

The Mermaid and The Prince

by whimbley

Severus and Hermione discover a lost and injured merbaby and must return it to its rightful family, but along the way they run into a "fishy" situation.

In Which Discoveries Are Made

Chapter 1 of 12

Severus and Hermione discover a lost and injured merbaby and must return it to its rightful family, but along the way they run into a "fishy" situation.

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Thanks to ancientgirl and bekbek01 for all your encouragement and help! And special thanks to my wonderful beta, June.

Chapter 1 - In which discoveries are made

Snape glared down at the three sitting along the lake's edge. They had completed their Hogwarts education almost four years ago. Why he had to be cursed by their lingering presence, he didn't know. Still, the Headmaster had requested his co-operation in the matter. He watched now as the Bossy Know-It-All began lecturing her friends about something.

"I told you, Ronald, we are gathering the bog-myrtle in order to complete the potion for our final project. We need this to graduate from University."

"Hermione," Ron whined. "It's just that I don't see why we couldn't have gotten it in Diagon Alley."

"Come off it, Ron," Harry growled in frustration. "Even I remember what Professor Barnestoodle said about it. It has to be freshly picked bog-myrtle gathered on the seventh day after a full moon."

"Honestly," Hermione sniffed.

From his vantage point, Snape sighed. He really didn't know how Weasley had managed to get into University. He knew the boy had plans to continue on to Auror Training School as well. He was sure the boy wouldn't have gotten in, if not for the fact of his participation in the downfall of Voldemort.

Even then, during the final battle, the fool had managed to fumble his way into another Death Eater while under the Jelly Legs Jinx. This had caused the Death Eater to fall right into the path of Voldemort's *Avada Kedavra* aimed at Harry, thus giving Harry the chance he needed to catch Voldemort off-guard and defeat him once and for all. Snape knew this because he was right there beside Voldemort when it all happened. Voldemort never suspected him as being anything but loyal. In truth, Severus had been doing his job, working for Dumbledore all along. And Dumbledore, who was still very much alive, cleared his name at the Wizengamot soon thereafter.

Snape had lived rather quietly these past few years at Hogwarts. That is, until this.

Dumbledore had requested his guidance for the Golden Trio in their final year at University. "Your assistance is greatly needed in their final potions project," was what

Dumbledore had said.

Severus had agreed but only begrudgingly. While he had shown the trio where the bog-myrtle was, he had not told them how to pick it. Too long a stem, and the potion would boil over. Too short, and the brewer would get a rather nasty surprise as he was turned into a newt. Snape really hoped it would be the last of these.

The Gryffindors had just returned to their bog-myrtle when the shadow of a large bird flew over them.

Startled by its sudden presence, Snape looked up only in time to see it drop something from its mouth. That something was making a horrible shrieking noise and plopped quite loudly into the shallow water near the lake's edge.

"What was that?" Harry yelled as he pulled out his wand.

Hermione rushed over to the small creature wailing and shrieking in the shallow water. Though the shrieking was nearly unbearable, it had a familiar sound to it that drove Hermione instinctively. She let out a gasp when she saw what it was.

"DON'T TOUCH IT!" Snape bellowed as he hurried down from his perch on the rocks above. "You have no idea what it is. There could be dark magic..." he started to say but broke off.

Hermione was now knee-high in the water, holding what appeared to be a shrieking and crying baby. Snape blinked, but upon closer inspection, realized the creature had a tail – a fish tail.

"It's a baby," Hermione said, clutching it to her. "A merbaby," she finished as she followed his eyes to the tail.

"Bloody Hell!" bellowed Ron as he too stumbled down the rocks, less than gracefully, and saw the baby in Hermione's arms. He then quickly put his hands over his ears. "Make it stop, Hermione! Make it stop!"

Feeling frustrated, Hermione shouted back, "It's hurt, Ronald. You'd shriek, too. Harry, go and fetch Hagrid, quickly!"

"I'm off!" Harry shouted over the din and made a quick retreat to Hagrid's cabin not too far away.

"Bring it here," said Snape, collecting himself after a few minutes.

Hermione dutifully brought it over to him. Snape carefully and quietly set to healing some of the wounds left from the bird. She watched mesmerized as the wounds magically began to heal while Snape whispered spells that sounded like a lullaby.

There was a great booming bark as Hagrid, Fang and Harry reached the group.

"What's goin' on?" asked Hagrid. "Whatcha got there, Hermione?"

"Oh, Hagrid," said Hermione. "It's a baby, a merbaby. And it's been injured."

Hagrid approached them quickly and took a good look at the babe. "Looks like someone has done much o' the healing already. Who did this work?"

"It was Professor Snape," said Hermione, nodding in Severus's direction.

"Well, he did a good job, then. There's not much more to be done about this," said Hagrid.

"Not much more? What do you mean, not much more?" asked Hermione shrilly.

"Yeah, what do we do with it now?" asked Ron.

"Put it back," said Hagrid with a shrug.

"Put it back!" Hermione said incredulously.

"Yeah, tha's all. It'll find its own way home," said Hagrid.

Hermione looked in desperation at the men surrounding her. "Put it back? A baby? You can't be serious," she said in frustration.

"It will go back to its own kind, Miss Granger," said Snape. "Release it."

Hermione looked at the small merbaby sobbing in her arms. "Release it back into the water so some other bird or worse can make off with it? I think not," she sniffed.

Severus narrowed his eyes. The girl – he corrected himself as he appraised her figure – no, the *woman* had already grown attached to the thing. Women seemed prone to this. Still, she was intelligent. Perhaps appealing to her reason would work.

"Miss Granger," he said smoothly. "The merpeople are not known for their kindness. They would not take well to a witch or wizard in their midst. Releasing the child would be the best thing."

Hermione frowned at him, seeming to have made a decision. "*Lac lactis Appareo*," she said with a wave of her wand, and a baby bottle appeared. "Hagrid, it does drink milk, doesn't it?"

"Can't say as I know much about the young'uns, Hermione. 'Tis worth a try," said Hagrid.

Hermione gently pushed the nipple into the baby's mouth, and the shrieking stopped. The baby began to suckle hungrily.

"I'd say that was a yes then," said Harry. "Hagrid, isn't Dumbledore friends with the merpeople? Couldn't he help?"

"Good question," said Ron. "Want me to go and fetch him?"

"Yes, please, Ron," said Hermione.

"If you insist on this, Miss Granger," Snape interjected, "might I suggest you lower the child a bit more into the water?"

Hermione glanced down at the babe in her arms.

"It would be more accustomed to the water than not," he said quietly.

Hermione gently lowered herself and the merbaby deeper into the water, and it did indeed seem happier.

There's Something Fishy Going On

Chapter 2 of 12

Severus and Hermione discover a lost and injured merbaby and must return it to its rightful family, but along the way they run into a "fishy" situation.

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Thanks to my wonderful new Beta, June! You are awesome!!!

Thanks also to ancientgirl and bekbek01 for all your help and encouragement!

Chapter 2 - There's something fishy going on

Dumbledore soon appeared on the lake's edge with Ron, who had summoned him, and beheld a strange sight. His Potions master was knee-deep in the water as he stood near his former pupil, Miss Granger. She was waist-deep and tightly clutching what appeared to be a merbaby.

"Oh, Professor Dumbledore, thank goodness you are here," said Hermione.

"Well, it would seem what young Mr. Weasley has told me is true. You have acquired a merbaby, Miss Granger?" inquired Dumbledore.

"Yes, a bird dropped it in the water. It was injured, but Professor Snape healed it," she said quickly.

"Well, it's very simple then," said Dumbledore. "You must take responsibility of it, Miss Granger."

"Are you mad?" shouted Ron. "How's she going to take care of a merbaby? There's no way she could keep it in her room at University... Just no way."

"No, I assure you I have not taken leave of my mental faculties, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore. "I am simply suggesting that Miss Granger be the responsible party for the offspring until its return to its rightful family."

"And how do you plan on doing that?" asked Snape darkly. He did not like the way Dumbledore's eyes were sparkling.

"By sending Miss Granger to the merpeople's village in the center of the lake," said Dumbledore.

"Headmaster," said Snape, leaning in closer to Dumbledore. "To do so would be to put Miss Granger in grave danger. You know as well as I do that the merpeople are not exactly friendly to outsiders."

"I am well aware of it, Severus," said Dumbledore. "And if I am not mistaken, so is Miss Granger?" he said, looking at her.

"I am," said Hermione. "But it is a risk I am willing to take," she said, snuggling the merbaby closer to her as it continued to suckle from the bottle she had conjured.

"Very well, then," said Dumbledore quickly. "You will need... these," he said as he murmured a quiet spell.

Hermione gave out a surprised gasp as she felt her body light on fire. Her legs seemed to meld together as a long green tail formed in their place. Her clothing seemed to evaporate and gills formed along her neck.

"Circe's arse, Hermione! Your bobby bits are hanging out!" shouted Ron, pointing to her chest.

Hermione glanced down just long enough to notice that her transformation had indeed left her with bare bosoms. She then glanced up in time to notice that all the males in attendance, with the exception of Dumbledore, were staring at her chest. She quickly ducked lower into the water so she wasn't so embarrassingly exposed.

Severus did his best to look away from Miss Granger's exposed chest. He was finding it increasingly difficult. Just when had she grown those? He certainly didn't remember her like this when she was his student. His eyes slowly scanned up from her chest to meet her brown eyes. She was looking at him.

Severus felt his cheeks redden at being caught. He quickly turned his embarrassment to anger towards Dumbledore anything to get his and everyone else's attention off of Miss Granger's chest.

"Albus, what have you done?" he demanded, turning on him.

"Simply made Miss Granger's job much easier," said Dumbledore.

"I could fetch her some gillyweed from my private stores, or she could cast the Bubble-Head Charm on herself," Severus argued. "Much simpler than this!"

"But this enables her to take as much time as necessary to complete her task. Also, her transformation includes the ability to speak Mermish, so that she may explain how the baby came unexpectedly into her possession."

"Why not send Potter? He's been there before the merpeople know him."

"Harry," the Headmaster turned to him. "Do you have any experience with caring for babies?"

"No, sir!" Harry said emphatically.

No one suggested sending Hagrid. The half-giant was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. His appearance might frighten the merpeople before he could explain anything.

"This is ridiculous, Albus," Severus fumed. "It simply is not safe for Miss Granger to go unescorted into a hostile environment in that condition with a..." he glanced at the merbaby in Hermione's arms "with an infant in her care."

"Ah, Severus, I'm glad to hear you think so. I think it's a wonderful suggestion," said Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eye.

"Why, thank you, Headmaster. I knew you would... Wait a minute... Suggest what?" said Severus nervously.

But before he could say anything more, Albus turned on him, brandishing his wand and whispering an incantation.

Severus felt a strange burning sensation shoot down his spine and into his legs. He watched as his favorite black robes seemed to melt away and a tail of sorts formed in the place where his legs should be. He instinctively flailed his body like a fish as he was tossed rather unceremoniously into the lake near Hermione and the merbaby. Gasping and sputtering, he quickly made his way to the surface. He opened his mouth to give Dumbledore a detailed diatribe, but was surprised when an ear-piercing shrieking sound came out instead.

'Dammit!' he thought. He was speaking Mermish.

"Now, now, Severus," said Dumbledore. "No need to thank me. I know you wouldn't want to hurt the ears of your former students and Hagrid right now with your tremendous thanks."

Severus glared at the old man on the shore. How he hated him right now. A happy little coo brought his attention back to Hermione and the merbaby in her arms.

Hermione had a shocked expression on her face that very well matched the ones of her friends on the shore. She was examining the Potion master's transformed body with great interest.

He took a moment himself to see just what Albus had done to him. He too was bare-chested, not that that mattered. But where Hermione had a green tail, he had a rather long and serpentine looking black one. This suited him well. Gills grew from his neck, but other than that Dumbledore had fortunately left him human looking. Hermione, he noted with a bit of appreciation, did as well. The two of them looked a bit more like the merpeople in the fanciful paintings, which graced Hogwarts' halls than the real ones which lived in the lake.

His eyes fell upon the little purple-haired babe in Hermione's arms. It seemed to have become quite contented there, he thought rather jealously. Of course, he wondered who wouldn't be snuggling so closely to her well-rounded bosoms.

"Your wand, Severus!" shouted Dumbledore, interrupting his thoughts before they could dwell more upon Hermione's bosom. "I think you'll find that it works just as well in the water as it does above," he said, tossing it to him from where it had fallen on the lake shore during his transformation.

Severus caught it and continued to glare at him. He realized the old man fully intended for him to carry on with this.

Dumbledore, however, ignored the glare and turned to address Hermione.

"And, Hermione, dear, you will need this," he said as he produced a bag full of baby bottles out of thin air. The bag floated gently through the air and settled quietly next to her and the babe. Hermione picked it up and slung the bag over her shoulder.

'He certainly wasn't so gentle with my wand,' Severus thought grumpily.

Hermione opened her mouth to thank the Headmaster but a screech came out instead.

"Bloody hell!" yelled Ron covering his ears. "Hermione, please!" It was the first thing he'd said since seeing Hermione topless.

Hermione closed her eyes in frustration.

"It's alright, my dear," Dumbledore said. "No need for thanks. Now, Severus, keep to the route we used in the past when I first took you there. I trust you remember the way?" asked Dumbledore.

Severus glared back at him and nodded curtly.

"Very well, then. Off with the two of you," he said. "We will be expecting you back in a day or two. If we do not see you, one of us will be along to help you find your way," said Dumbledore sagely.

"Be careful, Hermione!" yelled Harry. "Don't do anything to excite them, and you should be fine."

"And for goodness sakes, cover your bobbly bits!" yelled Ron. "Find some seashells or something!" he shouted.

"Ron," snorted Harry. "It's a lake, not the sea. And you really need to stop looking at Hermione's bobbly bits" he said, trying to suppress a laugh.

Severus, who was rather disgusted with the entire conversation, turned to dive under the water. If the redheaded idiot was going to continue in that fashion, he didn't want to be any part of the juvenile conversation.

"Take care now, you two," bellowed Hagrid as Severus began to dive with his wand in hand.

Fang's ringing bark seemed to echo his master's sentiments.

Hermione took a long look at all those she loved on the shore and then turned to follow Severus.

"Was there something you should have reminded her about?" Ron asked Harry, as Hermione vanished beneath the water. "You know, from when you were down there for the Triwizard Tournament."

"I don't think so," Harry mused. "Unless...Snape knows how to deal with grindylows and lobalugs, doesn't he?"

"He should," Ron muttered. "Hey, want to go see a Quidditch game?" They walked off together, Hermione and the merbaby temporarily forgotten.

Lost or Not, They're on Their Way

Chapter 3 of 12

Severus and Hermione begin their journey, but soon discover that they are lost.

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Chapter 3 - Lost or not, they're on their way

Hermione opened her eyes under the water, only to see the back of Severus's tail swimming away. Goodness, did he have to be so fast?

She gave her new tail a few flicks and swam after him. It certainly wasn't like any way of swimming she'd ever known. A few swishes of her powerful tail had brought her several feet from the shore, and the breaths she took with her gills felt perfectly normal. Pleased with her progress, she looked up to find Severus... well, no place at all. He apparently had swum on without her.

"Professor? Professor Snape?" she called out nervously. She didn't like the idea of being there all alone, with a helpless merbaby.

Severus, who had been swimming at a good pace, hesitated when he heard the sound of Hermione's voice. He turned, ready to warn her against impeding their progress, only to find no one behind him. Blast! The girl had already slowed them down. He frowned and swam back in the direction from which her voice had come.

He saw Hermione in the distance, her curly and unruly hair floating about her in enchanting waves, the length of which was covering the intoxicating bosom he had seen only a short while earlier on the surface. Severus shook his head as if to clear it and then swam over to where she was.

"What is the meaning of this, Miss Granger?" he asked sternly. "Why are you taking so long? Are you incapable of keeping up, or have you stopped to admire the surroundings?" he asked, angrily gesturing at the underwater plants.

Hermione felt her temper boiling. It was one thing to swim as a newly transformed mermaid. It was another thing to swim while holding a tiny merbaby with a sack of bottles over your shoulder.

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, Professor, I happen to be carrying a small squirming child in my arms. I'm certain it's much easier to swim with one's arms free, but I don't have that luxury."

Severus's eyes fell on the child in her arms. "Well, set it free then, Miss Granger," he said with exasperation. "I'm certain it can follow along. This is its own habitat."

Hermione frowned as well. She pondered whether the merbaby could keep up with Severus's unusually fast pace. Hmph! The chances were about as likely as Draco giving birth to a Hippogriff, but she decided to give it a try.

She gently let go of the wee merbabe and watched to see what it would do. It did indeed appear to be able to swim. It swished its tail and floated a bit to Hermione's right, stopping for a moment to give her a happy little grin. Then it turned its eyes upon Severus.

The merbaby had never seen anyone like him before. He had dark long hair and something pointy sticking from his face. He was strange, yet he was the one who had spoken the kind words to her and made her pain go away. Surely such a person had to be good. She swam slowly, in not such a straight line, towards the strange looking merman. He continued to stare at her with a funny look. Not knowing what this meant, she continued on, frequently getting distracted by something bright or colorful in the water.

After about five minutes of her swimming-and-stopping, the merbaby finally closed the distance and reached out for him. She grabbed onto the one thing guiding her the whole way that pointy thing, his nose. It just needed grabbing. She reached out with her tiny merbaby fingers and grabbed hold of it. Had she been anything other than an innocent merbabe, she would have known she was in dangerous waters by the glare Severus was giving her. Instead, completely unperturbed, she proceeded to take a bite of it. Surely something so magnificently large would be good to chew on.

Hermione watched the entire proceedings with frustration, surprise, horror and finally amusement. Who could have seen this coming?

Severus reached up to the small merbabe who was now gently gumming his nose. He removed her quickly and held her out as if she were something quite disgusting.

"Remove her, Miss Granger," he demanded while holding the baby out to her. "Remove her from my presence at once!"

Hermione did her best to not giggle as she swam to take the baby away.

Severus noticed her smile and glared at her angrily.

"Sorry, sir," she said, not at all sorry. "You've been referring to the baby as 'it' all this time, and now you've decided this is a girl."

"Of course it's a girl. One can tell by the subtle blue shading on her fins, see?" he said pointing to the blue shading around her small fins. "It's basic university level, Care of Magical Creatures knowledge," he said gruffly as he rolled his eyes.

She hid her smile, deciding that for now, the baby was a girl; after all, the professor said so. She reached up to take the child from his grip and watched while the merbabe, seemingly unperturbed by his furious glare or booming voice, smiled a huge toothless grin at him.

Hermione's heart melted. What a sweet merbaby she was. The Gryffindor looked back up to see if Severus was watching, only to find he had turned his back to her once more and seemed as if he was preparing to swim off again.

"Well," he said, clearing his voice. "I see that you are right, Miss Granger. We shall have to slow our pace to accommodate you carrying the babe. It is obvious she cannot possibly keep up with us."

"Well, I'm glad we got that straight," she said, gathering up the merbaby and her things again. "I told you..." she started to say but was quickly cut off.

"Yes, yes, let's just be on our way again, shall we?" he said gruffly, picking up the bottle bag.

"Just one moment, Professor," she said. "Let me just finish getting Crystal settled and we'll be on our way."

"Crystal?" he questioned. "CRYSTAL? Don't tell me you've named the damn thing."

"Well, of course," said Hermione. "I had to name her something."

Severus snorted through his gills. "Well, I happen to think Crystal is a horrible name," he grumbled and turned to swim off, albeit at a slower pace than before.

"Coral," he said rather facetiously over his shoulder, "is much better."

~*~*~*~

Several hours later...

"We're lost, aren't we?" Hermione said, slowing her pace and glancing around at their underwater surroundings.

"We are not lost!" Severus said grumpily. "Maybe, just a little off-course."

"Off-course? Off-course? Professor, the Hogwarts lake is a half-mile in diameter; we've been swimming for the past two hours now and should have found the merpeople's village. And I could swear we've been by that big rock formation before," she said, pointing at an outcropping of rocks.

"I'm telling you, WE ARE NOT LOST!" shouted Severus.

At that moment the merbaby, who had been sleeping soundly, woke up startled by all the shouting and let out a loud wail.

"Oh, great. Just great!" Severus said. "Now the baby's awake."

"Well, she wouldn't have wakened if you hadn't been shouting," said Hermione angrily. "Please, just hand me a bottle," she said, pointing to the bottle bag on his shoulder.

Severus removed the bag and rifled through it until he found a bottle, which he handed to her with a flourish.

She gently pushed the bottle into the baby's mouth, and the crying stopped instantly.

"We'll never get anywhere at this rate," Severus said grumpily.

"It's getting dark now anyway," said Hermione, eyeing the distant sunlight through the water. "Couldn't we just stay here for the night?"

Severus took a good look around them. In truth, he didn't really know where they were. He must have gotten lost several hours ago when they were navigating the underwater caverns. He had been so concerned with Hermione and the baby making it through unscathed that he must have made a wrong turn. The underwater cliffs and rocks were razor sharp. One brush against them would surely cut their tender scales. The sun up above was setting quickly. Soon there would be no light to travel by.

"*Lumos*," said Severus, lighting his wand. He looked carefully around at their surroundings. He didn't like it, didn't like it at all. He looked at the feeding merbaby and exhausted Hermione. They needed to rest.

He would have to be on guard tonight. There were too many opportunities for other things to be living and feeding amongst them.

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said hesitantly. "Tonight we'll stay."

Instincts and Discoveries

Chapter 4 of 12

Severus and Hermione settle in for the night and begin to experiment with their new merfish instincts and abilities.

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I am so sorry it took so long to update this chapter. Unfortunately illness threw a curve ball at me and it took longer than I thought. I've made this chapter a bit longer than the others in hopes to make up for it. I hope I haven't lost any readers, and as always, hope everyone enjoys it!

Thanks again to my wonderful Beta June! I couldn't do this without you.

Thanks also to ancientgirl for your wonderful suggestions and encouragement.

Chapter 4 - Instincts and discoveries

"Whew," said Hermione as she began to feed Coral. "I really wasn't looking forward to any more swimming tonight."

"Yes, well, that was quickly becoming an impossibility," said Severus. He watched as the merbaby nursed hungrily from her bottle. He began to feel hungry himself. "Did Dumbledore happen to put anything else in that bag for us to eat?"

Hermione began searching through the bag floating next to her.

"I'm afraid not, Professor," she said. "It appears to contain only baby bottles and... Hold on. What's this?" She pulled something out: it was a glowing canister of light. "Amazing," she said, staring at it. "He's made an underwater lantern."

Severus reached over and took the light from her. It really was a fascinating piece of magic.

"*Nox*," he said quietly, extinguishing the light from his wand.

Even the baby was fascinated by the new object, her eyes following the light as Severus held the lantern out between them. He created a tether for it and tied it to a rock, then let the lantern float on the current. Its light radiated all around and a few feet beyond them. Severus was glad that Dumbledore had the forethought to have included that in the bag.

"But no food for us?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at Hermione.

"No, sir; no food," she said.

"Typical," he said, snorting through his gills. *'It is just like the old man to make me work for my supper,* he thought. Severus scanned the area quietly. There were many small fish swimming nearby. *'Ah, fish. That might be the answer.'*

Severus the human was not a fisherman. However, thanks to the spell cast by Dumbledore, he and Hermione now had gills and tails just like merpeople and some other merpeople qualities that he was discovering. His eyes narrowed as he felt his senses heighten. Everything about him seemed to disappear as he focused on the fish

swimming about him. His eyes tracked their every movement. Hermione and the merbaby were temporarily forgotten. The only sounds he picked up were the roar of the blood through his ears and the movements of the fish before him. He could feel every little ripple they made in the water around him. He could smell which fish were good to eat and which were bad. Then, suddenly, with a quickness that surprised even himself, Severus' wand instantly transformed into a trident as he speared one of the fish in front of him.

Hermione let out a startled cry and gaped in astonishment at the fish flipping helplessly on the end of Severus's trident-wand.

"What was that?" she asked, finally finding her voice.

"That," said Severus rather proudly, "is dinner, Miss Granger."

"Should it still be twitching like that?" Hermione asked, watching the struggling fish.

"It will stop soon," Severus said, examining his catch.

He felt a strong sense of pride flow through him. He couldn't quite explain what had come over him, but for one small moment he had felt perfectly at one with nature. The instinct to hunt and provide had overwhelmed him. Equally impressive was the transformation of his wand. He hadn't planned on that happening, but he could definitely see why a trident was much more beneficial underwater than a wand. And since it still retained the powers of his wand, he was happy.

"Couldn't you have just used your wand to conjure us something to eat?" asked Hermione, gazing at the twitching fish with uncertainty.

"And conjure what?" asked Severus. "A roast chicken? Some bread? Hot soup? Use that incredibly gifted brain of yours, Miss Granger. None of that food would last in this water."

Hermione sighed. She hadn't thought of that.

"So you're just going to eat it like that?" she asked, watching as he removed the now still fish from the end of his trident-wand and began to raise it to his mouth like some type of fishy drumstick.

"Try to think of it as sushi," he said to her as he took a rather large bite.

Hermione cringed as she watched him eat it. She'd heard of sushi, but he was eating everything including the fish scales, fins, and innards!

'Impeccable,' thought Severus, as he savored another bite of fish. Never had he tasted anything quite so divine. He doubted that even a Malfoy house-elf could produce a meal quite so grand.

"Well?" asked Hermione. "Is it okay?"

Severus hesitated between bites. In truth it was delicious. The last thing he wanted to do was share it. He was hungry, and already much of the fish was gone. He was tempted to tell her it was horrible, but he realized she would need her strength as well, in order for them to complete the task of returning Coral to the merpeople. So he begrudgingly handed her the half-eaten fish.

"It is substantial," he said, not at all convincingly.

Hermione crinkled up her nose as she took the fish and looked at it like a specimen from an ancient tomb.

"Thank you, Professor," she said as she handed it back to him. "But I seem to have lost my appetite."

Severus rolled his eyes at her as he petulantly took back the fish. Secretly, he was pleased he had it all to himself again and soon fell to finishing it off with renewed gusto. It wasn't his fault that she wouldn't turn off her human sensibilities and eat like a mermaid. When in Rome, and all that.

In the meantime, little Coral had fallen asleep again.

"Where should I put her?" Hermione wondered out loud as Severus feasted on his fish. "I'm afraid to just let her float," she said, looking around and thinking of things that would eat a helpless merbaby. "And I don't trust myself to be able to hold on to her if I fall asleep too."

She looked up to see what Severus had to say about it, but he was busily gobbling down his fish. Hermione frowned and looked about her again. The light from the floating lantern was reflecting upon the plant vegetation growing around them. They were literally in a forest of underwater plants. Watching them sway back and forth in the current was almost hypnotizing. While she was gazing at them, she had drifted over closer to one of the plants when she felt her tail getting tangled in it. As she struggled to free herself, she suddenly got an idea. Spinning in a circle, she was quickly freed from the plant's hold.

Hermione looked at the little merbaby sleeping in her arms. Very carefully, she wrapped Coral in the stalk of the plant. After she was satisfied that Coral would not float away from her, she let go. The little merbaby swayed with the plant to and fro in a gentle rocking motion, but was securely anchored to the lake floor. Hermione smiled to herself. That was definitely better.

"Look, Professor... Look what I did," she said excitedly.

She looked up at Severus to see what he thought, but he was licking clean the bones of his fish, apparently not seeing her brilliant discovery of the underwater plants. She frowned and rolled her eyes at him.

Clearing her throat, she said loudly, "PROFESSOR!"

Feeling as if someone was watching him, Severus glanced up. He vaguely thought he had heard someone saying something. Hermione was eyeing him expectantly. He felt as if he had just missed something important. Had she been talking to him? He wasn't sure. She always seemed to be blabbering about something.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I said... Did you see what I did with Coral?" she asked impatiently.

"No," he said, a bit confused. Wasn't the child in her arms? He looked at her quickly. Nope, no merbaby. What in the world had she done?

"Here," she said in exasperation. She pointed to the floating yet stationary Coral. "If you twist your body around like this in the plants, you'll anchor yourself to the lake floor," she said while twirling around clockwise.

Severus thought it was all pretty ingenious. The woman certainly could be sensible.

"If we do this, then we won't have to worry about drifting away from each other tonight in our sleep," she said. "But in an emergency, we can get out just like this." She twisted her body anti-clockwise to demonstrate.

Severus nodded to her and moved closer to one of the underwater plants.

"Show me again how to do it, Miss Granger," he asked.

Hermione, only too glad to help out, quickly swirled about again.

Severus smiled rather devilishly to himself. He hadn't really needed the demonstration again, but he rather liked the way her long green tail moved when she did it. Side-to-side and around and around it moved, flowing gracefully around her; it was rather hypnotizing. He felt like he could watch her all day.

He suddenly felt a tightening in his mid-section that was all too familiar with him in human form. As a merman, this was a bit unexpected. Mortified, he began to look for a way to hide it, and he also was a bit curious as to where it was. He knew his bits and pieces had to be hiding under his scales somewhere, but he wasn't sure where. He hadn't taken that close of a personal inspection of himself when he was transformed. For all he knew about merpeople from studying at university, his knowledge didn't include anything about their sexuality.

Severus looked to see if Hermione was paying attention to him, but she was busily spinning about, her shiny green tail flashing in the light of Dumbledore's lantern; she looked like she was experimenting with her newfound mobility. He quickly looked back down at himself. Upon further inspection, he noticed a rather large scale on the front mid-section of his tail that covered his personal bits; the scale could be flipped up to reveal his bits when needed. He briefly wondered if there was such a scale for his backside as well; he imagined eventually that his dinner would make its way back out again.

Noticing that Miss Granger's anchoring demonstration was ending, Severus quickly began swirling about in the underwater plants as well anything to hide his... erm... growing problem. He was missing his long robes now. As he swirled, he allowed images of Umbridge to run through his mind; that seemed to take care of things. Soon he too was securely anchored in without that pesky scale problem.

He watched as the skeleton of his fish dinner floated by. It had been so delicious he had eaten every bit. He decided that in the morning he would hunt for some more. By then, he was certain, hunger would encourage Miss Granger to eat almost anything. Yes, Miss Granger with her delightfully wiggly green tail that shimmered just so in the light. . .

'I ought to say something to her,' he thought and looked at the mermaid next to him. The silence between them was deafening. Perhaps he could say something about her brilliant idea with the plants?

"Say something, you idiot," whispered a voice that seemed to come from next to him.

For a moment, Severus almost thought the odd blue fish swimming near him had whispered it. Deciding instead that it was just a voice in his head, he ignored it. Still, he gripped his trident-wand a bit more tightly and kept his eye on that suspicious fish.

"Thank you, Miss Granger, for showing me how to anchor myself to the plant. It was rather ingenious of you," he managed to say.

"Oh, you're welcome," Hermione said, very happy to hear him for once voice his approval of something she'd done.

Despite what people said about Severus, Hermione had always found him quite fascinating. She had never truly believed he had returned to Voldemort, and was so happy when Dumbledore announced the truth. She thought he was quite possibly one of the most intelligent and powerful wizards of their time. And while some found his looks unattractive, Hermione thought he was very sexy. Here at the bottom of Hogwarts lake, with his shiny black mane of hair floating about him, black eyes she could get lost in, and a large sexy nose that hinted of something else that could be large, she was just entranced. She was glad she was far enough away from Dumbledore's lantern so he couldn't see her blushing.

Severus, in the meantime, continued to look about rather uncomfortably. He knew he should say something more to her, but he just couldn't think of anything. He hadn't felt this awkward since his days of youth at Hogwarts.

"Say something," the blue fish next to him urged.

"What the..." he started to say while turning to the fish, this time pointing his trident-wand its way.

"Hmmm?" asked Hermione.

Severus quickly turned back to face her. "Erm... Hermione," he said again.

"Yes?" she asked patiently.

"Your name... It's Hermione," he said nervously. "Such a tragic character to be named after." Even as he said it, he thought to himself, *'Blast, Severus you idiot! Of all the things to say.'*

"Oh, yes" said Hermione. "Well, it is and it isn't. You see, my parents actually met at a Shakespeare Festival. A classmate of theirs was playing the part of Hermione. She introduced them to each other after the play, and they fell in love. They said when I was born there really was no question as to what they would name me."

"Interesting," said Severus. "That is a very nice story... Hermione."

Hermione blushed from head to tail. The way he said her name, it just rolled off his tongue. Even when he spoke Mermish, his sexy deep voice all but melted her. She tried desperately to pull herself together and respond to him.

"Why, thank you... Severus," she said softly.

Severus smirked to himself. He liked the way she said his name. He felt like he was finally getting somewhere with her.

"Were your parents rather fond of Roman history?" she asked nervously.

Severus thought about this. He seriously doubted his father had even been at his birth, let alone had a part in naming him. Unlike Hermione, his family life growing up was less than happy.

"It was my grandfather's middle name," he finally answered. "I had not really thought of its Roman origins before. I'm certain my mother had some desire for me to be named after him."

"Oh, were you very close to your grandfather, then?" asked Hermione.

"No," Severus said quietly. "I'm afraid my mother's family did not take too kindly to having a Muggle son-in-law in the family. They considered me an abomination."

"Oh!" said Hermione, quite surprised. She'd certainly never thought of him that way. As a matter of fact, she'd never even considered her professor's personal life at all.

"I'm sorry," she said gently.

"Don't be" Severus said gruffly, shifting a bit amongst his anchored plant. "It is not important anymore."

Hermione thought it might just have been important at one time, having seen his old potions book with the name "The Half-Blood Prince" scrawled on its cover. But she thought it wise not to push the subject. She suspected he had just opened up more to her than anyone else he'd met in the past several years.

She reached out her hand and placed it gently on his arm. "I understand," she said quietly.

Severus felt her hand on his left arm. It was warm and soft in the cool water. A tingling sensation ran through him and straight to his groin, threatening another potentially revealing scale issue. He knew he should remove her hand, but something more instinctive was urging him on. He hadn't felt a woman's kind touch in quite a while. There was something so nice about being touched this lovingly. He didn't even realize he was floating closer to her. With his right hand, he reached up to touch her fingers, then slid it down until he was holding her hand.

"Thank you, Hermione," he murmured, now gazing into her eyes. "It means the world to me to know that you care."

They were leaning even closer together. Hermione's breath was coming in short gasps, her gills fluttering lightly. He had taken hold of her hand and showed no signs of releasing it. He was even leaning in closer and closer to her face. She closed her eyes and leaned in a bit more, just as a flash of blue swam by.

"Now that's more like it," said the fish.

Severus jerked back away from Hermione and spun around. His trident-wand pointed threateningly in the direction the little fish had swum.

"I swear to Merlin, if I catch you, fish, you will be mine for breakfast!" he yelled after it.

"You mean you've heard it before?" asked Hermione.

"Yes," said Severus. "I thought I was losing my mind at first. You heard him too?"

"Yes," she said.

"I mean to watch for him tonight," he said. "I don't know what magic is at play, but I do not like it. I have never heard of a talking fish." His expression softened. "I will stand guard tonight, Hermione," he said gently. "It is late, and as much as I am enjoying my conversation with you, I fear that you need your rest. We have a long journey ahead of us still, and you need to conserve your strength for you and the baby."

Hermione stifled a big yawn. "Yes, you are right, Severus. I am rather exhausted." She glanced once again at the sleeping merbaby. "You will be alright standing guard all alone?"

"Trust me, Hermione," he said. "I have had much experience standing watch on many a sleepless night."

She nodded at him and smiled.

"I'm sure you do. Thank you, Severus," she said, relaxing into a comfortable sleeping position. "I enjoyed our conversation too. Goodnight."

"Good night, Hermione," he said.

~*~*~*~*~*~

I was really inspired to have Hermione anchor herself, Coral and Severus to the lake floor by a special I saw on the telly about sea otters. At night sea otters spin themselves around in the underwater vegetation until they are firmly anchored so that they will not float away from one another. And since Hermione's patronus is an otter, I thought it would be rather instinctive for her to do the same.

Watching and Being Watched

Chapter 5 of 12

We meet Philippe, Khai and a mysterious dark wizard.

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Thanks as always to my wonderful Beta June!

And thanks also to ancientgirl and bekbek01 for your encouragement and advice

Chapter 5 - Watching and being watched

The little blue fish didn't fully understand what had happened. The merman and mermaid were getting ready to kiss, and then suddenly the black-tailed merman was pointing his trident-wand at him.

"I swear to Merlin, if I catch you, fish, you will be mine for breakfast!" he yelled.

The blue fish swam as fast as he could, eager to be away from the angry merman behind him. He'd be lucky if he didn't get his tail fins sizzled tonight. He swam quickly to the middle of the lake, as his master had told him to. *'Where is it?'* he thought to himself, searching the lake surface for a sign. *'There it is!'* He moved quickly upwards towards the silvery circle of light on the lake's surface and broke through.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Albus Dumbledore was woken by a slight splashing sound. He hadn't even realized he had fallen asleep. He'd been up worrying about Hermione and Severus, among other things. The persistent splashing sound brought his thoughts back to the present. It could really only mean one thing. Philippe was back. Albus slowly stood and moved to the magical watery basin beside him.

"How goes it, Philippe?" he asked tiredly.

"What a merman you have me chasing about," the blue fish exclaimed. "Nearly got my tail fins singed by that one."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Well, Severus does have a temper," he said sagely. "Where are they?" he asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"On the far side of the lake," Philippe said. "They missed the merpeople's village by a mile."

"Hmmm... This is most unlike Severus," said Dumbledore, tugging on his beard as he gazed at the little fish.

"I watched them. He spent too much time guiding his mermaid and the baby through the underwater caverns," said Philippe. "He lost all track of time and where they were going."

"I see," said Dumbledore. "That is more like the Severus I know, protecting the ones he is guarding. But, they are safe?"

"Yes. They are for now," said Philippe.

"And how is our other project going down there?" asked Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling.

Philippe grinned proudly. "Well, coming along fine now that I intervened."

"You intervened? What did you do?"

"I had to tell him to talk to her. He seems a bit nervous, that merman of yours."

"Can I assume then that it was your intervention that nearly got your fins hexed off?" Albus asked, quite amused.

"Yes, it was as a matter of fact." Philippe said. "He didn't seem to like my encouragement."

Albus laughed. "Well, for your sake, Philippe, I would leave well enough alone. How did you last leave them?"

"They were about to kiss when he stopped and chased me off," said Philippe. "It won't be long now before they do kiss."

"One can only hope," sighed Dumbledore. "Any more news on the merbaby?"

"Well, it's all quite odd, Headmaster. There is a merfamily missing their baby, but no one knows how she disappeared. This was no mere accident. Whoever took this child snatched her from her home." Philippe's eyes took on a serious look. "I suspect there is something evil at play here."

Dumbledore sat back, clearly upset by this news. "And the other inhabitants of the lake?" he asked. "Do they know anything of this?"

"No, that's the curious thing," said Philippe. "Whoever took this merbaby did so quite secretly. I've questioned dozens of my fellow lake dwellers, and none have ever heard of such a thing happening. I fear for the worse."

"Are there no other leads then?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, there are the grindylows," said Philippe. "They're a tricky bunch. I'm not looking forward to questioning them."

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to do just that, Philippe," Dumbledore said sadly. "Much depends on this and the safety of those I love in the lake."

"Yes, sir, Headmaster. I will get right to it," said the little fish quite seriously.

"Thank you Philippe," said Dumbledore graciously. "And please keep a watch on my little ones in the water. They are like my own children. I do not want to see them harmed."

"Then I shall leave at once," said Philippe. "It will be my honor to guard ones you love so much tonight. And in the morning I shall see what those grindylows have to say."

"Thank you, Philippe, I am in your debt," said Dumbledore.

"No, Headmaster, it is I who is in yours," said Philippe. "It's an honor to serve you."

And with that he turned tail and splashed back into the water.

Dumbledore stared for several minutes at the magic basin beside him.

"Be safe, my friend," he said, "Be safe."

~*~*~*~*~*~

Deep in the murkier waters of the lake a grindylow swam quickly. He too was late meeting his master; only unlike Philippe, he feared this confrontation. Khai neared the lake's surface and swam to its edge. His master stood in the dark shadows just out of sight.

"Master, I have news of the merbaby," said Khai.

"And what do you have to tell me, Khai?" asked the dark stranger. Khai had never seen his face; he only knew that all grindylows feared him.

"A wizard and witch have found her, sir." The water demon cringed, waiting for a beating. When none came, he continued. "They transformed themselves into merpeople, in order to return her to her family, but have gotten lost along the way."

"They have her?" he asked. "Where?"

"At the bottom of the lake," said Khai, his pale green skin turning even paler with fright.

"Bring her to me now," demanded the wizard. "I will not tolerate any mistakes like last time," he growled.

"Yes, Master," said Khai, bowing away from him. "I will bring back the merbaby for you."

"You'd better," said the dark man. "Oh, and Khai?" he said to the retreating grindylow.

"Yes?" said Khai.

"*Crucio!*"

Khai fell back into the water, his cries of pain muffled as the water surrounded him.

On the shore, his master laughed manically.

As soon as the pain subsided, Khai swam off into the deep darkness of the lake. He knew he'd better do the job right this time. There would be no second chance if he failed again. He had to find his accomplices, Boris and Monito.

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Severus's eyes scanned the distant horizon. Movement of the living things around him had settled now. Much like the inhabitants on land, the ones in the water seemed to be sleeping too. Every now and then there was movement in the water, but nothing had seemed threatening.

He was very thankful for Dumbledore's underwater lantern right now. Its light illuminated an imaginary boundary he had forged in his mind. It also comforted him to know he was able to see that far. At one point during the night, he had seen a huge mass floating by. He was very relieved when it didn't come any closer, and hoped that it was simply the giant squid floating by for a good look.

The hours of swimming earlier that day and the relaxing movement of the plant he was anchored to were tempting Severus to sleep. Just as he felt he might, a movement to his left brought him around. He heard a whimper and a struggle, and suddenly he saw Coral floating nearby. He reached out and pulled her closer to him.

She reached out and patted his nose fondly.

"What are you doing out of bed, young lady?" he asked sternly, looking down his nose at her adorable little face.

Coral looked up at him sweetly and smiled.

"Couldn't sleep, eh?" he asked.

Coral cooed.

"Well, don't let Hermione know you got loose from her plant," said Severus. "She'd be quite upset to see you were able to get free."

Coral smiled at him and snuggled into his arms.

"Ah, very well," he said. "You can stay with me for a while."

He took this time to examine the merbaby a bit more. She had tiny little fingers, which Severus found quite fascinating. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent this much time with a baby, perhaps when Draco was born. Severus remembered staring at him in wonder such tiny little fingernails that seemed impossibly small to him. He wondered what her parents were thinking of right now, and he thought of how he would feel if something so precious was ever taken away from him.

"Where are your parents, Coral?" he asked out loud. "How could they ever have let you go? If you were my daughter, there is no way on earth I would ever let you leave or get hurt."

Coral looked up at him and curled her tiny little fingers around his long thin one.

"I suppose," he said rather sadly, "that you shall be the only thing I have close enough to be a daughter. I do not expect anyone would want to have a child with me."

Coral gave a cry of protest and looked towards Hermione.

"Hermione?" he questioned. "Well, erm... I'm not sure."

Coral gave him an odd look and an unhappy cry.

"Well, I suppose I could be wrong," he said. "Perhaps if I..."

But what Severus was about to say was never heard. Swooping in from all sides were grindylows.

When Grindylows Attack

Chapter 6 of 12

Severus and Hermione face the grindylows and we learn a little bit of Philip's story.

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Special Thanks to ancientgirl, who was a big help in the pearl scene! And a huge heartfelt, thanks as always, to my wonderful Beta June. I apologize for the delay in updates, but the good news is that the cancer biopsy came out negative! Next chapter will be much sooner - and we'll see what's happening back on land.

Chapter 6 - When Grindylows Attack

Surrounded by grindylows, Severus moved fast, but not fast enough. As he shouted for Hermione to wake up and held Coral tightly in one arm, with his other arm, he lowered his trident-wand and prepared to battle. He shot forth several disarming spells, but there were too many grindylows. He felt several of them scratching at his body, clawing at his arms, trying to steal Coral from him.

Hermione frantically struggled to free herself from her plant. She stopped only to give out a strangled cry when a grindylow wrapped his arms around her neck and squeezed hard.

Monito cackled manically as he squeezed the mermaid's neck. From what Khai had said, she was a witch, and if there was one thing Monito didn't like, it was witches.

Severus an excellent duelist on land and in water easily finished off several of his attackers before turning to face a new one.

"Give us the child," growled Boris, the largest grindylow in front of him.

Severus, who was within inches from his face, head-butted Boris and sent him flying.

"Break their fingers, Miss Granger!" roared Severus angrily. "Did Lupin teach you nothing in that DADA class of his?"

Hermione quickly recovered from her shock and snapped back the fingers compressing her windpipe. The audible crack and cry of her capturer made her feel good, as the grindyflow swam off screaming in pain. Clutching her throat and freeing herself from her plant, she moved forward to help Severus and Coral.

He quickly tossed her the baby and began swimming in a protective circle surrounding them, firing off spells as he moved. The grindylows were slowly realizing this was no average merman they were up against, and the injured ones quickly swam off. Severus continued battling with the few left surrounding them.

Hermione gave out a cry as one grindyflow went for her neck again, and she nearly dropped Coral.

Severus swooped the end of his trident-wand around and caught the bottle bag with it. Then he quickly dispatched the water demon around Hermione's neck.

"Put her in here!" shouted Severus, handing her the bag. "She'll be safer."

Hermione quickly obeyed and settled Coral in, pulling the strap of the bag shut tight. Hermione turned her attentions to the remaining grindylows attacking Severus, and she fought with as much strength as she could muster, while the bottle bag with Coral in it bounced on her shoulder.

She and Severus were doing a good job pushing back the grindylows, when Khai attacked them. Taking advantage of Hermione's grapple with one of the water demons, he snatched the bag off her shoulder. Hermione shrieked.

Severus swung from battle and swam after them. He lowered his trident-wand and leveled a disabling blast at the grindyflow.

Khai gave out a sickening grunt before unconsciousness overtook him. The bottle bag with Coral fell from his slack grip and floated towards the lake floor.

As Severus dove for Coral, a streak of blue flashed by him and went straight towards Hermione, who was still fighting off the remaining grindylows. A huge roaring sound rippled through the waters toward the grindylows. Hermione covered her ears and ducked as the blue fish chased on after the others.

Severus made sure there was no more imminent danger of attack, then grabbed the bag and pulled out a now sobbing Coral into his arms. Hermione recovered from her shock and turned back towards Severus and the baby.

"Coral," she cried out. "Severus... Coral, is she okay?"

Severus quickly examined the merbaby carefully for any harm. "She appears to be well," he said, handing the shrieking child over to her. "Just in need of you, I suspect."

Hermione took the crying child and did her best to soothe her. "Oh, Coral, oh, Coral, my poor little baby," she cried. "It's okay, it's okay. You're safe," she said, partially to Coral and partially to reassure herself.

Coral cried almost inconsolably. The same scary things that had taken her away from her parents had come after her again. They had tried to snatch her right out from "Daddy Big Nose's" arms, and had made "Mummy 'Mione" cry. It had frightened her beyond her capacity of coping.

"Where did the blue fish go?" Severus asked as he swam about in an agitated way. He seemed ready for attack again at any moment.

"It went that way," Hermione said, nodding to a point just beyond them.

Severus looked warily in the direction the fish had gone.

"What was it?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not sure," said Severus. "But it seems to have worked in our favor. That thrum sound he made seemed to have driven off the water demons."

"Shhh, shhh, Coral" Hermione tried to soothe the frightened child still sobbing in her arms. "Your Aunt Hermione and Uncle Severus will keep you safe. We won't let those bad grindylows hurt you." She snatched a bottle from the nearby bag and popped it into Coral's mouth.

Coral looked nervously from "Mummy 'Mione" to "Daddy Big Nose." He was scowling in the direction the loud fish had gone in. She wasn't sure if she was safe or not.

"Severus. Say something to her," Hermione hissed, nodding in Coral's direction.

Severus looked in her direction and raised an eyebrow. "Aunt Hermione and Uncle Severus?" he said questioningly.

"Yes, well, we have to call ourselves something to her... and... it doesn't matter. Just say something to her Severus. She's scared. I can feel her trembling in my arms," Hermione pleaded.

Severus moved over closer to the baby and peered into her frightened eyes. He felt truly sorry for the babe. She'd been through so much; the grindyflow attack would have frightened adults, and she was only a helpless baby. As he gazed deeply into her eyes, he saw the pain and fear within.

"It's alright, Coral," he spoke calmly but with authority. "You are safe now."

Coral stared back into the dark inky black eyes of "Daddy Big Nose." She almost felt as if he could see and feel her pain and fear. His deep strong voice was oddly calming, and his words seemed more a command than a request, which made her feel safe once more. She closed her fingers tightly around one of his and began suckling once more on the bottle. It too was giving her some comfort.

Hermione looked at Severus in surprise and amazement. It was hard for her to believe this once hardened man, who so strictly taught her while at Hogwarts, could be so caring and kind to the young little merbaby.

He removed his finger gently from the nursing girl and turned to look Hermione in the eye. He seemed to be seeking something from her, and he almost looked as if he thought she were about to tease him for his behavior.

Instead she smiled broadly and kindly at him. "Thank you, Severus. That was really very kind."

Severus cleared his throat. "I am not without kindness in my heart. Especially when it concerns an innocent young merbaby."

Coral watched the two of them from her vantage point in Hermione's arms. "Daddy Big Nose" and "Mummy 'Mione" were moving closer to one another. They were gazing into each other's eyes the way her own parents used to. She was certain something was about to happen when she saw the loud fish again.

Severus was just lowering his lips to Hermione's when he saw the blue fish streaking back towards them. He swung swiftly to his left and blocked the fish's way, standing protectively before Hermione and the baby. Nothing was going to get to his mate and baby, he thought to himself.

Philippe took one look at Severus's defensive stance and pointy trident and knew he'd better keep his distance.

"Do not hurt me, great merwizard from above," Philippe said, doing his best to bow before Severus. "I serve the same one as you, and have only come to help."

"And who is that?" asked Severus curiously.

"Why, I serve the great Dumbledore," said Philippe. "It is on his orders that I am here. He has sent me to protect you, your mate and your baby."

Severus frowned and stared at him more intently, doing his best to see if the blue fish was telling the truth. Would Legilimency work on a fish?

Philippe squirmed a bit under the stare of the dark merwizard before him. Had Dumbledore not prepared him for just such a thing, he probably would have swam away as fast as his fins could take him. He felt his brain being probed and searched.

At last, Severus broke his gaze away from him. "He speaks the truth," he said to himself and Hermione. "The fish is friends with Dumbledore, who sent him here to protect us."

"Yes, yes, to your mate you will listen," Philippe said to Hermione eagerly.

Hermione frowned. "What's all this 'mate' talk?"

"You are his mate, are you not?" asked Philippe innocently.

Hermione felt herself blush all over. "Well..." she started to say, but Severus quickly interrupted

"You came here to help or ask questions?" he asked, glaring dangerously at the fish.

"I'm here to help," said Philippe, nervous once again. He'd seen the dark merwizard in action now and was fearful of his anger. "I've taken care of the remaining grindylows. They won't be back. And we are not that far from the mervillage; it's only an hour or so away."

"Be that as it may, we have a rather upset merbaby here and are in need of some sustenance ourselves before we can travel again," said Severus. "You are certain the grindylows will not return?"

"Of that I can assure you," said Philippe.

"Very well then. You stay here with Hermione and the baby, and I shall get us something to eat," Severus said.

"Do you need some help?" Philippe said, swimming up closer to Severus. "What exactly are you looking for?"

Severus arched his brow and smirked at Philippe. "I was hoping to find some more fish."

And with that and a great swish of his tail, Severus swam off, leaving a quaking fish in his wake.

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Severus had meant to find some more of the tasty fish he had eaten last night, but was not as fortunate as he had been before. He had not found a single one as of yet. He didn't want to take too long in his search for sustenance. Although the noisy blue fish was guarding Hermione and the baby, he still didn't like being away from them. Still, he knew Hermione must be particularly hungry. An hour's swim was an hour's swim, and they would both need some nourishment.

He had searched this area once before and was just about to go back when he saw something on the lake floor. A grin came over his face as he swooped down to gather their breakfast.

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"Thank you so much again," Hermione said to Philippe. "It was very brave of you to come to our aid like that."

"Oh, you are quite welcome, Miss," Philippe said, blushing and smiling at her. He was just about to move in closer to her when Severus returned. Philippe quickly swam out of Severus's reach.

"What did you find?" Hermione asked curiously.

Severus turned over both of his hands, revealing their meal.

"Oysters." Hermione gasped.

"I thought it might be more agreeable to you than fish," Severus said.

"Oh, Severus... Thank you," she said excitedly and took one quickly from his hand.

Severus was mildly amused. "I hadn't actually thought how we would open them yet," he started to say, but soon stopped.

Hermione was banging the oyster she had taken from him on the side of a nearby rock. It was soon broken open, and she swallowed the contents down quickly.

The sexual innuendo was not lost upon Severus. He remained frozen in place as he imagined other things that she might devour not quite so quickly. An odd squeak was the only sound he made when she turned to him and asked if he had anymore. It was a gentle nudge from Philippe that brought him back to his senses.

"Of course I have more," Severus said as he handed her the remaining oysters. He stared after her wistfully, happy to have finally provided a food that his mate found satisfying.

It seemed all too soon to Hermione that the oysters Severus had given her were gone. She'd never tasted anything quite so good. She'd had oysters a few times with her parents when they went on seaside holidays, but never had they tasted quite so delicious. She began to wonder with regret if Severus's fish from the other evening had tasted even half as good.

Severus managed to drag his eyes away from his feasting mermaid for a moment to check on Coral. He saw that she was sleeping peacefully, snuggled in the cocoon of the bottle bag and anchored to a nearby plant.

He decided more oysters were needed and turned to hunt for more. *'And maybe I should eat some myself, since she has eaten everything I'd brought back for the two of us,'* he thought. He returned rather quickly only to find Hermione devouring her last one.

"Have you brought more?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes," he said, handing them over to her, but he kept one hand mysteriously hidden not easy to do, when a merman has no robes to hide under, not even a pocket.

"What have you got in your other hand?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Nothing," he said nonchalantly.

Hermione raised her eyebrow at him. "Nothing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said again, this time with a bit of a roguish smile.

"Yes", said Philippe. "Although he searched and searched the shore for it, Dumbledore was never able to find it."

"And so you've been a fish ever since?" asked Severus, horrified. Dumbledore had last been a teacher more than forty years ago; no wonder Philippe was more fish-like than human.

"Yes," said Philippe, but upon seeing the look on Severus's face, he quickly added, "It's not as bad as you think. Really! Once you get here in the lake, you realize just how nice life in the water is."

Severus looked at him doubtfully.

"Honestly, it is," said Philippe earnestly. "Your food is free and plentiful; there is no stress like on land. You needn't worry about money or the troubles of the world above. When I first got here, I was barely sixteen years old, and I felt very frightened and alone. Then I realized it was a chance to be the one thing I'd always wanted: to be an animal and live in peace with nature. It was a chance to reinvent myself. You see, on land, as a human, I was always quite timid and shy. Once here, I realized that I had a gift. That loud thrumming noise you heard me make before it is my defense, something not many fish in this lake have. I've used that thrum before, more than once. It has helped save myself and those I love down here and yes, I've found love as a fish. In time, I began to make friends with the other fish here. There were very few I could talk to, but eventually, I found my way and we became friends."

"But don't you miss your family?" asked Severus.

Philippe looked rather sad for the first time. "It was such a long time ago, I'm sure they have forgotten about me now. I try not to think of them. When I realized I could never go back to human form, I asked Professor Dumbledore to tell my family that I had met with an accident. I did not want them to see me like this; I was afraid they would take me home with them and put me in a glass bowl."

Severus swam for a bit in the uncomfortable silence. He felt badly for Philippe. The fish really did look sad.

Philippe suddenly brightened up. "But I still hear from Dumbledore, who arranged a way for us to talk. And..." He seemed hesitant. "I have my own mate down here. She's a wonderful fish. We have spawned many times." He blushed a fishy pink color.

Severus's eyebrows disappeared up into his forehead. "You have?" he said in great surprise.

"Yes," said Philippe. "See those fish over there?"

Severus looked at a small school of fish going by. "Yes."

"Those are mine," Philippe said rather proudly.

Severus looked surprised. There must have been twenty rather grown fish in the group. "They are all yours?"

"Yes, watch this," said Philippe. He called to the group, "Hey, you lot over there. Who's your father?"

The school of fish stopped for a moment, and all eyes turned upon them.

"FATHER!" cried the fish, and they all swarmed about them.

Severus stopped short as they were surrounded by a mini-whirlwind of fish.

Hermione and the baby swam up next to him. Coral squealed in delight as she watched the fish swim about. She reached out to them, trying to grab them, but they each swam just out of her reach playfully.

Philippe greeted each fish individually and with much joy.

"What is the word in the lake?" he asked the largest and apparently oldest fish in the bunch.

"The grindylows have been captured, Father. They are being held captive in the mervillage until they are able to have a trial. It is rumored that they will be banished from the lake forever, to dry land." He added, "We were just patrolling the lake as you had asked. So far there has been no more trouble."

"Well, that is good... good news," said Philippe. "Keep up the good work, my son," he said, patting him on the side with his fin. "Now, on your way!" he shouted to all of them. "Mind your brother, and remember what I always told you about safety in numbers."

With a rousing chorus of love and goodbyes, the school of fish continued on their way.

Philippe was beaming with pride from head to tail.

"You see," he said to Severus as they began to swim again. "It's not so bad here. Who knows, you may just decide to stay yourself." The blue fish turned a knowing eye from Severus to Hermione and Coral behind him.

Severus followed his glance and was momentarily speechless.. Then, just as he was about to say something to Philippe, Hermione gave a startled cry.

"Oh, look!" she said, pointing in front of them. "It's the mervillage!"

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Philippe's story was greatly inspired by the wonderful movie, "*The Incredible Mr. Limpet*", starring Don Knotts. I saw this movie when I was very young and it's been a favorite of mine ever since. It was probably one of the first movies to combine cartoons and live action. You can read more about the movie here: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058230/> Enjoy!

Homecoming

Chapter 7 of 12

Severus and Hermione return Coral to her family, but their adventure is far from over.

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Thanks go to ancientgirl, for helping me name Coral's parents. And thanks again to my wonderful beta, June. You are amazing!

Chapter 8 - Homecoming

Hermione and Severus looked all about them. Straight ahead was an outcropping of merdwelling. They entered the village cautiously. Severus was unsure of what kind of reception they would receive. The place seemed to be deserted. Hermione looked around nervously and clutched Coral tightly to her. Something didn't seem right about all of this. She thought she saw a movement near one of the houses and turned to see what it was. A mermaid with a small merchild in her arms was moving quickly, trying to pull the struggling merchild into a hiding place with her.

"They seem afraid," said Hermione. "I don't think we are welcome here,"

Severus was unsure too. Merfolk could be such tricky creatures. They swam a bit more, observing other merpeople behaving in the same manner.

Suddenly, Severus came face-to-face with the mean end of a trident.

"Don't move," said the severe-looking merman in front of him.

Severus didn't move, and Philippe too froze next to him.

"Turn over your wand, wizard," ordered the merman.

Severus had no choice but to give him his only weapon.

Several more mermen revealed themselves from hiding places all around, all wielding weapons.

"They're surrounded, Captain," said another fearsome merman.

"Good," said the Mercaptain. "Now, turn over the child."

"No," said Hermione.

"I am ordering you as Captain of the Merchieftainess' Royal Guard to turn her over now."

"I will not," she said, clutching an apprehensive Coral even tighter to herself.

"You are in possession of a merbaby taken from this village under suspicious circumstances," the Mercaptain warned. "You face severe penalties already. Your refusal to surrender the child will only work against you."

Severus held his tongue and braced himself. He was unsure what their next move might be. He doubted Hermione would turn over the child, and he could understand why. He was not a trusting man at any rate. These mermen seemed like they were village officials, but there had been so much foul play going on, it was hard to believe anyone.

"No," Hermione said again. "I found this child, and I will return her to her family only after I have spoken with the Merchieftainess. I came here escorted by a guide sent from Albus Dumbledore himself. You have nothing to fear from us, but I will not turn this child over to anyone but the Merchieftainess or the baby's parents."

Severus tensed and waited. Either the Meraptain would accept their explanation and demands, or they were in for the fight of their lives.

"She speaks the truth," Philippe spoke up. "I heard as much from Dumbledore myself."

The Mercaptain knew Philippe and the other talking fish were trustworthy. He then looked to Severus and then Hermione. The merbabe in her arms clung to her tightly. If anything, the child seemed to trust her. Seeming to have made a decision, he lowered his trident.

"Very well," he said. "We shall escort you to the Merchieftainess."

Hermione flashed Severus a smile.

"I warn you though," said the Mercaptain. "Any funny business and the Merchieftainess will never even know she had visitors."

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Severus and Hermione swam through the mervillage. From everywhere, merpeople were coming out to see them. Merpeople stared from windows and doors of dwellings. Some were quite bold and came very close to Severus and Hermione, eyeing them curiously. If any came too close by, one of their guards would shoo them away with their trident.

Hermione marveled at the architecture around them. There had been mostly crude hut-type dwellings where the village had first been discovered centuries ago. Now there were more elaborate buildings. The buildings grew closer and closer together, as they swam further into the village.

Coral seemed both happy yet cautious to be in the mervillage again. The sight of others like her was comforting, but everyone staring at her made her nervous. She clung to her "Mommy 'Mione" who wouldn't let any harm come to her.

Severus swam along and examined their surroundings with interest. He was remembering the way they came in; his eyes constantly shifted, looking for various escape routes should it become necessary.

Soon they were passing through the market area. Severus watched with some interest as a mermaid and peddler haggled over the price of a fish, which looked similar to the delicious one he had eaten just the other day.

Philippe, however, shivered as he stared at the many dead fish floating in the stalls.

"None of them talked," said the Mercaptain with a sly grin, slowing down to see what was keeping Philippe. "But, I'd gladly add another one to the pile if you don't keep moving."

Philippe gulped and swam forward quickly.

Severus tried to hide his chuckle. Were they in any other circumstance, he might just come to like this Mercaptain.

Hermione eyed the castle they were approaching with apprehension. While she was happy to return Coral to her family, she felt a certain sadness too. She hoped once at the castle she would feel more comfortable returning Coral to her family. Hermione was surprised when their group was escorted to the side of the castle, rather than the front. She soon saw why.

Next to the castle was an open area similar to a town square with many workers preparing for what seemed like a celebration. Atop a tall plinth was a throne, on which sat Murcus, the Merchieftainess of the Merfolk of Hogwarts. She looked glorious and regal from what Hermione could see and seemed a bit bigger than the other merpeople.

"You will bow, state your reason for being here and move on promptly," explained the Mercaptain.

Hermione nodded nervously. What would happen if the Merchieftainess didn't believe their story? She glanced at the throne again; Murcus certainly was a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female. Hermione wondered how Severus could stay so calm. He was swimming along quietly beside her and showed no sign of being nervous or intimidated. She wished she had his demeanor.

Severus was being cautious. He too was concerned with this meeting. If Murcus chose not to believe their story, they could be in real trouble indeed. His mind was constantly looking for possible means of escape. He was thankful for his years of working as a spy. The experience came in handy during times like these.

The Merchieftainess watched the approaching party with curiosity. She wondered why there was a witch and wizard in her waters who had transformed themselves to look like her kind. As they swam closer, she saw the baby cradled in the young witch's arms. A familiar looking blue fish swam along side of them. '*Curious and curiously,*' she mused.

"Your majesty," said the Mercaptain, bowing. "I bring forth this witch, wizard and fish to see you. They say the great chief of the land of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, has sent them. They wish to only speak to you, although I urged them to allow me to attend to the matter. They have in possession with them the missing child of Anwar and Ariana. How they came to get her is anyone's guess."

Murcus continued to give Severus, Hermione and Philippe a deep penetrating stare.

"Thank you, Auberon," said Murcus, nodding to the Mercaptain. "You did well bringing them to me. Please go to the family of Anwar, and tell them to come here immediately. Tell Anwar and Ariana that their child has been found and is safe with the Merchieftainess."

"Yes, ma'am," said Auberon, and he turned and quickly swam off.

"What is your name, witch from Hogwarts?" asked the Merchieftainess.

"It is Hermione," she said as she moved forward and bowed politely to her.

"Hermione," said the Merchieftainess. "That is a beautiful name. Tell me, please, how is it that you came to hold that child in your arms?"

Hermione took a deep breath through her gills and began to explain the whole story, from when the baby was dropped by a large bird to the grindylow attack, where Philippe saved them.

The Merchieftainess looked concerned as she heard the tale.

"You are very brave and kind," Murcus said at last. "To have come all this way, and at great risk to your own life. The family of Anwar shall be in your debt for the care you have taken with their daughter." She smiled at Coral who shyly peeped out from Hermione's arms. "I can tell you have tended to the babe with great care and love. She clearly loves and trusts you in return. A child can always tell who loves her." Her eyes rested upon Severus. "To you we owe a great debt too. Your bravery knew no bounds. The child looks upon you with loving eyes as well. It is a great honor for her to be loved by two such noble beings."

Severus began to feel uncomfortable. He never liked being in the spotlight, and while he loved Coral, he did not feel the need to proclaim it to the entire world. His feelings for Coral were intense and private. Still, he nodded politely to the Merchieftainess and thanked her for her compliment.

"And you, Philippe," Murcus said, smiling at the small fish. "I must thank you once more for helping our kind. It is because of your continuing loyalty that none of our kind will eat the talking fish. I am glad to know I have such loyal allies amongst the lake creatures."

Philippe blushed and bowed deeply in thanks to the Merchieftainess.

Suddenly her eyes were back upon Severus. "And you, my wizard friend. I recall having met you once before. It was many moons ago when you came with Albus Dumbledore himself. We are honored to have such a noble man amongst us again."

Severus humbly bowed his head.

Suddenly there was a commotion as a mermaid and merman came swimming up to them.

Hermione's heart gave a leap and a feeling of dread descended upon her. This couple must be Coral's parents. The horrible realization that she was about to forever give away the precious child gripped her heart.

A young mermaid with flowing purple hair and an equally young merman were swimming towards them, looking dazed and confused.

Hermione was just about to say something when the mermaid spied Coral in her arms.

"Sarafina!" she cried and lunged towards her.

Hermione blinked, confused for a moment, then realized that Sarafina must be Coral's real name.

Coral or Sarafina, as she was really called turned her head quickly in recognition of her mother's voice. Her eyes opened wide as she saw her mother swimming towards her.

"My baby!" cried her mother, Ariana. She moved so quickly to Hermione's side that she was a blur.

Sarafina took one look at her mother and sprang from Hermione's arms to Ariana's. Mother and baby clung to one another as if they would never let go, and both cried.

"Oh, my sweet little Fina," Ariana cried, snuggling Fina to her bosom and showering her baby's head with kisses.

An even bigger blur swam past Hermione.

"We are truly blessed by the gods, for my baby is safe and at home," Anwar said, his strong arms encircling both his wife and child.

Hermione watched the reunited family with tears of her own. She hadn't even realized the sob had broken from her mouth until she felt Severus place a comforting arm around her shoulder. Then she let the sobs go. She cried uncontrollably as she wrapped her arms around Severus. She cried for having to let Coral go, she cried for what the poor babe and her family had been through, and she cried for the happiness she felt for the reunited family.

Severus squeezed Hermione closely to him, trying to comfort her as best he could. He had to admit he was having a hard time not crying himself. He'd let the child into his heart. Coral no, Sarafina had shown him a side of himself he thought had died and gave him hope that someday... He glanced down at Hermione; well, he wouldn't let himself think that far ahead just yet. But she had given him hope for a kind of life he never thought he would have before.

"Anwar," the Merchieftainess called. "I must point out to you the witch and wizard responsible for the care and return of your child, whose bravery enabled this reunion of your family."

Anwar looked up from his family to the Merchieftainess.

"This is Hermione and Severus from Hogwarts," Murcus said, gesturing towards them.

Hermione looked up tearfully from Severus's chest, and Severus nodded his head to Anwar in acknowledgement.

Both were completely taken by surprise when they were almost knocked over as Anwar rushed to envelope them. He had Severus in a voracious hug, which nearly knocked the wind out of him.

"My brother!" Anwar cried, hugging Severus to him. "From this day onward I shall consider you my brother! For you have done so much for my family and me," he said with an emotion-clogged voice.

Severus thought his ribs might be broken, but managed to squeak out a bit of thanks.

Ariana quickly swam over to thank Hermione. "And you shall be my sister," she said, giving her a hug as well. "For loving and caring for my baby so."

Hermione smiled at Ariana.

Sarafina was happily snuggled up in her mother's arms and suddenly hungrily began suckling at her breast. Ariana smiled shyly at Hermione and settled Sarafina more comfortably in her arms. "We can never thank you enough," she said.

"I'm just glad Cor... Sarafina is home again," said Hermione. "She is a very sweet child."

Philippe blinked several tears from his own eyes as he watched from the side. He knew what it was like to have children, but he couldn't imagine what it would be like to have lost one and then found it again.

"Philippe," called the Merchieftainess.

He quickly swam to her. "Yes, your majesty."

"I wish to thank you once more, Philippe."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "It was my honor to serve."

"We are in your debt. This is not the first time you have helped us, and you have always refused recognition for your deeds. Is there not something we can do for you in return?"

"Thank you," he said. "But I wish nothing more than to take my leave and return to my home and my family. I have spent several days away already."

"Go then, Philippe, my talking fish friend," Murcus said. "And may many blessings grace you and your family."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Philippe, bowing low to the Merchieftainess.

He turned back to Severus and Hermione. "My new dear friends, I shall take my leave now. It was an honor to get to know each of you. I wish you all the best."

Philippe winked at Severus. "Remember what I said on our way here, Severus."

He turned to Anwar and Ariana. "I truly am glad your child is home safe once more."

"Oh, Philippe, do take care," Hermione said sadly.

"I will," said the blue fish, smiling.

Severus made a strange grunting noise, as he was still in his stranglehold in Anwar's arms.

"Thank you, Severus," Philippe said. "I will miss you too."

And with a wave of his fin, Philippe swam off.

"Auberon?" called the Merchieftainess, who was watching from atop her throne.

"What is it, ma'am?" asked the Mercaptain, swimming up swiftly to her side.

"Rescue our wizard friend there from Anwar's tight grip and bring him to me. Leave his mate where she is for the time being," she said.

Auberon quickly swam to Severus's side and brought him over to the Merchieftainess, who told him to remain.

"Severus," she said politely. "I wish to discuss more of how this child came to be taken from our waters. I fear there is more to this kidnapping of Anwar's child than meets the eye. What can you tell me of a possible motive for one of your kind to take a merchild so young?"

"I can think of several uses of a mermaid in spells and potions," said Severus. "Blood and hair can be used, but to use that of an innocent baby, I can only think of the worst kind of dark magic. Philippe's children told us you captured the grindylows who attacked us."

"Yes. The grindylows were quick to give up their information," said Auberon. "They said a dark wizard was involved, but did not know his name. It was he who ordered them to bring the merbaby to him. For what reason, they don't know."

"Well, it is something I intend to discuss with Dumbledore when I return to Hogwarts," said Severus. "We can communicate through Philippe to let you know our progress. I can assure you that I will not rest until I know who has done these horrible things to Cor... Sarafina."

"Again we are in your debt, Severus," said Murcus.

"I am here to serve," said Severus as he bowed low again before her.

"You are free to go and join your mate then," said the Merchieftainess, motioning towards Hermione.

"Thank you," said Severus, bowing away from her.

He looked reluctantly back towards Hermione and Anwar and his little family. He was sincerely hoping to avoid another hug from the overzealous merman. Actually, Severus was relieved to have met him. His first inclination had been to hex the merman's balls off when he saw him. He had wanted to give him a long discussion about how Anwar had failed in his duty as a father to protect Coral from the madman who had captured her. But as he had begun to observe him, Severus knew this not to be true. The merman he saw before him would have done anything to protect his mate and baby. No, the child had been taken from a home and village, which was normally very safe, and there had been no reason to suspect a kidnapping would occur. There was nothing more Anwar could have done.

Hermione was smiling at him rather desperately. Severus supposed he ought to go and save her from whatever awkward conversation Anwar and his mate Ariana might be having with her. He swam swiftly over to her side.

"Are you ready to go, Hermione?" he asked gently.

"Oh, Severus, we were just talking and..." but she didn't get to finish.

"You must come and stay with us this evening," pleaded Ariana. "Please let us at least have the opportunity to show you our gratitude for saving our daughter."

Severus arched his eyebrow and looked towards Hermione.

"Yes, stay. Stay with us you must," insisted Anwar. "For tonight is our village's annual mating ceremony." He gestured to the throne and decorations surrounding them. "Please come to our home so that we might have a double celebration tonight, the return of our daughter and the annual ceremony. Few humans have ever witnessed it, so we honor you by inviting you to attend."

Severus was astounded. He looked desperately to Hermione, who seemed to be just as surprised about all of this as he was. He opened his mouth to give his regrets, but Anwar interrupted.

"No," Anwar said, clapping Severus hard on the back. "I will have none of your regrets. We must insist. You will come to our home and be our guests of honor tonight. There will be time for leaving later. But tonight, you will come with us and celebrate like our brothers and sisters."

"Severus and Hermione of Hogwarts," the Merchieftainess spoke up. "Please do go with Anwar and his family. Be their guests and come to our ceremony tonight. You would honor us all by doing so. Besides, Sarafina would enjoy being with you a little longer."

"Well, then," said Hermione, looking helplessly at Severus. "I guess that settles it. Severus and I would love to come."

"Oh, good," cried Ariana, hugging Hermione and jostling the sleeping Sarafina in her arms. She quickly shifted Sarafina to her other breast and settled her again. "It shall be so much fun. Now, follow us."

Hermione looked at Severus in surprise.

"Well, after you," he said, gesturing towards the already retreating tails of Anwar and Ariana.

Hermione took a deep breath and began swimming after them. This certainly wasn't how she'd expected things to go.

Severus took a last look around the throne. It never hurt to keep looking for means of escape, he thought, then swam after her.

Auberon watched the two of them go. "It is a shame they have to leave our watery home," the Mercaptain said wistfully to the Merchieftainess. "I could have used that Severus on my squad. He is a fierce warrior."

"I agree they both would have been an asset to us," said the Merchieftainess.

"So smart, brave, noble and kind. But there is hope."

"Yes?" asked Auberon.

She smiled coyly at him. "Tonight is the mating festival. And if I am not mistaken, Severus and his mate have a strong desire to be together. If the two mate here in their Merfolk form, they will be magically bonded here forever and will not be able to change back to human form. All we have to do is sit back and watch nature have its way with them. It does seem to bring mates together." She looked to see if anyone was around before she gently wrapped her tail around his.

A knowing smile crept over Auberon's face as he moved closer to his mate and lover. "That it does, my sweet Murcus, that it does." He wrapped his tail even more tightly around hers.

Settling In

Chapter 8 of 12

Severus and Hermione enjoy their stay at Anwar and Ariana's home.

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I am so sorry it's taken this long to update again, especially after I said this chapter would be forthcoming. But unfortunately my health took a nosedive. However, I'm happy to report that the Oncologist says that I am now 90-95% cured. I just want to thank everyone who's still reading along. I have not abandoned this story. I truly love telling it, and I hope you will all continue reading.

Thanks again to ancientgirl for reading this over and for your helpful suggestions. And a huge thanks to my wonderful beta June!

Chapter 9 - Settling In

Hermione and Severus followed Anwar and Ariana through the streets and buildings of the mervillage. They traveled a bit further out from the city to a cozy outcropping of buildings. Here, they were led to a small, tidy dwelling.

"Welcome to our home," said Anwar, clasping Severus by the shoulder.

Severus grimaced in pain. The merman clearly did not know his strength.

"It's small, but it's home," said Ariana.

Hermione swam forward, eager to see the inside of a real merhome. She followed Ariana down a short corridor to an open room. On one side there appeared to be a kitchen or food preparation area. Fish hung in a net from a peg on the wall. Various underwater plants were growing in pots on a sill, and the roots of others hung like garlic on the walls. A table and four stone chairs sat in the middle of the kitchen.

To the right of the kitchen was a living area with more stone furniture and sea grass growing like curtains at the window.

Hermione looked around for Severus but saw he was still outside chatting with Anwar.

"Come with me. I'll show you the rooms where we sleep," Ariana started to say, but was interrupted by some happy cries of what sounded like an enormous crowd of people.

"My Fina," an older merwoman cried excitedly as she rushed toward Ariana and Sarafina.

Hermione moved quickly to the side as the eager merwoman swam by.

"Oh, Mother!" Ariana cried. "She's come back! She's safe and sound."

Ariana's mother burst into tears of relief as she kissed the top of Sarafina's head.

A rush of other family members, caring friends and neighbors poured into the house, all expressing thanks and relief.

Hermione felt herself being pushed aside as they surged forward to see the baby. She'd completely lost sight of Severus outside, and somewhere she could hear Sarafina crying. Just then, she felt a hand close around her arm, and she was pulled back to Ariana's side.

"Everyone, this is Hermione," she called out. "She is one of the brave land dwellers who helped rescue our Sarafina."

"Oooooo," a collective gasp went around the room as various merpeople, mostly women now, regarded Hermione with admiration. Loud chattering went through the room, as everyone there seemed to have something to say about it.

"Thank you, thank you so much, my friends, for all of your help," Ariana said at last. "But I think my cranky little Fina needs some rest after all this excitement."

"Yes, you are correct, my daughter," said Ariana's mother. She started leading everyone out. "We will see each other in just a few hours at the mating ceremony!"

The group of merwomen quickly began dispersing, but not before showering Hermione with praise and Ariana and Sarafina with hugs and kisses.

"I am sorry, Hermione," Ariana said as the others left. "I hope you were not overwhelmed."

"No, no, I am fine," said Hermione, smiling. She had never felt this popular or accepted with the girls at Hogwarts.

Ariana expertly maneuvered the cranky and sleepy Sarafina to a more comfortable position in her arms. The baby settled comfortably, sighed, and closed her eyes blissfully in a way only a child can do when she feels truly loved, safe and happy with her mother.

"Come," Ariana whispered to Hermione, gesturing down the corridor. "We'll put Fina to bed now."

Hermione followed her curiously. She felt honored to see Sarafina settled safely back home.

Ariana swam down the corridor to a smaller room. A large clamshell lay in the center of the floor. Ariana opened the shell and gently laid the sleeping merbaby inside. Two pieces of sea grass lay on either side of the shell. Ariana wrapped these around Sarafina to secure her in the shell, then closed its lid. She turned to Hermione and smiled, then motioned silently towards the door.

The two swam back to the main room where Ariana's mother, Amalthea, was waiting. Hermione saw that the woman was slowly yet nimbly sewing together a fishing net with her old hands.

"So, Hermione," she said, never ceasing her work, "what do you know about our mating ceremony?"

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Meanwhile, Severus and Anwar were outside the house discussing life in the mervillage. Severus had watched with some concern when the crowd had surged forward into the house. He kept a cautious eye on Hermione and Sarafina, and when he had determined they were both well, he turned his attention back to the mermen in front of him.

"Everyone," Anwar declared to the now large group of mermen surrounding him. "It is true. Our Sarafina is home, thanks to this brave wizard here, Severus, and his mate Hermione who is in our home. I have declared before our Merchieftainess that he is my brother, and from this time forward he is to be treated by all here as just that."

He ended his speech by grasping Severus in a tight hug. A cheer went up from all the mermen around him, and they quickly began thanking Severus and demanding the whole story from him.

Not normally a social person, Severus was somewhat taken aback. He was not used to being so popular or eagerly praised. Back in the wizarding world, even though he had been cleared of all wrongdoing in Albus's supposed death, he still wasn't treated well. People couldn't seem to get past his nasty disposition and Death Eater past. Here, Severus felt differently. These people only knew him as Severus the hero, and it was a good feeling. They only knew him as he was today, not when he was a student or as a teacher; there were no merpeople who had been to Hogwarts. So Severus began to relax and enjoy himself, recounting their adventure with quite some enthusiasm.

It was while he was talking that another merman, named Molossus, wandered over carrying a fishing net with an unmistakable fish in it. Severus's eyes glazed over for a moment. He stopped his narration.

"What kind of fish is that?" he asked Anwar, pointing to the net.

"Why, that is a merca," said Anwar. "Why do you ask?"

So Severus went into the story of how he had speared the fish with his trident on his first night as a merman, just before the grindylow attack, and how very delicious it had tasted.

All the merman stared at him with gaping mouths.

"You say you just speared it?" said Thebeus, a young merman with blue hair. He sounded incredulous. "And you've never caught one before?"

"No," said Severus, starting to feel a sense of bewilderment mixing in with his pride.

"Well, my brother, you truly are talented," said Anwar. "For this is a special fish. It is a rare delicacy in our lake and very difficult to find and catch."

Severus smiled, feeling his pride return.

"I cannot believe you just speared it like that with no practice," said Molossus. "It has taken me ages to learn how to catch the merca, and still all I have to show for it is this one. I paid a hefty price for it at the market."

"That is understandable, Molossus. To catch one is near impossible," said Anwar.

Then all the mermen began to question Severus in detail of where he'd found the fish and what technique he had used. Severus soon found himself immersed in a friendly conversation with them about it.

He could hear the voice of Philippe in his mind for the duration. The tiny little bug the blue fish had planted about staying in the mervillage was beginning to grow. If he stayed here, Severus reasoned, he would be respected as a hero. He could join the others in the hunt for merca, apparently a lucrative business in the mervillage, and be a respected member of the community. The Merchieftainess herself had called him a noble man. Such a thought was a huge temptation, because although Severus would never admit it to anyone, it was one of the things he had always craved at Hogwarts: acceptance.

"So Severus, are you ready for the mating ceremony tonight?" asked Anwar.

"I must admit I am not familiar with your customs and traditions," said Severus.

"Ah, the mating ceremony is a great thing," interjected Cranaus, another one of the merman floating nearby. "It's when a merman and mermaid come together for a little fun," he said with a leer.

"It is more than just 'fun' it is the joining together of two mates for life," Anwar corrected him. "This is how Ariana and I got together and how our Sarafina came to be."

"Do all the merfolk participate in this ceremony?" asked Severus curiously.

"No," said Anwar, "only those who are in love."

Cranaus laughed out loud. "Well, what about old Alphaeus? He's tried every year since I've been born. I've yet to see him be successful or in love."

All the mermen laughed at this.

"That is true," Anwar agreed, clapping him on the back, then turned to Severus. "Alphaeus is always there, Severus. That old merman, he's always hopeful that one day he'll catch himself an unsuspecting mermaid."

Severus laughed along with them. He found friendship rather easy here.

"So, Severus, have you plans for that mermaid of yours?" asked Cranaus. "I couldn't help but notice her pretty little tail as she went into Anwar's house. If I were you, I'd grab onto that one and not let go."

Severus actually felt his cheeks flush.

Anwar laughed and clasped Severus on the shoulder. "Come now, Cranaus, Severus will make his own decision when it's time. Let's not pressure him."

"Well, he can wait if he likes," said Cranaus, "but it seems to me that a mermaid that good shouldn't be let go."

"Aye," said Thebeus, now with a gleam in his eye. "You never know when another merman might snap her up. Perhaps even tonight."

"Indeed," piped up Molossus.

Severus frowned. *'We'll see about that,'* he thought.

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Hermione looked flustered. "The mating ceremony," she repeated to Ariana's mother. "I'm... erm... afraid I don't know much about that."

"Mother," said Ariana. "Hermione is not one of our kind. How could she know about the mating ceremony?"

"Know she should," said Amalthea stubbornly. "Anyone could plainly see her wizard is waiting for her. A witch her age should have mated by now."

Hermione blushed.

"Mother, the witches and wizards on land do not have our ways. Hermione may not even wish to be mated with her wizard," said Ariana.

"Of course she does," sniffed Amalthea. "She is in season, and her mate is just waiting for her. You will go to the mating ceremony tonight, Hermione. It will be good for you," she said with a knowledgeable nod of her head.

Hermione had a horrified look of embarrassment on her face, and Ariana moved quickly to help her.

"Come, Hermione. Let's go out in the back garden," she said with a knowing glance.

Hermione gratefully followed her out of the house. She was glad to be away from Ariana's mother and her suggestions about Severus.

The back garden had a small courtyard with numerous plants growing all around them, tall ones and short ones and water plants Hermione had never seen before. Ariana headed over to a large stone where the two of them could settle more comfortably.

"I'm so sorry about my mother," Ariana said quickly. "She's not used to holding her tongue. She's very old fashioned and likes to speak her mind. I hope she didn't embarrass you."

"Oh, no, it's alright," said Hermione politely.

"Yes, well, I'm afraid she prides herself upon being a matchmaker when the mating ceremony comes around. But I can see now that you have absolutely no interest in mating with your Severus, so you needn't worry about it," she said slyly.

"No, no, it's not that at all," said Hermione quickly. "I mean... It's just... I've never really thought about it at all," she said quite lamely as she blushed.

"Really?" asked Ariana. "Severus seems quite interested to me."

"He does?" asked Hermione.

"Of course. Didn't you see the way he looked at you when you swam into the house when you got here?"

"No," said Hermione crossly, wondering how she could have possibly seen him when she was swimming away from him.

"Well," Ariana said, leaning closer to her, "he was staring at your tail."

Hermione's blush deepened. "He was?"

"Yes," said Ariana with a giggle. "And when the crowd came in the house, he watched you until he knew you were safe. It's written all over him how smitten he is with you."

Hermione pondered this. She'd had no idea he'd been watching her.

"So you think he likes me?" she asked Ariana.

"Indeed, I do."

"But how can you be sure?"

"Well, that's the hard part," said Ariana. "At some point you take what you know and you just go with your feelings. See what your heart is saying inside. You'll get your answer one way or the other. But with your Severus, I'm counting on it going the way that you want." She smiled.

Hermione had just a little while longer to reflect on this when they were inundated by a giggling group of young mermaids.

"Ariana," cried out a beautiful, pink-haired mermaid swimming towards them. "We did not wish to disturb you, but I just couldn't go on to the festival without you."

"Hermione," Ariana said, laughing joyously as she hugged the newcomer tightly. "This is my best friend, Admete. Of course you must come, Admete it is after all the day of your mating ceremony."

"I know," Admete squealed. "I'm so excited, Ariana. Do you think Peraethus is as happy as me?"

"Oh, to be sure," said Ariana. "The two of you were meant to be."

"And you, Hermione, are you to join us?" asked Admete.

"Hermione is unsure," Ariana interjected. "This is all so new to her, and she is a visitor."

"Well, you can at least prepare for the ceremony with us," Admete said happily. "That's always my favorite part, the dressing and getting ready. It's so much fun to watch all the mermaids getting ready. I've watched all my life hoping to be one of the beautiful ones in the ceremony, and to think," she squealed again, "today it's me!"

Hermione smiled. She couldn't help but get caught up in Admete's happiness.

"Hold still," demanded Ariana as she swam over and began struggling with Admete's pretty, floating hair. "Your flowers have all become dislodged. To think of you approaching Peraethus this way." She tsked.

"Hermione, these are my other friends, Celaeno, Nocothoe and Ocypete," Ariana said, nodding to them each in turn as she continued to struggle with Admete's hair.

"Hello," said Hermione.

"Hello," they all said in return.

"Come here, Hermione," Celaeno said nicely. "Let me brush your hair."

Hermione swam closer to her and watched as Celaeno pulled a comb from her wrist bag and began running it through her hair.

"Such gorgeous hair," said Ocypete. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Oh, it is beautiful," said Nocothoe. "I daresay the witches on land don't realize how lovely it is."

Hermione giggled. She'd heard her hair referred to as many things but never as beautiful.

"Yes, it's very nice," said Nocothoe, shrewdly examining it. "But it needs something special for tonight. Let's see..." She began looking through the garden. Finally making a choice, she plucked a flower from one of the blooming plants and turned back to Hermione, placing it in her hair. "There, that suits you quite well."

"Oh," said Ocypete. "Wait; there are some more over here." She quickly swam off in the direction of some more flowers. "Look, these little white ones will look so pretty. She has so many flowing tresses we can put them in. She'll look gorgeous."

Before she knew it Hermione was being poked, prodded and made beautiful by all the mermaids in attendance. And in the end she couldn't help but feel somewhat pretty herself.

She was having quite a fun time. Although she had friends in Hogwarts, not many of them were other women like herself. Mostly she'd been with Harry and Ron, and that had allowed little time like this to enjoy just being a woman.

Hermione couldn't help picking up the contagious excitement about the ceremony that came from being around the others. She wondered what Severus would do. She swished her tail a bit experimentally. Had he really been staring at her tail? She blushed, knowing that was probably quite true since Ariana had seen it. There had been several times on their journey that Hermione had been sure he was about to kiss her. Still, he was an older man, and she wasn't sure if he would seriously be interested in her. This started taking her on a dark path of thought.

"Oh, Hermione," Admete cried out. "Wherever did you get that beautiful necklace?"

Hermione was pulled out of her thoughts to answer her. "This?" she said, fingering the chain with her black pearl on it. "Severus gave it to me. Sarafina has a matching one," she said to Ariana.

All the mermaids in attendance gave each other knowing smiles.

"You say your wizard gave this to you?" asked Admete.

"Yes," said Hermione.

"Well, I think he must like you a lot indeed," Admete said.

Hermione smiled in spite of herself.

"They're coming!" yelled Ocypete from her position near the back door of the house. "I can see the mermen they're making their way over to the house." She giggled excitedly.

Hermione found herself rushing to the door with the others. She was eager to see if Severus was with them. She almost forgot that she was there only to observe the ceremony and was actually wishing she could participate in it.

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Authors Note:

The names of most of the merpeople in this chapter were taken from ancient Greek mythology.

Amalthea was the daughter of Oceanus and was either a nymph or a goat and was instrumental in helping Rhea hide the baby Zeus from his father Cronus.

Cranaus was the King of Ceropia (Attica) and was half man-half snake.

Admete was also a daughter of Oceanus and was a sea nymph.

Peraethus was a child of Poseidon.

And Celaeno, Nocotheo and Ocypete are the names of three of the Harpies.

The Mating Ceremony

Chapter 9 of 12

Severus and Hermione finally get to see the mating ceremony and even become a part of it.

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Chapter 10 - The Mating Ceremony

Hermione rushed forward with the other mermaids in an effort to see the mermen, but hesitated along the way. She thought she heard a faint cry coming from Sarafina's room.

Hermione wasn't the only one who noticed it. Ariana heard it, too. They both stopped and went back towards the baby's room. Ariana moved swiftly to the large clamshell and opened it to find an awake and hungry Sarafina. She untied the pieces of sea grass and pulled the baby towards her. Hermione watched with amusement as Sarafina's crying seemed to get much more demanding. But Ariana seemed to know exactly what she wanted, and set to nursing her at once. Sarafina's sobs immediately stopped and she contentedly fed.

From the front room they could hear the giggles of the mermaids and the deep baritone of some of the mermen. Hermione could hear Anwar speaking with Ariana's mother, Amalthea. She and Ariana made their way back out into the hall and toward them, arriving just in time to hear Amalthea arguing with the young mermen and mermaids.

"And I am telling you no!" Amalthea yelled angrily at the mermen. "You may not see these mermaids before the mating ceremony. This is the way things have always been done you know better than to ask. Now get out, the lot of you." She shoed them all out of the open doorway.

"And I am telling you, Mother, that I will not leave until I see that my Ariana and Sarafina are well. She is my mate for life, you know. We've already done our ceremony," said Anwar, pushing his way back in.

"Very well," she said, relenting to her son-in-law while sternly guarding the door. "But only you. The others will have to wait."

Anwar swam in and quickly made his way over to Ariana. "I heard Fina cry. All is well?" he asked her gently.

"Yes," she said, smiling up at him as she nursed their baby.

"Good," he said as he kissed the top of her head.

Sarafina stopped her suckling for just a moment to look up at her father. She gently caressed his face with her little baby hand, in a way that Hermione had seen her do to Severus's nose, then turned her head back to her mother's breast and returned to her feast.

"Off we go, then. I will be seeing you soon at the ceremony," Anwar said to Ariana. He stopped in an afterthought, bowed to the rest of the mermaids present, and added, "I will be seeing *all* of you at the ceremony." Then he exited out the front door.

Amalthea quickly snapped the door shut amidst the groans and protests of her daughter's friends.

"Now, now, ladies," she said to them. "There will be time enough soon for socializing at the ceremony. Gather your things and let's be going."

Hermione watched as Ariana took a cloth and strapped Sarafina to her.

"This makes it much easier," she explained. "You can swim with free hands."

Hermione understood. She had swum the whole way to the mervillage while holding Sarafina in her arms, and it had been rather difficult. The carrying-cloth must be commonplace amongst the merfolk.

Meanwhile the other mermaids gathered their purses, nets, and other items. They all went out in a group with Amalthea leading the way. All the neighbors seemed to be heading the same place as well.

Hermione could just make out Severus and the group of mermen up ahead. She wasn't the only one looking, and soon the other mermaids saw them too. They giggled excitedly and called out to them.

Admete was searching the growing crowds of merfolk. "Where is Peraethus?" she said nervously to Ariana. "I can't see him anywhere."

But no sooner had the words come out of her mouth than a shadow passed overhead. Hermione looked up to see a rather large handsome merman swimming quickly

over them. He was headed to their little group of mermen up ahead.

"Peraethus!" cried out Admete.

He turned just in time to see her. "Admete, my love!" he yelled, waving to her. "Time cannot pass too quickly until we get to the ceremony."

She smiled and blew him a kiss.

His grin grew even brighter. Then he turned and fell in line with the other mermen.

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Severus swam along with Anwar and his friends. He had been a bit disappointed he hadn't been able to see Hermione back at the house. He thought he had caught a glimpse of her, but Amalthea had pushed them all back before he got a good look. The other mermen were talking excitedly and making jokes here and there. Severus had been surprised when the large handsome merman Peraethus had joined them.

Anwar had quickly introduced them and explained to Severus that Peraethus was an old and dear friend, who was hoping to mate with Ariana's best friend Admete. They were very happy about this arrangement.

Severus watched Peraethus out of the corner of his eye. He seemed like a nice enough merman, and after a while Severus deemed him safe to be around Hermione and Sarafina.

It wasn't too long before Molossus began passing his merca around to share. Severus's mouth watered as he waited for his turn and he contemplated taking more than one bite, but as he had seen the other mermen only taking one bite, he decided to follow their lead and only take one too. They continued passing it around until there was nothing left but the bones.

"Well," said Molossus. "That was money well spent, I think."

All the mermen heartily agreed and thanked him for sharing.

Thebeus soon looked back at the mermaids behind them and said, "I think what we need right now is some music. What do you mermen say? Are any of you up for a bit of a song?"

Anwar and the others heartily piped in and began to sing.

Anwar stopped for a moment and clapped Severus hard on the shoulder. "These are traditional songs that we mermen sing to the mermaids on the way to the mating ceremony," he explained.

Severus listened intently, noting the song had a romantic theme. The mermen sang it merrily to the mermaids behind them. The mermaids seemed to giggle for a bit, and then soon sang an answering song back to them. The mermen laughed and smiled at one another.

"Come on, mermen, I think we need to do better than that," suggested Cranaus, and he immediately began a new song with much more suggestive lyrics.

Severus was quite surprised and turned to see what the mermaids and other merfolk's reaction would be. To his amazement the mermaids seemed to be equally amused with it and were conversing with one another in a conspiratorial way. The other merfolk swimming on their way to the ceremony simply smiled at them and went on their way. No one seemed the least bit disturbed by the suggestive lyrics.

The mermaids swam out of their group and soon began singing a rather suggestive song back to the men.

Severus shared a laugh with other mermen about this.

"Well, if they want to play," said Cranaus, "then how about we sing them this..." He and the other mermen joined in a song even more suggestive than the last.

Severus was beginning to wonder what Hermione was thinking about all of this. The mermaids had huddled together and suddenly burst forth in a song more riotous than the mermen's last. Severus felt his cheeks turn red. As he glanced back he noticed that Hermione seemed to be singing as loudly as the rest.

"Well, that's something they don't teach at Hogwarts," he muttered to himself.

The mermen were laughing and good-naturedly patting each other on their backs.

"Just listen to them, men," said Cranaus. "They can hardly wait for us. It won't be long now."

"I feel as if I can hardly wait," said Thebeus, turning to look back at them.

"Indeed," said Molossus, stopping to look too.

Anwar and Peraethus nearly swam into them, as the whole group was slowing down.

Amalthea, ever at the lead of the mermaids, quickly yelled ahead to the mermen to continue on. "Get on with ye, you rotten mermen. We're nearly there now. Just swim on a few more feet and you'll see."

And she was right. Severus was surprised at how quickly they had swum to the town square. He'd been having so much fun he hadn't noticed. There were the decorations they had seen being set up a few hours earlier. As it was getting darker, he noticed that a glowing form of lichen seemed to have been spread everywhere like garland; some of the merfolk were carrying lanterns filled with the lichen. It gave the place a beautiful and mysterious glow.

"We'll settle here," Anwar said, pointing to an outcropping of rocks up ahead. He, Severus and the others swam over to it, as the mermaids swam to another outcropping not too far away above them.

"What do we do now?" asked Severus.

"We wait, my brother," said Anwar. "We wait."

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Hermione had found the trip to the town square quite fun and quick too. She had been shocked at first when the mermen began singing their suggestive songs. She was thankful that Sarafina had fallen back to sleep again and couldn't hear them. But once Ocypete had taught her some of the words, she had found them fun and infectious and sang quite boldly along with them. To her great delight, Admete, Celaeno and Nocotheo took turns telling her when Severus was looking back at her.

She followed their happy group to the rocks set up a little higher than the mermen. Ariana sat further back from the mermaids with her mother and Sarafina. Hermione leaned back, her tail curled neatly beneath her, so that she might talk to her.

"What happens next?" she asked Ariana curiously.

"Just sit back and watch, Hermione," she replied, passing her some of the food from the net they had brought along with them. "It shall begin soon and then all your questions will be answered."

Hermione smiled and looked about.

Pretty soon a trumpet fanfare heralded in the arrival of the Merchieftainess. She swooped in and settled upon her dais high above the proceedings.

"My mermaids and mermen, welcome to our wonderful mating ceremony. I am always pleased to see the many new faces who have come here to gather. I wish you all happiness and fertility. And now without further ado, let the ceremony begin."

She floated up and swung her trident in an arc high above her head. A beautiful rainbow of light lit up the lake and trumpets blared again. Merfolk cheered and then there was silence.

Hermione turned to say something to Ariana when she heard a mermaid singing. It was perhaps the most beautiful song she thought she had ever heard. Soon another voice added to this one, just as clear and strong, both echoing throughout the lake. She watched as two mermaids rose up from two different sides of the lake, singing and swimming upwards. To her surprise they were soon joined by two mermen and immediately began twisting their tails in a strange yet enchanting dance. The mermen moved closer, paired off, and began to dance with their partners. Each couple's tails twined about the other. Hermione frowned in puzzlement as she watched them, or rather tried to they had floated up higher than she could see.

Soon, from all sides, singing mermaids were floating upwards, only to be joined by their mermen. It was a very beautiful sight.

Admete suddenly got a very bold and happy look on her face. "Wish me luck, ladies here I go," she said and burst into a beautiful song as she swam up from their outcropping of rocks.

Hermione watched as Peraethus sprang forth from his place down below by Severus and joined Admete, their tails twisting and writhing around each other.

"Well, there's Thebeus," said Ocypete as she looked down at the outcropping of rocks. "I'm off!" She swam upwards. It didn't take long for Thebeus to join her. They too floated up doing their dance in the now crowded water above the town square.

"Keep your fingers crossed that it's Molossus who joins me, Hermione," said Nocothee as she too swam up to the others.

Hermione crossed her fingers and watched. After a few proddings from the mermen below, she saw that Molossus soon joined Nocothee.

"That Cranaus has been after me for quite a while," said Celaeno, looking down at him in the dwindling crowd of mermen. "I think I'll let him catch me this time," she said with a wink to Hermione. And off she went too. Cranaus, who had been waiting, took off quickly and with no prompting joined her.

Now with no one remaining in their group to be mated, Hermione tried to see just where the couples had all gone. Admete and Peraethus were high in the water above her. She was very curious to see what happened. So far she had seen them doing a very interesting dance, but didn't know what came afterwards. Being a naturally curious person, she was intrigued.

She started when she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Ariana. Hermione's eyes fell upon Sarafina, who was still asleep and peacefully curled up in Ariana's arms. Hermione's heart swelled with love for the child. She was so happy she'd been able to see her home. She knew now that Sarafina was safe and had a loving family. The knowledge made letting go of her that much easier, and yet Hermione yearned to have a child of her own someday. She allowed her mind to wander, and an image of a black-haired merbabe with a slightly large nose came to her. She saw several more scenes before her now, as she listened to the singing around her. She and Severus living in the mervillage. She and all her new friends raising their babies together. Sarafina playing with Hermione's children. Hermione's eyes glazed over as she withdrew more into her vision, the mesmerizing singing of all the mermaids around her encouraging her with these thoughts. She and Severus with several merbabies now, and Hermione teaching them teaching all the merchildren in the village. Yes, perhaps she could even teach them about magic and the world above on land. They would be quite happy. She could see that now.

"Hermione? Hermione?" Ariana shook her slightly.

Hermione's eyes came back into focus.

"I was just saying, if you'd like to see what's going on, you can swim closer," Ariana said.

Hermione glanced up to where Admete and Peraethus were now almost tiny specks, and then looked back at Ariana.

"Go ahead," urged Amalthea, pointing upward. "You go and see."

Hermione took a deep breath through her gills and surged upward. It seemed that everywhere there were couples swirling and dancing with one another. She swam up even higher trying to get near Admete and Peraethus. She finally reached them and watched with great interest as they swirled and danced with their tails. Peraethus stayed behind Admete, holding onto her arm and breast as they swirled, their tails coiling ever tighter. Soon their writhing became faster and faster until they pulled apart and then came together, now facing one another. Hermione could have sworn she saw a scale near Peraethus's front open. Admete seemed to have one as well, and then...

Hermione gasped out loud and her face flushed. She felt as if she was witnessing something she shouldn't. She wanted to look away but she just couldn't. There was a heavy alluring scent in the water, and her mind was growing fuzzy with all the singing. She felt herself thinking that she very much wished that it was she and Severus doing the dancing and mating right now, instead of Admete and Peraethus.

She gave her tail an experimental flick, the way she'd seen Admete and the other mermaids do it. Before she could stop she felt herself moving the same as the others. She was very quickly losing control and she didn't mind at all.

She needed a merman. She wanted a merbaby. She needed Severus. 'Yes, Severus,' she thought, and she didn't even realize that she was now singing his name.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Severus had watched with some interest as the ceremony began. He too found the mermaids' songs quite enchanting and had to clear his head several times, lest he swim off and grab the nearest mermaid he could find.

But mostly he found himself gazing up at Hermione. Someone had put the most beautiful flowers in her long flowing hair. She was simply breathtaking.

He gave a start as he heard the mermen all cheering for Peraethus. He watched as he joined his new mate, Admete, up above.

Then Thebeus, Molossus and Cranaeus swam off happily too, in what seemed like a short succession.

Severus noticed that the water seemed heavier with a rather intoxicating scent. And the mermaids' singing seemed to be putting him into an odd trance. He didn't even hear Anwar speaking to him until the merman shook Severus's arm.

"Your mermaid, Hermione," Anwar said, pointing upwards. "She seems to have decided to join."

Severus couldn't believe his ears. He quickly looked back up to find Hermione, but all he saw was her tail, her beautifully wiggly green tail pushing her higher above the

town square, right into the midst of the mating couples.

"Really, Severus, you should go after her," said Anwar. "You wouldn't want old Alphaeus to finally get lucky, would you?" He pointed to an old merman who was looking lecherously towards the back of Hermione's tail.

Severus gave a start when he saw Alphaeus move as if to go after her. His tail instinctively coiled and made him spring up so quickly he didn't even know he had moved until he'd swam several yards higher in the water. He'd be damned if anyone but himself was going to mate with Hermione. A deep predatory feeling came over him. She was his, and nobody else's. He'd fight to the death to prove it.

And so it was in this frame of mind that Severus swam toward Hermione. The singing was constantly urging him on. He listened to it as he passed by the many mating couples in the water. He listened to it as he rose up higher to where she was, and he listened with surprise when he realized Hermione was singing his name.

He approached her quietly from behind. He tried to shake the fuzziness from his mind, but found that he neither cared what his brain was trying to tell him, nor did he want to stop. Hermione was ready for him. He could smell it; the mermaid was in heat and wanted him. He could have everything he always wanted here in the merrillage he knew that now. And his mate, his mermaid wanted him too.

Very slowly Severus put a hand around hers, the other hand sliding up slowly to cup her breast. His mouth was at her ear as he whispered her name, "Hermione."

Hermione's body tensed up at the sound of his voice. She wanted him so badly. That voice of his it was doing something to her. Without even thinking of it, she thrust her tail backwards and wrapped it around his.

Severus groaned and made one last attempt for his brain to take over. "Hermione," he said again with great difficulty. "Is this what you want?"

She moaned and moved up against him again with her tail, nearly driving him crazy.

"Yes," she said, and Snape's brain knew no more.

Instinctively, their tails began the dance. Around and around they writhed, rubbing together in a dance as ancient as time itself.

Severus groaned deeply. He never knew a tail could have so much sensory capability. *'By the gods, it's nearly better than sex,* he thought to himself.

Backwards and forwards their tails and bodies flew. They were rising upwards at an incredible rate. Severus dropped his trident at some point, watching it fall gracefully to the bottom of the lake. His brain fueled only by lust, he could have cared less. This left him two good hands for caressing his mate. Their groans and moans soon joined the others, and he was pleased to hear Hermione crying out her pleasure. He nipped and kissed her along her neck, making her cry out even more. He did not think he ever wanted sex more than this.

His fuzzy brain barely registered that they had floated very high in the water indeed. He could almost see the surface of the water where a strange light seemed to dance across it.

Soon he felt he could contain himself no more. The time had come for him and Hermione to mate. He flipped her around so that she faced him. "Now," he growled at her, "you are mine."

Hermione groaned and arched her back, happily realizing that the scale on her front mid-section seemed to move on its own. She was more than happy to give herself to Severus. She ached to be with him.

Severus surged towards her, eager to sink himself into her depths when he suddenly felt a sharp pain on his head.

Suddenly he was being pulled away from Hermione. His hair was held tight in a pincer-like grip. He felt himself being pulled out of the water and into the cold night air. He gasped fiercely and began shrieking. He flapped himself around trying to escape. Across from him in an equally tight grip was Hermione. Never had Severus been so furious.

"Alright, there you are, Professor," said Hagrid happily as he dunked Severus into a barrel-sized bucket in the boat he was in. "And here's one for you too, Hermione," he said, dropping her into a bucket across from him.

Severus could not believe his horrible luck another chance at happiness literally plucked away from him. Gone was his chance of happiness in the lake. Gone were the first friends he'd made in years. Gone was his new life in the lake below. He angrily began screeching at Hagrid in Mermish.

"Won't do you no good there, Professor, trying to talk to me like that. The Headmaster thought you might be so eager to tell us what happened. But he said I was to borrow some earmuffs from Professor Sprout and bring you straight to him instead."

Hermione began screeching at that point too.

"Ah, I'm sure you are grateful, Hermione, but I can't hear you either."

Severus was so angry he didn't care. He shrieked the entire boat ride back to the shore, and he shrieked when Hagrid picked them up in their buckets and carried them to Hogwarts. But he eventually stopped shrieking on the walk up simply because they were being sloshed about so much by the half-giant carrying them.

He looked over at Hermione to see if she was alright. She looked frightened as she braced herself up against the side of the bucket to keep from falling out. He could see the lumbering Hagrid doing something just like that and not even realizing he'd lost one of them.

Severus screeched so loud and so long that he was actually losing his voice by the time they had reached Albus Dumbledore's office.

"Ah, Hagrid, I could tell by the sound of Severus's melodious voice that you had been successful," said Dumbledore, smiling as they entered his door.

At this point Severus began screeching even louder and angrier, shaking his fist in Dumbledore's direction.

"Now, now, Severus," said Dumbledore. "You'll hurt yourself trying to talk like that. What you two need is to be turned back to your human forms." He chanted an ancient incantation and transformed them back. "There we go," he said, smiling at them.

Severus and Hermione sullenly stepped out of their oversized buckets. Dumbledore used his wand again to cast a drying spell over the two of them.

"And where did you find them, Hagrid?" he asked the gamekeeper. He turned back to the returning couple. "We were quite worried about you when you didn't come back right away."

"Found 'em out in the lake, Headmaster," said Hagrid. "I got tired of waiting along the shore for them and thought I'd go out to take a look. And it was a good thing too. Another minute and they would have been mating. It's mating season amongst the merfolk now. I thought they might get caught up in that. There's nothing merfolk like to do so much during this time of the season as a good..."

"Thank you, Hagrid," interrupted Dumbledore. "I appreciate all your help in this matter. But as both Severus and Hermione seem to be in good condition, you can go ahead with your night. I know you were interested in some of the unicorn foals in the forest."

"Alright then. Thanks, Headmaster. As long as they're good, I'd really like to check on 'em foals. 'Night, Hermione. 'Night, Professor," he said, backing out of the office.

Dumbledore turned his eyes on the couple before him. Hermione's cheeks had turned bright red at the mention of the mating season, and she wouldn't look him in the eye. Indeed, she seemed to be boring a hole into the floor with her eyes. Severus, on the other hand, was glaring at him and looked as if he would like to kill him. Dumbledore began to wonder why the man hadn't tried this already until he realized Severus didn't have his wand. And he had never seen Severus without his wand.

"I'm very glad to see that both of you are well," Dumbledore said to them. "Come, let's sit down and we'll discuss it all over some tea."

Gryffindors, Slytherins, and Hippogriffs, Oh My!

Chapter 10 of 12

Severus and Hermione discover a lost and injured merbaby and must return it to its rightful family, but along the way they run into a "fishy" situation.

Author's Note: quick mention of a slashy kiss (not graphic, no details).

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Thanks again to ancientgirl and my wonderful Beta June!

Chapter 7 - Gryffindors, Slytherins and Hippogriffs, Oh My!

Minerva McGonagall walked purposefully through the Hogwarts corridors, eager to get to the Headmaster's office. She rattled off the password quickly as she neared the gargoyles. Her heels clicked angrily as she walked the few steps from the landing to his door. The door sprang open and she walked in.

Dumbledore was standing over a basin where he was apparently talking with a fish. As soon as he heard footsteps approach, the Headmaster stood up quickly, and there was a splash behind him. He turned to greet his new guest. There was no need to guess who it was, as he had the door charmed to admit Minerva. He knew from the sound of her footsteps that she was upset about something. The air practically crackled with magic as she swept up to his desk.

"Albus Dumbledore!" she stormed. "Just what is going on here?"

The Headmaster moved to cover more of the watery basin behind him. "I'm sure I have no idea what you mean, Minerva," he said.

"What I mean... What I mean... I'll tell you what I mean, Albus. I've had no less than fifteen owls from both Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter just in the past few hours. They claim they've been trying to reach you about Miss Granger."

He raised his eyebrows and looked innocently at her.

"None of this rings a bell?" she asked him in an accusatory tone.

Dumbledore looked about uneasily.

"And was that a *fish* you were talking to?" she said, pointing to the basin behind him, her voice ending in a shriek. "Have you gone batty?"

"Sit down, Minerva, and I will explain it all," he said with a weary sigh.

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"**You turned them into what?**" Minerva's scream could be heard echoing miles away. "Of all the harebrained things you've come up with in the past, Albus, this... This is just too much. Two of them against all those creatures in the lake, and the merpeople don't even know they're coming."

"But Minerva," he sputtered. "I had to do something. The merbaby needed to be returned to her family."

"Returned, nothing," she sniffed. "You just wanted to meddle again, and the baby was just an excuse."

"Minerva," he said. "You know as well as I do, had someone not done something, Severus and Hermione would have taken forever to get together."

"Still...", she began to say, but was soon interrupted by someone yelling angrily at the gargoyles below. "What in the world?"

But Dumbledore was already up and moving. "I suspected this might happen," he said as he moved to open the door.

On the other side, in angry mid-knock, was none other than Draco Malfoy.

"Dumbledore," Draco said coldly, despite being more than a hundred years younger than the greatest wizard of the age.

"Why, Draco, to what do we owe this wonderful surprise?" asked Dumbledore.

Draco looked suspiciously around the room, his eyes resting for a moment on Minerva. "Professor McGonagall," he said stiffly, bowing his head to her.

"Mr. Malfoy," Minerva said courteously in return.

"I am looking for my godfather," Draco said, angrily rounding on Dumbledore. "He was supposed to meet me for tea yesterday, and he never showed up. My owls have gone unanswered as well. My godfather never misses an appointment. Something is wrong here, and I intend to find out what it is." Draco's cloak billowed dramatically about him while he took his seat.

Dumbledore was about to comment on this when they heard the pounding of footsteps up the stairs, down the corridor and to the door. No guessing who this was either. The door was also charmed to grant Harry Potter entrance as well. The door slammed open, and Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley came running in.

"Professor Dumbledore, is there any news on Hermione and Professor Snape?" Harry yelled. "They were supposed to be back in a day, and it's been over a day now."

"Yeah, and she's down there with Snape! With her bobby bits hanging out! We've been owing you forever," said Ron.

The Headmaster opened his mouth to answer but was again cut off.

"I knew it," Draco said, pointing an accusatory finger at Dumbledore. "I knew something was going on!"

"You!" hissed Harry, glaring at Draco.

"Well, if there *is* something going on, then it has nothing to do with you!" shouted Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry angrily.

"Oh, really, Potter?" Draco said, moving closer to Harry. "I'm afraid anything concerning my godfather is very much my business," he said threateningly.

"Oh, yeah?" said Harry, coming chest to chest with Draco.

"Yeah," said Draco, moving even closer. "And what's Granger got to do with all of this? If that jumped-up little know-it-all has done anything to hurt him, I'll..." Draco broke off, shaking with anger, his hand tightly gripping the snakehead top of his father's cane.

"You'll do what?" Harry asked, his green eyes sparkling dangerously.

"I'll put her in her place, that's what," said Draco.

And at that, Harry let loose. He shoved Draco hard, pushing him to the ground. Unfortunately, the momentum carried Harry along with it, and both men landed on the floor with a thud. What happened next was a melee for domination. They rolled about on the floor fighting, kicking, and screaming. Harry felt as if every pent-up emotion he'd ever had about Draco was pouring out. Ron was on the sidelines egging him on.

"Get him, mate!" Ron shouted. "Hit him where it hurts!"

Minerva jumped and moved back as soon as the fighting started.

"**Stop!**" yelled Dumbledore. "This is accomplishing nothing!"

But the two men didn't hear him. They were grunting, sweating, and fighting on the floor. They had waited too long for this day. Everything they had ever felt about each other was coming out now.

"You'd better watch it, Scarhead!" Draco was yelling from his current position on top of Harry. "I'll pull my wand on you."

"Ha!" yelled Harry triumphantly. He had managed to free himself from underneath Draco and now was on top of him. "You try that, Malfoy," he said, watching Draco reach for the snakehead tip of his cane. "I know exactly where you're hiding your wand and just how big it is!"

Draco paused for a moment. A look of fear and mortification crossed his face. His cheeks flushed a bright red as well.

"I'd like to see you try to get my wand, Potty!" the blond wizard shouted.

Harry hadn't missed the look on Draco's face and wondered briefly just what it meant.

That pause was long enough for Draco to struggle free. He scrambled for his wand as Harry reached for his. The two men jumped up and aimed them at one another.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Dumbledore.

Both men and their wands went flying.

"*Accio wands,*" said the Headmaster, and both their wands flew to his outstretched hand.

Harry looked up at him for the first time with real fear on his face. Dumbledore was angry, and an angry Dumbledore was a very scary thing indeed.

The Headmaster looked with fury at both men. "That is enough!" He raised his wand angrily at them. Both men began to scramble, but neither was quick enough.

"*Hippogriffamous!*"

Ron and Minerva watched in horror as first Harry and then Draco were Transformed into hippogriffs. Harry changed into a golden brown one, while Draco became a brilliant white one. The two hippogriffs stood blinking at each other, both stunned.

"Out!" ordered Dumbledore, pointing to his window with his wand. The windows slammed open, the glass breaking with the magical force that threw them back. "Out, out, out! And don't come back until you've worked this out between the two of you."

Neither terrified hippogriff needed more urging, and both made for the window at the same time. They bickered, clawed, and pecked at each other before they were able to get out, one after the other.

Once outside, Harry screeched at Draco. The two flew at each other, fighting in mid-air. Harry knocked Draco onto the roof of Dumbledore's office. The sound of the battle echoed through the castle.

"Harry!" shouted Ron, finally moving from his spot beside Minerva. "I'm coming to help you!"

"*Petrificus Totalus,*" said the Headmaster.

Ron fell to the floor in front of the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said. "But I'm afraid Harry must go this one alone."

"Albus!" Minerva was clearly startled. "What are you going to do about this?"

Another loud crash on the roof caused them both to cringe as the battle continued on.

"I intend to do nothing," Dumbledore said, trying not to let his frustration show. "Those two will never be able to work things out on their own unless they're forced into it."

"Oh, Albus, you are interfering again," she scolded.

"Well, what would you have me do?" Dumbledore cried in frustration. "Those two on the roof are worse than the two we have in the lake. It's obvious to everyone else how they feel. It's time the two of them work it out for themselves."

"Well, of course it's obvious to everyone," Minerva said. "But they may have discovered it in their own time."

"Then what would you have me do now?" he asked stubbornly. "Let them destroy my office with their sexual aggression in the meantime?"

"It's better for them to destroy the castle as hippogriffs instead?" she asked shrilly.

As if to punctuate what she said, there was a crash and a screech, and then several white and brown feathers floated past the window.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, sounding tired for the first time. "Until they work out their differences, that's exactly what I intend them to do." And with that, he pointed his wand at his desk. A tea service appeared. "Tea, Minerva?" he offered.

Minerva shook her head angrily, brushed the rubble from her seat, and sat down with him.

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Harry and Draco had been fighting in hippogriff form with a fierce desperation. But in truth they were both getting tired. Draco's lunges towards Harry were becoming less and less aggressive. Finally, Harry saw his chance and attacked Draco, biting one of his clawed forelegs. Draco shrieked in pain and fell to the roof below. Harry looked at him and felt elation at having finally won the fight. But his elation didn't last long as he stared at the injured Draco below. Harry had dealt him a hefty blow, and Draco's foreleg was bleeding heavily. Harry flew down closer to get a better look. Draco was whimpering and instinctively licking at his wound with his tongue.

Harry called out to him in concern, but a terrible screeching sound came out instead. Draco cringed in fear and tried to move further away from him. Harry couldn't have felt worse. Why had he fought with Draco anyway? The Slytherin had only come here concerned about Snape. *'Concerned about Snape.'* Harry thought with disgust. Still, Draco's intentions had been honorable, and Snape was probably the closest thing to family he had left. Why had things gone so horribly wrong? Why did Draco have to call Hermione a jumped-up little know-it-all?

The Gryffindor felt more guilt as he remembered all that Draco had done for them during the war. The blond had pledged his loyalties to Dumbledore shortly after his flight with Snape from Hogwarts. This had cost him both his parents' lives. Draco's services to the Order had proved invaluable in Harry's defeat of Voldemort.

'Well,' Harry thought. He looked at the hippogriff, who was a few feet away from him, sadly licking his wounds. *'Things couldn't possibly get worse for him than this.'*

At that moment, the clouds opened up and it poured. Now Draco was injured and wet. And were those crying noises Harry was hearing coming from him? Harry felt horrible. It was as if he had turned into the bully he never wanted to be.

Draco was feeling miserable. Potter had bested him once again. Draco didn't know why he was always so defensive around him. He wished he could be friendlier, but he was afraid if he were nice, his true feelings would come out. He had thought for one frightening moment there that Potter had discovered the truth when he made that comment about his wand. Great tears rolled down his face as he realized the one man he'd ever wanted to have a relationship with most likely hated him. Draco had been so caught up in his own thoughts and tending his wound that he didn't even notice Harry's approach.

The Boy-Who-Lived had been contemplating his feelings about Draco for quite a while now, as he watched the sobbing and injured white hippogriff. He didn't understand why Draco aroused such passion and anger in him. Whenever Harry was near him, he felt as if something was going to tip him over the edge. And then it dawned on him that he had felt passion whenever he was with him. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. He could keep suppressing these emotions, but he knew it was time to finally acknowledge them. There was something in the way Draco had looked at him today that made him think maybe he felt the same way too. *'Perhaps,'* he thought, *'that was why Draco was reacting the same way too.'*

Harry had gotten very close to Draco by now. His heart went out to him as he raised his own brown wing to shelter him from the rain.

Draco, who was deep in his own thoughts, realized he suddenly felt no more rain. He looked up in surprise to see Harry's wing protecting him. Draco quickly turned to look at Harry. He really hoped this was not a trick. And then he looked into Harry's green eyes. There was a warmth, a kindness, and understanding in them that he'd never seen before. And as Draco was cold, wet, and injured, he decided it was in his best interest to trust him.

The brown hippogriff leaned in a bit closer to Draco, hoping the warmth from his body would help ease the Slytherin's shivering and give him some comfort.

Draco leaned into him and was soon snuggled into Harry's warm brown feathers.

The soft cooing sound Harry made when he tried to say something kind to Draco surprised him. It wasn't words but it seemed to get the point across to Draco. Harry moved closer to Draco's wounded foreleg and began to clean it.

The white hippogriff tensed at first, but once he realized Harry meant him no harm, he relaxed some more. Draco moved his head up for a moment to look into Harry's eyes. In that one look they shared it all. A sudden understanding of what they felt for each other came across. It was mutual and that was good. Draco cooed back to Harry, then snuggled closer to him, while all around Hogwarts silence reigned.

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"Do you hear that?" Dumbledore asked, looking up from his tea and crumpets.

"Hear what?" asked Minerva. "I don't hear anything."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore.

As if to contradict that, a loud stomping noise could suddenly be heard in the hall outside the door.

Hagrid didn't even have a chance to knock on the Headmaster's door before it swung open. He came in the door and stepped over the frozen Mr. Weasley.

"Oh, hi there, Ron," Hagrid said, looking down at him.

If the half-giant seemed to be concerned about the state of the Headmaster's office, he didn't let on about it.

"Seems like ya done some redecorating," he said to Dumbledore.

"It seems I have," said Albus with a twinkle in his eye. "And what brings you here, my friend?"

"Oh," said Hagrid, still taking things in. "I was wondering if ya knew 'bout the pair of mating hippogriffs you've got on yer roof."

"Mating!" Minerva yelled, knocking her chair over in her haste to get to the window.

Dumbledore hurried over to stand with her, both of them looking curiously out the window. "You say they are mating, Hagrid?"

"Oh, not mating... No," Hagrid laughed. "But ya can tell they're mates. All snuggled up and cute like," he said with a dreamy look on his face. "They'd make great friends for Buckbeak."

Minerva let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness," she said. "Albus, don't you see how dangerous your meddling can be? If they had mated, then they both would have to stay that way forever."

Dumbledore began to laugh. "Oh, Minerva. They're two males. I hardly think we need to worry about Harry and Draco with a baby hippogriff."

"No, Albus," she said angrily. "It's not them we need to worry about. It's Severus and Hermione down in the lake. Did you think about that, Albus? Did you? We could lose them both forever if they decide to stay. Did you even warn them about that?"

Dumbledore's face changed from one of merriment to one of concern. "Perhaps you are right, Minerva," he said. "I did say they would be a day or two in accomplishing their task, so if I don't hear from them by tonight, I'll send Hagrid out to collect them." He said nothing about Philippe, who had not given him permission to tell others about him.

Minerva looked at him severely. Her lips were pinched in a tight line.

"It will be okay, Minnie," he said, using his pet name for her. "I promise."

She continued to say nothing and seemed to blink back some tears.

"You will be able to find them, Hagrid, will you not?" Dumbledore said, turning to the half-giant standing behind them at the window.

But Hagrid was still entranced with the hippogriffs. "Look at them cuddling," he said dreamily. "Like little lovebirds... Bless 'em!"

Dumbledore looked out the window once again. Draco was preening Harry's facial feathers, and the brown hippogriff resembled nothing more than a fluff ball at the moment.

"That they are, Hagrid," Dumbledore said. "But, I'm afraid it's time to turn them back." He whistled loudly to call their attention.

Two hippogriff heads snapped up in his direction.

"Come in... Come in," said Dumbledore, waving them in.

Everyone made room as the two large creatures flew back into the office, the white one a bit wobbly. Dumbledore quickly said an incantation, and the two were immediately turned back to their human forms.

Harry quickly moved over to the injured Slytherin, who was on the floor, unable to stand. "Draco, I am so sorry... for everything..." Harry's voice broke off, tears welling in his eyes.

Draco reached up and put his uninjured hand on Harry's arm. "It's okay. It's enough that we've both come to this understanding."

"Never again, my love," he whispered as he leaned near Draco's face. "Never again will I hurt you so."

Draco smiled up at Harry and cupped his face with his hand. "I know. I know."

Then Harry and Draco both leaned in for a very deep and heartfelt first kiss.

"Bloody hell!!!!" yelled Ron, who had finally been released from the Headmaster's Body-Bind Curse. "Harry?" he said, looking at his best friend. "Draco?" he said, looking at the man his best friend was kissing. Then he fainted fast away, once more blocking the doorway.

Breaking away from his kiss with Draco, Harry turned to look at Ron lying on the floor once again.

"Ahhh... Well... He'll get used to it," Harry said. "Hagrid," he called more urgently to the completely puzzled half-giant standing nearby, while trying to help Draco up. "Hagrid, he's hurt. Won't you please help me get him to the hospital wing?"

"Alright, Harry," Hagrid said, scooping up the injured Malfoy. "I'm not rightly sure what just happened here, but I'm more than happy to help if ya wants me to."

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Harry, flashing him a grin. "It means a lot to me."

The three began to walk off when Dumbledore called Hagrid back.

"Hagrid," Dumbledore called. "Miss Granger and Professor Snape should be coming up from the lake this evening. Would you mind standing by the lake to watch for them, and bring them to me so I may return them to human form?"

"O' course not, Headmaster," said Hagrid. "I'll get right on it as soon as I get these two settled in the hospital wing."

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore.

Albus moved to stand next to Minerva, his arm resting comfortably around her shoulders. "Don't worry so, Minnie. It will be alright. We will have Severus and Hermione back soon."

Minerva rested her head on his shoulder and hoped he would be right.

~*~*~*~

A/N: Next chapter, we go back to the lake with Severus and Hermione!

Confrontations

Chapter 11 of 12

Severus and Hermione discover a lost and injured merbaby and must return it to its rightful family, but along the way they run into a "fishy" situation.

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Thanks again to ancientgirl for reading this over and for your helpful suggestions. And a huge thanks to my wonderful beta June for everything. I couldn't do this without you!

Chapter 11 - Confrontations

Severus glared at the Headmaster in front of him. A thousand different curses ran through his mind, but the spell that came from his lips was neither a jinx nor a hex.

"*Accio wand*," he growled.

Deep at the bottom of Hogwarts' lake, a trident-wand rose by itself.

Several merpeople looked up to see it rise in the water, including Anwar and Molossus.

"I see that our friend has truly returned to Hogwarts," said Anwar somewhat sadly, but with resignation.

The trident-wand rose higher still, gaining speed. It broke the surface with a tremendous splash and began soaring across the grounds of Hogwarts. It continued to accelerate as it heeded its master's urgent call.

Meanwhile, Harry and Ron were having a heated conversation on the front lawn.

"And I'm telling you for the last time. Nobody has put a curse on me! I'm in love with Draco, and you're just going to have to get used to it," Harry yelled angrily, jabbing his finger in Ron's chest for emphasis.

"Oy, yeah, right. I have to accept this, do I!" he shouted. Ron was furious and looked at Harry with a mixture of rage and disbelief. "Great, just great! The next thing you're going to tell me is that Hermione is shagging Snape and I ought to accept that too."

"Ron... That's... Just... Stop and listen to what I'm trying to tell you," Harry said, growing exasperated.

But Ron was beyond angry and didn't seem to want to hear anything.

"You want to know what I think," shouted Ron. "I think..."

But whatever Ron was going to say remained unsaid. Severus's trident, speeding past, had whacked him in the side of the head, and Harry found himself once again staring at Ron's unconscious form.

Back in his office, Dumbledore continued to stare at Severus. Blue eyes met beetle-black ones as a certain sense of expectancy seemed to hang over the room.

Hermione was just about to say something, but her words caught in her throat and turned into a scream as Severus's trident crashed into the office.

Severus caught the trident with one hand.

Dumbledore shouted a spell to protect them from the shattering glass and then repaired the recently repaired windows once more.

Oblivious to this, Severus examined his trident curiously. Sensing that it was back in its normal environment, the trident twitched in Severus's hand, then turned itself back into a wand. Severus swished and flicked it twice, and out came a single red rose. He turned to Hermione, gave a little bow, and handed it to her.

Hermione, who had been watching all of this with concern, at first stepped back, then flashed a bright smile in his direction, tucking the rose inside of her robes.

Severus smiled back at her, then quickly turned on Dumbledore and glared.

The Headmaster seemed to be ready for this, and though he didn't pick up his wand in front of him, he kept it nearby.

"I ought to kill you for this," Severus spat angrily at him. "You've no idea what danger you put Hermione and the baby in. Of all your foolish plans..."

"Now, now, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted complacently. "We both knew of the dangers before you left. That is why I sent you along with her, and you know I wouldn't have let you go this alone. It was for that very reason that I had Phillippe watching over you. As it turned out, everything is fine," he said with a smile.

Severus continued to frown, seemingly struggling over whether to jinx him or to listen to what he had to say.

As if he had read his mind, Dumbledore continued on. "You could strike me down, Severus, as I know you are angry enough to do, or we could discuss what occurred in the lake."

Snape's glare intensified.

"Of course," Dumbledore quickly added, "anything of a personal nature that occurred between yourself and Miss Granger can remain confidential. I merely wish to discuss what knowledge you have of who could have taken this merbaby and what possible reasons there were for her abduction."

"Severus," Hermione said hesitantly. "I think perhaps what Professor Dumbledore is saying is reasonable. We owe it to Sarafina to find out who tried to take her."

Severus eyes flicked back and forth between her and Dumbledore. Seeming to have made a decision, he lowered his wand and turned his head in a more receptive fashion towards the Headmaster.

"Very well, then," Dumbledore said with a sigh of relief. "Let's all sit down to have some tea and discuss all that you have learned."

Hermione made as if to move towards the chairs he had indicated, but Severus got there before her, pulling a chair out for her.

"Thank you, Severus," she said, blushing.

The Potions master's chivalrous action was not lost on Dumbledore. He had to check himself, lest they see the huge smile upon his face.

Several hours later, Dumbledore sat in deep thought, troubled deeply by the things that Severus and Hermione had shared with him. Somewhere out there was an evil entity that would think nothing of harming an innocent merbaby. He wasn't sure what to think of what had occurred.

Severus stirred restlessly before him, rousing him from his thoughts. Dumbledore was unsure of how long he had lapsed into silence, digesting all this new information. It was wrong for him to keep the two of them in his office while he thought things over. And the two of them obviously had more pressing matters to discuss.

"Thank you, Severus, and Miss Granger," he said. He stood up suddenly, startling Hermione, who had been nervously chewing on her lip.

Severus quickly stood up too.

"If you will no longer be needing us, sir..." he started to say.

"Oh, goodness, no," said Dumbledore. "I'm sorry to have kept you both so long." Go now, both of you. I've much thinking to do, and I suspect you've had enough tea for the evening."

"Thank you, sir," said Hermione, stepping away from her chair.

"You are welcome. And have a wonderful evening," he said, his eyes suddenly sparkling at them.

Hermione had the sense to blush. Severus gave him a glare that suggested he wanted no more comments on the evening and whether or not it would indeed be "wonderful."

The pair headed to the Headmaster's door with Severus's hand on Hermione's back, guiding her along the way. They entered the stairwell silently and remained so on the ride down. Once at the bottom of the stairs, both stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say after having lived through such an odd experience.

Severus moved as if to say something, and at the same time Hermione choked on words that didn't seem willing to come. Both of them hesitated, and a look of disappointment crossed over Severus's eyes.

"Well, then, Miss Granger," he said stiffly. "I bid you goodnight." He gave a courteous nod in her direction, then spun on the spot and swooped down the hall.

Hermione stared in shock after him as his retreating robes nearly smacked her in the face. Her mouth opened and closed several times. She seemed unsure about what to do and how to react.

'I had expected there to be some awkwardness, but not for him to just walk away from me, she thought. 'What about all that had happened under the lake? We almost mated! Has he just forgotten it or disregarded it?'

She had to do something. She'd waited so long to be with Severus, and now he was just walking away.

"Severus," she called out, running towards his retreating figure. "Severus, wait!"

He stopped so suddenly that she very nearly ran into him, and he stuck his hands out just in time to catch her.

She suddenly felt herself turning very warm at the thought of being in his arms again. It was something she suspected was reciprocated by Severus when she glanced nervously into his eyes.

"Yes," he said in that deep, sexy voice of his. "You had something you wished to say to me, Hermione?"

At the sound of her name on his lips, she felt some hope swooping back into her anxious heart.

"I..." She struggled to speak. "I... had just hoped we could talk about... about what happened in the lake."

"In the lake," he echoed, cocking an eyebrow at her. "I was under the impression that we had just spent the past few hours discussing what happened in the lake."

"No, not that, not the report," she said. She moved a little closer to him and happily realized that he hadn't let go of her since catching her a few moments before. "I mean," she said, her voice getting a little huskier, "what else happened under the lake."

Severus cleared his throat as he looked into her heavily-lidded brown eyes. Was it his imagination, or was she looking at him seductively?

"Well," he said, clearing his throat again. "I suppose that it is only natural that given the amount of time we spent underwater in our transformed condition..." His voice trailed off for a minute as she moved even closer towards him, the heat from her body arousing instincts in him that were not merely those of a merman, but those of any type of male creature in existence.

"Our... Our transformed condition and the instincts thereof would have of course added in our confusion and perhaps misguided attraction," he finished lamely, wishing he could push her to the wall behind him and kiss her with all his might.

"So," she asked curiously, moving yet closer towards him. "You believe it was only our transformed condition that attracted us to each other." Her body came into full contact with his.

Severus swallowed hard, struggling for some sort of reply. His attraction was now visibly obvious and was pressed hard against her.

"Miss Grang... Hermione, I am well aware of what others think of me. I am neither attractive nor desirable to the opposite sex. I have very clearly heard the things whispered behind my back about my looks. My nose is too big, my hair too greasy... I am the big, black bat of the dungeons. Is that not what the students say?" he asked rhetorically. "I could never expect that your attraction to me would be anything other than a complication of our transformation."

"Severus, your hair is dark and silky, your nose is sexy, and I am clearly not a student anymore. My attraction to you began a long time before we were transformed." Hermione moved even closer to him, backing him into the wall.

"Indeed," squeaked Severus, his voice surprisingly high.

"Indeed," said Hermione.

And then they were kissing as neither of them had ever kissed before. A deep burning seemed to smolder through both of them as their lips and tongues expressed that which neither of them seemed able to do with voices alone. Their bodies pressed even closer together, both moving towards a common goal.

Severus broke their kiss long enough to pick up Hermione and place her against the wall.

She wrapped her legs tightly around him as they moaned and groaned their desires.

Severus was thrusting himself against her clothed body as she urgently bucked back against him. His thrusts were pushing her against the wooden wall behind them, making a dull thudding noise that only registered to him as slightly odd in his lust-filled mind. The only thought currently making any sense right now was how to get himself inside of Hermione as quickly as possible.

Thud! They banged against the wall. *Thud!* They banged again.

Severus pulled out his wand to remove their clothes when they banged one more time against the wall.

Thud! Then they were falling straight through the place where the wall once was.

Severus landed squarely on top of Hermione, and the two of them looked confusedly up at the room that seemed to have transformed around them.

Harry Potter's surprised face was peering down at them.

"What in the world..." Harry exclaimed out loud.

From a canopied bed in the corner, a bemused Draco Malfoy was beaming at the newcomers. Draco snickered and said, "Well, looks like Ron's going to be on the floor again when he sees this. Is he specializing in Divination?"

Severus pushed himself up onto his elbows. He wanted to get off of Hermione. He was afraid that he might be crushing her, but at the moment he was still at half-staff, so he stalled to give himself more time.

"Just where exactly are we?" Severus asked Malfoy, avoiding Potter's eyes completely.

"Well, you're in our room," said Draco with a mischievous grin on his face. "And I would say it was the Room of Requirement, but you two seem to be in here by accident, as Harry and I certainly didn't tell the room we needed you. We thought Hagrid was trying to knock the door down. Never thought it would be you two."

The sheet on the bed moved a bit more off of Draco as he laughed, revealing his naked chest and falling down to his waist. The rest of his body seemed to be just as naked.

The Potions master glanced at Potter, whose robes appeared to have been pulled on quickly. Bile rose in his throat as he realized what he had just walked or fallen in on. Any thought of Potter and sex was enough to make him want to vomit. One look at Draco's sly expression told him that he had guessed correctly.

"I knew it," Severus said out loud.

Draco just grinned and Harry blushed.

"Well," Severus said in a much more quiet voice to Hermione, "this should make Christmas dinner at Malfoy Manor much more interesting."

"Hermione, are you okay?" asked Harry, only now realizing she was trapped underneath Snape.

"I'm fine, I think," she said as Severus moved off of her, quickly pulling his robes around him and offering a hand to pull her up.

Hermione stood up and looked around her. Her eyes moved from Draco on the bed to Harry, who was now blushing profusely.

"Well," she said, while looking from one to the other. "I guess there have been a lot of things going on while we were gone."

"I guess so," said Harry.

"Yes, they have," she said, taking Severus's hand in hers. It was her turn to blush as she shifted from one foot to the other. "I hope that's not a problem."

"It's alright with me, if it's alright with you," Harry said as he glanced over to Draco's naked form lying on the bed.

Hermione giggled. "Well, Harry, I always sort of knew." Her eyes moved from Draco back to him.

"You're taking it much better than Weasley," said Draco.

"Why? What has he done?" Hermione asked Harry.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it, Hermione. It's just... Well, you know Ron," he mumbled

"Yes, I do," she said quietly. "But, you know, Harry, I'm always here for you."

"I know," he said, smiling at her.

Draco stared meaningfully up at Severus's tall figure.

Severus took a few steps backwards. He looked about uncomfortably before finally mumbling, "Likewise, Draco."

Draco beamed back at him from his bed.

"Well, sorry about your door," said Hermione, awkwardly backing towards it.

"Yes. Well, we shall be leaving you two to do whatever it was you were doing...." Severus looked around uncomfortably.

Harry nodded towards them both and mumbled, "Goodnight," while Draco smirked.

Severus took Hermione's hand and led her out through the broken door.

Behind them, they heard Harry cast a Repairing Charm, and the door set itself back upon its hinges. They heard it lock shortly after that.

"Well, that was... erm... interesting," said Hermione.

"Indeed," said Severus, now leading her down the hall.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere where we won't be disturbed."

"And where might that be?"

"My rooms," he said. "And come hell or high water, there shall be nobody disturbing us then."

Hermione let out a squeal as he swooped her up into his arms and carried her the rest of the way.

Surprise!

Chapter 12 of 12

Severus and Hermione finally get some time alone, and the dark wizard is revealed.

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Sorry that this chapter took so long! I swear I will never promise a chapter will be up quickly again. It seems to curse me every time. Life has been very full, and this has unfortunately been on the back burner for a quite a while. In case you are wondering, I have had Gall Bladder surgery, a much needed vacation, wrote and helped produce a play and... Kidney Stones. Whew!

All that said I hope you all really enjoy this chapter. There is a lot of fluff at the beginning, but I thought Severus deserved a bit of that. The story has a more interesting twist at the end. And again sorry for the wait!

Thanks to ancientgirl for reading this over and for your helpful suggestions. And a huge thanks to my wonderful beta June for all your hard work, especially on all those dates. You are awesome!

Chapter 12 - Surprise!

Severus slowly began to wake. But when he became aware of the warm body snuggled beside him, he immediately became alert and had a comfortable, sated feeling within.

He smiled as he remembered last night's events, evidence of which were still scattered about his rooms. Hermione's knickers hung from the chandelier above him. Funny, he didn't remember that happening, but then he didn't remember much about what occurred before their frantic coupling. It had been a mad dash to remove as much of their clothing as quickly as possible last night. He grinned wickedly; they had been so eager they hadn't even reached his bedroom until much later. There truly wasn't a room they had missed in their progress to the bedroom.

And now, here they were back in his sitting room on the floor, next to his fireplace.

Severus stretched happily and gently began to extract his arm from beneath his bushy-haired Gryffindor. She shifted in her sleep, mumbled something, and rolled over onto her side.

He stood gently, bits of him creaking and protesting as he did bits that hadn't ached in ages. Severus smirked as he reminded himself just what had occurred to make his body ache.

He walked across the room to his magically spelled coffeemaker. A cup of his favorite Dragon Brew coffee was waiting for him. The Potions master drew in a deep breath of the coffee aroma and sighed.

He took his cup and moved towards the sitting room's enchanted glass window, which gave him an underwater view of the lake above and its calm, green waters. He'd never really appreciated the beauty of the lake and its view until now. Sunlight was glinting through the water as Severus enjoyed his moment of peace and took a long draught of his morning coffee ... and then very nearly spit it out.

Severus squinted at the odd moving shape in the water in front of him. At first he had thought it an odd reflection of the sun's morning rays from above. But the more he stared at it, the more it was starting to look like something else. Once he determined what it was, he began to choke and gag.

Thebeus was swimming up to the window with an excited and happy grin on his face.

Severus frantically searched the sitting room for something to cover himself with, but could find nothing. His coffee cup would have to suffice for now, although it barely covered anything.

To his dawning surprise and horror, Cranaus and Molossus swam up to join Thebeus. Anwar and Peraethus waved happily at him too.

"Oh sweet Circe's tit!" Severus swore under his breath. The whole lot of them were swimming up to his window now, something the very naked Potions master wasn't happy about. At least the merpeople had scales covering their bits; he had nothing.

Severus quickly turned to look behind him, praying Hermione hadn't wakened and seen any of this. Fortunately, Hermione remained sound asleep on the floor. He turned back to the window and nearly dropped his cup of coffee as Anwar was now tapping at his window with his trident.

"Shhhh, you fool... Shhhhh!" he whispered desperately at their smiling faces, even though they likely couldn't hear him through the glass. Severus was wondering just what they were doing outside his window and how long they had been there. All four of his mermen friends had married at the recent mating ceremony where he and Hermione had almost... so why weren't the mermen off with their new brides?

He hadn't even thought of anyone or anything looking through the underwater window. Had they seen him with Hermione? One look at Cranaus gave him his answer. The merman was making lewd gestures with his arms and tail gestures that were entirely reminiscent of Severus's last interlude with Hermione.

Severus felt himself blush all over.

Meanwhile, Anwar and Peraethus seemed to be having an animated conversation about Severus's entirely exposed bits and pieces. The topic seemed to be fascinating them. Apparently they had never before seen a naked human.

Severus looked on in horror, temporarily frozen to the spot while he was being sized up.

Meanwhile Thebeus was smiling at him and giving him the thumbs-up sign.

The mermen were enjoying themselves immensely. Molossus and Cranaus were now acting out the frantic coupling when Severus and Hermione first entered the room. Cranaus made a motion as if he was throwing Hermione's knickers high in the air, and Molossus was pointing at the knickers where they were still hanging on the chandelier.

Severus turned and stared at the knickers, wishing he had his wand so he could get them down and hide them quickly.

Anwar and Peraethus seemed to have ended their discussion of the human's private parts and were nodding and smiling in admiration and approval. If anything they seemed impressed and happy for him.

Severus felt some of his horror melting away and a bit of male pride coming back. A smug smile crept over his face. What man wouldn't be proud of what he had just accomplished? Normally a private man, Severus felt a sense of camaraderie with his merfriends. It was rather nice knowing that they came looking for him to share his happiness, although he wished it was not at so intimate a moment.

Suddenly, behind him he heard Hermione shift and moan as she was slowly waking up on the floor. It was time for his friends to leave. There was something to be said about privacy when entertaining one's new lady love. And he was sure Hermione would not have appreciated their friends' act of voyeurism no matter how innocent it was to them, Severus thought, remembering the very public mating ceremony. Seeing one's friends mating was a common occurrence in the mervillage, but not at Hogwarts!

Near the lake's edge, a tall, dark wizard was kneeling to hear the report from this grindy low spy, his only source of information of what went on in the mervillage.

"Khai had been imprisoned," the grindy low had reported. "There are only a few of us remaining in the lake. The others of our kind have been banished, and that mermaid that little mermaid has been returned safely to her family and is now well guarded."

The wizard was sparking with rage when he stood up. He reached into the pouch he carried by his side, pulling out a small glass sphere. Inside, an image appeared of a mermaid swimming, and a prophecy played out before him.

"Just before the second hour of the second equinox, before the second year after the end of the second millennium, a merchild shall be born. It is she who shall unite the magical creatures in great conference against an evil one and restore their peace with the magical world. Under her leadership and representation, the magical creatures of the world will hold equal power with witches and wizards, even working together as members of the Wizengamot

Then the sphere ceased glowing and the mermaid's image faded away.

The dark wizard pulled the wand from his cloak pocket. How he hated using the thing, but it was a necessity.

He whispered the spell, and his form began to shift and change. No longer was he suffering in that damnable human form. Instead, his body stretched out into its beautiful and strong elegant form, taller and with hooves.

Finally back into his true centaur form, Bane picked up the prophecy globe with disdain and placed it back in his pouch. The wand which he had stolen from a fallen Death Eater during the last war went in too.

Well, he had lost this battle to destroy the merchild Sarafina, but he would try again. This time, he would have to make sure that annoying witch Hermione and that dark wizard of hers would have no chance of helping the merchild again.

Yes, he knew he was beaten this time, but there was a long time between now and when Sarafina was supposed to bring about this supposed peace between their worlds. And he was determined that peace would never happen. He hated humans, whether they were Muggles or wizards. What had humans ever brought to magical creatures other than enslavement and their silly wars? The goblins and house-elves used to be more powerful than wizards look at them now! Centaurs were part of the so-called "Beast Division" of the Ministry of Magic, lumped together with dragons, werewolves, and "dangerous creatures." He'd heard of the Ministry's huge statue, depicting a centaur, house-elf, and goblin looking up adoringly at a witch and wizard. Bah!

Bane slung the pouch to his side and trotted away, leaving his last remaining grindy low spy dead with a kick of his hooves. He felt no remorse. It was all for the greater good of all magical creatures, and he would leave no trail of his deception behind.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Sarafina was born just before 2:00 a.m. on September 22, 2001 "Just before the second hour of the second equinox, before the second year after the end of the second millennium." There are two equinoxes each year vernal and autumnal. The term "equinox" refers to the two times of year when night and day are both 12 hours, the same length of time; hence, the significance of Sarafina seeing the era when magical creatures and magical beings (wizards and witches) are granted the same recognition, both equal in power.