How to Make Snape Happy in Ten Steps

by Lorraine Bluestar

Making Severus happy is simpler than anyone expects. Hermione achieves it in ten steps, but no one can say they were easy.

This story is a present for Melanie on her birthday; I hope you like it, Mel.

Step One. Achieve the Higher Score in His Potions N.E.W.T

Chapter 1 of 5

Making Severus happy is simpler than anyone expects. Hermione achieves it in ten steps, but no one can say they were easy.

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Disclaimer: All characters and concepts of Harry Potter's universe belong to J.K. Rowling; I just borrowed them for a little while.

"Ron, can you just stop it? I can't concentrate if you keep on muttering under your breath so close to me."

"I'm studying, right? N.E.W.T.s start next week, and I need to be prepared."

"If you had started studying months ago as I told you, you just wouldn't be in so much trouble now."

"Well, forgive me if I wanted to spend time training so Gryffindor could win the Quidditch Cup and surely the House Cup in our last year at Hogwarts."

"Ronald, I'm not questioning about your training. I just want you to let me study in peace."

"Hermione, if you want peace then go to the library. This," he said, gesturing around the room with his hands, "is the common room, and here everyone has the right to do what they please. I want to mutter whilst I study."

She couldn't believe it; he was actually suggesting that she might be better leaving the common room. Why did he have to be so rude? He had been inconsiderate with her since they had broken up a few weeks after they came back from Christmas break. It was the right thing to do; it wasn't working out for them, and he just acted as if he was offended. There were more important things to worry about -- like their N.E.W.T.s.

Voldemort was now history, just a bad memory for the Wizarding world. Harry defeated him on New Year's Eve when they faced each other in Godric's Hollow for the last time. Harry wanted to spend his holidays there with his friends near his parents' home and tombs. He wanted to do it before having to confront He-Who-Is-Nothing-Now. No

one imagined that Voldemort was planning to attack Harry and his friends during Christmas break, and if Snape hadn't managed to pass that last minute information to the Order, the trio would have been trapped by Voldemort and twenty Death Eaters. Fortunately, the Order members were able to assist them before it was too late, and with their aid and that of his best friends, Harry was able to face his nemesis and destroy him permanently.

After that final battle, the dynamics between the trio changed. Harry looked more mature, more focused now that he didn't have that heavy burden over his shoulders. He also became closer to Hermione; they talked a lot and started sharing a new type of relationship, seeing in each other the sibling neither of them had. Harry and Ron remained as good friends as always, but for Hermione, it wasn't the same. Now that everything was over, she didn't feel the need to grasp onto their relationship as an anchor to her sense of normality. She started seeing beyond their need for each other and realised with a heavy heart that they were not meant for each other; they were so different, and they would never make a good match.

Hermione decided that it was better not to argue with him; she was just tired of coping with his bad moods and having to endure his blaming her for not trying to make their relationship work. She knew he was hurt, and despite everything, she loved him as a friend and tried not to make things more difficult for him. With a heavy sigh that reflected her frustration, she grabbed all her books and placed them in her schoolbag before heading to the library.

Harry watched her leave knowing why she was leaving instead of staying there with the rest of her house. He had tried hard to stay away from their complicated relationship, but there were times like this when he just couldn't bear to see her like that.

"Why don't you let her be for a change? She just wanted to study."

"I don't know, mate. When I think about it, I know that I have to be more considerate with her, but when I look at her, at her eyes, it still hurts. It hurts that it didn't work out, because I love her, because I wanted to be with her, and it didn't bloody work out. I know that I'm mean for treating her like that, but I just can't cope with it in any other way. Can you understand, Harry?"

"Not at all, but I know that you're honest about this and that you care about her. Just try harder; you're hurting her with your attitude."

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Severus Snape felt like life was knocking at his door, the life that he had never had. Now that the Dark Lord was gone, he was free at last to start again, to pursue the life he had always wanted and never had the chance to have. He would apply for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post again; he was sure that he would get it now that everything was over and the Death Eater label was removed from him. Of course, he kept the bastard, greasy git and overgrown bat labels, but he could live with those. In fact, he didn't care about any of them; he wasn't a nice man and wasn't afraid to let the world know it. He was heading to see Dumbledore and discuss the matter with him when he saw her; she was walking distractedly and looking as if she would hex the next person who dared to cross her way. What a perfect chance to tease a student, the Head Girl no less, and provoke point docking. He walked towards her and collided with her intentionally.

"Miss Granger, I would recommend that you start paying attention to your surroundings so you can avoid causing an accident," he lectured her in silky but still dangerous tones.

'Brilliant. Bloody brilliant indeed. This is all I needed, to find Snape in the hallway and collide with him.'

"I'm sorry, sir. I was just a little bit distracted thinking about my N.E.W.T.s."

"Indeed, Miss Granger. It seems to me that you are just lurking in the corridors looking for someone to hex to make you feel better about something. So tell me, Miss Granger, who made our always polite Head Girl mad enough to do that?"

'Bastard...'

"I was just walking to the library, sir, as I have already told you -- I need to study."

'Just a little more to make her lose her temper and cross the line.'

"Are you sure, Miss Granger? Maybe I should ask Mr. Weasley about it just to be sure."

Hermione's eyes widened when she heard those words. 'How dare you? Who are you to interfere with my personal life, you overgrown bat?'

He smirked knowing that he had just hit the right mark.' Almost there.'

"It wouldn't be necessary, sir..." she said, emphasising the last word.

"I am, Miss Granger, the one who decides what is necessary and what is not. Your insolence must be punished properly. Ten points from..."

"What? You can't deduct points from me! I haven't done anything wrong!"

'Touché...' he thought.

"Miss Granger, how dare you yell at me as if I were your equal! That will be twenty points from Gryffindor for your little tantrum. And I suggest that next time you watch your way and be more respectful with your professors."

He turned and left her there, trying to digest how it had happened, why she was out of her common room, and why she managed to lose so many points. Definitely, it wasn't her day.

The N.E.W.T.s week arrived before they knew it, and every seventh-year student looked utterly terrified or on the verge of a breakdown. The only one who looked focused was Hermione, and that was the result of months of preparation for this moment. She wanted to get excellent marks in all her exams, and since she was thinking about becoming a Potions mistress, she had decided to achieve the impossible until now -- to get an 'O' in her Potions N.E.W.T. exam. No one had achieved it since Snape became the Hogwarts' Potions master; the best marks were 'Acceptable' and the well-known 'E' from Percy Weasley, but never an 'O.'

She had studied hard enough for this one; she was more than ready for it and took a deep breath to steady her heartbeat when the examiner called her name.

"Granger, Hermione Jane."

She stood and followed the woman inside the laboratory in which she would present her exam...

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"Severus, you know I can't give you the post if we don't have a replacement for teaching Potions."

"Then look for someone. I'm sure that there must be someone out there willing to take the post."

"My dear boy, how can I say this to you? You have discouraged every student that has placed a foot in Hogwarts in the last sixteen years from pursuing a career in Potions. The British Wizarding world has not had a Potions master since you got your degree."

"That is impossible; there must be someone there who can take the post."

"I am afraid not, Severus, unless we call someone foreign, and you know I do not like hiring non-British professors. I think it is time that you take an apprentice; that way you would be able to prepare your own replacement."

"There is no one worth the effort." But without thinking about it consciously, his mind formed Hermione's image in his head. He discarded it immediately; the girl hated him, and there was no way she would accept. Besides, he was sure that she'd join Potter and Weasley in the Auror program.

"Severus, I already have the N.E.W.T.s results here, and I think I should tell you that someone achieved an 'O' in Potions."

No way. He had prepared this exam to be complicated in extreme; only someone beyond Hogwarts education would achieve the higher mark. He knew that when a student got it he would be in front of the next best Potions master in England, an heir of sorts. "That is impossible... never... someone..."

"Well, just believe in the impossible," Dumbledore said that whilst passing him a parchment with a list of N.E.W.T.s scores on it. All the grades were 'O's,' simply perfection. He knew whose grades these were, and when he saw the name at the top of the parchment, he smiled. 'Hermione Jane Granger.'

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Hermione was beside herself; waiting for her N.E.W.T.s results was even worse than waiting for her O.W.L.s, and that time she had been pretty desperate. And, just like the last time she waited, she was sure she had done something wrong, something incredibly wrong, in all her exams. Some things just never change...

'I'm sure I stirred that potion in the incorrect stage; it had to be a perfect golden colour, and it had a yellow shade at the end. She sighed and plopped in the couch of her living room, still whirling around the same idea in her mind since she left Hogwarts. 'There goes my chance of becoming a Potions mistress; I needed the perfect mark to do it, to try to convince him to accept me as his apprentice. There's no way Snape would agree to it if I don't achieve the 'O.' I'll have to start looking to see if there's a Potions master at Beauxbatons or Durmstrang willing to take an apprentice.'

At that precise moment, she heard noises at her window and saw a barn owl pecking at the pane. Her eyes widened, and she stood there, frozen, gaping at the bird in the window. After a minute that seemed to last an eternity, she walked to let the owl in and took the envelope it offered to her.

She was trembling when she opened it; she wanted to know but felt scared about what she'd see on the parchment. Grabbing all her courage, she looked at the results just below the grading scale and her name. Seven 'O's,' seven perfect grades in all her subjects including Potions.

"Oh my God, oh my God..."

She had to sit on the couch suddenly, as her knees wouldn't support her any longer, and looked at the parchment again to be sure that she had read it correctly. She had indeed done it: she had gotten perfect grades.

She screamed, and a single tear of relief escaped her eyes.'I want to see Snape try to deny me an apprenticeship after he looks at this...'

Life couldn't be better...

A/N: This story is a gift for Melanie, and its intention is to be a light and sweet story, simply fluffy. It might not be something very different from what you have seen, but it's something special and I'm really pleased with it. I hope you like it

I also want to thank Magic (Barb) who helped me with the first version of this chapter, and thanks to LariLee, Vaughn, NotSoSaintly, and Southern_Witch_69 for helping me by betaing this story. Thank you.

Step Two. Become his apprentice

Chapter 2 of 5

Making Severus happy is simpler than anyone expects. Hermione achieves it in ten steps, but no one can say they were easy.

How to Make Snape Happy in Ten Steps

Step Two. Become his apprentice

"Miss Granger, it is wonderful to see you again."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall. It's good to see you, too." The older witch hugged Hermione. She had always been proud of this brilliant, centred, brave girl. "So, this is how Hogwarts looks during vacations?"

"Yes, a little sad, don't you think?"

It was indeed sad; seeing the castle, usually so full of life, now in complete silence was shocking. It seemed as if it was in a deep sleep.

"So, what brings you here, Miss Granger?" Minerva McGonagall brought her out of her reverie.

"I have a meeting with Professor Dumbledore. I have a proposal I want to discuss with him." Better to start with Dumbledore than with Snape. He would close his door on my nose before listening to me.

"I imagine you want to talk with him as soon as possible. Let me escort you to his office. That way we can talk about how you are spending your summer and your plans for the future."

Hermione nodded and followed her former Head of House. None of them saw the dark figure watching them from an adjacent corridor.

What is she doing here? Would it be the chance I have been looking for? Severus had tried to figure out how he would talk and convince the girl into accepting an apprenticeship with him. He wouldn't find a chance better than this one, and certainly, he would take advantage of it.

"Hermione, it is such a pleasure. Please sit down. Would you like a lemon drop?"

She smiled whilst sitting in the offered chair. Some things just never change. "No, sir, thank you."

"What brings you here so soon after graduation? One would think that you would be off enjoying yourself. Are you enjoying your summer?"

"I'm having a lovely summer. I'm spending more time with my parents now that it's safer to do so. They love travelling, so maybe we'll go to Greece soon."

"That sounds like a good plan, my dear. I am quite pleased that you have the chance to do so." He eyed her, smiling lightly. "I can give you some advice about some Wizarding places you can visit there." He eyed her expectantly, apparently wondering if she'd soon tell him what the meeting was all about.

"I only know of a couple of places in Greece, so any recommendations would be great." She swallowed thickly, gathering her courage. "Sir, I asked you for this meeting because I want to discuss something with you."

Dumbledore smiled in encouragement. He felt that he knew what she wanted to discuss, and if that was the case, he felt particularly pleased about it. "Yes, I recall you mentioned a proposal when you owled me asking for this meeting." When she didn't speak, he prompted her by asking, "What would you like to propose?"

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves before she started. "Professor, I'm sure that you're aware of the marks I got on my N.E.W.T.s."

"Indeed, I am. Quite impressive. Hogwarts has not seen marks like those in decades." He smiled kindly.

"Thanks, sir. I know that I can pursue any career I choose; in fact, I have already received some offers. But there's only one thing I want to do with my future, and that's what I want to discuss with you."

"I see." He leant forward slightly and peered at her over his half-moon glasses. "Tell me what I can do for you then."

"I want to take an apprenticeship with one of the professors here at Hogwarts..." She took another deep breath to steady herself. "I want to be Professor Snape's apprentice."

Dumbledore smiled triumphantly and leant back. If he had plotted this, it couldn't have turned out better. The fact that she had come to him made all the difference. "I do believe that would be an excellent beginning for your career choice, Hermione. However, I am afraid you should be making this offer to Professor Snape, not to me."

She wrung her hands nervously. She hadn't thought he'd say that. "I thought that if I talked with you first, then you could help me to convince Professor Snape."

"I could force him or coerce him to take on an apprentice, but I think, in this instance, I'll let Severus make his own decision without any meddling on my part. He's been working hard for many years, and I've imposed on him greatly in the past." He popped a candy into his mouth, studying her for a moment. "Why don't you go down and have a word with him about this?"

Hermione sighed, knowing he was right, feeling ridiculous for thinking he'd do the work for her. She had to face Snape. That's all there was to iHonestly, girl, you want to be his apprentice, but you can't even face him to ask for it.

"I'll do that, sir. I'm sorry for... taking up your time for nothing."

"Not at all, my dear. It would be nice to have you back with us." He held the candy dish out to her in offering. She shook her head. "Why don't you get the feel of the castle without the students here? You could join us for lunch, feel everyone out. Some professors stay here for the summer, and we share lunch everyday." His eyes twinkled in amusement. "That includes Severus."

"Thanks, I'd love to."

"Excellent. Please join us in the Great Hall around one o'clock. In the meanwhile, feel free to make use of the library or the grounds."

"That's a good idea, sir. I'll see you later."

She left his office, and Dumbledore couldn't stop himself from chuckling, knowing what was next...or better to say whom would be visiting him next.

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Severus raced through the stairs that led to Dumbledore's office. She must be still there. It had only been a few minutes. They couldn't have finished yet.

"Severus, my boy. Please sit down. Would you like a lemon drop?"

"Do not bother me with your candies now. Where is she? I saw her coming to your office."

"Who are you talking about?"

"For Merlin's sake, you know perfectly well whom I'm talking about. Now, tell me where she is."

"Are you referring to Miss Granger perhaps?"

Severus was starting to feel exasperated. "Of course I am talking about her."

"Oh, she has already left."

"What?"

"She left a couple of minutes ago."

"Bloody hell." Severus was about to leave the office when Dumbledore spoke again.

"But she accepted my invitation for lunch."

That statement stopped the Potions master. He turned to face his mentor who was making an effort to stop himself from smiling and sat in front of his desk. "May I ask what did you discuss?"

"It seems that she is finding 'difficulties' deciding about her future and how to obtain what she wants. Fortunately, I think I had advised her correctly."

"Did you talk with her about the apprenticeship I want to offer her?"

"No, I have not. That is something you have to do yourself."

Severus groaned and stood. "Fine. I will see you at lunch, Headmaster."

Dumbledore saw him leave, fuming, and when the door closed, he had to laugh. It was impossible not to. If he was right and if his years of experience were as good as everyone said, he suspected that this pair would be more than master and apprentice.

Without knowing it, two different persons were thinking the same thing at the same time but from different perspectives How am I going to do this? The apprenticeship request will never be accepted. Why did Dumbledore refuse to help me with this? I'm sure he would have achieved it easily and that way I wouldn't have to be here pacing whilst trying to find a way to do this...

That coincidence was curious enough before adding the fact that those previously mentioned persons met in the entrance of the Great Hall coming from opposite ways.

"Professor Snape. I... I... How are you, sir?"

"Miss Granger, articulate as usual..." Should not have said that. I am trying to convince her to stay, not to push her away! am fine, Miss Granger, thank you for asking. I... hope you are... enjoying your summer?" Much better.

"Oh, yes, sir, thank you. I guess you're enjoying yours. I mean, not having students here to bother you."

"Indeed, Miss Granger. I have always preferred the solitude and the silence that Hogwarts offers during breaks."

"I see. Sir, I was wondering if you..."

"There you are, children," Dumbledore said from behind them, interrupting Hermione. "I am so glad to see you both again for lunch. But do not stand there gaping. Come with me so we can join the rest of the staff."

Both of them cursed the old man in their minds, but they followed him silently, oblivious of the smile on the headmaster's face. He was really enjoying himself.

Lunch was a pleasant affair for everyone, but the same thought was still bothering Hermione and Severus How am I going to do this? When lunchtime was over, the rest of the staff started excusing themselves from the table until only Hermione, Severus, and Dumbledore remained. One could have cut the tension with a knife, and only one of the trio seemed to be having a good time.

"All right, children, I must leave you now, as I have some matters to attend, and I am sure you will find something interesting to discuss with each other." The headmaster left the Great Hall, leaving the pair to their own devices.

Silent minutes, which seemed like an eternity, passed between them before they dared to speak to each other. "I have a proposal for you..." they both said at the same time, looking at each other with wide eyes.

"Ladies first, Miss Granger. What do you have in mind?" Of course he would let her speak first to know about her intentions before saying something himself.

"Well, I was thinking that, considering my recent marks and the interest I have always had in Potions, maybe you would consider accepting an apprentice, and if so, maybe you would consider me. I mean, I really want to become a Potions mistress, and an apprenticeship with you would certainly be my best option. I have already researched about my chances at Beauxbatons or at Durmstrang, and I'm convinced that staying here is my best option. Please consider it, I mean, look at my grades during the last seven years. I did always do fine in your class and..." She paused for a moment. "Please think about it, and don't say 'no' too hastily, sir." Definitely oratory is not for me. Where did all that come from?

He suppressed his urge to smirk at the girl in front of him. Everything was going perfectly, and he didn't have to do a single thing. Definitely, this was starting in a perfect way, but does the girl stop talking at some point? He was feeling dizzy with her little speech.

"I would have to think about it, Miss Granger. I have never had an apprentice, and accepting one is a very important decision that cannot be done lightly A little teasing had never hurt anyone.

"I guess so. When can I have your answer, sir?"

"I will send you an owl when my decision is made. Maybe next week if I do not have more important issues to attend."

"That's fine, sir. I'll be waiting for your owl. I must go now. Please give my regards to the rest of the staff."

"I will do that, Miss Granger."

She left the Great Hall, and Severus smiled openly, seeing how things had accommodated themselves to suit his purposes. This was going to work out perfectly.

Hermione Apparated to the backyard of her house. The meeting had gone fine; at least Snape didn't say 'no' right away. He would think about it and was considering her proposal. She entered her house while thinking about a nice bubble bath and a good book before dinner. When she was climbing the steps to her bedroom, her mother called her name from the living room.

"Hermione dear, is that you?"

"Yes, Mum," she answered from the middle of the stairs.

"Come down here. There's someone who wants to see you."

Hermione descended and entered the living room. She stood there frozen looking at a different, but still familiar, face before reacting.

"Viktor!" she walked to hug her friend, pleased to see him there after so many years.

Severus let three weeks pass before answering her. He hadn't wanted to seem desperate. However, a month had passed since then, and she hadn't answered his message. Maybe he shouldn't have waited so long. Maybe she regretted making her proposal. Maybe the Potions master of a far away country had made her a proposal. I should not have waited so long. She has never liked me, and I am sure she thinks I do not like her either, not that I do like her, mind you, but she is a brilliant girl. The only one who can be my successor. What am I going to do now?

A knock at the door brought him out of his reverie, and the headmaster entered to his office. "Severus, how are you? You look concerned about something. Can I do something to help you?"

The old man sat in front of Severus' desk and waited for an answer. Reluctantly, Severus obliged.

"I have not received an answer from Miss Granger. I think she is no longer interested in the apprenticeship."

"Don't be so sure about it. Why don't you talk to her? That is the only way of knowing for certain."

Severus knew the man was right. He had to talk to her to know. That meant going to her home and exposing himself to a rejection. Was it worth it?

Hermione entered her house, laughing about something Viktor had just told her. They were getting along fine, and the time they'd spent together travelling around Europe...Viktor's graduation present...was priceless.

Once again, her mother called her from the living room and asked her to come and greet a visitor. She entered the living room and gasped when she saw hinOh my God, Severus Snape is in my house waiting for me. The apprenticeship! I didn't take the time to look after his answer. Bloody hell! He's going to refuse now.

"Miss Granger, I see you are fine." What the hell is that brat doing here with her? And why is he holding her hand?

"I'm fine, sir, thanks for asking. I'm sure you already know Viktor Krum."

Both men shook hands politely and muttered a good day to each other before sitting on the offered couch.

"Miss Granger, I did not receive an answer regarding your apprenticeship, so I assume you are no longer interested in it."

"Oh, no, sir, I'm still interested. It's just that I was abroad, and I didn't receive news from you for three weeks. I thought that you had discarded the idea."

"Not at all, Miss Granger. I had intended to accept."

"You're no longer interested, sir?"

"I must admit that your lack of interest diminishes my willingness, but considering that in almost twenty years you are the only one who had achieved the 'O' on the N.E.W.T. exam, I can make an exception and consider it again."

"Are you trying to tell me I got the apprenticeship?"

"I think that that is exactly what I mean, Miss Granger."

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed excitedly, and Viktor hugged her while smiling. She'd wanted the apprenticeship so much.

Severus smirked, knowing that he hadn't lost his apprentice, but he wished that the boy didn't hug her so tightly...

Lorraine's Notes: I had always wanted to have this Dumbledore in my stories, the Dumbledore with the twinkle in his eyes and that thinks that he knows better than the rest, even about their own feelings. He seems to think that Hermione and Severus have the potential to be something more... Maybe, but sometimes Dumbledore is mistaken, so we have to wait to see.

I also have wanted to include Viktor for a long time. I like him, and I'm sure we will see more about him in canon. Seems like he is not missing his chance this time.

I want to thank Magic who helped me with the first version of this chapter. I also want to thank my extraordinary beta, Southern Witch. I'm so lucky for having her help. Also, thanks go to Amethyst for her helpful advice.

Southern's Notes: I was worried for a minute there! I thought he'd missed his chance! Whew!

As per Rowling, no teachers truly stay at Hogwarts over the summer holidays, only Filch and Hagrid. I simply needed them to be there for my story and am hoping you don't mind.

Step Three. Show Him the Meaning of Dating

Chapter 3 of 5

Making Severus happy is simpler than anyone expects. Hermione achieves it in ten steps, but no one can say they were easy.

Step Three. Show Him the Meaning of Dating

Disclaimer: All characters and concepts of Harry Potter's universe belong to J.K. Rowling; I just borrowed them for a little while.

"Viktor, why don't you just try to understand? This process is taking more time than I expected; it's not as if I'm doing it on purpose or something like that."

"I know, Hermione, but you are not trying hard enough. I vanted you to meet my parents this veekend. Ve haff planned it, and now, you just can't go."

"I know, and I'm sorry, really. Please try to understand; this is my future. The rest of my life."

"And vot I am, Hermione?"

Well done, Hermione... She sighed to steady herself before answering him. "Viktor, this is not the time to discuss that. You know what I think about a change in our relationship at this moment."

"I know, but it does not change vot I feel and vot I vant."

"I'm too young and..."

"Do not vorry," he interrupted her, knowing that it was better to avoid that conversation right now. He knew that it would only cause her to get angry with him. She had avoided that conversation several times. Bringing it up at that moment...during a Floo conversation...wasn't a good idea. Besides, it would make her feel pressured. "I vill tell my parents you haff an emergency, and you could not depart England this veekend."

"Thank you."

"It is all right. I must go now. Ve vill talk later."

"I'll Floo next week so that we can arrange to have lunch together."

"I vill be vaiting. Luff you."

"Me too, Viktor."

With that farewell, his face disappeared from the fire. Hermione felt terrible after their discussion, but she had to cancel the dinner with his parents in Bulgaria. She was so close to finishing this stage of her experimental potion, and it was definitely more important to her than attending a dinner, which could be organised perfectly another day.

But this potion was a major breakthrough. It was her first attempt to create a brew of her own design. She had worked countless hours to find the perfect blending of ingredients, the perfect timing for adding each of them, the exact amount of time she had to stir, and the precise movements that had to be done. Due to the complexity, she had to dedicate all of her time to it. Why couldn't he see that? She was annoyed and resented the fact that he wasn't really interested in her work. He thought that she had to focus on her personal life, that her apprenticeship was just a secondary aspect. For Hermione, this apprenticeship was a part of her life that was as important as her romantic life. She normally refused to set levels of priorities between it and Viktor, but this time, the apprenticeship had the top hand.

Besides, her relationship with Viktor was becoming tiresome for her. The last few times they had met, there had been nothing special to do or talk about. They only met for lunch or at times spent a weekend together...each immersed in their own activities. In all honesty, their conversations were only about their daily activities, and neither was truly interested in what the other had to say. She had never been a Quidditch fan, and having to hear her boyfriend talking about it as the only available topic wasn't the ideal way to spend her time. Of course, he wasn't that thick; he was a very talented wizard, and at the first stages of their relationship, they'd had wonderful academic conversations. However, he didn't like Potions, and after a while, they ran out of conversations. Hermione stayed updated on every subject they'd discussed, and she would have loved if he had done the same because that way they could have continued their great conversations. He wasn't able to do so because Quidditch took all his time during the weekdays, and during the weekends, he had to divide his time between Hermione, his family, and his friends.

He had always been a loving and caring boyfriend with her, but recently, he would get upset when he noticed that she wasn't paying attention to him or when she didn't respond to his caresses as she had when they first started dating. At the beginning, they couldn't keep their hands off each other and didn't miss the chance to be together, but now, the sparkle was fading. She just didn't feel the same for him. She was beginning to feel like one of those old married couples. Their time together seemed as if it was only a mere routine while all the emotions they used to share were gone.

He was trying; she knew that, and it made her feel worse. He suggested the dinner as a way to make their relationship a more formal commitment. He truly believed that it would fix things between them if he could bring their relationship to another level. But she was too young to get committed. She still had to finish her apprenticeship and pursue her professional life. It wasn't as if he was asking her to get married, but he was asking her to become a serious couple, which would eventually lead to that step.

Hermione stood, trying to distract herself from that train of thought; she really didn't need to start analysing her feelings right now or any time soon. She skilfully ignored her problems with Viktor, as she had learned to do, and moved to the table to continue the stirring of her potion before adding the next ingredient. She was focusing on the task when suddenly she heard a low voice behind her, nearly causing her to jump.

"Miss Granger, why are you having those annoying personal chats in my laboratory? Next time, make sure you are in your own chambers, unless you want everybody knowing about your personal affairs."

"I'm sorry, sir. I needed to talk with Viktor, and since you weren't here, I thought that maybe I could use your Floo I've been his apprentice for almost two years, and he hasn't changed a bit, still the same git.

"No, Miss Granger, you cannot use my Floo. You are here to work, not to socialise." He didn't know why, but it annoyed him to hear her talking with Krum or about him. He kept telling himself that it was because it was causing her not to focus on her work.

"Sorry, sir." She didn't want to continue with this topic. It was obvious that Snape didn't like Viktor, but she was sensible enough to avoid the subject even when she thought that her relationship wasn't any of his business.

"Make sure it never happens again." Severus turned and left his laboratory. He had a class to teach, and he had only come to retrieve a book.

Hermione sighed. Since she'd come to work with him, she'd learned more about the person behind the sour Potions master's façade, but he still refused to be friendlier with her. Sure, he was polite and sometimes let her see the man he was, but these times were only a few brief glimpses. She was sure that if he would let her get closer to him, they could have something more than a master-apprentice relationship; he could see her as an equal, as a colleague. They both shared the same thirst of knowledge and kept themselves learning something new everyday. There was no way she could get bored with someone like him. He wasn't a pleasant man, but whilst getting to know him, she'd discovered that he was passionate from the way he talked about Potions or the Dark Arts, his favourite subjects. He also craved perfection or to achieve the impossible just like she did. He even had a sense of humour. Okay, maybe dry wit would better describe it, but it was there.

"If only Viktor were more like him." She was startled after hearing her own admission. Where did that come from? She was loath to admit it, but she would be so happy with someone like Snape... someone with so many appealing qualities. Most people didn't notice he had other qualities because he never allowed them to see another side of him. Apparently, he was one of a kind, and the only Severus Snape would never see her as anything more than the former Gryffindor know-it-all who had become his apprentice. Hermione sighed again more heavily. If only he could see beyond that...

"I don't understand it, Hermione. Why didn't you go to the dinner to meet his parents? If I were you, I would be more than excited. It means that he's quite serious about your relationship."

"I don't know, Ginny. At that moment, my project was more important for me. I know it was a horrible thing to do, but it seemed like the right thing to do."

"Answer me honestly. Do you love him?"

Do I love him? Really love him?"Why do you ask me that? Of course I love him. I mean... he's my boyfriend."

"You hesitated. Besides, the fact that he's your boyfriend doesn't mean you love him."

"I honestly think I love him...if what we have is love. We get along fine and don't interfere with each other's lives; he has his Quidditch, and I have my apprenticeship. We understand each other and have reached a comfortable closeness. I know he loves me, and I have learned to feel satisfied with that love and to love him back. When we are together, it's nice, and when he hugs me, I feel protected. I had always thought that love was different, that it was an overwhelming feeling that makes you want to scream and give your life for your partner. Something that makes you feel complete and not just complemented. Perhaps love is just this practical kind of relationship we have "

Ginny looked at her trying to understand at which point Hermione lost her idea of love. She was settling for contentment instead of looking for happiness. "Hermione, who are you trying to convince? Yourself or me? Love is indeed an overwhelming feeling, not just a nice arrangement of coexistence between two persons. I think that is all you have with Viktor. I suggest that you analyse your feelings, and if you don't feel completely sure, you must break up with him. It's not fair to either of you if you don't. If you really want to be practical, then try to ask yourself some questions about Viktor. Find out if you really picture yourself with him for the rest of your life, if you still feel the same emotions each time you see him, or if you feel that you can tell him everything and trust him with everything. Ask yourself if you feel more like yourself when you are with him, if you are comfortable around him. And most importantly, ask yourself if you truly love him. Answer honestly, and if all your answers are positive, stop torturing yourself and just be happy with Viktor."

"You're right, Ginny, I need to do that. Why am I always good at understanding other people's feelings whilst mine are all messed up?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's that when it comes to our own feelings we just can't see the full picture from an objective angle. Oh, it's almost seven o'clock. Sorry but I need to go, Hermione. Harry is coming soon, and I need to get ready. Remember, you owe me a lunch in Diagon Alley."

"I know. We'll talk later to settle a date. Ask Harry to owl or Floo me soon. I haven't heard from him for weeks."

"I'll tell him. Take care, Hermione."

"See you."

The red-haired girl disappeared from the Floo, and Hermione remained seated on the rug beside her chamber's hearth. It was so hard to get a chance to see her friends since being cloistered at Hogwarts; the Floo was her only means to keep in constant contact. Her head was aching. That happened every time she faced something she couldn't quite work out or that seemed beyond any logical thought. Why did Ginny have to make her question her feelings? She hated when someone else pointed at something she was trying to conveniently ignore.

Do I love him? I know that I feel comfortable with him and that we have reached a quite stable relationship, but I wonder if it isn't only because I'm used to him now and relish the feeling of security he gives me.

Hermione remembered perfectly how it all began two years ago. It'd started when he'd invited her to travel around Europe*l vant to show you the vorld*. He had always liked her and took his chance when she graduated. At the beginning, it had all been a novelty, and she'd felt happy. When he'd invited her to dinner to a fancy restaurant in London for her nineteenth birthday, it had been so easy to accept his desire to start a relationship with her. After several months, the emotion started fading, and she'd only been left with the routine of a nice relationship that didn't seem to have anything else to offer her. Only Viktor's feelings for her kept her there, trying to adjust to the situation. But the question remained: did she love him?

They had arranged to see each other for lunch at Hogsmeade. She'd arrived earlier and was waiting for him outside of the Three BroomsticksHow am I going to tell him? I don't want to hurt him, but I know that if I stay with him we both will be hurt worse. Hermione was brought out of her reverie when she felt two arms wind around her waist from behind. Turning, she saw Viktor, who kissed her in greeting. Hermione smiled at him, but her smile had a sad quality that worried him.

"Vot, Hermione? Are you not happy to see me again?"

"Of course I am. How have you been?"

"I haff been missing you terribly, luff."

Great, can he just make things harder for me? That's all I need now.

"I... we need to talk, Viktor. Can we go inside?"

That alarmed the young wizard. "All right, but I do not like your tone. Vot is going on?"

"Let's go inside."

They sat at a table in the farthest corner to avoid being disturbed. "Now tell me, Hermione. Vot is this about? You are making me feel vorried, and I do not like it. You know you can tell me anything."

"I know, Viktor. It's just that... I mean..." She bit her lip nervously trying to find the words, and when she found them, they came abruptly from her mouth. "Are you happy with this relationship? I mean really happy, not just content. Because they are different concepts, you know? When you feel content, it means that you're accepting a given situation, but being happy means more. It means that you feel completely, utterly overwhelmed and yet thoroughly satisfied. I know we feel comfortable with each other, but I have been thinking about it for a while. I have been remembering how it has been during these two years, and I don't know. It's so hard between Quidditch and my apprenticeship. We have so little time, and we have simply fallen into a routine, used to the demands of the other's life. But if you try to understand the subtle differences, maybe you will see..."

Viktor placed his hand over hers in an attempt to soothe her; she always tended to ramble like that when she was nervous about something. It worked because she stopped talking and looked at him with big brown eyes that were filled with sorrow.

"Hermione, vot are you trying to tell me? That you are not happy vith me? Is that it?"

"l... l..."

"Please be honest, as I haff alvays been honest vith you, and I vant you to do the same for me." He was quite serious with a wary look in his eyes; he definitely didn't like this situation

She sighed and looked down...not daring to face him. "I'm not, Viktor, not completely. I know that I love you, but I don't know if I'm in love with you. The kind of love that conquers all and that gets you lost. Can you understand it? Because I know that sometimes I can't myself." She looked up at him and immediately regretted it; his face was a myriad of emotions, a mixture of a deep sadness and anger. She knew that she was about to break his heart, but this was only the beginning.

"Vot are you talking about? Vare is that coming from? Did you wake up this morning haffing an epiphany? Because if it vos not like that, I just cannot get it, Hermione. You are going to tell me the truth. I vant to know right now vot is happening."

"Nothing is happening, Viktor. This is something I have been feeling for a while, but in the last few days, I have just given it more thought. I was finally able to put a finger on what was making me feel that way. I have never been dishonest with you about my feelings or anything else."

"Can you svear it?"

"Are you questioning my honesty, Viktor? I can't believe you can even suggest it. I am trying to explain how I feel!"

"I am sorry. I should not haff thought vrongly of you, but if you think about it, vot else can I think? Ve vere fine. Ve vere happy together, and ve haff plans for the future. You know my intentions. I vant to be vith you as long as it is possible. You are everything I effer vanted, and I vant us to be together to form a family in the future. I am villing to try and make it vork. Do you not feel the same? Do you not vant it to vork?"

"It's not a matter of wanting to make it work; it just doesn't work, Viktor. The point is that it doesn't feel right anymore."

"You realise what you are saying, Hermione? You are trying to end our relationship. If you decide to finish this now, there von't be a coming back. Think about vot you vant." He was trying to keep his voice still, but it wasn't working. His eyes were suspiciously bright, and his breathing was heavy.

"I'm sure about this, Viktor. I can't stay in this relationship." She was trying to keep herself controlled; crying wasn't going to help her with this situation.

"I do not accept this, Hermione. You cannot just come here and say it is over just because you haff realised you do not luff me anymore. Something must haff happened that you are not telling me. I do not deny that the last couple of months vere not the better ones in our relationship, but you are making a hasty decision. Ve can and vill make this vork." He grabbed her arm, pulling her close to him in a desperate attempt to keep her with him.

"Viktor, let me go! You are hurting me! You've never been like this! We can talk about this, but you have to let me go." She was getting scared. He had never been violent or had hurt her in any way, but he had a haunted look that she had never seen before.

He loosened his grip on her arm when he saw her fearful expression. He was desperate, having to hear and see the woman he had always wanted attempting to walk away from him. But he would never dare hurt her or make her do something she didn't want to do. He also knew Hermione. She wasn't someone who made a decision without thinking about every single factor and every single outcome. If she'd decided to talk with him about this, it was because she was sure about it, and nothing would change her mind.

"Vy, Hermione? Vy now ven I vanted to take the next step in our relationship." He was speaking more calmly, his anger lessening, only to be replaced by sorrow.

"I didn't plan this, Viktor. When realisation hit me, I knew that I had to finish before we could get hurt further."

"More hurt? Do you think I could feel vorse than this?"

"No, Viktor, I mean that ... "

"Do not try to explain something that does no haff an explanation. Just answer something for me: Did you effer luff me?"

"I did, Viktor. I still love you, but it's just not in the way you want."

He came to sit beside her and hugged her tightly, knowing that it was likely the last time. He turned her face to him and looked into her tearful eyes. He needed to know, although this conversation was hurting both of them, so he asked her, "Then vy, Hermione? Vy did you stay in this relationship vith me for so long?"

This was harder than she'd ever thought it would be; she was now crying despite how she had promised herself that she wouldn't. The man beside her was on the verge of tears. She had never seen him cry, and knowing that such a strong man was this vulnerable because of her was making her heart ache with sadness and guilt. What am I doing? Why does doing the right thing hurt so much?

She bent her head down again, a tear falling over her hands crossed in her lap. "You know that I did love you, and we were getting along so well. When we first started dating, it was wonderful, and we were doing fine. But at some point on the path, we got lost from each other and grew separately as persons, just not as a couple. When that started, I thought that it was part of settling down, but now, I know it wasn't that."

She turned to look at him and saw the couple of tears that had spilled from his eyes. She knew his heart was broken. "It is done," he said as if he had just realised it as an absolute truth. "Hermione, I vant you to be happy more than anything in my life, and if I haff to let you go so you can be happy, I vill do it."

"Viktor, I'm sorry. I..."

"Don't say a vord. Please spare me that pain. You deserff somevun who can make you luff him the way you vant, and clearly, I am not that man." He released her from his embrace and retreated from her slightly. "I haff to go now. I cannot stay any longer. Do you mind if ve cancel this lunch? I do not know if I vill be able to see you any day soon, but I vill let you know." Seeing his pain was one of the worst things she had ever had to endure, but she could also see in his eyes that he did love her and that he would do anything for her, even let her go.

He stood and kissed her lightly on the lips before leaving. He whispered into her ear, his tears now running onto her cheek, "Goodbye, my luff. Know that I vill alvays luff you and that all I had ever vanted is to see you happy." With that last farewell, he left her there immobile and oblivious to the world around her. Time passed, but Hermione didn't feel it. She was in shock and felt as if it had only been a surreal dream. When it started to darken, she reacted and stood to leave the place, feeling emotionally drained and physically exhausted. She didn't notice that someone was following her closely.

It was the last week of the summer break, and being a Saturday, Severus decided to get out from the castle for a change. He had to get out so he could think clearly about strange thoughts that had been haunting him, all related to his apprentice.

Since the beginning, they had worked fine together, and soon after, the tension between them had lessened. Without noticing, they'd grown more comfortable each day, even though he had not allowed himself to let her come close. His reasons were partly because he didn't want to cross the boundaries of the apprenticeship, letting her become familiar with him, and partly because he didn't know how to let someone close. So he decided to remain distant since it was the more travelled way for him, and it would save future problems.

Despite his decision, the sense of comfort developed naturally between them, letting them spend large amounts of time together without bothering each other or feeling awkward with their silence. Sometimes he discovered himself looking at her face while scrunched in concentration as she studied a particular book with interest. When he'd realise that he'd been staring, he'd look somewhere else quickly. Time spent with her was pleasant, and their working sessions were quite stimulating, especially when they started debating ideas, new theories, or results of their experiments. She even managed to deal with his bad moods and bitterness graciously, and she knew exactly what to do to avoid them and just let him be.

After two years, they had achieved a comfortable working understanding. She wasn't the annoying Gryffindor that she used to be. She certainly was the only one worthy of being his successor, and he was sure that she would be a brilliant Potions mistress very soon. She had everything needed to do so. He had to admit that her knowledge had grown as she matured, giving her an air of confidence. Part of him even admitted to himself that her beauty was growing with her. Of course he would never acknowledge that out loud. No one would ever know how much he now enjoyed the time they spent working together and how much he liked looking at her.

He entered the Three Broomsticks and immediately regretted his decision. Sitting near the back corner of the place, he saw a couple that made something twist inside of him. The only thing he couldn't abide about Hermione was her relationship with Viktor Krum. He was about to leave when he saw the young wizard grabbing her arm in a tight grip and pulling her to him. Just when he was about to go hex him, the boy lessened his grip. Severus realised they were in the middle of something important. He stood there, considering leaving again when he saw her face...the tears forming in her eyes and the sadness she reflected. He never cared about others' feelings; they were not of his business, but something about Hermione made him feel her distress deep within him and prompted a foreign feeling of protectiveness. He wanted to cross the room, take her into his arms, and keep the pain at bay. He stayed to watch her closely and to be assured that she was fine.

The exchange between the couple continued for some minutes, and Severus grew more concerned about her with each passing moment. He felt a surge of strong emotions when Krum hugged her close, and the emotions intensified when the boy stood and kissed her, whispering something into her ear. Severus' gaze also followed him as he exited the place and did everything possible to conceal any pain from his face. Turning to look at Hermione, all his anger subsided when he saw the haunted look on her face. A part of him wanted to go to her and comfort her, taking away her pain, but the stronger part of him didn't allow him to do something like that...mostly because it would mean baring himself in front of her. In addition, he simply didn't know how to comfort a woman. He stayed there waiting for her to do something. She wasn't moving, and he was growing more concerned about her. After a few hours, she seemed to come out of it and stood to leave. She was in bad shape, so he decided to follow her

She was walking distractedly on shaky legs; her mind had shut down to block the pain of it all and refused to function correctly. When she felt strong arms holding her, preventing her from almost falling, the realisation of what had just happened hit her full force, and she started crying.

"Miss Granger, are you all right?"

She couldn't stop the onslaught of emotions; she was crying and shaking in his arms. Severus didn't know what to do. He had never had to devise a course of action in a situation like that, but deep in his heart, he knew that he wanted to comfort her, to make her feel better. He cared about her, and he wanted her to know that he would be there if she needed him.

"Miss Granger, listen to me. I am going to Apparate us to the gate at Hogwarts; you are too weak to walk there by yourself. Do you understand me?"

She didn't answer but nodded slightly. With that sign of agreement, he Disapparated them both and carried her to her chambers, knowing that she could not reach them herself. He summoned food from the kitchen and offered it to her.

"Eat something. You are in this state because you are experiencing very strong feelings on an empty stomach, and that only aggravates your shocked state."

She took the offered food and ate in silence whilst he left to retrieve a phial of Sleeping Draught from his chambers. When he returned, she had finished her food and had stopped crying. However, she still had a haunted look upon her face.

"Drink this; it will help you to sleep peacefully. You will feel better tomorrow with a clearer mind."

She drank the potion and curled in her bed, closing her eyes. He stayed there until he thought she was sleeping and covered her with a duvet. He extinguished most of the candles, and when he was reaching for the doorknob, he heard her whisper, "Thank you. I don't know what I would do without you."

That evening seemed to change the tone of their entire relationship. During the following months, they developed a comfortable relationship and a familiarity that they hadn't had in the two years prior. They even started calling each other by their given names. Slowly, they started talking about themselves, each day becoming closer and moving onto more personal topics. They also adopted the custom of having dinner together outside Hogwarts each Friday evening.

"Hermione, I am sorry, but we cannot go to dinner this Friday. I have to attend other business that will keep me out for the weekend. I am sorry, but I will compensate you next week."

"Oh, I have gotten so used to our regular dates that I will certainly miss it."

"Dates? What dates? What are you talking about? We are just having dinner out so we can talk more freely."

"Severus, we go to have dinner every Friday away from Hogwarts to talk about our personal lives and to get to know each other in a different and more comfortable environment, and it seems to me that we are moving towards something more. That is called dating..."

Lorraine's Notes: It was hard to get rid of Viktor, I'm sure he loves her, and I like him very much. Knowing that there's no way we can have Hermione and Severus together in canon, I secretly wish Hermione would choose him above Ron.

Now, Severus has to face a completely foreign concept for him. It will be interesting to see how he'll react to Hermione's affirmation about dating.

I want to thank Magic who helped me with the first version of this chapter. Also thanks to Ginny W for her advice about the break up scene. And finally, but more importantly, thanks to the best beta any writer could have, Southern Witch.

Southern's Notes: I felt sorry for Viktor, but I am quite happy that Snape was there for her.

Step Four. Love Him in Every Single Way

Chapter 4 of 5

Making Severus happy is simpler than anyone expects. Hermione achieves it in ten steps, but no one can say they were easy.

Step Four. Love Him in Every Single Way

Disclaimer: All characters and concepts of Harry Potter's universe belong to J.K. Rowling; I just borrowed them for a little while.

This chapter was slightly inspired by three songs I love: "Salvation" by Roxette, "She's Like the Wind" from Dirty Dancing's soundtrack, and "I Don't Know How to Love Him" from Andrew Lloyd Weber's Jesus Christ Superstar. Anything you recognise from those songs, or looks familiar, belongs to the authors.

"Severus, stop it. I know exactly how to stir the brew and when to add the ingredient. This potion ismy creation, remember?"

"I am perfectly aware of it, Hermione, but your creation is an extremely dangerous potion; if something is done incorrectly, the result will be disastrous."

"I'm not Neville. I think I can do this potion without invoking a catastrophe." She turned to add the last ingredient, three drops of unicorn's blood. Suddenly, the potion started bubbling violently and seemed ready to explode. Severus pulled her away from the cauldron and turned to protect her with his own body immediately, fearing an explosion, but it never came. The potion stopped bubbling, and it took on a pearlescent colour with a light shade of blue.

Both turned back to look into the cauldron. "Severus, look! It has the expected colour and consistency. We did it."

"No, you did it. This is your creation, your achievement. I'm proud of you."

She turned to face him; his compliment was so spontaneous and different from all he had ever given her. It was a rare treat for him to offer something like that, and when she looked into his eyes, she saw a spark that made her shiver. She loved his eyes; completely black, they reflected her image perfectly. They reflected her sparkling eyes as she looked at him with a feeling that she experienced only with him.

They looked at each other intently, not daring to look away. He reached out with his hand to brush away a lock of hair on her face, caressing her cheek gently in the process. Hermione closed her eyes, and he leaned down, lightly touching her lips with his. It was only a light touch, and he realized that he was tentatively tracing her lips with tenderness he had never used in his life. Nor had he experienced such softness. Her lips were soft and sweet, exactly the way he had imagined in countless nights of dreaming. Severus got lost in the moment. This simply felt right to him, and he blissfully avoided any logical thought, choosing to just focus on the woman he was kissing. When Hermione parted her lips slightly and started teasing his mouth open with her tongue, it was as if he suddenly realised who they were and what they were doing. He stepped back, retreating from her, afraid of the emotions he was feeling.

"Don't," Hermione said, stepping forward in an attempt to kiss him again. He placed his hands on her upper arms to stop her.

"Hermione, stop. We cannot do this. I apologise for taking advantage of the moment and doing something so inappropriate. This will never happen again."

"Why? It seems to be that we both wanted that kiss, so I fail to see the inappropriateness of it. Besides," she said, lowering her voice in an attempt to be seductive, "I have never enjoyed a kiss like that before."

His eyes widened at her admission, but he rapidly hid behind his cold façade. "It is inappropriate in many ways. Let's start by pointing out that you are my apprentice, and you owe me respect by being in that position. Secondly, you are my former student, and we cannot cross that line no matter what. Besides, I am almost twenty years older than you. And finally, we do not share a relationship that merits this kind of behaviour."

That remark hurt her deeply. It reminded her that they were nothing more than master and apprentice despite the fact that they had came closer to each other. And they were nothing more because he wouldn't let her close to him, always withdrawing when she tried to take a step forward. After the night she had told him that those dinners they'd been having were dates, he had avoided going out with her for three weeks until she confronted him about it. He'd reluctantly agreed to start their weekly dinners again, unwilling to show her how much he cared about their meaning.

"I see." She turned away to check her potion. It was indeed perfect, but all the excitement about it had faded away after what he'd told her. She proceeded to bottle the pearlescent liquid while avoiding his gaze.

He knew he'd been harsh, but he couldn't help it. He just had to back away when he felt that his emotions were taking control of him. "Hermione, you have to understand that."

"I understand perfectly. You have been very clear about it. If you don't mind, I'll leave now that the potion is finished. I'm exhausted, and I want to rest." Without waiting for his answer, she turned to leave the dungeons before her emotions ran too high. She was feeling frustrated and angry. He always retreated when she tried to get closer to him, both physically and emotionally. She couldn't comprehend why she always tried again and again despite his attitude. The only thing she'd hoped was that, at the end of the way, she would find something special, something precious, and something she had been looking for all the while.

Later that day, Severus was thinking about what had happened with Hermione. She was definitely angry with him after he turned her away again, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was aware of the fact that he had feelings for her, although he could not put a name on them, being that they were completely foreign. All he knew was that his feelings were intense. He knew that he enjoyed her company and wanted to be with her every free moment. He felt an overwhelming need to protect her from anything that could harm her and wanted to keep sadness away from her. In his opinion, she was the most beautiful witch alive, and he would give her the world if she asked for it with that beautiful smile. Above all that, he wanted so badly to see her happy. Were all these emotions love? He was uncertain, as he'd never felt the same feelings for anyone else. He had never been shown how to love someone else; he had no idea what it was like to feel such unconditional and overwhelming emotion. What did it matter anyway? Certainly, it was impossible to have anything develop with her.

I am just a fool to believe I have anything she needs. She is simply out of my reach. Who am I trying to fool anyway? She will never look at me in that way. That kiss was nothing; she was feeling elated because of her success with the potion, and she just went with the moment. Besides, she likely just misses having contact with someone else. Her relationship with Krum had been a long one, and she'd ended it several months ago. That had to be it. She just misses the feeling and took advantage of my weakness.

He was taken out of his reverie when he heard a knock at his door. He knew perfectly well who was on the other side. "Come in, Albus."

The older wizard entered into his chambers and joined him in the spare chair front of the fire. "How did you know it was me?"

"Come on, Albus! Who else could be here seeking my agreeable company?" he asked, the last words dripping with sarcasm.

"I don't know. Your apprentice perhaps?"

Severus snorted. "Certainly not."

"Why not? It seems to me that you are getting along fine. You are even calling yourselves by your first names, and I saw you smiling at her the other day."

"That means nothing. Besides, at some point, we were meant to call each other by our first names. We will be colleagues soon, and it would be odd to keep on calling her Miss Granger."

"Are you certain? One would think that you like her more than you dare admit. Maybe you have developed stronger feelings for each other."

"Stop right now. You don't know what you are talking about. You can't come here and start presuming to know better than others about their own feelings, especially about mine. She's just a girl that would have nothing to do with me, and she certainly hasn't developed stronger feelings for me."

"And you think that you know better than her?"

"Please, Albus, don't try to see what's not there. She always hated me when she was my student. I accept that we have achieved a better understanding of each other now that she is my apprentice, but it does not mean anything else. Have you looked at me? I am too old for her, and I am far from being an attractive man. She deserves better than me. Besides, only a small part of myself seems to have the ability to feel. I refuse to open that to her and risk losing it. Rejection would destroy it."

"So it is true; you have feelings for her."

"Enough. I will not have this conversation with you or anyone else. If I have feelings for her, it is a matter that only concerns me, and rest assured that fact will never be

known by anyone else."

"Don't you think she deserves to know how you feel? Maybe you would be surprised."

"She will never know. I will not let that happen. Now, if you would kindly leave, I have things to do."

Albus rose from his seat, looking at the younger wizard sadly. "Very well, Severus. I will leave you so you can resume your activities, but think about what we were discussing. Do not lose a chance to be happy by being so selfish and believing you know her feelings better than her or better than love."

"Good night, Albus."

"Good night, Severus."

Severus didn't move his gaze from the fire. He would not let the rambling of the old man affect him. Hermione would never know about his feelings, and it would save him from having to bear her rejection.

Ginny and Hermione hugged when they met outside of the Leaky Cauldron. They had arranged to meet there to talk about Ginny's upcoming wedding with Harry. The couple were planning to get married in October, and the red-haired witch was talking excitedly about the how the preparations were going. Hermione smiled at her, eyes tinged with sadness. When Ginny noticed her friend's melancholy mood, she regarded her thoughtfully, wondering if the cause of her state was what she thought.

"What's wrong, Hermione? You smile and nod to me, but your mind is miles away from here. You look sad. It's about Snape, right? Tell me what's going on."

Hermione sighed heavily, trying to find the words to explain what she felt. She didn't intend for Ginny to notice her sadness and spoil their conversation with remarks about her feelings. Of course, her friend knew about her feelings, as they had discussed them before. At the beginning, the idea had disturbed Ginny, as she didn't want to think about her former professor with her friend in that way, but she understood how Hermione felt.

"I can't do this anymore, Ginny. He keeps on moving one step back every time I take one forward. I have tried to show him how I feel, how much I want to be with him, but he remains unchanged. He has placed a line between us that I can't cross."

"Remember what I told you when you confessed your feelings for him?" Hermione nodded, and Ginny continued, saying, "I told you that I have never seen you like that before, not even in all the time you'd spent with Viktor. You have found what you were looking for, your true love. You can't just give up so easily."

"I'm not giving up. I wish it were that simple. This is not like a difficult task that I can take apart and put back together until I find the correct answer. I love him so much that my heart is breaking slowly because of his indifference. I can't keep on doing this to myself. I can't just stay there and watch how the love I have craved for so long slowly dies or starts to turn bitter. In the beginning, I thought that it was just that he didn't know how to love someone back, but now, I don't know. What if it is that he can't love ME back? I couldn't bear that. It makes my urge to fight for him waver. Can you understand that?"

Ginny sighed. Certainly it was hard to understand, and it didn't make sense at all until she thought on it rationally. But she knew Hermione. Her friend never ran away from a difficult situation or dropped a task just because it seemed to be impossible. No, stubborn as she was, she would rack her brain looking for an answer or a positive outcome until she found something. This time seemed different. Hermione seemed defeated. It was a matter of the heart, and stubbornness would only make it worse. Ginny could see that and see how trying to force her affections on him would only break Hermione's heart, as he would likely push her even further away.

"I see your point, Hermione. What will you do about it? You have to stay at Hogwarts to take the Potions post, and you'll have to face him everyday."

"I won't stay. I just can't stay if I mean nothing to him."

"I wish I had something to tell you that could make you feel better or to help you somehow, but it seems that you are definite about this matter. I won't press you about it. Just think about it again so you can be absolutely sure about your decision."

"I know. It's the hardest thing I'll ever have to do, but I think it's for the best. I don't know how I'll do this and get away without my heart being broken."

"You'll be fine, and I think that you're right. You can't keep on doing this to yourself."

"Thanks, Ginny. You're the only one that knows about this, and your support means a lot to me."

"Anytime, Hermione."

They hugged again, and Hermione couldn't stop a tear from spilling down her cheek, knowing that her decision was the appropriate one, though not an easy one.

After a couple of hours of hard work, they finally finished revising all the required documents that certified her as a qualified Potions mistress. It was officially over. Her apprenticeship was finally reaching its end.

"Well, Hermione, we only have to owl this to the Ministry so they can register you in their records."

"That's great." She was feeling terribly uncomfortable, knowing that it was the time to tell him about her decision. She had been avoiding that moment for the few days since she'd had a conversation with the Headmaster, and he'd reluctantly agreed. Where's your acclaimed Gryffindor courage? You have to do this. You know that no one else will tell him, and you promised to do it yourself.

"Severus, I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

He turned to watch her intently, trying to find a second meaning in her words What is she playing at?" I beg your pardon?"

She sighed heavily in an attempt to steady her heartbeat and muster the courage she had been looking for the whole afternoon. "The apprenticeship is over, and I have no reason to stay at Hogwarts."

"Do not be silly. You have to stay. The purpose of this apprenticeship was for you to take my place teaching Potions. You cannot just walk away."

"I'm sorry, but I really have to go."

"Typical! Once again I am witnessing the so-called Gryffindor courage. You have not even started with your teaching duties, and you are already running away from them."

"How dare you talk to me like that? You don't even know my reasons for leaving."

"Your reasons? What reasons could you possibly have to run away?" He was starting to get a little desperate; she seemed to be serious about that leaving nonsense.

"I can't stay here. Don't you see it? Are you so blind that you can't see why?" Hermione's voice was strong and determined; only someone who knew her well enough would have heard the hint of sadness threatening to seep in. She couldn't stay if he couldn't love her back. It would be torture.

She'd thought that there was something there; she had hoped for it desperately. But he was always on guard around her, never letting her truly know him as a lover should. She'd started falling in love with him a few months after breaking up with Viktor, and when he'd kissed her, she'd fully realised her feelings. After that, she believed that he could come to love her despite the fact that he'd continued to withdraw from her. She believed that he would eventually let her in and that they would discover that he too shared that feeling she craved. However, people rarely changed, and her desires were nothing but dreams.

"What are you talking about, Hermione? What am I supposed to see?" He was starting to feel uneasy. If he was right, he knew exactly what she was talking about, and he had to admit that it scared him.

Her eyes widened at his questions. He even had the nerve to ask it, the bastard. She had been pretty obvious about her feelings for him, trying to get closer to him, trying to treat him tenderly. Gods, she had even flirted with him a few times. Severus was an intelligent man; he should have noticed, and if he was asking her these questions, it was clear that he was feigning ignorance in an attempt to not hurt her feelings.

"It really doesn't matter at all. I have spoken with the Headmaster to let him know my thoughts about this, and he understands my reasons. He is considering hiring a foreign Potions master, so you don't have to worry about the Defence post. You'll get it anyway."

Severus was speechless. She had even spoken with Dumbledore before telling him about her decision to make sure that nothing could stop her from leaving Hogwarts, from leaving him. He would certainly hex the bloody man for accepting her plan.

He was sitting there, looking at her with his cold gaze and not saying a word. In her mind, that could only mean that it was over, that he had nothing to say or didn't object. Hermione took advantage of his silence to say her farewell. "I can never thank you enough for the opportunity you gave me and for everything you have taught me during all these years. I would have loved to teach here, but I just can't stay, not like this." She walked to the door before addressing him again, not daring to face him, knowing that if she looked into his eyes all her resolve would waver. "I still have packing to do, so I'm leaving now. I'm not sure if I'll see you tomorrow. That's why I wanted to say goodbye right now. Take care of yourself, Severus."

She had wanted to say more, wanted to tell him that she loved him like she had never loved anyone before, but her tears were threatening to spill. She didn't want to break down in front of him. When she reached the door, knowing that it was over, something happened. She barely heard it, but it wasn't her imagination. There was a barely audible whisper from the man she loved.

"Hermione, please, don't leave me. Stay."

Hermione turned to face him, no longer battling with the tears in her eyes and letting them run down her cheeks freely. She struggled to find her voice and asked him, hoarse with emotion, "Why?"

He didn't answer her. What could he tell her? That he loved her? He didn't even know if he did. He grimly watched her while trying to find the right words.

"Severus, give me a reason to stay."

Silence. He remained there paralysed, not knowing what to do. He wasn't prepared for this, never having to confess his feelings before.

"Damn it! Talk to me. Open yourself to me."

"I cannot. I don't know how to do it, how to cope with it." He rose from his chair behind the desk and walked around to stand in front of her, his emotions threatening to unleash. "Do you know how much it scares me to be unable to recognise myself? To know that my fate lies in your hands and that I am at your mercy? Do you know how overwhelming it is?" He turned to walk away from her, realising that he had lost all control and said too much.

She looked at him incredulously. She never expected that reaction from him, and it was too much. He might feel the same for her, and he was fighting it because he couldn't bear her rejection. She had to do something, and the best course of action was to be completely honest.

"I know how you feel." He turned to face her in disbelief. "I know it because I feel the same for you. It's supposed to be that way, overwhelming." She walked to him hesitantly. "Severus, you'll never know love unless you surrender to it."

"I cannot open myself to something I do not know."

"Just tell me; tell me how you feel."

He turned away from her again, trying to hide. She came to stand beside him and placed her hand carefully on his arm. He reluctantly turned to face her and barely suppressed a gasp. She looked so vulnerable and so open that he could see her feelings plainly on her face. Their eyes locked; her brown ones bright with emotion and unshed tears, his black eyes dark and full of passion. When she whispered with a choked voice, "Severus, please," that was his undoing. He embraced her, knowing it was right and that there was nowhere else he wanted to be or anyone else he wanted to be with.

"I cannot do that. I cannot open for you and let you see who I am. You will loathe me, loathe the man I was and the terrible things I have done in my past. I was one of the Dark Lord's favourites. He asked me to do so many things, and I had to do them to avoid raising suspicions. You deserve better than me." He stepped back and eyed her. In that instant, he felt something snap. Why deny what he felt? He held her close again, talking softly into her hair, "I know you should have someone better, but selfish as I am right now, I do not care. I want you. Every time I look into your eyes, the horrors of my past diminish. If I'd allow it, you could bring out the best in me even though no one, including myself, believes there is still something good left."

"I could never loathe you. I'm not fool. I know what you have done in your past, but I can't put all the blame on you. You did what you had to do." She pulled herself from his embrace to look directly into his eyes and placed a finger on his lips to prevent him from answering. "Don't try to push me away, not again." With that, she removed her finger and raised her head, brushing his lips with hers in a tender kiss. She pulled back only to look into his eyes again, trying to convey how she felt. "I love you, Severus, the good and the bad."

It was enough for him; the last little thread of control he held broke instantly. He knew she was honest, and he decided to not allow the worry of his dark past to force him to push her away. He tightened his embrace and pulled her closer before starting to kiss her deeply, desperately. Something was set free inside him, and he gave himself willingly to his emotions and his desires. He wanted her more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. His hands started moving; one moved through her brown hair while the other moved along her side and through her robes until it rested on her waist. Her hands were also exploring his body, one tracing the contours of his face while the other slid over his chest.

She pulled back again and looked at him, breathless from their passionate kiss. Without thinking, just feeling, she said, "I want you. I need you."

Without waiting for further invitation, he lifted her into his arms and kissed her again while carrying her to his chambers. He entered and deposited her on the edge of his bed and sat beside her. Before resuming their kissing, he confessed to her, "I have wanted this, dreamed about this for so long."

"I have wanted this also. You can't imagine how much." And with that admission, she pulled him down with her as they kissed, lying against the mattress of his bed. A part of her wanted this more than anything, but another part wondered if it was too soon. After all, she had just admitted her feelings aloud for the first time, and he had kind of admitted the same, though he hadn't repeated the words. In the end, the only thing that mattered was that this felt right to her, that she belonged to him, and that there was no better place for her than his arms.

He gently caressed her body, knowing what he wanted, knowing that this was no illusion and that she was there with him. What amazed him most was the woman in his arms. She was actually giving herself willingly to him after confessing that she loved him. He slowly started undoing the clasps of her robes, exposing her shirt beneath. He moved his hands to slowly caress her breasts through the fabric while she fumbled with his countless buttons.

She broke the kiss to whisper in a husky and slightly annoyed voice, "Honestly, am I a witch or what?" With that stated, she grabbed her wand from the robes beneath her, and with a whispered spell, his robe disappeared revealing a white linen shirt. He couldn't help but to laugh at her remark, finding it amusing the way she'd admonished herself. "Much better," she mumbled, smiling at him briefly before resuming her kissing and attacking the buttons of his shirt.

They worked with the buttons of their respective clothing until both shirts were completely open. Deftly, he unfastened her bra, caressing her breasts again, and this time it was skin against skin. They didn't break their kiss until it was necessary for them to breathe. He looked into her eyes, pinning her with the intensity of his gaze, and caressed her face while moving a strand of hair from her face. "Are you sure about this, Hermione? If we continue, I will not let you go away from me...ever."

"And people say I talk too much." She laughed at his startled expression and answered his question. "Yes, Severus, I'm sure about this. I have never been surer about anything in my life. And know this: I'm not planning to go anywhere or letting you go by any means."

It was all he needed to know before he started kissing her again, this time more urgently and nearly ripping her skirt in an attempt to get it off. She helped him by unzipping her skirt and raising her hips, letting him it slip down to where he pulled it from her legs and tossed it to the floor. She did a better job opening his trousers, and with a little help from him, they were quickly wearing only their lower underwear. He spread her legs slightly while settling between her thighs and kissed his way down from her mouth to her neck and to her breasts. He continued kissing, laving, and sucking her nipples while she buried her hands in his hair and arched her body to rub it against his. His hands moved down, tracing the soft skin of her abdomen, the contour of her belly button, and her knickers. She was so beautiful and so perfect, and it wasn't only because of her body, it was that courage and intelligence she possessed that made her completely delectable. She had an air of confidence that made her completely irresistible to him.

If Hermione thought she had felt strong and overwhelming emotions before, nothing could be compared to what she felt in his arms with his body pressed against hers. She wanted to give him everything: her body, her mind, and her feelings. Even after that, it would not be enough. His tongue kissing her breasts, his fingers teasing her entrance...it was too much for her. She pulled him up for a kiss just after he removed her knickers. Between kisses and with a breathy voice, she told him what she wanted. "I need you now."

Severus thought there was nothing more enticing than her voice full of passion, her eyes dark with desire, and her love reflecting in her expression. "You are so beautiful." He moved to comply with her desires and removed his boxers before positioning himself to enter her. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and when he was fully sheathed inside her, they looked at each other for a long moment. In silent agreement, they began moving rhythmically in a perfect synchrony that made it seem as though they had done it forever and that they were meant for each other. They caressed each other, not daring to break their gaze, his hand squeezing her breasts, teasing her nipples as he thrust into her. He started slowly while their bodies moulded together, but with every passing moment, he quickened his pace, deepening his penetration, wanting to fill her and make her feel complete.

She clung to his back, tracing its muscles while she moved her hips upward to meet his thrusts. When the emotions and the sensations he elicited from her were too much, she laid her head against his pillow, moaning incoherently, feeling her building orgasm. He moved down to kiss her neck, her shoulder, and her collarbone while feeling the same tension building in his own body. When her body started convulsing and tightening with pleasure, she came and called his name. He kissed her lips, still pounding into her, knowing that he would follow her soon. After some frantic strokes, he also came, collapsing over her, holding her tightly, and never wanting to let her go.

Their lovemaking was so intense that sleep rapidly claimed both. He watched her through tired eyes, taking in her beautiful sleeping face, the peaceful rise and fall of her chest while breathing, and realised in that instant that he finally knew what love was.

Lorraine's Notes: It could seem that Hermione was giving up or that it was a trick to force him into taking the next step. She's not that cunning, and I don't consider her as someone who would give ultimatums. But I also don't see her as a passive woman who is willing to wait unconditionally for what she wants. She was fighting for him and trying, but after seeing no response, she just decided to stop hurting herself.

I really wanted to hex Snape until he got some good sense and realised what he was doing. He was so bloody stubborn and gave me a hard time, but at the end he did the right thing.

I want to thank Southern Witch, who did a great job beta reading this chapter.

Southern's Notes: It's about time he gets his head out of his arse, eh? Hehe.

Step Five. Give him his dreams back and fulfil them with him

Chapter 5 of 5

Making Severus happy is simpler than anyone expects. Hermione achieves it in ten steps, but no one can say they were easy.

Step Five. Give him his dreams back and fulfil them with him

Disclaimer: All characters and concepts of Harry Potter's universe belong to J.K. Rowling; I just borrowed them for a little while.

Harry Potter was laughing so hard that every witch and wizard near their table, and those who weren't, were staring at them. They didn't need such an outburst to be noticed; the Golden Trio still dragged attention to themselves just for being there.

"You're kidding, right? Hermione, that was a nice try, even for you, but you have never been good with jokes. Who do you expect to believe that you're in a relationship with Snape?"

Ginny looked nervously between her fiancé and her best friend. Harry was still laughing like mad, and Hermione looked as if she would hex him until he learned to keep his mouth shut. If she didn't do something, things would end in a nasty way.

"Eh, Harry, darling, maybe you should stop laughing, and listen to Hermione."

"Come on, Ginny. You can't tell me you believe this nonsense, unless... Oh, I can see it now; you're also part of the joke. It's a really bad one, love. You two should have asked Fred and George for some ideas."

That was the final straw. The look in Hermione's eyes was murderous, but when she was about to speak, she was interrupted.

"She's not lying, Harry. On the contrary, she's quite serious about it; I can see it in her eyes," Ron said. They had almost forgotten about him until he spoke because when Hermione broke the news, they focused on Harry's reaction, ignoring the silent red-haired man. He watched Hermione intently, studying her and trying to understand what was happening. His eyes had that angry look that he always wore when he felt that someone had betrayed or lied to him. "So, Hermione, I guess we couldn't expect better from you. I mean, you have always shown a terrible taste in men...first Krum and now Snape. Tell us, why do you find dark men, who nobody else wants, so appealing?"

"How dare you, Ronald Weasley?" Hermione couldn't believe it. What was he up to? "You don't have the right to talk to me that way or speak about him in such a way."

"I will bloody well talk the way I want! What were you thinking? Well, if youwere thinking, which it seems quiet obvious you weren't."

"Ron, calm down, mate. You're overreacting." Harry was now looking concerned. It was one thing to laugh at what he thought was a joke, but it was something different to treat Hermione like that.

"I'm not overreacting! Don't you see it? We're talking about Snape here, the greasy git that made our lives miserable for seven years, and now, he's taking advantage of her, taking the chance now that she's alone there."

"I will not listen to your nonsense remarks. I asked you to come here tonight to share one of the best things that has ever happened to me, not to hear your foolish chatter about a past that you seem unable to forget." Hermione was trembling as she spoke to one of her best friends. She knew that he wouldn't take the news in the best way, but she never expected such a reaction. The people at the neighbouring tables were already staring at them curiously. Of course they knew who they were, so having a piece of gossip, especially if it was something like a row about the legendary Golden Trio, was quite appealing.

"Fine, have it your way, Hermione. I refuse to be part of this insanity." Saying that, Ron stood, violently knocking the chair in which he was sitting over, and left the pub.

Harry rose from his seat quickly, standing beside Hermione and taking her hand in his.

"Don't worry. I'll talk to him, and everything will be fine. I... I'm so sorry for laughing at you, Hermione. You know I love you, and whatever or whoever makes you happy is fine with me." He squeezed her hand gently and moved to kiss Ginny before leaving.

"Argh... Ronald Bilius Weasley, just wait until I see him again. I'm going to hex him so badly he'll wish he had never opened his mouth! And when my mother finds out, I bet she's going to hex him all over again! Just wait and see. I assure you that...Hermione?" Ginny stopped her little speech when she saw a couple of tears running down her best fiend's cheeks.

"Why did he have to be so mean, Ginny? He's my friend; friends are supposed to be supportive and be happy about your happiness."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. He has had those changes of mood for a while. I wonder..." The red-haired witch paused, her eyes widening when she realised it. "Hermione, he loves you, and he doesn't know how to deal with it, so he reacts that way."

"What are you talking about?"

"He was always in a bad mood after you two broke up. It was obvious he didn't know how to cope with it. He even went back with Lavender, remember? When you were with Viktor, he was always tacitum and cynical, I remember he was about to be kicked out of Auror training, but Harry vouched for him with Kingsley Shacklebolt. When you broke up with Viktor, then the spark was back in his eyes again. Why haven't I seen it before?"

"Ginny, you're definitely not making me feel better about Ron."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but the idea just hit me. You don't have to feel bad about it, Hermione. Enjoy your happiness with Snape. I mean S-Severus. I know he makes you happy, and that's enough for us."

"Gods, this has complicated things even more, and it hurts so much. I knew that the news wasn't going to be received easily, but I never expected this reaction from Ron and now your little speech about him harbouring feelings for me."

"Eventually he'll understand. He has grown up, and he has better sense. Ron will see he's wrong, and he'll come back with an apology. Our friendships have survived so many things, even a war. Trust him to value your friendship, and your happiness above all."

"I hope he does, Ginny. I really hope."

Ginny hugged her friend, comforting her, but inwardly she promised that her brother would pay for his outburst and for hiding things from her. She had a couple of hexes in store that she'd wanted to try for a while.

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

Harry caught up with Ron a couple of blocks outside Diagon Alley's pub, giving thanks that the stubborn red-haired wizard hadn't Apparated to their flat yet.

"Hey, Ron, slow down, mate; we need to talk."

"What do you want, Harry?"

"Well, you can start telling me what that was. What's your problem with Hermione?"

"It's none of your business, Harry. Leave me alone!"

"I care about Hermione, and you hurt her with that rude little outburst. How would you feel if I treated Ginny like that? Hermione is like a sister to me, and you are my best friend, so I think that it's indeed my business."

Ron stopped abruptly and started pacing back and forth in front of the windows of Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. His face was flushed, his fists tightly closed. "I always thought that things would arrange themselves, that if I was patient enough I would have my second chance."

"What are you talking about, Ron? Second chance for what?"

"I was so young, Harry. I didn't know what I was doing. I was scared, and I had to run away from her. We were only kids, and she was too much. Then she started dating Krum again after graduation, and they seemed to be a serious couple. You don't know how many nights I cursed him for coming back and how many times I cursed myself for my cowardice. When they broke up, I thought it was my second chance, life was warranting the chance to date Hermione again. I gave her time. I waited for her to come back to me when she felt it was right. She spent so much time secluded in Hogwarts, devoting her life to that bloody apprenticeship, and I didn't want to push her. You know how Hermione is. She would have been angry with me if I had tried to get her out of her imprisonment in Hogwarts. I should have done it. Just look at what has happened! That greasy git is taking advantage of her. I..."

Ron turned around again, walking away quickly from his best friend. Harry ran after him, trying to keep his pace. "Ron, wait. We need to talk."

"What else do you want me to say, Harry? I have already told you everything. What else you want from me?"

"Why didn't you tell her, Ron?"

"I don't know, Harry. Look, stop asking useless questions. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk at all."

Saying that, Ron Disapparated from Diagon Alley, leaving Harry standing there in the middle of the street. A couple of hours later, when the dark-haired wizard went back to their flat, he noticed that his best friend hadn't come back. And he didn't return for a long time...

Hermione should have known better and should have refrained from telling Severus about what happened with Ron. Now, he was pacing furiously in front of her in his chambers. He had such a terrible temper, and she noticed that it was worse if he was angry about something that concerned her. He was kind of possessive with her and ferociously protective. At the beginning, she was surprised with the extent of his passion, never having experienced something like that from Viktor. Then, she felt a little flattered by it, knowing that she was the one causing such a powerful surge of emotion in the man who always appeared so in control and detached. But at the moment, she didn't appreciate his attitude about how she should handle the situation.

"Weasley told you what? Idiot boy, how dare he treat you like that? And to speak about me in that way! I will have his head for that. No one will treat you in such way. I am going to..."

"Severus, stop right now. You will not do any such thing. I'm not a damsel in distress who needs to be saved or protected from evil Ron. I told you about what happened because we are a couple now, and I want to share everything that happens with you. But this matter with Ron is only between us. I will not even let Harry interfere, no matter what he says about friendship and brotherhood."

"It is my duty to protect you."

"You can protect me. In fact, I expect you to, IF something threatens me, but I don't expect you to try to solve my problems as if I were a defenceless girl incapable of solving them."

"You are being stubborn again. If I am treating you like a girl it is because you are behaving like one. I have the right to expect him to answer to me for the way he treated you and for lusting after my witch."

"Your witch? Are you referring to me as if you own me? I am not a possession, Severus, and what was that remark about lust? I only said Ron seemed to still have a thing for me, not that he was actively putting the moves on me or making any propositions."

Voice dripping with sarcasm, he said, "Of course, he is your beloved friend...one of the 'Golden Trio.' Ronald Weasley would never have improper thoughts about his best friend. Do not be so naïve, Hermione. He thinks about you in that way, I assure you."

"Severus, I really didn't need to think about Ron in that context, thanks." She tried to calm herself down before speaking again. She was not that thick, and she knew he was simply being jealous and overprotective again, but he had to understand that she didn't need that from him. Hermione stretched her hand in an invitation for him to sit beside her on the couch. He sighed heavily but complied and sat beside her.

"You have to understand my feelings on this. I know how much you care about me and that you mean well when you try to protect me, but I don't need you to solve everything that concerns me or to interfere in everything that bothers me."

"I understand your need to solve things your way, but it infuriates me the way that friend of yours treats you. It seems like you let him get away with it! I refuse to allow anyone to mistreat you in any way, and I will always look for a way to prevent it. I apologise if I reacted in an unsuitable way, but it is how I feel."

Hermione smiled and turned to snuggle comfortably against his chest, his hands instantly started stroking her hair lazily. "It's fine, Severus. I guess it's just part of the adjustment process all couples go through."

"I honestly couldn't say, Hermione. This is the first time I have been in a relationship of this sort."

The brunette turned to face the man behind her eyeing him suspiciously. It was really rare when he gave details about his past. "Really? Are you telling me you have never been in a relationship at all?"

"The only affairs I've engaged myself in were casual encounters that only involved a few meetings, essentially to have sex, and I assure you it only happened a few times."

When she understood the implications of his confession, she felt her heart tighten, knowing it was quite possible that she was the first woman he had let into his life. She loved this man, and this new revelation made her feel special about what they had. "I love you, Severus. Forever."

He didn't reply. Instead, he leaned his head to kiss her, conveying the feelings he had for her. Their kiss deepened, and he picked her from the couch and carried her to their room to show her just how much he loved her back.

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

Sleep quickly claimed Hermione, sated and happy. Tomorrow would be the first day of the school year, and she would be introduced as the new Potions mistress of Hogwarts and him as the new DADA professor. They needed their rest, but as on many nights before, Severus didn't succumb to sleep. Instead, he spent several minutes watching her.

It had become his ritual since their first time together when he'd seen how beautiful she looked sleeping, her cheeks still pink from her flush, her satisfied smile and her still swollen lips slightly open. Since that first night, he waited until she was asleep after their love-making to take his time to study her: the angles of her face, the gentle swell of her stomach, and the glow of her skin. She was perfection to him.

His study of her body began again. He always started running his fingers slowly through her hair, her unruly curls that she hated and that he had learned to appreciate when the locks twisted around his fingers. He thought that Hermione had a beautiful face; her brown eyes were the reflection of her clear soul and her brilliance. He could just make out the start of slight traces of wrinkles, the price she would have to pay for the way she laughed open-heartedly. Her nose and her cheeks had some freckles, which gave her face a still youthful look of a girl, and her lips were irresistible to him, full and soft, always saving a kiss for him.

He kissed her brow, tasting the salty flavour of sweat. He was sure all her body tasted like that after their coupling. Her skin always bore a golden colour that contrasted with his pale frame. Hermione had always loved to wear a tan that make her white skin turn golden in a way that made it look as if the sun had kissed it.

No matter how gentle or how rough their coupling had been, she always fell asleep with a quiet demeanour. Her arms were always open when she slept, just like her heart and her mind, waiting to embrace him when she felt him near her body. Severus lightly traced the curves of her breasts while her chest rose and fell with the slow rhythm of her breathing. He couldn't stop himself, and he moved his hand lower to place it on her belly. It was common knowledge that he didn't tolerate children despite being a professor, which forced him to spend hours amongst them. But sometimes when he looked at her like this, something primal lurked in his mind, the thought of seeing Hermione with a swelled abdomen, pregnant with his child. He rubbed her belly softly, the promise of life there waiting for its time. Her legs were already tangling in the covers while she moved in the bed, trying to get into a comfortable position. He always wondered how they managed to sleep, considering how much she moved about. She was always active, even in her sleep

Severus smiled at her form; he liked being the guardian of her sleep, wondering what she was dreaming and if she shared his dreams. Did he say dreams? He hadn't acknowledged the meaning of the word for a long time. When he was a child, he used to have dreams, but they were trashed under the bitterness of his loveless home. His soul became even more bitter during his childhood and adolescence, causing him to forget about his dreams and acknowledge only a desire for things that brought power, money, or better standing. When he looked for redemption, putting his life in Dumbledore hands, the only thing left for him was a feeling slightly similar to hope. He had hoped to mend the error of his ways, and if it was possible, to survive a war, he'd wanted to see a world free of the darkness he'd once helped build. He had craved and

wished many things in his life, but dreams? The word was foreign to him until he'd found Hermione, and she'd shared her dreams with him, encouraging him to be a part of them and to find his own.

His mind wandered again to the woman sleeping by his side. He was always entranced while watching her sleep, always wondering if he was simply dreaming or if she was real. Hermione was no fantasy. She was really there with him, sharing his nights, his life. His heart felt light and was so at peace now that he found that he was able to have dreams again, and he often dreamed about the future. He loved her; he was absolutely sure about that, but he had never spoken the words openly, although he was certain she understood the language of his body, the look in his eyes. His feelings overtook him, and he made up his mind. Tomorrow, he would tell her the words that he had been too cowardly to speak.

He kissed her cheek gently before lying beside her, feeling her arms going around him as he moved closer to her. He knew that he didn't need to have 'sweet dreams' in his sleep, because his most cherished dream had already occurred in his bed with his Hermione.

"Are you nervous, Hermione?"

"A little."

Severus couldn't stop himself from smirking. Just a little indeed. "Why, pray tell, do you always say 'a little' when I ask you something that is plainly obvious? Is 'a little' a new way of denial?"

"Stop it. Severus. You know this is important, and I won't let you make fun of me."

He looked at her more seriously. "I know it is important to you, but calm down. You're prepared enough for the post, and you will do your job well."

"I know I'm well prepared to teach Potions; that doesn't bother me." She turned to face him, biting her lip in the same way she did it when she was a girl. "Severus, what if the students don't like me, or what if they just simply decide to ignore me due to my age?"

"Hermione, are you telling me you are nervous about the students?" He suppressed a chuckle and embraced her. "You, silly girl. Trust you to be brave enough to face Death Eaters in a war but to also still have the ability to feel nervous about facing a group of teenagers. You will be fine, and you will gain their respect easily...if not from authority, then maybe from that pure stubbornness you have when you feel the need to prove yourself. I can assure you that. Now, shall we go inside? I think they are expecting us."

Hermione nodded to him, unable to be mad at him about the stubbornness comment because somehow he made her feel better. He stepped aside to let her enter the Great Hall, but just before she preceded him, he grabbed her arm to stop her and said in a barely audible whisper in her ear, "I love you, Hermione."

She turned to look at him with a startled expression, which immediately changed to a smile that lightened her face. It was silly. Hearing the words shouldn't change anything, but she felt different. She had known that he loved her...at least she had assumed it...but now she was completely certain. Knowing they were about to face the whole school, she only squeezed his hand and whispered back her answer. "I love you, too."

He watched her enter the Great Hall for the welcoming feast. She was nervous. There was no doubt about it, but it seemed that his confession had given her some reassurance. He was sure that she would be fine. She was strong and determined, and her students would respect her, despite her young age. Severus sighed. Hermione was indeed young, also beautiful and intelligent, and she happened to love him. That fact was still beyond his comprehension, but as that always happened to him when thinking about her, he didn't care at all about logics. He smiled, looking at her and thinking about his life. He had the post he had craved for so many years, a peaceful life without the Dark Lord threatening the Wizarding world, and he had Hermione. He walked to the Head Table in order to start a new term, a new job, a new life. He had everything he wanted now. He had fulfilled his dreams, and it was because of her, his Hermione.

Lorraine's Notes: It has been a long time, but RL had been very demanding during the last months, and my muse was taking her time to get back. I hope you have enjoyed this chapter in which our couple is getting closer and Severus acknowledges his feelings openly for the first time.

Inspiration for the part in which Severus watches Hermione sleep came from a song called 'Duerme' (Sleep). I think only Latin readers are familiar with this song by Ricardo Arjona.

Thanks for your patience with this fic, I hope now that I'm not blocked I can write chapter six faster. Many thanks go to my dear beta, Southern Witch, who always deals with my lack of commas and never fails to make valuable comments that make this story better. Also, thanks go to CocoaChristy for giving it a read through!

Southern's Notes: What a romantic story. I am so happy that Severus is learning to cope. Now, let's hope that Ron can move on.

Christy's Notes: I enjoyed the read and the sweetest. I can't wait to see what's next.