

Sweet Sanctuary

by sweetflag

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: Many thanks to both fenrir and falcon falmorgan for going through this story and offering such excellent advice. Thank you.

"Has he settled?"

He paused on the bull-nose, his lips parting and his brown eyes rolling in feigned exasperation at his wife's unnecessary but familiar question. Stepping off the stairs, he wrapped his arm around her narrow waist while she giggled and playfully swatted at his arm, and he squeezed her hip. At his touch, she fell against him, her head resting against his shoulder and her right hand lifting to rest above his heart.

"He's cuddling his toy lion sucking on the poor thing's ear and watching the broomsticks on his mobile."

She closed her eyes and felt his breath ruffle her hair and the vibrations of his speech against her cheek. His arms were warm and comforting around her, and she smiled at the joy that he inspired. Some treacherous thought bubbled up...how easily it could have all been taken away... one wizard, one wand, one curse. Willing away the insurgent nightmares of Frank falling, his lifeless body sprawling before her, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut. The war was over. Voldemort had perished at the cost of many of their dearest friends and colleagues. Those dreadful thoughts were dispersed by his hands sliding up her back to rest on her shoulders.

"What's the betting," he said enthusiastically, "that Neville gets Sorted into Gryffindor and joins the Quidditch team?"

Pulling away, she tilted back her head to look at his enervated and smiling face. "Is that why you bought that particular mobile? Frank, he's a few months shy of his second birthday; don't you think that instilling the love of 'all things broom' is a bit of a wasted effort?" she scolded gently.

Chuckling and pressing his lips against her furrowed forehead, he countered her objection. "It was either broomsticks or flowers: which of them would you have bought?"

"Hmm... fair point."

He grinned and patted her bum. "Anyway, the point is that he'll be asleep soon, so..." he trailed off, wagging his eyebrows and grinning hopefully.

"Good!" she replied huskily, pressing herself against him. "You can help with the tea dishes then."

She disentangled herself from his grasp, smirked at his crestfallen look and sashayed to the kitchen.

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His heart had pounded in his chest. He had feared that the others would hear its frantic efforts, but his anxiety had been masked by the general despair and desperate tone of the meeting. They had gathered, the few who still dared to meet and still held that terrible belief that had fuelled them throughout the war. He had been surprised at how many of his ex-comrades still burned with fervour, how many of them saw the faded Dark Mark as a sin rather than a salvation, and thus carried on his noble ideal. Carrying on the masquerade, so that those who were still a poison within the Wizarding world could be drained and safely contained, he had maintained the illusion of loyalty. Various emotions had warred deep within him, and he had initially balked at the request, but his guilt was such that he would always acquiesce.

He swallowed as he listened to Bellatrix's spiteful yet entrancing words: he was amazed that she still thought the Dark Lord merely lost rather than dead. She called it a lull in his campaign, a slight delay in the fulfilment of his glorious plans. Yet these strange notions and her undeterred devotion were mirrored in the faces of those who hung on her every word. Could it be that the beast still clawed and gnashed without a head?

Up until now, the meetings had just been talk: constant discussion and bickering over what had happened and what would happen now. They had been nothing but malcontent mutterers. Now, they were beginning to shout louder, asking questions and intent on getting their answers. Now, they were plotters.

"They're the best target...the others are either too well guarded or too powerful to approach." Bella's voice was harsh, stifling the possibility of contradiction by sheer force of will. There were a few mumbblings, but no one openly disputed her decision. "Frank Longbottom was the Auror in charge of the investigation at Godric's Hollow; he would know more than anyone about what happened to our Lord that night." Her dark eyes glittered in the candlelight, and her lips were parted. She had acquired fear and respect while thriving in her Master's shadow, but now, she was experiencing the delicious drug that was power. It flowed through her, seeping from her like honey, and he could see how his comrades drank deeply, becoming as addicted to her as she was to the new-found power. "We have a way to encourage him to be honest with us." Her pale lips curved up in a subtle, vicious smile, and her tongue flicked out to moisten her upper lip. "He has a young son."

His heart stuttered painfully in his chest ... her words echoing in his skull. Once, he had wished that little boy as good as dead. Using his logic and wit, he had worked to convince the Dark Lord that only a pure-blood could fulfil that hated prophecy, and therefore, he had condemned the babe. But the Dark Lord had looked upon his own birth, seen the power in such humble origins as a half-blood and had sought out the infant that Snape had indirectly worked to save. He had prayed for the Longbottom boy to be the sacrifice to guarantee the Dark Lord's ambition, and at the time, he had been consumed by an urgency that had robbed him of his senses. Months later, that terrible decision haunted him: it mingled with his nightmares of Lily's murder into one guilt-ridden, horrific gestalt of suffering. He could not bear the thought of allowing the young child to be tortured for such an insane and pointless reason as Bellatrix's delusion. He could not bear the thought of harm coming to another child. He could not bear the thought of leaving Neville to his comrades' mercies. He hoped that saving the baby he had once offered up would ease some of the burning and twisting remorse that ate at him.

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"The dishes are done, the worktops are glistening, and the table couldn't possibly be any cleaner," Frank whispered into his wife's ear. "Put down that cloth," he suggested softly while his hands rubbed her shoulders, "and come into the sitting room. Let me ease some of the day's tension."

She sighed and tilted back her head; her short, dark hair tickled his knuckles as he caressed her slender neck. He leant forward to kiss the exposed skin on her shoulder and felt her give a small shudder. Dropping the dishcloth into the sink, she turned to face him. Her eyelids heavy and her pupils dilated. He loved that look in her eye...that hunger and passion. Her hands moved up his arms, the material of his shirt smooth and cool against her palms, and she returned his earlier caresses.

"Very true," she said huskily. "I could go and oust the colony of doxies that..."

"Not on your life!" he interrupted forcefully while bending to scoop her up into his arms. He carried her into the sitting room where the fire crackled in the hearth, its flickering light lending the room a sensual quality. It would have been a romantic precursor to an evening of sweet kisses, tender touches and languid love...had not Frank stepped on one of Neville's toys.

"Ouch!" he cried as he stumbled and dropped Alice, as carefully as he could, onto the sofa; he fell next to her, clutching at his throbbing foot. "Blasted toy broomstick!" he snarled as he waited for the stinging to subside.

Alice bit her lip, stifling the laugh which threatened to erupt, and moved to rest her head against his shoulder. She smiled as he went through a list of mumbled expletives and watched his long fingers massage the injured appendage. "Still think that he should join the Quidditch team? I believe that the brooms are much bigger."

"By then," he said through gritted teeth and ignoring her jibe, "Neville will be old enough to clean up his own toys."

She was about to retort when the sound of glass breaking emanated ominously from the kitchen. Honed skills took over, and they slipped off the sofa, wands at the ready and their minds working on strategies. Frank motioned up the stairs, and Alice Disappeared silently to their son's bedroom.

She surveyed the room, her trained eye taking in all the small details, but nothing suggested that this room, with its precious occupant, had been disturbed. Neville was asleep; tufts of dark hair sprouted out from between the blanket and the toy lion crushed against his little body. Her stomach churned, and a cold sweat broke out over her body. A fear coiled around her chest, crushing her heart and smothering her breath, a fear that hadn't plagued her since news of Voldemort's death echoed through the streets of the Wizarding world. Why now? Why now when they had started to believe that the worst was over?

She could hear heated voices coming from downstairs, the sound of a chair screeching against the tiled floor and then an eerie silence. Casting a series of powerful Defensive Charms, she left Neville to his dreams, her attentions torn between husband and son. Creeping along the landing, she peered down between the spindles, hoping to catch sight of the intruder. A sudden shadow lanced across the carpet in the hallway; she jolted back out of the line of sight and edged her way to the top of the stairs. Battling the fear that her home had been invaded, she licked her lips and wondered if they needed back-up. The shadow moved, and then Frank was rushing to the bottom of the stairs, his face white and frantic.

"Alice!" Frank screamed. "Get Neville out of here! Snape says that Death Eaters are coming!"

She was stunned. She stood and stared at him, her mouth working uselessly as she processed his dreadful order. The words finally sliced through her mind-numbing terror, and she raced back to the nursery and plucked Neville from his cot. The boy was still sleeping and tried to settle himself against her warm shoulder, unaware of the terror that was flowing through his mother. She couldn't Disapparate with him...he was too young to cope with the strain...so she held him as her mind worked frantically to find a means of escape. Cursing herself for a fool, she cast the Patronus Charm, and a sleek, silver vixen burst from the tip of her wand. She whispered her instructions to the attentive fox while she spelled the window open and then watched with desperate hope as it bolted from the room. Neville was beginning to sense that something was wrong and stirred against her, his chubby fist rubbing his eyes, and his lower lip protruded as he realised that he was waking up. She crooned softly and walked briskly towards her bedroom. She had an idea.

It had been Alastor Moody's idea to create emergency Portkeys, should any Order member need to escape, and although the threat was deemed to be over, she had kept the items out of memory of those troubled times. She had placed the treasured mementoes in her jewellery box, and now she held a wriggling and fretful toddler on her hip as she rifled through the glittering contents. Hushing and trying to soothe Neville, she felt her insides squirm that in amongst the bejewelled dross she couldn't find the valuable Portkey. Whimpering and almost weeping in desperate frustration, she upended the jewellery box upon the bed, her eyes frantically darting over the pile of trinkets. Neville was mewling, and her arm ached from holding him, but she would have welcomed the Cruciatus rather than let him go. A sound escaped her lips, a gasp of relieved elation, and just as her hand closed around the Portkey, the door burst open.

Neville was struggling in earnest now, his hands pressed against her throat and shoulder as he tried to squirm free of her hold. His head arched back, and he lashed out with his feet. The door crashing against the set of drawers startled him into silence, and his large, tear-filled eyes opened and latched upon a dark silhouette in the doorway. His mother turned sharply, lifting her arm, but he saw the stranger move faster, and a bolt of red light shot out to snatch his mother's wand from her hand. He heard her distressed whimper and trembled.

Snape felt stinging bile rush up as his eyes fixed onto the boy beginning to fret in her arms. He saw the same fear on Alice's face that he imagined had adorned Lily's moments before she had been cut down: the same desperate need to save her son. She had moved to fire off a curse, and he reacted; his Disarming Charm caught her off

guard, the wand landing uselessly on the floor beyond the bed. He watched as the child's face screwed up and the mouth opened wide...the silent prelude to a high-pitched wail of terror. Snape cast a Silencing Charm upon the boy, but Alice instinctively turned herself into the spell, intent on suffering its effects herself, however, she moved too late, and the spell hit its intended target.

Neville let out his cry, but no one heard his expression of fear. His eyes took in the dark man as he strode in and his mother backed away. The intruder's dark, frantic eyes bored into his own, and his pale, ghostly skin seemed shocking against the gloom of the room. Neville screamed and screamed, confusion and terror surging through him. He yelled for his mummy and daddy, but nothing made the bad man go away.

"You need to get out of here," Snape said hoarsely; a slight tremble to his voice highlighted his distress for them.

Momentarily befuddled, Alice hesitated and then lifted her hand to show Snape the sweet in her hand. The shiny wrapper reflected the meagre light from the hallway, and his eyes darted to it.

"It's a Portkey," she explained.

"Then use it!" he demanded harshly. "The others will be here very soon."

"You're the one who has been helping us," she stated quietly, some clues falling into place as her mind worked on a higher level. A bizarre serenity seemed to have smothered her dread as she studied the man she knew to be Severus Snape. Strange snippets of information suddenly made sense: Dumbledore's appearance at the inquiry which led to Snape being freed from Azkaban and the man's subsequent appointment at Hogwarts as Potions professor. Her epiphany lasted mere seconds, but Snape died a thousand deaths in what felt like hours.

Suddenly, screams and screeches of delight erupted from the kitchen, heralding her fate, and she knew what she had to do. The Portkey could only take one. Crouching down, she set Neville's feet on the floor and held him tightly for a few seconds. Snape caught her words of sorrow and love, and he gasped for breath when he heard her say goodbye to her son.

Neville screamed. He was scared that he made no sound, he was scared that his mother was letting him go, and he was scared of the dark man standing by the door. He was scared of the loud noises coming from downstairs and the coloured lights flashing off the walls. He was *terrified*. His mother was speaking to him; her voice was soft and gentle, and her lips were warm against his cheek. He lifted his arms and tried to grab hold of her neck, but she pulled his arms away. He tried to press himself against her, but she placed a hand on his chest and held him at bay. Her cheeks were slick with tears, and he could hear her crying, but she still wouldn't hold him. Jumping up and down in frustration and fear, he lifted up his arms, his hands tugging at her clothes, but she just grabbed hold of his hand and used her free hand and teeth to unwrap the sweet. He struggled, flinging his body in different directions to stop her as she prised one of his clenched fists open, but she was stronger. He turned to look at what she was doing...she was pressing the glittering wrapper into his hand. Her hand closed around his, forcing his fingers to press against the cool wrapper. Thought-stealing terror wracked his tiny body, and he fell to the floor, twisting and writhing, trying to get her to loosen her grip so that he could release the strange thing in his hand.

The sounds from the kitchen stopped. Snape noticed the silence first, and he moaned in despair. Alice sobbed, and at the creak of the stairs, she held Neville against her, kissing his hair and face. She knew that once the sweet was unwrapped, the Portkey would be activated in five seconds. Counting down the seconds, she kissed and wished him goodbye, her heart breaking when he was pulled from her arms to be whisked away by Portkey to safety.

She defiantly lifted her head to face her fear and saw figures crowding the doorway, heard their sniggers and whoops. Her eyes darted across to Snape. He was deathly pale, and she thought that he mouthed words to her. It took a moment to decipher his lip movements, and as the request sank in, she looked him in the eye and nodded surreptitiously. He had helped to save her son ... How could she not grant his plea and forgive him?