouble? I merely did what was asked of me before losing someone I cared for."

"But that might have been rubbish! And it didn't say you'd lose a family member, did it? Just something you cared for."

"Yes, I found out later on a few occasions what happened when tempting the tome. Heeding its warnings is always prudent. Now, are you still interested?"

"Why did you want the book?"

"I'll have your oath first, though I'm sure you can surmise that for yourself."

"You'd hoped to contact the Dark Lord...to bring him back." When he said nothing, she pulled her wand eagerly. "Do you think... that this, what I'm being called for, is going to show me a way to bring back Professor Snape?"

He leaned forward and said, "I can only hope so."

"If it's possible, he would live life as a hero and get the respect he deserves. Harry and I have been talking, and we both, even him, feel it's so tragic...the way he died and the life he lived."

"Potter? Feeling sorry for Snape? I find that hard to believe."

"He has his own reasons." She nodded towards her wand. "Let's do this."

Lucius pulled his out as well and flicked it towards Hermione's, enveloping them both in a red glow. "You will discuss nothing that I divulge to you with anyone who would use it against me...ever."

"I swear it."

"You will not try to pass this book on to anyone else unless it specifies that you must do so."

"I swear it."

"Considering that you may need assistance, I will help you, but anything that we do that could cause problems and possibly be considered illegal will not be revealed to anyone who might use it against me in any way."

"Paranoid, are you?"

"As I said, I'll not return to Azkaban."

"I swear it."

"Even though I have warned you that there may be certain consequences for not following what the tome instructs, you agree to study it and try to learn its secrets. Do you still accept this and refuse to hold me responsible for anything that might occur?"

"I swear it."

"And will you keep this book to yourself only...locked away...once you are done with it... until someone else approaches you and needs it?"

"I... swear it."

"You will warn them exactly as I've warned you?"

"Yes, I swear it."

"Very well. That should do." He flicked his wand, and the glow faded.

At this moment, Hermione realized that her brow was damp with nervous perspiration and her hands were shaking slightly. Putting away her wand, she said, "Tell me about Professor Snape."

Picking up his glass, he took a drink and gazed off in the distance as if thinking something over. She took that moment to admire the room and the man before her. He'd changed a little since his trial. Where he'd been run down and withdrawn...supposedly from months of abuse at the Dark Lord's hands...he'd regained that smooth, self-confident air she'd come to associate with him over the years. And she had to admit that she found him pleasantly attractive now that he seemed to be more civilized. His voice broke her trance.

"When I learnt that I was responsible for Severus' death, I felt quite guilty. He'd done all that he could to look after my family when I was unable. That's something a man doesn't easily forget." His eyes found hers. "I've always liked Severus. His mother's family was of high esteem for many years." He smiled then, remembering something fondly. "Though he was desperate for friends, he wasn't always easily swayed to do things my way. I am ashamed to say that I manipulated him in some things. Nevertheless, I felt it was for his own good."

"But why do you think you are responsible for his death?"

"I was the one the Dark Lord sent to fetch him. Had I known... I would have told Severus to run."

"He wouldn't have."

Lucius shook his head. "He was always foolishly brave when he should have been more careful." He dropped his gaze for a moment and then blurted, "I have Severus here. I couldn't bear the thought of him being paraded about by Potter and the Ministry as the man who'd killed Dumbledore. I didn't know that Potter would... change his tune."

"Burying him with your family, that's very honorable," she said softly, feeling sorry for what he'd gone through and had been dealing with. Guilt was something she was very familiar with. "But don't you think people have the right to know what became of him?"

"He's not been buried, Miss Granger."

She sat back as if slapped. "Sorry?"

Rising, he held out his hand. "Come with me."

Hermione gazed at his hand for a moment and timidly placed hers in his, allowing him to pull her up. Instead of setting down the half-full glass, she drained it quickly, feeling as though she'd need it for whatever he was about to show her. As he led her back down the corridor and to the stairwell that led to his home's dungeons, she tensed up.

"I assure you there are no ghouls here," he said with a mocking smile.

She rubbed her arms through the fabric of her robes. "It's quite cold. You don't have any of your dementor pals about, do you?"

He flashed her a mischievous grin that she found relieving. After passing a series of doors, he paused before a wooden one that was bolted by thick, rusty locks. "Severus is inside. Prepare yourself."

"Inside?" She was unsure of what to expect. A coffin? A tomb? Something similar to a morgue? However, when the locks were removed and the door opened, she nearly fainted. The brisk, chilly wind that rushed out to assault her had nothing to do with the trembling that overtook her body or the gasp she emitted.

Severus Snape was lying in the middle of the room atop a comfortable bed, a duvet drawn up over his chest. To all appearances, he was soundly sleeping, though she could see that his skin was paler than ever. Slowly, she moved forward, making certain Malfoy stayed in her line of sight, as deep down she was afraid to be left in the room alone with the dead man. Unable to help herself, she reached down to touch the duvet...to verify that there truly was a body beneath it...only to jerk her hand away.

"It's freezing."

"This wintry room preserves him," Lucius said grimly, seemingly unbothered by the temperature. "Along with some magic of course."

She peered at his throat where she'd last seen him trying to stop the bleeding from the wounds that Nagini's bites had inflicted. His neck had been cleaned thoroughly and only the ravaged flesh remained. A peek beneath the duvet at his clothes and hands showed that he'd been changed and tidied. "Someone's been caring for his body at least."

"Narcissa and I... we appreciated all he did for us."

"Mr. Malfoy, I must say that I'm impressed, but... why are you keeping his body here? Why not just let him be at peace?"

"And do you think he's at peace?" he asked, suddenly vehement. "I think not!"

"Well, I don't know, do I? But... to just lie here like some ornament in your home..."

"How dare you judge me? I do this for Severus and nothing else. I'd hoped that the book would call to me again...show me some way of reuniting his soul with his body." He sneered then, and a glimpse of the old Lucius momentarily returned. "Instead it deemed to call upon you." His voice lowered. "And now I ask, Miss Granger, what do you plan to do about it?"

"Show me the book, and let's see what I can find out."

He nodded and turned on his heel to leave the room. She hurried behind him, casting a piteous look at Snape's body once more before exiting *There may be something that I can do to help Professor Snape. This would be an amazing breakthrough, wouldn't it? Once I learn what to do, maybe I can do the same for others.*

Visions of the Weasleys staring in shock as Fred wandered back into the Burrow for Sunday dinner flashed through her mind. She imagined Tonks and Lupin being reunited with little Teddy. There were so many who'd been sacrificed. She was possibly on the verge of...

"What are you thinking?"

She shook away her thoughts and realized they were already back in his study. "I'm a little anxious about all this, and I hope that whatever happens is something good."

He sighed. "Be wary of this tome, Miss Granger. That's all I can ask of you...repeatedly."

"Call me Hermione."

"Very well. I suppose you may call me Lucius, as we'll be spending time together."

She said nothing, but she knew that she wouldn't spend as much time with him as he seemed to think. Yes, she might have questions, but she could likely handle most of this on her own.

"The best place to hide something you don't want anyone to find is in plain sight," he said with a sly smile. He walked behind his desk and pulled a large, black tome from a shelf. "Here we are. The name's been transfigured, of course, as were the pages." With a tap of his wand, the book shuddered. "A word before you take this," he said as he placed the book on his desk and seated himself.

Hermione sat in one of the comfortable chairs across from him, eyes finding the book. It was exactly the same as she remembered from her dream. Suddenly, she looked around the room, taking in everything anew.

"It was this room that I dreamed it to be in." Her head swiveled around as she looked at the door. "And that doorway... something was coming." Shivers made their way up her spine and into her hair, making the bushy mass feel as though it were standing on end. "It must be powerful... and dark." Part of her was suddenly afraid. What had she got herself into?

"Perhaps another glass of port before I carry on?" She nodded in reply, so he stood and made himself busy with their tumblers.

Unable to help herself, she reached out to run a finger along the spine of the book. She could actually feel the hum of magic beneath her flesh *This is really happening. I*

can't believe it. Just as she touched the corner and begin to lift it to see the first page, she saw Lucius at her side, drinks in hand.

"No! What are you doing?" he bellowed. "You mustn't!"

But it was too late. The cover was already opening, the yellow-tinged page visible. "I just thought..."

"You idiot! Do you know what you've done?"

"What?" she asked, bristling, letting the book close and sitting back to snatch the drink from his hand.

"You opened the book *here!*"

"So?"

"So, now you will not be able to open it anyplace else." He frowned. "If you'd waited, I was about to explain that to you." Shaking his head, he rounded his desk and sat down with a thud.

"That's crazy."

"That's the book's decision."

"Luckily for me, Cissy's aunt explained that to me, else I'd have been stuck reading it in that dreadful home of hers. You should have quelled that bloody curiosity of yours!" He shook his head. "Thankfully, nobody will be here for a while. At least you won't be interrupted. However, I don't know that I like the fact that you've manipulated me."

"Manipulated you? Are you mad? I had no idea that would happen."

"Well, I have guests occasionally, things to do, commitments. Now I'll have to be babysitting!" He took a deep drink from his glass. "Damn it."

"You said you wanted to help me," she pointed out. "What does it matter if I have to come here for a little while each day to read."

"And where will you tell your friends that you are going? What if I am otherwise engaged? What if the book refuses to be put off?"

"You know how important this is," she retorted hotly. "... that is to say, we, might be able to bring back Professor Snape! You might have to cancel a couple of your tea parties, *Lucius*."

His face transformed into one of a menacing man who was trying to hold his temper in check. When he leaned forward and spoke, however, his voice was low and calm. "You'd better hope that the book will allow us to establish a room that you may use as you wish without venturing into the rest of the house."

"What do you have going on here that you don't want me to see?" she asked suspiciously. "Something illegal maybe?"

"How dare you!"

"Oh, I know what it is. You just don't want any of your friends to see that you are keeping company with a Muggle-born, especially me...Harry Potter's friend."

He rose. "I think it's time you should leave."

"No," she said firmly, not rising. "We will straighten this out first. Shall we see if we can come to some arrangement with the book?"

"I can give you the run of my dungeons," he said finally after a long pause. "You will have access to Severus there, among other things, and if need be, I'll have the privacy that I require when I do have guests."

She swallowed thickly. Alone in his creepy dungeons with Snape's corpse. "Er... all right."

Lucius gazed at his timepiece. "I really must ask you to leave. We can finish this tomorrow."

"Expecting someone?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

She could tell by the tone of his voice and the guilty way his eyes shifted that it was likely a woman who was visiting. "And what about that little speech you gave earlier about being a married man? All talk, was it?"

He snorted lightly. "Good evening, my dear. I will see you out."

A/N: I chose this prompt: 19. Lucius Malfoy took notice of Hermione Granger during the battle at Hogwarts and when she'd been captured, strongly resisting Bella's torture. He'd never seen a woman--aside from Bellatrix--take charge and fearlessly do what needed to be done. And, unlike Bella, she was sane and clever... and dare he say beautiful? If only Narcissa hadn't been afraid of action the way the Muggle-born was. He seeks her out. Whatever happens is up to you.

As allowed, I tweaked the plot and added in a theme from one of the others: bringing Snape back from the otherworld. I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

"All right?" Harry asked as soon as Hermione entered.

"Yes," she said with a nod. "Ron?"

"Not home yet."

"Good."

"What is it?"

"I... Well, it was very interesting to say the least."

"And the book?"

She bit her lip and tried to think of what she could tell him that wouldn't go against her oaths to Lucius. She supposed for now it wouldn't hurt to just give him the bare facts. "He had it. I had a time of getting him to show me." She smiled to reassure him that all was well, though she wasn't quite as optimistic.

"Where is it?"

Her smile faded. "I left it there. It seems the book is contrary. It will only allow a reader to actually read it where it's first opened, so..."

"So you'll be spending time with the Malfoys then?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Not with them, no, but in their home," she said softly. "He's going to give me leave to use a room on my own."

"Why's he being so nice?"

"Er... well, I think he's truly trying to change. This is a gesture of friendship."

"Hmmm." Harry's expression had not changed. "What are you hiding from me?"

"N-nothing... much."

"I knew it!"

"Knew what?" Ron said, joining them. He leaned in to kiss Hermione's cheek.

"Knew that I'd fall into yet another research project," Hermione said quickly, uncertain why she truly didn't want Ron to know much details. She noted that Harry turned away angrily and poured himself a glass of water.

"Oh, well, that's sort of good because, uh, George... he wants me to go to France, see, and uh... there's this bloke who is interested in helping us start up a chain of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes there."

"Why doesn't he go?" Hermione asked in shock. "Shouldn't he be the one taking the break?"

"Well, he doesn't want to leave here," he said with a shrug. "Guess he feels closer to Fred... you know, where they started it all."

"How long will you be gone?" Harry asked.

"Maybe a week or so. It depends." He grinned and puffed out his chest importantly. "Went over it all with George today, and I think I'll do good enough." His glance moved back to Hermione. "And if you're going to be busy, the time will pass quicker for you...and me."

She smiled and nodded. "I will miss you though." And while that was true, she was relieved that she could use the time to be away from the house and to delve into the book.

He grinned and reddened slightly. "Er... want to go up?"

"Yeah, I'd like that," she agreed.

"Hermione, I'll be up early in the morning," Harry said, eyes boring into hers. "We can talk about your research then."

"Okay." She looked away quickly and allowed Ron to lead her upstairs to their bedroom. He was likely hoping that they could make love, seeing as they'd be apart for so many nights. She fully intended on doing so. Why not? She loved him. They should share this. He was the man she'd spend her life with. Why not let things carry on farther than ever before?

However, later, as she turned over with tears tracking her cheeks, she could only feel guilty that she'd been frigid again. Something had caused her to stop him. His obvious disappointment hurt her most of all. Why couldn't she go through with it? She wanted him, and he certainly aroused her, especially when he kissed her body all over and lingered on her center, giving her an explosive orgasm. What was wrong with her? What sort of person was she to allow him to do *that* but nothing more?

Oh, he'd seemed to enjoy the other things she did for him, but she knew deep down that he would have preferred to be inside of her when reaching climax*Damn it!* It was as if some unknown force wouldn't allow her to go through with it.

When Ron had moved between her thighs, eyes looking at her in question, she'd had every intention of telling him to make love to her. Instead, her voice formed the words of a soft rejection. Perhaps she should speak with her mother and get advice. Surely there wasn't anything that had happened in her past that her mind had blocked out, yet subconsciously affected her.

She'd read about something like that before, and it was the only explanation she could think of. Other than someone having a jinx on her. But who would care about her sex life enough to do that? Hermione's eyes narrowed as she thought of someone meddling in her life that way. And then Molly Weasley's kind face flashed through her mind. Would she go that far to ensure that Ron and Hermione's relationship remained non-sexual?

That was also worth looking into... but later. She had something more pressing to deal with, and the break from Ron for the week would give them both time to cool down and get over the awkwardness of another failed attempt at lovemaking.

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Hermione woke early, kissed a still sleeping Ron on the cheek, and went down to the kitchen to make breakfast. To her surprise, Harry and Kreacher were already in the kitchen, the elf hovering a pot over the fire while cleaning off a spoon.

"Oh... good morning," she said. "I was going to make breakfast."

"Kreacher will," Harry said. "We have to talk."

"You weren't joking when you said you'd be up early," she commented. "Let me get some juice."

"Kreacher, she'll have some juice," Harry said firmly and indicated the seat across from him. "Tell me."

"Harry, there are some things that I won't be able to tell you."

"Why?"

"I, uh, made wand oaths."

His expression changed to one of disbelief. "You can't be serious."

She raised her chin defiantly. "Very."

"You're smarter than that!" he roared, shaking his head, face contorted in a sneer.

Hermione hadn't ever seen Harry look at her that way and crossed her arms in front of her in a protective move instinctively. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," she began in a small voice. "That tome, Harry, it holds secrets. There are so many things that I can learn and put to use. I thought it would be worth it."

"Tell me everything. We'll find a way around this wand oath."

"The book would know. I can't."

"What? 'The book would know'?"

She nodded, pulled her wand from her sleeve, and cast a charm so that they wouldn't be overheard. She didn't want Ron to walk in again as he had the night before. "Lucius wa..."

"*Lucius?*"

It was her turn to sneer. "Yes, Lucius," she said firmly. "He warned me that the reason I'd been having these dreams is because the book wanted to make itself known to me. He feels it's sentient."

"Go on."

"Would you use anything that I say to you against him?"

"It would depend."

"Then I can't tell you everything. I made a wand oath not to divulge anything that might incriminate him to anyone that would use it against him."

"What's he told you about? Murder? Other crimes?"

She looked away and wished that she could simply tell him the truth about everything. Ignoring his questions, she said, "The book called to him in the past. He knows what it is capable of and will help me." Her hard gaze found Harry's. "That should be good enough for you. Trust me."

"I do trust you. It's Malfoy I don't trust."

"I was wary at first, too, but he seemed so helpful, so different. Can't we just give him the benefit of the doubt?"

"What else can you tell me?"

And here she debated on what she could say. There was no way she could let on that she knew where Snape's body was or who'd taken it. However, she did know that if Harry would ever wish for anything, it would be to bring back the dead. Hermione decided to use this to get his acquiescence. "I think it wants to show me how to bring someone back."

His expression softened. "Hermione, as much as I would like that, Dumbledore said that there's no true way to bring someone back."

"With all due respect to the headmaster, Harry, I'd bet that Dumbledore didn't know this."

"Because it's not common knowledge."

"Yes."

And it's dark, very dark."

She nodded.

"Then why didn't Malfoy bring his old mate Voldemort back?"

Hermione's cheeks heated, and her eyes widened slightly. What could she say? She couldn't tell him the truth. Instead, she whispered, "Who's to say he didn't try?"

Harry sat back and stared at her for a moment. "The diary. That's why he sent it to Hogwarts. He wouldn't have known anything otherwise."

She bit her lip and looked away. He'd guessed it right. Surely this wouldn't count against her. There was no hum of magic, no telltale signs of any curse.

"And if you're quiet, that means I'm right."

"I didn't say that you were."

"But I am. I can tell."

"Don't you see?" she said finally. "I can't just walk away from this opportunity, even if it's Lucius Malfoy who's helping me. The past will have to stay in the past...for now...while I go through this book."

"And what if you get hurt along the way? I can't just stand by and allow him to... to influence you."

"Look, I've got the week without Ron here to devote my time to this. If I don't make any progress by then or if I feel threatened in any way, I swear I will come to you about it. All right?"

He nodded, though it was apparent that he wasn't happy. She could see his jaw clenching and emotion storming in his eyes. Her heart filled with affection as she realized how much he cared for her and wanted to protect her still.

"Harry, you're a great friend, you know that. Thank you." She smiled brightly. "Trust me, okay? Give me this week."

"All right." He smiled back genuinely for the first time that morning.

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"Are you comfortable, Miss Granger?"

"I thought you'd agreed to call me Hermione?"

"Old habits, I suppose," he said.

"I am quite comfortable. I appreciate this room," she said with a small smile. And she did. Lucius had transformed an old unused room, or so he'd said, into a cozy study that only she and he had access to. He'd also created a Portkey that would bring her right into the room, enabling his house's wards to recognize her. In her opinion, that was a definite show of trust, and she hoped that while she made use of his home, she could get to know him better and learn to trust him as well.

Uninvited, he took a seat on the settee next to her. "You don't seem as excited as yesterday. Are you regretting our agreement?"

"No, not at all. I am happy with the arrangement. There are just other things weighing on my mind right now." She tried to give him another reassuring smile, but the gaze of his silver eyes was very perceptive.

"Have lunch with me," he said suddenly, surprising her.

She gazed at her watch. "I didn't realize that much time had passed already."

"Have you read much?" His pointy chin indicated the book in her hands.

Her cheeks heated with a blush. "Er... no. I've only just finished with this long foreword. It's quite complicated, I'm afraid...even for me. Half the time, I had no idea what the man was going on about."

"It seems to be about everything and yet nothing." He nodded and gave an amused chuckle. "I remember it well."

"What did you do then? Reading it over and over only helps so much. It's like the..."

"Like the text changes on you," he interrupted, finishing her sentence for her. "Indeed. I loathed having to approach Narcissa's aunt. Mrs. Black was a dreadful old crow...and not much help to boot. I don't know what she had the book for in the first place, and she never offered to tell me. Regardless, she did manage to pass along a few tips."

"And you'll pass these on to me?"

"After luncheon." He stood and proffered his hand to help her up.

She gently placed the heavy tome beside her and slipped a hand into his, allowing him to pull her up. When her eyes lifted, she was fairly certain that she'd caught him gazing appreciatively at her chest. It made her feel self-conscious, and she had to check the impulse to bring her hand up to cover already concealed breasts, but it also gave her a jolt, making her feel empowered suddenly. *The* Lucius Malfoy...arrogant, aristocratic, wealthy, handsome...actually seemed to find her appealing.

That one bold glance made her feel womanly on so many levels. While Ron always let her know that he desired her, she never caught him looking at her in such a way. He mostly whinged a little and hinted about getting into her knickers, never pushing the issue and respecting her wishes. What would she have done if he had insisted? Sometimes she had fantasies that he would burst into their bedroom and declare that in no uncertain terms would he be sleeping in a separate bed.

Of course he never would. Realizing she was blushing, she released his hand and kept her head down as he led the way to a formal dining room. Hermione hoped that he hadn't noticed her reddened cheeks or he might think that his gaze had caused it. Nearly snorting, she realized that it actually had been his gaze that had brought about the blush, though not directly.

"I hope you don't mind if we don't use the formal room. Since it is just the two of us, I thought that you might like to dine out on the back patio. We've got the gardens charmed to bloom year round, and it's quite pleasing to the eyes if I do say so myself."

"Anything is fine," she said calmly.

While he spoke with a house-elf, her thoughts drifted to Severus Snape. She'd been honest when she'd told him that the book had her mind boggled, but a great deal of the time, her thoughts were drawn to the body below in the dungeons. The Malfoys had taken such care of him in hopes that he could one day rejoin the world. She'd try her best to help Lucius accomplish that. Professor Snape deserved to live, deserved to live a life free of duties and secrets.

"Now," Lucius began as they sat down, "will you tell me what's really bothering you? I fear we won't get very far if your mind continues to wander."

"I... All right, if you must know, Ronald and I had a bit of a row before he left this morning."

"Oh?"

"Personal reasons." Her voice hinted that she wouldn't elaborate.

"Fair enough."

There was a long awkward pause, and each of them looked at the colorful, fragrant flowers. When the small house-elf brought in their meal, they resumed polite conversation throughout. It wasn't until she'd finished chewing her last bite that Lucius utterly gobsmacked her.

"I've lost my wife," he said, staring blankly out onto the grounds.

"Sorry?" Surely he hadn't said what she thought.

"Narcissa, she wants to separate." His gaze found Hermione's. "I suppose you're shocked."

"I... yes. For two reasons."

"They are?"

"First, your family seems so close. I didn't know there were problems. And, second, well, why are you telling me?"

He shook his head minutely. "I can't rightly say." Then he grazed her with a small apologetic smile. "I suppose you aren't interested. It just seemed that since we're doing this together...trying to help Severus...and you seem to... I don't know." He sighed. "I just needed to talk. You're here." His expression changed to a sly one. "And you can't go off and repeat what I say, so I know it'll be kept between us."

"I don't betray confidences!" she said indignantly. "I wouldn't need an oath for that. Besides, my oath didn't say I couldn't repeat anything you tell me unless it's to someone who would use it against you to bring you to Azkaban."

"Very well."

When he remained quiet, her curiosity got the better of her. "Tell me. Please."

"She feels I've changed too much for her liking, says the Ministry's rules are influencing me at home, and I'm not the man she once loved...especially after the way I acted after I fled Azkaban."

"I think that's horrible she would say this to you." She leaned closer. "Mr. Malfoy, Lucius, I can't believe how much you have changed. You must know it's for the best. You're so personable. I think... I think you really did deserve the chance the Wizengamot has given you and your family." She placed a hand over his when he gave her a disbelieving look. "She'll come around. She'll realize that if it weren't for you, she might not be living so comfortably right now."

He turned his hand over beneath hers and clasped her hand in his. "Thank you, Hermione. One can only hope." With a small squeeze, he released her and stood. "I'll let you get back to work. I'm going to have a walk out into the garden."

"All right."

Her heart broke for the man. Pain was evident in his eyes and facial expression...even in his body, his shoulders slumping dejectedly. She'd privately believed that he loved his wife and son more than his loyalty to the Dark Lord after she'd seen them together, and this only proved it. Hermione wished she could soothe him somehow. Even Lucius Malfoy didn't deserve to hurt so much...not after the changes he'd obviously made, inside and out.

The old Malfoy would have locked her away in his dungeon while this one had given her a room to call her own and treated her as a guest in his home, a friend even. Hermione rose and followed the path he'd taken, intent on keeping him company for a few minutes...wanting to leave him with a smile on his face or at least his haughty smirk.

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"How's it going at Malfoy's?" Harry asked as she made her way into the kitchen.

"Is that how you're going to greet me every time you see me?" she asked in annoyance, her tiredness flavoring her words.

"How are you?" he asked through a fake, wide smile.

"Exhausted and my eyes hurt."

"Now, how's it going at Malfoy's? Any progress?"

"The answer is the same as yesterday and the day before that as well. All is fine. He's been nothing but courteous and helpful." She sat down with a thud. "I barely saw him today though. I expect he was off on errands or something."

"Don't be angry with me," he said softly, flashing a lopsided grin at her. "I just care about you, and I don't trust Malfoy."

"I'll be honest. He's definitely not what I expected. I think that given time, everyone will see exactly how much he's changed. I barely recognize him. Well, aside from the fact that he looks like a grown-up Draco." She laughed. "The resemblance is hard to miss."

"You got that right. He definitely wasn't for the milkwizard," Harry joked. "Look, is there anything you can tell me about what's going on? Ron will be home in four days. You said you wanted to use this week to make progress. Have you?"

"The book is fascinating, Harry." She could see her eyes sparkling with delight in her reflection from the mirror behind Harry. "So far, the writer is giving background information as to why he wrote the book. And I have to tell you," she said seriously, "I can understand why the Dark Arts might appeal to some."

"You won't turn into one of those people, will you?"

She laughed and slapped at his arm playfully. "Harry, be serious. This is a learning experience for me. I'm just saying that I feel sorry for the bloke. Had a right rough life."

"That's the trouble with you, Hermione. You're too compassionate." Rising, he stretched. "It's a bit late for me. Guess I'll go on up. Remember, I'll be out of town with Ginny for the next two days. The Harpies are off to the Continent." He turned and went towards the door, stopping as he got there. "Oh, you had a letter from Ron. I put it on your dresser."

"Thanks."

Hermione had wondered when Ron would owl her. She was curious as to how his trip was going. With very little guilt, though, she realized that she'd barely noticed that he wasn't home. She shrugged those thoughts away, knowing it was simply because she'd been so busy, her mind emerged in text most of the day.

*You're not reading all day, Hermione, a voice reminded her...one that sounded much like her mother when she used a scolding tone. You've also been spending time with Lucius Malfoy.*

"We're friends," she said to her reflection. "That's all. There's nothing wrong with it."

She fled to her room to read Ron's owl.

*Hermione,*

*I know you're busy and all, but I just wanted to let you know that everything is working out here. George and I made the right choice to come here to meet with Jeri. Guess what? Jeri isn't a bloke after all. He's a she. Right nice, too, though I can't understand half of what she says sometimes (heavy French accent). She sounds like Fleur but speaks much, much faster.*

*Anyway, we're working out some details, but I may have to stay longer. I will let you know. If you have time, let me know how it's going there.*

*Ron*

Grinning, she placed the letter in a drawer, imagining his mouth gaped open as the lady said something. He was truly endearing at times. "I hope things work out," she said with a smile. He and George were doing remarkably well already, but this expansion would really bring in the Galleons both hoped for. She idly wondered if the new branches would mean that Ron would be out of town more.

Too exhausted to bathe, she shed her clothes and slipped into bed, deciding she'd write to Ron the next evening when she returned home. And then it came to her... as it had many times before:

*The book was there on the desk, but something was different...the pages. The text was no longer written in the dark ink she'd become accustomed to. No. It was now a*

*deep red color, words wet and running down the page. As always the room was cold and dark but for the scant candlelight. The feeling of fear seeped into her very soul, and she could feel that something was coming... something had followed her into the room... something would enter from the darkened corridor at any moment.*

*While watching the darkened doorway, she ran an index finger along the page of the book, only then realizing that the dampened, red ink was blood...fresh blood. She jumped back, startled. Whose blood was it?*

"No..."

*To her horror, the words rearranged themselves anew.*

The blood of a virgin... many properties it has.

*Hermione edged towards the doorway, wanting to leave the room, yet afraid to meet whatever surely lay in wait for her. There was a small sound, so slight she nearly missed it over the sound of her heavy breathing.*

"Who's there?"

*"Hermione..." whispered a voice.*

*Terror taking over, she ran across the room and tried to open a window, not caring that the drop to the ground was too far to survive a fall. She had to escape the torment that would surely accost her if she stayed in the room a moment longer.*

*And then she felt it...a hand on her shoulder, gripping her tightly. Long, pale fingers tipped with shortly cut nails pulled her back away from the window and against something solid. A chest.*

*"Please... what do you want." The earthy, overpowering scent of absinthe assaulted her, causing her to gasp for air.*

*A hand moved hair away from her shoulder and lips moved along her throat for a moment before she heard his words. "You," the voice said. "Help me. Give me life."*

*It had to be a vampire! It wanted to sustain its life by taking her blood... The blood of a virgin...her blood. Was this why she'd preserved herself, subconsciously knowing what her fate would be? Impossible.*

*"Stay away from me!" she yelled loudly, struggling against her captor.*

She woke up in her bed at Grimmauld Place, alone and panting and frightened. A dream. "Thank Merlin."

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A knock at the door drew her attention away from the page. "Come in."

"Care for any company?" Lucius asked. He leaned casually against the doorjamb. His usual attire had been discarded for a casual pair of gray trousers and a light blue shirt.

Hermione was taken aback momentarily as his eyes seemed so much more vivid than ever before. "You look nice," she said quietly and nodded to the chair. "Have a seat."

"I stood here for a couple of minutes, and you never even noticed me. It seemed that something held your attention, yet your brows were knitted in confusion. What are you reading?"

She placed the book on the table between them and leaned forward. "Look, I'm going to just come out and say it."

"By all means."

"I had another dream last night, but this one... it was different. The book changed, someone was there, I tried to escape...I could feel him, smell him!" She brought her hands up to cover her face for a moment while taking a deep breath. "I was so afraid that I couldn't sleep for a long while. I didn't want to go back into that dream."

"How had the book changed? Tell me about this assailant."

"The ink had turned to blood, and it rearranged itself to tell me something." She shuddered.

"What was that?"

"It said," she blushed a little but held his gaze, "something like a virgin's blood had many properties."

"And your attacker?"

"I'm not sure as to his identity or if he was even human. Actually, I'm sure he was a vampire. There was an earthy smell, his grip was strong, and his voice, it was so seductive and soft." She shrugged. "The blood on the book's page and what he said made me think of vampires."

"What did he say?"

"He wanted my blood, I think. He asked me to give him life. His lips were on my throat, and he knew my name."

"What happened after that?"

"I woke up."

"This is your first real message from the book then," he said with wide eyes and a confidence she wished she possessed.

"But... what does it mean?"

"Severus," he said simply.

Hermione could have slapped herself on the forehead with her palm in that instant. How had she not made that connection? "Give him life," she mused aloud. "I can't believe I didn't realize."

"The virgin blood is very interesting," Lucius said, bringing a hand up to his chin in thought. "I'm sure Borgin would have some we could purchase or know where to get it."

"I thought they outlawed its sale these days because of the... ravishing of younger females!" she said, outraged that people might still be peddling it.

"You don't honestly think it's not still out there on the black market, do you? We can find some if we need it... and we obviously need it."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't think I'd want to search it out. There's no telling where it's come from. Some poor girl... No."

Lucius shook his head in annoyance. "If the book says we use it, *wewill* do so. What? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"If you're so keen on doing something illegal, then you'll at least do it the right way! You can pay a woman...of age...who is willing, but I just can't condone any other course of action."

"Miss High and Mighty!" he said angrily. "Well, it's a pity you didn't always have these morals, else we could just use *your* virginal blood."

Her cheeks flushed brightly. "How dare you say something so uncouth!"

"Oh, come now, it's not like..." His eyes widened. "Are you...have you?"

"That's none of your business!" She stood. "I need the lav."

She stormed away and locked herself into the room across the hall, quickly splashing cool water on her face. Had the book been seeking ~~her~~ blood or any virgin's blood? She wouldn't tell him any more until she found out. What she'd done sexually was none of his business...even in this. And then her last humiliating night with Ron came back to slap her in the face. She'd felt as though something wouldn't allow her to make love to him. She'd wanted to, and then suddenly, she couldn't fathom carrying on.

"I'm in over my head," she whispered to herself. There was something sinister at work here, some driving force that seemed to be crashing in on her. Harry had been right to warn her about Dark Arts. Oh how she wished she could confide in him!

"Hermione?" Lucius called.

"I'll be right out."

"I apologize for my unkind words. My emotions got the better of me. I didn't intend to... hurt your feelings or to insinuate anything."

She opened the door. "Thank you. I guess I overreacted." Following him back into the room, she said, "This book, it's scaring me now, and there's something else that I can't put my finger on."

He looked at his timepiece. "I would that I could talk longer, but I... uh... well, I've something to do."

"It's fine. I... Would you mind if I stayed here a little later than usual tonight?"

His elegant eyebrows rose in question. "Have something in mind for your research?"

"Harry's not home, and Grimmauld Place is so... lonely," she finished lamely. "I hope to read myself into exhaustion so that I'll fall asleep straight away when I get there."

"Are you frightened to be alone? Is it the dream?"

"It's childish of me, isn't it? A grown woman and afraid to sleep alone."

His eyes moved down her body slowly and back up again. "Grown woman indeed." Lucius' gaze lightened and his lips curved upwards in a flirtatious smile. "If we weren't... attached to others, I would offer to keep you company."

Surely he was joking, so she laughed to keep from answering him, willing her awkward feeling away.

"Did I make you uncomfortable just then?"

"Maybe."

He smirked. "That's not a no then."

"No."

"Would you like to stay the night with me, Hermione?"

"Sorry?"

"Here. In my home," he said softly, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "I can have Bozzy prepare a room for you. There's no need for you to go home to that dreadful house alone."

"Oh, no, I couldn't... Well, all right."

"Lovely. I'll see to that now. He'll find you when he's done."

"Thank you. I really appreciate this."

"It's nothing." And with that, he was gone.

Her pulse didn't slow down until a few minutes after he'd gone. He'd been flirting with her. She was sure of it now. He'd been testing her, wanting to see her reaction to his question. The bad thing was that she knew deep down that she shouldn't have accepted his offer. Ron wouldn't approve at all...neither would Harry. But wasn't she a grown woman? She could make her own decisions, and the truth was that she'd rather sleep at Malfoy Manor where she wouldn't be alone. She'd been too frightened after her dream the night before, and she was afraid it would happen again. What if she got too caught up in it? What if she couldn't wake up? Kreacher didn't even address her half the time, though she tried everything to get on his good side, having eyes only for Harry. What if he wouldn't help her?

Unlikely, she knew, but not completely implausible. Sometimes Kreacher had an attitude that only Harry could dissolve. Thinking of Ron, she realized that she'd not responded to his owl. "He'll understand that I'm busy," she reasoned. And as if to make that the truth, she set out to pick up the tome and unlock any of its secrets, hoping for a clue.

~~~~~

Much later, Hermione slipped into a large, warm bed, wearing a lovely nightgown the elf had presented to her. It felt cool and silky against her skin...and very comfortable. He'd promised that his mistress had never worn it and had decided she didn't care for it after she'd brought it home. Why had her own bed never felt so good to her?

Her thoughts travelled to Lucius, and she wondered how his plans had turned out. She hadn't seen him at all for the rest of the evening, and she'd ventured out of her room a couple of times...once to his study and once into the dungeons. She'd planned on going to see Snape again...was drawn to see him actually...but once down there, she'd changed her mind and hurried back to safety. She'd felt utterly ridiculous for fleeing when she'd returned, of course, but the book had chose that moment to send her a message, so thoughts of going back to him evaporated.

She couldn't wait until she saw Lucius in the morning to share it with him. After all, it had everything to do with him. He would indeed be involved in the next step...one way

or another.

~~~~~

"You seem a bit too eager this morning," Lucius said grumpily. "What has you bouncing off the walls?"

"I had a message from the book!" she said, taking the seat across from him and accepting a cup of coffee.

"Lovely," he said sarcastically as he took a sip from his own cup. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, fine," she said dismissively. "But didn't you hear what I said?"

"Explain further if you must."

"You're so sour! Heavy night last night?"

"Bozzy!"

"Yes, sir."

"Find some headache potion for me, will you?"

"Bozzy will, sir."

After the elf popped away, Hermione quietly asked, "Would you like to know what it said?"

"Forgive me. I fear I am not myself this morning."

"It's all right. Everyone wakes up on the wrong side of the bed now and then." She beamed brightly and put her cup on its saucer. "The book's text changed, and it said, 'Ask him for the book his grandfather gave him...he'll know the one.'"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said blandly. "Did it specifically say me?"

"Well, no, but who else?"

Bozzy popped in with a phial, which Lucius took and drained straightaway. Upon doing so, he stood, and his entire demeanor changed drastically. "Come! I have an idea."

Hermione followed him to the family library where he walked to the far left and stopped to gaze at a small painting. There was a worm inching into a hole on an apple that set on top of a thin, green book.

"Uh... What are we doing?"

"This is the book he left me. It's the only one I can think of anyway."

"Great. Just great."

"Now calm down, girl." He pressed his wand against it. *"Reveal your secrets."* Nothing happened. "Damn."

"I read something about this," Hermione said suddenly, trying to remember what she'd read.

"I've always wondered why he would specifically call me over to his side and tell me under no uncertain terms was anyone else to have this painting. I'd pretended to appreciate it, of course, but I would have much preferred something more substantial. Cissy thought it was sweet of him to be so sentime..." His words trailed away, and his expression became cloudy.

"All right?"

"Ah, it's best not to dwell on certain things."

"If you'd like to talk."

"No, let's concentrate on this. My botched attempt at regaining my wife last night has no room for discussion between us today."

So that's why he'd been so foul tempered earlier. He'd obviously tried to talk to Narcissa and had been rebuffed.

"I will say, though, that it's times like these that have me missing Severus more than ever. He was a good friend, you know."

Determination filling her, Hermione said, "Then let's figure this painting out." And just as she said it, something came to her. She approached the painting, brought her finger up to the apple and tickled it. The worm wiggled out of another hole, causing the apple to roll off of the book. "Look!" She was able to tickle the book and force it to open.

"Extraordinary. How did you know to do that? I've never once thought of it in all these years." His gaze was full of amazement, and a new respect for her shone in his silvery eyes.

"Actually, it's what we do at Hogwarts to get into the kitchens. We tickle the fruit. I just thought I'd give it a try." She blushed slightly. "I'd hoped that it would swing open and reveal a real book, but I guess this will have to do."

"Indeed."

"Would you like me to read this out loud?" she asked. "Or do you prefer to just read silently along with me?"

"By all means, read to me," he said, brushing against her as he strode over to a cushiony chair. Once he sat down, he smiled and said, "You look nice in those robes."

"Your elf... he thought it would be all right."

"Oh, is that something of Narcissa's? I didn't realize." He held up a hand. "Don't worry about it. She's got a roomful of things that she's bought and never worn. Use anything you'd like. Bozzy will help you."

"Thank you, Lucius."

"It's nothing, my dear." He sat back in his chair and extended his legs, bringing his hands up behind his head. "Entertain me."

"Right." She licked her lips and turned to the portrait and began reading. "It's a book with a mixture of spells and potions directions...all with the intent of... of bringing back the dead."



Lucius' hands dropped. "The hell you say."

She nodded vigorously. "Merlin, I think we're on to something here!"

"The old man must have thought I could use this to bring him back, poor sod. I never did pay much attention to this wretched thing. He'd have done better just giving me a letter with instructions!"

"This won't do!" Hermione said suddenly.

"Pardon?"

"*Accio clean parchment!*" A few moments later saw a stack of Narcissa's fine ivory stationary zooming to Hermione's outstretched hand. She pointed her wand from the book in the portrait to the parchment and chanted another spell.

"Brilliant," Lucius said in approval.

"Nothing like a little replication spell. I certainly don't feel like standing up here and reading all day."

"I don't blame you. I wondered how long you'd last."

She grinned and sat next to him, summoning the parchments. "Here we are. Page one." She gasped and nearly dropped them.

"What is it?" he asked, alarmed, grabbing for his wand.

Instead of answering, she showed him the page. He, too, gasped, for it was a black and white picture of a man lying on a comfortable bed...a man with a hooked nose and black, shoulder length hair.

"It's Severus."

She nodded and looked at the next parchment. "... I think this is meant for you." She handed it to him.

He read aloud. "Lucius, I know you are wondering why I gave you a portrait of a bloody book with an apple. It wasn't because I was overly fond of reading, mind, but there was a reason...and a right good one. Remember the stories that I told you about Cassandra, my Seer friend from the earlier years? She had a vision about you...you and a young brunette who would need help in returning someone important from death. The picture you've just seen is the body of the man from her vision. Be careful, clever boy, for you are about to venture into a very dark place. Be sure that you truly want to go there before you read anymore."

"This is a bit much," Hermione said, gobsmacked. "Who's this woman?"

"A family friend."

"Long dead, I suppose."

He nodded and looked away. "If you will excuse me..."

"Wait! Where are you going?"

"I need to think about things I'm afraid. That man never used words lightly. There is something in store for us that I don't think we've even imagined yet."

She watched his back as he retreated, admiring the sway of his long, platinum locks. Hermione looked again at the picture the lady had drawn many years before. There was no mistaking that it was Severus Snape. Feeling bold, she rose and decided to pay his body a visit. Perhaps something would come to her while she was there. Either way, sitting with him for a while might help her to reach a decision on what to do next. What would she be willing to do to bring him back? Could they even do it? Was the price really worth it? Better yet... what was the price?

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A/N: And deeper she goes.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter One please.

*Thanks to my betas whose names are being held until the reveal.*

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Hermione approached the bed cautiously. It was as if she expected him to wake up and grab her. She decided to do what always made her feel better: talk.

"Hello, Professor," she said, taking a seat in the chair next to his bed. "I wanted to come down here to talk to you before, but I was a bit silly and didn't have the courage. Some Gryffindor, eh? I expect you'd take points from me for that if you could."

Feeling bold, she leaned closer and peered down at his face. He hadn't even been forty-years-old when he'd been killed. Most of those years he'd lived doing all he could for someone he hadn't even liked.

"No," she said softly. "It wasn't for Harry, was it? It was for his mum." She smiled sadly. "Even in death you aren't with her. I'm so sorry for you, sir." Harry had told her that his mother and father were always together the times he'd seen them. She doubted that Harry's father would want Snape around in the afterlife...or that Snape would want to be around him.

"You deserved so much better than what you got. What would you have done with your freedom after Voldemort died? Would you have kept your job as headmaster?"

She brought a hand up and slowly extended it towards his face, unable to resist touching him. His flesh was cold and quite firm beneath her fingertips. It reminded her of her grandmother's funeral and when she'd clasped the woman's hand affectionately in goodbye. Death did so much to the body. Would his body be the same if he returned to the living? Surely it would return back to normal.

Her hand fell away from his face as she sat back in her chair. It was all so complicated. What did the tome want them to do? Were they to follow the steps in Lucius' inherited book? What if his grandfather was right and it asked them for something they couldn't give? Hermione's eyes found Snape's face again. Why wouldn't he deserve a chance to live again? After all, Harry might not have had the chance to defeat the Dark Lord if Snape hadn't done all that he had in his life. In fact, if Snape hadn't kept his word to Dumbledore, things would have been much worse, and Harry wouldn't have found out the key to victory...or more about his mother's past.

"I swear I will do all that I can to help you, Professor. Just like you asked me in my dream." She shivered slightly, both from the cold room and from the memory of her dream. "That was you, wasn't it? You said that you wanted me to help you."

Wanting to move about to bring some warmth back into her body, she stood and began to pace next to his bed. "Do you think that you could send a message some other way? Those dreams are very disturbing, you know." She laughed. "I feel stupid right now, talking to you as if you can hear me." Then she paused. "Er... can you? How would I know? Could you send me a sign? If you truly want my help and possibly a new chance at things, let me know somehow. I'll talk to Lucius."

She stopped and looked at him again. "He's been very helpful and seems to genuinely miss you. That's a start, isn't it? At least you'll have one friend ready to welcome you back, and I'm sure his wife and Draco will be happy also." Resuming her pacing, she added, "Maybe even we could be friends. I would like that."

"I think he would like that, too, Hermione," Lucius said from the doorway, causing her to startle.

Spinning to face him, she asked, "Do you think so? I don't believe he's ever really liked me." She frowned. "In fact, I know he didn't...not when I was a student." A chuckle escaped her. "He thought me a pesky know-it-all and didn't mind letting me know it either."

"Well, people change with age. I am certain you aren't the same woman now as the girl he knew." He arched an eyebrow. "Am I right?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Oh, and when Phineas called me a Mudblood, he told him not to call me that. That's defending me, isn't it?"

"It is." Lucius seemed to shiver slightly. "Come. Let's go up and talk where it's not so cold."

"All right." She looked back at Snape's body once more before following Lucius out. He seemed so peaceful. Was she making the right decision in interfering? As she placed a hand on the door to close it behind her, the faint scent of absinthe wafted towards her. The person in her dream...Snape...had the scent clinging to him. Was this the sign she'd earlier asked for? She decided to remain silent and go up to Lucius' study with him.

"I'll get right to the point," he said the moment she entered. "My answer is yes. Whatever needs doing, I will do it."

"I had decided to go through with things, too," she said. "Why shouldn't he have a second chance at life after all he's done for everyone?"

"Exactly."

"And by doing this, we might possibly have a breakthrough...there might be a way around death!" she said excitedly. "I never thought I would be involved in something this big, this important after what we've done so far."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and cocked his head to the side. "I thought you understood that what we do here is to be between us."

"Yes, this is. I'm aware of that. However, I never said that I wouldn't use my knowledge for anything further once this is all said and done. There are ways around oaths, depending on how it's worded." She smiled. "Please trust me. All right?"

"I suppose I haven't any choice," he said, losing the smile on his face.

"Listen," she said, extending a hand to him, "we're in this together. You've proved to me that you can be trusted. Nothing you tell me will come back to haunt you."

Lucius took her hand in both of his, caressing her wrist with his fingers momentarily before lifting it to his lips to place a kiss on her palm. "I thank you for that. Your trust, it means a great deal to me." He kissed her palm again, adding, "If the friend of Harry Potter can accept that I've changed, maybe others will start to see it, too."

Feeling a little uncomfortable, yet mesmerized, she pulled her hand back, glancing at her palm for a second. "Shall we go over your grandfather's information now?" she asked, proud that her voice didn't waver. The man was certainly fascinating.

The rest of the day passed with them working very closely together, learning all they could. Hermione found herself enjoying his company, and she truly marveled at his intelligence, which shone through in all of his suggestions. If anyone had ever told her that she'd become friends with Draco's father, she'd have asked who'd confounded them. By the time he forced her to have dinner with him, they'd worked through many of the pages and discovered three charms that would be necessary during the process. Most of the ingredients had been easy to figure out; however, the pages mostly had the text in some sort of code, giving them riddles to finding out answers.

"Why didn't I see it before?" she said tiredly.

"We're both exhausted. This hasn't been the easiest day." He rubbed his eyes and blinked. "Now, what is it you see?"

"Absinthe."

"Well, what would be the point of that?"

"No, it makes perfect sense." She pointed to the second paragraph. "I read in a Muggle library once that if it's burned with Sandalwood as an incense, then you can communicate with the dead." Without thinking, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "In my dream, there was an overpowering smell, almost to the point of suffocation."

"Absinthe!"

"Right in one." When he noticed her hand, she quickly withdrew it. "And earlier, there was a whiff of it down there as well."

"And *Muggles* know about this?" he asked incredulously.

She shook her head. "It's an old myth mostly. I doubt there are many who actually still practice these rituals. When I learned I was to go to Hogwarts, I checked out everything I could about magic, myths, herbs... you name it. This just came to me. I knew there was something I couldn't pinpoint. This has to be it. See how it fits perfectly?"

"But how did they even hear of this?"

"Small circles. Someone in a pub spilling our secrets. Who knows? But think of it. There are many things the Muggles have in literature that we know to be fact while they think it to be fiction or simply the practices of long ago people."

"Well, that explains it," he said with a nod.

"How so?"

"It explains how you got better marks than Draco at Hogwarts. He's never read any of this Muggle information."

She laughed. "No, I expect he hasn't."

"I shall have to look into their libraries and see if anything interests me."

"Yes, do that! I could even help you...er, if you'd like, that is."

"Certainly." He placed the parchment on top of the stack on the nearby table and looked at her intently. "Are we done with this for tonight?"

His voice had changed slightly, was somehow deeper, and warning bells went off in her mind. She rose. "Yes, I'm afraid I can't stay up any longer." She faked a quick yawn. "I'll bid you good night."

As if sensing her panic, he smiled in amusement. "I suppose a night cap is out then?"

"Yes, sorry. I'll see you in the morning."

"Until then."

Once in her room, she closed the door and leaned against it, breathing deeply. What the hell had got into her? What sort of spell was he weaving? She couldn't help but to be attracted to him, as he was a very handsome man. However, she had a boyfriend who loved and trusted her, who'd been waiting patiently for her. Letting this man kiss her hand and say such things, make innuendos, was wrong. Tomorrow, things would be different, she vowed. *I'm going to make certain he maintains his distance. He's just lonely, maybe hungry for approval, and I simply happen to be here.*

"Bozzy is here for you, miss," said the house-elf immediately after he popped into her room. "He has put clothes for you on the bed. Is you needing anything else, miss?"

"No, thank you though. I appreciate it."

He smiled, nodded, and popped away again. "Poor Dobby hated it here and seemed to have been mistreated, yet Bozzy... he seems happy." That alone warmed her heart and proved something to her. She went about her evening ritual of readying for bed and was able to fall into a deep slumber...until nearly morning when the dream came for her again.

*A chilly breeze swept through the room, turning the pages of the book so fast that she couldn't make out anything, and just as quickly as it had started, the ghostly winds stopped, leaving the book open at the halfway mark, its bloody text running along the page a little.*

Your virgin blood. You are chosen, Hermione Granger.

"No!" she said out loud. "I will not be a sacrifice!"

"You needn't die," said a voice from the dark corridor...his voice.

"Professor? I know it's you," she said, trying to sound brave, though her heart was pounding so loudly, she could barely hear her own thoughts.

Thump. Thump.

Thump. Thump.

*And then he was there, filling the doorway with his presence, the candlelight casting an eerie glow about his face, his lank hair falling over his features, covering his gaze from her detection.*

"Hermione..."

"What is it you want from me?"

"You, just you."

"Stop it!" He'd stepped closer and fear clutched her insides.

"You need no signs to tell you what to do, Hermione. My word is good enough. Give me life."

"But how?"

*He lifted a pale hand and pointed a long finger towards the tome on the desk. As he moved closer the scent of absinthe became stronger. However, this time she could also detect a minute amount of sandalwood, which made it less suffocating and overpowering.*

"Please stop, Professor. I'm afraid." And she was.

*His mouth curved into a malicious sneer, and his head lifted ever so slightly, giving her the first direct view of his eyes...black as night, yet glinting menacingly. His steps brought him closer, one hand reaching for her."*

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"Hermione! Are you all right?"

She sat up in bed and scooted as far away from the silhouette and its grasping hands as she could.

"Leave me alone!"

"I mean you no harm," Lucius said. "I heard you screaming. I thought to help you."

"The dream," she said finally. "Much worse this time." Her hands shook terribly, and her hairline around her face was dampened with sweat. "Look at me. I'm a mess."

"Bozzy!" he called.

Pop! "Bozzy is here, sir."

"Bring the potion labeled Sleeping Draught from my bedside," Lucius commanded. With a nod, the elf popped away. "No more terrible dreams will haunt you this night,

Hermione."

"I shouldn't take anything. It never comes twice in the same night."

"Because, as you told me before, you usually don't go back to sleep after. I must insist you take this draught. There's no shame in it. I, too, have to use it at times."

She nodded and allowed one of his hands to clasp hers tightly in reassurance. When Bozzy popped back in and handed the phial to his master, she said nothing, only accepting it gratefully when Lucius then handed it to her. With a single deep gulp, she already felt calm and drowsy.

"Thank you, Lucius."

"I will sit here until you are asleep."

"There's no need. I'll... be... fine." Her eyes drifted closed for a moment. When she opened them again, Bozzy was gone, and Lucius was closer, gazing down at her intently.

"Sleep, my dear. May your dreams be more pleasant."

Hermione smiled and watched as he moved to lie next to her, propped up on his elbow to keep a watch over her, and she fell into slumber, welcoming the dark peace awaiting her.

And he was right. The next dreams she had were much 'more pleasant' indeed.

*A bare-chested Lucius slowly unfastened the buttons on her nightgown to reveal her breasts. "Full, yet perky," he said with a smile as he lowered his head to take an erect nipple into his mouth.*

*Hermione sucked in a breath and arched up towards his mouth and kneading fingers...oh, the pleasure his swirling tongue and lips were giving her. Her fingers clawed at the bed sheet while she writhed. Ron had never made her feel like this, but if he had, she would have....*

*"Oh, yes," she uttered as she felt his teeth lightly nick her. Lucius Malfoy, who would have thought he could make her feel this way, would want to make her feel this way.*

*Everything was foggy, and she knew it to be a dream, but it all felt so real to her. One of his hands slid down, cleverly delving beneath her knickers to fondle her, a finger sliding along her labia. "You're so hot for me, aren't you?" he asked, his voice a low purr.*

*"T-touch me," she begged, pressing against his hand.*

*His head moved down to her stomach, tongue laving a trail along her flesh. She lifted her head to watch and enjoyed the way his long, platinum locks slid over her skin. When his lips finally found his fingers and his tongue began to explore her intimately, she moaned in delight.*

*Fingers. Mouth. Tongue. Emotions. So quick, so practiced, so good.*

*"Don't stop!" she pleaded as culmination came for her.*

*And then it was over, the explosion leaving her boneless, mind wandering and drifting towards darkness. The last thing she saw was him sitting up and wiping off his mouth with dainty fingers, a feral grin on his face.*

*When her eyes closed, she heard him speak. "Now, now, Severus. I know she's yours, but one must be allowed a little amusement."*

*Though she fought to open her eyes, they wouldn't obey. Instead she knew nothing else until hours later.*

~~~~~

"You've been avoiding me all day, Hermione. I demand to know what's going on!" Lucius said, finally cornering her in her room.

"Just been busy, is all."

"I don't believe it." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Have I offended you in some way?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No, I just..."

"Tell me about your dream then if that's what it is."

Her eyes narrowed. "And just how do you know about it?" She'd had her suspicions upon awaking and finding her nightgown misbuttoned, but she'd been so tired that it could have honestly been her error. However, the sexual dream of him left her feeling very unsettled.

"I heard you crying out and went to wake you if you'll remember!" he said indignantly. "How do you think you had the Sleeping Draught? Bozzy brought it to you on my order!"

"Oh, I thought..." She shook her head in embarrassment.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. There was another dream...after that one." She could feel her cheeks reddening. "I don't mean to be edgy, but I can't help it."

"Would you like to talk about it?" he asked after a moment.

"The second dream? No."

"Perhaps I should have requested Dreamless Sleep for you," he said thoughtfully. "I apologize. Was it Severus again?"

"When you came to me, it was, yes. I could see him. He looked frightening and almost... sinister."

"This is nothing new." He chuckled lightly.

"But he's never really looked this way to me. Anyway, he said that I needn't die, and he also said that he wants me." She bit her lip. "He pointed to the book, and its page read that *my* virgin blood was needed."

"Yours in particular?"

"Yes. What are we going to do? The ingredient list for the potion has virgin blood on it."

"We'll just cut your finger and be done with it."

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "It has to be from... intercourse."

"That does pose a problem then." He frowned. "I know a spell that would sort of Apparate any blood spilled into a nearby phial. It should work the same way. Your beau needn't even know what you are about."

"My beau?"

"Are you not one of a couple?"

"Oh, yes, but..."

"The row you had the other day, would that interfere with this?" he asked curiously.

Knowing she needed to be honest, she said, "Yes, we'd nearly done this the night before, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it for some reason. He and I argued about it."

Lucius nodded, eyes alight. "The tome! It must have influenced you, knowing you shouldn't waste your... ah..."

She smiled. "I've been wondering about that, too, and will have to agree with you.

"That was days ago anyway. I'm certain a little 'making up' is in order," Lucius said with a knowing smile. "Surely you've talked since then?"

"He'll probably be home in a couple of days. His letter didn't sound angry."

"Are you up to it?"

Hermione felt uncomfortable for a moment. It was strange to be talking to him about this. "I mean... I don't know. I suppose I'll have to, but I just thought that our first time would be something special, the place and reason left up to us when we both felt right." She sighed. "This seems too contrived."

"I am certain that he, as any other male, will quite appreciate it regardless."

"But will I?"

"You'll have many years to make up for it," he said, an edge in his voice. "This is obviously a very important step in the potion's process. You agreed that you would see to it..."

"And I will," she snapped, suddenly angry. "Have you read anything new?" she asked in hopes of lightening the mood.

He drew himself up to his full height and towered over her. "I did, yes, and if you'll be so kind as to stop avoiding me, you can find me in my study...where I have the information ready for you."

"I didn't mean to..." But she was speaking to an empty room. He'd left as he spoke. Hermione took in a few deep, calming breaths, deciding to push the vivid dream of Lucius out of her mind. It wouldn't do to dwell on something that wasn't his fault, ruining their comradeship.

When she found him in the study, he was sipping on something from a tumbler. "I apologize," she said plainly.

He nodded and indicated the chair next to him. "There are two things we must do. First, we have to make a crown to place on Severus' head...one made of henbane."

"Like the dead who used to walk beside the River Styx! I've read about this, too."

"Good. Then you will know how to fashion one," he said curtly.

"I can certainly try. It's very poisonous though."

"There is something else here... Where is it?" He sifted through his notes. "Ah, here we are. We'll need three phials of black cat oil and have aloe soaking in it...for nine days total."

Her brow furrowed. "What's this for?"

"Oh my! Something you did~~not~~ learn in your vast reading of Muggle myths and literature?"

"Apparently not."

"We're to anoint our foreheads with this, as well as Severus'.

"What's it do?"

"It, ah, will help us to summon him and will give us protection against him."

"Protection against him? Why would we need that? Won't he be pleased to see us, to know what we've done?"

"Hermione, don't you remember anything about what was said yesterday? He won't be himself at first. He'll have hungers that must be sated." Lucius arched an eyebrow. "You don't think I plan to be a meal, do you?"

She laughed as the image flitted through her mind. "I am sure that's not what it meant. We'll just set some food out for him, though you'd think he'd have other things on his mind once he comes back."

"Perhaps we need to read more on that and find out exactly what it means," he said thoughtfully. "Has the tome revealed anything new today?"

"Not yet." She looked around. "Where is your family owl? I would like to use it to send a letter to Ron. I never did reply to him."

"Come. I'll show you. After that, I must leave for a while, but you can use that time to search more about this hunger thing."

"Oh, will you be late?"

"I am not certain. Why?"

"Harry, he's going to be home tonight, and I won't be able to stay here. He'll think... you know... something."

"I understand. You are welcome to stay as long as you'd like, but you are still free to come and go as you see fit. This way."

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"Kreacher, is Harry home?" Hermione asked.

"Master is staying away from home again. He is sending us news that he is going to be home tomorrow instead."

"Oh, all right," she said. "Thank you."

"Is miss staying away, too?"

"I might," she said with a smile. "There is some reading that I need to continue with."

"With the book miss asked about?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's what I've been reading. Do you know anything about the book?"

He shook his head, his bat-like ears flapping about. "I just knows it's a bad book. Master Regulus said it was," he said decidedly.

"It does have its troubles," she agreed. "Hopefully, though, I'm handling it all right so far." She flashed him a smile. "Have you been all right?"

The elf nodded, turned away, and busied himself with dusting. She watched him for a moment and appreciated that he'd had a full conversation with her. It was a very rare occurrence. She ventured up to her room and wondered when Ron would be writing back to her. She supposed it would take a while, considering he was in France.

After a long, hot shower, she decided that she would brave staying the night alone, as she'd done it many times before in her life...but not lately and not often, she added to herself. Once in bed, however, she changed her mind. She packed clothes for the next day, took out her Portkey, and quickly found herself in her small workroom at Malfoy Manor.

She hadn't seen Lucius for the rest of the day, and she hadn't made much progress in the book while he'd been gone either, so she was uncertain if he'd returned yet or that she should venture out to look since she had no news for him. Instead, she picked up the tome and went up to the room that was now "her" bedroom while staying at the Manor.

As she placed the tome on the bed, a breeze swept around her...not unlike the one in her dreams...causing her to look around, half expecting to see him there. Instead, she was alone with her room well lit. The tome opened in the gust, however, and pages were flipping of their own volition. When the breeze vanished, the book remained open.

Hermione instinctively knew this to be a sign. She crossed the room and began reading:

*When the dead return to the world, there are three hungers that they will seek out in order to complete their transition back to the world of the living. These hungers must be sated before anything else can happen, or else you unleash the wrath of the undead upon the earth.*

*The first hunger comes in the form of thirst. Be sure to have a selection of drinks on hand so that the body may quench its longing for the most important need it has to survive. Water would be the logical choice, but it has been noted that some have acquired a taste for something else.*

*The second hunger comes in the form of appetite. Be sure to have an array of foods ready for the body to consume, as sustenance will be required in order to gain back strength and will. Something light would be the logical choice, as it's been without food for so long, but that varies from person to person.*

*The third hunger comes in the form of the flesh. Be certain that a worthy and willing person is available for the sating of lust. To find sexual release is the final stage of the return, and once it is completed, slumber shall settle in while the body and mind heal completely.*

"Oh my God," she said aloud, realizing what her dreams had meant. It meant that the book wanted her to be the one to help him sate his lust. Why else would he have said he wanted her in those dreams? Why else would it have requested this of her? She was to make this ultimate sacrifice of her mind and body so that he could again find life.

But was it worth it?

Could she do it?

She leaned back against the headboard of the bed and drew her knees up to her chest, lost in thought. It was in this position that Lucius found her hours later.

"Hermione?" He knocked on the door and opened it. "Are you all right?"

Shaking her head numbly, she said, "I don't know."

He had a parchment and an envelope with him. "Should I return later?" he asked.

"No, I've got something to show you."

"Very well." He closed the door and moved towards her. "Potter knows you're here?"

"No, he's not home tonight."

"Ah, I see." He sat down and looked at her expectantly. She simply pushed the book to him, which was still opened to the page she'd read. "Good Lord."

"Exactly."

"What have you found out?"

"We're to start the potion tomorrow," he said, nodding towards the moon and pointing towards the parchment. "It's a new moon, and that's when it should be started. However, that would mean that we would have to have the, ah, contribution from you within three days. I have it all outlined right here."

She nodded. "I owled Ron earlier and told him how I was looking forward to his return home." Her words were laced with bitterness, and her puffy, red eyes met his finally. "I don't know if I can go through with this," she said calmly. "I wish that Professor Snape could return, but this is a very high price to pay, isn't it?"

"Do you remember my warning about the book?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, but..." Her voice cracked, and she trailed away.

"I will leave the decision in your hands, my dear, but please remember that I am not responsible for anything that happens if you chose not to do as it bids."

"Don't worry. You're still safe," she said sarcastically. "I need to sleep on it. Do you have... Dreamless Draught?"

"I do indeed. I'll have Bozzy bring it to you straightaway." He stood and placed the envelope before her. "From Weasley, I presume. Good night."

"Night."

Still partially shocked at what she'd learned, she opened the envelope to see what Ron's reply was.

*Hermione,*

*I've been doing a lot of soul searching while here, and I don't know that I should come home until that's done. There's just been so much going on between us...like what happened before I left. I've tried to get past that, and I will eventually. It's just hard for me right now. George and I are on the verge of the biggest deal of our lives, and I have us clouding my mind.*

*The people are great here, and there are many places I'd like to visit while I have the chance. I think I'm going to take another couple of weeks to myself here. I hope you can understand that. You should use this time away from me to think about what you want as well. Maybe it's just not meant to be, you know? Maybe we're just comfortable with each other on a more friendly level, or at least you are, and it's why the next step never gets taken.*

*I do love you. Always have. You know that. I'm just confused.*

*Ron*

She crumpled the letter and threw it across the room. This was the tome's fault! It had wrecked her relationship and was now asking too much of her. Tears began sliding down her cheeks. How could Ron do this to her at a time like this? Didn't he understand that it wasn't her fault?

"Here, miss," Bozzy said politely, obviously pitying her. "Miss will feel much better."

She sniffled and took the phial from him. "Th-thanks, Bozz-y."

No dreams found her this night.

~~~~~

Unfortunately for her, she remained in bed and fast asleep until nearly noon the next day. She'd wanted to rise earlier and figure out a plan or to try to find a way around what the tome requested. She wondered if Lucius had tried to wake her for breakfast. If he had, he probably assumed she needed the rest more than anything.

And then it hit her: Ron's letter. He sounded as though he'd been rethinking things where she was concerned. She vowed to not let any more tears fall and pushed those thoughts out of her mind until later. Fighting against the urge to visit Snape's body again, she went down to her workroom.

Just as she sat down, however, the door burst open and slammed against the wall forcefully. In walked Draco Malfoy. "So it's true!" he said in disbelief. "I had to see it for myself."

"Er... Hello, Malfoy."

"Granger, you shouldn't be here. Take your things and get out."

"I'm afraid that I can't do that."

"You can and you will. What's yours? I'll help you get it together," he said, moving towards her handbag.

"Leave off!"

"No, I'm warning you, Granger, get out of here."

"Draco!" Lucius yelled from the doorway. "How dare you come here and accost my guest!"

"Guest?" His voice held a note of incredulosity to match his face. "She might have been taken in by that rubbish, but I..."

"Calm yourself, boy!"

"Father..."

"You don't understand what's at stake here," Lucius said, coming into the room to grab Draco's arm. "Leave and return to your mother... immediately."

Draco looked back at Hermione and shook his head. She noticed that there was no malice in his eyes; it was actually more near a pleading look.

"Nothing untoward is going on. I promise you," she said, thinking he feared she was trying to move into his mother's spot in Lucius' bed.

"It's not that. You have..."

"Come here," Lucius said in an angry, gruff voice. She'd never seen the man look so mutinous. Even when he'd been her adversary, he'd always maintained a degree of coolness.

She watched as he pulled his son away from the room and heard nothing else from either of them after. "Likely put on a Silencing Charm or something," she mused aloud.

If Draco's purpose had served anything, it had given her a headache. She rubbed her temples. Perhaps this could be construed as a sign, too. Maybe she should heed his warning and get out before she got in too deep. Harry would be home, and he would have questions as well. What could she possibly tell him?

When Lucius returned, he looked like himself again. "I apologize for that," he said.

"How did he know I was here?"

"I went to see him yesterday, and it slipped out."

"You were in France?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was unaware that I had to report my activities to you," he said coolly.

"No, but it's so far away. It seemed like it would be worth mentioning."

"Not so far by Portkey and Apparition points," he said. "Have you come to a decision?"

She sighed. "I'm leaning towards no."

He nodded, and she could see his eyes narrow slightly. "And have you told the book this?"

At this, she laughed. "I didn't know I had to."

"It will warn you of something that you might lose. Will you be prepared for that?"

"I'm not prepared for much of anything," she said in annoyance. "I thought I might have to devote a large amount of my time, knowledge, and even money to this project. I had no idea it would be asking for something so personal."

"You were warned."

"Yes, I know all right."

"I believe your anger is misdirected. You've no one to blame but yourself."

She had to bite her lip to keep hateful words from spilling out of her mouth. "How would you like it if you were in this situation?"

"Who's to say I haven't been?" he retorted.

"Have you?"

"Similar."

"And you went through with it?"

"Look," he said to avoid answering. "What will you have me do? Severus does not like men in that way. It has to be a woman, and since out of the two of us, you are the woman..."

He let the rest hang between them. "Well, pity he doesn't like both!" she said with a growl. "Maybe we can get someone else here. Someone willing. I'm sure you can pay someone."

"But would she still be worthy, Hermione? That's what the book said, did it not? So far the only women I know of that the book thinks to be worthy are... Well, one is right here in front of me...the other one is long dead."

"It's all confusing! I mean, why me, of all the people out there?"

"I don't know," he said softly, stepping closer, "but there must be something about you that it deems worthy. It's an honor."

"Ron, he's not coming home," she blurted.

"Why ever not?"

"His letter said that he wants to take some time to see the sights there and to think about us. He suggests that I do the same."

"More the fool then."

"This bloody tome is coming between us!" she said bitterly. "Everything is just going out of control, isn't it?"

"Hermione, you'll have to go to him to convince him otherwise."

"I don't even know where he's going!"

"Owl him and ask him. Tell him you want to go to him."

"Why do you care?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"I don't. If he never returns, it will not matter to me, but I know that he is the one whom you'd choose to couple with, and you will have to do it soon for the potion."

"Sod the potion!" she said, hitting the arm of her chair in anger.

"Severus needs us!"

"I just can't."

"And what if the tome decides to kill off Weasley or Potter as punishment? Can you take that? Because it just might do it, you know."

"Don't try to use my fears against me like this!"

"I'm not joking or trying to cajole you. I assure you this is very real. You must choose between what you want and what's for the best."

She closed her eyes and willed herself to calm down. Different images flitted through her mind: Snape gliding down the halls of Hogwarts, Snape on his broom refereeing a Quidditch match, Snape smiling at Professor McGonagall at the high table, and Snape hovering over her in the hospital wing with a worried expression on his face. And then she saw Harry laughing happily with Ginny and saw Ron playing chess, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Have you started the base for the potion already?"

"Yes, when I woke this morning," he said hopefully. "Is this a yes?"

She swallowed thickly. "It is."

"I will work out a Portkey for you and give you a map of Apparition points."

"For what?"

"Aren't you going to go to Mr. Weasley?"

"I don't know if he'd welcome me."

"Very well. What of Potter?"

"Harry's more like a brother to me."

"But a life is at stake here."

"Want me to explain this to Harry then?"

"Well... no."

"There you have it," she said sourly. "And anyway, he and Ginny are in love. I couldn't ask that of him."

"Anyone else?"

"I will think about it. I have three days left."

"Two and a half."

She nodded. "Are you going to be all right with what's left of the potion for today?"

"It's nothing but simmering for today."

"I'm going to go home then. I've too much on my mind to be of any good. I'll have a talk with Harry when he gets home and tell him what I can about this." At his worried look, she held up a hand. "Stop right there. You know what I mean."

"Very well. I shall see you early tomorrow then?"

"Yes. Can I have a copy of the potion's outline to look over?"

"Certainly. Here."

"Thanks."

"Again, I'm very sorry about Draco. I'm sure his unkind words haven't helped the stressful situation you're in at the moment."

"I appreciate that, Lucius." She caught herself stepping closer to hug him and held out a hand for a shake instead. A small moment from the heated dream she'd had about him flitted through her mind. What if she had no choice but to approach him? *Absolutely not!* she said to herself, mortified.

"I bid you good day."

Hermione gathered her things, activated her Portkey, and left Malfoy Manor, much on her mind.

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"Hiya, Hermione," Ginny said brightly. "Where've you been? We got back hours ago."

"I told you," Harry said, saving Hermione from answering, "she told Kreacher she had to go to do some research for that secret project she's doing. Now don't badger her about it. You know she can't tell us."

Hermione smiled. "Harry's right. I'm sorry about that."

Ginny's smile, however, faded. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You've been crying, and you look terribly upset."

Harry's stormy expression joined Ginny's worried one as he asked, "Something you want to talk about?"

Knowing she couldn't tell Harry much anyway, especially not with Ginny there, she bypassed the subject of Malfoy all together. "It's Ron," she said sadly, letting the tears come back, unleashing the wretchedness from within. "He wrote to me, said he wants to stay in France for a couple of weeks to think things over...maybe deciding to end things between us."

She cried in earnest then and allowed herself to be taken into Ginny's arms. "But why?" Ginny asked, rocking her as she did so.

"We had a row before he left, and I guess... he must still be hurt over it."

Harry squatted down and patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Are you sure? George said he was supposed to be coming back in a couple of days? Maybe he's changed his mind."

Hermione wiped at her eyes and looked up. "You think so?"

"Want I should owl him?"

"Please, Harry."

"I'll do that now." He smiled at Ginny and left them.

"Let's get Kreacher to make us some tea, all right?"

"Sounds like a good idea to me."

"I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you, but I'll be staying here with you lot for a while."

Hermione's eyebrows arched. "Your mother is allowing this?"

"Well," Ginny said with a sly smirk, "I don't expect she had much of a choice." She held up her hand and showed Hermione the lovely ring on her finger. "Harry proposed! It's official."

"Congratulations! I'm so happy for you. Really."

"I only hope," Ginny said seriously, "that you and Ron will follow suit soon." She shook her head. "He'd better get his head out of his arse and quickly!"

Hermione said nothing to that and hoped that Ginny was right. There was so much she couldn't explain to her friends or to Ron, but she would try to make it up to them later...after the whole Snape mess was done with. This would teach her to get involved in things without knowing *all* of the particulars again.

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A/N: Yes, let's hope she's learned her lesson. She's in a terrible mess.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter One please.

*Thanks to my betas charmed\_nay and ladyinthecloak.*

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"You seem refreshed," Lucius commented.

"I had a good night's rest," she said. "Ginny is going to be staying with us now. She and Harry are engaged!"

"Good for them," he said distractedly.

"What are you working on so early this morning?" He smiled so brightly that she stopped to admire his mouth and white, perfectly shaped teeth.

"I went through my grandfather's book information again," he said. "I've done a little tweaking, and I think we're all set. Here is a revised copy of what I gave you last night." He handed her a parchment. "I went to your workroom to look at the tome, but it wouldn't divulge anything to me." At this, he scowled. "Bloody particular, that book."

"And troublesome!"

"Indeed." He patted the open space on the settee beside him. "Join me."

"Thanks."

"Any word from Weasley?"

"Harry owed him when I got home yesterday, but we've not heard from him."

"I'm certain he'll reply soon," he said with a small pat on the back of her hand.

"What's odd, though, is that he'd owed George yesterday morning as well, but he told him that he'd be coming home in a couple of days."

"That is odd, isn't it?" He reached up to move a lock of hair from her face. "Do you know what could have changed his mind?"

"No," she said honestly. "Only..."

"Only?"

"In his first letter, he talked about the lady he was meeting there for business," she said softly. "And I was thinking that maybe she and he got on well enough that she could convince him to stay?"

"And is he the type prone to wandering?"

"No. I didn't think so." She blushed as she thought of the dream she'd had of Lucius. It would serve her right if Ron had strayed, wouldn't it? It would make them even. This made her laugh out loud, gaining a shrewd look from her friend. Thinking that a dream would equate actual cheating was absurd.

"Are you going to share your joke with me?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, I'm just being silly."

She began to look over the instructions. "So... leaves of southernwood in about ten minutes then?"

"Yes, it's first on the list of those we'll add today."

"I don't understand what this has to do with it exactly," She laughed. "I saw a couple of bushes of this growing at my grandma's when I was younger. She'd call it Lover's Plant though."

"It's not only to stave off impotence, my dear," he said with a smile, "or to encourage menstruation," here he wrinkled his nose, "but it serves to clean out the insides. I expect that's why it's required."

"Seems like I remember that it's used in love potions. Once a girl tried to give Harry some chocolates injected with it... only Ron ate them instead." She snickered.

"How did he get out of that?"

"Harry brought him down to Slughorn."

"Old Horace." He shook his head. "He was my head of house all my years at Hogwarts."

"Were you in his Slug's Club?"

"I was. You?"

"Yes."

Lucius sneered slightly. "Draco wasn't invited, had to sneak into one of his parties just to see what all the fuss was about."

"I remember that night," she said. "Let's go prepare it then, nearly time."

"Very well."

He'd set things up in a room in the dungeon next to the one that held Severus' body. It made a passable laboratory. There were many cauldrons of different sizes, types, shapes, and grade. Several burners lay on a table, and there were two sinks...one on either side of the long table that would be used to prepare ingredients. His shelves were stocked with many things. She picked up a pestle nearby.

"This is very nice, Lucius."

"Thank you. I hope Severus will find it suitable."

"What would he need this for?"

"I'm certain he'll be staying on here for a while, and I know he'll want to brew his own potions for regaining his health."

"Probably," she agreed. "Does he have a home to go back to? What's become of it?"

"Narcissa and Bozzy went there months back. She set him about cleaning and tidying things." He shrugged. "It will be there waiting for him when he returns, should he still want it."

Hermione thought that he would likely prefer his own home than Malfoy Manor, but since she didn't know Snape that well, she couldn't be sure. He just seemed like the type to prefer his own territory to another's.

"Do you want to handle this or shall I?"

"I will," she said, going over to the counter where a few long sprays of southernwood lay. "Smells like lemons, doesn't it?"

"I've always thought so as well."

"I'll need nine leaves in all," she said, looking at his instructions. "Three at first, which will brew for three minutes, stirring clockwise, and then three more, same thing only anticlockwise, and then the last three." He said nothing, simply sat to watch her. She pulled a long sprig towards her and plucked off three of the slender, grayish-green leaves. One tickled her slightly as it feathered over her palm.

"Would you like me to take over the stirring in the middle?"

"That would help. My wrist gets tired quickly sometimes," she said with a laugh. "There's another stirring rod just there."

They worked together and made simple conversation while doing so, not wanting to wreck their tasks. Once Hermione had finished the stirring for the last round, Lucius turned the flame up a little and smiled.

"Well, that's done then."

"Next up, in... four hours, we'll need to powder an entire Mugwort plant...root, leaves, everything." She saw the purplish stem of a nearby plant and nodded. "I see you have it ready. I suppose I could prepare it now."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Coffee."

"I feel like a full English. What say you? To celebrate our start?"

"I guess we could do that."

"Lovely. I've also something I want to show you."

His smile was infectious, causing her to do the same. They left the lab and went up to their dining spot out near the gardens where Lucius made his order with Bozzy. He pulled a letter from a pocket and handed it to her.

"Read this."

*Father,*

*I apologize for not being able to control my anger yesterday. When you said that Granger was there working with you on something, I didn't want to believe it. And when I went home and saw it for myself, I sought to disrupt things.*

*Your son,*

*Draco*

"There now. See? He feels guilty about it."

"I don't think he does," she replied, "but it's clear he doesn't want to earn your ire." She shrugged. "Not that it matters anyway."

The rest of the day went by peacefully, each taking turns doing different tasks. By the time she'd gone home, she realized that she'd not thought of Ron since that morning.

However, upon seeing Ginny and Harry cozying up on the couch and watching the telly, she thought of him. "Any word from Ron?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not from him, no."

She could tell that something wasn't quite right. "What is it you're not saying?"

It was Ginny who answered. "George got an owl from him. Told him he's taking some time to himself to rethink things."

Hermione nodded. "I'll just go on up."

"Wait, Hermione," Ginny said, "have you even eaten? You look a fright."

"I ate earlier, yes," she said. It wasn't exactly a lie. They'd had something akin to a buffet for breakfast, and it had filled them both so much that they'd decided to skip lunch. She didn't feel all that hungry still, not now that reality was back to slap her in the face. "I think I'll go up for a bath. Talk to you later."

For now, she had to think of whom she would dare to seduce in order to get the potion's next needed ingredient. Not one person who came to mind was plausible. She couldn't do that to Ron, not with someone they both knew. He didn't deserve that no matter what he decided he wanted. It would have to be someone that wasn't considered a friend, someone who could keep quiet.

All her thoughts continued to go back to one man: Lucius Malfoy. But how could she approach the subject? He'd not hinted at being interested at all, suggesting various people she might consider. If nothing came to her by tomorrow, she'd simply just have to tell him that he had no choice in the matter...much like herself.

"There, that ought to make his arse squirm, and it serves him right," she said bitterly. After all, she was going from a girl who'd been in a monogamous, non-sexual relationship to a woman who would have to have sex with two people...for the purpose of a potion, not even one of lust, much less love. As appalling as the thought of having sex with Lucius Malfoy would normally be, she found that aside from the awkwardness and embarrassing circumstances, it might not be all that bad. Of course, she was greatly biased by the sensual dream she'd had. It had been so vivid; she could still feel the press of his soft lips and the swipe of his tongue against her body.

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"There's something on your mind," Lucius said, tossing the flannel he'd dried his hand with to the side. "What is it?"

"It's about the next ingredient."

"Which needs to be added in sixteen hours...after this has reached a boiling level twice and simmered for the remainder of the time." He frowned. "I say, should it look so black?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't really say, but we've done everything right, so I'm guessing it's fine."

"Now, what is it? Have you decided on whom? Has Weasley replied to you?"

"No, he hasn't. George is the last person to have heard from him." She shrugged. "It doesn't matter anyway."

"What of Draco?"

"What of him?"

"I'm certain I could talk to him and..."

"Are you mad? Don't you remember how he reacted when he saw me here the other day?"

"Well, it was a thought. Perhaps if I told him more details he'd be inclined." He gazed at her for a moment, eyes lowering over her body. "I daresay he'd find you very attractive."

"No, absolutely not!"

"Just a thought."

"Hmph! A bad one at that."

"Well, what have you planned then?"

"You." It was as light as a whisper but backed by determination.

"Pardon?"

"I said 'you' are the only option I have."

"Hermione, I don't think that would be wise."

"You're in this with me! You know what's at stake. You and I can do this, walk away from it, and never think of it again."

"I love my wife, Hermione."

"You met with someone the first night I came here. I am certain of it!"

"But that was different. I was angry, and she'd..." He shrugged. "I wasn't even able to..." He shook his head. "Come now. I think you can come up with someone. What of that stuffy brother of his? Percy, is it?"

"Certainly not." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I can't believe you are trying to weasel out of this. You don't care that I'm involved with someone...sort of! No, you'd send me off to shag a Quidditch team if you thought it would help." She held up her chin and firmly said, "You are all I have. It won't take long. We can just... you know, and then the phial can fill and..."

"You mean to say that you wouldn't want to finish what we'd start? Have you ever heard of the term blue balls, my dear? Very unpleasant." It was he who crossed his arms this time.

"So you would... have sex with me?"

He gave her a mocking smile. "Yes, I suppose I have no choice."

"Wait." Hermione held up a hand. "I have to know. Be honest please. Is it that displeasing to you? I hate to just spring this on you, but I need you for this. We'll just forget about it after. I won't... become attached, and you need never worry about me telling anyone about it. Ever."

"You are very attractive, but do you realize how awkward this would be for us?"

"I've thought of it."

"Make no mistake, I want to work things out with my wife." His eyes sparkled then. "However, one cannot help but appreciate what's before him, can he?" And he gazed at her as he had so many times before.

"And I hope that you do work things out, Lucius. Trust me. I won't ask for anything more."

"All right." Lucius cleared his throat. "When, uh, do you want to procure the ingredient?"

"Oh, please don't refer to it that way," she said with a nervous laugh.

"I confess that since you've been here, I've thought of you in that way a few times, never thinking anything would come of it."

She blushed slightly. "I have as well."

"Well, that's a start then," he said encouragingly.

"I was thinking that we could maybe have a few drinks to loosen up?"

"For you to loosen up you mean?" he said giving her a sly look.

"Yes."

"What of a draught of lust potion?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"It would certainly make this easier for you." He looked away from her. "For me as well, I'm afraid. It's been a long time since I've had anyone inexperienced in my bed."

"Okay. I'll have some."

"You'll have to procure it. I don't happen to have any here."

She smiled. "I didn't think you would. I'll go to the apothecary and be back later on. Have you any plans?"

"Not now I don't," he said, giving her a devilish grin. He reached out to touch her cheek. "All will be well. We do this because we must, and that doesn't make what we're doing wrong or bad. You are being very noble. Severus will be indebted to you."

Hermione nodded and looked away. "I'll see you tonight then."

"All right."

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"Hermione, you're shaking," Harry said as he watched her brush her hair. "What's going on?"

"I guess I'm a little nervous about tonight."

"What's tonight?" he asked, closing the door behind him so that Ginny couldn't happen upon them.

"You know I can't really tell you, Harry."

"Tell me what you can then."

"The gist of it is that we're making a potion... one that will do something amazing." She smiled brightly and put her brush aside. "I'll be able to tell you about it when it's all done, all right?"

"But why are you so nervous? You've always been good in potions. Nothing else is going on, is it?"

"No, Harry, it's just that this next step is very important, and I'm afraid that I'll mess it up," she said honestly. "I've never done anything quite like this before."

He smiled and confidently said, "You'll do fine." His smile faded, and he moved further into her room, stopping near her. "I wasn't going to say anything, and maybe I still shouldn't, but Ron wrote to George again."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I read the letter. Half of what he said didn't even make sense."

"I expect he was pissed when he wrote it then," she said with a shake of her head. "I just don't understand. Why now? Why after all this time?"

"Hermione, what did the two of you argue about? I mean, I heard a little of it, but then it went silent, and I could tell when he left that it still wasn't better."

"It's very personal," she said.

"Well, if you can't confide in me, who can you?"

"Fine. He wanted to have sex, and I didn't. There. Happy?"

Harry blinked and his cheeks reddened. "Er... oh."

"Not that interested now, are you?"

"I just thought that... it might have been something else."

"No. That's about it."

"Malfoy still treating you all right?"

"Yes. Will you stop asking?"

"Hermione, Draco owed me today. He wants to meet with me tomorrow. He says it's about you."

"Is that right?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not surprised."

"He told me not to say anything, but I thought I should." He ran his fingers through his untidy hair. "Any idea what it's about?"

"Draco showed up and tried to make me leave his house. I'm certain he doesn't approve of my new friendship with his father." She sighed. "Can you assure him that there's nothing..." Her voice trailed away. It was a lie, wasn't it? For she would be experiencing something more than friendship with Lucius in only a couple of hours. Another woman's husband. Draco's father.

"Hermione? All right?"

"People always think the worst of others," she said, hoping it was a good recovery.

"I'll talk to him." He grinned. "In the meantime, keep your chin up. I don't know exactly what you're doing, but I know it's for a good cause. Just know that you can confide in me whenever you need to, and... no matter what happens with Ron, that changes nothing for us."

"Thank you, Harry." She hugged him tightly. "That means a lot to me."

"Just so you know, I've already told Ginny that you'll be out tonight to work on some top-secret project." He laughed. "She won't pry too much. Thanks you're throwing yourself into your work now that Ron's being an arse about it all."

"No word from him then?"

He shook his head. "No. Sorry."

"He'll have to come back one day to discuss this, won't he?"

"Look, don't tell Draco's father that he owed me, all right?"

"Why not?"

"If you can keep a promise to him and leave me in the dark, do this for me. I told Draco I'd not say anything in my return owl. I'd like to at least partially keep my word."

"I promise then."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow then?"

"Wish me luck."

"You won't need it," he said reassuringly.

After he left, she muttered, "But I will," to herself.

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As Hermione Portkeyed to her workroom at Malfoy Manor, butterflies seemed to take flight in her stomach. How could she have talked herself into this? *Snape had better appreciate what this is costing me*, she thought sadly. Virginity had never been an issue with her. It wasn't anything that she held dear, but just having her body being used didn't sit well with her.

"Don't think of it that way, though," she said aloud. And why should she? She would get something out of this, too, and it wasn't just a sacrifice either. What she did with Lucius would prepare her for her other important role...sating Snape's lust. That had her more nervous than anything. So much so that each time she thought of it, she forced the thoughts away. It would simply be the next thing she'd have to conquer. After this was done, however, she vowed to not regret it. If things went as planned, *she* would be responsible for doing something that even Lord Voldemort had failed to do properly...sort of.

Knowing that Lucius was probably waiting for her, she went up to the bedroom she'd been staying in and took off her robes. It didn't pay for her to put on anything sexy for him. They were simply mutually consenting adults, both intent on achieving the same goal. No extra pleasantries were needed. Having already bathed before she left, she slid right into bed and nervously downed the small phial of lust potion she'd procured at an overly high price. However, she'd been assured that the effect came immediately and the price was well worth the outcome.

She used her wand to turn the lights off before placing it beneath her pillow. "Bozzy?" she called quietly, part of her hoping he'd not hear her.

"Yes, miss?" he said immediately, a small pop sounding at his appearance.

"Please tell your master that I am here and that he may join me at his earliest convenience."

A nod his reply, the little elf left her alone in the darkened room, moonbeams her only means of light. As she waited for Lucius to come to her, she felt a small change come over her body...her blood temperature seemed to have risen, she could feel heat radiating from her, and her pulse beat quicker than ever. Her mind hadn't changed, though, and now guilt was attempting to take hold.

How could she have sex with a married man? It was true that he and his wife were estranged, but what sort of woman did that make her? Draco's fears indeed had merit. And while she didn't seek to usurp the boy's mother's place, she was still crossing the line. Her only relief was that no one need ever know. No hurt would come to anyone because of this. She and Lucius were doing this to give life to a man who deserved it.

"Okay, enough of this reiterating things, Hermione. What's done is done," she said firmly.

A moment later, the door opened, and Lucius entered, quietly closing it behind him and making his way over to her. "Shall I leave the lights off?" he asked softly.

"Please," she said, her pulse hammering in her ears.

"Were you able to find a potion?"

"Yes, but... oh... did you need some? I'm sorry! I didn't think of that. I took it all, but I could probably go and find some more if you'd like. Or..." His chuckle interrupted her anxious babbling.

"No need, my dear. I find myself looking forward to this and need nothing to make me... want you." His voice had lowered to a soft murmur that had mesmerized her so much she hadn't felt the bed dip until his naked flesh lay pressed against hers. "Ah, now... where to start?" he asked playfully, placing a hand on her face to guide it towards his for a light kiss.

And then the lust potion fogged her mind. She wanted him, wanted to feel him on her, inside of her, all over her. Better yet, she wanted to touch him, taste him, learn every inch of him.

"I want you, too, Lucius," she said, not fully noticing how sultry her voice sounded.

"Show me what you want, tell me..."

Her hands began roaming his body, and she nearly asked him to turn the lights on so that she might see the treasure she'd been allowed to fondle. How could a man have such soft, smooth skin? And he smelled heavenly.

"Touch me," she said, pressing herself against him, her lips exploring his throat.

"As you wish..."

Much later as she lay entwined within his arms and legs, she began to feel some of the effects of the lust potion wearing off. The pulsating feeling in her body dwindled away, her breathing began to even out, and her mind began to clear. To her surprise, she felt at ease with what had happened, though a little embarrassed at the same

time, but she knew that nothing could change things and it would be best to simply accept it if she wanted their companionship to remain unchanged. Therefore, she didn't attempt to move away from him.

However, one thing weighed heavily on her mind. "Lucius?"

"Mmm?"

"Did you take care of the spells?"

"I did... before you came."

A light kiss was placed against her forehead. "That's a relief," she said. "For a moment there I thought we got a bit carried away and forgot."

"No, at least one of us had a bit of control," he teased lightly.

She couldn't help snickering. "I've never tried that before. I had no idea how, uh, carried away a person could get."

"And how do you feel?"

"A little sore, but not terribly so," she said, shifting slightly. "I'll need to take that contraceptive potion in the morning."

"Yes, we mustn't forget that." His fingers raked through her hair. "How do you feel... mentally?"

She felt him tense up and wondered if he thought she'd request him to spout sonnets for her suddenly. "I firmly believe we made the right choice, and my reasons and decision have not changed."

"There is something that I want to ask you," he said seriously, "and I hope you won't be offended by this."

Hermione swallowed thickly and turned to face him. "What is it?"

"Would you mind terribly if we," he traced her cheek with an index finger, "had another go? Just to, ah, make certain that we get it all. One never knows what might be missed."

Her stomach tingled when she realized what his words meant. She'd satisfied him, and he wanted her again...though it truly wasn't necessary.

"Since we're here and all that..."

And his lips found hers for a light, chaste kiss.

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Hermione woke when she felt him leave the bed. "What time is it?" she asked groggily.

"I have to prepare the... ingredient to be added. I thought I'd let you sleep in. Would you prefer to join me?"

"Yes, I'll dress and be down after I use the loo."

"Excellent. I'll have Bozzy make us some tea."

"Ooh, First Flush Darjeeling again?" she asked hopefully.

"Indeed."

"Yes, please."

He paused as if he wanted to say something more, but instead, he turned and left her alone. She could see that he was shrugging on his dressing gown as he opened the door.

Grabbing her wand, she said, *'Lumos.'*

Hermione's eyes first found the rumpled bedclothes and then her naked body. There were small passion marks on her breasts, but other than that, she looked the same as far as she could see. That was until she saw her reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Her hair was more disheveled than ever, her lips were swollen from his kisses, and her eyes seemed to have lost some of their innocence.

As she slid away from the bed, she noticed that there was no blood staining them and was grateful that Lucius' spell had worked. It was bad enough that Bozzy knew what they'd done, but she certainly wouldn't want him to see any evidence of their coupling.

*And not just one coupling either. Two. That was uncalled for!*

All of the things she'd not wanted to think of the night before flooded her mind at that moment. Ron. She'd betrayed him. What did it matter that he needed time away from her? He was still the man she'd planned on marrying, and instead, she'd propositioned someone else to engage in the very thing that she and Ron had rowed about. And Narcissa? What would she think if she knew her husband had bedded someone in her own home? Draco... She shuddered, not wanting to think of the names he'd call her.

"But they won't know," she said, stifling a slight sob. "Only I will know. I can handle this. I'll make up for it." With a nod, she gathered her things to ready herself for a quick shower. "It's just a price I'm paying for the greater good. That's all."

Amazingly, she didn't feel all that much different physically. Perhaps there was a little tenderness when she cleaned herself, but it wasn't anything worth mentioning. She remembered the way Lavender had gone on and on about the pain she'd suffered after being with Ronald back at Hogwarts. Hermione had hated her then, and she'd known that the girl was boasting loudly to hurt her, but now that she'd experienced sex for herself, she was certain that the girl had been laying it on thick.

Once she entered their lab, Lucius nodded towards the tea service. "Have a cup," he offered while measuring something.

As she poured her tea, she watched him. "I never took you for the type to have the patience for this."

"Why ever not? I was fair in potions, though I did much better in Charms in all honesty."

"I don't know. I guess it's just another new thing that I've learned about you." She smiled. "I'm glad."

"You know, I've found your *friendship* enjoyable as well."

She caught the way he'd emphasized the word 'friendship' and felt herself cringe. *He must truly be worried that I'll get emotional. Only one way to put him at ease!* It's a shame that you aren't my type."

"I'm not? But this is a first. Most women swoon at my feet and draw hearts with the Malfoy name inside."

Hermione laughed loudly. "Oh, you are definitely attractive, and you, uh, well, yeah, anyway... But for a relationship, I fear I'm drawn to a different type."

"Such as Weasley?"

She paused. "Ron and I, we've always been close, and there was always a spark there. He made me so angry that I just wanted to hit him sometimes...or kiss him. Over the years, we simply fell in love."

"You sound wistful."

"Things aren't really working out the way I'd thought they would, are they? It just gives me pause to reflect. What if he and I are wrong for each other and have wasted all this time?"

"Experience is not a waste of time," he said as he shook a stoppered beaker. "Say you wouldn't be seeing Weasley, what sort of man would you be drawn to? Wealth? Power? Handsomeness?"

"My family has always had money, so that doesn't exactly lure me in," she said honestly.

He snorted. "Hence the relationship with a Weasley."

"Ron makes good money now that he's working with George," she said defensively.

"I apologize. How rude of me."

"Ah, it's all right. Old habit and all that." She thought for a moment. "If I were to be attracted to a man, I would want it to be someone who didn't fear getting his hands dirty doing manual work. Loyalty is a must of course. Looks, well, that's a plus, but I'd rather judge by a person's inside more than his outside." She grinned. "I'd really enjoy someone studious, whom I can speak with at length and not be made to feel boring."

"I take it you bore Weasley?"

Hermione shrugged. "Sometimes he doesn't understand what I'm talking about."

"Pity. What else?"

Here she bit her lip. "This will sound ridiculous, but have you ever heard of Lord Byron?"

Lucius nodded. "I have indeed. The grandfather who left me that book was fond of Manfred and told me of it often enough."

"Just that one or all of Byron's works?"

"All of them, but that one in particular. I believe he felt a kinship with the bloke and claimed to have shared pints with him in his younger days." Lucius tossed his hair back from his shoulder. "My grandfather fell in love with his niece and married her. Not unusual back in the day." He shrugged. "His parents approved because she was a pureblood of course...from good stock, but her father didn't. It seemed the man thought that his own brother had impregnated the girl's mother whilst he was away, which would mean that my grandfather was in love with his half sister and not a niece. They dueled of course. My grandfather won." Here Lucius smirked. "He never made any apologies for his decision, but I assume he felt guilty that he killed her father. Things were never the same for them after that as far as I know."

"How sad."

"As is life sometimes."

"Anyway, I meant to say that someone like Lord Byron would appeal to me as far as looks go. I've always thought him devilishly handsome: dark, brooding, rebellious, and mysterious. He always stood up for what he believed in and wasn't afraid to say it no matter what the others thought."

Lucius placed the beaker down and faced her squarely. "I know just the man for you."

Laughing, she said, "Who?"

"Severus." His voice was serious and didn't waver. "You've described him in nearly all that you said. Do you think that maybe all of this is happening for a reason?"

"I... no." She shook her head. "Ron and I will talk things out after all this is done with. I'm sure of it."

He shrugged. "It's nearly time to add this. I hope you don't mind that I've saved what was left in case we've need of it again."

"Fair enough."

"After this, according to our outline, we'll have to chop the bark from a yew tree to add in."

She picked up the parchment. "Yes, in two hours." Looking behind her, she said, "And I see you have it at the ready. You know, you certainly got prepared for this quickly enough. If I didn't know better, I'd think you had this planned all along."

His eyes narrowed. "And why would you say that?"

"I'm joking. You had no idea what ingredients we'd need." She frowned. "Why so defensive?"

It was his turn to frown. "I didn't mean to snap, but I have been planning this for a long time. I knew there had to be something I could do for Severus. He and I, we had such plans, so many things left undone." He cleared his throat. "After the way Potter's mother treated him and then the way he lived his life under Dumbledore's thumb...for Potter...I feel he got a bad deal. Don't you agree?"

Hermione nodded. "I wish he could have been happier."

"Oh, make no mistake. Sometimes Severus was quite happy, but in general, his life was lacking." Lucius' eyes glinted with a new light. "All of that will change now...because of you, us, I mean."

"Doubt keeps creeping into my mind, and I wonder if I've made the right decision, but then I think of him, and I can't help but to feel that I have."

"Indeed." He poured the blood into the cauldron. "And the tome would have meted out something terrible if you hadn't, so it isn't as though you had much of a choice anyway, so don't feel too badly."

"I feel confident that this is the right thing to do." She paused. "Lucius, if he comes back..."

"When he comes back."



She smiled at his confidence in their potion-making ability. "When he comes back, it said he wouldn't really be himself at first. Uh, do you think that he'll hurt us?"

"Or be rough with you?"

"That too."

"Remember, you and I will be anointed with the same oil as he. He will not harm us. Do not be afraid, Hermione. You have been chosen for this, handpicked."

His words, no matter how reassuring they were meant to be, made her shiver. "I can't help but be a little frightened."

"Understandable."

"I'll start chopping some of the bark."

"Before breakfast?"

"Well, I wanted to have lunch with Harry and Ginny today. Maybe pop over to my parents' house, so the sooner we get this part done, the sooner I can leave."

"I'm a bit ravenous after last night," he said cheekily. "I expect you would be as well if I had dark locks like your dear Lord Byron."

And with those words, Hermione knew that she'd succeeded in putting his mind at ease about what had happened between them. She'd chosen the right tactic after all. "Ah, only if," she quipped with a fake sigh.

Later after they were done, she went back to Grimmauld Place to find Harry and Ginny setting the table. "Where's Kreacher?" she asked.

Ginny blushed, her skin nearly matching her hair. "Oh, I wanted to do this myself. How's the project going?"

"Everything is perfect."

"Told you," Harry put in.

"Anything I can do?" she asked.

"Do you remember where Ron hid that butter beer we bought?" Harry asked, widening his eyes for her to go along with him.

"I think it's in our room. If you follow me up, you can bring it back down while I wash up."

"Right." He slapped Ginny on the arse as he passed by and followed Hermione up the stairway. Once they were alone, he spoke again. "Did Draco show up there?"

She shook her head. "No, was he supposed to? I thought he was meeting you?"

"He didn't come. All I got was an owl saying that something had come up and he'd have to get back with me when he could. But he still asked me to keep silent about it." He breathed a sigh of relief. "I almost thought he might show up there just to interrupt again. I nearly went over myself to warn you."

"Er, thankfully there was no need." Her gaze fell to Ron's neatly made bed. "No word from Ronald?"

"Sorry. No."

"Nothing from me either."

"Write him, Hermione. Maybe he thinks that since you haven't responded, you agree with the time apart bit. What would it hurt?"

Hermione didn't feel as though she could write Ron a letter at the moment. Too many things were swirling in her mind, and she wasn't certain there was much to say at all. Lucius' conversation kept coming back to her. Had she and Ron been a mistake? Would she really do well with someone else? Someone like Professor Snape?

"I won't do it. He seems to want his space."

"Your decision."

"Absolutely."

"You look different today."

"I do?"

"Yeah."

"In a bad way?"

"No, not at all. Are you wearing makeup?"

"None."

"I can't pinpoint what it is exactly," he said thoughtfully. "But, uh, you look good."

She flashed him a grin and indicated where he could find the butterbeer.

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A/N: Oh my!

## Chapter 5

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter One please.

*Thanks to charmed\_nay and ladyinthecloak for beta reading.*

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Over the next couple of days Hermione continued to read in the tome, and while she was learning some new things, it seemed that it was mostly displaying information that she knew already or that could easily be found at a Wizarding library. Lucius didn't need any help with the potion, as they'd added most of the ingredients already, and it was merely simmering. So, most of the time she simply sat staring at nothing in particular, lost in her mind.

Was it too late to change her mind? The thought of having sex with Professor Snape wasn't very pleasant, especially since he'd been dead nearly a year...not that he'd be a corpse or anything when they did couple. How would it be possible for him to be normal so quickly though? Wouldn't it take time for him to get back to good? She'd been dealing well enough with what had happened between her and Lucius, as she simply tried to forget about it, but this was Snape! He'd been her professor for six years. She'd seen him die.

While she'd never thought him to be ugly, though Harry and Ron did, she wasn't all that attracted to him. She supposed that had a lot to do with his attitude and the way he'd treated them all in the past. When he woke and sought out the woman who was to help him return to manhood, would he be pleased to find her there? Would he laugh and refuse? Or would he simply be so desperate that he'd not even take notice who was there, just needing a warm body?

The thought of him rejecting her was unsettling. While she'd had those dreams where he seemed to want her, she knew them to be only dreams. The reality would be so much different. A brief image of him sneering down at her hatefully came to mind. He'd always been one to hurt with words, so it was likely he'd still be that way, perhaps even hurting her with his body. But, no, Lucius had said that he couldn't harm them once they anointed themselves. It was still only a small relief.

Lucius had it bloody easy. All he had to do was sit back and wait for Severus to return to himself. She, on the other hand, had to be there during the whole process and help him return to the land of the living. The more she thought about it, the more nervous she got. How could she face him?

What would sex be like with him? Would he be as patient a lover as Lucius had been? Their shag had been enjoyable, and she knew that had a lot to do with the lust potion she'd taken. Otherwise, she'd have been an awkward, bumbling, nervous wreck. She'd said so many lewd things, some she'd swear to anyone that she'd never even thought of before. He seemed to enjoy it, however, urging her to say more, do more. He had been affectionate with her, but she appreciated that he hadn't been too intimate.

Many times she'd imagined making love with Ron, his eyes holding hers while he slid into her body the first time. It hadn't been anything like that with Lucius. She'd kept her eyes closed for nearly the duration of the first time while his head rested against the pillow next to her head, and the second time, he'd turned her over and pressed her head down, taking her from behind. She couldn't exactly call it intimate, even though he'd done things to her that Ron had only wished to do.

"Oh, Ron," she said sadly. "What will happen with us?"

Before all this had happened, she'd planned on marrying him, having a couple of children, and working her way up at the Ministry...once she finally accepted their job offer, that is. But what did she want now? Could she face him again after she'd given another man her body? Would he be able to simply look at her and tell that she was different somehow?

Harry had noticed a change in her, only he couldn't place exactly what was different about her. Ronald would know. "Shite!" she said suddenly. When they finally would make love...if they ever did...he'd know that he wasn't the first she'd been with. How could she explain that without telling him the truth? No matter what explanation she would give to him, it would hurt him terribly and possibly destroy their relationship altogether. Ron had always been jealous about other men around her...still hated that she received occasional letters from Viktor.

And like magic, the answer came to her. She could tell him that she'd broken her hymen while learning to ride her broom back in first year at Hogwarts. He'd believe it easily enough, and she could attest that it was that which had ultimately made her leery of flying, leaving her unable to perfect the skill. It wasn't as though it couldn't have happened that way. Many accidents caused something similar to happen to young girls.

Wanting to get away from it all, Hermione slid down beneath the thick duvet on her bed, not caring that it was still quite early in the evening. Harry and Ginny could do without her company for one night, couldn't they? In fact, they'd probably prefer a little alone time before Ginny had to leave town again with her team.

*Hermione found herself walking into the candlelit room again, shivering for fear and cold. Each step towards the desk that held the tome seemed to take her further away. The pages on the tome began to flip and turn as the now-familiar breeze swept through the room. Finally, she made it to the desk to see that the ink was still bloody and the script messy. However, the message couldn't have been more clear:*

You have given the blood. Your body is next. And after, your soul.

"What?" she whispered incredulously. "My soul?"

"Yes," said his voice from the doorway.

She looked up to see him gliding towards her. "I will have your body, and I will have your soul. You are to be mine. It's the price you shall pay for dallying with such darkness."

"This isn't real. This is my imagination working overtime."

*In no time, he was before her, one cold hand touching her chin, the other inching toward her waist. "If believing that this is not real, that I am not your destiny, makes you feel better, then continue to do so." His face lowered towards hers, and the way the candlelight flickered against his face, making his dark eyes glow with an eerie light, held her mesmerized.*

*The hand that had grasped her waist pulled her firmly against him. She couldn't look away. She wanted to feel this. Wanted to know. Had to know. Rising up on her tiptoes, face tilted towards his, she pressed her lips against his mouth tentatively. He felt real. Why did it not seem like the dream that she knew it to be?*

*His lips parted beneath hers, and she mimicked his movement, her hands resting against his chest between them, ready to push him away if she so chose. She couldn't say that the kiss was sweet, as it felt more like a calculated exploration on both their parts...tongues tangling, mouths firmly meeting, and heads moving in rhythm.*

When he pulled away to gaze at her, he asked, "Do you still not believe?"

"I-I don't know."

Someone cleared his throat behind Severus.

"Lucius!" Hermione said, pushing the man holding her away.

"You see, Hermione," Lucius said with a smirk, "this is what lay in wait for you."

"You did not tell her everything, old friend." Snape's voice was deathly quiet.

"What does it matter?" Lucius said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"It matters," growled Snape, who took a few steps towards the blond man.

"What does he mean 'tell her everything'?" Hermione asked. The two men ignored her and faced off instead. She moved closer, looking from one dark, menacing face to his lighter counterpart. "Please... what's going on? What does the book mean by this?"

And Snape attacked Lucius, hands on his throat, bodily pushing him down to his knees. Silvery eyes widened in shock and fear, Lucius gasped and choked, his own hands clawing at those around his neck.

"Stop it! STOP IT!" she screamed over and over.

Hermione woke to find Ginny hovering over her. "All right?" she asked anxiously.

With a nod and a few blinks, the room came into focus for Hermione. "A dream."

"Harry told me you've been plagued by them," Ginny said, sitting next to her and taking her hand. "I'm going to kick Ron's arse for this. I can't believe he's pulled this shite on you and so bloody suddenly!"

Hermione dared not explain that the horrible dreams had nothing to do with Ron's actions, nor that they'd started well before he'd left. "What if he doesn't want me anymore?" she found herself asking.

"Oh, love, he'll come to his senses. I'm sure of it."

*What if I don't want him to come to his senses? What if I now know there is something more?* Maybe this is just for the best. I mean... do I really want someone who would treat me like this anyway?" she said, suddenly bitter, the guilt of her own actions egging her on. "One day he's fine, and the next he's not? After he's been meeting with a woman over there!"

"A woman? What are you talking about?" Ginny asked bemusedly.

"He wrote to me to say that the man he was to meet for business was actually a woman. I thought nothing of it then, but not long after that was when he decided to stay there and see the sights and think things over. What if... you know, he fancies her?" And wouldn't that ease her conscience? As much as she'd hate the thought of him making love to someone else, at least it would even the score between them...making her feel less of a harlot. *But you had no choice! It would have been him if his arse would have been here!* a voice defended. It was right. Why should she take all the blame? She hadn't asked him to go on holiday.

"Hermione, I don't think Ron would ever do that to you." Her eyes moved away from Hermione's. "Well, at least I hope he wouldn't. I just know how much he loves you."

"I just don't know about that," she said softly.

"Don't give up on him. You two have been through so much, and after all those years of not knowing how to tell each other how you truly felt, you finally made it. So what if you have issues? Many couples do!"

"You and Harry don't."

"Yes, Hermione, we do. Trust me."

"All right in here?" Harry asked, entering the room.

"Oh!" Ginny laughed. "She was sleeping when I came in, and I never asked her."

"Asked me what?"

"If you wanted to come down and watch a movie with us."

She ginned. "I thought you two would like some privacy."

Ginny smiled. "You've been gone so much the last few days that we've had more than enough privacy. Come on."

"I'll be there in a moment," she agreed. "Harry, if I could have a word?"

"Sure."

With a small nod, Ginny left them alone. Hermione smiled at her friend's retreating back and was thankful that the girl trusted her and Harry so much. It wasn't every woman who could handle her lover living with another woman.

"What's up?"

"I just wanted to ask you if you heard anything about Ron since we last talked."

"No. Nothing still."

"Draco?"

"Him neither."

"I should write Ron, shouldn't I, Harry?"

He nodded. "Do it, Hermione. For your own good."

She gave him a calculating look. "Are you still too much of an Auror for me to confide in you about Lucius?"

"Meaning could I honestly say that I wouldn't be angry enough to use what you say against him?"

"Yes."

"I don't know that I could honestly say that. I mean, what if you told me that he'd done something like... oh, kill Charlie's dragon? You couldn't expect me to just not do anything about it."

"Never mind then."

"What are you hiding for him, Hermione?"

"Maybe I'm hiding something of my own," she said quietly. "Would you send me to Azkaban, too?"

"You know I wouldn't."

"Then why can't you just agree..."

"Because he's not you."

She sighed in defeat, wishing he weren't so stubborn. And then, she suddenly felt very sentimental. Harry and Ron had always been there for her, and yet, here she was keeping secrets from the both of them, being unfaithful to Ron, having naughty dreams about a dead man, and chalking her reasoning up to it being for a good cause.

With tears in her eyes, she said, "Please tell Ginny I'll be down soon. I want to write to Ron."

"No problem." He backed towards the door. "Things will work out."

Once he closed the door, she moved to the small desk in the corner, grabbed a parchment and pen, and began her letter to Ron.

*Ron,*

*We need to talk. I don't know exactly what brought this on, but I can't help wondering if it's because of what happened the night before you left. I'm so sorry about that, and I can honestly say that it will never happen again. I swear it. Please come home so that we can straighten this out. I don't care if you've strayed while in France. Can you tell how suspicious my mind is right now? Really, it's all right. We'll start anew. Things will be different this time. I promise you.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

~~~~~

Dawn seemed to break earlier than usual the next morning, and Hermione found herself having a cup of coffee at Malfoy Manor shortly after, wanting to avoid the house before Ginny left (and any long talks that might ensue). Even after a restful night, she felt that her decision to write to Ron was a good one. She had no reason to not attempt to make amends now. She refused to allow the tome to dictate anything else to her.

It had already cost her too much.

"You hear that, tome?" she asked cheekily. "I'm not going to let you bully me around any longer. Stop sending me those bloody dreams. Stop with the cryptic messages." She nodded. "Lucius and I are doing what we can, and that's all we can guarantee."

Feeling better about things, she opened the book to the page she'd last bookmarked, only to find that the text had disappeared. "What the...?"

All the pages before her bookmark were blank, as if no ink had ever graced the stiff, white pages. Many of the pages after the bookmark were filled with odd symbols or were too blurry to read. However, once she got near the end, she found a page with plainly written words.

And she dropped the book.

It landed on its side, but just as she'd seen happen numerous times in her dreams, the book opened and pages turned. It stopped on the page again, and it's horrible words mocked her from below.

You have given the blood. Your body is next. And after, your soul.

The vision of Snape kissing her, wanting to possess her, telling her that she would be his for all eternity fluttered through her mind. *No!* she screamed internally. *My future will be my decision...and that's with Ronald if he'll still have me!*

In a fit of rage, she hopped up, kicked the book across the room forcefully, and said, "I will not do it! Sod this!"

She fled Malfoy Manor and went to the only place that could possibly make her feel safe. It took only moments after her distinctive crack of Apparition to draw the house's inhabitants out of the kitchen.

"Mum! Dad!" she said happily, running to them to hug them fiercely. "I needed to see you so badly." Tears began spilling down her cheeks as her pent up emotions got the better of her.

"What's wrong, love?" her mother asked, holding her tightly and rocking her while her father rubbed circles into her back, mumbling softly.

"Everything is just so wrong right now!" she said finally, not letting go. "Ron and I are on the outs, and I made a... Er, I had a horrible dream." She sniffed loudly. "I just don't know what to do."

Her father's voice hummed near her ear. "It's all right, poppet. We're fine. Sometimes I have strange dreams, too, and I wake to realize that it was all just a dream and nothing more."

She nodded and wiped her face, wishing that she could confide in her parents, but she knew that they wouldn't understand. "Maybe I tend to read too much into things sometimes," she said.

Her mother wasn't completely satisfied, however, and asked, "You said that you and Ron are having problems? What's happening?"

"He wants time apart and simply did it without talking to me about it first."

"Have you been arguing?"

"Not really, but before he left, we... er..." Her voice trailed away as she looked up at her father and blushed. "Dad, it's a little..."

"Say no more," he said with a smile. "Female talk."

"Sorry."

"Not a problem. How bout if I pop round to the market and get something you like for breakfast?"

"That would be great, Dad."

"Lovely. I'll be back shortly."

Once he'd gone, Hermione told her mother about the way she'd disappointed Ron. "And it's not like I don't love him, I do, but I just didn't feel right at that time."

"And you shouldn't have to if you don't feel right about it. That should happen when you're ready and not before!"

Hermione cringed internally. She'd not been ready for what had happened with Lucius either, not really, yet she'd done it...for the sake of science.

"You'd think a young man such as Ronald would understand this." She rose and led Hermione to the kitchen where she began to pour each a cup of coffee. "This is very disappointing. I'd had such high hopes for you and him, but this..." Jane Granger shook her head. "If he can't wait for you to be ready, then, honey, he might not be the man for you. This could very well be a sign of some sort."

Signs. Hermione had had many signs lately, but they'd been quite vague and questionable. And for some reason, she now felt something niggling at her mind, wanting to make itself know. But what?

"He does love me, but yes, it is disappointing. This has never bothered him before." She looked away. "We've done things, and he shares a room with me," here she held up her hands, "with separate beds... I want to do more. I want to show him how I feel, and now it's like it's too late." Tears came to her eyes. "I've mucked this right up, haven't I? Now he's off doing who knows what."

"Can you go to him?"

She shook her head. "I don't know exactly where he is. He's been quite vague about it."

"Anyway, you shouldn't have to go traipsing about after someone who isn't quite sure of what he wants anyway. Don't rush into it just because you think you'll lose him. That would be a mistake."

Before Hermione could answer, the telephone interrupted them.

"Who could be ringing this early?" her mother pondered aloud.

As Hermione sipped her coffee, she watched her mother's expressions change drastically, the smile changing from confusion to shock and then to horror.

"I'll be right there, and thank you so much, Mr. Spencer."

"What is it, Mum? All right?"

"Your father! He's been in an accident. Mr. Spencer up the block saw it all happen. Come with me."

Everything that happened next went by so quickly that it all seemed a great blur. According to Mr. Spencer, her father was zipping down the street in his car when a woman with long, blonde hair stepped out from the pavement into his path. Of course her father swerved to miss her, running over a few mailboxes and losing control of the car. When it hit a nearby tree, he somehow smashed into and flew out of the windscreen, landing in a heap nearby.

"And the wretch didn't even come to see if he was all right, and it was all her fault!" he'd said angrily while giving his report to the policemen. "Don't even see her about!"

Jane rode with her husband in the emergency care unit to the hospital while Hermione followed in the other car. According to the last doctor they'd talked to, her father was still in surgery, and the outcome wasn't a very good one.

As she watched her mother pace, it dawned on Hermione that it was her doing, that her father was suffering because of her. "It's all my fault," she whispered dejectedly.

"No, Hermione, don't say it. This was an accident."

"If only I hadn't gone there, he wouldn't have..."

This was the tome's doing, wasn't it? If she hadn't kicked it and told it to bugger off, this wouldn't have happened. Lucius had warned her, and she'd simply brushed that off like a right berk. She would lose her father unless she did something about it quickly.

"Mum, I'm going to go get a few things and come back. Will you be all right?"

"I will, but please, hurry back, honey."

"I promise." She kissed her mother's cheek and quickly left, using her Portkey to Malfoy Manor when she found a private nook in the hospital wing.

The book was just as she'd left it. She approached it purposefully and picked it up. "My father, you did this!" she said to it angrily. "I won't let you take him from me! Leave him be!"

Nothing happened.

"Please. Don't do this."

Still nothing.

"I'll do it. Anything. I swear it." She flipped through its pages looking for a message. "Just don't hurt my daddy."

And then she found it, a page with a message for her: *Just a taste of punishment is all it requires to keep you at your tasks?*

"Yes, so there is no need to harm him any more, all right? You've my word...again. I fully understand your power now," she said softly, hating that she had to kowtow for a book...for Dark magic.

Then perhaps all will be well, came the reply.

"Thank you."

She gently placed the book on the settee and ran towards the stairwell that would lead her down into the dungeons and to Snape. She had to see him. When she entered his cold room, she immediately went to his bedside and sat upon it, looking down into his lifeless face.

"Professor, what have I got myself into? I was warned, I know, but I truly didn't think that something like this could really happen. I mean I did think it, but then I just didn't

worry about it after a while. I was so angry and it's asking things of me and the dreams and..." Her voice trailed away as she realized she was babbling. "I can feel that you hear me somehow. I know you aren't in this body, but you're still here, aren't you?"

She looked up at the ceiling and around the room. "I can't see you, but I can almost feel you." The air did indeed feel thick around her. "The dream I had, what did you mean that I wasn't told everything? Why did you throttle Lucius? Shite!"

Bringing her hands up to her face to cover it, she muttered, "I'm going mad, I think. What if it's all in my head? What if it's not real?"

Peeking through her fingers at him once again, "How do I know you aren't at peace? Will this do more harm to you or make you more miserable than you obviously were before? Help me. Tell me.

"I'm frightened." She sniffed and blinked to stave fresh tears. "My father was hurt today, and it's because of this bloody tome and its orders! What does it mean about wanting my soul, too?"

Hermione sighed. "I wish you could answer me." One of her hands found his ice-cold forehead and then smoothed back a lock of hair. "What will we tell the world, Severus Snape? I admit that I want recognition. It would be nice to be known for something other than being Harry's best friend, you know?"

"And it's not like I'm an attention seeker; really I'm not! I guess I just want to keep doing some good in the world and for people to know it's me doing it...for people to look up to me. Wouldn't that be great for all Muggle-borns?"

She laughed. "Things are changing already. Kingsley is doing a great job with the Ministry so far. He's tossing people like Umbridge out on their arses, giving us all a fair chance. My work here, it would be a statement to the wizarding world, and that's important to me."

There was something else she wanted to say. "Will you loathe me, Professor?" She wished that he could respond. Her mind flashed the sight of his fingers around Lucius' throat. "Please don't hurt me. I'm doing this for you, sir, and for those whom I love." And for some reason, she bent forward and pressed a kiss to his colorless, thin lips, as if to seal a bargain.

"I must see to my father now, but I'll start on that crown that I'm to make for you." She paused for a moment. "I guess the apothecary in Diagon Alley should have the henbane. I'll, uh, see you tomorrow."

And she quickly left, feeling oddly at ease. A quick walkthrough of Lucius' home showed her that he wasn't about. She wondered where he'd gone off to, and thought to leave him a note, but she decided against it at the last minute. She didn't want him to show up at the hospital with the words 'I told you so' on his lips. That was the last thing she needed at the moment.

She Portkeyed to Grimmauld Place after checking on the potion's progress, grabbed a few things, and told Harry what had happened. He accompanied her back to the hospital where there was still no news on her father's surgery.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Granger. Is there anything you need?" Harry asked worriedly.

"Just being here is enough," she said, taking Hermione's hand. "It's been so long. What are they not telling us?" She lowered her voice. "Is there anything that either *you* can do?"

"Mum, I'm scared I might make things worse. I don't know exactly what's wrong or what they've done."

Her mother nodded. "I understand."

A doctor pushed open a set of swinging doors and headed towards them. "Mrs. Granger?"

"Yes."

"I am Dr. Walden." He extended his hand and shook hers, doing the same for Harry and Hermione. "Your husband is stable for the moment, but I'll admit that we had a scare for a moment there. The shard of sharp glass did more harm to him when he went through the windscreen than the actual landing did."

"So he'll be okay then?" Hermione asked, unable to help interrupting.

"I think so, yes, but as with anything else, he'll be here for a few days while he heals so that we can monitor him and make certain nothing else makes itself known." He flashed white, even teeth at them. "I'll let you see him now, and after, I can explain to you exactly what we did. I'm sure you're quite anxious."

Her mother nodded and immediately moved forward. "Yes, I'd like to see him."

"Me too."

"One at a time, all right? There are other patients recovering as well, and the need for quiet is considered necessary, not to mention the small amount of room we have."

"Mum, you go on. Harry and I will wait here."

She watched as her mother followed the doctor through the swinging doors. "Harry, what more could go wrong with my life now?"

"I'll go owl Ron and Mrs. Weasley."

"No," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "I don't want him coming back because he pities me or feels obligated. And don't worry Mrs. Weasley just yet." She smiled. "You're a good friend, you know that."

It wasn't until much later that Hermione brought her mother home, forced her to eat something, and was able to return to Grimmauld Place for a bath and much-needed rest. Exhausted, she fell asleep as soon as she lay on her bed, never making it under the duvet.

Seagulls flying overhead called down to her as the salty scent of the sea made itself known. She smiled and ran forward, the lush green grass giving way to worn trails in the rocky hillside that led to the sandy beach and splashing waves of the ocean. It had been so long since she'd visited the seaside and was happy to find herself there. Once she got down to the bottom, she kicked away her sandals and let her feet dig into the sand, squishing it between her toes.

As the water broke over the shore and slid away, she walked, simply breathing in the air and enjoying the hot sun overhead. Her walk was taking her toward a large, flat rock upon which a man sat. The closer she got, the more of him she could make out. She paused only for an instant when she realized that it was Severus Snape who awaited her.

Instead of the normal dread and fear that accompanied the dreams of him, she felt compelled to seek him out, wanted to talk to him, instinctively knew that he meant her no harm.

"Hello," she said.

"Miss Granger," he replied.

"There is so much I want to ask you."

"Which is nothing new."

His voice was not unkind, so she moved closer to sit next to him. "Why are we here and not in the usual room with the tome?"

"This has nothing to do with the tome. It only has to do with me. I can enjoy lovely scenery as good as anyone."

She smiled. "You've come to talk to me about what I've been doing, haven't you?"

"You wanted to know something," he began, "and I thought I'd put your mind at ease."

"Really?"

"I won't loathe you for doing this...don't loathe you and never have." His lips lifted in a small smile. "I would be mad to not want another chance at life to do things over again." His hand clasped hers. "I appreciate your sacrifice and am indebted to you. I will owe you my life."

"Doing this is the right thing to do."

"My life will be a very different one, and I plan to do things differently." His eyes lowered for a moment. "I'll need your help, someone to steer me right when I take a wrong turn."

She squeezed his hand, causing him to look up into her eyes. "I'll always help you, Professor."

"Severus," he whispered, leaning closer to brush his lips against hers for a small kiss.

Hermione moved away from his lips and looked at him with wide eyes. "W-what do you want from me exactly?"

"Everything."

The way he looked at her, as if she were someone special, something he cherished, left her feeling unsettled. She'd seen the memories he'd given to Harry, and in those, he'd looked at Lily the same way. Did he see her as a new Lily? "What if 'everything' is something I can't give?"

"You already have, Hermione; you gave your word."

She thought back to what she'd told the tome, to what she'd promised him when she'd visited his body. She'd vowed to do anything.

"A new chance, a new life..." he said, looking out across the waves. "No vows, no masters..."

"Please, we have to talk about this. It said that after I give you my... my body," she blushed brightly, "that my soul would be next. I don't know what to make of it."

"But you will and soon." He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a light kiss upon its back. "I must leave you now. Sleep well this night, my Hermione."

While she watched him walk away across the sandy beach, her feeling of confusion lifted as the foggy feeling of sleep began to fill her mind. The last thing she remembered before things went dark again for her was that she felt hopeful for the first time in a few days. He wasn't as horrid as she remembered him; he was more like the man she'd seen in his memories. A smile graced her lips.

AN: And, yes, next chapter will give us more Snape finally!

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1 please.

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak and charmed_nay for beta reading.

The next couple of days passed with no word from Ron, which began to worry both Hermione and Harry. Ginny had returned home and vowed that after her next game, she and Harry would go searching for Ron if he'd not sent them word. What was worse, she was worn down from spending so much time at the hospital visiting her father, who was finally able to breathe on his own, and supporting her mother, who was beside herself. Her sore arse hinted that she'd never sat so long in an uncomfortable chair before. Hermione shook her head to concentrate on the task before her. It wouldn't do to worry about Ron or her father while she finished making Snape's henbane crown. The plant's root was quite poisonous, and she had to be careful that she didn't ingest anything accidentally or allow it to touch her skin...else she'd find herself at St. Mungo's.

"You're doing a good job," Lucius said, coming up beside her.

"When'd you get here?"

"Only just. How's the potion?"

"Spot on."

"Excellent. Are you ready for tomorrow, my dear?"

"I am," she said firmly.

"I detect an air of sadness about you. Why?"

She lifted her wand and flicked it, fastening the last twig in. "Done." Pleased with her work, she set it aside and gave her attention to Lucius fully. "I'm worried about Ronald. He's not responded to my last owl, to Harry's, to George's. Anyone! What if something's wrong? What if he's been killed?"

"It would have made the news," Lucius said, averting his gaze. "I'm certain he's fine, Hermione. If he's thick enough to leave one such as you behind to move on to someone..." His eyes widened and found hers. "Forgive me."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean? Do you think he's seeing this lady?"

He sighed and moved towards his desk. "I wasn't going to say anything. I thought it best that you learn from him."

"You know something."

"I do."

"What is it then?"

He opened the locked drawer on his desk. "When you expressed your disappointment, I took it upon myself to hire someone to find him...just to be certain all was well. I'd hoped to find him lounging in the sun someplace or doing the tourist thing. However..."

Hermione took the envelope he extended towards her. With shaky fingers, she opened it, already knowing what to expect, as she'd seen it in Lucius' eyes, heard it in his voice. And there was Ron, cozied up to a tall brunette, pointing to the land below from their view on the Eiffel Tower. Tears came to her eyes as she looked at the way he rubbed the woman's back affectionately, the laughter in their faces. It was what she deserved, wasn't it? She should have showed him how much she cared and how much she appreciated him. Instead, he'd found what he needed elsewhere.

She couldn't judge him. She'd had sex with Lucius Malfoy, someone whom Ron despised. This pain would be her punishment. There were many pictures, all as telling as they could be. Ron and the woman were obviously lovers and having a great time together.

"Thank you, Lucius. I appreciate this." She placed them back in the envelope and tried to hand it to him.

"Keep it." He frowned. "I am sorry, Hermione. I thought it best not to say anything."

"I understand." She sniffed lightly. "Look at me, being silly."

"Not silly, hurt." He pulled a handkerchief out and handed it to her.

"Thanks." Rising, she said, "I'm going to go home now that this is done. I'll be here on time in the morning."

"Try to have a good night. Rest well."

She simply nodded, picked up her cloak, and used her Portkey to return home. She numbly walked into the kitchen and fixed some tea, feeling foolish for the last letter she'd sent to Ron. Had he shared it with his lover and laughed about it with the woman? How about all the guilt she'd been feeling for what she'd done...for what she would do? She'd made herself sick with emotion more than once. From the look on his face in the pictures, Ron was far from feeling guilty.

"Why the long face?" Harry asked as he and Ginny entered the room.

"Thought we heard someone clanging about," Ginny added good-naturedly.

She cleared her throat. "Are you two still planning to look for Ron?"

"Yes," Ginny said firmly. "In fact, we were just deciding where to start."

"Don't bother. He doesn't want to be found right now."

"Have you heard from him?" Harry asked, immediately seating himself across from her.

Hermione shook her head. "No, but L...er...the person I am working with hired an investigator to find him... to put my mind at ease." She then pushed the envelope towards her two friends. "He's alive and well apparently."

She watched with satisfaction as both faces showed shock and then anger. The vindictive part of her felt that it served Ron right for others to be angry with him for his actions. Bitterly, she asked, "Do you think he'll ever come back and face me?"

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Ginny said. "I had no idea he was such a... dirty rotten rat!"

"Who the bloody hell is this?" Harry asked angrily, nodding at the woman.

"I can only imagine it's the lady he met down there to talk about the business expansion. Jeri, I think her name was."

Harry stood. "I'm going to see George about this. He has to know something."

Ginny looked up at him. "I thought you were meeting Draco Malfoy tonight?"

"Malfoy?" Hermione asked suddenly. "You didn't tell me anything."

"I just got his owl a bit ago. He's here in London."

"Oh."

"Malfoy can wait a little longer while I see what George has to say about these!" He shook the envelope in his hand.

"I'll come with you to see George," Ginny said, rising. "I'd like to know as well. Hermione, coming?"

She shook her head, making a split second decision. "No, I need some time to myself. I'm going to pack a few things and leave." When her friends tried to protest, she lifted a hand to stop them. "Please. Let me have this time alone. It's my turn to think things over."

"Going to your mother's?"

"I don't think so. She'll know something's wrong, and I think she's got enough on her shoulders at the moment, what with Dad still in the hospital."

Ginny nodded. "I think you're right. Mothers always know. Still, I wish you..."

"I'll be fine. All right?"

They nodded and moved to embrace her before they left, making her promise to owl them and keep in touch...unlike Ron had. And she supposed it was the best way things could have worked out at the moment. She didn't know what would truly be waiting for her the next day, as it was the day she planned to help bring Snape back to life. She'd already told her mother not to expect her for at least a day or two, as she had a quick business trip to take. Determined to only think of him and her project, she packed a few items and Portkeyed back to Malfoy Manor, to the one place that had become her refuge in so short a time.

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"Good morning," Lucius said brightly. "You look well rested. Bozzy told me when you came here last night."

"Yeah, I wanted to have some privacy."

"I thought as much, which is why I didn't stop by."

She felt her cheeks heat slightly. The last time he'd stopped by her room had been the night they'd had sex. "I took something to help me have a dreamless sleep, so I doubt I'd have been up for a chat."

He nodded. "What say we have a spot of breakfast? Toast and juice perhaps?"

"I couldn't eat if I were Imperiused to do so," she said. Her stomach was tightly wound and already bubbling with nervousness.

"Understandable." He sat down next to her. "Not having second thoughts, are you?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No. I'm just nervous. I don't know what to expect."

"Let's go through it once more then."

Hermione sat back and listened as he walked around and went over the steps that they were to follow. She could barely concentrate on what he said, as she kept thinking of Snape and what was expected of her. The horrid, possessive Snape from her dreams came to mind, and she had to force herself to replace him with the happy, gentle Snape from the beach dream. Oh, how she wished that Snape would truly be the one she confronted today.

"To recap: bathe his body...every inch...in the potion; tip half a phial of it down his throat; massage him as he comes to...this may take a while; give him drink to soothe his thirst; give him food to soothe his hunger; and finally, give him flesh to sate his lust."

"Are you going to be with me?"

"I will be there, yes," he said, moving away from her and going to peer into the smaller cauldron. "Did you not want me to be?"

"I think I'd maybe rather you weren't," she said softly.

"All right. Come here."

When she approached him, he dipped his fingers into the oily liquid and pulled out a bit of soaked aloe, which he used to anoint, first, her forehead, then his own. "We're to put this on him as well?"

"Yes, the bed." He smiled crookedly. "We've nothing to fear from him."

With a nod, she went back to sit in the chair. "Have you had any dreams lately?"

"Nothing worth telling. Have you?"

She shook her head. "Not in the last few nights." A sigh burst from her lips. "Worry over Ron and my father have just had me exhausted and drained by the time I go to bed. I have been taking a small dose to help me sleep...not wanting another of those dreadful nightmares."

"How is your father?"

"As of last night, he's in a private room and breathing on his own. Bloody tome," she grumbled. "Sometimes I wish it had never chosen me."

"I remember thinking those same words at one time."

"You warned me about it doing this. What was it that you lost, Lucius?"

"I'd rather not say if you don't mind."

"Fair enough."

He pulled a silver timepiece from his pocket. "Shall we go down and commence?"

"Yes."

"Bozzy?"

"Yes, sir," the elf said from behind them, as if he'd been there all along.

"I'll need you to take our things down to Severus' room," Lucius commanded. "And also, bring us the drinks I had you make earlier."

The little elf nodded and began to bustle about, gathering what Lucius had instructed.

"Come along, dear." Lucius looped his arm through hers formally and led the way.

Together, they descended the stairs, and with each step closer to Snape's body, Hermione began to tremble more and felt the urge to retch.

"You're shaking like a house-elf about to be given clothes. Are you cold?"

"No," she snapped, not mentioning his poor excuse for a metaphor. She didn't care that he arched an eyebrow as if insulted. His part in this was easier than hers.

He unlocked the room and gestured for her to precede him in. Once inside, he gazed at her and frowned. "You can't wear that."

She looked down at her jeans and jumper to see what the problem was. "Why not?"

Lucius simply smirked. "Ah, here's Bozzy."

Hermione watched in a daze as the elf brought in the cauldrons, a table heavily laden with food, and a lovely fountain from which water sprayed out into its base. She could tell that it was cool from the icy mist rising from it.

"Place the crown on your Prince, Hermione," Lucius said with a mocking smile.

"I'm so glad that you're finding this amusing." Nevertheless, she picked up the crown from the table and made her way over to Snape's body. She leaned over him and placed it gently on his head, careful not to muss his hair.

She smiled despite herself and whispered softly, "You do look like a noble prince indeed."

When she turned around, Lucius was before her, extending a wineglass to her with one of his own in his other hand. "Let's have one last drink and make a toast." She shook her head, making him add, "I insist, and it will help to calm you down."

Reluctantly, she took the glass and raised it as he spoke.

"To teamwork. I couldn't have done this without you, Hermione Granger. And also to the future. May Severus have all he's ever dreamed of... and more."

"Cheers," she said, clinking her glass to his and taking a deep sip.

"Delicious, isn't it?" he asked, placing his glass in his elf's outstretched hand.

She downed the rest of it and wiped her mouth as a small amount trickled from the side. "How would you know? I didn't even see you take a drink," she pointed out.

"Of course not," he said seriously. "It's drugged."

"What?"

"Certainly. I couldn't expect you to go through this without botching it up, now could I?" His smirk widened into a nasty grin. "Tsk, ts, my dear. Don't look at me in such a way. This is for your own good."

Hermione felt a little woozy, but she was able to think coherently. She wanted to give him a piece of her mind and berate him for drugging her, for not trusting her to do her part, but she couldn't say a word. She simply stood there, staring at him while he instructed his elf to bring her something more appropriate to wear, which turned out to be a silky, black nightgown.

"Can't have Severus welcoming his new bride into his bed and life while she's clad in that ridiculous *Muggle* attire, now can I? You must look the part of the welcoming wife."

Her mind raced. *New bride? And why is he saying Muggle like it's a filthy word? He said he was past all that.*

"You seem so surprised," he said in a bored tone. "For being tagged as a clever witch, I find you to be amazingly gullible and quite easy to cajole. It didn't take me long to figure out how to manipulate you into doing my bidding. Ah, there is so much for me to tell you, isn't there? I should, I suppose, but you won't remember it after today anyway. You'll only know what I want you to know."

She lifted a hand in front of her face and blinked in surprise to see it there. It nearly felt as though it were still at her side. The heaviness in her head warred with her righteous anger. Hermione vowed to not forget the smug expression on his face or the admittance of his deceit.

Bride? It couldn't be.

And she must have said it aloud because he chuckled.

"Yes, Severus' bride. The virgin blood that you so kindly donated will bind you to him. And the lovely potion that was mixed in with your wine? I happened to have some of Severus' blood on hand to bind him to you. So, you see, that part is done, and now you need to simply consummate it." He nodded towards the bed. "You'll be doing that shortly."

After three attempts, she finally formed the words, "Why... me?"

"Various reasons," he said with a sneer. "My own little personal revenge for past dealings we've had for one. You are also Severus' type, so that is in my favor. Did you know that he spoke fondly of you once with me?" He nodded with a grin. "Over some firewhisky, the day before he was killed in fact, something about admiring your intelligence and fearlessness." He smirked. "However, I thought breaking into Bella's vault to be quite foolhardy."

"Come now. Let's get you dressed."

She shuddered inwardly as he slowly took every piece of clothing from her body, caressing her lightly here and there, fondling a breast, and cupping the juncture of her thighs. Her mind hated him for what he was doing, and yet her body seemed pliant and even moved to help him.

"Mmmm, Severus will enjoy you," he whispered into her ear. "I know that I most certainly did."

Hot tears of rage filled her eyes as he pulled the nightgown over her head and down her body, sliding her arms through the straps.

"None of that." He leaned in and placed a soft kiss against her cheek. "Now go. Prepare your husband. Give him life."

Hermione watched as he turned and went to the door, directing Bozzy to follow him out. The house-elf looked at her, and she noted a faint sadness tingeing his eyes. She knew it wouldn't pay to call out to him for help...even if she would be able to. Once the door was closed behind Lucius, she turned and made her way over to Snape, looking down at his still body.

Could she fight this? And as she peeled away the duvet, she knew that she wouldn't be able to fight it. The potion in her drink had done something to her. It was similar to an Imperius Curse it seemed.

Maybe her wand could help. Why hadn't she thought of that sooner? But where was it? When had Lucius taken it? She couldn't even remember. Her hands reached down and began to tug on Snape's clothes, which easily slid away from his body, the backside having been split to simply give him the appearance of being fully dressed.

"You're so thin," she said aloud, surprising herself with the ability to speak freely once again. Tears clouded her eyes, but not for her predicament, for him. There was a long, thin scar slashed diagonally across his stomach. What had caused it? She traced it with her finger. Odd that she could see that when Nagini's bite marks were hardly visible to her. His ribcage was just beneath the flesh and outlined perfectly. Did he never eat?

Her hands smoothed over them gently, pausing to nestle in the sparse thatch of hair in the center of his chest. At least he had wiry muscles and hadn't been a weakling beneath those black robes of his. The Snape in her dream had seemed happy and hopeful. Would she come to know that man?

Hermione shivered suddenly, remembering his light kiss and his words.

Everything.

Ron had abandoned her for someone else. Harry and Ginny had each other. Her parents, aside from the accident, were leading happy lives. Where did that leave her? Did she want to remain at Grimmauld Place once Ron returned anyway? What if he brought his new lover with him?

That would never work out. And even if he chose to move out, he'd still come around to see Harry and Ginny. It would prove to be too awkward, and she couldn't ask Harry or Ginny to not allow him over. What would she do? Where could she go? As much as she loved her parents, they never fully understood her world or her reasons behind things. The Burrow was out, and while she was certain Ron's family would take her in, she wouldn't put them in that position either.

Her eyes lowered to Snape's face again. *If we have sex, we will be consummating a marriage. I'll be married to a man who died. How will I explain this to everyone? What will the world think of me?*

Husband. Snape. Marriage. Binding.

She frowned. Lucius Malfoy would pay for what he did...he'd kept most of the information from her, and while the book and Snape had tried to tell her what she wasn't hearing, she'd ignored it. *I must remember what he said. Can't forget. Vengeance will be mine.*

The pictures of Ron and his new woman came to mind. That future was gone for her now, wasn't it? There was only Severus Snape for her. Research. The ability to possibly help others whose lives had ended too soon. Many people married for reasons other than love. That would never come for them, but she wouldn't mind the companionship he'd showed her to be possible in her last dream.

*Lucius will pay*, she reminded herself. Would Snape help her seek vengeance on his oldest friend? The one who'd gone through so much trouble to bring him back? And exactly why had he done that? Surely he had some ulterior motive, and she would find out exactly what it was.

Hermione reached down and pulled away the underpants that covered his genitals, leaving him completely naked for her to see. His thighs weren't heavily built, but they were firm and pleasing. She ran a hand over his cold flesh, taking notice of the soft feel of his hair against her fingers. And in that instant, she knew that she wanted the potion to work its magic. She wanted him to live. She wanted to be the one to bring him back, to whom he owed his life. Why should everyone have someone except her?

Quickly, she soaked a flannel in the potion and began to rub it over his body, careful to not miss a spot as Lucius had instructed. Each time she thought of Lucius, her mind snapped angrily. He'd lied to her, used her, and made a fool of her. Another part of her mind tried to soothe her by whispering, *No, no, Hermione, he's giving you a better life...power, fame, marital support will be yours. Severus would never flounce off like some petulant school boy.*

Was the potion making her so agreeable? And things got foggy for a moment before her mind cleared again. No, it couldn't be. She felt normal on the inside...mostly. At least her nervousness had gone; that was the only thing Lucius had done right, the bastard.

No blush graced her cheeks as she pressed the cloth against his groin, which surprised her. Nor did it come when she flipped him over to rub the potion into his arse, back, head, and legs, doing his feet last. When she turned him onto his back again, she noticed that the flesh on this body seemed softer. Hermione took the vial of potion, gently pried his mouth open, and poured it inside, moving his head to make sure it all went down.

After she tossed the bottle aside, she began to massage his softening skin with her hands, as if they were personally breathing the life and warmth back into each pore. Over and over she worked, shocked that her hands weren't cramping or that she didn't tire. She was uncertain how much time had passed, but her labor had finally paid off, as she felt his hand twitch beneath hers.

"Severus?"

It felt wrong to call him Snape, not with what was to happen between them. And then his chest expanded and sunk and expanded. A rasping shot of air came from his mouth, followed by a gurgling sound. He was breathing! Alive! They'd done it. As much as she hated Lucius at the moment, she wished he'd be there to see this with her...to see what they'd accomplished.

Instinctively, she began softly encouraging him, sitting him up a little and massaging his chest and arms. His rattling breaths continued, but he didn't open his eyes. The only thing she noticed, aside from his chest moving, was the twitching of his nerves beneath his skin, which had warmed extensively. The air in the room warmed around them, as if sensing the need to chase away the cold.

"You're doing fine. Wake up now. All's well."

Taking the duvet, she pulled it up over his waist, rubbing his legs through the thick fabric. "I told you I'd help you, right?"

He coughed slightly, and his eyes moved behind his lids. "Wa..."

"What's that?" she asked, rising and tilting an ear close to his lips.

"Wat..."

"Water. One moment." And so it was time to sate his thirst. She placed a glass beneath the spray of the fountain, filling it quickly and bringing it to him. She cradled his head against her chest and held the glass to his lips, tipping it slightly. He only choked a little at first before drinking deeply. To her surprise, one of his hands rose and helped to steady the glass.

"There you are." There was only a little left in the glass when his hand fell away and his head moved to the side to show he'd had enough. "Would you like some more in a moment?" Her answer was a grunt and minute shake of his head. Reaching as far as she could without moving him too much, she placed the glass next to the bed.

While he rested, she rocked him like one would while soothing a child and ran her fingers through his still-dampened hair. "Welcome back to the world." She tried to say something about Lucius and what he'd done, but she found that the words wouldn't come to her.

*Oh no! Wait a minute! What was I supposed to remember? I swore he'd pay for this, but for what? This was what we'd planned and have been working on together!* Her mind was hiding something from her, something important. She concentrated hard and found it. *He tricked me. He lied and used me.* Her gaze dropped down to Severus' sleeping face. *We're to be bound together, sealed by mutual exchange of blood-laced potion and consummated on the marriage bed.*

Panic set in suddenly. She could stop this now, couldn't she? Snape was alive. She could beat on the door, pretend to have done the deed, and then sneak off with him to St. Mungo's where he could get proper health. But an inner voice warned her that her father would suffer if she did that.

And then she felt her body tingling, heating. Was the room getting even warmer? She looked down at her skimpy nightgown and was glad to be rid of her heavy jeans and jumper. A groan brought her attention back to Severus, and she felt his head nuzzle into her breast as if rooting for something more. Easing him back against his pillows, she strode over to the table that held the food. Thinking he wouldn't want anything too heavy, she chose a bowl of grapes.

When she sat back next to him, the scent of sandalwood reached her nostrils, and she inhaled deeply, thanking the heavens that it wasn't the absinthe she smelled. In fact, sandalwood had never smelled so enticing to her. Shaking her head, she said, "I'm going to feed you some grapes." Her own voice sounded odd to her ears. "Juicy, large, and green..."

She took one and rubbed it along his bottom lip, prompting him to open his mouth, and when he did so, she eased it in, letting him nibble on it slowly. "So good, isn't it?"

After she was certain he'd swallowed it, she gave him another. *Sating your hunger*, she thought to herself. Hermione joined him, giving herself a grape or two now and then between feeding him. Soon, she reached down for the glass and gave him the last drink of water he'd left in it.

"Want some more, Severus?" she asked softly.

He shook his head and hoarsely said, "N-no."

At this she swallowed thickly. She knew what would happen next, what he would want. As she placed the glass back on the floor next to the bed. His voice startled her.

"Lil-mione."

"Pardon?"

"Her-lily."

"Do you not know who I am?" she asked, disappointment filling her. Had her dreams all been figments of her imagination? Did he truly not know that it was she who'd set about bringing him back?

"Hermione," he said, his voice suddenly firm...almost the silky caress she remembered.

"Yes."

"My Hermione."

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

His eyes opened, and the scream she meant to let loose never made it past her throat. There was no white in his eyes, only blackness. Oh, it was the same cold, black that she remembered so well, but it was as if he had the eyes of one of the many demons she'd read about. God help them all. What had they brought back to this world? For surely it wasn't the real Severus Snape.

She scooted back in fear, uncertain of what he'd do, but she thanked Lucius for thinking of the protection anointment. A hand on her wrist stopped her movement.

"Are you afraid?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes."

He sat up slowly, black eyes never leaving hers. "I will never hurt you."

It was his voice more than anything that put her at ease. She took a moment to unblinkingly gaze into his eyes. There was no malice, only curiosity. It was as though he was looking at her for the first time. His free hand lifted and cupped her cheek. Uncertainly, she did the same, surprised at how soft his skin was beneath her palm. Ever so slowly, their heads neared, closing the distance between them. Eyes closed, she pressed her lips against his in an unexpectedly delicate kiss.

Desire flowed through her veins with great intensity. She wanted this, wanted him. In that moment, she felt such power. She'd given him life, and he wanted her, would be hers. Here was a man who was arguably as powerful as Voldemort, and he wanted her. He'd never given any other woman a glance after he'd fallen in love with Harry's mother, and yet, *she* had turned his head, had made him want her. It was a heady feeling, quite intoxicating. She, Hermione Granger, had beaten death, had snatched back a man tangled in its clutches. What else could she do? What more could they accomplish together?

His deepening kiss nearly took her breath away and made all coherent thought impossible. The sensation of being pulled down to lie beside him filtered through momentarily, but she paid no attention, enjoying the feel of his lips moving against hers, his tongue tangling with hers. A hand slid down her body, caressing her through the silk, and stopped on her bare knee before moving back up again, this time lifting her nightgown, revealing her nakedness to him.

There was a deep growl, and then, he was all over her, hands everywhere, the nightgown yanked off and tossed aside, skin on skin, mouths crashing together. "Need you," he said when he pulled away from her.

Her eyes snapped open, and the weight of the situation crashed down on her. She knew that once they consummated their "bonding," they'd be husband and wife. "Wait," she said suddenly.

Severus nestled his body between her legs and planted open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone. "Want you."

"Do you know what's going to happen?" she asked. "We're being bonded together." She pulled at his hair to force him to look at her. When he did, she gasped. "Your eyes, they're back to normal." Back were the white sclerae, though the centers were still black as night. He dipped his head as if to go back to ravishing her, and she stopped him. "Did you hear what I said?"

A sardonic expression flitted over his features as he said, "Do you mind? I'm trying to bed my wife."

*So he knows.* Hermione felt much better about the situation and allowed the intense need for him to fog her mind and run through her veins. "Then get on with it," she said in a voice much huskier than normal.

"As you wish."

He ground himself against her as his lips became familiar with her breasts, and she thought she'd burst with need. Heat and wetness already pooled together in her core, awaiting his arrival. "I want you," she whispered boldly, and then she had him, pushing into her, filling her.

Severus' eyes never left hers, nor did she try to look away, as he slid in completely. "I want everything," he whispered as he pulled out slightly and slammed in again, causing her to gasp in pleasure. "All of you. Body. Soul. Heart. Mind." Each time he spoke a word, he drove into her, seemingly deeper, giving her erotic friction of the best kind.

"Yes, yes," she mumbled, not caring what he asked of her so long as he didn't stop. She wanted what he was obviously able to give her, what her body craved. "Don't stop."

Hermione gripped his thighs with her legs and tried to pull him closer and tried to gyrate against him forcefully each time his strokes brought his pelvis to rest against hers. Over and over he plunged into her, sometimes nibbling on her lips, sometimes not. She'd never felt anything so intense in her life...nor did she ever expect to. It was sensual, erotic even, and she wanted more. Their hair and skin were wet with sweat, their breathing was loud and breathy, and their bodies made a small slapping sound each time they came together. Fire filled her body suddenly, crackling through each nerve ending along the way, and then she exploded with a glorious shout. As the fire ebbed away, leaving her to smolder in its warm afterglow, she looked into the eyes of the man who was now her husband, who now had indeed claimed a piece of her soul, and she knew that she'd made the right decision, even as he reached culmination and murmured possessive words against her throat.

Everyone else be damned. She was where destiny had intended her to be.

She hoped.

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## Chapter 7

*Chapter 7 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter One please.

*Thanks go to charmed\_nay and ladyinthecloak for beta reading.*

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Hermione woke feeling as though she'd drunk an entire bottle of wine by herself. "Ugh. My head," she grumbled aloud, rubbing her sleep-crusted eyes. Then she remembered where she should be, causing her eyes to snap open. Sure enough, the thick curtains that surrounded Snape's bed were hanging next to her, and she felt a heavy arm flung over her waist possessively.

Small snatches of the night before came back to her in quick blurs: massaging Snape's lifeless body, Snape's hand twitching, eyes filled with only black gazing at her intently, sandalwood assailing her senses, Snape over her... inside her. Hermione sat up quickly and gazed down at the sleeping man. What would happen next? What exactly had happened, and why was everything so foggy? She had the feeling that there was something important that she'd forgotten. What was it? Would it come to her eventually?

She slid out of the bed slowly, not ready to face him if he should wake. She remembered Lucius saying that he'd likely rest for a long while. As she pulled on a dressing gown that had been laid next to her bed, she called out for Bozzy, Lucius' house-elf.

"Miss is calling Bozzy?" the elf asked immediately.

"Yes, I need Lucius to come here please. Would you fetch him for me?"

"Yes, miss."

Once the elf popped away, she closed her eyes to try to clear the mist from her mind and rubbed her temples tenderly. She could see Lucius clearly in her mind, telling her something, but she couldn't read his lips or make out his words. It was obviously something important, as she could feel the panic she'd felt then flow through her anew.

The door creaked open, and Lucius strode in, looking from her to the bed where Severus lay sleeping. "Hermione? All right?" he asked, a worried expression on his face.

Though she felt uneasy, she couldn't help but to stride forward and embrace him. "We've done it. Severus is alive!" Hearing Snape's given name fall so easily on her lips felt odd, yet it had been so natural. The memory of her crying out his name during their coupling came to her, and she released Lucius and looked away.

"How was he?"

"Pardon?" she asked, startled.

"His mannerisms? His words?"

"He... At first, I can remember being afraid of him. God, his eyes. They weren't normal. They were a demon's eyes...all black, no white at all, and yet, he... he was kind to me." She shrugged and looked at him squarely. "The anointment perhaps?"

"I've some news," he said gravely, pulling the tome from beneath his robes. "Do you remember our conversation before I left you alone with him?"

She thought hard. "I can remember that there was something, but... no, I'm sorry. I can plainly see you telling me something, and then things get foggy and dark."

"Hermione, remember the tome's words about your blood, your body, and your soul?"

"Yes."

"I've learnt what the soul part meant. I told you last night, but you agreed to carry on anyway, as you truly had no choice. Perhaps you've blocked it out, it being such a shock and disappointment."

"Just say it. What?" She wanted to know and didn't...not if his expression was anything to go by. "Will I die?"

"No," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder reassuringly, "but you are now Severus' wife, bound to him for all your lives."

"But how?"

"The potion, your virginal blood, the willing sacrifice of your body... I'm afraid that it was sealed when you and he had intercourse."

"NO! I would have seen that coming. I..."

"Neither of us had ever seen this potion before, and the bloody book wasn't very forthcoming, was it? How could we have known?"

"Lucius, there has to be a way out of this. I can't be bound to him. Ron and I have some things to work through, and... oh." Then she remembered the pictures of Ron and his lover. Other things began coming back to her: acceptance of her decision, Severus gazing down at her possessively as he slid into her welcoming body, the feel of hope... of power.

*I'm trying to bed my wife*, he'd said.

"I've done it, haven't I? I've married Snape."

"Unconventionally, but yes, you are now his wife." He pulled her into his arms and held her, rubbing her back soothingly. "I have no words, Hermione."

She pulled in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Snape's wife. Marriage. Images of a laughing Ron filled her mind, him holding her, gazing at her tenderly, his bittersweet farewell. All that she'd planned would never come to pass. There would be no wedding, which she'd been mentally planning since she'd seen how lovely Fleur and Bill's had been. Her parents would never understand her sudden choice to marry a man whom the Wizarding world believed to be dead. *God, Harry. What will I tell Harry?*

"What do we do now?" she asked in a broken voice.

"I believe you wanted to make a journal about all we've done for future reference."

She nodded. "I'll take the tome as well to see if it will give me any other information." Hermione turned around and walked over to Severus, pulling the duvet up slightly to hide the crack of his arse from Lucius' view. "What about him?"

"I think it wise for you to be here when he wakes... just in case. I can have Bozzy situate you? Bring your things?"

"Please." A sigh left her suddenly. "Will he be fully aware, do you think, of all that's gone on?"

"Of that, I am certain," he said with a gleam in his eyes, turning towards the door. "Oh, before I forget, I've had an owl from Narcissa this morning. She'll be coming home soon, misses me it seems."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What will she say about this?"

He chuckled. "Narcissa, like me, owes Severus much and will be happy to know that he's rejoined us. It was our greatest wish after all."

"Will she not hate that I am here?"

"She knows, remember?"

"I..."

He gazed at her for a moment. "I think it's best that we keep some aspects of our research to ourselves?"

"Yes, I agree." She knew he was referring to the night they'd spent together. "I think I'll feel very awkward though. Maybe I'll just go home to Grimmauld Place."

"Your place is with Severus now, Hermione. You are married. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I... This is just all too much, too sudden." She snorted and shook her head. "Maybe he'll not want to keep our vows, maybe he'll be glad to send me packing." Even as she said it, she knew that wouldn't be the case...not if his whispered words had truly meant anything.

*You are my own.*

She shivered involuntarily and felt gooseflesh rise along her arms.

*My wife.*

Lucius chuckled, obviously not thinking that would be the case either. "I highly doubt that, Hermione. Fear not, Narcissa will not make you uncomfortable. We are indebted to you for doing this. You have given so much."

There was something in his voice that made her look up. His expression seemed genuine, but his tone had held a hint of sarcasm. Surely she'd imagined it. "Send my things to me, and I'll get to work documenting everything. Most of it's done already."

"As you wish."

She took the tome from him and watched him leave the room. Once he was gone, she opened it and flipped through the pages. The passage was near the beginning, obviously eager to be read, its message taunting.

*Now that you have completed your tasks your loved one will be spared.*

*Do not try to undo anything that you've done, however, or you will pay dearly.*

*Go by your instincts, care for him, see to his comforts, honor and obey him, treat him with respect and behave in a manner befitting your new station.*

*He was powerful.*

*He is powerful.*

*He will be the most powerful.*

*The world shall be at his feet.*

*You have been chosen to be by his side...remain there for all your days.*

Hermione sneered as she read the message a second time. She'd see about this. She'd not given up her future and happiness to be treated in such a way. While she knew better than to test the tome's warnings, she knew that she wouldn't sit timidly aside and serve her new husband as women did in the past. She would talk to him and have him see her as his equal. Of the pieces she could remember from the night before, she'd ended up feeling safe and pleased with his handling of her. He was definitely not the Snape she remembered from her school years. The kind and smiling Snape from her dream at the beach filled her mind.

"I could possibly be happy one day, couldn't I?" she mused aloud. Still, she hated that it was all due to the meddling of some book. The meddling of some book and something else... something just out of reach.

*Go by your instincts, care for him...*

Hermione closed the book and went to sit next to Severus, placing her hands on his shoulders, massaging them lightly. It was good to feel warm, live flesh beneath her fingers. It took away the horrible vision of having shagged a dead man...some Inferius or worse.

"You're so soft," she whispered. Her hands stopped rubbing and trailed lightly down his back towards the duvet that covered his body from his arse down. "Will you be happy, Severus Snape?"

Beneath her hands, his body shifted, and he turned over to gaze at her, black eyes boring into hers intensely. "Will you be happy, Hermione Snape?"

Her eyes widened as she heard her new name on his lips. "I suppose that depends on you, doesn't it?"

"My answer is the same."

The next several minutes were spent staring at each other, as though sizing up opponents. She never realized that one of her hands had traveled to his face to rest on his cheek until he nuzzled it slightly with his mouth.

"W-what do we do now?" she asked finally.

"First, I would like a loo, and then I would like a shower. Later, we will discuss things further."

"You'll need to take things easy at first. You're supposed to rest and..."

He arched an eyebrow and smirked. "I am capable of seeing to it that I remain among the living." However, when he sat up, he was a little shaky. He said nothing more as she slid his arm around her shoulder and helped him to rise and make his way over to the loo that Lucius had had connected to the room. Once inside, she closed the door to give him privacy.

Slightly annoyed that he'd not thanked her for saving his life, she sat at the desk, preparing to make some notes. It was then that she noticed her strewn clothes from the day before...her jeans, jumper, and underclothes. The flashes from the night before had had her clad in nothing or a black nightgown. When had she put that on? The image of Lucius raking his hands over her body as he peeled away her clothes came to mind. She shuddered. Surely that hadn't happened. And then she could plainly see a malicious glint in his eyes, and she felt paralyzed, unable to fight him.

Hermione tried to examine the thought more, but then it was gone, replaced by the vision of Bozzy holding out the nightgown. Had it just been a dream? Her overactive imagination, always suspicious and conjuring new scenarios? Regardless of what it was, she quickly pulled on her clothes, knowing them to be clean, as she'd only worn them a few moments. At once, she felt comfortable and more confident.

As she picked up the quill to dip it in her ink well, she had the feeling that Severus needed her. He'd not called out to her, but she could feel it as easily as if he'd spelled it out for her. She dropped her quill and went to knock on the bathroom door.

"Severus?"

There was no answer. She opened the door, hoping she wasn't invading his privacy, only to find that he'd already used the toilet and had stepped into the shower stall. He was braced against the wall with the steaming spray just pouring down on him. She went closer and could see the emotion on his face, in his eyes.

"All right?"

He lifted his head and looked at her almost sadly, shaking it negatively. Without thinking, she peeled away her recently donned clothes and got in with him, taking most of his weight onto her and holding his shaking body to her tightly.

"I can't say that I know how you're feeling right now, but I can try to imagine how overwhelming this is for you...being here again. There is so much I can tell you, so much I want to ask you about what you remember, but we'll do this one step at a time. Together. I promised I'd help you."

To her surprise, her words prompted one of his arms to wind around her waist in a tight squeeze. She could feel him heaving against her and knew that he was crying, hiding his face in her hair as he did so. Her heart melted for him. This man had given so much to aid their world, had lost so much, had lived in such pain for all those years.

Hermione pressed a kiss to his wet shoulder. Compassion filled her, and nothing mattered more to her in that moment than soothing him, helping him adjust. She moved slightly, and her lips found the crook of his neck where she opened her mouth to taste him, sucking lightly. The shaking in his body subsided slowly as she trailed kisses along his throat towards his jaw.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice an emotional, incredulous whisper.

"Do you mind?" she asked with a small smile, tossing his words back at him from the night before. "I'm trying to kiss my husband."

The raw emotion in his answering kiss was enough to weaken her legs, especially with the added weight of his body against her, so they somehow managed to tumble out onto the thick rug on the bathroom floor, her on top of him, bodies slick with water from the shower.

"This is awkward," she said lightly.

"Beautiful," he quietly said, his hands reaching up to push her hair aside and cup her breasts, causing her to gasp in surprise.

She bit her lip, feeling her cheeks heat, realizing she was completely naked before him. She hadn't thought twice about doing it before, but now she questioned her judgment, especially seeing the lust and fascination in his eyes.

"I want to know every part of you," he stated plainly.

"Are you not disappointed?" she asked suddenly, uncertain what gave her the courage to bring up what was bothering her.

"How do you mean?"

"That it's me whom Lucius chose to work with?"

One of his hands tangled into her hair and then twirled a finger around a curl. "I find it hard to believe that it could be anyone else."

Hermione brightened at this. "Really?"

"I taught many students in my time, and I must say that out of the lot, you were one of the most promising and also one of the most logical. Tell me, Hermione, how exactly did you and Lucius figure out what could do this? Why have you agreed to do this, giving yourself to me when I've never done anything kind to you?"

"Never done anything kind? You died for us! You protected us so many times, and you put yourself at risk repeatedly, knowing what could happen."

"Don't think me so noble. I'm afraid there were other reasons," he said quietly, eyes suddenly unfocused as he lost himself in thought.

She knew that he must be thinking of Lily and wished that she could somehow compare to Harry's mother. "I know you loved her."

His eyes found hers again. "I do, yes."

And he probably always would, she gathered. The disappointment was surprising, as she knew there would never be love between them. Besides, she loved someone else, too. "The tome, it sounds as though you and I are to be on unequal terms, you lordling over me. I don't want to live like that."

"What tome?"

"The one that chose me to help you."

"Can you show me this book?"

"Don't you remember? You came to me in my dreams. The tome was always there."

"I have snatches of visions, but I can't be certain what's real and what is not."

"Where were you all this time? Is there an afterworld?"

"I shall answer your questions, but I would like to look at this tome."

Hermione moved off of him, kneeling and placing her hands over her breasts to cover herself. "It's in the room."

"Why do you cover yourself?" he asked, placing his hands over hers and attempting to move them. He seemed unabashed about his nakedness.

"I... feel strange."

"Never feel the need to hide yourself from my eyes. I want to see what is mine," he said seriously.

Anger bubbled inside slightly. Was she to be nothing more than a possession? "Please, talk to me about our relationship. The only way that this can work is if..."

"This can do nothing else but work. We are bound together. Do you not feel it? The thrum of awareness? It's as though you are part of me."

She thought for a moment. "When you were in the shower, I felt the need to go to you. You hadn't called to me, but I knew you needed my assistance. You did, didn't you?"

"In a manner of speaking," he admitted with a nod, slowly rising and extending a hand to her.

Hermione swallowed her pride and accepted his help, no longer trying to hide her body from his piercing gaze. After all, he wasn't hiding himself from her gaze. Why should they both not be able to feel comfortable in each other's company? "This way, Severus."

She showed him to the desk where she'd placed the tome, and while he opened it and thumbed through it, she found her dressing gown once again and a matching one for him to don.

"Stand. Let me put this on you," she said, tugging on his arm.

"Where is my wand?" he asked after he'd seated himself again.

"I don't know."

"Where is your wand?"

"I have no idea," she admitted. Her brow furrowed. "I think Lucius took it from me, but I don't know why."

"Why would you let him disarm you?"

"I... It's a little foggy. We came in here, and then he and I shared a glass of wine to celebrate. I was so nervous and a little afraid. But then..."

Severus slammed the tome down onto the desk and went to the bed, tearing away the duvet, looking at the bed sheet. "Am I not your first?"

"What?" she asked incredulously. "You can't be serious!"

"I most certainly am." He spun around and gazed at her darkly.

"I'm nearly twenty years old. You surely can't expect me to have never..."

"Did you not know what you were doing here? When I took you, did you know that we were consummating a marriage agreement?"

"I... Not until the last minute, I think. Lucius said that he told me, but it's unclear."

"You didn't know what to expect."

"Of course I knew that we had to have sex. It was the third part of the spell that went along with the potion." She backed away a little as he stepped closer and looked into her eyes unblinkingly. "What's wrong?"

"Where is Lucius?" Each word was drawn out and angry, frightening Hermione.

"He said for me to stay here with you while I finished documenting everything." She stepped away from him and looked away, not wanting his gaze to bore into hers any longer. "His wife will be home soon, so I expect he's preparing things."

"I will go speak with him."

"Wait!" she said, grabbing his hand. "You need to rest. You've not even had anything to eat or drink yet."

"I believe I have rested enough." Severus wrenched his hand from hers. "And I've quite lost my appetite. I will see Lucius now, and you will remain here."

"I most certainly will not!" she said angrily. "I won't be kept in the dungeon like some... pet. This is my life as well, and I deserve to know what's going on!"

"Is this how you plan to live, fighting me at every corner? I need to speak to Lucius alone. There are things that I intend to find out, and I highly doubt he'll speak of them in front of you."

"He and I have been working together."

"You are a fool if you think he's not been hiding things from you." He strode back to the desk and picked up the book, throwing it across the room. "Or manipulating you."

"Sorry? What?"

"Will you wait for me here?"

She frowned but nodded.

He seemed pleased with her answer, reaching out to place his fingers beneath her chin. "I will discuss this with you when I return."

"Will you tell me everything and be honest with me?" She clasped his fingers with her own. "It's very important to me. Severus, something... something's not right, is it?"

"Leave that to me." And then he was gone.



More confused than ever, Hermione went to the tome and picked it up, whispering, "Please don't let my father suffer because of his anger."

And then it struck her as interesting. His opinion of the book wasn't very high, but yet it had been instrumental in recruiting her and explaining things to her so that she and Lucius could give Severus his life back. All this was just too much to take in at once. Everything was happening so fast. Her mind was awl with thoughts that she couldn't quite remember, words she couldn't quite hear, so many questions, fear, anticipation, and strange feelings. She simply wanted to flee.

The Snape she'd just witnessed had been more like the one she remembered. He'd been quite offended that she'd not been a virgin when he'd had her. She now wished she'd have thought to toss it in his face that the bloody potion needed that personal ingredient and took that choice away from her. However, she'd been so indignant at what he'd said that she couldn't think straight for a moment. Perhaps she should have asked him if she had been his first and then pretend to be insulted when he admitted that he'd had other lovers before her.

"Prat," she said as she made her way to the bathroom to once again don her jeans and jumper. She had work to do, and the sooner she got all of her notes together, the sooner she could figure out ways to help others. She could only hope that Severus would support her decision. Surely he would. He'd been dead for heaven's sake, and it was likely he'd want to save others from that fate. But what was he so angry with Lucius for? What did he suspect that he didn't want to tell her?

That feeling of unease was upon her again, and she thought back to the earlier vision of a sneering Lucius, obviously saying cold words, and hard, silvery eyes gazing at her. Unbidden, the words *Lucius will pay for this* came to mind, sounding loudly in her ears.

"Good grief. I'm going mad."

Hermione wrote and made notes for what felt like an hour, and she'd had enough of waiting. He should have been back sooner than that. Frustrated, she went to the door, but she found that it was locked! Severus had locked her inside.

"How dare he!" she yelled angrily, kicking at the door. "Bozzy?"

The elf didn't appear as he had so many times before. Why? Fear gripped her heart. What if something had gone wrong with Severus? What if he and Lucius had fought, causing him to leave? Was Lucius holding her as a hostage? But, of course, not. He'd never do that to her. He had too much to lose. If he did such a thing, he'd land himself back in Azkaban.

"But who would tell anyone about it?" she asked bitterly. She'd made an oath that she'd never tell anyone anything incriminating about him if they'd use it against him. And everyone she knew would definitely use her words against the man...except Severus. They'd been friends for years as far as she knew.

"Oh, Severus, where are you?" she asked, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as if to warm herself. Wanting to retreat to the only place that she could "feel" him, she lay in the bed, snuggled into his pillow, and pulled the duvet up over her body. It was then that she realized exactly how exhausted she was and allowed her eyes to close for a bit of rest... just until he'd return, no longer.

*What have I got myself into?* she thought. *I should be with my father and mother at the hospital. I should have taken Harry's advice and just stayed away! But then Severus would still be dead. God, I'm married. I have a husband. Will this never feel real to me?*

A/N: Not good!

## Chapter 8

*Chapter 8 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter One.

*Thanks to my betas, ladyinthecloak and charmed\_nay.*

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Hermione woke feeling disoriented, a pounding in her head making her eyes ache and flinch against the light. And then things hit her again!*m married... to Severus Snape*. Bringing her fingers up to massage her temples, she lay back against the pillow and thought over the brief dream she'd had. It had been about Lucius...sort of. It was mostly foggy, but she could remember seeing him staring at her with a haughty expression on his face, even sneering somewhat.

But why would she be dreaming about that? They'd overcome their disagreements, and he'd made a change with great effort to not be prejudiced against those not of pureblood lineage. However, Severus hadn't seemed pleased with her usage of the tome. He'd definitely seen it before.

With that thought, she slowly sat up and opened her eyes. She had to get out of here and find out what had gone on. How long had she been sleeping anyway? Before her feet could touch the floor, she stilled, realizing she was not alone.

"S-Severus? How long have you been here?" He'd been seated on a chair near the fountain, watching her without saying a word. At some point, he'd taken off his dressing gown and had dressed in trousers and a light blue shirt. "All right?" she asked when he said nothing, noting that he looked paler than he had in death. Quickly, she went to him. Something had obviously taken a toll on him. "What is it?"

All desire to lash out at him for locking her in and for not explaining himself swept away in that instant. He was weak and troubled.

"I didn't want to wake you," he finally said. "You seemed to be at peace."

"You don't look well."

He snorted. "I've no doubt."

"Please, come to bed. I'll get you something to drink and eat."

"I do not thirst, nor do I have hunger."

Confused, Hermione said, "You're worrying me."

"Lucius..." He shook his head, leaned back in the chair, and closed his eyes.

"What about him?" she asked, the uneasy feeling returning.

"I should not have questioned your virginity," he said suddenly, sitting up and standing on his own. "You were right to be offended."

*Well, this is a change of subject, isn't it? I won't let this go.* "Exactly. I seriously doubt you hadn't ever... you know." She placed an arm around his waist and helped to guide him to the bed, noticing that his body was trembling slightly. "You need to be off your feet. You aren't well enough yet." Once he was seated, she asked, "Now, tell me, Severus, what's happened? What did Lucius say? Why did you act that way towards the tome?"

His deep chuckle sounded, filling the quiet room. "That tome is not to be trusted. Put it away and do not read in it again."

"I can't! My father's life depends on it!"

"No harm will come to your father." He lay back and closed his eyes. "It's rubbish. You should have kn..." His deep, steady breathing replaced his words.

"Severus?" she whispered.

*Should have known what?* she wondered. Her eyes left his face and found the tome. She wished she could have explained everything about the tome and how it had proven itself to be sentient and had manipulated things in her life so much that her father had been landed in the hospital. How could she not believe in it?

"I suppose since I've done what it wanted and brought you back, I'm free. That's likely what you meant." She sighed and placed a hand on his warm cheek. "At least you're not cold." Hermione shuddered as she remembered his stiff, cold flesh as it had been.

The room suddenly became blurry, and she felt quite dizzy with the realization of what she'd done. She, Hermione Granger, had defeated death, had taken a man who'd been utterly ensconced in its clutches. Never before had she felt so heady, so powerful, and so... dark. Was this what Voldemort had thrived on...this feeling of superiority? Of knowing things others did not?

Shaking her head, she quickly placed the duvet over Severus and made her way to the door. It was no longer locked, thankfully, but the corridor outside was quite dim, an icy draft of wind flowing through. "Bozzy?" she called.

"Yes, miss?" he asked, immediately popping into view.

"Why did you not come earlier?" she demanded.

"Bozzy did not hear miss call him."

"Is Lucius in?"

"Master has gone to retrieve his wife."

"Oh... er... lunch for two please when you get time."

With a small bob of his head, the elf popped away, leaving her alone in the eerie corridor. Before it had been lit by several sconces and had been warm like the rest of the house. She supposed that had been Lucius' doing, and as he was out, maybe the charms didn't renew on their own. Dungeons never did appeal to her...even at Hogwarts. Backing into the room again, she closed the door and turned around, only to stifle a scream. Bozzy was right behind her with a tray in his tiny hands.

"Thank you, Bozzy," she said, taking the tray. Before he could leave again, she added, "Please let me know when Lucius returns. I'd like to have a word with him."

"Bozzy will tell master."

"I... all right."

After he left, she placed the tray on the table, not feeling very hungry. She definitely wasn't tired enough to sleep. She pondered visiting her father, knowing she should go to him, but she also knew that Severus needed her. If he woke to find her gone, it might upset him, especially if he was still weak.

With a sigh, she went to the bed to lie next to him, deciding to think over the conversation she wanted to have with him when he woke. However, she slipped off into a sound sleep instead, days of exhaustion and stress making her more tired than she'd realized.

When she woke later, she felt a hand caressing her breast softly. She kept her eyes closed and tried to keep her breathing even, though she was uncertain why *You want to see how far he'll go*, said a naughty inner voice. Deep down she knew that wasn't the reason, but it was part of it...possibly. Another part of her didn't want to face him while he touched her so gently, else she might be lost in his embrace instead of forcing him to answer her questions. Quite plainly, he was intoxicating.

The fingers of his hand lightly circled her nipple, which hardened in response. To her shock his warm, wet mouth replaced his fingers and began to suck her nipple through her clothes. It was very arousing, causing her stomach to tingle and sending little jolts of pleasure from her breast straight through her body.

Hermione opened her eyes and watched him, knowing his attention was elsewhere. His head moved slightly, hair spilling about, as he laved his tongue against her. When his hand slid down to cup the heated juncture of her thighs, she arched against it helplessly. How did he provoke such feelings of lust in her? Better yet, why hadn't she ever felt this responsive towards Ron, whom she'd loved?

A nipping of teeth against her nipple caused her to voice her approval and arch completely against him. He ended his assault on her breast with a chaste kissing, lifting his head to gaze at her.

"I feel much better now," he whispered, crawling over her and pressing himself against her body. As his lips lowered towards hers, he said, "I find I can't resist you..."

And then his mouth was against hers, open and ready, tongue demanding that hers tangle with his. The pleasure of his kiss was nothing compared to the sensation his fully clothed body gave hers as he ground his hard penis between her thighs and against her center. Oh, how she wanted him, all else be damned.

Hermione began to wriggle beneath him in an attempt to push down her clothes. She wanted to feel his skin against hers, wanted to feel him inside of her. Severus never broke their fevered kiss as his free hand moved to help her. As her jeans and knickers moved down her knees, her legs maneuvered them lower as her hands then went to the fly on his trousers, intent on releasing him.

His mouth finally moved from her lips to her throat, nipping and sucking hard enough that she was certain he'd leave her marked. And she wanted that, just as she wanted to mark him. Her mouth found his flesh where his neck met his shoulder, and she returned his action, thinking in the back of her mind, *Hope he doesn't think of what Nagini did to the other side of his throat while I'm doing this on this side.*

His moan and the increased pressure of his body against hers told her that Nagini was the last thing on his mind at the moment. For now, only she consumed his thoughts. *I find I can't resist you* he'd said. The knowledge she had captivated him while no other had been able to, save his first love, lit her insides on fire. She wanted to prove

that she was the only woman who should be in his heart... his mind. Why should she have to share with a dead woman?

"Take me," she murmured boldly the instant one of her legs was free of her jeans and knickers, not caring that the other leg was still entangled with them. Her free leg curled around his body like a snake as he pushed down his trousers and underpants enough to comfortably slide into her.

"Yes," they breathed in unison, causing him to still, their eyes meeting in wonder. As he resumed his slow strokes, their gazes remained locked. She wanted him to see into her soul if he could, and she wanted to attempt to see into his. The situation would work out; she knew that. How could it not?

Letting go of all thought, she allowed herself to concentrate on the delightful friction she felt each time he pushed into her and pulled nearly out of her. His thrusts were long and deep.

"Sever... ah... us..." she said through a choked voice as he hit a certain spot inside of her that made her toes curl and her nails claw against the duvet beneath her. This caused him to quicken his thrusts, and she tried to match his strokes, gyrating her hips as their bodies met. "Harder, yes... Oh!"

Over and over again he pounded into her, neither caring that they'd never finished undressing, only wanting to reach culmination together. And it was coming... building within... rising... overtaking....

"Oh God, oh yes... Don't stop...." Waves upon waves of feeling washed over her, peaking and driving her to cling to him tightly. His movements became frantic and sporadic at once, and she heard him mumble something against her flesh that sounded like *my wife*, but she couldn't be certain. When had she closed her eyes anyway?

They lay sated and panting, him still embedded in her. His sweaty forehead was pressed against her throat just below her ear, and she moved slightly to press her lips against his cheek. He was amazing.

After many moments had passed, Hermione said, "I had Bozzy bring us a tray of lunch. Are you hungry?"

"I am," he replied, moving off of her to lie on his back.

"I'll get the tray," she said, freeing her leg of her clothing. Her shirt was long enough that it covered her bare bottom, so she felt no qualms about going across the room to get their food. She knew he'd told her to not be shy around him, but it was still too new not to feel a little embarrassed.

"Thank you," he said, pushing himself up against the headboard and accepting the tray. When she settled beside him, he said, "About just now, I just..."

"Are you going to apologize?" she asked incredulously. "If you haven't noticed, I did enjoy it."

His eyes met hers. "But when you were lying there, sleeping, I wanted to touch you."

She knew what he was getting at and nodded. "Isn't that what married couples do? Why should we be any different?"

"You were tricked into this. I know that much," he said firmly. "Therefore, we aren't the typical married couple."

"I knew that we would have to have sex."

"But you did not know you would be bound to me."

"Lucius and I had no way of..." She stopped abruptly as a flash of Lucius' face, a cruel smile playing on his lips, came to mind. A soft voice inside her head whispered, *Lucius will pay for what's he's done. I won't forget.*

Severus reached for a sandwich and handed it to her before taking his own. "Tell me about Weasley."

"What about Ron?" She felt uneasy.

"You were seeing him, were you not?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"He went on a business trip," she said a little bitterly. "Found himself some pleasure to mix into it. Why?"

"And you know this how?"

"Lucius had someone find him. There were pictures."

"I see." He took a bite and licked his lips while he chewed.

"I can't believe he did this to me. We did have a row before he left, but..."

"Over what?"

"We... He wanted to have sex, and I didn't, so he was a little upset."

He paused and looked at her. "And this is what made him turn to someone else?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so."

"And yet you respond to me so freely...barely knowing me, not even liking me."

Her face reddened. "I had no choice!" she blurted.

"Ah, so you admit it. You were tricked into this. You secretly find me repulsive."

"No! I don't. I thought that I would, but you're nothing like I thought. I want to get to know you. I want to make the most of this. I... The tome, it said..."

His rich laughter cut her words short. "I've seen that tome before."

"Of course, Lucius has had it for a long time. He got it from Mrs. Black."

"Yes, yes, and it's magical all right, but not in the sense you think."

"How dare you mock me! Do you know where my father is right now? He's in the hospital, and it's all because I tossed that tome down and refused to do this!"

Slowly, he chewed the last bit of bread, his eyes diverted from hers. Once he swallowed, he said, "I do apologize for what's become of your life." His eyes lifted. "But I am not sorry to be alive again, and selfishly, I want to say that I deserve your sacrifice."

Hermione took his hand. "I wanted you to live. You do deserve this. I didn't mean to make it sound like I don't want this. What I've done may eventually enable us to change things, beat death. Do you know the work I can put into this? I would devote my life to something as worthy as that." She blushed slightly. "And so far we've got on all right."

"Sex with you is... amazing," he admitted.

"Really?" she asked in surprise. It was good for her, too, and she'd thought he'd liked it, but to hear him voice it out loud warmed her heart. "I only ever... There was just one other person, and it wasn't really good, not like you."

His eyes darkened slightly. "Lucius has always bragged about being good in bed. I shall have to let him know that he leaves much to be desired then."

She was surprised by the venom behind his words, but she was too shocked to comment on it. "How did you know it was him?"

"He told me."

"But surely he also told you that the potion from his grandfather required my blood... a virgin's blood? We had no choice. He was the only one I could trust. Ron was gone with that other woman, and I couldn't just go up to someone and ask them to...where are you going?"

Severus had moved to get out of the bed. "I will kill him."

"Wait! What?" she asked, horrified, her hand on his arm. "I'm so confused."

"You didn't need blood from your hymen, girl. A prick on the finger would have sufficed!" he said hotly. "I had no idea that this was not explained!"

Hermione pulled away from him. "No, it clearly stated that..."

"Enough!"

"Don't speak to me that way! Like it or not, I am your wife now...and an adult! Explain yourself or let me explain. I'll not be shushed like some child!"

He took a deep breath and quietly said, "There is much going on that you do not know about. You have been lured into this. I cannot explain it all to you right now."

"Why not? I deserve to know the truth!"

"There is a drug in your system. For me to tell you the truth, it would shock your mind. I cannot utter it to you, but I can try to jar your memory." He reached out to cup her cheek. "Try to understand that this isn't easy for me either. I'm torn between being grateful and loathing what's happened. I'll not lie to you. I wanted to live again, for where I was, it was not death, nor living, and there was no peace."

"Where were you? What do you remember? Wait...drugged? WHAT? By whom?"

He sighed. "I should have said nothing, but there is more here than you can possibly understand at this moment." He smirked. "However, I don't fear that it will come to you. You know something isn't right, yes?"

She nodded. "I can feel it. I keep having flashes of... Lucius. Only he's not the Lucius that I've been working with. He's the man I used to call Malfoy in my mind, harsh and hateful." Bringing her hand to her mouth, she thought of what he'd said, "Oh, God, what's he done to me?"

Severus looked away. "For now, we will not dwell on it, but when the time is right, Lucius will pay for what he's done."

Hermione gasped. He'd said the very thing her mind had recalled thinking at some point before. Tears welled up in her eyes. There was so much that she knew, but her mind couldn't wrap itself around the information. What was it? Frustrated, she allowed the tears to spill down her cheeks, and she sobbed quietly. Her feeling of desperation lessened as his arms wrapped around her.

"I tried to throttle him," he admitted, "but I couldn't do anything... not really."

"Too weak?" she asked when she found her voice.

"A protective anointment. I can't harm him."

This made Hermione's sobs return. What had she done? What all had gone on? Why was she drugged? Only Lucius could have done this to her. But why? They'd been working well together.

"Were the dreams real?" she finally asked.

"I remember snatches of things," he said. "What I remember most vividly was talking with you by the sea."

"Yes!" she said, looking up at him excitedly. "Oh, I'd hoped you would be that Severus and not the horrid... er..." Her voice trailed away. "What are we going to do now?"

"Take each day at a time," he said. "It's all we can do for now."

Wiping the streaks away from her cheeks, she said, "I want to go see my father and mother."

"Are you ready to tell the world that you are a married woman?" he asked.

She pulled back and looked at him, mouth agape. What would her parents say? What would Harry and the others say? Ron *Oh, Ron, how could you have done this? How could I? What's happened to our plans and us? I'm sorry!*

"I hadn't thought of that. We'll have to explain how you survived of course." She frowned. "I won't be able to openly discuss what Lucius and I have done. I took an oath."

"We will just say that I've been in a coma all this while, here at the manor. It's nearly the truth."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "I do want to tell my mother that I'm married, though, but maybe I should do it alone. I'm sure she'll be quite shocked."

"Perhaps."

"I want to go wash up."

"Are you finished eating? You've only had one."

"For now. I just need..." she looked at him apologetically, "to be alone for a few minutes."

"Fair enough."

"Thanks." She quickly gathered some clothing out of a trunk. Before she left the room, she said, "I'd like to leave the manor. I don't want to stay here any longer."

"We can go to my home."

"Whatever you'd like, so long as it's not here. I can't stay here not knowing all that's truly gone on." She frowned. "It feels as if I should be away from here to clear my head."

"I'll make arrangements."

"I won't be long," she called over her shoulder as she slipped into the adjoining room.

As she sank into the bath, her mind replayed things the tome had written to her, things Severus had said, things Lucius had said. More than anything she was determined to make sense of it all, and drugged with some potion or no, she'd piece together all that was blurry or missing.

*He was powerful.*

*He is powerful.*

*He will be the most powerful.*

*The world shall be at his feet.*

What exactly did that mean? It sounded as though he would be the next Dark Lord. However, the lover she'd shared a bed with didn't seem to have lording over anyone on his mind. He seemed genuinely relieved to be alive, obviously wanting to experience life to its fullest now that he's been given a chance. Whatever Lucius had done or planned to do, Severus seemed to not want any part of it. That comforted her very much. Soon. She'd know everything. Soon. It would come to her.

And then she realized something. Severus seemed completely comfortable with her, as if he'd expected it to be her when he awoke. His spirit had connected to her through the dreams somehow. "Hang on," she mumbled. "He'd said that he couldn't imagine it being anyone else but me." The moment came back to her.

*"I want to know every part of you," he stated plainly.*

*"Are you not disappointed?" she asked suddenly, uncertain what gave her the courage to bring up what was bothering her.*

*"How do you mean?"*

*"That it's me whom Lucius chose to work with?"*

*One of his hands tangled into her hair and then twirled a finger around a curl. "I find it hard to believe that it could be anyone else."*

Something niggled at her mind. What? And then something else came to her: a soft, smooth drawling voice; an arrogant expression; a smug smirk; cool, narrowed silvery eyes.

*"You are also Severus' type, so that is in my favor. Did you know that he spoke fondly of you once with me? Over some firewhisky, the day before he was killed in fact, something about admiring your intelligence and fearlessness. However, I thought breaking into Bella's vault to be quite foolhardy."*

Lucius had said these words to her. His voice had been cold, unfeeling, and very unfriendly. When? Was this real? It had to be. She closed her eyes and tried to think. Only mocking words came to her.

*"Now go. Prepare your husband. Give him life."*

Her eyes opened when she could remember no more. The uneasy feeling in her stomach was replaced with anger.

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"Well, Ron's really bollixed this up," George said. "If I'd known all this would happen, I'd have gone myself."

"Actually," Ginny said, "I'm surprised you sent Ron in the first place."

"Yeah, why is that?"

"Well, I'd planned on going, but then Angelina came round and said she wanted to spend some time with me. She works locally and couldn't go with me." He shrugged. "Ron seemed up for it. It's not like I don't trust him to do what's right by the shop...or at least I did anyway."

Harry nodded. "I don't understand it either."

George stood up after he downed the last of his gillywater. "Back to the shop with me. Don't want to leave Angelina alone too long. Saturdays are usually busy."

"How's that going?" Ginny asked softly, not elaborating.

"Starting a relationship with Fred's ex-girlfriend, you mean?" he asked bluntly. When his sister nodded, he said, "It's not awkward as you might think. It seems like we can grieve together and like we understand each other more than anyone else could." He smiled sadly. "I think he would have wanted that."

"I think so, too," she said with a smile. "Off with you now."

"Thanks for the lunch. I'll let you know if the little wanker gets in touch with me."

"All right," Harry said.

Ginny added, "We'll do the same." After her brother walked away, she said, "We still need to find Hermione. She should come with us to France, don't you think?"

Harry ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation. "I've checked the hospital. Her mum hasn't seen her, but she knew that Hermione wanted to take a few days away."

"Still," Ginny added, "I can't see Hermione just not going to see her dad while he's there."

"I know," Harry agreed. "But we can't be certain where she is."

"I think you know more than you're letting on," Ginny said wisely. "Tell me about it."

He sighed. "All right. I think she's at Malfoy Manor, and before you ask why, let me just say that I can't just walk up to the front door and tell Lucius I want to search his place for Hermione."

"But I can," drawled a smooth voice from behind.

Harry turned to see Draco Malfoy there. "How much did you hear?"

"Hello to you, too," he replied casually, sitting down uninvited. "You missed our meeting. I've been looking for you."

"Sorry, but something more important has come up."

"It's about Granger," Draco said. "I've been trying to tell you this for a while now, but every time we were supposed to meet, something would come up. I think my father had something to do with that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he tried to forbid me to talk about it of course."

"About what?"

"Not here, Potter. Let's go elsewhere." He looked around the Three Broomsticks distastefully. "Your place."

However, Ginny wasn't having it. "If you know something, Malfoy, you need to tell us now."

"Wait, Gin, he's right. Let's go to Grimmauld Place where nobody can hear us and there'll be no distractions." Harry stood, tossed some Galleons on the table, and extended a hand to Ginny.

"Lead the way," Draco said, standing as well.

Harry was uncertain as to what Draco could say on the matter, but from the look in the man's eyes, he was sure he wouldn't like what Draco had to say. First, Lucius Malfoy had made Hermione take an oath, then all that shite with Ron had gone down, and now Draco had something to say about Hermione and the situation she was in? One thing was for certain, if Lucius Malfoy had harmed his friend in any way, he'd kill him.

A/N: More up soon!

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter One

Big thanks go to my great betas, whose names will be held until the reveal. You gals rock!

Harry had had enough of the stalling. "Look, Draco, you've paced enough. Out with it already!" he said in annoyance.

Instead of speaking, Draco ran his fingers through his blond locks, tugging slightly. It seemed as though he were in a battle with himself.

Ginny looked at Harry with an arched eyebrow. "Draco, please sit. We're anxious to know what you know, but you're making us worry even more."

"What's going on with Hermione?" Harry asked again.

"I'll have to start from the beginning then. Bear with me," he said, finally stopping to face them. His expression changed into one of pain for a moment. "Have you any port?"

"Firewhisky."

"I suppose that will do," he said, sitting down and waiting to be served.

With a sigh, Ginny got up and went to the cupboard to fetch glasses and the bottle of whisky. As she did this, Harry followed her movements but addressed Draco, "Are you under a spell Draco?"

"Sorry?" the other man asked.

"You look like you're in pain. Are you breaking a vow by talking to us?"

Draco frowned deeply and moaned before he spoke. "I am."

Harry nodded. "I thought so." He took out his wand and flicked it, his expression changing to one of surprise. "Damn. You know, if you go too far and say too much, it could harm..."

"I know."

"Is there a way around it?"

"I'd like to try to explain some things and possibly choose my wording carefully." He relaxed and sat back in his chair.

"Have you been living in France all this while?"

"Yes."

Noting that Draco didn't blanch, he asked another question. "Why have you been missing our meetings?"

"I've had to." He took the proffered tumbler from Ginny and drank deeply. "I'll have to just start from the beginning, all right? I can go back that far without my vow affecting me."

Harry indicated for him to continue and made room for Ginny to sit with him on the couch. He had a feeling that he'd not like what he was about to hear.

"Back when Snape was headmaster at Hogwarts, I overheard a conversation he and my father had. I was shocked, and it confused me even more than I already was. My father and Snape, they were making plans to overthrow Voldemort!"

"Snape was on our side," Harry said forcefully. "Always was."

"I know that. At least... I think I do."

"Sorry?"

Ginny snorted. "Take another drink, Draco. Might lessen your contradiction, there."

"What I mean to say is that I heard the plans they were making, and..."

"So, your father, you're saying, was actually on our side, too?" Harry shook his head. "I find that hard to swallow. He's been acquitted, no need to try to vouch for him now. What are you on about?"

"Shut it, all right?" Draco said with an icy glare. "What I'm trying to tell you is hard enough without you butting in, Potter."

Ginny placed a hand on Harry's leg. "He's right. Let him talk."

"Thank you."

"Right then."

"So, as I was saying," Draco continued, "I overheard my father and Snape talking about how good things would be after the Dark Lord met his demise. I hid below the stairway just under the main part of the headmaster's office. They never knew I was there, and the portraits, they didn't bother to tell them either. I think they wanted me to hear, expected me to do something about it. I can't be sure. So..."

Draco's eyes widened as he heard his father's cold laugh and icy voice.

"He'll be sorry he ever took my wand, treated me like some common Muggle filth in my own home, disrespected my family... The list can go on."

"That's why I've been working on this. Look at the notes I have here. Should anything happen to either of us, we can still be certain to follow through with our plan."

Snape's voice was so soft Draco nearly had to strain to hear it. They were speaking out against the Dark Lord. Surely they'd gone mad to do so!

"Cissy wouldn't be able to do this, Severus. She hasn't the qualifications or the heart."

"You speak of your own wife that way!"

"I mean her no disrespect, of course, but I know my wife's limits, my friend. We'll have to find someone else."

"I trust no one amongst our ranks."

"Nor I." Lucius chuckled. "Now here's a thought. What of Granger?"

"Are you daft? She'd be the last person to go along with this."

"Ah, but who says she'll have to know what she's going along with, eh? The girl is quite loyal to a good cause, is she not? That would be simple enough to play upon. Besides, you didn't see her in my home, proudly disobeying Bella, giving her false information, and withstanding the Cruciatus." He made a hum of approval. "Narcissa would never have fared so well."

"I will have to think on this. It does make sense, but the girl... Yes, yes, of course." His voice took on a tone that made Draco's spine tingle. "Hermione Granger, clever for certain, yet gullible, always wanting to prove herself."

"We are agreed then?"

"It could be no one else."

"That bastard!" Harry yelled. "He's tricked her into doing something for him, carrying on his dirty little work that he started with... Snape, but wait, Snape wouldn't have really condoned this. He was pretending, trying to get on your dad's good side."

"Do what exactly?" Ginny asked, placing her untouched tumbler aside.

"Bring whichever of them that fell back from the dead."

Harry sat back as if he'd been slapped.

"They wanted Voldemort out of the way so that they could take over and be the next Dark Lords. Nearly everyone in the ranks was afraid of Snape, him being their master's right hand and all. My father, he'd lost his clout once he was sent to Azkaban." Here Draco scowled at Harry. "So, naturally, he wanted you to win, Potter. He wanted you to do the dirty work, and then you'd least expect a betrayal much later."

"I don't believe it," he said adamantly. "Snape loved my mother. He wanted to protect me for her. He wouldn't have betrayed me... because of her and his feelings for her."

Draco shook his head. "Believe what you will, but you're missing the point, aren't you?"

"Oh my God!" Ginny said, gasping and bringing her hand up to her mouth, mumbling, "Snape..."

"Caught on, have you?"

"What?" Harry asked, looking between the two of them.

"Granger and my father have been working to bring him back, Snape." Draco stood and quickly moved to refill his glass. "Anyone else?" When nobody replied, he shrugged

and placed the bottle down, pacing a few times before returning to his seat.

"No wonder she was so... secretive!" Ginny said, clearly shocked.

Harry stood and walked over to the fireplace.

"And where the bloody hell do you think you're going?" Ginny asked.

"We've got to go over there! Do you know what kind of magic it takes to bring someone back? I saw what Pettigrew had to do to bring back Voldemort's sorry arse. There's no telling what she's had to do!"

"Would you sit down? I'm not done!" Draco said impatiently. "And you can't just show up at our manor either. Our wards wouldn't let you in."

"Why didn't you get her out of there? Why are you saying something now?"

"I tried. I went there and told her to get out of there, but my father, he made me leave, enforced that damn spell. I..." He scrunched his eyes up in pain. "Shite."

"Take your time," Ginny said soothingly. She then eyed Harry and arched an eyebrow. "Come back here and let him tell the story as best he can. We don't want his... death on our hands."

"He won't die," Harry said calmly, though he made his way back to the couch. "It's not that kind of spell. I guess dear old Lucius didn't want to take the chance of killing his son."

"But I'll bloody wish that I had with the pain," Draco said stiffly. "It fucking hurts."

"So what else did you hear that night?" Harry asked.

"That night? Nothing. Those two oafs, the Carrows, barged in to complain about Longbottom." Draco snickered. "They left, and I made my getaway."

"Where does your mother fit into this? She's been in France as well. Separated from your dad," Harry said, crossing his arms.

"They were never separated, Potter. Not in that sense of the word. We were there on holiday." He clenched one of his fists. "She knew... what he and Granger were doing...working to bring Snape back."

"Is-is Snape back, Draco?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"I don't know. The wards haven't allowed me at the manor since that day, and I've tried. My father forced me to write a fake letter of apology to Granger, and then when I told my mother I wanted to talk to you, that it had gone on far enough, she forced me to write that one to you, canceling our meeting."

"Forced?" Ginny asked.

"Imperius," Harry replied, knowing what Malfoy meant.

"Yeah, and I almost bought into it, not even realizing it, but something would always remind me and help me fight it off." He took a small sip of his whisky. "They think they are doing this for the good of the world. They think it's what Snape would have wanted."

"Bringing a man back to life is noble, but going about it in an underhanded way..." Harry shook his head. "I can only imagine what Hermione's been going through."

"She seemed all right, like nothing was wrong," Ginny said. "Did she know she... was being used?"

"No," Draco said immediately. "My father has her thinking they're best mates." At that moment, Draco doubled over in pain, dropping his tumbler on the floor with a loud clang, its contents lost.

"Harry, do something!" Ginny yelled, jumping up to help him.

"I don't know what to do."

"Something for pain, quick!"

Ginny rocked Draco in her arms, not certain what she could do to soothe him or relieve his pain. When Harry finally made it back with a phial of liquid, they had to force it down Draco's throat.

"Brilliant," Harry said, running his fingers through his untidy hair. "He's lost consciousness, and we don't know the rest of the story!"

"Harry! That's cold!"

"It's not what it sounds like. I just..."

"Let's get him to bed for now," she said. "He's doing a lot by just being here and trying to tell us. Whatever vow he took, it's hurting him terribly. Maybe he'll be able to talk more when he wakes."

"Well, I'm not waiting that long. I'm going to talk to Kingsley, and then we're going..."

"Harry, no, you mustn't! We don't know the situation Hermione's in. What if this would put her in more danger? What if... what if we'd go there and mess things up so that Snape can't be brought back?"

"I would want him to live, Ginny, but not at the cost of Hermione."

"What would Hermione want? What would she do?"

"She'd... she'd want to finish what she started." Harry nodded and flicked his wand to lift Draco's unconscious form. They'd just have to wait until they learned more. That was all there was to it.

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"Still not heeding my warnings about that book?"

His silky voice caressed her like nothing else could. She turned to face him, the tome still clutched to her chest. "It's hard for you to understand. My father..."

"Will be fine." He stood and collected his clothes.

"Bozzy told me that Lucius and Narcissa have returned."



"I think I'll go to greet them and let them know we will no longer be indulging in their hospitality."

"Yes," she said with a nod, "I want to leave this place."

"Get dressed. Come with me."

"I don't want to see him," she admitted. "I can't face him right now, not feeling so confused and foggy inside, knowing that he's done something but being unable to put my finger on it."

"Are you certain?"

"And I don't want to see his wife either!" She shook her head vehemently. "That would just make things worse."

Severus nodded, pursing his lips. "I won't be long."

"Severus," she said, placing the tome aside. "I want to see my father."

"I will come with you."

"No, not this time. I want to tell my mother about us before, all right? It's nothing against you, but this... this will be a shock to her."

"Fair enough," he relented, his eyes narrowing. "You will come back, won't you?"

While his voice was hard, she detected the underlying insecurity and went to him, wanting to comfort him. Placing her arms around his waist and her head on his chest, she said, "We're together now, and while we may not love each other, our paths are intertwined. I won't desert you, will help you with this, and will make the most of this."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and slid his arms around her body tightly. "I will do my best to give you a contented life, Hermione. Your sacrifice...what you are doing, my loyalty is yours. I swear it."

"My mum is probably a little worried. I won't be long." She smiled excitedly. "I hope he's awake."

Nodding, Severus said, "I'm sure he will be...from what you've said about it." Reluctantly it seemed, he released her and finished dressing while she did the same.

Ten minutes later, she walked into her father's room at the hospital to find his eyes closed, his body still, and her mother sleeping in a chair at his side. She was almost afraid to move. Had there been no improvement? When her mother stirred slightly, she decided to speak.

"Mum?" Hermione asked softly. She moved a little closer and tried again. "All right, Mum?" Her mother stretched and yawned loudly, causing Hermione to grin and rush to her for an embrace. "How's Dad?"

"He woke during the night. All the swelling's gone down, just some bruises left, that's all. He'll be all right," her mother replied, rubbing her eyes. "He asked after you."

"Hermione..."

It was her father's voice, weak and low to be sure, but Hermione had never been so happy to hear it before.

"Dad!" She quickly went to him, tears in her eyes, and took his hand in hers, placing a kiss on it. "You gave us a right scare, old man!" she teased.

"Sorry, poppet, I didn't mean to." He smiled and squeezed her hand. "The two of you, here with me... means a lot to me."

"I should have been here when you woke, but I've been tending to something very important." She closed her eyes guiltily. "Sorry. I don't mean that it's more important than you, Dad. It was a commitment I couldn't walk away from." *Literally*, she bitterly added to herself.

"No, it's all right," he said.

"Besides, he's not been alone," her mother added. "I've been here with him."

"That's right," he said. "There's something I wanted to ask you about."

"What's that?"

"That bloke who had that row with Arthur Weasley years back... at that bookshop, do you remember him?"

Hermione's stomach twisted. "Y-yes."

"I saw him."

"What? When?"

"Now, honey, you know the witnesses said it was a woman." She turned to Hermione. "The blonde woman that was seen walking in front of your father's car? He..."

"No, it was no woman. It was that man...with the long blond hair, wearing a long cloak. He walked straight towards me and knew exactly what he was doing. If I hadn't swerved, I would have hit him with the car."

Hermione let her father's hand go and stepped back. "Dad, are you certain? I mean..."

"I know what I saw. He had that same cane in his hand with the serpent's head! Why would he do this? How does he know where we even live? Is there something that can be done about this in your world?"

She stepped back and plopped down into the chair her mother had vacated. "We've been working together. He never said anything." Memories assailed her then...his haughty smile, his lips curled in a sneer, cold eyes.

*"Place the crown on your Prince, Hermione," Lucius said with a mocking smile.*

*"It didn't take me long to figure out how to manipulate you into doing my bidding."*

*"Mmmm, Severus will enjoy you," he whispered into her ear. "I know that I most certainly did."*

"All right, Hermione?" her mother asked in concern.

"I must go," she said.

"But you've only just got here."

"I have to talk to him. I'll be back... soon." She quickly made her way to the door and stopped once she got there. "There's so much I have to tell you. Things have... changed for me. I'll explain everything as soon as I can. I have to sort something out first."

She Portkeyed to the manor and paced around the room she'd been sharing with Snape in a rage. Lucius Malfoy had caused her father to wreck. And what were these memories coming to her? Were they real? They had to be. Her mind was starting to piece things together finally!

The tome came into her line of vision, and with it, Severus' warning. He'd been right. It had all been a lie. Lucius had somehow tricked her into asking after the tome and then used some magic to make it say certain things. Was Kreacher in on it? He'd been the one to direct her to Lucius! The dreams, they had to have been Lucius' making as well.

But how?

The room began to spin, and she had to sit down on the bed. There were so many thoughts flying through her mind, so many visions. Had she been so easy to hoodwink? But why her?

She thought of Lucius' hands on her naked body, his kiss against her flesh, and his body against hers, and it made her retch. What a fool she'd been! "Severus," she mumbled. "I need Severus. I have to tell him what I've learned!"

*"Hermione, remember the tome's words about your blood, your body, and your soul?"*

"Yes."

*"I've learnt what the soul part meant. I told you last night, but you agreed to carry on anyway, as you truly had no choice. Perhaps you've blocked it out, it being such a shock and disappointment."*

*"Just say it. What?" She wanted to know and didn't...not if his expression was anything to go by. "Will I die?"*

*"No," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder reassuringly, "but you are now Severus' wife, bound to him for all your lives."*

*"But how?"*

*"The potion, your virginal blood, the willing sacrifice of your body... I'm afraid that it was sealed when you and he had intercourse."*

*"NO! I would have seen that coming. I..."*

*"Neither of us had ever seen this potion before, and the bloody book wasn't very forthcoming, was it? How could we have known?"*

"It was all a lie," she said to herself dejectedly. And she'd walked right into it all with her eyes wide open. She was so eager to learn something new, to make a difference, that she never realized what was happening.

And she'd given her body to him. No wonder Snape had been so angry when he'd seen the tome. He must have recognized it for the scam that it was. "He knows most of this." She was certain of it. He'd said that she had a drug in her system...the wine Lucius toasted her with. That had to be it.

"He said that I'll have to put this together on my own. To learn too much at once would be too much for me and could..." She stood and faced the door, wincing at the ache in her head.

*That bastard tried to kill my father because he knew I had second thoughts about going through with this. Oh, God, what if those pictures are fakes? What if Ron...*

Hermione stormed out of the room, determined to find Lucius and hex him into oblivion. She could always ask questions later *He will pay for what he's done*. The fact that her head felt as though it were splitting into two didn't slow her down. Easily, she made her way to his private study, knowing he'd be there.

Before she could barge in, she realized that the door was open, and she could clearly hear raised voices. This prompted her to stop and lean against the wall while massaging her temples.

Lucius spoke then. "Severus, you knew I would choose her, and now you are trying to play the gallant knight? You forget, old friend, that I know you far better than that."

"You went too far with her, Lucius."

There was a loud thud.

"Kicking over my belongings won't change anything."

"Why did you have to bed her?"

"And why shouldn't I have?" There was a chuckle. "Now, now, Severus, calm yourself. You know you can't harm me."

"She is mine."

"Yes, that she is. Trust me, I want nothing more to do with her in that way. She suited our plans, and that's that. Her place is now at your side."

"You speak so calmly about this."

"I followed your orders to the letter. Why should I not be proud?"

"Where is Narcissa?"

"It's of no matter. She knows of it all."

"I see."

"Go to Spinner's End if you want her to feel more comfortable, but you will meet with me regularly. We've much to discuss and many plans to make."

"We'll be leaving shortly."

"Very well. Will you come round tonight for tea?"

"I will."

Hermione backed away in shock. Lucius had been following Severus' orders? But how? Severus had been dead, hadn't he? What the hell was going on? The pounding in her head worsened and threatened to split open. She wondered absently if it was how Harry had felt all those times his scar hurt.

A blurry vision of a blonde-haired woman came into view. The figure spoke in a haughty voice, asking, "Are you eavesdropping?"

Unable to take anymore, Hermione fell to her knees, certain she was crying, and watched her wand roll away from her. She'd been betrayed by them all...even Severus.

"What's going on here?" Severus asked. His boots came into Hermione's line of sight, followed quickly by his kneeling legs and hands, which were touching her face. "What have you done to her?"

"Not a thing," Narcissa said indignantly. "I found her here, looking rather pale and mumbling to herself. I believe she was eavesdropping."

"Fuck!" Snape exclaimed.

"Ah, it looks as if you'll have to explain things to your little wife soon, eh?"

She closed her eyes, unable to look at the light any longer. A moan escaped her lips, and she felt her body being lifted, knowing it was Severus who held her by his scent.

"Your bloody potion has done this!"

"Nothing you can't cure, Potions master." Lucius and Narcissa both laughed. "Shall I still look forward to you tonight? Or would you prefer to wait a day while you tend to her?"

"I will owl you," came Snape's reply, and Hermione heard no more.

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AN: Shorter than normal, I know, and I'm sorry, but I can't put more here without going too far. My next update will be sooner. Sorry but RL caught me in its snare.

## Chapter 10

*Chapter 10 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See chapter 1.

*Thanks to my betas, ladyinthecloak and charmed\_nay!*

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Hermione felt as though she were being pulled in many directions at once, and she couldn't stop it, not for lack of trying either. There were visions...memories...all coming at her at once. It felt as if she'd been tossed into the spin cycle of a Pensieve at some Wizarding launderette. And then the spinning and pulling stopped.

She found herself at the Ministry during an obvious trial of Lucius Malfoy, for he was seated in a chair in the middle of the room below the Wizengamot and others. Upon looking closely, she saw herself in the crowd and moved in that direction. Everything was just as she remembered it. Why was she here? What was the point of this... dream?

"What's going on?" she asked out loud. Nobody turned in her direction or even seemed to hear her.

"You may step down, Mr. Malfoy," Kingsley said smoothly. He then looked in their direction. "Miss Granger?"

"Yes," Hermione said in unison with her counterpart, feeling ridiculous.

"Why don't you come up here first since you have someplace to be shortly?"

"Certainly."

Hermione watched herself as she quickly went to sit in the chair Lucius Malfoy had recently vacated and saw her primly crossing her legs and fixing her robes, a self-important expression on her face as she took a drink from a small phial. *Good grief, do I really look like that? I almost look like Percy!*

"Please enlighten us as to your first encounter with Lucius Malfoy."

"I was twelve, and he saw me with my family at Flourish and Blotts."

"And?"

"And he took a poke at Mr. Weasley for associating with Muggles, as if it were a dirty thing. He even made a remark to me about my parents."

"So, he wasn't pleasant."

"No."

"Excuse me," came a shrill voice. Hermione recognized it as one of Malfoy's solicitors. "What's this to do with anything? I don't think he's on trial for the opinion of one's family."

"What was the outcome of the meeting?"

"Mr. Malfoy put Tom Riddle's diary in Ginny Weasley's cauldron. This caused..."

Laughter rang out from Malfoy's direction as his haughty solicitor stood once more. "Has this been proven?"

"I... no, but..."

"Then I suggest you stick with the facts, young lady."

Hermione looked away from the horrified and frustrated expression on her counterpart's face and looked over at Lucius. It was something she'd rarely done during the trial itself, but now, she found, she couldn't look away. Beneath his amused and calm expression, she could detect a hint of malice. His nose was slightly crinkled, and the coolness of his eyes articulated his loathing more than anything. How had she not noticed this before? How had anyone not noticed it?

The questions and answers continued, and she couldn't bring herself to stop watching him...his eyes, his mouth, his nose... even the grip on his cane. He hated her. Even as he sat there so long before, he'd started planning his revenge. It was plain he didn't appreciate her telling the Wizengamot all that she'd experienced at his hand and those of his friends. Even though it was the truth.

"What did you expect?" she asked loudly, wishing he could hear her. "I couldn't lie! They gave me Veritaserum. You saw that for yourself!"

Nor would she have lied anyway. She'd firmly believed that all he'd done had not been the product of an Imperius Curse. The man was truly foul, wasn't he? Look at all he'd done to her...coaxed her virginity from her, tricked her into marrying Snape, causing her father's near fatal accident.

In an interesting twist, his eyes warmed a little when she spoke on behalf of his son. Hermione turned to look at herself sitting in the chair, back straight and hands clasped in her lap.

"Draco didn't want to tell them that he knew exactly who we were. It was plain he was afraid, and later, he obviously tried to thwart Crabbe and Goyle's plan to take us to Voldemort."

"But he was part of their plan, was he not?"

"Yes, he was, but I don't think he felt he had any choice. His friends were quite... harsh towards him."

In the crowd, Draco bowed his head and couldn't look at the girl on the stand. Hermione remembered a conversation he'd had with her after it was over with.

*"Granger?"*

*"Oh, Malfoy, er... hello."*

*He scratched the back of his neck nervously. "I just... I appreciate what you did for me in there." He took a deep breath. "And at Hogwarts. I'll not forget it."*

*She was gobsmacked. Draco Malfoy had thanked her and had been sincere about it. "I just told the truth," she said with a small smile.*

*A simple nod was his reply, and then he was gone.*

Draco was definitely his father's son, but he didn't seem to agree with everything the man had taught him. Hermione's eyes moved back to Lucius' again, and she noted that he now had a gleam in his eyes. Occasionally, he would gaze out into the crowd where Ron and Harry sat, slyly watching Ron's obvious attempt to support Hermione through lopsided smiles and nods.

"And here is where your plan originated," she murmured. "You knew at this moment that you would have me, knew that Ron and I would never be intimate."

She slid down to the ground, her back rubbing against the cool, cobbled wall of the room, and she sat there in a daze as everything she and the others had said about Lucius Malfoy was smoothly explained away. In the end, he was free and had slipped away from another stint in Azkaban.

How had he been so sure she wouldn't have sex with Ronald? Had he done something to her, put some spell on her? She thought of the times she and Ron had been close to consummating their relationship, and she cringed. She'd always turned him away...no matter how close they were to joining. It was no small wonder that he'd turned to that willing woman in Paris.

Or had he? Was that a trick as well? Those pictures could have been faked! What if he was being held somewhere in France against his will? What if he'd been killed? No, surely not! Lucius wouldn't go that far, would he?

"Oh, Ron, what have I done? Why didn't I trust you more? Why did I let him trick me?" Her heart ached for Ron, for what they'd shared, for what could have been, and for herself. She'd been a fool. And now she was married to a man who'd approved of this betrayal. She'd given herself to him willingly, had even hoped to find peace in a life with him, but that was about to change. How could she be content with someone who'd done this to her? Someone who'd been in on it with Lucius from the beginning?

As if on cue, she felt her body being tugged away from the scene before her and into another one. She was once again in the Shrieking Shack and staring at the horrible sight of Severus Snape bleeding profusely from gushing wounds in his neck, silvery memories pouring from his mouth, eyes, ears...

Again, her counterpart was there, eyes wide and horrified as she conjured a glass for Harry to place the memories in. The feelings she'd felt that night hit her once again as if she'd never left. She'd never seen someone die before. Yes, she'd seen dead bodies and had even seen maimed or injured people, but she'd never seen something so graphic, so personal. His blood pooled beneath him like a small rug of death, a portal from this world to the next, pulling his soul from within his body down into the Otherworld.

She felt sick, afraid, numb, and wanted to run away...just as she had the first time she'd seen him. He'd always been so cold and indifferent. How was it that he looked so vulnerable in death? The Hermione from the past gave Snape one last look...making sure what she was seeing was truly real...and she left, the others following.

Hermione walked forward and gazed down into her husband's pale face, eyes open and lifeless. She knelt down, not caring that her knees soaked up his blood, and placed a hand on his still warm cheek. "You didn't deserve this, you know." And she meant it. Even though he'd helped Lucius somehow, she didn't wish him dead. She took a little comfort in the fact that he'd live again, but exactly how had that been accomplished? Sure, she and Lucius had seen to it, but she didn't know everything. She had to find out the truth.

Rising, she stepped back, and only then did she notice a small piece of parchment sticking out of his robe pocket. She slipped it away and immediately recognized the handwriting to be Lucius'. She'd seen enough of it over the past few weeks to recognize it anywhere.

*It's time. Drink this, my friend.*

"Drink what?" There was no phial near his body, and though she hadn't been able to see much while they'd hid, she didn't think he'd had time to drink anything while talking to Voldemort. Had he done it before getting there?

She knelt down again and felt his pockets, hoping to find a phial, but before she could find anything, the room began to spin again. Perhaps she couldn't do anything more since she'd not seen anything more the first time she'd been there. After all, it was quite possible, she'd noticed the parchment sticking out of his pocket the first time, only hadn't realized what she'd been seeing due to her shock.

Bright light filled her eyes, causing her to shut them tightly for a moment and then blink rapidly. The stench of a musty, unused bookstore filled her nostrils, and there was something else as well. A fresh, woody scent that reminded her of... Severus Snape. A dark blur came into focus.

"You," she said, voice cracking.

"You'll need some water," he said softly. "Drink." He tried to place a glass against her lips, but she turned her head.

There was no way she'd allow him to drug her. Not after all she'd learned!

"You need water, Hermione. Now drink."

"No."

She felt his fingers grip her chin and tug at her face, making her look at him. "It's not poison, I assure you."

"I don't trust you."

He released his hold on her and sat back. "What are you on about?"

"I heard you talking to Lucius!" Her head thudded painfully, and she felt as though she might fall back into blackness. "Used me."

"There is more going on here than you can possibly understand at the moment. If you try to take it in all too quickly, it'll be worse." He leaned closer and placed the glass against her lips. "Drink."

Needing it, she allowed him to gently trickle the water into her mouth, and she forced it down her throat, feeling much better right away. When she was done, she turned her face away and took in their surroundings.

She was in a medium-sized bed in a small, dark, stuffy room. There were cobwebs in the corners, and everything seemed to be dust laden. "Where is this?"

"This is our home on Spinner's End."

"Our home?"

"Your hearing is impeccable, I must say."

"There's no way I'm staying here with you. Not after what I heard!"

He shook his head and placed the glass on a rickety bedside table. "As my wife, your place is at my side."

The room became fuzzy once again, and Hermione closed her eyes, though she spoke to him through clenched teeth. "You planned this. You knew he'd use me."

"You have no idea what it's been like." His voice was cold. "There are things that I did not know about and do not condone, but..."

"But you don't care so long as you get to live!" She opened her eyes to see his figure get up and begin to pace. "I had a life! I had plans!"

"And you still have a life. What's more, you've saved a life."

"But at what cost, Severus?"

"A most noble sacrifice indeed," he said acridly. "There are, however, more important things here..."

"Yes, yes, I need to learn my place and all that rubbish. I won't be anyone's doormat!" She tried to sit up but simply fell back against her pillow weakly. "Why me, Severus?"

Silence.

"Where are you going?" she asked in frustration as he walked out of the opened door.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of everything she knew.

*"Severus, you knew I would choose her, and now you are trying to play the gallant knight? You forget, old friend, that I know you far better than that."*

*"You went too far with her, Lucius."*

*"Kicking over my belongings won't change anything."*

*"Why did you have to bed her?"*

*"And why shouldn't I have?"*

*"She is mine."*

*"Yes, that she is."*

He knew something about what Lucius would do, but it was apparent that he hadn't planned on Lucius' seduction, which had been unnecessary it seemed. Her stomach quivered slightly. How many times in the past had she warned Harry about rushing into things? Here she was... doing the same thing. She shook her head. What would her parents say about all of this? Hermione brought a hand up to hide her face as if they could see her where she lay.

*"That bloke who had that row with Arthur Weasley years back... at that bookshop, do you remember him?"*

*Hermione's stomach twisted. "Y-yes."*

*"I saw him."*

*"What? When?"*

*"It was that man...with the long blond hair, wearing a long cloak. He walked straight towards me and knew exactly what he was doing. If I hadn't swerved, I would have hit him with the car."*

Lucius had had to act out the tome's threats, or else she might not have gone through with their plans. Severus had nothing to do with the tome. Lucius. Lucius was the culprit. "He's telling the truth," she murmured to herself. "There is something more going on." The not knowing was even worse than knowing what she did. She'd always been the curious sort by nature. To have something within her reach like this was nearly unbearable.

*"The tome, it sounds as though you and I are to be on unequal terms, you lording over me. I don't want to live like that."*

*"What tome?"*

*"The one that chose me to help you."*

*"Can you show me this book?"*

*"Don't you remember? You came to me in my dreams. The tome was always there."*

*"I have snatches of visions, but I can't be certain what's real and what is not."*

*"Where were you all this time? Is there an afterworld?"*

*"I shall answer your questions, but I would like to look at this tome."*

Overcome with feeling, Hermione began to cry softly. She didn't know what to think. Everything was so confusing. It seemed as though Severus was more involved than she'd believed, but it also seemed that he wouldn't have agreed with the way Lucius had gone about things. She supposed the first thing she had to do was hear what he had to say, but her mind was foggy and her head ached.

If she played her cards right, she could find out everything. He would probably tell her, and what he left out, she could decipher for herself. Nobody would force her into anything ever again. If she chose to stay with him, then she would, but bond or no, if she wanted to leave, she'd see to it. As soon as she felt better, she intended on seeing her family. They were probably worried about the way she'd left and the information she'd divulged about Lucius.

And what would Harry think? Had he noticed she hadn't been back yet? Did he still think she was taking time to herself? Had he found Ron?

"Hermione?" Severus had come back and was hovering in the doorway.

She turned slightly to gaze at him through narrowed, damp eyes. "Yes?"

"I... It felt as though you were needing me." It seemed he felt uncomfortable with the idea that someone depended on him for anything...for anything such as this anyway.

"Our bond?" It could be nothing else. She'd felt it when their situations had been reversed, too.

He nodded. "All right?"

There was a small sigh that escaped her lips as the last of her tears diminished. "I want to know everything."

"I will tell you when I can. Now's not the time." He moved closer, his severe expression softening slightly. "You were crying."

"Wouldn't you? How would you feel if you were me?"

He sat next to her uncertainly. "I am brewing a potion that will help clear your mind. It will be ready within the hour."

"It's not just the effects of whatever drug I was given. I've been manipulated, lied to, and used."

His scowl deepened again, but he said nothing.

"How long have I been like this?"

"Almost twenty-four hours."

"My parents..."

"That will have to wait," he said firmly.

"Malfoy, that...that prat! I'll..."

"That will have to wait as well."

"Owww," she moaned, bringing her hands up to her temples. "It just hurts so much. I just...."

And she felt herself drifting back into a dark, misty place. Her senses taking leave of her one by one. That last thing she was truly aware of was the feeling of arms sliding around her, the feeling of being held gently.

When she opened her eyes again, there was no pain, and she felt warm and happy. The bright sunlight didn't affect her at all. Sitting up, she looked around in amazement. She'd been laid on a blanket on a pebbly, yet sandy, beach. Large boulders seemed to barricade her from any prying eyes. The tide rolled out slowly, leaving small wading pools in its wake.

It was then that she saw Severus. He sat beside a small pool with his feet inside and seemed to be hunched over, reaching into the water. When he pulled his hand back up, he held something shiny in his palm. However, that had nothing on the brightness of his expression as he looked her way, smiling triumphantly.

How could she have doubted someone who could smile that way? Shaking her head, she realized that she must be dreaming again. All that had happened couldn't be erased by a simple lifting of lips. Overhead, seagulls called out to each other as they circled the water. Why couldn't reality be like this? Filled with such peace?

"A Sickle for your thoughts," Severus said, dropping down to sit beside her.

Hermione gazed at him for a long moment and decided to be honest. What would it hurt? None of this was real. "I wish that we could live like this." She gestured around them. "Meaning that we wouldn't have the hate between us that we do."

He looked hurt for a moment before he recovered. "I don't hate you. Why would you think that?"

"I don't know what to think," she admitted.

"I've never hated you."

"Yes, you did."

His answer was a shake of the head before he lay back and put his hands beneath his head. "Look at all the clouds."

"I don't want to look at the clouds. I want to... I don't hate you," she said softly.

"Oh?" he asked without looking at her.

"Did you know he would ruin my life?"

Severus turned over and propped himself up on an elbow. "Is being my wife that bad? The equivalent of ruining one's life? I've said that I'll see you content. If I can change things about myself, why can't you accept that?"

"I had a future planned with Ron. I was content, and now... now I'm someone I don't even recognize anymore. I sold out everything I believed in for knowledge about the Dark Arts."

"To give life to someone and possibly others in the future."

She bit her lip and reached out to accept the shiny green gem he held out to her, enjoying its rough edges against her fingers.

"Weasley might be a good man, but it wouldn't have lasted. I know his type."

Her temper flared. "You only know him from classes, but you don't really know him!"

"That doesn't matter, does it?" Severus placed a hand on her cheek. "You and I will last. I've not felt this way since Lily...I want to protect you, cherish you, do anything for you. You will be glad that this choice was made for you one day. I swear it."

His words seemed so sincere. She leaned into him and placed her lips against his. "I'm so confused," she said when she pulled back. "Where do I start?"

"Trust in me," he said softly, cupping her other cheek as well and pulling her closer.

Deciding to enjoy the dream as long as she could, she nestled into his arms and kissed him back with everything she could, wanting to be as close to this Severus as possible.

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"How is he?" Harry asked as Ginny joined him in the kitchen.

"Well, he woke up. I gave him some water, and he went back to sleep...very restless." She went to the sink to splash water on her face. "I'm so tired." With a sigh, she added, "It's got to be nightmares he's having."

"We can't keep this up. It's been almost a whole day. We should contact his father."

"You just want to contact Lucius so you can attack him about Hermione and find out what she's doing!" Ginny accused.

"That's right," Harry admitted, "mostly anyway. I don't want Draco to suffer either."

"Maybe she's gone to see her parents again. Why don't you let me go over to see if she's there? I'm less apt to blurt out anything... unlike you."

"No, I'd rather you stay here with Draco. Your mum said she might pop round this morning. I don't want to deal with her and her questions again."

"Is discussing her daughter's future too much for you?"

"Trying to start a row, are you?"

"Do you want me to?" she snapped back, obviously frustrated with his attitude. "Maybe you should be the one to go at that."

"Gin... Ginny, come back," he called after her, but she left him alone. "Fuck," he muttered, running his fingers through his hair. He hadn't slept at all, and now he seemed to snap at everything she said, even though it was unwarranted. There was just too much he needed to know, and patience was a virtue he lacked...always had.

"Guess I'll go see Hermione's parents then," he said to himself. "And if Draco hasn't made any progress by the time I come back, I'll have to contact Lucius Malfoy."

That decided, Harry left Grimmauld Place and Apparated to the alley next to the Muggle hospital Hermione's father had been brought to. He quickly walked to the man's room only to find the bed empty. Alarmed, he went to the nurse's station.

"Excuse me? The man in that room, Mr. Granger, where is he?"

"Oh, he was released earlier today," she said with a smile, looking him up and down appreciatively. "Are you related to him?"

"Friend of his daughter's actually."

"Oh." There was disappointment in her voice. It was obvious she believed he was dating Hermione.

He didn't let her know of her error, not wanting someone's interest anyway...especially not a woman's. Ginny would have his arse and the lady's as well. "I'll just go knock him up, ta."

"You're very welcome."

Instead of feeling smug with the woman's flirting, he felt guilty. He'd been a right prick to Ginny and should apologize as soon as possible. She'd been right to get angry at his words about her mother. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk about their future, but he didn't appreciate being pressured.

"Maybe I should just go home. Hermione's dad is probably resting comfortably in his own bed now. It's obvious he's not in any danger still." He frowned, undecided on what he wanted to do. Would Hermione be at her parents' home?

Shrugging, he decided to return to Grimmauld Place. After they decided on what to do with Malfoy, they could go to the Grangers' house together.

However, when he entered his home, he found a tearful Molly Weasley sitting with Ginny in their kitchen. Both women looked up at him warily when he returned.

"What's all this?" he asked. "All right?"

"It's Ron," Mrs. Weasley said, pushing a crumpled parchment across the table towards him. "He wrote to me this morning, and I just..." Her sobs became loud and Ginny tried to soothe her.

Harry took one look at the note and dropped it as if burned. "What the fuck?" he roared. "Married! What about Hermione? That git!"

"I know, I know, poor girl, oh, Ron... how could you?" Mrs. Weasley cried between sobs.

Plopping down beside the two Weasley women, Harry wrapped his arms around both of them. His eyes met those of Ginevra's, and he mouthed, "Sorry about earlier. I love you."

She nodded, leaned closer, and kissed his cheek quickly and then turned her attention to her sobbing mother. Harry closed his eyes and held them closely, vowing to never hurt Ginny or Mrs. Weasley the way Ron had hurt his mother and Hermione.

Ron Weasley had a fight coming. He'd pay for what he'd done to Hermione and his family.

AN: More up soon, I swear! Thanks for reading.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter One.

Thanks to my betas, ladyinthecloak and charmed_nay.

Harry sighed as Ginny walked with her mother to the grate. It had been a trying two hours. He'd never seen Mrs. Weasley so hurt and angry before, and the whole thing had been emotionally draining. There was a light pop beside him as Kreacher appeared.

"Master, young Master Malfoy is waking," the elf said eagerly.

"Thank you, Kreacher. Tell Ginny to find me in his room once her mother has Flooed off."

"Yes, master."

Taking the stairs two at a time, Harry quickly made his way to the room they'd put Draco in. Upon entering, however, he could see that the man was getting worse. "Poor sod," he muttered. "Draco? Draco? Can you hear me?"

"P-Potter."

"Yes, it's me. You've spoke against your vow or whatever you're under... What should I do? What can I do?"

"Father..."

"All right?" Ginny asked from the doorway, startling Harry.

"No. Malfoy Manor it is, I think. Look at him. It's worse."

"Bloody potion for pain has worn off, that's for sure." Ginny touched a hand to his brow. "He's freezing... yet sweating."

"I'll have to Side-Along him outside the grounds there." He held up his hand when she tried to speak. "You'll be staying here."

"What? That's crazy. What if something goes wrong?"

"What could possibly go wrong?"

"You are angry and might attack Lucius Malfoy, that's what!"

"Oh, I'll talk to him, all right, but I will keep my cool in his home. I'm not that daft, Ginny."

"If you aren't here in thirty minutes, I'm going to follow you there," she said firmly.

"Thirty minutes, right." He turned to the again sleeping Draco and said, *Mobilicorpus!*

Minutes later, he was outside the gates of Malfoy Manor. As luck would have it, Narcissa Malfoy was visible within the private grounds, seemingly feeding white peacocks. Harry narrowed his eyes slightly, but he then remembered that Draco's health was more important at the moment.

"Oi!" he called out, waving his free hand at her.

She looked up and was completely shocked. When she saw that he clutched her son closely to his body, she sprang into action, running for the gates and calling for some elf named Bozzy to get her husband.

"Potter! What's happened to Draco?" she asked breathlessly, flicking her wand at the gates so that they granted him entrance.

"I figure you or your husband could tell me," he said with a touch of impatience. "Someone made him take a vow to keep things to himself, and he tried to tell me anyway. *This* is what happened."

"Who would do such a thing?" she asked, clearly horrified. "Oh, my poor son! Potter, do something!"

"What's all this?" Lucius asked as he joined them. "Draco!"

"You might want to remove your curse from him," Harry said evenly.

"I don't know what you're..."

"Do you know how much pain he's in?" This time, Harry's voice lowered coldly, and his eyes glinted with ire. "Might as well ease his pain, you won't get rid of me until I get some answers anyway."

Malfoy looked to his wife for a moment and then back at his son, as if thinking things through. At that moment, Draco's eyes cracked open slightly, and he moaned, long and loud.

"Lucius! Do something!" Narcissa cried, slapping Lucius soundly on the face and then trying to cradle Draco in her arms, even while Harry held onto him tightly.

One cheek flushed with embarrassment and the other from the sting of her hand. "Oh, all right!" he said, stepping forward to place his wand over Draco's abdomen.

Harry couldn't understand the softly murmured words, but he was certain he heard *Finite* at some point. He felt Draco's body tense for a moment and then go limp. Instead of looking as though he were fighting a painful death, he appeared to be resting peacefully.

"Come along, Potter," Lucius said as he used his wand to levitate his son and led the way to their home.

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Hermione's eyes fluttered open, and she noticed immediately that her headache had diminished. Gingerly, she sat up and breathed a sigh of relief that whatever potion Severus had given her had worked. She wasn't in pain at all. And she remembered everything.

"Lucius Malfoy... you've had a bad day, arsehole," she said aloud as she placed her feet over the side of the bed. The first thing she needed was the loo. After that, she and Severus had much to discuss, as he also had explaining to do.

The floor felt cold and grimy beneath her bare feet. She doubted that the wood had been scrubbed in decades, much less the time since Snape had last been there. The entire room was drab and dismal, and she knew she'd never be able to stand a single day in *his* home.

Opening the first door, she found a dark, walk-in wardrobe, its contents reeking of must and mold. The second door opened into a hallway, dimly lit by a single candle in a sconce some way from the bedroom.

"Great," she grumbled, slowly walking forward, noting that she now tread on damp carpeting. Before she could get to the candle and the door next to it, Severus came into view further down the hall, having come up a stairwell.

"You're up," he said by way of greeting.

"I need to use the toilet," she said, squirming slightly.

"It's just there," he said, pointing to the doorway. "Do you need... assistance?"

"No, I can have a pee on my own, thanks," she said curtly.

He nodded and replied in the same tone. "Fine, I shall be downstairs awaiting you. I've taken the liberty of making breakfast. I thought you might be hungry."

"I am that," she admitted, feeling her stomach quivering. "Just down the stairs there?"

"Yes. Instead of using the first doorway, which leads into our sitting room, carry on to the next door. That's the kitchen."

"Right then."

She watched as he turned on his heel and left before going into the room. As expected, it wasn't very posh, but it was a great deal cleaner than all she'd seen before then. *He must have done a bit of foolish wandwork*, she mused, noting that the old mirror even shined. Hermione could see where the shower walls were still wet and how someone...Severus of course...had thrown a used towel onto the floor after drying off with it.

How many times had she seen Ron or Harry do the same thing? What was with men and not being able to place used towels into the hamper? What would it cost them? Two extra steps, maybe three at the most? Sighing, she went about her business, sniggering to herself when she thought that it felt as if she hadn't relieved herself in days and then realizing that she hadn't.

"I've gone mad," she quipped as she washed her hands. There were no flannels set out to dry her hands with so she shook them off and patted them down the sides of her thick nightgown...obviously snatched from the Malfoys.

*What's this?* she thought as she felt something in the left pocket. She pulled out a roughly shaped stone of some sort, green in color. She'd seen it before, but where?

"Oh!" she gasped. "The dream." Severus had given her the same stone in the dream she'd had of him at the beach. So... it had been real, hadn't it? But how? "Now, he's really got some explaining to do." Wanting answers, she hurried down to talk to him.

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Harry paced back and forth while the Malfoys hovered over Draco, anxious to address the situation. He'd seen them huddled together in the same manner before...after he'd defeated Voldemort in the Great Hall. He couldn't deny that the family was close and truly cared for each other, but what sort of father would force his own son to take a vow? Why get him involved in the first place?

"Look, if you don't mind," he finally said, "I'd like a word."

Narcissa waved Lucius away, not leaving Draco's side. Lucius asked, "What is it you want, Potter?"

"Where is Hermione?"

"Sorry?"

"Come off it. I know she's been here working with you." Harry looked around suspiciously. "And where's Snape?"

Both Malfoys began to chuckle in apparent disbelief before Lucius replied. "You can't be serious! Severus was killed, as you well know. You saw it for yourself."

"I'm not stupid! Draco told me..."

"Draco is recovering from being hexed, Potter! Nothing more. He's delusional and can't be trusted alone." Lucius lowered his voice. "That's why he and Cissy went away to France...to seek help. There are only a few spells that can help him at the moment...and a potion he must take to keep his mind clear."

"Clear of the truth, you mean," Harry said, not believing him. "I'll ask one more time. Where's Hermione?"

"Gone," he said with a sigh. "And she'll be angry to know I've told you."

"Told me?"

"The Weasley boy, he's been seeing another woman."

"I know that already!"

"Yes, then you can imagine how she might feel," he said softly. "She's gone off to take some time to herself."

"And not see her parents?"

"Perhaps she is with them, I cannot be sure. She never said."

"I don't believe you."

"Shall I show you around the house?" Narcissa asked from behind them.

"Yes," Harry said with a nod. "That's exactly what I want."

"Now, Narcissa, give Draco his potion, I expect he needs it. I'll show him around."

"Wait," Harry said. "Don't give him a potion until I talk to him."

"You'll find that giving me orders in my own home will not work, Potter. You see, I am a free man and have rights. This is my home, and I will gladly show you around, but you'll not make demands where my boy's health is concerned."

Harry knew he couldn't force the issue, but he ached to question Lucius about everything Draco had said. However, that wouldn't be prudent...until he could learn more. He was sure he would help Draco. He'd use his Pensieve to go over the memory of the spell that Lucius had chanted. He had faith that he and Ginny could figure it out...maybe even Hermione would be back soon enough to help.

"Fine. Show me your house then. I want to see it all, too, and I do know you've got dungeons. Had a little stay there myself once."

Lucius wisely said nothing while he led the way out of the room.

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Hermione sat at the table just as Severus placed the frying pan back on the cooker. There was a plate with eggs, one with bacon, and another with toast placed on the table already. He'd even poured each of them a glass of orange juice.

"Smells and looks good," she said quietly.

He sat across from her. "And now we shall see if it tastes as it looks and smells."

Unable to help herself, she opened her hand and revealed the green gem on her palm. "Would you care to explain this to me?"

"What of it?"

"I know you gave this to me in a dream I had last night, and today, I find it in my pocket. The dream, was it real? All of the others? Were they real as well? Even the horrid ones?"

He set his fork back on the table and looked at her in resignation. "I don't suppose you'll cease your nattering while we eat?"

"No, I'll not shut up, and you will answer my questions."

A long and loud growl emitted from his stomach, causing him to smirk. "Do you mind if I eat while I explain then?"

"That's a good idea," she said as her stomach emitted a response to his. "Mmmm," she hummed in approval. "Good."

He nodded and chewed his food, head down, eyes watching her covertly from the curtain of his hair. She wondered if he was prolonging the inevitable and was about to ask him when he spoke.

"It's a Dream Stone."

Her eyes lowered and found the rock next to her plate. *This?* But I thought those were precious gems. While this is quite lovely, it's not... exactly what I had in mind. I've seen pictures of one that was stolen from its owner, and it looked nothing like this."

"I expect each stone looks different."

"Tell me about it," she said curiously. "I came across this when looking for information on the Philosopher's Stone back in our first year at Hogwarts. It's all very interesting. When I left Divination, I sort of pushed knowledge of it out of my mind...anything to do with scrying, see."

He nodded. "I've never been much for that art myself, but it does have its moments." He took a drink from his glass, wiped his mouth, and spoke again. "This is actually Beryl...green Beryl in fact."

"Emerald... a bit rough and not like those in my mum's earrings. I didn't recognize it."

"Stones of power, that's how it's known to old Scots, as they used to make the old crystal balls with it." He popped a torn off piece of toast into his mouth and chewed slowly.

"And whom does this belong to?"

"My mother's family. It was found by an ancestor of mine in Ireland near his home. He saw it for what it was right away, being a wizard."

She nodded. "How does it...?"

"Work?"

"Yes."

"This stone has been spelled for healing and rejuvenation when needed, among other things. You see, it works with a person's Chakra...was actually forged into a more powerful stone with the Chakra of my ancestor."

"Chakra? Fascinating. I've always wanted to learn more," she said honestly, forgetting about her food, about Malfoy, and about their situation.

"Anhata."

"The chest... more importantly, the heart! So, Severus, is this how... how you remained *alive*, for lack of a better word?"

He smiled then, a tight uplifting of lips. "I wouldn't say alive. The Otherworld is..." He shook his head. "Best we save that part for later, all right?" When she nodded her assent, he continued, "This Chakra, as you know, physically affects our hearts, our lungs, and even the thymus."

"Which staves off infections in wizards... This protected your body all this time."

"This and a bit of fancy wandwork by Lucius, of course."

Her gaze darkened for a moment. "And what else?"

"There was a potion I made to go along with it." He shrugged at her look of amazement. "I wasn't certain it would work, but it was worth a try."

"But your soul, where was it?"

"In the Otherworld." He seemed to shudder. "This stone, however, kept me in contact with this world...with Lucius." Again, he paused and gave his food attention, during which she remained silent. "Where was I...? Oh, yes. It wasn't as though I were here. He would use it to speak with me." There was a small snort. "I say speak with me, but the conversations were usually one sided. It was as though we couldn't convey full sentences. I expect it's because the stone was in his possession and not on my body."

"You're the owner of the stone, so it works best for you and not someone else."

Her eyes grew wide. "Severus... the spirituality effects...your love for Lily!"

At this, he sneered and sat back in his chair. "Yes, undying love and devotion. However, I don't put much faith in other things...forgiveness and compassion. Those, I lack."

She bit her lip but didn't let him know that she disagreed with his assessment of himself. Whether he knew it or not, there was compassion inside of him and probably forgiveness as well. However, she doubted it was aimed at himself, where it needed to be.

"You look as though you want to say something," he said softly.

"The color... I... er... remember something about the meaning behind the color," she blurted, not wanting to tell him what she'd truly been thinking.

"It will always be a shade of green, this stone, depending on who has possession of it and what they are feeling." He nodded. "See its color now? It's in your possession."

"The color is very faint, isn't it? Green, but quite light."

"What does that mean?"

"Fear of rejection and failure. Also, you've allowed yourself to become taken advantage of... to the point of an emotional breakdown." He reached across and turned the stone over. "Sickness."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "And whose fault is that?"

"Whose indeed?"

Hermione knew he was right. "My own. I shouldn't have allowed myself to get so caught up in things. I should have asked more questions, revised better... something!" Severus said nothing while she mulled over her thoughts. She then asked a question that sprung to mind. "What color is the stone in your possession?"

"For many years, it was of the darkest green...jealousy, anger, greed, ambition, the lot!" He chuckled darkly and shook his head. "The Dark Lord never knew I had this upon his return thankfully. By then I'd locked it away in my vault at Gringotts." He gazed into her eyes then. "Didn't come to me as mine until my mother died, which was three years after Lily was killed."

"H-how did she die?"

"By her own wand," he said in a curt voice. "But that is a story for another time."

Sliding the stone towards him across the table, she said, "Pick it up. Hold it."

He did so without hesitation, and they both watched as it slowly turned an aqua color. This time, it was Hermione who spoke.

"The color of healing itself!"

"And protection."

For reasons unknown, she reached across the table and placed her hand on his arm. "I don't regret helping you live. If I said something that made you think otherwise, I..."

"It's understandable, and for what it's worth, Hermione, I do apologize for all of this."

"I accept your apology," she said shakily, withdrawing her hand and taking the stone from him once again. "I can't understand why I'm being so calm about this. I should be furious. I should be ranting mad."

He leaned closer and placed his hand on her arm this time. "It's because you are approaching this in a logical, rational manner, as you are wont to do. It's what I like about you most, I think." His eyes averted hers for a moment before he added, "Besides a few other things."

Hermione's cheeks heated at this admission, and she felt pleased, oddly enough. "The dream I had last night... Well, one of the dreams anyway, it was of you and me at the beach. Did you project that into my mind?"

"I did, yes. I asked the stone to find a place where we would both feel at ease."

"I've seen you on a beach before."

"I remember."

"But how? Lucius had the stone then."

"At that point, he'd placed it beneath my pillow on the bed where my body lay, knowing I'd need it with me for our magic to work completely."

"There's so much I still don't understand."

"I happen to have many books on the subject," he said with a small smile. "When I inherited the stone, I wanted to know everything about it. There is so much more that you will find fascinating."

Hermione nodded and said nothing as she finished her meal, her thoughts straying to Lucius and to revenge. Once she was done, she noticed that Severus had finished his food as well. She knew it was time to ask a question that had been bothering her since she'd started remembering.

"If my... hymen's blood was unnecessary," she began tentatively, watching him tense visibly, "why did he... do that to me?"

"His reasons are his own, but I do plan to find out."

She shook her head. "I think I know why."

"Indeed?"

"Last night, I remembered his trial...the one where I'd given testimony about his deeds. Only this time, I saw it from a different perspective. I saw it in his expression, his eyes. He loathed me for my part in the war and for telling the truth against him that day. And he gazed at Ron, formulating a plan even then I'm sure."

When she stopped talking, Severus gestured to her with his hand. "Go on."

"I think he put a spell on me, one that would keep me from having sex with Ron."

"There are such spells. Fathers place them on their daughters sometimes," he said with a nod. "It's frowned upon now, but it's still done, I'm certain."

"So, you see then...? That was his revenge on me, taking what was mine to give to whomever I chose? Manipulating me with knowledge and false information? Tricking me into marriage with someone other than the person I'd been involved with after doing all that?" She brought her hands up to cover her face and leaned forward on her elbows, which were propped on the edge of the table.

After a moment, she said, "And what of Ron? Were those pictures faked? Thinking on it now, I honestly don't think he would have done that to me. There has to be something more to it, and I'll have to find out soon. I'll have to face him with what I've done."

She heard the scrape of his chair, footsteps, and then felt an awkward pat on her back.

"If it's any consolation, I am not taking this lightly, and I don't approve of what he's done."

"I believe you," she whispered, not moving, and was rewarded with his other hand being placed on her other side. His hold was firmer this time, enticing her to lean back against him, which she did. "But he's hoodwinked us both, hasn't he? You can't touch him, not now that he wears that anointment."

"We will find a way around that."

Her hands fell away from her face, and she looked up into his earnest eyes. "I hope so."

"Come. It's time I tell you everything, Hermione: how this plan came about, how Lucius got drawn into it, why I trusted him, and why I knew you could help."

Hermione stood and offered her hand to him and was pleased when he took it and led her to the sitting room, leaving the dirty dishes on the table behind them*There will be time to tidy up after*, she thought. And as she looked at the dingy floor and walls, she added*Much tidying up later.*

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"Satisfied, Potter? I would be happy to let you patrol the grounds," Lucius said over an hour later.

Something wasn't right, and Harry knew that, but he couldn't prove anything without any evidence that Hermione had even been there...much less Snape. He nodded and said, "I don't get why she didn't contact me."

Looking unconcerned, Lucius said, "Go round to her parents' home. They may know...she may be there."

"Possible."

"I'd like to check on my son now, if you don't mind."

"Good idea. Let's do that."

Harry knew that Malfoy was trying to dismiss him, but he wanted to see Draco as well and see what he had to say about all he'd told him. Smirking, he followed the man back through the corridor that led to the room they'd last seen Draco in.

To his surprise, Draco was sitting up and drinking from a teacup that his mother held in front of him. "Draco?"

"What are you doing here?" he asked, brow furrowing.

"I brought you here. Remember coming to my place? You and Ginny and I had a chat."

He shook his head. "I did want to talk to you. I know that."

"Do you remember why?" he asked, perplexed. What had they done to him?

"I went down the pub and got a bit pissed. Last I remember was downing mead with some big bloke. Must have saw you after that."

"Yes, that must be it," Harry said with a fake smile. "Guess you were right pissed."

Lucius arched an eyebrow and in a low voice said, "See? He's suffering from a hex, and it will take some time, but we will have him fixed. Once our research is done."

"Research? What, with Hermione? Is that what she's been working on?" His heart dropped. Maybe Lucius Malfoy was telling the truth after all. Hermione didn't exactly say what they'd been getting up to, only that it was top secret and that he'd made her take a vow about it. He hoped his disappointment didn't show. He'd thought all of his questions could be answered here. He'd hoped that it was true about Snape.

An elf entered the room. "Master, someone is requesting entrance at the gates."

"Indeed?"

"She's looking for Harry Potter, she is."

"Shite, Ginny." Harry looked over at Draco and noted his perplexed expression. "I'll see you soon, Draco. Owl me if you want to talk. All right?"

"I'll see you out," Lucius offered.

"I can see myself out, thanks."

As quickly as he could, he went to her, smirking at her angry, yet worried, expression. Sometimes she reminded him very much of her mother...so much it was scary.

"I've been waiting for you!" she said angrily before he even reached the gate.

"Sorry, was searching the manor."

"What for?"

"Hermione. Snape."

"And?" she asked anxiously, taking his hand to Side-Apparate.

"Nothing." He allowed her to do the Apparating and groaned when he noticed she'd brought them to the Burrow.

"Nothing? How's Draco?"

"You won't believe this." He quickly filled her in on everything as they walked towards the house, glad she seemed to agree with him that something wasn't quite right.

"But it is confusing, isn't it? What if Draco really was hit with something and..." She shrugged. "We really need to talk to Hermione, don't we?"

"Yeah." Harry stopped walking and balled up his fists when he noticed the redhead walking their way.

"George Flooed over and said that Ron and his... wife were here. I thought you'd want to talk to him."

"Oh, yeah, I want to talk to him all right," he said sarcastically, sprinting forward, allowing all the anger, confusion, disappointment, and frustration he felt to pump through him in the form of adrenaline. "Bastard!" he yelled. "How could you do that to Hermione?"

Harry's first swing was too short and missed Ron completely. Both of them were shocked for a moment before Harry swung again, hitting his friend squarely in the stomach. Ron doubled over for a moment, but then he lunged at Harry, knocking them both to the ground. As they rolled around and fought, neither realized the entire Weasley family had come out to try to part them.

AN: And so we have a little more light shed on the subject. More up soon!

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Thanks go to my betas, ladyinthecloak and Charmed_Nay. I appreciate the read through, mates.

Also, for those who don't know, this story won first place for chaptered stories in the last Potter Place Prompt Challenge. I appreciate the votes and want to say thanks for that, mates.

Hermione gazed at the hundreds of books on the shelves before her. His sitting room, while grimy and neglected, had walls of shelves, which made it appealing to her. "Are all these Wizarding books?" she asked.

"Not all." He walked to the far corner and perused a shelf, fingers trailing over books' spines delicately. "Ah, here we are." He nodded towards the shelf. "All books about the Dream Stone and its magic."

She strode forward and glanced at the titles, also reaching out to touch them. "I would like to read them indeed."

"What's mine is yours," he said quietly, causing her to face him sharply. "Just as the stone is now yours. My gift to you."

"Why? Why would you give me this?" She held the Dream Stone out. "Why do you not keep it?"

Severus strode away from her and sat down on the threadbare couch. When he spoke, his voice sounded a little choked. "You're the only family I have."

Feeling empowered by this statement, she followed him and chose the chair across from him, facing him squarely. "Your father, where is he?"

"Dead."

"No other family?"

"None."

"But this is your family heirloom." She placed the green gem on the rickety table between them. "I couldn't take this, Severus."

"You're my wife, and one day you will pass it on to our firstborn when you feel he or she is fit to have it," he said matter-of-factly.

Hermione sat back so fast, a cloud of dust emerged from her chair. She nearly felt as if he'd slapped her. "Firstborn? What?"

"I thought that..."

"Why do you think I'd want children? We're not even in love! I wouldn't bring children into something like *this*!" Her voice steadily rose. "I don't even know if I'm going to stay here, much less plan a family with a man who...someone I don't know if I even trust fully!"

"What do you mean you don't know if you're going to stay here? You have no choice!" His voice rose to meet hers, and his eyes pierced hers angrily.

Shrilly, she said, "Look at this place! It's filthy!"

"Pardon me, *dear*, but I've been fucking dead for more than a year now."

"I know that," she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest in annoyance. "But what about before? Have you no pride in your house?"

"My home was Hogwarts for most of my life!"

"But you still came here! What would your mother say?"

"How dare you speak about my mother!" he yelled, standing up in anger. "You know nothing of the kind of life I had here with my parents, no idea what I went through! The less I saw of this place, the better!"

"Well, perhaps you should tell me then. Or shall I chalk this up to yet another thing you want to keep from me?"

"You daft girl, I'm trying to tell you what you want to know!"

"No, you aren't, Severus. You're trying to get my mind off the questions I want to ask you by giving me this Dream Stone and throwing knowledge in my face. To make things worse, you're planning my future for me, even so far as to dictate that I'll have children!"

"Did you never plan to have them?"

"I did, but not..."

"Not with me." He sneered hatefully. "With Weasley then."

"I didn't even plan it with him. We were taking one day at a time, but at some point, I suppose..."

"So why wouldn't I suppose the same thing? That at some point you and I might have a child?"

Hermione uncrossed her arms and stood up, walking to the window and looking behind the thick, dust-covered curtain. "How can you even see out of this window?"

"Answer my question."

"My future with Ron doesn't compare to this. You can't use that in the same perspective. Ron and I chose each other mutually. We have feelings for each other."

"I chose you, too."

"Oh, right, how could I not forget about that! And you love someone else!"

"You chose to be with me. While there may be no feelings..."

"What would you do if I left?" she asked suddenly, turning to face him. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, and she was just as surprised with herself as he seemed to be.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "You cannot. You know that."

"Oh? You would force me to stay?"

"I would ask that you do, else we might undo all that we've done so far."

"Bollocks! You're back from the Otherworld. We've breached it. What could possibly happen?"

"Our bonding... you feel it the same as I. We can never be with another. Did you not know that?"

"Of course I know it! But it doesn't dictate where I have to live, so I want to know, Severus Snape, what would you do? Poison me like your mate, Lucius? Imperius me?"

He walked to the archway that led into the small entrance hall of his home and waved his hand towards the front door, opening it wordlessly. "Leave if you'd like. I will not force you to stay."

Heart pounding, Hermione moved towards the opened door, gazing out into the silent, rundown neighborhood. He would let her go and not force her to remain in his depressing home. Her heart clenched. She didn't want to leave him alone in such a place. He was hers, wasn't he? A possessive feeling swept through her body. Was it the bond forcing her to care about how he lived his life? She doubted it. There was something there, some spark...even without their bond. For better or for worse, he was her husband.

"And if I stay?" she asked.

"What do you want of me?"

She turned to face him, heart beating wildly, sweat beading at her hairline. Her words came out in a rush. "Everything...starting with the truth."

The door behind her closed with a click, and then he held his hand out to her. "Come. I will answer anything you ask. You have my word."

She took his proffered hand and allowed him to lead her into their sitting room.

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"Oi! Break it up!" Ginny screamed while Mrs. Weasley began flicking her wand to jolt Harry and Ron apart with small shocks, to no avail.

"Boys!" Mr. Weasley shouted. "Calm down!"

"Ron," Bill said, starting forward. "Harry!"

George simply laughed.

Ginny positioned herself between the two, not noticing the mud on her robes and not worrying about being struck. "You shouldn't be fighting, Ron, Harry. Stop it!"

Another woman reached out to place her hands on Ron's shoulders, but his elbow knocked her back onto her arse as he tried to hit Harry. She landed with a loud thud and a moan near Fleur's feet.

"Jeri!" Ron said at once, untangling himself from Ginny's and Harry's limbs. "All right? Here, let me help you up."

She smiled, smoothed down her ruffled hair, and let him help her up. Harry curled his lip at the way Ron held her close and tried to dust her off, and he was unable to keep quiet about it.

"So, this is Hermione's replacement then, is it?"

"Don't talk about her that way, mate," Ron warned.

"What do you expect? You want me to be happy about this? Do you know what you've done to Hermione these past few weeks? All that rubbish about needing time and then not a word. She's beside herself, you wanker! I never thought you'd do this shite to her again." He nodded to Ron's wife. "And then you go and get married? What about how she feels?"

"She made it pretty clear about how she felt before I left home, and in her letters, she didn't..." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'm with Jeri now, and that's all there is to it."

Harry got up when Ginny nudged him and didn't bother trying to tidy his robes. He turned away. "See you lot later," he called over his shoulder.

"Harry Potter!" Mrs. Weasley called. "We're going to have a family meeting, and you are part of this family. Inside," she said loudly, looking around, "all of you."

He stopped and looked at Ginny, who nodded, eyes widening pleadingly. "Fine," he muttered, only to have Bill clap him on the back.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," he said softly. "Far as I'm concerned, I'm with you, mate. Not sure what's got into my little brother."

At this, Harry paused for a moment. "Bill, you just might be onto something."

Inside, all the Weasleys sat around the kitchen table, but Harry refused, standing behind Ginny instead. He didn't spare Ron's wife another glance, wanting to hate her for taking away his other best friend's lover.

"Go on, Ron," Mrs. Weasley urged, wringing her hands nervously in front of her.

"As I was saying before Harry and Ginny came," he began, looking at Harry in the eyes, "when I met Jeri, I thought she was great, and then over the first few days, we became close."

"Love at first sight for me," the woman said softly.

Harry still didn't look at her. He addressed Ron, however, saying, "I thought you loved Hermione!"

"I do love her!" Ron said hotly before widening his eyes and shaking his head in confusion. "I always will, but she and I... it'll never be like what Jeri and I have found. I can't get her out of my mind. All I want to do is be with her when we're apart, even if she's only down the hall from me."

"I love him," Jeri said in perfect English, directing this at Harry, hoping he'd look at her.

It was then that he spared her a glance. "Yeah? What about his girlfriend who's loved him for years? Didn't mind wrecking that, eh?"

She shrugged. "He said they were having problems, that they were separating. Why should I not seek happiness? Why should he not if he had none?"

"He WAS happy." Harry stepped forward, nearly reaching over the table for Ron, but he stopped. "She saw pictures of you two cozying up. Lucius Malfoy had someone find you because she was beside herself with worry. You could have answered her letters... my letters! What kind of prick have you turned out to be? A couple of shags and you lose your senses?"

Ron jumped up and made to run around the table to pounce on him, but Bill and George both stood to stop him. "Calm down," Bill said.

"Look how he's talking about my wife! Would you not do the same if he said that about Fleur?"

"I wouldn't be in this situation, Ron."

Ron stopped struggling and faced Harry. "Lucius Malfoy, you say? What's he got to do with this?"

Harry felt his cheeks heat as the entire family looked at him curiously. He'd said too much. "She's decided to work with him on a project. I don't know much about it, but if *he* noticed how out of sorts she was, then that should tell you how bad off she was! Imagine a day that Lucius Effing Malfoy would care about Hermione more than her own... whatever the hell you are!"

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley admonished.

"Son, please, have a seat," Mr. Weasley said to Harry before looking at Ron. "You, too."

Both sat grudgingly, but it was Ron who spoke. This time his words were directed to his teary-eyed mother. "I'm sorry, Mum, but I fell in love with her so fast. I just... I couldn't leave France without her. This is the only way she'd leave...if I made it official, and I had to come back, what with taking over with George now and my family here."

"I love Hermione like a daughter, Ronald," his mother began. "And I always had a feeling that one day it would be official. What with the way things have been progressing lately, I was sure of it. This," she pointed between the two, "is very sudden." She gave a long sigh. "But if it's what you both want, and if you're both genuinely happy, mind, then I can do nothing but accept it."

"Thank you, Mother Weasley," Jeri said promptly. "I promise to love him all of my days."

At this, Mrs. Weasley's smile widened, and she opened her arms to the woman, accepting her into the fold.

"Ridiculous," Harry muttered.

"Eet ees not ridiculous, 'Arry," Fleur said suddenly. "She ees French and will be a good wife."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Ginny asked, exploding at her sister-in-law. "So should everyone else run out and find someone French? Maybe you'd like little Gabrielle to become Harry's wife then? Or were you planning on getting one of your mates to come over and do that job? How dare you! After the nice things Hermione said about you when NONE of us liked you!"

"Zat ees not what I meant!" Fleur snapped back.

"You could have fooled me!"

Harry had to place a hand on her shoulder to calm her down. "She's right." He looked around. "You're all thinking about Ron and this woman, but not Hermione."

"What would you have us do, mate?" George asked. "We can't hold a wand to him, can we? It's done now, and life's too short to hold grudges. Look at what happened to Fred. Look at all the time he missed out on with Percy because of a grudge and difference of opinions?" He stood and made for the doorway. "We can all work this out together...even Hermione. I'll be at my shop if anyone wants to talk, but I'll not be a part of this shite."

The door banged shut after he left, leaving an awkward silence in the room. Everyone gazed at each other. When Harry stood again and pointed his wand at Ron, the

women gasped in unison.

"Harry!" Ron said. "What are you doing?"

*"Finite Incantatem!"*

The jet of light hit Ron squarely in the chest, nearly causing him to flip backwards in surprise. "Eh? What's this?" he said, gazing at everyone. "Hexing me now! I... Bloody hell."

"You were under a spell," Harry said. "Someone Imperiused you into... into not thinking straight, into wantingher."

"And I'll bet," Ginny added, "someone's done the same to her."

Jeri, who'd wrapped her arms around Ron and continually asked if he was hurt, yelped as Ginny hit her with the same spell. "'Ow dare you!" she said, her French accent finally emerging with her emotions. "Mon dieu!"

"She's not under a spell, Harry," Bill said, stating the obvious.

"What ees 'e saying, Ronald? Ees zat true?" she asked tearfully. Fleur placed a hand on the woman's shoulder compassionately, but she removed it and stepped away when the woman began to sob.

Ron blinked a few times and turned to face her, pulling her against him and allowing her to cry against his chest. He looked at the others helplessly for a moment before murmuring that all would be well and placing a kiss atop her head.

"What do you remember?" Mr. Weasley asked. "How much of this... relationship has been real?"

"Were you married because of a curse?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "But you seemed so..."

"I don't want you to leave me," Jeri cried pitifully. "I love you."

"I won't," Ron said firmly, surprising everyone...apparently even himself.

"No?"

"No, we'll work something out."

"Have you gone mad, Ron? What about Hermione?" Harry asked hotly. "Someone's done this to you, you git!"

"Who? Why would someone want me with someone else?" Ron asked. "What the hell's been going on round here?"

"Shite," Ginny said. "I think... I think we've been had, Harry."

"Malfoy," Harry said grimly. "I should have known."

"Excuse me, but we're here as well," Bill said. "What's happening?"

"I... can't say much," Harry said. "It's Hermione's business to tell."

"But Hermione is missing," Ginny hissed. "We have to do something. Malfoy obviously lied. Draco isn't a nutter after all. How else would his father have had those pictures of Ron if it wasn't him what's done this?"

"Done what?" Mrs. and Mr. Weasley asked at the same time.

"The project she was working on... to bring Snape back to life."

"Snape?" nearly everyone said.

"It's mental."

"He's dead!"

Harry jumped up. "I don't have time to explain. First, I need to go to the Grangers' house to see if she's there."

"I'm coming," Ron said, disentangling himself from his wife's grasp.

"No, thanks," Harry said coolly. "You've got other things to be getting on with, haven't you?"

"Ronald?" Jeri asked, reaching for him.

"Mum," Ron said, "I've got to help find Hermione. I have to explain this to her."

"Jeri will be fine here. I'll put her up in your room."

"Thanks."

Bill strode forward. "I'll help."

"The less involved, the better. We'll be back as soon as we know more," Harry said.

"Well, Ginny, stay and see after your brother's wife at least," Mrs. Weasley said worriedly. "I don't like the idea..."

"Why don't you and Fleur handle her since you're both so accepting? I'm going with Harry to find Hermione."

"I'll be back, Jeri. We'll talk about all this, all right?" He gave her a small, awkward embrace. "Don't cry."

The woman nodded and wiped her eyes, making Harry feel...for the first time...sorry for her. She was just as much a victim in everything as anyone else. Who was he to hate someone for trying to find a person to share her life with?

"How long has she been working with Lucius Malfoy?" Mr. Weasley demanded. "Why did I not know about this?"

"Since right before Ron left. She took a vow and couldn't say much."

"But she could tell you, is that it?" Ron asked angrily.



"Couldn't tell me much."

"And you couldn't tell me?" he asked, striding forward purposely. Before Harry realized what Ron intended to do, a large fist hit him directly in the face, crunching his nose and spurring blood down his chin.

"Ron!" Ginny yelled, pushing him back and turning to face Harry.

"That's for lying to me! And for all the shite you've given me today," Ron said, voice low and menacing. "We'll finish this conversation later," he added. "Right now, Hermione might need us."

"He's right," Harry said, mentally pushing away his pain and wiping his face.

"Let me," Ginny said, flicking her wand.

"To the Grangers."

Minutes later, the three of them had left behind the puzzled Weasleys and had Apparated into the Grangers' backyard. Briskly walking to the door, they waited for someone to answer their knock.

Jane Granger opened the door moments later. "Oh, what a surprise!" she said with a warm smile. Calling over her shoulder, she said, "It's the kids."

"May we come in?" Ginny asked politely.

"Of course you can." Her smile faltered. "Ron, what are you doing here? I thought you and Hermione were having problems."

"I need to talk to her," he said promptly.

"Well, she isn't here," her mother replied.

"Not here, what?" Harry asked, moving into the house to look around for himself.

"Haven't seen her since before John was released from the hospital." She flashed narrowed eyes in Ron's direction before gesturing them into the living area. "I'll fetch some tea. John can tell you. It's all very odd if you ask me."

"Hello, Mr. Granger," Harry greeted, moving to kneel in front of the couch where the man rested. "You've not heard from Hermione then?"

"No, not since I told her what I remembered from my accident."

"And what's that?" Ginny asked, moving to stand behind Harry and pulling an uncomfortable Ron with her.

"I told her that it was no lady who walked out in front of my car that day, causing me to swerve and wreck. It was the arrogant fellow with the long, blond hair I saw. You remember, the bloke who fought with your father, Ron and Ginny, at that bookstore years back? Carries a cane with a snakehead on the tip?"

"Shite," Harry said, turning to look at Ginny knowingly.

"And you told Hermione this?" Ron asked. "Did she say where she was off to?"

"No, said she trusted the fellow and was going to talk to him, see what he was about. We didn't want her to go, but you know how headstrong our girl is." His expression became frightened. "You say you haven't seen her? You don't think something's gone wrong?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

"We'll let you know something straightaway," Ginny added, already sprinting for the door behind Harry.

"Leaving?" Jane asked. "But I've got tea."

"Some other time," Ron said as they ran by.

"I'm going to kill Lucius Malfoy," Harry said. "Lying bastard."

"Him and his wife, both liars I'd wager."

"You're probably right, Gin."

"So it's to Malfoy Manor then?" Ron asked.

"Yeah."

"Hate that place."

"Me too."

"Harry," Ron said slowly. "You don't suppose anything *bad's* happened to Hermione, do you?"

"I hope not."

"What's all this Snape rubbish?"

Ginny looked at Harry and took his hand. "Ron's got a right to know...before we go there, so he knows what we're up against."

"Yeah," Ron said nastily, "and no fucking lies this time."

Harry nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Out with it then."

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"You there, Bozzy, is it? We need to see the Malfoys right now!" Harry called out to the approaching house-elf.

The little elf popped away without a word.

"I expect he's going to get the blighter now," Ron mumbled.

"Shut it, else they'll know you're under Harry's cloak, Ron," Ginny said, trying not to look at the empty spot Ron's voice had come from.

"Yeah, then our plan'll be ruined. Just stick to what we decided and we'll find Hermione."

To their surprise, the gate opened and allowed them entrance. The trio walked towards the house and found Narcissa Malfoy awaiting them at the manor door.

"Back again, Potter?" she asked. "If you're here to check up on Draco's welfare..."

"That's one thing," Harry said smoothly, "but I'd also like to ask your husband a few things about what Draco said."

"We've told you that he's suffering from a curse. If he doesn't take his potion or remain...really!" she exclaimed as Harry pushed past her to enter her home, Ginny at his heels.

"Won't take long. Promise." He flashed her a smile and held up his hands.

"Oh, all right. Come in." She turned to the house-elf in the foyer. "Prepare tea, Bozzy."

"Bozzy is doing it now."

She closed the door and gestured for them to follow her into the sitting room. "I'm afraid you've just missed my husband. He felt it necessary to take Draco to France. That's where the Healer lives who's been treating Draco." She shook her head. "I'll be right glad when all this is behind us."

Ginny sat down and primly adjusted her muddled robes, causing Harry to smirk at Narcissa's expression as she took in the state of the other woman's robes. "Oh, dear," Ginny said in a fake, high-pitched tone, "let me tidy myself up."

Harry sat next to her as she spelled away the grime on her clothing. "Mrs. Malfoy, I have reason to believe that things are not as they seem. Draco was lucid when he talked to us. I know that to be true. I think that whatever potion your husband ordered you to give him..."

"Don't accuse my husband of anything. I've been with Draco these past few months. I know what he's been going through firsthand. Make no mistake, we love our son."

"I believe that and have seen it with my own eyes," Harry said, sitting back casually. "It's why I'm wondering why you'd let this go on." He noticed that her expression changed to one of regret for a moment. "Do you think it's all right for Draco to be like this?"

"Of course I hate that he's like this, but there's nothing that I can do about it. He'll be cured in time."

"Are you in on it?" Harry asked bluntly.

"Pardon me?"

"Is Lucius doing this with or without your knowledge? The question was quite clear," Ginny piped up.

"Harry Potter, *you owe me*. Are you forgetting it was I who saved your life that night at Hogwarts? I who lied to the Dark Lord for you?"

"Not because of any sentiments for me. You were trying to get to Draco, which is why I'm shocked you're going along with this, or if not going along with it, why aren't you questioning it more?"

Ginny leaned forward. "Draco deserves better than this."

She sat back as if pushed, but Harry could see that she was becoming nervous. She wrung her hands together and looked away from them. He decided to try a new tactic.

"And why did you lie about Snape?"

"Really! That's absurd."

"Absurd, is it?" he said with a smile. "I found some notes Hermione had at my place. They were trying to bring Snape back, her and your husband."

Narcissa sighed. "Severus is a good man, but I don't expect you'd understand that. Your lot has never appreciated him or what he's capable of."

"I know what he's capable of, thanks," Harry said. "If it weren't for him, things would have turned out differently."

"Well, at least that's one thing we agree on," she purred.

"Tea," Bozzy said, popping into the room with a tray.

"Put it on the table," she said absently. Once he'd done so, she said, "Help yourselves."

"I've learnt my lesson about drinking from a host I'm not quite sure I trust," Harry said. "Why don't you get your own cup and prove to us it's not poisoned."

She shook her head incredulously. "If all you are going to do is insult me and my family, spout bizarre ideas, and who knows what else you've planned, then I think you should leave."

"I want to talk about Hermione."

"Well, I can't tell you anything."

"Can't or won't?" Harry countered.

"Good Lord, Potter," she said, reaching for the nearest cupful of tea. After she took two sips, she said, "I don't appreciate being questioned in my own home."

"I can understand that," Ginny said. "It is rude of him, isn't it?"

"He thinks the world owes him everything for what he's done," Narcissa said and then brought a hand to her lips. "How rude of me."

"S all right," Harry said, sitting back with a smirk.

"Have you done it?" Ginny asked.

Narcissa looked at her questioningly. "Done what?"

"Oh, I'm talking to my brother."

Ron came into view as he pulled off the cloak. "Yeah," he said, patting his pocket. "Gave her a few drops."

"Another Weasley! How did you get in here?"

"Borrowed my mate's cloak," he said, pointing to it. "Now, what shall we ask her first?"

"Is Hermione here?"

"No, she's not." Narcissa's eyes widened. "What have you done to me?"

Ron pulled a phial from his pocket. "Veritaserum. Works wonders."

"Get out now. I intend to file a report with the Ministry at once."

Harry shook his head. "Won't do you any good. Is... is Hermione alive?"

"Of course she is."

Relief filled him. *She's alive!* "Where does Lucius have her hidden? Does he intend to harm her?"

"He hasn't got her hidden away anyplace! And why would he harm her? We need her too much."

"To bring back Snape?" Ginny asked.

"Yes."

Ron guffawed. "So, it's true then? Hermione and Malfoy are trying to bring back Snape... from the dead?"

Narcissa laughed haughtily. "Severus is already back from the Otherworld. They were successful."

"Bloody hell," Ron said in shock. "But how?"

"Spells. Potions. Quite clever, your little friend." She smiled nastily. "However, Lucius is cunning as well, is he not?"

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked, afraid of the answer.

"She's with Severus of course. At his home."

"And where's that?" Ron asked.

"I cannot say. It's Secret-Kept, see."

"Shite."

Harry stood up. "I have an idea what area it's in. Maybe we'll luck up and see something."

"You'll never find it unless he wants you to." She sipped her tea again, daintily holding out a pinky as she did so.

Ginny joined Harry but decided to ask Narcissa another question. "Why are you letting your husband get away with poisoning Draco? Possibly ruining his mind?"

"Draco will be fine once the spell is lifted. It won't have any lasting effects on his body."

"So you know then?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yes, I'm his mother. I know everything."

"You know that we saved his arse more than once that night at Hogwarts?" Ron asked. "He owes us life debts."

"What kind of mother would do this to her son?"

"One who knows it's best for him in the long run."

"Why? Why is this best for him?"

"Because Severus is back now. Things are going to change for us all. Draco will come to respect that."

"I think," said a cool voice from behind them, "that you've abused my wife's hospitality enough. I must ask you three to leave at once." Lucius Malfoy had returned home and had his wand pointed in their direction. "Cissy, leave the room, lest you give anything else away."

She nodded, stood, and regally exited like a queen, not looking back at any of them.

"Turned over a new leaf, eh?" Harry said accusingly.

"Smells like the same old rotter to me," Ron said.

"You will leave now, or I will be forced to defend my home. I still have that right, you know," Lucius said.

"The jig is up, Malfoy. We know Snape's alive, and we know you and Hermione did something to bring him back. If you've done nothing wrong, why are you trying so hard to cover it up?"

"It is not my right to announce Severus' return. That decision lies with him alone. I believe he'd like a little time to become reacquainted with living before announcing it to the world and have his person descended upon by every reporter, Auror, and blighter around." He pointed towards the doorway with his wand. "If you please."

"Where's Hermione?"

"I believe my wife has told you that she's with Severus."

"What for? Her work's done, isn't it?" Ginny asked.

Lucius gave them a cold smile. "She's with him because that is where her place is now." He nodded to Ron. "She's moved on just as you have, Weasley."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Before he could answer, Harry pulled his own wand. "That still doesn't excuse you from what you did to her father! We know you were there and caused his accident."

"I say, where did you hear this rubbish?" Lucius asked, looking affronted.

"John Granger told us. You walked in front of his car. Made him swerve and hit that tree."

Lucius laughed and shook his head. "The fool's got it all wrong. I was in his neighborhood indeed. Hermione told me to..."

"Don't use her name!" Ron spat.

"Why ever not? She and I are associates now." He flashed a mocking smile. "And when you were not there for her, Weasleys*someone* had to be. The poor dear cried herself to sleep more than once. She slept over many times, you know."

At his implication, Ron stepped forward, fists clenched at his side.

"Tsk. Tsk. Going to attack me in my own home? I think not." He aimed his wand at Ron. "How many times must I ask you to leave? This being polite business is certainly getting old quickly, I must say."

"What about her father?" Harry asked, not lowering his wand or moving.

"As I was saying," he began again, "Hermione asked me to wait for her near the pavement on the corner. I did so. The fool didn't watch where he was going, swerved on his own, and hit a tree. If I hadn't been there to cushion his fall with my wand, the berk would have been killed. You should be thanking me for saving his life."

"Why'd you take off then?"

"And have the Ministry come down on me for doing magic near Muggles? I have enough problems already." He shrugged. "Hermione knows this already. No sense in explaining myself to you."

"Who's Snape's Secret-Keeper? We need to see him."

"Lower your wand, Potter."

"Not while yours is lifted."

"Fair enough." He made a show of slipping his wand back into his cane. "There, now."

"I want to see for myself that she is all right... that Sn-Snape's alive."

"I will send word to Severus." He arched an elegant eyebrow. "It's the best I can offer."

"We need to talk to Hermione," Ron said angrily. "Do it now."

"I will *never* take orders from a Weasley, boy," Lucius said. "Mind your tone." He looked at Ron appraisingly, obviously finding him lacking. "Your friend may not want to speak with you, and that is not a problem of mine."

"Of course she would. She's written me letters. There're things we have to talk about."

"You don't owe him any explanations, Ron," Ginny said, placing a hand on her brother's shoulder. "Come on."

"Hang on," Ron said. "What did you mean Hermione's moved on?"

"Ah, it appears I've let slip a little something I shouldn't have."

"Such as?"

"Part of the magic called for certain things that only a woman could give. Hermione was that woman, and she made the decision on her own."

"What decision?" Harry asked.

"I'd rather let her tell you, though I do admit that I would enjoy seeing your expressions." He sneered at Ron again. "Well, I suppose I could divulge a spot of information."

"And?"

"Severus and Hermione are now magically bonded together."

"Shite," said Ginny.

Ron's mouth opened and closed. "What's that mean?"

Harry shook his head. "You're lying."

"Think so, do you? We shall see."

"What's that mean?" Ron asked again.

"It means," Ginny began softly, "that she's been magically bound to Snape. It's like marriage, only magically sealed."

"She would NEVER agree to that! Marry Snape, are you mad?"

Lucius shrugged nonchalantly. "I expect a future with Severus looked much better than pining after someone who'd been having sex with a woman he'd only just met."

"YOU!" Ron shouted, pointing a finger at Lucius. "The Imperius, you did it, making me fall in love with that woman!"

"I? Certainly not. My wand can attest to the fact that I've not Imperiused anyone. I don't care if you have a lover, Weasley."

"But you cared if Hermione thought he had one, didn't you?" Harry asked, speaking for the first time in minutes, his mind putting the pieces of the puzzle together. "Just like you wanted to keep Draco from warning her or from telling me so that I could warn her. *That's* the reason you've been keeping him like that!"

"Why don't you prove it?"

"Oh, I will, Malfoy. You can count on it."

"I'm going to..."

"No, Ron!" Harry shouted, running to keep Ron from pulling his wand on Malfoy. "Not in his own home. He's right. We can't do anything here."

"We've got to do something," Ginny said, eyes shining with unshed tears. "Poor Hermione... God, and with Snape now, it's horrible."

"That's why we'll be going to see Kingsley at the Ministry," Harry said, still struggling to keep Ron subdued. He turned to face the blond man. "We'll be back sooner than you think, arsehole."

"Indeed? Well, I shall make certain I have enough tea for everyone...only the best for my visitors, you know." He nodded towards Ron. "Leave Weasley behind, will you? Don't want him sullyng up the place."

"Bastard!" Ron shouted. "You'll pay for this."

"I've heard that before," Lucius replied smugly. "Bozzy, see that they leave immediately. Do what you must to see it done." With that, he backed towards the doorway his wife had exited through. "Now to see what you've done to Narcissa. I may have charges of my own to bring to the Minister."

"I'm going to kill him, Harry. I'll do it. I swear I will. He's ruined our lives!"

"Now's not the time, Ron. We have to find Hermione first, see what's really going on. I don't believe that load of rubbish he gave us."

"I don't either."

"Master says you is to be leaving," Bozzy said, holding out his hand. "Bozzy is taking you out to the gates."

"We're going," Ginny said quickly, pulling Ron towards the doorway. "Help me, Harry."

"No, I'll go on my own," Ron said, suddenly calm. "Harry's right. We need to see Kingsley and find out what we can do about this." He spat on the floor. "This arse hasn't heard the last from me."

~~~~~

AN: And so, here we are. ~SW waves to everyone~ How many of you knew this was me who'd been writing this under the "Hidden Before Voting" name? More up soon. I've got the next chapter plotted out on a spare bit of parchment, and it's filled with Snape and Hermione.

## Chapter 13

*Chapter 13 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter One

*Thanks go to my fantastic betas, ladyinthecloak and Charmed\_Nay.*

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Hermione watched as Severus gathered his thoughts. What would he tell her? She felt that he was sincere in wanting to tell her the truth, and the fact that he would have let her go if she'd chosen to leave made her feel comfortable. At any point, she could leave, and he would not force her to stay. The only surprising thing had been that she hadn't wanted to leave...not really. She just wanted to know that she could do so without him trying to control her or doing something as Lucius had done.

Lucius Abraxas Malfoy would pay for what he'd done to her. She'd see to it, and it seemed that she wouldn't be alone in that. Severus would help her. She smiled softly then, reached over to place her hand over his, and said, "Start from the beginning if you'd like. We've all the time in the world, don't we?"

He nodded and seemed relieved. Turning over his hand to clasp hers, he replied, saying, "Some of this will not be easy for you to hear, but I think that if we're to have a better understanding of each other and a chance at a... normal life together, then I'll have to tell you."

"I told you already. I want everything." And she did. So much more than words. There was an emotion growing within her, and it wasn't love, but it was something she couldn't name. It almost made her feel possessive of him. Was it the bond? How would she ever know what her true feelings were? Did it really matter in the long run? *My God, she thought, this is what the pull of darkness must feel like. Dark Arts, promising its user power... I shall have to find a way to counter this. I don't want to be like... them.* She closed her eyes, remembering the way Bellatrix cast the Cruciatus on her with a gleam in her eyes.

"When I was very young," Severus began, "my family had a happy home. Things were going well here. The mill was open, everyone had jobs, and there wasn't an uninhabited home to be found. My mother had always been open about being a witch to my father, who was a Muggle, as you know. So, yes, I knew from the time I could comprehend things that I was a wizard."

"Did your father not mind?"

"Not back then, no."

She nodded, squeezed his hand, and moved to sit back, wanting to relax for what was obviously going to be a long story.

Severus followed suit, letting her hand go to run his own through his lank hair. "I saw Lily for the first time when I was quite young. They were being walked to the Muggle school for her first day while my mother and I were going into town for supplies. She was beautiful...even at such a young age...and her smile was the most welcoming thing I'd ever felt. We were only five." He snorted suddenly. "Her older sister was with them and reminded me of a hawk, looking round in every direction with narrowed eyes, as if hoping to spot prey."

"When she saw me, she wrinkled her nose and stood right in front of Lily so that my view was blocked. It was too late, though, for I had already seen her, and I vowed that day to get to know her, to show Petunia that she wasn't any better than us, even though they were obviously better off than we were. I wanted her to know that I could fit in with them if I chose to."

"And so you decided to befriend Lily?"

"Yes," he said with a nod. "I could see even then that her sister was jealous of her and, strangely enough, quite protective. Even so, I wanted to get to know the pretty girl who'd smiled at me so kindly, who had the flaming red hair, who had the feel of magic about her." He was lost in memory for a moment. "Things got bad not long after that. People began to lose jobs, rumors that the mill would be closing ran rampant, and some of our family's friends began to move away." He faced Hermione then. "My father asked my mother to use a hex on his boss to make certain that he was one of the men who wouldn't end up without a job."

Hermione gasped. "Oh, no, your poor mother. Did she do it?"

Severus nodded. "I remember the fight. It was the first time I'd seen him hit her, and it shocked me terribly. She'd not wanted to do it, of course, but she loved him and wanted our family to do well. I remember her saying that there was no way she'd ask her parents for money, which he'd also asked of her."

"Would they not have helped?" Hermione asked.

"Heavens, no, not without forcing her to leave my father. They hated him and the fact that he was a Muggle. They cut ties with her, made her choose what life she would live."

"And she chose him?"

"Obviously."

"Go on then."

"She used the Imperius on the man, and my father was one of the few who were able to keep their jobs for the longest...though there was a substantial cut in pay. It was only a matter of time before all parts of the mill shut down." He shook his head sadly. "Things weren't the same after that. My mother resented the fact that he'd asked it of her, and he seemed to want more and more."

"Meanwhile, I took refuge away from home. I went round the playground most days. Sometimes I'd just sit there and watch Lily and her sister. They lived right near it. One day, my watchful eye paid off. I saw Lily do magic, and I knew that what I'd felt before...that magical pull...had been real. She was like me. Another wizard in the same neighborhood! I, of course, went to her."

"I'll bet her sister didn't like that."

"Not at all. But no matter what she did, she never managed to drive Lily and me apart. We became quite close, and I was even invited to her home on several occasions, though I never brought her here." He looked around at his rundown home. "Mum started letting things go. My father didn't try to help either. They fought more and more, him staying away with his friends down the pub as often as he could. It got really bad."

"I'm sorry to hear that. My parents had rows as well, but they always worked through them. I guess everyone does. It's only natural."

Severus nodded. "I agree. In this dark time, Lily was like a shining beacon. I told her everything, and she didn't use my words against me or make me feel ashamed. She told me that I should secretly contact my grandparents...maternal...to see if they would help us. I told her how owls could send messages, so she and I wrote a message and tried for days to catch an owl." He snickered slightly. "It didn't work, of course. However, as luck would have it, someone sent an owl to my mum and was awaiting a reply. I gave it a snack and added my letter to its burden, instructing it to find my grandparents, the Princes."

"I didn't hear anything for days and feared that it simply brought my pathetic letter to whomever my mother had sent her package to. I thought I would be beaten for certain if she found out. Nobody in her world knew of our problems, and I doubt she wanted them to know about it."

"But you ruined that by writing the letter, didn't you?"

"Yes. One day as I was leaving the park, after seeing Lily home, a tall man approached me and introduced himself as my grandfather. I was shocked. My message had been delivered, he'd said. Imagine my surprise. I remember it as clearly as if it had been yesterday."

*"Severus Snape?" a tall, dark-haired man asked, one brow arched questioningly and a slight sneer gracing his features.*

*"Yes," he replied respectfully, though his eyes widened as he took in the man's appearance. It nearly looked as though he were wearing a dress and a robe. This prickled Severus' memory. Hadn't he seen his mother wearing something similar years before?*

*The man gave a minute nod and pulled a sheet of crumpled Muggle paper from his pocket. "I believe you sent this to me?"*

*"You're my grandfather?" he asked in awe.*

*"I am," replied the man silkily. "Shall we have a word then?"*

*Eagerly, Severus nodded, wanting to get to know the man and hoping the man would be the help his family needed. He wanted his mum back the way she was before things had started going bad. He wanted his father to stay home like he used to and play cricket with him.*

*"I nearly didn't come," he said, looking around reprovingly and shaking his head. "Your mother disappointed us by marrying that Muggle. We raised her better than that." Here he looked at Severus appraisingly. "Can you do magic?"*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"How do you know?"*

*"I've made things happen from the time I were born," he replied proudly. "Mum says I get it from her family."*

*"Indeed. Definitely not from the Muggle's side." He tapped a finger against his lip for a moment. "Tell me everything about your family troubles."*

*Severus did so obediently, never noticing the man's ire or looks of disgust until he was finished.*

*"So," he spat, "he's making her use her magic to suit him." He clenched his fist and a nearby tree branch cracked and fell to the ground. "Filthy Muggle." And then the anger dissipated as he took in Severus' frightened expression. "I will be your teacher, boy. You will speak of our meetings to no one, even your mother, is that clear?"*

*It was more than he could have hoped for. He would be learning magic from his grandfather, a real wizard from the Wizarding world. "Yes, sir."*

*The man pulled out some notes from his pocket. "I took the liberty of requesting Muggle money, knowing you might need this. You look as though you don't eat; you're so scrawny. Do they not let you out of the house much? Buy yourself some food. You'll need your strength if we're to train you into something a Prince could be proud of."*

*Severus took the money. "I will, sir. I will make you proud! I swear it. I will gain my mother's honor back."*

*"We shall see." The man nodded and stepped back. "Meet me here this Saturday morning. Just after dawn." There was a pop, and his grandfather was gone.*

There was a long pause, so Hermione finally asked, "And did you? Meet him?"

"Yes. Weekly after that. I learnt much of what I know today from him."

"And your mum was never the wiser?"

"She found out eventually...and was angry."

"I can understand that." She smiled and listened as he talked about his meetings with his grandfather, his adventures with Lily, and all the secret things he did to Petunia, who'd always tried to spy or get them into trouble.

"And so that was where I learned all about Slytherin," he finished. "He told me that a true Prince would be in Slytherin. I wanted that more than anything. I hadn't realized back then that the man was training me to dislike my father, which didn't help things at home. I became snappy towards him and he towards me. We never had a good relationship again, and at the time, I didn't care. I hated my home life by then, especially after the mill closed and left us in dire straits. Sometimes I would sit alone in the dark and zap flies. It was an odd way to relieve my frustrations, but it worked."

"I longed for acceptance, for a place in the Wizarding world that I'd learned about. So, naturally, when I was Sorted into Slytherin, I felt that I was one step closer. Lucius Malfoy was a prefect in his final year. My grandfather had told me all about his influential family, so I was pleased that he accepted me into the fold with a pat on my back, telling others to look out for me. I felt accepted and part of something precious to my family heritage finally. The Princes would send me monthly treats and a small amount of spending money. I never used it for clothing, as they'd suggested, but for knowledge. There were too many books to be bought and too many things to learn." He sighed. "My only regret about being a Slytherin was that Lily had been sent to Gryffindor...where that arrogant prat, Potter, had been sent. We'd met them on the train to Hogwarts, him and Sirius Black. Blighters, both of them. And arrogant. I loathed them immediately, and for many years, Lily did as well."

"You know, I've wondered why you hated Harry so much all those years, and he told us that you'd hated his father. And then when I found out about your feelings for his mother, it didn't make sense. Why would you hate him if you'd loved her so much?"

"She chose to die for him," he said simply. "I saw her death as his fault. I hated him for meaning so much to her."

"So, it wasn't because he could have been yours?"

"Make no mistake, I would have wanted that life with her, but it was not meant to be. I did hate ~~that~~ he had that life with her. If only I'd had a better hold on my temper, things would have turned out differently."

"Tell me about it."

Severus went on to tell her about how he'd called Lily a Mudblood when she'd defended him in front of everyone. It had slipped out...his grandfather's word, the words of those in his house. His pride had been wounded, and he'd simply struck out at anyone...sadly, it was Lily, and she'd never quite forgiven him for what he'd said. He told Hermione about the times Lily had asked him to make a choice between his friends and her and how he'd never wanted to give up his friends. He'd wanted them both, and he'd felt that he should've been able to have that.

Hermione remembered all too well what it was like to be in a house where even her dorm mates mostly ignored her, so she could definitely commiserate with Severus on that level. If she hadn't made friends with Ron and Harry, she wondered how long it would have taken her to become part of some group of friends. Would anyone have taken her into the fold the way Ron and Harry had?

"I'm sorry to hear that. I suppose I can understand why she was so hurt."

"She felt that I'd chosen them by using 'their' word. It's my worst memory...or was."

"What's your worst now?"

A hand moved up to the side of his neck where he'd been bitten by Voldemort's snake. "Nagini."

Nodding, Hermione said, "It was horrible. There was blood all over, and your memories..." She took a deep breath.

"It was what I deserved though, wasn't it?"

"How can you say that?"

"Do you know how it felt to live all those years knowing that I'd been the one who'd brought the Dark Lord the information that made him want to go after her family? I had no idea it would be her."

"Didn't you care that it was a family at all? With a baby, Severus..."

"I didn't fully understand what I'd heard. I was just spying and trying to get anything useful so that I would be..."

"Accepted," she finished for him.

"Yes."

"That night with the troll in my first year, do you remember it? Quirrell had set it loose about the castle...we'd thought it was you."

"I do."

"I'd been in the bathroom crying because I'd heard Ron telling Harry how horrible I was and how I'd never have any friends because of it." She smiled at the memory. "When they heard about the troll, they came to find me...only it had found me first...but they still managed to save me."

"And you made up that story to get them out of trouble."

"Yes, it was the least I could do." She looked at him compassionately. "I know what it's like to be alone and to want to be accepted, part of something. I went against my better judgment to get that, and while it's not excusing what you did, or anywhere nearly as horrible, I can understand your reasoning."

"When I realized my error, I played both ends of the sword. I begged for her life, and then I went to Dumbledore and begged for him to help her. From that moment on, I was his spy as well. Thus began my double role of espionage."

"Did you really think Sirius had told the Dark Lord the location of their home?"

"Yes, I wasn't privy to whom the Dark Lord found information from, but Dumbledore himself told me that Black was the Secret-Keeper. I would never have thought that Potter would be stupid enough to use Wormtail. He was always a weak, pathetic follower." He gave her a deadly gaze. "I would have killed Black had I seen him before the Aurors took him to Azkaban. I'd planned on it, on avenging her."

"And instead, Dumbledore talked you into living your life at the castle and giving more of yourself to Lily by protecting her son."

"Which I gladly did for her."

She nodded. "I know. I saw those memories."

"Being a Death Eater was nothing like I'd imagined. When Lucius approached us later on, wanting us to meet a man who'd be able to help us get our world back on track...something I knew the Princes would support as well...I'd been eager to join, to learn more, and to be a part of something great. What person doesn't dream of changing the world for the better?"

"For the better meant meaningless deaths, bribery, hexing, and many things I shall not speak about, but you can imagine. I've seen horrible things. Lucius was even horrified. Never wanted to get his hands dirty, that one, but he went along with things all the same and changed over time. Some of the others didn't mind, like the Lestranges, but some felt like me and loathed the things done."

"And did you partake in these things?"

"Not much of it, I admit, thankfully, but I still bore witness to a lot and did nothing. That makes me just as guilty."

Hermione nodded her agreement and let slip a couple of tears as she imagined some things that might have happened. "Was your grandfather a Death Eater?"

"No, but he was proud when he found out that I was. He donated Galleons to the Dark Lord's cause, keeping his association away from prying, public eyes." Severus snorted. "I was finally introduced to my grandmother after he'd learned I'd joined up with other prestigious families, finally feeling I was worthy enough."

"How did she treat you?"

"More kindly than he. She truly, I believe, had affection for me. After our first meeting, she went to my mother and tried to get her to leave my father. My mother's pride won out of course...or her foolish heart." He turned a pale color. "It's hard to change my mind about things even now...even though I know more about it."

"And?"

"And within a week, my father had been killed."

Hermione gasped. "By whom?"

"It was an unsolved case, but I knew... deep down that my grandfather probably had a hand in it. For how else would they get my mother home and sever all ties with our Muggle life?"

"I'm so sorry. That must have hurt you."

"I... I didn't mourn him at first. I thought he'd been intoxicated again and broke his neck in a fall. I was bitter and felt it served him right, as he should have been home with mum. I later found out that he'd been sober, and there hadn't been any clear cause as to why he'd died. My grandfather had told us those lies, my mother and me both. It's why I know he had a hand in it."

"The Killing Curse."

Severus nodded. "None other." He pointed to the Dream Stone. "My mother was given this once she went home to them...even after all that time had passed. She was their firstborn and no longer disowned."

"Why are you brooding now?"

"Because the stone was her downfall. She misused it, trying to see my father, doing many things. It's why I wanted to learn so much about it." He nodded towards the bookshelves. "When I felt I might end up like her, I put it in my vault at Gringotts. It's not meant to be abused."

"I appreciate all this honesty," Hermione said. "I always want you to be honest with me. I may not like what you have to say, but I'd rather know the truth than be kept in the dark."

"I agree," he said, "and I would have told you more before now, but Lucius..."

"Tell me about him. Why did you two become such close friends? He's older than you, so it's not like you didn't have mates your own age. What made him come to you?"

"He always said there was something about me, that he simply knew he and I were a perfect complement for each other." Here Severus sneered slightly. "Meaning he wanted me to do the grunt work while he pulled the strings."

"I can't imagine you letting someone do this to you."

"Aside from Dumbledore and the Dark Lord you mean?"

"Oh, er... right."

"I'm not above letting someone think he is in more control than he actually is," he said with a sly smirk. "It's proven quite useful on many occasions I must say." He snuggled back against the couch. "I won't lie about being impressed with his wealth and connections, and by being his friend, I had those at my disposal at well."

"But at a price, I'm sure," Hermione said.

"But of course." He reached over to touch her cheek. "I thank you for talking to me like this. I know that I'm undeserving of it."

She leaned into his hand. "I like this, too. Tell me more."

"Lucius' connections helped him escape Azkaban after the Dark Lord vanished when he tried to kill Potter. He claimed to have been Imperiused, and the Ministry believed him."

"Why didn't they question him with Veritaserum?"

"Lucius is an Occlumens, not as good as I, but sufficient in hiding what he needs to."

"And an Occlumens can hoodwink the truth serum."

"Yes." He gave her a tight smile. "It was in those days that Lucius first began talking about continuing the Dark Lord's work...only in a more tasteful manner." When Hermione said nothing, he continued. "We talked about what we would want to do, how we would go about things."

"New Dark Lords?"

"Something along those lines."

"Why didn't you follow through with it?"



"Narcissa had a second child...stillborn...and was quite sick for a while. Lucius devoted much time to her and to helping with Draco. Whatever he might be, he does care for his family."

"That's the only thing going for him then." She shook her head. "He had me completely fooled." With a sigh, she asked, "And how did you two cook up this scheme to snatch someone from the Otherworld?"

Severus calmly said, "That he even knew about my continued research was an accident. I'd kept transcribed copies of some of our conversations where he'd explained some long lost lore his grandfather had told him. I used that information, as most lore is based on some form of truth, and I improvised...came up with a potion that might do the trick."

"I had my bases covered. If the Dark Lord ever found out, I would have pretended it was for him, but ironically, his want for immortality gave me the idea in the first place. And then there was the Dream Stone. I devoted much time, as I told you, when it came to me... to learn its secrets."

"Your mother just gave it to you and didn't wait until you were older?"

"She died and then it was mine."

"So young?"

"It was by her own hand."

"What happened?"

"I expect she wanted to be with my father." His expression turned bitter. "She'd gone a little mad near the end, but she was nearly the mum I'd loved so much as a child."

"And your grandparents? Where are they now?"

"My grandmother passed on about seven years after that, and my grandfather died after I became Headmaster of Hogwarts. He was quite proud of me...left me their home and all his money. I'd made the Prince family proud once again, you see."

"He left you everything, and yet you come here? Why? You were obviously miserable here."

"My grandfather wasn't really proud of me though, was he? He was proud of the face I showed the public, which was most definitely not me...not really. My life was dedicated to helping the son of the dead Muggle-born woman I'd loved most of my years. I was Dumbledore's man, not the Dark Lord's." He shrugged. "All I ever wanted was their approval, something more in life, something to make Lily proud of me, to see that the world could be ours...improved for us all."

"And now you don't want it, his approval."

"It feels wrong. Yes, I'm the Half-Blood Prince, as I fashioned myself, but I am also Severus Snape. I believe that I, being the latter more than anything, belong in this home...not his."

"Why can't you be both?" she asked curiously. "Take what you like from who you wanted to be and reconcile that with the person you are."

Severus shook his head. "It would not be so simple."

"I will help you," she said firmly.

"Why would you do that when it was I who got you involved in this?"

"And exactly how did that come about? I remember Lucius saying something about you'd mentioned me the day before... before you died. He said you'd admired what I'd done at Gringotts."

"Very daring, that," he said with a nod. "Foolish, however, but courageous all the same."

"Is that all there was to it?"

Shaking his head, he said, "I haven't explained everything, but I will answer this question after I tell you the first part."

"Right, jumping the wand here. Sorry."

"No, it's all right. I'm surprised it's so easy to talk to you about this, especially after your display earlier."

She smiled and gestured for him to carry on.

"Lucius came to Hogwarts unexpectedly. I had no choice but to leave him in my office while I hurried out to see what commotion the Carrows had caused. When I came back, he'd found something I'd been working on."

"At this point, the Dark Lord had taken over his home, had taken his wand, and was treating him nearly as badly as he treated Wormtail. Lucius was never bred to play lapdog to someone. I suppose he thought if he took my research to the Dark Lord, he might move up in the ranks again, become more trusted, gain favor."

"How did you talk him out of it?"

"I used his situation against him, telling him I detested the way his family was treated and what the Dark Lord had forced on young Draco." He smirked. "I opened a second drawer and showed him the notes I'd taken years before...how I'd improved his grandfather's findings."

"And he thought that it was meant for the two of you?"

"Right in one. Lucius became alive again. The light was back in his eyes, and when he shared the news with Narcissa, it gave her something to look forward to as well. She loathed the Dark Lord for what he'd done to her family, hid it well, but loathed him all the same."

"And me?"

"A conversation or two where you were mentioned. And I want you to know that I never intended for any of this to really happen, not really."

"What do you mean?"

"I was only researching, trying to find a way to survive a Killing Curse or something similar...a way to manipulate what I had already discovered. I knew that it would probably work the way Lucius and I had planned, but it was untested. I'd hoped he would forget about it in time, what with the Dark Lord growing angrier by the day and us always having to watch our backs."

"So he expected you to die? You expected it?"

"We thought that either of us might. It was something either of us could fall back on, the potion," he replied. "Sly as he is, he brewed the potion that would enable a body to remain alive...never to decay while awaiting its soul." His thin chest poked out slightly. "I created that myself."

"I would love to read these notes."

"In due time, my dear," he said smoothly. "My life seemed to be pointing in one direction: death. It was actually Lucius who mentioned you first, and as I did on many occasions, I went along with what he said to keep him silent and content, never thinking it would come to fruition."

"Clearly you didn't realize his commitment."

"Not at all. When he came to me after the night of the battle at Hogwarts, he said that he had a feeling I was about to be killed, something about the Dark Lord's expression and wording. He opened a phial and told me to drink it, saying it was our potion. He did the same with a second phial, asking me to look after Narcissa and to find Draco if something happened to him, leaving me to be the one who survived."

"I would almost find that touching if I didn't know the bastard."

Severus' lip curled slightly. "I cannot express how guilty I feel for involving you in this, but all the same, I am indebted to you."

"So... you didn't really want me."

He put his head down for a moment, not looking at her when he finally spoke. "Once I thought of it more, I realized that if something did go wrong, it had to be you who would help me. The instinct to survive, even when one feels he deserves his fate, is overwhelming and thrives when we least expect it to."

"You are bloody confusing, you know."

Hermione's mind wandered. He wanted her to be the one if he had to be brought back. He didn't really say why, and she wanted to know. Had to know. "I will ask again, Severus. Why me?"

"You remind me of her sometimes," he admitted. "She was much like you during our Hogwarts days...always revising, wanting to do the best she could. I never realized that until after I learned things during my stint as Headmaster. You are a brilliant woman. The things the other Death Eaters would say about you...the escape from Lovegood's house, the way you defied Bellatrix... Listening to what Phineas learned became one of my only times of joy. I thought of us as... co-workers almost. You were keeping Potter alive long enough until I could go to him and give him Dumbledore's instructions."

"I never thought of it that way." She scooted closer to him. "I saw the way you reacted to Professor Dumbledore when he told you that Harry would likely have to give his life in order to save everyone." She placed a finger to his lips when he tried to speak. "I know you said it was because of her that you did those things, but I do believe it was more than that. It had to be."

He pursed his lips slightly. "Perhaps."

She beamed brightly.

"Perhaps not."

Her smile faded. "There are some things that you'll have to work on, as will I." She rested her head against his shoulder, neither saying anything. She was both honored and annoyed that she'd been the one to catch his eye. She knew his words to be true. He would have never wanted Lucius to do what he'd done...taking advantage of her body anyway.

"Severus, while we're being honest," she began, "would you give me your opinion about why Lucius would want to have sex with me, especially if he knew you'd be angry about it? I have my theory about revenge, but why risk your wrath? He went out of his way to make certain he had some of that anointment, leaving you unable to harm him. And he supposedly cares for his family so much. What of his wife?"

"I am glad he gave you some as well...the anointment, I mean. I could have come back... different."

"Yes, how gentlemanly of him."

"Sarcasm isn't one of your finer attributes, my dear," he said softly. "But the more I think of it, there is only one answer I can think of."

"Oh?"

"A long time ago, after Lily's death, I'd gone on a binge...getting pissed and not caring what happened to me. School was out for break, and I hated all the holiday cheer. After all, what was there to be happy about? Lily was dead. Dumbledore granted me leave from the castle.

"I ended up at Malfoy Manor for one reason or another," he said. "I barely remember it, but Narcissa and I were talking... and I kissed her, chastely on the lips, causing her to pull back in surprise. She then leaned forward and kissed me back, more firmly. Lucius walked in and raged at us of course. I let him hex me without raising my wand. I felt guilty, so that I was, and I wanted to be with *her*, my Lily."

"And he forgave you?"

"He did... or so I'd thought." He gazed at her in a way she'd never seen him look at anyone, and it tugged at her heart deeply. "I'm sorry for what he's done to you, Hermione. Perhaps my one moment of idiocy has lent a hand to this. Her perfume, it reminded..." He waved his hand dismissing his words. "The reasoning doesn't matter, does it?"

In that moment, she felt more emotion than she'd ever felt with Ron. She wanted to soothe him, wanted to let him soothe her. How could she not feel something for him when he'd bared his soul for her to see and was obviously seeking approval?

"I... I want a real marriage, Severus." She wanted him to feel that way about her. How would it feel to be the center of someone's world? She was fairly sure she'd never been put first in Ron's mind, and she definitely knew the truth of that now.

The shock hit his eyes instantly. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. We'll take one day at a time while you learn to live again, but we'll do it together, as a man and wife should."

"I would like that."

She looked around the room and grimaced. "I expect we'll have to start with cleaning this filthy house."

He tilted his head back and laughed deeply.

"For now, I should like to have a bath, and it would be kind of you to... help me, as I am still suffering from your horrid friend's potion."

"I would be honored to join you."

"Join me? I don't know that I'd ask for that," she said quietly, gauging his reaction.

"Whatever you'd like then."

"Tempting as it is, I don't want sex right now, but I want to be close to you. Is that all right?"

He nodded and rose, extending a hand to her. "I always thought up my best plots of revenge while taking a shower."

"I use my bath time to reflect on things as well," she said with a smile, taking his hand. "Anything in mind?"

"We should discuss what I will do next with Lucius and in what way we will make him pay for what he's done to you."

"For what he's done to us. He's used you, too, Severus. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I shan't. Don't worry about that."

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AN: Sorry for the delay, but life's been full of things lately...in the fandom and out! Hopefully this chapter with nothing but Snape and Hermione was worth the wait. Thanks for following the story.

## Chapter 14

*Chapter 14 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

*I'd like to thank Charmed\_Nay and ladyinthecloak for the beta work and reading they do for this story. You are gems!*

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Hermione smiled tightly and squeezed Severus' hand. "I really appreciate that you're doing this, but I don't know that I could tell them about us on my own."

"But must we tell them everything?"

"I don't think I should lie about anything. Only the truth will make them accept this...or nearly the whole truth. I don't know if the whole he-was-dead part would go over well. I mean, while I've left things out in the past, I don't want to do that any longer. All right?"

"They're your parents, so you should know best what to do."

She felt his hesitation as she stepped forward. "Look, we can wait one more day."

He shook his head. "No, you want to see for yourself that your father is fine."

"Thank you, Severus."

"Lead the way."

She pulled him forward and knocked lightly on the back door of her home. When nobody answered, she tried the doorknob. "Locked." She knocked again, a little harder.

Quick steps neared the door, and a moment later, it opened to reveal her mother. "Hermione!" The woman scooped her daughter into her arms. "Oh, we were so worried after your friends left. We didn't know what to make of things! Come in, come in." She paused, her smile faltering. "Who's this?"

"This, Mum, is Severus Snape." To make a public show of affection and to give her mother a clue as to her relationship with Severus, Hermione reached out and took his hand in hers.

He nodded. "Mrs. Granger."

"Hello," Jane replied. "Come in then, the both of you."

They were ushered into the living room where Hermione's father lay on the couch. "Sorry I can't get up," he said by way of greeting. "Come here, poppet."

"Dad! Thank God you're all right!" She went to her father and hugged him tightly. "Mum says that my friends were here. Who?"

"Harry, Ginny, and Ron," he said, still holding her hand as she knelt in front of him. "They seemed right worried after I told them about that bloke and his part in my accident."

"You told them!" She looked to Severus with wide eyes and then blinked. "Wait, what? Ron? What was he doing with them?"

"So Weasley has finally returned, has he?" Severus said, a sneer gracing his face.

"I didn't appreciate that he showed up here after the way he treated you," her mother said, joining them with cups of tea on a tray. "He did seem worried though."

Hermione let go of her father's hand to accept a cup of tea from her mother, which she, in turn, gave to her father. Instead, she moved to Severus' side and took his hand. "There's something I have to tell you, and I want to tell you the truth. I only ask that you let me explain before saying anything. I'll... We'll answer any questions you have after."

"Oh, no... don't tell me..." Her mother gave her father a worried look.

"No, I'm not pregnant."

"Thank God," Jane whispered.

"You look so serious, Hermione," John added.

Severus cleared his throat and spoke. "What your daughter is trying to say is that she and the man who walked in front of your vehicle were working together on an important project."

"Right. We know that much."

"What you don't know," Severus continued, "is that the project concerned me." He gazed at Hermione and gave her a reassuring smile. "Your brilliant daughter helped to return me from a grave state. I was... injured in the battle at Hogwarts well over a year ago..."

"Oi, you're the bloke who'd spied to help them! You were killed by a snake," her father blurted.

"I wasn't killed, per se. No, I think you might understand it better if I say that I was in a coma of sorts."

"And our girl found a way to bring you out of it?" Jane asked.

"That she did."

"How proud of you we are," Jane said.

"Why do I sense something more?" John asked, looking worried.

"Because there is," Hermione said, taking over. "Dad, Mum, there was magic that needed to be involved to help coerce his, uh, soul back into his body so that he could awaken."

"What sort of magic?"

"It's quite complicated," Severus offered when Hermione didn't reply right away.

"Last I checked, we're not berks," John pointed out.

"Dad, Mum, the spells and potion called for some things and a bit of a sacrifice needed to be made."

"Blimey! You didn't kill anyone, did you?"

Hermione smiled. "Of course not, Dad, but the end result was that Severus and I needed to be bonded together."

"Meaning?" her mother asked.

"Meaning," she said nervously, "he's my husband now."

Severus drew in a deep breath before speaking. "I want you to know that I fully intend to honor your daughter for all my years in thanks for..."

"Married?"

"Yes, Mum."

"But... I know you were upset with young Ronald, but I thought deep down that you might work things out. Suddenly you've up and married someone else?"

"I know it seems sudden, and I... I didn't make my decision lightly."

"Hang on," her father said. "I don't buy this."

"Sorry?"

"That's why that fellow caused my accident. It was a warning to you that if you didn't go through with it, something worse would happen."

Hermione was speechless. How her father had come to the right conclusion with so little information was a mystery to her! One look at Severus told her that he was quite surprised as well. Finally, after a long and awkward silence, she said, "That's the gist of it, yes."

"You there, Severus, can't you release her from this bonding, what with you being well and all."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot. It doesn't work that way I'm afraid."

"That's preposterous!" her mother said, slamming the tray she'd still held in her lap aside. "Our girl won't be forced into some sham of a marriage! There's got to be something she can do."

"Mum, really, it's fine. Severus and I... we've come to an understanding, and we both agree that staying together is the best option." She went to her mother and placed her hands on her shoulders. "He wouldn't force me to stay with him if I didn't want to." She smiled slightly. "There are magical properties involved and what Ron did to me? I'll never have to worry about that with Severus. It's disallowed as part of the bonding. There are other positive points."

"Those are?" her father demanded.

This time, Severus spoke. "We've found that we're quite compatible in many things."

"It's true," Hermione added. "I'm not just trying to ease your burden. There are many things in the past for both of us that needed to be addressed, and we've done so."

"But to marry without love...?"

"Many people have had arranged marriages in the past," Hermione replied. "A good number of the time, love matches were made. I don't see why Severus and I might not find that one day."

"Severus?" her father asked.

"She is already quite... dear to me," he said quietly.

"I don't like it," the man replied.

"Nor I," her mother agreed.

"Maybe you'll just need time then?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"Definitely."

"Poppet, I just can't agree with your reasoning. I know you mean well, but to be tied to someone you don't know, for all the wrong reasons..."

"It's a rebound, isn't it?" her mother asked. "You're getting back at Ron for what he's done to you."

Part of Hermione knew that it had much to do with her decision ultimately, but she felt the need to speak the truth. "I'm drawn to Severus, Mum. I do want this, and in time if things should not work out, then he and I will decide where to go from there. Can't you respect my decision enough to at least think upon this with an open mind?" She pointed to Severus. "I've saved a man's life!"

"By giving him your own in return!"

She shook her head. "Dad, I'm sorry you feel that way, and I'll admit that when pondering things, I felt that way, but I've made up my mind." While she said this, her mind strayed to Ron and what had happened. Why had he chosen now to come back into her life and even have the audacity to look worried for her? She'd certainly give him a piece of her mind when she saw him, and... *God, what will he say about me? I'm married!* Not wanting to dwell on that at the moment, she focused on her parents.

"Very well," her mother said, cutting off John's reply. "But know that we are here for you should you need us... or a home to return to."

"Thank you!" Hermione felt tears of joy gather in her eyes. Her parents weren't pleased, but they wouldn't disown her at least. And Severus had held himself well throughout it all.

"I appreciate that," Severus said with a nod, extending a hand towards her father.

She watched her father as he looked at Severus' hand for a long moment before finally reaching out to accept it. It felt as though butterflies had taken flight in her stomach. It was official.

Her mother spoke again. "Now, let's have a cup of tea and talk about it all...where you will live, what will happen to that Malfoy man... Will he go to prison for his deed?"

"Tea sounds nice, Mum. Severus, let's sit."

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Severus Snape Alive!!

By Rita Skeeter

By putting in many hours of research, I have learnt that a man whom we'd all believed to be dead is in fact alive! Severus Snape, former Hogwarts Headmaster, former Potions professor, former Head of Slytherin, has been living in Malfoy Manor since his supposed demise. But the question is, dear readers, why has he been hiding from the public? I think there's more to this than I've been told, but I shall find out everything and pass it all on to you. A hero would normally want his just rewards! Why is this man hiding?

Is he disfigured from He-Who-Still-Must-Not-Be-Named's snake's vicious attack? Perhaps he's been maimed so terribly that he'd rather live his life as a recluse than allow anyone to see him.

Why have the Malfoys not brought this information to light? And what part exactly does one Hermione J. Granger play in this?

That's right. Best friend of Harry Potter has been seen frequenting Malfoy Manor in the last few weeks...even staying overnight sometimes. Is there a Snape in this girl's future now that her ex-lover, Ronald Weasley, has gone off to France to tie the knot with a voluptuous French woman? There was no reply earlier today when I attempted to Floo-call the Weasley home where the newlyweds are purported to be staying. And of course the Malfoys didn't deign to comment.

More late breaking news to come!

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The *Evening Prophet* fell from Hermione's fingers after she read Skeeter's article. "Severus! You've been found out!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, bending down to scoop up the paper. "Fuck!" he exclaimed. "I need to see Lucius."

"What for?"

"We'll need to get a story together before we go public about my return."

"I'm coming with you then," she said, not wanting to be left out.

He shook his head. "I think it would be best if I do this alone. I don't want any distractions, and if I can feel the loathing you hold for him radiating from you here, imagine what it will be like there. Besides," he continued with an eyebrow arched, "I want to discuss other things with him, things he'll not speak of if you are present."

She relented, remembering their plan. "Okay. You're right. I just..." A loud bang and the shaking of his home stemmed her flow of words. "What the hell was that?"

Severus strode over to the window and pulled the curtain aside. "Fucking hell! Have a look. They've certainly wasted no time at all!"

Hermione quickly joined him, and her jaw dropped. "Can they not see us?"

"No, my home is Secret-Kept. However, that obviously won't stop them from trying to oust us."

"It's not safe here then for either of us. We don't know if they mean you harm... or not."

"I doubt they are up for a friendly chat. Probably a band of anti-Death Eater extremists or something." He shook his head in annoyance. "I shall take Skeeter and ply her with the best poison I have."

"Where can we go?"

"The manor is probably experiencing much the same...idiots lining the grounds and attempting to get in or see something. So," he sighed, "we'll have to go to the home my grandfather left to me."

Trying not to let on that she was pleased with that, she asked, "And does nobody know where it is?"

"Not a chance. We'll have privacy there. Quickly, let's pack what we need and leave."

"I don't have much to pack. Most of my things are at Grimmauld Place."

"My mother's things are still here. Would you care to go through them and choose what you might want to use? I'd not object to having her things altered in any way." He shrugged. "We'll procure your personal items and clothes as soon as we can."

"Thank you, Severus. I'll do that. What else shall I gather? I know you'll not want to leave certain things behind."

"It's not like we won't be returning, Hermione."

"What if something happens to your house? Those berks might set the entire neighborhood on fire or something worse!"

"I see your point, but hopefully the wards will keep the home safe. I simply want to flee as a precaution for you... and to give us both peace of mind." He lifted a shoulder in surrender. "But we can pack some of the books, among other things."

"All right."

He reached out and touched her face softly. "I thank you for understanding."

She smiled. "I could do nothing but, Severus."

"There's a house-elf there. She can come back and get what we want to bring. Fair enough?"

Hermione nodded. "Okay." She hoped that the house-elf wouldn't mind having someone who appreciated the help in the Prince home. Kreacher hadn't taken well to the new people that had invaded Grimmauld Place at first. Would this elf be like him... or more like Dobby? She prayed it would be the latter.

And then the world stopped moving.

"What is it? You've gone pale."

"The paper..."

"Hermione?"

"It says that Ron is married...to that French woman. Lucius didn't fake those pictures, Severus. He truly was there, going round with her." She plopped down heavily in the nearest chair. "I'd thought that maybe it had all been lies Lucius had generated to get me to do this." A few tears escaped her eyes. "And I've been here beating myself up and feeling rotten because I'd married someone else without talking to him."

The future she'd planned for herself was well and truly gone. She'd known it, of course, but the full impact of that hit her like a ton of stones. Ron was married. And then the anger came.

She jumped up, sending Severus back a few paces, and began pacing the room furiously. "So! He went there, saw a woman he wanted, started ignoring my letters altogether, and married her! Without so much as a letter to say something to me! I'm going to hex his arse off when I see him! He..."

"Calm yourself," Severus said firmly. "We've more important matters to tend to at the moment."

Hermione rounded on him. "You can't know how this feels!"

"Can't I?" he snapped.

With narrowed eyes, she left the room to gather the things she wanted to pack, feeling that Severus couldn't fully understand what she was feeling at the moment. How could he really? She felt so many things that she thought she might explode: betrayed, guilty, saddened, relieved...

*Hang on, she thought in surprise. Why do I feel relieved?*

This puzzled her only momentarily, and then she knew the reasoning behind the emotion. He'd done it, too, married someone. He wouldn't be able to criticize her without admitting he'd done the same thing. And that wasn't all either. She was relieved that there was no baggage left to deal with. She could truly try to give her new marriage a chance and explore her new life now that she'd not have to deal with anyone throwing what she'd done to poor ickle Ronniekins in her face.

What would Harry say?

She knew that Harry wouldn't be angry with her. He might be shocked and disappointed, but he'd come around. He always had in the past. His support was a given. Besides, he'd want Snape to live. There were many things that she knew he'd like to talk to Snape about. With a smile, she opened the door to the small bedroom she'd been sleeping in. While putting all the things she wanted to bring with her near the door, she noticed, for the first time, a trunk in the corner. She'd thought it to be a table, as it had a cloth draped over it and had a few items on top. However, seeing the latches at the bottom near the floor from her new angle, there was no mistaking what it was.

*Disguised purposely? Or just a lack of real furniture?* she wondered.

Being the curious type of person that she was, she quickly went to investigate. It was locked and quite heavy. Pulling it towards the door with the other items was clearly out of the question, so she did the next best thing. She brought the things she'd placed there over to sit atop the trunk. She'd instruct the house-elf to bring it.

There was something about the trunk that intrigued her. Perhaps it was simply because it was hidden in plain sight or because she thought that Severus might have locked away much of his brilliance and past findings in there, but she wanted to open it and view the contents. Severus had been sleeping in a separate room, wanting to give her space for a couple of days while they adapted to married life, so she doubted that he'd have to get anything from the room, as he's moved the few things he used already. Therefore, he'd not know that she'd decided to bring the trunk.

"Good grief. Snooping in my husband's things? What's become of me?" she muttered aloud, feeling slightly nervous about the idea. Perhaps she shouldn't pry.

After a moment of indecision, she said, nodding firmly, "As far as I know, it's something important that he might need." Feeling better about her decision, she went to find Severus and help in the other parts of the house.

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Harry hugged Ginny tightly. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll only be gone for a few days...practice and the game. After we're done, I'll come straight back."

He nodded and smiled, wanting to say something that had been on his mind. "Ginny, about us..."

"I don't like that look in your eyes." The nervousness in her voice was unmistakable.

"No, it's nothing like that," he reassured her. "Your mum might be onto something. Maybe we shouldn't wait so long before the wedding."

"Look, you don't have to rush into something just because you're afraid something might change before then. We're not Ron and Hermione." She smiled softly. "There's no way I'll not show up to marry you."

"Same here." He kissed her then, ardently and lovingly. "But I want this, all right? As soon as we find Hermione and get this sorted out, I want to think about us and get things moving."

Ginny's hold on him tightened considerably. "You've just made me the happiest woman alive." With another kiss and a quick farewell, she entered the Floo and left him alone.

His smile immediately faded. Where the hell was Hermione? Kingsley had someone searching for Narcissa and Draco Malfoy in France, but if they were in a Secret-Kept home, they'd never be found. If it were up to Harry, he'd barge into Malfoy Manor again and force Malfoy to tell the truth. In the pit of his stomach, he feared that his friend had been killed for her silence. Had something gone wrong when they'd tried to bring Snape back to life?

Snape. Was he really alive? Excitement warred with dread. There was so much he wanted to ask the man, and yet, would their past hamper any attempt on Harry's part to make peace? What sort of man was Snape now that he was back from the dead...if it were true?

"It has to be true," he said to himself. "Malfoy wouldn't be stupid enough to lie about this, and Hermione took that bloody vow, so he wouldn't do anything to her. She can't say anything anyway."

In the onslaught of Kingsley's questions, he'd not been able to say much, for he truly wasn't in the know. He'd told the man what he could, but ultimately, it hadn't been much. On a whim, he decided to Apparate to Malfoy Manor once again...hidden beneath his Invisibility Cloak of course. Once there, he was shocked to find that groups of people were camped out in front of the gates and along the walls, all hoping for a chance to speak to Malfoy or see a glimpse of Snape.

He hated Rita Skeeter and had been appalled with the *Prophet's* edition the night before. Someone had leaked the information to the woman, and he'd make it his business to find out where she'd got her information. Or had she transformed into her Animagus form and spied? Either way, he'd learn the truth.

Stealthily, he made his way away from the crowds, following a well kempt path that followed the winding stone wall surrounding the estate. Tired of walking minutes later, he stopped to catch his breath, thinking, *Whatever gave me the idea that I might find a way in is beyond me* when suddenly a portion of the wall seemed to move away from itself in the shape of a man, immediately changing to resemble the green grass and shrubbery.

Someone's Disillusioned and leaving the manor! He remained as still as possible, not wanting to alert the person to his presence. Who was it? A Malfoy? A family friend? And then he had his answer. When the crack of Disapparation sounded, the Disillusionment faltered momentarily, giving him a view of the back of Severus Snape.

Quickly whipping out his wand, he flicked it, muttering the new spell he'd learned that could enable him to trace the Disapparation, he took a deep breath. He had his answer then. Snape was alive, and wherever he was going, if Malfoy had told the truth, Hermione would be there as well. He followed the trace, trying to concentrate on Apparating as silently as possible. When he opened his eyes, he found himself alone on a deeply sloping hillside of green and yellow. Flowers and shrubs littered most of the landscape, aside from a dusty path.

This was definitely not Spinner's End. Snape and Hermione had to have moved to another place. Harry smirked, assuming they'd fled the noisy crowds trying to find Snape's home...unless Snape had another home and had been there all along, not knowing people had found out that he'd beaten death.

"Shite," he murmured, following the worn path, noting the fresh set of bootprints along the way. After he made his way up to the top of the hill, he saw a large home sprawled out in the valley below, smoke coming from the chimneys. Just as he took a step closer, the scene shimmered and disappeared completely, leaving nothing but endless trees and plant life for him to see.

"Fuck! Wards." He shook his head. Would it pay to try snooping about? Perhaps he should go get Ron. He'd promised to keep him informed of anything he found out. "No," he said, realizing he shouldn't include Ron in this. Things would be heated enough as it was. And to be perfectly honest, he didn't care that Ron had been tricked into feeling something for his *wife*. It seemed to Harry that he should have fought the curse harder. They'd practiced it many times. Part of Harry knew he was being unreasonable, but he supposed he was just biased where Hermione was concerned.

Decision made, he moved forward. He'd walk about and see if he could figure out the wards. If the place was Secret-Kept, he shouldn't have been able to see it at all. He'd have to figure that out as he went along. For now, just getting down to the point he'd seen the home was what he'd worry about.

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Lucius Malfoy bolted up from his bed and spun around, searching his room for something that wasn't there. His long locks were sweaty and matted. "Who's there?" he asked, voice cracking, the sound of his beating heart seemingly louder than his words.

The sun was shining through the open drapes, as it was still only late afternoon. He can't have been napping for all that long. He sighed in relief. A dream. That was all it had been.

"A bloody nightmare more like," he said, lifting his wand from the nightstand with trembling fingers. "Bozzy!"

*Snap.* "Yes, master?"

"Ready my dinner and make certain a bottle of port is open. I shall be down after a shower."

"Master is showering again?"

He glared at the elf until it disappeared to do his bidding. *How dare he question me?* Shaking his head, he made his way towards his adjoining bath, only to stop and gasp as he looked in the mirror. His Dark Mark was black and quite visible once again. Since the Dark Lord had been defeated by Potter, it had been quite faint, much like it had been during the quiet years when the boy had nearly destroyed him the first time. Worst of all, the snake moved slightly and hissed before... it began to burn.

"No... no... no... He's dead," he said in panic.

Horrified, he watched his other hand rise and inch ever closer to the Mark...wanting to answer the Summons with a mind of its own. He tried to force his arm away, but he'd lost control of his limbs. His heart renewed its pounding with fervent vigor. The sweat that had plastered his hair to his forehead and face began pouring from his pale skin. The mirror plainly showed the horror in his eyes.

How would he answer his Lord's questions about his lack of help in the final battle?

And then he heard the low hiss of a snake, looked down to see what the tightening feeling around his legs was, and screamed in terror. Nagini was sliding around his body with excruciating pressure, cracking the bones in his legs as she did so, winding her way up, eyes glinting and mouth open. It looked as though someone had sewed her head back onto her body.

"How is this possible?" he shouted to the darkness surrounding him.

"Luciussssss...."

For the second time in a matter of minutes, Lucius Malfoy woke up, panting and frightened. "What the...?" Frantically, he tore away the buttons from the wrist of his shirt

and jerked his sleeve up to view his forearm. The Mark was still as faint as it had been before he'd decided to take a nap.

Swallowing thickly, he summoned his house-elf and asked for a stiff drink of scotch.

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A/N: Sorry this took so long. I had a bit of trouble with this one. I know where the story is going, it's getting there that's taking a while. :)

## Chapter 15

*Chapter 15 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See chapter one.

*I'd like to thank my betas Charmed\_Nay and ladyinthecloak for reading over this and helping to spot my oddities.*

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Hermione smiled as she made her way through the rooms of the home she now shared with Severus. The Princes had had a beautiful home, lots of windows to let in the bright sunshine and to allow the inhabitants a great view. Instinctively, she knew that it must have been Severus' grandmother's doing. The way he'd described his grandfather made her think that the man would have been happy shutting out the world outside.

The home certainly outshined pathetic Spinner's End. However, she could understand the reasoning behind Severus' adamant refusal of the place. She'd never been one to criticize people because of their homes, but she didn't want to live in such a gloomy place as his childhood home. If she were the type of person who truly cared about material things, she'd not have befriended the Weasleys or stayed in their magically held together home.

But to live in a dismal house for the rest of her life? No, she couldn't fathom it. "This is what I want," she said aloud, smiling at the way the puffy, white clouds rolled through the light blue sky above. The long grass swaying in the breeze over the hillside made her want to go and pick flowers, something she hadn't done in a long time.

She knew that she and Severus could be happy here, make new memories. And then her heart fluttered. Happiness. Severus. A life together. "The bond or true hope?" she wondered.

"Miss?"

"Oh, hello, Izzy. I'm was talking to myself," she said, smiling at the old house-elf.

"Does miss have orders for dinner?"

"No, I hadn't thought about it."

The house-elf bowed. "I is taking care of it."

"Thank you."

The elf had been eager to have humans in the home again, obviously having been lonely for some time. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel very guilty at having an elf help her or giving one orders. Thankfully, the elf hadn't ended up like Kreacher but had more of a Dobby attitude...mixed with Winky's.

She smiled again and made her way towards the stairs to go up to the large master bedroom, wondering what Severus would say when he realized that she'd had both of their things unpacked and brought into the room. Surely he would realize that she fully intended on sharing a room with him from that day onward.

And it was what she wanted: a new home, a new start, a real marriage.

Her stomach shivered as she closed her eyes and imagined his touch, his lips. How had she gone so long without giving in to Ron's desires? Had she known what lay in store for her if she'd have accepted, no hex Lucius had placed on her would have kept her away. She snorted suddenly. What would have sex been like with Ronald? He definitely wasn't as practiced, that was for certain.

"And I'll never know. Nor do I want to."

Just as she started up the stairway to go to the bedroom to investigate Severus' trunk, she heard the front door open and close. "Severus?" she called out.

"Yes," he replied, coming into view. "Going up?"

"Just to make sure everything is in place." She grinned mischievously. "He fell asleep, you know. Just like you'd said."

Severus nodded. "I was able to slip a few drops into his tea while he wasn't looking. I could see the drowsiness set in immediately and told him that I had to leave." He took a few steps up, stopping on the one just below her, putting him at her eye level. "And?"

"And the Dream Stone works just as easily as you said, started shining the moment he fell asleep. I'm glad we tested it." She bit her lip and shrugged. "Fearing that his late master has returned and wants to punish him for his failures is something that will be his undoing, I'm certain."

"Serves him right," Severus said darkly.

"How did the talk go before that?"

"We'll go public with the same story you and I thought would..." His voice trailed away, and his eyes narrowed slightly, darting from her to the doorway again. "Someone's breached our wards."

"Impossible. Nobody knows where we are or about this place."



"Someone could have followed me from Malfoy Manor." He pulled his wand out, saying, "Fuck," as he made his way back down towards the door. "I should have investigated further, but I saw no one, and there were no Disillusionment Charms activated. I checked twice!"

"Hang on..." she said. "I feel..."

"Potter! What the hell is *he* doing here?"

"Harry!" Hermione ran for the door but was stopped by Severus.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to invite him in. It's been too long. He deserves to know everything, and it's obvious he followed you." She pulled her arm free. "You said that I shouldn't owl anyone just yet, and I didn't, but he's here, so..."

"Fine," he relented, obviously not liking the idea.

"Don't worry. Harry's... er..."

"James Potter's son," he said with a snarl.

"And Lily's," she reminded him. "I expect that counts for something with you."

He turned and went towards the living room, leaving her alone. Not wanting to give him time to change his mind, she opened the door and strode out into the sunlight. Harry was tentatively touching the bark of a tree with his wand and hadn't noticed her.

"Harry James Potter, what are you doing?" she asked, laughing when he jumped.

"Hermione!"

They ran to each other and embraced.

"I was so worried when..." he began as she said, "I should have owled but..." They both started laughing.

"You should have owled," he said seriously once they'd stopped. "I thought... I thought Malfoy might have killed you, and we went there, only to find out...Snape! Where is he?"

"Harry, welcome to the Prince's Court," she said, waving a hand behind her. She grinned as his eyes widened when the Manor came into view for him.

"From up there, it didn't look like this. It was nice, but small, and then it disappeared."

"Oh, wards, strange ones. You shouldn't have seen anything but an old ruined shack...well, if you were a Muggle anyway, but I guess since... Severus is inside." Her voice had lowered to a whisper. "There are some things you should know."

He nodded and strode past her, apparently intent on seeing Snape for himself. His gait was hurried, yet hesitant, as he entered. "I don't see him," he said, turning to look at her, green eyes narrowed slightly.

"It's true. He's alive. Shocking, I know, but can you believe it? We've breached the Otherworld!" she said excitedly. "There are so many things that I've learned, and hopefully, I can one day figure out a way to use this knowledge and..."

"And help others," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe even... I-I'm glad."

"Come on. He's just there," she said, nodding towards the arch that led into the living room. "And, uh, he's... the same as you remember him."

"Still a git then," he confirmed. "Something I'm used to." He stopped dry when his eyes met the black gaze of Severus. "I can't believe it."

"Followed me from the Malfoys, eh, Potter?" Severus said by way of greeting. "In your wrapper, I expect. I hadn't thought of checking for a cloak, though I wouldn't have detected you anyway...not since you own the only true Invisibility Cloak ever made."

Harry shook his head dumbly and slowly walked forward, nearing Severus cautiously. "Does it hurt?"

"Am I doubled over in pain?"

At this, Harry snickered. "Never thought I'd hear that voice again. Some nights I wished that you'd be back, even if just to be a right nasty prat, so that I could tell you so many things... ask things."

Severus sighed but gestured for the both of them to sit down while Hermione took a step forward, asking, "Tea?"

"No."

"Yes."

"Right then. I'll just brew a pot." She assumed that they might need some privacy, and as much as she wanted to be present, she knew she should grant them that. Severus might not be as inclined to answer questions about Lily if Hermione were there.

"Izzy can do it," Severus said, calling for the elf.

Surprised, Hermione sat next to Severus on the couch, which positioned them across from Harry, who was waiting quietly and taking in the room. "This is Severus' family home," she said softly.

"Is it? I thought that other place was."

"Well, this is from the maternal side of his family."

"Oh, right, the Princes."

"If you two are finished," Severus said in clipped tones, "I'd like to get this inquisition over with."

"First," Harry began, "where've you been all this while, Hermione? What went on at Malfoy's house?"

She tried to speak, but her mouth wouldn't open. She remembered her vow. "Blast," she muttered. "Harry, if I tell you, will you promise that you won't use what I say to bring charges against Malfoy or have someone else do it?"

He was quiet for a long moment. "I'll not turn him in to the authorities or tell them, but I won't promise to condone any wrong doing he's done."

"Remember the vow I took? It was very specific that..."

"If Potter agrees, then you've done your part," Severus cut in.

"He tricked me into..."

"I knew it!" Harry yelled, rising up from his seat as if he were going to run off to Malfoy Manor.

"Calm yourself, boy," Severus said in a bored tone. "Still the same, I see, ready to run off and get into trouble before knowing the whole story."

He sat down and looked a little embarrassed by his outburst, saying, "Something wasn't right from the beginning. I knew if you had to take a secrecy vow that he was up to no good."

"I know. I was... thick about it. I was taken in so easily. He waved a bit of knowledge in my face, showed me *anagical* tome that seemed to call to me," here she shook her head in shame, "and manipulated me with the knowledge that I could help bring Severus back."

"It's odd, you calling him that."

"What else would she call me?"

"Well, Snape, of course."

Hermione noticed the smirk playing on Severus' lips and decided that Harry would take the news better if he heard it from her instead. "Part of the magic, er, called for some sacrifices on my part." She sighed. "When Ron stopped writing me..."

"The wanker got married!" Harry said heatedly.

"I know. I saw the *Prophet*."

"And you're not angry?"

"Well, I... don't expect I have a right to be."

"Sorry? What?"

"Severus and I... the magic that brought him back had to be sated by things, and uh, well, we're now bonded."

"Bonded," he repeated, obviously dumbfounded.

"She means to say that Weasley isn't the only one who's married now," Severus said, watching Harry warily.

"Married... to Snape... You're shitting me."

"It's true."

"I don't understand."

"You see, Potter, it's like this. When a man and a woman..."

"Severus!" Hermione admonished, cheeks heating. "Look, I knew what I was getting into...mostly. The truth of the matter is that I've helped to bring Severus back to life. I... I don't regret that."

"But what of Ron?"

"Ron's moved on, hasn't he?" she said, finally feeling angry.

Harry shook his head. "Ron couldn't fight off an Imperius Curse, that's why! That Jeri loves him, but he was hexed into it all."

Hermione's eyes watered. So, one of her fears had been confirmed. Lucius must have done something to Ron, ultimately making certain she had no options.

"Just another of Malfoy's tricks then," she said softly. "Not that it matters now."

"Unbond. I doubt you have to stay with Snape now that he's back."

"It doesn't work that way, Harry," she said, taking Snape's hand as she spoke. "And besides, we've talked and want to give this a try."

Harry sat back as if he'd been pushed, mouth agape.

"I'll have to explain to Ron that I'd really thought..."

"Those pictures. It's Malfoy who did it," Harry said. "He wanted to make sure that you thought Ron was with someone else. And your dad, he said that..."

"Lucius again," Hermione confirmed.

"Wait till I tell Kingsley about this!" Harry roared. "He's already helping me put things together to... Shite! I can't tell him about all of this; he'd use it against him and send him to Azkaban."

"Right in one," Severus agreed. "Ah, tea."

Izzy placed the tea service on the small table between the three of them. "Izzy is going to set another place for dinner."

"Thank you, Izzy," Hermione said graciously, educing an eager nod from the house-elf.

"Remember how I was going on about that tome in my dreams? I asked Kreacher about it, and he told me that his old mistress once gave it to Lucius Malfoy. Of course, that's when I contacted him about it. I had to know. It was haunting my dreams, and I thought that if I could find the book, I would be left alone." She rolled her eyes. "He set things up quite well. He fed me a line about how he and his wife had split up, how he didn't trust me because I'd testified against him, and he worked hard to prove just how changed he was. I didn't see it coming."

"He's always been quite smooth, Lucius," Severus commented.

"There's so much more. Perhaps we can discuss it over dinner? It smells as though Izzy is done," Hermione said. "I just... Oh, Harry, it's so good to have you here. Just please don't judge me."

"I don't like this, but it's not like I have any say in things."

"Well said," Severus quipped sarcastically.

"Are you going to keep being snide?" Harry asked. "I don't like our past either, but I'm here... trying to be, er, supportive, aren't I?"

"That, Potter, remains to be seen." Severus stood. "Shall we relocate to the dining room?"

"All right," Harry agreed. "But then, I'd like to know some things. Those memories you gave me, I have questions."

Severus simply nodded, placing a hand at the small of Hermione's back to guide her into the next room. Hermione relaxed into his touch and felt hopeful that the three could have a nice dinner and bring everything out in the open...everything except the fact that she'd had sex with Lucius Malfoy. She didn't feel the need to expose that dirty secret to Harry.

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"Well?" Hermione asked as she walked over to the wardrobe to find a suitable gown to sleep in.

"Well, what?" Severus replied, unbuttoning the cuffs on his sleeve.

"About Harry."

"I think he'll keep quiet."

"That's not what I'm talking about," she said in exasperation.

"He's... making an impressive attempt to be mature and levelheaded it seems. Something new for him." He shrugged. "I don't know what you want me to say." He turned to face her, his next words dying in his throat.

"You look surprised," she stated, inwardly pleased with his appreciative gaze.

"You're slipping into my bed."

"I am."

"I thought you wanted separate rooms for a while...like we were doing at home."

She rearranged her pillow and pulled the sheet up to her chin. "It's a bit cool here, isn't it? Pull the duvet up when you get in, will you?"

"You've not answered my question."

"You didn't ask one, Severus."

"Witch..."

"I think that we should look at this as a new start: new home, new beginning, a new us." She closed her eyes, not wanting to show her nervousness. "I think it's silly to have separate rooms, what with being your wife, Severus, and it's not like we haven't already... consummated anything, right?"

"I agree. I thought that I might broach the subject soon, but..."

"But you didn't want to pressure me, and that," she turned over to look at him, propping herself up on one elbow, "is why I think you and I will be all right."

"And do you still love him?" he asked suddenly.

"Sorry?"

"Weasley, I saw the way you looked when you spoke of him."

She remembered his honesty where his feelings for Lily Potter were concerned, so she decided to follow his set path. "It seems that I still do, yes, but you know that already. Why would you ask me this?"

He tossed his shirt away and began to unfasten his trousers. "You speak about wanting to have a new life and about being happy, yet you openly pine for that... boy."

"And you?"

"I don't openly pine for anyone."

"Not openly, but you do all the same."

"How do you know?"

"You told me."

"Perhaps my feelings have changed. Do you think that impossible?"

"In this length of time? I find it improbable."

His trousers joined his shirt across the room, and he waved a hand to extinguish the light. A moment later, she felt the bed shift and the warmth of the duvet rise up to cover her. Then there was silence.

"Am I not right?" she prompted.

His hand found her cheek and guided her face towards his in the darkness. "Do you mind? I'm trying to make love to my wife," he said quietly.

Feeling nervous, she opened her mouth to speak, but his lips met hers, effectively quieting her. The feeling of rightness and completeness washed over her, and she felt how deeply she wanted to be with him, to replace any woman in his heart, and send his past away.

His kiss intensified as he drew closer to her, his free hand tangling in her hair, and she felt herself melt into him, wanting to become one. Breathing heavily, they drew apart, her hands meeting his at the top button of her nightgown.

"Allow me."

"Yes," she agreed. She might have agreed to anything he asked of her just then.

As he unbuttoned the gown, he leaned in and began leaving open-mouthed kisses along her throat, using his tongue to tease the flesh he suckled roughly and causing goosebumps to rise over her flesh.

"Mmmm," she moaned in approval, her hands holding him close and rubbing his back fervently, lightly scratching him occasionally. As soon as her nightgown was pulled open, his mouth and hands found her bare body, exploring her anew and forcing her onto her back. Her breath caught as his teeth nipped at one of her taut nipples.

"All right?" he asked, breaking contact.

"God, yes."

He chuckled and moved back to her breasts, humming against her flesh with appreciation and laving her body as if she were something delectable to be devoured slowly and delicately. Her back arched up to press into him when he nibbled the underside of one breast and then the other, and her hands realized they needn't be still and moved to explore his lower back and arse.

"I like that," he said, raising his head up to look at her, his intense gaze easily readable in the moonlight.

Her lips crashed into his, and she doubled her efforts to bring him pleasure, sliding one hand around to the front in order to explore the crinkly hair and the erect treasure it surrounded.

"Wet already," he murmured as one of his fingers slid inside of her. When he moved it out and circled the tight bundle of nerves that was her clit, she moaned and moved against him. "Enough foreplay for tonight?"

"I want you," she said, feeling bold.

He swiftly moved between her thighs and pressed himself against her entrance as he kissed her lips passionately, rocking and pushing until he eased in, forcing them both to pull in a sharp breath. The rhythm he took her with started slow and steady, each wanting to convey something to the other, but it took a fervent turn soon after.

When he flipped them over, expecting her to ride him, she faltered and nearly lost her balance. "Sorry," she said quickly, feeling foolish.

"Don't be. Take your pleasure."

Hermione gyrated her hips experimentally and enjoyed the sensation she felt and the groan of pleasure from her husband. Wanting to chase the feeling, she began to move in earnest, placing her hands on his chest to keep steady, all the while undulating and rocking. With the added feeling of him thrusting up to meet her and his pelvis grinding against her firmly, she knew it wouldn't be long until orgasm found her...or him from the sound of it.

"Yessss," he hissed and pumped madly, frantically, upward.

She looked down as she rode him, watching in awe as his face contorted in what looked like pain, but sounded like bliss. It was humbling, it made her feel powerful, and she wanted to join him, wanted *him* to be the one who made her come undone.

"God, Severus, oh..."

Culmination found her, causing her insides to burst and flutter and clench. Before she realized what had happened, she noticed she'd fallen to his chest, panting and sated. "Is this all right?" she asked.

"Don't you dare move," he replied, just as breathlessly.

She smiled and snuggled closer to him, tightening her hold on him. Sleep found her shortly after, but it didn't keep her long. She felt him move to place her against his side and woke again.

"I don't love him," she blurted. "It never felt like this."

"You've never been with him like this."

"Well, you wanted to know, and I thought that I might, but... no, I don't."

One of his hands caressed her face and gently smoothed down her hair. "Thank you for telling me that."

"Did your feelings really change?" she asked, uncertain she wanted to know the answer.

"I told your father that you were already dear to me, and that was the truth."

"Because I saved your life."

"Because... Some of it is that, yes."

Her hand moved up to lace its fingers within those against her head, and she pulled his palm down to kiss it lightly. "Having s... making love to you, I enjoy it. I'm glad we've decided to do this."

At this he laughed deeply, causing her to do the same. "You have a way with words," he finally said, voice still full of mirth, "but I know what you mean. I feel the same."

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Harry knocked on the backdoor of the Burrow before opening it and walking in.

"Oh, Harry, you startled me!" Molly said. "You look upset. Something wrong?"

"No, well, yes, but I just need to talk to Ron."

"He's upstairs." She looked at the ceiling above them. "I expect he's trying to soothe *her*."

"What's wrong now?"

"Ah, worried that Hermione will come back in here and ask that Ronald goes back to her." She smiled sadly. "I don't think that's likely to happen."

"No, it won't," he said firmly.

"No? You know something? Have you seen her?"

"Yeah," he said, running his fingers through his hair, "but I'd like to talk to Ron privately about it first. I promised her that I would."

"I'll just fetch him then."

"No, I'll go up. We'll talk in the twins' old room, all right?"

Molly nodded. "Whatever you need, Harry dear."

"Thanks."

Each step he took towards Ron's room had his stomach clenching. He'd told Hermione that he would be the one to tell Ron that what Malfoy has said was true, which would make things easier on them all, but now that he was at the Burrow, he wished he'd just let Hermione do it. He wasn't up for Ron's wrath. Sure, the bloke was married and said he'd stay by his wife, but that didn't mean he'd appreciate Hermione doing the same.

"Ron?" he called. "It's Harry."

There was a thud and muffled talking before the door creaked open.

"Oi, it's late, yeah?"

"I need a word."

"You've been drinking?"

"Yeah."

"Must be something serious."

"It is. Come on. Let's go up to the twins' room for a private talk."

"I'll be there in a minute." He tilted his head towards the door to indicate he had to let his wife know.

"All right."

Harry didn't have to wait long for Ron and let out a deep breath before saying, "Look, let me get this out before you say anything, okay?"

"You've found her. She all right?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"You told her about, uh, Jeri."

"She'd read the paper."

"Blimey," Ron said, sitting down heavily on the bed across from Harry. "She didn't deserve to find out that way."

"That's why I'm here. There's something she wants you to know, and after tomorrow, you'll be reading about it in the papers."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"You won't like it."

"Tell me."

"First, I have to know if you will use anything I say in order to bring charges against Lucius Malfoy."

"That tosser does have something to do with this then? We were right? What he was on about the other day..."

"We were spot on about some things, but you don't know the half of it." When Ron folded his arms across his chest and became silent, Harry continued. "Shite. Hermione's vow. I can't say anything to you until you swear you won't try to see him locked in Azkaban."

Rolling his eyes, Ron nodded. "Fine. How's her vow extending to you?"

"It's a different sort. But anyway, the point is," Harry shook his head, "he tricked her into helping him bring Snape back. He showed her those photos of you and Jeri, made her think you'd left her for good..."

"We figured that out already, that it was him who put the curse on me... or someone he hired at any rate."

"Yeah, but that's only because there were sacrifices on Hermione's part that needed to be made in order to bring Snape back. One... she, uh, had to be a... inexperienced."

"What's that to do with anything?" Ron asked. "Oh, right, like unicorns prefer virgins to those who aren't. I guess some potions might want the brewer to be the same."

"Not exactly. See, she and Snape had to bond together and... you know, consummate that."

"Bond together. That again. Ginny was wrong, right? Malfoy was just saying that."

Harry shook his head. "No, it's real. Marital bonding."

Ron started laughing. "She made you do this, right? Mad at me for deciding to give Jeri a try, so she's just feeding on what Malfoy said to get a rise out of me. What? Does she think this will change my mind?"

"I'm not laughing, mate."

"Come on. That's mental. She's just helping him heal or something. Hermione and Snape."

"Are married and living together. I followed Snape home from Malfoy Manor today... had dinner with them and everything."

Ron stood and began to pace angrily. "So, she just up and married someone after seeing a few pictures? Didn't even try to come find me!"

"You'd stopped writing to us all, and you'd told her you needed space! There were photos! How were we supposed to know?"

"So, you approve of this? What the fuck, Harry? I get a punch in the gut and she gets a pat on the back?"

"No, it's not like that. I wish it would be different, but you've already made your decision about your marriage. What can I say? What should I have said?"

"You should have told her that she should have believed in me, that's what! It wasn't really me writing those letters. It was... my fucked up mind doing it!"

"Right. Rather her to have been waiting for you and to be devastated that you've decided to give your marriage a go? Thanks, Hermione," Harry imitated, "but I'm finally getting a steady shag now, so I'll..."

Ron's fist stopped his words and knocked him backwards against the bed. He wiped his lip and sat up. "I might have deserved that, but don't think I'll let you do it again."

"And we can't do a fucking thing to Malfoy," Ron ranted, not even acknowledging Harry's words. "He gets off again, slithering off like a great snake without so much as a slap on the wrists?"

"We'll keep working with Kingsley and find some other way to bring him to justice."

"What's going to stick? A Muggle's word that he saw Malfoy and swerved his car? That'll stick," he said sarcastically.

"He'll slip up somehow."

"I think I'll just kill him," Ron said calmly. "Ruined my life. Hermione's life. Maybe even Jeri's. Look at what that bastard's done! And all just to bring Severus Fucking Snape back from the dead! Who the bloody hell cares if he was dead! Good riddance!"

"Ron, Hermione was given the chance to save someone's life. Of course she felt she had to do it. Malfoy bewitched some tome and made her think that if she didn't go through with it, her father...or one of us...would be killed. It told her that the car wreck was a warning."

"And it was Malfoy the whole time."

"Yeah. So Draco was trying to help."

"We should find him and get him away from those mental freaks."

"Exactly what I was thinking. I told Snape and Hermione about how he was. Neither was very pleased."

Sitting back down, Ron brought his hands to his face, and it sounded to Harry as if he were sobbing softly. "It's really over, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, mate."

"I just..."

"I know."

When he looked up to face Harry, there were tears shining in his eyes. "Malfoy's going to wish he'd never done this to her. Tell me everything. I want to know it all."

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"Lucius!" Narcissa yelled, running to fling herself in his arms. "It's so horrible!"

"What is it?" he asked, moving her to arm's length so that he could look into her distraught eyes.

"It's Draco... oh, God!"

"Bozzy! Come light the lamps here and the fireplace. It's dark and freezing." He sniffed. "Damn elf!"

"Aren't you listening?"

"It's just the effect of the..." He stopped abruptly as he took note of her eyes. "Where is my son, Narcissa?"

"He's with *him*! He's back. Oh, it was horrible. He knew right where to find us. Draco didn't have a chance, what in his current state. I shouldn't have let you drug him and put that spell on him. It's your fault. He's been killed by *him*!"

"*Him*?"

"The Dark Lord," she said, her words coming out in a whisper, her breath hitting his face like a cool breeze.

And he felt his arm begin to burn.

"You're next," his wife said, her voice taking on the cold, emotionless tone her sister normally used when she'd lived. Her lovely face contorted into a devilish grimace, blood dripping from her mouth. "You're next, you're next..." The chant began to sound more like a song than a warning.

He stepped away from her, knowing she couldn't possibly be his Narcissa. She was an intruder! But how? His home was warded! Something on his arm caught his attention. His sleeve was moving, rolling... undulating, almost like a snake would be slithering beneath it.

"No." The words left his throat of their own volition.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes..." Narcissa chanted in a demonic voice.

"Luciussss."

The Dark Lord. Back. In his home.

"Planning to use Severussss for your own gains... ultimately intending to take MY place? Where were you when I needed you? More worried about your boy, the same boy you helped to destroy?"

"Master, I assure you that had I known what the Potter boy was planning..."

"*Crucio!*"

Lucius woke up, panting and sweaty, in his well-lit, warm room. "B-Bozzy," he croaked.

Pop. "Master calls for Bozzy?"

"Pack my things. I'm going to France to stay with Narcissa and Draco."

"When is master leaving?"

"Immediately. Tell no one. Not even Severus."

AN: And now the kneazle's out of the bag. I think that Lucius might have numbered days somehow. Guess we'll see. :)

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

AN: This chapter will be a little different. Just testing something out.

Thanks go to my lovely betas, Charmed_Nay and ladyinthecloak.

Severus Snape Tells All!

by Rita Skeeter

Readers, you must remember that it was I, Rita Skeeter, who brought you the latest news on Severus Snape first! I was contacted personally and requested to meet with Severus T. Snape and Hermione J. Granger for dinner. During which, I was able to ask many questions enquiring minds have been dying to know.

It seems that Severus Snape worked many months perfecting a potion that would later save his life. He won't go into details, of course, but suffice it to say that once he was bitten by You-Know-Who's snake, his body went into shock as the potion warred with the venom.

This, dear readers, is where Lucius Malfoy plays an important part. It seems that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had sent Mr. Malfoy to send Severus Snape to him, and being the astute man that he is, Malfoy...who'd been in the know about the potion the entire time...convinced Snape that it was the time to take it, feeling the fearsome man was up to no good.

As you know, Severus Snape was instrumental in the winning of the battle between Harry Potter and Lord Thingy. As soon as he was able, Malfoy went to find Snape and quickly brought him home to help him recover and let the potion run its course and win its battle against the poison invading his body. You should all remember the important part that Narcissa Black Malfoy, cousin to the infamous Sirius Black, played in the defeating of You-Know-Who. She and Potter hoodwinked him into thinking the boy had died during a duel.

Needless to say, Snape wasn't recovering as quickly as he should have been, so Malfoy contacted Hermione Granger for help. Everyone remembers the girl who's always stood at Potter's side...even stealing his heart during their early years at school together before she chose Viktor Krum instead. Her cleverness has been sung by many over the years, so is it all that surprising that she would be able to help in Snape's full recovery?

I, for one, am not surprised and surmised this myself before it was verified.

Here are actual questions and responses as recorded by my trusty quill.

RS: Why would the Malfoys keep quiet about their part in this?

SS: Why would they not?

RS: Surely they would want the Wizarding world to know they've helped to save a hero's life.

HG: Well, the world knows now, doesn't it?

RS: Why the hostile expression, my dear?

SS: Can we keep this on subject?

RS: So, you admit that they're just being modest about their part in saving your life. Gracious people, the Malfoys. What do you plan on doing now, Headmaster Snape?

SS: I'm undecided at the moment.

RS: Granger, what was your reaction to your Weasley's marriage?

SS: Snape.

HG: I wish him luck.

RS: Did I miss something?

SS: You called her Granger.

RS: So I did. And what should I call her?

HG: I am his wife. We've been married.

RS: There's no record of this at the Ministry. Trust me, I always scan the...wait! Where are you going?

And so, readers, you've read it here first! Hermione Granger and Severus Snape fell in love as she helped with his recovery. Isn't it romantic? I can see her at his bedside, a look of helplessness on her face as she moves a cool, damp flannel over his clammy, sallow flesh. And when he finally opens his dark, hooded eyes and sees that she holds so much concern for him, he instantly knows he wants her to be his wife and asks her immediately, not wanting to wait.

It's no wonder that Ronald Weasley went to France to lick his wounds and married the first woman he met. Hermione Granger has done it again...broke someone's heart by putting her desires for another first.

How long will our hero Severus Snape keep this woman as his own? Something tells me, readers, she'll have a lot of trouble discarding this one. He seemed right possessive as he led her out of the pub.

Severus Snape: The Return of a True Hero

by Luna Lovegood

Earlier reports that Severus Snape was alive and well and living in Egypt are now being confirmed...sort of. We now know that the man is indeed alive, so the witness who saw him must have been correct all along. Not only is Mr. Snape a war hero but he is also a great humanitarian. Our witness said that he'd been seen numerous times bringing medicine, food, and water to the sick in a small town cursed by the opening of a hexed tomb.

This town, Namun, is located within minutes from the small, lesser-known pyramid erected in the memory of Imhotep by his surviving priests. This is where the last sighting of the Crumple-Horned Knorsack took place. You may recognize this as the desert inhabiting cousin of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.

Has Severus Snape been secretly trying to find this elusive creature all this while? Has he found it and is now making his survival known to reveal it to us all? Only time will tell. I cannot convey enough how all things are possible. His 'return from the grave' proves that!

The Wizarding Enquirer

I am Carrying Severus Snape's Lovechild!

It's true. I'm pregnant with Severus Snape's baby. He came to me after he escaped the Hogwarts battle, and I nursed him back to health, what after all he'd been through with that snake. We shared so much...I gave him my home, my life, my heart, and my body! And then when I told him that I was going to have his baby, he disappeared days later.

Now I know that he's been living over at Malfoy Manor with that Granger woman! It's terrible that he'd forget all that I've done for him. I won't let our child suffer for it, and I intend to take him before the Wizengamot for support and parental acknowledgement as soon as our son is born. You'd think he'd treat the sister of a fellow Order member with a little more respect.

Dotty Dearborn

Editor's Note: Readers will remember that Miss Dearborn's brother, Caradoc, was part of the original Order of the Phoenix before he went missing and was never found.

Date Set For Potter-Weasley Nuptials

by Dame Samantha Jones

Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley have informed the Ministry of Magic that a summer wedding will be planned and have filed for the necessary documents. The date is set for Friday the 13th of August. While many would like to wish them well, we've been informed that guests will be allowed by invitation only. The wedding will take place on the grounds of the bride's family home.

The last Weasley to be married was the youngest son, Ronald, but he and his bride chose to elope. However, you will remember the lovely wedding of Bill and Fleur Weasley over two years ago, which also took place at the Weasley home. Fantastic decorating.

Fit for a Potter.

Update on Missing Malfoy Family

by Rita Skeeter

Earlier this month, I let it be known that Severus Snape and Hermione Granger fell in love while Snape recovered in the home of Lucius Malfoy. Shortly after this announcement, Lucius Malfoy and his family disappeared. Malfoy Manor had been searched by Aurors headed by the Minister of Magic himself, Kingsley Shacklebolt, when Lucius Malfoy failed to appear at the Ministry to answer to a complaint against him brought forth by a Muggle.

The Muggle's name was never released due to the Muggle Privacy Act, Section 3, Part 2, added last April, but it's been let slip to me that the Muggle was John Granger. You will recognize the last name and for good reason. This is Hermione Snape nee Granger's father. He contacted the Ministry on his own without the help of his daughter to file a complaint against Lucius Malfoy, accusing him of causing an automobile accident that left him hospitalized.

Why have the Malfoys left their home? Why would this Muggle accuse an upstanding member who rarely associates with Muggles of such a cruel act?

The Snapes have not been available for comment, and the location of the Grangers has now been concealed, likely via the Fidelus Charm.

Holyhead Harpies Lose: World Cup Hopes Dashed

by Luna Lovegood

Ronald Weasley, brother of Holyhead Harpies Chaser Ginny Weasley, stated earlier this evening that the team has suffered a big blow by the ten-point loss. A win against the Kenmare Kestrels would have brought the team to the semi-finals and given them a shot at playing in this year's World Cup.

Gwenog Jones, longtime team captain, says that the Harpies won't let this loss bring them down, and they'll be back practicing for next season as soon as they all have a good break. She goes on to say that they'll learn from their mistakes and utilize new formations, which should bring them a step closer next year.

Personally, I suspect the Nargles at the stadium had something to do with their bad performance in the last half hour of the match, enabling the other team's Seeker to catch the Snitch.

Snapes Seen at the Ministry

by Rita Skeeter

Severus and Hermione Snape made an appearance today in London to meet with Dotty Dearborn, who insisted that Severus Snape had fathered her child while living in

her home during the year after his supposed death. Severus agreed to a paternity test.

The woman made a scene and attempted to hex Hermione Snape in the foyer but was deftly disarmed. In a matter of minutes, it was learned that Mr. Snape is not the unborn child's father. In a twist of fate, the woman fainted and was Apparated to St. Mungo's. Tests show that she'd been Confunded heavily, and Healers were able to ascertain that someone made a mess of her memories.

In a statement from Minister Shacklebolt, we learn that Aurors have confirmed from a Pensieve memory that the man was none other than on-the-run Death Eater Donald Jugson. Charges may be brought against the woman for harboring a fugitive pending an investigation.

Minister Shacklebolt says, "Dark-wizard catchers have been dispatched to the area to see if they can pick up a trail on Jugson. Hopefully, he'll be brought back to England where he can stand trial for his crimes against us."

When asked to comment, Hermione Snape said, "What's to say? I knew Severus had nothing to do with the woman, so coming here for a paternity test was the least we could do to clear his name."

Draco Malfoy Returns

by Dame Samantha Jones

In a strange turn of events, Draco Malfoy, who...along with his family...hasn't been seen in nearly two months was spotted exiting number twelve, Grimmauld Place earlier today with Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley in tow. It is unknown where the trio went upon Disapparating, but it's safe to assume that if the younger Malfoy has resurfaced, his father and mother won't be far behind.

If you will remember, Lucius Malfoy is being sought to make a statement in the charges brought against him by Muggle John Granger. The other two Malfoys are not wanted for questioning.

However, it was stated that Potter's hand had clasped one of young Malfoy's tightly upon exiting the home. How does this affect the relationship Potter has with Ginevra Weasley? Has Potter changed his mind? Is there trouble in paradise?

Severus Snape Speaks Out

by Rita Skeeter

I was lucky enough to receive a letter from Severus Snape himself. He's refused to give me a proper interview, but I shall post his discourse here for you to read, as he didn't specifically ask me not to publish it.

Ms. Skeeter,

I find your numerous requests for interviews annoying, and I would greatly appreciate if you stop sending your pesky owl to my home. Else I shall have to take action against you invading my privacy and perhaps even against your familiar.

This is all I shall say on the matter, so do not ask again:

No, I have not been to Egypt, and I have no idea what Miss Lovegood was on about saying that I'd been spotted there. And exactly what would a doppelganger gain by being kind to people its 'earthly double' has never interacted with? I've never heard of a Crumple-Horned Knorsack, neither do I believe there is such a creature as the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.

I believe paternity tests prove that I have not fathered any lovechild, and my wife and I have no plans for children at this time. And I had nothing to do with the disappearance of Caradoc Dearborn. I barely remember what the man looked like, as it was very long ago when I'd last seen him, much less would I have anything to do with his sister now.

Lucius Malfoy is one of my oldest friends, and even I have no idea where he and his family are staying, but I am certain that if he wants to be found, he'll make an appearance. As far as the complaint filed by my wife's father, I have nothing to say on the matter. His statement is logged at the Ministry and will be addressed however they see fit.

Draco Malfoy, as far as I know, has no romantic inclinations for Potter, and I doubt Potter has any for him. Then again, one can never tell with a Potter and what he wants, can he? If Draco is living with Potter...and Potter's future wife...that's none of your concern, now is it? Yes, that means I am aware of where Draco's been sleeping for the past week, and no, I will not divulge any more than that to you. And exactly what business is it of yours or the public if my wife and I visit Potter's home occasionally?

Why would you ask if my wife and I are having problems? I think that if Weasley and his wife are estranged, it should have nothing to do with my relationship. They are on speaking terms, of course, as they were friends for years, but no, they do not meet without my presence.

I shall take my leave of you now. I hope this sates your curiosity. And if you publish this, I will personally see to it that you regret becoming a reporter in the first place.

Insincerely yours,

Severus T. Snape

There you have it, readers. If you read between the lines, I think it's safe to say that Severus Snape and his wife are having problems. It seems that he would like to have children, but she likely isn't interested. Either that is due to the accusations of the Dearborn woman or because...and I strongly believe this...that she is having second thoughts about their marriage. Of course, one can never believe what they read in rags such as the *Wizarding Enquirer* and *The Quibbler*.

Ronald Weasley's wife has returned to her home in France without him, and he's remained here...moving about from his parents' home and Potter's home. I would wonder if it wasn't *he* who had something going with Draco Malfoy if it hadn't been Potter who'd been seen holding the young man's hand. Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger parted when she left him for Severus Snape. Could it be that something's being rekindled? Is that why Snape obviously refuses to allow them to speak alone? Wouldn't old friends...only friends...not need a chaperone?

One can only wonder.

Rita Skeeter from the *Daily Prophet* Fired

by Luna Lovegood

It appears that the *Daily Prophet* has made its best move in years by removing conniving, lying, word twisting Rita Skeeter from its staff. *The Quibbler* hopes to resume affiliation with the popular paper now that it's fired the woman behind its fall from grace.

Skeeter published a private letter written to her by Severus Snape against his express wishes not to. The letter had a hex placed on it by Hermione Snape in that if the reporter reproduced it in any way, pustules would break out on her face, spelling out the word: Bitch. Also, it would prompt those in charge to release her from her position...never to hire her again.

She's also wanted for questioning in an unrelated matter. It's become known that she is an unregistered Animagus and uses her form...a beetle...to obtain private information. She'd been given a warning in the past and was told to register herself but, obviously feeling she's above the law, never did so.

Please report her whereabouts to the Ministry of Magic immediately if you have information.

Lucius Malfoy: Mentally Challenged?

by Dame Samantha Jones

Lucius Malfoy has good reason for not answering his summons to the Ministry to comment on charges filed against him by John Granger. He's been staying in a private facility in France, apparently seeking help in regards to a mental breakdown. Nothing more is known at this moment, but hopefully, with his return to his home under health care, he will be well enough to make a statement soon.

The Ministry is allowing Mr. Malfoy time to recuperate before requiring him to attend a hearing involving John Granger's complaint.

SW's Notes: And that should help to move things forward a little, giving you some background information. I had this idea when I started to write the next chapter, but then I realized that I had to move things forward a bit. I know that some things feel left out, but I will have explanations for the main plot points of course. Hope you enjoyed. It was kind of fun doing these little article snippets. Teehee.

Haha. I'm totally a fan of The Mummy movies, so you probably saw my little nod for them with the part about Imhotep's pyramid near Namun. LOL

Also, I rather like Friday the 13th dates despite the "bad luck lore" surrounding them. When I was little I adored the first few "Jason" movies. Snork. One of my first boyfriends was born on a Friday the 13th in August. Bwahahaha. And my godchild is due on August 13th, so I just thought I'd use that. This old boyfriend, by the way, had the number 69 on his football jersey, and that's where I take the 69 from in my penname. So, those of you who associate the 69 with something naughty... Noperz. Not this time. However... hmmm, never mind. < / end SW chat>

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak and charmed_nay for looking this over for me.

Frowning, Hermione thought about the past few weeks. Her life had certainly taken a different turn. She'd turned in her resignation for her job, deciding she would have to do something else if she wanted her marriage to work. Better hours and better pay would be one thing playing a major part in her decision. The week she'd tried going back had proven to be too difficult. There were always people trying to speak with her, reporters hounding her, and her assignments seemed to be lacking. Had they lost faith in her at some point?

Her parents were upset with her for what they considered "standing by and doing nothing" while Lucius weaseled his way out of facing charges. She'd tried to explain that things were different in the Wizarding world, but they still felt discriminated against. And in truth, that was exactly what was happening. Hermione could do nothing about it because of her vow to Lucius. "I wish I'd never taken that vow," she muttered. But then she wouldn't have saved Severus' life.

What would life without Severus be like? Different, that was for certain. For one, she was sure that she and Ron would be together. He hadn't willingly gone to that woman. "Not like me," she said bitterly. "Me who did this with my eyes open. Mostly." She knew it didn't pay to sulk, but things had seemed so simple before. Now that she was a wife--to Severus Snape no less--she found that things weren't exactly easy. Feelings were more complicated than ever. There was no bossing Severus around, and it was very hard to budge him once he'd made up his mind about something. And in an interesting twist of fate, he was quite good at coaxing her into seeing his side of things--much too often for her liking.

And she'd fallen in love with him at some point. She knew now that it was more than just the magic that thrummed through her when she was near him. For all his difficulties, he was quite a good husband and a very considerate lover. There was always some feeling, though, that nagged at her. It caused her to doubt things and to wonder if she'd made a mistake putting so much trust in his words. Now and then he'd say something that gave her pause. The last time had been the night before.

Severus chuckled darkly. "And that is why I chose you, my dear. You're so very clever."

"You had little choice in the matter," she said lightly.

His eyes darkened. "Hermione, I think..." Shrugging, he said, "Ah, it's not important."

"What isn't?" she prompted.

"Nothing."

"Severus, you were about to say--"

"Leave it be," he said, standing and leaving the room.

What had he been about to say? From the tone of his voice, she was certain he'd been on the verge of admitting something to her. And she didn't like what her instinct told her.

"Hermione?"

"Oh, Severus, when did you get home?"

"Only just. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Indeed?"

"That's what I said."

"I see." He turned to go up the stairway.

"How is your dear friend faring?"

He stopped and faced her. "He thinks that the Dark Lord has returned and is taking revenge on him. He wants to know if I feel anything or if I've seen anything."

"What an idiot. Did he never once stop to think about the dream stone? It's only us giving him a taste of his own medicine."

"He's not mentioned it once, so I doubt he's been thinking of it." He sighed and looked away. "Narcissa isn't doing well."

"Oh?"

Was that a hint of sadness in his expression? Why wasn't he looking at her?

"She's torn between worry with Draco and worry about Lucius." His eyes met hers. "And her part in what happened with you. Guilt. Shame."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "She should be."

"There's something you don't know."

"What's that?"

"It was she who made certain that Weasley and the French woman remained a couple, though her husband initially cast the first Imperius."

Sitting down sharply in a nearby chair, Hermione let out a deep breath. "I mean, I assumed she had something to do with it, what with her being in France all that while, but to hear it admitted." Triumphant, she smiled. "I never took a vow to not go to the Ministry with anything against her, Severus."

"That's true."

"But?"

Severus walked closer. "They did help to save my life. Hasn't this been enough?"

"What?" Hermione asked shrilly. "Are you saying that you don't want them to suffer any longer for what they've done to us? Done ~~to me~~?"

"Don't put words in my mouth," he snapped, crossing his arms. "I'm just saying that--"

"They've ruined my life!"

His eyes became stony, and his voice dropped to a quiet whisper. "Forgive me. I didn't know being my wife still left you feeling this way after all we've shared since becoming bonded."

Shame flooded through her. "Severus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

"No," he said certainly, "I think you did." He turned on his heel and left her alone in the sitting room, the last rays of the sun's light fading away.

Why had she said that? She hadn't meant to hurt him, but it had stung that he seemed to be having second thoughts about revenge on the Malfoys. When would it be enough for her? What sort of person was she becoming? Sometimes the highlight of her day was thinking up things to do to Lucius while he slept. She and Severus had even competed to see whose nightmare had more of an effect on him. And then she realized it had been at least a week since Severus had used the dream stone.

Had they gone too far? She hated Lucius for what he'd done to her. Nothing was the same. He'd used her, lied to her, nearly killed her father--the list was quite long. Her body and mind had been violated. "No, it's not going too far," she decided. "He deserves this."

And then her thoughts drifted to Draco. She and Severus had received an owl from Harry, asking them to quickly meet him at Grimmauld Place. He and Ron had found Draco and had brought him back home to England. Just thinking about his state helped her regain her anger with Narcissa Malfoy, for the woman had been helping her husband keep him in such a state.

"Hermione, Snape," Harry said, beckoning them inside. "Here, in the kitchen." He led them through the narrow hallway to the kitchen.

"Draco," Severus said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

At the table sat Draco Malfoy, holding a cup of steaming hot chocolate in front of his face. He looked horrible: dark shadows beneath his pale eyes, a few days' beard growth scattered about his pointy chin in patches, and his hair sticking up in odd directions.

"Malfoy, are you all right?"

"He's a bit tired and a little confused," Harry said, "but he'll be all right. I thought maybe the professor would know what we could give him to help him along."

Hermione watched as Severus sat next to Draco and used his wand to check him over, its tip glowing in various shades.

"I know exactly what he needs. Hermione? Coming?"

"All right."

She was going to ask to stay, but she saw how his eyes travelled over to Ron, who'd not said anything, only stared the entire time. She knew it wouldn't be a good idea.

Looking back on it now, she wondered why she'd been so passive about some things. Was she not an adult? Couldn't he trust her to make the right decision on her own? That day had been long, but after he'd administered a couple of potions to Draco, things began to look up. Malfoy had even regained some of his bite, and for the first time, she was glad to see his pointy-faced sneer--after that scrabbly beard had been shaved off.

"Malfoy? Do you have a moment?" Hermione asked. "To speak alone."

"What is it?"

She looked at the others and lowered her voice, hoping they were too busy talking to hear their conversation. "I just wanted to say that I'm sorry I didn't realize that you were trying to help me that day. I thought..."

"You thought I just didn't want you there."

"Yes." Her face heated as she thought of his father's touch on her skin. "I'm sorry for more than just that, Draco."

He held up a hand. "Granger, I don't think I want to hear about it."

She nodded. "Fair enough. Thank you. I'll never forget this."

"Back when the Wizengamot trial took place, I meant what I'd said. Maybe... maybe we can be friends even. I mean, you are married to Snape. We're practically family, in an odd sort of way."

"I'd like that."

He'd made a report against his father, but not his mother, claiming she'd been hoodwinked in believing her father's lies, but Hermione felt he just wanted to spare her. "Just as Severus does," she said quietly, wishing the daylight would have lasted longer. The beautiful place they lived sparkled with life when bathed in the sun's light. It took away her doubts, made her happy.

I am happy, she thought. All marriages have rough spots as well as good ones. Her parents' marriage was testimony to that. She expected that her life with Severus was bound to not be as easy as other relationships, as they were tossed into it feet first, learning about each other along the way. But there was something that didn't quite fit. She wished that she could Floo Harry and Ron and talk to them. It would all be so much easier if she could confide in them and get their advice--not that she'd take it, but hearing it all the same would be a comfort.

She'd been upset at first that she hadn't been told they were searching for him, but then she'd realized that things weren't the same any longer. She was no longer part of a trio. Just being around Ron was very uncomfortable. More than once, she'd looked up to find him watching her through pained blue eyes, and it didn't help that Severus hovered about suspiciously, as if trying to detect betrayal. The first time she'd seen him had been horrible for them all.

Mrs. Weasley nervously wrung her hands. "Hermione, Severus, hello."

"Are we not to enter?" Severus asked when she didn't move.

"I'm sorry," she said, stepping aside. "Please come in."

Suddenly, Hermione found herself enveloped in a tight, motherly embrace. The affection brought tears to her eyes, and she felt a pang of loss. "I still care about you like a second mother, Mrs. Weasley," she said sadly. "Always will."

"I feel the same," the woman replied, pulling back to look Hermione in the eye. "All right?"

Hermione nodded, and they both eyed Severus. He seemed to be ignoring him. "Ginny invited us over. Said she had something--Ron, hello."

His lanky form appeared behind his mother, his red hair hanging about his face looking unwashed. "Hermione," he said softly before giving himself a small shake. "Congratulations are in order, I expect."

"And for you as well," she replied.

"Why, thank you, Weasley," Severus said, stepping closer to Hermione and putting his hand on the small of her back. "Potter and your sister, where are they?"

Ron glared at Severus and fled out the back door, never answering. They heard a crack of Apparition moments later. And then Geri entered the room.

"Where 'ees Ron?" she asked, looking at Molly first, then to Hermione and Severus. The woman's eyes widened and then narrowed. "You! What are you doing here?"

Before Hermione could answer, Molly said, "She was invited."

"But... why?"

"Dear, you're just tired. Perhaps a nice nap would--"

"Napping! Always it's rest with you. Where 'ees Ron?"

"For some reason," Severus said, assuming an innocent air, "he stormed out the back door."

"Severus, please," Hermione began. The woman was very attractive, and she could see how Ron might have been drawn to her, but she wondered why Harry and Ginny seemed to think there were problems. As far as she had been told, Ron had vowed to make good on his marriage to the woman, for she'd truly fallen in love with him--at least as far as they knew anyway.

"What? Can't a man accept another's congratulations?" Severus' expression turned to one of glee, and he arched an eyebrow at Geri. "I expect Weasley to be down the pub having a pint or two."

Hermione shook her head in frustration, uncertain if she should cry or be angry. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley. Please tell Ginny and Harry that I'll meet them at Grimmauld Place at some point tomorrow. We're going to leave. I don't think..." She shrugged.

Mrs. Weasley nodded. "I'll have her owl you."

"Thanks."

"Are you certain?" Severus asked. "We are here and might as well--"

"Hermione!" Harry greeted. "Just in time."

They'd wanted to announce their decision of their pending wedding date, and both had been adamant about Hermione being part of it, even with her new husband. Ron's wife had sulked and gone upstairs, and he'd never returned. She assumed it had been too soon for him. And really, for it as well. They'd both done things that weren't right, and they'd both made choices they would have to live with. She was envious that Harry and Ginny would have the wedding she'd always wanted: friends, family, happiness, love. Would Severus want to have something like that one day?

"What are you smiling about?" asked her husband's silky voice.

"Thinking of Harry's upcoming wedding."

"Ah." He was quiet for a moment. "About earlier--"

"I didn't mean that... those harsh words," she said, rising and moving towards him. "I am happy with you--now. I just blame him for making a fool of me and for taking choices out of my hands."

"You had a choice, Hermione," he said coolly. "That's something you seem to forget. Often." He placed a hand on either side of her face. "Is it Weasley?"

"Of course not! I don't want him. Not the way I want you."

"Not sexually, damn it!"

"I'm saying that I'm really falling in love with you," she said, stepping back in frustration. "But is that what you really want from me? Do you want more?"

"I want what you want," he said, his voice clipped.

"What kind of rubbish answer is that?"

"Do you not remember what you told me?" he said, stepping closer and placing his hands on her face again. "I want ~~to~~ everything."

A tremor went through her body. He *did* want it all. "I love you," she said. "More than I thought I could. It's not been easy for me--for either of us--and sometimes I wonder and have doubts, but I couldn't imagine being without you. I wouldn't want to."

His lips brushed hers softly. When he pulled back to gaze into her eyes, he had a triumphant expression on his face. He stooped slightly and slid an arm under her knees, easily lifting her up and carrying her over to the settee, obviously intent on taking her right there in the sitting room.

And she wanted it. Wanted him.

As always, the pull to have him and be had washed over her.

"Severus..." she whispered in surrender, forgetting that she'd intended to hear his own confession of feelings.

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*Lucius Malfoy cowered before the Dark Lord in the dank corridor, his entire body shaking.*

*"Kiss the hem of my robes," hissed his master.*

*"Please, you must forgive me," he begged as a shaky hand reached for the robe. "I only had the best interest--"*

*"For yourself!"*

*A hand gripping a wand slashed through the air, causing Malfoy to writhe and scream in agony, his legs seemingly folding and snapping back and forth, the cracking of his bones heard loudly.*

*All the while there was manic laughter filling the air.*

*Laughter of a woman.*

*Catching sight of a mirror, the Dark Lord froze... Hermione Granger stared out from the reflection.*

"Nooo!" Hermione yelled, sitting up in bed, her hair sweaty and plastered to her head.

Severus had not woken and remained asleep at her side, curled away from her. The steady rise and fall of his body told her he'd not heard her. Swallowing, she slid a hand beneath her pillow in search of the dream stone. It wasn't where she'd placed it before bed.

Gone.

*Where is it?* she thought frantically, using both hands to lift the pillow and search the bedding. Then she stopped and gazed at her sleeping husband. Why had he not woken when she'd cried out? Their bonding should have forced his awareness of her need. Had he used the dream stone against her to show her she was going too far with her need for revenge against the Malfoys? She shuddered at the memory.

"You wouldn't..." she whispered. Impossible. Not after the way he'd made love to her that evening--once before dinner, which had been intense and rushed, and then twice after they'd gone to bed, both times slow and deliberate. But before she'd fallen asleep, he had brought up the Malfoys again, hadn't he?

*"Lucius is ready to go to the Ministry to address your father's charges."*

*"Oh? And is he going to admit what he did?"*

*"Of course not."*

*She sighed in frustration. Would the man never learn his lesson?*

*"I've accepted a dinner invitation to their home."*

*"When are you going back there?" she asked, allowing him to take her hand and squeeze it.*

*"We are to join them tomorrow evening."*

*"Severus, no, I don't want to... Really, no."*

*"Hermione, we have to do this. He'll be suspicious otherwise; he'll think I'm not doing my part in things."*

*"Wait, are you saying that he's still holding on to his plans after all this?" She felt as if she'd been slapped in the face. Was all her work for nothing? Why wasn't Malfoy breaking?*

*"I'm keeping up pretenses of course. He'd become suspicious if I weren't anxious about it, so yes, I do talk to him about it a little. However, he changes the subject rather quickly most of the time."*

*"I don't know..."*

*His hand tightened around hers and his other drifted over her chest and cupped a breast. "I am quite lucky to have you." Severus' nose nuzzled her hair lightly. "Sleep on it. Fair enough?"*

*"All right." She smiled in the darkness and placed her other hand over the one resting on her breast, interlacing her fingers with his.*

Hermione's mind screamed one word repeatedly: no. If he'd done this...

Ever so slowly, she moved a hand over to slide beneath his lower pillow and felt as much as she could before being unable to continue. It wasn't there--at least not on that side. She had to know or it would gnaw away at her mind. Hermione reached for her wand on the nightstand, but it fell out of her reach onto the floor. She quickly twisted and reached down to grasp it, finding something else instead. The dream stone.

Relief flooded her. Severus hadn't used the stone against her. It must have fallen when she'd thrashed about in bed. For the first time in a long time, she'd fallen asleep without tormenting Lucius, and after the dream she'd just had, she supposed she could give him one night's peace. She hadn't the energy to do anything anyway. Slipping the stone back beneath her pillow and placing her wand back on the nightstand, she pulled the duvet up over her and snuggled closer to her sleeping husband, but sleep wouldn't find her for a while. She had to make a decision about dinner at Malfoy Manor.

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"I want her to pay for what she's done to me. You should want her to pay for what she's done to you," the woman said slyly, hoping to coax the other woman into her scheme.

"Well, those Ministry blokes, they said it weren't him. They got proof, they have."

"Mrs. Dearborn, surely you know that anyone who could do*this*," she pointed to her scarred face, "and get away with it, could pay off Healers and Ministry officials. Hermione Granger-Snape has gone too far this time." She flashed a smile that she hoped would set the woman at ease, making certain her gold tooth caught the wandlight.

"Ah, I don't know 'bout that."

"You need the Galleons. How are you going to support your baby?"

"They told me to keep my nose out of trouble, the Ministry. I expect I should listen to them."

"Well then... how disappointing. I thought we had something in common." She shrugged. "Here, take this quill. When you're ready to talk again and have changed your mind, just say my name. It will bring you right to me." She sneered slightly and looked around at the woman's cramped home. "You'll be needing me soon I'd wager."

"Go on, Miss Skeeter. I almost got in enough trouble already with someone running from the Ministry. They got alerts out on you, too, now. Don't want nobody to see you here."

The woman looked down at the quill once she was alone, thinking about how she truly did need the Galleons if she was to make ends meet when the baby came. Even if her memories had been manipulated, she'd thought for sure Snape had been her man and would have been the father to her unborn child. That hadn't been an unpleasant fantasy while it had lasted. She thought of Hermione Snape and the way she'd held onto her man at the Ministry. It would be hard pulling one over on that one. She had fire in her, that was for sure.

Dotty placed a hand on her swollen stomach and looked around her dingy home. It was high time she did something for herself. Ever since her brother had disappeared all those years before, she'd not ventured out much, hoping that being unseen would keep her safe. But that Death Eater had gone to her anyway. Why? Had he known her brother? Had he had something to do with his disappearance?

She frowned. Why would she want to raise a child for a man like that? It might be better off being raised by folks who could give it a better name. Dotty sighed. "I'll always be known as that woman who was hoodwinked by a Death Eater." Something needed to be done. Her eyes found the quill again.

For now, she'd put it in a safe place and think about her options.

SW's notes: I'm sorry it's been so long, my friends. Most of you know that we had a hurricane that blew through here a couple of weeks ago (lost a small part of my roof, some trees, some shingles, my swimming pool, a few other things), and I still don't have my cable internet. I had to go and buy a wireless Air Card for my laptop. Let me just say that it's not the most trusty connection, and it's very uncomfortable to type on this. I'm so spoiled for my desktop and my Microsoft Word. :(

But I digress. I apologize for the length of time you've had to wait. If anyone still remembers this story, I hope you'll continue reading along, as the updates should be regular again. It's nearly done after all. Cheers!

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple

as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1 please.

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak and to Charmed_Nay for reading this over!

Severus stood on the hill facing the dawn with his head thrown back, his eyes closed, and his arms extended. The cool wind blew about and lifted his black locks, tossing them this way and that. If Hermione had been simply a Muggle who happened upon him, she might think him to be a sorcerer--someone able to summon the sun at his command. It was truly a sight to behold, and even being a witch and practicing magic didn't stop her from feeling awe. She felt a slight pull, as if she were being lured to him by an invisible rope. Slowly, she made her way to him, and he made no move when she stopped at his side, just continuing to breathe in the fresh morning air, saying nothing.

Her heart began thumping quickly, and she could feel a powerful rush flowing through her body. So much that she closed her eyes against it and steadied herself by tossing out her arms as he'd done. The sensation was unlike anything she'd ever felt before; it was everything good: like the satisfied feeling after the peak of an orgasm, happiness, adrenaline.

Power.

I could do anything I want. I could own the world.

Knowledge.

I can bring back the dead.

Possession.

Severus Snape belongs to me--never Lily. Mine. Mine.

Hermione shook her head, stumbled, and fell on her arse, feeling as though a spell had been broken. "What the...?" she mumbled.

"Did you feel it, too?" Severus asked quietly, head still tilted towards the sky.

"Is that how you feel all the time?"

It was then that he looked at her, and from the angle she was sitting, she gasped slightly and began to blink away the vision before her. The way the sun's dawning light haloed around his head was brilliant, though it left his face in the shadows, and for a moment or two, she thought that his eyes had been completely black--as they were when he'd first returned to her from the Otherworld.

"Your eyes..." she began, but then she realized that they were normal--whites included. "For a moment there, I thought I saw--you know, black eyes, like a demon, like when you first came back."

"I'm no demon, Hermione."

She took his outstretched hand and allowed him to pull her up. "I know that," she said softly, "but for a moment there, Muggle things I remember from my childhood, before I learned the truth about magic, came to mind." Hermione nestled against his chest and inhaled his fresh, woodsy scent. "I felt so powerful just now."

"Yes, well, considering I'm supposed to be the next Dark Lord, you are very powerful indeed, considering you have my heart. So many men have fallen because of the woman at their sides."

"Do I?" She'd wanted this confession for a while, had even heard it before. He said things, and she believed him, but later, upon reflection, it always felt as if he hadn't truly said anything at all.

"Don't you?"

"Severus! Stop that!" she said, annoyed. "Can't you just be honest with me?"

"I thought I was being honest. What's got into you? You seem shook up."

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just feel edgy about going to the Malfoys' home."

"Have you decided on it?"

"Yes, I will go with you."

He nodded. "Good." A light kiss was placed on her forehead. "Now tell me... what did you feel just now?"

Slightly embarrassed, she diverted her eyes and pretended interest in his chest, rubbing her face against the soft fabric of his robes. What would he think? "Besides powerful and feeling as though I could do anything I put my mind to, I felt very possessive of you. Jealous even."

"Jealous of me?"

"No. Of... Lily."

His arms tightened around her even more. "You are my life now, Hermione. Don't think about her."

"It's hard not to sometimes. She's in a place I want to be." She pushed away from him, feeling unreasonably angry. "I don't want her there! You should want only me. You should love me."

"And I do. There's not a woman alive that I would dare look twice at."

She shook her head sadly. "See? Not a woman alive." With a sigh, she added, "That says it all, doesn't it?"

When she turned to go back down to their home, he roughly grabbed her shoulders and halted her progress, his lips against her ear. "You gave me what she never would. You have my loyalty. Dead or alive, Hermione. It's you."

Her stomach tingled as his tongue flicked over her earlobe and dipped behind it. "Oh..."

His hands were upon her, each fondling a breast, fingers caressing her nipples through her blouse. When she felt his stiff erection grind against her, she moaned and felt

her center heat and dampen.

"Do you want me to prove it to you? Shall I show you what you never seem to hear?"

"Yes, yes, I do."

And then she was being lowered to the damp hillside grass, a comfortable invisible barrier keeping her from actually touching the ground, and he was behind her, lifting her robes and skirt. The only thing she could concentrate on for a moment was the chirping of a bird in the distance, causing her to wonder if it watched them and what it thought.

"Ah, Severus," she cried out as he slid into her from behind, making her bury her head against the pillowy cushion beneath her as she used her forearms to steady herself and pushed back against him, wanting all of him inside of her. The bird was forgotten, and the only thing that mattered was the powerful wizard behind her, what he was pouring into their frantic coupling--all heat and passion and wild abandon.

The beat of her heart thrummed in her ears and was joined by the beating of his--oh the lust she felt, the need! She would never get enough of him, never wanted to be away from him! How had she lived without him all her years?

"Hermi... ohhh-ne," he cried out, finding culmination and slowly chasing away the aftershocks with spastic thrusts until he was done. He slumped over her, putting his weight completely on her back, nosing away the hair on her neck and placing kisses and nibbles on her heated flesh. " *That* is what you do to me."

And though she hadn't had an orgasm, she felt completely sated and reassured in her relationship. What she'd been feeling while they'd coupled had been what he'd felt at the same time. Such was the way of the bond. Hermione simply sighed and grasped one of his wandering hands in hers, bringing it to her lips to kiss it. "I don't know what's got into me. Those things I said, I shouldn't have."

Severus moved off of her, flicking his wand lazily to clean them before pulling up his underpants. "Sometimes a relationship is all-consuming." He smirked down at her and smugly said, "It feels good to be needed in such a way, I must admit."

"It does, doesn't it?" she said while fixing her knickers.

"Come. Let's spend a quiet day together before we have to prepare for the Malfoys."

"All right. I was thinking of expanding the garden. Interested?"

"Quite."

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Dotty looked around the dark room suspiciously. "Rita? Are you here?"

She'd spent the last eight hours thinking about the woman's invitation before finally coming to a decision. She did need the money to help with raising her child, and she definitely needed to leave England. It seemed to be the only way to raise the child without having his name tainted by her actions. Things would have been different if her brother hadn't disappeared. She might have been inclined to do more with her life. Losing her parents and then him so close together had been horrible, something she wasn't certain she'd recovered from.

There was a thud outside the door, and the crack beneath it filled with light as someone neared. With a creak, it opened. "There you are," Rita said.

"What happened to you?" Dotty asked, gaping at Skeeter.

The other woman looked terrible--dark circles under her eyes, hair a mess, and clothes rumped. "This," she spat, "isn't the easiest of places to live, but it's Unplottable, so Aurors won't find me. It'll have to do." She grinned then and flicked her wand at a nearby lamp, instantly bringing light to the dank room. "Decided to help me, have you?"

Cheeks reddening, Dotty said, "Now, see, I don't want you to think badly of me, but you're right I do need the money."

"Excellent. I have a plan."

"What plan?"

Rita smirked. "A plan to destroy the Snapes, that's what. I'll have that little bitch sorry she ever messed with me." She pointed to her face. "Having the word BITCH spelled out on one's face can make her bitter, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't like it either, come to that."

Growling in disgust, Rita said, "You sure are *dotty*, aren't you? I expect that's why it was easy for that--what was that?" Rita looked around in a panic, pointing her wand here and there.

"I don't like being made fun of, Rita."

"Did you hear that? Shuffling... footsteps."

"As I was saying, I hope you won't think badly of me, but I decided to turn you in for the reward."

"You what?!"

Before Rita could level her wand on the woman, a jet of red light shot at her, seemingly from thin air, causing her to fall in a Stunned heap. Harry Potter revealed himself, placing his Invisibility Cloak aside. "You did a good thing, Miss Dearborn," he said.

"I hope they'll give me the reward money. Do you think they will?"

"Yeah," he said with a nod. '

At that moment, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Ron Weasley burst through the door.

"Got her?" Ron asked. "Oh, bloody hell, it smells in here! What's that stench?"

"Good work, Harry." Kingsley then nodded at Dotty. "You've done a good thing. This cooperation will go a long way with clearing your name."

"Thanks, Minister," Harry said.

"I'm right glad to hear it," Dotty replied. "I'll be wanting to leave soon, so..."

Still holding his nose, Ron asked, "'So...' what?"



"Er, she's concerned about the reward money for Skeeter's capture."

"We'll settle up on that first thing in the morning when Gringotts reopens," Kingsley said.

The woman smiled brightly for the first time, feeling as though things would be fine after all.

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"Severus, look at this!" Hermione said excitedly, handing him the newspaper.

He took it, and his expression changed to one of amusement. "I'll be damned."

The Evening Prophet

Rita Skeeter Found, Sent to Azkaban

Minister Shacklebolt released a statement earlier this evening informing us that Rita Skeeter, illegal Animagus on the run, has been apprehended, thanks to a tip by Dotty Dearborn. You'll recognize this woman's name as the one who'd accused Severus Snape of fathering her child (see page 3 for more details). Skeeter is being charged with not registering her Animagus form, fleeing a Ministry summons, conspiracy to harm others, bribery, and resisting arrest. Other charges may be added after further investigation....

Severus tossed the paper aside and smirked as the Rita picture on the front cover tried to break away from the two Aurors escorting her out of the Ministry. "I hope she gets what she deserves."

"So do I."

Hermione grinned, but the nervousness in the pit of her stomach made itself known, causing her smile to falter. "I guess we'd better go," she said softly.

"You have nothing to fear, my wife."

"I just hate being in the same room--with either of them!"

"This is a necessary sacrifice on your part. Remember the plan and stay the course."

She nodded. "You know I will."

An arm slid around her waist, and she felt the slight tug of Disapparation. Taking a moment to compose herself, she stepped away from her husband. "Ready."

With a hand at the small of her back, he guided her up the back path to Malfoy Manor.

The door opened immediately, and Hermione was surprised to see that Bozzy wasn't greeting them. Her eyes took in Narcissa's poised stance, unmussed hair, and artfully made up face.

"Good evening, Severus," she said, adding, "Hermione," as an afterthought.

"Narcissa," he said, bowing slightly. "I hope we aren't too early."

"Not at all. Come in."

Following her husband and the haughty woman, she glanced around, noticing that nothing had changed since she'd last been there. *Since I practically moved in here*, she thought bitterly, and then remembering why she'd come to the Manor--not just to help Snape but because she'd thought Ron had betrayed her--she felt her pulse quicken as anger and adrenaline set in. *What I wouldn't give to hex Lucius.*

"All right?" Severus asked, disrupting her thoughts.

"Yes," she answered, voice clipped.

"We'll get right to it," Narcissa said, "as Lucius will likely retire earlier than normal." She shrugged. "He's trying that new Dreamless Draught you brewed for him. I do hope it works. He's utterly stressed out--even losing some of his hair, though he'd never admit it."

Hermione's head turned slowly, and she met her husband's dark eyes. He'd not told her about brewing anything for Lucius. He seemed to know what was on her mind, for he mouthed "later" quickly. Would the draught work for Malfoy? Why was Severus undermining her by doing this... secretly at that.

"You may sit next to Lucius," Narcissa said, nodding to Hermione. "I'll take the chair next to Severus."

"I think not. I'll sit with my husband."

The woman blinked and then smirked. "Of course, if you must."

"I must," she bit out, seating herself in the chair Narcissa had been standing behind. She dared not look at the man who sat a couple of chairs away at the head of the table. She preferred to have a bit of wine first. "I shouldn't trust their food or drink," she muttered.

"What was that, my dear?" Severus asked, taking his seat and leaning towards her.

"Nothing."

"I assure you it's quite safe," he said, as though he'd heard her after all. "This will pass soon enough."

"I hope so." She took a tiny sip from the wineglass that appeared before her.

That's when Lucius chose to speak. "Long time, no see, Hermione." He chuckled. "And what's this? No greeting?"

She closed her eyes and counted to ten as she pretended to wipe the corners of her mouth. When done, she looked at him and nodded by way of greeting. "I'm not feeling well this evening."

There. That should be enough. She hadn't been rude or hostile, as she wished to be, so hopefully things would progress and he might take the hint that she didn't feel up for conversation.

"Pity. You live with a Potions master, and he's not given you anything for your malady? What is this world coming to?" His next words were addressed to Severus. "Can you not take care of your wife?"

Severus' eyes narrowed slightly. "I believe what goes on in my home is none of your concern."

"I agree," Narcissa piped up. "So, Hermione, how's married life?"

Hermione didn't appreciate the lilt of the woman's lips and knew she was being baited. "If I didn't like it, I'd be elsewhere," she said, glaring slightly. "What's your excuse?"

"I beg your pardon!" Narcissa sat back as if she'd been slapped. "Do you presume to think there is something wrong with my marriage?"

"I don't presume anything. Just asking a question." Now it was Hermione's turn to smirk, and even though she felt the warning tap of Severus' hand beneath the table, she couldn't help adding, "You were off in France while your husband was--"

"Aren't we supposed to be dining?" Severus blurted, interrupting Hermione.

An angry Narcissa scooted back in her chair and coolly said, "I shall be back in a moment."

Once his wife had left the room, Lucius turned his cold grey eyes back on Hermione. "I should think you'd not bring up such things... as we discussed."

She then wondered if Narcissa truly didn't know the extent of what had gone on, but surely she did. "You're right," she agreed.

"Excellent. Now then..." His voice trailed off as his eyes strayed to the tip of his cane, which was casually placed on the table. A long strand of blond hair lay curled on top of it. He quickly flicked the hair to the floor and cleared his throat, though two slightly red splotches burned on his cheeks. "... am famished."

His demeanor had changed completely. It was as though the hair had reminded him that he wasn't the man he used to be--not when he lived through nightmares and worried about his old master returning from the grave. Hermione felt smug. He deserved what he got. She might eventually forgive him, however unlikely that might be, but she would never forget. Ever.

Crack!

"Bozzy's mistress is feeling unwell," said the elf. "Dinner is being waiting while Bozzy's mistress takes a moment to herself."

With that said, he was gone with another crack.

"I shall go and check on her," Lucius said shakily.

"No, I'll do it," Hermione offered. "I was the one who was ugly." She made certain her voice sounded sincere, wanting to leave the room and be away from Lucius. And deep down, she did feel a little guilty, but not very much.

"That might not be a good idea," Severus said.

"No, I think she should. Cissy would appreciate it," Lucius said, widening his eyes at Severus.

Hermione hadn't missed the gesture and knew the man wanted a word with her husband. She stood. "Is she in the master suite?"

Lucius regained a little of his composure and said, "Yes, you remember the way, don't you?" There was a lewd look in his eyes.

She didn't waste her breath replying, and any newly developing guilt she'd felt was washed away. The man would never change. He'd always be an arrogant, hateful git who thought himself above punishment. Once she left the room and walked a few steps away, she doubled back to listen at the door. Unfortunately, she heard her husband's silky voice say, "*Muffliato*."

"Damn it," she whispered.

"Come here. I want to show you something." It was Narcissa.

Hermione followed the woman to a small tapestry and then slipped behind it into a small room. She realized immediately that the room was placed there for spying on those dining. She could clearly see Lucius and Severus, and amazingly, she could hear their every word. "But his spell..."

"Doesn't work in here."

"Does Severus know about this room?"

"I think not. I'm the one who made this. I doubt even Lucius knows." Her voice was soft, but it quickly turned cold. "I wouldn't share this with you, but I don't appreciate that you feel you can come into my home and treat me disrespectfully. I *want* you to hear what they say. I *want* you to know that your life isn't perfect, as you'd like to believe. As you think you are!"

"I never said that--"

"Be silent," the woman ordered, nodding to the men. "Listen to what your *husband* thinks of you."

"Yes, well, you'll have to work on her attitude, Severus. She seems a little testy still."

Severus snorted. "She's a pain in the arse, especially lately. Always griping about something."

"Harpy."

"Indeed."

Both men chuckled and raised their glasses to their lips for drinks.

The blood drained from Hermione's face. Of course she knew that Severus was playing a part in front of Lucius, but she didn't like being spoken about in such a way. And then there was the small part of her that wondered if he wasn't speaking the truth.

"However do you keep her in line?"

"Ah, but you see, she's quite passionate."

"Mmm. That she is. I could feel it beneath the surface, but she wouldn't give in to me." He took another sip of wine. "You must have something I don't."

"But of course," Severus said with a smirk. "And then there is the bond. I won't take all the credit."

"So things are working out just as you planned," Lucius said smugly.

"As we planned," Severus said.

"Right you are."

"The potion should be ready by the next blue moon."

"Which is...?"

"Five Saturdays from next."

"Excellent." Lucius shifted a little and asked, "Severus, have you not felt a presence lately?"

"Are you on about the Dark Lord again? I've told you no. He's dead."

Lucius nodded. "I detest feeling this way."

"I don't blame you." Severus placed his empty glass on the table and tapped it with his finger to have it refilled, though he didn't pick it back up. "I've gained Potter's trust, so that shouldn't be a problem. It seems he wants to be my friend." He snickered lightly. "Troublesome brat."

"Now, now, don't tell me that boy is the reason you truly chose dear Hermione as your mate, and here I thought you'd gone sentimental because she reminded you of Lily Evans."

"Lucky for us she's quite close to him, isn't it?" Severus said, eyes glittering. "That's a plus, of course, but my desire for her is much deeper than that."

"And when she realizes what you're doing? What will you do then?"

"She's already coming 'round to my way of thinking. The bond between us is deepening each day--only a few words *oractions* on my part convinces her to go along with me."

Hermione backed away from the glass. It was true, wasn't it? He was not lying to Lucius. He couldn't be. She thought about his words earlier.

That is what you do to me.

Was she nothing more to him than a possession after all? Where were the words of love? Why hadn't she realized it at that moment? If he loved her, he would have showed her in a different way. He would have placed her down gently and slowly made love to her, bringing her to culmination and whispering words of love in her ear. Instead, he'd frantically taken her from behind--possessing her, marking her as his. Lust. Not love.

*Oh God! My first instinct was right!*she thought as more of his words came back to her, slapping her in the face.

There's not a woman alive that I would dare look twice at.

And now he planned to use Harry for something. What potion was he brewing? And he'd wanted her to stop her revenge on Lucius! He was even trying to help Lucius escape the dreams.

"Oh, no," she whispered.

"Oh, yes," Narcissa said quietly, causing Hermione to remember she was not alone.

She looked at the woman and cringed. It was obvious that the woman enjoyed causing her pain. "Haven't you done enough to me already?" Hermione said softly, moving towards the exit.

"You are nothing. Just a filthy little Mudblood whore who's a means to an end. I'm sure Severus' little infatuation with you will eventually run its course, and when you're no longer useful, you'll be cast off like the dirt you are."

Hermione slapped the woman instinctively, wanting to hurt her in the only way she could. When she made to leave the room, Narcissa stopped her with a raised wand and threatening glare.

"I can't let you leave with this knowledge. I wouldn't want you to give away my secret."

Reaching for her own wand, Hermione quickly found herself disarmed. "You wouldn't dare!" she yelled.

"Of course I would," Narcissa said, moving closer. "Before I do this, I want you to know that I burned everything in the room you slept in while you were here. I made Lucius get checked over by the family physician, too. No telling what little diseases your lot might carry."

"Nothing worse than yours," Hermione retorted, trying to think of a plan.

Smirking, Narcissa said, "Did you enjoy fucking my husband? How did it feel to have someone like Lucius in your bed? Did it make you feel special?"

"It was nothing to write home about."

"Just so you know, he said you were quite boring, lying there and not even trying to please him. I told him, 'What more would you expect from someone like that?' He did mention you were much better whilst under the influence of a potion... Pity you thought yourself to be dreaming."

"You're disgusting! How could you let your husband do such a thing?"

"It's for the greater good. Once Severus is in place, the Malfoys will be right where we should be."

"Nothing but puppets once again." She sneered. "And what about Draco? How could you do that to him?"

"Do what? He's been sick! Lucius and I were trying to help him," she said indignantly.

"Do you believe your own lies? Or are you believing the lies of your husband?" Hermione edged closer, noting the woman was shaking with rage.

"My husband would never hurt Draco purposely."

"Keeping him drugged and making him take vows are not painless! It's got him so bloody confused, he's lost a piece of himself! You know it's bad when it's a relief to see him acting the prat he used to be! That is your fault. What kind of a mother are you?"

"You insignificant, little bitch! You're nothing and will never be anything! You'll never know the bond a mother has with a child!"

"I will indeed! When I'm good and ready, and I bloody well won't treat him like you've treated Draco!"

"Severus will never give you children. He just wants your body only--for whatever ridiculous reason--but he wouldn't want you to soil the Prince line by birthing dirty heirs! His Muggle father tainted it enough already!"

"After hearing that," she nodded to the window, which was darkening and blocking off her view, "I wouldn't want him to! Sod all of you!"

Narcissa raised her wand higher and began to mouth the words of her spell just as Hermione lunged for her.

"*Oblivate!*" she shouted.

Hermione tripped and slid on the floor, hitting her head as she did so. "Ohhhh, that hurts," she moaned. "What happened?"

Narcissa looked at her through narrowed eyes before extending a hand down. "You seem to have hit your head. I found you snooping around in here. What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. I thought I could find you and apologize for what I'd said."

"And you dropped your wand on contact with the floor. Here." She handed it to Hermione. "Our husbands are waiting for us. Come."

Hermione placed a hand on her head and rubbed the swelling bump. "I don't feel like eating, I don't think."

"Perhaps Severus can get you something. I'm sure we have a selection of pain potions here."

"Ladies," Severus greeted. "What took so long? I was about to search for you."

"Ah, no need to fib, my friend. We were about to ask Bozzy to find you," Lucius said, eyes glinting.

"Your clumsy wife slipped and hit her head," Narcissa said. "I found her in one of the paths to our dungeons. Snooping, I expect."

"I wasn't snooping! I told you I was looking for you."

"As I said before, you know the way," Lucius said. "Curious, that."

"Hermione?" Severus asked, seemingly worried. "All right?" He stood and touched her head gently, moving her hair out of the way to place his fingers at the source of her pain. "Are you hurting?"

"I think I might Disapparate home instead of staying for dinner. I just don't feel well." The bump seemed to have grown.

"We can leave."

"No, stay. Enjoy whatever they've planned for dinner. I'll take something at home. Really." She hadn't wanted to be there in the first place.

"I'll walk you out then."

She looked over to Lucius and Narcissa. "I appreciate the invite. Perhaps some other time."

"Perhaps," Lucius said.

Narcissa added, a wicked smile upon her painted lips, "Do be more careful in the future."

Severus helped her out of her chair and guided her outside. "Are you sure about this? I could Side-Along you."

"I'm fine."

"I don't want you to get Splinched."

"I said I'm fine," she snapped.

"Very well," he said brusquely, eyeing her oddly. "I shall see you in an hour or so."

She Disapparated before he could incline his head to kiss her.

Sadly, she looked around the grounds of the home she'd been sharing with Severus. How she had loved it there. "And I won't be here... you bastard," she mumbled tearfully, thankful that Narcissa's curse had missed her when she'd slipped. "What a fool I've been!"

AN: Well, that's not good, is it? Haha

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter One.

Thanks to ladyinthecloak for looking this over—as always! And also to Charmed_Nay, who will take a look at it eventually as well (she's totally busy at the moment!).

Harry looked at Ron and shrugged his shoulders helplessly, eyes wide, as Hermione leaned into his embrace and cried. He had no idea what had brought her to them, but she mumbled things like "Severus" and "hate Malfoy" and "should have known." He was fairly certain that she'd had a fight with her husband, and it was obviously bad enough for her to leave him—if the packed trunk floating behind her was anything to go by.

"I'll kill him!" Ron said suddenly, bolting for the door.

"Ron, stop!" Harry said, unable to move away from his sobbing friend. Luckily, she began trying to control her bawling and mumbled something incoherent.

"What's that?" Ron asked, stopping and backtracking to them. "You'd better tell me what's happened," he insisted. "You're leaving a lot to the imagination here, Hermione."

She pulled away from Harry, sniffing and wiping at her cheeks. "It's over!"

"Did he hurt you?" Ron asked dangerously.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What did he do?"

"I over—" She shuddered slightly. "I overheard him talking to Lucius about me. I don't think he loves me."

It seemed like she wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come out right, causing her expression to darken.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed in frustration. "Let's just say it wasn't very flattering!"

"What'd the bastard say?" Ron asked.

Harry was curious despite himself. Had Snape divulged something about their sexual life? Maybe it wasn't very flattering. That would sure upset a woman*Hell*, he thought, feeling mortified, *I don't expect I would like it if Ginny told anyone that kind of stuff either, especially if it wasn't very flattering.*

"He called me a pain in the arse!" she ranted.

Ron mumbled, "He's got a point, you know," slyly, causing Harry to shush him. Luckily, Hermione seemed to not hear, lost in her own thoughts.

"Lucius, that bastard, called me a harpy! Severus agreed," she said, seething now.

Ron snorted, unflinching his fists. "Bloody hell, Hermione, I thought the git hit you or something, and here I was going to... All right? You don't look so good."

Harry realized that Ron was right. She was pale, sweaty, and clutched at her chest. "Hermione? What is it?"

She panted slightly. "I don't know. Oh—blast! The stupid bond!"

"What, can't you be away from him at all?"

"Of course I can, you idiot," she grumbled, breathing as deeply as she could to calm whatever pain she was feeling. "It's just that I'm leaving him for good, and the magic must know and... disapprove."

"Oh, right," Ron said dumbly, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

"What can we do?" he asked.

"Harry, I want to lie down. It'll be better if I try to relax. I'm not going to let this drive me back. It's over. I won't be forced to go back to someone who doesn't love me."

"Love you? But I thought..." Things had been great between them as far as he knew, surprising everyone. He would have taken an oath that Snape loved his friend. It seemed to be all over the man's face when he watched her while he thought nobody to be looking.

"No," she said, "things were going fine, but apparently, I was wrong about a lot of things. Please don't let me be disturbed." She motioned for her trunk to follow her and fled the room, leaving the boys staring after her.

"I don't like this," Harry said. "There's something more she's not saying."

"Maybe she won't say it in front of me," Ron said, ears turning red. "You know, our past. Might feel uncomfortable about it. Maybe I should shove off for a while and give you time to talk to her. Not long, mind, but enough time."

"That might be a good idea," Harry agreed. "You could go to your mum's and see if Malfoy's fitting in all right there."

"Heh heh," Ron laughed. "Never thought he'd stoop to staying at my house."

Harry nodded. "He's trying to change, you know."

"Oh, I know. It's just ironic, isn't it? Has all that money and he's hiding from it at my place."

"Yeah, things have come full circle. Don't blame him for not trusting his arsehole father."

BANG, BANG, BANG!

"What the fuck?"

Harry looked towards the doorway as well. "Someone's trying to break in here." The thudding became louder. Wand drawn, both went down the passageway to the front door. "Who's there?" Harry asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"Open the door, Potter!"

"Snape. Found her fast, didn't he?" Ron snarled.

"Look, don't do anything stupid," Harry said, eyeing him meaningfully. "I'll handle this."

"I won't do anything unless he does."

Harry opened the door, wand still in hand. "I guessed it would be you."

"Where is she?" The words were like acid, his expression dark and eyes cold.

"Who do you mean?" Ron piped up.

Snape snarled. "Weasley, you'd better stay out of this."

"Or what?"

"Ron!" Harry said in exasperation.

"Look, she's upstairs and not up to seeing you right now."

"I have a right to see my wife," he said angrily. "Move aside."

When he tried to brush by, Harry stood in his way firmly. "She has a right to a little privacy. You should respect that."

"Yeah," Ron added. "Might watch your mouth in the future, eh?"

"I don't know what's going on," Snape admitted grudgingly, glaring balefully at Ron.

Ron snorted and looked at Harry knowingly. "Uh-huh."

"We were at the Malfoys' home, and she fell ill. Something didn't seem right, so I went home to check on her. I found that she'd taken most of her things and left! She's not at her parents' home, so I knew to come here. I just—put your wand away, *boy*."

This last bit was directed at Ron, who gazed back at him defiantly.

"I don't think she liked what you had to say to Malfoy, mate," he said nastily.

"Ron!" Harry scolded. "It's not your—"

"What are you talking about, Weasley?"

"She heard what you said about her! Him calling her a harpy, you agreeing with it, saying she was a pain in the arse. Didn't say what else she heard. I expect it wasn't all that great either." Ron's smug smile belied his anger, though Harry noticed the minute flaring of his nostrils, which usually meant trouble.

"Bollocks." Snape froze for a moment, comprehension dawning on his face, before looking at Harry. "I need to talk to her."

"Give her some time," Harry said, hoping the man would agree. He didn't want Hermione angry with him, and if she felt this was the only place she could go to, then he wanted to keep her with him—where she could feel safe.

Obviously seeing that he would have to fight his way through, Snape nodded briskly. "Tell her I was here." His eyes darkened even more—if that were possible—and he added, "Tell her she misunderstood."

"Oh, sure she did," Ron said sarcastically.

"I'm warning you, Weasley." Snape's voice had lowered menacingly. "If you think you can ~~weasel~~ your way back into her life, you're sadly mistaken." As this was said, Snape stepped closer to Ron. "She's mine."

Harry knew he had to do something, so he stood between them. "I'll tell her."

"Tell her I will be back again and again until she stops acting childish and talks to me. This... running off, I thought more of her." With that he turned on his heel and Disapparated.

"That arsehole!" Ron said. "He acts like he bloody owns her."

Harry slammed the door and rounded on him. "Where do you get off telling him what Hermione said! That's up to her to tell him! You know, Ron, if I didn't know better, I'd think Snape's right."

"Maybe I am glad she's found out he's not Mr. Perfect. Put yourself in my place, Harry!"

"Wait, I'm not saying that you haven't been hurt over this, but you *both* married other people."

"I didn't do it willingly."

"Neither did she!"

"But—"

"No, remember you tried to make it work with your wife and had decided that even before you knew that Hermione was married. So don't act like you only did that because of what she did."

"You git," Ron said through clenched teeth. He shook his head. "I want her to be happy, but it doesn't look like she is. She seemed adamant about it being over, so I just thought..." He sighed. "I'm going to the Burrow for a while. Want me to tell Ginny to stay away for a little longer? Maybe sleep there? I'm sure Mum could do with some help."

"This is her home. She doesn't have to stay away. You don't either. I just want to talk to Hermione alone for a little while. Maybe just let Ginny know that. If she comes back, she'll know to wait until I'm done." He smiled. "You, too, all right? I don't mean to run you off. I just... She needs us to be here for her."

"I know." Ron put his wand in his pocket and opened the door, leaving Harry alone to wonder if he'd done the right thing by not letting Snape see her. What if it had been a misunderstanding after all? They should clear it up as soon as possible. He hated when he and Ginny argued and went to bed mad, not talking things out.

"Well, here goes nothing," he said, moving towards the stairway that would lead him up to Hermione's room.

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Hermione curled up into a ball and shook one of her feet violently, hoping the urge to go to her husband would pass. She knew it would be mentally challenging, but she'd not been told anything about physical pain. She actually ached. And she also knew he was angry. She could feel that, too.

"Serves you right."

Shaking her head, she thought back over the time they'd spent together. He'd always been evasive about things, and she'd known it—had called him on it even—but she'd let things slide because she'd been hopeful. She'd fallen for him.

"I love him," she said sadly, feeling like a fool, "but I won't keep trying to have a one-sided relationship no matter what." Feeling used, stupid, and heartbroken hadn't been on her to-do list for today.

How could she get even with him? How could she beat the pain she now felt?

"His days of manipulating me are over. My conviction is stronger than some magical bond." At least she hoped it was.

A knock at her door startled her, and she felt a moment of trepidation. Would Harry have let him in? No, that didn't seem right. Besides, he wouldn't be knocking, would he?

"Come in," she called and was unsurprised to see her best friend enter. "Hey, Harry. Look, I'm sorry for putting you in the middle like this. I know it's not easy for Ron either,

but I just need a place to stay for now."

He closed the door and moved to lie beside her, careful not to touch her. "You can stay here as long as you like. About Ron, well, I don't know ~~exactly~~ what he feels about it, but he seems to want you here. Even though you got married, you're still one of us, Hermione."

"Thanks, Harry."

"Er, Snape was here."

"I thought he might show up. I can..." She shuddered slightly. "I feel his rage."

"The bonding?"

"Yeah." She gasped. The rage was giving way to something else: sadness.

"What is it?"

Brow furrowed, she said, "He's... sad."

"Oh?"

She shook her head. "Well, good. He should be. I expect he's not happy his little scheme is backfiring."

"Tell me everything. I know there's something more. I won't talk to Ron about it," he promised.

"Narcissa Malfoy tried to Oblivate me."

"WHAT?"

Hermione nodded, feeling her anger mounting again. *Let him feel my rage!* she thought mutinously. "I left the room, and she showed me a secret room that she uses to spy on Lucius and his friends. They were talking about me like I was just some... some whore Snape was using." She growled slightly. "He as much as said that he's using me, and I think it has something to do with you."

"Using me, too? How?"

There were some things that she simply wouldn't tell Harry. "I'm not quite sure. When I wanted to confront them, she turned her wand on me, gloating and saying horrid things, and then she tried to hex me. I slipped while trying to rush her and thought it best to pretend that her spell had hit its mark."

"Clever as always."

"I knew Severus would try to talk me out of going and would smooth things over with some rubbish about my misunderstanding things or him just saying that to keep Malfoy from getting suspicious, so I said nothing and went home." She closed her eyes and straightened out to lie on her back, still shaking her foot slightly. "I packed what I needed and came here."

"Do you want to file a—?"

"What would be the point? Besides, that stupid oath of mine, I can't touch them, can I? It's just not worth it. I'm going to handle this somehow ~~but~~ *by* way."

"I'm here with you in whatever you want to do. I just..."

Harry's expression was troubled. She knew that look well. "What is it?"

"He did seem concerned."

"The man could act his way out of death, Harry. Literally. Don't tell me you're falling for this? Of course he wants to be on our side. He needs us for whatever nasty little plan he's really got going."

"That could be."

She sighed as she realized she wanted to know what Severus had said. "And his words were?"

"He and Ron had a small row."

"Blast!" She rolled her eyes. "What did Ron let slip?"

"Yeah, you guessed it right."

"What an idiot!"

"Snape demanded that I let him in, but I told him no and that you needed your space. He seemed a little surprised that I wouldn't move to let him pass, and then Ron taunted him about not knowing how to keep his mouth shut."

"Damn it. What did Severus say then?"

"He wasn't happy about that, naturally, but he said that you two had been at the Malfoys' place and you went home. He went to check on you to find you gone."

She felt smug. "I wish I'd seen his face when he saw my things gone."

"From what he said, I think he went to your mum and dad's house, but I don't know if he talked to them or not."

"I hope not! They're unhappy enough with me as it is."

"He seemed puzzled about you leaving him. Oh, right! He said that he was disappointed that you just took off without talking to him. And, uh, well, he called you childish."

"Arsehole."

Harry arched an eyebrow in surprise. "Now you sound like Ron."

"Great," she said sarcastically.

"He even pulled his wand out on Snape." Harry snickered. "Told him you'd heard him call you those things. I was sort of proud of him."

"Yeah," she said with a smile, "always there for me, isn't he?"

"Not always," Harry said sadly.

"I guess we've all done things we aren't proud of." She thought of how she'd been seduced and tricked by Lucius, about her eagerness.

Harry placed an arm over her then and gave her a hug. "Like you told me long ago, not everything works out as we expect them to."

"If Sirius Black could end up an innocent man after all those years, then I'd say so."

"Then maybe Snape was telling the truth when he said you'd misunderstood. Maybe something else is going on."

"Maybe he should tell his wife the truth! I'm tired of all his little secrets, the ways he keeps things from me..."

"Confront him about it. Force him to tell you everything."

"Force Severus? Are you mad?"

"Right."

"Exactly." She closed her eyes. "I might talk to him, but it won't be now. I need some time to clear my head—if I can get it cleared." She curled up again to stave off the cramping in her abdomen.

"What can I do?"

"I don't know, but I'm not letting some magic bully me back into a relationship. I'll live like this as long as I have to if I believe it's the right thing to do." She sniffed slightly, trying to keep her tears at bay. She was tired of crying, tired of wondering, tired of feeling as if she owned the world only to find out she didn't even have stock in it, and tired of falling deeper into a world dominated by Severus Snape when she got nothing in return.

"Fair enough."

"How's Draco?"

"Believe it or not, he's doing better."

"I wish I could tell him what his horrible mother did, but I don't want to hurt him that way." A groan escaped her lips, and she rocked herself slightly, feet rubbing against the duvet. When it passed, she added, "He loves her so much even now." She snorted. "You wouldn't believe it, but she seems to think she was helping him. I asked if she was lying to herself or believing Lucius' lies."

Harry curled himself around her, squeezing her tightly. "When Ginny has, uh, cramps, you know, those kind, she says this helps. All right?"

"It does. Stay."

"I will."

Hermione ached so much and felt so cold she was actually hot. At some point, she dozed off and only woke when her door creaked open. Not wanting to open her eyes in case it was Ron who'd entered, she pretended to be asleep.

"Is she all right?"

Ginny. Relief filled her.

"No, it's bad."

"How so?"

The bed dipped slightly as Ginny sat near their feet.

"The magical bond. Since she's trying to leave him, it's like she's having withdrawal pains." His voice sounded suddenly sheepish when he added, "I thought this might help."

"Do you think I should go get something for pain? I have something in the medicine cabinet."

"Maybe. I hadn't thought of that."

"I'm surprised she didn't."

"No, you didn't see her. She's really upset. Probably slipped her mind."

"Won't hurt to try. I'll go get it."

"I can go."

"No, it's okay. Let her sleep. If you move, she might wake."

"All right. Thanks," he said, voice still a soft whisper. "Is Ron back?"

"No, he's staying there for tonight. He and Draco are going over to Fleur and Bill's for a few pints."

"Okay. Might be best anyway."

"Yeah, he told me a little of what happened. Idiot."

"I think he wanted to take Snape on."

"Probably been itching for it."

"Go get that potion. We'll talk later."

Hermione heard the door creak slightly as Ginny left. She opened her eyes and yawned loudly for Harry's benefit. "Thanks, Harry, I think I'll be all right now. It's not so bad."

"Did we wake you? Ginny's back."



"No," she lied, "but I know it's pretty late. Go on. It'll be okay."

"She's gone to get you a potion for the pain."

"Tell her I've got something, and I'll take it if it starts back up. Go. Your fiancée probably wants some alone time as well. I'm stealing you away here." When he hesitated, she said, "Now."

"All right. Come if you need me."

"I promise."

"Night."

"Night."

She watched her friend leave before resignedly fetching her wand to turn the lamps down. It would be a long night.

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"You look terrible," Ron said through a mouthful of half-chewed eggs.

"Thanks," she said sarcastically.

"Ginny made breakfast before they left." He nodded to the plates on the center of the table. "Good bangers."

"I might eat some toast."

"What? Snape doesn't feed you? You could use at least a stone."

"Really?" she said sourly.

He swallowed and wiped his mouth. "Just trying to make you smile is all."

"Thanks. Sorry. I just don't feel well."

"It's been two days. This can't keep up."

"I'm doing some research. I'll hope to find something."

"I still say St. Mungo's is where you need to be, Hermione." His cheeks reddened with anger. "If that git comes back again today, I'm going to let him have it! I'll ~~bete~~ knows a way around this. I can't believe he's making you go through this."

Hermione sighed and placed her mug of coffee on the table. "He's suffering, too, Ron."

"Oh, don't tell me—" a chunk of food flew out of his mouth, "you feel sorry for him. Starting to forgive him already, are you?"

"No, I just mean that this ruddy bond magic works both ways. What I'm feeling right now, it's not one sided."

"Er... oh."

"Right. So, it's not like he's sitting back and enjoying my pain."

Ron grumbled and popped a chunk of toast into his mouth. "Never know."

"I might talk to him today," she confided.

"Thought you might."

"Well, aren't you tired of the owls?" Hermione was certainly tired of them. Severus had been sending several letters a day asking for her to allow his visit. She only replied once, of course, and told him she'd let him know when and if she was ready to talk to him. "I mean, this is getting ridiculous."

"Make sure you talk to him here. I want to be nearby in case you need me."

She reached across the table and placed a hand over his, giving it a light squeeze. "I appreciate that, Ron, and you can bet that I'll not be going to our, er, his house for our talk."

Ron turned his hand over and held hers. "Harry said your mom sent word that she wants you to go round."

A sigh escaped her lips. "I should go, considering the way things have been going between us all lately, but I'm just not up to explaining anything, and I don't want to leave. He might be waiting for a chance to see me elsewhere."

"I'll go. I'll just tell them you're not feeling well and that you're staying with us till things get better."

"Would you do that for me?"

He shrugged. "They're still my family, too, even though we..." Instead of finishing his sentence, he took a deep gulp of pumpkin juice and slipped his hand from hers.

"I shouldn't have yelled at you like that when you came back the other day. I'm sorry."

"I should have minded my own business."

"You were just taking up for me," she offered.

"True enough, but Harry's right. I shouldn't have said anything. That's for you to tell, and now, thanks to me, he's probably brewed up some cover story to tell you."

"We'll see, won't we? All right if I use Pig?"

"Sure." He nodded to the plate of bangers. "Want those two?"

"No, I only want toast I said."

"Just making sure." He then pierced his fork into both. "Got an appetite today."

"You've been hanging out with Draco a lot."

"I suppose. We've been going down to Bill's a lot lately." He smirked. "I haven't seen this much of Bill since he first moved out."

"He and Draco get along well then?"

"Yeah, well enough. Mostly talks to Gabrielle though."

This gave Hermione pause. "Er, how old is she? She looked very young back at Hogwarts during our fourth year."

"Old enough. Sixteen maybe. Why?"

"I'm just... surprised. Fleur doesn't mind?"

"She's all for it. Says Gabby needs a friend right now. Was getting into a bad crowd back in France to hear her mum tell it." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "I overheard them talking and think they were talking while he was living out there with his mum." He frowned suddenly. "Keep that between us. I'm sure Fleur doesn't know that part. Would hate to get the git in trouble."

"Considering it was likely *his* crowd that the girl starting going around with back home, I'm sure Fleur wouldn't approve," Hermione surmised smartly.

"Right in one."

Hermione finished her coffee and ate two slices of toast before she went upstairs to write a letter for Severus. She wanted to word it so that he didn't get any false hope, and she wanted to make certain that her stance was clear.

Severus,

I don't appreciate the continuous owls. When I said that I needed time to think things over, you should have respected that. Coming here? The letters? Uncalled for. You told Harry that I was childish for running out without speaking to you. Fair enough, but what you're doing isn't any better.

Yes, I know that this separation hurts you. My body doesn't feel all that hot at the moment either, but unlike you, this actually hurts my heart. When I told you that I'd fallen in love with you, I wasn't just telling you what I thought you wanted to hear. I was serious about that. Despite how this relationship started, I know that I didn't want it to end, but now?

What can it do but end? No matter what I ask you, Severus, you'll have a sly reply. I'm tired of the lies. Yes, I know you are lying. Something's missing. What aren't you telling me?

I heard everything you and Lucius said. And giving him something to help with the dreams? Wanting me to stop it for Narcissa's sake? I hate her nearly as much as I hate her husband. They can both rot in Azkaban for all I care. You'll be quite surprised to know what your dear friend did to me before I left her home that night.

We can talk, Severus, but I will not go to your home. You can come here to Grimmauld Place to meet me. When will you be available? We won't be alone, but we will have privacy. That's the best I can offer, but if you want to talk, you'd better be prepared to be honest.

Just so you know, even your honesty may not fix what's happened. In fact, I wouldn't count on it.

Hermione

Feeling proud of herself for remaining firm and not allowing the magic to influence her wording, she sealed the parchment and motioned Pig forward. The little owl twittered about excitedly, and she had trouble tying the letter to his leg.

"Stop, Pig, or you'll be sent back to the Burrow for good."

Finally, she was able to secure the letter and opened a window. "Thanks," she called out to him, shaking her head slightly. "Ahhh..." she moaned and brought her fingers to her temples. "Ruddy headache."

For a moment, anger washed over her, and she wished she'd said something nasty to Severus in the letter. This was his fault. He would pay for this. The whole lot would.

Before she could muster the strength to close the window, Pig flew back in excitedly. "What the...? What are you doing back? I told you to bring it to Severus Snape."

The owl fluttered towards her and extended its leg, not landing instead.

"No, you are supposed to—shite!"

She noticed that the parchment tied to his leg now wasn't the one she'd sent out. Severus had received her letter already and had replied to it. That had to mean that he was nearby. This was something she hadn't counted on.

Snatching the note and shooing away Pigwidgeon, she quickly read her husband's reply.

I am available now. Meet me at the door.

Hermione's heart began hammering inside her chest. She'd hoped to have time to prepare herself for their meeting. She took a deep breath and decided to simply deal with it. First, she'd have to ask Ron to wait upstairs while she talked to Severus. They truly did need privacy for the row they were sure to have. Ignoring the thudding in her head, she steeled herself and left the safety of her bedroom.

SW's Note: More up soon. Really. :) Why should you trust this? Because the Potter Place Anything Goes Challenge has finally ended, and I totally have time for myself now! Whoot! hehehe

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 28

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1 please.

Thanks go to my friend ladyinthecloak, who always finds time to help me out when I need it, which is often. You're a great beta. Cheers! And I want to give a shout out to my lovely, long-time beta, Charmed_Nay, who's been having a busy RL and will beta this as soon as she's able!

Nervously, Hermione made her way to the door. Ron had reluctantly retreated upstairs and promised he'd come down if he heard anything amiss. Not that he would hear anything, as there were spells that would keep him out of their business. She paused before the door and took a few deep breaths, willing herself to be firm and not allow him to manipulate her any longer. She would fight the pull of the bonding...or so she hoped. Even now her pulse raced in anticipation.

She squared her shoulders and opened the door. "Severus," she greeted coolly and gestured for him to enter.

He did so, eyes dark and glinting, and before she realized what he was about, he had her in his arms, molding her against his body tightly with an arm around her waist and the other lost in her hair. She couldn't deny that it felt good, so right, but she had to put an end to it before anything else happened.

"Please, Severus, we're only going to talk."

Releasing her, he said, "How I've missed you."

"It's not been that long."

"Too long," he argued.

"Let's go to the drawing room." She turned and walked ahead of him, knowing he would follow. To her horror, her hands were shaking, and she hoped he wouldn't notice once they sat down, for then he would think her weak.

Severus said nothing as they seated themselves, her on the comfortable chair by the fire, he on the settee across from her. He simply gazed at her as if drinking her in. How could she have forgotten the intensity of his stare?

"You have some explaining to do," he said suddenly.

"Excuse me?" she replied incredulously. Of all the things she'd expected, that hadn't been it. Why wasn't he groveling and begging her forgiveness?

"You heard me," he snapped, flicking his wand towards the doorway. *"Muffliato."*

"I believe you've got it the wrong way around, Severus," she said, glad that her ire was building. "You've been lying to me about something all along, and don't you dare deny it! I'm not a complete idiot where you're concerned, and I shan't allow you to sweep it under the rug any longer."

"You know all that you should," he said quietly, though his eyes flicked away for a moment.

"All I should, eh? In other words," she jumped up to pace, "I only know what you want me to know. And the potion you've been giving Lucius to aid him with his dreams? How could you! You know how important that is to me! He deserves whatever he gets!"

"I don't deny he deserves it. I just thought that perhaps you were turning into someone unlike yourself by prolonging it."

She shook her head, outraged. "Why lie about giving him the potion?"

"I did not lie about it," he hissed. "I told you I was making a potion that would..."

"Liar!"

"If you would let me finish, Hermione, you would learn the truth."

"But..."

"Are you done? Do you not want your question answered?"

"You know I do!" He paused and gazed at her with an arched eyebrow, as if daring her to interrupt again. Oh how she wanted to slap his smug face!

"I told you that I was working on a potion that would release the effect of the anointment on me."

"Yes, what's that to do with anything?"

"When I realized that it shouldn't be me who ingests it but one protected by it, I lied to him and told him it was to stave off the nightmares." He crossed his arms over his chest. "That is why I hoped you'd leave off for a bit, to make him think it was working!"

"Why not just tell me the truth? Do you not have any faith in me? I would have seen the sense in it."

"I did not want to give you false hope that it would work."

"I've been disappointed before," she said bitterly, "and all you've accomplished is making me think you were on their side! You have no idea what I've been thinking these past few days." She plopped back down into her chair. "That bitch!"

"Hermione..."

"You could have tested it on me! I am protected against you as well."

He shook his head. "Never."

"What? Why not? It would be the same thing."

Severus frowned. "What if something had gone wrong?"

"You mean to say that I actually need that protection from you? You would hurt me? Is this a threat?"

"Stupid girl," he said angrily. "I mean that I wouldn't test something on you that way in case something would go wrong."

Hermione could see the logic in his argument, but she still didn't appreciate being kept in the dark. "I don't like it," she muttered. "But the way you talked about me to him, Severus..." Her voice trailed away, and to her shame, she felt tears prick her eyelids.

"What did you hear? How?"

"When I left the room..."

"I cast a spell to keep you from hearing, knowing how he'd speak."

"Well, your dear friend Narcissa, has a quaint little spy room that repels spells of any kind, so I heard your entire exchange. The things he said, and you agreed to them!" An angry tear slid down her cheek. "And you talked about our sex life...even laughed with him about what he and I... I don't know that I can forgive that." She swiped at the next tear that followed the first.

"I'm very practiced at what I do, Hermione. Sometimes you have to do and say unsavory things when you don't want to."

"H-how could you let him say those things about me." Her voice had lowered to a whisper, and she no longer tried to stem the flow of tears. "I felt like such a whore."

"Do you not think that I didn't want to rip his throat out for those words?" Severus said, his voice dangerously quiet. "I wanted to kill him, but I cannot. Think, why couldn't I?"

"The anointing we had," she said, shuddering slightly. She'd known all along that he would say that he'd only gone along with things because of the role they were playing, and hearing it only caused her more confusion. How could she trust that his words weren't smoothly orchestrated now? Glancing up, she saw that his eyes had darkened, and she knew him well enough to know that he was plotting murder in his mind.

Then she realized that she could actually feel his loathing.

"As soon as I am able, Hermione, he will pay for what he's done to you. I am biding my time, praying that my potion is helping, and when it does, Merlin help him." His hand lifted and caressed her chin. "I love you." The words were impassioned, and she knew them to be true. It was the most straightforward confession of his feelings he'd made to her.

This caused her to pull away and hug herself. What could she do? She wanted to go into his arms so badly, but to just let him get away with what happened? Why did she feel ridiculous suddenly? Had she been impulsive?

"Severus, Narcissa isn't innocent in this."

"Tell me. What did she do?" His voice seemed as though he was unsurprised.

"She said a lot of nasty things to me, and it made me realize that you and Lucius must always talk about me so horribly. How else would she have known?" She laughed bitterly. "After she had her say, she tried to Obliviate me. In fact, she thinks she succeeded. I pretended her spell hit me." Hermione gazed over her shoulder at him ruefully. "You see, she had my wand, and I was going to attack her bodily, but I slipped. She missed. I pretended that my head hurt so that I could leave."

"But I felt your pain. Your head must have been hurt."

"I was in pain, Severus. *You* caused it."

He stepped away from her then and strode over to the window, pulling back the thick draperies to gaze out into the back courtyard. "I do not know what to say other than I never meant to hurt you. I was just doing what I thought prudent to keep our cover."

"I won't deny that I'm still hurt over it, but I confess that I understand your reasoning. I am... I appreciate that you admitted how much his words bothered you." She sighed. "But there are other things you won't tell me. I can feel it."

"Yes."

"And you still won't tell me? Don't I deserve to know?"

"To know what, Hermione? What do you want me to tell you? Do you want me to tell you that you don't have to be my wife? That I can release you from this bond? That I've been selfish in keeping that from you because I want you for myself...for always?" He spun around to face her, his thunderous expression frightening her.

"Stop saying that! You know as well as I that there's no way around this bonding. We've decided to make the most of what we've been dealt and were doing such a great job of it. I love you, Severus. I want to share my life with you. I just want you to be honest with me about everything." She pulled at her hair in frustration and counted to ten to calm herself, breathing deeply. "Please be honest."

His nostrils flared. "I was being honest."

"W-wait, what?"

"I know how to release you from this bond."

It felt as though a fist slammed into her chest. "You've... you've only just discovered it, right? You've come across something recently and were just afraid to tell me because you are insecure about us."

"No."

"No? What do you mean 'no'?"

"From the moment I opened my eyes, I knew you were my wife and would remain so, for I swore I'd never let you go."

"You knew? All this time!"

"Yes. I couldn't risk you running back to Weasley. I wanted you to see how it could be for us, how badly I wanted it to be ~~you~~ I spent my life with."

Hermione's head began to spin. He knew. He'd betrayed her. She'd always known that something wasn't quite right, but the bonding, it worked against her in more ways than one. "And you manipulated me through the bond. You used me. Used it to your advantage to bend me to your will."

Bile rose in her throat, and she tried to calm herself to keep it down. The man she loved was not the person she'd thought him to be. Who was this person that had come back from the Otherworld? Severus Snape had been cruel, that was for certain, but this man was someone else entirely.

Panic overtook her. He seemed as though he might pounce on her at any moment, and she had to will herself not to scream out for Ron. It wouldn't help, as he wouldn't hear her, and then Severus would only be angrier.

"There's no need to run," he said menacingly, stepping forward.

"Stay back."

"I would never hurt you," he vowed, his gaze not wavering in intensity.

"You mean that you can't hurt me because of the ointment Lucius gave me!"

"Even without it, you silly girl, I wouldn't harm you in any way. I love you."

"Lies! Slithering from your silken tongue! Do you not think forcing me to remain married to you and allowing a fucking bond to manipulate my feelings isn't hurting me?"

"You love me!" he roared suddenly. "Dare you deny it?"

"I think I love you, but for all I know, it's the bond!"

"It is not! It doesn't work that way!"

"How can I trust you? How can I trust myself?"

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Are there other things that I do not know?"

He nodded. "Of course."

"You... Oh my God. You knew Malfoy would approach me without a doubt. It wasn't something you just happened to hope for. You and he planned this the whole time."

"Yes, I knew he would find a way to get you to help me."

She grabbed a nearby lamp and threw it at him with all her might, screaming furiously when he neatly dodged it and steadily came for her. "I hate you! How dare you!"

He pulled her into his arms and tried to hold her close, but she fought against him, kicking and hitting, until he released her. "You let him use me!"

"NO!" he hollered. "I had no idea about that. I swear it."

In a small, broken voice, she asked, "How could you do this to me?"

"Because I love you."

"You love me?" she snorted. "If it's true and you do love me, which I seriously..." She thought of his fervent declaration earlier. "And I do believe that you feel you love me, but that's only since we've been together. How could you have known it would work out that way before you'd even died? You certainly didn't love me back then. Barely tolerated my presence might better define your feelings towards me."

He shook his head. "I fell in love with you within the last few months of my life, Hermione."

"You were spying on me then?!"

"No," he said with a soft sigh. "But I can't tell you."

"You'd better!"

"Do you demand it of me then?"

"Yes, damn it! Stop with these games."

"Say it."

"Say what? I just said..."

"Say the fucking words, Hermione!"

"I demand that you tell me what you're on about at once! I don't know how much more of this I can take, you bastard!"

Severus shuddered visibly and closed his eyes, as if in ecstasy.

Hermione backed away, uncertain what he'd do next. He certainly was acting bizarre. "What are you doing?"

His eyes opened and found hers. In the calmest voice imaginable, he replied, "You and I worked together, during your sixth year, and we met a great deal in the months that I became the headmaster at Hogwarts."

Had she heard him right? What was he playing at? "I think you should leave, Severus. I'll not listen to any more of this."

"Who do you think helped me make the fucking potion that would eventually save my life?" He pointed at her. "Oh, we'd thought it would be for Potter, of course, but it was researched and created by us...many hours were spent on this."

"Interesting. And I don't remember this because...?"

"Because you chose not to, Hermione, and you made me take a vow that I would never tell you about any of this unless you demanded it of me. Can't you see? I couldn't tell you. How I wanted to be honest with you, but... I couldn't break that vow."

"I don't believe you."

He nodded. "Yes. I assumed you wouldn't. I told you that you wouldn't."

"Oh? Not going to offer to show me some memories then? You have had time to fabricate some, though, eh? This should prove entertaining."

"I pleaded with you to..." His voice broke. "I knew you wouldn't believe me, and I knew you'd never trust what I could show you."

"Then we're at an impasse, Severus."

"I can't even offer to take Veritaserum," he said bitterly.

"Nope. Superb Occlumens such as yourself can pass those tests with flying colors."

"You swore to me that you would leave yourself a clue, something that would trigger your memory. Please, at least try to dwell on that. Maybe it will come to you, and you will know..."

"Why in the world would I want to charm my memory? If I'd helped to create something such as this, I wouldn't want to lose that!"

"You had a good reason."

"Oh? What?"

"Weasley."

"What about him?"

"It's complicated."

"We have all night."

"Hermione, I'm sorry for the things I told Lucius, and I intend to make him pay for every syllable he's uttered against you, for every negative thought he's had about you, and for every touch he stole from you, for taking what should have been mine." Severus reached out to touch her and, apparently, decided against it, turning away instead. "I know I've not given you a lot to go on, but with the bond, you should *feel* that I am being truthful."

"Trickery for all I know. None of this feels right to me. I think... I think you're just trying to smooth things over, Severus, and I'm sorry, but you've not given me much to have faith in."

"I see," he whispered.

"I would like for you to help release me from this bond."

He nodded slowly and said nothing.

"When will you do this?"

"I have to go to Gringotts first. We can do it tomorrow, first thing."

"All right. Here?"

"Our home would be preferable."

"*Your home*, not ours," she said firmly. "It's... it's over for us. Someone who would deliberately do this isn't someone I can share my life with. I'm sorry." The dull ache in her body became splitting, causing her to cry out and double over. "It hurts..." Her groans were met with his, and she noticed that he'd leaned against the settee, clutching its back in a show of emotion as he tried to get through the pain that he obviously felt.

"So many times I wanted to confess to you what I'd done, but I couldn't. I was afraid to lose you." He sat down and hunched over, one hand on his abdomen. The next words he spoke were more for him than for her. "I shouldn't have told you. I should have lied again."

"You told me," she said through ragged breaths, "because you love me, and you couldn't continue being dishonest with me."

His expression was unlike she'd ever seen it, so forlorn, so defeated. "But I've lost you."

There was nothing she could say to that and simply clenched her teeth to stave off the next wave of pain and dizziness that she felt. Unsure of how many minutes passed, she felt a cool vial being pressed into her palms. "It's the only thing that helps me, though it doesn't last long."

Hermione nodded and doubted she would take it. There was no telling what he might try to do now that he knew she would leave him for certain. He'd as much as said he regretted admitting the truth to her.

"I'll expect you tomorrow before noon."

And from her prone position on the floor, she saw the heels of his boots tread towards the door and the billow of his cloak as it trailed in his wake. Burying her face into the rug, she cried loud and long, not caring that Ron would likely find her there...which of course he did.

To her surprise he didn't run off and try to hex Severus; instead, he lay down beside her and placed an arm around her, rocking her back and forth, saying soothing things.

"Please take something. I can't stand to see you hurting this way," he said softly.

She turned her palm over so that he could see the vial that Severus had given her. "I don't know if I should..." She hated to admit to Ron that she didn't trust her husband...soon to be ex-husband. For some reason, she didn't want to betray Severus that way, interestingly enough, considering he'd betrayed her in the worst way.

Not giving Ron enough credit had always been a downfall for her, and it always shocked her that he could have such insight.

"I'll try it first if you'd like."

Hermione wouldn't endanger Ron. Shaking her head, she said, "N-no. I'll drink it." Severus couldn't harm her, wouldn't harm her. She would have to trust that he wouldn't do something mental. When her shaky hands couldn't uncork it, Ron's hands steadied her and helped her to do so and helped to guide the vial to her lips. Almost instantly, she felt the intensity of her pain peel away, though she was still in some discomfort.

"All right?"

"Yes," she said, feeling her mind clear. "I need to go lie down."

Ron gently helped her up, lifted her, and insisted on carrying her up the stairs. She didn't argue, though she wanted to. It felt nice to have someone there for her...to have Ron there. When he placed her on her bed, he didn't think twice before climbing in beside her, holding her to him.

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"For what?" she asked curiously. "This isn't your fault."

"No, I'm sorry that you're hurting so much. I wish... I wish I could share your pain."

That was likely the most touching thing he'd ever said to her, and she wasn't sure what she could say. It would have been so much easier if she hadn't fallen in love with Severus. She could have gone on with her life, made things right with Ron, and then married him as she'd planned. Instead, she'd fallen for Severus, and now a future with Ron was impossible. Resentment welled up inside of her.

How dare he do... Her internal tirade was cut short as she thought of Severus' words. She hadn't wanted to remember because of Ron. As ridiculous as it seemed at the time, she now had an inkling of what he might have meant. It hadn't only been their work she'd been trying to forget, had it? Had she developed feelings for Severus and opted to have them stripped from her mind in order to carry on with her life?

What clue would she have left herself? For the first time since he'd told her of his betrayal, she felt a little hope, and she felt that perhaps he had been telling the truth after all. Later, she would do a bit of soul searching and try to think of what she might have done to later jog her memory.

SW's Notes: Whoops! Well, things definitely went south there, but I'm sure our girl will figure something out and learn about her decision to alter her past.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 28

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Disclaimer: See Chapter One.

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for reading through this for me now and to Charmed_Nay for reading this for me when she has time!

Hermione's hands shook as she ran her fingers through her hair. She'd had a long night and had barely had any sleep. From the reflection in the mirror, she could see the dark circles under her eyes and the paleness of her skin. It wasn't only her body that ached, of course, for it was her mind that bothered her most. Her future seemed so glum without Severus in it. What would she do with herself now? Once the bonding spell was lifted, would she feel any differently?

Surely she would or so she hoped. It would be so much easier to come out of this as if it had all been a vivid dream*Impossible*. The magic of the bond warred with her good logic: go to him, break the bonding...no, don't go, you love him!

A knock on the door made her jump. "Who's there?"

"Ginny. Can I come in?"

"Yes."

The door opened, and her red-haired friend entered, smiling softly. "Are you all right? You've been up here for a long time. You were supposed to leave ten minutes ago."

"I'm afraid," she admitted.

"Do you want me to go with you? Or Harry?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, that's all right." With a small sigh, she confessed, "I'm afraid that I'm making the wrong decision."

"Wrong decision!" Ginny said in disbelief. "He's been lying to you, messing with your mind with this magic. He's lucky you don't hex his arse or report him to the Ministry!"

Nodding, Hermione said, "I love him though, so this doesn't make it any easier."

"You *think* you love him. That remains to be seen," Ginny said sharply. "I just want my Hermione back. It's been so long since we've had you. You can't see it, but we all can. You're not the same." She bit her lip, debating on saying her next words. "I've... been wondering if it wasn't something like this all along."

"Have you?" Hermione asked darkly. "Yet you've been so supportive."

"What else was I to do?"

"A friend would have said something."

"No! A friend would have let you be happy and watched closely for any signs of something, which I did. How was I to know this when even you had no idea?"

"It's not like he tried to kill me," Hermione said hotly, wanting to defend Severus. "He just thought he was doing the right thing because he loves me and wants me in his life."

"Don't make excuses for that arsehole!"

"But he said that the reason I..." She quickly caught herself, having decided to not tell anyone about what else Severus had told her.

"Go on then. What?"

"Look, there's more to this than I'm willing to say at the moment, and I'm just telling you that maybe things aren't as bad as they might seem."

"Uh-huh." Ginny threw her hands up in the air. "You're going to go there and let this magic win, aren't you? You'll get caught up in a passionate emotional outburst, make love to him, and then decide against leaving him!"

"Ginny!" Her cheeks blushed furiously.

"Sorry. I just love you, and I want you to be happy." She crossed her arms and softly added, "Maybe you were meant to be with my brother all along."

Hermione frowned. "Is that why you are suddenly against Severus?"

"No! I'm against him because of what he's done to you. You'd be angry with Harry as well, wouldn't you?" Ginny touched Hermione's shoulder. "I think you and Ron could

be happy. I mean, look at what you told me that night you were able to slip away from Harry and Ron to sneak into Hogwarts. Remember that?"

"Sneak into Hogwarts? What?"

"When you three were on the run. I saw you in the library at Hogwarts." Ginny's frowned. "Remember?"

"No, sorry, but tell me."

"You're not serious? How could you forget that?"

"So much happened," Hermione replied, thinking hard about what Ginny had said. She hadn't gone to Hogwarts in all that time that she could remember, but if what Severus had said was true, then perhaps she had run into Ginny. "Refresh my memory, mate."

"You were nearly caught by Snape! I had to help hide you behind that stack of books. I wanted you to come to the Room of Requirement, but you wouldn't. You said you had to leave the way you came, had a Portkey waiting for you."

"Oh, it's coming back now," Hermione lied. "And I never properly thanked you for that."

"You were so happy to see me that you cried, and when I asked you about Ron, you should have seen the look in your eyes." Ginny smiled, remembering the encounter. "You told me that if you ever seemed to doubt your future with Ron, I should take that portrait you carry round in your purse...the one with you and him and Harry...and break it over your head." Ginny's eyebrow arched. "It's a bit late for all that now, but should I do it then? I mean, I haven't thought about it again until just this morning."

"No need for that. I just need time," Hermione whispered, wishing she could remember this. "For now, I've got to go to Severus and get this done."

"I would really like to go."

Hermione shook her head. "That's not a good idea. I have to do this alone. All right?"

"All right, but if you aren't back before the evening, Harry, Ron and I will go after you."

"Fair enough."

After her friend left her alone, Hermione looked at herself in the mirror once again. "You can do this. If you still love him after the bond has been released, you'll have to take one day at a time to see if you can forgive him. If not, well, then that's just what will be."

With a nod, she gathered herself and made her way down the stairs and out the door, not pausing to speak to anyone, and then Disapparated to one of the small hills near the home she'd shared with Severus. As always, the beauty and lay of the land made her breath catch.

Could she leave this place behind with no regrets? From her position on the hill, she could see the garden that she and Severus had started. They'd had to create an invisible barrier on part of it that worked like a green house, of course, for some of the plants and flowers weren't fit for the cool climate here, especially the cold nights. Walking forward, she used the worn path to descend the hill and bring her to her husband for the last time. Oddly, she felt the need to fight her tears. If this was the right thing to do, why did it feel so wrong?

*It's the bloody bond magic. It's trying to make you change your mind*she told herself. But somehow that didn't feel right either.

Before she could get to the door, it opened slowly, and Severus looked out at her sadly. "I wondered if you'd changed your mind," he said by way of greeting.

"I've not."

"Come then," he said and extended his hand.

She reached out tentatively and took it, a tear escaping to glide down her face. He led her to the sitting room, and as she looked around, she noticed that not one thing had changed since she'd left. "You don't look as though you've slept."

"When I had to make a potion that required constant attention throughout the night? No, of course I didn't," he snapped bitterly.

"If it's any consolation, I didn't sleep either."

"Hermione, this is ridiculous. Haven't you thought about what I said? I swear to you that I'm not lying."

"I have thought about it. How could I think of anything else?"

"And you still don't believe me?"

"I believe that something isn't quite right with my memory, but that doesn't mean it's what you said. I just don't know that I can trust you, and I'm sorry for that, but you've been lying to me all this while, manipulating me."

He simply nodded and looked away, as if meeting her eyes hurt. "I'm sorry," he whispered moments later. "I do love you." With a shrug of his shoulders, he turned and walked towards the doorway. "I'll just be a moment."

It seemed strange that they would have to take a potion to end a spell, but she supposed that since it had been a potion that had brought them together, it was logical that one would break them apart. A small part of her wondered if he wasn't desperate enough to use another potion on her to keep her with him. How would she know?

"Here we are," he said silkily, moving to sit next to her. "We will take this potion and likely fall into a deep sleep for a couple of hours while our body is released of the magic. Perhaps we should, ah, go to bed?"

"I don't see anything wrong with sleeping right here."

"Very well," he said, kicking off his boots. A flick of his wand saw the couch widen into a makeshift bed. "For comfort," he murmured.

Feeling nervous, she said, "This isn't a good idea, I think. Can't I just go home and take mine while you take yours here?"

"And if something goes wrong, we need to be here where the lab is. We need the proximity anyway. Understand?"

"Yes, all right."

He took a small phial out of his pocket. "Yours." Took another out after she held it in her hands. "Mine. Shall we?"

Hermione nodded and waited until he uncorked his and drank the lot before she did the same. She noticed the change in him before she felt anything for herself. His eyes scrunched tightly and he moaned as if in pain. Then she felt it...the pulling feeling in her gut, the need to expel part of herself? But what? How?

"God, it hurts," she bit out.

"I know, I know, I'm so sorry," he murmured and touched her face gently.

She opened her eyes. "Your touch, it chases away the pain."

"It's too late to stop this, Hermione," he said regretfully. "What's done is done."

"I know, and I don't ask that of you." She brought a hand to his face. "Does this make the pain... Ah!" She shuddered violently. "Does this help?"

"Yes."

Wanting the pain to dull, needing closure, wanting him one last time, she scooted closer. "Just for this once," she whispered, pressing herself against him completely and relishing the feeling of being pain free.

"Are you saying that you wish to make love to me?" he asked uncertainly.

"Under the circumstances, I think it prudent." She tried to make it sound like it was only to help the situation, but the truth was that no matter how angry she was with him, she wanted to be with him one last time at least. And it was likely the bonding making her think that way, but she didn't care. What was done, was done, and as he'd said, there was no stopping it now.

He nodded and leaned closer, bringing his lips to hers lightly, gazing at her as if she were the most precious thing in the world. "I will miss you terribly," he confessed. "You're everything."

Instead of replying, she eagerly kissed him back, parting his lips with her tongue and tangling it with his own, moaning. How she needed him in that moment! Their hands began tearing at each other's clothes, ripping and ruining when hindered. The hair she'd painstakingly brushed into manageability was now a wild mane tumbling around him. And then her naked flesh was against his, and the word hot fluttered through her mind over and over. The heat between their bodies was unreal, and yet, it was the heat that they needed to chase the pain away...the pain of their bodies having the magic ripped from them, the pain of losing the one person who meant everything to the other, and the pain of possibly never knowing anything in such a way again.

Severus sat up against the back of the couch and pulled her onto him so that she straddled his lap, kissing her throat fervently and fondling her breasts as she positioned herself to slide down his hard shaft. The moment they began merging into one, she hissed from the intensity of it and knew that her fingernails had drawn blood from his shoulders. He answered her eagerness by drawing blood of his own, for she was certain the rough nipping on her neck had broken the skin.

And she cared not. Only he mattered. This moment. *Severus, Severus, Severus*, her mind chanted in time with her body's movements. When his upward thrusts became more intense, she opened her eyes and met his. "I love you," she blurted. "Merlin, help me, I do."

His eyes closed, and his hands slid down to tighten around her waist as he vigorously guided her movements, helping her gyrate so that she was stimulated completely. There was heat, the building sensation, the want and longing and fear, and then the peaking explosion that caught her so suddenly she screamed, sounding as if she were in pain though she was not. She slumped forward, suddenly boneless and unable to move, her breasts pressed flatly against his chest.

She felt his breathing catch and release in a deep rush and knew that he'd also found release. Her dampened hair was stuck against his neck and shoulder, and she noticed that his was also matted against his face slightly. As the bliss of her orgasm ebbed, she felt as though she were losing something else, too. A light was leaving her, she could almost see the brightness fading, and in its place, something dark moved slowly in.

"Severus? I feel..."

"I feel it, too," he replied, not opening his eyes and still breathing heavily.

No, no, no! her mind screamed. *I've made a mistake!*

The power she'd once felt coursing through her was slowly trickling from her body as if she'd been pierced and was leaking its essence. She then noticed that her face was wet, not with only sweat but with tears. How long had she been crying? Loathing the new feeling of loss, she began to sob and held onto Severus as tightly as she could. What if she didn't like life as it would be? What if she'd made a mistake? How could she have wanted to leave Severus because of something so trivial?

Not trivial! a voice sounding like Ginny's whispered.

"I'll always love you," said his soft voice, but she couldn't open her eyes to see him, much less part her lips to answer him.

Darkness had come finally, despair and loss with it.

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Someone was talking. "Hermione... all right?"

She felt her arm being shook. "Mmmm, what?" she managed, though her voice was little more than a light croak.

"I've been trying to wake you for ten minutes! Where's Snape?"

Harry. What was Harry doing in her room? *Hang on! I'm not in my room. Severus. The potion.* Her eyes opened, and she was surprised to see that it was completely dark out, only a candle and the wand of Harry's light enabled her to see properly.

"What happened here, Hermione?" he asked worriedly, blushing as he moved the sheet that was covering her back up over her breasts when it slid down as she shifted. "There's only this sealed letter."

Horried, she sat up, clutching the sheet to her, and asked, "Where's Severus?"

"That's exactly what I want to know. What did he do to you? I'll have him for this!"

"No, Harry, it wasn't like that. The potion, it..." He was gone. Severus had left her there alone. The potion had worked well, for she no longer felt the pull of the bond, but she was more bereft than ever because she still loved him. It hadn't been the magic. He'd been telling the truth when he'd said that her feelings were her own. "Oh no..."

"What is it? What can I do?"

"I've made a mistake, Harry. I shouldn't have..."

"He was your husband," he said quietly. "Don't fret about it. Let's just get you home, okay? Ginny and Ron are going mad with worry. I wouldn't let them come though."

Hermione nodded, not correcting his assumption that she'd made a mistake for giving Severus a last shag. "I need my clothes."

Harry reached down to fetch her shirt. "Er, it's got a tear on the sleeve."

"S all right."

He tossed it to her and said, "Accio Hermione's Clothes. The rest of them, what was left of them, flew into his hands and he threw them to her as well, turning around to give her privacy as she dressed. "Do you need to go to St. Mungo's?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Sure?"

"Yes, he didn't hurt me. The potion worked. It's done with."

Tears burned her eyes as she pulled up the jeans she'd been wearing, having already stuffed her ruined knickers into the pocket. She loved Severus. The realization that she'd been truly in love with him and not forced to love him kept playing over in her mind. And now she'd chased him off because of her wounded pride and indignant anger. Of course she had reason to be angry with him, but now it all felt so inconsequential. Without a doubt, she knew she would never feel that way about anyone else again...not even Ron, no matter if she tried or not.

"Take me home, Harry," she finally said, unable to keep the sobs at bay. Her friend gathered her into his arms and Side-Along Apparated with her back to Grimmauld Place. He led her upstairs to her room and helped her to bed, telling her he thought she needed more rest, and she said nothing in return. When he reached the doorway, she heard him tell the others to leave her alone until she was ready to talk.

She'd never been more grateful in her life, and she wondered if she would ever want to leave the room again. Hermione had never been more miserable. She turned over and heard the distinct crumple of parchment. Shifting, she saw a letter and then remembered Harry saying there was only a letter there with her.

With trembling fingers, she opened the letter.

*My Hermione,*

*By the time you read this, I'll be gone. When I woke and felt that part of me was missing, I couldn't stand it. I had to leave and put distance between us. I've always been a proud man, even in times that I shouldn't have been, and had I stayed there, I would have badgered you upon awakening, begging for you to remain in my life.*

*I have decided that you have been wronged and hurt, and I loathe that I've been the man to do this to you. Please know that I only ever lied to you because I thought I was doing the best thing for us. I wanted you to have a true chance at seeing what it was like to be with me, what it was like to love me and to be loved by me in return...with no one else invading your heart and no guilt slipping into your mind. We were happy, weren't we?*

*Now I see where I made mistakes along the way. I should have reassured you more that you are the one I want to spend my life with, not the memories of another. And when it is time for me to go back to the Otherworld, it is you who I shall wait for there, ready to spend eternity with.*

*Lily, I will always have her in my heart. I loved her a great deal. You know this. I won't lie about it, but you are everything. When we first kissed, and this is something you won't remember, I couldn't believe that anyone else could touch me in such a way, stir such feelings so deeply. You were so beautiful that night, so confused about your feelings. I should have stopped things then, but I couldn't. I was drawn to you after that.*

*Yes, I'd come to respect you before that. After all, we were practically lab partners for all those months working on that damn potion, but you were more than I'd been expecting, were all I needed. In those dark days, you gave me light, and I will forever be grateful for that.*

*In the end, I wish that you had chosen me instead of Weasley, but I could see the logic in your reasoning. It's why I didn't fight harder for you, why I let you go so easily. I must confess that I hoped that I would be killed. Why would I say such a thing? Well, there could only be two outcomes, yes?*

*One, I would be dead and would not be brought back. This was acceptable, for I wouldn't have to see you and know that you could have been mine, know that I loved another woman who had chosen someone else to love and marry. It felt like losing Lily all over again, only worse.*

*Two, I would be dead, and Lucius would get you to help bring me back. Through the magic of the bonding, our fates would be sealed, and I would have you anyway. Devious, I know, but I thought I could show you how things could be and that you were wrong when you picked Weasley. We could have been happy, people would have approved, and I could have given you the life you so deserved.*

*Alas, I have failed on all accounts, and for that, I am ashamed. But I will not regret these months with you as my wife. They've been the best in my life.*

*Our parting doesn't impede my decision to seek vengeance on Lucius. He will pay for crossing me and for hurting you. Leave that to me. I don't want you caught up in anything that might harm you or destroy your life any further.*

*The only thing that I ask of you now is to not make it public that we've broken our bonding. Please, Hermione, give me the time so that Lucius doesn't get suspicious. I am so close. I know that you still have the Dream Stone. Continue to use it as you have done before if you'd like. If the potion I've been working on doesn't work to remove the ointment's protection, I'll try again and again under the guise of trying to help with the nightmares that are slowly driving him mad.*

*We shall have to keep in contact for that, so that I can keep you abreast of any changes. If you wouldn't mind, that is. I don't want to disturb you any further, and I have accepted that I've lost you due to my selfishness, though it hurts. I shan't try to sway you. Would you do this for me? It's my last request.*

*Always yours,*

*Severus*

She kissed the signature several times and then crushed it to her chest, wishing she could talk to him, that he hadn't fled before she'd been able to wake. But what would she have said or done? She'd made her decision. How could she go back on that now, much as she wanted to?

Time. Time would help her fix things somehow. Would she regain all her memories in time if she never found the supposed clue she'd left herself? What if she never recovered what she'd lost?

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to imagine a younger version of herself kissing the Severus Snape she'd known. How had she ever been that brave? Had they truly become so close working together? A smile lifted her lips as she thought of him sitting behind his desk and her slipping up beside him, leaning down to kiss him innocently. His face, in her vision, became incredulous, yet he couldn't stop himself from kissing her back. He'd fallen in love with her, and she'd obviously loved him, yet she'd not chosen him. Had she told him that he could never make her happy? That he couldn't give her the life that she wanted? That nobody would approve? When would she have ever cared what others thought?

She wanted those memories. All of them. No matter how much they hurt. Hell, she even wanted the memory Ginny had of them at Hogwarts. Sucking in a deep breath, she tried hard to remember anything...Severus, Ginny, Hogwarts, kisses, or potions work. Frustrated, she crumpled the parchment and threw it across the room, where it landed on her beaded purse.

Hermione's eyes widened. Ginny had told her something that she should have thought about more.

*You told me that if you ever seemed to doubt your future with Ron, I should take that portrait you carry round in your purse...the one with you and him and Harry...and break it over your head.*

Bolting out of her bed with a sudden energy, Hermione snatched up her purse and began dumping its contents out onto the floor; dozens of books, parchments, and several personal items plopped down before she saw the small, framed picture. Colin had taken it during her sixth year at Hogwarts. *Poor Colin*, she thought sadly as she gazed at the picture.

She was standing between Ron and Harry, all of them smiling, though she could see the troubled expression in their eyes. Ron was covertly looking at her when he wasn't smirking towards the camera. She seemed oblivious to his gaze, laughing at Harry's expression, though her hand brushed Ron's the entire time. Harry was shaking his head in disgust, tired of dodging Colin.

There was nothing extraordinary about the picture, nothing she hadn't seen before. Disappointment filled her. She'd hoped that maybe this had been a clue. Of course things wouldn't be so simple.

"Hang on," she muttered. With one last look at the picture, she gripped it tightly and heaved it as hard as she could towards the wall, biting her lip when the glass broke and the frame fell apart.

Carefully, she inspected the frame, finding nothing out of place. She picked up the picture and flipped it over, gasping slightly. On the back in what she recognized as her own handwriting was the title of a book, its location, and what appeared to be a quote.

*The Many Ponderings of Leonardo da Vinci.*

*Hogwarts Library, Restricted Section*

*'Of all human opinions that is to be reputed the most foolish which deals with the belief in Necromancy, the sister of Alchemy, which gives birth to simple and natural things.'*

"I've got to go to Hogwarts and find that book," she said determinedly. Knowing it wouldn't be prudent to go until she was thoroughly rested, for she would need her strength, she decided to lie down and try to sleep. Before she left in the morning, she would write to Severus and let him know that she would not make their parting public knowledge, but she wouldn't mention that she might be onto something where her memory was concerned.

She welcomed the hope that filled her, for after such a bleak day, she would be a fool to deny it.

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SW: Well, at least I updated quickly. Sorry it's still a bit angsty. More up soon.

## Chapter 22

*Chapter 22 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter 1 please.

A/N: Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for beta reading this for me, and I want to say thanks to Charmed\_Nay, who will also read through it when she has a moment. You ladies are great. Cheers!

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Hermione walked slowly through the stacks of the Hogwarts library, eyes closed and hands out, willing her memory to come back to her. Ginny had unknowingly given her the first clue to getting back the pieces of her life. The note about Leonardo da Vinci's book on the back of the portrait had to be the key.

A quote on Necromancy? Alchemy?

Yes, she was definitely on the right track. Pausing and opening her eyes, she gazed at the section on her left, remembering it well from the days she'd searched for information on Horcruxes. Why couldn't she remember searching for Necromancy information?

Snorting, she muttered, "Divination of the dead indeed." The first mental image she conjured upon thinking of Necromancy was one from early on in her childhood before she'd learned that magic was real. Her father had taken her to a festival where, among other forms of entertainment, a large group of psychics and Tarot card readers were grouped together. He'd always thought of her "gift" as something otherworldly and had hoped someone there could help them.

One woman in particular took interest in her and talked about Necromancy, saying she practiced the old ways and could summon the dead and ask for help and advice. In the end, Hermione's father had lost quite a few pounds, and they hadn't been helped with anything. All those years back when she'd met Trelawney for the first time, she'd been instantly reminded of the old fraud from the festival and had taken a dislike to her and the subject immediately.

"I'm quite with you here, Leonardo," she said softly. "Oh, there might be a few who are legitimate, but I wonder if much of it, tea leaves and whatnot, isn't sheer luck."

Hermione walked the next three aisles, turned right, and then made her way to a back section that did seem vaguely familiar. Letting her instincts guide her, she slowly made her way to the last shelf and looked up. Incredibly, the book caught her eye immediately.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," she huffed, standing on her tiptoes to reach up for it. *The Many Ponderings of Leonardo da Vinci* was quite thick and seemed to be a collection of information from some of his notebooks. "Interesting."

Carefully holding the old, worn book, and with shaking hands, she made her way to a small table in the far corner so that she could read without interruption. In her hands possibly lay the first step on the path back to Severus. Going by instinct again, she let the book fall open to wherever it may.

*20 August 1514*

*And to accuse me of such a thing, the superstitious twits! The church has gone too far this time, but I shall not proclaim anything publicly for the moment. Those fools can*

*look at me with as much disapproval as they deem necessary, for learning about the human body through dissection isn't ungodly or black magic. What, a Necromancer! Next I'll be branded a sorcerer! Think they that I, too, am small witted? I dare not explain that I've been thinking about a way to cheat God and death then, not yet, else I'll be branded a fool much like the Alchemists I mentioned last time. I admit they've aroused my curiosity. Who would have thought that the would-be creators of gold and silver might be on to something?*

"What is he on about?" she wondered aloud. It was intriguing that the book happened to open to a page where Necromancy was mentioned, but what sort of clue was this? Nothing seemed familiar, not for what she needed anyway. Of course she remembered that the church had accused him of Necromancy, but nothing had ever come of it. Did this passage mean something to her and the work she and Severus had done together?

"Cheat God and death. Hmmm. Did he use Alchemy after all to make a potion like the one that saved Severus?" she pondered. She flipped through a few surrounding entries and found a great deal of talk about painting and mirrors. "There must be something more."

She lifted her wand, suddenly remembering something she'd used many times in the past. *Reveal!* If anything had been written on a paper over the book, the spell would make it show up temporarily on the book's page as if written there. She'd learned that spell long ago so that she might see what other students had been thinking about when reading certain texts. She'd always been fascinated by the amount of people who simply wrote something on top of an open book, not realizing it could be traced with magic by another.

Her eyes widened as words began to form on the page, faintly at first, and then darker than the text itself. Her handwriting jumped out at her immediately. She flicked her wand to rid the page of any traces of another's writing to keep only hers. Whatever she'd been thinking, this had been orchestrated purposely, for it wasn't scribbled notes before her; she'd left clues for herself.

"Necromancer, cheat God and death, sorcerer, Alchemist... they've all got circles around them. I've written the words here on the left. Why? And why does the phrase cheat God and death sound so familiar?" Hermione's brow furrowed as she thought this over. "What's this?" At the bottom of the page, she could clearly see the name Darcilo Von Dinea. "Who the bloody hell is that?"

This caused her to snicker and think of Ron. He'd offered to join her at the library, but she'd refused his company, not wanting him to know what she needed to research. Deep down, she knew that she hadn't wanted to disappoint him. The hopeful expression he'd given her when she'd entered the kitchen had made her feel instantly guilty. She wanted to believe in Severus...desperately. She wanted to forgive him and move past what had happened. By doing all of this, however, she would never have a life with Ron, no matter how much she might have wanted that once. That definitely wasn't what she desired any longer, and if what Severus had confessed was true, then she may have never truly wanted it in the first place.

It was still hard for her to believe that she would have refused him because she worried about what others thought, not if she loved him. Would she risk her happiness just to make Ron and others happy? She thought about Ron then, his hopeful expression, his goofy grin, and his warm eyes. Yes. Yes, she would have, but she couldn't do that again. This time she would decide what was best for her. If it turned out that Severus wouldn't be the man in her life, then she would deal with it, even though she loved him more deeply than she'd ever loved anyone, including Ron.

She sighed softly. "Perhaps there will be something on this Von Dinea bloke here in the library. I can crosscheck all of these. Not like I have anything else to do." Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she stood and took two steps before faltering and leaning against a bookshelf. A vision came to her unbidden, blurred and confusing but a true memory nonetheless.

*Severus laughed loudly and happily. "You did it! I can't believe I didn't see it! You brilliant girl, how did you know? What made you add this?" He paused when he noticed she wasn't replying. "Is something amiss?"*

*"You called me brilliant."*

*"I... of course I did. This merits it."*

*"It wasn't me." She held the thin book up and shook it playfully. "Von Dinea gave me the idea."*

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. The memory, albeit short, was precious to her and proved...somewhat...that Severus had been telling the truth. "That had to have been before we... fell in love," she said.

What she didn't understand, however, was why she would willingly alter her memories. It just didn't seem like something she would do. Had she been so weak that she couldn't bear to remember her feelings for Severus while moving on with Ron? Surely not.

"Or was I?" she wondered. She conjured the memory again and replayed it in her mind. It didn't feel as though she loved him, just that she'd been in awe that he'd given her such praise. It was a little blurry, though, and just not easy to tell what feeling she could have held for Severus at that time. The smile on his face had been beautiful, ridding his expression of its usual scowl...or the constant scowl he'd worn in those days anyway. Never again would she take something so lightly. Would he ever look at her and smile in such a way? Gush excitedly? Laugh so loudly?

For the first time, she fully appreciated what she'd cost her parents when she'd taken their memories from them. In that instance, she'd thought she'd done the right thing, what needed to be done for the greater good. "So it's true then. I would have done this to myself for the greater good." That thought disappointed her. Why couldn't she have found a better solution?

"It's obvious that I wasn't sure about my future with Ron," she said as if talking to the book in her hand. "I wouldn't have told Ginny what I did. I wouldn't have left these clues for myself."

*Good grief. I'm talking to a book.* She snorted lightly. *Pity it can't talk back and give me what I need.* Determined, she followed the shelves in search of a nearby card catalogue that might point her in the right direction. As she neared it, however, she felt the same little dizzying feeling she had before when that memory had returned and leaned heavily against the wall, Leonardo's book slipping from her hand as she did so.

*"Ginny! Snape, he's in the library. I've got to hide," Hermione whispered urgently.*

*The redhead's shocked expression turned to worry as she pushed Hermione out of sight behind the next stack of books and then pretended to be reading as Snape entered the aisle from the other way.*

*"Miss Weasley," he said quietly, "have you seen anyone?" He glided closer, his black eyes narrowed in suspicion.*

*"If you mean Malfoy, then I have, and he's being a right... He tried to hex me again, Headmaster."*

*"Tried? Did you accost him then?"*

*She shrugged and looked back toward the large tome in her hands, which were shaking slightly.*

*"Very well," he said when he realized she'd not say anything more. "And, Miss Weasley, do stay out of trouble, else there will be another detention for you."*

*"Yes, sir," she bit out.*

When he left, Hermione poked her head around the corner. "Ginny, thank you."

"What are you doing here? Are you mad?"

"I had to come for a book of course."

"Where's Ron? How's Harry? What's going on? We've been trying to get news! Come with me to the Room of Requirement. There's so much to show you and say."

"No, I can't. I have to go back the way I came. I have a Portkey, but I don't have it on me right now."

"Oh... damn it. I've missed you so much." Ginny hugged Hermione tightly. "It's been so scary, not knowing what's happening with you lot. And the Carrows..." She shook her head.

"Not much longer, I hope," Hermione said, already trying to walk away and looking about for a sign of Snape. "Promise me, Ginny, that if it ever seems like I'm not happy with Ron, you'll take my favorite little portrait of us...the one in my purse...and break it over my head!" She flashed a small smile for reassurance.

Smiling knowingly, the younger girl said, "So he's finally doing something right then, is he? I'm glad you two are hitting it off so well. You know I'll always be here for you."

"Great. I have to go."

"Wait..."

"I can't. Remember that, okay?"

"Be safe, and tell Harry... Wish him luck."

Hermione nodded and scurried away, adrenaline coursing through her body. She had to get away before Severus found her, before he succeeded in changing her mind. Her decision had been made. There was no future for them, and she had to do what she had to do.

And now she knew what Ginny had been talking about. Retrieving the memory didn't make her feel any better, though she was glad to know it for herself. She'd not wanted to talk to Severus, and it was obvious he was trying to stop her from leaving so that he could change her mind about... about their relationship? About wanting to alter her memories? It obviously had been a hard decision to make. She could still feel the despair mingled with determination that she'd felt that night.

No longer needing help to find the book, she began the small walk that would lead her directly to it: the Restricted Section, tenth shelf down on the right. Madam Pince was nowhere to be seen, so she slipped in without any questions and easily found the small book.

"All this fuss over you," she murmured, grabbing it gently.

The title's glinting letters on the cover caught the light from a nearby flame, and Hermione realized that it was actually gold or at least plated. She read, *Cheat God and Death Be Ye A Sorcerer, an Alchemist, or a Necromancer* by Darcilo Von Dinea, edited by Caradoc Dearborn.

Hermione's stomach jolted. "Dearborn!" He was the brother of the woman who'd claimed to have an intimate affair with Severus, the one who'd helped bring Rita Skeeter to justice. What could it mean? How did he tie into things? If Severus knew about this, why did he not say anything when the woman had accused him? He'd told more lies, hadn't he?

Wanting to be alone to read and investigate further, she placed the book in her beaded purse with the other one and flicked her wand to conceal them both from the magical book-theft detectors, something Severus had taught her, something else she suddenly remembered. *How convenient*, she thought bitterly, yet still welcoming the knowledge.

Just as she left the Restricted Section, a tall woman stepped in front of her. "All right, Mrs. Snape? You look a bit pale." Madam Pince's hawk-like features came into focus. "Mrs. Snape?"

"Sorry." She wanted to point out that she was no longer Mrs. Snape but hadn't the heart, hadn't the want to voice it out loud. "I think I need a nap. I'm not feeling my best."

"When you said you wanted to use the library, you didn't mention anything about needing the Restricted Section."

"Oh... I just... You know, nostalgia and all that."

"Any students in there?"

"Not that I saw, Madam Pince."

"Right then. See yourself out."

"Thanks." Fleeing the library, she left Hogwarts without talking to anyone else, practically running the Apparition point. Once there, she Disapparated without thinking and then nearly fainted upon seeing her location. She'd gone *home*...to the home she'd shared with Severus.

There was no smoke coming from the chimneys, the house looked dark and vacant, and the feeling of safety lured her closer. Severus wasn't there. Had he not returned then? Unable to help herself, she walked down the hillside to the house. Emotion welled up inside of her; things flicked through her mind: his smile, his sad eyes, his long-fingered hands reaching out for her, and their last kiss.

"It's all gone, isn't it?" she whispered numbly. She longed to feel again the power of the bonding and all that it entailed, wanted to know what he felt at that very moment, wanted to feel closer to him than anything else. She missed him, missed the security he provided, not that she needed it, but it was nice to have. She missed his love, now that she was certain she'd had it.

Hermione entered the house easily, the wards recognizing her still, and she went through the rooms on the bottom floor and saw that it had remained unchanged, right down to the couch he'd transfigured into a bed for them to sleep off the effects of the bond release. Her eyes were drawn to the large set of windows she loved.

"Our garden," she muttered and strode forward to the side door. The books in her purse forgotten, she began watering their plants and flowers. "You lot shouldn't suffer just because we're utter arses, now should you?" Before she realized what she was doing, she'd added soil to several plants, picked some vegetables that were ripe for eating, and even repotted one that seemed to have grown too big for its holder over night.

Happiness. That was what she felt. Simple things that she'd enjoyed doing with Severus made her happy. Why had she not accepted it, her life, as it was? She could still be happy, him at her side, the bond keeping them close. Would it have been so bad?

Frowning, she knew the answer. She never would have been happy not knowing if her feelings were her own or the result of the bonding. And she never would have been told the truth about their past, for how would she have demanded it of him in any other situation? So, no, things couldn't have remained as they were. They would have eventually poisoned her against him anyway, maybe bringing about even more damage. What if children had been involved? They would have been hurt.

With a pang, she realized that she might never have that with him...a real family. What if she wouldn't approve of what she found out? What if her memories revealed things he'd still kept quiet about? Obviously, there was so much more...just seeing Caradoc's name on that book proved that. Yet Severus never uttered a word about it, claiming he had no idea about the man's life other than he'd disappeared and simply remembered him in passing. Had the oath he'd given her kept him from admitting anything more?

What would she have thought if he'd mentioned knowing he'd edited someone's book? Hermione wondered if she'd have taken the initiative to look the man's work up on her own and what would have happened if it had jogged her memory without warning.

"I probably would have thought I'd gone mad," she said with tight smile. Sighing, she stood and fidgeted with soil stuck under her fingernails, knowing she'd put off the inevitable long enough. "Now to see what's going on with this Darcilo Von Dinea man."

Going back to Grimmauld Place was out of the question, as she'd likely not have privacy for very long there...not with her well-meaning friends anyway. Since Severus hadn't been back since their parting, she assumed it would be all right to make herself at home and read in her sitting room by the fire as she'd done so many times before.

Truth was it felt great to be home again.

"Is miss staying home again?" came a squeaky voice from the doorway.

"Oh, Izzy!" Hermione gasped, startled. She had been so caught up in her thinking that she'd not thought to call out and greet the house-elf. "I'm so sorry. I was just... I'm not staying permanently, just for a little while."

Feeling suddenly guilty, she wondered if the elf still saw her as her mistress now that she and Severus were no longer married. Would the elf try to insist she leave?

"I is hoping to have company. Master isn't staying here again. Izzy is alone."

"While I may not live here any longer, I promise that you won't be alone. I'll come to visit you every day that I can."

"Miss is wanting tea?"

"All right. I'll just get a fire going while you do that."

"Izzy is making sandwiches for lunch, too."

"That sounds... Thank you. I'd like that."

She watched the elf strut happily away and smiled. Izzy, though a house-elf, was a good companion. Hermione felt anger with Severus for leaving her alone again. How could he do that? And why hadn't he thought to water the plants? Would he just let the things they'd loved wither and die because he felt better off brooding at his wretched Spinner's End home?

Hermione brandished her wand and flicked it furiously, setting the room to rights again. Had he told Izzy to keep things as they were? Why hadn't the elf tidied? She opted not to ask in fear that the elf would see this as a reproach and try to punish herself. Instead, she thanked her for the tea and sandwiches and told her that she wouldn't mind if she did any cleaning necessary and was sure that her master would approve. The elf seemed grateful and as much as admitted she hated to change anything in case the master came back and became angry.

Finally settled with the book in one hand and a triangle-shaped ham sandwich in the other, Hermione opened the book to read the foreword by the late (or missing, rather) Caradoc Dearborn.

*Of late, I've been fascinated by the work of Darcilo Von Dinea and have made it my personal project to go through his many theories and try to decode the riddles and shed light on touchy subjects. For a Muggle, he seemed completely knowledgeable about certain things we wizards hold dear, almost to the point that I would suspect he, too, was a wizard. For all we know, he could have been.*

*Not much is known about his early life, as he took great pains to conceal his true identity, but he had influential friends from the Wizarding world, the Flamels being only two. Nicolas Flamel obviously partook in mentoring Von Dinea and possibly shared Alchemy secrets...along with secrets of our world...with the man, who indeed made gold from lead successfully through Alchemy. We all know that Flamel is most famous for creating the Elixir of Life, but I intend to prove that he and Von Dinea were actively working on other ways to cheat God and death. These theories are not just the spouting of a Muggle nutter and are possibly starting steps for something great.*

"Flamel again!" Hermione had a wave of nostalgia once again as she read the man's name. The first time she'd researched something about him had been back in her first year at Hogwarts when she and the others had needed information on the Philosopher's Stone. "If he mentored Von Dinea, then perhaps they were on to something. They must have been."

She snorted at herself. "Get a grip, Hermione. You know that you found a key to breaching the Otherworld through Von Dinea's book already." The earlier memory she'd had flashed through her mind. It was just hard not knowing everything. At what sort of rate would she regain her memories? Would something strike her as familiar and jog them? Maybe they would all come flooding back in a rush.

The latter would be the best for her, as she hated not knowing and having to learn things piece by piece. *Especially things I bloody well know already*, she thought bitterly. Popping the last bite of her sandwich into her mouth, she turned the page and saw a drawing that looked very familiar on the book's title page.

"Where have I seen this before?"

An older man, haggard looking, with bushy brows, hair long and wavy and a long beard to match stared out at her. He faced the left slightly, and while his eyes seemed to be scowling, there was a small smirk playing at his lips. The entire picture seemed to be done in red and black chalks, no other colors aside from the many hues of those. His robes were dark and his pale hands crossed in front of his waist, resting on his stomach. In the background, she could make out a rocky terrain and some path through which people traveled. She was certain she'd seen the man before.

"It'll come to me," she said certainly. "Always does."

The original work was first published in 1520. Caradoc published his edited version exactly 450 years later in 1970. What puzzled Hermione the most was how the man had even heard of Von Dinea. She considered herself well read and had never heard of him. What had Caradoc been researching? Had Dumbledore requested his help with something? The man was an Order member, so they were likely close. Dumbledore also knew Nicolas Flamel and practiced Alchemy. Was this why Caradoc had disappeared all those years ago? Had he been killed for his knowledge? He'd gone missing not long after that publication date.

"Shite. Voldemort. He would have wanted to know ways to stay alive. When he published this book, he signed his own death warrant I'd wager." She nodded as she mulled this over. *That's why he was never found again. Voldemort snatched him, wanting his help with becoming immortal.*

Wishing she could get Severus' opinion and talk things over with him, she turned the page again to start reading through the book. How she missed Severus. She wondered if she should owl him to ask him to join her or if he would. Would he answer her questions about Caradoc? Would he want to be close to her now that she'd left him? His letter had as much as said that he'd rather not because it was too painful for him, but he had admitted to wanting to keep in touch.

"I never sent an owl back to him," she said sadly. "I'll do that when I go back to Grimmauld Place." She wanted him to know that she wouldn't go public with their

separation and would do whatever it took to see that Lucius pay for his actions.

*That bastard, how could I have ever fallen for his trickery? How could I have stepped foot back in his home after what happened to me there?* A dizzying sensation filled her, and she immediately braced herself for another memory.

*"Please," she begged. "I don't know anything."*

*The man's stinking breath blew into her nostrils as he answered in what sounded like a growl. "You'll know something before this night's out, girl. I'll see to it personally." He made a show of sniffing her neck and inhaling deeply. "Mmmmm... yes."*

*"Fenrir, step aside. I want to question the Mudblood," Bellatrix Lestrange said, sneering. "You can play with her later if you're good. You will have deserved a toy."*

*Hermione's eyes darted around the room, and she saw Draco standing behind his mother, eyes wide with horror, clutching the woman's robes as if to get her attention. Was he going to help me? God, I can't let them know anything! The sword is our only...*

*"AHHHHHHHHHH!"*

*"A little taste of what's to come, you filthy girl!" And again she set the Cruciatus on Hermione.*

*Her entire body convulsed of its own volition, twisting this way and that, and every muscle felt as though it were on fire while each bone hurt and felt near snapping. And had she just urinated on herself?*

*When the curse lifted, she heard herself say, "I don't know anything," and she thought of Severus, his broken expression as she'd told him of her plans to ensure that she'd not remember their time together. Still, she'd not betray him, wouldn't let them know of their work, and she'd not betray Harry... Death. Death was better than hurting either of them. Let it come. Let the pain end.*

*Faintly, she thought she could hear Ron calling out for her, and before the next hex hit her, she saw Draco vomiting while his mother pat his back consolingly with Wormtail leering in the background.*

*"The sword! Where did you get it?"*

The memory faded, and Hermione's eyes were filled with tears. The memory she had of that night was much the same, but she'd always known there were holes, things missing, but she'd assumed it had been due to the pain she'd been in. She was certain that she'd passed out a few times. She'd been worried about protecting Severus as well as Harry. She would have died to protect him and the work they'd done together...not just for Harry but because she'd loved Severus.

She could feel that through the memory. At that point in her life, she'd been in love with him. Strangely enough, in the memories she'd come to know, she'd thought her heart had belonged to Ron then. And it had. She loved Ron, too, but Severus had had more of her. *When? When did I decide to forgo a future with Severus for Ron? What made my decision?*

"Oh, God... the night he came back to the camp." It came crashing back to her suddenly.

Ron had left them, had let the Horcrux poison his mind and had said horrible things to her and left. How she'd loathed him, yet missed him. How she wished he were more like Severus. Severus would never have abandoned them.

*Hermione sat outside the tent and kept watch while Harry slept inside. She listened carefully, wondering if anyone were nearby. She couldn't believe that Ron had left like that. Tears slid down her cheeks. She'd been thinking that she should give her whole heart to Ron and had already ended things with Severus. It was for the best after all. They wouldn't have a future together, so why should she continue pretending they could? Nobody would approve. What would Harry say? What would the Weasleys say? Her parents?*

*But when Ron had left, abandoned her and Harry, she'd felt so foolish for having had so much faith in him and for possibly making the worst mistake of her life. He would never be half the man that Severus was. How could he have betrayed them? "Is there no hope?" she whispered sadly. "Am I not to be happy either way?"*

*A shooting star flitted through the sky overhead, and at that moment, she decided to make a vow. "If Ron comes back to help us and apologizes, I will forgive him. I'll see that as a sign to honor the decision I made to be with him. However, if he doesn't come back before I see Severus again, I'll know that it's Severus who's the man for me. I'll tell him that my plan is a mistake, that I shouldn't have ended things."*

Ron had come back three days after that, and she'd been so angry that she'd wanted to beat him within an inch of life and probably would have if Harry hadn't been there. The longer he'd stayed away, the more she'd regretted her decision to spend her life with him instead of Severus. By the time he'd come back, she'd been planning out the ways she'd sneak to Hogwarts and let Severus know she'd changed her mind. When he'd walked back in, looking as though he should be welcomed with open arms, she'd nearly hated him, hated that he'd once again confused her.

"It was the sign I'd asked for after the shooting star, so I stuck with my promise." Hermione shut the book in her hands, reached over for her tea and took a sip of it, and then stood to stretch. With these things on her mind, she couldn't concentrate on the book. Any clues would be lost. What she needed was a hot bath and possibly another nap.

"Izzy?"

"Yes, miss?"

"I'm going to go up for a bath and a nap."

"Is miss needing Izzy to help?"

"No, I just wanted you to know, and I'd like you to wake me up if I'm still sleeping before dusk, all right?"

"Izzy will. Is miss wanting Izzy to cook dinner?"

"I... No, I don't think so, Izzy." When the elf looked disappointed, she added, "Maybe tomorrow."

"Izzy is proud to be helping miss."

Hermione smiled at the elf affectionately and made her way upstairs to the suite she shared with Severus, wondering why she didn't feel as if she were trespassing. After all, it wasn't her home any longer, yet it felt more like home than anywhere else had in a long time. When she entered the room, she heard the water running in the bath already and spied Izzy putting out a large towel for her.

"She beat me up here," she said to herself, going to the wardrobe to fetch one of Severus' shirts to nap in after her bath. After finding a shirt, she noticed the trunk that they'd taken with them from Spinner's End. At one time, she'd debated on breaking into it to see what treasures it held, but she'd never had the courage to do so. Those

were Severus' personal belongings after all. If he'd have wanted to share its contents, he would have. It was very tempting now, especially knowing all the things he'd lied to her about and had kept from her.

Forcing herself to turn away, she went to have her bath instead. She'd think about the chest later. For now, she wanted to concentrate on finding herself again, on regaining her precious past.

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**SW's Notes:** I'm sorry for the delay in posting. I got caught up in the holidays and judging a contest and so many other things I could go on about. Hahaha. This won't happen again. I'm very excited about the things I have planned for the next few chapters, so I hope you'll stick with me.

## Chapter 23

*Chapter 23 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** Please see chapter one.

*Thanks go to the lovely betas in my life, ladyinthecloak and charmed\_nay (when she gets a moment), for reading this over.*

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Hermione stretched and yawned, blinking to bring the darkened room into focus. She'd slept much longer than she'd planned to. "Izzy? Are you there?"

A pop alerted her to the house-elf's presence. "You is calling Izzy?"

"Why did you not wake me as I asked?"

Izzy's already bulging eyes widened, and she began to shake her head violently before running full speed and hitting the wall. "I is bad! I cannot!"

"NO! Stop it right now! Please!"

"Izzy is a bad elf!"

"No, you're not!" Hermione quickly said. "Please..." The elf looked at her, big ears nearly flat against her head. "Well, you brought this warm blanket to cover me with. Thank you."

"OH! Izzy is bad!" Again, the elf began to punish herself, this time by grabbing a nearby lamp and whacking her body with it.

"Stop it right now!" Hermione said firmly. "Explain yourself!"

"Master is telling Izzy to keep silent. Miss is telling Izzy to talk! Izzy is confused." The lamp lifted in her hand, but a glare from Hermione had her setting it down. "Master is coming to see Izzy to make sure Izzy is okay."

"S-Severus was here?" she asked incredulously, looking about to see if anything had changed, embarrassed that he'd caught her in his home.

"Yes." Her green lips trembled. "I is telling him that Izzy is to wake miss up, but he is telling Izzy to let miss rest."

"I... Well, it's okay. I mean, I shouldn't be here in the first place, so..."

"Miss is wrong. Master said this house is for miss if miss wants it. I is to make miss happy and help miss. I is to be a good house-elf." She began sobbing loudly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Enough! There's no need for this! It's not your fault. I... thank you for the blanket at least. Really. I'm not late for anything, all right?"

"Izzy isn't putting the blanket on miss. Master is doing it, master is taking care of miss and letting miss rest."

Stunned, Hermione just nodded and clutched the blanket closer. He'd been in the room with her, had covered her... had seen her wearing his shirt to nap in! What had he thought? Part of her wished that he'd woken her. She had so many questions to ask, but would he give her the answers she needed? Was she ready to see him anyway? There was still so much to sort out.

"Did he say anything else?"

The elf fidgeted a little before shaking her head. Hermione was uncertain if Izzy was being honest, but she didn't want to bring about another self-imposed punishment.

"That will be all. I'm going to get dressed and go home now. I... Izzy, that trunk there, can you open it?"

"Master's chest is private."

"But he told you to take care of me, right? It would be a great help to me and what I need if you could do that for me."

The elf nodded and lifted a hand towards the trunk. A white light shot out of it, and the unclicking of a lock was heard.

"Thank you, Izzy. You've been very helpful."

"Izzy is happy to be helping miss."

"I'll see you tomorrow. For now, I need to—" She realized that she might run into Severus if she returned. "Izzy, is Severus going to be here tomorrow?"

"Master isn't telling Izzy."



"Well, I'll still try to see you anyway."

Once the elf popped away, Hermione realized that she'd left her things down below. Had Severus seen the book? Hurriedly, she dressed, levitated the trunk behind her, and took the stairs two at a time to make certain her book was where she'd left it. Spying the book, she breathed a sigh of relief and felt foolish for thinking he'd take it.

After all, didn't he want her to regain her memories?

She put the book in her beaded bag, shrunk and stuffed the trunk in as well, and left for Grimmauld Place. Upon arrival, Ginny and Ron accosted her, and several questions were shot at her at once.

Holding up her hand, she said, "I did some research and then went to a quiet place to read. Nothing to worry about."

"I was worried," Ron said.

"All right then, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"I'm fine. I had a nap even, so yes." She grinned and patted her purse. "Got lots to go over."

"I've made dinner," Ron said.

Ginny coughed.

"*You* made dinner?"

"Well, I told Kreacher what to do, remembered what Mum did, and you liked it then, so... I thought."

"Oh, er, I just remembered I have to meet Harry," Ginny began to back away. "Um, don't wait up."

Before Hermione could say anything, her friend was gone, and she had the sinking feeling that this had been planned. "Ron..."

"Come on, Hermione. What'll it hurt?"

She sighed, nodded, and took the proffered hand, allowing him to lead her to the kitchen where the table had been set for two and candles had been lit. Dismayed, she sat down without a word, frowning slightly.

He sat across from her and said, "Elf-made wine. Kreacher did it. Right good, too!"

"Thanks," she said, adding, "but we need to talk, Ron."

"I know. That's what this is all about."

He filled their glasses and snapped so that the courses would appear on the table between them. "Lamb chops like Mum makes." He smiled. "And that Yorkshire pudding, too."

"You remembered."

"I, uh, remember a lot of things, Hermione."

"This won't work," she blurted.

His face fell slightly. "I didn't stop loving you, you know."

"What of Jeri? Why didn't things work out?"

"You."

"Me?"

"I mean, I wanted to try, feeling sorry for her and all, and what with you and Snape being married, but I just couldn't. She knew she didn't compare to you."

"All this time that I've been married, I've developed feelings for him."

"I know that," he said decisively, "and I can even understand it, but now you've left him, you've seen how he can be. Maybe in time, you might feel that way about me again."

"I... still love him, and if things happen that—what I mean to say is that I hope we can work things out, Severus and I."

Ron looked down and began to spoon food onto his plate. "New potatoes are good this way."

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah, I did. No need to let all this food go to waste though, right?"

She smiled and reached over to place a hand over his. "I'm sorry. Too much has happened. I don't think I'll ever feel that way again."

"But there's always hope," he said, sounding as though he were asking.

Hermione simply shrugged and took a sip of the wine. "This is good."

"Uh-huh. Told him he should've let me know about that sooner."

They ate in awkward silence for a while before Ron spoke again. "I want to plan something for Harry before the wedding, you know, just for the blokes. Are you going to do the same for Ginny? A hen party? Haven't heard you mention it."

Horrified, she said, "Blast! I haven't thought of the wedding at all! Have they said anything?"

He smirked. "Gin says you two are going to Madam Malkins and... some other place, Muggle, I think, this weekend."

"That's news to me."

"Maybe she hasn't asked you yet. Don't tell her I said anything. They don't want to pressure you, not with all that's been going on with the git."

"Why do you love me?"

It was something she had to ask. She needed to know.

"I think I always have, Hermione. You know that." He grinned, resembling the Ron she'd fallen in love with years earlier. "When I wake up, I wonder what you're doing, and then I realize that it's not my business anymore. That makes me feel... like nothing really matters now. Going into business with George, it's helping him and our family, but it was mainly for us—you and me—so we'd never have to live like Mum and Dad. I just thought... The thing that I wanted to do for us is what ended up tearing us apart. If I hadn't gone to France to..."

His blue eyes darkened violently, and one of his fists clenched.

It had been a long time since she'd seen him quite so passionate about something, and she wondered if she was making the right decision—choosing Severus. Could she destroy Ron all over again? Harry and Ginny seemed to approve of—*no, no, no*, she thought firmly, realizing that she'd been down this path once before, and it had cost her some happiness already.

"All right?" she prodded when he drifted into thought for a long time.

"Malfoy's going to pay for what he's done."

"He's already been paying a little," she said with a sly smirk. "I think tonight it's time for a little more payment." She thought of her Dream Stone and knew it was time to resume her activities. First, she needed to owl Severus and let him know what her plans were and to let him know she did agree with keeping their separation a secret.

"Draco's doing all right," Ron said after a moment. "Can't believe he'd leave all that behind."

"Sometimes money isn't everything."

"When you've never had a lot of it, I guess that's hard to understand." He shrugged. "The prat's not like me. I don't think I could just hide out like this."

"Everyone handles things differently I expect."

"Yeah, I guess." He smirked. "He's still got a thing for Gabrielle. It's the Veela in her, and I've tried to tell him that, but he won't listen."

"Well, what would be so wrong with that? I mean, she's a little young, but Fleur's turned out to be all right."

"She's of age, only just, and is a small thing, so she looks younger than she is."

"Why don't you approve? I wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"Are you attracted to her, too?"

"No," he said quickly. "I mean, you know how Veelas affect me, so I think she's pretty, but I just think he's got enough to be going on with."

"Maybe, Ron, he needs something to keep his mind off of his horrible father and mother—who've been keeping him drugged against his will."

"Hadn't thought of it that way. Maybe she is good for him then." He wiped his mouth.

"You've grown so much, do you know that?"

"What's that mean?" He patted his stomach. "Trousers still fit the same."

"You've grown in maturity, Ron. I'm... proud of you."

"Thanks, love."

She pushed her plate away. "I've had enough, I think. It was delicious, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry that things haven't worked out how you thought they might."

"S all right. Never know how that might turn out, right?"

Hermione stood and left, giving him a small, tight smile as she did so, but her heart felt heavy, and she wished that Ron wouldn't be hurting on her account. She also decided to ask Harry and Ginny to stop feeding his hopes. She didn't need their meddling, even though they obviously meant well.

After settling down in her room, she took the book and Severus' trunk from her purse. Fighting the desire to open either immediately, she instead penned a letter to her ex-husband and allowed Pig to deliver it for her. When he didn't flit right back in as he had the last time, with a reply from Severus, she was a little disappointed.

No quick response meant he wasn't nearby. She hadn't expected him to be, not really. Not waking her at his house meant that he wasn't ready to talk to her. She would give anything to know what he'd thought upon seeing her. Had he looked down at her with love and longing... or disappointment? Both, likely.

Why was there no charm to simply right her memories? Why would she have chosen such a fate for himself? Growling, she opened the book, willing it to bring forth a memory—any memory. When nothing happened, she felt like crying out in frustration.

"I'm just fucking everything up!" she said aloud bitterly and quickly brought a hand to her mouth. "Swearing on top of everything!" Ron had rubbed off on her.

Ron... the first time she'd kissed him had been when he'd finally shown the compassion she thought all beings should feel, something she'd thought he lacked until his worry over the Hogwarts house-elves. Before that point, he'd always seemed so thick, and she hadn't really...

*"Severus, I have to do this. I'm sorry."*

"You stand there and tell me that you choose Weasley? Weasley, whom you've ranted about nearly every day you've been in my company? Weasley, whom you do NOT love."

"Make no mistake, I do *love him*."

"But not the way you care for me. I've seen it in your eyes."

"You used Legilimency on me?"

"You daft... I'm saying that you are readable, and you're honest if nothing else. How many times have you told me that you hope things work out for us?"

"And how many times have you pushed me away? How many times have you said that I deserve better?" She shook her head. "Look, my parents wouldn't approve. They think that Ron is the boy I'm going to marry."

"They don't think anything about you! You've taken their memories!"

She slapped him soundly on the face, surprising them both. She stepped back quickly as he advanced on her and gripped her wrist tightly.

"Don't strike me... ever again."

"I didn't mean... I'm sorry." She wrenched her wrist away from him and wiped at the tears on her cheeks. "You're clouding my judgement on everything. I can't do it. How can I be there for Harry and help him thoroughly if you're on my mind? I can't even make logical decisions for fear that you'll be in jeopardy! We've done what we set out to do, and now we have to put aside what we feel." She sniffed loudly before continuing. "And Ron, he'll come into his own one day. He's still learning, still growing. You've had a lifetime of experiences that he can't—"

"Ah, so it is about age then. I told you repeatedly that the age difference would matter, and you reassured me that it wouldn't, so despite my reservations, I gave in. What a fool I've been! Lies then?"

"No! You're twisting my words around."

"Silence! Someone is coming!" He pushed her down behind his desk and stood before it just as the door burst open.

"Snake," Amycus wheezed, "that fucking Longbottom. We've got to do somethin' about him!"

"Unable to deal with a child, Amycus?"

"Oi, he's run off again. Can't find the pillock! Sent a hex at Alecto, hit her right in the back afore he run off!"

"Tell Filch. He'll know where to look and will send his cat out to scout."

"When are you going to do something?"

"I am waiting for word from the Dark Lord tonight. Shouldn't I be here if he calls on me?"

"He's off on the continent!"

"But for how long?"

The dumpy man nodded. "Right. I'll see Filch then."

"Very well," Severus said, adding, "and if you do catch the little wanker, let him know that his grandmother shall be getting a visitor from our associates very soon."

"Aye, that'll teach the brat."

"Indeed."

The man stormed out, slamming the door behind him, and Hermione rose.

"I'm so glad that Neville's keeping them on their toes like this."

Severus nodded. "Not just Longbottom either."

"I know." She frowned and moved to hold him tightly. "I do love you, Severus, you know that, but some things are more important than my happiness, and to be honest, I think if I weigh my future, then our parting ways now would be the best for all of us." Trying to steady her voice, she added, "I know I have your love, and you have mine. But sometimes we need more than love. I want to be loved, but I want to be happy and have a content life. I want things to be conflict free. I've had enough of this bloody war and all the fighting."

"I could give you the life that you want. I could see to it that you live happy and comfortable for the rest of your life. Why should we care what others think?"

"You will be free of all of this and can start over. I'll... I'll do what I always knew I would. I hadn't counted on falling in love with you, and I will never regret it."

"Of course you won't! You opt to not remember it!"

"It's for the best—for both of us."

"You don't believe that."

"I do!"

"I wish you'd never found that fucking book!"

"Then we wouldn't have finished the potion."

"Hermione..." His voice caught as he fought to school his expression.

She sucked in a deep breath. "I've got to go. I'll be missed."

"I... Please."

This caused her to pause and tear up anew. She'd never imagined he would ever beg her for anything. Yet here he was, begging to be a part of her life.

Before she could change her mind, she backed away, donning Harry's cloak. "I'm sorry."

As fast as she could, she fled his office and ran for the library. She'd have to leave clues in case she wanted to jog her memory later... just in case this was a big mistake.

"So that's when I told him I wanted to end things, that I wanted to erase my feelings for him from my memories," she said softly, gazing towards the window and the dark sky beyond. "That must have been right before I saw Ginny in the library."

A fog lifted. "He didn't proclaim his love very often, but he always went on about how he could make me happy and give me a content life. It's what he thought I wanted to hear, yet all this time I..."

The feelings of confusion and heartbreak that she'd felt during that conversation filled her mind and soul. That had been the hardest thing she'd ever done, despite the firm stance she'd taken when talking to him. And it was no wonder she'd been feeling like a fool for her decision when Ron had had his tantrum and had abandoned them. She'd made the wrong decision for all the right reasons. Well, right wasn't exactly the best word, was it?

To defend herself, she knew that she'd needed to concentrate on helping Harry and that it should have been her top priority. Worrying about Severus as well had been a drain on her. But what a ridiculous way to go about things! Why this way? It was a very selfish thing to do, now that she thought about it. It felt as though she'd only been worrying about herself—how she felt, how she would deal with things.

"Poor Severus, how hard that must have been!"

Her eyes once again moved to the trunk. Dare she open it? If opening it was the right thing to do, why did she feel so guilty about it? Why had he left it at their home? If it were so important to him, he would have guarded it better, given Izzy specific instructions to keep it safe from everyone.

"Maybe he wants me to open it. Maybe it holds the key."

As she reached over for it, the Dream Stone caught her attention. It lay proudly on her bedside table, waiting to be useful. Thinking of Ron's hurt expression, she knew it was time to use it again. How she wished things could be much simpler. Grasping it in her palm, she lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. Immediately, she could feel its smooth surface heat and vibrate slightly, the hum of its magic tingling against her skin.

In her mind, she tried to reach out for Lucius Malfoy several times. When she couldn't connect to him, she realized that he was likely awake. Instead her mind thought of Severus and wondered if he'd given Lucius anything else to help him sleep.

*Severus.*

She felt his presence and knew that she need only imagine the scenario and meeting with him would be hers. Would it be wrong to do this to him? She reasoned that it would only be returning the favor. Had he not allowed Lucius to do this? Had he not done it himself from the Otherworld with Lucius' help?

Suddenly, she found herself walking along a lonely stretch of beach, sand and shells beneath her bare feet, the tide flowing in towards her a little more with each step she took, wetting her ankles and toes. Severus waited for her atop a large, flat rock that overlooked the sea.

Hermione floated over to him as if she were light as a cloud and sat beside him, smiling happily. "I've found you," she said.

"So you have."

His tone was clipped and she knew he was angry. "I shouldn't have come, but..."

"Why have you come?"

"I wanted to see you. There is so much that I want to ask, so much I need to know."

Severus shook his head. "You will have to find out those things on your own."

"Can't you just—"

"No!" he said sharply. "You wanted it this way, so that's how you'll get it."

"You owe me!"

"Yes, and you seem to like pointing that out, don't you? Will you always throw this into our conversations? What I've done is wrong, but what you did... How could I not? It was the only way!"

"It wasn't the only way. You could have... or you could..."

"There was no way. You saw to that when you fucked with your head!"

With that he stood and began to walk away.

"You can't leave!" she said. "I control this dream. Please come back and talk to me. I didn't mean to sound so... harsh. I'm just confused."

"Maybe you aren't the only one who is. Leave me be, and don't use my own Stone against me again—for selfish reasons."

"Selfish? How dare you!"

"Yes, selfish! You aren't here because you miss me or want me. You're here because you want answers to your bloody questions! Questions you already know the answers to, yet have hidden them away."

"I *do* miss you." This was said in a broken whisper. "I just need time."

"By all means," he said, turning away and disappearing.

She could feel that the connection was broken. He'd left the dream and had woken up. How had he managed that? Why wouldn't the Dream Stone work against him? His Occlumency skills alerted him somehow? What surprised her even more was his bitterness. From what Izzy had told her, he'd wanted her cared for. That had given her a measure of comfort. But this? He seemed acerbic... and very hurt. What had she done? She'd lost him, hadn't she? "Dear God, let me just piece this together and rebuild what we had together. Please."

He was right about it all, wasn't he? This was her doing. If she'd been the woman she should have been all along, she would have fought to be with the man she loved, not the man everyone thought she should love and would approve of. In all fairness, she had loved Ron—still did on some level—but with Severus...

As she turned over to think about things, she murmured, "I'm sorry, Severus," and meant it with all of her heart. A vision overtook her.

*Professor Snape lay on the rotting, wooden floor of the Shrieking Shack, his blood pooling around his head and upper body. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest as she watched her friend put the man's memories in the bottle she'd conjured. There was something that she couldn't quite put her finger on, but part of her wanted to throw herself down to the floor next to him and beg him to stay alive. He'd killed Dumbledore, and yet... she couldn't hate him, didn't consider him evil. There had to be something redeeming about him. It seemed that he wanted to help Harry after all, asking him to take the memories and wanting to look into his eyes.*

When Professor Snape exhaled his last breath and drifted into death, she knew a moment of extreme mourning. No one deserved such a fate after all. However, Voldemort's high-pitched voice pulled her away from that, instilling her with fear and horror. There was work to be done. As she and Ron ran for the exit, she stopped once to look back at her old professor's body, fighting the urge to go to him and deciding to carry on with her duty in helping Harry to the end—whatever end that may be.

Sobs wracked her body as she remembered again Severus' death and how she'd felt. It was the same way she'd always remembered it, but now it meant something more to her. Her subconscious had practically been screaming out to her that it hadn't just been her old Potions master who'd been dying before her but a part of her soul—the only man she would ever truly love so deeply that she'd give part of herself to if she had to in order to bring him back from death... from the Otherworld.

Which was exactly what she'd done ultimately, though she'd not done it all on her own. And was it all worth it? Yes. He lived and breathed again. Would she do it all again to save his life? Yes.

And then it all came flooding back to her—every single thing she'd forgotten.

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AN: More up soon! :)

## Chapter 24

*Chapter 24 of 28*

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter 1.

*Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta and to charmed\_nay for also reading it (when she has the time, busy gal).*

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13 July 1996

Hermione yawned loudly, then blinked in the darkness as she took in her surroundings. It took a few moments to realize she was in Ginny's room at the Burrow and not at home; Fleur's light, whistling snore sounded to the right from her makeshift bed. Beside her, she could feel Ginny's warm body. Thankfully, Hermione had slept on the side of the bed near the doorway and wouldn't wake anyone up on her way to the loo by tripping or rolling over Ginny as she had the two previous nights.

As she slowly got up and tip-toed to the door, she wondered why she'd even woken at all. She'd had a very exciting day. Harry had joined them at the Burrow, and then their O.W.L. scores had arrived. A small tinge of disappointment washed over her as she thought about the one "E" that she'd received. If only she'd done a little better in Defense Against the Dark Arts, hadn't pushed herself so hard, she could have had all Outstandings. Already she vowed to plan out a better study outline that would take her through to her N.E.W.T.s in two years.

She closed the door quietly and turned to go up the stairs but paused when she heard a creak further down the flight of stairs. "Someone there?"

"Oh, Hermione dear," Mrs. Weasley said in a whisper, "I'm right glad you're about. I thought you'd be asleep."

"I was off to the loo."

"Go on then, but come down to the kitchen when you're done, all right? And don't tell anyone."

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione replied dutifully, anxious about what she might find awaiting her. Had someone been hurt? Had Harry run off? Surely he wouldn't have. He'd only just got there! As quickly as possible, she used the toilet, washed her hands and face, and then brushed her teeth, wanting to be presentable...especially if Bill was about. On the way down, she used her fingers to comb through her sleep-matted hair nervously.

However, Bill was nowhere to be seen once she entered the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was standing before her at the table, speaking in hushed tones with someone seated just out of Hermione's eyesight.

"Mrs. Weasley? You wanted to see me?" she prodded softly.

"Oh, yes, come in, come in," the older woman said, turning around and pulling out a chair for Hermione. "You've a visitor."

Hermione moved forward but stopped upon seeing exactly who had come for her. "Professor Snape?"

"Excellent memory, Miss Granger," he said with a light sneer. "To know who I am after not seeing me for a few weeks. Exceptional, that."

She frowned as she looked from his annoyed expression to Mrs. Weasley's anxious face. "I'm just... surprised." Feeling uncomfortable in her nightshirt, though it was thick and long, she sat in the proffered chair and scooted it closer to the table.

"I'll just be in the living room," Mrs. Weasley said, "finishing up with the laundry."

"Very well, Molly, I shan't be long," Professor Snape said, eyes still on Hermione.

"What can I... Am I... Have I done something wrong?" Hermione asked, frightened that he was here to tell her that there had been some mistake with her O.W.L. scores. *Oh no! He wants to change my "O" in Potions to an "E"...or worse!*

"Unfortunately," he began coldly, "I am here because you've done something right."

Relief washed over her and then evaporated as she took in his meaning. "And that is?"

"You received your grades today, did you not?"

"Yes, sir," she squeaked.

"I want you to know that I am only here because the headmaster has asked this of me. If it were solely up to me, I wouldn't be here at all, as I don't feel as though I need any assistance."

At this last word, Hermione perked up. He needed her help with something. Dumbledore had forced him to ask it of her. "All right," she said when he paused for a long time.

"There is a potion that the headmaster has discovered, and he feels that it would help Potter in his... fight against the Dark Lord. It's very complicated, and there are certain stipulations that must be met." He pushed his wooden chair back from the worn table with a screech and stood before pacing a couple of times. "After reviewing the O.W.L. results today...those of people friendly with Potter...we've come to the decision that if anyone is to help me, anyone loyal to Potter with at least some intelligence, it should be you."

"I don't know what to say."

"You will decide if you want to assist me or not. If you choose the latter, you will speak of this to no one, even Potter, as we don't want to give him any false hopes. For all

we know, this potion might be a waste of my precious time."

"And if I choose to help?"

"You will agree to meet with me privately and do what I say...be it ingredient preparing, brainstorming, or even testing the potion. You will keep this a secret. And above all else, you will not let anything come before our work. I am certain I don't have to reiterate how important this is?"

"Of course I'll do what I can to help, sir. I accept those terms."

"Very well," he said, leaning down over the table to glare at her stonily. "And don't think that this will garner you any leniency. In my classroom, you will do your work or fail; there will be no favoritism."

She wanted to point out that he afforded his Slytherins favoritism but didn't want to be disrespectful...or make him change his mind about having her help. As it was, it was an honor that Headmaster Dumbledore would think of her for something so important. And even though the professor behaved as if he was annoyed at having to ask her, she'd seen the relief light his eyes briefly when she'd agreed. It had to be something very complex indeed if he...someone she knew to be very intelligent and skillful...agreed to have an assistant.

"I will strive to do my best, sir, as always," she replied, extending a hand. When he glanced at it with an arched eyebrow, she pulled it back and sighed *What have I got myself into?*

"Very well." He straightened and turned away to go towards the doorway. Stopping and looking back, he asked, "What's with the black eye?"

Hermione felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment as one of her hands flew to touch the colored skin beneath her eye. "One of Fred and George's products... a telescope. It punched me."

"And you've not thought to use magic to clear it up?"

"Well..." She shrugged slightly. "Both Mrs. Weasley and I tried everything we could, but nothing works.""

He snorted and shook his head. "Let's hope that asking you to assist me with this potion isn't a mistake...if you can't even get rid of a black eye." And with that said, he left her sitting alone in the Weasley kitchen, indignant and a little angry at the way he'd treated her, though he needed her help.

Mrs. Weasley walked in and slammed the door he'd left partially open. "Well, if he could do it better, he should have," she grouched. "The nerve!" She flashed Hermione a smile. "I just heard the last of it as I was coming in. Stopped me in my tracks, that did." She sighed. "Guess it doesn't pay to ask what he wanted. He as much as told me it was none of my business."

"Sorry, it's not to be discussed, not even his visit."

"Thought as much. Up to bed with you then, dear."

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione hurried up to the room she was sharing with Ginny and Fleur, wondering if her new project would interfere with her reviewing for classes. Not that it mattered. She would do anything to help Harry and the cause. Feeling important, she slid into bed and mentally listed all potions she could think of that might aid Harry in his fight.

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3 August 1996

Leaving the safety of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes without permission to follow Draco Malfoy down to Knockturn Alley had been a bad idea. Hermione feared that the Weasleys would catch them and be furious. Just watching Draco talk to the owner of Borgin and Burke's had her ill at ease. She felt as though someone were watching...impossible, as they were hidden beneath an Invisibility Cloak...or as if something bad were about to happen. How had she let Harry and Ron talk her into this?

All the stories she'd heard of Knockturn Alley came back to her: the seedy shops, the kind of people who frequented there, and even horrible crimes. What if someone bumped into them? It was bad enough that they barely fit comfortably under the cloak, and if they moved the wrong way or a strong wind blew, people could likely see their feet.

The tinkling of the bell over the doorway drew her from her thoughts, and she watched as a smug Malfoy strutted out and pulled his cloak tighter about him, looking left and then right before going back the way he'd come.

Ron whispered, "What was that about?"

Before she could give her opinion, she noticed oddly distorted movement next to a stone wall where Draco had just passed and realized that someone was there, Disillusioned. As she opened her mouth to alert the boys, Severus Snape came shimmering into view. He gave the shop one lingering look before hurrying after Draco.

*He's spying on Draco. It's obvious he's not seen us. Oh, blast!* Not wanting Harry to follow Draco and have them happen upon Snape, she did the first thing that came to mind.

"*You two stay here,*" she whispered and ducked out from beneath the cloak. Pretending to check her hair in the glass of the store, she made certain that Snape could no longer be seen walking down the path. Certain he was gone, she entered Borgin and Burke's.

What came next happened so fast, she found herself blurring out things to the man, who'd seemed suspicious about her from the moment she'd entered. She chalked it up to the fact that he probably hadn't many honest looking schoolgirls shopping at his store. The ghastly trinkets were definitely nothing she wanted. It ended with the man chasing her out of the store and yelling for her to 'Get out.'

Annoyed that the man had seen through her façade and that she'd even gone into the shop in the first place, she took her anger out on Ron, who seemed unsurprised that she'd failed at her task. She wondered if she would ever find out why Snape had been following Draco. Hadn't Draco always boasted that his Head of House was a close friend of the family? If her first instinct was right, Snape knew Draco was up to no good. But what? She still smarted over the name Narcissa Malfoy had called her while at Madam Malkin's: scum. And Draco had called her a Mudblood... not for the first time in her life. Would she never receive the respect any person in the Wizarding world deserved? More importantly, did Snape feel that way about Muggle-borns? She hoped not, although she had to wonder...he was a Slytherin and a friend of the Malfoys after all.

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1 September 1996

The Sorting was nearly done, and Harry still hadn't made an appearance. This worried Hermione. Last she'd seen of him, he'd gone to Slughorn's gathering on the Hogwarts Express. Neville had said that he'd slunk off after Zabini, so she hoped he didn't get into any trouble. Everyone else from the train had gone to the Great Hall.

"I wish Harry would hurry up."

"Don't worry. Maybe he was talking to Hagrid."

"Possibly, but Hagrid's joined us now."

"Maybe... maybe he asked Harry to do something for him," Ron said after a moment. "You know," he lowered his voice, "Professor Dumbledore might have needed him to do something."

"I don't think he would do that now of all times, Ron." She looked over to where Professor Slughorn sat and frowned. What had the man wanted? Neville hadn't told him, as he'd started an animated conversation with Luna about plants mentioned in a *Quibbler* article. "I'm off to the girls' toilet," she told Ron and quickly left the table.

The Entrance Hall was deserted, her shoes clomping loudly on the stone as she made for the exit. It was possible that Harry had talked to Hagrid about something and then had decided not to enter the Great Hall, knowing everyone would stare, point, and whisper. She and Ron had been accosted several times by people asking questions about the fight in the Department of Mysteries and other things the papers had been printing. So it could definitely be avoidance. Or Harry might be taking a moment to himself to think about Sirius. Coming back to the castle could have brought back memories of their flight from the school's grounds to try to rescue him.

Before she could open the door, however, a deceptively quiet voice stopped her. "I wonder, Miss Granger, what would be so important that you would leave in the middle of the Welcome Feast. Not interested in seeing what new little dunderheads are to join Gryffindor?"

"Hello, Professor, I... er, I was going to the lavatory."

"I was unaware that we had one located outside." He glided closer. "It would be prudent for you to tell me the truth."

She remained silent, trying to think of something to say that wouldn't out Harry. The last thing she wanted to do was get her friend into trouble.

"I believe that's the first time I've ever asked a question that you've not had an answer ready. I expect it's nothing you can recite from a textbook then." He glared at her and stooped down to look directly into her eyes. "Running off to meet with Potter?"

"No, sir," she said indignantly. "I'm worried that..."

"Save your explanation and get back to your table."

"But, sir, something could be wrong. Even the Ministry is taking precautions to..." His sneer stopped her mid-sentence. "I mean no disrespect."

"He is with Auror Tonks, if you must know, girl, and I am on my way to fetch him at the gate." He straightened to his full height and nodded his head towards the doors to the Great Hall. "Get back inside."

"Yes, sir," she replied, glad he hadn't stooped to taking points before the term had even started.

"And Miss Granger?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Expect notice from me as to when we will have our first meeting."

"I shall."

She didn't linger to see where he went, but she felt better knowing that Harry was with Tonks and that the staff seemed aware of it. For a moment, she'd thought perhaps a Death Eater had found a way to snatch him without anyone knowing. As she took her seat next to Ron, who was taking a big chomp out of a chicken leg, Professor Snape's words flitted through her mind again.

He would be contacting her soon.

Excitement took flight in her stomach, replacing her anxiousness over Harry's disappearance. Working with the sour man would be trying, she knew, but the end result could be worth it. If she could help him create something that would help Harry, any sacrifice she had to make would be worth it. If she were honest with herself, she knew that she could get by with less reviewing than she'd planned. She'd been reading her textbooks since she'd got them anyway.

*I should have kept that Time-Turner. I could really do with it now. Blast, I think they're all broken...and our fault at that.*

At that moment, Harry made his way towards her and Ron. "Look, he's back!"

"What... oh!" Ron waved at Harry and told Dean to budge up so they could make room for Harry between them.

She sucked in a sharp breath. There was blood on his face! Had Professor Snape done something to him? She knew for a fact that the man had gone to get him. What had happened? Had there been an attack?

"*You're covered in blood!*" she said, horrified. How could he not know that his face had blood on it? *Come here...*" With a flick of her wand and an urgent *Tergeo!* his face was cleaned. She nearly choked when he asked if his nose looked all right.

Something had happened indeed. Surely the professor wouldn't have hit him in the nose (staff wouldn't dare, would they?), but if he asked that...and had that blood crusted onto his face...someone had. He dodged her questions on it and forced her to wait for answers.

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19 September 1996

Ron had been smacking loudly as he chewed his way through a box of biscuits Hermione's mum had sent to her as part of her birthday gift, and she'd had enough.

"Close your mouth when you chew, will you?" she snapped.

He glared at her and made a show of chewing with his mouth closed.

"Honestly, you're so immature sometimes. I don't know why I even bother to...oh, what's that?"

An owl had flown in through one of the common room windows and was headed for them. Harry looked up and extended a hand to it. "School owl," he said. It landed on his outstretched hand but looked at Hermione and extended its leg to her.

"Another birthday gift?" Ron asked. "Might be more sweets."

"You wish," she said as she took the small envelope from the owl. "Honestly, is that all you care about, eating?"

"Quidditch is a close second," he quipped, again chewing noisily.

Inside the envelope was a single sheet of parchment, and in a spiky handwriting, she read the one-line sentence *Be in my office at eight o'clock tonight.* There was no mistaking that this was Professor Snape's handwriting. She'd seen it enough through the notes and marks on her tests and essays for his classes.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Oh, er, Madam Pince has decided to allow me to help out in the library. I volunteered," she said, knowing they'd believe the lie. "Want to join me?"

"No," they both said immediately.

She grinned and slipped the parchment into her pocket. "Ron, give this owl a bite of biscuit, will you?"

"Whereryoffto?" he called out after her, mouth full.

"To get ready. I have to be there in just over an hour." She hurried up the stairs leading to her dormitory room. Once alone in her room, she sat on her bed and drew the curtains around it in case one of the others came in. Her breaths were coming in short gasps.

*Relax, she chided herself internally. He can't bite your head off. Well, actually, he can, can't he? Stop being so nervous, Hermione. This will be like any other class, just with less people.*

She much preferred the way Professor Snape had taught Potions. Slughorn, while a nice man, had a completely different method, and she felt that she wasn't living up to her potential under his instruction. This caused her to scowl. Even Harry was doing better than she was, which made absolutely no sense at all. He'd never been all that great in Potions before, though she could agree that Professor Snape had much to do with it.

Blast! Nervous would be mildly describing how she felt. Wanting to look her best but not draw any suspicious gazes, she chose a presentable outfit to wear beneath her school robes and pulled her hair up in a twist. It would do well to get it out of the way, for there was no telling what mess she could be in for...some ingredients are quite messy. Before she knew it, the time had come for her to join her professor.

With only a nod at her friends, she crawled through the portrait hole and made her way to the stairs, practically skipping down them in anticipation. It was her good fortune that she met with no Slytherins on her way down. Wiping her hands on her robes, she knocked.

"Enter," he called out.

The door opened with an ominous squeak, and before she could greet him, he spoke again.

"A bit early, aren't you?"

"Only just," she said quietly, closing the door behind her.

"Eager to prove yourself?" he asked, voice cold.

Hermione turned to face him. "Eager to help."

"Very well." He beckoned her closer. "Where did you tell your little friends you were going tonight?"

"I said that Madam Pince needed my help."

"Your lie," he began, smirking, "works to our advantage. Your assignment tonight..." he pointed to a parchment on his messy desk, "...will be to go to the library and find these books."

She thought it odd that he wouldn't simply get the books himself. "Sir..."

"Silence, girl," he hissed. "As I was saying, you need to get these books without anyone being the wiser. I don't even want Madam Pince finding out. If anyone should know that someone had taken these books all at once, it might be deduced..."

"She has spells on the library. No one can take books without properly checking them out, Professor."

His glare could have melted ice. "Do not interrupt me again, Miss Granger. Two points from Gryffindor." Here he graced her with a nasty smile. "I've included a spell that should allow you to get by with the books, though I've never tested it. Better for you, an over-achieving student, to be caught than I. Test it out with a random text first."

"Yes, sir." She tried to keep the anger out of her voice and succeeded, barely. How dare he take points!

"You have one week to get *all* of these books. Meet me back here, same time. Understood?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Excellent. Be on your way."

Was that all? Why a week? Surely it wouldn't be so hard to find the books.

"You have a question?"

"Several."

At this, he chuckled lightly. "Why am I not surprised! Find the books. We'll talk later. There is something that I must do tonight... unfortunately."

"All right. Good night." She wondered what had come up that would possibly take him away from his duty.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Happy birthday."

He turned away, leaving her to retreat, stunned, with only a stammered thanks. The entire walk to the library, she wondered if she'd just imagined his grudging birthday greeting. Perhaps losing two house points was worth the cost of hearing him say something and sound almost human about it.

She beamed broadly.

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12 October 1996

"You're late," Professor Snape said as she walked through his doorway.

"It's been a... long day," Hermione said resignedly.



"Understanding," came his soft reply.

This gave Hermione pause. She looked around to see if they were alone, shocked that he'd not gone into his usual lecture about wasting his time. Not that she'd been late much, mind. Twice maybe?

"Thank you."

"Miss Granger, before we start..."

Her eyes widened. He sounded a little nervous.

"Have a seat."

She quickly sat in the hard chair across from his desk and waited impatiently as he took his seat. Something had happened. Did he no longer need her? What did he seem so uncomfortable about?

"Professor, if my notes on the books are a bit..."

He waved her words away and rubbed his temples a few times before speaking. "I must talk to you about today, Miss Granger."

"The Katie Bell incident?"

"Yes, the very one."

"Sir, we told Professor McGonagall all that we know."

"And I'm sure that you've become aware that my esteemed colleague doesn't accept theories very well. She mentioned something to me...something about Draco...but would say nothing further."

Hermione took a deep breath. "And you want me to tell you what was said."

"It could be of great importance. I... I know that you understand that there is more than meets the eye with all of this...you do, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I've come to understand that."

"Then I must implore you to help me. Tell me all that you know."

"To be honest, I don't know much. It's Harry who was ranting about Draco being involved. I told him not to say anything."

"Why don't you start from the beginning, hmmm? What would make Potter jump to the conclusion that Draco Malfoy had been involved... when he hadn't even been to Hogsmeade?"

So that was it, was it? He was looking to protect his little Slytherin. Just as she opened her mouth to say so, she remembered that the professor himself had been spying on Draco. Perhaps her first instinct about that had been correct.

Seeing her internal struggle, he spoke again. "I am not asking you to betray confidences for the joy of learning about your friends' ridiculous lives or petty secrets. I know what this places on your shoulders. It's why I'm hesitant to ask, but anything more that I can give to the headmaster upon his return Monday would be appreciated."

"When we went to Diagon Alley during the summer..."

"I want to know about today!" he snapped.

"If you'll not interrupt me, you'll find that I must tell you a little back story first, else this won't make sense!"

"Very well," he said, one side of his lips twitching upwards in appreciation of her cheek. "Go on."

"We saw Draco in Diagon Alley and followed him. He ended up at Borgin and Burkes."

His eyes widened as he remembered the exact day she was referring to.

"I saw you there. After he left, you Disillusioned yourself and followed him. I figured you were doing the same as us, trying to find out what he was about."

"And the others?"

"They didn't see you. I... uh, I ducked out from beneath the cloak and went into the store. That way we wouldn't follow and see you. I thought maybe, you know, you were doing something for Dumbledore, and you know how Harry is." She swallowed thickly and continued. "Anyway, we'd listened in on their conversation through a pair of Extendable Ears."

"Clever."

She smiled and told him what they'd overheard. "And that's when I saw the necklace for the first time."

"But if it was still there, then why would Potter think Draco had it to do this?"

"That's what I said, but he thinks he might have owled for it later and had someone here help him...with the Imperius and giving it to Katie Bell." She snorted to relay to him that she found the notion ridiculous, but was shocked as he nodded and brought an index finger up to circle his lips in thought. "You think that's plausible?" she asked incredulously.

"I think it's a sound theory, even if it is was Potter who thought of it."

Gobsmacked, Hermione sat back in her chair. "I mean it just sounds so... outlandish."

"Desperate people will do desperate things. That's always been the way of the world."

"I talked to Leanne a great deal, Katie's mate, right shaken up she was. She has no idea how Katie got it, just that she'd gone to the toilet and came back with it, sounding mysterious. She doesn't know who it was intended for."

"And Potter? What does he think?"

Puzzled, Hermione said, "His first thought was Dumbledore, then an Auror or Slughorn."

"Interesting."

"I thought maybe it was meant for Harry."

"Not likely, as she would have just given it to him instead of going back to the castle."

"That's what Harry said!" It was truly discomfiting the way Harry and the professor seemed to think alike. "So... do you think it was for Dumbledore then?"

He blinked. "I apologize. I was lost in thought for a moment." He shrugged lightly. "I guess we will never know."

"Are you... Are you going to question Malfoy?"

"I will indeed."

A new respect developed for him in that moment. He'd always favored his own house, but it seemed that he would be fair in this...when someone's life had nearly been lost. It gave her comfort that he would try to find out more.

"Katie Bell, they're sending her to St. Mungo's."

He nodded and pulled a scarf out of his pocket, gently opening it to reveal the necklace. "I've got some ideas about how she can be treated from looking over this, quite complex, so it will take some time."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir."

"Now, what do you think about Von Dinea?" He once again wrapped the necklace in the scarf and placed it back in his pocket.

"Darcilo Von Dinea is none other than Leonardo da Vinci himself. See how you can rearrange the letters and make one name from the other?"

"I wondered when you'd come to that conclusion. Yes, da Vinci and he are one and the same." He took a deep breath. "I'm sure it's where the Dark Lord got the inspiration to do the same with his name."

"Right, using Tom Marvolo Riddle to make I am Lord Voldemort. Harry told me about that."

The professor nodded and seemed on the verge of saying something until she blurted out her thoughts.

"I don't understand why he would do this, da Vinci I mean. Develop this other pseudonym!"

"Think clearly, girl. Back in those days, the church played a major role in things. If he'd been branded irreparably, he might have lost his life. It was bad enough they were suspicious of him. So, he faked his death, changed his appearance and went on with this studying."

"Oh! He's the one who broke into Nicolas Flamel's tomb and found it empty! I can't believe I didn't see it before! They knew each other, didn't they? He learned his secret and the empty tomb was proof."

"I think it's safe to say that not many people know this. When Carodoc Dearborn published this book, he drew attention to himself."

"Attention of the worst kind: Vol...er, You Know Who."

"Yes, I have no doubt that he was taken and used for information. The Dark Lord strove to find the missing piece to the puzzle of immortality."

"Do you think he's alive?"

"That is highly unlikely."

"I was reading over the..."

A knock on his office door interrupted them. "Be quiet," he demanded of her before calling out, "Enter."

"Oh, good, Severus, you're... Miss Granger, what are you doing here?" Professor McGonagall eyed them both curiously. "You aren't here relaying Potter's unfounded accusations, are you?"

"Some of us, Professor McGonagall, have better things to do than to sit around speaking of your pet Gryffindor," Professor Snape cut in. "I was just speaking to Miss Granger about her essay from Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Top notch, I expect," McGonagall said fondly.

"Words written on a page show less merit than the practice of what's written. She needs work in this area. Repeating text lines to me in a rearranged fashion are less than impressive."

McGonagall waved his words away with a hand gesture and a sniff. "I need a moment if you don't mind."

"Certainly. We've just finished up here. Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, sir, and I will try to do better."

"So you say," he said, turning away from her and facing his colleague. "Have a seat, Minerva," he said, conjuring a plump, comfortable chair for her.

Hermione hurried off to ponder their conversation, excited that she'd unraveled part of the book's mystery correctly. Now they just had to decipher the rest. The man spoke in bloody riddles and codes!

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AN: How's that for a walk in the past? This is so fun for me. More up soon.

A few lines of dialogue have been taken directly from JK Rowling's sixth book, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.

## Chapter 25

Hermione teams up with Lucius in order to bring Severus Snape back from the Otherworld. Everything is not as simple as it seems. Will she be willing to pay the price?

Disclaimer: See Chapter One

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for beta reading this.

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2 November 1996

Hermione could barely see where she was going, as the tears in her eyes were making her vision blurry. Ron could be such an insensitive prat. She had no idea what she'd done to offend him so. Well, she supposed she could understand that he was disappointed that she hadn't had faith in him to be in top form as Keeper during the game. She'd truly believed that all those good plays were luck brought on by Felix Felicis, not skill or coincidence. But there was something else lingering there. She wondered if Harry knew what she'd done to make Ron so angry.

Not that long ago, he'd seemed pleased that she'd mentioned wanting to ask him to Slughorn's party, but she'd seen him minutes earlier, sucking face with Lavender Brown! It was a shock, and it hurt so much. When he'd brought Lavender into the room that she'd been in while talking to Harry, she couldn't help sending her conjured birds to attack him. She knew only one reason he and that witch would have needed a private room: sex.

What had changed? She'd been so sure that he cared for her but just couldn't admit it. But hang on... If he did, what was he doing with Lavender? More sobs wracked her body and she leaned against the cold stones of the wall, sliding down its bumpy exterior to land on her arse. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. She was doing her best to help out behind the scenes with Professor Snape, so she had a lot on her plate at the moment, what with revising and all. But this thing with Ron, it was really bothering her.

"Not in your common room celebrating with the other Gryffindors?" asked a silky voice.

*Oh no... It can't be. Not now.* When she looked up into his wandlight, she was certain she heard a sharp intake of breath...probably because she looked so miserable. "No, sir," she muttered, recognizing her professor's voice and trying to even out her own.

"Has someone hexed you, Miss Granger?" Snape asked, stooping down to look at her more closely.

"No, I just..." She had to force herself to breathe deeply for a few moments, else she might begin to sob anew. "I'm having problems of the personal sort."

"I am not here to listen to any rubbish about schoolgirl dramatics," he said, rising brusquely.

"Well, it's not like I searched you out, is it?" she snapped angrily, having had enough of his ugliness. She didn't need his shite on top of everything else. "Take points, give me a detention, and be done with it!"

"Five points from Gryffindor then. I certainly don't appreciate your tone."

"Can't you ever just be nice?"

"Two more points. I'm not here to be nice, Miss Granger. I'm here to make certain that students are..."

"Then maybe I should rephrase that, Professor. Can't you ever be decent? I'm having a horrible evening, and you're just trying to make it worse! On purpose, I think." She sniffed loudly. "I just wanted to be alone."

"And that you happen to be in the dungeons should not draw my attention? Why else would you be here if not to see me?"

"I...what? Dungeons?" For the first time, she looked around. She'd fled so quickly and had somehow ventured down near his office. "I didn't realize..."

"Up. Come on," he said, beckoning for her to follow him.

She quickly did so and silently went where he led, wiping her tear-streaked cheeks. Was he going to give her a detention right then? She thought it possible, as he seemed to be leading her to his classroom.

To her surprise, they passed that doorway and ventured past his office to a tapestry. He lifted it and mumbled something before stepping aside. "Please, come in."

Hermione entered the small opening in the wall and was surprised to find herself in what looked like a cozy sitting room. A few shelves of books lined the walls, along with a few paintings. The chairs and chaise were plush and softly covered in the shade of black. She felt his robes brush by her a moment later. "Where is this?"

"My home while at Hogwarts," he said quietly, not looking at her. "I thought you might like a moment to compose yourself before returning to whomever had you so worked up." He strode off towards a small cabinet. "I have butterbeer if you'd like."

"I would," she said in surprise, seating herself in a chair beside his grate, taking the offering of a drink as an invitation *I can't believe he's invited me to his personal chambers*. Instead of feeling uneasy, she felt very comfortable.

As he returned to take the seat across from her, he handed her one of the two bottles he held. They shared a quiet moment before he spoke. "Sometimes what we want most isn't what we get. Other things happen." He took a long sip before continuing. "I've found that by distancing oneself from nearly everything can keep a person from falling into despair." He gestured towards her. "The way you were, hurt and angry. I know those feelings well. Or I have known them in the past."

Was he trying to give her advice? She tried to imagine him being the one alone in a corridor crying over a lost love. Had he ever loved someone? It seemed surreal, but why shouldn't he have had someone in the past? She'd just never thought of the possibility that he wasn't always the cold man that he was now.

Compelled to talk to him, to know him, she said, "When I first came here to Hogwarts, I was alone...not by choice...and I hated it. I don't do lonely well."

"It gets easier as time goes by."

"Ron's just been... He and I, we've been arguing a lot, and just now, I set a small flock of birds after him. I shouldn't have done it, but it felt so good to hurt him the way he hurt me."

He sat back in his chair and looked at her thoughtfully. "It sometimes feels too good to lash out at those we are angry with. It can become a habit if you aren't careful. And sometimes... Sometimes it's too late to take back the pain you've caused...no matter how justified you felt about it at the time."

She frowned, but was glad he hadn't taken points for her admission of attacking another student. "I just...why does he have to want her? I'm the one who's been at his side all this time. How can he just shove me off like that for *her*?" At this, his eyes widened, and she found she couldn't look away from him. "I'm sorry. I know you said you didn't

want to hear about the students' lives."

"If you repeat any of what I'm about to tell you, I shall dock a hundred points from your house and give you detention with Filch for a month..." He gave her a tight smile.

"You have my word to keep silent...as always, sir." She returned his smile. "I think I've proven trustworthy already."

"Those words you just said...I've said them before in my past as well. Suffice it to say that the woman I thought to be the one for me turned away from me. Of course, I wasn't exactly perfect back then, so some of the fault does lay on me; however, like you, I wouldn't have thought her capable of choosing someone else over me."

"Oh, I'm so sorry for you."

He held up a hand. "It was an experience that made me the person I am today. I am stronger for it. I know not to let anyone get too close, for even those you trust most can betray you in the end."

She nodded, though she hoped she'd never turn out like Professor Snape...bitter and lonely. "I'll take those words to heart, Professor."

"I doubt you will, Miss Granger, but I felt the need to say them all the same. It may not be the most appealing lifestyle, but you'll not find yourself weeping in the corridors at least."

"Please don't be offended, sir, when I say this, all right? I don't want to be alone. I want to have a life full of happiness...a secure home, a steady relationship, a job. What hurts is that I might not have it with the one person I've been pining for."

"You'll live," he said a little harshly. "You learn to adjust." Downing the last of his butterbeer, he rose and placed the bottle on the small table next to his chair.

She took another swig and did the same. "Sir, for what it's worth, I'm glad I found my way down to the dungeons. I... I appreciate the talk."

He shrugged before speaking. "You will serve detention tomorrow night, Miss Granger."

Upon hearing this, disappointment filled her. She'd thought that they'd exchanged a friendly talk, that he'd been trying to help her, and yet, the entire time he'd still planned on giving her a detention. "Yes, sir."

"Well, it's been over a week, after all, since you've come to work with me on our assignment."

At this, she smiled brightly. "Thank you. I'll see myself out."

"Good night, Miss Granger."

As she made her way back up to Gryffindor Tower, she wondered what a Severus Snape in love would be like. Who had hurt him so? Would he ever find someone again? Hermione truly hoped so.

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20 December 1996

Hermione leaned against the shadows of the stone wall, hoping she was camouflaged enough not to be seen by McLaggen, who'd been trying to find her since she'd slipped out of Slughorn's party to hide. It seemed like he had a tracking charm on her, for no matter which corridor she tried to hide in, he'd soon pass by. It's why she hadn't gone back to the common room. She certainly didn't want to see Ron and Lavender. Or even Parvati, who'd lately taken to saying things purposely that would hurt her feelings. She shouldn't have expected anything less, considering the girl was Lavender's best mate.

The profile of the person wandering the corridor came into view, and she breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't her date's bulky frame. However, she'd know this profile anywhere. But for the first time in her life, she wasn't assaulted with his normal scent...a woodsy smell that was very appealing. It seemed that the good professor had had a few drinks at Slughorn's party. She'd only seen him briefly earlier, and he'd had a tumbler in his hand, but he'd seemed normal, his dark gaze taking in every detail.

Suddenly, he stumbled slightly and began to mutter. "What the...? Who put that bloody stone there?" At this, he paused and snickered. "That little brat and the old fool's got me talking to myself. Idiots, the both of them."

Hermione stifled her laughter and wondered exactly whom he was talking about. She supposed the brat could be Harry and the old fool could be Slughorn because when she'd hidden behind a drapery at the party, she'd seen both talking to him. When he nearly stumbled again, this time having to catch his balance by grabbing the wall, she strode forward and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Profe..."

Before she could finish her sentence, she felt the tip of his wand against her throat and met a menacing glare. Her hand fell away from him as she swallowed fearfully.

Recognition lit his eyes. "You! What are *you* doing here? We aren't to meet until after the holidays."

"I'm hiding."

"From whom?" His eyes darted around as if trying to see her foe.

"From my date. I've been trying to avoid him."

"Why?"

"He keeps dragging me under any nearby mistletoe."

Snape lowered his wand and let out a bark of laughter, his alcohol-laced breath hitting her as he did so. She waved her hand in front of her nose to clear away the air and made a face.

"Good grief, sir."

"Most girls your age want nothing but snogs under the mistletoe, and here you are, Migg Sranger, hiding from it." He shook his head. "Weasley, is it? Not the great kisser you'd hoped, eh?"

She felt her cheeks heat and didn't comment on the drunken mispronunciation of her name. "No, I'm still angry with him. It's... McLaggen."

"That dunderhead! Ahahahahaa!"

"Sssh!" she said bossily. "What if someone hears you? Or worse, what if *he* hears you?" She tugged on his robes and slid a hand around his waist, forcing him to put his arm around her shoulders. "Come on. Let's get you home."

"If you don't mind, girl, I am quite incapable of... Hang on. Quite capable of handling you myself. Wait! That's not what I meant. Handling myself, thank you."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh lightly. "Don't worry, sir. I know. It's the...whatever you've had to drink."

"I didn't mean that I would handle myself," he said, suddenly stopping, his face scrunched in horror.

"What have you had to drink?"

"Slughorn had some concoction."

"I'm quite shocked to be honest. You seem too..."

"Oi! I can enjoy a few drinks the same as anyone else."

"I know, but you seem too reserved." She lowered her voice. "And I know you're on the lookout for things."

He snorted. "Draco," he muttered. "Nothing will come of anything tonight, and I've just come from the headmaster's office. He doesn't care either it seems." He shook his head and began to murmur to himself.

She thought she heard the words "dotty" and "unprepared," but couldn't be certain. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"You've not." He began walking again, more steadily. "You won't mention this, will you?"

"Do I ever mention anything?"

That was when he graced her with the most perfect smile she'd ever seen. It took years away from his own thirty-six, and he looked quite handsome. He sort of reminded her of Victor, except he was quite thinner. Was it a trick of the light? No, she could very well see the similarities...dark eyes, same type of nose, dark hair, and... "Professor, we're nearly at the staircase. Please hold on to the railway there. I don't want you to fall." *Or take me down with you*, she added to herself.

Luckily, they reached the bottom of the narrow stairway without accident and smoothly made their way to the tapestry that hid the entrance to his rooms.

"Here you are," she said as she watched him steady himself.

"I am... thoroughly embarrassed," he said honestly. "I don't know what's got into me. Tonight's just been..." He shook his head and gazed down at her as if seeing her for the first time, causing her heartbeat to quicken. "Do you want to come in?" he asked softly.

"I... No," she blurted. "I don't want to get back too late. Hopefully, he's gone to bed by now... or found someone else to manhandle." She wasn't certain why, but of all the time she'd been spending alone with Snape, this was the first time she'd ever felt uncomfortable. There was something in his gaze, and then him asking her to his rooms? That alone was a loaded question. What exactly did he need her for?

He nodded. "I don't blame him, Lily. I would have tried to get you under the mistletoe as well." He lifted a hand and nearly caressed her cheek before thinking better of it and disappearing behind his tapestry.

She stood there, stunned, mouth gaping open. First, he'd called her Lily. There was only one Lily that she knew: Harry's mum. Secondly, had he just flirted with her? Had he admitted that he thought her attractive enough to kiss? Puzzled and afraid suddenly, she ran back to the stairwell that would lead her to the higher floors.

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5 January 1997

Hermione walked into the castle with the other students who'd just arrived on the Hogwarts Express and deftly dodged hard snowballs Peeves had been pelting out at everyone. Before she could turn towards the stairway that would lead her up to Gryffindor Tower, Headmaster Dumbledore called out to her.

"Hello, my dear, have a nice holiday?" he asked.

"I did, sir. You?"

"Quite nice." With his good hand, he handed her two scrolls of parchment. His withered hand pointed to the shorter one. "I need you to give this to Harry for me as soon as he gets in."

"Certainly. And this one?"

"Professor Snape. I believe he's in his office just now." He smiled kindly. "You'd save an old man a long walk if you'd deliver it."

"I'll bring it to him now." She smiled, hoping she didn't reveal the trepidation she felt at seeing Professor Snape again after what had happened. "Er, do you know if Hagrid is at his hut?"

"Why, I believe so."

"I might visit him and Bu-Witherwings for a while... until Harry gets back."

"I expect he'd like that very much. Good day."

"Thank you, sir."

She placed the scrolls in her pocket and smugly looked at Lavender, who seemed shocked that the headmaster had sought Hermione out. Needing to compose herself...and make sure the Slytherins were in their common room...before going to see Professor Snape, she stood by a window and looked out.

Most of the holiday had been spent wondering what Harry and Ron had been up to. She was glad to have had the time with her parents, however, and didn't regret staying with them the entire time off. Besides, she was still very angry with Ron, and she'd be damned if she would apologize to him first. He'd started this entire mess. Another part of the holiday had been spent thinking about Severus Snape.

She'd analyzed the conversation they'd shared many times over, and she'd come to the conclusion that he'd been too impaired to realize what he'd been saying. He'd called her someone else's name, a name that she was certain belonged to her best friend's late mother. It made her feel better, for she was a little concerned that any person in a position of authority would fancy one of his charges.

And it also made her feel worse... for she'd taken to fantasizing about him. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn't help it. Several times she'd imagined being stuck beneath the mistletoe down a deserted corridor at Hogwarts with him coming to her rescue. Nearly each time, she imagined him to say something like, "I've been wanting to kiss you like this for weeks now." Another fantasy, a more naughty one that she thought of only in the darkest hours of night in her own bed, brought forth the scenario that she'd taken up his offer to join him in his chambers. Was it healthy for a seventeen-year-old girl to be thinking of a professor this way?

Biting her lip, she thought again of those visions she'd conjured, him leaning down to kiss her (the way she'd always wanted Ron to do), him unbuttoning his robes with that lovely smile he'd bestowed on her, him moving between her thighs and...

"Blast," she muttered. *He's a Legilimens! What if he 'sees' this in my mind?* She calmed herself by repeating the word "relax" a few times and breathed deeply. All she had to do was clear her mind of these thoughts, lock them away in a secret place in her mind. If they weren't on her mind, he'd never see them...not that he'd be looking into her mind anyway, but one could never be certain.

Slowly, she made her way down to the dungeons, her shoes clicking against the stone. On the way she'd met a few sneering Slytherins, mostly younger years, but no one had said a word to her. When she stopped in front of his doorway, her heart began hammering in her chest. *What if he stops our association like he did when he stopped Harry's Occlumency lessons? The project we've been working so hard on will have been for nothing! Dumbledore will be so disappointed.*

Knock. Knock.

"Enter," he called out.

Hermione pushed the door open and walked in. "Hello, Professor."

"Miss Granger, back from holiday I see?"

"Yes, sir." Her eyes lifted to meet his, and all the tension in her body left. He didn't seem displeased to see her. "Er, have a nice holiday?"

"As good as one can have being stuck in a castle with nine whinging children underfoot part of the time." He beckoned her closer. "And you?"

"It was nice. I spent it with my parents."

"Yes, I remember you saying you were going there. It's why we couldn't work together over the holiday." When she said nothing, he asked, "What brings you here?"

"Oh!" She dug in her pocket and found the scroll. "Professor Dumbledore asked me to give this to you. He said you'd be here now, so I came down right away."

"I wonder why he simply didn't send it in the Floo."

She shrugged. "I don't know, sir."

Without opening it, he tossed it onto his desk. "Will there be anything else?"

"Nothing else. I... Are we still on for Thursday?"

"I must apologize, but no, we aren't. Something's come up."

"Right then. When would you like me to come?"

His brow furrowed for a moment before he said, "I will have to contact you to let you know."

"Okay." She felt a little let down. Did he feel awkward and was now trying to avoid her? It had seemed, at first, that he'd not remembered what had happened. She'd hoped that perhaps with the alcohol he'd consumed, he'd awakened the next morning and hadn't remembered. She wasn't so sure now. "I'll just go then."

"Good day."

"Thanks." She turned and made her way to the door but stopped. When she turned back to face him, she saw that he was just opening the parchment. "Sir?"

"Yes?" He looked up from the scroll.

Hermione was unsure where her courage came from, but she formed the words boldly. "The reason we're not meeting Thursday, is it because of... Are you upset with me?"

Snape shook his head. "Not at all. If you must know, I've been invited to dinner for my birthday. I am unable to... decline this invitation."

She brightened. "Happy birthday then... early of course."

He smirked and waved her off with a shake of his head.

Practically skipping, she happily made her way to Hagrid's hut. For some reason, it was very important to her that they move past what had happened. And she wanted to pat herself on the back, for she hadn't thought about her silly fantasies once while in his presence.

Later that evening, alone in bed, she found herself thinking about Professor Snape again. This time he wasn't the playing the part in one of her fantasies. Harry had told her all he'd overheard the night of Slughorn's party, which put some things into prospective for her. She couldn't come out and tell Harry what she knew because then she'd have to tell the whole tale, and besides, she didn't want to betray Professor Snape that way...or have it get back to him.

She was certain now that he'd been drunkenly muttering about Draco, not Harry, and instead of Slughorn, it must have been Dumbledore to whom he was referring as the old fool. That made sense, and unlike Harry, she believed that he'd only said those things to Draco because he was spying on him. She wished she could ease Harry's mind. Hopefully, when he talked to the headmaster on the following evening, the man would let Harry know that all was well and that the professor could be trusted.

Something else had been plaguing her for the last few minutes as well. Who had invited him to dinner on the evening of his birthday? Surely it wasn't Voldemort, unless that was just a cover up. No, it seemed true. Was it a woman? Her eyes narrowed as she imagined some beautiful woman kissing him and asking him to join her in her bedroom.

Hermione's eyes widened. The feelings she felt at that moment were very familiar. She felt nearly the same way when she saw Lavender attached to Ron's face like some great bloody eel sucking the life out of him. She was jealous. Jealous and didn't quite like it. Or understand it.

How in the hell had this happened?

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AN: Thanks for sticking with me, dear readers (most of you anyway). I hope you are enjoying our walk down memory lane. I'm really having fun with this part of the story. I guess the build up to a relationship is my favorite thing to read or write about.

# Chapter 26

*Chapter 26 of 28*

Dreams and a magical book draw Hermione to seek the help of Lucius Malfoy, who has a secret of his own: Severus Snape can be brought back from the Otherworld. Will she help?

Disclaimer: Just mucking around. Not making any Galleons from it either. Bummer.

*Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for beta reading this. I appreciate that you've stayed with me all this time.*

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*2 March 1997*

Hermione rounded the corner, glad to have snuck out of the common room without McLaggen seeing her again, and came face to face with the sneering face of Lavender Brown.

"Excuse me," she said, trying to pass her.

"We need to have a talk," the dark-haired girl said shrilly before grabbing Hermione's arm and pulling her back. "You'd better stay away from my boyfriend."

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me. You haven't been talking to him at all, and now that he's the talk of the school, you want something to do with him. Well, I won't have it I tell you."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Hermione said, "Ron and I have been friends for a long time. I don't need you to tell me what to do, thank you very much." She wrenched her arm from Lavender's grasp and added, "Ron can make his own decisions."

"You just want him for yourself!" Lavender tossed her hair from her shoulder. "It's me what's got his heart now. Just back off."

Hermione whipped out her wand, intent on hexing the harpy, but Professor Snape stepped into view. "Hello, Professor."

"Using magic in the corridors, Miss Granger?"

"I was debating on it."

"Miss Brown, I heard your shrill voice down the corridor. What's going on here?" he asked, glaring at both of them equally.

"Nothing, sir."

"Indeed?" One of his eyebrows arched in disbelief. "Perhaps a day of detention with Filch will help you to control yourself in the future."

"But, sir, I wasn't the one with my wand out!"

"I am not blind, Miss Brown." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Miss Granger, you will have detention with me. I happen to need a batch of shrike spines that need to be plucked for my next seventh-year class."

Hermione fumed but said nothing. She wanted badly to lash out at Lavender...at the professor as well. Who was Lavender to tell her she couldn't see Ron? If Professor Snape hadn't come upon them, she'd been about to tell the girl that the first word Ron had said when he'd come to was 'Er-my-nee,' obviously meaning Hermione, and if he didn't want her there, why would he have called out for her?

Frowning, she followed the professor, along with Lavender, down towards the stairway, giving the other girl a dirty look the entire time. She'd been feeling horrible for the way she'd been treating Ron lately. She'd made fun of him the day before during their Apparation training, and then he'd nearly been poisoned hours later. What if he'd died? She'd never had the chance to say she was sorry, to let him know that she did care for him.

"Ah, I was just looking for you, Mr. Filch," Professor Snape said when the wheezing man came into view. "I've got some help for you." He pointed towards Lavender. "I think Miss Brown would be delighted to help you in cleaning all of the Hogwarts bathrooms today."

Filch's jowls quivered with excitement. "Right. Right. I'll have her. Come along, you."

When the pair and Mrs. Norris turned and went back the way the man had come from, Professor Snape spun around to face Hermione. "Where were you last night?"

"Ron drank some poison and..."

"Yes, I know where Mr. Weasley was, but that isn't what I asked, now is it?"

"I stayed outside the infirmary with Harry waiting on news about Ron until we were allowed in by Madam Pomfrey."

"So you deliberately chose to go there instead of joining me."

"I did," she said, lifting her chin defiantly. "I rather think that a friend's near death is more important than..."

"Than a potion that might help save the Wizarding world? I don't think I can agree with you, Miss Granger," he hissed angrily. "You've got work to do. Come on."

As she stared at his back and descended the stairs with him, she wondered how she could have ever been attracted to him. He was such a brooding, harsh man most of the time. Definitely not what she needed clouding her mind. And then Hagrid had told her and Harry about what he'd overheard. What exactly had that been about? She was certain it wasn't as ominous as Harry wanted to believe, but it made her curious all the same. Maybe he didn't want to follow Draco anymore? Right now, she needed someone more than ever to talk to, and he was only bent on making her suffer for her decision to go to Ron.

And anyway, what was she doing fantasizing about a teacher? That was against the rules. She never would have thought she'd succumb to silly schoolgirl crushes. She always felt ill when the other girls went on about how sexy Firenze was. Then again, Hermione had never been partial to horses, much less a centaur that taught a class at Hogwarts. *Well, all right. There was Lockhart I had a crush on when he taught here, but I was younger then, and he wasn't a centaur* she thought. A part of her mind snidely commented, *You still have that bloody card he gave you when you were in the infirmary!*

Her cheeks heated at this. Hermione hadn't been so confused in a long time. Just the day before, she'd given a small smile to Professor Snape during her Apparition practice, and he'd nodded back minutely. At that moment, she'd felt as though they'd shared a small secret: kinship. She had been barely able to contain herself as she'd thought of going down to the dungeons to work with him on the potion.

However, once she'd heard about Ron, she'd felt very guilty for that. She should have been feeling those things for Ron, but ever since he'd started going out with Lavender, her mind and heart had traveled elsewhere. There was no doubt that she was jealous that Snape seemed to have a ladyfriend...one who sometimes caused him to rearrange their meeting times.

The professor stopped suddenly on the stair below her, and she barreled into his back, having been lost in thought. "Sorry," she muttered, placing her hands on his back to steady herself and step away.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, looking back up the way they'd come.

"I heard nothing."

He snorted, shrugged, and continued on. They stopped at the doorway to his Potions classroom once down the corridor. "There are three dead shrakes preserved in those jars. I want the spines from them only. Leave the remains in the jars. I've a use for them."

"Are you serious?" Hermione asked incredulously. "You want me to do this because I chose to remain by a friend's side, a friend who might have died?"

He deftly pushed her into the room and closed the door behind her. "This is no joke. You will do this as your detention. When you are finished, you may find me in my office. We will proceed from there."

Hermione felt like crying she was so angry and frustrated. "Fine," she spat out, not caring how disrespectful or childish she was being.

"You may think this is cruel, but you will see my reasoning in time. What you did last night could have put our plans in jeopardy. Do you not know how important our work is? When you agreed to do this, you agreed to put it above all else. I thought that you, of all those here at Hogwarts, shared my..." He shook his head.

"If it were one of your friends, you would have done the same," she retorted. "If it were..." She cut off her words, having almost said Harry's mum's name. Snape seemed to get the gist of her meaning.

"How dare you assume to know my thoughts?" he demanded. "Shall I insist you never join me again? If you prefer Weasley, then..."

"Who is doing the assuming now?" she blurted out, unable to contain her emotions any longer, a few tears rolling down her cheeks. "He could have died last night, on his own birthday at that, and he never would have known that I care for him. I never told him! I wouldn't have been able to say goodbye. I..." Her sobs came in earnest, and to her surprise, she was soon wrapped in Professor Snape's firm, warm embrace, her nose nuzzling into his chest, inhaling his scent.

This made her cry even more, for this was what she needed...someone to listen to her, someone to hold her. It didn't matter that it was Professor Snape because this was *her* Snape, the one she alone knew, the one she'd come to fancy.

*I'm so confused.* Deciding to voice her feelings, she said, "I've been so horrible to him. He was with her, and I've been jealous. I hated him, wanted him to be miserable, even hurt, but when it really happened, I just couldn't stand it."

"Luckily, all will be well. You will be able to tell him." He sighed. "Some of us are never given that chance."

"But that's not all. While I've b-been," she tried to steady her voice, "angry with him, I've gone and done something I shouldn't have."

"What's that, Miss Granger?"

"I've been thinking about someone else... in that way." When he said nothing, she pulled back to look up into his black eyes. "And it makes me feel dirty now, like I've betrayed him."

He stepped back from her, dropping his arms to his side. "You've done nothing of the sort. He was not yours to betray. This was his doing, not yours. Why should you have to put your life on hold for so long, wishing to have your affections returned, living on what-ifs? Why shouldn't you have another if the opportunity presents itself?"

She wondered briefly if he weren't trying to convince himself of that very thing. Sniffing slightly, she said, "I'm sorry. I always seem to get so emotional lately, and you... you've been here for me. I want you to know that I..." A knock on the door interrupted her, causing her to jump.

"Enter," Snape said, turning to face the doorway. "Yes, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Crabbe's caught the common room on fire again, sir! Lucky for us Professor Sinistra was there for a chat and was able to stop it. We tried all we knew, us students, but we couldn't do anything. I ran here to let you know, but I expect she'll be round to tell you about it."

"Thank you. I will be there directly."

"You're welcome, sir." Millicent sneered at Hermione before leaving.

"We will finish this later if you don't mind," he said, not looking at her, but running a shaky hand through his hair. "It seems I have a student who needs to be reprimanded."

"All right," she said quietly, watching him go. What had she been about to admit to him? To her horror, she was certain she'd been about to tell him that he was the man who'd captured her attention, the man who'd invaded her mind and had helped to heal the pain over Ronald's new relationship.

Hermione never thought she'd be grateful to Millicent Bulstrode for anything in her life, but she was glad the girl had run to the professor and interrupted their talk. More importantly, though, now that she thought on it, she realized that he'd looked at her in... a different way just near the end. And he'd been trembling slightly. Could it really be possible that when he'd said those things that he had been thinking of himself as well? And possibly of her?

This made her smile. Could someone such as he want someone like her? There was the age difference. He was just over nineteen years her senior...her seventeen and a half, him just now thirty-seven...but he certainly didn't look it. The worst part was the taboo of him being her professor...any relationship would be forbidden indeed. Her heart fluttered, and her stomach tingled while she thought of what it would be like to have him hold her exactly as he had and then kiss her. Her smile faded as she realized that perhaps the person he'd been meeting with was the one he'd been thinking of instead.

And why would Professor Sinistra be visiting the Slytherin common room? Snape didn't seem surprised that she'd be there. "Oh, right," she said aloud. The woman was once a Slytherin herself and probably checked in on her old house. *Or*, Hermione thought in dismay, *she's the one*. This didn't sit well with her, for Aurora Sinistra was a beautiful woman, her slim figure, pale skin, and dark hair and eyes would match someone like Professor Snape perfectly. Keeping this in mind and not thinking any more of Ron or Lavender, she went about getting the spines, viciously slashing her wand as she did so.



Once she was done, she went to his office and knocked on the door. There was no reply, so she entered quietly, thinking she could wait for him to return. Surely he couldn't get angry for that; he'd told her to go there, hadn't he? She settled herself on the small sofa near the cold fireplace and began to shiver immediately. "No wonder he wears those thick robes. It's bloody freezing down here."

Spotting a cloak hanging on a hook near the doorway, she went snatch it and then covered herself with it. It smelled just like him, and she was filled with a sense of security. She waited another ten minutes before deciding to rest her eyes just a bit. What she hadn't counted on was falling asleep.

Much later, she awoke to find that the room had transformed completely. No longer was it cold; a toasty fire lit the grate. The lamps that had been lit were now dark, and she was not alone. Professor Snape was with her, sitting on the floor with his legs stretched out in front of him and his back against the couch she was lying on. His head lolled to the side and rested on the cushion even with her shoulder. And at some point, he'd fallen asleep.

How much time had passed? Surely she hadn't missed dinner. Harry would be worried about her. Maybe Ron had asked about her again *Damn! I forgot about Ron.*

She stretched as quietly as she could, afraid to wake her sleeping professor. It would be quite awkward; she felt that already. What had possessed him to allow her to sleep? To put a pillow beneath her head? To fall asleep beside her?

Unable to stop herself, she lifted a hand and brought it to his head and lightly ran it down the length of his hair. It was very soft to the touch. When he didn't move, she softly traced his jawline with her fingertips, stopping at his chin and not daring to touch his lips as she longed to. Would they feel as soft as they looked at this moment in the fire's glow? Afraid her touch would awaken him, she pulled her hand back and closed her eyes, wishing she could fall asleep again and awake in her own room, bypassing the point when they both woke and had to talk. She dared not try slipping out without speaking to him, though she wished she could.

A moment later she heard him speak and cringed.

"I'm surprised you didn't continue exploring further, Miss Granger. Your curiosity, much like a Kneazle, normally knows no bounds."

Mortified, she said, "I'm so sorry, sir. I just... I didn't mean..." With a small sigh, she admitted, "I couldn't stop myself."

"I confess," he began, his head still lying on the couch and his eyes still closed, "that I hadn't the want to wake you when I saw you sleeping so soundly. After your earlier... outburst, I thought you might need the rest."

"And you opted to sleep as well?" she asked, gaining courage.

"I thought to sit here only, and yet..."

Smiling, Hermione said, "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Don't," he whispered. "Just don't say it."

His words puzzled her. Had he come to the conclusion that she'd meant to confess her "feelings" for him earlier? "I fear I must."

He let out a deep breath. "So be it."

"Sir, last night Hagrid let something slip. Something he overheard."

The professor's head snapped up, and he turned to look at her, a slight expression of surprise on his face. "*Is that* what you want to discuss?"

"I..." She shrugged in confusion. "Did you know he heard you then?"

Abruptly rising and going to stand near the fire, one hand on the mantle, he said, "It's hard not to hear him tromping away...even when he's trying to be silent. However, I told Dumbledore he'd tell someone. He never can keep a secret. I am surprised, though, that he said something so quickly and to whom he said it."

"So... are you all right?"

"Fine. You may leave now."

"Leave?" His retort had been curt, as if he were angry with her. "Are you mad?"

"Mad? In what form of the word, Miss Granger?"

"Are you angry?"

"No, just go."

"I will not," she said, rising. "I've offended you somehow and would like to know why." What had caused this change to overcome him?

"Rest assured that I am carrying on with Dumbledore's request... however much I'd like not to. Remain silent on this. And go. Please." At this last word, his voice cracked.

She could do nothing but obey his order, not wanting to hear him become distraught due to her presence. "All right," she said, her voice a mere whisper. "I'm sorry to have upset you."

"We'll reschedule our meeting."

At this she paused. "Why should we?" she asked suddenly, spinning around. "You made me de-spine shrakes because I missed last night's meeting, and now, just because you're angry with me, you want to do the same!" She regretted her outburst the moment he looked at her. He wasn't the same professor she knew. His eyes whispered that all would never be well for him again. Something else was going on, something more than following Draco.

"Out. Now!"

Running to him, she put her arms around his waist, wanting to give him the comfort he'd given her earlier. Why should one not return the favor? He needed her even if he'd never admit it. When he didn't return her embrace, she looked up into his shocked face and said, "Please hold me. Like earlier."

He closed his eyes, as if in resignation, and complied. They stood that way for a long time, the heat from the fire warming them. His breathing became a little shallow, and she felt a tremor go through him.

*Has he started crying?* she wondered. *Here's a man who definitely doesn't have the emotional range of a teaspoon. He locks this part of himself away. How hard that must be for him. How alone he must feel.*

"I think I love you. You're the one I was talking about," she blurted. She'd wanted to soothe him, had meant to say something that would ease him, but that was what had come out. The word love. She'd never thought of love when thinking of him before. Why had it come out just now? She felt him stiffen, and she held her breath, waiting to be pushed away and berated.

When she looked up, he'd just looked down, and their eyes met. Ever so slowly, she rose up on her tiptoes and met his descending lips with her own. *This is really happening. He's kissing you. He feels it, too, the connection,* her mind screamed. Hermione felt giddy and frightened at the same time.

His lips were soft and yet firm as he led her in their first kiss, lips brushing and tasting before their mouths opened and the kiss deepened, tongues exploring and tangling. Snape's arms tightened and pulled her even closer to his body, and her hands moved around to his chest and slid upwards until her fingers were grasping his hair, making certain he remained as close to her as possible.

Time had stopped it seemed, and Hermione realized she'd never felt anything so powerful before. Snape was magic, and she couldn't get enough, didn't want it to ever stop. She'd shared kisses before, but Viktor hadn't made her feel as though a fire had started in her abdomen. When he hummed approval with a short "mmmm," Hermione moaned in reply and felt her core heat and pulse with want. *That* had certainly never happened before. She could feel that he, too, was affected by what was happening between them because his firm erection now pressed against her stomach.

With a final brushing of lips, they pulled back and looked at each other, both breathing quickly, a look of surprise mirroring on their faces. Hermione slid her arms down so that her hands rested against his chest between them, and she felt his hold on her loosen slightly as his hands moved to rest on her lower back, just above her bum.

"I'm not sorry," she said.

"I think, Hermione, that we should be," he said, causing a ripple of awareness to flow through her.

"Are you sorry then?" she asked, adding boldly, "Severus."

"No." His voice was a mere whisper. "Merlin, help me, no, I am not."

Again she rose up to press her lips against his, and he eagerly accepted her kiss, this time lifting her so that her feet left the floor and her body molded against his and left no chance for misinterpretation for what he wanted. Nothing in the world mattered just then. Who was Voldemort? What were Death Eaters? As his lips left her mouth and traveled to her neck, she arched back to give him access, relishing the feel of his nipping teeth and soothing tongue.

"You taste so good," he murmured against her skin.

"Oh," she gasped, and with those four words, the world came crashing down around her. What was she doing? With whom? "Wait. I..." She slid down against him until her feet hit the floor and backed away. "What are we doing? Do we want this?" Her heart beat wildly, afraid of what she might do next.

"You should leave," he said hoarsely, stepping back as well.

"Don't misunderstand me, please. I'm not saying I don't want this, just that this is so sudden. I'm so... confused."

"You want two men," he said softly, eyes gazing towards the floor.

"I don't know what I want exactly." She stepped closer and touched the arms that were now crossed in front of his chest defensively. "I do want you...and all that it implies. I think about you all the time, and the things I think of..."

His head snapped up. "What things?"

"You and me, kissing... Us, in bed... Holding each other."

"Why me?"

"Why not?"

"I don't understand this." He spun away and went to sit on the couch she'd recently vacated.

"We should try to understand what's going on here," she said, walking over to him and kneeling before him. Placing her hands on his knees, she said, "And there's Ron. I thought that I wanted these things with him, but... I don't think he could ever touch me the way you have. Getting to know you these past months has been something so very important to me."

"It's been long since I've felt something...anything...for anyone but her," he admitted. "Some of the things you say, your feelings, have been things I've felt in the past. I thought no one would ever understand how it felt to..." He shook his head and took her hands in his. "Hermione, this cannot happen, much as I would want for it."

"Because you're my teacher."

"Mostly, yes."

She lay her head in his lap and released one of his hands so that he could smooth away the hair from her face. "We don't have to decide anything right now," she said hopefully. "We finish working together. Whatever happens, happens."

He was quiet for a long time before he spoke. "Hermione, I have to tell you something. It's about what Hagrid overheard. If I don't share this with you, if you don't know now...before anything occurs between us, if ever...I couldn't live with myself."

Hermione lifted her head and gazed at him. "You sound so... forlorn, so serious. What more is he asking of you?"

"Albus is dying," Severus admitted.

She sat back on her heels, reeling in shock. "His arm?"

"Yes." He nodded vigorously. "He means to end his life on his terms, making it seem something other than it is."

"How long does he have?"

"Hermione, he wants me to end his life."

Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant. "But that's horrible to ask of you!" Everything made sense. All of it clicked into place. "Draco, he's been trying to kill the headmaster all this time! But he wants you to do it. God! And you are trying to thwart him so you can be the one to do it? But... surely there's something we can do. The potion..."

"Isn't complete. It's why we must continue to work on it the best we can. There's more."

"I'm listening."

"You would share my burden so readily?"

She moved to sit beside him, feeling emboldened by his vulnerability. "Yes," she said simply, taking his hand. "Tell me all you can."

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AN: And that's it for memory lane. We will go back to the "real" story now that she's shared these memories with us. Other things will be reflected on, of course, throughout the rest of the story, which is nearing its conclusion. Thanks so much for reading. I appreciate it.

## Chapter 27

*Chapter 27 of 28*

Dreams and a magical book draw Hermione to seek the help of Lucius Malfoy, who has a secret of his own: Severus Snape can be brought back from the Otherworld. Will she help?

**Disclaimer:** See Chapter 1.

*Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for beta reading this.*

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Hermione wiped her eyes and was surprised that there were no more tears. Everything that had happened could have been prevented if only she'd made the right decision about Severus before. She'd chosen Ron when she shouldn't have. Her reasoning now seemed so childish to her. And yet Severus' feelings had never wavered.

Things he'd done and said all made sense to her now. He was just fighting to keep what he loved in his life. It could have all gone about differently, but what was done, was done, and there would be no changing it. The first thing she had to do now was get her husband back.

She felt the loss of the bond more deeply than ever and longed to be tied to him again. "And I will be," she said determinedly.

Going over to sit at the desk in the corner of the room, she took out some parchment and an inkpot before fishing out a quill. She began scribbling on the page.

### **To-Do List**

- 1. Make amends with Severus**
- 2. Explain everything to my friends**
- 3. Exact a final revenge on Lucius Malfoy**
- 4. Explore Severus' chest**
- 5. Plan Ginny's Hen Party**

"There's more, but this will have to do for now," she muttered as she looked over the pitifully short list again.

Then, feeling rather emotional, she wrote out her feelings:

*Hermione loves Severus*

*Hermione J. Granger-Snape*

*Hermione G. Snape*

*Severus and Hermione always*

A bubble of laughter left her then, and she was filled with hope. How many times had she done that in the past? It was as if writing it out solidified it. Decision suddenly made, she pushed the parchment aside and was bent on getting at least one item from her list taken care of. She strode across the room and sat next to the chest, placing a hand on the top and lovingly caressing it.

"What secrets have you placed in here, Severus?" she wondered aloud as she flicked her wand to unlock it. The lid creaked as she opened it and peered in to find several parchments scattered about. She recognized his handwriting immediately.

Gently lifting one parchment, she untied the ribbon holding it closed and allowed it to unroll. "I hope I'm doing the right thing," she whispered before looking down to read his words.

*26 December 1997*

*Potter finally has in his possession the Sword of Gryffindor. I knew that my plan to lead him to it with my Patronus would work. The boy is sentimental if nothing else. It pained me to be that close to Hermione and to not be able to see her. I wanted nothing more than to follow his tracks back to the tent and call out to her. However, for the good of the war, I stuck to my plan.*

*Weasley the Witless Wonder showed up just in time to actually help Potter...just when I thought I might have to show myself. I must admit that what I saw was quite disturbing. The locket...one of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes...seemed to shift and conjure the imagines of Potter and Hermione, painting them as lovers. Again, I have to admit that it angered me, and I wanted to lash out. If being in the vicinity of the bloody Horcrux for such a short amount of time had that effect on me, I suppose I feel more respect for what they've been going through having it in their midst all this time.*

*It's a wonder that my Patronus still remains a silver doe. Is it necessity? Or was it the memory I'd clung to when calling it forth? And why did I still choose that memory instead of something new and more meaningful than I'd ever thought possible?*

*Definitely something to ponder. For now, I must deal with the Carrows.*

"So it's a trunk of letters and writings containing his private thoughts." Unable to stop herself, she reached in and pulled out another parchment. This time, her heart dropped as she read the letter's salutation.

*My Dearest Hermione,*

*I believe I have lost you for good. You think that I can't give you the life you want...one of peace, contentment, love and happiness...but in my heart, what's left of it, I know that I can. I made mistakes in the past with Lily that I know I won't make with you. I've learned so much just by having you in my life. You've given me hope where I had none.*

*How can I just let you go so easily and respect your decision when I know it's not the right one? There are thoughts in my head that I can't stop. I feel that if I do things a bit deviously, I can again win your heart and prove to you that I can be the man that you need.*

*People may object at first, but our feelings are what matter in the end. Bigger them. They'll come around and leave us in peace eventually. And if they wouldn't? Why should we care? We'd have each other! No matter. I know what I must do, and I hope that one day you will understand why I've done this, for I know ultimately it will be the right decision for us.*

*I can't have you live your life without ever revisiting what you feel for me. I can sense it in your gaze, feel it in your touch. Your life would be a lie, a half-life if anything at all. You deserve so much more than that. I won't let this happen.*

*While you may never read this letter, it makes me feel better writing it.*

*I love you.*

*Always,*

*Severus*

"This must have been after I left him that day... when I hid from him in the library." Hermione frowned. How could she have hurt him so? Why had she been so childish in her decision, thinking of others and the easy way out?

Snatching a scroll partially rolled up with red spiky writing on it, she sat back against the headboard to read it.

*God forgive me, but I've done it. I hexed her. She'll not lay with him no matter what she thinks is right unless I release her.*

Hermione sucked in a harsh breath. She knew without reading anything else what he was speaking of. It was he...not Malfoy...who'd cast the spell to make sure she'd not want to have sex with Ron. Feeling angry and betrayed, she tossed the parchment aside and closed her eyes.

When had he done it? It had to have been after she'd forced her memories to hide. Little indignant voices began whispering in her mind: 'So he planned it all along, eh? Oh, he was more worried about safeguarding his return from the Otherworld, that's why he did it! He did this without your consent! He's a dark wizard after all, harming she whom he loves!'

"No," she said firmly. "I'll not let this poison my feelings again. I know what I want. He's not perfect, never has been, but it's part of why I love him. Who knows? I might have done something similar if I'd been half as desperate as he apparently was."

She lifted the paper and began reading again.

*I told Malfoy about it, and he thinks it's a brilliant spell, but he feels I've wasted it on a Mudblood, as he calls her. I hate when he says that about her. It makes me want to strangle him. Next time, I'll take him to task, no matter how much money he has or how many connections he has. She doesn't know what she's thinking, and I won't let Potter ruin her in a fit of passion. She'll regret it all her life when she returns to me.*

"Potter?" Hermione's brow furrowed. "What in the..."

And then it came to her. The chest didn't only contain things about her but also things about Lily. It was Lily he'd cast the spell on. And Malfoy did know about it after all. So possibly, it could still have been Malfoy who'd hexed her and not Severus.

"Severus was so obsessed with Lily," she said. "Am I only his next obsession?"

She hoped that was not the case. He seemed so vehement in his love, and with the bond they'd shared, she'd felt the extent of his feelings. Why hadn't she understood this then? Why had she made such a mess of things?

Still, he must have released Lily from the spell, else Harry wouldn't have been conceived. That proved that he ultimately let her have her happiness at the expense of his own.

Tenderly, she placed the parchment down and vowed not to read any more of his private thoughts. She had no right to trespass on his things, for she wouldn't have wanted him to do the same with her. If he decided in the future to let her read through them, then she would choose if she wanted to do so or not. She was uncertain if she wanted to know so many things about his past with Lily.

That didn't matter to her anyway. The man Severus was once didn't matter either. The here and the now mattered. She loved him, and she would be with him again. Hermione fixed the chest's contents back as she'd found them, closed the lid, and then magically locked it before placing it beneath her bed. She moved towards her desk again, lifted her quill, and scratched out the fourth item on her To-Do List.

#### 4. Explore Severus' chest

Deciding it was time to try to explain things to her friends...completely...she left her room. The house was dark and quiet. Ron had apparently gone to bed, and she wasn't sure that Ginny and Harry had returned yet. She'd have to wait until the morning before she could speak with them, and she promised herself she'd not leave a single detail out. They deserved to know the truth, especially Ron.

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Lucius woke from a pleasant, erotic dream and decided to roll over and pull his wife closer to him, allowing his hand to wander down her abdomen and to rest between her thighs for a moment before sliding his fingers beneath her lacy knickers to delve into the moist heat of her body.

"Already wanting, are we?" he purred, moving to turn her over and position himself between her thighs, pushing down his underpants as he did so. "Let's get rid of these," he murmured as he bent forward and nipped at her knickers with his teeth to pull them down her thighs as she readily lifted her arse and maneuvered to help him. On his way up her long limbs, he kissed and laved her succulent flesh, stopping for a moment to tease her clitoris before quickly moving himself over her and plunging in hard and deep.

As he rocked on top of his wife, her legs tightened around him, and she moved with him, moaning and urging him on. He leaned forward and kissed her deeply, holding himself up on his forearms as his rhythm became choppy and rough, deliberately trying to hit her inner spot of bliss. Once the kiss ended, he rested his head against her shoulder, sucking the sweetly scented skin at the base of her throat as he continued to thrust into her, bringing her...and himself...closer to the edge.

"Lucius! Oh, don't stop. Harder, faster!"

"Lucccciuuuussssss, yeeessssssss..."

Placing light kisses on her throat, eyes closed, he dared not move away or out of her until his breathing calmed, as did hers. "I love you."

His eyes opened wide, and he realized that he'd not made love to his wife, and it wasn't she who lay beneath him. Slowly, moving up, he shuddered as he gazed into the ruby-slitted eyes of the Dark Lord. His flaccid prick slid out of the Dark Lord's arse immediately, and Lucius felt he might be sick.

"Yes, my Lord," he replied, nearly gagging and wondering how this had come to be. One moment he'd been fucking his wife and the next...

Over and over the Dark Lord pushed Lucius' head and forced him to take his thick member into his throat entirely, choking and gagging him as he did so. *When will it end? When will he come?* Lucius thought over and over.

Lucius vomited and awoke from the nightmare, the remnants of his dinner on his bedsheets. "NO!!" he shrieked, scrambling out of the bed.

"It was a nightmare," he panted. "I thought... It felt so real... It was like..."

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### 3. Exact a final revenge on Lucius Malfoy

"What if Severus kills him?" she wondered. Then she shook her head. She wasn't sure that he would, though Lucius might wish for death. Hermione didn't let her thoughts stray any further, keeping what he'd done to her and to her family in the forefront of her mind.

Decision made, she scratched another item off her list.

Hurriedly, she dressed and made her way down to the kitchen where she found Ginny cooking porridge.

Ginny smiled. "Morning to you. Guess our plan didn't work, huh?"

"He was right behind me. Think he needed to use the loo first."

"Good. I hope Ron's not left yet."

"No, he was just waking when I passed his room," Ginny answered. "And already grumbling about being hungry."

"As usual," Hermione said, laughing lightly.

"Of course."

She rose and began making toast while waiting for Harry and Ron to join them. Once the toast and porridge was done, both men appeared magically as if summoned by ready food. Purposely, she sat at the head of the table so she could face the three of them.

As plates and glasses were filled, she cleared her throat. "I thought it was time to be honest with you lot about... about everything. I think you deserve to know the full truth."

"Hermione..." Harry began.

"No, I need to do this, Harry, but first, if you want to know, you have to promise me that you won't use what I am about to tell you against Lucius Malfoy in a way that might land him in Azkaban. And apparently," she said, "you won't be able to tell anyone either. I took that stupid oath when I began working with him, and it's one of the conditions."

Ron put his spoon down very slowly and deliberately, focusing his attention on her. "I don't like it, but I want to know all of it. You have my word."

Ginny nodded. "Mine as well."

Harry frowned. "You've got me in a tight spot, but... you know you can count on me. I promise that I won't turn him in." His knuckles turned white as he gripped his spoon and tried to look calm. "What is it then?"

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"Ron, please say something," Hermione pleaded, knowing that his red face and narrowed eyes were a warning.

"What do you want me to say?" he said, voice loud, as he expelled a harsh breath. "I hate that bastard." Suddenly jumping up, he tossed his uneaten bowl of porridge to the side and stormed out of the room, yelling, "He'll pay for this!" as he did so.

"H-Harry?" Hermione said, voice trembling. "Please stop him!"

He nodded and quickly followed in Ron's footsteps.

Ginny eyed her sadly. "So... all this time you've been in love with Snape, removed him from your memories, Malfoy... Malfoy used you to get him back, Snape was in on it, and poor Ron never had a chance."

"I'm sorry." It was all Hermione could say.

Opening her arms, Ginny scooted closer and hugged Hermione, who promptly began to cry in relief. "I was used in a similar way once, Hermione," Ginny said quietly. "I know how it feels to think one thing, do another, have no place to turn, no answers... It's horrible. I'm sorry you had to experience something like that."

It was strange how easily she could forget that Voldemort himself had used Ginny when she'd only been an eleven-year-old girl. Ginny just seemed so strong, like it hadn't had any repercussions in the least. "I didn't think about that, Gin," she admitted. "I wish that had never happened to you either."

"Thank God for my Harry."

Hermione nodded and continued to hold her friend, afraid of what Ron might be planning to do. When they heard a yell and a thud, both girls startled from their own thoughts and ran to see what had happened.

They found Harry lying on his side, wand a few feet from his body. He'd been Stupefied. "Harry!" both girls cried out, running forward to help him.

"*Finite*," Hermione said with a wave of her wand. "Ron's gone, isn't he, Harry?"

Harry sat up, rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah. I think he's gone to Malfoy Manor. Come on! We've got to stop him. I think he might... kill Malfoy."

"Shite!"

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Lucius pounded on the door until the small elf answered. "Where is your master?" he demanded, barging past her and knocking her down.

"Master isn't being here," she said.

"Find him. Now!"

Lucius strode into the sitting room and helped himself to Severus' bottle of firewhisky. The man...and the bitch he called wife...had a lot of explaining to do. If he had to, he'd send Severus back to the Otherworld without any qualms. He'd missed his friend, but if Severus weren't loyal to the cause and all the plans they'd made, it wouldn't pay to have him about where he might ruin things. And Granger would pay for it as well.

He smirked and mentally patted himself on his back. Having the foresight of creating the ointment and anointing himself with it had been genius. Severus could do nothing to stop him.

A loud crack sounded.

"Lucius, what do I owe the pleasure of a visit so early in the morning?" Severus, looking surly, strode forward and extended his hand.

Taking the proffered hand and shaking it, he said, "And why were you not here with your harpy, I mean, wife? Surely a newly married couple such as yourselves have a lie in now and again."

Severus frowned, turned, and went to pour his own glass of firewhisky.

"What is it?" Lucius asked curiously.

"She's not here," Severus said before tossing back his tumbler without a grimace.

"Oh? Do tell."

"We had a row...and she's gone off to stay with Potter for a few days. I decided I needed time away from her anyway," Severus said, pouring himself another drink. "More?" he asked, nodding to Lucius' half-full glass.

"All right."

Both men settled into comfortable chairs with their refilled glasses. "She's not as easily controlled as I'd hoped it seems. I'm working on something to change that." He smirked at Lucius. "We shall see if it works later today, for I'm going to go to her and slip a bit into her drink."

Lucius looked at his own drink speculatively before replying. "Where is your Dream Stone, Severus?"

Severus' brow furrowed. "Izzy!" he called.

"Yes?" she asked, immediately popping into the room.

"Fetch my Dream Stone."

"Master, Mistress is having the Dream Stone," the elf said warily.

Noting the way Severus' face turned dark, Lucius knew the man wasn't behind the dreams he'd been having. He felt a moment of relief, for he hadn't really wanted to dirty his wand and kill his friend. He needed him far too much. It was so much easier to allow Severus to take the chances while he, himself, pulled the strings and ultimately had control.

"That will be all, Izzy," Severus said. He then faced Lucius. "Tell me. What are you not saying? What's she done?"

"I believe she's been behind my troubles...the nightmares, the sleeping problems, the lot of it! That fucking Dream Stone." He sneered. "She will pay for this, Severus."

Severus nodded. "Let me handle that."

"For now," the blond man replied. "I will have satisfaction. Last night was... the last straw."

"Do tell."

"I'd rather not. Suffice to say that it could possibly be one's worst nightmare concerning the Dark Lord." He placed his glass on the table next to his chair. "Why did you not tell me you were having trouble with the bint?"

Severus shrugged. "I expect I didn't want you to think I was failing at something. I suppose I tried to give her a little leeway. It seems to put her in the right mood for manipulating."

Lucius flashed a feral grin. "Indeed it does, my friend." He sighed slightly and then sobered. "What say you to having our first meeting? I've been able to sift out a few who would join us without much prodding. The Ministry seems to have stopped their sniffing around for the time being."

"You want to move things forward already?" Severus asked, seemingly surprised.

"I think we should."

"All right. I've been able to work out some ideas. Want to see my notes? I think you'll be surprised to..."

A loud pop sounded, and Bozzy scrambled into the room. "Master is needed at home, sir! My mistress is calling for him."

"What's the problem?" Lucius asked, sitting forward, ready to spring into action.

"Master Draco is home. Mistress isn't happy."

"Draco!" Lucius stood quickly. "Severus, do you want to come along to the manor? I need to see what he's divulged. I might be able to use your expertise in that area."

Severus nodded and rose. "Certainly."

"I can't believe the little ingrate has been hiding from us, his own family!" Lucius huffed, striding out the room.

"I expect he doesn't appreciate his treatment. You'll have to concoct a good story."

"Or none at all, depending what he's let slip. I've still got some of the potion left after all."

"As you see fit, of course," Severus said, Disapparating a moment before Lucius.

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AN: And so, what do I say about the length of time it's been since I updated? ~pulls from hat of excuses~ I've had surgery last week and have been recovering. Before that, I was in the midst of some serious life changes (liquid diet, etc.), and I've been incredibly busy with martial arts and other RL things.

I can only say that I'm sorry for keeping you waiting...those of you still following anyway. I think my slow updating has caused most readers to drop the story. No matter. I'll still plod along. It's nearly done now. ~grin~

## Chapter 28

### *Chapter 28 of 28*

Dreams and a magical book draw Hermione to seek the help of Lucius Malfoy, who has a secret of his own: Severus Snape can be brought back from the Otherworld. Will she help?

**Disclaimer:** See chapter one.

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak who beta'd this for me.

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Hermione, Ginny, and Harry quickly decided to go to Malfoy Manor. It was the only place Ron would have gone, for he had revenge on his mind. She should have thought about how he might take the news of the whole truth before she'd told them everything. All they could do now was get there as quickly as they could and pray they weren't too late for whatever Ron was planning.

"See you there," Hermione said, Disapparating away.

She materialized outside the gates of Malfoy Manor seconds later. "Or not," she quipped, knowing her friends were hidden beneath Harry's Invisibility Cloak. Only the telltale sound of their Apparition alerted her to the fact that she was not alone.

Hermione said nothing, unsure who might be watching, and approached the gate, hoping her presence was still allowed on the grounds without needing to request entrance. When the gate opened, she smiled. "Let's do this," she murmured, glad to have her friends with her and hoping their plan would work.

A high-pitched scream rent the air, and Hermione gave up all pretenses of simply walking quickly to the house. She ran for the front door, hexing it to pieces before she got there, and sprinted into the house, calling out, "Ron! Stop!"

She could hear Draco's voice then and nearly stopped in shock. What was he doing at home? He'd said he'd not return there.

"Weasley, how dare you hex my mother!"

"She deserves it! Made that one up myself. Like it?"

"Give me my wand," Draco said.

"No, you'll just try to fight me." Ron's voice was calm and angry, which frightened Hermione.

She was used to an explosive Ron, but this one was something to be reckoned with. "Ron," she said, stopping in the doorway to the study, "don't do anything you'll regret."

"Too late for that, Hermione." Ron looked back at Narcissa, whose face had several rows of wrinkles and looked much older than it should. "Where is your husband?"

"I told you! He's not here!" The blonde-haired woman's hands continuously touched her face. "What have you done?"

"We're supposed to be mates, Weasley... Ron," Draco said, trying to reason with him. "Whatever my father's done, take it up with him, not my mother."

"She's part of this, too," Ron said coldly. "And if—"

A loud crack interrupted him, and everyone turned to see Severus striding into the room from the opposite doorway. "What's going on here?" he asked.

"Stay back, Snape," Ron said threateningly. "If I see you go for your wand... that's it."

"Severus!" Hermione said, running to him and wrapping her arms around him. "Ron's found out everything. He's looking for Lucius."

Severus nodded and pushed her aside gently. "He'll be here in a moment, Weasley. He was with me at my home."

*Crack!*

"What the bloody hell happened to my door?" Lucius said striding into the room from the doorway Hermione had just vacated. "There you are, you little bitch!" he said, his voice nearly a growl.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Ron said, quickly flicking his wand at Lucius, who for the first time realized others were in the room.

He gasped as he saw his wife's face. "Narcissa!"

"He's gone mad," she said tearfully, trying to hide her face in Draco's chest.

"Father, Ron is angry with—"

"I'll talk for myself, thanks," Ron said, pocketing Lucius' wand. "You ruined my life, you filthy bastard! And you had your hands on her. I should kill you. I will kill you."

"Ron!" Hermione yelled just as Harry materialized from beneath his cloak, grabbing Ron's wand arm, saying, "I can't let you do that, Ron. I won't put my best mate in Azkaban for the likes of Lucius Malfoy."

"Let go, Harry. He's slime! He doesn't deserve to live!"

"He deserves to be punished."

"How? That fucking vow he made Hermione take won't let us do anything that can land him in Azkaban."

"There are other ways," Harry said quietly, stepping back once Ron lowered his wand."

"Weasley... my mother," Draco said from behind them. "Please."

"After all she did to you, along with your dad, why would you care?" Ron pointed out. "If they'd had their way, you'd still be what you were."

Draco dropped his eyes for a moment before answering. "But she's still my mother. Think if the situations were reversed."

Ron nodded. "It'll have to wear off. She'll be fine."

Lucius sneered at Ron. "You'll regret hexing my wife."

"Not as much as you'll regret manipulating Hermione!" Ron said, again lifting his wand. His eyes met Hermione's for a moment, and a light suddenly shone in them. "I've the perfect punishment."

"Ron, please," Hermione said, "don't do this. Don't become what he is. You're better than that. Better than him."

"She's right, Ron," Ginny said, throwing off Harry's cloak, her wand aimed at Lucius Malfoy's back. "He's not going anywhere. Let's just calm down and figure out what to do with him."

Looking defeated, Ron sighed heavily and lowered his head and wand. "All right. Harry, do something with him. Tie him up."

The moment Harry walked over to where Ginny stood, Ron lifted his wand again.

"Sod that," he said. "*Oblivate!*"

Before the jet of light could hit Lucius, Severus shouted, "*Protego!*" protecting the man from the curse. His wand was then aimed at Ron, who'd spun around to also aim at him.

"Snape! So, the truth comes out then? You and he planned this shite? You're on his side?"

"Se-Severus?" Hermione asked, feeling as if waking from a dream. "What are you doing?"

Ginny's and Harry's wands were both aimed at Severus now. "Snape?" Harry asked. "Lower your wand. Nobody wants to do anything brash."

"I do," Ron said angrily. "This git stole Hermione from me!"

"I didn't steal anyone," Severus said quietly, his black eyes glinting.

Hermione added her wand to those lifted, but hers wavered slightly before aiming at Ron. "Put down your wand, Ron."

"He's got you brainwashed, Hermione!" Ron said incredulously.

"No, he's just stopping you from doing something you'll regret. Like Harry said, let's talk this over."

"I'm not going to—"

Before Ron could finish his sentence, Severus cast a silent Disarming Charm and easily caught his foe's wand. "Never did focus very well," he said to Ron. Then, he gazed at Hermione. "You trusted me. Even after everything."

"Yes," she said firmly. "I do. I love you."



Severus nodded thoughtfully and turned back to Lucius Malfoy. "What to do with you, my slippery friend? Ah, I know..." He reached into his pocket and took out a vial. "Do you have any idea what's in here?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," Lucius said dryly.

"Once I drink this..." he opened the stopper and downed the contents, smacking his lips, "your little ointment for protection will have been for nothing."

"Bollocks," Lucius replied confidently. "That was something only my family knows about."

"Am I or am I not a Potions master, my friend?"

Lucius' eyes widened slightly. "Severus... think of our plans."

Stepping closer, Severus said, "The things you and Cissy have been saying about my wife... doing to her... I've had enough. I want to hear you apologize right now."

Ron shrieked, "Apologize? Is that all?" and tried to pull away from Harry's grip.

"I'll not apologize to her... or you," Lucius said proudly.

"Then at least apologize to your son, Lucius. What you did to him and intended to do again is abominable."

"He understands me. He knows that I wouldn't hurt him."

"Wouldn't hurt me?" Draco said, finding his voice. "You don't think what you've done is wrong, Father? Not just to me, but to all of us... even to Mother."

Lucius tilted his chin defiantly. "Do your best, Severus."

"I shall."

"Severus, what are you going to do?" Hermione asked nervously, her wand pointing towards the ground as she took in her lover's countenance. "I don't want to lose you! You'll go to Azkaban!"

"Snape!" Harry said warningly.

"I'm only going to finish what Weasley started," he said before flicking and swishing his wand. A stream of bluish-purple light erupted from his wand's tip and shot out towards Lucius, hitting him in the chest and knocking him backwards.

"What have you done?" Hermione said, running forward to look at the unconscious Lucius.

"Weasley needn't dirty his wand. I'll take responsibility for Obliviating Lucius." Severus looked over to Harry. "Well? Will you be arresting me?"

"No!" Hermione said, horrified. "Harry, please." She quickly stood in front of Severus as if protecting him from Harry.

Ron started laughing. "You had me fooled for a minute there, Snape." He cleared his throat and said, "I didn't see anything. No idea what happened to Malfoy."

"I didn't see anything either," Ginny chimed in, going to stand next to her brother. "Did you, Hermione?"

"I..." She swallowed thickly. "Malfoy hexed himself." She pointed to the wand that Severus had used. "Look, his own wand cast the spell."

Everyone turned to look at Harry then. Instead of saying anything, Harry strode over to the Malfoys. "Draco?"

Draco nodded. "It's punishment enough. I'll make sure Mother says nothing."

"Brilliant," Harry replied. "I didn't see Snape do anything either."

Narcissa began sobbing and crawled over to her husband. "I'll fix this somehow. I will," she murmured, trying to lift his upper body to hold him.

Lucius began groaning and rubbed his head. "What's going on here? Where am I?"

At this, Narcissa sobbed harder, and Draco strode forward. "You tried to cast a spell on someone, and it backfired. You fell and hit your head. All right?"

Lucius shook his head. "I'm confused. I don't... Who are these people?" He nodded towards Ginny, Ron, and Harry.

"Friends," Draco said.

"I... Draco? You seem much older. What... Something isn't right."

"Oh, dear," Severus said in a voice of false concern. "I wonder if you've not lost some of your memory."

"Severus, you look older... yet healthier," Lucius said softly. His eyes then found Narcissa's. "What the...? Mrs. Black?"

"It's Mother," Draco said. "Not Grandmother. She's been accidentally hexed." Here he glared at Ron. "But she'll be back to normal soon. I hope."

"It's too much," Lucius said, trying to rise.

"We'll take it from here," Draco said as if dismissing everyone. "We'll talk about this later," he told them in an air of authority, much like his old self finally.

"Very well." Severus strode towards the door without looking at anyone else.

"Wait!" Hermione said, running after him. "You're just going to leave?"

"I think it best for now."

"But, Severus... I meant what I said. I love you. I trust you. I want to be with you."

"How can I know that for certain?" he asked quietly, nodding behind her at her friends. "What if you decide that Weasley's right? That you belong with him? Where would that leave me... again?"

"I've made my decision."

"I'll be in touch," he said and popped away.

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Hermione looked down at her to-do list and frowned. She'd done everything on the list but make amends with Severus. She'd even planned Ginny's Hen party. It had been four days, and she'd not heard a word from him. He'd said that he'd be in touch, but he'd not answered any of her owls, nor had he been home when she'd gone round to see him.

She crumpled the paper and tossed it into the nearby bin. "Maybe he'll show up tonight," she said aloud hopefully. She'd sent him an invitation to Ginny's party, hoping he'd at least show up where they could talk. Hermione had even stooped to trying the Dream Stone again, but both times she'd been able to find him in her dreams, he'd done the same as before: Occluded her or woke himself up.

"Ready?" Ginny asked from the doorway. "Oh, you look beautiful."

"So do you!"

"Where are you taking me? Come on! Give me a hint."

"Nope," Hermione said mysteriously. "It's a surprise, but you'll have your wish. It will be unlike any other Hen party you've ever been to."

"Well, that's good, considering I've not been to any."

Hermione laughed. "Thank you for being so supportive. If it weren't for you and Harry, I don't know how I could have got through the last few days."

"Has Ron come back yet?" Ginny asked.

"Not that I know of." Hermione smiled lightly. "I think he'll be okay though. So much time's passed for us. I hope he can see that it would never work for us."

"Well, if he's off trying to sort out his feelings, maybe he might feel something for Jeri after all. Or maybe he'll just wait for the right person to come along."

"I'm betting on the latter," Hermione said. "And pity for her. I think she really cares for him."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, "but enough about them. Tonight is *my* night."

"Let's go then." Hermione flicked her wand, blindfolding her friend.

"Hey, that's not necessary."

"Yes, it is!" She grabbed Ginny's hand and Side-Along Apparated her to their destination. "Just trust me to guide you."

Trekking up the walkway to Malfoy Manor, Hermione grinned as Draco opened the door and held a finger to his lips before beckoning them forward. Hermione led Ginny up the steps and into the home, their shoes clicking on the gleaming floor.

"Where are we? It smells... familiar."

"You'll see."

Draco opened another doorway, which led to his family's ballroom, where everyone who'd been invited waited to surprise Ginny. On Hermione's cue, Draco lifted his hand to start the countdown with his fingers.

At one, Hermione flicked her wand to remove Ginny's blindfold, and several things happened at once: music blared to life, dozens of people shouted a welcome, and Ginny squealed with excitement.

"The Weird Sisters? Oh wow!" She hugged Hermione and then Draco before scurrying forward to bounce around with others who'd already started dancing.

"Thank you, Draco. I appreciate this."

"The Weasleys were good to me. It's the least I could do."

"I guess I'm just surprised you'd want us here after what happened to your father and mother."

"Ron was right about that. Mother's learned her lesson, and Father, well, he's not learned anything, but with my help, I think he can be a better man."

"Where are they?"

"Just there." He nodded. "In the corner. With Snape."

Hermione's head spun fast to look in that direction. "He came," she said in surprise.

"Yeah. Said to tell you he'd be waiting for you."

She began walking towards him, forgetting to greet her other friends, only seeing him. When she stood before him, she said, "You're here."

"I am."

"Does this mean... Have you thought about things?"

"Naturally."

"And?"

He pulled her close. "Do you mind?" he asked in a cocky voice, arching his eyebrow. "I'm trying to kiss my wife."

She laughed and gladly surrendered her lips to him. "I love you so much," she whispered when they broke apart.

"Let's go out on the terrace where it's more quiet... and private."

Hermione nodded, not caring if they came back inside at all, forgetting that she'd wanted to see a scantily clad Harry jump out of Ginny's cake. All she needed was in her arms, her head nestled against his chest. She paid no mind to the Malfoys who stood beside them, one glaring while the other gazed about curiously.

As Severus guided her to the concealed doorway, he gazed back out at the partygoers, glad that all was ending well. His dark eyes then met a pair the shade of icy blue. His lips tilted up in a knowing smirk, and he received the same in reply.

Yes, all is well, isn't it?

AN: And that's all, folks! I could have dragged this on a bit, but this was my ultimate goal, and it just happened to work right here. I hope you don't mind. Thank you so

much for reading my story!

I've got another one brewing. Hope to see you there! Requests? Dedications? LOL

SW69