

Polyandry and Other Problems

by ayerf

A magical plague strikes the wizarding world, decimating the female population. The Wizengamot sees a revolutionary new marriage law as the only way to repopulate their dying world. Hermione, Severus and Lucius Malfoy get caught up in the consequences.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 37

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Polyandry and Other Problems

AN: It's only fair to warn prospective readers that this plot bunny is the unholy spawn of a threesome bunny and a MLC bunny, raised without rules, and fed on DH to be mostly canon compliant with it (the epilogue was spat out and savaged to pieces).

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Chapter 1

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic, lifted his head from his hands when the door to his office opened. He looked blearily up at his visitor, rubbing at his weary eyes.

"Come in, please, Severus." Ordinarily there would have been a receptionist to let him know of such arrivals, but in current circumstances ... Kingsley mentally shook himself, gesturing to one of the high-backed chairs in front of his desk.

Severus seated himself. He looked just as tired as Kingsley felt.

"Is the Wizengamot overconfident?" asked Kingsley, steepling his fingers.

The lines on Severus's face, entrenched by sleepless nights, deepened as he scowled. "Only in how welcoming of this law the public will be."

"The cure is working, then."

"You knew at our last meeting that it was, Minister. It is only now being produced in quantities that make a difference." Severus said with a half-hearted sneer.

"Do you have any idea how many..." Kingsley was cut off by the door banging open.

Lucius Malfoy strode inside, the tip of his snake-headed cane cracking on the polished floor with every step. His usually composed face was contorted with fury, his fair complexion flushed with blotches of red. He marched up to the desk, and thrust a crumpled copy of the *Daily Prophet* into Kingsley's face.

"What is the meaning of this, Shackbolt?" he spat, shaking the paper.

Kingsley took it, straightening it out to see the headline: *Ministry Blunders With Marriage Law Scandal*. "I see Rita Skeeter has a successor," he commented blandly.

His calm tone only seemed to enrage Lucius further. "How dare you? I demand to know why a jumped up Auror thinks he can dictate to Wizarding Britain on marriage."

Skimming the inflammatory article, Kingsley was not overly surprised to find that he was the scapegoat.

"For someone fortunate to escape Azkaban, you demand a lot, Mr. Malfoy," Kingsley snapped, bristling.

"Do I?" Lucius laughed hollowly. "It is obscene to order a recently widowed man to remarry."

A contemptuous grunt escaped Kingsley. In his opinion Lucius's 'clandestine' visits to his lovers while in mourning were also obscene.

Seeing Lucius's eyes narrow, Kingsley spoke. "As for this new legislation, I have no choice. I did not write the law, the Wizengamot did. I am sorry that you are required to remarry so soon after your wife's death, but you are not alone. Many wizards will have to do the same thing." Hopefully his words would offer a less insulting reason for his contempt.

"Including the bachelors."

Lucius straightened and spun around, surprised to hear a familiar voice from the high backed chair behind him. Taken aback, he needed a brief moment to regain a fragile semblance of control over his expression. He turned and stepped back so he could face both men.

"What are you doing here, Severus?"

"If you must know, reporting to the Minister on the progress of the cure."

Lucius eyed him resentfully. "Progress? Your brainchild failed to save Narcissa."

Severus glowered back. "It is saving enough for the Wizengamot to bring in this new law. I am also not the only one working on the cure. If you want to blame anyone, old friend, blame your late master. All signs point to him as the architect of this ailment."

"Then why is it affecting pure-bloods as badly, if not worse than the..." he paused, glancing at Shackbolt, "...Muggleborns?"

His face darkening, Severus stood up. "You are deluded if you believe that the Dark Lord would have cared for pure-bloods to survive when he did not."

Kingsley intervened before the squabble could turn into a fight. "Gentlemen! Both of you are subject to this law. As am I. Your quarrel is with the law, not with me or each other."

There was a tense moment when the Minister wondered if he would be ignored in his own office.

"My apologies, Shackbolt," Lucius murmured. He turned to Severus. "Perhaps you are right. The Dark Lord admittedly was insane by the time he died. We can discuss this later, over drinks. I'll expect you at eight o' clock, Severus. I will leave you to your meeting." Before Severus had a chance to refuse, he left, closing the door quietly.

* * *

One of the house-elves retained by the Malfoys had led Severus into the study.

"Ah, there you are, Severus. I was beginning to wonder if I would have to fetch you."

Lucius was reclining in his favourite chair by the fireplace. But he was not indulging himself in the promised drinks yet, obviously waiting for his guest to arrive. Yes, because otherwise Lucius would be speaking before Severus was led into the study.

"Draw up a chair. Now, what would you prefer? Firewhisky?"

Severus sat down. He held up a hand in refusal. "Thank you, but I must decline. I cannot drink any alcohol when I need to brew."

Lips twisting, Lucius shook his head. "As you will. Surely now that this cure has been discovered, you are no longer needed. Others can brew that potion of yours."

"The demand for it is too great. I cannot stay long."

"May I offer you some mineral water then?" Lucius snapped his fingers and sent the house-elf scurrying for a glass of ice-cold water.

Severus accepted the water and watched Lucius pour himself two fingers of Firewhisky, swirl it around the glass and take a sip.

"What did you tell Shackbolt about this cure?"

"Why do you want to know?" Severus asked. After Lucius's angry words in the Minister's office, Severus was surprised that Lucius would want to know anything about the cure.

Lucius drained the last of his drink, then deposited the glass onto the table beside him. "Because of this abominable legislation. I have spent this afternoon investigating it, I've pulled what strings are still available to me to find out as much as I can," he rasped. He spoke too soon for his voice to cope with the burn of the Firewhisky. Clearing his throat, he continued in more normal, smoother tones.

"I think I can see the need for this new law," he reluctantly admitted. "How many witches have died?"

"Nearly two thirds in Wizarding Britain. I'm not aware of the numbers in other countries, but it has spread to every wizarding enclave across the world."

Lucius paled. "I had anticipated half, but that many? Then there is a real need."

Severus sighed heavily. "Indeed. We may not like it, but we do not have much choice. If the numbers at Hogwarts while I was teaching were anything to go by, there were fewer witches than wizards even before this pandemic."

"Either we comply with this law, or we marry *Muggles*." Lucius looked sickened at the thought. "Beyond the dangers of watering down magical blood with Muggle marriages, there are also ... implications for the Statute of Secrecy."

"Are you aware that Muggle-born witches are more resilient against this disease than pure-bloods?" Severus asked, before draining his glass and handing it to the house-elf.

"Frankly, I would marry a Muggle-born before I married a Muggle." Lucius stared moodily into the fire. "Ordinarily I would persuade the Wizengamot to exempt me from this law. But with the outcome of the war ... I no longer have enough influence."

He abruptly looked over at Severus. "Do you realise that this law does not just dictate marriage, but also enforces polyandry?"

"Too many witches have died, and too few wizards are willing to marry Muggles," Severus said, repeating what he knew of the Wizengamot's justification for this unseemly legislation.

For a moment, Lucius watched Severus with a calculating glint in his eye. "And what of you, Severus? Would you marry a Muggle rather than share a witch?"

"I do not share," Severus stated, crossing his arms. "Yet the only women to hold my interest in the past have been witches," he admitted reluctantly, frowning.

His host smiled. "I thought as much. You see, I have no wish to be remarried. What I propose is that we marry the same witch. In my case it would be a marriage in name only."

"Marriages must be consummated," Severus pointed out.

"One night, then. After that, you would have the witch in question to yourself, and I would be free to do as I please."

Severus's frown deepened. It did sound better than the alternative, but something seemed wrong with Lucius's plan ...

"Not even a night, if you're that bothered by the idea. Just as long as it takes to do my duty, and our bride would be back in your bed," Lucius wheedled, misinterpreting Severus's obvious reluctance.

"If that is what the woman in question wants," Severus said stiffly. Lucius did not seem to allow for the fact that three people would be affected by this.

Throwing back his head, Lucius laughed. "What does that matter? If it isn't what she wants, it is a simple matter to persuade her that it is." He shook his head, still laughing. "Oh, Severus, you have the honour of a Hufflepuff."

Affronted, Severus was about to stand and take his leave when Lucius stifled his laughter.

"Now, don't take offence. Your noble qualities will be to your advantage with regards to attracting a suitable bride. We will need to decide whom to pursue. My only requirements are that she has sufficient power and influence so that marriage to her..." He paused briefly, "...will better my current standing in the wizarding world."

'*Not that it would take much*' Severus thought, resisting the temptation to voice the disparaging comment. "I need time to think about this plan of yours before I agree. It is, after all, a life-changing decision. Besides, it's still too soon to tell exactly which witches will survive. The cure works, but it doesn't work miracles. Some witches still die before the cure has a chance to take effect."

"Is that so? Very well. Do let me know what you decide. I should let you resume your work. We can't have any more witches dying for want of the cure."

* * *

When she drifted awake, she needed a moment to remember a few vital details: who she was (Hermione Jean Granger) and what she was (a witch). She realised that she needed further input before she could figure out where and when she was.

She cracked open her eyes, only to screw them shut against the painfully bright light. Rolling over, she winced at the complaining muscles and buried her head into the pillow, using it to shield herself from the light. Gradually, her vision adjusted to the illumination.

'Cold institutional feel, stark décor (complete with vomit green painted walls), privacy curtains pushed back, rows of beds ...'

Or rather, row upon row of sleeping patients. At least, Hermione assumed that they were sleeping, but on closer observation the breathing wasn't right. It couldn't be natural for people to all be breathing at the same time and at a mechanical rate. Could it be enspelled sleep? Had she been in the same condition as these people? A shiver ran down her spine.

Right, so she was in a hospital. Not at Hogwarts, as it wasn't this large. St. Mungo's? Were there any other wizarding hospitals? Hermione had never heard of any, so for now she'd assume that she was in St. Mungo's.

But why was she in hospital? She racked her muzzy memory, shaking her head with a grimace at the warning throb of pain. Perhaps it would be best to put that question aside until she could ask someone. It seemed that the same went for the date. There were no calendars or newspapers around to indicate it. Besides the ... sleeping patients, there was no one else in sight.

When she pushed back the covers, Hermione was not surprised to see that she was dressed in a hospital robe, designed to offer easy access for the professionals. Slipping out of bed, she was grateful that it didn't have a gap at the back like Muggle equivalents.

The floor was cold under her bare feet, but there were no slippers or even her wand around for her to conjure some with. Her muscles might be protesting at her movements, but they didn't seem to be about to collapse under her.

Slipping out of the room, she turned back to check if there was a sign indicating what it was. Sure enough, there was **BASEMENT: SECURE WARD**. Looking closely, Hermione was alarmed to see that there was an additional notice pinned beneath the first.

"Quarantine..." she rasped, her breathing unsteady, heart thumping. Surely if she was under a restriction like that, she wouldn't have been able to leave the room? Hermione was distracted from her rising panic by a pinging noise from around the corner of the corridor she stood in.

Footsteps echoed around the corner, together with the indistinct rumble of lowered voices. There were people headed towards her. Instinctively, Hermione looked for somewhere to hide, but there was only the room she had come from. Perhaps she could get back into bed and pretend to be asleep still? Before she could, the approaching people rounded the corner and spotted her.

There were two men, one a Healer judging by his lime-green robes, the other...

Hermione felt faint. That was impossible. She'd watched him die. The earlier headache returned. Her head felt as if it was cracking open. A rushing sound filled her ears, dark spots danced in front of her eyes. She was a puppet with its strings cut.

A steady arm stopped her from falling to the floor, another wrapped around her back. She was lifted into someone's arms, then carried away and laid down on a soft, firm surface.

A cool, damp cloth mopped at her sweating forehead and soothed away the deadening weight that pressed down on her.

Slowly, she grew aware of her ragged breathing slowing down. Her hearing returned to normal, and the lights seemed to brighten.

Snape stood next to her bed, dampening a handkerchief with a carefully controlled cast of *Aguamenti*. He gently wiped it across her face before registering that she was watching him.

"I am well aware that I am a nightmarish sight to most former students, but I was under the impression that I was a welcome sight to you, Hermione," Snape teased, his dark eyes glittering.

Her eyes wide open in her shock, Hermione was speechless. He'd called her by her first name. The last time she could remember him addressing her, he'd definitely called her 'Miss Granger', ordering her and Luna to look after Flitwick. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been bleeding to death from Nagini's bite. What was she missing?

"You're alive," she blurted.

The teasing glint in Snape's eyes deadened. "I had hoped ..." He sighed. "Hermione Miss Granger what is the last thing you can remember?"

She hesitated, reluctant to think back for fear of sparking another attack of whatever had struck her at the sight of Snape. But if it did, help was at hand. There was something about Snape's presence that made her feel safe, illogical although it was. The man was a murderer, a traitor...

Her breath caught as a memory of Harry's voice rang in her ears, proclaiming Snape's true loyalties. With that memory came a trickle of others. The pieces of her missing memories were slowly falling into place, though there were still some obvious gaps and jumbled parts that didn't seem to fit.

"How did you survive, Prof...." Hermione trailed off when she realised that she had no idea what to call him. He was no longer her professor, while 'sir' was probably too formal and was also how she'd addressed him when he still taught her. Just 'Snape' didn't seem very respectful, and 'Mister Snape' sounded strange.

"Severus," Snape said. Startled, Hermione looked up. "Although you do not remember it, I did grant you permission to call me 'Severus'."

"Um, thanks. Could you tell me how you survived, Severus?" she asked. While his name sounded strange to her ears, her lips and tongue didn't stumble when it came to forming the syllables. Muscle memory, perhaps?

Snape looked across the room, catching the eye of the Healer quietly roaming around checking on the other patients. As the Healer walked over, Hermione tried to decide whether it was a man or a woman. With the concealing baggy robes, there was no way to be certain. There was a faint moustache on the upper lip, but no hint of any other stubble in the wrinkled face. When it was close enough to read the nametag was of no assistance, merely stating 'Healer Gould'.

"... so it will not interfere with the recovery of her memory?" Snape was saying.

Healer Gould's voice was deep, but within the possible range of a woman, so there was no hint there. "Master Snape, were you not informed? One of the side effects of the cure is memory loss."

"No, I was not." Snape sounded calm, but from a single look at his white face, compressed lips and burning eyes, Hermione knew he was furious.

"Well, I'm sorry to say that in every other case so far, it's been permanent. It seems to be related to the duration of the plague."

"Plague?" Hermione asked, her voice faint.

Her voice was drowned out by Snape's roar. "Permanent?"

"Master Snape, all of those cured so far are lucky to be alive. The cost of a few months' memory is a small price to pay," Healer Gould said, its tone reproachful.

"Months?" Hermione's voice was even fainter, but this time she was heard. "What happened to me?"

"You've been very ill for quite a long time, Miss Granger," Healer Gould said, only to be distracted from the explanation by his/her wand beeping and flashing. "My attention is needed elsewhere. Master Snape, could I defer the full answer to that question to you? Much obliged."

Before Snape could say anything, the Healer raced out of the ward. A sound not unlike a growl escaped Snape. Scowling, he pulled a miniature chair out from under the bed, enlarged it with his wand and sat down.

"I'm sor..."

Snape cut her off. "You did not cause this ailment, Hermione. Nor did you fail to inform me of the problem with a potion I helped devise." He glared in the direction of the door the Healer had exited through.

Turning back to Hermione, he paused presumably to collect his thoughts before launching into his explanation. "The Dark Lord had been dead for almost six months when a magical ailment began to infect witches."

Looking around the ward, Hermione noted that all of the patients were women. She hadn't thought anything of it, assuming that it was a ward for women. Hermione returned her attention to Snape when he cleared his throat impatiently.

"It is very contagious, and attempts to contain it with quarantine failed. Within six weeks of the first case, it had spread to every country with a wizarding population. The sole blessing was that wizards and Muggles proved to be immune."

It was on the tip of Hermione's tongue to ask why that was, but interrupting Snape had never been a good idea at Hogwarts, and now was not the time to find out if that was still the case.

"The first symptom was shortness of breath, followed by the onset of an elevated temperature within a day. What happened next seemed to depend on the lineage of each witch. Pure-bloods succumbed within 48 hours, Muggle-borns lasted up to a fortnight.

"Regardless of how long it took, the end result was the same. The victims were wracked with pain, perhaps equal to that induced by the Cruciatus Curse, I would not know. Death was a merciful release when the vital organs could take no more. Until recently, there was no cure."

Snape gestured at the rows of peaceful, mechanically sleeping patients. "Before the cure was developed, this was the only way to control the disease: a magically induced coma. It bought some time, but it did not prevent death."

Hermione swallowed hard. She found the idea of being forced into a comatose state repellent. But what she found worse was the damage to her memory. The last thing she could remember was Voldemort's death... No. There was a foggy memory of being in Dumbledore's office with Harry and Ron. Regardless, Snape had said that the sickness had only appeared about six months after her last memory. The Healer had mentioned that the length of memory loss was related to the duration of the sickness in each patient. That must mean that she'd been ill for six months. She was missing almost a year of her life ...

"In the time it took for the cure to be developed, half of the witches who survived the war died. The death toll was approaching two thirds by the time the cure was being produced in sufficient quantities." Although he was looking in her direction, Snape appeared to be staring into space, his attention fixed on something that wasn't there. "And because so many witches have died, the Wizengamot have found it necessary to take steps to ensure that the wizarding population of Britain recovers."

Alarm bells seemed to ring in Hermione's head at Snape's words. "What steps?"

His eyes suddenly refocused on her and widened. It seemed that he had been so caught up in his explanation that he had told her more than he'd been intending to.

"Do not concern yourself with that. You are still recovering..."

Too agitated to care about the possible consequences, she interrupted him. "I feel fine. *What steps?*"

AN: Polyandry is when a woman is married to more than one man, as opposed to polygyny, when a man is married to more than one woman.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 37

Hermione gets some answers and has a visitor. Severus makes a decision, and makes the mistake of informing Lucius.

Chapter 2

AN: Many thanks to my invaluable betas, septentrion and JunoMagic.

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Severus watched as Hermione dragged a hand across her face and rubbed at her eyes.

"Let me get this straight," she said through clenched teeth, "the Wizengamot, in all their wisdom, have decreed that in order for the Wizarding population to recover, everyone has to get married. Because there are too few witches of child-bearing age compared to wizards, that means every witch has to marry two wizards. What about marrying Muggles?"

"While not outlawed, it is not encouraged, for reasons to do with the Statute of Secrecy. I doubt many wizards would be keen to marry Muggles anyway, even if it means they have to share a witch instead."

Hermione was staring at him, her face pale, lips compressed into a thin line. "You said 'wizards'. What about witches?"

For a moment Severus did not understand what she meant until she elaborated.

"Are witches allowed to marry Muggles?"

He had to think for a moment. Most of what he knew of the law was restricted to how it would affect him, but he had vaguely noted what Hermione was asking about. "No. The purpose of this law is not just to encourage reproduction but also to prevent wizards fighting over witches."

Two spots of colour had appeared in her cheeks and her eyes glittered. "Obviously a committee decision," Hermione muttered darkly, a hint of a tremor in her voice. "No single person could be that stupid."

Severus frowned, not quite understanding her point. It was unfair that witches had less say than wizards in whom they married, but the Wizengamot didn't have much choice if they wanted to keep the peace.

"As if there won't be bloodshed between wizards anyway! I'd bet my life that some women will be in higher demand than others. What wizard would marry a witch like, oh, Dolores Umbridge, if they could have a beauty like Fleur Delacour? No, bad example, she's Fleur Weasley now."

"Actually, those already married will have to marry a second husband. But you are right that some witches will be in demand," Severus admitted, looking intently at Hermione. She blushed, opening her mouth to say something, but the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps distracted her.

They both looked towards the door as it swung open, banging on its hinges. Ronald Weasley skidded inside, dropping to one knee as soon as he saw Hermione.

"I came as soon as I heard you'd recovered," he blurted. "Marry me, Hermione!" He fumbled in his pocket, tugging out a ring. It slipped out of his hands, rolling across the floor to stop beside Severus's feet. Weasley swore and crawled over to retrieve it. Only when his fingers closed around the ring, did he look up and register Severus's presence.

Weasley scrambled to his feet, staggering slightly when his nose almost bashed against Severus's knee. "What're you doing here, Snape?" he demanded, standing up unnaturally straight in a crude attempt to intimidate Severus by looming over him.

Twisting his lips into a sneer, Severus rose as well. Although he was shorter than Weasley, the boy still unconsciously stepped back. "Unlike some people," he said, looking pointedly at Weasley, "I have full clearance to access all areas of St. Mungo's without falling back on war hero status."

His ears flushing red, Weasley glared at Severus. Before he could say anything, Hermione spoke from the bed, where she was sitting bolt upright.

"How dare you." Her voice was trembling, angry tears sliding down her cheeks. Weasley looked smugly at Severus for a moment, until the nasty smile was wiped off his face with Hermione's next words. "How could you, Ron? Jumping at the first chance this fucking law gives you, taking advantage of this mess like a ... like a Malfoy!"

"Hey, it's not like that!" Weasley protested, freckled skin mottling further as the flush spread from his ears to his cheeks.

Severus intervened before he could say any more, drawing his wand and jabbing it into the boy's chest to make him stagger back. "Get out. I will not have you upsetting her."

Weasley made as if to draw his own wand, only to refrain when he looked beyond Severus, presumably at Hermione. Not taking his eyes off Weasley, Severus could only guess that Weasley was realising exactly how angry and upset Hermione was, and that if he stayed to argue she would lose what little control she had on her temper ... and take it out on the hapless boy.

"A word, Snape."

Wondering what Weasley could have to say, Severus inclined his head slightly, motioning with his wand for Weasley to lead the way out of the ward. He paused to make sure Hermione had a glass of water before following Weasley.

Once out in the corridor, Severus cast *Muffliato* before returning his wand to the pocket in his robes. "Well?" he asked expectantly, crossing his arms.

With Severus's wand no longer pointing at him, Weasley had found his bravado, and puffed out his chest. "Stay away from my girl!"

Laughing derisively, Severus shook his head in disbelief. "You couldn't intimidate a homesick first year Hufflepuff, Weasley," he sneered. "Furthermore, Hermione is not

your girl."

His freckles nearly invisible beneath his angry flush, Weasley took a step towards Severus. "She's my girlfriend! When she calms down a bit, she'll be my fiancée."

"On the contrary, I think you will find she is not and will not be." Severus felt an unexpected pang of pity for the increasingly confused young man. "Weasley, she can't remember anything since the defeat of Voldemort. An unfortunate side effect of the cure."

Weasley's jaw dropped. It took a while for him to find his voice, opening and closing his mouth. The first noises he made were incoherent splutters. "Wh-what?" he finally managed to stutter. Then he narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What did you do to her? You invented the cure, so you must have done something." His hand twitched, as if to move for his wand.

"Would you rather she had died? Memory loss is apparently the price to be paid for the cure. And for your information," Severus snapped, prodding his finger into Weasley's skinny chest to emphasise his point, "I knew nothing of this until today."

"Whatever," Weasley muttered, brushing Severus's hand away. "I suppose I should thank you. This means she doesn't remember being your 'friend'." He twisted his face into a sneer, an expression that he could have done with practicing in a mirror. "Mark my words, Snape: this time she won't want anything to do with a creep like you. She's mine." He turned to leave.

Reaching out, Severus grabbed the back of his shirt. Weasley shrugged him off, twisting around with his fists clenched as if contemplating fighting like a Muggle.

"I presume you have heard about this new law," Severus drawled. "A witch with qualities like Hermione possesses will be in high demand. I suggest you brush up on your duelling skills, boy, if you seriously intend to claim her."

"I knew it! You want her for yourself." Weasley was fumbling for his wand.

Severus re-crossed his arms, his dominant hand within easy reach of his wand. "Even if that were the case, it is Hermione's choice which suitors she accepts. Not yours. If you value your life, you will not attempt to dictate to her."

Weasley pulled his wand out, his lips forming a hex. Before he could finish casting the spell, his wand leaped from his hand onto the floor with a clatter.

Smirking, Severus removed his hand from his pocket, and motioned with his wand for Weasley to pick his wand up.

"Fool. I was not threatening you, simply stating that as angry as Hermione is with you, it would not be advisable to rile her further. If you have any sense, you will not darken her door until she has both calmed down and been released from hospital."

"Fine," Weasley spat, shoved his wand into his pocket, and stormed off.

* * *

Hermione had been brought up to know that ladies did not eavesdrop. But as far as she was concerned, a woman was only a lady when it was convenient. Furthermore, she was far too angry to care about her own bad manners. So when Snape had followed Ron, Hermione had got out of bed and padded over to the closing door just in time to be included in the range of Snape's spell.

With her ear pressed to the door, Hermione overheard the entire conversation. She'd thought that she couldn't be angrier with Ron, only to discover that wasn't the case. Her blood was boiling in her veins, her heartbeat so loud in her ears that it nearly drowned out the argument in the corridor outside. More than once she'd had to keep herself from either bursting through the door to confront the red-headed idiot or making a sound and giving herself away. She suspected that Snape had probably heard her unsteady breathing, but that was no reason to make sure he knew she was there.

It was just as well that Ron made so much noise making his exit, his feet thundering down the corridor, otherwise she might still have been standing against the door by the time Snape opened it.

The door swung open as she tugged the covers back over herself. It was only when she was in the still-warm bed that she noticed how cold she'd managed to get while eavesdropping. Although it was difficult for her to tell whether she was shivering more out of cold or trembling with rage.

Crossing the room to sit down again, Snape eyed her in the same cautious way she had looked at the majority of the beasts in Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

"I hoped that removing the charming Mr Weasley from your presence would help calm you." Snape reached over and placed his hand over hers, his skin warming hers. "He's not worth endangering your health, Hermione."

She stared down at his hand, wondering how close they had been before she became ill. For such a taciturn man, he certainly seemed comfortable with her. Perhaps Ron's obvious jealousy of Snape hadn't been unfounded

Looking up, she established eye contact before asking: "What was between us, Severus? Were we ...?" She hesitated, feeling heat rise in her cheeks. "Were we lovers?"

Snape's hand twitched against hers, his face briefly showing a flicker of some sort of feeling before it closed down into inscrutability. "No, we were just friends." His control didn't extend to his voice; there was a clearly wistful tone in it, at least to Hermione's ears.

"There's nothing to stop us from being friends again, Severus," she said, briefly biting her lip before overcoming her nervousness and continuing, "In fact, I'd certainly like us to be." She looked away, her cheeks burning. While the most recent memory she had of Snape was his death well, near death and the revelation that he wasn't a traitor, she felt that she could trust him ... and liked this new side of Snape she was seeing.

Snape's fingers gently brushed across the back of her hand, drawing her gaze back up to meet his. He smiled slightly. "I would like that, too," he murmured, his smile fading as he regarded her thoughtfully for a long moment. He slowly withdrew his hand, the corners of his mouth turning down.

"Do you intend to go back to where you were with Weasley? He was your ..." Snape seemed to be struggling to find the right word, or perhaps that struggle was something else entirely

Hermione felt a strange jolt in the region of her heart, almost as if it had leapt, a ridiculous notion. But the idea that a man like Severus Snape might feel more than just friendship for her was flattering to say the least.

"My boyfriend? I thought as much," she said, taking pity on Snape's struggle. Unfortunately, that inevitably meant thinking of Ron and awakening the anger that had begun to subside. "As far as I'm concerned, all there was between Ronald and I was a single kiss in the heat of battle. He has another thing coming if he thinks I'd marry him even if I did remember everything up until I fell ill."

"Much as I think that you can do better than Ronald Weasley, you should not let your anger dictate your choices," Snape said. Something in the tone of his voice indicated to Hermione that he was speaking from his own experience. He stood up, tight-lipped, his eyes never leaving her face.

"I will do what I can to bring your missing memories back," he said eventually. Whatever he had told Ron earlier about the side effect of the cure, he clearly felt responsible. "I cannot stay any longer, but I will visit when I can."

He left the room before Hermione had a chance to say goodbye or ask for some reading material. Flopping back onto the bed, she sighed heavily. She wasn't entirely sure that she wanted her missing memories back, or deserved to have them back in the first place, come to think of it. Her usage of Memory Charms during the war had been

for good reasons, and in most cases with underlying good intentions, but ...

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions, young lady. You must learn to bear in mind the consequences of your actions."

Hermione grimaced. She hadn't learned anything that had been her lecture from her parents when she'd managed to smash their best crockery at the age of six in an attempt to set the table for dinner all by herself.

Her parents ... what had become of them? Had she been able to restore their memories of her and brought them back from Australia? And what about Crookshanks, left behind at the Burrow so long ago?

She rolled over onto her side, swallowing hard against the rising, choking guilt. As she stared towards the wall, her view blurred with tears. Her first thoughts on waking had been for herself. *'Selfish!'* She didn't deserve her own memories back, but if she could, and if Snape Severus would let her, she would help to restore the memories of the other patients.

* * *

"Severus, such an unexpected pleasure," Lucius called from the dimly lit landing where he stood, recognising his visitor, who had been terrorising one of his house-elves. "You will stay for dinner? Dilly, inform the kitchen elves that I have a guest."

The house-elf bowed, and was about to do as ordered when Severus shook his head.

"No, I must decline. I came only to tell you that I have decided."

That got Lucius's attention. "Who?" he asked, advancing downstairs, almost missing a step when Severus named the witch.

"Hermione Granger."

Perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised, Lucius mused, his thoughts almost racing as he stared down at Severus. While his friend had been close-mouthed on the subject, Lucius had gathered that Granger had somehow finagled her way into being one of the few people Severus called 'friend'.

Carefully watching where he was stepping, Lucius finished descending and walked over to where Severus was standing beside the door. "I was under the impression that she was being courted by the youngest Weasley boy. Not that it matters, of course," he said, in an attempt to cover his surprise. The slightly amused gleam in Severus's eyes told him that he was unsuccessful.

"She has an unfortunate heritage," Lucius murmured, carefully choosing his words, since he was aware of Severus's touchiness regarding the 'M' word. "But she is certainly powerful and influential. A good choice." If a difficult one when it came to charming and courting the girl himself, but he was not averse to the challenge.

He very carefully kept his thoughts away from what ... From what Narcissa would think. She was dead. Now he had to live on without her, regaining his lost influence. If he had to marry a famous Mudblood to accomplish that, so be it.

Severus nodded, a brisk gesture that implied an underlying sense of impatience. "Indeed. But I would advise against pursuing her immediately, as I witnessed her rage at Weasley's proposal earlier on today. She needs time to calm down and accustom herself to the situation she finds herself in, before we approach her."

"Very well," Lucius said. He reached out to lay a hand on Severus's shoulder as the man made a move towards the door. "But that is no reason not to put others off pursuing her, like the Weasley whelps. They are scions of an old pure-blood family, they will respond to a challenge to settle the matter with a duel."

Severus spun around, shrugging off the hand that restrained him. "Lucius, no. I know Hermione, and she will not appreciate being duelled over."

"She doesn't need to know." Lucius smiled. He bared his teeth in a winning grin, unaware of how much that made him look like a shark. "You'll be my second, won't you?"

Severus heaved an exasperated sigh and scowled.

"Excellent, I knew that I could count on you," Lucius purred, and clapped his newly acquired duelling chum on the shoulder.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 37

A duel and the fallout.

Chapter 3

"This is a bad idea," Harry hissed in Ron's ear, repeating himself for the umpteenth time. "Hermione's going to kill you. If there's any fighting over her, she'll want to fend for herself. You know how she is!"

"I know it's a bad idea! But I don't have a choice. Backing out of this will put my family's name in the mud and I'll lose my right to marry Hermione." Ron's voice was almost lost in the hubbub of the crowded Atrium, where the Ministry had set up a duelling platform at Ron's request.

"You'll lose it anyway. Malfoy wasn't a Death Eater for show!"

"Shut up! Some second you are, you should be encouraging me," Ron complained. "I can do this." He sounded as though he was trying to convince himself.

"I don't want to give you false hope," Harry said, breathing deeply. He'd be no use to Ron at all if he lost his temper.

"Just keep your big mouth shut!"

He inhaled between clenched teeth, and glowered at Ron, a suitable retort on his lips when Snape interrupted their bickering: "Potter!"

Harry shot Ron one last glare before he walked towards his fellow duelling second. It was a small consolation that Snape didn't look any more pleased than he did to be

there.

"Shall we get this farce over and done with?" Before Harry could reply, Snape smirked, "that was a rhetorical question, Potter. It doesn't require an answer."

"I know that." *'Git.'*

"Have you taken part in any formal duels before?"

Harry thought for a moment. None of his duels with Voldemort really counted, as they were nothing less than thinly-veiled attempted murder. "There was that duel with Malfoy in the duelling club..."

Snape snorted, interrupting him. "In other words, no. The challenged in this case, Weasley chooses the ground. The challenger chooses the distance. Both of these steps have already been completed." He gestured at the duelling platform where they stood.

"The seconds fix the time and terms of the duel. As it stands, those are simply that it will not be to the death. Apart from anything else, the Ministry will not tolerate it. Hell must have frozen over; it seems the new regime actually values life."

"Disarm only?" Harry tentatively suggested. He glanced back over his shoulder at Ron, who was pacing back and forth, passing his wand from hand to hand, his jaw set mulishly.

'That's Ron, perfectly capable of being contradictory even with his body language.'

When he turned back to Snape, the older man grimaced. "Wishful thinking, Potter. I suspect 'nothing fatal' is the best we can hope for."

Sighing, Harry nodded. He stared as Snape stiffly held his hand out and reluctantly took it, shaking it briefly. The knowledge that he had an audience was all that kept him from wiping his hand on his clothes. While he no longer felt quite the animosity towards Snape as before Voldemort's death, Harry had no desire to touch him.

He walked back to Ron. "No spells that will kill," he said shortly, still simmering with anger at his best friend.

Ron looked quite hurt. "What do you take me for? Do I look like a Death Eater to you?"

"Snape's telling Malfoy the same thing!" Harry pointed at the other end of the platform, where Snape was speaking to Malfoy. "It's just the terms of the duel. I'm on your side, remember?"

Ron muttered something that sounded an awful lot like 'could've fooled me'. He stepped forward, his toes on the line marked on the platform. "Ready, Malfoy?" he called. Silence fell in the Atrium, all conversation ceased between the watching wizards and the few recovered witches.

Malfoy stepped up to his line, twenty paces away. He tossed his head, bringing his hands up to his long hair to tie it out of the way in a ponytail. He held out his hand to the side for Snape to pass his wand.

"Still want to settle this matter in a duel, boy?" Malfoy drawled.

Harry watched Ron's back stiffen. "What do you mean?"

"Gentlemen only resort to duels when negotiations fail. A young man from an impoverished background such as yourself could profit considerably from surrendering his claim on the witch in question."

Sparks flew from Ron's wand. Harry had to jump forwards and hold Ron back to prevent him from forfeiting the duel. "Not yet! Wait until after the count to three," he said and forced Ron to lower his wand. "Don't let him get to you."

Ron shook him off. He was breathing heavily, his ears flushed red. Harry got the impression that he hadn't listened. But at least he waited until after the master of ceremonies (Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister himself) had started the duel before he began casting spells as fast as he could, shouting the syllables at the top of his lungs.

Malfoy was using non-verbal spells, as far as Harry could tell. Malfoy's lips weren't moving and he could hear no curse being spoken, but with Ron shouting right in front of him, Harry couldn't hear anything else. At this rate, his ears would be ringing before the duel was over.

The brightly coloured sparks of the curses, hexes and jinxes were ricocheting wildly. But the rebounding spells were weakened by the barrier between the duelling platform and the spectators, only causing minor injuries or effects when they struck the caster or the target ... Or the unfortunate seconds, as Harry found, his hair ruffled by a hex even as he ducked.

When he cautiously peered around Ron's sweating body, Harry was disheartened but unsurprised to see Malfoy unruffled, casually deflecting Ron's bellowed spells and flicking his own at Ron.

As the minutes dragged by, poor Ron started panting, the colour of his spells began to fade as his exhaustion increased. Malfoy finally seemed to grow impatient, his lip twisting into a contemptuous sneer as he clearly enunciated: "*Expelliarmus.*"

Ron tried to block it, but couldn't summon the energy. His earlier rage-fuelled reckless casting had left him drained. His wand flew out of his hand and he fell down, dragging Harry to his knees as he tried to catch Ron.

An outburst of noise, a chaotic mingling of booing, excited chatter, catcalls, whistles ... and even some applause at Malfoy's victory swept through the crowd in the Atrium. The racket almost drowned out Ron's voice, but Harry was close enough to hear his devastated, cracked voice repeating the same three words: "I've lost her. I've lost her. I've lost her..."

Harry exhaled shakily, thankful that he hadn't given in to Ron's requests, pleas and demands for the Elder Wand. It would have been disastrous for it to end up in the hands of Lucius Malfoy. He instantly felt his stomach lurch with guilt; Hermione was now in Malfoy's hands.

* * *

Hermione had been in St. Mungo's for almost a fortnight when Healer Gould pronounced her fit to be released. The wait had been tedious except for visits. True to his word, Severus had come by whenever he could, usually once every day, and Harry had managed to come once or twice. Thankfully, Ron hadn't poked his long nose into the ward since his ill-fated proposal.

Healer Gould gave her no warning that she was free to go, just presented her with her clothes and wand after lunch one day. He/she (Hermione still didn't know) drew the privacy curtains closed for her to dress. She found that she had to transfigure a belt from a handkerchief on finding that her trousers sat dangerously low on her hips; she'd lost weight, although she wasn't skin and bones. But she was in far better shape than a Muggle coming out of an equivalent length coma would be. Presumably the enspelled sleep had more components to it than simply keeping the patients unconscious, such as monitoring spells to keep track of safe levels of body mass and maintaining muscle tone.

Looking down at her body, threading the belt through the loops of fabric at the waist of her trousers, Hermione had to admit that she was looking better than she had when Voldemort had fallen, although there had been about six months for her body to recover from that before she had been infected.

Fully dressed, she pushed open the curtains and let the androgynous Healer lead her to the waiting room, where she could find her own way out. Hermione felt her heart sink when she realised that Severus wasn't waiting to escort her, but he probably hadn't known she was being discharged.

She beamed when she saw Harry hurry in. But her smile faded when she saw him quail at the sight of her, his face pale. She walked over to him, noticing that he was clutching what appeared to be a rolled up newspaper.

"Hermione, I..." He handed her the newspaper, audibly swallowing. "I'm sorry."

Giving him a suspicious look under lowered brows, Hermione unrolled the newspaper.

'Sat 24th April

EVENING PROPHET

STOP PRESS: War Hero Loses Love To Death Eater'

Hermione's frown deepened as she read the article, her lips compressed tightly. The wizarding photograph that accompanied the article captured the moment of Ron's defeat. She felt a brief flicker of amusement at Ron's fall, but the look of complete and utter devastation on his face banished that. Poor Ron....

Her eyes narrowed when she discovered the identity of the seconds supporting the duel. *'How could he?'*

She looked up at Harry. "I'll talk to you later," she said, her voice cold and clipped. "I have bigger fish to fry."

* * *

The *crack* of her Apparition echoed around the wild patch of Wiltshire countryside surrounding Malfoy Manor. She was shaking with barely suppressed fury, her mind far too hazy with anger to manage a more graceful, silent arrival. It was a wonder that she hadn't Splinched, really.

She stood before the wrought-iron gates barring the way to the long drive leading to Malfoy Manor. Steeling herself, Hermione reached to take hold of one of the iron bars in order to summon the enchanted gate guardian she had seen at her first ... visit. She stumbled back when her hand passed straight through the metal as if it wasn't even there.

Shock briefly overrode her anger. She cautiously reached forward again, passing her hand through as much of the gate as she could reach. The gate guardian still didn't form, although Hermione strongly suspected that her actions had to be tickling it.

Mentally shaking herself, Hermione stepped through the insubstantial gate. She was here to give Lucius Malfoy and Severus, if he was here a piece of her mind, not to contemplate the magical intricacies of his property.

She marched up the driveway, ignoring the scream-like calls of the albino peacocks strutting along the tall hedges to either side of her. The dark, hulking shape of Malfoy Manor loomed in front of her, growing larger with every step she took. Hermione paused at the base of the broad marble steps leading up to the heavy oak front door. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and gritted her teeth. Now was not the time to remember her last visit, and certainly not the time to recall her torture within these walls at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange.

She tightened her grasp on the newspaper, using it as a tangible reminder of why she was there. Her eyes snapped open, and she strode up the steps to hammer on the door with her fist.

It was opened almost immediately by a house-elf. "Miss come in, please."

Hermione shivered slightly, although the air inside was warm enough on her exposed skin.

"Can Dilly take Miss's coat?"

"Thank you, but I won't be here for long," Hermione answered, tugging her coat out of the house-elf's eager hands and folding her arms around herself in an effort to ward off the strange chill. "Is your master home?"

"He is." The voice came from an open doorway. In the dimly lit hallway lined with wizarding portraits, Hermione almost mistook Malfoy for a full length one, until he sauntered out, advancing to meet her. She almost expected the chill she was feeling to deepen, but if anything it lessened slightly ... movement in the same doorway caught her attention. Severus was standing there. For a moment, he looked pleased to see her, a smile briefly lighting up his face, until his eyes met hers and he flinched slightly.

Malfoy drew her attention back to him, clearing his throat. "What can I do for you, Hermione?" He laughed softly, reaching for her hand. "I may call you Hermione, may I not? Such a lovely name." Malfoy bent to plant a kiss on the back of her hand.

Just before his lips could touch her skin, Hermione swung the rolled-up *Prophet* at him, striking him across the face. He straightened up, looking flabbergasted. A part of her was delighted to witness how the smug, arrogant expression had been wiped off Malfoy's face by the blow. While another part was frantically shrieking that she'd just gone and struck a former Death Eater. Most of her was too angry to care. She never stopped to think, raising the newspaper to hit him again.

"How dare you?" *Thud.* But before she could strike him a third time, he snatched the impromptu weapon from her hand, his cheeks reddening and his eyes narrowed dangerously. His knuckles whitened where they gripped the paper. Hermione held her breath, her body tense.

"*Lucius,*" Severus snapped, suddenly right behind Malfoy, his equally white-knuckled hand on his friend's shoulder, his other long-fingered hand reaching for the newspaper. He tugged it free and stepped around Malfoy to unfold it for both of them to see, nonchalantly placing himself in front of Hermione.

"My, my. We made the headlines," Malfoy observed, glacially calm once more.

Hermione clenched her fists, trying to restrain herself from slapping the renewed smugness out of him. "Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

He raised his sleek blond head from his perusal of the *Prophet*. "When would you like the wedding to be?" Beside him, Severus hissed between his teeth in a belated attempt to shush him.

Now she felt as if she'd been slapped. The article in the *Prophet* had been bad enough, but for Malfoy to rub it in like that ... "Just because you won that duel doesn't make me your bride! Apart from the fact that I wasn't Ron's to lose, I don't accept the medieval concept that women are property to be won and lost.

"And you," Hermione turned to Severus, hugging her arms tighter around herself. "Your part in this... I am so disappointed. How could you?" She sniffed, swiping her knuckles under her eyes, and angrily dashed her threatening tears away.

Hermione turned on her heel and swung the door open, ignoring the protestations of the house-elf that 'Miss must let Dilly do his job'. She paused at the top of the steps, but didn't turn to face them. "If I never see either of you again, it will be too soon." She strode away, refusing to look back even when Severus called her name desperately.

* * *

The house-elf obediently closed the door at Lucius's dismissive wave of his hand, before Severus could follow Granger.

Severus grabbed the door handle, tugging fruitlessly. "Open the door, elf!"

Dilly took one look at Lucius and Disapparated. Stifling a guttural snarl, Severus twisted around to face his host. He looked almost unhinged, his face contorted into a grimace, his eyes unblinking, glaring.

Lucius watched as coolly as possible as Severus began advancing on him, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"Open the fucking door, you inbred twerp!"

"No..." Lucius was cut off when Severus grabbed hold of the front of his robes, shaking him hard enough that his teeth rattled.

"You've really fucked things up. I told you she wouldn't appreciate being duelled over. If you'd listened to me, we'd still have a chance!" Severus gave him one last shake, and let him go as if he was something unclean.

Lucius extracted his handkerchief from a pocket and used it to wipe off the spittle. Severus had a disgusting habit when enraged of spitting when he spoke. "Rest assured, I will rectify the situation. We will have the bride of your choice, I promise."

He Disapparated, feeling the wards gently test him, then allow him to pass through unhindered.

Like Hogwarts, Malfoy Manor was sentient, responding to the whims of the master of the house in much the same way the wizarding school did with the commands of the headmaster. As such it was absurdly simple for Lucius to adjust the wards, so recently changed so that his future bride could come in unhindered, to lock her inside the grounds.

Lucius arrived at the gates almost instantly, just in time to see Granger walk into the suddenly solid iron bars. His lips twitched, but he managed to control the impulse to laugh.

Granger staggered back, briefly clutching at her ribs before grasping the closest bars and shaking the gate. When that failed to summon the guardian, she kicked it.

The sight of Granger hopping about on one foot, swearing, was more than Lucius could take. He managed to muffle the guffaw as a snort, but she heard him, spinning around to face him, her wand in hand.

"Let me out, Malfoy."

"Not until you have heard what I have to say. Kindly lower your wand," Lucius murmured, speaking to her as if she were a wild animal. For all he knew, she might have been raised like one, which would explain her lack of manners. He absently rubbed his cheek where she'd struck him with the *Prophet*.

She slowly lowered her wand. Lucius raised an eyebrow, although he was unsurprised at her current target. "Lower, if you please."

When Granger had pointed her wand toward the floor, Lucius gingerly stepped closer. "Thank you. I think I can understand your outrage, but you mustn't take it out on Severus. He advised me against the duel."

Granger looked completely unimpressed, her face impassive. "Really? Even if that was the case, he was your second."

"He didn't have any choice. Severus cares about you, Miss Granger. He cares about you enough to want to marry you. Weasley had a claim on you, and duels are the way such matters are settled in the wizarding world, medieval though the concept may be. I won the duel, so now Severus and I have that claim on you. If Severus hadn't been my second, he would have no claim."

Lucius was suddenly conscious of large droplets of water splattering on his exposed skin. He looked up, grimacing. "Please come back inside. While we could continue this conversation in the rain, using magic to stay dry, it is unpleasant to do so."

She scowled at the suggestion, her wand hand twitching.

"I promise I will allow you to leave afterwards."

The way Granger's lip curled implied that she didn't trust his promises, but she nodded reluctantly.

Lucius offered her his arm. Predictably, she refused to take it. "Miss Granger, if you hold on to me, I can Apparate us both inside. Much better than walking in the rain, I think you'll agree."

"I don't trust you," she stated bluntly. "But I do trust Severus, even after this stupid duel." She took Lucius's arm.

Malfoy Manor was very reluctant to allow a witch of such parentage through the Anti-Apparition wards, but Lucius wasn't the master of the house for nothing. The house seemed to realise that it was to get used to the presence of Granger, so it let them through with only a second's delay.

Severus whirled around to face them. It seemed that he'd been pacing up and down the hallway. Frankly, the man was fortunate that Lucius hadn't Apparated on top of him. The deep lines of his scowl were erased when he saw Hermione with Lucius. He took a tentative step forward, one hand outstretched, falling short when Hermione let go of Lucius and defensively crossed her arms.

"Let's discuss this matter in more comfortable surroundings, shall we?" Lucius suggested. He opened the nearest door. "Ladies first," he said, carefully moderating the sarcasm in his tone. For nothing, it seemed, because Granger glared at him all the same before she stepped past him.

She stumbled to a halt, staring around the spacious room. Lucius smirked; the drawing room always had this effect on guests. He walked inside, and waved his arm in a broad gesture encompassing the highly polished floor, the crystal chandelier, and the ornately carved marble fireplace.

"Wonderful room, isn't it. You'd never guess that is not the original chandelier. It was replaced after the destruction of the first over a year ago, when..." Lucius almost twisted a muscle in his neck when he jerked his head around to look at Granger. He swore under his breath. Quite the faux pas, bringing the girl into the room where she'd been tortured by his unhinged sister-in-law.

Granger was deathly pale, her eyes focussed somewhere far away. She didn't seem to be breathing either.

'*Shit.*' Lucius took a step towards her when he saw her sway on her feet, but Severus reached her first, wrapping his arms around her before she could fall. She seemed to be unconscious now, her eyes closed, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

"What did you do?" Severus demanded, giving him an accusing glare. He shifted Granger in his arms so that her head was better supported by his chest.

Lucius shrugged helplessly. "Nothing, I just... I forgot about the particulars of her first, ah, visit."

Severus's eyebrows lowered over narrowed eyes. "What happened?" he ground out.

"I'll tell you later," Lucius muttered. "Suffice to say that we shouldn't rouse Granger here." He stepped forward, drawing his wand to Transfigure his handkerchief into a

stretcher, but Severus would have none of it, hefting the girl up into his arms to carry her manually.

'Merlin's cave, the man's smitten!' Lucius thought, his jaw almost dropping. He watched the lovebirds for a moment before his lips curled up into a smirk. So Severus had a heart after all ...

Shaking his head, Lucius held the door open and lead the way to his private study. He stepped inside, held it open again for Snape and his burden, almost letting it swing back in his shock when a petulant voice spoke up from the fireplace from his favourite chair!

"What the hell is going on, Father? And why's *she* here?"

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/duel/sfeature/rulesofdueling.html> was referred to, although only rule 17 seemed relevant for a wizarding duel.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 37

Conversations.

Chapter 4

Draco shot to his feet as soon as he realised who Severus was carrying. Disregarding the tortured screech of the antique chair against the floor, he drew his wand. When Lucius found himself the target, Draco only smirked slightly at the gobsmacked look on his father's face.

Severus gave Lucius a chilly smile. "I'll leave you to explain." At Lucius's splutters he chuckled darkly. "No, no, I cannot get in the way of a father-son reunion." He turned away from the open doorway and carried Granger away.

When he heard Severus's footsteps recede upstairs, Draco slowly lowered his wand and sat down.

He lazily flicked his wand at the other chair, pushing it out. "Have a seat, Father."

Just as Lucius gingerly lowered himself down, Draco flicked his wand again. To his disappointment, though not to his surprise, Lucius stayed seated on an invisible cushion of air.

"Such juvenile behaviour." His father shook his head, lip curling as he pulled the chair underneath himself. "I thought better of you."

"Likewise," Draco spat, and thrust his wand back into his robes, shifting his hands to the chair arms.

Lucius blinked and raised his eyebrows. "When have I ever behaved like an adolescent?"

"You know what I mean! Seems I was right all those months ago, after your precious Dark Lord fell and almost brought us down with him. You're back up to your old tricks."

"Now, Draco, I have nothing to do with the formation of this new law..."

Draco jerkily raised a hand to interrupt him. "I know that! It's hardly as if you have the influence anymore. What I want to know is why you're jumping at the first chance you get to replace Mother."

"*Replace?*" Lucius was on his feet, his face blotching an angry mottled red. "Your mother is irreplaceable."

"Then why duel Weasley for Granger?" Draco demanded.

"Because Severus wants her. She will be his wife, and mine too although mine in name only. Still, I expect you to offer her all due respect, as she will be your step-mother too. If in name only."

"Really?" Draco sneered, "And what did Granger say about that?"

"Nothing yet, she had a bad reaction to the drawing room before we could discuss it."

'That explains what was up with Granger; she fainted.' Draco's jaw dropped. "You took Granger into the drawing room? Where Aunt Bellatrix tortured her?"

"I forgot," Lucius muttered, flicking his fingers as if the matter was of no concern to him.

'Prick.' Draco snorted contemptuously. "You haven't changed at all. All those atrocities you witnessed in our own home meant nothing to you. Oh, but *you* forgot: you participated in many of them."

His father paled, his skin acquiring a sickly hue that almost rivalled his pale blond hair. "You know nothing, boy. I did what I had to in order to keep us alive. Had you access to the transactions of my vault, you would know that I have donated to many worthy causes since the end of the war. Like funding war orphans through Hogwarts, regardless of their blood status."

Draco lurched to his feet. "If not for your following a madman in the first place, none of that would have been necessary!" He breathed deeply following his outburst. "You still believe pure-bloods are better than half-bloods or Muggle-borns. Don't try to tell me different, you only see the worth in Granger as what marrying her will do for your precious influence."

Lucius stared at Draco as if he'd never seen him before, an expression Draco had only seen once before, on that night after the Dark Lord fell for the final time. The night when Draco had been free to voice thoughts that would have got himself and his family killed were the Dark Lord still alive. The night when he argued with his father, ignored his mother's pleas and left the family home.

"I might not like Granger much, but I do respect her. In fact, I daresay I'll treat her with more respect than you will. I don't like the concept, but she will be my step-mother, and not in name only. Speaking of Granger, before I leave I want to know that she is really all right."

Dragging a hand across his face, Lucius looked haggard and weary. "If you don't trust me, surely you can trust Severus?"

He ignored the hurt in his father's voice, turning away. "I suppose so." He stalked over to the door, and tried the handle. When it refused to open, he turned to look at Lucius and spoke between clenched teeth, "Release the wards, father."

"No. Draco, we haven't talked in far too long. Even at Narcissa's funeral, you didn't speak a word to me. And we need to talk now."

"Presuming that you manage to persuade Granger to marry you which, by the way, is unlikely, as in my experience she can't be manipulated I'll attend the wedding."

"Your confidence in me is so reassuring," Lucius drawled. "But what I wanted to talk about is your own nuptials."

Draco spun around, backing against the door. He contemplated drawing his wand, before he remembered something from his mother's last letter before she fell ill. *'...please give your father a chance...'*

"Fine. Talk."

"I know you blame me for the current state of the Malfoy reputation, but I am doing all I can to restore it. You could help with that by marrying a witch of sufficiently high status. Perhaps Ginny Weasley? I hear that she survived the plague. Yes, she would be perfect. A pure-blood, perfect for continuing the Malfoy line."

"You think the Malfoy name and lineage is all that I care about?" Draco laughed derisively. "It's high time that the Malfoy line had fresh blood in it." He laughed harder at the gormless expression on Lucius's face. Stunned disbelief suited him.

He turned the doorknob, satisfied to see it was mobile again. "I'll be sure to send you an invitation. Goodbye, father." He Disapparated, slipping through the open wards before Lucius could close them against him.

* * *

Once upstairs, Severus made his way to his usual guestroom. The door-elf briefly appeared to open it, although Severus could have easily managed the small amount of wandless magic necessary.

Instead, he wandlessly drew back the covers on the bed as he walked over to it. He laid Hermione down and straightened up, rubbing the ache from his arms and stretched his spine, feeling it click. While it had felt good to hold her close in his arms, it seemed that it did no favours for his body. Perhaps he needed to put on some weight before attempting to lift her again.

He looked down at Hermione, tapping his finger against his lower lip. Surely he could do better to make her comfortable ... Although tempting to use his hands, this was one instance where it was better to use otherwise foolish wand waving. A few swishes and flicks of his wand, together with accompanying non-verbal incantations, had her coat and boots off in seconds.

Severus frowned. Earlier, while in his arms, Hermione had been breathing shallowly, but more deeply than she was now; he could barely make out the rise and fall of her chest. He knelt down beside the bed, returned his wand to his pocket, and took hold of one of her hands with both of his. As he suspected, her breathing eased.

But what he didn't understand was the cause of this fainting attack. Clearly something had happened that Lucius had failed to tell him about, something that Hermione had also neglected to mention.

He moved one of his hands to brush a stray lock of hair away from her face, brushing his fingers across the soft, smooth skin of her cheek in the process. Intrigued, Severus brought his fingers back to gently stroke that velvety surface. What would it feel like for his lips to take the same path? The thought startled him, and he inhaled sharply, suddenly aware that he'd stopped breathing.

There was nothing to stop him. No one watching. Hermione wouldn't know. He leant down, his lips almost touching her skin when he stopped. He would know that he'd taken advantage of her vulnerable state, and that was enough.

Straightening up, he took his wand out once more. "*Rennervate*," he murmured, watching as Hermione's eyes opened before they screwed up, unaccustomed to the light.

He waited until she could keep her eyes open before he asked the questions he felt a burning need to have answered. "What happened?"

"I was about to ask that," Hermione groaned, and covered her face with her hands, slipping hers off his in the process. Within moments she flinched, hugging her arms around herself, her breathing uneven.

"Give me your hand," Severus said, holding his hand out to her.

She didn't hesitate, and gripped his hand tightly as her breathing eased. She sighed in relief. "That's better. I don't know what caused that attack right now, it's not as if I was tortured in this room."

It was only the need to stay in skin contact with her that kept Severus from leaping to his feet and pacing in his agitation. "You were tortured in the drawing room," he stated, a thin veneer of calm in his tone. "When did that happen?"

"Oh. You didn't know?" Hermione smiled sheepishly. "About two months before the war ended maybe a little less, my memory's a little foggy Harry managed to get us caught by Snatchers, who took us to Malfoy Manor. Bellatrix was there."

"And she decided to play with a Muggle-born?"

"No, she noticed the sword. Gryffindor's Sword. She wanted to know how we got it. Bitch hoped that the Cruciatus Curse and a little knife play would persuade me to talk."

Witness of many terrible things during his Death Eater days, Severus had seen and heard worse, but this sickened him, made his stomach churn with nausea. That Potter had Gryffindor's Sword at the time had been down to him, which made him at least partially responsible for Hermione's torture.

"Anyway, when I stepped foot into the drawing room, did you say?" At his nod, she continued, "into the drawing room today, something took me back to the last time I was there. Not just to the memory either, it was as if I was being cursed again. But doesn't that happen with the Cruciatus Curse, feeling pain long afterwards?"

"It can, but only as muscular aches, and never triggered by revisiting the location where the curse was cast. You also seem affected by Malfoy Manor as a whole, not just the drawing room."

"Maybe the curse left me sensitive to places with a Dark atmosphere. Is there a spell to detect Dark magic?" she asked.

"Yes," Severus affirmed, and cast it, a red glow similar to the light cast by the Lumos charm hovering over his wand. "A non-verbal spell, and not one that I want you ever to be able to use, as it requires the caster to have used Dark magic." He moved his wand around, watching the steady glow for any flickering. "As can be expected with the usage of the Manor in recent years, it is reeking of Dark magic."

He cancelled the spell. "But being the victim of the Cruciatus curse once does not result in sensitivity of the kind you clearly feel, even if the caster was Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Could it be a side-effect of the plague?" Hermione voiced the thought that had also occurred to Severus.

"Quite possibly. I hope not; apart from anything else, it has implications for the efficacy of the cure."

Severus was lost in thought for a while, staring into space as he absently stroked Hermione's hand with his thumb. He focussed on her when she spoke, and dragged his thoughts back to the present.

"Was Malfoy telling the truth when he told me that you're the reason he challenged Ron, because you want to marry me?" She was just resting her hand on his now, as if she would snatch it away despite the resulting discomfort if he said the wrong thing.

"He was, although I didn't ask him to do so. In fact I..."

"Advised him against it. He said that, too. He also said that you want to marry me because you... care for me."

"I do," Severus breathed, sure that to speak louder would somehow make her reject him.

"I don't know you very well. But I do trust you, and I certainly like you. Due to this harebrained law, I need to get married. Twice.

"But I owe my life to you," Hermione stated, looking steadily at Severus. "Gratitude is not a healthy foundation for a marital relationship."

At first, Severus didn't understand what she meant. Then he realised: she meant the cure. "*helped* to develop the cure. Also, although you do not remember it, you helped Fawkes save my life. Neither of us have a debt to the other," he said, and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back, beaming at him.

"So that's how you survived!"

Severus peeled back his collar with his wand tip, showing her the unblemished skin where Nagini had bitten him. Hermione tentatively reached up to touch it, and paused as if for permission. Severus raised his head slightly, granting her access.

Just before she touched him, there was a knock at the door.

* * *

Hermione felt Severus's hand jerk, and had to hold on to it to prevent him from moving out of her reach as he stood and turned to face the door. As it was, Hermione had to sit up, bracing her free hand behind her to balance herself when she felt dizzy at the sudden movement.

The door swung open, Malfoy not waiting for an answer before he entered. He seemed to be leering, watching Severus and Hermione with a voyeuristic glint in his eyes, almost as if he had been expecting them to be snogging. He raised an eyebrow at their clasped hands.

"How touching," he murmured, just within audible range for Hermione.

Severus apparently heard him too, no surprise for a former spy and school teacher. "As a matter of fact, Lucius, if I do not touch her, she suffers from the Dark atmosphere of your home. Might I suggest that you get a curse breaker in?" To prove his point, he repeated his Dark-detecting spell, bathing Malfoy in the sick red light given off by his wand, which made the man look even more devilish than usual.

"Very well," Lucius murmured. "Now that we will not be interrupted, shall we discuss the matter at hand? Perhaps not here, it might be a little," a definite leer spread across his face, "cozy. Follow me."

It was a little awkward struggling into her shoes and coat with the need to keep hold of Severus, until he sighed and used magic.

Hermione looked up at him. He was smiling slightly, and shaking his head. Half-amused, half-exasperated, if she was any judge of Severus's moods.

"Thanks," Hermione murmured. She walked hand in hand with Severus after Malfoy, who led them down a richly carpeted corridor with portraits glaring out of their frames, and even the odd tapestry adorning the walls.

Malfoy stopped in front of a richly carved door. He opened it and stepped aside for his guests to enter first. Out of the corner of her eye, she observed Severus move his head toward Malfoy, although the only clue to his expression was the slight snort he made.

Any further contemplation on what Malfoy could be up to for Severus to react like that was wiped from Hermione's mind when she stepped inside. It seemed Draco hadn't been exaggerating much when boasting of the size of his family library. It was at least the size of Hogwarts' library, yet more spacious perhaps due to the lack of desks and chairs to clutter the place up. It was also better lit, at least during the day, by the ceiling being made entirely of glass.

She took an involuntary step forwards when she took in the neatly arranged, almost overflowing bookshelves almost forming corridors and lining the walls. If she'd noticed them first, the rest of this beautiful room would have been overlooked. Whoever the architect had been had planned this room well.

Hermione stepped closer to the nearest bookshelf, itching to see the titles, and even keener to read them. In doing so, she lost her hold on Severus's hand.

A strangled gasp escaped her as an icy hand seemed to reach inside and grasp her lungs, squeezing the air out of her. Although the sun shone through the crystalline ceiling overhead, her surroundings seemed to darken. The only thing missing from her experience in the drawing room earlier on was the echo of the Cruciatus Curse.

Two large hands gripped hers, and the chill faded. She inhaled deeply, relieved that she could breathe properly again. One of the hands clutching her own was smoother than the other, and felt colder ... no, it was warm, but her hand could gain no heat from it. Hermione glanced down, puzzled, and found that Malfoy had taken one of her hands, while Severus had the other.

"Severus, let go for a moment." When he did so, Hermione hissed between her teeth as that intangible chilly hand returned, and wrenched herself out of Malfoy's grip, lunging for Severus and grabbed hold of him as if he were a lifeline.

"So it's not just the touch of another person you need," Malfoy mused. "It's Severus in particular. Interesting."

"Very," Hermione spat, and glared at Malfoy. Yes, it had been an experiment, but he'd just cavalierly ignored her obvious pain. She kept hold of Severus with one hand as she tugged him over to one of the sofas scattered around the room and sat down. "You wanted me to stay in order to listen to your spiel about why I should marry you. I'm here; I'm listening, so *talk*."

Malfoy settled into an armchair across from them, and smoothed the creases from his trousers. "Provided that you like the idea of marrying Severus, I do believe that I am your best choice of the required second husband. Assuming, of course, that you, like Severus don't like sharing."

Hermione frowned. What was Malfoy driving at? "Get to the point."

"Believe me, I am." Malfoy bared his teeth, the smile not reaching his eyes. "After the recent loss of my wife, I have no wish to be married. Yet by law I must. Beyond the necessary consummation, if you marry me, it would be a marriage in name only."

"I see," she said. She couldn't read Malfoy the way she could read Severus, but it did sound like the truth. A glance at Severus reinforced that notion, as he nodded slightly at her. *'Nothing whatsoever to do with my status as a war heroine, huh?'*

Malfoy cleared his throat, probably readying himself to pile on a few incentives.

Hermione held up her free hand. "Save it. You want to marry me, Mr Malfoy? Fine. While it must be said that I'd marry you for your library alone, I have other requirements."

"Such as?" Malfoy asked cagily.

"Nothing too onerous." She looked again at Severus. "I want to help Severus with his research and development into a cure for this memory loss. As it's highly doubtful that the Ministry will cough up the funds, you can."

"Very well," he muttered, flicking his fingers dismissively. If he was as filthy stinking rich as reported, it was no wonder that he didn't bat an eyelash.

"Good, because I also want you to fund my campaign against the powers that be to restore equal rights to witches. This law bans them from marrying Muggles, so banning them from marrying whomever they please. While it never even crossed my mind to marry a Muggle, I find it outrageous that the Wizengamot dictates in this way."

This time Malfoy actually blanched, much to Hermione's satisfaction. "Narcissa probably spent more on clothes and shoes during the time we were married," he said under his breath, right on the edge of Hermione's hearing. "As you wish," he continued, raising his voice into more audible levels. "If that's all, is my word sufficient, or do you require a vow? Or a prenuptial agreement?"

"A prenuptial agreement might draw undue attention from the Ministry," Severus murmured.

"Good point." Out of sight of Malfoy, shielded by Severus's hand, she stroked him with her thumb. Hermione turned her attention back to Malfoy. "I should insist on a vow, but that wouldn't be a very auspicious start to this marriage."

Tugging on Severus's hand, she climbed to her feet. "It's time for me to leave. Harry knows I came here, he'll be storming the place soon if I don't hunt him down for his lecture on his part in the damn duel." She gave both men a dark look. "I haven't forgotten your parts in it either. Let me assure you, you'll regret it." She gave them a chilly smile.

Malfoy stood, and walked over to her. He gave her an indulgent smile and bent over her free hand, planting a kiss on the back of it with warm, dry lips. "Of course. I shall look forward to it."

Hermione was vaguely surprised that she had no urge to wipe her hand on her clothes. For all his good looks, the man had a repulsive personality, or had possessed one before her illness as far as she knew.

"I'm glad to hear it." She looked down at the still-seated Severus. "Would you mind escorting me to the gates?"

He got to his feet. "It's time I left, too. I'll see you anon, Lucius."

They got as far as the library door when Hermione called back over her shoulder: "You can start by meeting my parents." Severus flinched slightly beside her, but the dismayed expression on Malfoy's face more than made up for the twinge of guilt she felt at her friend's no, fiancé's reaction. After all, he'd have to meet them too.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 37

Meeting the parents ... and the aftermath.

Chapter 5

It was still raining outside, weather to make Severus thankful for his cloak. Certainly worth the bother of putting it on while holding Hermione's hand, shunting his pride aside in order to accept her help with such a supposedly simple task. True, he could cast a charm to repel the water, but to him that was foolish wand waving. After all, no need to waste magic when he had a perfectly good cloak.

He glanced at Hermione, suddenly aware that although he didn't mind the rain, she might. It was also possible although unlikely, she was the nightmare know-it-all in her year at Hogwarts that she didn't know the Water Repelling Charm.

Clearing his throat to attract her attention, he asked: "Does the rain bother you?"

"Not really," Hermione replied, "I can always cast a Drying Charm when I get home." She gently tugged his hand and walked down the steps to the gravel driveway, the pebbles crunching and squeaking beneath their feet. She paused abruptly, and would have come close to being pulled flat on her face if Severus hadn't been watching her. "If I have a home, that is."

"You were living at your parents' home before you fell ill, sometimes visiting Hogwarts for private lessons." Severus blinked, and frowned over at Hermione. "You mean to say that St. Mungo's released you without checking that you knew where to go?" He growled under his breath at her hesitant nod. "I'll be having words with their staff."

They resumed walking down the ridiculously long drive, with no sign of the albino peacocks. Presumably the ornamental creatures were sensible enough to seek shelter in wet weather.

"I did manage to restore my parents' memories and bring them back home after the war, then? I know I intended to as soon as it was safe."

"You did," he affirmed. For a moment he was tempted to tell her the whole truth, but coming from him it might sound rather much like bragging ... the sort of thing a boy like Weasley might do. He restrained himself to saying, "Will and Helen are looking forward to seeing you. They would have visited you in St. Mungo's if they could, but the only Muggles the hospital allows inside are magically injured ones."

"I thought that might be the case, I mean, I hoped they were back in the country..." Hermione halted, stumbling when Severus didn't stop fast enough. "Will and Helen? You're on first name terms with my parents?"

Severus watched her intently, and wondered how much to tell her. "Our friendship formed in a time when you were doing your best to heal the inevitable rift between your parents and yourself. They were not best pleased about the magical interference in their lives, or the secrets and lies about the war. We were able to convince them that your actions were both necessary and justified."

She raised an eyebrow, clearly sceptical about something in his explanation. 'We?' she mouthed. Severus just smiled slightly, squeezed her hand, and continued down the drive, toning down his usual long strides so that Hermione could keep up without running.

They walked in silence for the remaining hundred yards, although Severus could almost hear Hermione thinking. No Legilimency was necessary for that, just observation of the frown furrowing her forehead. The mere thought of intruding inside her head without permission repulsed him, and not merely because he did not want to lose her trust. Good grief. He really was showing decidedly Hufflepuff tendencies. *Still it was worth it.* Severus allowed his eyes to wander up and down his newly acquired fiancée's body. Oh, yes, well worth it. He smirked.

His eyes were drawn back to her still-frowning face, and his smirk faded. A fine figure, to be sure, but combined with that mind ... Lily Evans, eat your heart out.

Hermione's lips twitched. Her frown melted away. "Stop it, you're making me blush!" Indeed, her cheeks were slightly reddened, although not nearly as much as she probably thought.

"My apologies," Severus murmured. He turned to look at the now nearby gate.

The gates parted for them like smoke. But the effect was lost on Severus as he knew exactly what was behind it. Once a year, Lucius came to him for the potion used to douse the iron in order to meld it to the whims of the master of the house.

It took a moment for Severus to realise that now they were outside the bounds of Malfoy Manor. He slowly relaxed his grip and slid his hand out of hers, strangely reluctant to let go.

"Well, I guess I should be going. I need to find Harry," she said. Severus stiffened at the mention of the insufferable boy, incensed that she would rather spend time with him. Hermione rolled her eyes. "To give him an earful! Would you rather that I gave you one instead?"

Ah. Yes, come to think of it, she had mentioned something about that before they had left Malfoy Manor.

"I thought as much. Send me an owl tonight, then I can let you know when you and Lucius can meet my parents."

Severus nodded reluctantly, a knot of fear twisting his insides, something he'd last felt in the presence of the Dark Lord.

She stepped close, looped her arms around his neck, pulling him down slightly as she stretched up on tiptoe. Then her lips, even softer than her cheek, touched his.

He stood stock still, unresponsive, until Hermione began to withdraw, spurring him into action. He put his arms around her, drew her against him, one hand on her back and the other cupping the back of her head.

Hermione leaned further into him. She parted her mouth beneath his, inviting him to deepen the kiss. Before he could, a choked gasp behind them made them jump. They broke apart, wands drawn and pointing at ... Potter?

"Her-Hermione? What the hell do you think you were doing?" Potter demanded, fists clenched at his sides.

"It's a free country, Harry. A girl's allowed to kiss her fiancé if she wants to," Hermione grumbled, stepping between Severus and Potter.

Potter's jaw dropped. "*Fiancé?*" he spluttered. His mouth opened and closed a few times, emitting only incoherent noises. "But what about Ron?" he asked. "He loves you, and you're just going to rub his loss in his face like this?"

"Even if Ron hadn't lost that duel, I would not have married him. As far as I'm concerned, he's a friend, not husband material." She put her hands on her hips. "And besides, you're not the one who has to marry two men in the very near future, Harry."

"But I will have to share Ginny with someone else!" Potter wailed.

"Blame the Wizengamot. Just try not to get into any duels over her." Hermione looked over her shoulder at Severus. "See you soon." She turned back to Potter, strode over to him and took hold of one of his arms. "Come on, Harry. Let's have a little chat."

In the moment before she Side-Along'ed Potter away, Severus glimpsed something to warm the cockles of his heart: Potter's face falling, eyes wide with what could only be described as dread.

* * *

Hermione had been home for almost a week when she broached the subject of inviting guests over.

"Just two. I know you'd keep me all to yourselves, but just two?"

Will Granger had been aware of daily (or nightly, rather) visits from an owl bearing messages, but a man grew accustomed to such things when he had a witch for a daughter. Her friends obviously wanted more contact with her than letters.

"This is your home as much as it is ours, my darling," Helen simpered and laid her hand over their daughter's.

Will rolled his eyes. Although to be fair, he'd been spoiling Hermione too ever since she'd come home. But then Severus had made it very clear exactly how serious that disease had been. Hermione was the Grangers' only child, and they'd come very close to losing her. That was enough for even the strictest parent to allow said child however many sticky, sweet, tooth-rotting sweets she wanted.

Not that Hermione had wanted sweets. No, it was books for her, as it always had been. It was certainly a pleasure to see Hermione curled up on the sofa reading a new book. The minor demon masquerading as her cat was happy to have Hermione home. He flopped on top of her, purring, malevolent eyes on Will whenever he was in the same room.

It only occurred to Will when Hermione's guests had arrived that he really should have asked more questions. Two guests had implied that it would be Harry and Ron; Will knew that Severus only got on with Hermione, not with the boys. Although Will had to admit that he didn't blame Severus. Harry was all right, but Ron ... He grimaced. The boy was a real trial. He and Helen felt only a little guilty about being glad that Hermione couldn't remember being Ron's girlfriend. They dreaded her making the same mistake again.

So when Will opened the front door to see Severus and another man standing there, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Severus, good to see you." Will held out his hand for his friend to shake. He was puzzled when Severus grimaced slightly and took it reluctantly, shook it briefly and pulled away.

After he shot Severus a quizzical, somewhat hurt look, Will turned to the other man, who had even longer hair than Severus, a very pale blond. His clothes looked like they were made out of expensive fabric, silk lining visible at the cuffs and collar of his jacket.

Will noted that Severus's friend stood very stiffly, something he often saw in his patients at the practice. Perhaps he feared dentists, and Severus had told him of Will's job? But that couldn't be the case, as the man bared his all-but-perfect teeth in a rather fake smile.

Taking a second look at this stranger's face, Will realised that he'd seen him before. Years back, in that wizarding bookshop ... coming to blows with Arthur Weasley. What was his name? Manly? Yes, something like that. And his first name, it was on the tip of his tongue...

"Lucifer Manly, I presume," he said, and held out his hand again.

Judging by the way Severus spluttered into a coughing fit, Will's memory had played up.

The man took his hand anyway and shook it firmly. "Lucius Malfoy. Charmed to meet you, Mr Granger."

"Please come inside. Dinner won't be long."

* * *

"With Muggles like that, the Dark Lord would have had more than he bargained for in either ridding the world of them, or in enslaving them," Lucius commented, still picking bits of glass out of his clothes and hair. They had left the Grangers' house with limbs thankfully intact, and were on their way to the Apparition point concealed in an alleyway further down the quiet street.

Severus snorted. "Apart from the initial explosion, that went quite well, really."

Lucius gave him a filthy look. "You didn't have a glass thrown at you by that harridan of her mother."

"I ducked." Sometimes Severus could be infuriatingly smug. This was definitely one of those times.

"So did I! Yet I still got a shower of broken glass." Lucius gingerly touched a scratch across his cheek. He winced at the resulting tingle of pain. That had better not scar ...

"Stop moaning," Severus snapped. "Hermione did her best to restrict the damage, but a full-blown shielding charm might have endangered her parents by hurling the glass at them. They do not have intrinsic magic to protect them, remember."

"They'd have deserved it," Lucius muttered sulkily. "I need a drink."

"You just had one," Severus scoffed. "Will's finest whisky at that."

"It was merely passable." Lucius sniffed. As if a Muggle whisky could compare to Old Ogden's finest! "What's more, I couldn't finish it. Rather hazardous when it contains shards of glass, you know."

The Muggle street they were walking on was fairly clean, he supposed, but littered with white and grey marks on the pavement. Lucius poked at one with the tip of his cane, and was most disgusted when part of the white mess stuck to it. When one or two attempts to scrape it off didn't work, he gave up. After all, one of the elves back at the manor would clean it.

He picked another fragment of glass out of his hair. To his horror, it came away with a few strands of his pride and joy.

"Can you honestly say *they*," he said, and gestured behind them in the direction of the house and its terrifying occupants, "won't give you nightmares? I'm not even marrying the girl in anything more than name, but they almost scare me more than the Dark Lord ever did."

The Grangers even had something in common with the late, unlamented Dark Lord: Lucius couldn't attack them. Or defend himself.

Severus shuddered. "You don't know the meaning of fear. Did you see the look in their eyes when they offered me free dental treatment when we made our farewells?"

Lucius stifled a chuckle. "Yes. Rather like Greyback when youngsters were around." He grinned at Severus, flashing his near-perfect teeth in a Lockhart-esque manner. "Makes me thankful that I can't be threatened in such a way."

"Despite the lack of a real marriage, you do realise that you will have to see the Grangers again? And not just at this Muggle ceremony they demand takes place."

'Hmm, Severus is slacking. A better retort would have been to remind me of Helen's offer to cut my hair.' Lucius ran a hand over his sleek locks, a cold shiver running down his spine at the thought. He blinked. Perhaps that had been Severus's intention ... there was no worse enemy than oneself. Severus was bound to know that, the cunning bastard.

"I hope you realise, *old friend*, that this Muggle thing they want means that you'll have to attend two weddings," Lucius said frostily. "There's no need for me to attend that one."

Muggles would count the requirements of this law as whatever the feminine version of bigamy was called. Therefore illegal. As the true husband, it would make sense for Severus to be the groom in the Muggle one. Particularly as Lucius did not exist in the Muggle world; he had no identity there. Very ... convenient.

"Indeed." Severus gave Lucius a worryingly calculating look. "But as you will be my Best Man, you cannot escape this Muggle ceremony either."

"I'd be delighted," Lucius said, lying through his teeth. He followed Severus into the dimly lit alleyway.

After a cursory check to see that there were no Muggles to be spooked by suddenly vanishing men, Lucius closed his eyes and thought of home, of the biting tang of Firewhisky on his tongue ...

Before he could Disapparate, Severus clapped a hand onto his shoulder. "You wanted a drink. It's the least I could do to give you one. Spinner's End might not be as grand as Malfoy Manor, but it's cosy enough."

Damn. It would be boorish to insist on Malfoy Manor instead. "So kind," Lucius murmured, his shoulders slumping slightly as the prospect of his Firewhisky became more remote. "Spinner's End it is."

* * *

"Mmm," Lucius smacked his lips appreciatively. "If I'd had any idea of the quality of your liquor, I would visit your humble home more often."

Severus saluted him with his half-full glass. "For a man with an infamous wine cellar and a substantial share in Old Ogden's, that's quite a compliment."

"You can repay it by pouring me another glass." Lucius held out his glass. "A little more, just a drop ... Oh, give me the bottle, man!"

When the bottle was returned, Severus frowned at the amount left. Lucius hoped that he would cough up another bottle. Unfortunately not; his friend was more intent on talking.

"What did you make of Will and Helen?"

"Before glasses were flying, you mean?" Lucius fingered one of the cuts on his face again. "Decent enough for Muggles, I suppose.

"And Harridan Helen did cook a decent meal." Almost to the standards of his house-elves, in fact. Roast pheasant was the sort of meal they served him. "I wonder if her daughter inherited any of the same skills. Not that she'll have any need for them. House-elves are for cooking."

"Do you realise what Hermione's views on house-elves are?" Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Lucius frowned. Come to think of it, one of Draco's letters in his third or fourth year at Hogwarts had mentioned something about it. "Surely she's outgrown such ludicrous ideas!"

"No," Severus said flatly. "And they are not ludicrous as such. Just remarkably poorly thought out and executed for her. She will want to see you treating your elves well, or you can expect a lecture at the very least."

"The things I do for you," Lucius muttered darkly. "Next she'll be wanting me to fund her elf endeavours too."

Severus chuckled. "Probably." He emptied his glass and topped it up, emptying the bottle in the process.

They drank in silence for a while, until Lucius's glass was empty. He hoped that Severus would get the hint and produce another bottle to satisfy his guest, but the man was stingy.

"In regards to the dinnertime conversation, you charmed the Grangers very well."

Lucius smirked. A Malfoy was meant to be the epitome of charm.

"But did you mean it, about ornithology?"

"I keep white peacocks. What do you think?" Lucius asked. He gave Severus a contemptuous glance. "That they were Narcissa's, hmm? I'm not sentimental enough to have kept them if they were, man!"

He sighed. Severus's prying had not warranted being snapped at. "I have an aviary. I also have a pair of Omnioculars, those have uses other than watching Quidditch." Like catching Severus and Granger in the act of their first kiss. How ... touching.

"And what about you?" Lucius turned his attention back to Severus. He theatrically roamed his gaze around the bookshelves littering the walls. "I see no detective novels. Helen the Harridan was quite pleased to have a fellow fan."

"They're in my bedroom," Severus drawled. "You wanted to borrow one, I seem to..."

A shrill ringing of the same pitch of his peacock's cries filled the room. Lucius jumped to his feet, yanking his wand from his cane. He looked wildly around for the source of the alarm.

"Sit down," Severus snapped. "It's my telephone. If you will excuse me?" He stood up and moved over to a black box with a handle, which he picked up and held to his ear. "Hello?"

Lucius collapsed back onto his chair, shakily sheathing his wand. He did not react well to surprises, not since having the Dark Lord in his home.

"Will. I did not expect to hear from you." Severus listened to a jabbering on the edge of Lucius's hearing. "What? You don't know where she is?"

Jabber gibber jabber.

"I see. Yes, I'll find her." He put the handle back down, and started pacing. "Hermione's had an argument of some sort with her parents. They have no idea where she is; she Apparated."

"So could be anywhere. Malfoy Manor?" Lucius suggested.

That earned him a poisonous glare. "Stop thinking with your appetite for Firewhisky. She won't go there without being sure that I am. Unbearably Dark atmosphere, remember."

"Send her an owl, then. With instructions to come here."

Severus stopped pacing. "Good idea. It will take a while, though." He pulled out his wand and used it to Summon writing materials. After he'd scrawled a letter, he walked to the front door. Presumably to call his owl, but before he could, Severus seemed to hear something, his head cocked to the side.

Lucius rose to his feet and stood next to him, the cool night air causing goosebumps to rise on his skin. Sure enough, there was something or someone calling. For Severus.

"I thought she didn't know where your home is?"

"She doesn't," Severus breathed. "Of all the stupid things ... Apparating to somewhere you have never seen ... Pure dumb luck that she hasn't Splinched!" He stepped outside, trembling with rage. "Hermione!"

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

The first scene was written for Kribu.

This is the last chapter that I have already written. The wait for the following chapters is likely to be longer, but rest assured that I fully intend to complete this tale.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

"Come down from there! Right now!" Severus barked, pointing to the cobbles at his feet.

"How?" Hermione wailed. A roof tile under her right foot shifted ominously. She trembled. If she'd been standing up instead of crouching, she couldn't have kept her balance.

"Apparate, you stupid bint!"

Anger overcame her fear. She leant forwards in order to glower at Severus and the roof tile gave way. Rattling and clattering as it disappeared over the edge of the roof. Hermione flailed wildly, desperate for something to hold onto. Her stomach lurched while she slid inexorably downwards. For a short, hopeful moment she managed to cling to the gutter. Then it broke away with a tortured groan.

For a split second time stopped. Pure terror prickled her innards, before she plummeted off the roof, head over heels, with no time to scream, or even to breathe. Air rushed in her ears, then she hit the cobbles of the street below. Surprisingly soft cobbles; while the impact winded her, there was no sickening crack of broken bones, no blinding haze of pain.

Hermione blinked away the stars obscuring her vision, until they were replaced by the distant ones shining far above in the night sky. Then Severus moved into her field of view, knelt beside her, and trailed his wand over her. He muttered some sort of incantation under his breath as he did so, which eased the ache of her bruised and breathless body.

"Stupid girl," Severus snapped. At odds with his harsh words, he ran his hands over her limbs, checking for broken bones. Only when he was satisfied that she was in one piece did he let her sit up, supporting her with his hands under her elbows.

"Just as well for you that almost all of these houses are abandoned, or your acrobatics would have had an audience." Severus stood and helped her to her feet as he did so.

"More of an audience, you mean," Lucius Malfoy's voice drawled from behind Hermione. She almost put a crick in her neck when she jerked her head around to face him. "Bring her inside, it's getting cold."

Only then Hermione noticed that her teeth were chattering. Why was that? She might have been on the roof ever since she'd Apparated to Spinner's End, without a coat to boot, but it hadn't been for that long. But then again, the cobbles may have been cushioned by a charm, but the chill from them could have seeped into her bones.

"Come on," Severus muttered. He rubbed her arms as he frogmarched her inside, past the smirking, seemingly solicitous Malfoy holding the door open.

While Malfoy made himself useful closing the door, Severus settled Hermione into the chair closest to the fireplace. He draped a blanket over her, which looked strangely like parchment to Hermione. But it felt exactly like a blanket was supposed to feel; soft, warm and cosy, so she put its weird appearance out of her mind.

Hermione was just starting to feel comfortably warm when Severus loomed over her again. His arms were crossed, almost hiding his clenched fists. The look in his narrowed eyes sent a chill down her spine. Combined with his scowl, Hermione could only describe his expression as thunderous.

"Call your parents," he hissed.

She blinked. That hadn't been what she expected him to say. She'd been bracing herself for a telling-off worse than the one she'd given Harry almost a week earlier. "Send them an owl, you mean?"

"No." Severus uncrossed his arms and hauled her to her feet, throwing the blanket over the back of the chair. He tugged her over to where a metre high cabinet stood. She blinked; to her surprise a telephone was placed on top of it. "Well, don't just stand there. Your parents were frantic when they telephoned a few minutes ago. Something about your leaving after an argument."

Hermione picked up the phone, a bizarre mental image of Severus scowling at a BT bill crossing her mind as she reluctantly dialled her parents' number.

"Severus! Have you found her? Is she safe? Will she come home?" She held the phone away from her ear, wincing at her mother's flurry of questions. "This is Severus, isn't it?"

For a sorely pressed moment, Hermione was tempted to say that it was one of her parents' patients with an emergency. But that would have been cruel, her mother was obviously worried ... and apart from anything else, Severus was right beside her. She didn't want to seem childish.

"No, Mum, it's me."

A sigh of relief rattled down the phone line. "Hermione, thank goodness. Please come home. I'm sorry we shouted, but you really should have told us about this marriage law nonsense as soon as you came home."

Hermione groaned. "Mum ... There was no right way to do it with a mess like this."

There were muffled mutters on the other end of the line as her parents discussed something. Eventually she spoke up audibly, "Don't worry, dear, we'll sort it out."

"For the love of...Mum, I told you, even with that bad wizard dead, the Ministry isn't going to listen to Muggles."

"I see," her mum sniffed. "Well, come home so we can help you sort out your..." another sniffle, "wedding."

"Erm, there's not all that much to sort out, is there?"

"Not much? Hermione, darling, there's the venue for the wedding itself, another for the reception, clothes, invitations..."

Hermione had a nightmarish vision of her mother's dream wedding, inflicted on her. She glanced at Severus and at Lucius. Much as they probably deserved it after that stupid duel, she couldn't do that to them. Most of all, she couldn't do that to herself. She hurriedly interrupted her mother. "There's really no one I want at this wedding except you and Dad."

"Not even Harry and Ron?" Her mum asked after a long (and probably horrified) pause. Hermione grimaced, feeling like a monster. But this was her wedding, not her mother's.

"If they want to come to my wedding, they can come to the wizarding one." *And I don't expect they will. Who can blame them, especially poor Ron?*

"If that's what you want." Her mother said stiffly. To Hermione's dismay, she also sounded hurt, but that couldn't be helped. "Are you coming home tonight?"

"I don't know. I've got quite a bit to talk about with Severus and Lucius."

"Hmm. I suppose I can trust Severus."

'But apparently not me. I'm not a child anymore, Mum!' Hermione counted to ten before she said anything more. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mum. Give Dad my love."

"Hermione..."

"Good night, Mum." She hung up, almost slamming the phone back down onto the receiver.

She turned to Severus. "Well?" Hermione demanded, steeled for a fight.

Severus dragged a hand across his face. When he lifted it away, he looked weary. She wondered if she should have counted to ten again. He hadn't done anything to deserve her taking her frustration with her mother out on him. She felt her anger evaporate like the power of a Dementor against a Patronus.

He reached for her hand and gripped it tightly, bringing her attention back to him. "Promise me you will never Apparate blindly again."

"Most people Apparate with their eyes closed!"

"You know perfectly well what I meant! Unless it is a matter of life or death, I want your word that you will never Apparate to a place you have not seen before." His grip tightened even more, almost crushing her hand beneath his. The pressure eased when she winced, and his fingers stroked the back of her hand apologetically.

She, Harry and Ron had done a lot of risky things during the search for the Horcruxes. It was perhaps a little foolish to do them in more peaceful times. All right, completely foolish. "I promise."

* * *

"Good." Severus almost pulled her into an embrace when he was reminded of Lucius's presence.

"Much as I hate to interrupt," Lucius said in a way that could only be described as a leer, "but you said that you had to talk to us."

Severus stepped away from Hermione, releasing her hand. If Lucius the supercilious voyeur hadn't spoken, he might have exposed himself and Hermione to his friend's mockery.

"Actually..." Hermione looked away guiltily. "I don't want to go home yet. My parents need time to calm down." She sighed. "So do I."

Lucius smirked. "How Slyth..."

"Not Slytherin, actually," Severus countered. He took great pleasure in wiping that smirk from Lucius's face. "I could tell that it was not the whole truth when you said it. But then Gryffindors do tend to be obvious when they lie."

"Not the whole truth? I out-and-out lied!" Hermione protested.

"Ah, but you were going to tell us what your argument was about, weren't you?"

"If you really want to know," she said doubtfully.

"I do. Sit down, and I'll put the kettle on. After your almost calamitous arrival, I think you could do with a cup of tea." He certainly felt the need for one. At this rate his bride-to-be would give him a heart attack before they could marry.

The tea was brewed and poured before Hermione saw fit to explain herself.

"Where to begin?" she pondered aloud. She took a sip from her cup and winced when she burned her tongue.

"Use the charm on your tongue, not the tea!" Lucius blurted, horrified when she made moves to touch her wand to the cup. "Cooling Charm~~s~~uin tea."

Severus kept a straight face as he drew his own wand and used it to cool his tea down directly. When he looked over at Lucius, it was impossible to keep his lips from turning up a little at the appalled expression on his friend's face.

"I believe I am the certified potions Master around here. Trust me, it does not ruin it."

"Philistines. I'm surrounded by philistines," Lucius muttered, and shuddered when Hermione used the forbidden charm on her own tea, smiling sweetly.

"Right," Hermione said, after she drained her cup and set it aside. "Well, to cut a long rant short, my parents were a little upset."

For a moment, Severus could almost hear Helen's enraged shriek as she hurled her glass in Lucius's and his direction. "Hardly surprising. What about in particular?" he queried.

"That I have two fiancés, that you're both considerably older than me, that they have to adjust from thinking of you as a friend to a prospective son-in-law ..." She counted off the issues on her fingers. "Frankly, they'd have problems if it was only you." She glanced up at Severus.

She slumped back against her armchair. "They were especially upset that I hadn't told them until today." Her lips pressed together into a thin, unhappy line. "My parents aren't stupid. They knew something was up long before the subject of the marriage law was brought up after dinner."

"The only thing they were thankful for was that you weren't there to talk about something bad to do with the plague."

Severus was not surprised that Will and Helen had picked up on their guests' unease. It had been a very awkward meal, full of uncomfortable silences. While he and Lucius had managed to charm them for a good part of the evening, Helen especially, with talk of detective novels and bird watching, all of the charm in the world would not have been able to cover up the fact that something was wrong.

"I left..." Hermione's voice wavered and she fell silent. She looked away, glaring furiously at the fireplace until she had regained control. Her eyes, brimming with tears, reflected the dancing flames. At last she went on, "I left just after they demanded we marry in a local venue, Mum seething in the same breath about the damage it will do to their reputation."

She laughed hollowly. "The Grangers' wayward daughter, marrying a man twice her age, old enough to be her father. And so quickly! She must be pregnant." Her lips twisted. "'You aren't, are you?'" It was uncanny, how Hermione managed to mimic her mother's voice. "As I was angry enough for the nearest shelf of books to fall apart at that point, I thought it was best for me to leave."

She rubbed her knuckles against her eyes to wipe her impending tears away. She avoided looking directly into Severus's eyes, but kept her face turned further towards him than Lucius.

"Well," Lucius broke the awkward silence, "at least there is no fear of that. The law does not dictate on that part of marital life."

"Yet," Hermione muttered darkly. She gave Lucius a contemptuous look. "Do you really think that the Wizengamot will leave the law as it is indefinitely?"

Lucius blinked, taken aback. "It's a given in wizarding society that marriage results in children eventually."

"If this polyandry poppycock doesn't result in pregnant witches within the next few months, you can bet that the Wizengamot will implement an addendum to the law." Hermione crossed her arms. Her scowl matched Severus's best efforts. "They clearly didn't think this through, as they'll require children rather more immediately than 'eventually'. Wait and see."

That was a troubling thought, at least to Severus. He had no desire for children in the immediate future, although somewhat to his surprise he found the idea of maybe one or two in a decade or so not completely terrifying. Lucius just shrugged, glancing between Severus and Hermione in a way that made it clear that would be their problem, not his.

"While we are all here, we might as well settle certain things."

Severus eyed Lucius suspiciously. "What things?"

"Don't worry, not plans for your Muggle marriage. I wouldn't dare encroach on Har... er, Helen's territory." Lucius glanced a little nervously at Hermione. It was obvious to Severus that he had almost called her mother 'Harridan Helen'. For Lucius's sake he hoped that it was less so to Hermione. She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"The usual sort of things." He dismissively waved a hand. "Name change, marital abode, rings..."

"I'm not changing my name, other than from Miss to Ms."

Severus was not terribly surprised. She was an only child, so there was no one else to carry on the Granger name. She also definitely had modern ideas. Lucius, however, straightened up in his chair, his eyes narrowing.

"That's unheard of in wizarding society. While you will only be my wife in name only, unless you want that charade to be discovered, you will have to take my name."

"On the contrary, *Mr Malfoy*, it's hardly feasible for me to change my name, as it would mean favouring one husband." She leant forward, returning his glower. "As you're obviously so fussed about regaining your precious influence and reputation, why don't you change your name? Lucius Granger has quite a ring to it, don't you think?"

Lucius worked his jaw, his fists clenched. Severus fingered his wand, ready to intervene if necessary, but Lucius backed down without so much as an uncivil word.

"Very well. But I think not in regards to taking your name. Wizarding society can only take so many upheavals before it collapses, after all."

"As for rings, I don't see what there is to talk about. I have but one ring finger, so wedding rings will be plenty." Hermione said no more on the matter, but Severus could tell that she was tempted to say something else. Probably about her fiancés wearing the engagement rings if they insisted on them.

Severus nodded. "My only requirement is that the rings are simple and platinum, at least in my case. I do work with volatile ingredients."

"It's getting late," Lucius stated, expectantly eyeing Severus. *'If he was hoping for another nightcap, he could wait until he returned to Malfoy Manor.'*

"Well, I'll take my leave." Lucius looked a little put out when he stood up. "As it's clear where we shall live after marriage: Malfoy Manor."

"You cannot be serious!" Severus lurched to his own feet. To his side, still seated, Hermione stiffened.

"The Ministry would know it was not a real marriage if one husband lives elsewhere, man!" Lucius tossed his head, exasperated.

Also exasperated and angered, Severus took a step forward. "That may be so, but you cannot expect Hermione to live in a place where she was tortured, and certainly not when the atmosphere of that same place sickens her without my touch."

That and Severus felt uncomfortable with the idea of living under the same roof as Lucius, particularly with a wife in tow. He was well aware of Lucius's voyeuristic proclivities.

"I am more than willing to have a curse breaker in to deal with the forbidding atmosphere. And it's simple enough to let the girl loose in the drawing room to deal with her demons. A spot of redecorating after that, and it'll be fine."

Hermione snorted.

Lucius looked around the room they stood in, lip curling at the shabby furniture and cramped bookshelves. "Surely you don't suggest that we live here? I am certainly not about to move to this hovel."

Flushed with rage at this insult, Severus took another step towards Lucius, on the brink of throwing his 'friend' out into the street.

"Stop it, both of you!" Hermione stepped in between them. "Honestly, you could talk as if I was in the same room." She sounded exasperated. Almost as if she had been trying to make herself heard before ...

"Malfoy Manor does make sense, Severus. And this isn't a hovel, Lucius. If you think it is, you should see pictures of a shanty town." She continued under her breath, too low for Lucius to hear by his lack of reaction: "And live in one for a while, that ought to take you down a few essential pegs."

"Before you start smirking about your victory, either of you, remember that Crookshanks will be living with me. I hope you don't mind cat hair, and too bad if either of you happens to be allergic to cats."

"Feel free to bring your cat. Just keep it away from my aviary." Lucius stepped close to Hermione. For a moment it looked as if he intended to kiss her lips ... to Severus's relief, he bent forwards at the last second, gallantly raising her hand to his lips. "Good night."

When the door closed behind Lucius, the lingering burn of jealousy faded from Severus's heart. Much as he tried to tell himself that there was nothing to feel jealous about, simply the sight of Lucius touching Hermione was enough to make his blood boil. Or at least bubble.

"It's late. Would you rather I go to..."

"Do you know where Potter lives at the moment? Or would you go to the Weasleys?" He shook his head. "Of course you can stay here. *'Silly girl!'*"

"It was rather rude of me to presume, that's all."

"Hardly. My home is your home now." He pulled her into his arms.

Severus had intended for it to be a brief embrace, but he hadn't counted on Hermione. She stretched up, grabbed the back of his head and brought his mouth down to hers.

This time there was nothing to interrupt just when things started to get interesting. Their lips parted, tongues intertwined and hands roamed. She wrapped one leg around him, pressing their groins together.

It was only when he unsnapped her brassiere, one hand slipped beneath her shirt, that he came to his senses. He turned his face away so that Hermione's attempt to

reclaim his lips landed on his cheek, then gently pushed her leg back down and held her at arms length.

"We are not ready for that step, even if..." Severus grimaced. He stepped back to adjust his protesting erection in uncomfortably tight trousers. *Even if we both want to.*

Hermione reached out, her eyes fixed below his waist, but almost immediately retracted her hand, blushing fiercely. She briefly met his eyes before she looked away. "No, you're right."

He hesitantly extended his hand. "Come upstairs. I will sort out the spare bedroom for you. My parents' old room; I still sleep in my childhood room."

"A double bed?" Her wicked smile was at odds with the embarrassed colour still in her cheeks and would-be innocent question.

"Hermione, don't tempt me. I am a man of flesh and blood." He swatted at her behind and chased her upstairs, her laughter livening up his shabby home.

* * *

Lucius tugged at the stiff collar of his uncomfortable Muggle suit. The Harridan had insisted that he and Severus wear the ridiculous clothes normally worn at Muggle weddings. 'Penguin suits', Will Granger had called them, perhaps after the monochrome colouring ... or maybe it referred to the ungainly waddle the infernal suits forced upon the wearer?

He shot Severus a baleful look; his friend didn't look nearly as uncomfortable. Hopefully he was merely better at hiding his discomfort, it wouldn't be fair otherwise. But then again, Severus was blind to anything other than the 'enter' door to the left, his eyes fixed on it like a rat watching a Kneazle.

"You have the rings?" Severus double-checked, keeping his eyes on the door.

"No."

"*What?*" yelped Severus, his panicked gaze wrenched from the door.

"Relax, Mr Snape," one of the two Muggle officials present interjected, spoiling Lucius's fun. "I have the rings now. Your friend is just teasing you."

It had been just over two weeks since the disastrous dinner at the Grangers. Without marrying over the anvil, it was apparently as soon as was possible. *Such a sluggish system.*

His lip curling slightly, Lucius gave the room where the ceremony was to take place a once-over. The room set aside in Oxford's Register Office might be impressive for Muggles, with the high ceiling and stained glass windows, but it was pretentious to him; particularly when compared to his own home. The light fittings were shaped to look like candles, but on closer inspection were powered by that Muggle energy. Electricity, that was it.

The only thing that he approved of was the oak panelling and matching solid table, the top covered with leather. The theme was completed by the chairs at the desk being leather padded too. Reminiscent of his own private study, if a pale shadow.

The drag of the door opening against the carpeted floor drew his attention to where Will was escorting Hermione inside, the Harridan on their heels.

Lucius glanced at the Bridegroom, and almost rolled his eyes. Severus was transfixed, unblinking as he watched Hermione advance on her father's arm. Granted, the girl did look pretty in her simple, pure white dress (as if she was a *virgin*, which Lucius found highly unlikely), but she was nothing compared to what Narcissa had looked like on their wedding day...

He swallowed hard and resolutely turned his eyes back to the desk, blinking regularly to avoid the threat of humiliating tears. It was only when he registered chairs being pulled back that he stepped back and took his own seat.

One of the Muggle officials remained standing and proceeded to waffle on about love. That was just insult to injury for Lucius, so he ignored it as best he could.

The Harridan's voice began to penetrate his ears from the row of chairs on his left. Judging by the lack of protest from the officials, it must be a planned part of the ceremony. After giving notice of their marriage in person as was required, Severus and his bride had left the planning to the Grangers, as they insisted.

Lucius blinked. Now that he listened to what Harridan Helen said, he couldn't believe his ears. Judging by the tense backs of Severus and Hermione, neither could they.

"...one wine glass of common sense, a dash of modesty." The Harridan cleared her throat, clearly unaccustomed to public speaking.

"Put the love, good looks and sweet temper into a well-furnished house. Beat the butter of youth to a cream, and mix well together with the blindness of faults. Stir the pounded wit and good humour into the sweet argument, then add the rippling laughter and common sense. Add a dash of modesty and work the whole together until everything is well mixed. Bake gently for ever."

Lucius watched the bride and groom exchange a nervous glance. He couldn't blame them. What would Will's reading be after Helen's ... interesting choice? *Thank Merlin this charade isn't my wedding.*

Severus took Hermione's hand, their eyes locked onto each other in a way that was painful for Lucius to watch.

"I do solemnly declare, that I know of no lawful impediment why I, Severus Tobias Snape, may not be joined in marriage to Hermione Jean Granger."

Compared to Severus's more confident declaration, Hermione sounded nervous. "I declare that I know of no legal reason why I, Hermione Jean Granger, may not be joined in marriage to Severus Tobias Snape." She also stumbled over Severus's middle name.

"I, Severus Tobias Snape, take thee, Hermione Jean Granger to be my lawfully wedded wife."

"I, Hermione Jean Granger, take you, Severus Tobias Snape, to be my lawfully wedded husband." She sounded less nervous this time, more used to Severus's full name, Lucius supposed. Either that or somehow reassured by Severus's subtle squeeze of her hand between the legal declaration and the contracting words.

One of the officials stood and moved around the desk to pass the goblin wrought platinum rings to them, Lucius's contribution to this marriage. Other than that, Hermione's parents were paying for this.

"I give you this ring as a token of my love and friendship." It was a definite wrench to see Severus slide the band of metal onto Hermione's finger, and another to hear her echo the words and put her ring on his finger. Lucius fingered his own ring, all too soon to be removed and replaced by a token of a fallacious union.

From his place beside the Harridan, Will cleared his throat. It was apparently time for his reading. Lucius braced himself, slightly amused to see the happy couple do the same.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is no love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark..."

Swiping at his eyes, Lucius swallowed hard. Narcissa had adored Shakespeare. This time the tears trickled out, unstoppable. Thankfully all eyes were on the almost-married pair. By the time Will had finished his recitation, Lucius had regained control of his emotions, clandestinely using magic to erase all evidence of his tears.

'When will this ordeal be over?'

Much to Lucius's relief, he could tell that it must be almost over when the paperwork on the desk was signed and witnessed. He could hear a pen scratching over paper, although his view was blocked by the assorted bodies.

After the bureaucratic requirements were fulfilled, Lucius dispassionately observed the newlyweds pose by the desk for the camera-wielding Will.

Thanking the officials, they made their way to the exit on the right side of the room.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" The main officiator asked, a rhetorical question if Lucius had ever heard one. "You may kiss the bride."

The Harridan sniffled as Severus bent down to chastely kiss Hermione, burying her head into Will's shoulder, who wiped at his eyes. Lucius did his utmost to convince himself that he was unmoved, but felt something in his traitorous chest twinge. Not sorrow this time ... His eyes widened. Surely not jealousy?

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing. And to Kribu for alpha reading.

Credit to septentrion for the idea of Hermione landing on the roof at Spinner's End.

Civil ceremony information from: <http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/marriages/>

Oxford Registry Office information from: http://portal.oxfordshire.gov.uk/content/publicnet/council_services/

community_living/birth_death_marriage/marriages/virtualtours/qt/oxfordvirtualtour.mov

Reading references:

A Good Wedding Cake (author unknown).

Sonnet No. 116 by William Shakespeare.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 37

The wizarding wedding.

Chapter 7

Severus eyed the door. As usual, Lucius was fashionably late, even by the sluggish clock on the mantelpiece. Reluctant to step inside the *hovel* that was Spinner's End, most likely.

It was the day after the Muggle civil ceremony. The idea was that the three of them would meet to discuss the wizarding wedding. It made sense to get the damn thing organised before the Ministry could breathe down their necks any more than it already was.

Finally there was a sharp knock at the door, as if a certain someone had rapped his poncey snake-headed cane against it.

Tempting as it was to jerk the door open after a pause so that Lucius fell inside, Severus tugged it open immediately.

Lucius swept inside, utterly ignoring Severus. He walked straight over to where Hermione sat in her now-favoured chair next to the fireplace.

Jaw tightening, Severus resolutely turned away to close the door. This time, he would not watch Lucius's jealousy-inducing courtly behaviour around *this* Hermione. He glanced down at the plain platinum ring encircling his finger. His wife, even.

He blinked as he registered a hoot behind him. He had to bite back a laugh at the sight that greeted him when he turned.

A small owl was clinging to Lucius's forearm, talons piercing his robe. As Severus watched, Lucius shook his arm. The owl merely hooted in response ... and proceeded to do its business, the mess of course deposited on the shredded fabric.

"Would you care to remove this abominable creature from me?" Lucius snarled, clearly itching to draw his wand.

Hermione lowered her hand from her mouth, her body shaking as she struggled not to laugh, much as Severus was.

"Pig, come here!" The owl instantly let go and fluttered over to Hermione.

Lucius only growled all the more at the ease with which Hermione brought the owl under control. He drew his wand from his cane, balefully eyeing the owl, but only Scourgified his sleeve and repaired the torn fabric. Sitting down, he was the epitome of hurt dignity.

Severus rolled his eyes and took his own seat, closer to Hermione.

She had removed a letter from the owl's leg, folded up so small that even Severus's keen eyes had missed it at first.

"I owled Ginny yesterday morning, to ask her to be my bridesmaid in the wizarding ceremony. I think she'd kill me if I didn't," Hermione explained as she unfolded the letter. Her eyes moved as she scanned the missive; then she winced. "Sounds like she's going to kill me anyway, leaving it until now to get in touch with her. But she definitely will

be my bridesmaid..." she trailed off, frowning slightly as she read further.

Hermione covered her mouth again, but not to mask laughter, her eyes wide and ... horrified?

Utterly ignoring Lucius's presence, Severus leaned forward to put his hand on her shoulder. She didn't react, even when he squeezed gently.

"Hermione, what's wrong?"

"I think I might know," Lucius said quietly, from his chair across the room. Almost hesitantly, if a Malfoy could be anything other than completely certain. "I recall a rumour that there had been a death in the Weasley family due to the plague. The mother."

"It's true. Molly's dead." Hermione finally looked up. "We might not have always seen eye to eye, but I'll miss her. And the Weasleys... how awful! First Fred, now Molly." She bit her lip, but was unable to restrain herself from howling: "Will it never end?"

The letter crumpled under her fingers. "I sent a letter to Luna Lovegood too, asking the same thing of her as I did of Ginny." She inhaled a shuddering breath. "According to Ginny, there will be no reply, unless Luna's father can bring himself to answer."

"Miss Lovegood is dead, too?" Severus closed his eyes. "I did not know. Nor of Molly's death. Other than the deaths at Hogwarts, I have not been kept informed of exactly who died. Only of the numbers involved."

Hermione twisted around to face him head on. "Deaths at Hogwarts?"

"It was a pandemic, Hermione," he gently reminded her. "The population of witches has been decimated worldwide, even at Hogwarts. The so-called safest place in wizarding Britain was no safeguard against the plague."

"Who died at Hogwarts?" she demanded.

"Students and staff, and literally at Hogwarts in some cases, as St. Mungo's was overflowing."

"Who?"

Severus sighed. This was not a conversation that he really wished to have ... but she did deserve to know. "Professors McGonagall..."

"No!" Hermione's protest sounded as if she'd been winded.

"Please do not interrupt. This is not easy for me, either. They were my colleagues, even if not always on the best of terms with me."

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Professors Vector, Trelawney and Sinistra; and Madam Pomfrey."

A strangled sob escaped her. As Severus recalled, she had been one of Vector's favourite students, but her reaction could equally well be down to the mention of the no-nonsense matron. Hermione had spent quite some time in the hospital wing, after all, largely down to her misadventures with Potter.

"I should have asked. I should have realised what it meant when you told me how many had died back when I first woke up." Hermione's voice wobbled. She ignored the tears trickling down her cheeks, and made no effort to wipe them away. It was as if she did not even realise that she was crying, or did not care.

Severus shifted. Tears had made him uncomfortable long before he earned the mentally-scarring moniker of 'Snivellus'. But he kept one hand on her shoulder as he reached inside his pocket for his handkerchief, thankfully clean.

Just as he held the scrap of fabric in front of her, Lucius also reached across with his own offering. A tremulous laugh escaped Hermione, her voice equally shaky when she thanked them. She took both, blowing her nose with Lucius's finely embroidered and monogrammed specimen, and using Severus's to wipe away her tearstains.

"Keep it," Lucius muttered. He flinched almost imperceptibly when Hermione offered to hand his handkerchief back to him.

Severus also refused his. "I have a spare." One that was not damp, either, but there was no need to state that; it would make him sound like a squeamish schoolboy.

"I suppose I might need to use them again. Who else died? How many students?"

Lucius cleared his throat before Severus could do more than wince at Hermione's question. "At the risk of sounding like an unfeeling bastard, I came here to discuss our impending marriage."

Severus felt Hermione tense under his hand. "Unfeeling, yes, but ..." She sighed and relaxed. "You're right. We need to get this organised."

* * *

"The Ministry has requested that we have a public wedding. Apparently a marriage involving war heroes will be good for the morale of wizarding Britain."

"How convenient for you, Lucius. That's exactly what you wanted, isn't it?" Severus sneered. "Good publicity for the Malfoy name."

Lucius merely sipped his tea, eyeing the liquid as if he wished it was something stronger. The way this discussion was going, Severus had to admit that his friend might well be in luck, despite the relatively early hour.

"Much as I'd prefer a private ceremony, this might get the Ministry and the press off our backs. And us in their good books," Hermione mused.

"Convenient for your protest against the law. And one must suffer for one's causes," Lucius sniffed. "And speaking of suffering, you'll be pleased to hear that the curse breaking team has almost finished work on purifying Malfoy Manor. Considering how long it has taken Gringott's finest, I suppose it was high time that the place had a spring clean."

Severus rolled his eyes at Lucius's long suffering tone. "I fail to see why you are grumbling about 'suffering' curse breakers in your home. It can only do your precious social standing in the current climate good to be seen to rid your home of the lingering Darkness from your unfortunate affiliation during the war."

Lucius opened his mouth, clearly affronted. Before he could say a word, Hermione dug her fingers into Severus's forearm, painfully catching his attention. Ignoring her during a previous argument with Lucius had been a mistake if it meant that she would make sure she had his attention this way. *'Ouch! Has she never heard of the expression of catching more flies with honey than with vinegar?'*

"Don't start bickering. We need to get our nuptials sorted before the Ministry sorts them for us. Do you really want to risk whatever horrors they come up with, either of you?"

Severus exchanged a wary look with Lucius, visions of far worse than Helen's recipe reading passing through his mind. Ring bearing unicorns were romantic, but hardly practical; their skittish nature around non-virgins could reveal rather too much about the bride, if they didn't bolt away from the assembled throng of guests. That and the mess. But unicorn manure was a valuable potions ingredient. Maybe it would be worthwhile ... He glanced sidelong at Hermione. Then again, perhaps it wouldn't be ...

tactful. Best not.

"No? Then let's get on." To Severus's relief, Hermione relaxed her talon-like grip on his arm.

* * *

'Do not hex the photographer. He may be paparazzo masquerading as the official photographer, but hexing him would be more trouble than it's worth.' Hermione did her best to ignore the blinding flashes from the camera wielded by the over-enthusiastic photographer. Besides, to hex him or the infernal camera would require extracting her wand, and she couldn't manage that without exposing rather more leg than was considered decent.

Her father gave the photographer a warning glare, as did Ginny to judge by the way the unfortunate wizard stepped back. To Hermione's relief, the barrage of flashes finally stopped.

Before Hermione could do more than step towards the still-closed double doors of the Ministry's largest hall, there was a muffled slap from behind her. Hermione and her dad twisted around, almost expecting to see the photographer clutching his cheek, with a vengeful Ginny loomed over him.

Instead the photographer looked just as perplexed as her father; as puzzled as Hermione felt. But the sound of the slap was easily explained by Ginny's hand on her own forehead. She looked stricken.

"I can't believe I almost forgot! Your dress, Hermione."

Hermione frowned, completely mystified by what Ginny could mean. During the planning of the wedding, the only thing specified about her dress was that it had to be wizarding made. Lucius had been most insistent. Perhaps she should have asked why at the time.

"Did you think that the way Fleur's dress looked was down to her being a part-Veela?" Ginny rolled her eyes. "The fabric is enchanted before the ceremony. This is cutting it a little fine, especially as this idiot..." she nodded at the photographer, ignoring his indignant squawk, "was snapping away before you were ready."

"Now, if you blokes don't mind looking away while I retrieve my wand, I can get the bride sorted out."

Her dad let go of Hermione in order to firmly turn the photographer away. Hermione stepped in front of Ginny so that if the wizard was as dodgy as he appeared to be and tried peeking, he wouldn't see anything.

Ginny lowered the skirt of her silver dress, wand in hand. "Now, close your eyes and... Oh *Bugger*. The spell is only as bright as the strength of your feelings for the groom. Grooms in this case. It's going to make it a little obvious that this isn't a love match."

Ah. A potential problem, then. Although in the week since her marriage to Severus, it had become clear to Hermione that she felt more than just friendship for him. But love at this stage in their fledgling relationship?

"Just cast the spell, Ginny. If it's the usual thing, it will look even stranger if the bride doesn't glow at all." She closed her eyes, wishing that Ginny didn't look so dubious.

"Alright. Keep your eyes closed and think no, focus on your feelings, not thoughts about your soon-to-be husbands. Don't think about anything else, or this 'glow' will be even dimmer."

'The way Severus and Lucius's faces lit up when they talked, even when they argued ... Severus holding her in his arms ... The strange flutter in her chest she'd had to suppress the last time Lucius had kissed her hand ... The feel of Severus's mouth, the caress of his tongue, his body against hers ... And the way Severus respected himself and her enough not to rush into a physical relationship before they were ready ...'

Hermione felt the skin beneath the fabric of her dress tingle as if a Cooling Charm had been cast on it.

"Hermione ..." Ginny's voice sounded strange.

Once she had opened her eyes, Hermione could see why. While not as bright a glow as Fleur's wedding dress had been, her own dress still cast a respectable shine. It was also strong enough to have the same sort of beautifying effects on those the light fell on: it made her father look years younger, the photographer almost respectable, and Ginny breathtakingly pretty.

"Since when did you have feelings for Snape and *Malfoy*? I heard that you were friends with Snape, but surely you must've forgotten about that what with the side effect of the cure?" Ginny shook herself. "Never mind. We're already late."

The doors swung open at their approach, revealing a room the size of a cathedral, complete with vaulted ceilings far above. Hermione had no time to wonder at the size, as she instantly felt the weight of the eyes on her as soon as she had stepped inside.

The hall was packed with people, at least two thirds wizards. Few of them looked familiar to Hermione, although there was admittedly not much time to tell, and her eyes were drawn down the marble-floored aisle to where Severus and Lucius stood in front of the officiator: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic.

Walking down the aisle on her father's arm seemed to take forever ... and somehow no time at all, the loss of her sense of time magnified by the eerie silence, broken only by the occasional stifled gasp and the faint music emitted by silver balloons floating overhead.

Severus was staring unblinkingly at her, transfixed. Although somewhat similar to his reaction in the Muggle ceremony, it utterly eclipsed it.

Lucius seemed shaken by the sight of her. His eyes dropped to his bare left hand. Hermione noted the way his hand seemed to convulsively tighten into a fist, then relax as he looked up again, his face once again a cool mask. Interesting

It was bizarre, watching their appearance change as she neared. Severus became progressively handsome, while Lucius looked almost too pretty to be allowed. Perhaps it was a good thing that the beautifying effects were not as strong as with Fleur's dress, otherwise Hermione's bridegrooms would have been unrecognisable.

Her father squeezed Hermione's arm before he handed her over to the bridegrooms, each taking one hand and standing either side of her, although Lucius had to nudge Severus into action.

To Hermione's embarrassment, Lucius also had to nudge her a few minutes later when it was time for their vows. *'Damn,*' she thought, blushing, *'I'm just as bad as Severus, and for the same reason!'* Dragging her eyes away from Severus, she muttered an apology to Kingsley. She blushed harder when he winked at her.

"Do you, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, take Hermione Jean Granger to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." Lucius seemed to hesitate slightly, but his voice was confident and even when he spoke.

"Do you, Hermione Jean Granger, take Lucius Abraxas Malfoy to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do." At least this time there was no stumbling over archaic middle names. Kingsley was the only one who had to worry about that, and so far every word had come smoothly from his mouth.

"Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, take Hermione Jean Granger to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do," Severus said. Hermione noticed that he was being careful not to look at her, which explained why he sounded more like his usual gruff self.

"Do you, Hermione Jean Granger, take Severus Tobias Snape to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do."

"Are you sure that you two don't want to exchange vows?" Kingsley asked, his voice pitched for their ears only. His eyes flicked mischievously between Severus and Lucius. The matching poisonous glares they gave him only made him chuckle. Hermione had to bite down on her lip to avoid laughing. "Alright, if you're sure ... Now you may exchange rings."

Hermione was already wearing Severus's ring, as he was wearing hers, so Severus could keep hold of her right hand while Lucius slid his ring onto her finger.

Once Severus had released her hand, Hermione took the remaining ring from Kingsley's hands. After Lucius's earlier reaction, she was unsurprised to see a melancholy look flicker across his face as she placed the ring on his finger.

"Just signing your marriage certificate remains." Kingsley held out a long, thin black quill. The point on it looked sharp enough to make it count as an offensive weapon. There was no ink well or ink pot on the desk behind him ... a horrible suspicion began to dawn in Hermione's mind. As she watched Lucius sign, she had to stifle a gasp when his signature briefly appeared, cut into the back of his hand before it healed seconds later.

She stood, frozen in a horrified daze. This was effectively two marriages, so she'd have to sign twice. In her own blood. Her eyes seemed to be the only part of her still capable of moving, fixed on Severus as he took the quill from Lucius. Watching as his name was incised on the back of his hand. Almost feeling the sting as it did so

"This is nothing compared to Harry's detention. Come on, you've had worse. Move!"

Very reluctantly, she forced herself to step over to the desk and take the quill from Severus's hand. Her hand shook; how was she meant to sign her name?

A warm hand laid over her shaky one, gently stilling it.

"I will kiss it better later. In private." Severus's lips tickled her ear as they moved, his nose brushing her hair where it was bundled up on top of her head as tidily as Ginny could manage.

That brought back her courage, although it also dusted her cheeks with colour.

She signed her name, her teeth gritted at the sharp sting accompanying every stroke of the pen. Damn her parents for giving her such a long name! At least the resulting cut healed fast, although slower after the second time she signed. It also looked and felt rather sore. *'Severus had better make good on his promise.'*

Kingsley took the quill back, examined the document, then signed his own name. He motioned for them to join hands again.

"I declare you bonded for life." He drew his wand and raised it as high as he could reach over their heads. A shower of silver sparks rained down. They felt like melting snowflakes wherever they landed on Hermione's skin.

"You may kiss the bride."

Without hesitating, despite all the eyes on them, Severus reached over to lay his free hand on her jaw. He gently turned her head to his and bent down to claim her lips.

After a while, Lucius cleared his throat. Severus released her. He hid his reluctance fairly well, but Hermione could tell that he wasn't happy. Something to do with the set of his jaw, or was it the look in his eyes?

Distracted by her ponderings on Severus, the only warning she had of Lucius's kiss was when he tilted her head up. His lips were drier than Severus's, and he did not linger quite as long, although to give him credit, he also didn't just peck her on the lips and jerk back as if he was repulsed by her.

Their audience seemed to get over their shock at seeing their darling war heroine in the arms of two former Death Eaters; war hero though Severus was, he was hardly popular. An uneven smattering of applause broke out, the clamour bolstered by the addition of doves and silver bells from the popped music-emitting balloons above.

* * *

"Mind if I cut in, Uncle? I'd like to dance with my step-mother."

Draco managed to keep his smirk internal as Severus gave him a dark look.

"I'm not your uncle," Severus snapped. To Draco's surprise, he turned to Granger. "Do you mind?"

She shrugged, regarding Draco with some bafflement. Hardly surprising, really, as she probably knew nothing of his estrangement from his father, and his new stand on blood purity.

"Return her to me in one piece," Severus ordered as he handed Granger over, and moved to stand over by the bar. Provided Severus stayed there, Draco thought it would be easy enough to do as he 'asked'.

"Don't worry, I don't bite," Draco said, in an attempt to get her to loosen up. Granger held herself far too stiffly in his arms, despite his stance at a respectful distance.

"I guess not. You left that to your lackeys."

Draco winced at her icy tone. For a moment, he thought she meant his use of Crabbe and Goyle's muscle during their school days, then, with an awful sinking feeling in his stomach, realised that she meant that disastrous time in the room full of hidden things at Hogwarts, the night the Dark Lord fell. Crabbe had tried to kill her ... No wonder she remembered that. From what Draco had heard, none of the plague patients had memories of the year since the victory of the Light over the Dark.

"Yes, um ... Sorry about that. I had no control over them at that point, what with the family reputation in the gutter. I told them not to kill, really!"

Granger's gaze felt as if it could see into his soul. Much like Severus's could, Draco realised. He shuddered to think what she'd pick up from his father.

"I believe you," she stated. "If you had a taste for killing, Severus wouldn't have had to kill Dumbledore."

Draco winced all the more at the reminder of that.

"Sorry, Malfoy," Granger muttered. "We're really starting this step-relationship thing off on the wrong foot."

"Shall we start over again, then?" He stopped dancing and stepped back. "Please, call me Draco."

He bent from the waist in his best courtly bow, took her hand and kissed the air above it.

"Er ..." Granger seemed lost for words. "Right. Draco. Erm, you may call me Hermione."

"Hermione," he repeated, testing out the unfamiliar syllables on his tongue. He made a mental note not to call her Granger again, even in the privacy of his mind. He straightened up. "Allow me to escort you back to your husband."

Draco was puzzled to see that Severus was no longer at the bar. The serving wizard behind it pointed him in the direction of the men's lavatories.

"We might as well wait outside it. I had my fill of champagne earlier." A single glass, as far as Draco had been able to tell. It seemed that Gra...Hermione wanted to stay sober on her wedding day.

"I was talking to your parents over dinner," Draco said, attempting to find a topic of conversation that would prove his improved character to her.

"I noticed. Did they offer to give you a dental check-up?"

"No." Draco blinked, nonplussed. "They complimented me on the condition of my teeth, though. Is that usual for Muggles?"

"For them, it is. They're dentists: Muggle tooth doctors."

Draco blinked again. Perhaps he should have taken Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, although his parents would have disowned him if he had.

"Healers for the mouth. I keep forgetting that there's no such thing as doctors in the wizarding world."

They were now loitering outside the toilets. Severus could appear at any moment, but as Hermione seemed to be in an understanding mood, Draco though he would try his luck.

"I promised my father that I'd attend this wedding, but making an effort to reconcile with him is not the only reason I came today."

"Oh?" Good. He'd piqued her interest. She was regarding him with much the same expression on her face as when they'd been given Arithmancy homework at Hogwarts.

"Like every wizard out there, I need to get married."

Hermione blinked. At his expectant look, she seemed to realise that he wanted suggestions from her. "What about Pansy Parkinson?"

"She's dead," he said flatly. He still felt a sharp pang of loss. Pansy had been his friend long before they ever started at Hogwarts.

"Daphne Greengrass?"

"I was betrothed to her little sister, Astoria, who's also dead, by the way. Daphne's just got married to Theo Nott. He happens to be bisexual, or maybe homosexual, I'm not sure which. Anyway, the point is that he fancies me. I'm decidedly not gay, Granger!"

Hermione raised an eyebrow, either to remind him to use her first name, or to imply that she thought he protested too much. To Draco's relief, she let it slide.

"Millicent Bulstrode?"

"Are you kidding? She's getting married to Goyle. Good for him, he's about the only wizard who won't be crushed by her."

"The point is, Hermione, that I don't want to marry a pure-blood. Or a Slytherin. I want a fresh start."

"Let me get this straight." Hermione massaged the bridge of her nose, almost as if Draco's problem was giving her a headache. "You want my help to find you a bride."

"Yes. I mean, yes please. Cutting myself off from my family unfortunately didn't do much to help my reputation. If you endorsed me, I'm sure witches would see me in a new light."

She didn't look convinced.

"*Please*. Think of it as performing your step-motherly duties."

"I'll think about it." She sighed, and slumped back against the door to the men's loos.

Draco was about to try pleading his case again when Hermione twisted around, pressing one ear to the door. She pressed a finger to her lips. Curious, Draco pressed his own ear to the door, a head above where Hermione could reach. Muffled voices reached his ears. Extracting his wand, he tapped the door with the tip, a muttered spell making noise pass through the door as if it was not there.

"...don't like you. I don't trust you. But compared to Malfoy, you're my best friend." The voice made Draco feel as if his hackles were rising. Weasley, going by the whiny tone.

"Take care of her, okay?" Ah. So Weasley was presumably talking about Hermione. To Severus?

"I will." Yes, that was Severus's deep, silky baritone.

'Better the devil you know, eh, Weasel?' Not that Draco could blame him. He wouldn't trust his father either. But he didn't think that Lucius would do anything to hurt Hermione. It would do his precious reputation no good, even if he survived Severus's wrath.

Draco glanced down at Hermione, his attention drawn by a stifled growl, much like a lioness on the hunt. The look in her eyes made him take an involuntary step back, as his eyes jumped to the slim hand laid on the wood of the door. Slim, but powerful. He touched his cheek, remembering the force behind her slap back in their third year. No, she didn't need anyone to protect her. Woe betide anyone who presumed to try, and Lucius if he did anything to upset her.

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Chapter 8

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Hermione yawned widely. It had been a long day, made all the longer by her repressed anger. Tempting as it had been to burst into the men's toilets to set Ronald and Severus straight, that only would have caused a scene. Not something she wanted on her wedding day. The way it had been taken over as a Ministry propaganda tool was bad enough.

No, Ron was someone else's problem now whoever he found as a wife. As for Severus ... he could learn his lesson in private.

Malfoy Manor was a welcome respite from the crowded Ministry hall. By the time they had thanked the most important guests for coming, it was so late that it was early.

Lucius had produced a Portkey to spirit them away before the rabble of parasitic paparazzi could descend. *'I could have kissed him.'*

The Portkey deposited them in the entrance hall. Lucius tossed the chipped champagne flute that had served as their escape route to Dilly the door-elf.

"First of all we should check if the curse breaking worked." Lucius nodded at where Hermione's hand was still intertwined with Severus's to touch the Portkey.

Severus let go of her, but kept his hand hovering near hers. While it was endearing for him to be so protective, Hermione also experienced a fresh surge of irritation. But she suppressed that, too. Her poor pillow would end up deaf by the time she was free to scream into it tonight.

"Well?" Lucius asked. His voice drawled expectantly.

Right. She closed her eyes in an effort to heighten her other senses, but there was nothing to detect. No icy hand clutched her insides this time.

"It seems to have worked, although you'll forgive me if I don't want to set foot into the drawing room to truly test it out right now."

"Excellent." Lucius had to stifle a yawn. "I suppose it's high time I showed you to your rooms."

Severus took her hand again, and they followed Lucius upstairs through a maze of dimly lit corridors. Soft snores came from ancestral Malfoy portraits, any disapproval of her presence masked by painted sleep.

Luckily her dress was no longer glowing, otherwise the portraits would complain about the light. But the fabric had dimmed as soon as they'd arrived at Malfoy Manor. Hermione suspected that the illumination spell Ginny had used required proximity to the caster to remain active.

Lucius turned into yet another corridor, but stopped beside the first door. "Here we are." He gestured to the door, and to the next one. "Adjoining rooms. If you're sure that you don't want your own wings?"

Hermione nodded slightly at Severus's querying glance. "Absolutely certain," he said. "That wouldn't be married life as either of us expect it to be."

At that, Hermione had to force down another flicker of anger. What did Severus know of her expectations? They'd never been discussed.

"I suppose it would be a jarring change from cosy Spinner's End," Lucius murmured. He covered his mouth delicately as he yawned again. "I'll bid you good night." He made as if to step towards Hermione, but flinched. Watching closely, Hermione was unsurprised to see his eyes flicker towards his ring, rather than at Severus. His gaze only lingered for a second, before he turned on his heel and disappeared down the corridor.

She exchanged a look with Severus, a small smile quirking the corners of her lips when they both raised an eyebrow at the same time. Her smile faded as quickly as it had appeared, as she remembered that she was angry with him. This time it was no use trying to suppress her anger, as it simmered past boiling point. She let go of his hand and glared up at him.

"Hermione?" Severus looked utterly baffled, almost as clueless as Ron at his worst. That just fanned the flames of her annoyance all the more.

"If you *expect* us not to share rooms during our married life, I might as well go to bed now. See you in the morning." Then she yanked the door open, flounced inside and closed the door in his face before he could say a word.

The room was spacious without overwhelming her, the walls pale green while the carpet was predictably silvery. Hermione thought that she wouldn't be surprised if that was the colour scheme for most of the rooms.

There were no bags cluttering up the floor, presumably because the house-elves had unpacked as well as transported their belongings. But there was also no Crookshanks. A sinking feeling in her stomach, Hermione opened the nearest cupboard. As she suspected, it was full of Severus's clothes. She made a mental note to drag him out on a clothes shopping expedition at some point: he definitely needed a bit more variety in his wardrobe.

She turned away from the cupboard when there was a knock at the adjoining door.

"Hermione, either your cat is in my room, or you made your dramatic exit into the wrong one." His voice was muffled by the door, but she could all-too-clearly hear the laughter that followed the clatter of wardrobe doors opening. "I'm not really into cross-dressing, dear."

Red-cheeked, she walked across the thick carpet to open the adjoining door. At least Severus had the sense not to smirk, although his eyes shone with suppressed mirth.

Before Hermione could go through the adjoining door, Severus deftly caught hold of her. He dipped her in his arms, bent over and kissed her. She let him, even kissed back, although her anger lent a bruising force to them on her part.

He set her back on her feet. Hermione was breathing hard, her heart pounding.

"I'm still angry with you."

"I know," he said, and had the nerve to smirk at her. He bent to kiss her again.

She reluctantly pushed him away. "I'm not in the mood," she stated, and stepped towards the door.

Severus frowned, then nodded. "I suppose we're too tired for that step." He put his hands on her shoulders. "And you're too angry," he murmured, fingers working on her tense muscles. "But the point of having separate rooms is so that we have our own space. Notice that they are adjoining rooms? We won't be living separate lives."

"I know. But you should have talked to me about it first." She shrugged him off. "Good night," she said firmly, and stepped through into her room. She turned to close the door.

"Allow me." Severus shut the door before she could. Not that she could blame him. It had to hurt his feelings to have a door closed in his face, and for her to attempt to do so twice in one night ... She winced. *'I'll make it up to him tomorrow.'*

She turned to her new room, lit by candles on wall sconces. The décor was much the same as Severus's, from the green walls to the silver carpet. One wall was taken up by a window, currently blocked from view by curtains of deep green velvet. Looking at the room, it seemed to be a mirror of the one she'd just been in, although she hadn't noticed the door next to the bed, across the room from the adjoining door. A peek through it revealed an en suite bathroom, with a bath more than big enough for two people.

Hermione turned to the bed. A king size four-poster (with velvet curtains of the same shade as those on the window) for one person ... typically extravagant for this house. Although, she supposed that it was intended for two occasionally, as that was the whole point of adjoining rooms for a married couple.

Crookshanks had made himself at home, curled up on the green and silver chequered quilt. Hermione yawned again at the sight of him. She ached to join him in slumber.

But first she needed to get out of her increasingly uncomfortable wedding finery. For a moment, she struggled to reach for the zip on the back before her tired brain recalled that it wasn't a Muggle dress. No zip. No buttons, either. Ginny had dealt with it that morning. *'Perhaps I should have paid a little more attention to how she did it. She didn't say anything, though. Maybe she assumed that I knew how to take it off? Argh! Even if I crawl back to Severus for help, he'd likely be just as clueless as me.'*

A muttered *'Finite Incantatem'* had no effect whatsoever. As good as she was with charms, she didn't want to try to cut it off herself unless she had no other choice.

"Oh, help," she muttered, along with a few choice swear words.

"Missy wants help?" a voice squeaked from behind her.

Hermione spun around, automatically looking down. It did sound like a house-elf, after all. It was, with a pointy nose and matching ears. Hermione thought that it looked rather similar to poor Dobby, but different, somehow. A female, maybe? It was always so difficult to tell with house-elves.

Large green eyes blinked up at her. "Master sends Tricky to new Mistress."

"Lucius sent you? How ... kind ... of him." Much as Hermione didn't want the service slavery! of a house-elf, she really did need help to undress if she wanted to keep her wedding dress intact.

"Master always kind to Mistress." The elf sounded insulted at the implication that her precious master could be anything other than kind, at least to the Mistress of the house. "What can Tricky do for Missy?"

"Could you help me out of this dress, please?"

The elf snapped her fingers, and the closure at the back of the bodice finally opened.

"Thank you. Oh, you don't need to..."

"Tricky is a good personal house-elf." The elf was using her magic to peel the dress and underclothes off Hermione, a nightie floating out of a cupboard, ready to slide on to her.

"Missy is pretty," Tricky commented, before snapping her fingers again. The nightie slid over Hermione's head, muffling the elf's squeaking voice. Hermione thought that it added something like 'Although not as pretty as my poor Mistress', but couldn't be sure. She said nothing more by the time Hermione's head was free of the clingy cotton.

Crookshanks hissed from the bed. His yellow eyes were fixed on Tricky, narrowed into a baleful glare. He tensed as if to pounce, his tail flicking from side to side.

"Crooks, no!" Hermione grabbed hold of his collar. He growled and swatted at her, but kept his claws retracted. "What's got into you? House-elves are not prey."

She turned back to the elf, most of her concentration on restraining her struggling cat. "Sorry, he's usually very well behaved."

"Tricky will leave Missy to sleep now." Tricky turned away, but didn't vanish immediately. She was muttering something under her breath. The only word Hermione could catch was 'Mudblood'. She felt her heart sink. Just like Kreacher

There was a *crack* and the house-elf was gone. Hermione crawled into bed and put out the candles with a wave of her wand. Crookshanks snuggled up to her, his warm weight and purrs reassuring.

Hermione sighed. She needed to put her thoughts aside in order to sleep. Severus being overprotective and her guilt over her reaction to that could wait. Harry ... *well that* would be dealt with soon enough. He knew she wanted to talk to him, she'd told him at the reception in no uncertain terms. He might even have an inkling about why she wanted a word, although this being Harry, maybe not. Did he know how difficult it had been for her to look the remaining Weasleys in the eye?

She took several deep breaths and determinedly pushed Harry out of her mind. Sleep was still a while in coming.

* * *

It was still dark when some inconsiderate person knocking on the door awoke Severus. He rolled out of bed, his wand levelled at the door, his heart hammering. Then his mind caught up with his reflexes, thankfully before he hexed anything. That was the adjoining door. *'Hermione. She needs me. Why?'*

"*Lumos.*" He squinted in the light cast by his wand, but at least it lit less of the room than relighting the candles would.

He swiftly crossed the room and opened the door. Hermione had her own wand, also lit, but her hand was trembling so much that the light wavered.

Had the Dark atmosphere somehow returned? That would explain why she trembled like a leaf. Severus pulled her into his arms, but his touch didn't stop her shivers.

"What's wrong?"

"Nightmare." Her voice was muffled against his chest.

He stroked her back with his free hand. "Come to bed."

The adjoining door closed. Severus had no wish to be clawed by a cat misguidedly trying to defend the honour of its mistress. They curled up together, nested like spoons, Hermione in the curve of his body.

"What was the nightmare about?"

She just shook her head, her hair brushing against his chest.

"It might help to talk about it," he suggested.

"I ... can't actually remember. It's stupid, I should go."

In answer, Severus tightened his arms around her waist. "I have nightmares like that. But the feeling stays with you, even if the specifics of the dream do not."

"It still makes me feel ridiculous," she grumbled, but laid her hands on top of his.

After a while, just as Severus was about to drop off to sleep, she spoke up again. "While I can't remember what it was about, it felt familiar, somehow. As if I'd dreamt it before. I woke up suddenly, quite, um, upset ... but I felt exhausted, as if I'd been running."

"Hmm," he grunted. "Why didn't your cat comfort you? Not that I'm complaining, just wondering."

"I literally jerked awake. Crooks vanished under the bed and wouldn't come out. He sulks when his sleep is disturbed."

'Understandable.'

Oops. Judging by the way Hermione had just stiffened, he'd managed to say that thought aloud.

She tugged at his hands. "If you want me to go..."

"No. It's just been a very long day. Sleep?"

"If I can," she muttered.

"Shall I get you a dose of Dreamless Sleep?"

"Please."

By the time Severus got back from his hunt through the medicine cupboard in the bathroom, Hermione was snoring softly. *Typical.'*

He set the vial of Dreamless Sleep down on the bedside table, just in case it would be useful again. Then he climbed into bed next to his bride and pulled her close.

It was light when Severus's sleep was disturbed again. This time, the door to his room from the corridor clicked open. Severus did two things on snapping awake. He pulled the quilt up to Hermione's throat, and grabbed his wand from the bedside table. Only a fool would sleep with a wand under a pillow, due to the potential of sparks.

Lucius stood in the doorway, his eyebrows raised at the sight before him. Did he expect them to sleep in separate beds, or did he not expect to have a wand aimed at him? No matter.

"Go away. Knock next time, too. Just because you are the master of this house does not give you the right to barge in like this."

"Apologies," Lucius sneered. "Come down when you want breakfast. I won't send an elf with food today, since there are things we need to talk about." He closed the door with exaggerated care.

Quite why they couldn't talk after eating breakfast separately was beyond Severus. Perhaps Lucius wanted to be sociable over meals? He shuddered at the recollection of his parents arguing over meals. No, meals were for eating, not for discussing serious matters.

He replaced his wand on the bedside table, noting the time as he did so. It was high time for breakfast. The pangs of hunger he felt made that quite clear. It was time to wake the young woman drooling on his pillow.

It was only when he leant close to her in order to wake her up with an embrace that Severus noticed Hermione's state of undress. Thankfully under the covers, where Lucius hadn't been able to see, but Severus could certainly feel it. He was most ... interested to discover that her nightgown had ridden up to her waist.

The only thing between them where she still lay spooned against him was his new silk pyjama bottoms, his sole concession so far to married life, and a wedding present from Hermione's parents. During their week living in close proximity in Spinner's End, Hermione had informed him that the pyjamas were far more attractive than his old nightshirts.

Nuzzling his nose against her hair, he inhaled deeply. Yes, she was a bit sweaty after her disturbed night, but she still smelled good to him. Very natural, very feminine, very ... very Hermione.

Severus explored the warm, smooth skin exposed under Hermione's nightgown. The soft, slight curve of her stomach. One hand went beneath the nightgown, drawn to explore higher up, while the other one found the coarse curls. And slipped even lower.

'Merlin.'

He found the nub of her clitoris, circled it ... pressed lightly. His fingers slid down, bent on exploring further.

'So soft. So wet.'

Severus removed his hand to smell and then taste the moisture on his fingers. 'Mmm.'

He went back, dipped his fingers into her wetness and spread it.

It was wrong, she was asleep, couldn't give consent ... he should stop. But he couldn't, not when her breath hitched like that, not when she moaned, even in her sleep.

But then he realised that he was grinding his erection into her arse, the flimsy fabric of his pyjamas no protection from the spot of moisture on the tip of his cock, particularly not if he carried on like that. He pulled back, guiltily removing his hand too, only for her to grab hold of his wrist. And brought his hand back between her legs.

"You might as well finish what you start," she said, her voice breathy with sleep and ... arousal, if he wasn't mistaken.

She guided his hand, until he picked up enough of her preferred movements and rhythm. Back and forth, quick flicks of his fingers, a gradual circling motion. Her hips shifting, pressing herself against his hardness, then against his fingers and back again.

Her heavy breathing, almost in synchronisation with his own.

Gasps, moans, groans ... pleas to 'finish, dammit!'

He cupped a breast in one hand, squeezed it gently, rolling the nipple between finger and thumb.

But still not enough, according to her drawn out hiss of his name.

He kept up his attentions on her breast, and shifted his hand to plunge a finger, then another inside her, his thumb busy on her clitoris.

Nearly enough ... he could feel her inner muscles contract around his fingers. He curved them upwards and beckoned in a come-hither motion. The way she arched upwards let him know that he had the right spot. He kept up the movements.

At last Hermione gasped, her head fell back against his shoulder. If he hadn't moved his head in time, she might have hit his nose.

Severus could feel her vaginal muscles twitch around his fingers, faster than the dull throb in his penis. He winced, removing his hand from her breast and withdrawing it from her nightgown in order to pull his pyjamas down to free himself. As well as bring himself off.

He was getting close, his own head thrown back, when he almost choked.

Hermione's hand had joined his own on his cock.

He looked down at her, wide-eyed. She'd pulled his other arm away from and out of herself, and had twisted around to face him.

"You don't have to do this," he tried to say, but only managed to gurgle incoherently.

"I want to," she whispered, somehow understanding him. She leant forwards to kiss him, even as she replaced his hand with her other one.

Her movements were a little hesitant, but she repeated the same moves of his hand with growing confidence.

He flung his head back again, his eyes rolling back in his head. And then...

"Oh God!"

The touch of her lips on his glans, and the flicker of her tongue.

After he caught his breath, and cast a rather embarrassed Cleansing Charm on her face, he embraced her.

"I can last longer," Severus assured her. "It's just been quite some time since I've had any touch but my own."

* * *

Lucius sipped his tea. He had half a mind to order the house-elf serving his breakfast to fetch the Firewhisky, but it was far too early for that. Unless he resisted whenever the urge to drink struck him, he'd end up as a pathetic alcoholic. Well, apart from a couple of fingers of Ogdens's Best at night. That was perfectly safe, even beneficial to the upkeep of a healthy body.

But these ... feelings were not. His sleep was disturbed, and not just due to the void Narcissa's death had left in his life. No, this was something else. Jealousy, gnawing at his insides, even when he couldn't see Severus and Hermione.

At least he'd managed to keep either of them from noticing. Although for how much longer? They had both seen through the cracks in his mask when grief overwhelmed him. Lucius grimaced, his fingers twisting his new ring. The humiliation of his feelings bared, even if Severus and his bride were the only ones to see.

That mortification would be nothing compared to what he would feel if they discovered his jealousy. Bad enough if they thought that he was jealous of their happiness; their pity would be a bitter pill to swallow. Even worse if they thought that he was jealous of Severus, that he desired a *Mudblood*. 'Never.' Yes, she'd looked radiant in her wedding dress, even beautiful, but of course still not a patch on Narcissa.

'Liar,' a treacherous voice in his head declared. *'The moment you saw her, your heart leapt. Whatever would Narcissa think?'*

"Shut up," he hissed, before his cheeks burnt with the realisation that he was arguing with himself. Then the cup in his hand shattered, spilling hot tea over his lap. Further embarrassment mingled with pain, but at least it distracted him from his internal squabble.

The elf cleared up the mess and repaired the cup. "I is sorry, Master, and I is going to iron my hands because I is a bad elf."

"Don't bother," Lucius ordered, after he cast a Cooling Charm on his lap. "Just bring me more tea."

It was an hour since he'd mentioned to Severus that they needed to talk. An hour since he'd caught them in bed together. He really should have expected it, but the sight of them like that was like a blow to the gut. It didn't take much to imagine what was delaying them. Lucius closed his eyes and dragged a hand over his face.

"What was it that you wanted to talk about?"

Lucius looked up. Severus stood in the doorway, his arm around Hermione's shoulders.

"We can talk after you've eaten. You must be hungry," he murmured and offered them a tight smile. It was either that or wince.

* * *

"Is that today's *Prophet*?" Severus asked when he had washed down his full English breakfast with coffee. He pointed at the paper folded on the table in front of Lucius.

"Yes. It's part of why I need to talk to you." Lucius turned to Hermione, careful not to look at Severus. "I apologise in advance for my lack of tact, but there's no particularly delicate way to say this. When will you be ready to consummate this 'marriage' of ours?"

Hermione bristled despite his apology. "Wait your turn," she said tartly.

Lucius dropped his teacup. It smashed on the floor, broken for the second time that morning. He gaped, eyes flicking between Hermione and Severus.

"What? You haven't ... I knew you hadn't last night, it was rather late ... I have no idea why you didn't do it after the Muggle ceremony a week ago, but I know you didn't. But, this morning, surely you did ..." He made some rather obscene motions with his hands, words failing him.

Severus glared at him. Well, Lucius supposed he had been rather crude.

"But ... but ... What in Merlin's name were you *doing* before you came down for breakfast?" Lucius spluttered.

"None of your business," Severus snapped.

Hermione was frowning at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"By what?" Lucius asked, slumped in his chair.

"You said you 'knew' we hadn't done anything else last night or before it. How?"

"Read this." He passed her the *Prophet*.

Severus leant over to read it with her. Lucius knew by the way their faces darkened that they'd found the pertinent part.

"How the hell do they know that we haven't consummated our unions?" Hermione demanded. Lucius just motioned for her to read on.

"I see. From the marriage certificate. But how?"

Lucius gave her a puzzled look. How did she not know? "They are a matter of public record."

"No, I meant how do they know about the lack of consummation from the certificate? It's just a piece of parchment!"

"A piece of enchanted parchment signed in blood," stated Severus. "I imagine that has something to do with it."

"Indeed." Lucius nodded. "When consummated, the signatures change colour. I don't know the specifics of the magic involved, but it will be all too obvious to any prying eyes that our names are still signed in blood, not silver or gold."

Hermione blinked. "Why silver or gold?"

Ah. She had to ask that question. Lucius got the distinct feeling that she would not like the answer. "It's better than the alternative. In the old days, the sheets would be checked."

"For bloodstains? You mean that the colour ink changes to reveals whether or not the bride was a virgin?"

Lucius nodded again. She was definitely angry, he could feel the magic pouring off her, almost taste it as an electric tang in the air.

"That's outrageous! Things like that shouldn't be a matter of public record. Nor should whether or not the marriage was consummated."

The remaining crockery smashed, pelting them with shards if not for the timely intervention of Severus's Shielding Charm.

'Like mother, like daughter. Heaven help me.'

"Sorry," Hermione muttered. "Not your fault."

'Maybe not quite the same. The Harridan didn't apologise.'

"The fact of the matter is that if we don't consummate soon, it leaves the way open for other wizards to challenge these unions. To challenge Severus and me to duels. If we lose, then the marriages are annulled, and you will have no choice but to marry the victors."

"No," Hermione gasped. Severus drew her close, lips to her ear, whispering some sort of comfort to her.

"But we have some time. It's been a while since the *Prophet* spread the news. If anyone was going to challenge us immediately, Owls would have started to arrive by now."

There was a tap at the window. An owl seemed to glare inside, and rapped again on the window.

It seemed that he had spoken too soon.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 37

Consummation, part one.

Chapter 9

Severus watched Lucius open the window to let the owl in, carry it over to the table and feed it some bacon.

'Bird lover,' Severus thought, his lip curling derisively. If he'd gone to retrieve the letter, he would have sent the bloody bird on its way, hungry and with smoking tail feathers to boot. Even if it was only the messenger.

Lucius untied the letter from the owl's leg. He stared at it for a moment, before passing it to Hermione.

"It's for you."

'What sort of wizard addressed his challenge to the witch of the household?'

Hermione broke the blob of wax acting as a seal and unfolded the parchment. From his position by her side, Severus could also see it. The scruffy handwriting looked very familiar.

"Potter," he breathed. For a horrible moment, he thought that the Chosen-fucking-One intended to challenge their marriage. Then he actually read the letter. Potter was arranging to meet with Hermione, as she had apparently asked. What could she possibly want to talk to Potter about?

"Quill, please," Hermione said. After Lucius passed her one, she scribbled 'Tomorrow, 11:00. HJG' on the back of Potter's letter.

The owl fluttered over to her, leg obediently held out for her to tie it on. That done, it flew off, the last piece of bacon still dangling from its beak.

"It was not a challenge, then?" Lucius asked.

"No. I've got something to discuss with Harry; that was his arranging to meet with me. It would have saved us a lot of bother if he'd known his schedule for the rest of the week at the wedding. I don't know about either of you, but the thought that Owl was a challenge made my heart skip a beat."

Despite her obvious relief that it hadn't been a challenge, Hermione looked rather grim to Severus. Whatever she had to talk to Potter about was not something she was

happy about. Perhaps he needed to have a word with the brat too ...

"At least it wasn't a challenge. Regardless, it would be advisable to get on with the consummations. Might I suggest with Severus today and myself tomorrow?"

"I suppose we don't have a lot of choice," Hermione muttered.

"No choice," Severus affirmed, his eyes on the window as the almost-silent whisper of air under wings drew his attention to the second owl of the morning. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you're expecting anything from Weasley."

The owl landed on the table and tucked into some more bacon offered by Lucius.

"Provided the boy isn't foolish enough to challenge us after losing the first duel," Lucius sniggered. He yelped when Hermione swung her leg under the table. Severus winced in sympathy, and reminded himself not to mention that duel around Hermione.

Hermione took the letter from the owl with trembling fingers. She frowned at the seal for a moment, then rolled her eyes. "Honestly, he has rotten timing."

"Who has?" Severus asked, not recognising the imprint in the wax.

"Viktor Krum. We've been pen pals since the Triwizard Tournament." She unfolded the letter.

Krum's handwriting was neater than Potters. And the language oddly formal. In fact ...

"How can he?" Hermione exploded.

"A challenge?" Lucius asked, shielding what crockery was unbroken before Hermione's anger eroded her control over her magic.

"Gormless Quidditch jerk! If I needed his help, I'd bloody well ask for it." She screwed Krum's challenge up into a ball and tightened her fists around it until her knuckles were white.

"We can handle Krum. Triwizard Champion though he was, he is still no match for us."

Hermione unfolded the parchment and smoothed it out. She was scrawling something, an angry note most likely, to judge by the way she almost snapped the quill.

But then she grabbed the owl, walked over to the window, tied the letter back onto its leg and chucked it out of the window.

Severus watched, aghast. "Hermione, we needed to accept that challenge!"

"Relax, I accepted it."

"You *what*?"

* * *

Tricksy watches Master Snape stand over Missy Mudblood. He is yelling at her, treating Tricksy's new Mistress as she deserves to be, the filthy Mudblood taking the place of Tricksy's poor Mistress. Poor Mistress, what would she say if she sees Missy Mudblood in her home?

Missy Mudblood is trying to say something, but Master Snape isn't listening. He grabs hold of Missy Mudblood's shoulders. Tricksy hopes he will shake some sense into new Mistress, but Tricksy supposes bad blood cannot be shaken out.

"Severus, calm down." Master steps in between Missy Mudblood and Master Snape. "If this were anyone else, Hermione would have done a very foolish thing. But Krum seems to care about her enough to want to protect her from us. I seriously doubt that he will fight a duel with her. Few wizards would, come to that, but ..."

Tricksy's Master turns to Missy Mudblood. "Don't do this again. It's not worth the risk."

"I'm perfectly capable of fighting my own fights, Malfoy."

"Back to Malfoy, are we, Granger?" Missy Mudblood makes Master sad, Tricksy can hear it in his voice. Tricksy will make Missy Mudblood pay for that if she is not careful.

"I'm sorry, Lucius. It's Viktor I'm angry with, not you. He's my friend, yet he thinks I can't protect myself?"

Master seems to accept Missy Mudblood's apology. Tricksy does not.

Master Snape is whispering in Missy Mudblood's ear. Tricksy can still hear them, house-elves can hear the quietest whispers.

"I have half a mind to drag you upstairs now, but if you think that your friend will back out of this challenge, I should trust that. We shall wait until we hear back from him."

"But that could take quite some time if he's in Bulgaria..."

"Eager, are we?" Master Snape laughs softly. Missy Mudblood presses herself against him. Both ignores Master's distress at this, but Tricksy notices. Tricksy is a good house-elf.

"In all seriousness, the only way Krum, as a foreign national, could challenge this union, is if he is in this country at the moment."

The owl comes back after Tricksy serves lunch. The bad wizard who dares to challenge Tricksy's Master's marriage cannot be far away.

"He's backed out," Missy Mudblood says as she reads the letter. Tricksy thinks she is hiding something when she says no more.

Master Snape takes the letter. "What you neglect to mention is that he taunts us for hiding behind our woman."

"Typical," Tricksy's Master says. "I trust you will be no longer associating with such a charming young man?"

"Viktor's got another thing coming if he thinks I will."

Master Snape takes Missy Mudblood's hand. "Now is the time for us to ensure that our union at least can't be challenged again."

They leaves Master alone. Tricksy will stay with him like a good house-elf.

* * *

'We have to do this, but there's nothing to stop us from enjoying it.'

Hermione pushed Severus against the door to his room, her lips locked with his. One arm was around his neck, the other fumbled for the door handle.

She found the handle, but before she could open the door, Severus caught hold of her wrist. He used his other hand to gently push her back, breaking their kiss. Even so, she staggered for a moment, on tiptoe as she'd been, until Severus stabilised her with a hand on her elbow.

"Contraceptive potion," he explained at her questioning look. "It's still at Spinner's End, the house-elves only retrieved our baggage from the bedrooms and bathroom. Make yourself comfortable." With that he Disapparated.

Lucius must have modified the wards so that it was possible for them to Apparate within the house and grounds. How considerate of him.

Hermione opened the door and walked in. The bed had been made since she'd left the room. She felt a pang of guilt. Unfortunately, with the current situation, there was no way to avoid creating extra work for the house-elves. Oh, who was she kidding? The elves would probably thank them for it. The best she could hope for was to get Lucius to treat them better.

She kicked the door shut behind her, toed her shoes off and padded across the carpet to the bed.

'Well, he did tell me to make myself comfortable.'

Someone was calling her name from far away.

"Mmm?"

She heard her name again, but just rolled over and dozed off again.

...

Hermione came awake very abruptly, as if a mental light switch had been flicked.

"I know I said to make yourself comfortable, dear, but you were also meant to stay awake."

She glowered up at Severus, who just raised an eyebrow and set his wand down on the bedside table.

"What'd you do? I've never come across a spell to wake someone up." She had to get that spell out of him somehow ...

He raised his eyebrow all the more. "You've never come across Rennervate?"

"But... but that's just to revive Stunned people!"

"It also works to wake those merely sleeping. As you just found."

"Prick," she muttered.

If he heard her insult, he ignored it. "Here." He dangled a small vial of crystal clear potion in front of her. "One vial per day."

"Remind me why we decided on a daily dose," Hermione grumbled.

"Because, as you pointed out before our Muggle wedding, the Wizengamot may well alter the law to require children, outlawing contraception. In the event of that, a contraceptive lasting any longer than a day might land you in Azkaban. This type of potion also has the benefit of taking care of the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Better to be safe rather than sorry when you will have, however briefly..." He paused, his face tight, "...two partners."

Hermione firmly pushed *that* thought out of her mind. Yes, she had to bed Lucius as well, but she'd rather not think about it right now, thank you very much. Today was for her and Severus. Tomorrow she shuddered involuntarily could wait.

She took the vial, pried the cork out, and drained it. For a potion that had taken over a week to brew, it tasted rather like salty water.

Severus bent towards her to brush his mouth against hers. Just as she reached to pull him closer, he jerked away. She watched, baffled and a little put out as he snatched up his wand and turned back to the door. His wand danced in a series of complicated twists, flicks and swirls.

"What are you doing?"

He briefly halted his decidedly-not-foolish wand waving. "Warding the room. Lucius happens to be a voyeur."

"Why am I not surprised?" she muttered. Severus didn't answer, recognising a rhetorical question when he heard one.

Her blood felt as if it ran cold when a nasty suspicion struck her. "Severus, *darling*, did you set up those wards this morning too?"

Before Severus answered her, he finished his warding. "No, but Lucius was having his breakfast at the time." Then he replaced his wand and joined her on the bed, straddling her.

He was gentlemanly enough to keep the majority of his weight on his knees ... which reminded Hermione of something.

"You owe me," she stated, her conversational tone at odds with the flush she could feel rising on her cheeks, together with her deeper breathing as he began to explore with his hands.

He paused his caresses, his fingers lingering on neck and cheek. "I do?"

In answer, she extended her right hand to him, palm down. When he still looked blank, she moved it as if she was writing.

"Ah. Yes. I did promise to kiss it better. How remiss of me."

Severus took her hand. First he stroked the back of it with his fingertips, tracing over where the blood quill had cut into it. Then he bent over it, lips almost touching her skin. He looked up at her and smirked, before he turned back to his task and closed the gap entirely.

Hermione's lips parted as she inhaled sharply. Lucius's hand kisses had been pleasant enough, but this ... Oh, this was something else. Something more. A lot more, when his tongue started to trace over where the quill had sliced her own name into her hand. Granted, not exactly over, as the skin was no longer even tender, but she wasn't about to admit to that.

It didn't seem very fair to her that she was the only one to experience this. She reached for one of his hands, only for him to catch hold of her left hand to bring it to his lips as well. Now, that really wasn't fair!

While he was concentrating his attentions on her newly captured hand, she grabbed his left hand and gently pulled it towards her. He didn't bat an eyelash at first, perhaps thinking that she was merely going to give him the same treatment. She speared her fingers through his, spreading them in the act. Then, her eyes fixed on his as-yet-

unsuspecting face, she took his forefinger into her mouth.

The movements of his tongue slowed. They stopped altogether when she sucked on his finger, and he looked over at her, his eyes wide. He looked almost like a deer caught in the headlights.

Her lips quirked as she did her best to smirk around his finger, then started exploring the hardened skin on his fingertip with her tongue. When his breath caught, she sucked his finger again.

With a growl, Severus tugged his finger from her mouth and moved his hands to hold her head, burying his fingers into her hair. His elbows on either side of his head to help brace his weight, he dropped his body down onto hers.

Hermione could feel his erection pressing into her belly. She shifted, but not to shy away. His breath hissed between his teeth, his eyes narrowed. Then he smothered her smug smile with his lips, and gently bit down on her lower lip to get her to open her mouth. When he slid his tongue inside, she sucked on it much like she had his finger.

Severus groaned into her mouth, a deep rumble of his chest, and bucked his hips, his erection grinding into her with the movement. He used his hands in her hair to tilt her head back, deepening their kiss even more.

It was her turn to moan. She went for the buttons on his neck, fumbling with them for a moment before she grabbed blindly for a wand on the bedside table. It was only after she had waved it and non-verbally Banished Severus's clothes that she realised that it was his wand. Her wand wasn't quite as heavy, and didn't actually feel right to her it was still Bellatrix's old wand, after all. This wand, on the other hand, felt like it had been made for her.

Her ponderings on the matter were quite rudely interrupted when Severus placed his hand over hers and returned the favour, Banishing her own clothes.

They both inhaled sharply at the contact of skin to skin along the full length of their torsos. Hermione could feel his penis twitch against her, clearly more than ready to take her.

The wand fell out of suddenly nerveless fingers. Hermione dimly heard it clatter onto the floor as Severus redoubled his attack on her mouth. She put her arms around his neck as his hands slid up her sides, over the curves of her breasts until his thumbs slowly moved between their bodies.

Moving her hands to his shoulders, she pushed him back. He broke off their kiss and removed his hands. She dug her nails in before he could move off her entirely. That wasn't her intention at all.

"Touch me," she demanded well, begged and moved her hands down his arms to grip his wrists. She brought his hands back up to her breasts, and shifted them so that his thumbs rested on her nipples.

This time he got the message, and repeated his motions of that morning, this time on both breasts.

Hermione was just reaching between them for his penis when he shifted out of her reach. Before she could do more than draw breath to object, he bent his head to take a hardened nipple between his lips. Severus swirled his tongue around it, all the while keeping up his attentions with his hand on her other breast. She reached down to thread her fingers through his hair.

She was only vaguely aware when he shifted off her, caught up in the sensations he was still creating at chest level. That changed when his free hand moved between her legs, two of his fingers gradually thrusting into her vagina, his thumb on her clitoris.

After that morning, he knew exactly what to do, what motions would make her heart pound and her breasts heave.

Hermione gave a whimper of protest when his mouth abandoned her breast, but that was quickly stifled when she felt his hair tickle her on the way down to...

"Oh!"

His lips replaced his thumb on her clitoris. As he started to repeat the same swirling flicks with his tongue that he'd used further up, she couldn't keep herself from bucking her hips.

The pressure built ... and peaked.

By the time Hermione regained her senses, Severus lay between her legs, his elbows once more beside her head. He bent to kiss her once again, his taste an interesting if slightly bittersweet and salty blend of them both.

His erection prodded at the entrance to her vagina. She reached down to guide his penis into the right position. When she felt him barely within her, she closed her eyes. She put one arm around his back, keeping the other in his hair. This was it. The point of no return. She pulled him closer, winding her legs around his.

Severus gradually thrust inside her. He gave her time to adjust to his girth. Each careful move and slow thrust made her sigh until he was fully sheathed within her. His length didn't quite nudge her cervix when his first thrust bottomed out, and she couldn't tell if she moaned because she was relieved or disappointed.

At first they moved slowly together, just their hips gently rocking. But soon she found that she wanted more and she clutched at him, arching her hips against him. They moved faster. The power of the thrusts increased. Severus was positively pounding her into the mattress. When he hit her cervix, she sank her teeth into his shoulder and raked her fingernails down his back. Her legs parted even wider, wrapping around his body as high as she could, allowing him to penetrate her deeper.

She could feel her second orgasm build up inside her, a powerful sensation of need. She was on the brink, she just needed, needed ... helplessly she pushed herself against him and he ejaculated, his penis twitching inside her.

And in the Ministry archives, or wherever they kept records like the accursed marriage certificates, the brown of dried blood would be turning...

'Don't think about it, don't think about it,' she thought. But it was too late. Her almost-orgasm receded, the mood was ruined, leaving her unfulfilled and aching. Then she frowned. What colour would the ink turn?

Caught up in thought, she only noticed Severus had withdrawn himself when he retrieved his wand to *Evanesco* the mess. Then he dropped his wand on the bedside table, yawned and proceeded to snuggle up to her. Dozing off in post-coital slumberous bliss, the ... the ... the *man*.

She poked him awake only for him to doze off again. Growling under her breath, she snatched up his wand.

"Rennervate." 'Hah! See how you like it, dearest.'

"What is it?" he grumbled.

"What colour will the ink have turned? Lucius didn't mention which out of silver or gold proclaimed virginity or lack thereof to all and sundry."

"I suppose it is better to discuss this now than over tomorrow's *Daily Prophet*," he muttered. "Both of our signatures will have turned silver."

Hermione blinked. "But you weren't the typical clumsy virgin."

He gave her a pointed look. "Neither were you."

"I'm not a ..." she trailed off. Had she forgotten such an intimate detail of her life due to the plague? She must have, though. She frowned. "But why did we go so gently at first?"

"It has been quite some time since you last had sex."

Hermione wondered why she felt so violated. Because that damned certificate would proclaim personal information to be reported to every reader of the *Prophet*, or because she couldn't remember losing her virginity, or because Severus knew of that when she didn't? Come to that, how did he know? According to him, they'd only been friends before the plague. She looked suspiciously at him.

"Before you ask how I know that, I'm the one you came to for your contraceptive potion when you were with Weasley."

Knowing the fecundity of Weasleys, going to a Potions Master for that had been a good idea. But had Severus harboured the feelings he had now for her back then? If he had, it had been a rather callous thing for her to do.

It seemed rather silly to apologise for something that she couldn't remember and might not even be the case, so she dropped the matter and cuddled up to him, doing her best to avoid thoughts of the next day. But she couldn't help feeling relieved that she'd forgotten about being with Ron, which opened another can of worms: guilt. She also wondered what else she'd forgotten about ... what else did Severus know that she'd forgotten? That memory regaining potion Severus was going to develop was looking more and more like something she herself should take.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

And thanks to catherinecookmn for this inspirational snippet with hand and finger kissing:

Severus was in his Ironic Gentleman mode, so he took Hermione's slim hand in his and held it to his lips, managing to smirk even as his mouth brushed against her flesh.

Ah, so that's how it's going to be, thought Hermione. With a smirk to match his, she held onto his hand, gently pulling it towards her own mouth... but before it arrived, she uncurled his index finger from its loose grip on her hand and, slowly, her eyes never leaving his, began to lick it.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 37

Consummation, part two.

Chapter 10

Harry stepped foot inside Malfoy Manor for what he hoped was the last time. Snape had met him at the gates, leading the way up the long drive in near silence. His attempts to make friendly small talk with Hermione's new husband had been acknowledged with curt monosyllables.

Even after all that had happened, Snape still looked at him like he was an idiot. But then Snape never had said 'thank you' for all that Harry had done to make sure that he stayed a free man. Git.

At least there was no sign of Malfoy. For Hermione's sake, he'd do his best to tolerate Snape, but Malfoy? Not a chance.

Snape opened one of the doors lining the corridor and held it open. He gestured for Harry to walk inside. The door swung shut as soon as he'd stepped into the small study, narrowly missing him. How charming ... At least Snape hadn't followed him. He'd be able to see Hermione alone.

Hermione stood with her back to him in front of a bookshelf. She didn't turn to face him, although she must have heard him come in. For an awkward moment he wondered if he should clear his throat, say hello, or give her a hug. Come to that, why wasn't she hugging him? That was her usual greeting.

'Something's wrong. Since when has she signed letters to me as 'HJG'? It's always been 'love from Hermione' before.'

"Sit down." Her voice was cold and clipped. It was almost as if it were Snape talking to him, not Hermione.

"What's..." he started to ask what was wrong, but she cut him off.

"Just sit down." She still wouldn't look at him.

This time, Harry did as she asked and took a seat to her left. At least he could see her face in profile now not that it made him feel any better. Hermione didn't look happy. What he could see of her forehead was creased in a frown and her arms were crossed.

"You visited me when I was recovering in St. Mungo's. Do you remember what you said, when I asked whether anyone I knew had died?" she asked quietly, almost conversationally.

Harry swallowed hard.

"It has been over a month, should I refresh your memory?"

Finally she turned to face him. He flinched: scratch unhappy, she looked furious. The sort of expression that had always been reserved for Ron, now aimed solely at him.

"You lied. Why?"

Harry realised that he'd half raised his hands to his ears, to cover them if she began yelling. But her voice was still quiet. Deadly quiet, in fact. It was somehow even worse than if she shouted.

He gulped, not trusting his voice. He'd rather not stammer or squeak if he could help it.

"Well? Do you have nothing to say for yourself?"

He leaned back in his chair, pressing himself against the padded back.

"You still need me to make your excuses for you?" Her lip curled. "Let me guess, you were trying to protect me. As I was in St. Mungo's at the time, I obviously wasn't fit to be told. Am I getting warm?"

Harry nodded hesitantly.

Hermione dragged a hand over her face. "Ignoring the fact that you had no right to decide that, you didn't tell me when I was out of hospital. Why? And don't say that you had no opportunity, you could've told me after that stupid duel."

When he felt that he could trust his voice, he spoke up. "You had that horrible law on your plate. And you were busy organising your weddings."

"Not good enough," Hermione snapped, her glacial cool cracking.

"I-I th-thought Snape would tell you..."

Again, Hermione cut him off. This time she crossed the space between them, grabbed the arms of his chair and brought her head down so that she was almost nose to nose with him. Furious brown eyes glared into his own.

"He didn't know who died, apart from those at Hogwarts. Helping to invent the cure rather kept him busy, imagine that."

As soon as it had overcome her, the red hot anger cooled. Hermione pushed herself back onto her feet and once more turned away from Harry, her shoulders slumped.

"Do you have any idea how I felt last week when I learned about Luna and Mrs Weasley's deaths?" Her voice didn't sound cold this time, just sad. Defeated, almost.

"I cared about them, too." Harry wondered if he should get up and give her a hug. It looked like she needed one. Hesitantly, he stood up.

"You didn't have mortification on top of your grief. Harry, my parents brought me up to send my condolences in the event of deaths of friends and family. And of acquaintances, come to that."

Tentatively, Harry reached out to put an arm around Hermione. The moment he touched her shoulder, she spun around. Her hand stopped just beside his cheek. She'd almost slapped him.

She slowly lowered her hand. "Just get out of my sight."

Harry felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. Hermione couldn't mean ... Surely she wouldn't destroy their friendship over this?

"Go." She gave him a surprisingly gentle shove. "Before I lose my temper and do something I might regret."

"But ... you're not you can't you wouldn't!"

"Contemplate never seeing you again? I won't lie, it did occur to me. But I have had a week to cool off a little."

In his relief, Harry did hug her. She allowed him a few seconds, standing stiffly in his arms, then shoved him away.

"That said, if I see you again anytime soon, I won't be responsible for my actions."

'Not as bad as it could be ... at least we're still friends.'

She drew her wand. "Run."

'Erm ... spoke too soon. I don't think she's bluffing.'

It was just as well that Harry took her seriously, as he'd just slammed the door behind him when he heard a spell impact the wood. Then he felt the heat of it when his collar was grabbed and he was slammed back against the door.

When the stars from hitting his head had cleared, he was nose to nose with Snape. A very scary sight, although Hermione's rage was still worse.

"Upset my wife again, Potter, and you will regret it. Clear?"

"Perfectly," Harry muttered. He didn't intend to upset Hermione again if he could help it, but he'd say anything to stop Snape throwing him against the door again. Whatever Hermione's hex had been, it made the wood uncomfortably hot. And knocking his head against the door like that made his head thump.

"Good." Snape let him go. "I trust you can find your way to the gates?"

"Yes." At least he wasn't being kicked out of the front door. *'Come to think of it ...'* Harry walked fast down the corridor to the exit. No need to present a tempting target to Snape.

Severus sat on the edge of his bed, hands gripping his knees and his eyes fixed on the door adjoining his room to Hermione's.

She... *They* were not in there. Lucius had suggested using a guestroom further down the corridor: neutral ground.

His fingers clenched tighter on his knees until his knuckles whitened and his ring dug into his leg.

The woman he cared for no, the woman he loved; he might as well admit that now, if only to himself. Yes, the woman he loved. In the arms of another. In the ~~bed~~ of another. Or soon would be. Time had passed slowly for him, but according to his Muggle clock on the bedside table, it had only been five minutes since Hermione had reluctantly pried herself from his embrace to do her duty.

Jealousy, that familiar blight of his schooldays, burned once again. Every breath he took seemed to make that internal fire burn hotter.

He took a deep breath, trying to put a damper on that raging jealousy. It could be worse. At least this way, she was his. He only had to share her with Lucius once ~~but~~ *even one fucking time was too much.'*

Releasing his grip on his knees, he reached up to run his hands over his face. This irrational jealousy would get him nowhere, other than angry with his hapless friend, and undeservedly so at that.

Occupied as he had been with Hermione, Severus was well aware that Lucius was still grieving over the loss of Narcissa. The thought that Lucius would enjoy bedding

Hermione he winced was frankly laughable. Not because Hermione was not attractive, but because his friend would probably struggle with guilt. But that knowledge didn't make Severus feel much better.

Severus kneaded the bridge of his nose. He really should stop moping about and do something constructive, but ... there was no chance that he would be able to concentrate. Not when right at this moment Lucius was...

'What was that?'

He tilted his head, straining to hear. Although muffled by the closed door, he could hear the door to the guestroom open and footsteps padding down the corridor. He frowned, and glanced again at his clock. Surely they couldn't have finished so soon?

The footsteps approached his door, followed by a knock. Hermione wouldn't do that, surely? The knock repeated, louder this time. Come to think of it, hadn't he asked Lucius to do exactly that yesterday morning, instead of barging in?

"Come in," he called, rising to his feet. In his current frame of mind, he didn't want to see Lucius, but it might be something important.

As he suspected, it was Lucius. He was still clad head-to-toe in his dressing gown, despite there still being daylight. In Lucius's defence, Severus supposed that he was dressed (or undressed, even) for a bedroom environment.

"I think we can skip the pleasantries. Neither of us are in the mood for them." Lucius did not look happy. Perhaps he couldn't move past his grief, so couldn't do his duty? "She can't relax enough. She's too tense, nothing I can do helps."

"Lubricant?" Severus spat.

"For the love of... Is it too much to ask that she enjoy this? Lubricant will not magically relax her enough for that."

Glaring at Lucius, Severus snapped: "I may be a possessive man, but I'm no monster. Of course it would be better if she can experience some pleasure. But surely you have no problems when it comes to pleasing a woman?"

"Ordinarily, no. But it seems my touch does nothing for her," Lucius reluctantly admitted, his face twisted into a grimace. "Perhaps if she were more relaxed, it would be a different story."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "I presume you know that while Calming Draught would relax her..."

"It would be one extreme to another." Lucius nodded impatiently. "Yes, I know that. I had something else in mind ..."

* * *

Severus followed Lucius into the guestroom. Or rather, into an antechamber, where Lucius took off his concealing dressing gown, revealing his finely embroidered nightshirt. Severus was almost expecting to see lace, but perhaps that would have been too much even for Lucius. Instead, it was a mixture of satin and silk.

In the guestroom itself, Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, her knees hugged against her body. She looked up at him with a mixture of misery and embarrassment. Like Lucius, she was also wearing her nightclothes. Had they not got far enough to take them off, or was Lucius that old fashioned?

'Or perhaps they are simply not comfortable enough to bare their skin?' Not that Severus was at ease with that thought either, but if it helped ... He took a deep breath.

Hermione's jaw dropped, her wide eyes following his hands as he unbuttoned his shirt. Baring his chest a little more with each twist of his fingers.

Once unbuttoned, he took the shirt off entirely, letting it drop to the floor as he toed his slippers off, keeping his trousers on.

Severus looked pointedly at Hermione and Lucius, who were both staring at him as if he were a madman. "Well, don't stand on ceremony. Clothes off, you two."

He climbed onto the bed behind Hermione and sat back against the headboard, pulling Hermione with him so that her back rested against his chest.

"The inherent formality in clothing won't help anyone relax. Clothes off. Now." Severus touched the hem of Hermione's nightgown, but decided that it would be best if she took it off herself.

Lucius turned away, tugging his nightshirt over his head, his backside pale in the daylight from the window.

Perhaps as Lucius had intended, Hermione took advantage of the lack of his eyes on her to undress. Once naked, she leant back against Severus, a soft moan escaping her at the contact of skin to skin. As Severus had hoped, her tense muscles relaxed a little.

But only a little. She tensed up again when Lucius turned back and was unable to keep his eyes straying. From the heat of her skin, she might have been blushing, too. Well, if that was how Lucius wanted to play it ... Lazily, Severus looked him up and down.

'Been enjoying the house-elves' cooking and the Old Ogdens a bit too much, eh?' Severus curled his lip, his gaze lingering on the developing paunch. In all fairness, it was barely rounded, but still noticeable when compared to Severus's lean body.

Lucius raised his chin and proceeded to strut over to the bed. Severus had to stifle a snigger; the way Lucius's erect cock waggled about in the process looked quite ridiculous. But at least it seemed to help Hermione get over her embarrassment, as she relaxed a bit. She also had to stifle laughter by the way her shoulders shook slightly.

When Lucius clambered onto the bed as well, crouched on his knees in front of them, Hermione tensed up again. Severus ran his hands from her shoulders to her hands, gently massaging her as he went. Perhaps it would also help if he whispered something in her ear, but ... words failed him. This situation was uncomfortable for them all.

"I'm sorry," Hermione croaked. "I've made this worse, dragging Severus into this mess too."

Leaning forwards, Lucius put a finger on her lips. "Don't be. Severus wouldn't be here if he didn't want to be."

Not entirely true, but Hermione didn't need to know that. Severus wasn't sure what was worse: imagining what was happening or witnessing it. Regardless, she needed him. That was all that mattered.

He dropped his head, pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck. Hermione turned her head to kiss him, then laid her head onto his shoulder.

When Lucius caressed her, she tensed up a little, but slowly relaxed under their stroking hands. Lucius followed Severus's lead, his hands tracing after wherever Severus touched. Until Severus cupped one of her breasts, then Lucius didn't wait until he'd ceased his attentions, instead gently grasped her other breast. He stroked his thumb over her areola, mirroring Severus's actions.

Hermione shuddered, inhaling sharply as her nipples peaked. She arched her back, pressing herself further into his hand. Int~~at~~her hands, Severus corrected himself. He grimaced at the flicker of fresh jealousy accompanying that thought. So far, he'd been able to focus on Hermione's needs. But now ...

He breathed deeply, trying to force his jealousy back down to nag at his subconscious. And failed when Lucius leant forwards to kiss Hermione. Severus couldn't look away, his stomach roiling at the sight of that sleek blond head and Hermione's brown curls so close together.

Severus gritted his teeth. Now was not the time to be ruled by his emotions. He had to pull himself together and think logically. Hermione was Lucius's wife too, at least for this encounter. It would be akin to treating her like a prostitute if Lucius didn't kiss her.

He kept up his attentions on her breast and reached down with his free hand. The idea was that Hermione should be able to enjoy this, after all, not merely be aroused enough to be physically comfortable.

She moaned as he began to finger her clitoris, using his knowledge from yesterday to bring her closer and closer to orgasm. The flesh around his eyes tightened at the muffled nature of her moan; she was still lip-locked with Lucius.

Severus felt Lucius's hand brush his own as it descended past it. He could feel Hermione's back tense again at Lucius's intimate explorations, so he stepped up his attentions on her clit. If she had to be tense, it would be in the best possible way.

Lucius shifted, propping himself up on one arm, his hand pressed against the headboard, and his head opposite Hermione's, almost on Severus's shoulder, his hair brushing against Severus's skin. Now lying between Hermione's legs, Lucius pressed closer, one hand positioning his cock, and thrust inside.

Hermione cried out, her hips jerking and her clit throbbing against Severus's fingers as she came. Lucius groaned and held still, presumably for fear of ejaculating too soon for his pride.

The thought of Hermione's internal muscles clenching around the other man made Severus feel as if his heart was aflame. Then, to his mortification, he felt his cock twitch. No. He could not be growing aroused. *He was not.* But denial was no good when the evidence of his arousal was pressing against Hermione's lower back.

'It's simply my proximity to Hermione, and the fact that I know what it feels like to be inside her. A completely normal physical reaction, nothing to be ashamed of. It's not as if I'm enjoying Lucius taking my wife!'

Certainly not, if his growing discomfort was anything to go by. He could feel every thrust Lucius made, both through the bed and with the way Hermione's body moved back to press against his. Severus could also feel her breast jiggle in his hand. He resumed his attentions on her clit, trying to distract himself.

Then Hermione grabbed hold of his hand, tugging it away from her breast to hold it tightly, her fingers intertwined with his. Her other hand was on Lucius's back, fingers twitching as if she wanted to dig her nails in, but didn't dare to.

Severus could feel Lucius's thrusts speeding up. He closed his eyes, unwilling to watch. True, if his eyes were open he wouldn't be able to see much, but he would be able to see Lucius's muscles tense and release.

It was bad enough to hear Lucius grunt and feel the bed and Hermione shake one last time, without seeing it. Then he felt Hermione's breath hitch. Her grip tightened on his hand, and once again, her clitoris pulsed against his fingers as she came for the second time.

He opened his eyes when he heard Lucius shift away, heralded by a sickening wet pop as Lucius withdrew his penis.

Severus was distracted from his discomfort when he noticed Hermione's shoulders were shaking. He felt a drop of water land on his hand. He frowned down at it for a moment, before he realised that she was crying.

He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her close. Lucius hesitantly touched her shoulder, only to draw back when she flinched.

She just sobbed harder when Severus tried to ask what was wrong. He exchanged a helpless look with Lucius.

"It's been a long day." *Long month, really.* "I'll take her back to our rooms. Lucius ..." Severus paused, trying to find the right words. 'Thank you' lodged in his throat. He settled on merely squeezing his friend's shoulder, doing his best not to wince at the sweat, or rather cause thereof.

Lucius nodded. "I'll see you later. Tomorrow, most likely."

* * *

After Severus had taken Hermione away, Lucius donned his nightshirt and dressing gown. There was no need for more clothes when he didn't intend to set foot outside.

In the corridor, he paused outside Severus's room, but decided not to poke his nose in. If his experience of women was anything to judge by, Hermione was overwhelmed. Furthermore, if his touch made her flinch, his presence would probably be unwelcome. Best to enquire of her wellbeing tomorrow.

He wandered towards his own room, but on reaching the main staircase, decided to assuage his battered pride with a finger or two of Firewhisky. The lights in the corridor downstairs flickered on as he approached, the fire in his study licking at the logs as soon as he stepped inside.

Lucius rummaged around in his drinks cabinet, found a fresh bottle and poured a finger. Or two. Or three. Perhaps another for luck. He swirled it around the glass, watching the amber liquid lap at the crystal.

At least with Severus present, his touch had done something for Hermione. Proof that he was still capable of pleasing a woman.

He took a sip, savouring the burn on his tongue.

And he had done the decent thing, fetching Severus. It had been unexpectedly enjoyable, too. Perhaps it might be precedent for more?

Lucius spluttered. No, he had not just thought *that*. Quite besides breaking his word that it would be one time only, the implication was that he wanted more of Hermione. No, no, no. Impossible.

She was attractive enough, true, and to be fair, a delight to bed when relaxed enough. But she wasn't Narcissa. It hadn't been easy for him to do his duty and consummate the marriage. Frankly, it had felt as if he was betraying Narcissa, his new wedding ring an unwelcome weight on his finger. But to take it off and return to his old one? Unthinkable. Most certainly not the done thing, what would society think?

But try as he might to deny it, it was no use lying to himself. He wanted more of Hermione already. Explaining the need as an unfortunate side-effect of the aphrodisiac he'd used held no water, as it was a purely physical potion. And, looking down, he could see it had since worn off.

'Well, tough luck. I can't have more. I gave Severus my word. Regardless, I doubt she wants more of me, if those tears were anything to go by.'

He took a large mouthful, swirling it around his mouth. If only he could drink away his troubles. But that would only lead to health problems. Resolutely, he turned away. And choked. Eyes watering, he staggered over to the door. He ran his fingers over the damaged wood.

Wasn't this the room where Hermione had met with Potter? What had she done to the unfortunate young man?

Lucius sighed. Did she have to damage the door, and why hadn't she or the house-elves repaired it? An attempted *Reparo* later, and it was evident that the damage was permanent. It seemed that it was time to have words with her about the respect one's own home should be afforded.

But perhaps a reminder of the dangers of her temper was a good thing to have around.

'Yes,' he thought, taking another swig of Old Ogden's. *'A healthy dose of respect for it, too. Tears are only one way of expressing emotion. Best keep my head down.'*

He certainly didn't envy Severus the task of comforting her. Narcissa had been bad enough during her emotional upheavals. But a spitfire like Hermione? Lucius hissed between his teeth and shook his head. Poor Severus.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 37

The aftermath and an aviary.

Chapter 11

Hermione pulled back from Severus, swiping the back of her hand across her eyes. She had made a soggy mess of his shirt, soaked through to cling to his skin where her head had been buried against his shoulder. But it was nothing magic would not fix.

What magic could not do was sort out the current mess of her emotions. Cheering Charms or Calming Draughts were only temporary measures, and would not deal with her feelings. They would only delay dealing with them, and bottling up her emotions would do more harm than good. Not that there was much danger of that, as her past few minutes of sobbing in his arms had proved.

No, helping her was up to him. There was no magic solution, no wave of his wand or an expertly brewed potion that would work.

Although Lucius would have more practice and expertise at giving comfort, he was also part of the problem, if the way Hermione had flinched at his last touch was anything to go by. No, he was on his own.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Severus asked tentatively. And winced. That was clumsy at best and insensitive at worst, but he was trying.

She shook her head, her face crumpling as she tried and failed to restrain more tears.

'I should have kept my mouth shut.'

Severus touched her shoulder, only for Hermione to flinch. He drew back as if he'd been burnt, stricken. Was he part of the problem too, then? He stepped back. Should he leave?

Before he could do more than consider it, Hermione staggered back into his arms. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand buried in her hair, the other stroking her back, until she pulled away again. Her tears were once more under control, her eyes dry and reddened, cheeks tearstained.

"Sorry," she croaked, her voice raw. "Not your fault. I ... I just ..." She grimaced and plucked at her nightgown. "I feel dirty."

"I'll run a bath..."

"No," she blurted.

Of course. A bath would mean lying around in water that she wouldn't be able to help thinking of as dirty. But there were no showers in Malfoy Manor. Plenty of baths large enough to share, no showers. Too Muggle, perhaps? That was something that they would have to rectify. For now, it was hardly the time to start experimenting with spells to create a magical shower.

Hermione had taken a single step towards the bathroom before she stopped in her tracks, obviously coming to the same conclusions as him. And a step further: "I'll be at Spinner's End," she murmured.

'Oh no, you don't!' He grabbed hold of her before she could Disapparate.

"I am not letting you go alone. Come to that, you're likely to Splinch. Let me take you Side-Along."

She bridled, twisting around to glare at him, her eyes once more brimming with tears.

"No argument, please, Hermione. I'm trying to help."

Her lips thinned and she looked away. But after a moment, she nodded reluctantly.

Severus took a firmer hold of her shoulders, eyes sliding half-shut as he focused his mind on their destination. After a second in the tight squeeze of Apparition, they stood in the dark bathroom at Spinner's End.

Magic could interfere with electricity, so he manually pulled the dangling string to switch the light on. It wouldn't do to blow the lights out in the whole shoddy house.

There was a spider in the bath, as usual, but a zap from his wand took care of that. It was big enough to be used as a potions ingredient, otherwise he'd have let it live as Hermione wasn't scared of them.

He picked up the dead spider. "I'll be right back, I'll just bottle it." He kissed her forehead to seal the promise.

She caught hold of his sleeve, stopping him in his tracks. "I want to be alone," she said quietly, the tremor in her hand belying the steadiness of her voice.

"But is what you want the same as what you need?"

"Yes," Hermione snapped, her voice cracking. "Please. Let me have some space."

It was on the tip of his tongue to refuse. He doubted that she was right. Being left alone in her state couldn't be better than comfort and company. He should say no. But how could he, when she looked at him like that?

* * *

With the bottled spider stored in his laboratory in the cellar, Severus sat down at the top of the stairs, the narrow landing illuminated by the light streaming under the bathroom door.

The water pipes were banging, almost drowning out the sound of the dilapidated shower he had installed upon inheriting the house. While baths were all very well, he'd never liked lingering in them. A shower was so much quicker and more efficient.

Quicker in theory, anyway. Yes, Hermione was female and so it was her prerogative to take longer, but at this rate she'd drown herself... She wouldn't, would she?

Severus scrambled to his feet and knocked on the door, loud enough to be heard over the pipes and the running water. No answer. He tried the handle. She'd locked him out. Why would she do that, unless ...

He blasted the door off its hinges, not waiting for the shower of dust to clear before he dashed inside and yanked the shower curtain aside.

'At least she hasn't drowned herself,' Severus thought as he caught hold of Hermione's wrists and gently pulled her hands away from herself. He ignored the still running shower, after turning the temperature down. What did it matter if he got wet?

Hermione had done her best to scrub herself raw, with the water uncomfortably close to scalding, producing a boiled lobster effect in places. Thankfully he had got there in time before she seriously hurt herself. A muscle in his jaw twitched at the thought.

'I knew I should have stayed!'

Teeth clenched, he slowly counted to ten. It would not do to react angrily. Even if her dripping wet body wasn't shaking with near-silent heaving sobs, anger was not the answer.

'Oh, Hermione. What am I to do with you?'

Severus sighed. Once she'd stopped trying to pull away from him, he let go of her wrists. She let him put his arms around her. He held her close until the worst of her tears had passed, his shirt absolutely sodden by the time he drew back in order to retrieve the soap.

After working up a lather, he gently ran his hands over her skin. To his relief, she didn't tense under his touch. He hesitated when he came to her breasts; he didn't want her to mistake this for a sexual advance.

"No ... no, it's okay." Hermione sniffled miserably. She looked at him through bloodshot eyes. "Don't stop. I need to trust you."

He did as she asked. All the same, he did not linger on her breasts or between her legs. She might trust him, but could he trust himself?

Hermione took a shuddering breath. "I know I shouldn't feel like this."

"Like what?" Severus asked, lathering up his hands again. That she was opening up had to be a good sign.

"Guilty. That I enjoyed it. That I feel dirty, *used*. It's not your fault, or Lucius's."

He stopped, soapy hands on her back. "I was the one who made you enjoy it."

"Don't you start feeling guilty too." She held his face in her hands. "It was better than the alternative. It wasn't rape, even if my stupid, ~~stupid~~ *stupid* body makes it feel that way." Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks.

This time she didn't let him embrace her, rubbing her hands over her face until the tears had stopped. "I'm pathetic. Weak. You and Lucius aren't falling apart, and it wasn't any easier for either of y..."

Severus cut her off with a hard, firm press of his lips against hers. "You can be silly at times, this being a prime example, but weak? Pathetic? No."

He pushed his wet hair away from his face, where it had been plastered by the cooling water from the shower. Time to rinse her off before it got any colder. He unhooked the showerhead and ran it over her, the remains of the soap trickling away. She yelped when it went completely cold and scrambled out of the bath.

The ragged towel hanging from the radiator was a little dusty and coated with spider webs to be used. It hadn't been that long since they'd last been here, but the bathroom was a magnet for dirt. Besides, the fabric was too rough for Hermione's irritated skin.

Hermione's teeth had started to chatter. Come to that, he felt cold in his wet clothes. He pulled her close and disappeared.

Uncomfortably close to his ear, Hermione screamed. She staggered back, almost slipping on the warm tiles of his bathroom.

"Warn me before you do that!" she gasped, rubbing at her sternum. She glared balefully at him, and snatched a towel from the rail behind her.

"It diverted you from your feelings." Severus finished casting a Drying Charm on his clothes, then strode over to her and wrapped the towel around her shoulders, gently rubbing her dry as he spoke. "Which reminds me: a lesser woman would have 'fallen apart' as you put it before St. Mungo's released you."

He paused in order to dry the worst off her hair. "You have been under a lot of pressure. You still are. I do not think less of you for being emotional."

She muttered something that ended with a wail of "in front of Lucius!"

"Lucius has been a married man before. He knows better than to think that you were weak for crying."

Now that she was dry, he replaced the towel. Severus walked over to the open cupboard lining one wall, his eyes searching the shelves packed with assorted potion vials and jars. Where had he put it?

"I made you a healing salve, specifically designed for intimate areas." He fished out a small jar. "I thought, as you are somewhat unaccustomed to sexual activity, that you might be sore."

"I'm not at the moment. But chances are that I will be in the morning."

Severus gave her a sceptical look. "You almost scrubbed yourself raw. After washing and drying, that must sting." He opened the jar. "This is most effective if applied by the maker."

Hermione gasped at the first dollop of the salve, squirming under his touch. He smirked: he had neglected to mention that it was also ice cold until it was rubbed in.

"Rub it in. Once I've literally *applied* it, your touch should not cause it to lose efficacy." That and he didn't think it wise for him to rub it in around her genitals.

When all of the scratches and sore patches of skin had been coated and had begun to heal Severus replaced the jar on the shelf.

"Let me know if you need it again."

He took her hand and led her into his bedroom, then through the adjoining door into hers.

Her cat wound around their legs, butting its head against his hand when he leaned down to stroke it. Hermione had pulled on a fresh nightgown by the time he straightened up again. Before she could get into bed, he caught her face between his hands.

"If you did not feel, you wouldn't be the Hermione Granger I know." He kissed her, lingering longer than the last time.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Aren't you coming to bed?" she murmured against his lips.

"I won't be long..." Severus trailed off. He stared up at her, momentarily dumbstruck. *Coming to bed? Not going?*

"I don't want to be alone. And Crookshanks isn't ... well, he isn't you."

Severus felt the corners of his lips quirk upwards. "Then I'll stay." He stepped back, out of her arms.

"Er ... Where are you going?" Hermione asked.

Severus paused on his way to the adjoining door, before Hermione answered her own question.

"Oh. Pyjamas."

"Indeed."

By the time he'd changed into his pyjamas and performed his ablutions, Hermione was asleep, her cat curled up at her feet. Yellow eyes watched him slide into bed behind Hermione, spooning against her, but there was no hostile hiss. Perhaps that meant that he wouldn't be ambushed in the middle of the night by a sharp-clawed fur ball. The yellow eyes narrowed malevolently. Temperamental brute. It had found him trustworthy enough before he got into bed with Hermione.

"Do it, cat, and you will find yourself locked in the aviary. If some of the occupants don't rip you to shreds, Lucius will."

The cat turned away, tail hiding its face. Hopefully it had got the message.

"Nox." Even without his wand, the magical lights went out at the verbal command. He soon joined Hermione in slumber.

* * *

Hermione hesitated outside the breakfast room. Severus had gone straight in, only to pause and look back at her, his eyebrows lowered in concern. She tried to smile, to signal that she was fine, but her stomach was lurching with anxiety-induced nausea.

The idea of eating made her feel worse, but her mother had hammered the lesson into her during her childhood that breakfast was the worst meal to skip. Maybe some dry toast would go down.

Or maybe not. At the sight of Lucius, she had to take several deep, slow breaths. Now was not the time to have a panic attack.

"How are you this morning?" Lucius's voice, laced with what sounded like genuine care and concern, calmed her stomach.

"Fine," she said, too quickly; both men raised an eyebrow, mirroring each other. "Better, anyway."

She walked over to the table. Hermione had to steel herself not to flinch when Lucius courteously moved the chair opposite him for her to sit down, even though it was with magic. It wasn't as if he was looming over her.

'This is ridiculous!'

Hermione sat down and shuffled her chair towards the table under her own power, before Lucius or Severus could. She'd been pampered enough already.

Once Severus had sat down next to her, she tucked into some toast, covered by thinly spread marmalade. The food was tasty, the company easy on the eyes, but the conversation was stilted. And virtually non-existent.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, breaking the awkward silence after they'd finished eating.

Across the table, Lucius blinked, nonplussed.

"About yesterday. My ..." She fumbled for the right word. "My reaction just made it worse for all of us."

Lucius slowly reached over the table and patted the back of her hand. "Don't worry about it. If anyone was at fault, it was the Wizengamot."

Beside her, Severus tensed. Hermione was barely aware of that, her stomach lurching again while she struggled to relax under Lucius's light touch. At least it wasn't as bad as it had been the previous day. Perhaps, given time, she wouldn't flinch?

Before she could become accustomed to the friendly touch, Lucius withdrew his hand. His lips twisted into a wince that what was probably meant to be a smile. And the look in his eyes ...

Oh, she hadn't intended to, but Hermione could tell that it had hurt him. Lucius Malfoy was as human as she was.

Yes, the Wizengamot had a lot to answer for ...

Severus cleared his throat, interrupting Hermione's dark thoughts before she could think of suitable punishments for the Wizengamot and their pet Ministry.

"Let me guess: we don't want to know." He pointed at the fragments of what appeared to be newspaper in the fireplace.

"Quite." Lucius curled his lip. "I'm not sure it will do much good, but I have drafted a letter to the *Prophet's* editor. A reminder that everyone is subject to this legislation, and a veiled warning that he will not want his own dirty laundry airing, or that of his surviving daughter. Basically, for him to cease and desist.

"Speaking of ceasing and desisting," Lucius drawled, looking directly at Hermione, "Please refrain from inflicting further damage to our home. Malfoy Manor doesn't take kindly to it, and even if it wasn't sentient, a home should be afforded all due respect."

For a moment, Hermione didn't know what he was talking about. Then she remembered: the irreparable damage to his study door when Harry had fled. Oops.

She cringed, willing herself to disappear. "Sorry, it won't happen again."

Severus stifled a snort at her words.

Lucius bared his teeth in a wide grin. "Oh, I've no doubt that you'll lose your temper again. But please use less permanent hexes in future. For your own sake, or you may find yourself locked out of any room you can comfortably sleep in."

"What about the drawing room?" Severus asked.

Hermione stiffened at the mention of *that* room. It might not have the same nasty effect on her now that the atmosphere had been purified by a team of expert curse-breakers, but the mere thought of it still triggered bad memories.

"Hmm. Good point. I hadn't considered that." Lucius stroked his chin, deep in thought. "To ensure that the house doesn't bear a grudge, the best solution would be to modify the house plan. Not now, though. Malfoy Manor is most likely to accept changes at night, when it is most sleepy."

"Malfoy Manor's like Hogwarts? It's alive?" Hermione asked, her tongue finally caught up with what her mind had tried to compute since just before she'd apologised for the damage.

"How else would I be able to adjust the wards without casting a spell? If you're interested in the technicalities, there are several books on the subject in the library."

On another day, Hermione would have bounded to her feet in her enthusiasm. Even with her subdued mood, she felt irresistibly drawn to the library.

Lucius rose to his own feet. "Before you lose yourself in the library, I'd like to show you my aviary."

"Er, thanks, but ..." she trailed off, wondering how to politely say that she preferred the most boring book to any bird.

Severus also got to his feet. "Trust me, the library can wait," he whispered into her ear, his breath raising goosebumps on her neck. "The aviary is worth seeing."

* * *

It was. Lucius's precious aviary was a tower, with a spiral staircase in the middle allowing access to the upper floors. The entire structure was made of glass, with the floors and stairs frosted into opaqueness, while the walls were so clear that they didn't appear to be there.

"Don't the birds fly into the walls?" she asked, watching the albino peacocks strut about. "Or walk into them, in their case?"

Lucius just smirked. He walked over to the wall and proceeded to wave his arm through it. "What wall? There are wards to prevent intruders and accidents on the upper floors, mind."

He led them upstairs, where golden pheasants preened. Neither man lingered, merely beckoning her further on.

A Fwooper occupied half of the next floor, beak wide open in song. Thankfully the Silencing Charm was intact; their situation was insane enough without them following suit.

Lucius held his arm out, to stop her exploring the other side of the room. Surely he didn't keep any dangerous birds?

"Look." He pointed to a small nest, where a fluffy yellow ball rested, moving slightly as it breathed.

It wasn't until she saw a yellow blur zoom past that Hermione realised what they were.

"Snidgets?" Another reason to dislike Quidditch. The poor birds had been hunted almost to extinction for the love of that game.

"Indeed." Lucius sounded smug. "I am a certified breeder." From what she had read, he deserved to be so satisfied; a licence to keep Snidgets couldn't be bought. Additionally, he had to have a way with birds to get the flying balls comfortable enough in his presence to breed.

And he did. The flying Snidget swooped down to land on his outstretched finger, chirping up at him. Hermione had to smother a snigger when he cooed back at it. Then it zipped off, back to its mate on the nest.

He looked up and cleared his throat, his cheeks flushed. "Next floor!"

Shaking her head, she followed him upstairs, Severus right behind her.

The sight of a bird she thought of as extinct stumped her, and almost sent her and Severus tumbling down the staircase. Hands on her bum, Severus halted her in time.

"Sorry," Hermione muttered, angry with herself. A Diricawl. Not a dodo, although that was how Muggles knew them. Or had known them.

She stormed off the spiral staircase onto the next floor. Startled by the sudden noisy movement, the Diricawl vanished, leaving a cloud of feathers behind it. A few seconds later, it reappeared in its nest, peeking out nervously.

"I have a new acquisition," Lucius said, an almost childlike glee in his voice. He was standing by a wren-sized blue bird.

"How kind of you to supply me with Jobberknoll feathers," Severus drawled.

Lucius's face darkened. "You must be joking."

"Not at all..."

"Jobberknoll feathers are important ingredients in memory potions," Hermione parroted, before covering her mouth. This time, there was no snide comment about her being a know-it-all, though.

"Precisely. They may be useful in experiments to restore your missing memories, and those of all cured plague patients."

"Very well," Lucius growled. "Upstairs."

The next floor was home to a handful of eagle owls. Lucius paused briefly to stroke their heads, before continuing upwards.

"Don't the owls hunt the smaller birds?" Hermione asked.

"The wards stop all of the inhabitants of my aviary from fighting or consuming each other. Apart from one."

She frowned, opening her mouth to ask what sort of bird could do that. Then she reached the end of the spiral staircase and emerged onto the top floor, blinking in the sunlight.

The sight of the resident bird distracted her before Hermione could get any more than the vague impression of nothing but sky overhead.

"You have a phoenix?" She bit her lip. That was a case of foot in mouth to almost rival Ron at his worst.

Lucius didn't take offence. "Actually, he's technically Severus's. Although I would argue that he is his own. You've met him before, I think."

The swan-sized bird raised his head and ruffled magnificent scarlet and gold plumage, disturbed from his doze. Eyes darker and more piercing than Severus's regarded her for a moment. The phoenix warbled in greeting and ... recognition?

Hermione swayed on her feet as something stirred in the depths of her memory. It remained elusive when she tried to grasp it, slipping through her mental fingers.

"Hermione?" Severus touched her shoulder, but her attention was held by the phoenix.

He Fawkes, the name suddenly slipped into the forefront of her mind cocked his head to the side, and sang again.

This time, what stirred in her memories didn't slip away.

'She was somewhere dark, lit only by the glow from her wand and the phoenix, his feathers shining.

Severus was there, he was getting to his feet, holding onto her for support.

No, he was lying in a slowly widening pool of blood. Hermione gagged.

Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire, unearthly phoenix song filling her ears.

She was holding Severus in her lap, his head in her hands, Fawkes perched on him, tears trickling and...'

Pressure built behind her temples, from a dull throb to a sharp, continuous ache. Her ears were ringing, she couldn't hear, the fingers shaking her on the edge of her awareness.

Head clutched between her hands, she barely felt her knees collapse under her, the floor tilting to meet her. Darkness would have been welcome.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing and getting this back to me so soon. And to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 37

Memories and a meeting.

Chapter 12

Severus managed to catch Hermione before she hit the floor, but it was a close thing. Shaking her to catch her attention hadn't been a good idea, as it meant that she'd slipped out of his grip.

He'd dropped to his knees as he grabbed hold of her, not wanting to end up underneath her or on top of her. His knees throbbed painfully from where they had hit the frosted glass below.

Bruised knees did not concern him, though. The young woman in his arms did. Severus shifted his grip on her until he could see her face.

Hermione's eyes were still open and unfocused. Only semi-conscious, perhaps?

He freed a hand and waved it in front of her eyes. She gave no indication that she'd seen him, her pupils fixed and dilated. That in itself indicated that she was in pain, but combined with the way she was clutching her head between her hands, almost as if she was trying to cover her ears ...

Severus scowled up at where Fawkes still sang on his perch. "I know you're glad to see her, you daft old bird, but shut up!"

Fawkes snapped his beak shut and gave him a wounded glare. Severus glowered back. A phoenix was meant to be intelligent. Was Fawkes ~~trying~~ trying to hurt Hermione?

Although the soul-ensnaring song had ceased, Hermione kept her hands pressed against her head. She was still hurting.

"What's wrong with her?" Lucius asked. "Phoenix song shouldn't affect her like that; it doesn't hurt me and my soul must be far darker than hers. Has the plague somehow tainted her?"

Severus shook his head. His detection spell would have shown Hermione glowing red if that were the case, and anyway ... "Phoenix song isn't meant to cause anyone pain. It merely 'strikes fear into the hearts of the impure'."

"Perhaps the curse breakers were not as good as they were cracked up to be. My lawyers will be delighted if that's the case." Lucius smiled grimly.

"This is not how she reacted to the dark atmosphere in the house. No, the curse breaking hasn't failed."

"Then what's wrong with her?" Lucius threw his hands up, exasperated.

"How should I know?" Severus snapped. "I'm not a mind reader."

"But you're a Legilimens!"

True. While Legilimency was not as simple as reading someone's mind, it might help them to figure out why pain was still plaguing Hermione. Except ...

"She can't give consent."

Lucius snorted. "Worry about morality after she's better. Get on with it!"

"You're not the one who shares a bed with her," Severus muttered under his breath.

He sighed, shifting his grip on his wand. Hopefully Hermione would listen to his explanations before he was banished from her bed.

The first spell he cast was not Legilimens but Rennervate. As he'd expected, it didn't work. Worth a try, though.

Hoping that Hermione was not a natural Occlumens and not just because he would prefer to avoid the inevitable headache caused by the encounter with an Occluded mind, as it would take time that he didn't have Severus readied his mind, focusing his concentration and sharpening it to a point, his eyes unblinking as he looked into Hermione's vacant eyes.

'Legilimens.'

One thing was clear instantly: Hermione was no Occlumens. While that allowed him easy access to her mind, the horrendous tangle of thoughts, emotions and memories that awaited him was enough to make him wish that she was one. At least her mind would have been organised.

The swirling mess inside Hermione's head was worse than anything Severus had experienced when attempting to teach Potter Occlumency. And that was without going deep enough to access the contents of her memories.

Severus ventured into the tangled mass of memories. The very first memory he encountered almost disrupted his concentration *His body, drenched with blood trickling from his neck.* Seeing himself through another's eyes was always strange, but what really threatened to throw him out of Hermione's mind was his own experience of that moment. The stuff of nightmares; his own.

Mentally shaking himself, Severus moved to another memory. Phoenix song accompanied the shift. He must have followed a mental thread, because this memory was connected to the first. *Hermione's hands holding the wounds on his neck together, in position so that Fawkes could cry healing tears onto them.*

Wait. Hermione hadn't been able to remember that, it had been among the memories affected by the cure. She hadn't even recognised Fawkes just now, but then she was not a student who had frequented the Headmaster's office when the phoenix had been in residence.

Yet these previously missing memories were uppermost in her mind, not absent or buried in her subconscious. Severus followed the mental thread. The phoenix song was the only way he could unravel the Gordian Knot of Hermione's mind.

Examining the sequence of memories, he discovered two things. One, all of them either featured Fawkes or the phoenix was at least present in them. Two, as a series of memories they should have been in chronological order. But judging by the last memory he'd found, *Fawkes appearing in a flash of fire* they were not.

At least this set of memories were ones that he knew the correct sequence of. He could only hope that once he'd sorted them out, the rest of the muddle in Hermione's head would follow suit.

Legilimency itself could only identify the problem; memory modification was called for to rectify matters. Memory modification did not necessarily mean using Oblivate or replacing true memories with false ones. It could also involve untangling a mess like Hermione's.

This was an instant where a spell needed no incantation, verbal or non-verbal. It depended on his intentions and the strength of his will, rearranging the sequence and the connections between them. Severus could only hope that he discovered the correct order, as his own memories of the time were only reliable after Fawkes had healed him, not during or before.

Hopefully his actions would not change her. Meddling with the mind was not to be done lightly. Even so, there was nothing the 'experts' in St. Mungo's would be able to do better than Severus himself where Legilimency was concerned. And he wasn't about to wait if his wife was in pain.

Severus held the sequence of the memories in his mind and shuffled them into the right order. Then he used that as a template to rearrange the original ones in Hermione's head. Finally, he restored the connections between them, redrawing the mental thread.

He examined them once more to be sure that everything worked as he intended. Good. The memories were not tainted by the fog that normally marked false memories or impressions that had been tampered with.

Hermione was on her way to retrieve Snape's body. Outside the Whomping Willow, Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire, unearthly phoenix song filling the air. The damaged tree's feeble twitches ceased as it slipped into healing slumber.

She stood in the darkness of the Shrieking Shack. The only light came from her glowing wand tip and the shining phoenix on her shoulder.

His body, lying in a slowly widening pool of blood. The acrid sting of bile as Hermione gagged, doubled over, her hand over her mouth. Fawkes sang, bolstering her courage until she regained control over her body. She dashed to his side and knelt down.

She gripped the edges of his wound, holding his neck together, while Fawkes dripped healing tears onto the wound. The trickling flow of blood stopped. Had Nagini's venom slowed his heart? She was kneeling in his blood, but not nearly as much as she'd thought there would be.

Hermione shook herself. There was no time to waste wondering about things like that. She tugged Snape onto her lap, his head in her hands, jaw held open by her fingers. Fawkes perched on him, tears trickling into his throat

The snakebite was healed, the venom dealt with, but his eyes did not open. Hermione shifted a trembling hand to his neck, to where his pulse should beat. She sighed with relief, only to swear viciously seconds later when she checked whether he still breathed.

"I don't suppose you can do mouth-to-mouth?" she asked Fawkes, who cocked his head sideways, bemused.

She cast a Cushioning Charm on the floor, then laid him down. Hermione pinched his nose closed, and bent her head down to his.

The memory clouded. For a moment Severus was afraid that something had gone wrong with his efforts. He sighed with relief; he just hadn't examined the memories in detail, just the start and end of each snippet. In the memory, Hermione's eyes were closed, which contributed to the clouding from her prevailing emotion:

Fear. That she'd fail, that she'd do it wrong it had been years since she had practiced artificial resuscitation under the tutelage of her parents' refreshing obligatory First Aid courses.

The taste of blood and the salty tang of phoenix tear remnants on his lips, her own lips tingling as the dry, sore cracks in them healed.

Pulling back to inhale, first for herself, then another breath for him. Again and again and again ...

'Come on, come on, come on, don't die on me, please.'

A coughing, choking breath from him. Watching his eyes open, focus on her, then frown up at her.

"Miss Granger?" he rasped.

She nodded shakily. How was he going to react? She had done the right thing, hadn't she? Her doubts subsided when he abruptly fingered his healed neck. His frown deepened, until he spotted Fawkes, once again perched on Hermione's shoulder.

"Thank you."

With her help, Severus got to his feet, leaning on her for support. He had lost a lot of blood.

In a flash of fire, Fawkes took them to the hospital wing, not trusting them to make the journey under their own power.

Severus withdrew from the untangled set of returned memories. As he had hoped, the rest of the mess was gradually straightening out. He suspected that Fawkes's song had triggered the return of those memories where he was present, which had churned Hermione's usually organised mind into a knotted mess. No wonder her head had been hurting.

He lingered for a few more seconds to ensure that her thoughts were back to their usual state. The temptation to pry into her surface memories was there, but the desire to stay in Hermione's good books and her bed was stronger.

The headache hit as soon as he ended the spell and left her mind.

'Definitely need some Headache Relief.' He groaned, massaging his temples in an unconscious attempt to ward off the pounding. Severus cast a baleful look at the instigator of the events leading to his headache. Fawkes's chest was puffed up, his neck craning back, sure signs that he was about to burst into song.

"Oh no, you don't!" Severus tightened his grip on Hermione and Disapparated them both.

Upon his arrival in the bathroom, Severus collapsed to the floor. Judging by the now thunderous pounding in his head, it might have been a better idea to cast a well-placed Silencio on the bloody bird. He passed out.

* * *

Severus awoke to the business end of his wand. Well, that answered the question about how Hermione felt about his unauthorised rummaging around in her head. Or maybe not; she lowered his wand and helped him to a sitting position. Or then again, maybe it did, as she tipped a potion into his mouth with a terse instruction to 'drink this'. He swallowed, resigned to his fate.

Wait. That wasn't Veritaserum, it distinctly tasted of ... Headache Relief? Indeed it was, he noted, as the pounding in his head ceased. So he was forgiven? She didn't want payment in kind for his invasion of her privacy?

"I remember. Helping Fawkes. Saving you." Her eyes narrowed. "I didn't do that much. If Fawkes hadn't been there, you'd be dead."

"I beg to differ. He healed me, yes, but breathing is rather vital, too, don't you think?"

Hermione's lips twisted into a reluctant smile. "I suppose," she murmured. "And thank y..."

There was a knock, muffled by the distance between them and the bedroom door.

Unsurprisingly, it was Lucius. He stepped inside Severus's bedroom and frowned at Hermione as he held out an envelope addressed to her.

"Why would my son be writing to you?" To Severus, there was an undertone of hurt to Lucius's question. And well there might. Relations between father and son were still strained, despite the promising development of Draco attending their wedding.

Hermione took the envelope, explaining while she opened it and extracted the parchment. "Draco asked me to help him find a wife. He seems to think that I'll be able to convince his future bride that he's decent. Er, I mean, he *has* turned over a new leaf, but he thinks that my ... my endorsement would improve his chances."

She fell silent while she read the letter. "He wants to get this sorted out sooner rather than later."

"Then tell him no. Not today." Severus crossed his arms. After her breakdown the previous night, Hermione was still in a fragile state.

Hermione merely Conjured a quill. "Sorry, Severus, but I have to disagree. Draco's right; if this isn't sorted out, he won't have a choice left. But by the time the owls have gone between us, tomorrow would be better than today to see him."

Severus scowled slightly when she began to scratch out her reply on the back of Draco's letter. He didn't agree, but it was her choice to make. Still, it was better than Draco descending on them today.

"I'll take it," Lucius offered, once she had finished and was scratching out her name on the envelope and replaced it with Draco's. "I have to send that letter to the Prophet's editor anyway." Although Lucius's voice was tightly controlled, Severus could tell that his friend was all the more hurt that Draco hadn't come to him for help.

"Thank you," Hermione murmured, handing the letter to Lucius. He turned on his heel and walked stiffly away.

After he had gone, she turned to Severus. "Draco's not going to want Lucius around when he's meeting me, is he?"

"No, I can't imagine he will."

"I can't help with that." Hermione abruptly turned to face him, a light in her eyes as if something had just occurred to her. "But there is something I *we* can do. I don't think we ever got around to giving Lucius a wedding present, did we?"

Severus shook his head.

"I've got an idea. Diagon Alley should have what I've got in mind. We could go today, just the two of us."

"We will not. Or have you forgotten about the recent coverage in the *Prophet*? You need a quiet day. I'll go to Diagon Alley."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue.

"Besides, we shall doubtless need to get some gold out of Gringotts," Severus said, sure that would settle the issue.

"So?"

"Ah." *Of course. She only got those memories back that featured Fawkes.* "Did we neglect to mention that the goblins have banned you from Gringotts for life?"

"What? Why... oh. Something to do with breaking in and out, I guess, huh?"

"Indeed. Potter and Weasley are also banned." Severus smirked at the thought of the worshipped *heroic* duo at last getting some comeuppance. "I would have to leave you alone to withdraw money, and I'm not about to do that with the press in the current mood it is, today of all days."

"Fine," she huffed. "But surely you don't want to leave me on my own at all, 'today of all days'?"

All too true, he mused, ignoring her grumbling. Why hadn't he thought of that? "I shall go tomorrow morning. I'll be back by the time you've seen Draco. Just remember to tell me what I'm supposed to buy before then."

She nodded. "I'll tell you now."

"You could also tell me what you would like to do for the rest of the day."

"How does you, me, and the library sound?"

He wrapped his arms around her, lips by her ear. "Kinky."

* * *

Lucius stepped back as his study door closed in his face. Obviously Draco didn't want him to be present for his meeting with Hermione. Or to hear anything of it, judging by the complete lack of muted voices from inside.

Perhaps he should be grateful that Draco had at least spoken to him on his way inside, while he was waiting for Hermione to come downstairs. At least he did rate a brief hello, and a question about whether there was a door missing in the corridor. It had been worth altering the house plans just for the startled expression on Draco's face when Lucius had told him about the removal of the drawing room.

Not that it had done much to improve Draco's opinion of him. The suspicious look that swiftly followed the surprise left a bitter taste in Lucius's mouth. It was rubbing salt into the wound to be shut out when Hermione had come down, but no more than Lucius had been expecting.

He touched the door, stroking his finger down it, his eyes half shut. The Manor responded to his wishes, and the door vanished. Another stroke on the now-invisible door, and the privacy charm Draco had used was bypassed. Within the wards, the Master of the Manor could do as he pleased, a secret Lucius had kept even from Draco. Just as well, as it meant that his son had no idea he was being observed; from inside the room, the door would still be visible.

"...exactly do you want me to do?" Hermione was asking. She sounded a little exasperated. "Write an article for the *Prophet* or the *Quibbler*? Both?"

Draco leaned forward in his Lucius's favourite, to be precise chair. "I was thinking more along the lines of putting in a good word for me with your friends."

"I don't have many female friends. Even less after..." Hermione trailed off, looking away from Draco, towards the door. Lucius could see the raw pain in her eyes.

"I know." Draco hunched down in his seat. He cleared his throat. "But I think I know who I'd like to court. Without you, I don't think I'd have..."

Lucius missed whatever Draco said next. A wand held to his throat was rather distracting. Damn Severus and his silent Apparitions!

"Explain." Severus growled into his ear. Lucius shuddered; Severus was spitting mad. Unfortunately, moving to wipe the spittle away might result in a hex.

"Well, I suppose that answers the question of whether someone standing next to me can eavesdrop too."

Perhaps being flippant hadn't been the best idea, Lucius mused, as Severus dug his wand in hard enough to bruise Lucius's neck.

Lucius winced. "Draco shut me out. I only wanted to hear what his decision would be."

Sparks flew from the wand tip, stinging wherever they touched his skin, but thankfully not hot enough to blister.

"Have you 'eavesdropped' like this on me? On my wife? *In our bedrooms*?"

"I wouldn't dream of it." Lucius almost cringed at how shaky his voice sounded. He tried to console himself that there was a limit to how composed a man could be at wand point.

The wand jerked against his neck, momentarily pressing harder. Then Lucius was spun around, pressed back against the door with winding force.

Severus was right in front of him, wand pointing at his face.

"That had better be the truth." Black eyes narrowed with barely contained fury. "Wand. Now."

Surely he wasn't demanding a duel over this? Lucius reluctantly reached into his pocket.

"I want a Wand Oath that you will never invade my privacy like this, or Hermione's."

"Don't you trust me?"

Severus gave him a hard, contemptuous look. "Would you trust yourself when it came to voyeuristic behaviour?"

Lucius felt his cheeks burn, but didn't react to the insult. If it took this to maintain peace in his house, so be it. He held his wand tip to Severus's.

"I'll do it. On the condition that you don't breathe a word of this to Hermione."

"Very well." Severus's lip curled. "Much as you deserve her displeasure, she has enough to deal with already."

"I, Lucius Malfoy, swear on my wand, channel of my magic, that I will not invade Severus or Hermione's privacy with magical interference." His wand tip flashed white, sealing the oath. "Will that do?"

"You've left holes wide enough for a Thestral to fly through, but I suppose that's the best I'll get," Severus grumbled.

Still pressed against the door, in closer contact with the house wards, Lucius could feel the privacy charm being lifted. Draco must be about to leave, which meant ... Lucius only just had enough time to put his wand away and have the Manor cancel his eavesdropping spells before the door opened. He stepped away from the door, glancing back at Severus. To his relief, Severus had put his wand away too.

Turning back to the open door, Lucius's face fell. Only Hermione stood in the doorway.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I tried to get him to stay for lunch, but ..."

"He came to a decision?" he asked, changing the subject as soon as he could. He didn't want her pity. He wanted her... No. He was not about to follow that train of thought. Certainly not with Severus standing right next to him.

"He did." Hermione didn't elaborate, her lips pressed tightly together. If Lucius was any judge of a woman's moods, now was not the time to press her.

She turned to Severus. "Any luck?"

In answer, he held up a box marked with the logo of the best jeweller's in Diagon Alley. Not the name, as it was impossible to pronounce even for wizards fluent in Gobbledegook.

Severus handed it over to Lucius. "Not that you deserve it at the moment," he muttered, too quietly for Hermione to hear. Lucius only heard it because the Manor amplified his senses in such instances.

Lucius ignored him. He opened the box. Inside was a fine silver chain. He held it between finger and thumb, testing the strength. For all its apparent fragility, it was as strong as Acromantula silk.

"Thank you, it's very ..." He searched for the right word. "Is it intended to be symbolic?"

Hermione looked away as she covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking as she laughed. She soon sobered, though. "No. It's for you to wear your old wedding ring on. We've seen you looking at your ring finger as if something was missing, and, well ..."

"It's an acknowledgement of your relationship with Narcissa," Severus continued. "Neither of us expect you to forget about her."

For a long moment, Lucius stood frozen, fingers locked around the chain. He swallowed past the lump in his throat, keeping his stinging eyes on the silver thread. A tangible reminder that he was Hermione's husband in name only. That his heart still belonged to Narcissa. *And it did.*

It hurt, but it was thoughtful of them. Wearing his ring from Narcissa on a necklace had actually occurred to him. It just hadn't seemed socially acceptable, even if it would have been out of sight of the public. He would have known it was there, hanging so close to his heart. That was what mattered. It was not done. But if it was a wedding present from Severus and Hermione ...

He opened his mouth to thank them, but the threatening ache of the lump in his throat warned him that doing so would result in the release of tears. Lucius just nodded, lips pressed tightly together. Tears swam in his eyes regardless, blurring his vision.

A hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed gently. Another, larger one gripped his other shoulder. Narcissa was gone, but at least he was not alone.

AN: Many thanks, as always, to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 37

Matchmaking and lobbying.

Chapter 13

Five nights after her nightmare, Hermione had another. She had the same feeling of déjà vu, but just like the previous time, she couldn't remember what the nightmare was about. She just jerked awake, half gasping, half sobbing. Trembling like a leaf.

Unlike last time, she didn't have to get out of bed for comfort. Severus pulled her closer, even as she twisted around in order to burrow into his arms.

"Nightmare?" he asked, voice thick with sleep.

Hermione nodded against his shoulder.

Severus stroked her back, her breathing gradually slowing to normal as he did so. "Want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. "Can't remember." It bothered her more than anything else that this basilisk-of-the-night melted away as soon as she awoke; disturbing her own and Severus's sleep for nothing.

"Need any..." The rest of Severus's question was lost in a jaw-cracking yawn. "Dreamless Sleep?" he continued.

"Don't think so. Last time, it didn't come back again. Not in the same night."

"If you're sure." He pressed his lips against the side of her neck, sending an entirely different sort of shiver through her body.

She felt him pull back slightly, hair brushing against her shoulder as if he was cocking his head. A moment later, Severus touched his mouth back to her neck. He nipped gently, lips quirked into ... what? A smile? A smirk?

Hermione pushed him onto his back, hands trailing down his chest to his waist in the darkness to find his pyjama bottoms. One rested on the elastic, the other slipped inside to explore, fingers stroking down his treasure line.

One of his hands tangled in her hair, cupping the back of her head. He gently brought her head down to his, their noses clashing for a moment until they tilted their heads to the side.

"Want you," she breathed against his lips.

His reply was muffled by her kiss as her hand closed around his hardening erection. His hips jerked, pushing his twitching penis further into her grasp.

Their kiss deepened as she thrust her tongue between his parted lips. Groaning his appreciation, his tongue parried her attack.

Severus tugged her nightie up to rest at her waist while she freed his erection from his pyjama bottoms.

Before she could move to straddle him, his hand was between her legs, thumb resting on her clit as his fingers tested the growing wetness slightly lower down. Much as she wanted to brush his hand out of the way and lower herself onto his hardness, she just wasn't quite ready yet.

A ragged gasp escaped her. If Severus kept that up, she would be very ready soon. By now he knew how to please her and he was putting that knowledge to good use. Within moments she was bucking into the swirling, flicking pressure of his thumb, his fingers not thick enough inside her.

'Want more. Need more.'

With a guttural growl, she tugged his hand away. One hand positioning his penis, she straddled his hips and sank down on him. Her eyes rolled back, fingers digging into his shoulders.

Severus gripped her hips as she began to move, thrusting up as she let gravity pull her down.

Harder.

Faster.

Circling her hips in a figure of eight motion. Rising and falling, again and again.

The silk of his pyjamas against the back of her thighs, damp with sweat.

His right hand slipping from her hip to rest above where they were joined. Fingers flicking over her clitoris.

Her insides pulsed around him, triggering his ejaculation.

She felt more than heard the low, shuddering groan of his release as she cried out her own.

When she came back to herself, she was slumped on his chest, her throat throbbing with each breath she took. His softening penis slipped from her still-clenching internal walls. Hermione rolled to the side, but stayed snuggled up to him.

* * *

Long after Severus had fallen asleep in the aftermath of making love (leaving her to clean them both up, the man), Hermione lay awake.

Damn Draco. Not that it was his fault that he needed to find a bride, but did he have to set his sights on one of her only surviving friends?

After the emotional upheavals the first few days after her marriage, Hermione was reluctant to ask it of anyone else. It would be worse than her own situation, as unlike Lucius, Draco wanted a real marriage.

'How can I ask this of Ginny? Of Harry? Even with that stupid overprotective stunt he pulled, he doesn't deserve this.'

Hermione knew that she hadn't had an easy time since she awoke in St. Mungo's over a month earlier, but at least she hadn't been in a pre-existing relationship. Not one that she could remember, anyway. Nor one that she cared to resume.

But Ginny and Harry had more between them than Hermione had ever felt for Ron (as far as she knew). That, and Ginny had probably fallen ill after Hermione had, so hadn't lost as many of her memories.

Even if Draco didn't get his way, Ginny and Harry would have to accept an intruder into their lives, into their bed. Presuming that her parents and five older brothers let such a young unmarried couple spend any time alone ... Hermione wasn't sure which situation was worse; to share a bed long before the intrusion or to deal with the intruder at the same time as the upheavals of the first time with a loved one.

Hermione pinched herself. Either she keep her thoughts on the matter at hand, or she should do her best to stop thinking and go back to sleep. Considering the sort of meeting she had ahead of her in far too few hours, sleep sounded like a very good idea.

"If a far fetched one," she grumbled under her breath, punching her pillow and settling her head into the newly formed hollow.

Sleep was a long time coming, even with Severus's comforting presence by her side.

* * *

Hermione, eyelids tightly shut, used her wand to clean Ginny's spluttered Firewhisky from her face.

Perhaps the Leaky Cauldron hadn't been the best meeting place, but it was neutral ground, and they had privacy in the parlour Hermione had hired. The topic of conversation also warranted a stiff drink. Just preferably not sprayed all over her.

"Sorry, Hermione, but don't tell me things like that when I'm drinking," Ginny rasped, slowly recovering from her own exposure to Firewhisky in the wrong places.

Getting Firewhisky into one's eyes was undoubtedly unpleasant, so Hermione was inclined to agree. It was just as well that she'd blinked in time.

Ginny set her glass down with an unsteady hand. *'Draco Malfoy wants to marry me? And he's got you to propose for him?'*

"Yes... No! I'm not proposing, all I'm doing is finding out what you think about this."

"What I think?" Ginny snorted. "Harry would have a fit. It'd be worth telling him just to see the reaction." She cast a suspicious look at Hermione. "You're not behind this, are you? This isn't some scheme to get back at Harry, is it?"

"No!" Hermione bristled, scrabbling for the reins of her temper before she lost it. "Contrary to popular belief, not everything revolves around Harry."

"I'll believe you."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Ginny might have left 'thousands wouldn't' unsaid, but the doubtful tone of her voice was enough.

"But just because he saved the ferret's life doesn't mean he wants him as the other man in our marriage!"

Hermione sighed heavily, her breath whistling through clenched teeth. This wasn't going well. "Draco's changed."

"Really?" Ginny raised a sceptical eyebrow, then frowned in thought. "But then he did seem oddly restrained at your wedding."

"He's been estranged from his father for months. Something to do with Lucius's allegiance to Voldemort endangering their family. He's also changed his tune about Muggle-borns."

Ginny propped her head on her hands. "It sounds too good to be true."

"I know. But it's true. Severus would have told me if it wasn't."

"By the way, exactly how much of that glow on your wedding dress was down to *Severus*?" Ginny waggled her eyebrows.

Hermione felt her cheeks warm. "I like him. I like him very much," she admitted. "But what's that got to do with the matter at hand?"

Ginny ignored her. "Do you remember a certain late night talk we had, at Grimmauld Place? When objects of crushes came up?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat. But perhaps she could turn this twist of the conversation to her advantage ...

"And you said there was no one," Ginny continued, "were you fibbing?"

"Would I?" Hermione kept a straight face, resisting the urge to smirk. "But do you remember what you said?"

Ginny flushed crimson. "I should've kept my big mouth shut," she muttered. "I hoped you'd forgotten that bit."

"Is it still the case, though? You said you fancied Harry, yes ... but you also named others. Including Draco."

"Only in body! His personality is repulsive. Was, I mean." Ginny heaved an exasperated sigh. "Oh, all right. I'll give Mal.*Draco* a chance. If you give Harry a chance. Not of the same sort, of course!"

Hermione looked away.

Ginny touched the back of her hand. "He's really sorry about what he did."

"I know." She bit her lip. "This whole mess with the law is going to get worse before it gets better."

"I've a nasty feeling you're right." Ginny shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. "Can you afford to fall out with a friend in times like these?"

Hermione grimaced. Much as her injured pride objected, Ginny had a point. "Fine. He's forgiven."

"Good. Harry's been moping."

"Anything but that." Hermione raised her glass, clinking it to Ginny's in a toast.

A magically refilled (and drained) drink later, a slightly inebriated Ginny asked: "What's it like, being married to two men?"

"If anyone else asks, it's too early to tell. For your ears only, that applies too, but ..." She double-checked the Silencing Charm and leaned closer to Ginny. "I'm married to Lucius in name only."

"Apart from the one night making it legal?"

Hermione nodded, carefully steering her thoughts away from that night. Maybe one day she'd be able to think back and not feel as if she'd been doused in icy water, but that wouldn't be anytime soon.

"I did wonder if it was something like that. It's not as if you were friendly with Malfoy, while you were with Snape. I can remember that much; I fell ill months after you." Ginny cocked her head to the side quizzically. "Come to that ... you forgot about being Snape's friend. So why ..."

"Why did I marry him?" Much as Hermione wished she could simply snap that she didn't have to justify that to anyone, Ginny deserved some sort of answer. And had done nothing to warrant snarling at. "Whatever I saw in him in the first place is still there, and it's more than enough for friendship."

"And he's your intellectual equal or maybe better. I'm not even going to bother asking why you didn't start things up again with Ron. I saw the cracks long before you did."

"Oh?"

"At least Snape doesn't seem to take you for granted; Ron always did." Ginny shook herself. "Anyway, we're getting away from the topic at hand. Even if Lucius is only your show husband, you still have to put up with two men, even if you're friendly with one of them. How do you manage?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "Lucius has been civil enough. Understanding, even."

"I'm such a hypocrite. Asking this of you when I'm not doing it myself." She buried her head in her hands.

Ginny leaned forward, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, you can't take the credit for coming up with this mess. It's not your fault."

Hermione almost gave herself whiplash with the speed she jerked her head up. "Saddling you with Draco is!" *Great job of putting in a good word for your step-son, Hermione ...'*

"Don't be stupid! I'm giving him a chance, not marrying him right off." Ginny scoffed, shaking Hermione's shoulder gently. "He's still got to prove himself to Harry and me. And if not him, it'd have to be someone else. At least Draco's gorgeous."

"If you say so," Hermione muttered. Ginny ignored her.

"It's true that Harry would prefer someone like Neville, not that he wants to share me at all. But Neville's marrying Hannah Abbott. And ... he's a dear, but I don't fancy Neville even if he were single."

Ginny shook Hermione's shoulder again. "Anyway, you're assuming that *Lucius Malfoy* is going to keep his word. What happens if he changes his mind? You'll be in the same dragon cave as everyone else."

"He won't."

Ginny snorted. "He's a Malfoy. They're not called 'bad faith' for nothing!"

"I meant that Severus would kill him if he did, actually. I know Lucius is a slippery customer. But I think he's unlikely to break his word. He's still grieving for Narcissa, apart from anything else. And even if he wasn't, I'm not exactly his type."

"But you are his wife. With this law, he's not going to be able to have mistresses, is he?"

Hermione blinked. It hadn't occurred to her that Lucius would want mistresses. Rather short-sighted of her, really, as he was unlikely to want to be celibate for the rest of his life.

"There's not enough women to go around, I mean. And there's the public image, too. If I know anything about Malfoys, Lucius married you for your status."

"That was the impression I got, yes. This is something I should have thought about ... Not that I can do anything right now." Hermione mentally shook herself. "What you said about Malfoys ... I hope you won't hold that against Draco."

"Nah, I meant it when I said I'd give him a chance. If you say he's changed, I'll trust that."

"Thank you." Hermione checked her watch. "I'd better get moving."

Ginny pouted. "Just one more glass? My treat."

"I'd rather not be any more intoxicated for a meeting with the Minister! It's my first step in my campaign against this legal mess."

"You mean to tell me that after a morning arranging a match dictated by that 'legal mess', you're going to spend the afternoon doing what you can to tear the law to pieces?" Ginny covered her mouth with her hand, attempting to stifle her laughter. And failing.

"Oh, shut up."

"Hermione. I was wondering when you'd turn up." Kingsley stood up to take Hermione's hand and give her a warm handshake. "Have a seat."

He smiled half-heartedly at her as she sank into the chair opposite his desk. They'd been on friendly enough terms after that traumatic flight with Voldemort on their tail. But he suspected that this was not a social call.

"Before you ask, I can't do anything about the polyandry law. I'm subject to the dictations of the Wizengamot as much as anyone."

"I thought as much." Hermione shrugged. "It was worth a try, though."

"I take it you are going to campaign against this?"

Hermione nodded vigorously. "It's outrageous. It takes away the right of witches to marry whomever they please. No one else seems to be taking a stand."

'That's my girl,' Kingsley thought, smiling internally. "I'm not about to stand in your way. But I can't publicly side with you, either."

"I realise your hands are tied. The Wizengamot makes the law, and the Ministry enforces it. By extension, so do you."

"Exactly." Kingsley looked down at his clasped hands, eyeing his brand new wedding ring. He'd married Rolanda Hooch sooner than he'd originally intended, and was negotiating with her to pick a suitable second husband in order to set an example for the public.

"I can give you some advice, off the record." He drew his wand, checking the privacy wards, once, twice, and recasting them before continuing to speak. "Attempts to abolish the law won't work. There needs to be a viable alternative. A better means to repopulate our world. If you can come up with that, the Wizengamot should be all ears." Kingsley cleared his throat uncomfortably. "What I can't do is provide funding."

"Are you forgetting who you married me to?" Hermione smirked.

Kingsley laughed heartily. "I'm impressed. You've been married to the man for less than a week and you've already wrangled your own key to the Malfoy Gringotts vault." He sat up straighter as he suddenly remembered something. "Er, have your husbands mentioned the fact that you can't set foot inside Gringotts without ending up in Azkaban?"

Hermione stiffened. "Severus did mention that I was banned for life, but not anything about Azkaban." That sounded a little like ticked-off-female to Kingsley, if he was any judge.

"Oops. I hope I haven't just landed him on the sofa tonight."

"No, it wasn't a bed banishing offence, and he has his uses," Hermione muttered. She flushed, clearing her throat, looking at Kingsley as if she'd suddenly realised exactly who she was talking to.

Kingsley took pity on her and changed the subject. "It's almost time for my next meeting, I'm sorry to say. Is there anything I can do to help that is within my power?"

"Can you grant me access to the Ministry and the Wizengamot's records?"

Kingsley stroked his chin thoughtfully, his stubble scraping across his fingertips. "You already have access to most Ministry records as a privilege accompanying your Order of Merlin. I can grant you access to everything, including the Wizengamot's archives ... if you sign a confidentiality contract."

"How am I meant to use any information I find if I have to keep it to myself?" Hermione spluttered.

"You can share it with anyone else who has signed the contract. And with the Wizengamot, of course, in the event that you find something that could change the law." Kingsley reached into his desk and extracted two copies of the Top Secret Research contract. "Severus has already signed one. I must be mad to supply one for Lucius Malfoy, but these things were drawn up by goblins from Gringotts. If anyone can find a loophole, they deserve to."

He rummaged around inside his desk again and extracted a Soul Selling Quill. It was nothing of the sort, of course, but signing one's name in one's own blood once had certain convenient superstitions attached. Kingsley offered the magical black quill to Hermione.

She eyed the quill in distaste, but took it without complaining. While she read through the contract, Kingsley got up and moved to the fireplace. Flinging in a handful of Floo powder, he knelt down.

"Malfoy Manor," he called as he poked his head into the green flames. Kingsley kept his eyes shut as he felt the disconcerting whirling rush in his head while the rest of his body was still stationary. It would not do to be sick upon arrival. He really didn't want to think about the logistics, either, of what would happen to the vomit en route. The addition of soot could be the very least of the problems. Ugh. He did his best to shake the disturbing thoughts from his head. And regretted it, as the movement made him all the more queasy.

At least Floo travel didn't take long. His nausea eased seconds later, and he opened his eyes to the austere length of the hallway in Malfoy Manor.

"Lucius Malfoy!" Kingsley yelled.

"You called?" Lucius drawled, poking his head out of the nearest doorway. "Why have you seen fit to honour me with your presence, Shackbolt?"

"Your charming wife has twisted my arm into increasing your access to the Ministerial archives. If you want it, come through into my office." He pulled his head back into the whirl of Floo travel.

In the time it took for Kingsley to regain his control over his stomach, stand up and back away from the fireplace, Lucius had come through, radiating suspicion.

"Just sign on the dotted line." Kingsley gestured to the parchment on his desk, next to where Hermione had just finished signing her name and was now flexing her right hand, wincing.

To his grim delight, the sight of the tightly worded contract combined with the Soul Selling Quill changed Lucius's expression from merely wary to looking as though he'd just bitten into a maggoty apple.

"I knew there would be a catch."

AN: Many thanks to JunoMagic for betaing and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 37

Bad news travels fast.

Chapter 14

Lucius knocked on the brand-new laboratory door. Although simmering with annoyance about the infernally air-tight revisions of the Ministry's confidentiality contract, he wasn't foolish enough to barge in when Severus could be working with hazardous ingredients.

'Make that explosive,' Lucius observed when a muffled boom was followed by a string of expletives mingled with coughs.

The door burst open even as he raised his fist to rap on it again. Acrid smoke wafted out, making him choke. But the fumes quickly disappeared as the air conditioning wards came into effect.

"What?" Severus barked. His face was blackened with soot, his eyebrows singed, and some of his hair standing on end. Scratches covered his hands. To Lucius's experienced eye some looked like peck marks. None of his birds pecked him with anything but affection, of course, but Severus was a different matter.

'Serves him right for plucking my Jobberknoll!' Lucius looked back up at Severus's face, unable to keep a smirk from quirking his lips. "If you'd only asked me, I would have extracted the feathers you needed."

The growl that escaped Severus was more fitting for the mascot of Gryffindor House than to a Slytherin alumnus. "I took *one* measly feather."

"Why didn't you restrain it first? It would have been kinder."

"I attempted to use my hand, you pillock. Potion ingredients can be spoilt if magic is used on them. Any idiot knows that!" Severus spat.

'Ugh.' Lucius pulled out his handkerchief and wiped a spot of spittle from his cheek. "Kindly refrain from taking your temper out on me."

Severus dragged a hand down his face, smearing the soot. "Sorry. I know it's not your fault," he ground out through clenched teeth. "Perhaps a 'do not disturb' sign might be an idea. My reaction would not have been any different had Hermione interrupted me."

He peered past Lucius. "Come to that, where is she?"

"She's still at the Ministry. And just as well, considering how short your fuse is today. I'd rather not have newlyweds fighting in my I mean our house."

"Surely she's not trying to read through their archives in a single day?" Severus raised the remains of his eyebrows. "Although I wouldn't put it past her."

"Indeed not. By the way, why didn't you tell me that the Ministry had revised their confidentiality contract?" Lucius cringed internally. If not for the fact that he was a Malfoy, the tone that crept into his voice would have been a whine.

"You are losing your touch," Severus sneered. "Isn't it obvious? The way the Ministry operates was almost redrawn from scratch after the unlamented fall of the Dark Lord. It was virtually the only way to ferret out the corruption."

"But bloodsucking quills on top of a contract now worded tighter than the security spells at Gringotts? That's pure paranoia."

"What can I say? They know you, Lucius."

Lucius huffed at the undertone of sardonic amusement in Severus's voice. *Right.* No one laughed at a Malfoy. "Your experiments are going well?"

"Clearly," Severus snapped, gesturing at his sooty self. "Smashing. Two melted cauldrons and three explosions. At least the safety wards on my new laboratory are being rigorously tested." His eyes lit up with what could only be a nasty idea for Lucius.

"As you're here, you can help clean up the mess."

'Definitely a nasty idea,' Lucius thought as he quickly stepped back. Not fast enough, though, as Severus caught hold of his sleeve and yanked him into the lab. "But the house-elves!" Lucius spluttered.

"Are banned. I'll not risk them cleaning up the wrong things." Severus's grin could only be described as evil. "Furthermore, need I repeat again that magic can't be used? The residue might be dangerous, after all."

"You owe me," Lucius spat as he stopped trying to escape Severus's clutches.

"Consider it a wedding present."

"But the lab..."

"Was one of Hermione's prenuptial conditions."

Lucius clenched his fists, resisting the urge to forcefully wipe that smug look from Severus's face. A Malfoy outmanoeuvred? Unthinkable!

"Very well." He relaxed his hands, forcing any outward signs of anger to fade from his features and posture. Internally, he still seethed. Old habits died hard, and he was beginning to tire of being reasonable and good all the time. Where was the fun in that? True, he had no wish of reverting to his old ways completely. Falling out of the Dark Lord's favour and the resultant danger to his family *had* changed him.

But his pride still suffered. Both due to his fall from grace, and because of bowing to the wishes of those he had never considered his equals. It was high time to assert himself, if only in his own home.

Lucius was careful to avoid eye contact with Severus as he schemed. Although a passable Occlumens himself, he had no doubt that a man whose skills in the mental arts were powerful enough to fool the Dark Lord would have no trouble slipping into his mind. Though Severus seemed to be more and more concerned with asking permission first. Lucius shuddered. What was becoming of his slippery friend? Any Slytherin worth his weight in gold was of the persuasion that it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

* * *

Severus thoroughly enjoyed witnessing how Lucius had to dirty his hands cleaning cauldrons. Even though Lucius wore the finest Swedish Short-Snout dragon-skin gloves, his lilywhite hands would gain some calluses besides those from wand handling.

Tempting as it was to leave Lucius to his scrubbing and go upstairs to enjoy the shower recently enchanted into his bathroom, Severus wasn't about to leave a sulky Lucius alone with valuable ingredients. It would be just like Lucius to ensure that the next potions experiment ended with a bang.

As a result, Severus was still in the shower when Hermione came back from the Ministry. The first thing he knew about her return was when she joined him, embracing him from behind, her breasts pressed against his back. A pleasant surprise, until she stopped just as she'd been about to pull him down for a kiss.

Whatever she said was lost in the magical downpour. His lip-reading ability hindered, he twisted the Muggle-style lever, reducing the water flow from the cloud above to drizzle.

"What happened to your eyebrows?"

'Knew I should have used that Hair-Grow Tonic first...' Of course, even if he had, Hermione would have found out about his failure. No doubt Lucius would relish giving her every detail about his less than dignified appearance post-explosions. But to admit that even he made mistakes with potions? Inconceivable.

"Let's just say that today's experiments did not go well."

"Maybe I could help tomorrow?" Hermione definitely had moved on from her know-it-all days, when she simply would have proclaimed that she would help whether it was wanted or not.

"A second opinion would be useful," he allowed. "And your potions skills are more than adequate. But will you have time with your research and campaigning?"

"I can make time. Besides, it wouldn't do to neglect you. Spending time with you will prevent that, even in the lab."

"Indeed, it wouldn't do to neglect me," Severus purred and pulled her closer.

* * *

"Are you sure you don't want a shower in your bathroom, Lucius?" Severus asked. "I can't recommend them highly enough."

'Oops.' On second thoughts, perhaps it would have been wiser to wait until they had finished dinner to spar with Lucius. Hermione choked on her soup, her cheeks almost steaming with more than just embarrassment.

Patting her apologetically on the back, he passed her his handkerchief to dab at her streaming eyes.

"With the right company, perhaps." Lucius ostensibly kept his eyes on his bowl, but Severus was uncomfortably aware of how he surreptitiously glanced at Hermione as he spoke. But she was too busy glaring at her shower partner to notice.

Veiled attempts to rub his marital bliss in Lucius's face were doubtless unfair if not outright cruel, but it was simply payback. For decades Lucius had done much the same thing, and far more overtly. Theirs had never been the most stable of friendships.

Most of all, Lucius had known what he was getting into. If he had wanted no reminders of the real marriage under his roof, he would have made it a condition.

If Hermione continued to glower at him like that, Severus decided that he would have to enlighten her of another aspect of the real Lucius Malfoy. Although insufferably self-righteous Gryffindor that she was, she'd probably just tell him to be the bigger man; that he was better than that.

Hermione had stopped glowering, her eyes slightly unfocused as something occurred to her.

She turned to Lucius. "That reminds me, we never did discuss what should be done about your..." she trailed off and cleared her throat, "your needs. For, you know, company."

Severus doubted that Hermione could blush a deeper red.

She shifted uncomfortably. "It might be too soon for you to consider moving on, but this is something that should have been covered in those prenuptial agreements."

Grieving though he was, Lucius didn't take offence. Severus knew perfectly well why that was: Lucius had loved Narcissa, but he'd only been emotionally faithful. The cheating bastard had flaunted more than just his wife in front of Severus.

Much to Severus's discomfort, Lucius took his time responding to Hermione. Severus didn't need Legilimency to see that Lucius was tempted to break his word and demand his conjugal rights.

Pity that Lucius's poker face masked that from a recent acquaintance such as Hermione, whereas Severus could clearly recognise the nasty gleam and calculating look in those grey eyes. Would Hermione believe him if he mentioned it to her? Or would she just think that he was paranoid?

Possibly, as she did not react at all when Lucius glanced back and forth between them, the slightest smirk tugging at his lips. Too slight for Hermione to notice.

Severus tensed, his hand touching his wand inside his pocket. Friend or not, if Lucius lived up to his surname, he would regret being conceived, let alone born.

Lucius finally spoke up. "It's a moot point anyway, isn't it? There aren't enough women to go around for wives, never mind for mistresses. I may be a changed man, but I'm not about to take a Muggle into my bed. What's more, it would be social suicide to be caught 'cheating' on you."

Severus didn't release his wand. "So you'll be happy with your hand for the rest of your life?"

"Refreshingly blunt as always," Lucius sneered. "Have a little faith in the wife. She's intent on scrapping this law, isn't she? And on solving the population problem. When has Harry Potter's 'brain' failed?"

"It has been known to happen. I meant to ask while you were in Kingsley's office, but you left before I had a chance..." Hermione smiled winningly. "I could use some assistance."

"Your wedding present from me, I suppose," Lucius muttered, clapping his hands for the next course to appear. "Very well."

Satisfying as the thought of Lucius actually doing some work for once was, the ease with which Lucius had acquiesced to Hermione's request troubled Severus. Particularly coupled with the way those cold eyes flickered over Hermione's body, flushed as she was from their shower and her embarrassment...

His tight grip on his wand made the ebony creak warningly. Severus relaxed his grip, narrowing his eyes at Lucius, who quirked a cocky eyebrow right back at him.

'I know you're up to no good!'

'Of course,' said the smug smile creeping across Lucius's pointy face. *'And what are you going to do about it?'*

Severus might have inadvertently snapped his own wand if an owl hadn't tapped on the window at that moment.

* * *

"Looks like you were right," Lucius commented, his eyes fixed on the *Evening Prophet* in front of them with much the same distaste he had reserved for Muggle-borns until recently.

'WIZENGAMOT BLUNDER: BROODMARES' the headline proclaimed.

Severus pushed his plate away. No matter how sumptuous the food was, the contents of that front page were enough to put even a ravenous Weasley off his dinner.

"Why didn't he tell me?" Hermione seethed, the crockery vibrating, a sure sign that her hold on her temper was slipping. Severus put his hand on top of hers, thankful when she relaxed a bit under his touch.

"*He* being Shackbolt?" Lucius asked. Before she could answer, a muffled voice could be heard in the hallway. "What a coincidence," he muttered. He made his way to the door and yanked it open.

"While an honour to see you, Minister, twice in one day is far too much. Do you want to come out of the fireplace this time?"

Severus didn't hear the answer to that question, but it proved unnecessary, when Kingsley walked into the dining room.

"Hermione, Severus. I hate to interrupt your meal, but I thought you'd appreciate a heads up..." Kingsley trailed off, his eyes drawn to the bright red headline on the *Prophet*. "No fucking way. I only just heard about it, and I was there! There were no press permitted."

"You have a leak," Lucius drawled, gleeful. If he hadn't witnessed Lucius's honest surprise a moment before, Severus would have suspected that Lucius had something to do with the leak.

"Obviously," Kingsley spat. "Rest assured, I know how to handle one."

He picked up the *Prophet*, white-knuckled fingers crinkling the paper as they unconsciously threatened to tear it to pieces. After flicking through it, he tossed it back onto the table.

"While I can't give you a warning thanks to this," Kingsley poked the garish newspaper, "I can give you more details, thanks to that contract you've all signed."

"Is this addendum to the law effective immediately?" Hermione asked, too impatient to wait for Kingsley. It would be a while before she outgrew such traits, if she ever did.

"Not exactly. You see, there is what passes for a silver lining in that this isn't enforced for a month."

Severus frowned. That delay wasn't like the Wizengamot at all. The council could take forever to come to decisions, but when they did, it usually became legally binding instantly. "What's the catch?"

"The delay is to allow for the Healers at St Mungo's to check the fertility of all those of childbearing age."

Beside Severus, Hermione was attempting to keep control of her magic, her eyes closed and breathing deeply. Judging by the way the *Prophet* was smoking, she was failing. As gratifying as it would be to watch, the rest of the table would also go up in flames. They would never hear the end of it from Lucius if his antique table got singed, magical repairs or not.

As he didn't know which pocket Hermione's wand was in or even if she had it on her he thrust his wand into her hand. Sparks flew from the tip, safely venting the outburst of magic accompanying her rage.

Calmer after venting, Hermione was coherent enough to speak. "The only thing the *Prophet* mentioned was no contraception until two girls are born. I take it there are other stipulations?"

Kingsley grimaced, wrinkling his normally smooth head. "What haven't they stipulated, you mean?"

Severus had visions of the addendum about procreation longer than the law itself, dictating on every aspect of sex and pregnancy. He shuddered, sickened.

Hermione groaned. "You know, I'm really starting to hate being right."

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

This will be on hiatus while I work on my contribution to the SSHG Gift Exchange. I hope to post at least one more chapter by the time of the mid November deadline. I'm not abandoning this story!

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 37

Stipulations and an appointment.

Chapter 15

At the whisper of wings overhead, Hermione looked up from her perusal of the most recent records of the Wizengamot.

An owl was an unusual sight inside the Ministry of Magic after the development of inter-departmental memos. Or so Lucius had told Hermione. However, since the news of the addendum to the law had been leaked, owls were an increasingly common sight.

Hermione could only guess as to the contents. There were no red envelopes to be seen, or explosions heard. According to Lucius, the Ministry had wards to repel Howlers, which explained the lack. Unless the rest of the population of wizarding Britain was not as bothered by the addendum as the *Prophet* assumed with its inflammatory headlines? As Lucius had said before they'd married, it was a given that marriage resulted in children.

But to have the authorities dictate on when those children were to be conceived? To placidly, passively allow themselves to be treated as nothing but a means to an end, and not as people...

Her thoughts were interrupted when the owl swooped down to land right in front of her, proffering its front leg. She eyed the attached envelope in much the same way as she had Blast-Ended Skrewts.

"Are you going to take it?" Lucius asked, from his seat across the table. "Or shall I, so that there's no risk of your hexing the messenger?"

"If it has any sense, it'll leave if it's carrying bad news." Hermione relieved the owl of its burden. It immediately took off. She watched it go with a sinking feeling. Bad news, then?

She tore open the envelope and removed the slip of parchment.

"Well?"

Hermione scrunched up the parchment and resisted the urge to set it alight with her wand for good measure. After all, she was in a library. "It explains the flocks of owls... I have an appointment at St Mungo's tomorrow." She sighed. "I had hoped that it would take longer than seven days for them to get to 'G'."

"At that rate I can expect my own notification within a week."

"And Severus a week after that." That would be three weeks out of four before the addendum was enforced, presuming that the Wizengamot didn't change their minds and decide to enforce it after everyone in each union had been through a fertility check.

She thumped the table, ignoring the affronted glower from the librarian. "We're running out of time."

"I know you hope to find a solution, my dear, but I'm afraid it's verging on the impossible." Lucius gestured at the cavernous room they were in, lined with shelves upon shelves of Ministerial records. "Certainly impossible within a month, even concentrating on the paperwork of the addendum itself."

"I can't give up!"

The librarian hissed a *shush* at Hermione's raised voice.

Hermione lowered her voice. It wouldn't help her cause to be thrown out of the archives. "Reproduction is not something the powers that be should dictate. Everyone should be able to decide for themselves when to have children, and not have the number or gender dictated."

"I wasn't suggesting that you should give up," Lucius interjected mildly. "I'm still here, assisting you, am I not? And I do agree that interference in wizarding private life is not on, but you must see the Wizengamot's point."

"I do," Hermione muttered. "There is a problem with there being not enough witches and a population bottleneck. That doesn't mean I agree with their methods in 'solving' that problem. There has to be another way."

Lucius picked up the crumpled appointment notice. "May I?"

"Go ahead," Hermione said absently, her thoughts elsewhere. Apart from anything else, if she didn't find a solution within three weeks, she would be forced to have children long before she was ready.

Oh, she did want to have a child or two, but not yet. Maybe in a decade or so, but not now. She was only nineteen! As for Severus, she didn't know if he even wanted kids. They hadn't talked about it, unsurprising since they'd only been romantically involved for a little over a month. This was something they should be allowed to decide eventually, not to have it decided for them by the bloody government.

Hermione glared down at the now all too familiar stipulations of the addendum. The edges of the scroll started to smoulder. She took a deep breath, reigning in her temper. While it would be cathartic to see it burn, it wouldn't do the same to the actual law-to-be. And she suspected the librarian might burn *her* if she did do it.

Once the addendum was law, it would be all the harder to retract. Even if she did find a viable alternative, the Wizengamot would be unwilling to ditch something that was in place and was proven to work.

It would work, too. The Wizengamot had made sure of *that*, stipulating the usage of fertility potions to guarantee conception, and sexual congress with the father-to-be at least every two days during the first trimester to help ensure that the foetus would not be rejected.

The Wizengamot had also contracted Severus to concoct a potion to ensure that all foetuses were female by eliminating Y chromosomal spermatozoa. After the required two girls per witch were born, the wizards would be provided with an antidote.

Lucius's voice dragged her away from her thoughts. "...unless I'm much mistaken, Hermione, you didn't read the back of this." He held up the smoothed out parchment, twisting his hand to reveal something printed on the reverse. It was in block capitals, large enough for her to see from across the table.

'THIS IS MANDATORY. WE WARN THAT MISSED APPOINTMENTS ARE AN ARRESTABLE OFFENCE, PUNISHED BY A FINE AND/OR AN OVERNIGHT STAY IN AZKABAN.'

Her jaw dropped. "Surely they can't do that! Something like that should be where it can't be missed, and to send it out the day before..."

"They should leave more notice, yes. Be sure to attend your appointment. Even without Dementors, I do not recommend Azkaban." Lucius reached over to rest his hand on top of hers. "Nor do I want to see you there, even for a single night."

"Much as I despise the purpose of these check ups, rest assured that I won't miss it." Hermione gave him an uncomfortable smile as she gently extracted her hand from under his, ostensibly to turn the page. While his concern was touching, Lucius's means of expressing it reminded her too much of his flirtatious and charming behaviour toward her over the past week.

At first, Hermione had thought that he was doing it to annoy Severus. Why else do it in such a way that Severus was the one who noticed, like the day they learned of the addendum? But since then, Lucius had ramped up the charm, even when Severus was not around. As such, the concern Severus had expressed about Lucius's behaviour did not seem entirely unwarranted.

It was a little worrying that Lucius seemed inclined to break his word about marriage in name only. He seemed unconcerned by the consequences of antagonising Severus; in fact, unless Hermione was mistaken, Lucius delighted in it.

But Severus was overreacting. After all, he had nothing to worry about. She wasn't interested. No matter how charming Lucius was, she was not about to jump into bed with him. Only... if the addendum couldn't be revoked, Hermione would be required to have Lucius's daughter, something that would involve sleeping with him repeatedly.

Hermione shuddered. The thought of being forced to accept Lucius's attentions again dredged up the memory of the night she'd fallen apart, something she would rather stayed buried forever.

She turned her attention back to the records in front of her. There had to be a something, some means to escape the demands of the addendum. So far, the only way Hermione could think of was to sterilise herself and Severus. And that was not an option. She'd rather bed Lucius again than do anything that might permanently take away her hopes for the future.

Examining the list of stipulations was perhaps not the best use of her time considering that she virtually knew them by heart but Hermione couldn't help but hope that yet another read through would reveal something that she had missed.

She half-heartedly took a blank piece of parchment and an Ever Inking Quill. Lists had served her well in the past, and freeing the stipulations from the web of legal jargon in the actual document might help.

No contraceptive, magic or Muggle. That was no surprise, as something that they'd known about ever since the *Prophet* leaked it. What was a little surprising was that the Wizengamot had taken the time to learn of Muggle methods.

Mandatory check ups at St Mungo's every month for witches. Hermione scowled. That might have the innocuous reason to follow the progress of the pregnancies, but it also had the ulterior motive of ensuring that no one was breaking the first stipulation. Although with the usage of fertility potions, it would be painfully obvious what was happening if a witch failed to get pregnant.

Only penetrative vaginal sex permitted, and only with the father-to-be. No other methods of congress. Quite how the Ministry was going to enforce that, Hermione did not know. Nor did she care to imagine. At least there was a subsection in that part where women could do as they pleased with whichever husband after the first trimester was up. As long as it didn't endanger the precious pregnancy, anyway.

But if part of the aim of the law was to avoid wizards fighting over witches, why add a stipulation which temporarily banned one of the men from exercising his conjugal rights? It had to be something to do with the required regular exposure to the father's DNA during the first three months. Was it also to reduce the potential for squibs? She would have to do some research there...

Fertility potions will be provided in order to guarantee conception. Attached to that stipulation was what had made Hermione think and almost immediately discard the idea of sterilisation. The potions would not work on the sterile. As could be expected for a law concerned with reproduction, those with untreatable infertility were exempt. Those marriages would also be dissolved. Hermione hoped that the Ministry wouldn't waste valuable time by annulling marriages where all involved were sterile, though. It wouldn't be *fair*, damn it. Not that anything to do with this law was...

Some people might be desperate enough to sterilise themselves. Particularly if couples or even threesomes were genuinely in love, and one of them was naturally infertile. But if the authorities suspected that was the case, surely it would be simple for them to prove if magic could pick up things like contraceptive usage and even what sort of sex people were having. The law was clear what the consequences for such attempted escape was: Azkaban.

There had to be a solution. But what?

Hermione stared down at the list, a blot of ink spreading like a bloodstain where her quill rested.

'Who am I kidding? It's hopeless!'

Hermione rolled up the scroll and tossed it aside. As soon as it was clear of the table, it was spelled away by the reshelving enchantments. The librarian was only there to keep an eye on people using the archives.

She sighed heavily, burying her face in her hands. The solution *if* there was one, which she increasingly doubted would not be found in the addendum. For once, the Wizengamot had made it without loopholes. Fertile unions could not escape their *duty* to procreate.

Her appointment tomorrow would be the first stage of the process that would result in a baby around nine months hence. And another after a year of recovery time between pregnancies. Long before she was ready... Furthermore, what was to stop the Wizengamot from drafting yet another addendum, requiring more children? After all, the primary objective of the marriage law was for the wizarding population to recover. The current two children might not be that unreasonable, but there had to be a gender balance. That put the total up to four.

The Wizengamot had already started down the slippery slope of encroaching on the liberty of the public. Where would it end? With the decimated population of witches required to have pregnancy after pregnancy until their menopause?

'Broodmares, in other words.'

She was screwed. Just like everyone else.

* * *

Healer Artemis Hipworth was in a bad mood. The great-something-or-other-granddaughter of Glover Hipworth, inventor of Pepper-Up Potion, her natural environment was working on research in a laboratory. Not on the front line in St Mungo's. Yet here she was, thanks to the latest wheeze of the Wizengamot.

"Next," Artemis called, dumping the medical notes of the last patient into her out-tray and retrieving the notes for her next patient from the tray above it.

The young woman who stepped inside her makeshift office looked familiar. Somewhat like the famous Harry Potter's female friend, come to think of it. A glance at the name on the medical notes confirmed that the resemblance was no coincidence.

Unfortunate girl. Artemis had been among the last witches to fall ill with the plague; Hermione Granger had been one of the first. The marriage law and subsequent

addendum must be insult to injury. At least Artemis herself was exempt, as she was just past her menopause.

Not that she was entirely unaffected, as she would still be expected to do her duty by marrying similarly affected men in order to 'maintain the peace', or so the Ministry propaganda had said. Her workload had also increased *and* changed for the worse. Artemis was not a people person, hence the reason why she had been a researcher.

"Sit," she said, pointing at the seat in front of her desk. Perhaps she should have added 'please', as courtesy was rumoured to cost nothing. But *it* cost time, which Artemis was severely lacking.

The Wizengamot had not provided St Mungo's much time for these required check ups, and had even gone to the ridiculous measure of dictating that one alphabetical set of surnames would be seen each day. Idiots. The census at the Ministry made it clear that there were some letters far more populated than others. Like 'G', for instance.

Ms Granger sat, her muscles taut. Whether her apparent discomfort was to do with the situation or Artemis's brusqueness was a mystery. By the end of the appointment, Ms Granger was sure to be even more uncomfortable. The spells might not be as physically invasive as a Muggle speculum, but... they did violate an unwilling patient's privacy. In this situation, what patient was willing?

That was another aspect of this law that any self-respecting medical practitioner would resent. Apart from overworking them, it also overrode confidentiality, the sacred bond between Healer and patient.

Much as Artemis hated the entire process, she still had patients left to see if she wanted to go home at all that day. She picked up her wand, ready to begin the examination. As a laboratory creature, her skills as an active Healer were a bit rusty, but she had practiced on enough patients in the past week to be familiar with the spells.

'*Contraceptus Revelio.*' That briefly outlined Ms Granger in a faint red corona. That had been brighter in most witches Artemis had seen so far; those on contraceptives lasting for a month or more.

"Be sure to stop taking your daily contraception before the addendum comes into action, Ms Granger."

At that point, it would be illegal to use contraception, although most offenders should escape Azkaban as no method of contraception was one hundred percent effective.

The next step was one of the most invasive, to Artemis's disgust. But the sexual health of the patients must be checked.

Ms Granger gasped, a quite restrained response considering that the spell made it feel as if the reproductive organs had been touched all over by icy hands.

"Clean," Artemis muttered, touching her ragged Quick Quotes Quill with her wand to activate it. Ms Granger was completely free of sexually transmitted diseases, a bonus to one of the more complex and expensive daily contraceptives. Probably brewed by one of the husbands, Snape, as it was well within his reputed brewing capabilities. "And sexually active five hours and thirty five minutes ago."

'*Oops.*' Judging by the way Ms Granger stiffened, she had heard that. How embarrassing... Artemis was prone to forgetting that one of her experiments had permanently affected her hearing, which meant that what she thought was mumbled under her breath was perfectly audible to others. It really didn't help her reputation as the Healer with the worst bedside manner in the history of St Mungo's.

At least there was only one more spell to perform in this whole horrible experience for her poor patient.

'*Gravida Typicalis.*'

Artemis thought that she must have performed the spell wrong. She was about to recast when the ghostly projection of Ms Granger's typical pregnancy appeared. Interesting, the delay must correlate to the ease of conception. Which would make sense, considering the fact that Ms Granger was currently using contraception.

The ghostly embryo fast became a foetus as a simulated day passed every second, growing until it was about the size of Artemis's hand, from palm to fingertips. It was recognisably human, and had just moved for the first time when the projection faded.

Artemis blinked. That was something different... If it meant what she thought it did... But better make sure she was right, first. She Summoned the thick textbook on fertility spells from across the room, flicking through it.

'*Ah.*' It did mean exactly what she thought. How to break it to the patient, though? Interacting with patients really wasn't her strong point...

When Artemis looked up, Ms Granger was still staring at where the ghostly foetus had been, her face almost as pale as the whitewashed walls of the room. Perhaps she suspected the truth. She was reportedly intelligent, after all. Still, Artemis had to say *something*.

Artemis cleared her throat. "I don't know whether to offer my commiserations or to congratulate you."

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 37

From bad to worse.

Chapter 16

Severus held the vial up to the light as he pushed the cork in. When he stoppered the final version of a potion he'd invented, it was usually a moment of pure satisfaction only surpassed by the result of a successful test on the efficacy. His concoctions rarely had an unsuccessful test either, even in their earlier stages.

This time there was no satisfaction thrumming in his veins. Only doubt. Oh, he had no suspicion that the potion would not work. All experiments with samples of his own sperm so far led to that conclusion. No, Severus's doubt was of the 'should I have done this' variety, a feeling he'd only had with potions brewed for the Dark Lord.

Doing anything to help further the accursed addendum wasn't something Severus took lightly. But a gender selection potion like he'd been contracted to produce was

nothing to mess around with. Far too many so-called potions masters would start work on the antidote afterwards, when sensible practice was to do it at the same time, if not in advance.

It was not arrogance but a simple fact that Severus was the best potions master around at present. As such, according to Shackbolt, it was his duty to invent the potion. But what had really decided it for him was that Hermione would have to take it.

All that was left was to hand it over to the Ministry for them to test on volunteers, after the antidote had cooled down enough. Severus was not about to hand over his creation without a way to reverse it.

Five minutes later, the antidote was bottled. Ten minutes after that, the lab was in a safe state to leave. Both still warm vials in hand, Severus left the room. He checked the time, surprised to see that it was after lunchtime. Come to think of it, he vaguely remembered eating the sandwiches provided by house-elves in a break during the brewing process.

Hermione's appointment had been at 11:30, and shouldn't have lasted any longer than ten minutes. So where was she? The week-old 'DO NOT DISTURB' sign on the lab door must have kept her away, as she normally waited until he emerged to greet him if she had been out. Severus had thought that she would ignore it if need be, and today of all days... surely she felt the need for his company?

Had she gone straight on to the Ministry archives? Hermione had returned earlier than usual yesterday, disheartened. Oh, she hadn't given up, but Severus had been under the impression that she'd followed his advice of taking a break from her research for the day of her appointment.

He went upstairs to check their bedrooms. No sign of Hermione, only her dozy cat on her bed. She wasn't in the library either... but her research partner was, his nose buried in a book.

Lucius. He was one of Severus's few friends, a number even fewer after the deaths due to the plague. Why did his *old friend* have to put that at risk? Lucius hadn't broken his word with a demand for a real marriage with Hermione, but he had crossed the line. A real friend would not try to worm his way into the marital bed after promising he wouldn't.

It was clear that Lucius's word could not be trusted. And even when the slippery snake of a man did keep his word, he wriggled around it. While Severus hadn't caught him in the act again, he wouldn't be surprised if Lucius was still spying on them, even if he wasn't using magic to do so.

As for Lucius assisting Hermione with her research... Severus did not like the idea of his rival alone with his wife. Furthermore, was Lucius truly assisting her? The addendum to the law gave Lucius a means to bed Hermione again. And far more than just one more time. It was to Lucius's advantage to hinder Hermione's cause. However, Hermione was no fool. She would surely notice if Lucius was up to something. For now, Severus was limited to regarding Lucius with suspicion.

Ordinarily it would have relieved him to know that Lucius was nowhere near Hermione. The bastard could hardly practice his charming wiles on her if she wasn't there. However, if Hermione had gone on to the Ministry to do more research, she would surely have summoned Lucius to assist her. That was obviously not the case. Where was she, damn it?

"Lucius!" Severus snapped.

Lucius looked up with a start, dropping his book and losing his place. "Look what you made me do! Why can't you make a sound when you move?" His eyes shifted to peer behind Severus. "Hermione's not with you?"

"That was what I was about to ask," Severus ground out between clenched teeth. To admit that he had no idea where his wife was to his friend-come-rival turned. "I take it you haven't seen her."

"No. She hasn't passed the wards either, before you ask." Lucius fished his pocket watch out of his robes to check the time. "She should have been back an hour ago. Still, I wouldn't worry. We would have been summoned if it was anything serious."

'Fine for you to say.' Severus glowered at Lucius. *'But as you are merely in lust, how can I expect you to be truly concerned about Hermione?'*

"I can't imagine Hermione will have any problems. Not like Narcissa you know how slender she... she was, and the difficulty she had giving birth to Draco. Now, Hermione, she has the makings of a voluptuous figure. Or will have, when she's finished filling out from the rigours of the plague." Lucius smirked at Severus. "A woman like her is made to have children."

"I'll be sure to tell her you said so," Severus muttered under his breath. He would take great pleasure in watching Hermione slap the message into Lucius that she was no baby making machine.

"What did you say?"

"I have a delivery to make to the Ministry. If Hermione returns in the meantime, tell her I will not be long."

Lucius smiled mock sweetly before Severus could turn away. "Delighted to be of service. Don't worry, if she gets back before you do, I'll be sure to keep her entertained."

Severus just snarled and left the library with a billow of black robes and a slammed door.

* * *

Helen Granger almost dropped her teacup when Hermione suddenly appeared in the sitting room. She laid a hand against her chest, in a futile attempt to calm her racing heart.

"Hermione! Either teleport outside or into your bedroom. How many times do I have to..." Her scolding died in her throat as Hermione turned around.

Something was very wrong. Hermione shouldn't be that pale, or look as if she'd been struck although there wasn't any mark on her.

Helen put her cup down and hurried over to Hermione, pulling her into a hug. "Darling, what's wrong?"

If Severus or that Lucifer had hurt her Hermione, there would be hell to pay, even if they were wizards and she was 'just' a Muggle. Although surely it couldn't be Severus; he'd sooner kill himself. And unless she was much mistaken, Lucifer entertained a healthy dose of fear for his mother-in-law.

Hermione stood stiffly in her arms. She shook her head and pulled away, wrapping her own arms around herself. She wouldn't look at Helen either.

"Hermione?" Helen laid a hand on her daughter's shoulder and gently turned her chin so that she faced her. Hermione still didn't focus on her, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I can't have children," she murmured at last, her voice a hollow monotone. A single tear tracked down her cheek.

'Oh, Hermione...'

Déjà vu of the worst kind. Helen had already had a very similar conversation with Hermione, when unbeknownst to her daughter Ron had been making noises about seeking parental permission for proposing. Before the plague.

Her heart felt as if it had dropped into her shoes. Ever since she'd learned of Hermione's amnesia, she'd been dreading this. That had made her procrastinate. She should have told Hermione before now. Before her daughter had married.

Helen led Hermione over to the settee, sat her down, and pushed her own half empty teacup into shaky hands.

"I came from St Mungo's. The Healers there did say that there was a chance that I'd be able to have one child, but..." That possibility was one Helen had grasped like a drowning woman did a lifeline. The news didn't brighten Hermione's face at all. Did she want children by both husbands? Come to that, why did Hermione want children so soon? She hadn't even been married for a month yet.

"They did a spell that simulates what happens with a typical pregnancy." Hermione swallowed audibly. "My typical pregnancy... it... I would have difficulty conceiving in the first place, and... and... it would end in miscarriage. Before the foetus was viable. I got a second opinion to be sure. And that... that revealed... they found that if I manage to carry a child to term, that's it." She put the teacup down and buried her face in her hands, her shoulders trembling. "Even if that child was stillborn."

It was the same problem that Helen herself had, then, although there had been no spell to confirm it, just the heartache of miscarriage after miscarriage. And then Hermione, her miracle child. Attempts for a sibling for her baby had failed not even a miscarriage. Nothing. It was clear that her loins could only bear a single fruit.

"I'm afraid that this is my fault, insofar as a genetic flaw can be. You see, my mother had the same problem as I do... there's a reason we're both only children."

Hermione jerked her head up. "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded. There was finally some life in her gaze, even if only anger.

Helen wrapped her arm around Hermione's tense shoulders. "I did, dearest. I should have told you again, though, as it was one of the memories affected by your amnesia. Ron was making noises to your father and I about asking you to marry him. I thought the possibility was something you should know, especially when involved with someone from such a fecund family."

"Did I tell anyone else?"

"No, darling. Not anyone I know of. It was something to talk to Ron about if he proposed, and he didn't before you fell ill."

"I was wondering if Severus knew. But *he* would have told me."

Helen winced at the poisonous glare her daughter sent in her direction. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I should have told you before you got married."

"Yes, you should have," Hermione spat, before her shoulders slumped, the fight gone out of her. "Oh, Mum... I don't want to argue with you. Not now."

She didn't resist as Helen gently pulled her into another hug.

"I had hoped that these wizards with their magic would be able to fix the family fertility problem," Helen murmured. "I'm so sorry that they can't."

"Magic has limitations. It can't fix me anymore than it can spontaneously create magical babies." Hermione drew back, a strange expression on her face. Was that bitterness or dawning comprehension? Whatever it was deepened into a scowl with her next words. "Magic does me no favours. The Muggle government would never force their citizens to reproduce. If not for this addendum of the Wizengamot's, it wouldn't... it wouldn't matter that I'm st-sterile."

Helen went rigid. She didn't speak immediately she needed to get her emotions under control. She'd be of no use to Hermione if she followed her first impulse and raged. She had to remain in control. She counted slowly to ten, breathing deeply.

"What addendum?"

"Oh..." Hermione cringed. "With everything going on, I forgot to tell you."

"Go on."

"I'll give you copies of the documents. I don't want to rehash the full details now, but suffice to say that the Wizengamot amended the marriage law so that witches are required to have at least one daughter by each husband."

"I see." That explained why the chance of having even one child had been no comfort to Hermione. "What will the Wizened Amok do to couples er, threesomes where one has fertility problems?"

"Call it infertile, Mum. The Healers did." Hermione looked away. "And marriages that cannot produce the minimum of two daughters are dissolved."

"I eventually wanted to have children... it's bad enough that this takes that away from me." Wide, scared, pleading brown eyes met Helen's. "It's even worse... I'm going to lose Severus."

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing, and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 37

Severus's solution.

Chapter 17

Lucius marked his place and shut the book with a snap. Ever since Severus had disturbed him, Lucius had been unable to focus. He wasn't even entirely certain that he'd found where he had been reading when Severus had so rudely interrupted him.

He hadn't been this distracted from the usually consuming grasp of his reading since Narcissa...

Lucius grimaced. Thoughts of his deceased wife were all the more painful since he'd allowed himself to look at Hermione in *..that* way. It felt like a betrayal. Ridiculous, really, as he had done far more than just look when Narcissa was still alive. What was the difference? It wasn't as if he *loved* Hermione. He was attracted to her, yes. She

was pretty and intelligent. Two things that drew him to women like a Seeker to a Snitch.

But love was for Narcissa alone. His flirtatious efforts towards Hermione were not to replace Narcissa in his heart. Of that he was sure. So why did he feel guilt?

It was his right to exert his claim, regardless of whatever he had promised before becoming a part of this polyandrous union. Annoying Severus in the process was a bonus. No, neither of those were anything that he felt guilty about.

His research with Hermione made it clear that the marriage law and the addendum would not be easily revoked. Unless the Wizengamot miraculously changed their collective mind, he would be married to Hermione for quite some time. So why not enjoy it? Why not reap what benefits he could?

Really, his intentions were quite honourable. Instead of replacing Severus in Hermione's bed, all he aimed to do was to join them. He'd always wanted to partake in a ménage à trois. The night of his consummation with Hermione hardly counted, although it had whetted his appetite.

Of course, it would be a satisfying outcome if he did manage to charm his way into bed with Hermione alone. Severus did have to learn to share his possessions; their mutual wife in particular.

And with this addendum, outrageously intrusive as it was ... well, it would not be so bad if they failed in their efforts to overturn it. It did, after all, give him a way to bed Hermione again. Repeatedly, at that.

Even as Lucius smiled at the thought, his stomach twisted. No. That was not right. He wanted Hermione to be willing, not a repeat of their disastrous first time. Once Severus had joined them, it had been physically enjoyable, but ... not something he cared to repeat. Hermione deserved better than that.

'Where is she, damn it?'

Lucius dropped his maltreated book onto the coffee table beside his chair. Narcissa would be horrified. Her husband, purest of the pure, worried over a mere *Mud...*

No. Hermione was different. Far too intelligent to be classed that way. Unless everything he had been bred to believe was a lie, she must have magical blood somewhere in her ancestry.

Lucius checked his pocket watch again. It had only been a few minutes since Severus had left for the Ministry. Despite his words to Severus that there was nothing to worry about, it was not like Hermione to be late. Perhaps it would be worth going to St Mungo's and asking after her? It would have the added bonus of a public appearance showing concern for his wife. The *Prophet* would love it ...

Before he could see about boosting his reputation with such a public relations stunt, Lucius felt the wards alert him to someone Apparating inside the manor. Either Severus had returned, or ... A little concentration should give a few answers. He closed his eyes and kneaded at the bridge of his nose as he 'spoke' to his abode.

A witch. Outside no, inside, now Severus's potions laboratory.

There was only one witch with Apparition clearance within Malfoy Manor.

Before Lucius could Apparate to greet her, Hermione moved. He frowned. That was not normal. Once inside, Hermione walked from room to room. Good manners, perhaps, but more likely a sign of her Muggle upbringing. But just now ... she'd Apparated again. Where?

Severus's bedro...Apparition. Library.

"Where's Severus?" Hermione's voice rang in his ears before Lucius could even open his eyes. He winced; it was both louder and shriller than usual.

Lucius opened his mouth to welcome her back. It wouldn't hurt for her to know that he'd been concerned, too. His words died in his throat. Hermione did not look her usual self any more than she sounded it. Pale-faced, her eyes burned with a fire that put him in mind of an enraged Hippogriff. What was the phrase? Wild-eyed, that was it.

"Hermione? What's wr..."

"Where. Is. Severus?"

"At the Ministry. He won't be long. Why don't you sit down?" He Transfigured his chair into a sofa and patted the seat next to him.

She shook her head, her already dishevelled hair frizzing up even more. It wasn't just the movement causing that: Lucius could feel the magic as it welled no, boiled up out of her. At least he didn't have to worry too much about another explosion of uncontrolled magic from her, as he'd taken the precaution of shielding his books.

Lucius stood up and cautiously approached Hermione, as if she was a nervous resident of his aviary. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes briefly met his before she looked away. "Fine."

Lucius raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Why so pale? That's Severus's speciality."

"I...I just had a bit of a shock."

His other eyebrow joined the first. A shock, hmm? What could possibly be a shock at a fertility check up? And something that she wanted to tell Severus about... Could it possibly be that she was already pregnant despite that contraceptive Severus had brewed? Maybe she had missed a dose. The newlyweds had certainly been consumed by each other enough to forget.

"I'm here if you want to talk about it."

Another shake of her head. Definitely something she wanted Severus to hear first.

"It's all right, you know." Lucius took her hand and patted it. "I don't mind if you don't want to tell me. I can guess; Narcissa didn't want to tell anyone else before she told me."

Hermione's eyes darted back to his, her gaze caught this time like a Jobberknoll's by a Kneazle. Oh yes, he'd definitely struck on the truth.

Lucius smiled down at her. Now to try to put a healthy flush back on her cheeks with a bit of reassurance. "You needn't worry about Severus's reaction. After all, no child of yours would be a dunderhead."

"What?" The word escaped her as a soft gasp.

"I'm not surprised, you know. That you're pregnant."

Her eyes narrowed. She did not appear pleased that he'd guessed her secret before Severus could be told. Oops. Quick, a compliment to get him out of hot water, it had always worked with Narcissa ...

"A body like yours is made for breeding."

Finally, that healthy flush on her cheeks! Success...

Lucius saw stars. In the few seconds it took for his vision to clear, he registered a couple more blows, this time against his chest. What had happened? He shook his befuddled head to clear it.

Hermione had slapped him, if his stinging cheek was anything to go by. And she was now pounding her fists against his chest.

Perhaps he should have paid that earlier enraged Hippogriff analogy closer attention ...

Even as he lifted his arms to capture her wrists, Hermione's blows weakened as her body shook with sobs. Instead of restraining her, Lucius wrapped his arms around her.

"There, there," he murmured. She clearly needed comfort, and Severus wasn't there.

* * *

'Where are you, Hermione?'

After dropping off the potion and antidote at the Ministry, Severus had called at St Mungo's. The Welcome Wizard (the witch had been a plague victim) had been able to tell him when Hermione had left, but not why her appointment had been longer than usual. It seemed that being her husband was not enough for St Mungo's staff to break their confidentiality code. Only the Wizen-fucking-gamot could do that.

Hermione's appointment might have been twice as long as the average fertility check up, but it had still not taken an hour. After she'd left St Mungo's, the trail ran cold. Wherever she was, she'd been there over half an hour.

Severus would have tried Summoning his Patronus if not for the difficulty of thinking of a happy memory that wasn't tied to Hermione. Those that were had the decided drawback of feeding his worry much like happiness fed a Dementor. Besides, what was the point of Conjuring Bambi if Hermione most likely didn't know how to make a Patronus talk in order to send a message in return?

If Hermione wasn't at Malfoy Manor when he returned, he'd visit Fawkes and get him to fetch her.

Severus Apparated just outside the library door. It wouldn't do to startle Lucius into hexing him. Hopefully his slippery friend had some information on Hermione's whereabouts by now.

He opened the door and swept inside. Severus staggered to a halt at the sight that awaited him. Hermione. In Lucius's arms.

Most of Lucius's face was hidden in those riotous brown curls, but those grey eyes glinted maliciously at him.

Severus inhaled sharply, the air hissing through clenched teeth. It burned, an ache to complement the ice cold fist closing around his heart.

'How could she?'

He couldn't find his voice. No matter, he didn't need to be able to speak in order to hex the living daylight out of Lucius.

His hand closed around his wand when Hermione pushed away from Lucius's embrace, and spun to face him in the same motion. Severus only had time to register her bloodshot eyes and tearstained cheeks before she threw herself into his arms.

'Huh?'

Hermione buried her face against his shoulder, moving her mop of hair in the process so that he could look at Lucius unobstructed.

Lucius's cheek bore a red handprint, something Severus would be sure to ask about. Later. When Hermione wasn't falling apart in his arms.

At his questioning stare, Lucius just shrugged. Apparently he had no idea what had Hermione in this state, and of course he wouldn't admit that she clearly wanted Severus, not him. But that didn't thaw the fist gripping Severus's heart by much. Hermione was hurting.

He bent his head to whisper in her ear, "What's wrong?"

Hermione shook her head, the movement barely distinguishable from a nod as close as she was pressed to him.

Severus glanced over at Lucius. Whatever it was, Lucius did not know. Was there a reason for that? Lucius rolled his eyes and started to saunter over to the door. How ... charitable of him to decide to make himself scarce, but it wasn't right. Malfoy Manor was his home, after all. Severus Disapparated for his bedroom, taking Hermione with him.

The squeeze of Apparition startled Hermione out of his arms. Her eyes darted around the room before they returned to him. Severus was prepared for her to step back into his arms, but not for her to launch herself at him with enough force to knock them both onto his bed.

"Oof!" And enough force to knock the breath out of him. He soon forgot the discomfort of being winded when Hermione's lips found his in a desperate, consuming kiss. Her tears were cold against him, her taste salty from them. But still unmistakably Hermione, if bittersweet.

Hermione broke away from the bruising kiss in order to straddle him, seated on his thighs. Her fingers found his robe buttons and made short work of them. Her intentions were clear as her next target was the fastenings of his trousers.

Flattering as it was for her to want sex more than once in the same day, Severus did not appreciate Hermione's apparent use of his libido to attempt to distract him from finding out what had upset her. How to stop her without rejecting her, though?

"I can't lose you," she choked, her shaky fingers fumbling with his trouser fly.

Severus caught hold of her wrists, bucked his hips to unseat her and rolled them both over so that their positions were reversed.

"Why would you lose me?" he demanded, and released her to hold her face between his hands in effort to get her to meet his eyes. "Look at me, Hermione. Tell me what's wrong."

She shut her eyes, her face twisted into a pained grimace. He gently stroked her cheek with a thumb. Her eyes opened, swimming with fresh tears. She bit her lip before releasing it with a ragged sob. Finally, she met his gaze.

"I'm infertile."

Those two whispered words made his heart ache at the underlying pain in her voice. Severus swallowed hard at the matching pure agony in her eyes. For a while he could only breathe raggedly until the ringing in his ears faded.

'Oh, Hermione.'

"If when you desire a child, I can brew a fertility potion powerful enough to make a man conceive if he could."

Hermione shook her head as much as she could with her head cradled between his hands. "It's not just difficulty conceiving. The spell the Healer used... it showed a typical pregnancy. Ended in miscarriage."

"I see." He bent his head to kiss her. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. If it is the case, it won't affect how I feel about you."

"*When* we come to it? Severus, the Wizengamot will dissolve our marriage long before then. *I am going to lose you*"

Of course. The addendum's accused stipulations on what happened to the infertile. "Not if I have anything to do with it. Come with me."

* * *

It was a bit of a distraction having Hermione with him in the potions lab, but he was not about to leave her on her own. Nor could he entrust Lucius with her, not with his current seduction scheme.

At least it was a straightforward potion to brew, something he had stumbled across in the process of inventing the gender selection potion. It had occurred to him that wizards married to post-menopausal witches might need some secret assistance to escape the demands of the Wizengamot. But he hadn't expected to need it himself ...

The last ingredient added (a broken Ashwinder egg), and the potion only needed to come to the boil and then cool before it was ready.

"Severus, what..."

Severus laid a finger across Hermione's lips to quiet her. He kept his eyes on the cauldron, ready to put out the flames below as soon as it bubbled. Overcooking the potion would render it useless.

There. A jab of his wand to extinguish the fire and he could explain his actions to his baffled wife.

"Is that for me?" she asked as soon as he lifted his finger from her mouth.

Severus winced at the hope brightening her voice. Of course she would jump to the wrong conclusion. He had invented a potion that would select the gender of a child, why not one that would guarantee survival to birth?

He pulled her into his arms. "It's for me," he murmured. "I am the best living potions Master, but ... I can't work miracles, my love."

She hid it well, but Severus could feel the crushed hope in the slight slump of her shoulders.

"It's a sterility potion of my own devising. The powers that be won't be able to detect it or reverse it; only I can do that."

"They'll suspect foul play," she said in a flat, deadened tone.

He tightened his arms around her. "Yes. But they will have no way to prove it. Thank Merlin you kept your own name, or we might have been summoned for fertility check ups on the same day."

It was also just as well that he hadn't shared the results of his own tests of the gender selection potion with the Ministry. While it was not a fertility potion as such, it proved that he did have an adequate sperm count. The sterility potion would change that.

"What about Lucius?"

Severus drew away from Hermione to frown down at her. "What about him?"

The knut dropped. "Ah. I see. Unless the whole business with the Dark Lord taking and breaking his wand had repercussions on his virility, the Wizengamot will dissolve your union with him."

So this cloud did have a silver lining after all. The thought of dispensing with Lucius's flirtatious ways would have been pleasant if it didn't come at the cost of Hermione's pain.

Besides, even if Lucius was taken out of the equation, the Wizengamot had another aim for the polyandrous unions apart from procreation: marrying off the population. There were at least two wizards for every witch. If Lucius was sent on his wicked way, a stranger would replace him. A stranger who might force Hermione to share her bed, rather than just attempt to charm her into it.

He stepped toward the cauldron and filled two vials with the now cool enough potion.

"Better the devil we know."

AN: Many thanks to JunoMagic and Septentrion for betaing and to Kribu for alpha reading.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 37

Lucius unmanned.

Chapter 18

"You want me to *what*?"

"I wouldn't go that far, old *friend*," Severus snarled. "Believe me, *want* has nothing to do with it."

'Like dogs at a bone.' Hermione hugged herself tighter, glad that she couldn't see the fury contorting their faces. Not when the cause of the anger was her fault, even if they weren't venting it on her.

"Too true," Lucius sneered after an overly dramatic pause. "I would have thought you'd jump at the chance to be rid of me."

"Make up your mind! Either act like an insulted Hippogriff over being requested to take this potion, or because I'd like nothing better than to see the back of you. You can't have it both ways."

'Make that two dogs fighting over the same worthless scrap...'

"I've had enough of your dictating! Keep it up and you'll find yourself banished to your hovel, you filthy..."

"Stop it!" Hermione turned her head to glare over her shoulder. They both had their wands drawn, sparks flying from the tips. Time to intervene...She quickly darted between them, a hand on each tense chest. "Both of you."

They both lowered their wands, but Lucius shrugged off her hand and had his finger pointing at her nose before she could blink.

"As for you, *madam*, I do not appreciate being made a tool just so that you can escape the proactive demands of the law."

Hermione flinched, his words yet another twist on the metaphorical knife embedded in her heart ever since her appointment at St Mungo's.

"*Silencio*," Severus hissed. The charm rippled the air right in front of Hermione and stole the words from Lucius's tongue before he could say another word.

His face bright red with fury, Lucius raised his wand, eyes narrowed dangerously and one of them twitching.

'Expelliarmus!' Hermione deftly caught both wands in her free hand and chucked them and her own into the corner of the room. With emotions running so high, it wasn't a good idea for any more spells to be cast. At this rate fists would be flying next...or one of them would have an explosion of wandless magic to match her occasional lack of control.

Severus caught hold of her outstretched arm and used it to gently draw her behind him. Hermione glared at the back of his head. While understandable that he felt overprotective of her, she could take care of herself *thank you very much!* She moved to stand next to him and elbowed him in the ribs when he tried to shift her behind him again.

"If you had let us finish explaining *before* you exploded, Lucius, you would know that this isn't some kind of ploy. Not that sort, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Lucius demanded, his nose in the air. Haughty, affronted body language, but unfortunately it just made him look ridiculous. Particularly when Hermione was about a head shorter the sight of his nostril hairs was not exactly awe inspiring.

"I'm infertile," Hermione snapped, that knife twisting a little more each time she admitted it. Was it better or worse that she felt more angry than upset now?

Lucius's jaw dropped. He closed it with a snap, his cheeks flushing scarlet. "I do apologise. I had no idea, you must believe me. If I had any idea, I would never have made such a faux..."

"Sometimes sorry is not enough," she stated, mentally counting to ten in an attempt to keep her cool. "Well, now you know. Anyway, if you want to stay married to me, take that potion." Hermione pointed at the vial on the table behind him. "If not, fine. It's your choice." She walked over to the door.

A warm hand touched her shoulder before she could leave the room. She shrugged it off.

"Hermione?" Severus asked.

"Sorry," she muttered, still facing the door. "I just need to be alone for a while."

"If you're sure that is what you want." There was only a hint of the pain Severus must have felt in his voice.

"No. But when I'm in company at the moment, I just want to be alone. And vice versa. That said, being alone is better than being in the same room as you two." Hermione winced. Where was her tact when she needed it? Oh well, might as well completely chuck said tact out of the window... "If you hadn't noticed, you fight like Hippogriffs in rut at the moment."

There was a moment of silence. Exchanging looks, perhaps... "We could make a truce. For you."

Hermione shook her head. "You've already done enough."

"There's nothing I wouldn't do!" Severus called after her as she slipped out of the door.

She paused, torn between turning back and fleeing. Hermione turned her head to look back over her shoulder at him. "I know. I do appreciate that. Very much so." She smiled sadly. "But sometimes there's nothing you can do."

* * *

As Hermione's footsteps faded away, Severus turned on Lucius. "Now look what you've done!"

"What I have done...you...I..." Lucius protested, and spluttered to a halt. "Well, I suppose I may have put my foot in the proverbial dragon dung, but it was completely unintentional!"

"That may have been, but what of your...womanising ways, for lack of a better term?"

Lucius snorted contemptuously. "Don't be absurd. Even if I wanted to indulge in other women, there are none to spare at present."

"You know perfectly well what I mean!" Severus yanked Lucius close to snarl in his rival's face: "She *is* my wife."

Lucius extracted his collar from Severus's grip and leaned away, wiping his face with the back of his hand. Drama queen! Severus was positive that he didn't really spray *that* much spittle around, even when his blood was boiling like at present. Hermione certainly never complained.

"Absolutely, old friend. She just happens to be mine, too."

'You had better be careful, old friend,' Severus fumed to himself, *'or you might find yourself impotent instead of merely sterile.'*

He stretched out his hand, his wand answering his wandless summons from the corner of the room where Hermione had thrown it. The other two wands twitched but stayed where they were. Once his wand was in hand, Severus used a non-verbal spell to retrieve Hermione's. It seemed Lucius was not aligned with his replacement wand enough yet to call it to him unaided. So much the better...

Severus thrust his wand against Lucius's throat. "You gave your word that it would be a marriage in name only."

Lucius swallowed hard, Severus's wand digging in a little further as he did so. "Now, Severus, our bride has expressed her displeasure with fighting."

"Our?" Severus demanded, shifting his wand to rest against Lucius's pulse point.

"Perhaps I misspoke. You suggested a truce?"

"Yes. You keep your word and I refrain from sending you to join Narcissa," Severus replied, with a jab of his wand for emphasis.

"Very well, you've made your point." Lucius winced, and rubbed at his throat where he could. "Kindly lower your wand. For Hermione's sake, I'll keep my hands to myself, and we shall do our utmost to keep from quarrelling like an old married couple."

"Agreed," Severus snapped, and reluctantly lowered his wand. The most Lucius meant by this truce was that his efforts at seduction would be more subtle, presuming that the slippery bastard meant even a word he said. Even if he did, he'd soon revert to his wicked ways.

It would be down to Severus to mask his anger, and not just from Hermione. Lucius would only provoke him further if he broadcast his feelings, and if Hermione found them mid-fight...well, that was to be avoided at all cost.

"Must I really take this?" Lucius had the vial of sterility potion in his hand and eyed it in much the same way as he would a peacock dropping. "Your handiwork may be safe, but it's sure to taste absolutely revolting."

"Actually it's virtually tasteless." A lie, but compared to some it was mild. Nothing like Skele-Gro, for instance.

Lucius uncorked the vial and had it at his lips when he paused. "But I'm a Malfoy! The purest of the pure."

Severus muffled a disbelieving snort as a cough. Compared to the Weasleys to most other pure-blood families, too the Malfoys were new blood.

"Virility is paramount. I can't do it."

"You do already have an heir," Severus pointed out, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at Lucius's dramatics. "What's more, there is an antidote. Once Hermione has found an alternative to the whole legal sham, you can marry whomever you please and have as many Malfoylets as the manor can hold."

"Still, is there no other way?" Lucius huffed. One would think he had an impotence draught in his hand, not a reversible sterility potion... "You could try to solve whatever fertility problem afflicts her. Are you the best potions Master or not?"

"You of all people know that I cannot do anything for infertility!" Severus snapped. "I couldn't stop Narcissa's miscarriages, or make it possible for her to conceive again after Draco."

Lucius flinched. "I know. But Hermione is a different woman, and her problems..."

"Are very similar. She'll have difficulties conceiving and a very high risk of miscarriage. She also said the Healers told her that she can only carry one child to term, even if that child is stillborn. Sound familiar?"

"I thought it was a problem limited to pure-bloods!" Lucius staggered back, almost spilling the potion in the vial.

Severus smiled mirthlessly. "Perhaps now you'll realise that there is no difference. Regardless of parentage, all wizards and witches have Muggle blood."

"Then everything I believed is a lie?" Lucius whispered, on the edge of Severus's hearing.

Severus rolled his eyes. Married to a Muggle-born, living under the same roof as that Muggle-born and a half-blood, Lucius had only just caught on? Perhaps the Malfoys really were the 'purest of the pure'. Inbreeding might explain such obliviousness.

Lucius shook his head slowly. He still looked a little poleaxed as he raised the vial once more to his lips. This time he drank it.

"Ugh! Tasteless, you say? The only thing tasteless is your sense of humour." He glared at Severus, who merely smirked back and raised a mocking eyebrow.

Lucius shot him one last poisonous look, then turned his baleful glower onto the empty vial. "And of course, now that I have taken this, it occurs to me that there might have been another way: what if Hermione had become pregnant with twins and safely carried those to term, hmm?"

Severus looked at Lucius in much the same way as he'd looked at the average Hogwarts student. "Quite apart from the fact that the Healers' tests imply that it is virtually impossible to satisfy the addendum those hypothetical twins would have to have different fathers. The addendum's stipulations don't allow for that, or have you forgotten the one-husband-in-bed at a time part?"

"Oh. Yes. That even after a child is conceived, the father-to-be and only the father-to-be is required to maintain sexual congress during the first trimester. That was something I was advised to do during Narcissa's pregnancies." An old sadness shadowed Lucius's eyes. "Not that it seemed to help."

That aspect of the addendum sounded like an old wives' tale, but it must have some sort of practical usage. Not that it mattered in their current circumstances ...

"Regardless, Hermione cannot fulfil the demands of the addendum. I will do my utmost to help her should she ever want to try for a child, but to raise false hopes now would be cruel. We both know how likely I am to succeed." Severus exchanged a hopeless look with Lucius.

"Yes, it is rather a moot point," Lucius agreed. "And I suppose not trying right away makes sense. We do have other things on our plate."

"Indeed." Getting rid of the law came to mind. There was no point in Hermione running the emotional gauntlet of miscarriage after miscarriage, not when she needed her full concentration for other things. The ever-present fear of miscarriage if she was pregnant would only distract her.

There was also Hermione's age to consider. She was not even twenty yet. Without the law, she probably wouldn't even think of having children for another decade. And now they should be freed from the demands of that law...

"...suppose all we can do now is wait." Lucius's voice interrupted Severus's musings.

"What?"

"Wait until both of us have been inspected by the experts at St Mungo's," Lucius said with exaggerated patience. "I presume this potion of yours is meant to be undetectable, and only reversible by you."

Severus scowled. While what Lucius said was true, Severus did not appreciate the implications about his skills. "It will be fine. You may have had a son, but there has been all that nasty business with your old wand. I have no convenient broken wand in my history."

"I'm never going to be allowed to forget that, am I?" Lucius huffed, crossing his arms across his chest. Before Severus could do more than quirk his lips into a nasty smile, Lucius changed the subject. "But we both also have the excuse of our exposure to Dark magic. I'm sure that the Cruciatus has long-term effects. And scions of pure-blood

families such as us are well-known to have fertility problems. Why else are we only children?"

'Conveniently forgetting the lesson you so recently learned about magical blood already, eh?'

Severus shook his head. Why did Lucius have such a large library if he didn't bother to learn from it? "If that was the case, the Healers would have mentioned Hermione's exposure to the Cruciatus as a factor in her problems. They did not."

"But...for the love of Morgana! That means we risk Azkaban if your handiwork doesn't stand up to scrutiny."

"Give the man an Order of Merlin, he finally catches the snitch," Severus muttered. "Of course there is a risk. There's a risk of arrest even dissolution of the unions even if they don't discover anything untoward. All the addendum says, after all, is that infertile unions are annulled."

Lucius stared at him for a long moment. "Do you mean to say that I just unmanned myself for no reason?" he asked in a dangerously calm voice.

'Drama queen.'

"No more than I have. If we are all classed as infertile, the Ministry should have better things to do with their time than to split us up. After all, their confounded marriage law is not just for procreation, but also to pair up marry off, even the population."

"The sooner we have those check ups, the better," Lucius grumbled. "I hate waiting."

* * *

Severus was inclined to agree with Lucius, but at the least the other man didn't stand to lose much if it all went tits up.

He left Lucius to his grumbling and went in search of Hermione. Until judgement day came (otherwise known as his check up at St Mungo's), he would spend every moment that he could with Hermione, waking and sleeping.

Hermione was in her bedroom, her attention on her mercurial monstrous cat, currently purring in her lap.

Severus sat down beside her and tentatively put his arm around her shoulders. After her earlier words, he wasn't sure how welcoming she would be of his company.

She leaned into him and turned her body to wrap her arms around him, resting her head against his shoulder. Her cat settled across both of their laps, purring even louder. Claws began to knead contentedly at Severus's lap. It was just as well that the fabric of the clothes he wore was enchanted to resist explosions, which made the mangy half-Kneazle's attentions merely tickle.

* * *

The next twelve days gave Hermione a nasty sense of déjà vu. The last time she had felt this on edge had been when she was on the run with Harry and Ron (before the latter left them, something that still hurt to remember). At least this time she was not responsible for feeding a couple of boys as bad tempered as if they'd somehow had PMS. And there was no god-forsaken camping, either.

But frankly Hermione would take the camping over this torturous wait. Heck, she'd take wearing the Riddle-infested locket again over this. Maybe another interrogation by Bellatrix, although she'd need clearer memories of that to be sure.

She tried to keep herself occupied by scouring Malfoy Manor library yet again for anything that could be of use in finding an alternative to the law, but it was too connected to the current situation. She just couldn't concentrate, her mind whirling in a vicious circle of worry.

Like her own, the notification owls for Lucius and Severus's check ups arrived the day before the appointments. The reminders only added to the tension.

Lucius went to his check up six days after her own, and returned with the news that Severus's potion worked as intended. He had also seen Draco, so was more concerned with the way his son all but ignored him. From what Hermione could gather from his ranting, Draco just stiffly greeted him in passing, and told him to expect an owl within the next month, purposefully keeping Lucius in the dark.

Hermione retreated to her room, where Lucius never intruded. She couldn't bring herself to care about the bee in Lucius's bonnet. Not when she had far more serious concerns on her plate. Just because Lucius had passed unscathed through St Mungo's checks didn't mean that Severus would too...

Severus stayed with her in her self-imposed confinement, Crookshanks far past his initial reserve by this time curled up on his lap.

Five days after Lucius's check up, the house-elf assigned to her brought a horribly familiar-looking envelope with their breakfast. Severus tore it open only to confirm that it was the notification before he incinerated it with his wand. The house-elf Tricksy, yes, that was her name glowered at Severus, muttering obscenities under her breath as she cleaned up the ashes. With one last glare at Hermione, as if it had been her fault, Tricksy *cracked* away.

Hermione spent a sleepless night in Severus's arms, all too aware that just because the sterility potion worked didn't mean that the Ministry wouldn't arrest Severus on suspicion of foul play. They would no doubt already be suspicious after Lucius's check up.

And...there was still the possibility that their marriage would be dissolved despite their efforts.

In the morning, Hermione tried to give Severus the same send-off he'd given her, to no avail. She was too stressed, tense and exhausted for making love to be comfortable. In truth, so was he.

All she could do was cling to him as if she'd never let go.

Severus bent to kiss her tenderly, disentangled himself from her, and then he was gone.

Hermione buried her hands into Crookshanks's fur, her sight blurred by unshed tears. Her throat burned with the strain of keeping the sobs suppressed, her breathing ragged.

There was nothing she could do but wait.

* * *

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Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 37

Hermione on the warpath.

Chapter 19

Kingsley Shacklebolt ground his teeth together as he glowered at the ever-multiplying pile of parchment on his desk. For every sheet that vanished from his outbox, at least another two arrived in his inbox.

"Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork," he ranted under his breath. "Always more Merlin-forsaken paperwork."

And he'd thought the amount of bureaucracy was bad in the Aurory...He forced eyes glazed with boredom to focus and skimmed through yet another pointless form, scribbled his signature and dropped the parchment into his outbox. Pity the things didn't vanish in a puff of smoke, or he might have been able to fool himself into thinking that the confounded red tape burned to a satisfying crisp.

He sighed heavily and reached for the next worthless scrap of parchment in his inbox. His breath caught. Surely not?! But it was! Merlin be praised, there was only one more form! For the first time in far too long or was it ever? he would be home on time. Gawain had been able to monopolise far too much of Rolanda's time. The Head of the Aurors had far less bloody paperwork than the Minister; Gawain Robards was a lucky sod.

But today, Kingsley might just be home first. Time alone with his Hooch and finest Firewhisky sounded good...

Thump.

The form crumpled in his tightly clenched fist as Kingsley stared, horrified, at the pile of parchment that had replaced it. Unless he was hallucinating, it brushed the ceiling.

A strangled whimper escaped him. He pointed his wand at the pile, the tip trembling as his hand shook with barely contained rage.

"*Incendio!*"

Nothing happened.

"Fucking hell! Completely inefficient mess of bureaucratic filth, all for the 'personal attention of the Minister', and it's warded to match the security of the archives? Fuck this. I'm going home."

Kingsley pushed away from his desk, ignoring the *crash* as his chair upended. He stormed over to the fireplace and had a pinch of Floo powder in his hand, when the form still crumpled in his other hand tried to unfold itself.

Disgusted, he dropped it. There was no way in hell that he was taking any work home.

The Floo powder fell from his fingers in a drizzle of sparking green as red letters on the form caught his eye as it fluttered to the floor. Red letters spelling out the name of the wizarding prison.

He bent down to pick it up. He read it through. Unable to believe his eyes, he read it through again.

"Fuck, no," Kingsley muttered, and reached for another pinch of Floo powder. He threw it into the fireplace and bellowed the name of the current Head of Magical Law Enforcement. "Andromeda Tonks!"

* * *

"Tell me, Andromeda, why do I find a form requesting the transferral of a prisoner from Ministry holding cells to Azkaban to await trial?" Kingsley righted his chair and sat down again behind his desk.

Andromeda sank down into the seat opposite him. She looked about as tired as he felt. "Procedure, Kingsley. A pain, but one I am required to follow. Why the Ministry architects can't simply alter the plans to include more cells, I do not know."

"Something for me to follow up," Kingsley muttered. He eyed the towering stack in his inbox. "When I don't have quite so much on my plate." He shook himself. "Beside the point. I know the procedure, we were both part of the Wizengamot session that put it into place."

"What you want to know is why Severus Snape is the prisoner in question," Andromeda stated, inspecting her fingernails nonchalantly.

"Indeed. Particularly when the infraction stated is against legislation which isn't enforced yet." Kingsley arranged his quills with equal nonchalance.

"You may well ask. But the law is clear that it is retroactive to include this month. My hands are tied, Kingsley."

"I'm sure they are." Kingsley raised his head to meet Andromeda's dispassionate gaze. "But are you quite sure of your impartiality on this matter?"

There was a spark of emotion behind that mask. "No less impartial than you."

"That good, huh?" He sighed heavily. "Dromeda, you know that Severus had nothing to do with Ted's death."

"I know that!" she snapped, irritation increasing her likeness to her unlamented late sister. "Snape's arrest had nothing to do with me; it was an automatic order processed by the results of his check up at St Mungo's. As far as I'm concerned, I would like nothing more than to get him out of my hair."

"In which case you will have no problem with my refusal to sign this." He jabbed the form with a dismissive finger.

"Putting him in Azkaban *would* get him out of my hair," Andromeda grumbled. "And you're one to talk about impartiality."

Best keep to the impartial arguments, then... "The man's a war hero! We don't need that sort of bad press."

"Unless we kept it quiet..."

Kingsley goggled at her as if she belonged in the Janus Thickey ward. "Do you really think there is any way to keep it from his wife *The* Hermione Granger?"

Andromeda rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "It wasn't a serious suggestion, Kingsley. I'm well aware of the rights of prisoners, that spouses are to be informed within twenty-four hours of arrest. In fact, I was about to let her know in person when you called."

Kingsley leaned forward, steeping his fingers. "As far as I'm concerned there's no need simply release Severus Snape."

"I would if I could," Andromeda ground the words out between clenched teeth. "While it may not be a crime to be sterile, it is to attempt to evade the procreative elements of the marriage law. After Snape's check up at St Mungo's resulted in exactly the same problems as Malfoy senior, we had no choice but to arrest him. There's too much coincidence."

"Perhaps, but is there any proof of foul play?" Kingsley had the nasty sensation that he was grasping at straws, unable to put his finger on the cause of the sensation.

"No. But it will be equally difficult to prove Snape's innocence. He's the most talented living potions Master; who knows what he's capable of?"

Oh yes, that was why. What had Severus got him into now?

BOOM. CLANG.

The thick dust choking the room was taken care of by a quick charm from both Kingsley and Andromeda.

Standing in the open doorway, the door blasted off its hinges at her feet, was Hermione Granger, her wand pointed directly at Kingsley's chest, the tip glowing with barely contained sparks.

"Where's my husband?" she demanded, her voice far too calm. Dangerously so. Kingsley swallowed hard.

"Hello to you too, Hermione. Do come in, have a seat." He Conjured another chair as casually as he could when held at wand point.

Hermione stepped over the door, her wand unwavering in her hand as she walked to the chair. Her eyes never left him, darkened with...what? Anger? Worry? Both?

"You do know how to make an entrance, dear, but might I suggest you put the wand down? Before the Aurors arrive?"

At Andromeda's words, Hermione glanced over at her. She flinched, all colour leached from her face, her eyes wide. She looked as if she'd seen a well, not a ghost, but someone back from the dead.

Andromeda, her face creased with concern, started to rise from her chair, leaning towards Hermione.

"No! Stay back!" Her wand now pointed at Andromeda, Hermione's voice and hand shook.

Realisation dawned. Kingsley exchanged a glance with Andromeda. Of course, shortly before V-Voldemort's defeat, Bellatrix had duelled Hermione among others.

"I'm not my sister, Hermione," Andromeda said firmly. "Andromeda, not Bellatrix. We've met before, remember?"

Hermione said nothing. By the look of her grey-tinged face, she was on the verge of fainting. Her eyes rolled back and her wand dropped from her hand.

"Shit," Andromeda hissed, and darted forward to catch Hermione before she could hit the floor.

"Heavier than she looks," she grunted, and gently lowered her burden to the polished marble floor. She gave Kingsley an impatient wave of her hand. "Get over here. I'm obviously not the best sight for her to wake up to."

Kingsley did as he was bid and knelt down. "I don't get it. Why such a strong reaction when she only duelled Bellatrix?"

"How such an idiot managed to become Minister I don't know," Andromeda muttered, no doubt deliberately within his hearing range. "Obviously there's more to it than that. You wake her up and I'll deal with the draught." She pointed to the gaping doorway.

"*Rennervate.*" Kingsley leaned over Hermione, hoping to block her view of the woman behind him.

Hermione groaned, her eyes blinking open. She raised herself up on her elbows, and froze when she caught sight of Andromeda. She looked between her and Kingsley. "Bellatrix is dead," she murmured, as if to convince herself of that fact.

The door back in place, Andromeda walked back, warily eyeing Hermione.

"I'm not about to faint," Hermione assured them. "Once was quite enough." She sat up.

"Glad to hear it. Care to explain why you fainted? I'm used to people flinching when they see me, especially women as it hasn't been so long for us thanks to the plague, but fainting? That's a new one." Andromeda turned to Kingsley. "And you might want to cancel the security alert before Aurors gatecrash."

"Sometimes I wonder why I'm the Minister," Kingsley muttered under his breath. He brightened at the idea of his load of paperwork on someone else's back. Andromeda was welcome to the job! He scribbled the cancellation on a Ministry memo (dipped in Veritaserum to prove it was truly him and un-coerced) and chucked it into his outbox. Something he should have done when Hermione stormed in, really, but being on the wrong end of her wand was justifiably distracting.

Interested in Hermione's answer, he kept part of his attention on her conversation with Andromeda.

"Sorry. I guess I do owe you an explanation. Bellatrix tortured me. It the fainting thing has happened before, in Malfoy Manor, the first time I went back into the room where it happened."

"Has it happened since then?"

"The room no longer exists."

"Changing the layout of his precious home for you? Perhaps Malfoy really has changed." Andromeda didn't sound like she believed it. "The question is will it happen again the next time you see me. As you are close to the Weasleys, it is pretty unavoidable; I shall be marrying Arthur after the addendum comes into force."

"Oh, congratulations. Er, I hope it won't happen again. Severus might have some suggestions, he is an expert with Dark Arts...speaking of which, where is he?" Hermione got to her feet, her eyes narrowed as she glared between Andromeda and Kingsley.

"In a Ministry holding cell. And don't blame me, I only just found out," Kingsley spoke up, acutely aware of the sweat trickling between his shoulder blades. Had she been taking lessons from Severus in glare effectiveness?

"When he didn't come back after his appointment at St Mungo's, I was...concerned. I spoke to the Healers and they confirmed my fears." Hermione turned away, her arms wrapped around herself as if she might break.

Andromeda tentatively put her hand on Hermione's shoulder. "He's not in Azkaban. You can thank Kingsley for that; he refused to sign the transfer form."

"*It's my fault,*" Hermione breathed, or at least Kingsley thought she did. It was...difficult to read lips in profile. But combined with the desolate guilt in her eyes and slumped shoulders, he was pretty sure of what she'd said.

Both Malfoy and Severus sterile, and in light of what Hermione had just said, Kingsley would bet his front teeth that she was too. And that their fertility problems were no coincidence. In his position of authority, he had no wish to know more. The less he knew, the better. Good for Hermione if she'd found some way to avoid the invasive addendum, but it looked like she needed his help if Severus was to stay out of trouble.

He met Andromeda's eyes over the top of Hermione's head and saw his own conclusions reflected there. Andromeda's lips tightened in displeasure, but she nodded in agreement. While she might not be overly fond of Severus, she was definitely not fond of the law or the way it tied her hands.

"As the law stands, we cannot release Severus. But I have my issues with that aspect of the law."

Kingsley fancied he could hear Andromeda's teeth grinding from across the room. Helping Severus like this would sting her pride.

"As do I," she choked out. "That's an objection seconded, enough to call an emergency session of the Wizengamot. Within the hour."

"Don't worry. We'll get him out." Kingsley moved around his desk to squeeze Hermione's shoulder.

"She could help us," Andromeda suggested. "Private session or not, it concerns her."

* * *

Fudge swelled up like a bullfrog as he pointed a fat finger at where Hermione perched on the arm of the chair in the middle of the room, the chains quiescent behind her. "What is she doing here? Civilians have no place in closed Wizengamot sessions where the proceedings do not concern them."

Kingsley paused as he settled into his seat in the centre of the dais, ready to speak up. Not that he would need to, if the defiant fire in Hermione's eyes was anything to go by.

"Objection. This very much concerns me as the future of my marital unions are at stake over the outcome."

"The prisoner is not present. This is not a trial, but merely a session called to clarify the law. You may attend the criminal trial..."

"So sterility is a crime now. Are you going to arrest me?" She left the rest of the question unspoken, but from the way she looked at certain members of esteemed council before her, Kingsley could tell that she was wondering who else would be arrested. Her gaze lingered deliberately on Fudge.

Fudge flushed purple at the insinuation. "It is a crime to artificially become sterile in order to avoid your procreative duties."

"And what proof do you have that is the case with my husbands?"

"You know, if we've arrested Snape for this, we really should arrest Malfoy too," Gawain whispered to Kingsley from his seat next to him. Kingsley smiled grimly. If it came to that, it would be the silver lining...

Fudge looked around for backup. The rest of the Warlocks avoided his gaze. Kingsley suppressed a grin. It seemed that they did have some sense after all...

"Come now, Mrs Sn...Ma..." Fudge spluttered, fumbling for the right name.

"*Ms. Granger.* I married two men. It would have meant giving one of them an unfair precedence over the other if I took only one of their names. Besides, my name is already enough of a mouthful without a triple-barrelled name."

"Ms. Granger, then. Your husbands both have the same problems. The chances of two people, let alone two people married to the same woman, there is far too much coincidence..."

Hermione had even less patience for Fudge's bluster than Kingsley had on his worst day and cut him off again mid-stream.

"Might I remind the...honourable...members of the Wizengamot that there are also more 'coincidences'? They are both former Death Eaters and were not always in Voldemort's..." Almost everyone present flinched. "...favour. Who knows what he did to them?"

"I-I have here before me..." Fudge almost dropped the partially unrolled parchment as he waved it theatrically overhead. "...the medical report of Severus Snape. The Healers detected no Dark magic as the cause."

"Firstly, it's been over a year since Voldemort oh, get over it! He's dead! fell, so any trace may well be long gone, and secondly, what makes you think that *Voldemort* always used Dark magic?"

"To interfere with a natural process in such a way is Dark!"

"In which case if it had been interfered with, regardless by whom, it would have been detected."

"Oh, I like this one." Kingsley's co-husband nudged him companionably. Gawain grinned at him. "Can we have her in more of these sessions? She really livens them up."

"It's certainly a treat to see someone walk over Fudge without getting stuck," Kingsley muttered back, returning his attention to the entertainment.

Fudge cleared his throat. "The law is clear. Those infertile will have their unions dissolved. They may later remarry those in similar circumstances..."

"Perhaps you could make it clear how that relates to my husband's arrest."

"Well, I, ah, there are suspicions that he...the man's a potions Master! There's no telling what he did..."

Kingsley struck the gavel once, curtailing Fudge's rant before he could hit his stride. "Cornelius, suspicion and coincidences alone will not stand up in a fair trial. You were present when this august body presided over the changes to the law to ensure that there could be no imprisonments without a fair trial."

"That may be so, but neither can the procreative elements to the marriage law be ignored..."

"Tell me, Cornelius, where does it stipulate that if all of those in a polyandrous union are sterile that the Ministry should waste time and therefore money tearing them asunder?" Andromeda piped up.

"Er, well..."

Kingsley fixed Fudge with a challenging stare. "And does it also stipulate that those married to post-menopausal women should have their marriages annulled as well? Do tell me if I'm wrong, but wasn't part of the purpose of the law unity? To marry off the population in order to prevent fights over the few remaining witches?"

"Well, yes, but the primary function was to repopulate our world. For that, as many unions as possible need to be fertile. Unfortunate as it may be, that means annulling some marriages." Fudge straightened his hat.

"I refuse to support the enforcement of that where two thirds or all of each trio have fertility problems," Kingsley stated. "When the woman is one of those infertile, that is..."

"You are the Minister! It is your duty..."

"All in favour of amending the law," Andromeda chipped in. Just over half of those present raised their hands.

"Good call," Kingsley whispered. While he had been focusing on Fudge, she must have been observing the expressions and body language of the rest of the Wizengamot.

"That settled, would you mind if I liberated my husband?" Hermione's voice reminded Kingsley of her presence. In all fairness, he had been rather caught up with the sport of Fudge-walking.

"That is not for you to decide, young lady." Fudge turned to face his fellow Warlocks, effectively ignoring Hermione. "I suggest we adjourn this meeting. It is already beyond our work hours, might I suggest we reconvene tomorrow? Or maybe next week?"

There was a murmur of agreement from Fudge's cronies.

"I suggest you release Severus Snape before I lose my temper. You don't have enough proof against him for a fair trial, and without that you have no right to hold him any longer. If you don't let him go free, I will, and I don't care what I break in order to do so."

The shocked silence was broken by Gawain's guffaws, hurriedly muffled as coughs.

"I, you, well, I...Are you insane? Do you think you're above the law? I...Andromeda! Gawain! Arrest her!"

Neither moved.

"Cornelius, she's committed no arrestable offence." At the most, she'd be cautioned. And maybe monitored. Kingsley suspected that both Andromeda and Gawain would let her off for the amusement she'd provided. "Under the Freedom of Speech Act *you* voted for, I might add, she can no more be arrested than the staff at the *Daily Prophet* or the *Quibbler* can be for printing whatever they please."

"I might add that certain members of the Wizengamot aren't above the law either," Hermione snapped. "You cannot act as you did before Voldemort was defeated and imprison people without fair trials, whether they're in Ministry cells or in Azkaban."

Fudge spluttered, his flabby face mottled red and purple with fury. Hermione was on her feet now, her hands clenched into fists, her whole body trembling with equal rage.

'*Time to intervene*,' Kingsley thought, or he'd have to get Hermione out of the cells too, and that would be more difficult than springing Severus if she assaulted Fudge in front of his friends.

"All in favour of releasing Severus Snape, effective immediately." Every hand rose, including Fudge's. That was a surprise, although maybe he just wanted to escape Hermione's wrath.

The young woman smiled disarmingly at the assembled Warlocks.

"Mark my words, she's going to be trouble," Fudge muttered to his nearest neighbour, his eyes fixed on Hermione as though she was a Manticore. "You should hear the tales my wife tells of her."

Kingsley bit his lip to stifle laughter. '*Oh, Fudge, you don't know the half of it! Or perhaps you do, if Dolores Fudge née Umbridge's horror stories are true.*'

* * *

AN: Dedicated to cck_brit. Happy belated birthday!

Many thanks to Kribu, JunoMagic and Septentrion for betaing.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 37

One more straw on the camel's back.

Chapter 20

Severus paced the blank white confines of his cell. Every time he sat down on the barely padded pallet, he soon sprang up again. At least it gave him something to do, even if it made him look like a caged tiger to those doubtless monitoring the cell...it wouldn't surprise him if the walls were transparent from outside.

They had confiscated his watch as well as his wand, so his only idea of the passage of time was the growing hollow pang of hunger. A refilling cup of water was provided, but no food. Severus drank his fill after he ascertained that it wasn't tainted by anything. Of course, that meant that he'd needed to use the ever-emptying bucket sooner rather than later.

For him to feel so hungry, it must be long past dinner time. If only there was some way to let Hermione know!

He dragged a hand through his hair distractedly, his thoughts on Hermione as he'd left her that morning. Distracted. Helpless.

The door to the cell abruptly appeared, a dark outline against the white. Severus staggered to a halt in his pacing as it was flung open by none other than Hermione.

Not so helpless, then.

Then she was in his arms, standing on tiptoe to slant her lips across his own. He pulled her closer, his lips parting to allow her tongue to slide across his.

Someone cleared their throat. For an insane moment, Severus thought that Lucius was acting the voyeur *again*... but he wouldn't have announced his presence. Whoever it was watching, Severus refused to give them a show of what was sacred to him.

Or would do, if Hermione would let him draw away. When he tried to lower her back to the floor, she lifted one of her legs to wrap around him. Severus groaned at the increased contact that brought warmth and friction right where he didn't need it. His cock twitched in disagreement, and his hand...now on her knee...held her leg in place rather than gently lower it as he'd intended.

Her hands had shifted to hold his head, which he no longer tried to pull away. His hips seemed to move of their own accord, grinding his growing hardness into her softness.

"Unless you want to spend a night in this cosy establishment, save it for when you're at home, okay?" a familiar voice, deeper than his own, spoke up.

Hermione reluctantly drew away from their kiss, an act that only served to cantilever her more firmly against his erection. He stifled a whimper, his eyes slightly crossed as she shifted her leg, rubbing against him even more.

"Severus, let go," she hissed, her cheeks stained scarlet.

He blinked. *She* was the one rubbing herself against...oh. Severus glanced down at his hand, still grasping her knee. He let go as if it was red hot. Hermione stepped back, leaving him thankful for his robes concealing the bulge in his trousers. Especially when he caught sight of who stood in the doorway.

It was Kingsley, the sheepish look on his face at odds with the amused glint in his eyes. He beckoned to them. "Come on, let's leave before we're locked in for the night."

* * *

"Oh, you should have seen her, Severus. She barged into my office *and* a closed session of the Wizengamot in order to spring you." Kingsley paused, groaned and slapped his forehead. "I'm an idiot. You *can*." He Conjured a flask, raised his wand to his temple and removed two glowing silver strands of memory.

Kingsley sealed the flask and held it out for Severus to take. "Here. A belated wedding present. Show it to Malfoy, too. It's about time he realised what he's got himself into...ow!"

"Hermione, it's not advisable to attack the Minister in the Ministry," Severus murmured, slipping between Kingsley and Hermione. "Particularly not in the Atrium when it's this crowded." He glared at the dumbstruck onlookers.

"No, it's okay. Andromeda's slapped me on the back of the head before without a demotion, so I'm not about to have your lovely wife arrested for elbowing me. She got off scot free for blasting her way into my office, after all."

"She *what*?"

Severus stared at Hermione, who shrugged nonchalantly. As if it was no big deal. He'd been under the impression that Potter had been responsible for most of their school and wartime escapades. Either she'd picked up some very bad habits from the boy, or she was the real culprit. Whichever was the case, the next time he was incarcerated, he'd be sure to worry more about Hermione doing something to end up in a cell right next to his.

"You'll see," Kingsley chuckled, indicating the flask of his memories, and stepped aside to let them go through the Floo first.

"Thank you, Kingsley," Hermione said, while Severus shook his hand.

"Anytime. I look forward to seeing you in action again." Kingsley's ear-to-ear grin accompanying those words made Severus eye the flask in his hand apprehensively. What had Hermione done to amuse an adrenaline junky like Kingsley?

* * *

Lucius shoved his plate away, the half-eaten steak and kidney pie stone cold. A Warming Charm would take care of that, but it would ruin the tender meat. Besides, he'd never been one for comfort eating.

For every step of progress made with reconciling with Draco, at least two steps back followed, if not a tumble down an entire flight of them. A slight exaggeration, perhaps, but his hopes had been so cruelly dashed. Hopes that when Draco pursued marriage, he would feel the familial bonds that tied father and son. Apparently not. At this rate, Lucius would be a grandfather before Draco decided to act as a son should.

It was enough to turn any self-respecting man to drink. But even that comfort was taken from him as Severus had not replenished the supply of Sober-*U* and had the cheek to cloister himself away so that more could not be begged, borrowed or stolen. While Lucius could have gone to Diagon Alley and bought some more, the thought of that leaking out into the *Prophet* and the resulting public disgrace was enough to keep him sober.

What really added insult to injury was that on top of their avoidance of him, neither Severus nor Hermione had had the courtesy to let him know when they were leaving Malfoy Manor. That they had done so separately and after an interval of some hours did not soften the blow. If not for the wards notifying him, Lucius would have been left in the dark. *And that was not done.*

As St Mungo's seemed to cover one alphabetical group of surnames per day, Lucius would be a fool not to be able to hazard a guess where Severus might have gone six days after Lucius's own appointment. And for Severus to be this delayed, he must have been arrested.

'He'd better have been...' The thought of Severus in a cell was far more soothing for Lucius than the thought of him sending for Hermione and celebrating with a romantic meal out. Of course, that was hardly likely. Hermione *had* left an hour or two before dinner time.

On second thoughts, it was cause for concern if Severus was under arrest. Lucius would be next, and far worse, he had yet to extract the antidote for the sterility potion from his slippery friend. How embarrassing; he was losing his touch... A true Slytherin would have obtained such vital knowledge before even taking the potion. Now it might be too late, and he would be emasculated for the remainder of his miserable life.

"Master not liking his dinner? Should Tricky tell Hotty and Toddy to boil their feet?" The house-elf's squeaks took a while to penetrate the gloomy cloud clinging to Lucius.

"Hmm?" She was on the verge of clicking her fingers to vanish off to oversee the punishment of the kitchen elves by the time Lucius focused on her. "No, the food was fine."

"Master wanted company? Bad Master Snape and Missy Mu...new Mistress, deserting my poor Master."

'Missy Mudblood?' Lucius gave Tricky a sharp glance. Perhaps it had been a mistake to assign Narcissa's personal elf to Hermione... Where had the elf picked up that sort of language, anyway? Narcissa had never used such uncouth language, even if Lucius did himself...oh. Well, at least the elf apparently did know better than to actually say the word.

"Master wants pudding?" At Lucius's distracted shake of the head, Tricky cleared the table and *cracked* away, with a last mutter of 'poor Master'.

How much lower could he go? Lucius Malfoy, reduced to being the object of pity from a deranged, grieving house-elf. The humiliation! He dropped his head into his hands and dragged a hand through his hair. A horrified gasp escaped him as he fingered his pride and joy. *Split ends!*

An estranged son, a Muggle-born bride he was far too attracted to for his own good, a jealous fellow husband, all of whom saw fit to ignore him, leave him in the dark when he might be about to lose them *and* now this?! It was the absolute limit.

The wards twinged as a wizard and a witch Apparated just inside the front door. So, Severus and Hermione thought they could nonchalantly return for a late dinner? They had another thing coming...

Lucius spelled the dining room door open with a resounding bang as they reached it. "Finally back, are you? You have a lot of nerve swanning back as if you owed me no explanations. / am the master of this house, how *dare* you..." He was just getting into his stride when the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, prickling at some unconsciously perceived threat.

Severus had his arm around Hermione's waist and was poised to shield her. As if Lucius would do anything to hurt her! What sort of monster did Severus think he was? Both of them were glaring at Lucius. If looks could kill...

Severus took a threatening step forwards, face twisted with rage. Lucius braced himself for the oncoming clash of horns, only to have the wind cut out of his sails when Hermione darted between them.

"*Who do you think you are?*" Her shrill outburst was almost drowned out by the tortured scream of shattering glass. Lucius winced; those priceless family silver cabinets would resist a simple *Reparo*.

Hermione clenched her fists, breathing raggedly, her jaw tight as she clamped down on her uncontrolled outburst of wandless magic. She spoke with forced calm between clenched teeth. "I admit it might have been polite to let you know I was leaving, even why, obvious as that reason was. But that you had a right to know?"

Lucius opened his mouth to object at the implied insult in her words and tone: that he should have known, that he was ~~too~~ not to have known.

Before he could say a word, she cut him off. "I couldn't care less after this last week. Courtesy be hanged. You need to remember that you're only bound to me in name only, by your own word, before you demand anything. Or is a Malfoy's word really worth nothing after all?"

Lucius closed his mouth at the realisation that he was gaping at her. The cheek! How dare she?! Although it had to be said that her anger had really brought out some fetching colour on her cheeks. And the way those deep, unsteady breaths moved her breasts... Spitfire did not do her justice. Imagine that unleashed in the bedroom...

Lucius looked over at Severus, who stood next to Hermione, a smug smirk on his ugly mug: *Lucky bastard.*

"Oh, I see. Because I 'avoided' you in the run up to Severus's check up, you're ignoring me now. How very mature of you," Hermione snarled.

Lucius blinked, and shifted his gaze back to goggle at her. He'd only taken his eyes off her for a moment, and she accused him of ignoring her *Women!*

"I wasn't...I...you..." he spluttered.

"Is it really any surprise that I spent every minute I could with Severus? For all I knew, the Ministry were going to tear us apart."

Lucius opened his mouth to protest that she would have been torn asunder from him too, but after her reminder of his established place in their marriage, he suspected that saying as much would result in a hex.

"I was worried too, you know. You might be my wife in name only..." Severus snorted, a disbelieving sneer on his face. At least that had wiped off that infuriating smug smirk... "...but I'd like to think we are friends."

"Stellar job of showing it over the past few days," Hermione retorted, her tone so chilly that Lucius swore his breath misted the air. Her eyes shifted away, though, a tell-tale guilty twitch. Before Lucius could pursue this advantage, she carried on, the ice gone from her voice. "I suppose if this is a friendship, I haven't done too well in being true to that either."

"That goes for all of us," Severus agreed, his eyes fixed on Lucius. He was undoubtedly referring to Lucius's attempts to encroach on his territory, but Lucius didn't even twitch. It would take far more than that for his guilty conscience to stir.

"The proverbial werewolf was howling at the door," Lucius allowed, as magnanimous as only a Malfoy could be. "Now that whole nasty business is over, things can be different, perhaps?"

Severus opened his mouth, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. Concerned about what Lucius meant by 'different', no doubt. Lucius suppressed a smile. Severus was much too fun to bait to stop doing that, even if due to Hermione's request he would have to be more subtle about it. Only... Lucius swallowed hard. Any urge to smile was obliterated by the bitter realisation that toying with Severus would have to be halted until that blasted antidote for the sterility potion was safely in Lucius's keeping.

Unless he could indirectly appeal to Hermione by requesting it in her presence? The smile tugged again at the corners of Lucius's mouth. That would have the added bonus of infuriating Severus...

"That reminds me, I would appreciate it if you could provide the antidote to that potion of yours, Severus."

Severus's jaw dropped. The comical slack expression didn't last long, though, and a deep scowl replaced it. "No. There are sure to be other check ups. You need to remain sterile until the law is repealed."

"Obviously!" Lucius spat before he could rein in his temper. He shot a glance at Hermione. A slight disapproving frown creased her forehead, but hopefully he hadn't scuppered his chances of gaining her sympathy. "I meant for me to have it available in the event that something happens to you. I don't want to be stuck like this forever!"

'*Oops.*' Judging by her pained grimace, it had not been a good idea to remind Hermione of however close she had come to losing Severus. And, indirectly, of her own infertility. *That* made his guilty conscience twinge. A married man should be more sensitive than that, after all.

Severus's glare was incendiary as he stepped up next to Hermione and wrapped his arm around her. "Then it would be in your best interests to stay in my good books, as the antidote has a limited shelf life and can only be brewed by someone with sufficient potions skills: not you. I'm not about to provide instructions for you to get someone else to make it for security reasons. A few hours in Ministry custody was enough; I have no desire to end up in Azkaban."

"But what if something happens to you?" Lucius winced as he saw Hermione blanch at his words. Again, insensitive of him, but that couldn't be helped. He had to get his point across!

"Tough luck," Severus sneered.

Lucius grimaced at the finality in Severus's voice. Oh yes, it had definitely been a bad idea to alienate his pet potions Master: *But...* He looked wistfully at Hermione. *But worth it.*

Severus grunted. Lucius's eyes were drawn to the movement of Hermione's arm as she retracted her elbow from his ribs. Lucius gave her a quizzical look. Much as he thought Severus deserved it, he was under the impression that was the minority opinion in their household.

"Behave," she muttered on the edge of Lucius's hearing, before raising her voice to a more audible level. "Just in case anything..." Hermione paused, finding Severus's hand and gripping it tightly. "In case anything happened to you, perhaps you could teach me. I know it's not ideal...something could just as easily happen to me, but it would give Lucius some peace of mind."

"Perhaps. Unlike Lucius, you had some aptitude for Potions at Hogwarts."

Well, that was better than nothing. His eggs were still in one basket, but now there was actually a chance that he'd be able to charm the information out of Hermione. And on the bright side, he would be at liberty to antagonise Severus... so long as Hermione was unaware. Hufflepuff tendencies Severus was developing aside, he wouldn't snitch: it would upset her.

'Win-win.'

* * *

Severus levered himself up out of the Pensieve, Lucius close behind him. Potter was definitely more innocent in their absurd escapades than Severus had thought.

Sitting down to a late dinner, the bottled memory in his pocket had poked him. An uncomfortable reminder, but it had served to ensure that he didn't forget Kingsley's gift. Hermione ducked their questions about it and ate her meal in silence before she escaped to wash her hair. The flush in her cheeks made him eye the glowing silver bottle with even more apprehension. With good reason, as it turned out.

Scratch worrying about her ending up under arrest next time. After seeing her literally breaking into Kingsley's office and threatening Fudge, she might be safer if she was locked up. It'd keep her out of making more trouble for herself, that was for sure. True, other than his place in the Wizengamot, Fudge was not much of a power these days. His recent marriage to the disgraced Umbridge only cemented that. But some of his friends were more dangerous: Hermione had made some powerful enemies that she'd really be better off without.

"Magnificent." Lucius's whisper drew Severus's attention.

'Fuck.' Severus's mood darkened further at witnessing the all-too-familiar expression on Lucius's face: lust-struck admiration. The same expression as when Narcissa had been playing hard-to-get at Hogwarts so long ago, and in more recent years when Lucius pursued his latest flavour of the month.

Kingsley had done Severus no favours with this 'gift'. Now that Lucius knew more of what Hermione was capable of, he would only want her even more: she was more of a challenge to him now. The only bonus was that Lucius should respect her more, perhaps finally as an equal.

And to think that he'd hoped that he would have less on his mind after his release from the Ministry cells. Now the fear that the powers that be would tear them apart was gone, he had Lucius-the-lusty to worry about more. There was also Hermione's reaction to Andromeda in the first Pensieve memory.

On second thoughts, perhaps that was actually a weight off his mind. While Hermione fainting was hardly something he liked to see, at least it allayed his unease. Those horrible suspicions he'd had...that Hermione had voice...after what the Dark atmosphere of Malfoy Manor had done to her, that it was something to do with the plague. That it was a sign that the plague was merely dormant, not cured. Jumping to conclusions, perhaps, but Hermione had been in places with Dark auras before the plague with no consequences. After the fall of the Dark L... *Voldemort*, it had taken curse breakers weeks to remove the taint of his malevolent presence from the great hall at Hogwarts.

That the sight of Andromeda was enough to trigger a flashback to Hermione's torture at the hands of Bellatrix, in the same way that the Dark atmosphere of Malfoy Manor had before the curse breaking, was a reassuring thing. It gave Severus hope that her reaction to the Dark atmosphere was merely a rare quirk accompanying the more usual post-Cruciatius trauma.

The door to Lucius's study creaked open, pulling Severus from his thoughts. Hermione padded inside, her fingers fiddling nervously with the tie of her dressing gown.

Severus drew breath to give her the admonishment she was undoubtedly expecting, that she needed to be more careful, that she'd made enemies and harmed her cause to overturn the law.

Only for him to nick his tongue as he ground his teeth in frustration at Lucius's flamboyant bow, and at the flattering words that followed.

"Most impressive, my dear. Your handling of Fudge was simply delightful."

Hermione grimaced. "I may have overreacted." Well, at least she seemed to know better, that she had messed up her future negotiations with at least Fudge's clique in the Wizengamot.

"Perhaps, but there are two ways to gain cooperation. To be loved and to be feared. All is not lost."

Surprisingly sage advice from Lucius. Fear had given Severus control over a classroom of incompetent children for twenty years, so it might also give Hermione a similar hold over certain overgrown children among the Wizengamot.

"Ron always did say I was scary," Hermione muttered.

Severus eyed the swirling silver memories in Lucius's Pensieve. *For once, Weasley, I'm inclined to agree.* Yet what scared Severus more was Hermione's talent for getting into serious trouble. If he went prematurely grey, he would know why.

* * *

AN: Thanks to Kribu and Septentrion for betaing, and to JunoMagic for naming the kitchen elves.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 37

Leashing the green-eyed monster.

Severus stormed out of his laboratory, the door slamming behind him. His expression was thunderous, and his face almost as black as his hair, courtesy of yet another attempt at a memory restoration potion gone up in smoke.

At least this time he had a sneaking suspicion as to the cause of his failures, namely that the Jobberknoll feathers should be willingly given. Which would mean all of his attempts were doomed to failure as no bird – save a phoenix – gave feathers freely. Unless Lucius could coax his feathered friends to moult... which would give him yet another thing to lord over Severus.

A glowering house-elf intercepted him, sparks leaping from long fingers as it magically cleaned the soot from him, head to toe. Severus glanced behind him at the sooty footprints soiling the carpet. In another shower of sparks they vanished. Pity. A filthy floor was nothing less than Lucius deserved.

So far Lucius had kept his promise to keep his hands to himself. However, since their truce was obtained at wand point, Severus did not anticipate Lucius would keep his word that for him it was a marriage in name only. What was worse, after seeing Hermione in action in the Pensieve memories from Kingsley, it was clear that Lucius was in lust. If risking the loss of Severus's friendship was not enough to stop Lucius from crossing the line before, it certainly wouldn't be now.

In the last few days Severus had come across far too many intimate little conversations between Lucius and Hermione. True, they were not as intimate as his own with her as there was no touching involved – or at least none that Severus had seen. It might be different when they were researching in the Ministry...

Severus clenched his fists at what that thought provoked in his mind's eye, of Lucius touching Hermione with the freedom she allowed her true husband. Severus paused to steady himself against the wall. Imagining it was even worse than seeing what happened under his nose, as at least the latter was nothing that wasn't innocent... at least on Hermione's side.

He had to believe – *trust* – that Hermione was not interested in anything more than friendship with Lucius. And that even if she was attracted to him, she wouldn't cheat on

'If he somehow did manage to charm his way into her bed, she wouldn't be cheating on me in order to do so; Hermione is legally wed to Lucius as well.'

—Fine, that she wouldn't betray him. Would she?

History was against Severus. On one of the rare occasions that he was interested in a woman after Lily's death, she was stolen away by Lucius. That stung at the time, but at least the damage was only to his pride, as he hadn't loved Lucius's conquest.

But this was Hermione. Just before the plague struck, she'd known Severus was attracted to her, and he was certain that it was mutual. Yet she hadn't acted on it, because she was with Weasley. Her fidelity could be in no doubt.

Although... because it had been days before she fell ill, Merlin only knew what would have happened had the plague never occurred. She might have left Weasley for him, which meant—

'No. Don't go further down that path. Paranoia paves it; madness lies at the end.'

Rather than search the whole house for Hermione, Severus called an elf. The same one who cleaned up after him appeared near-silently. It stared blankly at him when he asked where she was by name. Obviously more formality was needed.

"Where is the mistress of the house?"

"Poor Mistress is in her tomb waiting for Master to join her."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose as he restrained the urge to kick the elf in revenge for the heart-stopping second that he thought it had meant Hermione. "You're a Mistress. Where is she?"

The elf scowled. "With Master and his birds."

Severus dismissed the elf and Apparated to the top floor of the aviary. Fawkes trilled a greeting. The short burst of phoenix song soothed Severus's temper. He gave Fawkes a stroke on his smooth feathered head in gratitude.

Unfortunately Severus's newfound peace shattered as soon as he descended to the Owlery on the floor below. Lucius had a magnificent pure black owl on his arm. Hermione was hesitantly reaching out to stroke the head, her back to Severus where he stood on the staircase.

"He's lovely. But... don't you already have enough owls?" she asked.

"Ah, but he's not for me. He's for you. Happy anniversary." Lucius lifted his arm and the owl fluttered over to perch on Hermione's shoulder. She staggered a little under the weight.

"Anniversary?" Hermione echoed, bemused.

"It's been a month since Shackbolt married us. I know it has not been a pleasant month, but that's all the more reason to give you a gift." Lucius didn't look at Severus, but he was surely aware of his presence. The wards would have given away the Apparition apart from anything else.

"Thank you," Hermione murmured, stroking the owl gently clinging to her shoulder. "I've never had an owl of my own. What's his name?"

"Umbra. I would have left the naming to you, but a good post owl needs to be named as soon as he hatches." Lucius smiled warmly at Hermione. It was the sort of smile that Severus strongly suspected was mutual.

He stood there seething, his fists clenched as his teeth ground together. This time the outrage was not solely aimed at Lucius, but also at Hermione.

True, it would be rude to reject Lucius's gift, but surely she was not so obtuse to not realise that it was a gift from a husband to a wife, and that meant that she should reject it and Lucius's advances.

Damn her. She was too nice. Too friendly. She was *encouraging* the bastard, for the love of Merlin! It was painfully obvious that Lucius's professed wish to be friends was actually to be friends with *benefits*.

And... it hadn't even occurred to Severus that they'd been married for a month. Although it was more confusing for him due to the fact that he'd married her twice. It was over a month since their Muggle wedding. If he went by that, he'd missed the first month mark. If he went by the wizarding one he'd been upstaged by Lucius and always would be – he had no bottomless Gringotts vault. Still, a real wedding anniversary only applied after a year. Severus curled his lip. That was the solution, then. He would only observe the annual anniversary of their Muggle wedding... provided that Lucius did not steal Hermione away before then, of course.

Lucius looked over Hermione's head and met Severus's glower. The warm smile on that pointed face morphed into a smirk.

Severus stalked off the stairs and onto the Owlery floor, his pulse throbbing in his temples. He wanted to bloody Lucius's smug face. He wanted to—No. He didn't want to strike Hermione. But he did want to shout some sense into her.

He almost reached Hermione when he came to an abrupt halt. Lashing out at her – even only verbally – would only serve to drive her away. And worse, if she was driven away, it would likely be into Lucius's arms.

Furthermore, now that he stopped to think, he also knew that in his right mind, unclouded by anger, he didn't want to lash out. Not at her.

And even if he wanted to fight Lucius off, he couldn't do that in front of Hermione or risk her coming across them trading blows. He knew how much that upset her...

That left only one course of action: Occlumency. It was not advisable to bottle up emotions indefinitely, as they could break through the mental walls explosively, but Severus had managed to do so for years while spying on the Dar—Voldemort.

Severus closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, each inhalation and exhalation the physical expression of building layers of mental walls blocking off the negative emotions provoked by Lucius's actions... and Hermione's inactions.

When he opened his eyes, Severus was glacially calm... Although it was a little disturbing that he had to instantly force a fresh surge of anger behind the shields the moment his eyes set on Lucius. It was obviously going to be just as challenging as facing Lily's murderer every time he'd answered Voldemort's summons.

But it was worth it. Seeing the way Hermione's face lit up when she turned to face him underlined that.

And if it deprived Lucius of the pleasure of baiting him, so much the better.

Ginny dropped her toast back onto the plate. She was vaguely aware that it had landed jam-side down, but most of her attention was on the *Prophet* where it lay open on the table.

She'd been idly reading through the trashy articles when a familiar name caught her eye: Severus Snape. She read it through twice, unable to believe her eyes.

Then Draco's drawling voice penetrated her stupor. "What's so riveting in that rag?"

"Let's see," Harry said from beside him, reaching for the *Prophet*.

"It's there." Ginny pointed to the article. "And I've got to find Ron before he does something stupid." She pushed away from the table and dashed over to the fireplace in Grimmauld Place's kitchen, grabbing a handful of Floo powder and hurling it in. "The Burrow!"

She fell out of the fireplace in her family home, feeling the normal yet heart-rending pang at the lack of her mother's presence. The house was just *empty* without her. It was why her dad had let her move in with Harry with only a token protest.

She'd arrived just in time, as Ron clattered down the stairs and made for the front door like an Acromantula was on his heels. Ginny launched herself at him and tackled him to the floor.

"Augh! Ginny! Lemme go!" Ron kicked at her and wriggled away, only to fall stricken in a Full Body-Bind.

"Sorry, Ron, but it's the only way you're going to listen to me." Ginny casually perched on the edge of the kitchen table, twirling her wand in her hand. "You've read the *Prophet*. They say Snape was arrested, and give the 'facts' that he was locked up because he was sterile and tried to fool the Healers so that he'd stay married to Hermione. And let me guess, I caught you before you could go to Malfoy Manor and offer yourself up as a replacement hubby for Hermione."

Ginny relaxed the Body-Bind so that Ron could move his head. "Yeah. So what?"

"It might not be true, that's what! This is the *Prophet* we're talking about. And even if it is true, I don't think Hermione would appreciate you blundering in. She really does like Snape, you know."

Ron grimaced and turned his face away.

"I know you don't like to hear it, Ron, but Hermione wasn't the girl for you. You don't have much in common except friendship with Harry. You just don't fit." She meshed her fingers, cradling her wand in both hands.

Ron must have almost given himself whiplash with the speed he twisted his head back to face Ginny. "And you and *Draco Malfoy* do?" he spat.

"He's dishy—" Ron retched theatrically. Ginny stuck out her tongue. "—and he's decent these days. Believe it or not, he also gets along with my other husband-to-be now that Harry's given him a chance."

"I don't want to know! And with Hermione... this could be my last chance. Please, Ginny. Let me go."

"If I let you go, Hermione'll turn you into a toad. No, it's better if I go. If it is true, I'll try to put in a good word for you. Okay?"

Ron looked away, sulkily. "Okay," he grumbled.

Ginny stood up and made her way to the front door. She'd have to Apparate as she probably wouldn't be able to Floo to Malfoy Manor without access from Lucius Malfoy.

"Hey!" Ron cried from behind her. "Aren't you going to Finite the Petrificus?"

"You'd only barge in. I'll come back and let you go... if I remember."

"Oi! Ginny, come back. *Ginny!*"

She laughed and closed the door on her whining brother.

After the magical gate let her in, Ginny wandered up the long gravel drive to the manor. She kept her eyes on the path rather than inspecting the scenery (not that the tall hedges on either side would let her), as to do anything else risked stepping in peacock shit.

The house-elf who answered the door *cracked* off to let Hermione know that she had a visitor. Moments later, Hermione herself Apparated into the entrance hall, a quill tucked into her hair just above her ear and ink stains on her hands.

"Ginny?"

"Er, hi. Is there somewhere we can go to talk?"

Hermione opened the nearest door in the hallway. The room beyond was small by Malfoy standards, with comfortable dragonhide chairs to sit in.

"Drink?" Hermione offered.

"You might need one," Ginny muttered. "No thanks. I'm just here on Ron's behalf. He wanted to charge in to the rescue like some sort of knight in second-hand dented armour."

Hermione cocked her head to the side and raised an eyebrow in a way that was creepily like Snape's.

"Have you seen today's *Daily Prophet*? No? Oh... well, there's something about Snape being arrested after his fertility check up at St Mungo's. The reporter assumed it was because Snape's sterile and tried to cover it up."

The blood drained from Hermione's face, leaving her as pale as Snape. So it was true...

"Oh. I'm sorry, Hermione. I know what Snape means to you." Ginny swallowed hard. What she had to say next might *geber* hexed instead of Ron... "If the worst comes to the worst, there is always Ron, or another of my brothers. Weasleys are just about guaranteed to be fertile enough to knock you up at the first try. You wouldn't even need to do it more than that one time if you didn't want to."

"Ginny..." Hermione's hand twitched as if she was about to draw her wand. Ginny tensed, ready to whip her own out to defend herself. But Hermione's wand stayed out of sight. Instead, she hugged herself. "Shut up."

Ginny gaped at her. She'd never known Hermione to be quite so... so... She couldn't put her finger on it, but something was very wrong.

Hermione whipped her wand out. Ginny flinched, but only a *Muffliato* was cast. Hermione looked away, her mouth trembling slightly. "I'm the one with the problem, not Severus, or Lucius for that matter. Severus made a potion that made them infertile too, something only he can reverse."

Ginny closed her mouth with a snap and found her voice. "Wow. That's so romantic. He must really love you." She shook herself. What sort of friend was she?! "Oh, Merlin... I'm so sorry, Hermione. The Ministry, the Wizengamot... they're not going to annul your marriages, are they?"

"No. Although they would've done if Kingsley hadn't put his foot down. And that wasn't just for my sake – it just doesn't make sense to break unions if the woman is sterile."

'Can I do anything to help' was on the tip of Ginny's tongue. But of course there wasn't. If anything, it would help Hermione if she stayed away, at least after she married Harry and Draco. They were almost guaranteed to fulfil the addendum in record time, what with the Weasley-Prewett fertility record. It would hurt Hermione to be around Ginny when she was pregnant...

Yet it would also hurt her if Ginny avoided her. And it would hurt Ginny too... neither of them had many female friends left, not after the death toll of the plague.

Life *sucked*.

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, JunoMagic and Septentrion for betaing.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 37

A disturbed night, newsworthy snippets and a wedding reception.

Chapter 22

Thud.

Hermione groaned. She lay where she was in the chill air, disoriented. She'd been asleep, dreaming no, having a nightmare; a dream wouldn't make her feel like *this* and then she was awake. There had been a jolt ...

"Hermione?" Severus's voice came from somewhere above her.

She opened her mouth to respond, but only a dry croak escaped. Hermione grimaced. Her tongue felt like sandpaper.

"*Lumos.*"

Hermione's eyes screwed up against the sudden light. She cautiously blinked them open, one hand raised to give them time to adjust.

"Are you all right?"

Finally she could squint up at Severus without being blinded by the glowing tip of his wand. He was leaning over the edge of the bed, frowning down at her.

"Hermione?" His frown deepened.

Oh, right. The question. Hermione grimaced as she sat up, several aches and pains in her shaken body making themselves known. "Water," she rasped.

One glass of Conjured water later and she was clambering back into the warm bed.

"*Nox.* Are you..."

"Nightmare. Fell out of bed." Hermione cringed. It had been years since she'd done that, maybe even a decade.

"I know that much. A mere dream wouldn't have you thrashing about so much that you kicked me. Were you trying to escape something?" Severus asked as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Sorry." Hermione muttered wretchedly, and turned her head to press her lips against his shoulder. She could only hope that she hadn't kicked him too hard. Come to think of it, though, had she fallen out of the bed or been *pushed*? If so, they were even.

He brought a hand up to stroke her hair. "Not your fault. What was it about?"

She thought back, working through the hazy memories of her disoriented awakening. Only the horribly familiar feeling of déjà vu awaited her. "I can't remember."

"Ah. So it was too much to hope that those had stopped."

"Presuming that they're the same recurring nightmare. But I'll take having them every month or so to having them every few days."

"I'd rather you did not have to suffer them at all." They lay in silence together for a minute until Severus haltingly continued. "I... I'm powerless to stop them. They don't seem to recur in the same night, so Dreamless Sleep is useless. And using it cannot be used as a precautionary measure as it is highly addictive."

He sighed heavily. "That you cannot remember them after you wake means that I can't talk you through them and deal with your demons that way."

Hermione looped a leg around his to cuddle up to him fully, from head to toe. "This helps. Nothing is worse post-nightmare than struggling through the fear alone. After nightmares, I never could get back to sleep. With you, I can."

"Mmm. Good."

"There's a reason why you're the only one who can do that for me."

"Mmm."

"Severus, I... this is something I've been wanting to say for a while."

"Hmm?"

Hermione opened her mouth, only for her courage and voice to fail her.

'Come on, just say it. It's three words. You can do it.'

"I love you," she whispered. Hermione held her breath as she waited for his response.

He snored.

Typical. It would be so much harder to repeat by the light of day, too. Unless ... unless he was only feigning sleep?

Her heart skipped a beat. The implications of that didn't bear thinking of. Either he wasn't ready for such a confession, or ...

Or he didn't feel the same.

'Come off it! By his own words and actions there's nothing he wouldn't do for me. If that's not love, I don't know what is. No, he must be asleep. And I should be, too ...'

Hermione shifted her head from Severus's shoulder to rest beside his head on his pillow. She yawned widely, thoughts slowing as sleep neared.

'Tomorrow. But ... don't want to put him on the spot. Should wait. Let him ...'

Sleep claimed her.

Hermione and Severus emerged downstairs after a leisurely shower together. Lucius glanced up as they entered the dining room. He raised a knowing eyebrow at their damp hair something that made Hermione's cheeks burn before he returned to scowling down at a letter in his hands.

As Hermione sat down next to him, Severus at her side, she saw that it wasn't a letter but a card, gilded and embossed. A wedding invitation, then.

"Draco?" Severus asked.

In answer, Lucius held out the invitation to Hermione. She flicked it open, held so that both she and Severus could read it.

'Ah. I see. Oh, Draco, for once can't you give him a break?'

It was a mass produced invitation, one sent out to any prospective guest. Not the sort of thing to send to one's father, unless it was to hammer home paternal-filial estrangement. There was a more personal postscript, but that was pointedly addressed to Severus and Hermione herself; asking them to stand with the happy couple...er, trio. No, wait: it was couple. Ginny and Draco. Harry's best man would be Ron, of course.

"I've already sent our RSVP." Lucius rose to his feet. "I'll be in my aviary. Let me know when you're ready to leave for the Ministry archives."

Hermione watched him walk away, his gait stiff. Turning back to the table after the door shut, she met Severus's gaze. He'd also been watching Lucius leave. As badly as he'd been getting on with Lucius recently, there was no trace of enjoyment of Lucius's obvious pain in Severus's eyes. Only pity, mingled with something that might have been concern if it was stronger.

That was promising ... and a relief, to be honest, as Hermione knew that she'd inadvertently damaged the friendship between Severus and Lucius. It was good to know that the damage might not be fatal to that friendship. Come to think of it, things had improved in the past week or so. She couldn't put her finger on what changed, but there seemed to be less tension when both men were in the same room.

Whatever it was, Hermione mused as she tucked into her muesli, it was no thanks to Lucius. His behaviour hadn't changed at all. For all that he claimed that he only wanted friendship, Hermione was well aware that he would not be averse to more. Not that he would get it; physically attractive as he was, Lucius simply wasn't Severus.

That left Severus ... Before Hermione could begin to wonder what on earth Severus could have done to alleviate the bad feeling with Lucius, an owl flew through the window apparently left open for it. That morning's *Daily Prophet* dropped from the owl's talons to be caught deftly by Severus before it could land in the dregs of Hermione's breakfast.

Severus unfolded it, his eyes scanning the front page. "Well, that makes a change," he muttered.

Hermione swallowed her last spoonful. "What?" she asked as soon as her mouth was clear.

"It's a fairly sensible article on the addendum. Of course, it asks more questions than it answers ... and of course we haven't escaped a mention."

"What now?" Hermione groaned, and slumped back in her chair.

"A list of those sterile. We're prominent on it."

All things considered, that was hardly surprising. At least it hadn't become public knowledge well, beyond the news of Severus's arrest and the accompanying assumptions until after the addendum was enforced.

"It also lists those unions annulled. Thanks to an amendment ..." Severus glanced up at Hermione, clearly suspecting that she was behind it. "... it only affects marriages where it is only the wife, or one or both husbands. Hmm. And in the case of the latter, there's a lottery of sorts. Only some of the one-fertile-husband-unions are split as it depends on how many fertile witches need husbands."

Hardly fair, but it was still better than every marriage with a sterile spouse being annulled.

"Those sterile who are now unmarried are still subject to the law. They can't have anyone not in polyandrous marital bliss, apparently."

They both snorted in mutual disgust at that. Was it too much to hope that the Wizengamot would change? That it would become a little less patronising and dictatorial in the not-so-distant future? Hermione suspected that it was both overoptimistic and naïve to boot to hope so.

"Just as well Lucius did take that potion too, then. Or we would have one of these newly single sterile wizards after a place in my marital bed." Hermione shuddered at the thought.

Severus squinted, presumably at some small print. "How insulting ... if a fertile wizard happens to be part of an otherwise sterile union one of those spared annulment there is a monetary encouragement for him to marry a Muggle."

She sighed. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me. They really want as many of the magical population as possible to go forth and multiply."

"Quite. I wouldn't be surprised if in the distant future, when more witches have been born and have come of age, that the Wizengamot interferes further to marry them off."

"Annul some more marriages, you mean?"

He nodded. "Where there is one fertile wizard in the present matches."

That would be just like the powers that be. All the more reason to come up with an alternative, better solution before the Wizengamot could interfere with the next generation.

"There's also a list of those arrested: both those who missed their appointments apparently even being deathly ill is not a good enough excuse, as it should mean that one was already in St Mungo's and those who sterilised themselves."

"Anyone we know?" she asked. By the way Severus grimaced there was someone familiar there.

"Argus Filch. Of course ... Irma Pince is past her menopause and Filch must have wanted to ensure he stayed with her. The fool! Why didn't he come to me?" The *Prophet* crumpled in Severus's fingers.

Hermione laid her hand on his arm. She didn't care much for Filch, but she could sympathise ... and he must have been a friend of sorts to Severus. That alone was reason enough to care for the crotchety caretaker's fate.

"He must know of my role in the cure and the fact that it was funded by the Ministry ... he probably thinks I'm still in their pocket," Severus spat bitterly.

"Hopefully he won't be in too much trouble; it's not as if he's a wizard."

"Quite. But he still has enough magic in him to see Hogwarts ... I'll have to speak to Kingsley, see if there's anything he can do." Severus stroked his hand over hers before smoothing the paper out and resuming his reading and running commentary.

"Hah. Listen to this: 'Much to the disappointment of Gladys Gudgeon, Gilderoy Lockhart and other permanent patients of St Mungo's are exempt from both law and addendum.' Seems there's still some lines the Wizengamot won't cross."

"Yet," Hermione added darkly. She was willing to bet that if this Gladys Gudgeon wasn't past it, the Wizengamot would make an exception for her. It was Lockhart's memory that was gone, after all, not his virility.

Severus made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "In their infinite generosity, the Wizengamot will 'allow' the witches who already happen to be pregnant with males to carry them to term."

"And what about recovery time?"

He read on for a minute or two before answering. "They allow the full year, but only because there are some things that it is detrimental for magic to interfere with."

Well. That was better than nothing, even if it was for all of the wrong reasons.

Severus turned the page. He tensed, his eyes riveted on something in the newsprint. "Ah. Just as well this," he tapped the *Prophet*, "arrived after that." He pointed at the invitation where it lay on the table. "They've posted marriage banns already."

Hermione winced. The invitation couldn't have arrived much earlier than the *Prophet* owl ... that really didn't bode well for how warm Lucius's welcome would be at the wedding in a fortnight.

* * *

When Hermione sat down for dinner at Harry, Ginny and Draco's reception, it suddenly occurred to her that she couldn't remember much of the wedding itself. Despite the fact that it took place mere hours earlier, it was a blur.

'At least I can be certain this memory lapse is nothing to worry about,' Hermione mused, furiously attempting to smother the blush she could feel on her cheeks before it could spread over her décolletage. She failed as a warm hand joined hers in her lap. Hermione glared at Severus where he sat smirking beside her and caught that hand in hers before it could slip between her thighs.

Incorrigible man. While flattering that he couldn't seem to get enough of her today, if he actually engaged his brain for a moment, he wouldn't want to risk being caught in public.

Clearly she would have to make sure that he didn't shag them both senseless before important events in future.

Oh, and while she was thinking about resolutions like that ... not to be late to aforementioned important events as a result of said shagging. She could remember that much! Her glower strengthened as his smirk faded.

"What?" Severus breathed as he bent close to her under the pretext of examining the menu.

"Nothing, *darling*. Other than the fact that we're lucky that the happy cou...*trio* were more inclined to snigger at us than fume. You're Draco's best man. I'm the bridesmaid. We're meant to make sure that the wedding goes as planned, not ensure its delay!"

"Hermione..."

She cut him off as soon as the last syllable of her name slipped past his lips. "And what about Lucius? What sort of friends are we, doing things like that rubbing it in when we should be trying to make sure things go well between him and Draco?"

"Don't worry," Lucius put in, leaning close on Hermione's other side. She scowled; he wasn't supposed to hear that. "You provided me with some quality entertainment."

Hermione barely resisted the urge to drop her head onto the table and groan. That would make a scene, and was hardly the sensible thing to do when dinner was going to appear at any moment. She settled for closing her eyes and kneading at the bridge of her nose.

'Men! They're all the same.'

* * *

"Are we okay?" Harry asked softly.

"Huh?" Hermione looked up from her empty pudding bowl. Harry had swapped seats with Lucius, allowing him to attempt to talk to Draco while Harry had a more private word with her.

"I mean, you did tell Ginny that I was forgiven, but ... I haven't heard from you." Harry was poised on the edge of the seat, as if ready to flee at any moment.

Hermione threw an arm around his shoulders to give him a one-armed hug despite her vocal displeasure, she hadn't banished Severus's hand from her lap.

"Sorry. *I did* mean to. It's a pretty pathetic excuse, I know, but..."

Harry hugged her back. "That's okay. You've been rushed off your feet. And even if this new part of the law doesn't ..." he trailed off, looking anywhere but at her.

"Even if the addendum doesn't affect me, I'm still trying to find an alternative so it can be overturned. And preferably something that means the whole bloody law can be scrapped."

"Yeah, that." Harry sagged in relief. Poor thing obviously didn't feel comfortable touching on those sort of personal problems, the typical bloke. "Er, if there's anything I can do to help ..."

"I'll let you know." And Harry Potter's influence could potentially be very useful ...

"Mind you, it's probably best that you didn't write to me or see me right after you forgave me."

"Let me guess, you almost sent me a Howler."

Harry nodded sheepishly and rubbed at the back of his neck. "It did take me a while to get used to the idea of Draco as the one I have to share Ginny with. But you were right: Draco has changed."

Hermione took a sip of her champagne and held it on her tongue, savouring the taste.

"He's growing on me," Harry confided.

Hermione glanced quizzically at him. The slight flush on his cheeks and the dreamy look in his eyes said it all. She choked.

Both Severus and Harry patted her on the back.

"Too much information, Harry!" she croaked. Happy as she was for Harry, she really didn't need to know *that*.

Harry waited until Severus went back to his conversation with Mr Weasley. "Does Sna...Severus and Lucius get along in the same way that I do now with Dra..."

"No!" Hermione grimaced. She could really do without picturing Harry in any sort of sexual situation. "They don't, and never have, at least as far as I know." Although come to think of it, that would explain the change in tension recently ...

'Oh, don't be ridiculous! Severus would no more break faith with me than I would with him, even assuming that tension was UST. It looked more like the green eyed monster to me.'

"...can't go back to Hogwarts," Mr Weasley was saying to Severus. "Harry and Draco finished their schooling last year, but no witches did. Ginny won't want to be apart from them, and she'll be pregnant soon."

"If she isn't already," Severus muttered.

Mr Weasley didn't take offence. "I know I should have kept Ginny at home. But with Molly ... well, every Weasley sought comfort where they could find it. I did with Andromeda, Ginny did with Harry and now with Draco too."

Considering Mr Weasley's opinion of Malfoys, he and his remaining children did seem to be doing remarkably well coping with Draco in the family. And with sitting at the same table as Lucius, come to that. But after so much loss, perhaps it was no surprise that old grudges were laid to rest.

"Will Hermione go back?" Mr Weasley asked.

"She never went back in the first place, not really."

"Oh? But she went back to Hogwarts repeatedly before she fell ill, first helping with the rebuilding and then for lessons. Or at least that's what I heard from Ron."

"She came for private tuition. Ordinary schooling would have been a waste." On her lap, Severus's hand squeezed hers. It was quite a painful thought, that she'd lost so much knowledge thanks to the memory loss accompanying the cure. Until she found something to rescind the cure, she couldn't spare the time to repeat those forgotten lessons. And complete them, as she must have fallen ill in the autumn.

For now, all she could do was hope that Severus would be successful in his efforts to restore her memory. She squeezed back, all too aware that he was having about as much luck with that as she was with her campaign: namely none.

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AN: Many thanks to Kribu, JunoMagic and Septentrion for betaing.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 37

Trickery.

Chapter 23

Lucius wiped his lips with his napkin and rose from the table. Perfect timing. According to the wards, Severus and Hermione were just coming downstairs. He walked over to the open doorway and watched them approach, a prime position to observe the way they walked close enough to touch, with lingering touches at that.

'Excellent. They're like clockwork; they never miss their Sunday morning shag.'

"Good morning," he murmured, not even bothering to mask his expression. So much the better if it made that most becoming blush rise in Hermione's cheeks, and if it happened to break that infernal Occlumency-induced control of Severus's ... No such luck, there was only a brief flicker of anger in those dark eyes before it faded. The spoilsport had ruined the pleasure of Severus baiting.

At least he still had the power to embarrass Hermione, and if that failed there was still the thrill of the chase. And even if the unthinkable happened and he never managed to charm his way into her bed, one form of entertainment remained, even if they left him and Malfoy Manor behind. And such quality entertainment ...

Just thinking about it made his cock harden. Not a good thing in such tailored, close-fitting robes: voyeur though he was, Lucius did not like being watched in return. Unless it was by participants in the carnal act, of course, but that was a different matter!

But now it was time to make a hasty exit before *he* blushed under Severus and Hermione's scrutiny. Well, that and the supplier of his quality entertainment should be waiting for him. "I'll be in my study. Enjoy your breakfast."

Lucius had to restrain himself to a casual walk as far as that was possible with a growing erection even after the dining room door closed behind him. After all, they would hear it if he broke into a run. That might make Severus suspicious as to why he was in such a hurry. Additionally, it was hardly dignified.

The moment Lucius set foot inside his study, the painting standing on his desk blurred. It was a combined portrait-calendar, and the picture changed each month as soon as his proximity triggered it. Last month it had been of one of his prized albino peacocks strutting along the driveway. This time ...

Lucius swallowed hard. He tore his eyes away from the family portrait and staggered inside. Pushing the door shut behind him, he stumbled over to his desk and sank down on the dragonhide chair in front of it.

With a trembling finger he traced the contours of Narcissa's painted face. She smiled sadly at him and raised her own hand to press the shifting oil of it to his finger.

Immediately after her death and the funeral Lucius had spent his days languishing in front of her portrait until his calendar decided to save him from himself by selecting scenes without her. Until now ... Yet while the sight of her struck him like a blow, the grief was not as raw as it had been.

But to make up for that, the painted Draco beside her had turned his back on both the painted Lucius and the flesh-and-blood one. At least he hadn't stalked off this time, as had happened in every single painting of him since the fall of the Dark Lord. That meant there was some small progress ...

That was encouraging, since their conversation hadn't gone well at Draco's wedding reception. Draco had accepted his congratulations. But apart from that they hadn't talked, while Draco made a point of conversing with absolutely everyone except his estranged father. Even to the male Weasleys.

A small long-fingered hand pawed at his knee, only to snatch itself away and open and close a drawer on it. There was a strangled squeal. "Bad Tricky touching Master unasked for!"

"I is here, Master," the elf added a moment later. What was it about the creatures that made them state the blindingly obvious?

Lucius drew his wand. "Concentrate on what I bid you to watch unseen," he commanded. Something that he'd repeated ad nauseam, but he did not want to subject himself to a mix-up.

He touched the tip of the wand to Tricky's temple and slowly drew out the wisp of silver. It was only when he struggled to keep it on the end of his wand that he realised that he'd forgotten to Conjure a bottle for it.

"Idiot," he grumbled, before he flicked the memory into the air and quickly Transfigured a scrap of parchment into a delicate glass bottle. Lucius picked it up and held it under the memory as it floated back down, straight into the container. He didn't bother to seal it he'd be watching it soon enough only tapping it with his wand to make the glass Unbreakable.

"You may go. Oh, and remember that Hermione's parents are coming for lunch today."

Those huge green eyes widened. "Children of mud in the house! What would Tricky's poor Mistress say?" the elf wailed. She clutched at her ears.

"Mistress would have been a perfect hostess, even to Muggles," Lucius snapped. "Now go, to the kitchen with you!"

Tricky *cracked* away, still wailing.

Lucius gave the painted Narcissa another lingering glance before he rose to his feet and crossed to the wall of his study opposite the door. He rested his hand against the wooden panelling until he felt it give way a few seconds later, literally melting into nothing. Of course, to anyone else it would still be visible and perfectly solid, otherwise it would be a pretty pathetic secret room.

And pathetic could hardly describe the chamber beyond. By the end of his life, it should rival the size of his library, although at the moment it had a fair amount of expanding yet to do.

As always, Lucius paused to spare the time for an admiring inspection of his beautiful collection, the walls of the circular room lined with shelves full of glowing silver bottles, the gilded engravings labelling the shelves with names and dates.

Lucius walked to where his Pensieve stood in the centre of the room, the basin silver smooth as a mirror. That would change as soon as he tipped in the memory he

carried. Then it would come to life, swirling gently until he dipped in. And such a pleasant dip it would be ...

He overturned the bottle and let the memory drift down, where it cast rippling eddies as it landed in the Pensieve. After placing the empty bottle into a pocket, Lucius rested his hands on the rim of the ornately carved marble and leaned down. His face touched the surface and he whirled into his own private paradise.

And there they were ... the room was dimly lit, but enough light was streaming under the curtains for Lucius to see what was going on. There were no blankets in the way either, thanks to his slight manipulation of the wards governing the temperature in their bedrooms. Not enough that they would overheat in bed, but so that it was comfortable with no bedclothes.

Lucius loosened his robes and unfastened his trousers, his eyes fixed on the couple entangled on the bed. No underwear made things so much easier, too, Lucius mused as he reached inside to draw his thickening cock out.

He watched as she slid down the slim male body to take his prick into her mouth, rapidly firming it from half-mast to fully erect.

There was a masculine groan, then she was pulled back up into a kiss, before he rolled them over and sank down to return the favour. How delicious she must taste ... Lucius licked his lips and stroked at his cock, savouring her moans at the caresses of that sharp, clever tongue.

They moved so that she knelt on the bed and he sank into her from behind. Lucius sidled to the left so that he could watch that slick prick pound into her wet cunt, fisting himself in time with their rhythm.

"Yes, Severus, give it to her!" He could almost fool himself into thinking that they followed his every whim as the pace increased. "Harder! Harder! Hard...unh!"

Afterwards, once rational thought returned, Lucius pondered again how disorienting it was to ejaculate nothing. Well, not nothing, as the mess to clean up would be inside his trousers in his physical body where it bent over the Pensieve.

Lucius watched them finish, Severus grunting something that might have been her name as Hermione cried out. They collapsed onto the bed, Severus rolling aside so that he didn't land on top of her. Lucius levered himself out of the Pensieve. It was more pain than pleasure to watch the tender aftermath of their lovemaking.

He stepped back from the Pensieve, grimacing at the way his flaccid cock clung to the sticky mess in his trousers.

"*Evanesco*. Much better."

Lucius dipped his wand into the Pensieve and scooped out the memory. With a flick of his wrist, he slid it into the bottle. He picked it up and walked over to the shelf nearest the door.

"Here we are, Severus Snape and Hermione Granger ... let's put you where you belong." He put it down at the end of the row of bottles. As he did so, the polished wood stretched slightly, along with the room itself.

"Thank Merlin for loopholes," Lucius murmured, looking down the shelf at his ever growing collection. Within the year it should match the size of the other shelves. It had been risky to put *Tricky* to use, spying on Severus and Hermione while invisible, especially after Severus made him swear that wand oath, but ... definitely worth it. Thankfully house-elf magic and extracting a memory was indirect enough to circumvent the oath. Lucius smirked and stroked his most recent acquisition. Well worth it.

Although it would be even better if he could use the little-known charm to make it so that he experienced everything Severus or Hermione did. Sadly, that was impossible as the memory would have to be from one of them for it to work. Bribing a Knockturn Alley whore for her or his memories was more satisfying in that respect, but ... it was just not the same mentally. Lucius's own memories were better for that, only his only personal experience of Hermione was not one he cared to revisit.

Perhaps if he could somehow redo that disastrous night ... But that would take time. He wanted something more immediate.

That was it! Polyjuice. With one of Severus's hairs, he could have a most pleasant hour. Well, provided that Severus had no opportunity to catch him in the act, otherwise it would be far too risky. Ward him in with his potions? So long as he was occupied, he wouldn't even notice. As for gaining the necessary hair, a house-elf could easily take one.

He would have to be sure to spell himself clean of any taint of Polyjuice or the game would be up. And there was the difference in technique ... she might notice something and mention it to Severus later. Or get suspicious and Stun him until it wore off. *That* would be disastrous. But if he used his observations of Severus's style in the memories correctly, she wouldn't know differently.

He would have to *Obliviate* her afterwards regardless. He couldn't risk her saying something to Severus, even complimentary.

Yes, that would work. Not something he could do today, what with the parental visit, but tomorrow ... Still, he was getting ahead of himself: first he had to check his stock.

It was only when he left his hoard behind and opened the drawer warded to respond only to his touch that he froze, appalled, staring at the vials of Polyjuice.

"What am I thinking? I'm better than *that*. It's not who I am."

He closed the drawer and sat down heavily. A true Malfoy did not need to force himself on anyone. More to the point, he didn't want to. Using Polyjuice would be akin to drugging Hermione. Besides, while he wouldn't mind being part of a Severus and Hermione sandwich, he didn't really want to play the part of both Severus and himself in that encounter.

Lucius eyed the drawer thoughtfully. He wouldn't use it to trick his way into Hermione's bed, but surely it wouldn't be so wrong to steal a kiss? Yet even that would be better in his own skin.

* * *

Harridan Helen (he really had to break that habit before he slipped up to her face!) and Will were late for lunch. Something about an emergency appointment for a family friend. As a result, they were too hungry to talk much during the meal itself.

Which was just as well, as Lucius needed time to cool off. The murdering Muggles had roared up his drive in their wheels of death, colliding with one of his peacocks. The poor bird had never seen a car before, and as a result didn't move fast enough out of the way.

How they had failed to see a pure white large bird in time was beyond Lucius. At least they were truly sorry, being bird lovers themselves.

The only silver lining was that after the deceased peacock had hung sufficiently long, he would have a delicious roast.

"How's that memory restorative going, Severus?" Will asked.

Severus shook his head. "No progress. Although I might have a breakthrough if I could obtain some willingly shed Jobberknoll feathers, and not ones that merely drop off through moulting at that."

So that was his game, indirectly asking Lucius such a thing where he couldn't rub it in, not if he wanted to appear a gracious host. Not that there was anything to rub in, though. "I'll try, but there are some things even I can't get my birds to do."

"Pity," Severus muttered. "That means I am back to square one in all likelihood."

"And you, Hermione? How is the campaign going?"

Hermione's shoulders slumped at her mother's question. "Nowhere fast. If not for the fact that the Ministry is better under Kingsley, I'd think they'd hidden or worse, destroyed anything that I could use."

"Come now." Severus patted her hand. "You did get them to alter the addendum so that they didn't split every single sterile union apart."

"That was more Kingsley's doing. Just as he's the one who pardoned Filch on the technicality that he was a Squib. You did say he was already in the process of doing that when you asked him to."

"True. It does make a pleasant change to have a decent Minister."

Harr...Helen cleared her throat. "Anyway, why I ask is that, well, I did promise to look into Muggle methods that might help."

Hermione straightened in her chair. "You found something?"

"Perhaps. I know that the Wizened Amok..." Lucius mouthed Helen's mangling in disbelief. He met Severus's eyes and looked away quickly. Now was not the time to burst out laughing, although at least Severus also must be struggling to withhold it. "...won't take mere Muggles like us seriously, even with the regime change. But they'd surely listen to you!"

Hermione made an inquiring noise. Helen continued. *In vitro* fertilisation. And it would help you, too, at least with the conception difficulty."

What did 'in glass' have to do with fertilisation? The question was on the tip of Lucius's tongue, but Hermione was speaking.

"Not me, Mum." Hermione looked guiltily away. "I ... I forgot to mention that Severus and Lucius sterilised themselves to stay with me."

"Hermione Jean..." Will growled, only for his wife to lay a hand on his arm.

"She's had a lot on her plate, remember," she hissed. Helen turned to Hermione, who still avoided her parents' disappointed stares. "But you should have told us."

"Maybe it's time I got you a *Daily Prophet* subscription," Hermione muttered. "I know. And I should come myself instead of sending an owl with a letter."

"Including when you invite us here." Will fixed her with a steely gaze when she finally looked up at him. "Anyway, Helen's idea is more than just for you. It could be used for any witch or wizard. Even those with miscarriage risks like you: simply use a surrogate, as adoption is apparently not on."

Lucius was thankful for that. He could make an exception for Hermione and her parents, but a Muggle child? That was one benefit of the addendum: magical children only. And Muggle-borns had their own parents. Besides, the necessary girls would have died anyway thanks no, due, a death like that was not something to wish on anyone to the plague.

He blinked as something Will had said registered: surrogate. From the context it sounded like it meant to have another woman carry the child, but that was impossible.

"Surrogates? What next, wizards as sperm donors, and witches as egg donors?" Hermione said doubtfully. "I don't know, Dad, that seems wrong. I'm surprised you're advocating something that would involve taking advantage of Muggles."

"But it wouldn't be, don't you see? Surrogates volunteer to be pregnant, if only for money. And users of sperm banks and egg donations *want* to have babies."

Lucius exchanged a completely flummoxed look with Severus. Good, at least that meant it wasn't pure-blood ignorance. 'A sperm *what*?'

"What does 'in glass' have to do with it, and what in the name of Merlin is a sperm bank?"

Will looked at Helen as if they were mentally deciding who got the short straw.

"They are Muggle fertility techniques, obviously," Hermione explained. "*In vitro* is where eggs and sperm are combined outside the woman's body. It got the name from the test tube it took place in, as far as I know. After that the fertilised egg is put back into the womb, where it hopefully successfully implants."

So that was what Will had meant by a surrogate ... the fertilised egg wouldn't be put back into the mother, but into a different woman.

'Ugh!'

At the dubious expression Lucius was unable to keep himself from showing, she continued. "It does work. It can take a few attempts, but it has helped many infertile Muggle couples."

"And sperm banks?" Severus prompted.

"Exactly what it sounds like. It's where the, er, deposits from sperm donors are kept until they're needed."

"What are sperm donors?" Lucius asked. He had a nasty feeling that he would like this even less than 'in glass'.

"Again, it's pretty self explanatory. As most wizards aren't part of the National Health Service, I guess it would have to be done anonymously the less Confounding that needs to be done, the better."

Lucius stared at her. "Muggles have places where women with infertile husbands go to be impregnated by a stranger?"

"Yes."

Helen cleared her throat. "With anonymous sperm, it's frozen first, and they make sure it's clean from any diseases. It's also artificially inseminated or used *withn vitro*, so wipe that look off your face."

Lucius scowled. While Muggles were perhaps not quite as barbaric as he'd thought before Helen's expansion, that really wasn't saying much. For a wizard to do that would be to sire bastards. And worse ...

"Absolutely not. That's outrageous, no decent wizard or witch would stand for it. From what you say, donors are anonymous. Just imagine it, within two decades there would be half-blooded half-siblings unknowingly marrying!"

"That could be overcome by a genetic familial, to you 'decent' wizards comparison before marriage." Helen's voice was considerably frostier.

"Regardless, family is paramount to wizards! No one will stand for Muggles raising their child."

"Then use surrogates," Helen snapped.

"That's still out of the question! What about the statute of secrecy?"

"Surely no different to the parents of Muggle-borns finding out about magic," Will huffed. "Or is that beyond the pale too in your opinion?"

Lucius glared at his guests and opened his mouth to defend his honour. "I may have an unfortunate past, but I'm a different man now, you stupid...Ow!" He doubled over and clutched at his shin.

"Those are my parents you're talking to," Hermione hissed. "Keep a civil tongue in your head or it'll be *Silencio* next time."

She turned to her parents. "And this is the first Lucius and Severus have heard of these things. It is going to sound rather outlandish and, to be frank, against the grain. I can't say that I like it either."

"What's wrong with it? The only thing possibly immoral with it is 'playing God', and we are cheerfully agnostic or atheist, aren't we?"

"Even if the Muggles involved want children, it's still wrong. As it's girls that are needed, it would make most sense for sperm donation rather than egg donation. Severus's gender selection potion would mean that there would be no problems with 'unwanted' boys. Nothing too dubious with that.

"But a Compulsion Charm would have to be applied to make sure that the wizarding sperm is used before any Muggle sperm in the bank *That's* nothing less than trickery," Hermione spat.

Will and Helen exchanged an uncomfortable glance. "Well, put like that, it's not very nice, but ..." They floundered for the right words.

"It's nothing new," Severus stated flatly. "Not right, by any means, but wizards have done far worse. The Wizengamot wouldn't bat an eyelid at least, not about that aspect."

"I suppose it's better than what the addendum dictates," Hermione admitted. "But that's really not saying much." She sighed. "I suppose it's too much to hope that there's a solution out there that isn't a lesser evil."

"Judging by that look on your face, dear, we're going to lose you to your research this afternoon."

"Sorry," Hermione grimaced. "It's just if I want to get this in front of the Wizengamot tomorrow, I need to do my homework."

Lucius cleared his throat. "There's no need. The ministry archives won't have anything on these Muggle methods, I can guarantee that. They're unheard of." And barbaric to boot, although voicing that would only earn him another vicious kick. "Besides, the archives probably aren't open today."

He rose from the table. "Now for the tour of the house and grounds. I'm sure you can't wait to see my aviary."

* * *

"How did it go?"

Hermione slammed the front door behind her in answer. She grimaced and muttered an apology to the cringing door elf.

A brisk walk up the long driveway had done little to calm her down. She could still hear Fudge's derisive laughter echoing in her ears.

"Ah. *That* well." Lucius stood aside to let her storm into his study. He crossed over to his desk and picked up a small glass. "Here. You look like you need this."

Hermione glanced at the shot of Firewhisky but made no move to take it. "No thanks. Headache. Alcohol won't improve it; I'd kill for a cup of tea."

"Tricksy!" Lucius called. The house-elf instantly cracked into view and fixed a sickeningly adoring gaze on her master. "Hermione would like some tea."

Tricksy turned those large eyes onto Hermione as if just noticing her presence. The difference in expression was striking, from adoration to the sort of disgusted glower one would bestow at peacock doings after stepping in it.

Regardless, Tricksy did as she was asked without a word, leaving the tea leaves to steep before she vanished silently from sight.

It would be a while before the tea brewed. She might as well make use of that time by venting a little, even if it was only to Lucius ... Much as she wished Severus was there, he must still be busy in his lab.

"You were right that the Wizengamot had nothing about *in vitro* or sperm donation in their archives; I checked that this morning and afternoon before Kingsley managed to call a meeting at 6 o' clock.

"But they summoned someone from St Mungo's." One thing for sure, she had to find a way to get her hands on St Mungo's archives. "He knew of the Muggle methods. While that spared me from the torture of explaining it in terms that Fudge and his cronies would understand, it turns out that there's a reason why they have the stipulation about sex with only the father during the first trimester, and regularly at that," Hermione spat bitterly. "Stupid, stupid, stupid: I discounted that as irrelevant, as Muggle-borns exist perfectly well without it."

"I forgot about that," Lucius admitted. "I don't know the details, but I do know that it's what St Mungo's advised Narcissa and me to do before we managed to have Draco. But it didn't seem to help."

"From what the Healer the Wizengamot consulted had to say, use of a surrogate and so also sperm donation wouldn't work as even if the babies survived to term, they would probably be stillborn and guaranteed to be Squibs if they lived."

That was apparently all down to the connection between the mother and father, and the child. The bond, the Healer had said. Without a healthy bond, the magic of the child couldn't develop properly. It wasn't merely genetic but to do with the soul too.

"But *in vitro* might work?"

Hermione shook her head. "The conception is crucial. The Healer was mortified to say it, but it's all down to it being an expression of love: it has to be sex. Seems Dumbledore was right: love is the strongest magic."

"I suppose that's proof that even Severus's parents loved each other once."

Hermione nodded absently. "Love potions work, too," she murmured, thinking of Voldemort's case.

"What about Muggle-borns?"

She clenched her fists and started to pace furiously. "Muggle-borns such as yourself are a fluke, a quirk of nature." Hermione mimicked. "I think Fudge really meant 'mistake'. Bastard. I think you will find that the results of your unnatural Muggle fertilisation technique are never magical."

A wordless snarl escaped Hermione. "Then that smug piece of outdated confectionary had the cheek to say: 'Next time you come before us, be sure to do your research.'"

"He'd better watch out for the next time you do go before them," Lucius murmured. "By the way, do you have a perfect memory?"

"No. Just as well too. One day I might forget the way that fuckwit and his friends *laughed* at me." Hermione stopped pacing when the glass cabinet opposite her began to shake. She forced herself to breathe deeply and tried to relax her tense muscles.

She jumped when Lucius's hands started to knead her shoulders.

"Relax," he murmured. "You'll make that headache worse. Let me make it better."

Lucius's touch in itself made her tense, but as he worked on the knots she found herself more at ease.

"Spitfire." Lucius's voice against her ear raised alarm bells. Hermione stiffened. Then she felt his lips on her neck. She jerked away and turned to face him in the same motion that put some safe distance between them.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she hissed.

"I'm sorry. I can't help myself." He closed that so-called safe distance with a single stride. Then his lips were on hers.

Hermione's luck held. Before she had a chance to so much as draw in a shocked breath, Severus spoke from the doorway.

"I should have insisted that you swear an Unbreakable Vow, *friend*."

Hermione shoved herself away from Lucius. Too late. Far too late. Severus's voice was deadly calm.

"A fidelity charm, too," he stated, his eyes fixed on her.

"It's not what it looks like!" Hermione protested. She felt like she'd been winded by a near-fatal drop, matching the pain in his shattered gaze.

"If that's so, there won't be any problem with you coming to join me in bed. Be there by midnight ... or I will not forgive this betrayal." He stalked away.

Hermione forced her trembling limbs to move and staggered after him. She caught his arm, forcing him to stop or drag her behind him. "Severus. Severus! Wait, you don't..."

He halted and shrugged her off. "By midnight," Severus thundered, his fury breaking through the calm before the storm. For a moment he stood there with his back to her, shoulders rising and falling with gasping breaths as he struggled for control. "You have five hours to make your choice, surely adequate for any flighty female."

"Severus, don't be ridiculous ... *I love you*."

He ignored her, deaf to her calls as he stormed upstairs.

Hermione fell to her knees. It felt like she couldn't breathe.

"He's a fool, walking away from you," Lucius murmured from behind her.

Her eyes narrowed. This was Lucius's doing. His fault. She rose to her feet and turned to face Lucius. There was a glint of triumph in his eyes and a smirk tugging at his lips. She saw red.

CRACK.

Lucius staggered back, clutching at his cheek where she'd backhanded him. A trickle of blood emerged from the corner of his mouth.

Hermione drew her wand, her grip firm and her aim unwavering. *Stay away from me!* she shrieked. Without even thinking a spell, he was blasted across the hall.

She sprinted after Severus. He had to listen to her. *He had to.*

* * *

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Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 37

Treachery.

Chapter 24

Hermione slumped against the door, her throat dry and raw. Either Severus wasn't in his room, or he had an Imperturbable up ... or he was ignoring her. She tried the door once more. Still locked, and far beyond what a simple *Alohomora* would open. If that was the case with this adjoining door, chances were that the other door was still locked, too.

She gently rubbed her aching knuckles. Backhanding Lucius hard enough to make him bleed hadn't done her any good. Pounding the same hand against the door only made matters worse.

If Severus wasn't in his room, where was he? His lab? With Fawkes in the aviary? A quick Apparition or two would answer that ...

Nothing happened. There was no squeeze of Apparition. Hermione tried again, this time focusing inside Severus's bedroom. Again, nothing.

'Bastard!' Lucius. It had to be. He must have blocked her passage through the manor's anti-Apparition wards.

She could make one more quick check. Hermione pulled out her wand and laid it flat on her palm. *'Point me,'* she whispered, keeping her thoughts focused on Severus. Ordinarily it would point north, but it could be put to other uses if the caster had the necessary strength of mind.

The tip of her wand turned slightly to point at Severus's bedroom door. It didn't stay still, instead following his movements, shifting to and fro. He was pacing.

So he was licking his perceived wounds in his bedroom. What now? Wait until he cooled off enough to let her in? Send a Patronus message to make him listen to her? No, that wouldn't work. She didn't know how. If she'd ever found out, it was among the memories she'd lost.

Hermione pulled up her sleeve to check her watch. There were still most of the five hours left before the deadline Severus had imposed.

Plenty of time to have dinner and attempt to wash away the bad luck clinging to her with a nice long shower. After that, she could try the door again, and if the stupid man still didn't respond, she'd break the fucking door down.

Hermione called Tricksy. For once, the house-elf didn't glare at her. That was strange, especially considering that she'd struck precious Master. Maybe Tricksy didn't know about that, or she knew and didn't approve of Lucius's actions. Whatever the case, this was hardly the time to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Tricksy brought up a plate of lasagne, with a tray to balance it on Hermione's knees where she sat on the end of her bed. After coming back with a glass of wine and a bowl of fruit salad, Tricksy *cracked* away again.

Hermione wasn't in the mood for wine. A quick spell changed it into water, and she gulped it down. She'd be able to speak to Severus now, at least, rather than croak at him.

Hungry as Hermione was she'd managed to forget about lunch she could only pick at her food. Her eyes remained on the locked adjoining door. She forced herself to eat. She'd need her wits about her if Severus was going to listen. The lasagne was cold long before she finished. A Warming Charm didn't even cross her mind.

She pushed aside the tray and resisted the urge to try the door again. Instead she undressed and pulled on her dressing gown, before wandering into the bathroom.

The hot water felt good, but she couldn't enjoy it. Not when she was mentally pacing in front of the locked door like a caged tiger. The pads of her fingers had pruned by the time she gave up. The water still ran hot where any Muggle shower she'd been in would have long ago run cold, although that was magic for you. Despite the heat, her muscles were just as tense as before she'd set foot in the bathroom.

Hermione dried herself off and dressed for bed. When Severus let her in, he expected her to hop into bed with him. Wearing pyjamas instead of nothing under her dressing gown should make it clear that she wanted to talk first.

She stalked over to his door. It was unsurprisingly still locked. Surely two hours was long enough to hide away? It better be ... Hermione drew her wand.

'Reduc...Stupid! Check that the idiot I happen to love isn't in the way first ... Point me.' Good. Severus must be in his bathroom.

'Reducto!' All that happened was that the door glowed slightly red. Hermione tried it on the wall instead, only for the same thing to happen. Wait ... it wasn't the door or the wall. It was the wards.

Hermione hesitated, a more powerful spell on the tip of her tongue. Better check that Severus was still out of the way ... He was. If this worked, there wouldn't be much of his bedroom left.

'Defodio!' The glow was brighter, but both door and wall were unaffected.

Severus must really want to be alone if he'd thrown up wards like *that*. They must be stronger than Gringotts, or at least stronger than the ones Gringotts had before she, Harry and Ron had broken out on the back of a dragon.

What now? Try to break the wards? She could try, but it would only mean working herself into magical exhaustion. Wards that could repel that sort of magic were beyond her skills.

That left one thing to do: wait. Hermione levelled her wand at the door and concentrated. There. Now it would open as soon as it unlocked.

There were three more hours until midnight. Three hours until the deadline Severus set. Hopefully he'd see fit to let her in before then, but if he was angry enough to lock himself away, he might let her worry until the last minute.

Hermione sat down on the edge of her bed. Where was Crookshanks when she needed a purring furball to cuddle? She hadn't seen him since that morning.

She flopped back on the bed and reached for the book she was reading, one of Severus's detective novels *Strong Poison*. After reading the same page twice, she gave up. Unsurprisingly, her thoughts were on the owner of the book, not on the story.

What could she do to make him listen to her? Take Veritaserum? She didn't know for sure if Severus had any. Legilimency? That depended on him, he might refuse. Shove him into a Pensieve memory? For that to work, she'd need to get her hands on a Pensieve. They were expensive; it was unlikely Severus had one. Lucius might, but he'd hardly let them use it.

Hermione dropped off into a restless sleep. She dreamed of running after Severus, only by the time she caught up he was behind a locked door. There were a hundred keys to try, and when she found the right one, there was another locked door. And another. And another. The last key broke in the lock with a loud click.

She jerked awake. The door had finally opened. It was almost midnight. Hermione sprang to her feet and dashed inside Severus's room. It was empty.

Hermione laid her wand flat on her palm once more. *'Point me.'* It almost rolled off her hand as it spun anticlockwise. No, no, no ... He was out of range *Gone*.

A glint of silver caught her eye from the bedside table. No. Not silver. Platinum. His wedding ring.

Her knees felt weak. She sat down on his bed before she fell down. She hesitantly reached out to touch the cooling metal, her sight blurred by tears. Hermione angrily scrubbed at her eyes. Crying wouldn't help.

Something clinked nearby. Hermione sat bolt upright and pulled her hands away.

Tricksy stood in front of her and had set down a cup on the bedside table next to...

'Come on, Hermione, it won't ... won't kill you to think it: Severus's ring.'

"Tricksy helps Missy. When poor Mistress was upset, Tricksy gives her tea."

The universal panacea. It was what her mother would do, after hugging her. She definitely wasn't about to ask *that* of Tricksy, friendly as she was being at the moment.

"Thank you." She took the cup and cooled it to perfect drinking temperature with a murmured Cooling Charm.

She took a sip of the tea and swallowed. She blinked. *'What?'* The clock on Severus's bedside table, a Muggle style clock with Roman numerals. The short hand pointed at 'XII', as could be expected, but the long hand rested on 'I'. Five minutes past twelve. Yet her clock hadn't struck midnight ...

"Accio watch!" Hermione deftly caught her watch and set it down on the bedside table. She'd enchanted it herself so that it could never be wrong, and a quick spell assured her that it hadn't been tampered with.

It was two minutes shy of midnight.

Something was wrong.

Of course ... Those wards weren't Severus's doing. They were the manor's wards. Lucius's work. His fault! She stood up and stalked towards the door. The interfering bastard would soon learn his lesson ... And why was she still holding the teacup? So much for cutting a dramatic figure. Well, most heroines didn't have something like this land on them when they'd only just started a cup of tea.

Hermione raised the cup to her lips and paused. Something was *very* wrong. She put a hand to her throat. It *burned*.

The cup fell from her hands. Hermione clutched at her chest, more white-hot pain swelling with each breath behind her sternum...no, with each heartbeat. She fell to her knees, her scrambled thoughts only registering the sound of the shattering cup when shards of fine bone china drew blood.

"Help," Hermione called out, or rather tried to. Nothing happened, not even a whisper. There was only a rush of air, accompanied by a fresh wave of agony.

"Missy needs help?" Tricky asked, appearing in front of her. The elf who'd brought the tea. *Poisoned tea*. Through the pain, her blood felt like ice.

'Innocent until proven guilty.' Hermione reminded herself. But if Tricky was innocent, then ... The chill deepened. *"Bezoar,"* she mouthed.

"Missy wants bezoar? Missy Mudblood can't have one." If Tricky's words didn't confirm who the culprit was, the way the elf started to dance gleefully proved it.

Hermione closed her eyes as her sight blurred, at least two elves dancing in front of her. It didn't help; if anything her sight was even worse when she opened them again.

"You bad elf." She drew her wand. It felt heavy; she could barely lift it, her hand trembling. How was she supposed to Summon a bezoar?

"Bad Tricky! Bad Tricky!" Tricky cackled, arms jerking as she struggled with the impulse to punish herself. She had something in her hand, easily as long as Hermione's hand span.

Before Hermione could try to focus on whatever Tricky held, the deranged elf turned it on herself. As if from far away, Hermione heard a bubbling, raspy choke.

'Punctured her lung. Must have been something sharp.'

Tricky would have to wait; while Hermione was no Potions Mistress, she knew she'd be a goner if she didn't get a bezoar or antidote down within a minute of swallowing poison. That left her mere seconds now.

"Accio bezoar." Nothing. Hermione clenched her teeth, forcing past the weariness weighing down her thoughts.

"Acc..." She doubled over, coughing and choking. The metallic tang of blood filled her mouth.

'Oh no ...' Where was her wand? She couldn't see it, her vision a swirling blur. She felt around for it, her movements sluggish. Her fingers knocked it. She dimly heard it roll away.

More choking coughs shook her, the pain searing her throat. She collapsed to the floor, the silver carpet filling her vision. Crimson pooled across it, trickling from her mouth.

Her mouth ached, everything stung from her tongue to her teeth. But it paled next to the burn of her throat and knees, and the blazing of her chest. The fire spread further with every beat of her heart.

The blur of silver and blood red was fading. No, not just that, it was her sight. Everything was dimming.

There was something she was forgetting. Something she was looking for. What?

So much pain. All she wanted was to close her eyes and let the darkness take it all away.

She shook her head weakly. No. *Severus*. Where was he?

"Help," she mouthed, blood trickling out of her mouth with the futile rush of air.

No one came, of course; Severus had gone.

Darkness claimed her.

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, JunoMagic and Septentrion for betaing.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 37

Midnight.

Chapter 25

Severus slowly drew his hands away from his head and opened his eyes. It took him a moment to recognise the room from where he huddled in a corner. The chairs lay in pieces against the wall of shelves, debris littered the carpet.

His only thought had been to get as far away from Malfoy Manor as possible. Apparently Spinner's End was far enough. A relatively harmless place for a wandless outburst, too, thanks to the protective enchantments on his books.

He climbed to his feet, leaning heavily against the bookshelf behind him, still trembling from the rage that gripped him. His skin prickled with the remains of the wild, wandless magic. He dealt with that by pressing his hands to the wards surrounding his books, the spark of magic safely earthed.

His self control was another matter entirely. His Occlumency shields would need time to recover. In all his years fooling the Dark Lord, they had never shattered. But the sight of Hermione kissing Lucius ...

Severus closed his eyes and breathed raggedly through clenched teeth, battling against a fresh surge of rage.

After five hours the wound was still fresh. That Hermione hadn't come to him was salt in that wound. To imagine where she could be clawed the rent wider; with Lucius, and his so-called friend taking advantage of her distress.

And that was his own fault. *'She confessed that she loved me. I walked away.'*

She could very well take that as rejection. But he had no choice! To stay would have risked hurting her, and not just verbally. Every negative emotion that he'd bottled away for over a month had surged forth; every smile, laugh, and touch Lucius had coaxed from her right in front of him ... The kiss had been the last straw, his Occlumency ripped to tatters as his suppressed emotions surged forth.

Those five hours had been for his own benefit as much as for Hermione to make her choice. He couldn't be near her, not when so furious *He would not be his father.*

His rage had slowly cooled. A long shower helped with that, as he tried to wash away the memory of Lucius's lips on Hermione's. But as the hour approached midnight, the anger built once more.

When she failed to turn up, he almost went looking for her. Almost. The thought of finding her in Lucius's bed was unbearable. He'd seen red at the mere thought. If he'd actually found her there, he would have lost control completely.

Instead, he fled. If Hermione changed her mind, she'd be able to find him here. She must know that whatever he'd said about not forgiving her if she tarried beyond midnight, he didn't mean it. He just wanted her back.

But *would* she know that? Severus glanced down at his bare ring finger. He'd left the band of platinum behind in his fit of rage.

Crack.

Severus's breath caught. His hope that Hermione had indeed realised her mistake and Apparated to his side died as soon as he turned around. It was a house-elf, tugging at its long ears and hopping from foot to foot.

"Bad elf! Tricksy is a very bad elf! Miss needs Master Snape *now!*"

He stiffened. So that was Hermione's game ...

"Tricksy, is it? You can tell your Mistress that I'm not falling for that. It's too late."

The elf released its ears and shook its head. "I is Dilly, Master Snape. I is a bad door-elf, but doors can't die. Miss will if you does not help her! *Tricksy has done a very bad thing.*"

Severus crossed his arms and scowled down at the elf. "As if elves could harm their mistress! Go back and tell Hermione 'nice try', but she'll have to do better than..."

The clock on the mantelpiece struck. Once. Twice. Thrice?! Severus jerked his head around to stare at it. Quarter to twelve ... The clock was sluggish, but *not* that sluggish. In fact, it ran reliably late. By exactly fifteen minutes.

But that meant ...

"Midnight," he whispered. *Shit.* His ring. If she found...Wait. What had the elf said?

A small hand grabbed his leg and tugged. "Master Snape must come now! Miss is dying! Bad, wicked, *evil!* Tricksy poisoned her tea!"

Poison. Dying. *Hermione.*

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think, frozen by the icy hand gripping his heart.

A sudden sharp pain in his shin thawed the ice, although he still felt the chill with each breath. He glanced down, and hissed between his teeth as the elf kicked him again.

"Master Snape must keep his head!"

Severus frantically patted down his pockets. A gasp of relief escaped him as he felt the irregular, smooth outline of the bezoar and the tiny bottle full of the strongest general antidote he could brew.

"Take me to her," he snapped, and reached down to grip the elf's shoulder. Dilly whirled them away into the tight squeeze of Side-Along Apparition.

They emerged in familiar surroundings: his room in Malfoy Manor. His innards lurched, and not due to Apparition sickness. Hermione lay sprawled on the carpet, face down in a pool of blood.

He fell to his knees beside her and pulled her onto his lap. Her eyes were closed, her face pale beneath the bloodstains. Severus rested trembling fingers against her throat. Her pulse was weak and irregular, but still there. Her chest rose and fell, her body wracked by bubbling coughs. Blood still trickled from her lips.

Severus choked back bile, unable to stifle a cry of distress. Her lips were raw, and where the blood stained her face it attacked the skin. A corrosive poison, tainting her blood. It could only be worse internally, the poison less diluted there.

He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the blood from her cheek. He wanted to do the same with her lips, but touching them would do more harm than good.

He didn't bother to retrieve either bezoar or antidote from his pocket. It was too late. Both needed time to work.

He was too late. All that was left was to hold her close as she died.

No.

"FAWKES!"

The phoenix didn't appear in a flash of fire at his call. Surely the elf hadn't poisoned him too? Or was it a burning day? Severus fought back the rising panic. Even if Fawkes was reduced to a chick, he could still cry.

* * *

The top floor of the aviary was open to the sky, warded to provide protection from the elements. The only light was from the moon and the glowing of the phoenix chick. Where Severus had laid her down on the floor, Hermione looked both ghostly and as though she were bathed in blood.

Fawkes cheeped, tears already trickling down his beak. Severus quickly Conjured a vial to collect them. It seemed to take forever to fill. He stoppered it with his thumb and rushed back to Hermione's side.

He tipped the tears into her mouth and rubbed her throat. She had to swallow. *She had to.*

Her throat moved under his fingers. He could breathe again.

Now to keep her alive while the phoenix tears healed her. She should be out of danger within a minute ..*Shit.* She'd stopped breathing. Her heart wouldn't be far behind.

Severus dashed back to Fawkes and collected more tears, this time in cupped hands. He held them to Hermione's lips and waited until they had healed, checking her pulse while he waited. *Shit.* Nothing. He pinched her nose between his fingers and bent down to give her a breath.

Thank Merlin he'd persuaded her to teach him how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation. It had been a year ago, though, and he couldn't quite remember the timing. Definitely more compressions than breaths ... But how many more?

He winced at the dull *crack* of a breaking rib. At least the phoenix tears should heal that too.

Severus paused. Did she just ... Yes! Her chest rose and fell in a reassuring regular rhythm. He touched his fingers to her throat. Her pulse was still a little weak, but regular.

There was a quiet, rasping rumble. Crookshanks was curled up beside her, purring, yellow eyes fixed on Hermione. Severus blinked. What was the cat doing in the aviary? Unless ... Of course. The bad elf must have shut him in here to keep him out of the way. He was a half-Kneazle; a poisoning attempt with him in the same room would have failed. And if Lucius had found him here ... Murderous elf!

Lucius ... was he the orchestrator of this? The one holding the elf's strings?

Fawkes warbled, attracting Severus's attention. Fresh tears welled in his eyes. Severus frowned and looked Hermione over. Her knees were bloodstained, the skin still red and raw. Severus ruffled Fawkes' downy feathers in thanks and collected another handful of tears. He applied them topically to Hermione's knees and watched them heal before his eyes.

"Sev'rus," Hermione rasped. Her eyes were open and bleakly focused on him.

He cupped her cheek in his hand and stroked his thumb across her lips. "Don't try to talk. Your voice is still healing."

It couldn't be comfortable lying there on the frosted glass floor. Severus snaked out an arm and grabbed Crookshanks before the cat could do more than hiss at him. A squeeze of Apparition later and they were back in his room. Crookshanks yowled and shot into Hermione's room, fur bristling.

Severus picked up Hermione and laid her on his bed, ignoring her weak attempts to get there under her own steam. She tugged at her clothes. On closer inspection, he could see that the poisoned bloodstains were slowly eating them away. He drew his wand. Two quick spells later and she was clad in a fresh pair of pyjamas. Her dressing gown would need replacing, though.

"Thanks," Hermione muttered. She looked away. Raw pain flickered across her face as she caught sight of something.

It was his ring. Severus sat down heavily. He snatched it up from the bedside table and slipped it back on. "I was a fool. The kiss ... it doesn't matter. Not when I almost lost you." He swallowed hard. "I love you."

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she swatted his arm, her strength returning. "About time you said so!" Her voice was back in shrill form, also recovered. "And no, that kiss doesn't matter, particularly as I wanted no part in it. He kissed me, you idiot, and if you hadn't stormed off you'd have witnessed me slap the message in that it wasn't on."

Severus dropped his head into his hands. "I should have trusted you. This is my fault. If I had been here ..."

The bed shifted slightly as Hermione moved. Her thigh pressed against his as she sat next to him. She tugged his hands away from his face and brought them up to her lips to kiss them.

"You can't take all of the blame. I couldn't get in to talk some sense into you. The wards were up around your room, I couldn't Apparate still can't, as far as I know and your tampered clock fooled you into leaving before midnight."

'Lucius ...'

"Dilly?" The helpful elf appeared at the call of his name. "Fetch your Master, please." Dilly bowed and vanished.

Hermione blinked at him. "Surely you don't think Lucius is behind this?"

"The wards must have been his handiwork."

"But Tricky killed herself as a punishment for doing it! She wouldn't have done that if he'd ordered her to poison me."

Severus looked at where the elf's body lay between the bloodstain that marked where Hermione had fallen and the door. "All that means is that there was a conflict of loyalties. Lucius assigned her to you. Even in the unlikely event that he is innocent, he might know what poison the elf could have laid hands on. Aside from being corrosive, I have no idea what it was."

"There might still be some traces. It was in the tea." Now that she mentioned it he could see the shattered remains of a teacup. Severus rose to his feet and collected one of the shards, careful not to touch it with anything but the enchanted glass of a vial.

Severus had just sat back down when Dilly arrived with nightgown clad Lucius in tow.

"Incarcerous," Severus hissed.

Lucius swayed on the spot as magical ropes bound him. He fell back against the door, swearing.

"Master!" Dilly squeaked, but the elf only looked wildly from Severus to Lucius, before his wide eyes lingered on Hermione. His loyalties clearly lay with her.

"What the fuck, Severus? Release me!"

"Shut up. You see that elf?" Severus pointed at where Tricky's body lay at Lucius's feet. "It's one of your elves, correct?"

Lucius nodded dumbly, his eyes riveted on the pathetic little corpse.

"It saw fit to poison Hermione. If not for Fawkes, she'd be dead by now."

Lucius met Severus's glower, stricken. He didn't even seem to notice that Severus had drawn his wand.

'Legilimens.'

It was clear that Lucius wasn't acting. He wasn't even Occluding, his emotions roiling with shock and guilt. But it was not 'what-have-I-done'. Lucius was innocent, at least in this.

"The wards also prevented her coming to me. The only reason I was there to get her to Fawkes in time was because not all of your elves are murderous."

Lucius's jaw dropped. "But I'm the only one who can change the wards, and I didn't touch them!"

Severus exchanged a glance with Hermione. There was no doubt that Lucius was telling the truth. He released Lucius from the magical bonds. "It seems that your elves have a special relationship with the manor's consciousness."

Lucius shook his head in mute disbelief, absently rubbing at his arms where the cords had cut in. "My wards. I don't believe it." He blinked, his brows drawing together. "But poison? There's nothing that she could have used."

There was a tentative squeak from beside Lucius. "Dilly knows." The elf looked miserable, large ears drooping.

"We was cleaning the seventh floor at Hogwarts, like Master tells us to after the big battle. Tricky finds it in a dark corner. A great big snake tooth. I says to her that Tricky mustn't keep it, but Tricky never listens...listened to Dilly."

"One of Nagini's? But snake venom is not a poison it's harmless when ingested," Lucius protested. "Even I know that."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Not if it gets into the bloodstream, idiot. The venom was corrosive! Look at your precious carpet."

Just like Hermione's discarded clothes, the carpet was slowly being eaten away by the venom in her blood still staining it, and by the venom in the spilt tea.

"Imagine that at work in flesh and blood. If not for Fawkes, that would be Hermione's fate."

Lucius covered his mouth with a shaking hand. He looked as though he might be sick.*Good.*

But something didn't add up. Nagini hadn't been anywhere near the seventh floor, and more to the point her venom was not corrosive.

Severus stood up again. He walked over to take a closer look at the dead elf. It had stabbed itself with something ... He tugged it out of the elf, holding the stiffening body down. It was a great big snake tooth, as Dilly had described, far larger than Nagini's. Severus shuddered. If that's what Tricky had used to poison Hermione, a bezoar or general antidote wouldn't have worked even if there was time.

"This big?" Severus held out the fang.

Dilly nodded. "Tricky dips ... dipped it in Miss's tea."

"But ... but ... that's not one of Nagini's. What is it, a dragon fang?" Lucius pushed away from the door and stepped over Tricky's body to get a closer look.

"It's from a Basilisk." Hermione's voice was strained. She dropped her head into her hands, her shoulders shaking.

Severus sat beside her and put his arm around her. He stared at her. She wasn't crying. "What's so funny?"

Hermione straightened up, still laughing. "It's one of those laugh or cry things. If I'd known that kissing Ron Weasley in the heat of the moment would almost kill me, I wouldn't have done it."

Severus stared at her. Had the phoenix tears addled her wits?

"During the battle, I'd gone with Ron to collect some Basilisk fangs from the one Harry killed in the Chamber of Secrets. We needed them to destroy the remaining Horcruxes. Anyway, I ended up dropping my armful of them when I kissed Ron for the first time. One of them must have rolled into that dark corner."

Lucius cleared his throat. "If you're trying to lay claim to the blame for what happened, don't. Tricky is the culprit, but I am the one at fault." He turned away, unable to meet Severus or Hermione's gaze.

"I can't apologise enough for Tricky's actions. I swear I had nothing to do with them, but ... she must have seen you strike me, Hermione. And you only did that because I ..." Lucius bowed his head. "It was my fault."

He turned back to face them, his face as grim as the day Narcissa died. "I am sorry. I overstepped my bounds, broke my word to act in my own selfish interests. That almost killed you, thanks to a fanatical house-elf. I ... I promise to keep my word from now on. I'll give a Wand Oath. An Unbreakable Vow, even."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "No loopholes?" he sneered. A pained grunt escaped him as Hermione elbowed him.

"I don't want an oath or a vow. A promise kept under those conditions only breeds resentment. If there's any chance that some form of friendship can exist between us again, just your word will have to be enough." Hermione glared fiercely enough to make Lucius step back. "Don't disappoint me."

Lucius straightened his shoulders and raised his chin. "I won't. And thank you. In your shoes, I don't think I could be so trusting."

Severus smiled mirthlessly. "See that you are worthy of that trust." He stood up and escorted Lucius to the door. "Good night." He dropped his voice so that Hermione wouldn't overhear. "Lucius, if she had died ... so would you."

"I know. If you'd even indirectly caused Narcissa's death, I would have done the same thing. Truce?" Lucius held out his hand.

Severus reluctantly took it. "So long as you actually keep your word this time."

"It's in my own interest to do so. Good night."

Severus watched him walk away. That was true enough ... especially as Lucius had yet to get the formula to the sterility potion antidote.

* * *

An hour later, Severus was wide awake in Hermione's bed. They had left his room to be cleaned in the morning, insisting that Dilly get some sleep. He refused to let any other elf near their rooms.

Hermione lay in the curve of his body, close enough for him to feel the reassuring beat of her heart and listen to her breathe.

Alive. Safe in his arms.

It took a long time before he could drift off to sleep. And when he did, he dreamt of her coughing up blood and slipping through his fingers like smoke.

The sound of Hermione's voice soothed him back into a dreamless, deeper sleep.

"It's just a dream. I'm here. I'm fine."

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 37

Hermione's bad day.

Chapter 26

Hermione stormed out of St Mungo's. She ignored the excited babble from the wizarding public in the waiting room, oblivious to the shocked gasps at the hair-raising tingle of barely controlled magic in her wake. She stalked into the nearest alleyway and Disapparated with a muted *crack*.

She emerged from the whirling squeeze of darkness at her destination: home. Or what passed for it ... She paused outside the gates, glaring up the long drive. After her poisoning, she just didn't feel safe within Malfoy Manor unless she was with Lucius, Dilly the elf, or preferably Severus.

'Pathetic!' Hermione scowled. No matter what she told herself, she still felt guilty that Tricksy killed herself. She tried to kill you, idiot. Think of what that would have done to Severus. And Crookshanks! She shut him in the aviary. If Lucius had caught him there, he'd have been skinned alive.'

Hermione shook her head and pushed Tricksy to the back of her mind. She didn't want to think about the pitiful twisted creature at the best of times, least of all after the day she'd had. She strode through the gates and started to make her way up the gravel path. Perhaps a walk was just what she needed, to calm down before inflicting her temper on anyone, and to get some fresh air. The cool breeze was pleasant against her flushed skin. Hopefully it would air out the mental cobwebs.

Maybe it would improve her sleep, too ... Every single night for the past week she'd jerked awake from nightmares. It bothered her more than she cared to admit that she couldn't even remember what the dreams were about, especially when the terror evoked would...if not for Severus...cling to her like her own personal Dementor. What the hell was her subconscious trying to tell her? Bad enough that it resulted in interrupted sleep for her, but it disturbed Severus's rest as well as her own. No wonder he was getting nowhere with the memory restorer, no matter what he said about not needing much sleep.

The only 'progress' Severus had made so far was to identify what would not work. If that luck held, he'd blow up more cauldrons than Neville in five years of Potions at Hogwarts. Perhaps it was time to give up her lost memories as just that, as even the miracle cure of phoenix tears proved useless. Her last memory before those lost was just as foggy as it had been before Fawkes' tears were applied as an antidote to the Basilisk poison.

As for her own progress ... Hermione consciously separated her teeth. She could almost hear her parents lecturing her on the evils of clenching and grinding one's teeth. Also, besides the potential wear and tear, she really didn't need a tension headache.

A month of fighting through bureaucratic red tape, and for what? *Nothing*. Oh, she'd managed to see the records at St Mungo's for herself, but apart from more details about the connection between love and magic, she had learned nothing new. Nothing that would further her quest for an alternative to the addendum, anyway.

A *month*. Wasted. She couldn't even fool herself that she'd find something useful in the hospital's records. While far better organised than the Ministry's, it had been thoroughly picked over by St Mungo's own researchers. They didn't like the law any better than she did...and no wonder, due to the demands it put on their resources.

The only part that had been worth it was defying Fudge in the process. Her difficulties in gaining clearance had his sticky fingerprints all over them. Kingsley and Severus tried to help her, but the decision to grant her access had to come from the director of St Mungo's: one of Fudge's cronies. Despite the fact that Severus did have access, he couldn't give her any information due to a confidentiality contract.

It had been a bitter and drawn out struggle to convince the director to capitulate. In the end, Hermione suspected that she 'succeeded' only because the wizard wanted her out of his greying hair.

'Think positive,' Hermione scolded herself. She *had* gained knowledge, even if that wasn't her top priority at the moment. And in future she could avoid making a fool of herself in front of Fudge and his cronies if a possible solution presented itself by checking her facts in St Mungo's archive as well as in the Ministry's.

Hermione stopped at the foot of the steps, gasping for air. She'd felt short of breath all day, but this was ridiculous! Surely she was not so unfit that a brisk walk up the driveway should leave her doubled over? Unless her poisoning had weakened her immune system, despite the dose of phoenix tears, and she was coming down with something? She certainly felt the tingle of déjà vu mingled with wrongness that normally heralded an oncoming bug.

Perhaps she should Apparate to Severus's potions lab and ask him for a precautionary Pepperup. Then again, maybe she *was* just unfit. Apparating everywhere was pure laziness. *'No,'* Hermione decided. *'If I need to get to the lab, I can walk. If I felt so bad that I couldn't, I wouldn't be able to Apparate either.'*

Hermione slowly started up the marble steps, her legs heavy, each breath more of an effort than the previous one. She tugged at her collar. So hot ... She shivered as an arctic chill swiftly replaced the heat, her skin clammy, her thoughts sluggish.

A temperature. Not good.

Maybe it would be best to Apparate to the lab? No ... The way she felt, she might Splinch.

She took one last hesitant step to bring herself up to the level of the front door. Pain lanced through her, jangling every nerve. Thrown off balance, she swayed.

Stinging ... aching ... throbbing ... it all blurred together, and worsened with each pounding beat of her heart.

The sting of a paper-cut...

Densaugeo and its aching, throbbing, tear...

Bellatrix's knife dancing over her skin, trailing fiery pain in its wake...

The breath-stealing burn of the Death Eater's purple-flame curse...

Hermione was dimly aware of her legs buckling under her. *Too much.*

The pure agony of the Cruciatius, Bellatrix's ruined face contorted with rage...

And beyond. She couldn't see scream breathe think...

* * *

Lucius emerged into his study from his secret hoard of Pensieve memories. He adjusted his trousers, satiated yet decidedly ill at ease. For the past month, every single time he viewed one of the memories of Hermione and Severus, he felt dirty. *Guilty.*

Although he hadn't added any more memories to his collection, Lucius knew that he would have if he could. That only made the guilt all the more insidious, to know that it was only down to an elf: Dilly refused to spy, and the other elves were banned from Severus and Hermione's rooms thanks to Tricky's actions.

He was abusing Hermione's trust. If she found out about his stock of Pensieve porn not that she could she would be very ... disappointed in him. Severus, on the other hand, would just skin him alive.

Clearly his conscience was conspiring against him. Soon he would have to make a choice about which was more important to him if he was to feel comfortable in his own skin: the vicarious pleasure voyeurism brought him, or being trustworthy.

Perhaps the answer was to avoid the memories featuring Hermione and Severus? He *did* have plenty of other options to choose from, after all. But none of the alternatives were quite as ... interesting. Of course, that might be because his interests always had waxed and waned according to the current object of his desire. At least his guilty conscience did not plague him about *that*. To Lucius's mind, it would only be unfaithful to Narcissa's memory if he fell in love.

To lust after Hermione was only a betrayal so far as his friendship with Severus was concerned, and that had not held him back in the past. The only restriction now was to get what he wanted without breaking his word. A novel challenge, to seduce Hermione without actually doing anything.

The only way forward at present was to prove himself worthy of the happy couple's trust, and to strengthen the ties of friendship. That would provide a solid foundation for more. It would also take time, time enough to make her or even them want him. Hopefully the Malfoy charm would not fail him ...

Lucius automatically looked out of the window when the manor's wards tinged. A witch with privileged access had just walked through the gates ... Hermione. He couldn't actually see the driveway from his study, only one of the tall hedges flanking it. Odd that she was taking the long route to the front door rather than Apparating directly inside. That said, it was fine weather, so maybe she just fancied a walk. Perhaps he could join her.

As he passed his desk, that morning's *Daily Prophet* caught his eye. He'd been up earlier than Hermione and Severus, as usual. That gave him the opportunity to hide the newspaper, as Hermione would need her wits about her if she was finally granted access to St Mungo's archives...and if she'd read the headlines she would have been upset. The question was whether to show it to her now.

One thing for sure, he couldn't protect her from it forever. Within a few months, it would be all too obvious.

The *Prophet* had changed its tune and lauded the addendum a success, as it broke the news that every fertile witch in the country was pregnant.

Hermione would not be a happy witch. Doubtless she'd see it as a failure that she hadn't managed to come up with a viable alternative yet, and as a personal one, as well, since the news would only rub in the fact that she was infertile.

Of course he also had an ulterior motive to keep the news sequestered away as long as possible... an unhappy Hermione tended to mean something of his shattered. Hopefully one of these days things would settle down. Lucius had gathered from Severus that, as far as he knew, she never used to have magical outbursts before, so they were surely a sign of stressful times.

But there also was a reason to give Hermione the *Prophet* sooner rather than later: his recently acquired daughter-in-law would be pregnant too. Unless that pregnancy was why Ginny had not visited Hermione lately? Or was it him that she was avoiding? That diary debacle certainly didn't make for smooth relations with one's in-laws.

Hermione was also the sort of witch who would not appreciate having the truth kept from...

Lucius clamped his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to block out the shrill scream scattering his thoughts. The wards carried on their raucous alarm call until he barked '*Finite!*', only feeling his own voice's vibrations until the scream blessedly stopped.

After Hermione's poisoning, he'd reactivated the long-dormant wards that warned him of mortal danger to a member of the household. Obviously he needed to tinker with them a little more, as they weren't much use if they deafened him.

'Merlin's tits, what am I doing?! No time to dawdle.' Lucius spun on his heel as he Disapparated to the origin of the ward's alarm. He arrived just outside the front door.

Hermione was sprawled in the gravel at the foot of the steps, her mouth open in a silent scream as she writhed in agony, her body wracked with uncontrollable spasms and twitches.

Déjà vu pulled at his memories. Lucius could almost hear his deranged sister-in-law's shouts as he impassively watched her torture Hermione.

The sight of blood pooling behind her head spurred Lucius into action. His wand out, he jumped down the steps to crouch beside her.

"*Episkey,*" he murmured, staunching the flow of blood. He paused, agitatedly tapping his wand against his palm. He couldn't check for skull fractures while she was still

thrashing about. Judging by where the ward's alarm had flared from, she must have fallen down the steps. He couldn't check for concussion either; her eyes had rolled back, only the whites were showing.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" Nothing happened. But then it couldn't be a curse ... Minutes had passed since Hermione passed the gates, and the *Cruciatus* had immediate effect. She wouldn't have been able to walk up the drive if that was the culprit. The wards would have registered an intruder, too.

Besides, although excruciatingly painful, being Cruciated was not life threatening. But that meant ...

The sickening sensation of déjà vu deepened. He'd definitely seen this before. Not with Hermione, with...

"Impossible," he choked.

Narcissa. Two weeks before the plague claimed her life.

No, no, no. *It couldn't be.*

It couldn't be. Hermione hadn't complained about being short of breath and having an elevated temperature over the last fortnight, or even over the two days it had taken for pure-bloods to succumb to the pain.

Yet Lucius knew the plague's seizure when he saw it. He relived it in his nightmares, watching, helpless, as Narcissa collapsed. Unable to do anything to save her. Just as helpless as he was now.

Crack.

Startled, Lucius narrowly avoided ending up on his arse in the gravel. He turned to see Dilly and Severus at the top of the steps.

For a moment Severus just stood there, his eyes riveted on Hermione as his sallow face drained of colour. Then he practically flew down the steps to kneel next to Hermione, drawing his wand in the same smooth movement.

There was a flash of red light and Hermione's convulsions ceased. Of course ... although neither of them knew the spell the Healers used to induce a coma, a Stunner would work temporarily.

Severus had her head in his hands...no, he was feeling the back of her head for the wound. Lucius cringed. He'd neglected to deal with the blood from the wound. If the sight of that had alarmed *him*, it must have given Severus quite a turn.

"*Tergeo*," Lucius murmured, his wand siphoning up the blood. "I healed it," he explained. "It didn't occur to me to Stun her, so I couldn't check for fractures."

"There are none." Severus's voice trembled as he shifted his grip on Hermione and cradled her to his chest. "Dilly, take us to my lab."

Lucius reached out and squeezed Severus's shoulder, frowning. "Why..."

Dilly obeyed the command and Apparition stole the rest of Lucius's words.

They emerged in Severus's labs, where Severus cast a cushioning charm before he laid Hermione down on the floor.

Severus staggered over to a cupboard, where he rummaged around before producing a bottle. He drank one mouthful directly from it before throwing it back inside to clink against its fellows. If not for Unbreakable Charms, they would have shattered.

"Calming Draught," Severus said shortly, finally meeting Lucius's questioning gaze. "I didn't want to risk Splinching." He dashed across the room to another cupboard, wrenched it open and flung assorted vials and potions behind him as he emptied it.

"What are you looking for?" Lucius yelled as he ducked one stray bottle. He readied his wand to keep any from hitting Hermione, though none even came close to her.

Severus lifted a wooden crate onto the nearest table and took one vial filled with sparkling clear liquid from it. He dashed back to Hermione and almost uncorked the vial before slapping his forehead.

He wrenched off two buttons from his shirt and Transfigured them into small vials.

Lucius's jaw dropped as Severus tore Hermione's sleeve open up to her left elbow.

"What are you doing?"

Severus did not answer. He pressed his wand against the crook of Hermione's arm, his eyes narrowed in concentration. The wand tip flashed red and one of the vials filled with...

Blood.

"Vampire," Lucius muttered. He sheathed his wand, going against his instincts to interfere. He had to trust that Severus knew what he was doing.

Severus picked up the vial with the clear potion in it again and prised the cork out of it. He tapped the vial with his wand, then held the wand to Hermione's elbow again. With a white flash, the liquid in the vial slowly drained.

"What was that?"

"The *cure*," Severus spat.

Lucius shook his head. "What's the point? It obviously doesn't work."

"It worked for six months," Severus snapped. "There's nothing else. Phoenix tears don't work against the plague. The *point* is that it should give me time to come up with a permanent cure."

Severus picked up the remaining empty vial and touched it to Hermione's elbow once more. There was another red flash and the vial filled with blood.

"What are you doing that for?" Lucius asked.

"The plague affects the blood, hence the intravenous application of the cure. These samples should allow me to check whether the cure is still functional." He stood up and walked over to a table with some sort of overgrown stationary Omniculars. "This Omnicoscope will allow me to see the plague. It appears in cellular form in the blood."

Severus bent over the Omnicoscope, his lank hair dangling down. He twisted some of the knobs littering the instrument.

Lucius frowned. "Why did you take a blood sample before you gave her the cure?"

"Because the sample after the cure should have no plague cells remaining by now. Diseases can change over time." Severus's voice was hollow. He straightened up and turned to Lucius, his face as white as a skull. "The plague has mutated. The cure barely worked...is barely working." He glanced at Hermione, his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. "Next time ... it won't work at all."

"I think you might need another dose of Calming Draught," Lucius said. "You can't be thinking clearly, you look like death warmed up."

"An overdose of that won't help matters." Severus spoke in the same deadened tone. "I compared these blood samples with ones I took from Hermione months earlier. There's no mistake, the plague has changed. Look if you don't believe me."

Lucius staggered back, stumbling as he collided with a table. "No, no, I believe you." He didn't want to see Narcissa's killer.

Severus crossed the distance between them. He moved jerkily, his normal grace as gone as his composure. He grabbed Lucius's robes and shook him. "Do you realise what this means?"

"What?" Lucius didn't struggle. Severus still held his wand, and the desperation in his voice coupled with his deadened eyes was unnerving.

"*Hermione is going to die.*"

Right. Lucius shrugged off Severus's grip, snatched the wand out of his hands and backhanded him.

Severus clutched his cheek, his eyes wide.

"You can't give up. The cure is working this time, yes?"

Severus nodded dumbly, blinking at Lucius. "Barely..."

"It's still working. That means you should have another six months to refine it. You have those samples. You can use them to predict how it will change."

Severus kneaded the bridge of his nose. "Yes. I must. She needs me ..." When he looked up again, Lucius was satisfied to see that the light in his eyes was back, if subdued. "But I cannot do that yet."

"Why?"

"Hermione was among the first to fall ill. She is the only one of those surviving. That means every other witch is going to follow suit. I need to brew more of the cure, and I don't have much time. One of the ways in which the plague has changed is that the symptoms have accelerated." Severus swept back to the table with the crate and picked it up. "Here." He thrust it into Lucius's arms, snatching back his wand at the same time.

"Thank you." Lucius stared at the wooden box. There were seven vials. "What do I want them for?"

Severus ran a hand over his haggard face. *Number Twelve Grimmauld Place is the home of Harry Potter.* In his post-war admiration of me, Potter saw fit to make me his Secret-Keeper."

Lucius made a confused sound in the back of his throat.

"Go to your son!" Severus barked. "Your daughter-in-law will need a dose, as will the Weasley wives."

Lucius flushed, mortified. Before he could Disapparate, Severus grabbed his shoulder, catching a handful of his hair in the process in a tug that made him wince.

"Wait! You need to warn them that whilst the plague is dormant, the cure attacks the blood itself. They need to wait until the third symptom appears; the pain."

Lucius felt his heart skip a beat at the implications. "But that means ..."

"I know," Severus whispered, his face contorted. "Go!"

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

If Omniculars are magical binoculars, it follows that Omnioscopes are magical microscopes.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 37

Dark times loom.

Chapter 27

AN: Sensitive readers beware! Things take a dark(er) turn here. Specifically miscarriages, although none happen. Yet.

* * *

His fault.

He *knew* diseases could change over time. Just because the cure had been successful did not mean the plague would never return. He should have known. He should have seen it coming. *He should have done something*

Now, because of his blindness, every single witch in the whole world was in mortal peril.

Worse, many of those witches would be pregnant by now. All of those would miscarry.

His fault.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose to centre himself. The blame, the guilt ... facing his emotions would have to wait. He didn't have time for this. The witching population certainly did not.

His movements were stiff and mechanical as he set about preparing the saline base of the now temporary cure. Too slow *Distracted*.

His eyes were drawn to where Hermione lay on the floor, deceptively peaceful under his Stunner. Within her veins the cure still battled against the plague, and would over the next few hours.

"Dilly?" At Severus's call, the house-elf stirred from where he was watching over Hermione. "She'll be more comfortable in her bed. Keep her asleep. When it is safe for her to be awakened, I will do it myself."

The house-elf bowed before he vanished, taking Hermione with him.

Severus turned back to his preparations. Much as he wanted to keep Hermione near him, he couldn't afford to be distracted. Although she was still very much on his mind, it was not possible to watch over her when he should be brewing. He had to trust Dilly to do so in his place.

He paused before he added the next ingredient. There wasn't time to brew enough of the cure before the plague came out of dormancy in more witches. If Hermione's case was anything to go by, the cure bought six months of borrowed time. Time that would run out for every other witch on the planet within two weeks.

If he had those full two weeks to brew the cure, he might manage enough doses for all of the witches in the country. But too many would need it long before then. Within the next few hours, knowing his luck. At the most, he had a day.

The way the plague had mutated to an even more aggressive form and still mutated in the isolated blood sample was ... worrying. It had taken six months for the 'new and improved' plague to come out of dormancy. The next, even more virulent strain might only need half that time to strike again. There was no way of knowing yet, not even by glaring down his Omniscope at the plague cells, as it changed too slowly for him to see. He would have to wait days if not weeks to observe it under the time-lapse viewing mode.

There was not enough time. Not enough to brew the cure, nor enough to modify it.

'Idiot!' Severus rapped the side of the cauldron with his wand and applied a Stasis Charm. *He could share the burden.* The cure was a difficult potion to make, but there were others capable of it. And while the cure had been his brainchild, he hadn't been the only one responsible for the creation.

He stormed across the room to the storage cupboard and dug around in the chaos left by his unearthing of the crate containing the remaining cure. There should be a sample of it left even with the last emergency supplies of it gone with Lucius ... Where was it?!

Severus slapped his forehead. *'Idiot is not a strong enough term.'* He drew his wand. *"Accio plague cure."* From the depths of the cupboard a single vial flew into his grip. Sheathing his wand, he stalked over to the fireplace.

He grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the bowl on the mantelpiece and tossed it into the fireplace. "The Minister of Magic's Office!" he barked before he dropped to his knees and pushed his head into the green flames. Anyone not keyed to Kingsley's wards who tried this would find themselves sucked through the Floo and into a Ministry cell. Fortunately for Severus, he'd been granted access almost a year ago when he became part of the international team working on a cure. It was not a privilege that he'd used before, disliking Floo travel. But with no time to spare, he'd use it.

Severus's head emerged in Kingsley's office. There was no sign of the occupant; if Kingsley was in his office, he was hidden behind the tower of parchment in his inbox.

"Kingsley!" At Severus's sharp call, the precarious pile collapsed.

Kingsley was now visible, staring at where the assorted forms strewn across his office had been. One of his hands was still poised above his inbox, where he'd apparently flinched at the sound of Severus's voice.

"You'd better have a very good reason to have your head in my fireplace," Kingsley remarked conversationally. One eye twitched spasmodically.

"I do, unfortunately." He passed his hand through the Floo connection to join his head and threw the vial of cure to Kingsley, who deftly caught it. "It's back."

Kingsley frowned down at the vial, bemused. His face froze; he must have caught sight of the label. *Shit!* The vial fell through trembling fingers to the desk, rolling until it stopped against the inbox. He dropped his bald head into his hands. "I really wish you'd just wanted to say hello."

"*If only,*" Severus bit out. "It gets worse: the plague has changed, and not for the better. Hermione's just collapsed and she had no symptoms yesterday. I think we can expect every other witch alive to fall ill within a week or two."

"Fuck." Kingsley's head dropped even further, down to his desk, pillowed on his arms. "In other words, I need to warn my counterparts in other wizarding countries. St Mungo's too. They distributed the cure; they know who's capable of making more." Kingsley looked up sharply, his voice no longer muffled. "It does still work, doesn't it?"

"For the time being." Severus bit his tongue before he could voice a nightmarish scenario that just occurred to him: that the plague hadn't mutated in the same way with all witches, rendering the cure completely useless for some of them. If that was the case, there was nothing he could do. But misleading Kingsley would be cruel if he raised false hopes ... "At least, it did for Hermione."

"I need to get back to brewing more of that." Severus gestured to the discarded vial. "Remember the limitations. *Do not* give it to your wife before all symptoms appear, no matter what."

Severus pulled his head back through the Floo connection, hoping beyond hope that the cure would work. *It had to.*

He stood up and returned to his cauldron, ending the Stasis Charm. He hadn't been working for more than ten minutes when the fireplace flared green, and a Ministry memo flew through it, almost dive-bombing the cauldron before Severus caught it.

Severus unfolded the paper aeroplane. Kingsley's handwriting was even messier than usual, so much so that it was crossed out and followed by the easily read script of a Dicto Quill:

'Severus,

St Mungo's has some emergency stocks. If other wizarding countries have any sense, so do they.

Finish that batch of cure you're working on, get it to St Mungo's for them to distribute, then concentrate on modifying the cure. I realise that if the Merlin forsaken plague has mutated once then it will again, and the cure obviously needs to be changed with it. You can't be spared for the grunt work. You're the Potions genius in the international team put together last time, and you should be hearing from them soon.

-Kingsley Shacklebolt

P.S. Thanks for the heads up and for the cure. I've sent it home to Rolanda with Gawain. He knows when to use it.'

Severus returned his attention to the cauldron before the partially brewed potion within it was ruined. He clamped down on his emotions, reeling in stray thoughts. He had to focus on the cure.

After an hour of intense concentration, Severus stepped back from the cooling cauldron and kneaded away the tension headache nagging at his temples.

Now he could start to contemplate what needed to be done to modify the cure, even if he could not actually do anything until the contents of the cauldron were safely bottled and sent to St Mungo's.

The problem, Severus mused, was that he had no way of knowing if the plague had mercifully relatively speaking mutated in the same way with every witch in this outbreak. And even if it had, there was no guarantee that it would *next* time. Modifying a universal cure would be impossible if there were thousands of different strains of the plague, even if it was possible to predict how the plague would mutate.

There wasn't enough time.

Severus exhaled a ragged breath. If that nightmare happened he would *not* let Hermione die. He'd find a cure for her.

But ... what if the plague did not mutate as expected? What if it was completely different to what the Omnioscope could help him predict?

Severus gripped the edge of the table with white-knuckled fingers. He couldn't afford to feel *sohelpless*. Not when Hermione needed him. Not when there was no way of knowing what would happen.

What he needed what the entire wizarding world needed was an Arithmancer to calculate how the plague would mutate. Unfortunately that Arithmancer would have to perform Master-level equations. The cure development team did have Arithmancers, but no Masters. Why? Because Arithmancy Masters were technically Mistresses. It was one of the branches of magic that witches excelled at while wizards were merely adequate: good enough to pass the NEWT with flying colours, but that was just because the examiners allowed for the gender imbalance.

Arithmancy Masters and Apprentices had all been ill at the time the cure was developed. Now the situation was far worse: none of them had survived the plague. And those witches that had the potential to become Arithmancy Masters did not have the time. Brilliant though Hermione was, even she would need well over a year to become one, provided she could without a Master to learn from.

A year the wizarding world did not have. All Severus could do was attempt to do his duty to the best of his abilities and hope for the best.

Hope.

A commodity in ever shorter supply, but he could not afford to lose it. Not when Hermione would die within months if it failed.

Severus set about bottling the batch of the temporary cure, the slight tremor in his hands betraying his roiling emotions.

Hope...doubt...fear...resolve.

He could not, would not fail.

Failure was not an option.

GINNY staggered into the bathroom. Much as she hated Grimmauld Place, at least it was sympathetic to the pregnant wife of the master of the house, moving the bathroom to next door to wherever she happened to be. She dropped to her knees and performed her evening worship of the porcelain goddess.

A pair of solicitous hands held back her hair. Another rubbed her back and proffered a glass of water. Ginny took it and darkly contemplated throwing it over the husband in question. Instead she used it for the intended purpose of washing her mouth out, and resisted the temptation to turn away from the toilet and spit it out onto their feet.

After all, they hadn't really done anything to deserve it. Besides knock her up. And hover worse than her mother ever...

GINNY swallowed past the painful lump in her throat. That was the core of the problem. Harry and Draco were waiting on her hand and foot, something that her mother might have done if she'd lived. And ... her mum might have also been able to tactfully get Draco and Harry to back off. To explain that she didn't need so much smothering attention, at least not yet.

For the love of Merlin, she was less than three months along. Morning sickness and the fatigue were unpleasant, but she wasn't crippled, damn it! If they didn't stop anticipating her every need, real or otherwise, tact could fly out of the window. Maybe they'd stop it if she threatened them with Bat-Bogeys ... She'd certainly kick them out of their bedroom and its Emperor-and-his-harem sized bed if she didn't know that they'd have far too much fun commiserating in one of the many spare rooms.

A grim smile crept across Ginny's face as Draco and Harry herded her into the kitchen and began *tdovingly* prepare dinner. At least she had an ally in her quest: Kreacher was no happier than she was.

"Bad Masters! Let Kreacher cook!"

Enough was enough.

"Boys."

"Yes..."

"...Ginny..."

"...What..."

"...Can..."

"...I..."

"...Do?"

"Potter, she's talking to me!"

"No, Malfoy, she isn't!"

"Either of us might be the father, so let me do my duty!"

"Boys!"

Draco and Harry stopped bickering, their heads swivelling to face her.

"Let Kreacher do his job. I'm not an invalid yet!" At her words, Kreacher's ears perked up.

"But..."

"No buts! You can keep up the morning sickness service if it makes you feel better, but unless I ask for more *stop it.*"

"Ginny..."

Ginny stepped close to Harry and Draco and poked them both in the chest. "If it really bothers you two so much that I'm 'suffering', I'll look up the Fourth Unforgivable and make you experience it instead!"

The boys flinched in unison. Ginny softened her pokes to caresses.

"Harry, I know you have that saving-people-thing, but ... I don't need to be saved!"

She turned to Draco, who wiped the smirk off his face a little too late at Harry's rebuke. "And you, Draco, I think you're doing your 'duty' at least partly to prove that you've changed, by chasing after me like a house-elf no offence, Kreacher. We know you're not the brat you used to be." She brought her hand up to stroke his cheek. "I didn't marry you just for your looks, you know."

Ginny put her arms around both of them and pulled them into a hug. They hugged her back gently. She rolled her eyes and growled, "I won't break, you kn..."

The fireplace behind Harry and Draco glowed green. Ginny tugged them out of the way as someone shot out of it in a cloud of ash, coughing, spluttering and swearing as he slid to a halt, sprawled on his back on the kitchen flagstones.

The boys spun around, instinctively shielding her with their bulk as they drew their wands.

"*Scourgify!*" Draco spat. Their uninvited guest was now soot-free, at the cost of spluttering on bubbles.

"I thought that was you under there, Malfoy," Harry snarled. "How did you get past the Fidelius?"

Draco Vanished the bubbles still tormenting his father, although Ginny suspected it was no act of kindness just so that he could answer.

"Severus let me know, of course. And kindly do not hex me, at least until I've put this down."

Ginny sidled around behind her overprotective boys until she could see Lucius Malfoy. He sat up and set down a wooden box.

Harry shook his head and kept his wand trained on Malfoy. "He wouldn't do that. How did you really get in, and what are you doing here?"

"Harry, unless he saw one of the notes you have to let people in, Severus must have told him," Draco hissed out of the side of his mouth. "There's no other way to get the secret out of the Secret-Keeper."

"But..."

"It doesn't matter," Malfoy snapped. "We don't have time for this nonsense. I came here to give you this." He tapped the box.

Draco stiffened. "We don't want anything from you. Why don't you take your crate and go home?"

Malfoy swatted the 'suggestion' aside with an impatient wave of his hand. "Shut up and listen. I came to tell you that Hermione collapsed within the last half hour."

Ginny gasped, echoed by her husbands. She forced aside the pang of guilt that she'd avoided Hermione since the wedding. Hermione had to be okay. She had to be ...

"What?" Harry blurted. "Is she..." Ginny elbowed him. Interrupting would only slow Malfoy down.

"The plague is back."

Ginny felt the blood drain from her face. She felt faint; her legs gave way beneath her. She sat down heavily, vaguely aware that Kreacher only just managed to shove a chair under her.

She heard the boys' frantic questions as if from a distance, unable to tell them apart. At least Malfoy's voice still sounded different.

"Are you sure?"

"Is Hermione alright?"

"Severus took blood samples to be certain. He gave her the cure, and while it's not as effective as it once was, he was sure it would still work." Malfoy tapped the box again, which came through to Ginny's ringing ears as a hollow echo. A toll of doom.

'No ...' She shook her head numbly, her hands protectively cradling her stomach. *'Not like Fleur. Please, no.'*

"He sent me with doses for the Weasley women."

"Tell him thanks. You can go now."

"Not yet: he also gave me a warning to pass on." Malfoy reached into the box and held up a small bottle. "This must be applied intravenously to work..."

"We know that, we even made sure to learn the spell months ago."

"Listen to me! If the plague isn't active, the cure attacks the blood instead. You must wait until the pain..."

"But that means ... The baby ... You're lying!" That was Harry. No one else could sound that self-righteous.

Malfoy shot to his feet and stood nose to nose with Harry, ignoring the wand pressed against his neck. "What sort of monster do you think I am?!"

Draco pulled Harry's wand arm down. "Harry, think about it. My father might have made some bad choices and done some bad things, but he wouldn't lie about something like this. Not about miscarriages. Not with our family history. And certainly not with a baby that might be his own grandchild."

"It's true." Ginny frowned at the sound of her own voice. It sounded like someone else, curiously detached. "I'm surprised you don't know, Harry. Dad filled me in after I got better. I thought he would've told you too."

"What?" Harry snapped. He'd better not take being kept in the dark as a personal insult!

"Oi! He did have a lot on his mind at the time. Mum died, Fleur lost the baby, Hermione escaped death by the skin of her teeth the cure was only just made in time, you know and I came too close for his comfort too."

"I know Fleur miscarried, but that was before the cure was invented."

"Yes, but Dad and Bill wanted to know if it could have saved the baby."

Draco and Harry moved to flank her, each resting a hand on top of hers over her belly.

"There must be something we can do!"

Ginny closed her eyes. "There isn't."

"The pain is what causes the miscarriage, isn't it? What if you couldn't feel it? Spells, potions, that enforced coma ..." Desperation rushed Draco's words.

"Fleur," Ginny choked, tears trickling down her cheeks. She shook her head, unable to keep talking.

"They tried," Harry said softly, wrapping his free arm around Ginny. "The Healers did everything they could, even the coma thing before the pain symptom started."

Draco's hand squeezed hers tightly too tightly before he snatched it away. He buried his hands in his hair and bit back a sob. *Why?*

"I'm sorry." Malfoy hesitantly laid a hand on Draco's shoulder. "The plague. It attacks organs regardless of whether witches are conscious of the pain it causes."

"I can't do this." Draco collapsed into his father's arms, his body trembling. "I can't lose Ginny, the baby ... I lost Mother, I ... *I never said goodbye!*"

Ginny turned away, burying her face against Harry. She couldn't watch, not when she was teetering on breaking too, herself.

"I know. I know ..." Malfoy crooned. "Draco, you have to be strong. Ginny will survive this, she will need you. There ... there will be other children..." Malfoy's voice choked off.

Ginny glanced back. She almost expected to see Draco throttling Malfoy. Instead, Malfoy's face was a mask of horror.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Draco pulled away, his cheeks wet. He stared at Malfoy too. "Father?"

"Severus said something about the plague changing. That's why it's back. And it'll keep coming back unless he can come up with a permanent cure." Malfoy's eyes focused on each of them in turn, lingering on Ginny. "He thought it'd be back again in another six months."

Ginny couldn't speak. She hugged herself, both arms wrapped around her belly. It wasn't just this baby that was done for. It was all of her babies, unless Snape succeeded.

Worse, not just her, but every single pregnant witch.

Hermione and the other infertile witches were the lucky ones.

"There's worse. Severus said the cure won't work at all next time."

And if Snape didn't manage to make one that would ... Hermione wasn't so lucky after all. She'd be the first to die.

Malfoy cleared his throat. "I need to get back to him, either to see if I can help or to watch over my wife." He passed the dose of the cure in his hand to Draco, then picked up the box from the floor.

Harry slipped his hand under Ginny's arms to stroke her belly one last time. "Love you," he whispered.

Then Harry walked over to Malfoy and took the box from him. "I'll take it. And I know, I need to remind them about when ~~it~~ it can't be taken." He turned to Draco. "Take care of her." With one last lingering glance at Ginny, Harry Disappeared.

"If there's anything I can do ... Call me if you need me," Malfoy murmured. He slowly walked back to the fireplace and took a pinch of Floo powder. Ginny watched him leave in a flare of green flames.

Draco stepped back to her side. "Ginny?" He sounded lost. Scared. Dread had him just as surely as it did her.

How much longer did they have? Hours? Days? Not nearly long enough.

"Hold me."

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 37

Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

Chapter 28

AN: As with the previous chapter, sensitive readers beware. Similarly dark content is mentioned ahead.

* * *

Hermione awoke suddenly, even more abruptly than when she'd fallen out of bed. Yet she hadn't – she was still in bed. But she'd definitely felt like this before ... She frowned, perplexed, as the niggling sense of déjà vu mingled with confusion.

A movement beside her caught her attention: Severus, dropping his wand on the bedside table. Had he used Rennervate on her again? That would certainly explain why she'd jolted awake.

But why would he have needed to do so? Come to that, *why* was she in bed, dressed (undressed, even) in her nightie? Hermione blinked and looked around. The familiar surroundings of her bedroom did nothing to lessen her disorientation: they'd slept in Severus's room last night.

The last thing she could remember was getting up to go to St Mungo's. No, arriving in St Mungo's to meet with that intractable director again. There was something else, too ... a foggy memory of an immense library-cum-storeroom? Had she finally gained access to their archives?

Wait. A foggy memory ... That was a problem she'd had before. But when?

Hermione's breath caught as she remembered. Her memories immediately prior to the ones affected by the cure-induced amnesia had also been foggy.

It would certainly explain why there was no light to be seen around the drawn curtains; why she was missing some time. That hours, if not days – or worse, ~~days~~ *weeks* – had passed.

No. It couldn't be. For that to be the case, she'd need to have been given the cure again, and for that to happen ...

Hermione looked back at Severus. At his pale, drawn face. And the look in his eyes ... fear. That scared her more than anything.

"Severus?" She swallowed hard in an attempt to steady her wobbly voice. "What happened?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he cradled her face in his hands, lowered his head down to hers and kissed her. Tenderly. Deeply. *Desperately*.

She responded automatically to the familiar sensual pleasure of his lips on hers. But if he'd been trying to reassure her, it failed, as her fear ratcheted up another notch. Something terrible had happened for him to kiss her like that, as if she was about to slip away at any moment.

Hermione gently pushed at his shoulders with both hands. Severus got the message and drew back, breaking their kiss. His hands slipped down to rest on her shoulders.

She worked her mouth, speechless as she struggled to find the words to express herself. *What the fuck is going on?!*

Severus hesitated. His fingers twitched as if he would have a white-knuckled grip if he wasn't holding onto her. Then he told her *Everything*. The steady monotone of his voice belied the raw pain in his weary eyes.

Her collapse, six hours earlier. That, as she feared, the plague had returned. And worse, that it had mutated into an even more lethal form. The acceleration of the symptoms; shortness of breath, an elevated temperature and the pain on the same day, regardless of the patient's blood 'purity'. That every witch on the planet would fall ill again within a fortnight. Or less, if the plague was even more aggressive than Severus feared.

'No.'

That the cure barely worked this time, although it still stole twelve hours of her life: the hours of unconsciousness plus those affected by amnesia. That the cure wouldn't work at all next time. And there *would* be a next time – the plague still mutated, even dormant and undetectable within the victims. Within her, inside her own body, her own blood.

'No...'

And worst of all, the limitations of the cure. And what that meant for the fertile witches. Hermione was no fool; she didn't need to see the *prophet's* headline in St Mungo's to confirm what she already knew. That Severus's gender selection potion meant that every witch in the country who could be pregnant already was.

'Please, no.'

That all of those children ... all of those *girls* would never live to draw breath. And if not for the sterility potion – if not for the addendum stipulation forcing Severus and Lucius to take it – it could have been her. Her child.

What was crueller? To dread the miscarriage wrought by her fertility issues, or for the plague to steal away the potential new life?

Hermione struggled to swallow past the lump in her throat, her eyes burning with unshed tears. She couldn't feel any gratitude that her sterility had a silver lining. To her, it was tarnished.

She didn't want the addendum to work, but ... *not like this*. Miscarriage was something she wouldn't wish on her worst enemy, let alone her closest friends. Harry *Ginny*. Ron, too, must have married by now.

Bitter tears spilled down her cheeks. Severus pulled her into his arms, his hands sliding from her shoulders to her back.

"No ... No! There has to be something the Healers can do."

His silence spoke volumes, as did the way his arms tightened around her.

But Severus was no medical expert, surely? There might be something he didn't know of. Yet even as fragile hope blossomed, it was crushed when she recalled that horrible day of her check up in St Mungo's. The Healers could do nothing to prevent the miscarriages predicted for her. By that logic, they could do even less for those caused by the plague.

"They tried," Severus murmured, so softly that his voice was almost more audible by the way it vibrated through Hermione. "Back when the plague first appeared. Witches were dropping like flies; nothing could be done for them. But for those pregnant witches as yet unaffected they hoped to at least save the foetuses, even if it meant that they would be born Squibs."

"It didn't work," Hermione stated flatly.

Severus nodded, his chin shifting against her shoulder. "I did not know the full details at the time, but it must have been that magical bond between mother and child. All

attempts to complete the pregnancies elsewhere failed. From what I heard, fatally so.”

He sighed. “With what you learned from that Healer at the Wizengamot session before ... before that elf tried to kill you, I can make an educated guess as to what went wrong. Moving the foetus severed the connection between mother and child with a lethal backlash, which must have killed both surrogate and child.”

But for that to be the case, why hadn't it been mentioned at that Wizengamot hearing? Was it considered irrelevant? Or perhaps St Mungo's only released the bare minimum of information; they certainly took security seriously.

“What about the bond between father and child?” Hermione suggested half-heartedly. Even as she said it, she doubted it would work. Men were not built to carry babies.

Severus froze, his body rigid against her. “I think they tried that. It would explain why some wizards also died early on during the plague. The official verdict was suicide. I think it was nothing more than desperate fathers-to-be trying to save their children.”

Hermione sniffled, swiping at the tear tracks on her cheeks with one hand as her other kneaded at the tense muscles of his back.

“All that can be done is to eradicate the cause; to permanently wipe out the plague.”

If it could be. Otherwise within six months the wizarding world would be just that: only wizards, witches extinct.No. Severus would find a cure. It was inconceivable that he couldn't, even if her own life wasn't at stake.

And she'd be right there by his side doing whatever she could to help him. It wasn't as if there was any point in continuing with her campaign at the moment. Not when there needed to be surviving witches for the marriage law and its addendum to be an issue.

Hermione frowned. Severus had explained everything that she'd missed. Yet why did she still have a nagging suspicion that she'd forgotten something? Whatever it was, it must be something vital judging by the strength of the feeling.

But what? It couldn't be Crookshanks; she could hear him snoring under the bed. If Lucius had any sense, he'd be sound asleep in his own bed. Severus was sitting beside her, so—

Her parents. Did they know? Surely not, or they would be right there with Severus, even if it was the middle of the night and during the working week.

“Has anyone told my parents?”

Severus jerked back, his face stricken. Apparently not, then. But Severus did have an airtight excuse. The plague, the cure ... he'd have been run off his feet since she collapsed hours earlier.

“Oh, shit. I ... I'm sorry. I don't think it occurred to Lucius, either. When he returned from Grimmauld Place I sent him to St Mungo's with the batch of cure I brewed, and when he returned he was up here keeping an eye on you, until I sent him to bed. In his defence, he had a lot on his mind.”

What could Lucius have had on his mind? Worry for her, obviously, and a nasty reminder of how he'd lost Narcissa, but—

“The only silver lining is that I gather Draco is finally turning to him, no doubt due to facing losses that Lucius has already suffered.”

Losses? Hermione frowned. If not for the fact that he'd specifically stated it as plural, not singular, she'd assume that Severus was referring to the possible loss of a wife.

“Lucius probably didn't mention it to you, did he?” Severus asked, his eyes fixed on her face.

“What is it?”

“It's not really my place to tell you, but to have Lucius do so at the moment would be nothing less than cruel. He and Narcissa suffered several miscarriages before Draco. It seems she had very similar fertility problems to you.”

“What does that have to do with—” Her voice was strangled to a halt by painful realisationLosses indeed. So it might be Draco's child Ginny was soon to lose, and like every other witch Ginny's life was in peril.

“There's nothing we can do,” Severus murmured. “It is best to focus on that which we can act on. Your parents do need to know, but it's too late to do so until the morning. They need their sleep, as do we.”

He rose to his feet and undressed, resorting to a spell when his weary fingers struggled with the myriad buttons. Naked, he climbed into bed beside her, leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor. Ordinarily she'd complain at the extra work for Dilly, but ... not after the day he'd had.

Hermione tugged her nightie over her head even as Severus reached for the hem. It seemed he wanted the same thing as her: nothing but skin between them.

* * *

The next morning Hermione Apparated into her childhood bedroom, as soundlessly as she could manage when lacking sleep. Neither she nor Severus had slept well due to the stress and worries caused by the events of the day before. That and the nagging sensation that she'd forgotten something hadn't gone away, despite her attempts to put it out of her mind. As if she didn't have enough to worry about already!

Hopefully seeing her parents would put that niggling demon to rest, although that was bound to be too much to hope for.

Hermione opened her bedroom door and walked downstairs, automatically avoiding the creaky floorboards. Entering the kitchen she found her parents finishing their breakfast.

Her father's grey eyes widened as he caught sight of her. “Hermione! What a lovely surprise!”

“We were expecting you on your birthday, dear,” her mother attempted to look at her watch to check the date without being obvious.

“Don't worry, Mum. You still have a week or so to find me a present.”

The elder Grangers both breathed what they thought was a clandestine sigh of relief. Hermione had spent too much time with two Slytherins for their mock coughs to fool her.

“Breakfast?”

“No thanks, I've already eaten.” And it was just as well that they'd just finished eating. What she had to tell them was bound to affect their appetites.

“Cuppa?”

Hermione shook her head. The universal panacea wouldn't be able to touch the crushing weight she felt bearing down on her.

“Is something wrong?” her mother asked, frowning in concern as she reached over to take one of Hermione's hands, and gently tugged her arm until she sat down.

Hermione sighed heavily. "Very much so."

By the end of Hermione's explanation none of them were dry eyed. Her mother was mopping at her cheeks with a hanky, while her father brushed away the few that had escaped his eyes.

There was no relief in sharing the bad news. It was painful to go through it again, and all the more so to know that she put her parents through the same emotional rollercoaster she'd been through the night before. The miscarriage aspect must hit them even harder than it had herself, due to their struggles to have a child.

And there was nothing she could say that would make it better. She could promise that Severus would find a permanent cure, but the fact that she'd be by his side while he did ... She'd be taking herself away from her own parents when there was a chance that she wouldn't survive.

"Shit."

Hermione blinked, wide eyes focusing on her father, shocked. *Henever* swore.

"We wanted so much to be wrong," he continued.

"What?" Hermione blurted, wrong-footed. They reacted with sadness, yes, but the complete lack of their surprise implied by that statement was unexpected.

Her parents exchanged a grim glance. "You're not the only one with bad news to share, and, well ..."

"We think they're connected." Her mother completed her father's sentence.

Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse ... "Out of the frying pan, into the fire," Hermione muttered.

"Indeed. While the plague doesn't affect Muggles any more than it affects wizards, it ..." her father trailed off.

Hermione felt as if she'd breathed in lead. It didn't take a genius to guess what Dad was driving at. "Muggle-borns."

"Yes," her mother sobbed, before noisily blowing her nose.

"We don't know for sure, but we think your Ministry managed to keep it quiet at first, until there were no Muggle-born children left alive. Then ... they must have forgotten, what with all the adult witches dropping like flies and all—"

"Please get to the point, Dad." Hermione's throat was tight with fear. She had a horrible suspicion that she knew what was coming.

"I am, I am ... It's in the news, now. Cot death, they call it. But from what you told us, I think we have a better name for the main culprit."

"The plague," Hermione said, hollowly. It wasn't just the lives of unborn babies of magical parents that would be stolen. It was newborn Muggle-borns, too.

"Quite. Only it's not so much returned as never left. *The Times* reports a year of increased cot death, but it's actually a year and a half now, according to our friends among the medical doctors."

Could the cure be given to babies? Hermione almost didn't want to know the answer, sickened by the possibilities.

"We guess that it's cot death rather than miscarriages because the baby is insulated by the Muggle mother while *in utero*. But afterwards ..." Her mother sniffed, her voice wobbling.

"One thing that made us wonder if the plague could be the cause was that while in most cases it did take sixteen days for the newborn to die, which was the life expectancy for infected Muggle-borns, it ... it gradually decreased, until now it's two days."

Hermione swallowed hard. Even if the cure could have been given to the babies, it was bound to be useless by now: the plague must have mutated for the timing to change so drastically.

"But with what you said about the plague mutating, this must be connected. And ..." He grimaced, hands white-knuckled.

"What made us think of the plague more than anything else is that almost all of them are baby girls," her mother said softly. Both of them had to be imagining themselves in the place of the parents of one of those poor children. Or thinking that it could have been Hermione herself.

"We were going to tell you about this when we saw you on your birthday, but now is better, really. That way we won't blight your special day." Her father reached over to pat Hermione's free hand.

"And I can do something about this sooner rather than later." Hermione pushed her chair back and got to her feet.

Her mother tightened her grip on Hermione's hand. "Wait, dear. You can't confront anyone about this until you have concrete proof that these really are Muggle-born babies dying."

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I know. I'm not about to go off half-cocked. While the Ministry might have records I can use to check things, I'd rather they didn't have any advance warning. If it's true, there'll be no sweeping this under the carpet."

"Where will you go?" Her father asked as he stood up and began clearing the crockery into the dishwasher. "St Bungles, or whatever your magical hospital is called? You were trying to access their records, last thing I knew."

"Not St Mungo's, no. I think I did manage to gain access before I fell ill yesterday, but the Director would tell the Ministry what I was up to. If I go to Hogwarts instead, I think I can keep things quiet."

"Of course!" Her mother squeezed her hand. "They must register all magical children, including Muggle-borns, to be able to send all those letters at the start of the year."

"Exactly. I don't know who's Head at the moment, but I think I can sweet-talk my way in. I wasn't teacher's pet for nothing."

"Let us know what you find out." Hermione's father kissed her cheek. "We'll see you on your birthday, then?"

"Yes, will do." After pecking both of her parents' cheeks, Hermione closed her eyes and focused on the gates of Hogwarts as she concentrated. Apparating to Scotland in one Apparition jump was not for the faint-hearted. Particularly not when *Side-Along*—

'Side-Along?'

That realisation came too late, and the squeeze of Apparition closed around her. A second later Hermione could feel the cool air of late Scottish summer on her face.

Hermione opened her eyes and mentally counted to ten. Then she turned to the gaping woman clinging to her hand.

"Mum! How many times do I have to tell you, let go of mebefore I Apparate!"

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, JunoMagic and Septentrion for betaing.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 37

Bad news at Hogwarts and Malfoy Manor.

Chapter 29

AN: As with the previous chapter, sensitive readers beware of similar dark content.

* * *

Horace Slughorn almost dropped his coffee mug when Hogwarts' wards whispered the name and location of an unexpected guest in his ears.

Hermione Granger, outside the gates.

A sidelong glance at his colleagues affirmed what he already knew: it was his turn to be on duty and attuned to the year-old new wards, not the headmaster's. He masked a smug smile by drinking the last of his coffee. No need to share such an illustrious guest with Filius.

Even better, his first lessons of the day were after lunch. He'd have the delightful Miss Granger all to himself, and maybe for the whole morning if he was lucky. Technically it was Mrs Malfoy, or Mrs Snape, of course. Then again, perhaps she used *Ms* Granger, progressive Muggle-born that she was.

Pity she couldn't have been Mrs Slughorn, but Horace knew he would never have had a chance with her. Not when Malfoy and Snape outclassed him in fame and wealth. That, and they were both considerably younger. He couldn't resent them too much, though, not when he valued his bachelorhood. At least his marriage to Pomona Sprout was in name only; Filius Flitwick was her true husband.

Such a shame, however, that according to the *Prophet* there would be no progeny from the Granger-Snape or Granger-Malfoy union. Their children would have had such potential.

Horace stood up, muttering to Filius and Pomona that he'd forgotten something in their rooms. The wards twinged before he could sidle towards the nearest exit behind the high table. Horace narrowly avoided swearing aloud. Typical! One of the top ten...maybe even top five...in his prize collection arrived but left before he could reel her in.

He continued towards the door. Turning back now would leave him looking foolish. Once outside, he allowed his shoulders to slump and slunk off to his office. True, he was behaving like a pathetic animal hiding away to lick its wounds, but it wasn't every day that such an opportunity slipped through his grasp.

Then once again the wards delivered music to his ears:*Hermione Granger, outside the gates.*

Thankfully everyone was still at breakfast, otherwise he would have made a most undignified sight virtually skipping his way down to the edge of the grounds.

'Perhaps she will be grateful enough for my prompt appearance, he thought, touching his wand to the gates to unlock them, *that she will agree to come to my next party.'* After all, if not for the new wards, she would otherwise have been stranded until she could summon a member of staff to let her in.

Horace bounded forward as soon as the gates opened to grasp Miss Granger's hand in both of his and enthusiastically shake it. "Miss...Mrs...Ms..." He faltered. If only he knew what she called herself now! It made him squirm, at least internally, to know that he must look like a bumbling fool, stuttering like a star struck fan.

Worse, she might think he was stumbling over her appearance. Miss Granger looked drawn and pale, despite her recovery from the plague months earlier.

Thankfully, that appeared not to be the case. She smiled, if a little stiffly, and corrected him. "Ms, Professor."

"Ms Granger, such a pleasant surprise! Come in, come in." Horace put one hand on Miss *Ms* Granger's elbow and shepherded her through the gates and onto the path up to the castle. "What can we at Hogwarts do for you?" Other than preferably nothing that would mean sharing her with anyone else.

Ms Granger gently shrugged out of his grip. Horace didn't take offence; he supposed he had absentmindedly grabbed hold of her like a husband might have. "If it's possible, I'd like to see the records of all those who have their names down for Hogwarts but haven't started yet."

"I'm sure we can arrange something." Like her promise to attend all of his parties for the foreseeable future ... "I'm Deputy Headmaster now, you know. The one in charge of writing the letters to students before the start of the school year. That puts me in charge of those records."

"How kind of Hogwarts to send you to fetch me, then," Ms Granger murmured. "That is, I presume Hogwarts itself let you know I was here?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. You seemed to change your mind about coming." Would that suffice for her to satisfy his curiosity about her movements?

"Hrm? Oh, you mean it let you know when I was coming and going?"

Horace nodded. "Not that I'm complaining that you did decide to come back, of course!"

"It wasn't really my decision to leave."

Horace frowned. From what she had said, it sounded as if someone had made her leave. Yet the wards had only notified him of her presence and no other. Were they faulty? "How so?"

"Something I'm sure I'll laugh about later. My mother accidentally tagged along. You'll be pleased to know that Hogwarts' anti-Muggle enchantments are definitely still

working."

"Oh, good, good. You did manage to reassure her that we didn't school you in a ruin?"

"I didn't need to. She's read *Hogwarts: A History*."

Horace gradually increased his walking pace, conscious that breakfast would be over soon and that he needed to escort his esteemed guest to the Headmaster's Office before then. Filius should be teaching immediately after breakfast, after all.

Muttering the password to the gargoyle outside, he stepped aside for Ms Granger to ascend first. He stepped onto the rising staircase just in time to block the sight of her with his bulk from some passing students. Excellent ... There would be no rumours sweeping the castle of her presence from them.

Horace's eyes widened as his breath caught: students were not the only source of gossip in Hogwarts. He scurried up the stairs, afraid that he would be too late. By now Ms Granger had surely set foot into the office above, and that meant every portrait in the castle would know she was there if Dumbledore's portrait was awake.

He stifled a sigh of relief at the sight of Dumbledore snoring away. Thank heavens the painting was such a deep sleeper; the other portraits' welcome of Ms Granger would have roused anyone else.

Horace led the way through the assorted charm-related clutter of Filius's office to the inner sanctum where the Book of Names and other assorted priceless treasures were kept.

"Here it is," he proclaimed and opened the book with a flourish. Or would have, if the clasp hadn't firmly held it shut. Horace glowered, certain he could see the House mascots adorning it making faces at him.

At this rate Ms Granger would realise that he had technically shirked his duties ever since poor Minerva had persuaded him to be her deputy: that he'd never actually opened the book and instead used spells to write the letters.

A sharp rap with his wand and the clasp released, allowing the book to fall open on the intricately carved lectern holding it.

"Perhaps you could come along to my next little get together?" Horace suggested as he stepped aside to allow Ms Granger to stand in front of the book.

She gave him such a venomous glare that he stepped back...it was almost as if Snape had Polyjuiced himself as his bride.

"I hardly think this is the time for parties."

'Not the time for a party?! What could possibly...Ah, yes.' According to his Slug Clubbers on the Wizengamot, Ms Granger was campaigning against the law. "Of course, of course ... after everything is back to normal, and the law's interference is over, I mean."

She shook her head. "At the moment that law is the least of our problems."

"Oh?"

Ms Granger bent over the book, her eyes roving across the parchment. "The plague. It's back."

Horace clamped his mouth shut before he could ask if she was sure. Of course she was. Snape invented the cure...nifty bit of potions work that was indeed...so he must have been informed that his skills were needed again. Or ... Horace looked again at Ms Granger's pallid appearance. Perhaps she'd already relapsed, and that was how they knew.

So it really was back. But then the rest of the witches ... the staff, the students ...*Pomona*.

Ms Granger began to flick ahead in the book, turning pages. She had flipped through the pure-blood section and was making short work of the half-blood. "Severus is working on refining the cure. It still works, don't worry, but ..."

"More needs brewing?" Horace itched to be in front of his cauldron as soon as the answer had passed Ms Granger's lips. He already knew how to brew the cure; he'd been involved in manufacturing it last time.

"I don't know. I think Kingsley and St Mungo's are handling that. The problem is that the plague has mutated. The cure as it is won't work at all next time."

"Hence Severus's work on refining it, then. What are you looking for?" Horace asked, tugging at his moustache, hopefully the only outward reflection of his anxiety.

"My parents informed me of something that better not be true." She had reached the Muggle-born section now. Horace had a sinking feeling that he knew what was coming. He wanted to edge away but found himself rooted to the spot.

'It's not my fault!' he wailed internally. "What is it?" he made himself ask, his mouth dry.

"That the plague hasn't so much as returned for pre-Hogwarts Muggle-borns as never ..." she trailed off. Horace could see a single tear track down her cheek. It fell onto the book, drawing his eye to the list of names on the page. Almost all of them were struck through with a single line, red as blood. The only exceptions he could see were either the names of those who had already been to or started at Hogwarts, or masculine names.

And Horace knew he would have known about the damning situation already if he hadn't delegated his summer work to enchanted quills.

'The governors will have my job for this.'

His vision blurred for a moment, his breathing constrained. The spots in front of his eyes were soon replaced by the furious visage of Hermione Granger. Horace blinked. His feet were dangling in the air. How had such a slip of a girl managed to lift him off his feet by his collar?!

"You should have known about this. If not for you, some of these children could have been saved!"

"I didn't know!" Horace protested feebly. "I swear I didn't." He grimaced as she shook him, clacking his teeth together. Her arms weren't even trembling under his weight, he absently noted.

"It's not my fault! Ever since quills could be enchanted no Deputy Head has written the letters. It's always magically done, I swear! All we do is link the quill to the book and set it writing. Heavens above, if we did it all manually we'd be here all summer!"

She shook him one last time. "You disgust me," she spat and dropped him. "Can you honestly tell me that Professor McGonagall did that? How do I know that you're not lying, and you knew this was happening and purposefully did nothing?"

"I would never!" Horace pushed himself off his knees. "I swear upon my magic! I have nothing against Muggle-borns. They bring in fresh blood and ideas and the power some have ... look at yourself and Lily Evans, Merlin rest her soul!"

"Whatever you say, you're still at least partially responsible for the deaths of more Muggle-born children than I want to count."

"Partially?" Horace clung to that like a lifeline.

"Mostly whoever was responsible for distributing the cure to Muggle-borns outside Hogwarts. If you want to make up for your part in this, you'll bring that book and come with me to the Ministry as my witness," Ms Granger snarled, poking him in the chest.

"But the Book of Names can't leave the Headmaster's Office! And ... lessons! I can't leave the school!"

"This is rather more important than that. You'll have to do alone if the book can't come." She grabbed his wrist and pulled him along after her as she headed for the fireplace as the portraits watched, wide-eyed and stunned to silence.

"But..."

"Refuse to help me, and I'll make sure you go down with whoever bungled at the Ministry."

"That's blackmail!" Horace protested, then muttered, "Weren't you a Gryffindor?" under his breath.

"I married two Slytherins. And I wasn't averse to using blackmail long before that." She took a handful of Floo powder from the mantelpiece and cast it into the fireplace. "*The Ministry of Magic!*"

* * *

A knock at the door of his study rudely tore Lucius's attention from his enchanted portrait-calendar and its current depiction for September of a pregnant Narcissa.

"Come in," he called, his voice rough. Belatedly, he swiped his hands across his face, wiping away the dampness on his cheeks. Not that it mattered; his bloodshot eyes would doubtless give his tears away.

But it was not Severus who witnessed the evidence of his weak hold on his emotions. Instead it was Draco who stood in the doorway. Yet there was no shame to make Lucius's face burn; his son had been crying too, his eyes puffy and reddened.

"Ginny's miscarried." Draco's face crumpled, fresh tears spilling down his cheeks.

Instinct dictated Lucius's actions as he stood up and crossed over to Draco to pull him into a fatherly embrace, rocking him as Lucius would a child until his sobs subsided.

The awkwardness following that moment was alleviated by busying himself with preparing a shot of Firewhisky spiked with Calming Draught and pushing it into Draco's hands, something Severus had provided for him in the aftermath of Narcissa's miscarriages.

"Ginny's unconscious while the cure works on her. Harry ... I can't talk to him. He won't leave Ginny's side, and I can't bear to see her and know the baby's gone. Not yet," Draco rasped, his eyes slightly unfocused as the calming potion kicked in.

"But you needed to talk to someone," Lucius gently nudged.

Draco nodded miserably. "I don't know if the baby was mine or Harry's. I'm not sure I want to know."

"Would it change anything if you knew?"

Draco frowned and glared at Lucius.

'Perhaps I should have slipped more of the Calming Draught into the shot ...'

"You tell me, Father. Would it change anything for you if I wasn't the father of that poor baby?"

"It would change nothing. You would have been a father to the child, by nurturing if not by blood." Lucius forced down his indignation, moderating his voice so that he spoke calmly. He would *not* snap at Draco, not now. "I ... I would never wish a miscarriage upon anyone. I know how it feels to lose a child before it has a chance to draw breath."

Draco's shoulders slumped. He sniffled, fishing out his handkerchief to dry his tears and clear his nose. "Does it get any easier?" he whispered.

Lucius grimaced. "The loss never goes away, but having other children helps ease the ache."

The sound that escaped Draco was too harsh and bitter to be called a laugh. "We both know that's not possible until the plague's gone for good, or witches will keep miscarrying."

"Severus will come through. He always has before."

"I hope you're right," Draco muttered. "He does know that this isn't his fault, doesn't he?"

Lucius curled his lip. This being Severus ... "I think he does blame himself, but I'll do my best to point out that the powers that be are the guilty party here. They're the ones who forced more pregnancies than there would have otherwise been; and therefore will cause more miscarriages."

"They shouldn't have interfered. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a ..." Draco trailed off as something rapped on the window. Lucius marched across the room to open it and allow a bedraggled owl inside.

"I did wonder why the *Prophet* was delayed. It's at least half an hour late." Lucius removed the paper from the owl's leg and stroked a gentle finger over the ruffled plumage. "Go up to my aviary and get some food and rest, eh?" The owl gave him a friendly nip and swooped away.

He unfolded the paper. "Fuck," he blurted as he spotted the headline.

Draco peered over Lucius's shoulder. "Well, that puts the cockerel with the basilisk."

Absently, Lucius belatedly realised what Hermione must have meant when she once said something about foxes and chickens. He shook himself; he needed his wits about him. "Are they *trying* to incite a riot?"

"I was about to say that I wouldn't be surprised if there was one before that owl arrived. All the *Prophet* is doing is accelerating things. Is it such a bad thing if a mob descends on the Ministry?"

"It is if they also go after Severus!" Lucius stabbed a finger at a paragraph which named the developer of the potion which had made it so that almost all fertile women would conceive a daughter. "It's also no secret that he helped make the cure. He might get blamed for its perceived failure, too."

"We've got to warn him!"

Lucius led the way to Severus's lab. "Fuck," he repeated as he tore off the note stuck to the door.

Draco took the note from him and read it out. "Hermione, I'm meeting with my research team colleagues at the Ministry. I will be back late, I'll join you in bed. Always yours, Severus.' Ugh. Bit too much information there for me!"

"Or too little," Lucius murmured absently.

"What?!"

At Draco's suspicious stare, Lucius hurriedly corrected himself. "I mean, we don't know exactly where he'll be at the Ministry. It'll have to be a Patronus."

It took a few tries to summon his peacock Patronus, his difficulty there the status quo after Narcissa's death and his estrangement from Draco, even if the latter was healing. Lucius put all of his focus into getting his silvery peacock to stop strutting about and concentrate on the message.

"Find Severus and tell him this: 'Screw your meeting and get back to Malfoy Manor right now if you want to keep your scrawny hide intact. The *Prophet's* out for your blood.' Go!"

The Patronus cocked his head quizzically for a few seconds, then finally scurried off as if a wolf were on his tail.

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Sorry for the delay with this chapter. Although expected for the past few months, the death of my grandmother at the end of September had a detrimental effect on my muse. The start of the academic year also means that while I'll try to have at least one update every month as usual, I can't guarantee it.

Chapter 30

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Mob at the Ministry.

Chapter 30

Hermione kept a tight grip on Slughorn's wrist as she dragged him through the Floo. It was possibly dangerous for two people to travel at once, but she didn't want to risk him slipping away if her blunt attempt at blackmail wasn't enough.

Thankfully her gamble paid off, and they emerged unscathed through one of the dedicated Floo fireplaces in the Ministry's Atrium. Unfortunately, that did not last.

A mass of shouting people blocked the way forward, so close to the fireplace that Hermione rebounded from them into Slughorn behind her. Before she could recover her footing, she was shoved from behind as something knocked Slughorn forwards.

If not for Slughorn grabbing her arms, Hermione would have fallen. That saved her from being trampled underfoot, but it didn't save her from being caught between Slughorn's bulk and the crush in front of her.

Winded and bruised, she gasped for breath even as another push from behind drove it from her lungs once more. This time she was pressed too tightly against other bodies to inhale. Spots danced in front of her eyes.

Hermione desperately flicked her wrist until her wand slid from her sleeve and dropped into her palm. For a heart-stopping moment, she almost lost her grip on it, her arms and hands aching after holding up Slughorn's weight during her earlier adrenaline rush.

'Protego!'

She could breathe again, her vision cleared. Hermione felt a twinge of guilt at the people knocked to the floor around her, but if she hadn't acted ... She shuddered.

Then, through a gap in the baying mob crowding the Atrium, she saw a familiar face, barricaded behind the golden gates at the end of the room.

Severus, his eye blackened.

Before the space she had created could close, Hermione turned to grab Slughorn again, hauling him up from the floor. She noticed that a web of golden light blocked all of the arrival fireplaces behind them, which explained the shoves from behind: wards pushing them clear so that they could activate. With Slughorn in tow, she forced her way through the crowd. Several times she was elbowed and once she was punched. Fed up, she resorted to carefully controlled Shielding Charms; she didn't want to hurt anyone.

She didn't try to call out to Severus. There was no way he would hear her, not when several members of the crowd were using *sonorus* to try to make themselves heard. The result made their words mingle together into an incoherent roar of rage at a volume that made Hermione's ears ring.

When she'd fought her way through to within a metre of the gates, she could no longer hear most of the crowd, doubtless the work of some kind of wards. She could finally make out the words of those closest to her.

"Murderers!"

"Come out from your cage and face us, coward!"

"My child didn't get a chance to live! I want justice! The Wizengamot on trial!" This last shout came from a wizard who Hermione was shocked to recognise as the Ministry archive's librarian.

Hermione swallowed. The cat was out of the bag about the plague and the miscarriages, then, and as a result these people wanted Severus's head in addition to the Wizengamot's. At least he was safely behind the gates. She could see Kingsley pulling him along towards the lifts.

"Severus!" At her call, Severus turned his head. Unfortunately his attention was not the only one to have been drawn ...

"An eye for an eye!" With that cry, a burly wizard lunged for her.

Hermione spun to face the danger. Another cast of *Protego* knocked her attacker back before he could lay a finger on her.

But he was only one of many. The mob closed in. Her fingers stung when Bellatrix's wand was torn from her grip as a swift *Expelliarmus* disarmed her before she could try another Shielding Charm.

Slughorn managed to disarm three of the bloodthirsty crowd before his wand was also taken.

Hermione stepped back, but that only pinned her against the cold metal of the gates. No hexes were cast ... could it be that they wanted to tear her apart with their bare hands?

She should let go of Slughorn. Maybe if she did, he'd be in less danger. Yet when she dropped his wrist, he twisted it so that he had a firm hold of her even as he stepped in front of her.

"Leave her alone! Look at yourselves! Attacking an unarmed woman, and a woman who helped Harry Potter..."

Slughorn was cut off by the sick slap of fist against flesh.

Even as hostile hands reached for her, the gates behind Hermione swung open. She fell inside, pulling Slughorn's dazed bulk with her. Familiar hands caught her and dragged them clear as the gates snapped shut, knocking the mob back.

Kingsley stepped forward to relieve Hermione of Slughorn.

Severus shifted his grip on Hermione and wrenched her around to face him. "Idiot girl! If you're part of a mob, blend in with it unless you *want* to be torn limb from limb." He shook her with every word that passed his lips.

Hermione winced as her body protested the rough treatment. "I tried that and being crushed and asphyxiated instead didn't appeal."

Severus instantly stopped shaking her and gently ran his hands over her body. "Are you all right?"

"I could ask you the same thing." She pointedly looked at his swollen-shut eye and the split lip trickling blood down his chin. "Give me your wand."

"It would have been far worse for me if Lucius hadn't sent a Patronus warning me. That gave me just enough time to call Kingsley; I was in the Atrium waiting for my research team colleagues to arrive." He handed the length of ebony over. "I saw those cowards take yours."

"It was Bellatrix's, so no loss there." She pointed his wand to his eye and then to his lip, healing them as best she could. "Anything else?"

The glint in his eye made it clear exactly what else he had in mind for when they were alone.

"Hey, you two, wait until we're somewhere safer. The new wards in the Atrium mean that no offensive spells can be cast, but they won't last forever when there's Curse Breakers in that mob." Kingsley shepherded them towards the lifts. Once safely inside, he turned to Hermione. "I can understand why you're here, what with the *Prophet*'s front page...although I did hope you'd have more sense than to come to Severus's rescue...but what's Slughorn doing with you?"

"I haven't seen the *Prophet* yet. What have they done now?" Hermione crossed her arms. Was that infernal newspaper capable of anything good?!

"Ah. Well, that mob was the reaction to it, within minutes of delivery. The *charming* editors decided to share the blame that belongs to the Wizengamot with Severus."

"Why aren't the Aurors or Magical Law Enforcement up there?" Slughorn asked from where he was propped up against the side of the lift.

"They are." Kingsley sighed. "Problem is that they're part of the mob. Seems they don't want to uphold the Wizengamot's decisions anymore. I wouldn't blame them if not for the fact that they aren't just after the Wizengamot."

"Should I be honoured that they consider me a scapegoat to surpass that august body?" Severus sneered. Hermione tightened her grip on his arm almost unconsciously. No one would be taking him from her if she could help it!

"I don't know, I might match you there," Kingsley grumbled, jabbing his wand against the doors when they threatened to open as the lift briefly halted. "I am the Minister and as such have a seat on that stupid council, too. Oh, and I'm protecting you."

"True enough ... even if I'm the one with the largest target painted on my back, you're standing in the way."

The lift slid to a halt again, but this time Kingsley let the doors open to reveal the familiar corridor that led to both the Department of Mysteries and the courtrooms.

"The silver lining to this mess is that although I only called an emergency meeting just after I got the *Prophet*, almost everyone will already be here. It'd usually take them at least an hour...nothing like trying to save their own necks to motivate them!"

Kingsley cautiously walked forward, wand in hand. "The mob is still upstairs, but there might be hostile Ministry staff around. Only the actual courtrooms down here have strong defensive wards, but unfortunately the anti-offensive ones haven't been implemented yet."

Still dazed, Slughorn surrendered his wand to Severus, who tried to fall back into rearguard position. Hermione had none of it, slipping past him so that he was with Slughorn in the middle of their squad. His lack of protest was suspicious, though ... It didn't take long for her to realise that Kingsley had somehow shut down the lifts, leaving her position at the back as the safest.

But that would only be the case if no one came out of the Department of Mysteries, Hermione mused as they left that door behind them and swiftly walked downstairs towards the courtrooms. She fingered the line of the scar across her chest, remembering the last time she found herself ambushed in the bowels of the Ministry. Was it too much to hope that Kingsley had somehow managed to lock that door as well? That might explain why Severus hadn't tried to swap places with her.

The corridor seemed even darker and longer than normal, the tense silence only broken by their muffled footsteps. It should have been a relief that they reached Courtroom Ten with no marauding Unspeakables or other Ministry drones swarming. Instead Hermione felt all the jumpier, as both logic and instinct screamed at her that an attack was looming.

Kingsley touched his wand and then his free hand to the door. The wards protecting it appeared as a web of gold, temporarily parting to allow them through as the door swung open.

A forest of wands trembled before them, held by almost universally unsteady hands. They lowered with varying speed as the occupants registered who had entered. Hermione noted with some amusement that Fudge and his cronies almost dropped theirs in their hurry not to risk her wrath.

"I see we are all here," Kingsley boomed, his voice raised over the babble of the assembled Wizengamot. "Good. We can begin."

"Begin what? And we're *not* all..."

"All those who can come, Fudge. If you haven't noticed, those missing are witches, and I think we can all guess why they are indisposed," scoffed a tall man from beside Kingsley. Hermione recognised him as Kingsley's fellow husband, but couldn't remember his name.

"Enough!" Kingsley ordered, before Fudge could do more than open his mouth to retort. "We are under siege. Unless we want to be torn limb from limb by the mob that will eventually break down that door, we need to come up with something that will pacify them."

"He's the one they want!" cried one of Fudge's cronies, his mouth hidden by a beard that seemed to sprout from his nostrils. He was pointing straight at Severus. Hermione raised her borrowed wand, ready to hex that revolting beard into worms.

Severus laid his hand on her arm and gently made her lower it. "He's not worth it," he whispered, his lips by her ear.

Kingsley stepped between them and the bearded finger-pointer. "Severus may be their named scapegoat, yes, but the Wizengamot do not escape the rightful blame."

"You are meant to be on our side, Minister!" Fudge protested.

"And whose side is that?" snapped a portly man to his left. Fudge stumbled back in shock; Hermione surmised that the speaker must have been one of his cronies. "That Merlin forsaken addendum is why my wife *and* my daughter are going to miscarry. The only reason I'm not part of that mob upstairs is that I'm one of their targets. If I'm on anyone's side, I'm on *hers*." He levelled a fat finger at Hermione. "She's got the right idea, getting rid of that stupid law."

Fudge sighed heavily and reluctantly spoke up. "All in favour of revoking the addendum, at least until the plague is no longer a threat?"

Miraculously, all hands raised ... including Fudge's.

"While that might be enough for the enraged public, we're now without a means to repopulate. For the love of Merlin, we're worse off than we were at the start of this mess!" Fudge turned his balding head to Hermione. "I hope you have a viable alternative up your sleeves, young lady."

Incredulity contorted Hermione's features. "In a situation where witches cannot carry a child to term? *Are you out of your mind?*"

"What about Muggle women?" suggested a wizard too far back in the room for Hermione to make out his face. "I know it's not an ideal solution, what with the Statute of Secrecy, and the fact that they are, well ... Muggles. But they don't fall ill, so if we marry off wizards to them, there will surely be more witches born that way. No miscarriages!"

"*Not an ideal solution?*" Severus hissed. "It is not a solution at all while there are witches alive. No one will stand for any further interference from you. No man worthy of the word would stand by and do nothing by allowing an established marriage...even one brought about by this body...to be torn asunder."

"But what if the witches are doomed?"

Severus's arms closed around Hermione. "Over my dead body," he snarled. She could feel his words as much as she could hear them. "*will* modify the cure successfully. The alternative is unthinkable."

"Of course, of course, I mean, I accept that we cannot ask wizards to abandon their wives, and that you will do your utmost, Master Snape, but we have to plan for the worst. If it comes to pass, we'll need to act to save ourselves or eventually die out too."

"Perhaps we can discuss that at another time," Fudge suggested, eyeing Hermione and Severus. He obviously thought that time should be when they were not present to argue. "The matter at hand, gentlemen. We need more witches. Until our pet Potions Master provides us with healthy mothers-to-be, we need to explore alternatives."

Kingsley's co-husband spoke up. "Let's hear it, Fudge. Your voice is practically oozing smugness. I can only think that you have an idea."

"Indeed I do, it's absurdly simple: we adopt Muggle-born girls under the age of eleven. We can prepare them far better for life in the magical world than their biological parents can. It's the perfect solution. Just as my esteemed colleague said, Muggle women won't be miscarrying."

Ice cold fury chilled Hermione's blood. She wanted to wipe that smug smirk from Fudge's face, preferably by sealing his lips shut permanently. The only silver lining of his abhorrent suggestion was that he'd reminded her of why she'd gone to the Ministry in the first place.

The room had erupted with a chorus of shocked gasps, enraged shouts and sickening applause. Hermione tapped Severus's wand to her throat and cast *Sonorus* to make herself heard. "Quite apart from the morally *abominable* idea of taking children from their parents, the only pre-Hogwarts Muggle-borns alive are male. *There are no Muggle-born girls younger than twelve.*" An appalled silence had fallen, allowing Hermione to remove the Amplifying Charm.

"It's true," Slughorn admitted, fulfilling his purpose for being there. Hopefully his probable concussion wouldn't discount his word. "The Book of Names at Hogwarts has recorded the deaths."

Fudge's face was a sickly grey. Sweat beaded his brow, and he sat down heavily where he stood. "Oh, Dolores, how could you ... I trusted ..."

'Umbridge. What does she have to do with this?'

"Spit it out, Fudge. What do you know of this?" Kingsley's voice cut through the rising consternated babble.

"I ... I swear I had no idea ..." he stammered, covering his eyes with a shaking hand.

"Pull yourself together and get to the point," Kingsley snapped.

Fudge flinched. "The Director of St Mungo's is a close personal friend of mine. He was overloaded with work organising the distribution of the cure." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "He begged a favour of me by deferring responsibility of distribution to the Muggle-born population to me."

Hermione felt something intangible snap deep inside. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, her sight fading until Fudge's loathsome face was all she could see. She lunged at him with an incoherent cry of rage, breaking free of Severus's grip.

Before she'd taken one leap, arms closed around her from behind, pinning hers to her sides. She struggled madly, but that only resulted in her being lifted off her feet.

Severus's voice in her ear forestalled any attempts to kick, as she belatedly recognised the arms restraining her. "Much as he deserves it, I will not see you imprisoned for attacking Fudge."

She stopped struggling and fell limp in his arms. She loosened her white-knuckled grip on the wand in her hand, something which all things considered was fortunate that she'd forgotten about. Her throat ached.

"Please don't let go of her," Fudge blurted as Severus set her back down on her feet. As requested, he kept his arms around her. In retrospect, it was just as well he did ...

"Um, so I had responsibility for that, but I'm a busy man at the best of times with my position here, and back then ..." Fudge continued, eyeing Hermione much like a mouse would a cat. "I deferred it to my secretary at the time and now my wife Dolores Umbridge-Fudge."

Once more Severus had to hold Hermione back, this time snatching his wand from her fingers as she tried to raise it.

"Let me at him!" She twisted her head to the side to snarl at her husband-come-captor, who shook his head regretfully. She stifled a furious sob and turned back to face Fudge. "How *could* you put their lives in her hands! *Umbridge* was responsible for the atrocities of the Muggle-born Registration Committee!"

"She ... she was under the Imperius Curse. She testified as much under *Veritaserum*!"

"*Veritaserum* has an antidote and can also be resisted by a sufficiently powerful *Occlumens*." Severus loosened his grip slightly as if he were considering unleashing her on Fudge for his sheer stupidity.

"Regardless of whether or not she really was under the Imperius then, she was definitely not in this case. Gawain, find Madam Umbridge-Fudge and arrest her." Kingsley ordered, crossing to the door and temporarily lowering the wards for his co-husband to depart. He turned back to Fudge and bound him in silver cords with a flick of his wand. "Cornelius Fudge, you are under arrest for criminal neglect if not outright manslaughter."

The sight of Fudge slumping in resigned acceptance of his fate smothered the fires of Hermione's anger, leaving her hollow. There was no satisfaction to be had when all of the victims were either dead or still dying.

Severus released her from his restraining grip and gently turned her to face him, running his fingers across her cheeks to wipe away the dampness of tears she hadn't even been aware of shedding.

"I need to deal with that mob now that I have the news to pacify them. Severus, do you think you can escort Hermione and Slughorn to my office so that they can Floo out from there? Your colleagues should be able to arrive once I've persuaded our uninvited guests to go home." Kingsley turned back to the door and lowered the wards once more so that they could leave. Once outside, he raised them again.

"Aren't you worried that Fudge's friends will set him free?" Hermione asked.

"No. Apart from the fact that the spell I bound him with can only be removed by my wand, his fair-weather friends won't want to risk going down with him. Some of them are Muggle-born or have a Muggle-born parent, too, so I should be more concerned about whether or not he'll still be in one piece when I get back." Kingsley smiled grimly.

They reached the lift without incident. Kingsley reactivated it, presumably locked back down after Gawain Robards used it, and took them up to Level One.

"Time to handle the mess in the Atrium. Wish me luck!" With that, he sent the lift back down.

Severus led the way to Kingsley's office, passing his wand to Hermione and using Slughorn's again himself.

Hermione slapped her forehead. "*Homenum Revelio*," she murmured, wishing that she'd thought of casting the detection charm during the tense trip through the Ministry dungeons. There were no Ministry staff present. Were they all in the Atrium, or had they deserted their posts out of fear? Whatever the case, they reached Kingsley's office safely.

Severus pressed his hand to the door, which smoothly swung open at the touch, a far more subtle approach than Hermione's last entrance through it.

Beside the fireplace, Slughorn fumbled with the Floo powder, spilling a handful.

Severus cleared his throat and held out the wand in his hands. "Don't you want your wand back, Horace?"

"Oh, yes, much obliged." Slughorn took the wand back and turned to Hermione. "I'll keep my eyes open from now on, I promise *Hogwarts*!" He left before Hermione could respond, something she regretted since he had acquitted himself well, both in trying to protect her and in vouching for her.

"What did he mean by that?" Severus asked, his body a comforting warmth against her.

"He hadn't looked in that book at Hogwarts before today. Fudge and Umbridge could have been caught long before now if he'd done his duty. But he is trying to make up for that now, so I don't think it'll help to tar him with the same brush as that horrid pair."

"Incompetent sycophant," he muttered. "Hermione, I ... I had no idea about the Muggle-borns. But I should have known!"

Hermione spun to face him. She took his face in her hands and waited until he reluctantly met her gaze. "It's not your fault. You're not the one whom Kingsley is throwing in Azkaban! You helped make the cure. You're not the one who was meant to make sure everyone who needed it got it."

"I suppose so ... I swear I will make sure that the research team investigates whether Muggle-borns babies can be given the cure, as they are surely still being born."

"Yes, and dying within days. My parents told me about reports in the Muggle news, so I went to Hogwarts to check that it wasn't some sick coincidence. It wasn't. It was Umbridge. Azkaban is too good for her." Hermione's words were muffled against Severus as he pulled her into a fierce embrace.

"Kingsley will make sure justice is served. In the meantime, I will find out if it is safe to give the cure to babies. I don't know, as adapting the dosage of the cure to make it suitable for as many as possible was the responsibility of one of my colleagues."

Hermione lifted her head to share a despairing glance with Severus. Muggle medicines were often unsuitable for children that young, a problem that might well be the case with magical ones too. Worse, even if the cure could be applied safely, the plague might have mutated outside the influence of the cure.

A Ministry memo flew out of the fireplace to be caught by Severus. He skimmed the contents and sighed. "I should go to meet with my colleagues. Will you be all right until I get back tonight?"

"I'll be fine," she stretched up on her tiptoes to give him a quick kiss on the lips. "See you later." She stepped out of his arms, handed his wand back to him and took a handful of Floo powder. "*Malfoy Manor*!"

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

"The addendum has been revoked until the plague is no longer a threat. The Wizengamot and the Ministry advise that any voluntary attempts to have children are put off until then, too, for obvious reasons.

"While I do understand your anger and feel your suffering...my utmost condolences to you all...I am sickened by the attempts I witnessed to murder two innocent people: Severus Snape and Hermione Granger. Both are worth a thousand of the cowards in this crowd who cast the metaphorical stones. Shame on you.

"Without Severus Snape, there would be no cure. He did not create it alone, but it would not have been found without him. And with no cure, there would be no witches. He is not the guilty party here; he did not create the plague, in all likelihood Voldemort did. That the cure 'failed' is also not Severus Snape's fault: the plague mutated.

"Furthermore, if you had succeeded in murder...and you know who you are...when the plague comes back again, there would be nothing to stop it. We all need Severus Snape to adapt the cure.

"As for Hermione Granger, her heroic deeds need no introduction. And you would have killed her for nothing but the fact that she is married to Severus Snape, not twelve hours since the plague had her in its grasp once more.

"She, too, is essential to the cure. Do you think Severus Snape would care about saving any other witches had you succeeded in murdering his wife in front of him? In fact, you should all ask yourselves if he will help you now after you merely attempting to do so.

"You, with the quill ... your masters at the Daily Prophet owe them both an unreserved apology for the omissions in this morning's paper that almost resulted in murder. The same could be said to be owed to the Ministry and the Wizengamot for inciting a riot, but in the circumstances I am more inclined to forgive and forget."

"Forgive and forget. An interesting choice of phrase," Lucius mused, raising his gaze from the newspaper in his hands to where Hermione sat opposite him. "Good of Shackbolt to defend Severus, but I fear it will remind people of his shady past."

"Because they'll think he'll only help them if there's something in it for him? Even when Kingsley gave the explicit reason why he might be reluctant?"

"Indeed." Lucius smiled thinly. "Attempting to murder you. Which, incidentally, you neglected to mention. In fact, you neglected to mention it so well that you led me to believe that you hadn't set foot in the Ministry and had instead been contacted by Severus."

Hermione shrugged. As if it was *nothing*. "I didn't want to worry you. Wouldn't want that pretty hair of yours to fall out, would we?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes at her. Hair loss was a forbidden topic under his roof, and while she hadn't actually lied to him as such, her omission was nearly as bad.

"I didn't know about the riot when I went to the Ministry, although that doesn't really count for much because I would have gone even if I had known. Especially if I had."

'*Gryffindor!*' Yet Lucius could not stay angry with her. Not when he'd actually been on the point of going with Draco to Severus's rescue just as Hermione had returned with the news that all was well. Relieved, Draco left to watch over his wife.

As for Hermione trying to keep things secret from him ... well, for him to hold a grudge about that would be quite the double standard, considering his Pensieve porn. Not that he was about to come clean there, as it would be nothing less than suicide. He let it slide and returned his attention to the newspaper.

"I hope you'll be pleased to hear that the *Prophet* has done as Shackbolt directed and printed an apology. And not hidden away, either." He turned the page, both to read on and to show her the apologetic babble under the transcript of the Minister's speech.

His eyes narrowed as the subheading of the article taking up most of the second page caught his attention *Muggle-borns Murdered!* His fingers tightened on the paper with each sentence he read until the paper threatened to tear. Lucius forced his hands to relax and smoothed the paper.

"Another thing you neglected to mention?" His voice frigid, he handed the *Prophet* to Hermione. He couldn't really blame her for keeping it from him, though. Not when his opinions on Mudb...*Muggle-borns* until recently were well known.

"Amazing. I thought the Wizengamot might have tried to keep that quiet. Then again, they do have the guilty parties to push all of the blame onto and so can be seen to be doing their jobs for once," she spat bitterly and passed the paper back to him. "What it doesn't mention is that I'm the one who discovered that. You know I went to visit my parents this morning? Well, they had some information for me. Muggles have noticed higher infant mortality, and the fact that it's mostly girls made my parents think ..."

"That it was the plague's doing."

Hermione nodded. "I went to Hogwarts and got Slughorn to show me the book of names. What we saw ..." She sniffed, her eyes welling with tears. Lucius patted her hand and discreetly offered her his spare hanky. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose with a *honk* that had his lips twitching. To his relief, she did not offer it back.

"I know I have not always ... favoured Muggle-borns, but even in my days as the Dark Lord's pet, I would not have wished that fate on them. Especially not on children." He curled his lip. "Umbridge, on the other hand ... I do wonder why the likes of her survive while good witches die."

She frowned. "Come to that, why was she around to handle the distribution? Surely the plague should have had her insensate in St Mungo's too."

Lucius cleared his throat. "Rumour has it that she's *a/le*. I certainly never knew a Dolores Umbridge at Hogwarts, but I did know a Brennan Umbridge. Funnily enough, he was an only child."

"I suppose that might explain a lot about Umbridge. All the pink, the sickening taste in decorations ... she... *er/le*, was overcompensating." Hermione shuddered. "But still more than I ever wanted to know."

He took pity on her and changed the subject. "Indeed, but there is some good news at least. The culprits have been arrested, and even those as wealthy as me could not buy their way out of that shitload of trouble. And you've got what you wanted: the addendum has been retracted!"

Hermione didn't smile. "I was there when they did it. Believe me, it's no victory. Not this way." She lurched to her feet and began to pace up and down. "We need an alternative solution to the addendum when it comes back. And there's *nothing!*"

The hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, Lucius readied himself to cast Shielding charms. While he'd tinkered with the wards so that his home and its contents could no longer be damaged by Hermione's temper, *he* still could be.

But the explosion of wandless magic did not come. Hermione's shoulders slumped. "Except there's no need for a solution until the plague is cured. Without that, there is no solution because no witches can be born."

"I'm sure Severus will..." Lucius stifled a surprised yelp as a silver creature burst through the wall and came to a sudden halt in front of Hermione. A Patronus. He frowned, trying to recall whether he knew of anyone with a pig as a guardian form.

"Ms Granger." Slughorn's voice emerged from the pig's throat rather than *anoink*. "Please come to Hogwarts. It's worse than we thought."

Hermione dragged a hand over her face. "What now?" she half-sobbed. "How can it get any worse?"

Lucius was lost for words. He stood and hesitantly walked over to her. Conscious that a comforting hug might get him in serious trouble with Severus, and possibly with Hermione herself if it was misconstrued, he awkwardly patted her shoulder.

She visibly pulled herself together, straightening her shoulders. "I'd better go." Hermione paused and patted her pocket. "Via Ollivander's. Severus will have my head if I go anywhere else without a wand."

Lucius blinked. If he remembered rightly, she'd been using Bellatrix's old wand ever since she'd appropriated it from the raving bitch. Where was it now?

"The rioters disarmed me." Presumably just before they tried to kill her ... Noticing Lucius's scowl, she hastily continued, "It gives me an excuse to get a new wand, so no harm done."

"I'll accompany you to Diagon Alley. Now. No argument, please, you do have enemies."

"Fine." Hermione sighed. "I suppose you'd sic Severus on me otherwise."

"Indeed." Lucius offered his arm. "Shall we?"

Hermione's new wand (yew and dragon heartstring) in her pocket, she Flooed directly to the Headmaster's office from Ollivander's. Lucius hurriedly thanked Ollivander before Flooing to his own fireplace. After the wandmaker's time as the Dark Lord's captive in his home, Lucius didn't feel comfortable in his presence, despite feeling as much a prisoner during that time.

While he waited for Hermione to return, Lucius visited his aviary. It was something he'd always liked to do when feeling out of sorts, and something he'd sorely missed during the Dark Lord's invasion. After all, if he'd inadvertently attracted the bastard's attention to it, his poor birds would have ended up on the dinner table at best and in Nagini's stomach at worst.

It seemed like mere minutes later that he felt Hermione's arrival in the library through the wards. He stroked his Snidget goodbye and Apparated to Hermione's side.

She stumbled back in surprise, one hand over her heart. "I hate it when you do that!"

He bowed. "My pleasure. What did you learn?"

Hermione shook her head, tight-lipped. "I can't tell you."

"I see. Too sensitive to share with the likes of me?" Lucius pouted. "I thought you trusted me."

She had the cheek to roll her eyes at him. "Honestly! I didn't ask you for an Unbreakable Vow after Tricky poisoned me, did I? No, I trusted your word. I can't tell you ~~yet~~, which I was about to say when you opened your mouth and inserted foot."

"Oh." Lucius felt his cheeks burn. "Why not yet?"

"Because it's really not something I want to repeat, so I'd rather wait until Severus can hear it too."

"But he won't be back for hours! I saw the note he left you, and it said he wouldn't be back until you were in bed."

Hermione shrugged. "I need a distraction. For longer, the better." She wandered over to the nearest shelf and selected a book.

"Humph." Lucius went back to his birds, Disapparating with an intentionally loud crack.

Severus returned earlier than his note had estimated, while Lucius and Hermione were eating dinner. A house-elf brought another heaped plate for Severus, which he picked at.

Impatient to hear Hermione's news, Lucius was about to prompt her when Severus threw down his fork.

"Fools," he spat. "The international research team now has no Arithmancers at all. The idiots got themselves killed and nearly finished off the rest of us too."

Come to think of it, Severus did look a bit haggard, his eyes bloodshot. Both were signs of magical exhaustion but easily mistaken for common or garden tiredness.

"They tried to combine the magic of the whole team in order to solve the equation which would reveal how the plague will mutate. The fallout ... it was a Master level spell! Of course it would kill those not skilled enough. One of the Arithmancers realised when it went wrong and released the rest of us, which meant we only suffered nosebleeds while they ..." He looked away.

Lucius frowned. "Wasn't there a Master Arithmancer among the team? I thought they were meant to be experts."

"You didn't do Arithmancy at Hogwarts," Hermione stated. Quite how she knew that from his perfectly reasonable question was beyond Lucius. "All Arithmancy Masters are actually Mistresses. For some reason no wizard is skilled enough it's a witch speciality." At Lucius's affronted expression she continued, "Oh, wizards are good enough to pass up to NEWT level, even to get Outstanding, but they allow for gender handicap up to that point. It's just like Potions is a wizard speciality, it's nothing against the other gender that they cannot reach Mastery. Magic balances things out in other areas."

"But why doesn't the team have any..." Lucius came to a sickened halt as the truth occurred to him. "The Arithmancy Mistresses all died."

Hermione nodded reluctantly and turned to Severus. "What I don't understand is why the Arithmancers on your team didn't use Vector's test."

"Vector's *what*?"

"Something Professor Vector invented to test if an equation was too dangerous to perform." Her eyes widened. "Oh. Of course ... she had to do it for the boys. I think it's a 'witches only' thing. But why didn't the team get someone who could do it?"

"There are still no witches on the team because it needs to be able to operate when the plague is active. Quite why we shouldn't have witches to help until that happens is

beyond me." Severus stabbed his fork into his dinner.

"We do need to know how the plague will mutate, and how long it will take before it's active again." Hermione hesitated, eyeing Severus. "I could try..."

"No. I will not risk you."

"But..."

"Please. Don't."

Hermione mercifully dropped it before Lucius had to witness Severus beg any more. Did the man have no shame? It had been a year of marital bliss before Lucius fell to such lows with Narcissa.

Lucius cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the tension between them. True, he wouldn't mind witnessing the inevitable shagging, but these raw emotions were another matter. "I think one of my ancestors was a famous Arithmancer. There's a portrait of her somewhere: I will ask her if she can help." He made to escape on that pretext.

Hermione called him back. "Wait. I should tell you what Slughorn called me back to Hogwarts about."

To Lucius's relief, the tense atmosphere faded slightly with her words.

"Slughorn did what he said he would and looked through the book in more detail. He knew how to make it show year by year intake." She turned away, hugging herself.

Severus moved to stand behind her, his hands resting on her shoulders. One of Hermione's hands moved to grip his, forcefully reminding Lucius of when Narcissa did the same with him.

"The intake drastically increased after the plague. But it can only be seen in the book because it's Muggle-born girls who never lived to reach Hogwarts. Looking at the numbers and comparing them to the witches that have died, whatever causes Muggle-born births is trying to balance things again," she said in a deadened monotone.

"Nature abhors a vacuum," Severus murmured.

Hermione nodded. What Lucius could see of her face was wet with tears.

"But this is good news, isn't it?" Lucius stepped close enough to offer her another hanky. She refused it, extracting the one he'd given her earlier from a pocket. "When the plague is cured, this will be the solution you've been searching for..." It was a strain to sound happy at the prospect of the wizarding world overrun by Mud...Muggle-borns. But for Hermione, he'd try.

"It's not good news yet," Severus snarled, glaring at Lucius. "Not when I must concentrate my efforts on adapting the cure. Not when it's entirely possible the plague has mutated independently with Muggle-borns who never had the now obsolete cure. Not when even in the event that the plague is gone forever, the pure-blood supremacists would rather kill the influx of Muggle-borns than have their world 'taken over' by the invaders."

"True," Lucius admitted. "Not too long ago, I would have been one of those misguided fools. One thing for sure, it will do no good to keep this information a secret. Not when Slughorn knows. At the very least, we must tell Shackbolt, and it would be an idea to let the general public know, too. So that they can grow accustomed to the idea, so that we can put the best possible spin on this. Perhaps my former brethren will rethink their positions if I personally champion this." He winced. Generations of his forefathers must be rolling in the family mausoleum. "And it will give me something to do while you two work on the cure."

They were both staring at him as if he'd grown another head.

"Er, thanks." Hermione managed to find her voice. "Well, that's one way to prove to everyone that you've changed."

"Indeed," Severus murmured. "Perhaps you'd like to visit Kingsley while I inform my wife how she can be of assistance to me. After all, what the team does not know about witchily assistance won't hurt it."

"My pleasure," Lucius grumbled. While it had been his idea to update the Minister, he hadn't intended to be the one to do so. That would teach him to volunteer for anything.

* * *

Hermione turned to Severus as soon as Lucius left. "I thought you didn't want to 'risk' me." As soon as she had said it, she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. Now that he'd decided he wanted her help, she didn't want him to change his mind!

"There is no risk for what I have in mind. You're at least as good as Draco when it comes to potions, and I'd much rather spend the time with you than him."

"But it's the Arithmancy that you need!"

"Not at the cost of your life," Severus snapped. "How can you ask that of me after what I saw today? They dropped dead in front of me, burnt out husks, and you would have me see you die the same way."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest but didn't have the heart to push Severus. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She'd just do the Arithmancy in private. With Vector's test, there was no risk. Well, not as much as Severus thought there was, the overprotective worrier.

Severus led the way to his lab, clearly expecting her to follow. She'd have to wait to do her clandestine calculations.

The lab was in a mess, or what passed for a mess with Severus's exacting standards. Congealed potions slowly corroded cauldrons shoved out of the way to clear space for what looked like a microscope.

Severus cursed under his breath as he noticed where she was looking. A series of irritable wand flicks cleared everything away except for the microscope and some vials arrayed next to it. "I was working on the memory restorer before you fell ill. After that I had more important things to worry about."

With that obvious reasoning, even Harry and Ron wouldn't find any glee in Severus going against his own classroom or lab rules.

"Will we be brewing more of the cure?"

"No. I am to work on altering it. While there is not much anyone can do to assist me, I would much rather it be you."

The unspoken 'in case you don't survive the next bout of the plague' made for an uncomfortable silence. To be honest, Hermione would much rather spend what time she could with him as well and could hardly fault Severus for wanting the same. She only hoped she would not be a distraction.

Severus peered into the microscope and adjusted some of the knobs. "Come and look at this." He stepped back to let her in.

Under the microscope Hermione could see what looked to be red blood cells and ... what in the world?! There was something else, something alien. Hermione had never seen a cell like that in her parents' medical textbooks. It was shaped more like some sort of virus, but ghostly, as if it was some sort of illusion. Whatever it was, it moved and slowly changed in front of her morbidly fascinated eyes.

"That is a sample of your blood with the plague active in it. I took it just before I gave you the cure for the second time." He reached over to twist a knob on the microscope. "And this is another sample of your blood, taken when you first fell ill."

Ah. Her blood. Talk about facing her own mortality! Hermione suppressed a shudder and resolutely stared down the microscope. It couldn't hurt her. Severus would hardly show her otherwise.

The picture was static this time, showing the plague before it mutated. Severus flicked the image back and forth, allowing her to see the difference.

"I had hoped I could calculate how it would change from comparing the two, but ..." He showed her a slideshow modelling how the plague should have mutated, but the end result was different to how the plague currently looked in the most recent blood sample. "It seems to mutate at random, although there must be some sort of pattern in there. Otherwise how can the cure still work on all witches previously given it? That, and I learned today from my colleagues that it has mutated in the same way worldwide."

"So the plague affects the blood," Hermione mused, straightening up. "Have blood transfusions been tried? Magically replacing all of the blood, if it's not too dangerous?"

Severus nodded. "It has been tried. The plague just spread to the new blood supply, far faster than any Muggle disease could. As fast as a curse, come to think of it, since Voldemort has been implicated with the creation of the plague, which is hardly surprising given the proximity to his death and the devastating effect."

"I guess if anyone would try to wreak vengeance like a bad loser, he would." And from what Hermione had seen, if anyone had the power to do such things it was Voldemort. A powerful wizard to begin with, he'd turned inhuman after creating too many Horcruxes.

"But we cannot be certain, as it didn't strike the moment his own Killing Curse backfired on him. Not knowing the cause for sure makes it ... difficult to engineer a cure."

Hermione slipped her hand into his and squeezed it. "You did it once. You'll do it again."

Severus gently pulled away and braced his hands on the table, a bleak expression on his face. "I appreciate your faith in me, but I fear it is misplaced. In order to adapt the cure I need to know what the plague will mutate into. I do need an Arithmancer. But I will not risk you."

At least that was a start ... Severus knew deep down inside that he was wrong to stop her, so maybe he'd turn a blind eye when she conveniently found some private time. Then again, maybe not, if the set of his jaw was anything to judge by.

"But maybe we could adapt the cure to mutate as well, to the same pattern as the plague," Severus murmured. He turned to Hermione. "If you're to help me, you'll need to know the background."

He held up a vial of clear fluid. When he swirled it around, it shone with an inner light. "I had the idea of phoenix tears when you fell ill. Fawkes doesn't cry for just anyone, but he did for you."

"So that's ..."

"Phoenix tears?" He shook his head. "When I gave you the tears, nothing happened. Fawkes provided some more after the discovery that the plague affected the blood. Normally topically applied phoenix tears will cure anything except a few curses: the instantly fatal ones."

"I intravenously applied the tears. Again, nothing happened. Or rather, nothing appeared to. Blood tests proved that they did work against the plague. The reason the tears 'failed' is that they were absorbed too quickly, something unheard of."

Severus put the vial down and began to fiddle with his magical microscope again. "Some Healers at St Mungo's tried to get me to have Fawkes cry enough tears so that the entire circulatory system would be cleansed of the disease. I vetoed that. I think you can guess why."

Because there was a limit to how much poor Fawkes could cry, and even a miracle cure like phoenix tears had to be dangerous in too large a dose. Hermione said as much.

"Indeed. Injecting too much of a foreign liquid, even a beneficial one, would kill you. By the time it was absorbed it would dilute your blood too much." He tenderly cupped her cheek. "I was not about to lose you to a cure worse than the disease."

"So phoenix tears were not an option. Thanks to Fawkes we knew what we needed, something that could do what the tears did but wouldn't be absorbed so quickly."

He flicked the vial containing the cure, resulting in a musical ring. "As such, the cure is effectively artificial phoenix tears, although it only works against the plague. Until now. By the time it was ready for testing, you had coughed up blood, even in the induced coma." Severus's lips pressed into a firm line, his eyes haunted.

"I insisted that you were among the test subjects. Risky, yes, but I ... you had no time to lose."

Hermione stepped closer to wrap her arms around his chest, tucking her head under his chin. "I take it coughing up blood is a particularly bad sign with this plague?" She pulled away slightly in order to speak without mumbling.

"It happens forty-eight hours before death. As the cure also takes time to work, by the time it had been administered and fought through your system ... put it this way, I prefer not to think of it."

She swallowed hard. "The Muggle-born babies are dying within forty-eight hours."

Severus's arms tightened around her briefly, before he stepped away, his brow furrowed in thought. "And the early symptoms of the plague were accelerated with you with this second attack. There might be a slight silver lining to this ... the plague is clearly more advanced with no influence of the cure. I would need blood samples to be sure, but perhaps it is a way to predict how the plague within you is mutating."

"Can't you just take another sample from me?"

"Once the cure has been applied, the plague is not visible. I would not be able to see it, although I am sure it is still mutating."

There was a fragile hope in Severus's eyes. Hermione prayed to whatever deity would listen that hope was not crushed by whatever he found out in the days to come. For both, no, for all of their sakes.

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Sorry for the longer than intended delay in updating. Real life is rather demanding and will remain so until I finish uni. Please be patient, I will do my best to update when I can.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of 37

Illicit Arithmancy.

Chapter 32

Lucius emerged for breakfast to find that Severus and Hermione had already finished theirs.

Severus raised an eyebrow at him. "Late night?"

Lucius shot a dirty look at him over the top of his cup of coffee. "I seem to recall that you are the one who sent me on an errand to Shackbolt last night." He pointed at the empty plates only just vanishing from the table as the house-elves collected them. "You could have waited for me."

"It was your idea," Hermione reminded him from her seat beside Severus. "And we would have, but we thought you needed your beauty sleep. Speaking of Kingsley, what did he have to say?"

"You are looking at the official Ministry liaison between Muggle-borns and the wizarding world." Setting his cup down, Lucius dug into his fry up.

"Congratulations," Hermione murmured.

"I'm surprised you managed to sit on that overnight. It might be just what you need to kick your reputation out of the gutter."

Lucius shrugged, unoffended at Severus's words. A mouthful of bacon kept him from saying anything. Under the current circumstances, his reputation or lack thereof didn't matter much, although proof that he had really changed after all was admittedly useful. It might make it easier to gain access to Shackbolt in future, too, as it had taken him a couple of hours to do so.

"You'd already retired for the night by the time I got back, and it's hardly as if it means anything as things stand. For the time being I can assist Shackbolt in preparations to ease the passage of Muggle-borns into our world, but it's a meaningless title when there's practically no Muggle-borns to do it for."

Lucius paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, suddenly aware that he was flirting with a case of foot in mouth, saying such things in present company. "Merely a statement of fact," he hurriedly added. "It will still keep me occupied and make me feel marginally useful while the two of you help save the witches of the wizarding world."

Severus snorted. "While I admit the cure is a touchy subject, you don't need to walk on eggshells around it. I know that you must have some faith in me, or you wouldn't have bothered to waste hours chasing Kingsley around at the Ministry to talk to him about something that wouldn't be an issue should I fail."

"When are you going to ask that portrait of your ancestress about the Arithmancy?" Hermione asked.

"I already have, actually. I did not so much as have a 'late night' as you two had an early one; there was time for me to talk to a family portrait before bed."

"Define late," Severus muttered. "It was a long day. That riot did not start it well, and the Arithmancers on the research team killing themselves and nearly taking me with them really did not improve matters."

In other words, Severus had been the one in need of his beauty sleep. It had even worked to some extent, as he looked far less haggard. Almost healthy, although his skin was still as fallow as ever.

Hermione sighed. "I meant to ask if I could be there when you did talk to the portrait. But I guess there's nothing to stop me from talking to her at another time?"

"Nothing except the fact that she will not talk to half-bloods, let alone a Muggle-born. It's why I didn't wait until morning so that you would be around too." Lucius looked away, embarrassment an uncomfortable heat. Even before Hermione proved to him that it was possible for a Muggle-born to be exceptional, his views hadn't been quite so extreme.

"Why doesn't that surprise me from a Malfoy," Severus muttered, on the edge of Lucius's hearing; he wasn't that old, so it was still as sharp as ever.

Lucius narrowed his eyes at Severus. Granted, it hadn't been long since he held similar views, but besmirching the family name was not on. Particularly when it was not correct to do so. "Technically she is only related to me by marriage to a brother of one of my great grandfathers."

Before Severus could do more than open his mouth to say something in return, Hermione put her hand on his arm. "At least Lucius knows better now. It doesn't matter what his portraits think of me. Hardly as if they can poison me, is it?"

Lucius winced. Good of her to defend him, but bringing up the murderous actions of that elf gone bad would not help pacify Severus.

"Provided that they cannot give orders to the elves."

Or perhaps it would, as this way Lucius could assure him of Hermione's safety. "Of course not! While in some households that might be the case, not under my roof. I am the master of this house."

"While that's good to know, don't we have other things to talk about? Like what that portrait had to say, for instance." The impatience underlying Hermione's words was endearing. Always so eager to learn more.

Lucius frowned. He found lots of things appealing about his flavours of the month in the past, but only Narcissa's quirks had been endearing. Such affection *love* – was reserved for her alone.

'It's nothing but lust! Hermione is appealing in both personality and body, but... Impossible. Never love.'

He blinked and refocused his eyes on Hermione when she waved a hand in front of him. "The portrait?"

"What?" *'Very smooth, Lucius.'*

"If you would care to stop daydreaming, did your portrait have anything useful to say?" Severus said, impatience bleeding into his voice in a far less endearing way.

"Well..."

"Young Abraxas should be ashamed to produce such an inbred fool! I told him that your mother was too closely related, but did he listen? You make me glad to be only related to you by marriage, although poor Wilfred would turn in his grave."

"Aunt Mildred, a simple 'no' would suffice. And perhaps an explanation rather than insults. I am the master of the house, you know, and you are bound to provide me with answers to any questions I might have."

"Very well. Then you might leave me in peace, or as much as I can have when a Child of Mud sleeps under this roof."

"Get on with it."

"Really! Such ill manners. In my day—"

"I shall not ask again."

"To perform my art, I would need a heart to beat beneath my bosom, to be flesh and blood once more. Not oil on canvas, imbecile!"

"Thank you, Auntie, that's quite enough. You're a fine one to talk of manners, and I have but one more word for you: turpentine."

Lucius winced; Mildred's outraged shriek still rang in his ears. "In a word, no. Suffice it to say that an Arithmancer needs a pulse to calculate anything."

"Oh, damn. Sorry." Hermione slapped her forehead. "I should have been able to tell you that. It's in the textbook that the equations rely on the magic of the caster, and that's tied to the caster's life. Ghosts can't work magic in the same way that living people can, and portraits are even more limited than that."

"Don't worry about it," Lucius said and patted her shoulder. "Perfectly understandable that you would be preoccupied in the current circumstances."

"Indeed." Severus put his hand on her other shoulder, apparently ignoring Lucius's straying hand or interpreting it as the friendly touch it was. "While Arithmancy would let me know for sure how the plague will mutate, examining the plague affecting the dying Muggle-born babies may reveal something useful for a permanent cure, or at least one that will work for your next attack."

Hermione shrugged them off. "I do appreciate the thought, both of you, but I don't need to be coddled." She stood up, rolling her eyes when Lucius and Severus also rose. "Do you really want to go to the loo with me?"

Lucius watched her leave, his eyes still fixed on the door as it shut behind her. "Lovely girl, but her manners could do with a bit of work. A lady talks of powdering her nose."

"Hermione is only a lady when it suits her, and I wouldn't change her for the world."

Poor Severus. Under her thrall already. For him it had been at least a year until that point with Narcissa.

However disgustingly in love Severus was, at least it had provided Lucius with some entertaining memories. Come to think of it, dipping into a few would be the perfect way to spend the morning.

He started for the door and halted at the realisation that Severus was following him. While Severus would not be able to follow him into his sanctuary, it would be very suspicious if he disappeared through a wall right in front of him. "Shouldn't you be in your lab?"

"There's not really anything productive I can do until I receive samples from those Muggle-borns."

"When will you get those?" Lucius asked, doing his best to keep the frustration he felt out of his voice. Even if those samples arrived in the next minute, being reminded again of those dying newborns was a formidable mood killer. Severus had no idea, of course, but he'd just sucked out any enjoyment Lucius could hope to get that morning, just as efficiently as a Dementor could.

"As soon as possible. Beyond that, I have no idea. I sent the messages before bed last night to ask for them and to inform what's left of my research team."

"So the owls might not have even reached them yet, depending on how far away some of those researchers are now. You could be waiting for days! Surely there is something you can do." As soon as Lucius spoke, he regretted it. The last thing he wanted to do was put any pressure on Severus. He'd be under plenty even without anyone else saying anything. Long association made it very clear that no one was harder on Severus than himself.

Severus merely shrugged. "That might be the case if I had used any of your owls. Fawkes was rather insistent that I use him. ~~was~~ going to use some owls, but Fawkes appeared before I could so much as select one. He recovered from his burning day faster than I expected."

Lucius closed the distance between them with two quick strides, stabbing his finger at Severus. "Appeared? You had better mean that he flew, or I might have to evict him from my aviary, pride of the collection as he is."

Severus pushed his hand away. "Fawkes lives wherever he wants to and does whatever he wants to. I thought you knew everything about birds – phoenixes are not familiars. If anything, I'm his."

"In other words I have some rather singed owls, don't I?" Lucius shot him a dirty look.

"I'm afraid so." Lucius glared harder; Severus's tone was utterly unapologetic. "But they'll live. My point is that Fawkes took the messages and was done within a minute, the smug show-off."

"They had better," Lucius grumbled. As he couldn't amuse himself with his illicitly acquired memories – and was no longer in the mood to do so, thanks to Severus – perhaps he should check on his poor birds. "I shall see to them myself, then." He turned to leave.

His hand was on the doorknob when Severus spoke. "Before you do, might I have a word? I assure you that they could all still fly perfectly well, as they all made themselves scarce with no difficulty."

"Can't it wait?" Lucius snapped, not even bothering to turn around. His owls might not be of any concern to Severus, not when he had his very own pet phoenix to instantly transport messages, but Lucius did not have the same luxury. Apart from that, every single one of his birds was a treasured feathered friend.

"It could, but it's not something I want Hermione to hear. It's about the plague."

Ah. Something considerably more important than any bird, then. Lucius let go of the door handle and turned back. "What is it?" he asked, his tone as gentle as it could be when directed at another man.

"You remember my Omnioscope?"

Lucius blinked at the apparent non sequitur. "The thing you used to examine those blood samples you took from Hermione?"

"Yes. The sample I took just before I gave her the cure for the second time is the issue." Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, and spoke hesitantly, as though the words were somehow painful.

"How so?" Lucius prompted, wondering if the conversation could be any more surreal. Severus obviously wanted to talk, yet the words had to be pried out of him.

Severus dropped his hand from his face and opened his eyes, something flickering in them before his face went blank. Lucius thought it might have been worry but couldn't be sure. "With the first sample I took, back before the cure was developed, the plague was completely stationary. It still is in that sample, as if it were somehow dead or frozen. But the most recent sample..."

"Yes?" It had been easier to get Draco to confess when he'd pinched some of his Firewhisky while underage.

"The plague isolated in that sample is mutating."

"Isn't that good news?" Lucius asked, puzzled why Severus looked so grim. Surely it meant that how the plague would change could be predicted.

"Not when the changes are occurring fast enough to be seen by the naked eye. Especially not when those changes were not visible at first except by comparing the current form to the records in the Omniscope."

Lucius frowned, conscious of Severus impatiently folding his arms, awaiting his reaction. "So the speed of the mutation is increasing. Which will make it difficult to predict how it will have mutated by the time it attacks again?"

"I fear it will be virtually impossible if there is no link between the 'cured' plague and the plague unaffected by the cure, the one currently afflicting new Muggle-borns."

Hence why Severus hadn't wanted Hermione present for the conversation, then. There was no point raising such a fear when it might not be an issue.

"I hope those samples you are waiting for arrive soon, then. And, of course, that they will help—Ah!"

The wards screamed. Lucius winced, his hands instinctively raising to his ears, the alarm call still a little too loud. *Finite,* he barked.

"What's going on?" Severus asked.

"The wards," he said shortly.

He frowned, concentrating on the origin of the alert. Hermione's room. His face contorted with a mixture of concern, bafflement and fury. He couldn't tell that she was actually in the room, her presence hidden. Only one thing could result in that: she'd put up her own wards. *"What is she doing?"*

"She? *Hermione?* What—"

No time to explain. Whatever Hermione was doing, she was in danger. He grabbed hold of Severus and Apparated them outside her room. If they had to break down the door and her warding with brute force, so be it.

* * *

Hermione slipped into her bedroom and closed the door behind her. She slumped against it, deliberately letting her head fall back with a slight thump. *Wonderful excuse, idiot.*

While saying that she needed to go to the loo had let her escape from Severus's watchful eye for a bit, it wouldn't be nearly long enough. Fifteen minutes at the most, then Severus would be bound to look for her. All she could do was try to delay him a bit.

She pushed away from the door, strode over to her bed and perched on the end of it, after checking if Crooks was hiding under it. No sign of him, thankfully, as he might also have objected to what she was doing.

Wand in hand, she cast an Imperturbable, making sure to extend it beyond the doors and walls of the room. That way the spell would serve to protect the physical barriers. It wouldn't hold off Severus forever, but it would hopefully slow him down enough for her to do what had to be done.

After Summoning a self-inking quill and some parchment, and enchanting the parchment so that she could write on it with no table beneath, she set her wand aside. The quill scratched across the paper as she started scribbling down the numbers and letters forming the equations. Several times she had to pause, searching her memory for the right formulae. It *had* been over a year since she last touched her Arithmancy textbooks, or at least over a year since she could remember doing so, anyway.

The parchment quickly filled up, although Hermione caught herself anxiously glancing at her watch several times. Five precious minutes had passed by the time she finished, and another minute wasted to double check the calculation.

'No.' Not a waste. Checking something was never a waste of time, particularly when it was this important. It would not do to end up calculating how she would mutate rather than the plague, a mix-up that was not out of the realms of possibility when using her own blood to attune it.

She reached for her wand, ready to touch it to the parchment to cast Vector's test. Or not, Hermione realised, eyes widening. One vital thing was missing: the blood! Hermione didn't hesitate. She snatched up her quill again and stabbed it into her left palm.

'Ow!' She flinched, hissing through her teeth as she tugged it back out, a mixture of blood and ink dripping from both quill and wound. She quickly scrawled over the relevant part of the equation with the bloody ink.

Picking up her wand, she looked to her wound first. It wouldn't do to get any more blood than necessary on the parchment. She also needed to concentrate when casting the spell, and the throbbing pain wouldn't help. And—

Ouch. The cut looked quite deep, blood welling out of it to pool on her cupped palm, the ink a dirty stain mingling with it.

"Am I a witch or not? Better use a little Diffindo and something to collect the blood in next time. Hope it's not toxic ink," Hermione muttered faintly. *Tergeo.* That took care of the collected blood and seemed to remove all traces of ink, but blood still welled from the wound. Obviously. Although she didn't think of herself as squeamish, the sight of that self-inflicted wound made her feel rather lightheaded.

"All right, idiot, stop dawdling and deal with the wound." She absently wondered what it said of her mental state that she was talking to herself. *Episkey.* She paused before casting another *Tergeo* which took care of the freshly leaked blood. It was very doubtful that this calculation would pass Vector's test, so she might as well take a sample of blood to use with a different calculation. That done, she turned back to the parchment.

She touched the tip of her wand to the middle of the parchment. *'Salus in numerus.'*

The ink started glowing as soon as the spell was cast. Back in her first Arithmancy lesson, Vector had showed them how her test worked but stressed that none of those who would be able to cast it — the girls — would be allowed to except under her supervision until they were studying at N.E.W.T. level. The test itself was not dangerous as such but required adult supervision to ensure that none of them tried to activate the calculation after performing the test.

A successful Arithmantic calculation meant that the equations must balance. That didn't just mean that the equations had to be correct, but that the caster had to be powerful enough to power the spell used. As the Arithmancers on Severus's research team had demonstrated, there could be fatal consequences in attempting Arithmancy

that was beyond the caster's abilities.

Hermione kept her unblinking gaze on the ink and made sure that her wand did not stray from the parchment. Breaking the connection would mean redoing the test, and it was never as reliable when repeated. Vector had explained once that it was something to do with the ink having limits on the amount of magic it could absorb.

The ink stopped glowing and started to change colour. To green, at which Hermione blinked, as it meant it was safe to cast the spell, but within ten heartbeats it changed again to amber. Not advisable to cast, then, as while she was powerful enough it would drain her magical reserves for a while. She almost lifted her wand from the parchment, but the ink colour changed again just before she did. Hermione swallowed hard. Red. Permanent loss of magic. If she had lifted her wand and tried to cast, then...

Wait.

All colour faded from the ink, returning it to ordinary black. Impossible. She'd double checked the calculation, she couldn't have made a mistake. Plain black meant the spell wouldn't—

Hermione clutched at her chest as her heart skipped a beat. She broke the connection between wand and parchment with a gasp, her fingers white knuckled and her heart racing after the rude interruption in its rhythm.

Not plain black, then, but the last of Vector's traffic light warnings. Black for death. As most ink used by students tended to be black, Vector had modified her test twice; so that the red was a different shade to that used in marking, and again so that it made the caster's heart skip a beat if it resulted in the worst case scenario.

Definitely just as well she hadn't broken the connection sooner, or Severus would be put out with her to say the least. It would have been rather embarrassing to inadvertently kill herself, too.

Hermione threw the stiffened parchment up into the air, and while it floated down aimed her wand at it. *Incendio.* By the time the parchment reached the carpet, it was so much ash. Rather than give poor Dilly more work to do, she Vanished it. Theoretically she could have just used *Tergeo* on the ink and reused the parchment, but that was something Vector had advised against doing time and time again. Like other writing utensils, quills left indentations in parchment. As such, reusing the parchment risked accidentally activating the erased calculation in addition to the one written over it.

She took a fresh sheet of parchment and held the quill over it, poised to start again. As she'd suspected, she'd have to calculate something different. Not how the plague would mutate, which should also include when, but... what?

As she racked her brain for an alternative hopefully within her capabilities, Hermione caught sight of the vial of her blood collected after her display of what-not-to-do-with-a-quill.

If she couldn't calculate how the plague would mutate, she could still try calculating *when* it would strike again. Not nearly as helpful to Severus, but an idea of how long he had would still be of some use. She began scrawling on the parchment again, pausing when she came to the equations governing what would be used to calculate it with. Perhaps the plague itself was too complicated. Instead...

A grim smile slipped over her lips as she dipped the quill into the vial of blood and continued to write. This way, she didn't even need to modify the attuning medium.

She double checked the equations carefully, something that she had always done, of course... But today she took extra care, as she didn't usually combine blood with ink, let alone her own blood at that.

Hermione rested her wand tip against the parchment and cast Vector's test. The ink flickered to green, then to amber. She waited a minute before breaking the connection, but there were no further changes. Not advisable to cast, then, but...

Before she could let her doubts and guilty conscience – a mental voice that sounded distinctly like Severus – talk her out of it, she moved her wand to rest on the first equation.

"*Sum,*" she muttered, activating the calculation. It was a deceptively simple incantation for such a potentially lethal spell. She trailed her wand over the parchment in the direction that the equations were written, the ink glowing again after her wand passed each numeral.

Once all of the ink was glowing, she tapped the centre of the parchment with the wand tip. The ink ran together and slowly started to rearrange itself into the answer to the calculation, glowing brighter still until Hermione could see purplish after images every time she blinked.

Her skin began to tingle as though she had a cross between mild static electricity and pins and needles, mingling uncomfortably with the exhilarating rush of watching the calculation rewrite itself.

The tingling increased until it became prickling, moving from discomfort to pain. She could feel the drain on her magic now, almost as if a Dementor was attacking, but on her personal magic supply rather than her emotions.

Then the exhaustion hit. Her breathing ragged, she struggled to keep her eyes open. Everything was blacking out around the edges, as though she were in a tunnel. Darkness claimed her.

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Salus in numerus = safety in numbers, at least according to the English-Latin online translator I used. While quite possible that it's wrong, I hope it's not too glaring.

Sorry for the delay in posting the chapter. It was the busiest time of the uni year with no breaks between essays, revision and exams. With any luck I should be able to get back to my usual posting schedule of about one chapter per month over the summer. There should also be about three chapters left, not including the epilogue.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of 37

The deadline.

Chapter 33

As soon as the compression of Apparition released him, Severus rushed to Hermione's bedroom door, only to hit an invisible wall. He rebounded, staggering back. Lucius caught him, releasing his arm when he regained his balance.

"Not that there was time, but I suppose I could have mentioned that she's warded us out."

"Indeed," Severus snapped, his eyes intent on the door. He drew his wand. *Finite Incantatem.*"

Lucius echoed him, and the joint casting struck the wards blocking the door together. Severus wasn't surprised when the only effect was that the wards briefly turned opaque before fading back into invisibility.

A dome. Surrounding the door, walls, and no doubt extending beyond both ceiling and floor. Most likely an Imperturbable. Knowing what it was would only help them so much, as countering it would take time. Time they likely did not have, with the manor's inhabitant harm alarm triggered.

Lucius swore under his breath. "What in the name of Merlin is *shedding*?"

"Arithmancy." That was easy enough to guess, but *why* was another matter. Because she wanted to help, undoubtedly, but she had promised...

'No, no, no...' No, she hadn't promised. All Hermione had done was drop the matter.

He couldn't breathe. In his mind's eye he saw the charred bodies of the research team's Arithmancers, recalled the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh. And Hermione suffering the same fate...

"Well, nothing we can do but break through. On three?" Oblivious to Severus's distress, Lucius raised his wand again.

Severus caught his arm. "No time," he rasped. Even if they somehow broke the barrier immediately, it would still be too late. The research team's Arithmancers had only been able to break the connection between themselves and the rest of the team; an Arithmantic equation could not be stopped once it was in progress, not even when it burned the hapless casters alive.

But he had to try. Even if he dreaded what he would find beyond that door, he had to get in there *Now*.

"Fawkes!"

The phoenix appeared in his usual flamboyant flash of fire. He cocked his head at Severus, seeming puzzled. That in itself was reassuring: surely, if Hermione were in mortal danger Fawkes would be frantic, swooping in to catch hold of Severus, taking him instantly to Hermione. Instead, he waited for Severus and Lucius to grasp his glowing feathers before carrying them away in a disorienting whirl of flames.

Within a second they appeared inside Hermione's room, untouched by the flames dying down around them. In another flash of fire, Fawkes vanished. Severus staggered into Lucius, his legs shaky. Travel by phoenix was just as bad as by Floo.

The sight of Hermione in a crumpled heap on the floor spurred him into action. One moment he was leaning against Lucius, the next he was on his knees beside her, turning her over with shaking hands.

Not a charred corpse still smoking from her own magic backfiring. Still breathing. Pulse fluttering against his fingers. A gusting sigh of relief escaped him.

'*Thank Merlin.*' Just unconscious. Although... He frowned down at her. Her face was pale and drawn, dark shadows under her eyes that he was sure hadn't been there scant minutes ago.

"She looks like you did yesterday evening, but worse. Like death warmed up."

"No doubt for the same reason," Severus growled, narrowing his eyes at his idiot girl. "Magical exhaustion."

"Indeed." Lucius levelled his wand at Hermione. No, not at her, at a bit of parchment beside her. A sheet of parchment with glowing symbols on it, moving as if they were alive. The Arithmancy calculation. "*Finite Incantatem! Incendio!*"

Nothing happened. At Lucius's snarl of frustration, Severus sighed. "It can't be stopped. Not even the caster can do that. Why do you think those Arithmancers on my research team met their sticky end yesterday?"

"Then what can we do?"

Severus shook his head, his eyes intent on Hermione's face. "Nothing. Hope that magical exhaustion is all that the little fool has done to herself."

Lucius huffed impatiently. "When can we know for certain?"

"Fawkes would not have left if it was anything life threatening. I for one *am not* going to wait until she wakes up on her own." Severus laid his wand against Hermione's chest. '*Rennervate.*'

Hermione groaned. She needed his help to move from floor to bed she didn't even have the energy to sit up. In his arms she felt almost as limp as when she'd been insensate.

"I feel like I've been run over by a bus. What..." She trailed off as Lucius pointedly held up the parchment, ink still glowing and moving sluggishly, near complete.

"Oh."

"*Oh?* Is that all you have to say for yourself?" Severus struggled to keep his voice and himself under control. She was in no shape to be yelled at, and deep down he knew he didn't really have a leg to stand on; in her shoes he would have done the same thing. That didn't mean he had to like that she disregarded the risks *and* his request, putting herself in danger dire enough to trigger the manor wards. It also didn't make it a good idea to do it alone...

"You stupid, stupid girl." He clenched his fists, resisting the urge to shake some sense into her. "You could have killed yourself, reduced yourself to a Squib..."

"I used Vector's test. It was safe enough. My magic's just temporarily drained, that's all."

'*All?*' Severus bit back another rant on her foolishness. Her voice was faint and slurred as if she was half asleep. She would need to rest to recover. His shoulders slumped. "Never scare me like that again." He cupped her cheek in his hand, eyes intent on hers.

"I won't. Not if I can help it."

Lucius snorted behind him while Severus raised an eyebrow.

Hermione tried and failed to sit up, indignant. "I couldn't help it! It had to be done."

All things considered, that was the best he could expect. And it was hardly as if she'd hurt him on purpose that wasn't in her nature, at least not when he'd done nothing to deserve it. What mattered was that she was safe, if drained.

He bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. She returned it, but he couldn't enjoy the moment as he would if they were alone. Not when Lucius rudely cleared his throat mere seconds after their lips touched.

"Why?" Lucius snapped.

Severus exchanged a baffled look with Hermione. Whatever Lucius meant by that non sequitur, it was directed at Hermione judging by the way he was glaring at her.

"Why what?"

Lucius huffed as if it should have been obvious. "Why did it have to be done? If it would take an Arithmancy Mistress to predict how it would change, surely you didn't have that level of expertise?"

"No, I don't. But I think it was still worth ruling that out with Vector's test."

"Kindly do not put yourself in danger under my roof. And don't go elsewhere to do it, either, as at least here the wards let me know when you do something stupid."

"Vector's test isn't dangerous!"

"So you say, but you clearly did something to set off my wards. Something to do with this." Lucius crumpled the parchment in his fist. While Lucius couldn't do any real damage until the calculation was finished, it was clearly near that point, the ink's glow faint.

Hermione scowled at him. "Don't you dare!" She grabbed her wand, but to no avail as the parchment merely shifted slightly towards her in Lucius's grip. At least there was some movement; her magic was not completely drained.

Lucius smirked at her, mockingly waving the parchment at her. "Why not? It might teach you a lesson."

Severus rose to his feet and snatched the parchment from Lucius's grasp. "One that would be well deserved, I admit, but one that would be pointless. She'd just do it again, and I'm sure draining one's magic is not healthy even if it's not permanent."

"*She* is still here, you know!" Hermione struggled to sit up, her face even more pale and drawn at her attempt to Summon her parchment. Severus returned to her side and propped her up with some pillows behind her.

He handed the parchment to her. "What did you calculate?"

"How long there is until the plague attacks again." Hermione glared at Lucius. "Information worth a little stupidity, wouldn't you say?"

Lucius pouted. It made him look rather like an overgrown toddler. "No, I would not. You endangered yourself needlessly. We know it takes six months for the plague to return. Isn't that right, Severus?"

"Actually, she's right," he reluctantly admitted. "The increased speed at which the plague is mutating means that it could be well under that. Three instead of six, perhaps. Much as I did not want Hermione to endanger herself, it is useful information to know for sure."

"Ah. Yes. In that case, good idea, Hermione. With any luck it will be six months rather than three."

The parchment had stopped glowing, most of the ink vanishing with it, leaving just a few symbols behind, too small for Severus to make out from where he stood. Whatever it said, it could not be good news, as Hermione paled even more. If she lost any more colour, she'd surely faint.

"Shit." Lucius dragged a hand down his long, pointed face. "Don't tell me. It's three."

"Not..." Hermione sounded winded. "Not even two. Forty-eight days until the plague is active again. No! Less. Forty-six at the most."

'No.'

"Perhaps you made a mistake?" Lucius's voice sounded as if it came from far away. "It can't be very accurate if there's two days' worth of leeway."

Severus shook his head, his eyes riveted on the parchment. Breathe. He had to breathe. It could be worse. There was still time. "I might not be an Arithmancy expert, but even I know that a mistake is glaringly obvious, just as in Potions. If this was wrong, the parchment would be so much ash."

"Exactly. And there's two days 'leeway' because of *what* I calculated. I have a suspicion that the nature of the plague itself would require an Arithmancy Mistress to calculate anything specifically to do with it, but I had an alternative: when my heart stops beating if nothing changes."

"And the plague takes at least two days to kill, recurring within forty-six days as you said. My mistake."

Severus lifted his eyes to Hermione's face. They had forty-eight days left. Slightly less... a cure would need time to work. He could not fail. Not her. He would develop a working cure by... what was it? By the end of October. Halloween. The day Lily died, so many years ago...

'No.'

He would not lose Hermione. Not on that day. Not at all. *Never*. Not in his lifetime. Not if he could do anything to prevent it.

Forty-seven days, just under sixteen hours and counting...

Recovered from her magical draining enough to safely Apparate, Hermione left after dinner. The latest news was not something she should keep from her parents. Despite being at work when she'd discovered it, they would not be happy she hadn't barged into their dental practice to share it instantly, although to do so Severus would have had to take her in on a stretcher. Best that she'd waited until she'd slept most of the day and no longer looked quite so much like a vampire suffering from malnutrition.

Not that her parents were happy with her news anyway.

Hermione watched as her father dropped his head into his hands, his voice muffled when he spoke. "Next time you come to see us, is it too much to ask that there be some good news to share?"

'Like a working cure. Severus is doing all he can, but it'll take a miracle for him to manage that within a week.' "We can but hope... I promise I'll do my best to keep my

birthday free of bad news."

"Oh, darling, the sort of bad news that comes at the moment is hardly anything under any of our control. We love to see you, even when you come bearing news like..." Her mother choked on a sob. Her father emerged from behind his hands in order to wrap his arms around her.

Hermione got up from her armchair and perched on the arm of the sofa so she could put her hand on her mother's back. "It'll be fine, Mum. Severus will find a new cure."

Her mother just sobbed harder. Her father grimaced and tightened his embrace, raising his head to look at Hermione. She flinched at the desolation in his grey eyes. "We all hope he will, dear. But less than forty-eight days really isn't much time. You're our only daughter. Our only child. And it's not fair on you or on Severus to demand you spend all of those days with us. Much as I want to."

Finally, her mother's sobs trailed off into hitching, deep breaths. "No, Will. We m...mustn't panic. Severus will have more time than that. He did the first time around. Remember? They put a Sleeping Beauty spell on Hermione and all those other patients. They can do that again. Buy more time. Isn't that right, darling?"

Hermione struggled to smile reassuringly at her mother, a leaden weight in her stomach. She couldn't wouldn't shatter her mother's fragile hope. But she couldn't outright lie. "I don't know, Mum. It should slow the plague down. It did before."

Except the plague had mutated since then and continued to do so at an alarming rate. Worse, what she'd calculated *if nothing changes* implied that the plague had mutated too much. So much that the enchanted coma would make no difference. And worse, the enforced comas had been used before. It wouldn't be a change.

'Severus will manage it. He will... won't he?'

"Forgive me if 'should' isn't very reassuring," her father muttered.

'Sorry, Dad. Difficult to be reassuring if I'm not reassured myself.'

Forty-one days, twenty-one hours and counting...

'Happy twentieth birthday, Hermione,' she thought bitterly to herself, watching her parents talk to Lucius, Severus still locked away working feverishly in his lab. She'd be with him, if not for her parents visiting. *'Enjoy the party; it might well be your last one.'*

She grimaced. She couldn't let herself think that way. Severus would manage to find a cure, and he needed her to believe that he would. Bad enough that he clearly feared he would fail without her joining him in that. Oh, he hid it as well as he could during the daytime, but he couldn't keep his nightmares from her. At least it only interrupted their sleep once a night thankfully it was reassurance enough for him to hold her close until he dropped off again.

"...may, of course, stay here. Provided the manor doesn't object too much. I'm afraid having Muggles here is not something my home is used to. It actually struggles a bit with having you here only a few hours, so I'm not entirely sure how it will react to an extended stay."

Hermione blinked, tuning back into the conversation. "But I live here. Surely Malfoy Manor can't object too much to Muggle blood."

Lucius turned to her. "You may be Muggle-born, Hermione, but you are still magical. And married to me, which also makes it easier." He turned back to address her parents. "I should be able to adapt the manor's wards, but it may take a while to do so."

"We have arranged leave from our dental practice, but that won't start for a week or two. It's all this uncertainty we don't know for sure if this counts as a terminal illness..."

"It better not," her father snapped. "Sorry, darling, go on."

"It's all right, Will, we're all on edge. Anyway, as it stands, our leave has to come out of our holiday allowance for the year. And our patients deserve a little notification so that no appointments get cancelled completely out of the blue. We have the last four weeks of the... the..."

"Of the countdown off." Hermione guessed. For some strange reason it was easier for her to say. Perhaps performing the calculation that had provided the time limit meant that she could regard it with slightly more clinical detachment?

"Yes. And time after that, too, if need be. If we have no leave left for skiing, so what? You're far more important than falling down any snowy slopes."

'Thanks, Dad. I think.'

Twenty-eight days, twenty-three and three-quarter hours and counting...

"Go to the aviary if you want a treat," Severus snapped as he snatched the letter from the eagle owl at the lab window. The owl took off with an indignant hoot, but Hermione was sure that a majestic specimen like that would be fine amongst Lucius's owls. An owl like Pig, on the other hand...

'I wonder if that's why I haven't heard anything from Ron recently?' Regardless of the reason, it would be an idea to see him before the plague struck again. Just in case she didn't have the opportunity afterwards...

'No. Cannot think like that.' Especially not when the parchment in Severus's hands might be the news they had been waiting for with bated breath. Good news, for once, hopefully. *Please.*

Not that good news would benefit her at this stage, but it would still be a relief to hear. A relief that fellow Muggle-born girls would no longer be dying forty-eight hours after they were born. The Ministry had supplied blood samples from the dying Muggle-born babies within a few days of Severus requesting them, and in less than three weeks he'd been able to develop what they hoped would be a cure. With any luck, if that cure was successful, it would provide something for Severus to work from in regards to a cure for her and the rest of the witches.

If it was successful...

"Well?" she prompted.

His eyes scanned the parchment once, then again, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was reading. Hermione held her breath, hardly daring to hope.

At last Severus looked up. "It works," he said flatly.

Good news, then. *Very* good news. No more Muggle-born baby girls would be dying.

Hermione inhaled a shuddering breath, but it froze within her before she could release it as a relieved sigh. Severus did not look reassured. In fact, he looked just as tense and worried as he had before the news arrived. Something was wrong. "What is it?" She reached over to squeeze his hand. "There's something else, isn't there? Something you haven't been telling me."

He grimaced. "I should have known I couldn't keep it from you for long."

"Keep what from me?" She winced. For something she'd been aiming to say calmly, that came out coldly.

Setting the letter down, he held her hand in both of his. "You have to understand that I did not want to raise false hopes."

He looked so grim she couldn't help but jump to conclusions. "Oh, no. It's a completely different version of the plague affecting those Muggle-born babies, isn't it? That's why you always found something else for me to do whenever I suggested I compare the blood samples with mine."

Severus's eyes widened. "No! Quite the opposite. I did keep you from looking at those samples, but my reason was different. That I didn't want to raise false hopes. You see..." He led the way over to the Omnioscope, fiddling with the settings and gesturing for her to look.

She blinked. Why were there two identical samples of her own... Oh.*Oh.*

"As you know, the plague affecting the newborn Muggle-borns thankfully had no variants. Although the blood from the samples was of different types, the plague affecting them was the same. What I kept from you is that's not the only thing that is the same."

"Yes... I... I see." She raised her head to look over at him. "One of these is my own blood sample, isn't it? I'm familiar enough with that. The other..."

Severus nodded. "The other is from one of the Muggle-born babies."

Identical. Not the blood itself, of course, although both looked about the same to her. But the plague, visibly changing... It was the same. Mutating at the same rate, in the same way.

And the cure Severus had developed for the Muggle-born variant *worked*. The variant that wasn't really a variant. It worked.

If she hadn't been leaning heavily against the worktop, Hermione realised faintly, she would have fallen over. As it was, she felt light-headed.

Good news. Very, *very* good news. They had to share this with her parents and Lucius and...

Reality seeped in as a sinking feeling in her stomach. If it really was such good news, why was Severus not relieved?

Beside her, Severus braced his weight on his hands, standing so close to her she could feel him pressing against her side. "I tested the new cure on small samples ~~from~~ the samples. Including yours. It worked, at least the same way as the temporary cure did. There was no sign of the plague left. That it worked on a larger scale, curing the Muggle-born babies, is of course promising."

"But?" she croaked.

His hands curled into tight fists, his knuckles whitening. "There's no guarantee. That it's permanent. That the plague won't diverge into two variants as we originally feared it had. That the sample of your blood containing the plague is the same as the plague still mutating invisibly within you. *Anything could go wrong.*"

"I can see why you kept it from me," she said faintly. She shook herself, repeating her mantra *cannot think like that, cannot think like that* "It should be fine. Even if it is just temporary, this cure works. If nothing else, it will buy time."

"Yes, you're right," Severus muttered. "The cure we developed adapts with the plague, personalised to the patient by combining it with their blood before administering it. It should work." Despite his optimistic words, Hermione couldn't help but notice that he didn't sound at all convinced, his body as tense as ever beside her.

"Severus?"

The tension broke with an almost audible snap. One moment Severus stood beside her, the next he took her in his arms. A split second later the squeezing sensation of Apparition pressed her just as tightly as his arms held her against him.

Then she was falling back against his bed, his weight on top of her, supported partly by his forearms either side of her head.

She opened her mouth to ask something what he was doing? Obvious enough. Why he was doing it? Not so obvious. What was wrong? Besides the obvious, it still felt like there was something else.

Before she could decide what to ask, Severus closed the remaining distance between them. *I can't lose you*, he breathed and crushed his lips to hers.

Her mouth was already partially open, making it so easy, so natural for the kiss to deepen. For a moment, Hermione just enjoyed the stroke of Severus's tongue against hers, her mind blissfully free from thoughts.

However, it took a lot for her brain to stop working, and something still nagged at her. Something about the tone of Severus's voice. About the desperation in it. About how desperately he was kissing her. The tension in his body before he pounced, which still underlined every move he made.

Joining up the dots, Hermione recoiled from the picture they made. She moved her hands from where they'd buried themselves in his hair to his chest and pushed. It took a few shoves for him to get the message, but Severus slowly drew back.

Holding his head between her hands, Hermione stared at him in the sudden fear that gripped her.

"Promise me you won't do anything drastic if... if the worst comes to pass. *Promise me.*"

Severus met her eyes, the hollow look in them a knife twisting in her heart. "I cannot promise that."

"I really hoped I'd misunderstood you," Hermione muttered. What could she say to make him see sense? "You... you can't... You managed to live without Lily!"

He shook his head, lifting one of his hands to stroke her cheek. "Lily was an adolescent infatuation. Yes, I loved her. But I was never romantically involved with her. You are my wife. I'm in love with you. This is entirely different to that. Stronger. And I would remind you that I melodramatically expressed the wish to die to Dumbledore on learning of Lily's death. It was only at his insistence to ensure that her sacrifice for Harry was not in vain that I did not do 'something drastic'."

"And you're not being melodramatic now? The wizarding world needs you. I do have every faith in you that you'll solve this. But you need to stay alive for that. If, Merlin forbid, I do die, I don't want that to be in vain by dragging you with me, thanks to your suffering a fit of maudlin hysterics more befitting a teenage girl who thinks love is the only reason for living."

Severus smiled mirthlessly. "I'm afraid we'll have to agree to disagree."

"If it were you in my shoes, would you want me to kill myself if you died? Please. Promise me."

He scowled. "Very well." Severus lowered his head to seal the deal with a kiss.

'I think I'd better have a word with Lucius. A reluctant promise can't be the most reliable, especially not when it's quite probably to shut me up. That cure had better work, for all of our sakes.'

Severus rolled them over, freeing his hands from supporting his weight so that he could undress her. She reciprocated, pulling him free of his clothes.

Finally naked, she reached for him. And blinked. Come to think of it, she hadn't felt his erection pressed against her, despite his lower body having been resting on hers.

Grimacing, Severus took himself in hand, but to no avail. An incoherent snarl of frustration escaped him.

Hermione laid a hand over his. Not even a twitch, even at her touch. Swallowing her disappointment, she whispered, "It's all right. Later, when you're not as tense. Just... lie with me for a bit. Let me feel you."

He sighed and relaxed as Hermione stretched out beside him, pressed against him from head to toe. Skin to skin.

Minutes later, his breathing evened out as he dozed off. Hermione closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of him beside her. On the sound of his heartbeat, his chest rising and falling under her head.

'Can't let myself fall asleep. Got to tell Mum and Dad the good news. And Lucius. And Harry. And Ginny. And Draco. Ron, too. And the other Weasleys. But don't want to risk... false hopes. Cure should work. But further tests. Make sure plague won't mutate. And hope against... hope... that plague outside me is same as... in me. Can't... sleep. Can't...'

Her thoughts trailed off, soft snores replacing them.

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 37

Countdown to collapse.

Chapter 34

Twenty days, eleven hours, fifteen minutes and counting...

"Severus still working?" her mother asked, looking up when Hermione opened the library door. It was late, high time for bed, but Hermione needed to wind down before she tried to sleep. As did everyone else, judging by the presence of all the manor's human residents. Everyone except her workaholic husband. Not that she was much better...

She dragged her tired feet over to the sofa and sat down beside her mum, lips twitching in what she hoped was a smile. "He's just finishing up. I'll dig him out on the way to bed if he doesn't appear soon."

Her father spoke from behind a dragonhide-bound, hand-written manuscript of *Beedle the Bard*. "Just as well there's, what, twenty-two days left at the most? Or he'd work himself into an early grave."

"Surely he doesn't need to work quite so hard? Now that there is a cure, he could share the burden more with other potioners. Or whatever it is you call potion makers." Her mother looked pointedly at Hermione. "That goes for you too, young lady."

"You should've seen him when he was still coming up with the cure." Hermione sighed and dropped her head back against the cushions. "He has delegated as much of the workload as he can. But the cure's even more complex than the last one. There's just not enough people who can make it. I can only assist him, I can't actually make any by myself."

Lucius closed his book with a snap and looked up sharply. "Is enough of the cure being made?"

"There will be. Part of the reason Severus and every other qualified brewer is working so hard is that they refuse to do an Umbridge. We can't let any more Muggle-born babies die if we can help it."

"Good to know my work as Muggle-born Liaison is not for nothing," Lucius muttered. "Even if I'm of no use otherwise."

That made her father put his book aside. "At least that will be of use in the future. We Muggles can only look on as helpless bystanders, so I wouldn't complain too much about being useless."

Lucius bristled, lips curling back. Before any more angry words could be exchanged, Hermione hurriedly intervened. "None of you are useless. Even if you can't contribute directly to making the cure, you are helping by being here. I'm sure Severus appreciates your support. I know I do."

"It's not enough," her father muttered while Lucius and her mother avoided her eyes.

"I know! Even Severus feels that way, what with there being no guarantee that the cure will actually work." Her mother flinched beside her *Great job, Hermione. Very tactful.* She inched closer and gave her mum a one-armed hug. "Sorry. I just get..."

"Frustrated." Severus's voice came from the open doorway. She cringed even more. With any luck he knew she'd been trying to defend him and not to express doubt. Or her careful control, down to her thoughts until now her mantra of *'can't think that'* would be for nothing.

"Understandably so." His gaze shifted from Hermione to her mother, then settled on her father. "While there are no guarantees in life, everything possible is being done to make sure this cure works. Only the limited supply of samples of the active plague keep me from having Hermione check that it still works more than once per day."

"Presumably there is no danger, as Hermione is healthy other than being under stress, but are you certain it's safe for her to be near that live plague in her blood sample?"

Lucius asked, leaning forward as he waited for Severus to respond.

"Funnily enough, the thought did cross my mind before I had her go near it last month. The plague hidden within her seems to 'protect' her from fresh infection."

"But how could you be sure? You risked..."

"I was as sure as I could be of anything. As if I would put her at risk if there was anything I could do to prevent it!" Severus snarled, stalking towards Lucius, who stood up, arms crossed.

Before they could end up nose-to-nose, shouting at each other in front of her parents! Hermione darted between them, her palms resting against Severus's chest as he halted rather than push her.

"We're all under a lot of stress. Why don't we call it a night?" She held Severus's incensed stare, silently pleading with him to drop it.

"Feels like bedtime to me," her father said. She didn't dare break eye contact to look at him, as the heat in Severus's eyes slowly subsided and his muscles under her hands relaxed.

"Yes, it does!" her mother agreed, false cheer in her voice. "Before things get out of hand. Blood must be so hard to get out of the carpet."

Hermione flinched, remembering another carpet in the manor that had soaked up her blood. Bellatrix hadn't only threatened her with that knife, although the Cruciatus had been the worst.

The last of Severus's bad temper disappeared, replaced by concern. A questioning frown creased his brow as he put his hands on her shoulders. Hopefully her parents didn't realise anything was wrong. That she'd been tortured was something she never wanted them to know.

To her relief, her parents murmured their goodnights and left. Lucius did the same, squeezing her shoulder on the way past. Of course he already knew. He'd been there, watching impassively. But if he were to see it now, with the changes she'd seen in him, would anything change... No. Of course it wouldn't. Not with his family to suffer if he didn't toe the line.

"Well?" Severus prompted, wrapping his arms around her as if it could protect her from what had already happened.

"Bellatrix. She liked to play around with knives. But Cruciatus was the worst of it, really."

'If recalling that doesn't cause nightmares I don't know what will. At least now I'll compete with Severus in causing interrupted sleep in our bed... Maybe we should treat ourselves to a dose of Dreamless Sleep for once?'

* * *

Eleven days, one hour and counting...

'Right. That's the third owl you've ignored, Ron. No more. Even if I don't know where you live now not even whom you married your dad will.'

She grabbed a handful of Floo powder and flung it into the fireplace. Kneeling down, she cried "The Burrow!" and stuck her head into the green flames. She closed her eyes against the disorientating rushing sensation until it stopped. Once she opened them, she could see the kitchen and the occupants sitting at the table.

"Morning, Mr Weasley, A-Andromeda..." *'She's not Bellatrix, no fainting. You don't want to fall flat on your face in their fireplace.'* "Do you know where Ron is..."

Mr Weasley pushed away from the table and stood so that she could see behind where he'd been sitting. Ron waved mutely from where he was stuffing his face with his elevenses. Someone must have finally drilled it into him not to talk with his mouth full. Perhaps he didn't want to risk finding out if Andromeda was anything like the sister she resembled so much.

"We'll leave you to it, Hermione," Mr Weasley said, after exchanging a meaningful glance with Andromeda. She nodded and walked over to where Teddy sat in his high chair, picking him up. "Let's go for a walk."

Teddy gurgled, his eyes glued to Hermione, his hair matching the flames her head floated in. She must be quite the novelty for him; presumably he hadn't seen many floating heads in the fireplace.

Andromeda turned back just before she left through the open front door. "And Hermione, do spare your knees and come through."

Hermione did as prompted, wincing as her knees protested. *'Diot.'* She'd forgotten to cast a Cushioning Charm. She staggered over to the table and sat down across from Ron.

"Ron. So kind of you to return my owls."

He swallowed his mouthful before speaking. Good heavens, he really had finally discovered his manners. "What owls? I haven't heard anything from you since Harry's wedding. You're the one who ignored my wedding invitation."

She frowned. "I didn't get one. I don't even know whom you married, let alone when."

"Lavender, beginning of August. She'd already married Seamus. I was lucky her scars from Greyback put everyone else off. And I sent the invite myself, so don't you dare blame Lav."

"Did I say anything?"

"No, but I know you don't like Lav..."

"Not much, no, but I don't hate her. I saved her neck from Greyback, remember?"

"Yeah, thanks for that. Otherwise I'd be locked up for not being married. No one else would have me," he spat bitterly. "Bet Malfoy or Snape made sure you didn't get the invitation."

"Don't bring them into this," she snapped. "If anything, the owl you sent never arrived. Did you send Pig? Or Errol?"

"Hey! Pig's never failed to deliver anything."

"Lucius has an aviary, which includes an owlery. I don't think his owls would appreciate having Pig around."

"So it was Malfoy's fault!"

Hermione narrowly resisted the urge to drop her head down onto the table. "The point is that I didn't get your invitation. I didn't come here to pick a fight with you, Ron. There's nine days until the plague attacks me again. I wanted to make peace with you. To be friends again."

Ron looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh. Okay. That's... that's good. But, er. Well, um, Snape's made a cure, right? Harry said so, and the *prophet* the other day. I mean, you're not going to die or anything?" He looked back at her with wide, pleading eyes. No doubt concerned about her, but thoughts of Ginny and Lavender had to be paramount. Or should be.

She hesitantly reached over to pat his hand. "He has. It should work."

"Should?" If anything, Ron looked even more worried.

"As far as we know, it will. It all depends on the plague hidden within me and every other witch mutating in the same way as isolated samples. We know for sure that the new cure works on those samples, despite the plague in them still mutating as the cure adapts, but until the plague strikes again we can't be certain."

"Oh." Ron frowned. "So it's a bit like chess where one of the players has an invisible queen that only appears when it checks the opposing king?"

"I guess... Just to be completely honest, there's a chance it could be checkmate."

Ron turned his hand so that he could grip hers. "Snape did it before. He'll do it again. I don't like him, but I do trust him when it comes to potions." He released her hand to wave at her. "And you look, well, you look like hell, but Lav looks a bit like that too. He's treating you right?"

She stiffened. *'Don't bite his head off. He's not saying that Severus is mistreating me. He's not. He even said that Lavender doesn't look too good either.'*

"Of course. He looks no better, I assure you. We're all under stress at the moment. You don't exactly look full of the joys of spring either, even if your appetite isn't affected."

"Oh, good. I mean, bad. I mean... Oi! I only picked at breakfast this morning."

"I'm not criticising you, Ron. It's a good thing if you can eat as normal. Although normal seems to actually include some manners now. Lavender finally taught you, or was it Andromeda?"

Ron's face fell. "No. It was you. Back before the plague. Lav's great and all, more my kind of girl now, never calls me Won-Won, but... she's not you. I like her, I think I'll love her, it's just... you'll always be the one that got away." He reached for her hand with both of his. "I wish you could remember it. We were good together."

Hermione flinched and pulled away, hugging herself. "Fact is that I can't. I don't want to hurt you, Ron, but I love Severus."

He winced. "Don't. I know, all right? And I know Snape's got more important things to do than giving you your memories back. He's better than me with that, okay? I wouldn't even try. I wouldn't want you to remember being with someone else." Ron frowned again. "Are you sure..."

"That he was trying to come up with something to restore my memories before the plague returned and put everything else aside? Yes. He was. Because even if I was 'your girl' back then, he does want me to remember being his friend. And as for being better than you, Ron, he does have twenty years on you."

"S'pose so," Ron muttered. "It's not fair. I lost mum, then I as good as lost you too. And Lav lost her baby. Wasn't mine, but it still hurt."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your mum, and about Lavender. But you haven't lost me; it's just that we can only be friends."

He looked up as Hermione pushed away from the table. "You're not going already, are you? We're good, aren't we?"

She nodded, taking a handful of Floo powder from the broken flowerpot on the mantelpiece. "I think I'd better. We're fine, so long as you accept that I'm with Severus now. I'm *happy* with him. You're with Lavender now. If we're going to be friends, you need to be happy with her too."

"I will be, I mean, I am! Don't I get a hug?"

"Sorry, Ron. It's too soon for you. Maybe when you're not still hung up on the past."

"But..."

"Malfoy Manor." The rest of Ron's words were cut off by the racket of the Floo.

She emerged at the other end in the empty hallway, slowly brushing off the ash clinging to her. *'I am sorry, Ron. I do want to be friends again, but it's too awkward when you look at me and talk like that. At least even if I never get to see you again, we have some closure.'*

Six days, around nine hours and counting...

Her shuddering breaths slowed as Severus pulled her into his arms.

"Same dream?" Spooned in the curve of his body, she could feel the vibrations of his voice as well as hear it.

"Can't remember." For all she knew, it wasn't a recurring nightmare but *nightmares*. Which for some reason escaped her memory as soon as she woke. "It was the same last time. Before the plague came back. Every damn night for a week."

"At least you don't kick me awake every time," Severus grumbled but tightened his arms around her at the reminder of how little time was left.

"Sorry. Could you find out what they're about? Use Legilimency?"

"If you can't remember them, there will be nothing to see."

"When I'm still asleep, I mean."

"Needs eye contact. Even if I lifted your eyelids your eyes would be moving. Can we go back to sleep now?"

"Yes. Sorry. You especially need it. If it's not your own nightmares disturbing your sleep, it's mine. Maybe we should sleep alone..." Hermione reluctantly tried to wriggle out of his grip to get out of bed to go and disturb Crookshanks instead.

His arms tightened around her again. "No."

She stopped trying to escape, instead putting her hands over his and squeezing. In his place she wouldn't want him out of her sight either. Not when there was only a week before she might... Forget being in his shoes; she didn't want to be apart from him either. Maybe she'd better treat herself to some Dreamless Sleep for the remaining nights. Not as if she'd have a chance to get addicted, after all.

Two days, three hours, forty-nine minutes and counting...

Hermione emerged from her bathroom, wrapped in a dressing gown, her hair still slightly damp. She'd woken up later than she'd wanted, too close to breakfast time to shower with Severus as planned. Instead they showered at the same time but in separate bathrooms. Dreamless Sleep made for an undisturbed night, but also meant it was harder for Severus to rouse her in the morning.

Crookshanks wound around her legs, almost tripping her as she padded across the carpet to her chest of drawers. She walked over to her bedroom door, opening it to let him out into the corridor.

"Go on, find Mum and Dad. Pester them for breakfast. It'll be quicker than waiting for me."

He slunk off with a disgruntled mew.

She closed the door after him so she wouldn't find herself with a twisted ankle if he slunk back inside. Just because today was not going to be *pleasant* did not mean she wanted to start it that way too.

Going back to the drawers, she selected some underwear for the day, then opened up the wardrobe. Choosing a pair of trousers, she paused, hand on her favourite shirt. Long-sleeved. Severus needed access to the insides of her elbows. She didn't really want to have to repair it after he tore the sleeves to draw her blood, combine some with the cure and then inject it. Grabbing a t-shirt instead, she laid the clothes down on her bed and untied the sash of her dressing gown.

Severus came through the adjoining doorway. "It occurs to me," he said, slipping his hands under her dressing gown and pushing it off her shoulders to pool at her feet, "that we could keep the others waiting. They won't mind."

"That's good, because we already are. Breakfast was meant to be at eight o' clock." Hermione glanced at her clock. "Getting on for fifteen minutes ago."

She stepped into his arms for a kiss, his hands caressing her bare skin. She tugged his dressing gown open until skin pressed against skin. Ordinarily she might have put a stop to this, with her parents waiting. But today of all days... Severus was right. The others would understand.

He lowered her onto the bed, their lips still locked in a passionate kiss, disregarding the clothes creasing beneath them. Propped up on his forearms, lying cradled between her legs, she had the pleasure of his full warm body length against hers without being crushed.

Severus started to rock his hips, rubbing his fully engorged erection against her, teasing her clitoris until her breath quickened. She reached down to position him, stroking his erection against herself, coating it in her juices. Revelling in his groan.

He thrust in torturously slowly, eyes locked to hers as every millimetre of pulsing flesh slid against her inner walls. She wrapped her legs around him, thrusting back in an effort to get him to speed up. Gradually, he did so, until the bed rocked beneath them.

She'd thought that last night they'd been absorbed in the sensation as much as possible, making love with tender desperation. But this... Their eyes locked in bright daylight, concentrating on the feel of every thrust, of skin sliding against skin, this was even more intense.

"This isn't goodbye," she gasped.

"No, it's not."

'But just in case...' She released her tenuous grip on coherent thought and enjoyed the moment, straining towards mutual release.

'Yes, yes, yessss!'

Even if it did mean being late to breakfast and subjected to knowing looks from her mother and Lucius, and her father's grimace.

"Please tell me you've been on a bracing walk."

"Some form of invigorating exercise, I'm sure," Lucius murmured, leering. He yelped when her mother smacked the back of his head.

"Behave."

He sent her a wounded look and smoothed his hair down.

Hermione avoided her father's eyes, her cheeks burning. "Something like that."

'Sorry, Dad. I haven't been your baby girl for a long time.'

* * *

Two days, four minutes and counting...

"How are you feeling, dear?" her mother asked for the umpteenth time, seated across from her in the library.

"Fine," Hermione muttered. *'Apart from feeling like a zoo resident.'* She was all too aware of seven pairs of eyes watching her anxiously. *'Or like a ticking bomb.'*

"That's good, right? No symptoms might mean the plague won't come back yet." Harry looked from Hermione to Ginny, his hair even messier than usual.

Hermione bristled, poised to defend her Arithmancy skills.

"There was nothing wrong with the calculation," Severus snapped. "All it might mean is that there is less time between when the plague attacks and when it kills."

"Not good at all, then." Draco's knuckles whitened where he held Ginny's hand in his.

Lucius steepled his fingers. "How long does the cure need to work?"

"Around five hours."

Her parents exchanged a worried look, before they both turned to look at Hermione again. "Any change?" Her father cleared his throat. "Not that I want you to fall ill, darling, but better sooner rather than later, eh?"

Hermione eyed her watch. Just under two minutes left, if the plague was still the same as that attacking the baby Muggle-borns.

"Dear?"

"I..." She stood up. "I have to go." Hermione darted through the door, closing it after herself and tapped it with her wand, locking it. Not that it would stop them for long, especially not those cleared to Apparate within the manor.

She staggered, leaning heavily against the wall. She shivered, chilled yet sweating. Feverish. The first symptom. She gasped for air. The second, already. Not long now...

Then Severus was beside her, pulling her into his arms. Much as she didn't want anyone, even him, to see her collapse, she did need someone to knock her out. And, of course, apply the cure.

"Hermione?"

She pulled her head back from where it rested against her chest so she could look him in the eyes. "Didn't want them to see. It's coming." She reached up to rest her fingertips against his lips. "Please don't. Need to say this while I can. If the cure doesn't work, don't give up. I know you'll try again if that happens, but if time runs out... don't do anything drastic."

She leant up on tiptoe to replace her fingers with her lips. "Love you," Hermione croaked, flinching as the pain started to build. "Stun me. Now..."

Mercifully, the pain didn't cut her off. There was a white flash, and her body felt numb.

"Love you..." Severus's voice, faint through the ringing in her ears.

Then nothing.

* * *

Lucius caught Severus's meaningful glance right before he Disapparated. Looking at Lucius, then at the others in the library. Then back. A slight shake of the head, too, if he was not much mistaken... *'Don't follow, then.'*

Potter, ever the hero, shot across the room. If he'd been cleared to Apparate within the manor, he'd doubtlessly have followed Severus. He rattled the door handle. Locked, of course.

"Alohomora!"

Before he could open the door, Lucius elbowed him out of the way to physically bar the door.

"Hey!" Potter whined.

Everyone else was on their feet too. Harridan Helen and Will looked particularly offended.

Lucius held up his hands. "Give Severus a moment. I don't think they want an audience."

"But we want to be there for her!" Ginny protested.

"And how will we know what happens?" Draco added, eyes intent on his wife. He undoubtedly wanted the cure to work on Hermione, but his primary concern had to be his spouse.

"Much as I'm sure she appreciates that you care, this is something Hermione won't want any of us to see. I don't think she really wants Severus there either, but he needs to be, what with the cure... As for the rest, the wards will let me know when she falls ill, and Severus will..."

Lucius clutched at his head as the alarm flared. He'd tinkered with the wards so that it was less deafening, but there was a limit to how much he could do and still be notified.

"Lucius?" The Harridan had her hand on his shoulder.

"Finite." He wordlessly shrugged her off and turned to the door, pushing it open. Severus stood outside, holding Hermione's limp body in his arms.

Her parents gasped behind him. "Is she all right?" Will asked.

Lucius tightened his jaw. She wasn't writhing in pain; it could be worse. Far, far worse. "Stunned?"

Severus kept his eyes on Hermione and shifted his grip on her to brush her hair away from her face. "Enchanted coma. Far gentler and, I suspect, needed to slow the plague down so that she does still have forty-eight hours left."

Harridan Helen brushed past him to feel Hermione's forehead. "She's burning up."

"It *is* one of the symptoms," Severus snapped, still watching Hermione's face closely. Lucius had a horrible suspicion that he knew what Severus was waiting for.

"Why don't you give her the cure now?" Potter asked, his whining voice right in Lucius's ear.

"Because," Severus hissed, his wand in hand and raised to Hermione's lips, "there's no point if she chokes on her own blood first."

Almost as if he'd prompted it with those words, blood started to trickle from her mouth. Then her nose, too, in a steadily increasing stream. At that rate she'd soon need a Blood Replenishing Potion.

Lucius swallowed hard and looked away. It didn't help. He could still see Narcissa in Hermione's place, haemorrhaging in the same way. Forty-eight hours later... Dead. Cold. *Gone.*

"Now I can give her the cure," Severus said.

Lucius looked back. The blood was gone, including the deep red stains on her clothes.

"But not here. Somewhere quieter and more comfortable. I need to concentrate." He glared pointedly at Lucius.

"Her bedroom? Your lab?" Lucius suggested, avoiding Severus's glower. He had tried to keep everyone from following... just that he hadn't done very well at it. Especially not after the wards flared.

"Both: Hermione to her bedroom, then on to my lab. Walk down to my lab and by the time you get there I should be able to tell you if it has worked." With that, he Disapparated, taking Hermione with him.

The Harridan snatched her hand off Hermione just in time. "I'd never hear the end of it from Hermione if I Teleported with her again." She sniffled, turning to her husband and burying her face against him. "It has to work."

"Follow me," Lucius murmured. He led the way downstairs, through the corridors to the door of the lab. The portraits were silent as he passed, some snoring softly. Rather than subject his in-laws to their insults while they lived under his roof, he'd had the manor put all portraits under the Sleeping Beauty Enchantment.

It only took a couple of minutes, but each step felt like eternity. The uncomfortable silence broken only by Helen's sniffles did not help with that impression. Finally, the lab door was in front of him. Lucius knocked and then opened the door.

"Did it..." Lucius drew his wand, eyes wide. *"Protego!"*

A vial rebounded off the Shielding Charm. An Unbreakable Charm, then, or it would be so much shattered glass mingled with the contents was that blood? on the floor.

"...It didn't work?"

Across the room, Severus snarled incoherently, his eyes wild. He slashed his wand through the air. The door slammed in Lucius's face.

"That's a 'no', then."

'Shit.'

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 37

The weight of the world.

Chapter 35

His worst fear, worst nightmare, come true.

The cure. It hadn't worked. *Failed.*

He'd failed.

'Hermione...'

A wail of grief, dimly heard through the door, echoed his mental cry. Helen's voice, distorted almost beyond recognition. And broken sobbing.

"There, there, love. This one didn't work, but the next will. Severus'll work it out."

"He will, he's got to."

Severus snarled. He lashed out, sending everything on the tabletop crashing to the floor. No satisfaction, though. Nothing smashed. No way to make his surroundings match his internal turmoil, of his world falling apart. Nothing would break, not with Unbreakable Charms on everything.

Hands on the edge of the table, he heaved. Finally, it overturned with a deafening crash.

Gasping for breath, his shoulders slumped, his rage gone as quickly as it came. While he did not have Will's or Potter's confidence, he could not would not give up.

The lab was in disarray. Hopefully the one-way soundproofing had worked as intended and kept the noise from those outside. He didn't want anyone to witness the extent of his temper and despair. To shake their confidence in him, and in his stability. Not because he needed it himself, but her parents, her friends... They needed it.

Breathing slowly in and out, Severus focused on his Occlumency barriers, repairing the rents torn into them by his uncontrolled outburst. Giving his hands something to do helped, so he set about manually putting the room back to rights. He picked up his Omnioscope, inspecting it carefully. Thankfully, it appeared to be undamaged. Unbreakable Charms had worked just as well on such a complicated instrument as they had on a simple glass vial.

...Unless the charms had only worked on the exterior, and the interior of the Omnioscope was wrecked? One glance was enough to assure him that it was in working order, as the latest blood sample viewed was still displayed. And the plague's ghostly cellular form still mutated, too fast for the naked eye to see anything but a blur he'd had to slow down the speed with the Omnioscope.

Just before Lucius and the others arrived at the door, he'd finished examining the fresh blood samples he'd taken from Hermione. Much as he wished he'd mixed the sample up, he knew he hadn't. The sample currently visible under the Omnioscope was from *after* he'd administered the cure. Yet no trace remained of the cure by the time he'd seen it. The plague had changed too much, completely different to what had been predicted.

Fighting back panic, he'd combined another dose of the cure with that sample of blood and seen the disaster unfold right before his horrified eyes: the plague destroyed the cure, leaving no trace behind.

Then he'd lost control. Understandable, yet he did not have time for it. Hermione didn't.

Back to the drawing board. And under even more pressure than before, with this deadline so close. His wife, facing her own mortality in less than forty-eight hours if Severus couldn't formulate a successful cure.

No time.

What could he do?

Try the original cure again? But that almost failed during the last plague outbreak, and it was far more advanced now...

Go to Fawkes for some more tears and try those? But the reasons phoenix tears did not work before still held.

Unicorn blood? No. It only prolonged life, it did not heal. And besides the curse it carried, administering it to all of the witches worldwide would render unicorns extinct. *For what? A little extra time, cursed time. So, for nothing.'*

All he could do was try everything he could think of... Except the unicorn blood idea. Everything within reason, then.

But before he tried anything, he needed to share the bad news. Kingsley would be expecting a message. Severus had informed him of when the plague was predicted to strike again, after Hermione performed her reckless Arithmancy. Fawkes could spread the word fastest.

Even as he thought of him, Fawkes appeared. The flash of fire was somehow slightly dimmer. Perhaps the phoenix was worried about Hermione too?

Severus grabbed a quill and a piece of parchment and scribbled a quick message. He pressed his wand tip to it, ready to duplicate it. And paused. He didn't know how many he would need. Instead, he scrawled a postscript. Kingsley could pass along the message to anyone else who should know.

He gave the parchment to Fawkes, who cocked his head at him expectantly. Waiting for something else... But what? There was no point sending the failed cure. Maybe the latest plague sample? If he included a copy of the information in his Omnioscope, perhaps someone else would have a brainwave. One of his colleagues on the research team, or someone at St. Mungo's. Because Severus was all too aware that he was running out of ideas.

And fast running out of time.

* * *

'Where am I?'

Hermione blinked. She felt like she'd just taken a single step forward, yet she was standing in the middle of the room. A room that felt familiar, yet she had no memory of ever being in it before. She looked around, examining her surroundings. A vast library, shelves lined with books as far as the eye could see. Like Hogwarts, or Malfoy Manor's libraries, yet on an even larger scale. She'd definitely remember this room if she'd been here before...

'Maybe I've come here before in my dreams. And those nightmares I can't remember are about having to leave here.'

She stepped closer to the nearest bookshelf. Every title on the leather-bound book spines looked interesting. Hermione chose one at random and took it from the shelf, flipping it open.

A hand slapped the book out of her grip before she could read a word.

"Don't!"

Hermione blinked again, her jaw dropping. Narcissa Malfoy stood beside her, placing one foot on the book as it tried to float from the floor. She bent to pick it up, putting it back on the shelf.

'Am I dreaming? I must be. She's dead.'

"Not again," Narcissa groaned. "Yes, I am dead. But this is no dream, girl. What did your friend Potter tell you of what happened after the Dark Lord tried to kill him?"

Voldemort had tried to kill Harry several times. Which did Narcissa mean?

"Of course, you cannot remember being told about that either... The Dark Lord killed Potter, but the Horcrux within him was destroyed in his place. Before Potter returned to life, he was in your place. On the threshold between life and death, where Dumbledore waited for him as I do for you."

"Harry's... threshold?... is a *library*?"

"No, this is your personal threshold. Potter's was some imaginary version of King's Cross. If he had caught a train, he would have died. Similarly, if you read a book here, you die."

Of course. As her Arithmancy indicated, the plague attacked her again forty-eight hours before she died. And she must have coughed up blood soon after that... She was dying.

"Then I just don't read anything. I won't die before the cure has time to work."

"That cure has failed."

'Oh, no... Severus. Don't you dare blame yourself.'

"Eventually you won't have any choice in the matter. The books will fly into your hands, and you won't be able to do anything but read."

At Narcissa's words, a book started to draw out of the shelf on its own volition. Hermione reached forward to push it back, but Narcissa swatted her hand out of the way and shoved the book back in.

"Touch a book and you will not be able to keep yourself from opening it," Narcissa snapped. She must have said those words before, more than once judging by her exasperated tone.

Hermione stepped back, her mind whirling. She had been here before, then. That must be why it felt so familiar. Each time she fell ill with the plague, she was taken here. And it would explain why she felt as though she were forgetting something each time she'd recovered... The cure had wiped her memory of it.

But then what were those nightmares about that she could never remember on waking? Memories of being here? That implied that the cure might only have locked them away, rather than wiping them entirely. Not that it mattered now. She had to survive first, and it would be a miracle if Severus managed to develop a new cure in time.

She was dying.

...And of all people, *Narcissa Malfoy* was her... guide? Threshold keeper?

"Why you? Why not Luna Lovegood, or Molly Weasley, or McGonagall, or Vector, or Madam Pomfrey? Sirius, or Remus, or... or Dumbledore, even?"

"Victims of what you call the plague can only converse with those dying of it. And why it should be you is something I assure you that I wondered at first. But then you married *my* Lucius."

"It's not..."

Narcissa slapped a book away with an impatient hand before it could reach Hermione. "I know perfectly well that you only regard him as a friend. And that his feelings for you are not love. He might not have ever been physically faithful to me, but he has always been emotionally. Still, the bonds of matrimony seem enough that I am bound here to you as..." She grimaced. "...counterparts."

"Then why me? I mean, why keep me alive?" Hermione pointedly looked at the book Narcissa had prevented from reaching her.

"I care nothing for you, true. But I do care for Lucius. He might not love you, but he will be hurt if another wife dies. And Severus... he saved Draco. He would be

devastated. Those are reasons enough to try to save you. There are others, too."

"Others?" Hermione prompted.

"I might not like you, as someone of Muggle parentage and my replacement as Lucius's wife, but I do pity you. You are not much older than my own son, and dying already."

Hermione frowned. Was that really jealousy albeit mingled with pity in the other woman's voice? "I'm not your replacement. You said it yourself, Lucius doesn't love me."

"But he does lust after you. And you find him attractive."

Hermione opened her mouth to deny it, but what was the point? Narcissa already knew the truth. "Maybe, but I'm *attracted* to Severus. I love Severus. Lucius is just a friend. It's a marriage in name only to him."

Narcissa shook her head, her smile brittle. "I have no doubt you do love Severus. But I know Lucius, and I do not believe you can resist him forever. Besides, possessive of Lucius as I am, I do not want him to be alone for the rest of his life."

Hermione looked away, uncomfortable with Narcissa's cold, piercing stare. It reminded her rather too much of Bellatrix. A resemblance between the siblings, perhaps? They looked nothing alike, but there might be something in their mannerisms. What did she want, for Hermione to promise to leave Lucius alone? Or to do the opposite, to make sure he wouldn't be? Either way, it wasn't Narcissa's choice to make. The only way Hermione would ever let Lucius join her in bed was if Severus was there too, and hell would freeze over before that.

Far safer to change the subject. Hermione mentally rewound the conversation, hoping for something obvious for her to latch onto. Surely Narcissa wasn't bound to her here just to talk about Lucius?

Wait.

'Victims of what you call the plague can only converse with those dying of it.'

What you call the plague...

"Mrs Malfoy..."

"You might as well call me Narcissa. You are technically Mrs Malfoy as well."

"Narcissa, then... You said 'what I call the plague'. What did you mean?"

"Exactly what I said, girl. It is no plague. And that is the main reason I am doing all I can to keep you alive. The living must know what the dead know of the 'plague'."

A book was suddenly in Hermione's hands, without her even reaching for one. Narcissa slammed it shut just as it began to fall open before Hermione's transfixed stare, like a mouse watching a snake.

"As I was saying... You have no real reason to trust me. Despite my efforts to keep you alive. For all you know, I am controlling the books. I may have lied to the Dark Lord about your friend Potter being dead, but we both know I only did it for Draco. But if you want to live, you must trust what I say."

"I'm listening."

* * *

"Eat," Lucius snapped. He barged into the lab, balancing a tray of sandwiches with one hand while warily holding his wand at the ready with the other. This was his house-elves' job, but so far they'd failed to get Severus to eat anything left for him. Most likely he'd been so absorbed in his work that he hadn't even noticed the food.

Severus lifted his head from staring down his Omniscope to scowl at Lucius. "Yes, mother." He snatched a sandwich from the tray and wolfed it down. Eyes bloodshot, unshaven and unkempt, his hair even more lank than usual, Severus looked rather like a denizen of Azkaban. If generally more healthy. He certainly ate with all of the manners of a starved convict.

"You'll make yourself sick, eating like that." Lucius gestured at the crumb covered but otherwise empty tray.

Severus shrugged and handed the tray back to Lucius. "Mildly nauseous, perhaps. It's not been that long since I last ate."

"You missed lunch and dinner. Keep it up and you'll miss breakfast."

"*What does it matter?*" Severus slammed his hands down on his table, making the Omniscope jump. "Time is running out fast. Potions can keep me going until there is nothing I can do."

Lucius watched Severus closely, ready to duck. He knew Severus could be a little unstable when... angered, for lack of a better word. But he'd never seen him quite this unhinged before.

"I need more time," Severus croaked, his head bowed, face hidden behind a curtain of greasy hair. "O for a Time-Turner! But no, there are none left. All destroyed in that ludicrous 'battle' when Black died."

Lucius swallowed hard. *'Don't even think about it. He's a better Legilimens than I am an Occlumens. Change the subject.'*

"You need to rest." Good. His voice sounded normal. Hopefully no guilt showed on his face either...

"I need to find a *cure*. I don't have time for sleep." Severus glanced at his watch. "Thirty-seven hours, Lucius. Then she dies."

Lucius shrugged helplessly. "I know. I didn't think you would rest, but it had to be said. What can you do for her if you're exhausted?"

"Weren't you listening? Potions. Wit-Sharpener and Pepper-Up will keep me going. I don't have any choice."

"Potions can only do so much."

"They will have to suffice. What would you have me do?"

"I..." Lucius looked away and ran a hand back through his hair. "You'll do all you can. I know. Her parents can do nothing but stay with her, and they refused to sleep as well. To be honest, I don't think any of us could even if we tried."

"What do you mean, refused to sleep? When I last came to take a blood sample, they were both snoring." Severus's eyes narrowed at him suspiciously.

"They did refuse. I just happened to spike their tea with Dreamless Sleep."

Severus shook his head. "They may only be Muggles, but when they wake up and realise what you did and they will you'll have hell to pay."

"It's not as if they can hex me."

"No, but this is... what was it you called her? Harpy Helen?"

"Harridan," Lucius croaked, his mouth suddenly dry. Maybe an Obliviate would be in order, so that her parents didn't remember that offer of tea? "I'll..."

Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire. By the time Lucius blinked away the afterimage, the phoenix had gone again. In his place, Severus tore open a roll of parchment, a raw, desperate hope in his eyes. But the emotion died a quick death as he read, a black scowl taking its place. He crumpled up the parchment and tossed it into the air, incinerating it before Lucius had a chance to grab it.

"What is it?"

Severus turned away, his face shadowed by his hair. "Baby Muggle-borns. The cure has failed with those born since Hermione fell ill again. Those already cured are fine for now."

"Merlin, no. I'm sorry. Surely... at least... doesn't it mean that the plague hasn't split into variants? That it's still mutating as one? That's some faint silver lining?"

"It might mean that if I can find a cure, it will work universally. But that's*if*, not when. I had hoped that message would be an idea from one of my colleagues to try. Something new that would work. Instead..."

"More bad news."

Severus nodded. He turned back to his Omniscope, his mouth tightened into a bitter line. "It didn't even occur to me to ask about those Muggle-borns*And I don't care* Hermione is my only concern. I can't lose her."

"I know. I don't blame you." Lucius sighed, guilt a leaden weight in his stomach. 'She's my concern too, although so is Ginny if only for Draco's sake. I should care more about those Muggle-borns, though. I'm responsible for them, their liaison with the Ministry.'

"I'll leave you to it. Let me know if there's anything you need. Or call one of the elves, they'd be delighted to assist you."

* * *

Lucius rubbed at tired eyes. He straightened up in his chair, forcing his neck to support his head rather than lolling back against the headrest. Within a minute he slumped back down, struggling to keep his eyes open. Time for another Pepper-Up Potion. He fumbled in his pocket, struggled with the cork and tipped the potion into his mouth. Swallowing, he grimaced as an unpleasant wave of heat washed through his limbs and back through his torso to emerge as steam from his ears. At least the discomfort was worth feeling more human and less like an Inferius.

He glanced at the seats next to his, the Harridan and Will snoring softly. He'd have to Obliviate them again in the morning, or they wouldn't accept anything from him, not even comfort if things went as badly as he feared.

'Still no cure. Eleven hours to go.'

Perhaps he should have offered her parents the potions that kept Severus and himself going. They only wanted to spend as much time as possible with Hermione, to keep vigil. Just as he did.

But what good would it do? Hermione couldn't appreciate it. At least under Dreamless Sleep her parents were at peace. And it meant that he had some respite from witnessing their devastation as hope slipped away with each hour. Seeing them both shed silent tears in their despair was an excruciatingly painful reminder of his own as Narcissa died.

A muted crack from the opposite side of Hermione's bed heralded Severus's arrival. He looked no better than he had on any of the previous occasions he'd come to take an hourly blood sample. Progressively worse, if anything, as the shadows of his unshaven bristles deepened and his face became ever more haggard.

Lucius blinked as Severus swept back his greasy mane from his face, eyes intent on Hermione as he lifted her arm to press his wand to the crook of her elbow. The vial for the blood glinted in his other hand, mirroring a glimmer in Severus's eyes. Could that be hope?

'Don't ask. If he wants to share anything, he will. Don't be like Potter and pester the poor man.'

Severus pocketed the vial of blood and lowered Hermione's arm, caressing it with a lingering touch before he let go. Lucius looked away, uncomfortable. Ridiculous! He could happily watch an illicit memory of the pair making love, but witnessing a simple touch left him squirming in his seat?

Then again, that gentle caress reminded him of... Lucius winced, flinching away from the memory of the last time he'd touched Narcissa, her skin cold. Dead.

"They left?" Severus's voice drew Lucius back to the present.

"What?"

"Potter. Draco. Ginny." With each name, Severus looked pointedly at where they had been sitting, then back at Lucius.

"Ginny fell ill, too. I persuaded them that pestering you for progress would not help, and pointed out that she might be more comfortable in her own bed." He shook his head. "Not that she would know anything about it. I think my promise to get any cure to them personally did the trick."

"Thank you," Severus muttered. Potter's questions had clearly been every bit as distracting as Lucius thought.

His gaze returned to Hermione, that flicker of emotion showing again. "I had an idea. Something to test with this." Severus patted the pocket with the vial. "While I can think of no way to develop a cure independently, the plague is mutating so fast now that an isolated earlier sample might attack a current one."

"You're going to try to fight fire with fire? If it works, wouldn't it just infect Hermione with a new variant of the plague?"

"Not if the two versions of the plague cancel each other out."

"More like fire and ice, then."

Severus nodded. "It worked exactly as I hoped with the previous sample."

"Then give it to her!" Lucius looked away from Severus's glare. "Sorry. I know you must have your reasons."

"Indeed," Severus snapped. "I need to be sure it still works, and that if it does, that it is actually safe. I am well aware that she is fast running out of time, but I will not risk killing her myself."

"I'm sorry," Lucius repeated, dragging a weary hand down his face.

"Forget it," Severus said, absently stroking Hermione's cat, curled up at her feet. Pining. "Potions or no, we are both overtired." He turned to leave, almost spinning into Apparition before he twisted back. "Do not breathe a word of this idea of mine to her parents. Not even in their potion induced slumber. I do not want to raise false hope."

"I won't." Lucius spoke to thin air.

* * *

Severus returned in an hour.

"Did it..." Lucius trailed off at the sight of the blank look on Severus's face. He shook his head, his eyes equally blank, no emotion stirring in the dark depths.

Moving with none of his usual grace, Severus mechanically took another blood sample. "It failed." His voice was a dead monotone.

'Occlumency,' Lucius realised. Not his usual subtle variety, either, instead his mind so heavily shuttered that it was a wonder he could register anything.

"The plague reacts as if alive, almost sentient. It completely destroyed my attempted anti-plague."

"What will you do now?"

A flash of raw pain flickered across Severus's face. His Occlumency was only as strong as he was, and he had to be near breaking point. "I want to stay with her. But I cannot," he choked. A single tear slipped down his sallow cheek.

Of course. If there was any chance Severus could still do something, he'd never forgive himself if he gave up. He'd regret not staying with her, but he'd regret not doing all he could to save her even more. Even if there was nothing more he could do.

Severus must have Apparated. Either that or somehow vaulted across the bed without disturbing Hermione's cat, because after a single blink of Lucius's eyes, Severus was standing over him. Two claw-like hands grabbed Lucius by the front of his robes and hauled him up to his feet until he stood nose to nose with Severus.

"Stay with her. If by some miracle a cure is found in time, by all means go to your daughter-in-law with a dose, but otherwise ~~stay~~ *stay with Hermione*. Promise me."

"I promise," Lucius said, trying to gently tug his robes out of Severus's creasing grip without ripping them.

Severus abruptly let go. Lucius dropped back into his seat, almost tipping it over backwards. Then almost slid out of it, cringing away, when Severus slammed his hands down on the arms of the chair. No wonder his students had been terrified of him...

"And let me know if anything changes." Severus straightened up, staring unblinkingly at Lucius, reminding him of a bird of prey. A vulture, waiting for him to die of fear, then feast on him.

Lucius mentally shook himself. He was older than Severus, for Merlin's sake. He'd never been taught by him. Never been terrorised by him under threat of point loss and detention, so *get a grip*.

'*You were a Death Eater. You know all these intimidating tricks, even if you considered some of them too uncouth to use.*'

He straightened up in his seat. "Of course."

Severus nodded and stepped back. He looked again at Hermione, leaning over to grip her hand.

"Um, her breathing changed. Even under enspelled sleep." Lucius shuddered. Yet another reminder of Narcissa's last hours.

"I know." Severus brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. "It's harsh and laboured, only still regular due to the spell. It happened the first time."

"Does it mean what I think it does? That she can still feel pain?"

"If so, she's not conscious of it."

"Then what..."

Severus glared over his shoulder at him. "Simple. Her lungs are starting to fail."

"But the spell!"

"It only delays the plague, it does not stop it. I know you must be trying not to remember it, but Narcissa went through the same."

"Then if you already knew, why did you want me to let you know of any changes?" Lucius snapped.

"I meant if she's obviously dying, I want to be there. I'll come anyway during the last hour of the countdown, but if she starts to fade sooner..."

"Oh," Lucius said softly. "Yes, of course."

With one last caress of Hermione's hand, Severus turned to leave again.

"I'm sorry," Lucius blurted. "I didn't mean to snap. I don't want to remember, but all of this *does* remind me of Narcissa. Losing her. And... I won't lose another wife."

Severus looked sharply at him.

Lucius held up his hands. "I know, I know. In name only. I still don't want to lose her. All I meant is that I know what you're going through. Even married for such a short time, I know you love her as I loved Narcissa."

"I do," Severus whispered, closing his eyes. The wall of Occlumency fell once more. He nodded dispassionately and Disapparated.

* * *

"Severus. It's not your fault. We know you did all you could."

At Will's hoarse voice, Lucius turned to his in-laws. Helen nodded vacantly, her bloodshot gaze fixed on Hermione. They cradled one of Hermione's hands between theirs.

Lucius looked nervously at where Severus perched on the other side of Hermione's bed, his head in his hands. Ever since Severus staggered into the room, Lucius had been keeping a watchful eye on him. Just in case he had to protect her parents if Severus snapped...

But Severus just raised his head, turned to look briefly at them, and looked down at Hermione. He reached out to caress her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I know," he finally muttered.

Keeping his hand on his wand just in case Lucius glanced at the clock on Hermione's bedside table. Half an hour left...

Movement from Severus brought his attention back. He almost raised his wand. False alarm. Severus was merely leaning over to kiss her.

Lucius looked away from the tender, gentle, one-sided kiss, to look at her sniffing, watching parents. They gasped.

Severus had jerked back, wafting something away from his mouth. His hand plunged into his robes, coming back with his wand. No, not his wand, a vial? And scooped a silver, wispy thread from the air.

A memory. From Hermione. How? A wand was needed to remove memories, *aspell*. How did Hermione do it, wandless and unconscious?

"What's that?" Helen croaked.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

Severus ignored the questions, launching himself onto his feet. Lucius followed suit, striding over to him.

"I can't risk leaving this for after..."

'After she dies.'

"It might be something important. I have no idea what Hermione can possibly know that would work where everything else has failed, but... I have to check."

"Where are you going?" Lucius grabbed hold of Severus as he started to twist in tell-tale pre-Apparition.

"Hogwarts," Severus said, baffled. He tried to shrug Lucius off. "Let go!"

Of course. The Headmaster's office almost certainly had a Pensieve. But by the time Severus got to Hogwarts... He'd have to Apparate outside the gates, then hope the wards would let him in as former faculty. Run to the castle, and hope again that he'd get into the Headmaster's office as a former Head himself.

No. It would take too long. If Hermione's memory somehow contained a vital clue, Severus needed to see it now.

"No time," he snapped, and Side-Along'ed them into his study. "I have one, remember?" More than one, of course, but only one on public display.

Severus nodded. And paused, poised to pour the memory into the gleaming Pensieve on the desk. "Where's the solution?"

"What?" Lucius stared at his Pensieve, horrified. A freshly polished, shining and completely empty marble bowl. It wouldn't work without the silver solution to display the memories. "Elf!"

A house-elf immediately appeared. "Master calls Moppy?"

"Did you clean this?" He pointed at the Pensieve with a shaking finger.

"Moppy did. Moppy is a good elf and keeps Master's shinies shiny."

"Why didn't you replace the solution? The shiny silver that should *behere*?"

"Moppy needs to ask Master's friend to brew more. Has Moppy been bad?"

Lucius bit back a furious 'yes!'. The elf hadn't actually done anything it hadn't been told to.

Severus cleared his throat impatiently. "It'll have to be Hogwarts, then."

"No," Lucius croaked. He crossed over to the wall and pressed against the panelling, revealing the entrance to his sanctuary to his eyes. A mental tweak of the wards revealed it to Severus as well.

"I have another Pensieve."

'One that I wish I hadn't put a Permanent Sticking Charm on. Please, please, please don't notice the shelf with your and Hermione's names on it...'

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 of 37

In the nick of time.

Chapter 36

'So far, so good.'

Severus had made no comment about the contents of the room, only raising an eyebrow at him when they reached the Pensieve in the centre of Lucius's... sanctuary, for lack of a better word.

Of course, the real danger would be when they left the room, as the incriminating shelf was right next to the door. Perhaps he could change the names on the shelf while Severus investigated the memory? No, that would be too suspicious. Severus would expect him to want to see the contents of the vial he upended into the Pensieve. With

that in mind, Lucius reached out to touch the swirling silver inside the marble basin at the same time as Severus.

After the disorientating whirl of entry into the memory, Lucius found himself with Severus at his side in a vast library, reminiscent of both his own and that at Hogwarts.

Beyond them, Hermione was reaching for a book, only to have it slapped out of her grip by...

Impossible.

Narcissa.

How? Was it so that she and Hermione could say goodbye to their respective beloveds? If so, they really should leave the memory for later. Severus would want to stay at Hermione's side until the end, and Lucius himself should be there to support him. Yet he couldn't bring himself to leave. Odd that Severus showed no signs of leaving either...

Or perhaps not so odd. Narcissa only spoke to Hermione. *Oh.* How disappointing. She was there for Hermione, to stop her from crossing the threshold to death before her time. He could hardly begrudge her keeping Hermione alive. If she had no words for him, then he would instead immerse himself in the bittersweet sting of being in her presence.

Of seeing her again, caressing her familiar, slender, beautiful body with his eyes. He pulled back his hand before his fingers could follow the same path, before stark reality could interfere. As a memory she would be more intangible than a ghost; at least there was an unpleasant chill when flesh moved through ectoplasm. Here there would be nothing.

He sighed, focusing instead on her voice. Would she be there, waiting for him when he died? Her voice, whispering sweet nothings to him rather than talking urgently to Hermione about...

Wait.

What?

Not a plague? What, then? What had taken his Narcissa from him?

He glanced guiltily at where Severus stood, fists clenched and white-knuckled, his dark eyes only on Hermione.

Whatever it was, it would also take Hermione from Severus.

"What killed me and countless other witches what is about to kill you is a curse, the Dark Lord's last revenge against the living."

Lucius exchanged a perplexed look with Severus, both frowning, before they returned their gazes to their witches. A curse? Impossible. Even the Dark Lord was incapable of something of this magnitude. Wasn't he?

"If this is Voldemort's...oh, get over it, as you say, you're dead, and so is he!" Hermione's voice rose in irritation as Narcissa flinched at the name of the Dark Lord. "As I was saying, if this curse was *Voldemort's* handiwork, why didn't he do it in life and kill off all Muggle-borns?"

"This is no ordinary curse, but one last malevolent act with all of the Dark Lord's will and power behind it. A death curse, I suppose you could say."

Lucius's frown deepened. Impossible...

"I've read about those. They only cause bad luck, they don't kill."

"When inflicted by your average Dark wizard, yes. But the Dark Lord was never ordinary, least of all by the end. He was something inhuman, warped by his shattered, fragmented soul. His vengeance was something..." Narcissa grimaced, wresting a book back onto a shelf. "...special."

"You said Harry had a near death experience like this. Why don't others who nearly died know about this? I know the cure stops plague well, curse patients from remembering it, but what about other causes? I was poisoned and nearly died. Why don't I remember being here then?"

'*Good question.*' Why had this message of Narcissa's not been passed on before now?

"I told you, the curse's victims can only converse with those dying of the curse. We cannot share our knowledge with the other dead or living."

Lucius glanced at Hermione. She looked just as baffled as he did. "But... How do you know all this, then? If you can't converse with the other dead, how do you know..."

"We do not have time for this!" Narcissa pushed two books away with an impatient wave of her arms. They were coming faster, and now more than one at a time. All too soon she would not be able to keep Hermione from touching one. And then... Lucius flinched away from the thought.

"To understand, you would have to die first. I do not recommend it. Some knowledge comes at too high a price."

'I wish you could have stayed with me, too, my love.'

"Nor does death bring omniscience. I do not know precisely what the Dark Lord intended with this curse, only the cause and effect. Perhaps he aimed for Potter's beloved to die, but instead the curse was warped like its creator and affected all witches; I do not know." Narcissa looked away, lost in thought.

"*Narcissa!*" Hermione's panicked cry drew Narcissa's and Lucius's attention. An open book was in Hermione's hands, who strained to keep her head turned away and her eyes shut. Some unseen force was pulling her face back, and would doubtless open her eyes when she could no longer move her head.

Narcissa swore under her breath and snapped the book closed, disregarding Hermione's yelp of pain as it caught her fingers. Severus's hands passed through the book as she did. Lucius couldn't blame him for trying to intervene, even knowing he could do nothing.

He gripped Severus's shoulder. "She was alive, she'll be fine."

"For all we know she could be dead already. I didn't realise, Lucius, I thought she would be 'safe' until she reached the end of the time she'd calculated."

After shelving the book again, Narcissa kept her eyes on Hermione from that point on, within arm's reach of her should any more books attack. "Regardless of the Dark Lord's intentions, the fact remains that somehow you must pass on that it is a death curse, not a plague, and most importantly that the Dark Lord's body must be destroyed."

"Of course!" Severus slapped his forehead. "Damn you to hell, Albus!"

Lucius blinked. "What?"

"Later," Severus muttered.

The ladies were still talking. "...how do I pass it on?"

"That is the snag. You could not manage it before, nor remember when you recovered. Now you are nearly out of time."

Lucius watched as Narcissa fended off book after book as Hermione paced, deep in thought. Much as he appreciated seeing Narcissa's lithe body in action, those books were coming far too close to Hermione for comfort.

"Severus managed to do something similar once. After Nagini bit him, he leaked some memories. But he was conscious."

"That is your only hope." Narcissa strained to keep three books away at once. "Do it quickly."

"But how?"

"I don't know!" Narcissa snapped, her hair dishevelled by her struggles. "You're supposed to be *the brightest witch of your age*. Prove it!"

Hermione stopped pacing in front of Narcissa, inadvertently blocking Lucius's view. She reached into her pocket and drew her wand, surely an imaginary construct. Unless her wand was still on her body? Lucius couldn't remember if she'd been changed into nightclothes or not. Even if she still had it, this was inside her head. Wasn't it?

"I've never removed a memory before. Have you?"

Narcissa must have nodded. "Hold the wand tip to your temple and think of the memory. Slowly pull the wand away and the memory will come away with it. Don't think of anything else or it will fail, and you'll get a nasty headache. Not that it can matter that's not a real wand."

Hermione put her wand to her temple regardless. "Really? It's as real as anything else here. Are you telling me those lethal books are a figment of my imagination? Are *you*?"

"No, they are as real as you are, but you cannot be physically holding that..."

The memory ended, depositing Lucius and Severus back into his sanctum in a disorientating whirl. Real wand or not, Hermione must have managed to extract the memory at that point. Impressive.

By the time Lucius started moving, Severus was halfway to the doorway of the not-so-secret room and at the threshold when a nagging question occurred to Lucius. "What did you mean? About damning Dumbledore to hell?"

Severus paused, stiffening, his head turned almost as if to look back at him when he continued out into Lucius's study, approaching the fireplace.

'Time and a place, idiot. Now is not it. The Dark Lord's mortal remains must be found and destroyed before Hermione dies.'

Even as he reached for the Floo powder, Severus raised his other arm to check a Muggle watch strapped to his wrist. "Not now. Hermione has maybe ten minutes left, provided none of those books get past Narcissa."

"But what became of the Dark Lord's body?"

"Shacklebolt should know." He threw the Floo powder into the fireplace, green flames roaring up in readiness.

Lucius glanced at his desk, and back at Severus. He lunged forward, dragging him back before Severus could step into the fireplace. "We need more time..."

Severus pushed him away. "We don't have it! Stay with Hermione."

"But..."

"I hold you to your promise. Don't leave her side, in case..." He shuddered and stepped forward again into the fireplace.

"Wait!"

"The Minister of Magic's Office!" Severus vanished in a roar of green flames.

Lucius staggered over to his desk and slumped down into his chair. "It's down to me, then," he muttered, and pulled open his warded desk drawer. He reached inside, retrieving a dose of Polyjuice, an eyelash in a labelled vial, an envelope containing a letter in his own hand, and a unique necklace, the last of its kind.

* * *

Kingsley Shacklebolt paused, fingers still clenched around his handful of Floo powder. He frowned at his office fireplace. Was that a green glow? Shit, it was. He leapt aside, just in time, dodging both a cloud of soot and a body that shot out.

A non-verbal *'Tergeo'* cleared the air and cleaned his guest, without risking a mangled incantation, coughing on a verbal attempt.

"Severus!" Kingsley dropped his handful of Floo powder. Calling his French counterpart could wait.

'Please have good news...' That hope died as soon as he met Severus's wild eyes. *'Oh, no...'* More than ever, he wanted to forget his duties as Minister and be with Rolanda, like Gawain. But it was far worse for Severus. Hermione must be nearly out of...

Severus grabbed him by the collar, hauling him close until they were nose to nose.

"Where is Voldemort's body?"

Kingsley blinked. "In the Department of Mysteries. I think. Why?"

"Take me there." Severus released him.

Kingsley rocked back on his heels, unbalanced. "Wha..."

"Now," Severus snarled. He looked unhinged, the stubble on his normally clean-shaven jaw somehow making him look even more deranged.

"Follow me." He led the way to the lift, ordered the occupants off it, and used his Ministerial override to make it take them directly to Level Nine and the Department of Mysteries.

"It must be completely destroyed," Severus said as the lift started going down.

"What?"

"Voldemort's body. Because it's not a plague."

Kingsley gave Severus a strange look. "Of course it's not a...Oh. Not the body, you mean *the* plague." The disease that would kill all witches within the week. Including his Rolanda... Wait. *Not* a plague. "What in the name of Merlin is it, then?"

"It's a curse that mimics a disease." Severus started pacing like a caged Kneazle. "That's why nobody became immune. That's why no witch escaped it. A death curse, active as long as his body still exists."

"But... but that's impossible." Kingsley staggered and supported himself with a hand against the vibrating wall of the lift. "I did the spell to check for a curse signature myself. ...Wait, did you say *death curse*? They're a myth! Blamed for any of the victor's bad luck if their adversary dies."

"No, they exist. And as something far more serious than mere bad luck when that adversary was as twisted and inhuman as Voldemort."

Kingsley swallowed hard. Death curses, real... and serious. *Lethal*. Not a plague, but acting like one. Carried in the blood of witches. The only reason they hadn't died immediately must be that it took a while to build up to those lethal levels.

'Of course.' Why hadn't they seen it before? A curse. A pure creation of the Dark Arts. Like them, it was akin to a hydra *Unfixed*. *Mutating*. Kingsley's breath caught as he remembered the last of those characteristics from his training as an Auror: *Indestructible*.

'No...' Severus must know what he was talking about. Just as most curses could be countered save for the Killing Curse destroying the caster would stop this curse. The alternative was unthinkable.

"Damn Dumbledore!" Severus stopped pacing and pounded his fists against the door. Or would have, if the door hadn't opened. He staggered outside into the corridor beyond, closely followed by Kingsley. "It must be why he made sure Voldemort's body was gone the first time around. Why didn't he warn anyone?"

"His portrait is a heavy sleeper... or perhaps it was a secret that died with Dumbledore? Portraits don't know everything their counterpart did." Kingsley opened the door to the Department of Mysteries and stepped inside. Ordinarily he'd let Severus go first, but the Unspeakables sometimes objected to his Ministerial access. Who knew what they'd make of a former Death Eater?

Inside, an Unspeakable stopped and glared at them. No, not at them, *athim*. "Minister? Haven't you disrupted us enough today already?" A woman's voice, dripping with contempt.

'Huh.' Scratch sometimes: Unspeakables always objected to his presence. '*Hang on...*' "What? I haven't set foot in here for weeks!"

The Unspeakable snorted. "Try that excuse when you haven't made an unusual *request* to me not an hour ago." She pushed back her hood to reveal the lined face of an old woman. Yet her hands were youthful... some sort of time-travel experiment gone wrong? They were trying to recreate the Time-Turners, after all.

"Never mind that," Severus snapped. "We are here on urgent business. Where is Voldemort's body?"

The Unspeakable didn't flinch at the name, instead frowning. "The Minister should be able to tell you that, Snape. He's the one that insisted on taking it away. Something about disposing of it properly, saying we'd had enough time to research it and threatening *cuts* to our funding when I objected. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." The Unspeakable stalked off, slamming a door behind her.

Kingsley shook his head emphatically as Severus turned to look at him with accusing eyes. "I haven't left my office all morning!"

"Polyjuice," Severus stated, his voice a deadened monotone.

"Impossible!" As an Auror, he'd been careful about his nail clippings and magically removed his hair. "As a Minister, I remove ~~all~~ hair and dispose of it myself. My nail clippings too."

"Your eyebrows," Severus croaked. "You still have them." He leaned close. "Eyelashes too. Even if you had remembered those, it can be done with skin cells."

'*Shit!*' His hands shot to his eyelids. So obvious that he'd forgotten them. "We'll find it, Severus. I promise you, we will."

"Too late for Hermione." Severus raised his left arm, revealing his Muggle watch.

"We may yet be in time..."

Severus shook his head violently and jabbed a shaking finger at his watch. "Not unless we can find it in the next..."

"I know, it's nearly been two days. I'm so sorry, Severus," he said, with all of the sympathy *empathy* he could muster, as Rolanda would be on her deathbed soon if she wasn't already...

Severus said nothing, his eyes fixed on his watch. He didn't seem to be breathing.

"Severus?"

"Over two days ago," he finally whispered. "By four minutes."

"She might still be..."

"No. No, her Arithmancy... it's too late. Even if there is any leeway, by the time we find the body..." Severus tore off his watch and hurled it away, blasting it out of the air with his wand, scattering fragments of glass and gears across the floor.

Kingsley laid a tentative hand on his trembling shoulder. "Go home to her. I'll find the body and destroy it. I'm so sorry it will be too late for Hermione."

* * *

Hermione scrunched her eyes tight shut, her breathing unsteady.

"It's too late," Narcissa murmured from beside her. "I have no more influence here."

The book had passed straight through her to be caught by Hermione's unwilling hands, immediately falling open.

She had to resist the urge. She couldn't *must not* open her eyes. For her. For Severus. For Lucius, too. For both of them. Tears trickled down her cheeks. She couldn't stop it any more than she could hold her breath indefinitely.

Her eyes opened.

* * *

Hermione...

Dead. *Gone.*

The walk from the entrance hall fireplace to their adjoining rooms had never been longer, that terrible knowledge echoing inside his mind, his Occlumency torn to shreds. His breath rasped in his ears, each step heavier than the last.

Her bedroom door at last loomed in front of him. Severus raised a shaking hand to the door handle, slowly turning the cold metal, cold dread a leaden weight in his heart. He couldn't hear her parents or Lucius. From outside, the room was as silent as the grave.

He opened the door and froze for a second as he took in the scene. He dashed inside, kneeling on the floor beside her parents. Helen lay sprawled partially on top of Will, his hands positioned as though he'd caught her before falling himself. Both alive, thankfully. Unconscious. No... Stunned.

Lucius... He *promised*. He promised he'd stay with her. How could he? *How dare* he?

"Severus! I know I have house-elves to clean it for me, but *please* don't trample soot all over my antique carpets." Lucius's voice came from behind him, outside in the corridor and getting closer. "*Tergeo!*" That drawing voice was right behind him now.

Even as the spell cleaned off the soot that must have been clinging to him since he'd Flooed back, Severus spun around and plucked the wand from Lucius's hands, tossing it aside.

"Sev..." He closed his hands around Lucius's throat, cutting him off.

Lucius gurgled, trying to speak, but Severus's grip was too tight. '*Good.*'

"*You left her to die alone,*" he snarled, hands tightening even more around Lucius's throat.

"Severus? Stop it! Let him... My parents! What happened to them?"

He froze at the sound of his name on Hermione's lips. *Impossible*. He let go of Lucius, turning back to stare at the bed. Hermione had thrown back the covers and struggled to get up, wide eyes fixed on her parents. She swayed on her feet.

Severus darted forward to catch her, almost tripping over her parents in his haste. He pulled her into his arms, burying his face into her hair, breathing in her scent. Alive. She was alive, flesh and blood against him. Not a hallucination. Not a ghost.

She gently pushed him back to take his face in her hands, frowning up at him. "You look like hell. Have you slept at all since I collapsed?"

He ignored the question, cupping the back of her head as he bent down to capture her lips. She swayed even more by the time he drew away, his arms the only thing keeping her upright. Perhaps he should have tried to hold back the desperation in his kiss.

"You need a shave," she muttered, looking up at him with dazed eyes.

He winced. Was that whisker burn he'd inflicted on her delicate skin?

"Sorry," he murmured, gently settling her back in bed. "I've been... distracted."

She reached up to grip his hand. "Understandably. Now, my parents. Are they all right? And Lucius, why were you throttling him? What happened?"

"I Stunned them," Lucius admitted, his voice a little hoarse. "Allow me to revive them."

"*You what?*" Hermione shrieked, sitting bolt upright as though she wanted to lunge at Lucius and throttle him herself. "Where's my wand? Give me my wand and we'll see how *you* like being Stunned, you..."

"My apologies, but I did have my reasons." Lucius must have retrieved his wand and used non-verbal Rennervates, for Hermione's parents groaned in unison and sat up.

"You!" Helen scrambled to her feet and lunged at Lucius. Will managed to pull her back before she could do more than pull back her hand to slap him.

"You had better have a very good reason for what you did, Lucius," he said. "Or I will show you what a dentist is capable of *With no anaesthetic*."

"He says he does have reasons, Dad. Mum, please calm down. We should hear him out."

"Hermione!" her parents chorused. "You're alive!" Helen raced over to her. Kissing her forehead, she beamed down at her daughter, joyful tears trickling down her cheeks.

"...awake! You managed to get rid of this curse, then, Severus!" Will clapped Severus on the shoulder.

"No, because an imposter of the Minister had stolen the body." Severus turned to look at Lucius, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I wonder who that could have been. But how?"

Lucius reached into his collar and pulled out a gold chain, until he held up the necklace on it. No, not a necklace. A Time-Turner?! Impossible.

"It all started with a letter..."

* * *

Do not give the Time-Turner to Severus. He would only work himself into the grave. Remember the risks: it would also create a paradox if he managed to create a cure for reasons I you? will soon know. You will know when the time has come to use the Time-Turner yourself. Or myself. Never mind the right pronouns! Remember that you cannot change what has already happened. For the past future to you to be changed, there can be no witnesses. Good luck.

Lucius put down the letter left by his future self, and picked up his Time-Turner. During his time as Fudge's bankroller, he'd managed to get his hands on one, unbeknownst to the Unspeakables and the Dark Lord. Perhaps he should have given it back to the Unspeakables after the Dark Lord's defeat so they could recreate more of them?

No matter. The important thing was that he had one. While he could not use the Time-Turner to take some of the cure back and give it to Narcissa not when he knew all too well that she was dead he could try to save Hermione, and by extension Ginny and all other witches.

He put the chain of the Time-Turner around his neck and upended the vial containing Shackbolt's eyelash into the Polyjuice. He almost put it to his lips when he glanced again at the letter. Witnesses...

He capped the Polyjuice vial and pocketed it. Standing up, he drew his wand. He Apparated into Hermione's bedroom, where her parents immediately bombarded him with questions.

"What happened?"

"Where's Severus?"

"What was that silver stuff?"

He held up his hands. Mercifully, they fell silent, waiting for answers. "It was a memory. Hermione is currently on the threshold between life and death. There, one of the dead my first wife, Narcissa gave her some vital information, which Hermione let us know with that memory."

"You mean she's having an out of body experience? I hope you told her to stay away from the light."

Lucius blinked, nonplussed. "I suppose you could call it that... but it was a memory. It had already happened. We could only watch it in a magical device, not speak with her. But as we are fast running out of time," He glanced pointedly at where Hermione lay in bed, her breathing now even more laboured. "Please do not interrupt me."

"What was this message from your wife?"

"That the plague is the Dark Lord's last curse, and that his body must be destroyed to break it..."

"What?!"

'So much for not interrupting... if Hermione dies before I can go back in time, I can change nothing!'

"I know it sounds farfetched, but you must believe me when I say the Dark Lord was capable of this. Severus has gone to attempt to destroy the body and end the curse."

Her parents shook their heads as they tried to process the truth, outlandish as it seemed. Helen looked up sharply. "Attempt? You think he'll fail."

"Indeed. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. *Stupefy!*" The Harridan fell down, to be caught by her husband. Lucius winced at Will's look of shocked betrayal before he Stunned him too. The Grangers fell to the floor.

Lucius turned away, resisting the impulse to make sure they were comfortable. They wouldn't be lying there for long.

"Dilly?" The house-elf appeared, squeaking with distress at the sight of the Grangers, sprawled on the floor. "Leave them! You and the other elves are to stay out of this room until I give you permission to return. Your Mistress's life depends on it." The elf obeyed instantly at those magic words.

Lucius turned to leave, before realising Hermione's cat-Kneazle hybrid was still awake. "The same goes for you!"

The cat eyed him balefully, but obediently jumped off the bed and trotted out through the door Lucius held open. Lucius followed him out and closed the door behind him.

He froze as a horrible thought occurred to him. *'The wards! They will alert me if she dies. I have to leave.'* But he couldn't turn up at the Ministry as himself either, or before he went back in time. Too risky.

He took out his Polyjuice again and hurriedly gulped it down, grimacing at the taste: too sweet. He shuddered at the unpleasant sensation of his flesh shifting, growing slightly taller, his chest broader, arms more muscled, threatening to split the seams of his shirt under his robes. Lucius quickly Transfigured his clothes before any damage was done.

He frowned down at the deep crimson robes. Shackbolt always dressed like this whenever he'd seen him, but what if he'd dressed in something different today? Oh well, nothing he could do but hope whoever he bumped into at the Ministry hadn't seen Shackbolt yet.

Finally he pulled out the Time-Turner from where it had slipped beneath his robes. And paused. He needed to know when to destroy the Dark Lord's body and could not do it at a time when he knew Hermione was still affected by the plague. *Curse.* He pulled out his pocket watch and glared at it. 'You're not too late yet' was nowhere near specific enough. He was about to Transfigure it when he realised that when the Polyjuice wore off would serve to let him know when the right time was.

He stuffed his pocket watch back into his robes and fumbled with his Time-Turner, his fingers clumsy in their guise as Shackbolt's larger, unfamiliar hands. His surroundings blurred until there was nothing but darkness. And then he was back in Hermione's room. He Disapparated before his past self or Hermione's parents could notice him.

* * *

At the Ministry, he did his best to swagger around like the Minister. When he got some odd looks from Shackbolt's underlings, he toned it down a little. For a Malfoy, it was too easy to walk around as if he owned the place, which, come to think of it, was not how a man like Shackbolt moved. After that, no one gave him a second glance. Hopefully Shackbolt had dressed as normal, then.

He boarded an empty lift which fortunately took him directly to Level Nine with no one else attempting to get on. His voice should sound just like Shackbolt's same vocal cords, after all, in this Polyjuiced body but there was no guarantee that he could speak like him. A Malfoy talked differently to other mortals. As such he should keep any talking to a minimum.

Lucius left the lift and strode into the Department of Mysteries, throwing the door open so that it banged against the wall. Shackbolt's body was made for making an entrance.

An Unspeakable hurried out of one of the adjoining doors. "Minister, we're trying to work!"

He resisted the urge to look down his nose at the Unspeakable. *'Think Shackbolt, not Malfoy. What would he say?'*

"My apologies. Do you have the D..." *'Not Dark Lord! He wouldn't say that.' "V..." 'I can't say that!'* "You-Know-Who's body?"

"Yes, Minister. Why?" The Unspeakable lowered her hood so that he could see her glower.

"I am afraid you must give it to me. It is high time it was properly disposed of."

"But Minister! You can't, we haven't finished our research..."

"I don't care!" Lucius snapped. "You've had over a year to carry out your research. If you think you have all the time in the world to do it, it's high time I cut the Department of Mysteries' funding."

The Unspeakable gasped, blanching. "Very well. Take the body, *sir*, but leave those funds alone."

"Bring it to me, then."

The Unspeakable did as she was told, grumbling under her breath all the while. Lucius took over the *Mobilicorpus* and walked the body out of the Department of Mysteries. He paused in the corridor beyond. He could hardly take it out through one of the fireplaces in the Atrium. It would be torn apart by an enraged mob, and ironically preserve the death curse as the scattered pieces would not be completely destroyed. Only Fiendfyre would be enough. Even a mob wouldn't dare use that.

A Portkey, then. The Manor would be able to fashion a suitable room for him to play with fire. He took out the empty Polyjuice vial, set it on the floor and tapped his wand to it. He steeled himself, grabbed hold of the Dark Lord's body and touched the vial.

The tugging sensation ended abruptly with a shock of cold water. He sat up, spluttering, and took in his surroundings. He'd landed in his back garden, in the shallow water of his ornamental fountain. Something brushed against him, and he looked down. Lucius yelped, shuddering in revulsion, and shoved the Dark Lord's body out of his lap.

He scrambled out of the fountain, dried himself off with jets of hot air from his wand, and waited until his trembling stopped and his breathing evened out. That was one memory that would haunt him at the worst possible moments. The Dark Lord's head, face down in his lap...

He shuddered again. *Fellatio* would be spoiled for life. Unless... He raised his wand to his head and tugged the strand of memory out. Now it was far less vivid in his head, at least. He let the memory evaporate in the air, unprotected from the gentle breeze.

Lucius turned back to the body and Levitated it out of the fountain. He dried it off. Bad enough that he had to take it inside, there was no need to have it dripping everywhere he dragged it.

He looked up at his home and frowned. What to do until he could destroy the body, besides have the Manor prepare the crematorium? Not his aviary just in case his owls tried to attack the body. Reducing it to owl pellets would not be enough. Fawkes might also do something unpredictable, and Lucius doubted even a phoenix could do what must be done.

The library it was, then, with a very disturbing reading companion.

* * *

It was time. He could feel his flesh bubbling as the Polyjuice wore off. Lucius Apparated himself and his *guest* to the newly prepared dungeon room, warded to rival Gringotts' vaults. He cut off the *Mobilicorpus*, the Dark Lord's body unceremoniously dropping to the floor.

He glared down at the body, unchanged from the day the Dark Lord fell, eyes open and rolled back in the skull, that horrible snakelike face vacant in death.

"For my wives," he spat, backing towards the door even as he raised his wand. "Burn in hell *my lord*."

He leapt back as the room filled with white-hot flames. A slash of his wand, and the door slammed shut before the fire could do more than lick out at him. The searing heat sent him sprawling flat on his back, arm flung protectively over his face.

He frantically checked his face and hair. Still there... not even his eyebrows were singed. Lucius patted the floor affectionately. Good old Manor. The wards had held.

He got to his feet and tentatively reached out to touch the door. It felt hot but did not blister him. He stroked a finger down the door, tweaking the manor wards so that he could see through it.

The Dark Lord's body was no longer visible, engulfed by the Fiendfyre. Lucius transfigured his overlarge clothes back to normal and watched the flaming creatures dance until the wards twinged, notifying him of a wizard's arrival downstairs. *Severus*.

Lucius smiled. He turned away to make his way slowly on foot to Hermione's bedroom, so that Severus could find Hermione first. A pleasant surprise for him, for once, to find her alive. Maybe even awake.

That smile slipped from his face as he encountered the first of the soot stains.

"Severus!"

* * *

"Oh, Lucius!" the Harridan sobbed and flung her arms around his neck. "How can I ever thank you?" She peppered his cheeks with kisses. He grimaced, trying to wriggle free without offending his mother-in-law.

As soon as she let go, Will grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously until he thought it might drop off. "You saved my little girl. I can't thank you enough."

"I couldn't have done it without Hermione's memory. Or without Severus keeping her alive until now," Lucius muttered, eyeing Helen warily in case she pounced on him again. With any luck he could unleash her on the other two.

"Lucius," Hermione called from where she sat up in bed. "Thank you."

Will finally let go of him. Lucius massaged some feeling back into his hand and nodded at Hermione. "I only wish I could have done it sooner."

Severus let go of Hermione and stood up as her parents swarmed to her side. He strode over to Lucius and embraced him. "I know. I wish Narcissa could have been saved too." He clapped him on the back. "I'll explain things to Shackbolt. You won't get charged for impersonating the Minister. You should get an Order of Merlin, although it's not enough for what you lost."

Lucius squeezed back, blinking back threatening tears. The dust must be irritating him. A Malfoy did not weep. "I know I can't get her back. But she'll be waiting for me, and in the meantime I have you two for company. You know what they say, all's well that ends well."

"Indeed," Severus murmured, leaning close so that his words would only be for Lucius. "Much as I am grateful for your saving Hermione's life, we are going to have a little *chat* about exactly why you have a shelf of memories labelled with my and Hermione's names."

'Or not so well...'

* * *

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing. Just the epilogue to go now, provided the plot bunny behaves himself.

Epilogue

Chapter 37 of 37

Life goes on.

Epilogue

Ginny sat bolt upright. She flopped back, exhausted. "I remember..."

From where they lay on either side of her, Draco and Harry sat up and leaned over her, their faces mirrors of concern.

"Ginny!"

"You're awake! Are you all right? Has the plague—"

"I'm fine." *'Just tired.'* "I think... I think it's gone. I was at the Burrow, with Mum." Ginny sniffled. Much as she'd wanted to live, she hadn't wanted to leave there. "Not dreaming, but like when you were at King's Cross talking to Dumbledore, Harry."

Draco caressed her cheek. He'd lost his mother recently, too, to the same thing. Ginny had to look away from him. So soon after seeing her mum, it was painful.

"What did she say to you?" On second thoughts, Draco's grief-stricken empathy was easier to bear than Harry's tactless nosiness.

She paused before replying until she could be sure she wouldn't burst into tears. "Apart from that she loves us all, she had a message for me."

Harry gripped her hand, clumsily offering what comfort he could. "What message?"

"It's not a plague but a curse. You-Know-Who's handiwork, and his body had to be destroyed to stop it. Thing is, I couldn't pass the message on."

Before she'd even finished speaking, Harry rolled out of bed and to his feet. "We've got to find Kingsley and tell him!" He bolted for the door.

"But I'm awake! I feel fine! Someone else must have managed to pass it on, and someone must have got rid of the body."

Harry paused in the doorway at her words. "We've still got to be sure."

"Harry, wait!"

"Sorry, Ginny, the sooner I go, the sooner I can come back." He ran away, his footsteps fading.

Ginny turned to her remaining husband. "Draco, could you go to Malfoy Manor? I'm fine, but... is Hermione?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't want to leave you on your own. Father said he'd let us know if the worst happened."

She sighed. "Then no news is good news."

* * *

Kingsley Shacklebolt raised his head from where it had dropped onto his desk with a painful sounding thud. *Lucius Malfoy* has the last Time-Turner *and* Polyjuice samples of me, and you say I *can't* arrest him?"

Severus resisted the urge to smirk. "Not if you're determined to be a better Minister than those before you. He saved Hermione's life. He saved the lives of all witches, worldwide."

Kingsley looked as though he'd smelled something foul. "Merlin fuck me. I'm going to have to give him an Order of Merlin, aren't I?"

"Look on the bright side. The crisis is over."

"Yes. And the mystery is solved. I had Harry Potter barge in here not long ago to tell me what you'd already told me about the plague-that's-really-a-death-curse, and that his wife had inexplicably recovered. I knew Voldemort's body must have been destroyed, but not who had done it."

"Potter wasn't too disappointed someone had already stolen his thunder?"

"Not when it meant his wife really must have recovered. He wanted to know if Hermione had survived. I think he left to see for himself... When I told him what I last knew from you – that she was dead – he didn't want to believe it."

Hopefully Lucius would have finished with him by the time Severus returned. He didn't feel like dealing with Potter.

"I'll let Lucius off the charge of impersonating me, provided that he surrenders his collection of clippings from me. And that he tells me where he acquired them from."

Severus nodded. "Understood. I'll pass the message on."

"Where is the hero of the day, anyway? I can understand him sending you to do his dirty work, but I'd think he'd want to be here for me to thank him in person, just so he can rub it in."

"He had a letter to write."

Kingsley stared at him. "What letter can be so important?"

"This particular letter orchestrated events so that Hermione would not die. I'd say that's far more important than being here in person."

"He has a Time-Turner! He can be in more than one place at once. Which reminds me, he needs to turn that over to the Department of Mysteries."

"I believe Lucius also didn't want to risk being arrested. And I'll hand it over personally if he does not." Severus turned back to the fireplace and took a handful of Floo powder from the pot on the mantelpiece.

"See that you do. And Severus?"

He paused, hand outstretched to throw in a handful of Floo powder.

"Do pass on my thanks to Malfoy. And tell Hermione I'm very glad she survived."

"As am I," Severus muttered. Again, he wished he could have sent Lucius in his place. He hadn't wanted to leave Hermione's side. The sooner he could get back, the better. Before Kingsley could say anything else, he threw in the Floo powder. "Malfoy Manor!"

* * *

That night, finally alone together, Severus settled into bed beside Hermione, pulling her into his arms even as she wrapped hers around him. They lay clinging together in silence. Severus could not speak through the lump in his throat, not that there was any need to. Hermione already knew he'd been afraid that he'd lost her. Seeing him try to throttle the life out of Lucius was proof enough of that.

Finally the stifling emotion passed, and Severus could relax. His mind wandered again to Lucius, and to what Narcissa had said about him in Hermione's memory of her near death experience. Something had to be done, but what? Clearly this was not something he alone could decide.

He pulled away slightly so that he could make eye contact with Hermione. "What Narcissa said about Lucius..."

Hermione looked confused for a moment, before she blushed and looked away. "Oh. You saw that part. I only meant to extract the bit about the plague being a curse and Voldemort's body needing to be destroyed."

"Look at me," Severus murmured. Hermione reluctantly did as he asked when he gently laid his hand against her cheek. "You admitted to finding Lucius attractive, but I cannot hold that against you. He *is* an attractive man."

"And I'm *attracted* to you. I love you, not him."

Severus leaned over and kissed her. "I know. My point is that Narcissa's last wishes were that Lucius should not be left alone for the rest of his life. While we are there for him as friends, I do acknowledge that he needs more, or he'll have nothing but the emptiness of memories until the end of his days."

Hermione nodded. "It will be at least seventeen years before there's available witches again. The plague was worldwide, all witches will be married off by now – apart from the new Muggle-borns. But what can we do?"

"Despite his word to the contrary, Lucius does want a more husbandly role. And after all he's done, he does deserve something more," Severus forced out through clenched teeth. "But if we are to give him what he wants – a ménage à trois – it should not be out of gratitude. Or a pity fuck."

"Agreed. It's not something that can happen instantly, either, *if* it does happen. That sort of relationship can't be built overnight. I might find him attractive, but I need to trust him more than I do. I mean, I obviously trust him to save my life, but I'd trust Harry and Ron to do that, too. It doesn't mean I'd trust them to join us in bed." She caught the thunderous expression on Severus's face and rolled her eyes. "I don't mean I want them to, idiot man! Just thinking of Lucius in bed with us is more than enough. Too much, even, at the moment. I'm not ready. You're not ready. I don't think even Lucius would be ready."

"Perhaps a variation of a marital contract would help build the trust needed with Lucius. Something with clear conditions, signed by all of us."

Hermione groaned. "Let me guess, that means signing with that infernal Blood quill *again*."

"I'm afraid so. But it is far more comfortable than Unbreakable Vows and secure enough for our purposes."

"What sort of conditions?"

"Nothing Lucius won't agree to. It can wait until morning."

She yawned, triggering a massive, jaw cracking one of his own. "Good night," she murmured, nuzzling close.

* * *

"I have two options for you, Lucius. You can either keep your illicit collection of memories of Hermione and me, or you dispose of them and we can discuss further options for you."

Lucius stared at him. "That's it? Not even threatening me with loss of limb? Surely you must know or suspect the content of those memories. I'm not complaining, but the Severus Snape I know would exact his revenge."

"I haven't told Hermione about your collection of Pensieve porn yet. And if you destroy those memories, I will keep your dirty little secret."

Lucius's hand twitched towards his wand, but he casually moved it away again when Severus pointedly drew his own and began to ostensibly polish it with his handkerchief. *Obliviate* was not an option for Lucius. Even if he somehow managed to get the drop on Severus, not for nothing had he set up safeguards with Dilly.

"What are these options? You can't expect me to make such a decision when there are no clear benefits for me."

Severus reached into his pocket and withdrew a vial. "This is the antidote to your sterility." He threw it at Lucius, who caught it with fumbling hands, almost dropping it. "I've already taken mine. Much as I wish it could be, it can't be your reward for getting rid of those memories. Not when the immediate return of our fertility can be thought to be connected to the breaking of the death curse."

"Thank you." Lucius opened the vial and drained it, grimacing at the taste. "What are the benefits of doing as you wish with the memories, then?"

"As I wish?" Severus glared at Lucius. "What I want has nothing to do with it. This is to your benefit, not mine. I've already discussed the matter with Hermione as much as I could without mentioning those memories."

"Well, spit it out!"

Severus took a sheet of parchment from his pocket and handed it over to Lucius.

"A contract?" Lucius read through it aloud, his eyebrows rising higher with each word. "We, the undersigned, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape, release Lucius Malfoy from his word that he will not pursue conjugal relations with Hermione, with the understanding that he will not engage in conjugal relations with Hermione alone, as that is for Severus and Hermione as a couple in love. Any possible future sexual activities Lucius is involved in must involve the prior consent and agreement of all parties."

Severus moved so that he could see the contract and stabbed a finger at it. "You will note that the possibility of a ménage à trois is only a future option. None of us are ready for that yet. Such relationships must be built on trust."

"Understood." Lucius nodded and looked over at him sharply. "Trust... that's why you haven't told her about that incriminating shelf of memories in my formerly secret room."

"Indeed. It would break what trust she has in you, and she'd never be able to trust you again. She already doesn't trust you enough yet to let you jump into bed with her."

Lucius was staring at him as though he'd grown a second head. "You have the power to ensure that I will never have anything with Hermione, yet you would let that go?"

You know I have memories of the pair of you that I've taken voyeuristic pleasure in, yet you would let me sign this contract and open up such possibilities... Why?"

"To be perfectly honest, I'd rather that you're not left to your own devices. I have some idea what you are capable of. You wriggled around an oath on your magic not to spy on my bedroom activities with Hermione. And there is the fact that you have changed – you saved Hermione's life. *A Muggle-born*. There is also Narcissa's last wishes."

"What last wishes?"

"You saw the memory." Severus raised an eyebrow. What had Lucius been doing, if not memorising every word his beloved late wife said? "Or weren't you listening at that point? Narcissa didn't want you to be alone for the rest of your life. Hence that condition." Severus pointed at the contract again.

"...should the undersigned Lucius Malfoy require more than Severus and Hermione may be able to provide in future – namely the possibility of joining them in a ménage à trois on special occasions – he will be granted an amicable divorce on request as soon as it is legally possible." Lucius flipped over the parchment, checking that he hadn't missed anything. "I see that you and Hermione have already signed. A blood quill, I presume..."

"What is it to be, then? Wallowing in memories, or the possibility of something more?" Severus pulled the quill from a pocket and offered it to Lucius.

Unsurprisingly, he took it. "I have other memories," Lucius muttered as he signed, wincing as his signature was cut across the back of his hand as well as scrawled onto the parchment. "And I've never had the opportunity to partake in a threesome before."

"You do understand that it is only a possibility? Not a guarantee?"

"Oh, yes, I know." Lucius smirked. "But I'm also sure I'll be able to seduce the pair of you."

"Trust, remember, Lucius. That is the foundation you need, not lust alone."

"On that note, I suppose you have another contract in mind to ensure that I do dispose of those memories."

In reply, Severus withdrew another sheet of parchment from his pocket and handed it to Lucius, who glanced over the contents, balled it up and set it on fire.

"*What are you doing?*" Severus raised his wand. Did his *friend* have some treachery in mind now that he had what he wanted?

"Calm down. Hermione cannot know of this contract. While I could try to hide it, I cannot risk the manor wards accepting her more than me as a certain house-elf already has. I have another idea. I'm willing to make an Unbreakable Vow."

Severus flinched in memory. "Don't be absurd. Unbreakable Vows are not to be trifled with. Besides, who would act as bond?"

"Not Hermione, as you would not stand for her to be Obliviated, I take it? No, I propose Draco. While I'd rather not modify his memories either, if he knew of my 'dirty little secret' it would harm our fragile father-son bond. Knowing that his father is a voyeur might be too much for his tender sensibilities."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. He might be one as well."

"Perhaps... but he might take after Narcissa in this respect. She never approved of my voyeurism. Not unless she could be an active participant, and that's not the point of it."

"Very well. If you are so set on an Unbreakable Vow, so be it."

"I am. I'll Floo Draco."

* * *

Still glaring at his father, Draco pressed the tip of his wand to Severus and Lucius's clasped hands.

"Will you, Lucius, destroy today all of the memories made of Hermione and myself without our permission?"

"I will." At Lucius's words and the ribbon of flame binding their hands together, the heat in Draco's glare faded slightly.

"Nothing more?" Draco growled.

"No." The tongue of flame tightened around their hands before it faded as Draco reluctantly withdrew his wand. "With the contract, this is more than enough. And the Unbreakable Vow was your father's idea."

"Humph." Draco's glower did not falter. Clearly Lucius was right and an *Obliviate* was in order so that the reconciliation between father and son was not damaged.

"Thank you, Draco," Severus murmured and drew his wand. "*Obliviate!*"

* * *

Severus settled in on the comfortable armchair and was about to open his book when he registered that Hermione hadn't sat down beside him yet.

She stood frozen, trembling hand outstretched to take a book.

"Hermione?" Of course. Those lethal, threatening books of her personal threshold... "It's all right. The worst these books can do is give you a paper cut, if you keep away from the Darker ones."

"I know!" Hermione snapped. She set her jaw and snatched the book from the shelf. She threw herself down beside him, but still hesitated before opening the book. "I know I'm being silly," she muttered.

Severus laid a hand over hers and gently flipped the book open. "Not to me. Traumatized, yes. But don't let it win."

She glared down at the book. "I won't." She lifted it up and started to read, soon devouring pages at her usual rate.

* * *

The Daily Prophet

Friday 5th November, 1999

PLAGUE WAS A DEATH CURSE!

"Lord Voldemort, You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Lord Thingy, Tom Riddle... whatever you want to call him, he was responsible for this, his last act. He almost managed to kill all witches.

"A message from the beyond ensured that he failed, although many witches died. A comatose Hermione Granger managed to pass on this vital message to her husbands. It would have been too late for her if Lucius Malfoy had not possessed the last Time-Turner, which he used to go back in time to destroy Voldemort's body and end the curse, saving his wife's life and those of all other surviving witches.

"For this, I present Lucius Malfoy with the thanks of the Ministry of Magic and an Order of Merlin (First Class). He has returned his Time-Turner to the Department of Mysteries, where it will allow our Unspeakables to recreate more of them."

See page 2 for interview with saviour Malfoy!

END OF MARRIAGE LAW IN SIGHT!

The Wizengamot have finally seen sense and have modified the controversial marriage law, permanently revoking the reproductive stipulations.

Why is this, we ask? In the same announcement, our Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt revealed the reason: now that the plague is obliterated, Muggle-born births are replacing the dead witches. Magic itself is righting the balance among the magical population!

The antidote to the gender selection potion will be given to all affected witches, so that new little wizards and witches will be both male and female, regardless of whether they are pure-blood or Muggle-born. But as there already are many new Muggle-born baby girls, we should prepare ourselves for our sons to marry new blood.

The marital element to the law still stands until there are enough new witches of age. At that point, new polyandrous unions will be banned, with only existing ones remaining legal.

LUCIUS MALFOY SPEAKS!

An exclusive interview with the latest recipient of the Order of Merlin (First Class), Lucius Malfoy.

"I did what anyone in my place would have done. And I could not have done it without Severus Snape. He kept Hermione alive this long with his work on the temporary cure, a cure which held the plague-curse in check for many months. I also could not have done it without the message Hermione passed on, which let me know what I had to do: destroy the Dark Lord's body.

"And I took great pleasure in doing so. I was once fool enough to be one of the Dark Lord's Death Eaters, something I could not regret more. He killed my first wife, Narcissa, and almost killed my second, Hermione.

"I am the Ministry's new Muggle-born Liaison. As such, I am responsible for the smooth passage of the increased influx of Muggle-borns into our world, who will enter Hogwarts in approximately eleven years. Once these girls are of age, I do advocate our future sons courting them.

"We should welcome these incoming Muggle-born girls. We should ensure that they are educated in the ways of the wizarding world, sponsor them. But only take them from their birth families if those are abusive. Any adoptions of such abused children by magical parents will be closely monitored. Muggles are not the only people capable of abuse.

"Despite my past views, I now know better. Look at my wife, Hermione Granger. She is a prime example of what Muggle-borns can be. Look at her achievements: the brightest witch of her age. She kept the Boy-Who-Lived alive so that he could defeat the Dark Lord. Fresh blood is to be welcomed.

"Purity should be a thing of the past. Look at what pure-blood mania almost cost us. The Dark Lord believed in it, and he almost succeeded in making witches extinct, regardless of their blood purity. I implore you to think of what he and his beliefs cost us. How many wives, mothers, sisters and daughters have to die before we eradicate the Dark Lord's beliefs like I eradicated his body?"

* * *

"Happy birthday, dear Cissus! Happy birthday to you!"

Narcissus, Lucius's ten year old grandson, blew out the candles on the massive cake. His pale red hair stood out from the sea of redheads around him, except where his part-Veela cousins were paler still. His half-siblings, James and Molly, were dark haired exceptions in the mass of next generation Weasleys, but then they were Potters. The concept and reality of a redheaded Malfoy had been hard for Lucius to take, but Severus didn't believe a word of his grumbling. Lucius adored Cissus.

The supervising Ginny magically cut the birthday cake into enough pieces for all present. She slapped Ronald's hand away, before a flick of her wand set the slices of cake onto plates, and another had everyone with some cake.

Various high-pitched cries of "Thank you, Mummy!" and "Thank you, Auntie Ginny!" had Hermione turning away, but not before Severus caught sight of her brittle smile, and the flicker of pain in her eyes. So many children... none of them her own.

Hermione moved so that she could whisper something to Ginny, whose smile faltered, but she nodded in understanding and hugged Hermione. Moments later, Hermione slipped inside the Burrow.

Severus exchanged a worried glance with Lucius.

"I know. It's not just Narcissus's birthday today," Lucius stated. "Go. I'll stay. Cissus will have to be happy just to have his grandfather here, and not his Grand-Snapes."

Severus nodded stiffly and followed Hermione. As he expected, she had gone. He twisted into the squeeze of Disapparation.

Tucked away into a corner of Malfoy Manor's garden were seven small graves, each with a small headstone marked simply with 'Snape' and a date. The last of these shared that of Narcissus's birthday.

Whether these were their unborn sons or daughters, neither Severus nor Hermione knew. Neither had wanted to know exactly what they had lost.

Hermione knelt before the last of these, her shoulders shaking with her sobs. To see these graves was a knife to the heart. To see Hermione's grief twisted that knife. Severus swallowed hard, and swiped a hand across his eyes. It would do her no good if he joined her in tears.

He staggered forward and laid a hand on her shoulder, dropping to his own knees beside her. She turned to him and let him pull her into his embrace, her tears soaking into his robes.

Clinging together, he waited until her sobs quietened and were replaced by sniffles. Good. Not that he resented her right to grieve, far from it... just that in her delicate state, it could add to the risk already there.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

He pressed a kiss against her brow. "It's not your fault."

"It will be if I don't calm down! I can't help it, though. I fear it will happen again, that I'll lose this one, too." She put a hand between them, to where the child swelling her belly pressed against him.

He tightened his arms around her. "As do I. But it still won't be your fault."

"Fear adds to the risk. I know that, even without the Healers telling me that whenever I see them."

"There is always hope, though. Especially this time. You've never been this far along."

"I know." She looked away, at the graves. She flinched and turned back to him. "It still *hurts*, Severus."

"I know." He pulled her closer and laid his head against hers, forehead to forehead. He closed his eyes against the threatening sting of tears. "If... if the worst happens. If you never carry to term, or... it ends in stillbirth—"

Another sob escaped Hermione. He turned his head to kiss her gently. They both knew what that would mean. They had one chance for a child, only one. After that, even if it were stillborn, there would be no more.

"If the worst happens, it won't – doesn't – change how I feel about you. I love you, not your fertility."

"Severus," she sobbed, and kissed him, her tears wet against his cheeks.

* * *

The Daily Prophet

Friday 20th December, 2013

Births:

Lucius Malfoy, godfather, welcomes Octavia, born on 19th December to Hermione Granger and Severus Snape.

* * *

The End

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AN: Many, many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing. Considering the first chapter was finished on 14th February 2008, it's taken quite a while to finish this story. It was my new year's resolution to finish it this year, and I have managed that. Thanks to my readers for sticking with me for so long, and I hope you've enjoyed the ride.