

Longing

by livvy6

Severus fails a test for his allegiance to Voldemort. The fallout from one night will change everything.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 18

Severus fails a test for his allegiance to Voldemort. The fallout from one night will change everything.

A/N: I have read many stories where Snape was forced to rape Hermione. I thought, "What if he didn't? What would be the fallout?"

I want thank my AMAZING beta, Shellsnapeluver. This fic would be a complete disaster if not for her. So, any errors or spots of poor writing found, blame it on me. Also, please review! I do like to hear your thoughts whatever they are.

□

I am not sorry for my soul

That it must go unsatisfied,

For it can live a thousand times,

Eternity is deep and wide.

I am not sorry for my soul,

But oh, my body that must go

Back to a little drift of dust

Without the joy it longed to know.

"Longing" by Sarah Teasdale

It was quiet now in the field. No more crying, no more taunting: Hermione had resigned herself. All that remained was the cold, humiliation, and a sense of foreboding. She listened to the fire crackling all around them, the wind that rippled through the black robes of her abductors. They were faceless, save one. Voldemort was there in his snake-like glory, perched on a makeshift throne. Wormtail was at his side, like some deranged court jester.

They had warned her it might come down to this. They had reminded her being a friend of Harry's could only lead to trouble if she became a full Order member. Yet, she had refused to distance herself. She had thrown herself into working for the Order, doing what she had insisted was her part in the war effort. She had wanted to prove she was valuable: and she had been. Her intelligence had contributed to many of the Order's plans at sabotaging Voldemort's attacks. She had been proud to be a student and an Order member. She had tried to be careful, but in the end, she had not been careful enough.

A Stunner to the back of her head in Hogsmeade had led to this nightmare. She had been stripped and spread eagle, naked for someone to torture. She looked up into the peaceful Scottish sky as the wet, cold grass itched and prickled her body. She focused on the twinkling stars above her that were so beautiful. All she could do was wait.

Then *he* came. She closed her eyes sadly. Of course, it had to be him. Whom else would Voldemort want to test? It was a trap, a test. She knew it had to be. This had been so elaborately planned and seamlessly executed; a great amount of thought had gone into this night's event. She opened her eyes and saw *him* looking at her in disgust and pity. She felt as if she had been stabbed. She had worked so hard at trying to get him to notice her as a woman, an adult, and an equal. Of course, as long as she still sat in his class, eighteen-year-old or not, Order member or not, he never would. He had refused to show her anything but his anger over her induction. He had refused her admittance. He had made it clear he hadn't wanted her around him. Unfortunately, no one else had agreed with him. Therefore, he had—in his words—to *endure* her presence.

In time, she had found that if she was quiet and worked hard, he would relax and allow her to assist him. She had cherished those times and worked diligently for him, obeying his every word and never questioning him. Even if what he said had been wrong and the potion ruined, he would look at her sharply and ask her what she would have done differently if he had not been there. She would answer respectfully, and he would nod his approval, telling her to do as she had suggested. Once he had nodded and *smiled* his approval. That had been a good day. Sometimes, though, there had been bad days where he would rail about her faults. He was harsh, but never wrong, she had discovered. His words had hurt, but he had always been right. In the end, she had been becoming an efficient potion maker. She had taken his verbal abuse in stride, and in time she had grown to be grateful for his diligence in her training. She had always harbored a crush on him. However, it was growing to be much more. Hermione was falling in love.

Bellatrix cackled in the distance. Hermione heard the rustling of her robes as the witch moved forward.

"Look at the Mudblood, Snape! Isn't she luscious?" she purred as she leaned into him. She walked over and considered Hermione's nakedness.

"So beautiful, isn't she, Snape? Look at her breasts and creamy skin. She's soft, I know. *felt* her."

Snape glanced at Hermione. He then looked into Bellatrix's eyes. "She's an ugly Mudblood. She does not entice me."

"But, Severus," pouted Bellatrix as she ran her hands between Hermione's legs. "She's *avirgin*. I felt her barrier around my tiny finger. She has such a pretty pink pussy."

Snape knelt down and ran his hands down the length of Hermione's body. He was deliberately slow, grazing his fingertips over her nipples, weighing one breast in a cupped hand, and then lightly brushing the curly thatch between her thighs.

"Unbind her. She will not run," he said coldly.

"No, Severus," Voldemort said in a chilling voice. "She's all ready, and we are waiting. Surely, Dumbledore will understand. After all, you can say she gave her innocence for the 'Greater Good.'"

The cackling laughter made Hermione shiver in terror.

Severus looked back at Hermione's body clinically. He did not speak, just began to fumble with his trousers. Hermione thought he was unbuttoning them. She turned her head to avoid seeing what was going to happen and closed her eyes. She felt the brush of his robes around her legs, and soon he lying on top of her, crushing her. She wanted to scream, but she was too shocked. She felt his heavy traveling cloak rubbing against her nipples and his hair tickling her face; his breath was warm on her cold neck, making her feel a rush of pleasure that made her feel disgusted with herself. He was fumbling around, and she kept her eyes closed. A whispered "*Finate Incatatum*" was muttered, and her ropes disappeared. A split-second later, she was on the ground of someone's living room floor.

"Get up!" he said sharply as he leapt off her.

Hermione staggered to her feet, trying to cover her nakedness with her hands. She was freezing from her exposure to the elements for so long. She was fairly shaking as she saw Mrs. Tonks running down from upstairs.

"Oh, heavens above! Tell me it hasn't come to this!" said the older woman, fear laced in her voice.

"If you mean my days as a spy are over, then yes, it has come to that. If you would please find a robe for Miss Granger?" he hissed.

Mrs. Tonks quickly took off her robe and gave it to Hermione. She was wearing Muggle clothes underneath. "I have a bunch of Nymphadora's old clothes if you'd prefer. Let's go upstairs. Severus, you look like you could use a stiff drink. Help yourself," she said curtly.

They walked into what Hermione guessed was Tonks' old bedroom and looked around at the old posters of Muggle rock bands and movie stars as Mrs. Tonks swiftly closed the door.

"Have you have raped?" she asked bluntly.

Hermione shook her head. "Just embarrassed is all. A couple of them grabbed me a little, but no harm done," she whispered.

"I'll bet!" she said angrily. "What happened?" she asked as she rifled through some dresser drawers. She found a pair of jeans, a tee shirt, and a jumper and handed them to her. She took another tee shirt, transfigured it into a pair of underwear, and found a bra.

"I think you and Tonks are about the same size. I'll fix it if it's not right. Here is a pair of socks," she said.

After Hermione was dressed, Andromeda asked her again. "Tell me, Hermione, what happened?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around her body, chilled from the night's events. "I was a test. Voldemort was there and told Professor Snape to rape me. He unbuttoned his trousers, laid on top of me, and before I knew it, we were here," she said numbly.

"Let's get you some cocoa," she said, wrapping Hermione into a motherly hug. Hermione embraced the witch, burying her face into the woman's bodice. Andromeda soothed her and patted her, telling her she was safe now. Hermione hadn't been mothered in so very long. Now, she wanted it more than ever.

After a moment, Hermione released her, and they walked back down to the living room. She sat on the couch with her cocoa with Mrs. Tonks as Professor Snape talked to Dumbledore through the Floo. They spoke softly in hushed tones so she couldn't hear what was said. When he was done, Snape rose and addressed the two witches as he took off his cloak importantly. Hermione put down her cocoa. He looked very upset.

"We shall stay the night. In the morning, Albus will arrange for us to Floo into his office. He has to work with the wards to allow this. I do hope you are pleased with yourself, Miss Granger. You may have just derailed the entire war effort!"

Hermione was shocked. She jumped up and shouted, "How dare you!"

He descended on her like a storm. "No, Miss Granger. How dare you! Your ineptitude has caused me to reveal my true allegiance. There shall be no more spying from me. Now there shall be no one to aid the Order! Because of your *idiocy*, all the hard work and sacrifice from each Order member has now come to an unfruitful end! I always

knew you were an insufferable know-it-all, but now, you little *swot*, you have dismantled my entire life!" he raged.

"It is not my fault! I did everything I was supposed to do! I was attacked from the rear!" she hollered. "It's not my fault they decided to test your loyalties. It was an entire set-up, Professor! *Obviously*, they all had begun to doubt you long before this!"

His face was emotionless, but his vein on his temple throbbed, and his eyes glittered madly. She knew he was murderously angry.

He looked at her with unveiled disgust. "Such a pity it had to be you, Miss Granger," he said scornfully. "Any other female and I would have been able to stomach pleasuring myself, but no, it had to be *you*, an ugly, frizzy-haired, buck-toothed, old maid in training! I'm sure to catch hell-fire for not going along with it for Dumbledore's 'Greater Good,' but honestly, I don't think I would have been able to get it up to do the deed!" His eyes, filled with ridicule and contempt, bored into hers. "I can't imagine any wizard ever being able to stomach touching you!"

Mrs. Tonks jumped up, and in a flash she slapped Snape across the face. "How dare you speak that way to a young girl! You should be ashamed of yourself!" she hissed angrily.

She carried on, railing against him as Hermione sank down into the couch. Something broke inside her. She couldn't even get angry enough to yell back at him for being an arse.

She stared as Mrs. Tonks and Professor Snape fought. Finally, she curled up on the couch, tucking her legs to her chest, and fell into a catatonic state.

"What the hell were you thinking, Severus Snape?" Andromeda raged as they stood in the kitchen. She poured the remainder of the cocoa into the sink and threw the two cups down into it with a clatter. She stood there with a hand on her hip and the other resting on the counter. She was furious.

"Spare me, the diatribe, Andromeda!" Snape seethed as he poured himself another glass of scotch. "You have absolutely no idea ~~the~~*hell* that is about to be unleashed because of this!"

"There will be the devil to pay, Snape! She's a young lady and *has been through hell* tonight—she doesn't need you to belittle her! I knew you were cold and cynical at times, but I never imagined you to be so deliberately crippling with your insults!" Her voice was full of loathing.

"Don't you think you are being a tad bit melodramatic?" he sneered before tossing back his drink in one gulp.

Andromeda was at a loss.

When she did not answer him, he stood up straight and tall. "Now, if you don't mind, I would like to have a bit of sleep before I have to face the headmaster in the morning!" He stormed out and sat down on the couch. He glanced over at Miss Granger. She was curled up in the fetal position, and her eyes were wide open.

He sighed as he rubbed his eyes. *What a night!* he thought. *You are such a little girl, you have no idea what horrors you would have experienced! I knew it was a mistake letting her in the Order! Now look at her. What a mess!* He shook his head as he eased onto the couch facing Hermione. *It'll be better in the morning. Her little boyfriends will tell her I'm just a greasy git, and she'll have done with it.* He looked at her and saw her eyes were still wide open, but vacant somehow. He nestled in and tried to fall asleep. He'd deal with the outcome tomorrow.

"Get up!" Snape shouted at Hermione.

Hermione opened her eyes and faced a black wall in front of her. She looked up and rubbed her eyes only to see clearly the sour face of Professor Snape. She glanced around her, and it all came rushing back: the cold, the fire, the fear, and the humiliation. She was confused and disoriented as she tried to recall how she got to where she was and whose clothes she was wearing. She looked around the cozy living room. There were pictures of happy people all around her. Plush sofa chairs and couches with throw pillows and blankets decorating them surrounded her. It was very nice and comforting. Professor Snape was oddly out of place here. "Where are we?" she asked tiredly.

"Shut up!" he ordered and grabbed her roughly by the arm, throwing her in front of the fireplace.

Andromeda came into the living room from the kitchen. She was in her bathrobe, and her long, dark hair was in a plait that swung over one shoulder. She looked at Hermione with deep concern. "Please, stay and eat something! Hermione looks so weak!" she begged.

"Miss Granger will have her little dunderheaded friends to feed her ego and outrage, I'm sure!" Snape said sardonically.

He grabbed the Floo powder and thrust it in her hand. She shook and struggled to keep the powder in her hand. "Say Headmaster Dumbledore's office, Hogwarts!" he commanded. "I shall be right behind you, so move out of the way!" he warned.

A/N: The artist of the picture above is ~flam and you can access more works at deviantart. Many thanks to ~flam for letting me use this picture *Colour Autumn Argument*.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 18

Severus and Hermione separately deal with the changes in their lives.

A/N: Thank you for all the wonderful reviews! For my beta, Shellsnapelover, all my adoration. You're the best!

Hermione was sitting silently on a sofa in Dumbledore's office while Professor Snape spoke with the headmaster...talking as if she were not even present.

"Severus, I must say I am most disappointed in you," said Dumbledore sadly.

Snape crossed his arms defensively. "Oh, really, Albus? Did you honestly think I would rape one of my students for your 'Greater Good?'"

Dumbledore glanced at Hermione. Snape refused to look at the child, but out of the corner of his eye, he could tell she had a vague, empty expression on her face. She seemed to be in another world.

Dumbledore leaned in and whispered, "Severus, I understand there have been many things...horrible things that we must do to win this war. However, I never would have forced you to hurt one of our own so heinously! What concerns me now is your treatment of Miss Granger. She's been through a harrowing ordeal and your callousness..."

"Callousness?" Snape shouted, jumping to his feet. "She should be grateful that is all she has had to endure! She came within a hair's breath of living forever with the knowledge her teacher was the one to take her virtue, possibly impregnating her in the process! In addition, knowing the Dark Lord as I do, he would not have allowed a tender deflowering. I would have been forced to brutalize her! I say, old man, you overestimate my abilities to wound with my words!" he said snidely as he crossed his arms around his chest, glaring down at the older man.

"Severus, there are others to spy for us, I realize this must be frustrating. Please, sit down," he reasoned.

Snape snorted. "Frustrating? It ceased to be frustrating ten years ago. How about *excruciating*? I have endured more tortures and humiliations than that...*swot*...could never imagine, and you are worried about her feelings being hurt?"

Before Dumbledore could reply, Snape excused himself stating, "I have a lot of work ahead of me. Any moment now, the Mark will burn for me, but I shan't be able to answer. If you want to blame someone, Albus, blame yourself! I told you she was too much of a silly little girl to be inducted into the Order!" With that, he swept from the office, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione remained in the headmaster's office with Professor McGonagall at her side. She had been given the strictest of instructions. No one was to know of her abduction, especially the part of Snape being the one ordered to violate her. They couldn't risk gossip amongst the Slytherins. As it stood, some of them probably already knew of the story. Hermione would neither confirm nor deny if asked. The headmaster wanted complete silence. Her life would continue as normal.

She was quiet for once, having nothing to say. The harsh words of her professor kept ringing in her ear, crushing her spirit.

"Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked with concern.

"Yes?" she asked. Her voice was monotone. She felt numb and mindless and kept her head lowered, focusing on her hands in her lap.

"Have you any questions or concerns?" Dumbledore asked softly.

Hermione didn't want to talk to him or anyone else. "No," she said simply.

"I am here if you need me, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall quietly as she put her arm around her.

She wanted to disappear, be invisible, not have to have answer to anyone or talk about what had been the most humiliating event in her young life.

Hermione only nodded, and she got up to leave.

The concern on the professors' faces was palpable.

Snape was in the midst of trying to figure out a way to bypass the pain of the Dark Mark. He knew it was only a matter of time until the bastard called him again, and he was not about to sit about waiting for the agony to begin.

Damn that swot! he thought as he slammed a worn book onto his lab table. He flipped through several pages before finding the directions of a spell he believed could help dull the pain. He quickly found the passage he was looking for and furiously flipped through the pages of another book to find a spell he needed to ease the pain. He ran his long, pale, finger down a page and thumped the spot in the text he was looking for.

He went to his bedroom to remove his robes, frock coat, and shirt.

She has to be a continual pain in my arse, doesn't she? he thought.

He focused on the incantation as he gripped his wand in his right hand, bearing down painfully onto the Dark Mark. He needed to focus for the spell to work, but his anger was starting to get the best of him. *Why did Albus have to let her in the Order?* he raged internally.

Suddenly, his left arm started searing. "Fuck!" he swore. He dropped his wand as he instinctively grasped the Mark in pain. He had better get himself under control, or he would never find relief. He was going to have to endure the pain as he began the incantation over again. He just hoped he wouldn't pass out. He tried to ignore the calling of his Dark master once before, and the burning had become so unbearable that he nearly blacked out. Thank God he knew someone like Filius Flitwick who had offered him the book, which contained the obscure numbing spell he was now putting on his arm.

He panted through the pain and finished the spell. He tossed his wand beside him on the bed and rubbed the Mark methodically, willing for the spell to work. Finally, after a while, the white-hot searing pain dulled to just an uncomfortable ache. That he could tolerate.

He lies down on the bed after taking a Calming Draught and quickly fell asleep. The next thing he knew, his eyes snapped open, and he looked at the clock, seeing it was time for breakfast. Now that the pain was nearly tolerable, he realized how hungry he was and knew he needed to eat to sustain his energy. He headed down to the Great Hall to start the day. He was eating heartily when he was nudged by McGonagall.

"Severus, I am very concerned with Miss Granger. Her friends said she didn't speak more than two words all day yesterday. Miss Patil and Miss Brown said she had cried all night long. Is there something else I need to know about?" she asked angrily.

"Go take her to Poppy if you don't believe me. Perhaps one of the other Death Eaters got to her before I arrived. I know Bellatrix molested her a bit. Perhaps, she thinks it makes her a lesbian," he added sarcastically.

"You are an unmitigated bastard!" she seethed.

"Was there any doubt?" he retorted with a wry smile.

She huffed and stalked off.

Out of the corner of his eye, Snape could see Dumbledore giving him a very cold and angry look. Snape thought it best to leave now before any other outbursts arose.

He strode down the Great Hall and did not notice the young woman who cringed as he passed her.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" asked Harry as Snape strode past them. He was deeply troubled for his friend.

"Nothing," she mumbled and shook her head. His near presence flooded her mind with pain and humiliation. She wanted to shrink into herself and not exist. She made an excuse about a book she had forgotten in her room and returned to Gryffindor Tower. She desperately needed to be alone. The Great Hall seemed so suffocating.

She sat on her bed in her room and breathed deeply, trying to calm herself before her first class. She couldn't get Professor Snape's words out of her head. They had haunted her throughout the night, destroying her sleep, and they were taunting her now so that she was terrified to face going to classes, acting as if nothing had happened! She shook her head as if trying to shake the words out of her mind, but they wouldn't shake loose.

"Mudblood"

"Swot"

"Ugly"

"Frizzy-haired"

"Buck-toothed"

"Old Maid"

She had to move from where she was...do anything to make herself feel better. She decided to take a nice hot shower to relax herself. After she had taken off her clothes, she saw herself in the mirror.

"No one will want me," she whispered to herself as she stared at her nakedness in the mirror. She looked like hell. She remembered how Professor Snape had looked at her with disgust.

"I am disgusting," she said as she looked at her nude body.

She got in the shower and sat on the floor with her knees up to her chin while the hot water ran over her. She wanted to scream, wanted to hurt someone, wanted to die, wanted not to be all the things he had called her. She knew it was true.

"I see no difference."

She cried...her tears mixing with the hot water falling off her head...but crying didn't ease the ache of self-loathing. He may be a cruel bastard, but he was right. She was all those things. All her life she had been ridiculed for her looks and for her knowledge. However, to be told this by someone who she had respected...had even started to...well, that was what broke her. She had tried to not be such a know-it-all; she had thought her induction into the Order would force him to see her differently, but for him not to see *any* change in her...to be so fucking *hurtful* on purpose had been devastating! She couldn't have helped being caught by the Death Eaters! How dare he blame her and slice her apart with his words!

He was right. He's always right!

Her chest hurt so badly, the pain was unbearable. She wished she could let the pain out, but she didn't know how to rid herself of it. She grew afraid. The pressure on her chest would not go away. She needed to be delivered from it. There was just too much pain inside. There had been so many hurts, so many cutting remarks from those she had just wanted to see her...to really see her. However, no one had ever cared to look deep enough.

The water in the shower was growing cold, but she didn't care. She didn't feel anything but pain...pain that was screaming inside her to be set free. She had been strong for so long. She just wanted to be the weak one, not the formidable person everyone needed. A black thought crossed her mind. She had thought of it many times in the past, but had never gone through with it. Now, she would. It would help her to find that perfect release that she sought after so badly but had always eluded her...

She took her shaving razor and carefully removed the blade.

She took the blade and swiped the inside of her thigh, watching the blood run down her leg. It felt like a pressure valve decompressing inside. The blood running out was her anger, ugliness, and powerlessness. She felt she had a satisfying secret that was empowering. She continued to slice and gouge her thighs as salty tears streamed down her face. What did it matter? No man would want to see what she had between her legs anyway. She was too vile, too hideous...

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 18

Hermione makes a decision to protect herself from all the pain she cannot handle.

A/N: I want to make a statement about Hermione's state of mind. For those of you who may not be familiar with cutting or do not understand why a person would do such a thing to their own body, I have this to say: Most people, more females than males, who are more susceptible to the vicious cycle of self-mutilation, are highly intelligent, driven, perfectionist types who thrive on praise and recognition from peers and authority figures alike. I do not believe cutting or self-mutilation is OOC for Hermione, if she were pushed to a point where things became too much for her psyche to handle. In canon, the issue of boys (Ron) seeing her as a girl, along with her sensitivity over being teased about her physical appearance was a reoccurring tender spot for Hermione. In fact, it was Professor Snape's comment of "I see no difference" that caused Hermione to cry, versus when she held her tears back when he called her "an insufferable know-it-all."

I hope that, although this topic may be disturbing, you will try to continue and stay with the story. For not everything is what it seems, and the main crux of the story has yet to be revealed.

Hermione missed her first class because she had been over-zealous in her cutting and had to spend time patching up the deeper slashes. For the first time in her life, she

didn't care she had missed class. It had been worth it to discover this new secret. As she bandaged up a deep gash on the inside of her thigh, she made a mental note to herself to be careful the next time. It wouldn't do to miss any more classes.

She took her time in getting herself ready. She spelled her hair the way Lavender had taught her the year before. It took time wielding her wand the way she needed to when she was not familiar with the movement, but after a while, she got better at it. Before today, she couldn't be bothered with beauty treatments and make-up, but now she felt a need to do this. Soon her hair was hanging in wavy curls. She placed her wand on the vanity and deftly touched the soft curls that lay delicately on her shoulders. It felt silky and nice under her fingers. She forced her mind back on track and rummaged through one of the drawers in the vanity and found the make-up Lavender and Pavarti had insisted she buy last year in Hogsmeade. She had a very good complexion, so she had no need for gobs of liquid cover-up. She took the container of powder in one hand and the applicator brush in the other and made swirling strokes over her face and neck. It was just enough to make her skin look extra soft. She nervously picked up the blush and concentrated hard on what Lavender had said to her about applying it to the "apple" of her cheek. She lightly swiped it on her cheeks, and she had just a hint of pink that could be seen.

The next part was the hardest. She sat looking at the eye shadow with fierce intensity. She wanted to look different but not like a clown! She muttered the rules Lavender had told her about eye shadow application as she worked with the tiny brush. It was light, but the definition in her eyes could not be mistaken.

Finally, she took out the dusky pink lipstick and slowly moved it over her lips. She took a tissue, blotted carefully, and then looked at the effect as a whole. She scrutinized her work. It was passable. The make-up was light enough not to be seen as dramatic, yet enough that she looked different.

She rose from the vanity and took out her newest school robes. She wanted to look serious and intimidating. She took her Muggle nylons and slowly put them on, careful to adjust them around her bandaged thigh. They were jet black in color and looked classic with her black heels. She remembered from her younger years her mum's friends and their "power suits." They wore their make-up and clothes like a suit of armor. They had been most audacious and formidable. That was what she wanted: her own suit of armor. She could hide behind this. She figured she would really need it today. She steeled herself as she walked to her next class: Potions. As she walked, her heels made loud clacking noises on the floor. She felt forceful and daunting. No one was going to reach through and hurt her today!

She walked in the classroom, relishing the pain in her thigh, and sat down. There were a couple of wolf-whistles as she took her seat. Professor Snape was at his desk scribbling something.

"Quiet," he said lazily, not bothering to look up. However, after a few moments, he lifted his head because he sensed a change in the room. There was something afoot. He glanced around the room and saw Miss Granger.

"Impertinent girl," he muttered under his breath.

He stared at her angrily as she looked at him with a vicious smirk on her face. The words rushed back into her mind:

"Swot"

"Ugly"

"Old Maid"

"No one will want you."

"Miss Granger," he began in his silky voice as he stood from his desk and swept around slowly to face her up close. "I know that gathering the attentions of young wizards is uppermost on a young witch's mind; however, you will not make my class a place for you to humiliate yourself by your feeble attempts at trying to prove you are a female. I assure you, no one in this room cares."

Harry and Ron jumped up and began shouting and cursing at the wizard. Hermione pulled on them both.

"Just sit down, be quiet! Stop!" she pleaded as she tugged on their robes.

"Well, Miss Granger, I see that you have regained some sense. However, fifty points each, Potter and Weasley, from Gryffindor for your rude behavior, and detention for a week with Mr. Filch," Snape said as he smiled nastily.

"As for you, Miss Granger, five points will be taken for your attempts to cause a distraction in my classroom...no matter how unsuccessful your attempts were," he added casually as he returned to his desk.

Hermione sat unmoving and uncaring. Each word was just another drop, just another gush of blood that she would take out later. ~~He~~ He could no longer wound her.

He noticed a flicker of gleam in her eyes, and it disturbed him. He had expected the girl to cry or get angry, but instead, she had pleaded for her friends who were taking up for her to stop and looked at *him*...the wizard who had just verbally abused her...as if nothing odd had happened. In fact, she seemed *content* with his abuse!

Hermione began her work after the directions were placed on the board. She brewed happily, enjoying each time she shifted and moved against the wound on the inside of her thigh, taking the pain in as a safeguard against humiliation. No one could humiliate her again. She had found a way not to let it remain inside.

Snape continued to watch the young witch as he prowled the room. She had placed her hair up in a makeshift gathering of sorts up and away from where it would get in the way. He came by and looked at her progress.

He was used to her looking up at him with hope for a kind word. She had always reminded him of a dog, begging for a pat on the head or a treat for doing a trick well done. Instead, she ignored him and kept on with her work.

Over the next few days, Hermione kept up her beauty regimen. Lavender and Pavarti told her how pleased they were that she was actually taking their advice.

"Hermione!" exclaimed Lavender one morning as she touched her long tresses, "you are beautiful."

"Thank you," Hermione replied softly and went about her business.

Many people commented on her outward transformation. Hermione, always polite, never failed to thank them and walked on, refusing, as some girls were wont to do, to revel in her new found popularity.

Hermione was amused by it all. She laughed inwardly because she knew the truth. She worked hard at the illusion she created every morning. Inside was still the ugly, frizzy-haired, future old maid. That was the real her. It was laughable how people were so impressed with what she considered a glamour, a fake covering of her ugliness so she wouldn't stand out so much. Therefore, the attention, in her warped mind, served to only ingrain the belief that the Potions master had been right, as he always was, that she really had been so ugly before that people were amazed she could change and clean up so well.

Every day, at night, she took a hot shower and cut herself. Over the next month, she had quite the scars and marks. She had worked her way down the one thigh, so she started on the other one. Her skin was raised and angry looking with fresh wounds. She became confident in her bloodletting. She was able to let out copious amounts of blood in order to extract the pain from her. She imagined as the scarlet liquid swirled down the drain that her pain from the day went down with it. Sometimes she became dizzy after her shower, but she just went to bed and rested after bandaging herself.

She ate ravenously every morning at breakfast, but she knew she was too thin and pale...especially when her friends started commenting on her appearance. She had horrible circles under eyes that she tried to hide with make-up. However, people could see how weary she was. She loaded up on protein and foods rich in iron. She knew people were concerned with her, but she couldn't stop now, so she had to keep her energy up and replenish her body. She couldn't afford to skip one day of cutting if she wanted peace of mind.

Snape sat at breakfast, mulling over the events of the night before. He made sure not to catch the headmaster's eye. The Potions master knew the old goat was angry with him, and he wasn't in the mood for a lecture!

The staff had met last night, just another normal meeting in which they spent the first twenty minutes to gossip and let off steam. Then, Dumbledore would call them all back to order and start the official meeting. Snape had tried to bypass these "ridiculous grousing sessions," as he called them, but the headmaster had refused. Even if he had nothing to contribute; he had to play his part and listen.

The usual gossiping had already been underway when Snape had made his entrance into the staffroom. He had been blissfully tuning the noise out when he had caught Professor Flitwick comment on Miss Granger's radical change.

"Have you all seen how our Miss Granger has blossomed? She's all grown up! It seems like yesterday she was just a first-year," he said wistfully.

Professor McGonagall was proud and puffed up. "Yes, Filius, Miss Granger is becoming a most lovely young witch. In fact, perhaps too lovely. I'm having some difficulty getting the boys to pay attention in class."

Snape gave a derisive snort.

"Do you have anything to add, Severus?" Dumbledore asked benignly.

He put on his best sneer and said, "She is only embarrassing herself, flouncing about, trying to attract attention from the fact underneath it all she's still just a swotty little know-it-all!"

The professors began to verbally attack him.

"That is just mean, Severus!" snapped Madam Hooch. "She's turning into a right pretty thing, and she's not flouncing or anything of the sort. She's matured into her own. The boys will stop gaping soon, find their tongues, and start asking her out for dates."

She turned to Professor McGonagall. "Once that happens, Minerva, the boys will start paying attention again. Especially if she accepts one as her boyfriend."

"That's rich!" Severus interrupted snarkily. "I can see it now! All of Hogwarts will forget how annoying she is just because she's polished up. I'm sure the boys will be stepping in line to be nagged into studying and corrected a million times a day by 'She-Who-Knows-Best.'"

"Why are you being so cruel?" breathed Professor Sprout.

He jerked his head sharply towards her direction.

"I only speak the truth, Pomona. Miss Granger can plaster on all the cosmetics her hair and face can handle, but inside she's still the same annoying girl she's always been. That will never change. It's her nature."

Then he turned to McGonagall and said, "Once the boys figure out her change is all but an illusion, she'll fade into the background once more. No wizard wants a needy, desperate witch for long. Then you'll find peace again."

Albus looked hard at the Potions master. Minerva was white with shock at his spitefulness.

"Severus, it seems you have taken issue with Miss Granger's transformation. Why is that?" Dumbledore asked softly, but with power behind it, meaning that he wanted an answer.

Severus stiffened. "I have enough problems with the better-known dunderheads than adding her to the mix. I've had more incidents of near explosion in that particular class because of her desperate need for affirmation. It makes my job that more dangerous, and frankly, I do not have the patience for it. Now, could we please get on with more appropriate subjects than Miss Granger's appearance and start this blasted meeting?" he snarled.

Snape ate his breakfast quickly, determined not to be sidelined by Dumbledore. He felt the familiar blue eyes upon him, but they were not twinkling. Snape pushed his plate away and stalked back to his dungeons. He could see that the headmaster was concerned for the young witch. *Let him deal with her!* he thought as he slammed the door to his private office behind him.

Dumbledore was back in his office, pacing and thinking about last night's staff meeting. Severus' behavior had been most irregular. The fact that the wizard was sarcastic and overly critical did not bother him...he was well familiar with that side of Severus' personality. It was the *anger* behind the comments which worried him. Not only that, but seeing Miss Granger this morning put him ill at ease. She did not seem to be well at all. He was determined to sort it all out. He called Minerva to his office for a chat.

"Minerva, I am very concerned with Miss Granger. I wanted to know what you have heard from the Gryffindors," he asked with concern.

"Well, most of the students like her new appearance and think her transformation is a good thing... except Messrs. Potter and Weasley. They seemed worried. They have mentioned that she is withdrawn and silent most of the time. She has always out-shone in Transfiguration. However, her magical abilities seem to be... waning. I thought it was because of the attention she was receiving...she didn't feel the need to bury herself in her work. However, I realized, Albus, she still may not be over the shock of what Voldemort tried to do to her."

"Interesting," mumbled the headmaster. He went to the Floo and called for Professor Flitwick to join them.

When Flitwick arrived, Albus asked him about Miss Granger's class work.

"Her essays are excellent. She is still very conscientious in class. Whenever I do call upon her, she is always prepared to answer correctly. However, she is not as eager to answer questions as she once was." Flitwick said in his squeaky voice.

"How is her Charms work?" Dumbledore asked softly.

Flitwick grimaced. "Well, Albus, honestly, it is growing weak. She can not perform the same level of magical power she was doing before the attack."

Dumbledore looked at his teachers with barely concealed rage. "Why has this been hidden? Why have you both not seen fit to discuss this matter with me?" he snapped.

McGonagall and Flitwick exchanged nervous glances.

"Albus," McGonagall said as she approached the side of his desk, "I thought it best to let some time go by. After all, you did say we were not to speak of what happened to Miss Granger. I'm sure Filius agrees with me that we just wanted some time to pass to see if it was just a bump in the road, as it were. If it had continued for much longer, I was already set in my mind to speak with you," she said reassuringly.

"Same for me, Albus," confessed Flitwick. "I didn't want to place more pressure on the girl after what she had gone through. I just wanted to give Miss Granger time to sort out her problems, like Minerva said."

Dumbledore sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose after removing his glasses.

"Thank you, Filius," he said quietly. "You may leave."

"Albus, what is happening to her?" Minerva asked, visibly upset.

"I don't know. However, I want to see Miss Granger immediately."

McGonagall rose to leave. "She's in Potions. I'll speak with Severus."

Snape was lecturing on the brewing process for the Draught of Living Death when he heard a sharp rapping on the classroom door. He snapped at Weasley to see what the person on the other side wanted. The Potions master was not pleased to see the domineering presence of Minerva McGonagall in his classroom. He made sure his glare was fierce as she walked up the far aisle.

She reached him and whispered, "Severus, Dumbledore wishes to see Miss Granger immediately in his office. I'll escort her."

"Miss Granger!" he snapped.

"Yes, sir?" she asked as she looked up wearily.

"You are dismissed. Go with Professor McGonagall. I shall place your potion in stasis. Afterward, you will come and finish it. I shall speak with Professor Vector about your absence from her class," he said sharply.

McGonagall shot him a look of pure loathing as she went to help Hermione, who seemed to be walking slowly.

Before they started walking up the stone stairs that led from the dungeons to the main hall, McGonagall turned to Hermione and looked at her appraisingly.

"Hermione, I am very concerned. You do not seem at all well! What is wrong?" the older witch asked.

Hermione lied. "Nothing, Ma'am. I think I'm studying just too hard for my N.E.W.T.s and not getting enough rest."

Hermione knew McGonagall did not seem satisfied with her answer. Nevertheless, she hoped that she would accept it. After all, it did make perfect sense. She was notorious for working herself into the ground when it came to important tests.

They walked slowly to the headmaster's office. Hermione felt very tired. It was a long trek from Snape's classroom to Dumbledore's office, and breathing was becoming difficult.

They finally reached the office, and before Dumbledore could speak, McGonagall said, "Headmaster, Miss Granger is extremely ill. She could barely walk here from the dungeons without difficulty and labored breathing."

Hermione felt her stomach drop to the ground. *Oh, God! Please don't let them find out!* she thought frantically. She forced her face to remain calm and not to give away her emotions. She made sure not to look at the headmaster in the eyes.

"What do you suggest, Minerva?" Dumbledore asked.

"I want to take her to Poppy," she said decidedly.

Hermione could feel her heart racing. She was petrified. Poppy would surely want to examine her. If she did, then her secret would be out, and everything would come undone! She still forced herself to stay calm. She would figure out something!

"Very well. I shall speak with Miss Granger's professors," Dumbledore replied.

Hermione kept her head hung low, refusing to look at the old wizard, but she could sense him looking at her over his half-moon spectacles.

"Miss Granger, regardless of what Madam Pomfrey might say, I want you to stay for the remainder of the day resting in the infirmary. You may only leave for dinner. I want you to eat a very rich and healthy meal. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she said quietly and then followed McGonagall out of the office, towards the hospital wing.

She was terrified.

Hermione knew she had bled a little too much earlier and decided that she was going to need to get into Professor Snape's storeroom and steal some Blood Replenishing Potion if she was going to continue cutting. Then, she would be just fine and not have to worry about McGonagall or Dumbledore interfering. The problem was getting it without having any help. Perhaps, she could get Harry and Ron to help her sneak into his private stores by telling them that she needed something else, or she could lie about wanting to make a creative mix-up with his potions since Professor Snape had been so cruel to her. They would believe that. It would be like her to be clever with her vindictiveness.

She had been so busy coming up with a suitable plan in her mind that she hadn't realized that they were already in the infirmary and Madam Pomfrey was talking to her.

"Well, overwork and under-eating can ruin a person's health!" the mediwitch chided.

Hermione nodded dumbly as Madam Pomfrey looked on, sighing.

"I'm giving her a Pepper-up Potion, Minerva. I wholeheartedly agree with the headmaster! She will stay here for the duration of the day, resting."

She looked at Hermione and said sharply, "There shall be no studying for you today, my girl! Now in bed with you!"

Hermione obeyed, crawled into a bed, took the small phial that Madam Pomfrey handed her, and drank it in one gulp. She felt the magic of the potion tingling through her, and for the first time in weeks, she felt true relief.

As she drifted off to sleep, she heard Madam Pomfrey say to Professor McGonagall, "Well, I've never seen a person react so adversely to a Pepper-up Potion! I must speak with Severus. After all, he is the one that brews this for me...this could be serious!"

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 18

As suspicions rise, Hermione becomes more determined to keep her secret, which culminates into a tragic disaster.

A/N: I am so humbled by all the reviews I have received. The honesty shared by some of you have touched me deeply. I hope this story will bring you some healing and understanding. I want to also thank my beta, Shellsnapeluver, who has walked me through each chapter. She is a true gem!

That evening, Madam Pomfrey watched Hermione as the younger witch ate her dinner. The mediwitch usually didn't take her dinner in the Great Hall; there usually were too many patients in the infirmary for her to get away so early. Most evenings she had a tray brought to her by the house-elves in her office. However, this evening she had been very concerned with Miss Granger's pallor and gait as she had left the infirmary for dinner. Madam Pomfrey had wanted to question her further about the night she had disappeared. Dumbledore had held a staff meeting with all four heads of houses and herself. She knew that Miss Granger had nearly been raped and that Severus Snape had been present to witness it. The young witch had rope burns on her wrists and ankles. She had healed her burns easily enough, but Miss Granger had remained stubbornly silent when she tried to urge her to talk more about what had happened.

Poppy pursed her lips into a thin line as she recalled the headmaster's directive on not talking about the event. She felt it had been an error on Dumbledore's part. She had watched her patient walk out of her care still pale and uneasy as she had entered it. The mediwitch observed Miss Granger as she ravenously ate a very rare steak. The mediwitch's brows furrowed. *Something is wrong! I don't give a damn anymore about what the headmaster thinks! I'm going to get to the bottom of this!* Poppy thought. She would speak with Severus immediately.

Professor Snape was pouring himself another glass of pumpkin juice when he caught Poppy Pomfrey eyeballing him.

What in the world is she about? he thought, irritated. *She never comes to have dinner here!*

He resumed eating his dinner, having decided to ignore Poppy's glare. He took a bite of potatoes when the thought came into his head that maybe there had been a problem with the latest patch of potions he had given her last week. *Well, if that's the issue, she needs to just come over, talk to me, and stop glowering at me like a misbehaving first-year!* he thought meanly.

Soon, Madam Pomfrey stood, and Snape watched out of the corner of his eye as the mediwitch made her way to his side.

He rolled his eyes as he took a stab at his asparagus. Why couldn't people have the courtesy to wait until after dinner to deal with minor annoyances!

"Professor Snape," she said tersely as she stood behind him at the Head Table.

"Yes, Poppy," he said with a sigh as he laid down his fork. There would be no finishing his meal this night! He knew that tone in her voice only too well.

"I must speak with you immediately about the health of a student. I fear it is most urgent!" she said curtly.

That's unexpected! he thought. His expression softened. "Of course," he murmured and left his dinner to follow her to the infirmary. He wondered why on earth ~~a~~mediwitch would need his opinion on the health of one of her patients?

Damn and blast! Who got whom pregnant? he thought angrily as he strode into the infirmary right behind Poppy.

He looked around the room, searching for the emergency...for the patient, for that matter...as all the beds were empty. He looked at her with a mixture of frustration and confusion. "Where is the patient?" he asked, annoyed that she had interrupted his dinner for a lark.

Madam Pomfrey stood straight and tall. "She is not here any longer. However, I need to speak with you about her condition," she said crisply.

"You couldn't have waited until I was finished with dinner?" he snapped at her.

She gave him one of her infamous glowers. "Severus, please have a seat in my office," she said icily.

She sat behind her desk, and he took a seat across from her, waiting for her to tell him what was so damn important.

His impatience must have been evident. She went right into her speech with a clipped tone.

"Severus, I had Miss Granger brought to me by Minerva this afternoon." She raised her hand, knowing very soon he was going to start interjecting and went on ahead.

"Now, I know what happened the night Miss Granger was taken from Hogsmeade. I also know the headmaster does not wish for us to discuss the matter. Nevertheless, I feel I must! I know that you were there that night, and I thought perhaps you could shed some light as to her condition."

She paused for him to absorb her words.

When he remained silent, she continued. "Miss Granger was very tight-lipped about what had happened to her when I healed her burns. I had wanted to give her a full examination that very morning, but the headmaster said it wasn't necessary. However, after what I witnessed today, I feel I must insist on it. Miss Granger came in here this afternoon pale and short of breath. She was frail and weak, and when I gave her a Pepper-up Potion, she had an adverse reaction. She actually fell asleep! Then, later at dinner tonight, she ate an extremely rare steak. Either she's with child or a werewolf!"

She sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. "Now, is there something I need to know, Severus, before I examine her?" she asked impatiently. "I don't want to walk into this with my eyes closed, and Miss Granger isn't exactly being forthright these days! Has she been violated or bitten?" she asked shrilly.

"Sounds like Lycanthropy," Severus said worriedly. "However, we would know if she had been attacked." A signal went off in his brain *What if Greyback bit her that night?* No, he had seen no puncture marks or wounds on her. Moreover, that animal would have ripped her to shreds before releasing her once he had been allowed a taste. Nonetheless, he may have been ordered to only bite her in a discreet location on her body. It wasn't as if he got a close-up look upon every part of her body!

He resumed his detached demeanor. "Well, it seems she is in need of Blood-Replenishing Potion. I agree with you. Her ravenous eating, the rare steak, weakness, paleness, all point to that," he replied. He turned to leave and then stopped and looked at her thoughtfully. "Poppy, I can honestly say I have no idea as to the reason behind Miss Granger's condition. She should have been given a complete physical. All I can say is this: Miss Granger is a virgin. I Portkeyed her away with me before she could have been raped. My suspicion would be Lycanthropy. Look for any suspicious bite marks. I will send her up to you."

"Very well, Severus," she said in satisfaction as he walked out of her office.

Severus was concerned. He knew he had been very cruel and viciously malevolent towards her. He just could not handle what had happened that terrible night in the field. He knew he had been unforgivably abusive and crippling with his words. He actually felt relief when Andromeda had slapped him. He had deserved it. He had deserved to have his bollocks hexed off! However, Miss Granger had not retaliated. He was now at a loss as to why.

But then she had the nerve to show up in his class looking like a siren! As if she needed those stupid cosmetics to make her pretty. She was gorgeous without a drop of make-up! He had already been feeling like dirt because of the way his body reacted to seeing her naked and tied up in that field. The deviant and dark part of him wanted to tear right into her and take her virginity for himself to enjoy. However, his honorable side was greater, and he was repulsed by the *display* in front of him...but, oh, not *her*, and had cursed himself for the erection in his pants while she had lain there debased and humiliated. Then, to make things worse, his conscience had slipped, and he found himself unable to resist running his hand down her body. He had nearly lost his control. He had never known she had hidden such a mature body under her robes. God, he wanted her, and he hated himself for it!

The day she had walked into his class looking so fetching and lovely, he had been terrified. Had she been trying to prove to him that he was a liar, calling her ugly? He felt his body react strongly to her beauty. He had not been able to get her out of his head. He knew now the body that was hidden underneath her robes. Until that night, he had never allowed himself to fantasize or dwell on her for any length of time. After all, she was his student! It did not matter she was eighteen. There were rules, and certain rules must never be broken. But, all of a sudden, she was a woman. Her naked body was full, luscious, and his for the taking. He had remembered she was already of legal age, which was the reason for her induction into the Order, but she had continued to wear those damn school robes around him and had continued to call him *Professor!* He didn't want that. He wanted a woman, a real woman with a mature woman's mind to match the body. He had already noticed she was very adult in her mind. However, as long as she wore those robes and called him professor, she could never be a woman to him.

Then in an instant, it had all fallen apart, and he had found himself staring at her naked body lustfully. There had been no school uniform, no endless questioning. He had only seen the woman she had become as he had stared at her full breasts, rounded hips, and the thick patch of hair between her legs. His mouth had watered as he had reached down to glide his hands down her body. Now he was dreaming of her every night and masturbating to the image of her underneath him as he brought her to orgasm again and again. He imagined the way she would call out his name and the sweet sounds she would make as he took her gently over and over.

He had to stop this desire, this *awareness* his body now had for her. She could never know how much he wanted her, so he had turned malicious and angry. Yet, she had remained passive and unaware of the motive behind his cruelty. He had seen how she had crumbled before him, but he could not have afforded to care or show his concern...he still couldn't.

Besides, he was still so angry that she had cost him his place in Voldemort's court, which meant his very existence was now useless, his purpose lost. His Mark had indeed begun to burn, but a special localized numbing spell had dulled the pain and had made it just an unbearable pain, instead of the excruciating, gut-searing pain to which he had become accustomed.

After dinner, Hermione was on her way back to her dorm when Professor Snape stopped her. He materialized out of nowhere, as usual, startling her. As she tried to calm her breathing, he began to yell at her for not finishing her potion.

"Miss Granger," he began as his eyes bore into hers, "I just spoke with Madam Pomfrey. If you would take more care of your body instead of whiling away your time on frivolous and superficial matters, such as, making sure your lipstick is on correctly, I wouldn't have had my class, or my dinner, interrupted! Because of your selfishness, I've had my entire day disrupted, and you have received a zero for failing to finish your work. I do hope it was worth it," he finished with a sneer.

"Now," he said nastily. "I want you to return to the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey wants to examine you. You look like hell! I expect for you to never disrupt my class again because of your worthless, idiotic notions of beauty! Have I made myself clear?" he barked.

"Yes, sir," she whispered as he whirled away, leaving her standing alone in the hallway.

She stood there angry and furious as the words of Professor Snape resounded in her mind. She decided not to go back to the infirmary. She had no intention of having Madam Pomfrey discover her secret. After she had been chewed out by Professor Snape, she was desperate to cut herself. Her efforts were frivolous, superficial, and worthless? Of course, they were. She was only doing, what was it...trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear? That's what her mother called it whenever she would see an ugly woman trying to make herself beautiful. Well, she may be just a sow's ear, but she needed her armor, and she wasn't going to stop! She needed it now more than ever, now that McGonagall and Pomfrey were suspicious of her condition.

Hermione decided she couldn't wait until the night to relieve her pain. Instead of going to the infirmary, she nearly ran back to Gryffindor Tower to begin her ritual. She locked herself in the bathroom and began to remove her clothes. She looked at herself in the mirror. She carefully removed her bandages from her stomach. The word UGLY in prominent bloody letters surrounded by puffy, pink skin rose out from the canvas that was her pale body. She got into the shower and cleansed it so it would not become infected. She had to take the next step. She had been so wounded by the lecture Professor Snape had given her earlier; his words had been like a knife, plunging straight into her heart. The heaviness of her anger and self-hatred made her chest feel as if there were ten hippogriffs sitting on it. At every turn, she continued to be a disappointment to him. She would never be anything acceptable. She would never be worth anything. She just couldn't do anything right to please him or anyone. Well, perhaps this would be where she could excel.

She grasped the razor, took a deep breath, and started to carve.

It was taking too long. The words in her head would not stop speaking! She had to cut deeper and gouge it out! She began to slash at her arms one swipe after another. She was in a vicious rage. The blood splattered across the white tile of the shower with each slice across her milky, white skin. She ground her teeth and swallowed her screams as she continued to wield her razor in a fury. Once the rage had subsided, she stood there panting as she looked at her blood in detachment. It looked like scarlet ribbons sliding down from her body, rippling and cascading in a mock parody of decoration. She lifted her arms one by one and gracefully moved them in sweeping arcs, the blood falling onto her face and chest as she raised them above her head.

She then returned to her original purpose. On her chest, above her breasts, she carved the word, that horrible word: SWOT. She was amazed at how much pressure inside was now relieved. No longer was her chest feeling tight and constricted. She was feeling light and high, floating on a cloud. *A red cloud*, she thought with a giddy laugh in her head.

Now, it was complete. A Swot...that was what she was. *Professor Snape is cruel, but he isn't a liar*, she reminded herself. She started to feel fuzzy and light-headed. The room was spinning around and around. It felt nice. The last thing she remembered was falling...

A/N: I know this is an evil cliffie, but rest assured, Hermione will be found alive.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 18

Hermione is discovered, and Snape, while trying to save her life, is confronted by a very outspoken and intimidating Ginny Weasley.

A/N: Again, my humble thanks to my beta, Shellsnapelover, and to all of you who have continued to read and review!

"Hermione! This isn't fair! You can't take up all the hot water!" whined Lavender Brown, who was standing in front of the bathroom door, yelling at it.

Pavarti rushed in and said to the furious girl, "What is wrong?"

"I'm trying to get in to take a damn shower before bed and Hermione has warded the fucking door! Bitch!" she screamed loudly as she gave the door a kick in frustration.

Pavarti rolled her eyes. "I'll get Ginny. She knows how to undo Hermione's wards."

A moment later, Ginny walked into the dorm room, looking concerned, pushed Lavender aside, and began to remove Hermione's complicated wards.

"What the hell?" said Lavender after Ginny had pushed her aside. "Who the hell do you think you are?" she snapped.

"Shut it, Lavender," snapped Ginny as she concentrated on the wards.

Finally, the redheaded girl successfully broke the wards, slammed open the door and ran inside. A horrific scream pierced Lavender's ears, and a chill shot up her spine. Lavender looked at Pavarti in alarm and together the two Gryffindors dashed inside. Lavender heard mumbling coming from the final shower stall and motioned for Pavarti to her side. They yanked back the curtain and screamed when they discovered a soaking wet Ginny holding a naked, bloody Hermione. There was blood everywhere, streaming from Hermione's body. Lavender couldn't tell where the injury had originated from; it seemed every vein in her body had burst and she was bleeding to death. Lavender knelt down next to Ginny's side. The water was freezing cold now, so she quickly turned the water off. Ginny yelled for a towel, and Pavarti ran back to cabinet where the all the linens were kept. Lavender sat frozen as she watched Ginny cradle her best friend. She could see Hermione was murmuring something to Ginny, and the redhead was nodding in return. Lavender felt her brain was numb. She couldn't make any sense of the mangled mess Hermione had made of her body.

Ginny shook her out of her stupor. "Lavender, get help, now! Get McGonagall!" she yelled.

Lavender ran out of the bedroom, in her dressing robe, ignoring the wolf whistles as she ran past the common room and dashed out the door. She was beside herself. *Okay, okay, I have to get McGonagall!* she thought hurriedly.

She ran down the corridor towards the staircases and saw Professor Snape coming around the corner. *Oh shit!* She tried to run past him, but he stuck his arm out, blocking her path, catching her by the waist. She began to scream for him to release her and fruitlessly tried to kick him in order to fight off his grip.

"Miss Brown!" he thundered. "You will desist this minute!"

Lavender was desperate to find Professor McGonagall. She didn't want Snape knowing what was happening in Gryffindor Tower. She continued to strain against him whilst sobbing. She felt herself begin to hyperventilate. Snape must have noticed her distress. He began to shush her and took hold of her arms gently.

"Miss Brown," he said kindly. "Miss Brown, calm down," he whispered softly as he stroked her arms and straightened her robe. "Tell me what is wrong," he said, coaxing her to regain self-control.

Lavender gulped and took a breath. "I have to get McGonagall! I-I-t's H-Hermione Granger! Blood, dying, I-I...she was in the s-shower and Ginny, blood everywhere!" She started to cry again when she saw Snape's face go pale with alarm. He grabbed her wrist and made her run back with him back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Password, girl!" he snarled as they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Willy-Nilly" she said breathlessly.

The door opened to the common room as gasps, and shrieks came out from the crowd as Professor Snape strode in with Lavender Brown in tow. He had her by her upper arm in a death grip, but she wasn't going to dare struggle from him.

Whispers came from everyone. *What the bloody hell is going on? Why was Professor Snape in Gryffindor Tower? Why was he with Lavender? Didn't she just run out of here? Are they shagging? Naw, he wouldn't be seen with her if he were shagging her, you pillock!*

The muttering continued as Lavender led the Professor up to the seventh-year girls' dormitory.

Lavender Brown led Snape toward the bathroom, where he threw open the door. His eyes darted around the room, and noticed Miss Patil sitting in a corner of the bathroom covered in blood, sobbing. She pointed a shaky, bloody hand to a shower stall. He braced himself as he strode towards the far stall. He gathered his thoughts as he ripped the curtain back. His eyes made immediate contact with Miss Weasley, and in her arms lay Hermione, covered in copious amounts of thick, dark, blood. Her face was pale as death. It was too much for his mind to comprehend. His heart felt it was going to burst from the pain that racked his chest. He tried to remain in control of his feelings, but his voice betrayed him. He let out an anguished choke at the sight in front of him.

Ginny Weasley was clutching the naked, limp, and bloody form of Hermione like she were a broken doll in need of tender handling. She was holding her gently and looked at her soothingly, whispering words of comfort to the unconscious girl. Ginny was soaked to the skin and was shivering terribly. However, she seemed unaware of her own condition; Hermione was all that mattered to her. Her red hair clung to her face as she smoothed the blood-matted hair of Hermione's away from her face. There was a blood soaked towel that had been used and discarded in the corner of the stall. The witch's body was a mangled mess of slashes and blood. Ginny tried to keep Hermione

modest while Professor Snape conjured a stretcher and levitated her on it. Miss Patil handed him another towel, and he laid it over her, covering her nakedness as he levitated her out and into the common room. The three girls followed.

They came down the stairs back into the common room. The Gryffindors there rushed towards them, talking at once.

"Ginny, what happened?"

"Lavender, why was Snape dragging you back here?"

"Professor," began one student.

"GET BACK!" Snape barked as he continued to levitate Hermione's stretcher out of the common room. He stood glaring at the students with barely concealed fury. "One more word, and I shall remove every house point you own!" he threatened viciously.

The Gryffindors backed down and got out of the way. Some looked at the girls curiously. However, they all shook their heads tersely and remained silent, following Professor Snape silently to the infirmary as if mourners.

Snape banged through the doors of the hospital wing. The wooden doors crashed against the walls as he strode like a thunderstorm through the entrance.

"POPPY!" he bellowed as he went about getting Hermione settled in a bed. He circled around looking for the best place to put her where she could have privacy. He levitated the stretcher to the far wall and snapped his fingers at the three girls to follow him.

Madam Pomfrey dashed of her office, breathless, saying, "My goodness, Professor Snape! Must you..." She stopped and quickly sped over to the stretcher and looked at the pale face of Hermione Granger. She looked at the two bloodstained girls and signaled Snape to get the girl onto a bed.

He stripped down the blankets and sheets with one hand while he continued to levitate the stretcher with his wand hand. As he worked, he heard Madam Pomfrey sharply question the girls. They were all talking at once.

"Door locked..."

"Ginny came and unwarded it..."

"Hermione bleeding from cutting and collapsed!"

"Severus, go into my personal stores and get Blood-Replenishing Potion. Here...take my wand. You can't access my stores without it," she explained as she pressed the thin rod into Snape's palm.

Without a word, he strode towards the back room while Poppy gently pulled back the towel. He glanced out of corner of his eye the mediwitch's gasp of horror at the bloody sight before her. He wished he could just snap his fingers and Hermione's body would be pristine and whole. He wanted to stop and return to her bedside and remain with her, but he couldn't. He hurried to the large wooden door and unwarded it. He searched the many small drawers and cupboards and saw the label for Blood- Replenishing Potion. He grabbed a large full beaker and dashed back into the infirmary where he could see the full extent of the witch's injuries.

An ashen-faced Hermione lay with cut marks all over her arms and thighs. On her stomach was the word UGLY that appeared recent but not from this night. Above her breasts was the word SWOT. It was fresh and recently clotted.

Poppy gasped and tried to cover her from Snape's eyes, but he pushed her aside. He balled up his anger, revulsion, and fear and forced it down inside him where he could control it while he began to administer the Blood-Replenishing Potion to Hermione. It was uncommonly quiet. There were no more hushed whimpers and sobs. He glanced upwards and saw the three girls looking at him with concern and fear.

Madam Pomfrey had been standing in shock until this point. She placed her hand on Snape's shoulder. "Professor Snape!" Madam Pomfrey screeched. "This is most irregular! You should not be seeing her in this condition!" she hissed.

"Poppy, shut up!" he bellowed as he began testing her vitals. He opened one of the unconscious girl's eyelids open and passed his palm over it and removed it quickly to check the dilation of her eyes. "Get me more Potion!" he growled to the mediwitch as he absent-mindedly thrust her wand back into her hand. His eyes never left Hermione's face. Her lips were gray, he noted, as he passed a thumb over them. He stripped off his teaching robes and overcoat and began to examine the wounds. He noticed blood slowly seeping from between her legs. He gently pushed her legs apart to see the inside of her thighs.

"Shit!" he swore softly.

He jerked his head towards the three girls who had been silently staring at him with wide, concerned eyes and glowered at them. "Well, what do have to say? You are all her friends, right? Why the *bloody hell* didn't you inform anyone about this?" he shouted in a fit of rage. He wanted to throttle all of them for being so blind and stupid!

Ginny stepped forward, apparently not afraid of the wizard.

"We didn't know, and believe me, we tried to find out! All we knew was that something was wrong. Even though she was looking more posh with her new hair-do and make-up, we still knew something was wrong, but we never thought this!" she said in whispered horror.

Snape glided his hands lightly across the words carved on her body.

"Professor, do you think someone did this at first and then she just began doing to herself?" Pavarti asked softly.

"No, Miss Patil. I think this is all self-inflicted," he whispered softly, never taking his eyes once off her body as he spoke.

"Why?" cried out Lavender suddenly. "Why would anyone want to carve such things on their body?"

Snape winced. Ginny caught it as it flashed across his face. He watched as the redhead glared at him accusingly. He waited for her to accuse him, hex him, or scream. She did nothing. Poppy returned with more potion. Snape broke his eye contact with the young Miss Weasley as he ripped the bottle from Poppy's hands and focused again on Hermione's care. He forced more Blood Replenishing Potion down her throat and rechecked her vitals. Finally, he breathed a sigh of relief and looked down at his hands, noticed that they had been shaking the whole time.

"She's going to be fine," he announced with a sigh of relief.

He allowed himself a moment to control himself and then bent over and began to whisper an incantation over her body to heal her cuts. His voice carried like a song as he gently and patiently magically erased each cut from her flesh. If it had been any other situation, it would have been very erotic to be so close to her sex. His voice breathed warm air over her tiny curls, and his sensitive nose could detect a hint of her feminine musk over the blood. However, he was not thinking of such things. All he could think on was saving her life and undoing the damage she had inflicted upon herself.

Poppy began to make another protest about the indecency of a male professor healing a naked girl between her legs, but surprisingly, Ginny shushed her.

"You will not speak to me in this manner, my girl! Now you get yourself out of here back to Gryffindor Tower and take these two with you!" Poppy ordered.

Snape rose from between Hermione's thighs.

"Will you shut up!" he hissed at the mediwitch. He bent his dark head back down to Hermione's thighs and said, "Let them stay, they are witnesses. If you are so damned concerned, then get the headmaster here," he growled.

"Why? This is unthinkable! Why would Hermione do such a thing?" Lavender asked again.

"I don't know, Lavender," Ginny said softly. "However, I'm positive someone knows."

Snape glanced up at Miss Weasley. She was glaring darkly down at him with her arms crossed imperiously across her chest. He lowered his head and returned to healing the unconscious witch.

Dumbledore and Minerva finally arrived. Lavender and Pavarti quickly told them everything that had happened in bathroom while Ginny kept her vigil at Hermione's unconscious side, keeping her glaring eyes upon the Potions master. Snape could feel her eyes boring into his head. He wasn't about to be intimidated. He glanced up again at the girl and narrowed his eyes at her before returning his eyes back onto Hermione.

Dumbledore walked around while McGonagall tried calming the young ladies down and was confronted by Madam Pomfrey.

"Headmaster, this is indecent! I insist you make Professor Snape end this at once!" she said shrilly.

"No, Poppy, Severus is very good at healing deep slashes," he said absent-mindedly as he took in the words carved into Miss Granger's flesh.

"Her innocence and modesty, headmaster? Do those things not mean anything?"

"Damn it, woman! Shut the bloody hell up!" Severus bellowed with irritation as he lifted his head to glare at the mediwitch.

Dumbledore patted the mediwitch on the shoulder as Snape continued to glare at her. "Poppy, I think it would be best to leave this with Severus. I shall call you when he is done with the healing," he said calmly.

"Fine!" she snapped as she stormed off.

Dumbledore looked at the young Miss Weasley.

"Ginny?" he called.

"Yes, Headmaster?" she asked angrily.

"Do you have any information that would be of any use?" he asked gently.

"No," she said, her voice dripping with hostility. "Ask him!" she accused. Snape noticed she was pointing an accusing finger at him, but he did not retort. He was starting to work on the first word...UGLY...as Dumbledore continued his questioning.

"You think Professor Snape had something to do with this?" he prodded.

"I do! I think that something happened that was very bad two months ago...that day she went missing in Hogsmeade. Hermione hasn't been the same since! I think HE knows what happened and won't tell," she said snidely.

Ginny made her way back to the bed where Hermione lay unconscious. "Tell me, *Professor*, how does it make you feel finally seeing the outcome of the abuse you heap on those who don't deserve it?" she said viciously.

He remained silent, but it was getting difficult to ignore the chit, but he continued to focus on Hermione as he healed her sliced and mangled body.

Professor McGonagall grabbed Ginny by the forearm, but she shook her off violently and leaned closer towards Professor Snape. "Tell me *Professor*, how is it that a beautiful and talented witch comes to sink so low that she cuts words like UGLY and SWOT into her flesh?" she cried, yelling louder and louder with each accusation.

"You will mind your cheek, Miss Weasley!" he finally shouted angrily, abandoning his task.

'Oh, but I haven't even started yet, *sir*,' she threatened.

McGonagall started to go after Ginny again, but Dumbledore held her back. Snape had looked up to chastise the Weasley girl again when he saw Minerva try to contain her and was halted by Dumbledore. He looked at the old wizard suspiciously. He was looking at Miss Weasley with a very curious expression, as if her were trying to sort out a puzzle.

Snape finally turned his narrowed eyes onto the young girl. The witch and wizard locked eyes in rage. Dumbledore finally broke the tension and said, "Severus, please finish attending to Miss Granger." Then, he nodded for McGonagall to intervene.

"Miss Weasley, I think you, Miss Brown, and Miss Patil need to return to your dormitories," said Professor McGonagall sharply.

"Fine," she said curtly, never taking her eyes off the Potions master. She leaned over the supine body of her unconscious friend and whispered, "This isn't over, Snape. Not remotely, close. And if you think you can intimidate me like you can my boyfriend, you are an even bigger fool than I thought," she said coldly.

She straightened herself and walked out without looking back.

"Severus, you may have eluded the Dark Lord, but you have a new enemy to watch out for. We shall talk more on this later," Dumbledore said angrily.

Cursing all and sundry under his breath, Snape bent over to start healing the word SWOT.

If only I could do this to her mind as well...

When the danger had finally passed, Severus made his way down to the dungeons to relieve his panic. His hands had begun to shake terribly now that the need for him to force a calm face in front of the spectators had passed. He just couldn't get the images of Hermione out of his mind. He had barely closed the door of his private rooms before the tears came down his face. The guilt was eating away at him. He had done this. He had pushed her too hard, had been too cruel.

He made his way to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. He had been ordered by Dumbledore to help her. "Hermione is special, and although she is young, she has much to offer the Order." Snape had never accepted her admittance, never gave her a chance, blaming her for every little thing that went wrong. Always, hiding, always lying...afraid to be found out how much he really cared.

He sat down and brooded as he stared into the fire. He closed his eyes. *The truth always hurts the most. Why can't we just keep on lying?* He thought bitterly. The truth was Hermione was everything that he thought was refreshing and bright about the world around him. There was so much doom and gloom, and he was so very weary. Then

one day, she marched in like a mist of water on a hot summer day. The perpetual winter inside him basked in the summer sun that he saw in her eyes as she had repeated her Oath of Allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix.

Tonight those eyes had threatened to grow as cold as he. Even if he could never tell her how alive she made him feel, how happy and awake he felt whenever she was in his presence, he could bask in the sunshine of her brilliance and feel warm and free...

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 18

Snape has to face Dumbledore and explain his actions towards Hermione the night she was kidnapped by Voldemort.

A/N: Again, I am so grateful for the reviews I've received. I hope that you all enjoy this chapter.

Also, my continued praise to my wonderful beta, Shellsnapeluver!

Snape had finally finished healing Hermione's wounds about a half an hour ago. She was now miserably resting in the infirmary...well, she was trying to rest. Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall were on one side of her bed, while Snape and Dumbledore were on the other, looking down on her with pity.

"Why, Hermione?" Professor McGonagall asked softly. "Why would you *mutilate* yourself like that?"

Hermione shrugged as she stared forward, looking very hard at the dull bed across from her as if it held something of greater importance than talking to any of her professors.

McGonagall turned her head at the wizards and shrugged in frustration. She turned back to focus again on the young witch and sat next to her in her bed.

"Hermione, this is very desperate behavior. It calls for drastic action on our part. You need to tell us what is wrong."

She looked at the wizards standing silently by and replied numbly, "I've been ordered not to speak of it, remember?"

She shifted her eyes slowly towards Snape and darted her eyes upwards to meet his. She wanted to accuse him, to cut him as he had sliced her. Instead, she felt a sharp pain behind her eyes and a small intrusion.

"How dare you!" She placed her hands over her head. She didn't want his eyes probing inside her. Then, she grew fiercely angry and pulled herself together. She sat straight up and challenged his audacity. "How dare you try to Legilimize me, you fucking excuse for a human being!"

McGonagall jumped from the bed. "Miss Granger! You will mind your tongue!"

"Really, Miss Granger, there is no cause for that sort of language!" scolded Madam Pomfrey.

Hermione ignored them both. "I hate you! I fucking hate you!" she screeched. Her fists were balled up into small fists, and her throat felt scratchy from the force and volume she used.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "You will not..."

In a flash, Hermione tore off her bedcovers, jumped out of bed, and struck him across the face. His face swung hard to the side, and her hand began stinging.

The adults around her blew up in response.

"Albus, do something..."

"Hermione Granger, I am appalled at your behavior..."

Hermione blocked out everyone around her except for Snape. "How dare you think to speak to me? You are a black-hearted vulture! You are nothing more than a dementor, feeding off the good in people for your own consumption! Everybody was right! How could I ever have thought you had any decency in you? I spent years defending you, and it was just a bloody waste of my time and energy!" She stood glowering at him, wanting her rage and hate from her gaze to burn through him. She would have clawed his eyes out, but thought of touching him again, even just to maim him, was repugnant to her.

"Miss Granger, you will calm yourself this instant!" he snarled as he tried to gain control over the situation.

"I'll just do it again, you know," she whispered with a deranged smile spreading across her face. McGonagall and Pomfrey gently led her away from Snape and were putting her back into bed. "It doesn't matter anyway," she muttered to no one in particular as she curled up beneath the sheets, staring into nothingness.

"Dear Merlin, she's gone round the twist," said Madam Pomfrey to the others as she looked intently into the blank face of the young witch.

Dumbledore faced Snape, "Severus, my office, now!" His eyes were throwing daggers, and Snape knew there was going to be hell to pay for what happened to Hermione. He walked out of the infirmary feeling a heavy weight upon his chest, and he knew what that was: guilt. He had gone too far and made the girl lose her mind.

When they reached the headmaster's office, Dumbledore walked directly to his fireplace and Flooed Andromeda Tonks. Snape stood by the desk, silently waiting.

When Dumbledore finished, he said, "Mrs. Tonks will be coming to speak with us, Severus. I believe she has some information concerning Miss Granger that may shed some light as to why she is behaving so self-destructively. Have you anything to say before she arrives?"

"No, Headmaster," he said quietly.

When Andromeda Tonks arrived, she strode out of the fireplace and into the office looking furiously angry. She pointedly ignored the Potions master and instead addressed

Dumbledore.

"Headmaster," she said politely.

"Please, Andromeda, call me Albus," he said as he gestured for her to take a seat. She refused.

"I don't believe I shall sit, Albus. I am much too livid over what you have told me," she said as she stood. Her thin frame was fairly shaking with rage.

She continued as she pointed to Severus, still not looking at him. "I warned him, Albus. I warned him that very night there would be the devil to pay!

"When he and Hermione Portkeyed into my house, I thought the worst. He was standing over her naked body. She was blue in her extremities from exposure. She looked terribly frightened and disoriented. I took her upstairs, got her some of Nymphadora's old clothes and asked her what happened. I thought she had been raped. She said, no, just that she had been touched a little."

"When we came downstairs, that black bat descended on her like a nightmare! He said the most vile and humiliating things!" Her voice was shaking, and her eyes were full of tears ready to spill over.

Snape continued to stand, his feet firmly planted onto the ground. He watched as Andromeda shouted and pointed her finger at him in her rage. There was nothing he could do. Every word she said was true. He thought of that night and relived each excruciating moment of it. He winced internally at each accusation Andromeda hurled at him. A part of him wanted to fall in front of Hermione and beg her forgiveness, but he couldn't do that. It was better for him to remain a bastard, but this damn cutting had to stop. He didn't have a clue as to how they all were going to fix this situation.

Albus waited for Andromeda to take out her handkerchief and dab at her eyes. She continued. "I slapped him, and I'm glad. God knows what else he might have said to her if I had not intervened. He told her that she was nothing more than a swotty, future old maid with frizzy hair and buckteeth! I could only assume by their conversation that he had been ordered to violate her and he had refused, that's why they ended up at my place."

Dumbledore nodded, glaring at Snape, and gestured for her to continue.

She hunched over the desk, placing her fists on it as she continued. "He said if it had been any one else, he would have been able to do it. But because it was she...he couldn't 'get it up.' The bastard actually said he couldn't imagine any man being able to stomach having sex with her."

She stood up and crossed her arms, waiting for Dumbledore's reaction. He looked so very sad.

"Severus, do you have anything you would like to say?" Dumbledore whispered.

"No. I do not think anything I could contribute would be of any use," he said, trying to keep his voice as emotionless as possible.

Snape watched Andromeda battle herself. The witch wanted to hex him badly, and he didn't blame her. Dumbledore probably agreed with Andromeda that he needed hexing, badly, although only Severus knew the real motivation behind that unfortunate exchange between him and Miss Granger.

"Andromeda, I thank you for coming so late. I assure you, this matter will be dealt with immediately," Dumbledore said forcefully.

"It had better," she warned him. "He mutilated her, same as if he had carved those words into her body himself!" she raged. "I want to see her!" Her voice was very commanding. It was not a question.

"She's in the infirmary with Minerva and Poppy."

"Goodnight, Headmaster," she said sharply and walked out the office in a flourish of robes.

Dumbledore turned to Snape, who stood blankly, staring straight ahead.

"Severus, I do not understand this. Your conduct and behavior was reprehensible! Do you have anything to say for yourself?" he demanded.

"No," the taciturn man said, chastened.

"I suppose not. I suppose you would rather sit while the rest of us yell and holler about what a bastard you are, waiting for the moment we've rid ourselves of our vitriol," he said sadly.

"I'm sure you meant nothing by it...nothing truly harmful, correct?" Dumbledore added.

The dark wizard shrugged his shoulders.

Dumbledore grew angry. "You will look at me, boy!" he growled.

Snape's black eyes shot up at Dumbledore's piercing blue ones. They were flashing dangerously.

"You will explain yourself now, Severus, or I shall force you to explain in front of all the staff and Miss Granger," he said furiously.

Snape's face grew pale. He licked his lips and swallowed hard. "Fine," he said in a strangled voice. "You have no idea how disgusted I feel at this moment...how filthy and revolting I have felt ever since that night. I can't get it out of my head; I can't forget!"

He began pacing across the floor as he spoke, his black robes swirling around his long legs.

"I could have handled things a number of different ways. I thought it best to remain the vicious, cold teacher she was used to dealing with, rather than having her staring at me for the rest of the year thinking I had seen her naked and humiliated. If I had been...*tender* she would have built up an ideal, a knight in shining armor, a twisted attraction," he said painfully.

He turned around on Dumbledore, his eyes full of anguish. "Don't you dare tell me I'm making too much of it either, Albus! Ever since you let her in the Order, she has been looking at me with those eyes. I know that look. Every year, some woe-begotten girl thinks that I'm the wizard she's always wanted, always waited for, and damn it, Albus; I will not allow this with her. I *had* to make her hate me! To be so cruel and vicious that she would run crying to Potter and Weasley, letting them soothe her and tell her all would be all right. Then you had to tell her to keep it quiet!"

He slumped down in a chair and hung his head. He ran his hands through his stringy hair and sat back, resigned and tired.

"Severus," Albus began. "Poppy told me how you reacted when you arrived in the infirmary with Miss Granger. She said you were rude, territorial, and acted abominably. She also said you would not let anyone touch her or tend to her but yourself. I wonder why, for a wizard who feels no wizard could ever stomach touching her?"

He sat on the edge of his desk closer to Snape and said softly. "You care deeply for her. So deeply that you would rather she hate you with all the emotion she has built up for you these past two years than feel anything else towards you."

Snape looked at him, shocked.

"Oh, yes, my boy, I am quite aware our Miss Granger has been carrying a torch for you for quite some time. You thought it best to kill those feelings. Instead, she nearly killed herself."

"Severus, you are so intelligent, so powerful in your magical abilities, but when it comes to matters of the heart, you are quite ignorant. Miss Granger has been experiencing her first love, experimenting with her budding womanhood. She felt safe in dreaming of you as a "knight in shining armor," and you fulfilled it. Yes, a loss for the Order, but for one bright, indispensable young woman, her future saved. I understand your not wanting to encourage her, to build up hope. You could have taken her innocence as Voldemort instructed, brought her back, and remained cold and silent. However, you did not do that. Why is that, Severus?"

Snape closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

"I know, Severus, I know," the old wizard said kindly. "You respect her too much to have violated her. You also care too much to help feed her illusion of you. However, she had already decided that it was your opinion, *your word*, that mattered most. She believes, Severus, that all you said, no matter how hurtful, is the truth."

"Is she mad?" Snape asked brokenly.

"I don't know. We'll have to see. You are going to watch out for her, Severus. You are responsible for this mess, and you are going to have to clean it up. You are going to have to learn, my boy, the hard way. There will be no 'tit for tat,' no trying to minimize her pain by weighing it next to your own. You've always felt your pain and suffering to be just a bit more unbearable than everyone else's. Therefore, discounting the feelings of others never bothered you. It will bother you now," he said decidedly.

"What do you want from me, Albus?" he asked angrily.

"For now, I want you to observe. I want you to analyze how Miss Granger acts and reacts...think of it as empirical observation. I only want you to intervene if you see or sense she is damaging herself again. Other than that, you are not to speak to her while observing her. You will take no house points from her, nor will you assign detention. You will continue as her teacher, but no more hostile behavior! I will speak with Minerva about this. Now, have I been clear?"

"Yes, Headmaster," he replied softly.

Snape left Dumbledore and made the long trek back to the dungeons. As he walked along the cool, spiral staircase down to his quarters, he thought about all that Albus had said. The older wizard knew about Hermione's attraction for him, knew that she had been carrying a torch, knew that *he* was so concerned about it that he had made himself to be the bad guy in order to spare her out of his own love for her. But now it had backfired. It had all gone wrong.

Now, he was to watch over her, to see what life looked like through the eyes of the female member of the Golden Trio. He had just finished wrenching the truth out of himself and laying his emotions out for Dumbledore to dissect. The only thing he wanted to do was to stay as far away from Hermione as humanly possible. How could he possibly help? It was his fault that she was in her situation. He didn't know where to begin.

He stepped into his quarters and began to settle down and relax for the night when his Mark began to burn.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 18

Snape watches Hermione deteriorate further and sees her life through her eyes. Then another incident happens that forces Snape to realize the full weight of what he has done to Hermione.

A/N: Hugs and chocolate for my amazing beta, Shellsnapeluver! I also want to thank each one of you who take the time to read and review.

Over the next few weeks, Snape watched Miss Granger as he had been instructed to do by Dumbledore. He followed her to class, snuck around the dusty shelves of the library to keep an eye on her, and usually stared at her from beneath his lashes as they ate in the Great Hall. It was the most gut-wrenching experience he had ever known, watching the perpetual sadness eat away at such a sweet and vibrant girl. He usually Disillusioned himself so that she wouldn't notice him watching her...and it was during those times that he learned the most about Hermione Granger, or at least what others thought of her. At times he would risk exposure by leaning in closer to her to see her eyes, and it pained him to see what he found. Sadness and melancholy were inadequate to describe the hollowness he found hidden in their depths. There was a resignation that terrified him. The words she had whispered, "I'll only do it again," rang in his ears as a fearful promise. And if he ever started to doubt the seriousness of the situation, all he had to do was stick around after she left a room and listen to the gossip.

"Lavender said she was cutting herself!"

"She said she carved the word "SWOT" on her chest!"

A girl gave a snort. "On her non-existent chest? Well, at least it was the perfect word to describe her!"

The other girls sniggered.

Snape wanted to hex them all into oblivion.

One day, Snape saw Hermione walking with Mr. Weasley down by the lake. As usual, he Disillusioned himself and walked towards them, standing next to a nearby tree, listening to their conversation. Weasley was trying desperately to cheer her up...in his own, pathetic way.

"Hermione, I don't know why you had to do that to yourself!" Weasley chided her.

"Ronald, I don't expect you to understand," she said softly as she looked off, watching the water with great interest.

"Why do you think so badly of yourself? You're the smartest girl in school, best at everything you set your mind to do. I mean, everyone thinks you're brilliant. You know everything!"

"Yeah, that's me, Ron. I'm just a walking Encyclopedia," she said sharply.

"I don't mean it like that. You're a great person!" he said nervously.

She turned and faced him. "Ron, when you look at me, what do you see?" she asked hopefully.

"I see you...Hermione," he answered.

"And exactly who is Hermione?" she prodded.

"I dunno, Hermione. You're smart, uh, very responsible, and you're a great friend. You always have been there for Harry and me over the years. You're our mate, and we love you! So, stop this rubbish, Hermione. We don't want to lose you." The uneasiness he was feeling was apparent on his face as he tried to extricate himself from the conversation.

The chimes from the large clock tower rang, and Ron looked nervously around. "I-I got to go to Quidditch practice," he said, placing his hand on her shoulder. "See you in the common room later, yeah? And could you proof-read my essay for Potions?"

"Yeah, sure," she replied sadly as she looked off into the distance.

"Thanks, Hermione!" he said as he took off.

"He never even noticed," she said aloud to herself. "No one notices."

Snape noticed. He wanted to box Ron's ears for being so damn obtuse. She was so lovely. And if anyone would just give her half a glance, they would see it. Sure, the robes didn't do any of the girls any favors when it came to showing figures, but Weasley and Potter had seen her enough in her Muggle clothes to know Hermione was turning into a beautiful, young woman. He continued to watch her as she sat down in the grass; the loose hairs that had slipped out of her hair clip were now playing around her face as she continued to look at the lake. She drew her legs up to her chest and began to cry softly.

"Why do I even bother?" she whispered to herself. "Snape is right. No one cares I'm even a girl. I might as well be like a plastic Barbie doll with no anatomical bits!"

Snape continued to watch Hermione from a near-by tree, hidden from her sight. He wished he could touch her, comfort her, and tell her she was wrong. He wanted to tell her he had been a complete arse just like every other wizard who couldn't see her worth and value as a woman. For Snape, she was worth ten of any other female at this wretched school.

Dumbledore had a person from the Ministry send over a woman to talk with Hermione a couple times a week to discuss her "cutting." Snape learned about these meetings through his monitoring of her whereabouts. He noticed she usually left these meetings with red eyes, usually sniveling in a handkerchief. He knew better to ask Albus about the meetings. He didn't want the old coot lecturing him any more about Hermione. When he saw Hermione crying as she left her meetings, he found there was anger bubbling inside him. He thought it was absolutely ridiculous for her to go to these blasted meetings! The only problem Hermione had was that she was completely surrounded by intellectual inferiors and useless wizards who didn't have the sense God gave a kneazle in order to know they were in the presence of beauty itself! Many times he had wanted to just come out and tell her she was incredible, striking, and full of a fire that would set a man's blood aflame if she ever chose to deem him worthy of her affections. He wished he could, but he couldn't. He doubted she would even hear him now. He had done too much damage.

As time passed, he slowly saw the Hermione he had grown to adore slip away into mediocrity. She still went to the library, studied and read, but her eyes were starting to glaze over. Sometimes the book would slip from her hands and fall unnoticed onto the table as she continued to stare into nothingness. Each time he watched a book slip from her limp hands, the tears would start to fall down his face. How much longer would he have to continue to watch her deteriorate?

Snape also noticed a marked difference in class work. She was listless, preoccupied, and refused to participate. She had gone from being the most tenacious student he'd ever known to the most shiftless. She made even Longbottom seem like a genius. Most times he wished she would start shooting her hand up in class and interrupting his lectures again like she used to, in order to show off her knowledge. He couldn't take much more of this.

By the middle of the second week, he'd had enough and went to see Minerva about Hermione's frame of mind.

"Minerva, you need to have a word with your protégé, Miss Granger," he said tersely as he strode into her classroom after classes were done for the day.

"What seems to be the problem, Severus?" she asked with a sigh as she continued to write in her ledger.

"She needs to be removed from the school and if not the school, then my class. She is listless, mindless, and is seemingly uninterested with remaining in the land of the living!" he spat. He knew he was being an arse, but he couldn't have Minerva knowing he was concerned for Hermione, or worse, that he cared for her.

Minerva looked shocked. She ripped her glasses from her face. "What's happened, Severus? Is she in the infirmary?" she asked shrilly.

"No, Minerva...nothing so very serious, at least not yet. However, this coddling and pitying is not helping her! If she were a Slytherin..."

"Yes, I am quite aware of how well your methods have worked thus far, Severus," she replied scathingly. "I am sure Albus informed you that her cutting has tampered with her magical abilities. It may be some time before she will be able to perform at the level she was before. Heaven knows I've had to adjust my expectations of her and so has Filius," she said informatively.

Snape heaved an impatient sigh. "Minerva, that is not the point. She is allowing whatever anyone says as fodder for her to turn it into an insult against her. She needs a good shaking!"

Minerva placed her hands on top of her desk and stood up with an impatient sound of her own. "Severus, has it even occurred to you that perhaps Miss Granger has taken these comments to heart because she is convinced that is the reality? She is unhappy with who she is. That is the worst kind of hell! She knew she was bookish and studious, that didn't stop her from being happy before, or maybe, in the back of her mind, she was never truly happy, and now the reality has come smack into her face! She's eighteen, Severus. She's a woman now and has never had any boy look at her like she is a female," she said sadly.

"What about Victor Krum?" he asked. "That boy couldn't keep away from her!"

Minerva smiled nastily. "Oh, yes, Mr. Krum. Nothing ever happened between them when he was here. All it ever was to him was just a friendship. Miss Granger came to me in tears months later saying that she had gotten the courage to tell him how she felt about him. He wrote her back and apologized for the mistake. Seems he was told by Igor to befriend her, that she could be useful during the Tournament. He said he was so happy to find someone who wasn't following him around like a lovesick dog. He thought she was 'safe' and 'nice', and that he had a fiancée in Bulgaria. He used her, just like they all have used her."

Snape narrowed his eyes and said darkly, "I have had to live my whole life being constantly overlooked and under appreciated. Nevertheless, it did not hinder me from becoming a Potions master and a respected member in my field. I suggest Miss Granger get on with life. There are far worse things that can happen to a young witch than being unloved!" He turned sharply on his heel and strode out of Minerva's office, his robes billowing behind him.

He left Minerva's office feeling sick and exhausted. What he had said was true. When had he ever been loved? When had any woman ever seen him as a man and wanted him? He still managed to live and find purpose for himself without experiencing that kind of love. *So if that's true, why won't this guilty feeling let up?* He thought miserably.

That evening, he received a visit from Lavender Brown.

"Professor Snape?" she asked timidly as she knocked on his opened door to his classroom.

"What are you doing here, girl? It's late!" he snapped at her.

"I know. I needed to make sure I wasn't noticed. The headmaster told me that I should see you if I suspected anything strange about Hermione," she said nervously.

He was alarmed. "What has happened?" he demanded as he stood up anxiously.

"Well, she's been a bit secretive again about her body, and I saw some droplets of blood by the toilet in our dormitory. I just have a really bad feeling that she's *doing* it again." She swallowed and took a breath. "I spoke with Pavarti, and she said you need to get her to Madam Pomfrey...that's what the headmaster told us to do, not to confront her alone, but with you."

Snape rubbed his eyes. *Of course! Albus couldn't help himself to make sure Hermione's friends knew to collect me in case she tried cutting herself again. Albus is bound and determined to make sure I'm made aware of every painful detail. Damn girl!*

"Alright, then, let's go," he said slowly.

They made their way up to the common room, and Hermione was sitting at a table, looking over Ron and Harry's essays.

"Excuse me, boys," he said silkily. "Miss Granger, you need to come with me."

Hermione eyeballed him and set her face. "I'm not going anywhere with you," she snapped angrily.

His hand flashed out from nowhere, grabbing her arm, and pulling up her robe. There were fresh cut marks.

"Hermione!" Harry and Ron yelled instantaneously.

She looked at the Potions master as if she wanted to strangle him. She tried to wrench herself free, but he held on.

"You are coming with me to the infirmary," he announced.

"Why do you even care? Is this your punishment? Look after Hermione, make sure she doesn't 'off' herself?" she spat.

The other Gryffindors in the common room remained frozen in place as they watched Hermione Granger shout at Professor Snape in disbelief.

He bit his tongue and hauled her out of the room as she screamed and cursed at him. Once they were alone in the hall, he turned on her.

"Why do you insist on destroying yourself? You are supposed to be smart, not stupid!" he yelled. "You do realize that your cutting is draining away your magical powers, do you not? Is that what you want? You want to become a Squib? Why are you so hell-bent on acting like a little fool?" he hissed.

"That's right. I'm just a stupid, little fool! Although, why should you care is beyond me! I don't expect anything decent to come from you. To you, I'm hopeless. Just an 'Old Maid in training.'" Her face relaxed, her voice became soft, and her eyes hollow. "No man would be able to touch me without vomiting. Why should I want to live that life? I'm better off dead. So why don't you just walk away and let me die?" she asked calmly.

He closed his eyes and let her go. "You cannot be that thick," he sneered.

She looked at him in surprise, her eyes snapping dangerously. "What did you say?" she said angrily.

Finally! he thought excitedly. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her close to him. "You idiot girl!" he seethed. "You actually believe that I meant what I said? I was only trying to regain a sense of normalcy. I'm your evil teacher who is cruel and hard. You are the insufferable know-it-all. The Dark Lord, although thwarted in his original intent, ultimately succeeded in disturbing that delicate balance. I needed you to forget I ever saw you...that I was present for any of that..." He stopped short, seemingly unable to know how to say what he meant. He realized how close he had drawn her to himself. He let go of her shoulders and grabbed her by one of her upper arms.

"Come here!" he thundered, dragging her down to the dungeons. She was terrified. She kept glancing at him, but his face was set like stone. Once inside the Potions lab, he released her by pushing her in front of him.

"Get in my office," he hissed.

A flick of his wrist opened the door, and she meekly walked in, hovering in a corner whilst he rummaged through various bottles and muttered to himself.

He turned and saw her cowering and frowned.

"Just sit down!" he snapped.

She sat in the chair across from his desk. He took his large chair and sat across from her. There were various dusty bottles in front of them.

He looked intensely into her face, and her eyes shifted from his face back to the bottles and then down to her lap.

"Look at me," he whispered.

"No," she said with a sob.

He rolled his eyes. "Why are you sniveling?" he asked harshly.

"I don't want you peering in my head!" she said heatedly.

Aha! There is something she doesn't want me to see, and she's very nervous about it he thought with interest.

"Miss Granger, I do not need to stare into your eyes like some second-rate Muggle hypnotist!" he sneered. "Any time I wish, I can rummage through your mind at my own pace, with or without your approval."

"That is against school rules!" she shot back angrily.

"I never said anything to the contrary, Miss Granger. I only stated a fact," he said with a twisted smile playing on his lips.

"I want you to tell me right this minute where on your body you have been cutting," he ordered.

She huffed, then took off her robe and pushed up her sleeves to reveal slash marks on the inside of both her arms. He sighed and took his wand in hand to begin healing her.

"Why do you care?" she asked in a strange tone.

He looked up at her and set his wand down on his desk. He took her small hands into his own large ones, looking at how different her hands looked when enveloped by his own. It felt right and comforting to touch her this way. He collected his thoughts and dragged his eyes from their now entwining fingers, looked up, and gazed into her eyes. It was time to tell her the truth. He had to find a way to push his fears away and be honest...even if just for her sake.

"Miss Granger...*Hermione*...I do not know why you have been so neglected. Perhaps when you are a bit older and the wizards you know now are more mature, they will begin to notice the lovely young woman that was in front of them all the while. So, I will continue to heal you. I feel responsible for all this mess."

She stared at him warily. He could see the disbelief and trepidation. Was she afraid he was going to hurt her again? Did she believe him or was she thinking he was mocking her? He waited for answer as he continued to hold her hands in his own. She looked down and watched as he stroked the delicate skin of her hands with his thumbs. He looked down as well, waiting for her to snatch them away from him, telling him he was an ugly, pathetic git. Then he felt something splash onto his hand. There was another. He looked up and all he could see was Hermione's bent head, her mass of curly hair tumbling around her shoulders and falling so forward their hands seemed to be curtained by it. He saw as the tears fell from her eyes and collected into their intermingled hands. Her back was beginning to shake.

Snape was speechless. He loosed one hand from her and slowly picked up his wand. He took his other hand and lifted her face to his. He wanted to kiss each tear away and rip the pain from her and swallow it. He would gladly take on all her hurt and suffering if she would only be the Hermione he had always known...the Hermione he loved.

"I'm going to heal you now, Hermione," he said softly.

She slowly offered her arms out to him for healing. He began to methodically heal each cut and gash with care and gentleness. When he finished, he took some lotion and rubbed it onto her skin. It was warm, and it tingled. He looked into her face as he slid the liquid over her skin. She began to blink her eyes, and her breath was becoming shallow. He wondered how his touch made her feel. He wanted so badly to ask her, but he couldn't. He didn't want to scare her. Her eyes flitted upwards to meet his. Her pupils were dilated in an obvious sign of desire. He watched her as she lowered her eyes to look upon his hands. She had been oblivious to the look on her face. He gently prodded her mind and saw the adoration she held dear in her young heart. He sighed inwardly. He felt a confirmation of sorts in his heart. She liked his touch, his hands on her flesh, but why him of all men? She was too good for him.

He pulled himself together and asked, "Is that all, Miss Granger?"

She lowered her head, and he saw the return of the thick tears dripping onto her lap. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Alright then, Miss Granger, where else?" he said softly.

He closed his eyes and lowered his head as she unbuttoned her shirt to reveal the top part of the word "SWOT" reemerged on her chest.

He sat back in his chair and exhaled, overwhelmed by the monster he had helped create.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 18

Valentine's Day comes around, and a revelation comes to light that changes everything at Hogwarts.

A/N: This is a HUGE chapter, meaning a lot of things will change from here on out. I'm really excited to know your reactions and thoughts. Again, thanks to my fantastic beta, Shellsnapeluver, who has been a joy to work with!

Valentine's Day came with a feeling of dread in Severus' chest. He had been doing his part by keeping his eye on Miss Granger. She had seemed to be doing well. However, he had decided to not assume she would behave out of his sight, so he had ordered Misses Brown and Patil to keep him informed on her progress.

He had also kept a wide berth between Miss Weasley and himself. The fiery redhead had it out for him badly. Although she had not yet confronted him, a day never passed that she did not glare at him in furious rage. It continued to concern him.

The days that had led to Valentine's Day had been positively hellish. As it was every year, boys and girls were paring off, snogging in alcoves, trying to get a leg over. He had been constantly stumbling upon these couples. It had brought more than one hurtful memory of all that had been denied to him at that age. In the midst of it all, however, he realized just how much he had had enjoyed keeping his vigil over Hermione, especially as she had started spending more time alone in the library. He silently observed her, Disillusioned, so she would be none the wiser.

He had begun to notice that she was not sleeping well. The longer he watched her, the bolder he became, walking closer to her and looking deeply into her face. She had faint, dark circles under her tired eyes. He had wondered if she was sleeping at all. She had still tried to keep up her beauty regimen, but as Valentine's Day had grown closer, she had begun to hide away, neglecting herself. It had come as no surprise to him. After all, he had been of the same mean at her age. Why be around all the happiness that could never be yours? More than once he had found her sitting in a sofa chair, her arms wrapped around her legs, tucked up under her chin, looking out the window in the library at the couples walking outside. More than once, he had seen a tear slide down her face. How he had wished he could have collected them in a crystal phial; they were too precious to be spilled so easily and disregarded. Her suffering had started to become personal to him, and he felt it deep within him. He just wanted it all to stop and have the Hermione he knew was there somewhere hiding, back the way things used to be.

Snape sat eating dinner that Valentine's evening, before the older students were to pair off and go out to Hogsmeade for a special "romantic" evening. He observed a young Ravenclaw, Marcus Belby, approach Hermione. Snape watched her intently as her eyes darted around her. He knew this eye movement. It meant she was nervous and felt trapped. Keeping his eyes on her, he leaned over Lupin, and slammed his hand on the table to get Minerva's attention. Hermione suddenly shook her head and turned, running out of the hall. The Gryffindor table was up in arms. Weasley and his girlfriend, Miss Brown were yelling and shouting at Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter. Suddenly, Miss Weasley turned and started to screech at Mr. Belby and then turned and yelled at Miss Brown.

Finally, as things began to settle to a disgruntled murmur, Miss Brown's shrieking voice could be heard above everyone else's.

"How was I supposed to know he'd behave like a retarded mountain troll? He's supposed to be *irRavenclaw* for Merlin's sake!"

At that, a couple of insulted Ravenclaws joined in the mêlée. Minerva and Filius went to sort out the argument before wands were drawn.

Out of the corner of his eye, Snape watched as the young Weasley girl slip out from the mass of the squabbling, stride up to the Head Table, and precede to scream at him.

"You will pay for this, Severus Snape!" she shouted as she pointed her wand at him. Just then, Harry, who had come out of nowhere, enfolded her from behind trying to stop her from hexing a teacher.

Not that she would have gotten far! Snape thought snarkily. He was actually amused by her little outburst.

He must have smirked, for she blasted Harry from her and stood her ground facing the Potions master. The hall was hushed. Snape stood cautiously. Lupin was poised, ready with his wand drawn to act at a moment's notice while Dumbledore remained curiously silent and still.

"What exactly do you think you are doing, Miss Weasley?" Snape whispered in a deadly voice.

She stuffed her wand in her robe pocket and bellowed at the Potions master, her voice reverberating off the walls off the quiet hall. "I will not waste my magic on you, you pathetic sod! You did this to her! You have all but destroyed her!" Her fists were balled up; the whites of her knuckles barely contained the fury she was holding back.

She turned to scream at Dumbledore. "Why do you keep him on here? He's a sadistic bastard! He's the reason she's mutilating herself!"

She fixed her enraged face back onto Snape. "She loved you! She only wanted you to love her in return! Why did you have to hurt her so badly?" She broke down sobbing as McGonagall marched up to the girl and grabbed a hold of her.

"Miss Weasley!" Professor McGonagall cried out as she shook her, "Contain yourself!"

Miss Weasley's eyes were huge and wild. "It's all my fault. I didn't mean to do it! I couldn't stop him. You don't understand...Tom is so powerful!" she choked out as she grasped on to her Head of house.

Horrified, Snape looked up at Dumbledore, who closed his eyes in resignation and glanced at Minerva, who was pale. Without another word, the older witch gathered Ginny and took her to the headmaster's office.

Ginny sat in the chair in front of Dumbledore's large, wooden desk. She held her head in her hand, sobbing. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Pomfrey, Lupin and Harry stood around her in disbelief and fear, waiting for her explanation. Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to find Hermione while Sprout and Flitwick stayed in the Great Hall with the other students.

Finally, Ginny's cries calmed, and she began talking as she held her arms around her protectively.

"It started my first year, you know, the year Tom possessed me. Since then, he's been coming into my dreams. I thought that was all it was, just dreams. For the longest time, I didn't even know it was he. At first, I dreamt about vague things, events in my day, just normal stuff. Then about a couple years ago, I was just having the most vivid dreams about Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Then the dreams really focused on Hermione. I thought I was losing my mind or falling in love with her because I was dreaming about her all the time! At first, it was just random things, snippets of personal conversations, but then I began dreaming about important things, like her induction into the Order and then things that she had she sworn me never to tell. Then about four months ago, Tom came in the form he had before when I was eleven...the sixteen-year-old boy. He reminded me of all the things we had shared together." She took a large breath of air and was slightly blushing.

"What sort of things did he say?" Lupin asked.

"He was asking me all about Hermione. I tried to fight him, but he said we were connected, he and I, and that I had given my will to him once before, and I couldn't stop him now, we were a part of each other. He said the only way he would release me was if I stopped resisting him and let him know everything he wanted from me. He said I had no choice! It was either this way, or he would do what he did to Bertha Jorkins seem like child's play." Her voice grew quiet at the end, and she started rocking herself.

She drew a ragged breath and continued. "He wanted to know if Hermione had a boyfriend or a lover. He said he knew that she was very powerful. I didn't want to tell him, I had promised!" She turned to Harry, "I never even told *you* about who Hermione loves!"

"Hermione in love?" Harry asked in confusion. Then he sighed in relief and said, "Oh, you mean that idiot Lockheart?" He laughed. "Gin, that was second-year, and she got over it," he said dismissively.

"No, Harry," she said sternly. She glanced around at everyone looking at her so intently and took a deep breath as she continued.

"Hermione had told me the day of the dueling club, when Professor Snape had disarmed Lockheart, that she thought about how powerful and intelligent Professor Snape was. And you know how highly she regards those things. She begged me to never breathe a word to anyone, and I never did!"

Ginny covertly glanced at Professor Snape. His face was impassive and emotionless.

"Then her fourth year came, and she was so excited about Krum. She really thought she had gotten over her crush on Professor Snape. The day he humiliated her in front of Draco and his friends, she had cried and cried for days over it. She tried so hard to put all her feelings into Krum, and by that time Ron was being such a prat, treating her like she wasn't even a girl, taking her for granted. She was so sick of it! She had been so happy Krum had asked her to the Yule Ball. Then, during her fifth year, she told me she had finally gotten the guts to tell Viktor that she felt she fancied him, and the way he treated her...he was such a *bastard!*"

"Miss Weasley!" Professor McGonagall scolded.

"Uh, Professor," Harry interrupted cautiously. "I know what he did, and that's honestly the kindest thing for her to say," he said uncomfortably.

"What did he do?" asked Dumbledore angrily.

Harry answered for Ginny. "He wrote her back saying, 'Sorry, but it was Karkaroff's idea for me to cozy up with you for the Tournament...you being so smart and all.' Then he said he already had a fiancée in Bulgaria. He said he had liked that she was 'safe,' that she had never fawned all over him like the others. But, he just didn't see her 'that way.'"

Ginny spoke up. "She was *crushed*. She had already been feeling so inadequate about her looks and how she hadn't even had a boyfriend yet. I knew how deluded she was! I took one look at Krum and knew she was just trying so hard to find a replacement for Professor Snape. So anyway, Tom kept popping up in my dreams and dragging all my memories of Hermione up to view. Hermione admitted she realized she had just transferred her feelings from Professor Snape to Krum because of how mean Professor Snape had been. But when we had all learned that he had been working as a spy for the Order, she said she could look past his meanness...which it was all an act, and she had decided to stop fighting her feelings. Soon after, she told me she thought she was falling in love with him and hoped one day he would notice her. That was why she was so keen on getting into the Order and helping Professor Snape. She wanted to prove she wasn't a silly, little girl anymore, but a grown-up witch."

During Ginny's story, everyone had taken turns looking at Snape to watch his reactions. At first, he had remained cool and detached. However, as the story grew more personal and heart wrenching...especially about Krum...his face had begun to blush furiously. As she continued, his nostrils were flared, and his eyes moved around the

room as his body remained still as stone. After Ginny was through, he looked as if he were daring for anyone to question him. He was silent as the room waited for someone to say something. Ginny had hoped he would at least say something about being sorry or that he felt bad about the whole damn business, but he didn't, and her anger surged.

Dumbledore spoke to her. "Miss Weasley," he said. "Do you mean to tell me that this entire time, Tom has been aware of Professor Snape's true allegiances?"

Ginny was pale. "I think so," she whispered.

For the first time ever since he had taken the Dark Mark, Snape lost his composure in public, and he collapsed onto the chair next to him. He was positively green.

Ginny panicked. "I tried, I tried! I was constantly arguing with him to stop bothering me, to get out of my head! But he kept digging deeper into my brain, and he saw how much Hermione was talking about Snape, how much she was starting to love him, how deeply she felt for him. Then, it was over. It was all over. The dreams stopped. I thought it had all been just an aftershock. I mean, they were just dreams, right?" she asked weakly.

"Ginny!" Harry yelled as he bolted from his chair. "How can you sit there and tell us 'just a dream?' Don't you recall all the nightmarish dreams I had my fifth year? *My God!*"

Ginny opened her mouth and huge tears ran down her face. "But, Harry, you had been seeing visions and places you had never been before! I was just dreaming about things that were already in my head. No one was putting ideas in there for me to act or do a thing. It isn't the same! By the time Tom came and revealed himself, he told me if I told anyone, he would send all his Death Eaters to kill each member of my family! I knew he would too! He killed your parents, Harry, and he killed my uncles!"

The adults looked over at Snape. He was raging underneath and looked like he was about to implode.

"She was right," Snape said softly to himself.

"What, Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

"That night...Miss Granger told me that it had seemed as if it all had been a set-up, that my loyalties had already been questioned. That it was all...a test!" His hands began to shake, and his breathing became shallow. Madam Pomfrey rushed over to examine him. He silently shook his hand at her. He just needed to process the shock.

Filch burst in. "Headmaster! We found Miss Granger! Hagrid and I took her into the infirmary. He's with her there," he said breathlessly.

Dumbledore looked relieved. "Thank you, Argus. Madam Pomfrey, would you please check on Miss Granger, to make sure she is alright?"

"Certainly, Headmaster," she replied as she got up to leave.

Dumbledore turned back to Ginny. "Miss Weasley, what happened tonight in the Great Hall?" he asked calmly.

Ginny was rubbing her forehead as if struggling with a migraine. She gave a low groan of frustration before speaking. "It was all Lavender and Ron! They thought she just needed some attention to get her self-esteem back...a bloke asked her to the Valentine's Outing," she said angrily.

As she spoke, she became increasingly animated. Her tone grew furious with each word. "They got Marcus Belby! You know for a Ravenclaw he's rather thick! He told Hermione he had been noticing how pretty she was looking and wanted to take her to Hogsmeade with him as a date. She brushed him off, well, more as if she didn't believe him when he said she was pretty; she's been so down on herself. Then the git had the nerve to turn to Lavender and say, 'Hey, I thought she was a sure thing!' she recounted in a gruff, manly voice.

There were audible groans coming from everyone then.

"It was hell! Hermione lost it! She thought 'sure thing' meant that he was expecting her to sleep with him! She turned so pale, and her eyes were filling with tears, and she ran out of the hall. Then Ron and Lavender started yelling at Marcus. Then Pavarti, Harry, and I started yelling at Ron and Lavender for butting in where they shouldn't have. Then Lavender said that comment about Marcus acting like a troll, and some of his Ravenclaw buddies heard her and started to yelling at us!" she shouted.

Her face grew dark as she continued, not looking anyone in the eye as she spoke; her voice was no more than a whisper. "I was so mad. I was angry because ~~she~~ *what* had happened that night she had disappeared. The night I had found her in the shower, bleeding from the cutting, she had been delusional, losing blood in the shower like that...she had thought she was dying! I had thought she was too, and she had told me what had happened. We were freezing, sopping wet from sitting in that shower. She grabbed me by the front of my robes, pulled me close to her, and whispered everything to me!" She burst into tears, shaking her fists as she looked over at Snape and said, "I wish I were a grown witch! I'd hex your bollocks off, you vicious bat!" she swore.

"Miss Weasley!" Professor McGonagall shouted. "You will refrain from that type of language! Fifty points from Gryffindor! I don't care what you think of Professor Snape, you will show respect for your betters, young lady!"

Harry was shaking with rage as he stared at his girlfriend. "What in the name of Merlin has gotten into you?" Then he turned to Dumbledore and Professor Snape, his emerald eyes flashing dangerously. "I want to know what the bloody hell happened to Hermione! She's my best friend, and if Voldemort is behind all this, I have the right to know!" he thundered.

Snape hissed at the mention of the name of his master, but spoke up anyway and recounted the events of that night. The abduction, near rape, and the time spent hiding out at Andromeda Tonks' house...it all came out. Then, Snape confessed what he had said to Hermione without reservation. Minerva told them about the extent of Hermione's cutting and how Professor Snape had saved her life.

Harry had stood calmly until Snape told them all the hurtful comments he had said to Hermione. After that, he jumped up and went to attack the professor. Ginny screamed as Professor Lupin restrained Harry.

"You sick, sadistic prick!" Harry swore as he fought against Lupin grip.

Snape stood and hovered over the young wizard with a venomous glare. "What, Potter, going to tell me how you and Weasley never used her, never overlooked her? Has either of you even recognized she's not a 'mate,' but a young woman?" he hissed.

Harry stopped struggling and hung his head in shame. It was true. Hermione had always been neglected and overlooked by them. Lupin released him, and he sat down hard into one of the chairs. He sat and held his head in his hands; the guilt was overwhelming. It hung in the room heavily. He raised his head and glared at the dark wizard with a look that said he wasn't about to let Snape off the hook just yet. "That may well be. However, that does not absolve you for what you did!" he said viciously.

Snape let Harry's outburst roll right off him. He didn't seem concerned to have to explain himself to anyone. "She's cutting again," Snape announced harshly. "She's not going to stop, either. Something will have to be done, Albus," he said quietly.

"Now when you say 'cutting,'" asked Professor Lupin. "What do you mean?"

Ginny spoke up. "She has mutilated her thighs and arms with gouges and slashes. She carved the word 'UGLY' onto her stomach and the word 'SWOT' onto her chest!" She glowered at Snape. She wanted him to feel her hatred. She wanted him to choke on his guilt.

"Oh, God!" Professor Lupin said weakly as he rubbed his eyes.

"She's not only cutting again, but carving as well, Albus," reported Snape. "I have healed her again, but if she doesn't stop, the damage will be permanent. She keeps

reopening the healed wounds."

Ginny couldn't believe the audacity of the wizard. She thought to herself the hell with it and let loose on him. Teacher or no, he was going to hear everything he had coming towards him. "Have you even tried to talk to Hermione? Have you even apologized?" Ginny shouted at him. McGonagall went to restrain her, but Dumbledore stopped her.

Snape glared at Ginny. "Young woman, I do not have to answer to you. You have no idea what I have lived through and continue to live through!" he thundered.

"Well, I guess that's how you can justify treating everyone like they are dragon dung under your boot!" she quipped. "You just go for the old 'none has suffered like me,' routine! But I don't give a shite. You're cruel and vicious because you're just a frustrated old man who has probably never had a shag outside Knockturn Alley!" she spat maliciously.

Professor McGonagall's face was white with rage. She pushed Dumbledore's arm out of her way and grabbed Ginny's arm. Some powerful magical force repelled her from touching the witch. Albus drew McGonagall to his side silently as Ginny raged, motioning for no one to touch the young witch. There was something going on within her, some primitive magic that could not be restrained.

Terrified to stand up to her, Lupin and McGonagall tried to calmly shush her, but she screamed at them. "Just, SHUT UP!" She pointed at Snape and continued to yell above everyone else. "*He* gets to say whatever the bloody hell comes into his mind to wound people, and we just have to take it? Why can't *he* take it for a change?"

She strode over to him and continued to rail. "You've blamed Harry for everything his dad and Sirius did to you as kids. Well, I'm turning the tables on you, Snape! I'm going to blame you for all the pain Hermione has experienced. And if she ends up killing herself, it'll be your fault!"

Then, she stormed out of the room with McGonagall following in her wake.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 18

A plan to infiltrate Voldemort's mind is concocted when Professor McGonagall brings more shocking news about Hermione.

A/N: I can't tell you all enough how incredible it has been reading the reviews you all have sent. Thank you for taking the time to read and review. Also, my deepest gratitude to Shellsnapelover, who has worked tirelessly to help me with writing this fic.

There was an incredible silence after Ginny stormed out of the office.

"Did you all see that?" said Lupin in a shocked voice as he looked at the others. "She was untouchable!"

Dumbledore spoke up. "It's Voldemort. He has a hold on her and has been drawing her into himself, and she has drawn him into herself in return. I've been feeling a change in the magic around the castle. Now we know where it all is concentrated. Something will have to be done," he said darkly as he sat down looking deep in thought.

"So, this entire time Severus was out there it was all just a game for Voldemort?" whispered Lupin.

Snape thought he was going to be ill. "This is a nightmare," he whispered as he looked down at his hands, motionless on his thighs.

Dumbledore spoke again. "Drastic actions will have to be taken. We must sequester Miss Weasley immediately. She will have to leave Hogwarts, and she will no longer be able to go to Grimmauld Place, nor will she be able to speak with Harry or anyone else in the Order. She may have to even be separated from her family," he said weakly.

Harry tried to argue on Ginny's behalf, but Dumbledore raised his hand. "Harry, Ginny is not safe. She is now another weapon of Tom's. She is not at fault. She has been used desperately and viciously without any real knowledge on her part. However, that being said, she did retain this information and did not share it with anyone. Her decision to hold back such vital information shows a lack of judgment, an ability to decipher from what is real and what is false. I do not see Tom stopping now. He has already destroyed any the hope the Order has that Severus could return to his service. How easily Tom could have just eliminated Severus and Miss Granger that terrible night!" He visibly shuddered. "It is just not safe having her near. She must be put away," he said decisively.

Harry looked heart-broken. Snape couldn't believe what was happening. He thought about all the times he had stood in the Dark Lord's presence, working so hard to maintain that fine, thin line between good and evil. They all were shocked and beyond words. Finally, Snape stood and went to leave.

"Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

"I have a great deal of things to do, Headmaster," he said quietly as he walked out the door and headed towards the dungeons.

As Snape walked a thought crossed his mind. *If the Dark Lord could create a bond with Miss Weasley, surely there is a way that the tables could be turned on him. Once the dam broke, the Dark Lord would never be able to keep his thoughts to himself. All his secrets, all his plots would be laid bare for Ginny to gain and then for he and Dumbledore to dissect and destroy. It would involve the darkest of magic, Dumbledore might not even approve...but as the Dark Lord had said, he could always appeal to the Greater Good.*

He would need an assistant...someone competent and intelligent enough to follow difficult instructions to the letter. He needed someone who would not fight him, who had an understanding of precision, timing and perfection.

He would take on Miss Granger.

Not only would he have the freedom to spend time alone with her to talk with her and hopefully undo the damage he inflicted, but she, in turn, could build her self-esteem by her own work. She could be trusted to handle the simpler work. Hell, he could even make her a true apprentice as they worked on this project! She could grade papers, even teach his first and second-years. She would not accept his words alone, just as his words alone did not start this, but his attitude and actions coupled with his words would make an impression. No, it would have to be the whole package. It would mean spending time alone with her...a lot of time alone with her. This could only be a good thing in his mind. The obstacle was getting her to agree. Oh, he could just tell her to do it, but that would have to be a last resort. She would need to know he wanted *her*; no one else would do. No one else could do the job. In the meanwhile, he could take the time to prove to her that intelligence could be as equally appealing and arousing to

a wizard as looks, and he could slowly show her how desirable she truly is, inside and out.

A smile started to form on his face as he plotted a form of strategy. He could make it up to her and save face at the same time. He would not have to grovel like a fool, and she would recover from this malady. Then, when the time was right, he would have her, make Hermione his own...forever.

Hermione had been staying in the infirmary since her breakdown in the Great Hall two days ago. She had felt more humiliated than anything, when Professor McGonagall had told her she was to assist Professor Snape in creating a special potion. She had felt she was going to be ill.

"But Professor, I don't want to be alone with Professor Snape," she had whispered to her.

"I know, but if it makes you feel better, he insisted you were the only person he would entrust as an assistant," she had replied with a smile.

Hermione had snorted. "I don't believe that for one moment!" she had snapped angrily.

"Well, there's only one way to know for sure, isn't there?" McGonagall had quipped. "And don't you think I would send in my best student to be subjected to his sharp tongue if I was not absolutely sure of his honesty!"

Hermione had looked slowly into her eyes. "He really said that he wanted me?" she had asked painfully.

"Yes," the older witch had said happily.

Hermione had not looked as happy and excited as McGonagall had hoped. Instead, the young witch had looked downcast and sad.

"Hermione? What is the problem?" she had asked quietly.

"It's just typical. I suppose I should be relieved, shouldn't I? After all, that is all what I am good for: to be trustworthy, dependable, and reliable enough to be entrusted with such difficult work. I am a brain. That is all I shall ever be," she had replied softly.

"No," replied McGonagall as she placed her warm hand on top of Hermione's cold one.

"I promise, my dear, one day there shall be a wonderful wizard who will think you are the most beautiful witch he has ever seen!"

"Perhaps," she had acquiesced. "However, I doubt the wizard I want ever shall," she had whispered softly as she had looked away towards the window.

Hermione slowly walked to the dungeons, replaying the conversation with McGonagall back and forth in her mind. Sadness and fear of being ripped to shreds verbally filled her head and made her feel sick to her stomach. She rapped on the door and waited for the door to open.

"Miss Granger, you know why you are here, correct?" Snape said as soon as she closed the door to his office.

"Professor McGonagall told me you asked for my assistance for a special potion," she said, still standing near the doorway.

"Yes," he said slowly as he walked towards her carefully. "I only asked for you, specifically. I rejected any other possible candidate. In my estimation, you could be the only person here capable to work according to my standards," he said, satisfied with himself.

"I'm flattered, I'm sure," she said with a hint of resentment in her tone. "It's good to know one's purpose in this world. Mine has been made clear to me. It would be a rather shallow existence if I could not at least be counted on in this capacity."

Snape looked at her confused. "Miss Granger, what are you on about?" he said impatiently.

"Never mind," she said dismissively. "It has no bearing to the task at hand. Where do we begin?" she asked.

How indeed, Hermione, he thought ruefully.

He led her into his private Potions lab.

"Miss Granger," he began, "I need for you to take a stool next to me. There are some things you and I need to discuss."

Hermione looked at him unsure of his intent. She sat, and they faced one another. It did not escape her mind that it had been not so long ago when they had worked together comfortably and easily at headquarters. But that was before.

"Miss Granger, Hermione," he whispered.

She looked at him in alarm. He never called her Hermione. Never.

"Miss Weasley revealed some very interesting happenings in the headmaster's office two days ago. She was extremely overwrought and highly upset. Of course, she had every reason to be upset. She confessed that the Dark Lord has been infiltrating her mind for quite some time now."

Hermione's hands flew to her mouth. "I swear, I didn't know!" she exclaimed.

Severus lifted a hand and nodded his head. "I know that. The Order knows as well. No one knew what has occurring between Miss Weasley and the Dark Lord. Apparently, it wasn't until a couple of months before our own... unfortunate experience that he revealed his true nature to her. He threatened the lives of her family if she told anyone of his nightly visits into her mind. So, unwittingly, she was forced to reveal vital pieces of information about the Order, such as my true allegiance. While he was there rummaging around her mind, he targeted Miss Weasley's conversations and interactions with you."

"Me? Why me? She's Harry's girlfriend! Why would he focus on me?" She stopped talking and the realization dawned on her. Voldemort knew she was in love with Professor Snape and how often they had worked together for the Order. She had been right all along...it had been a test! She held a hand over her mouth and averted her eyes from his. She was not going to cry. He knew everything, now. He knew how long she had loved him, that she'd had a crush on him since she was twelve, that when she had been spread naked under his piercing glare, she had been in love with him. Then, when he had said all those horrible, horrible words that shattered her heart, she had still been hoping against hope that he would one day grow to love her.

She got up nervously from her stool, still refusing to look at him. "I-I h-have t-to go," she stuttered as she dashed to grab her bag.

"Hermione," Severus called to her. She tried running, but he had jumped up and grabbed her arm, clutching her to his body.

"Let me go, damn you! Let me go!" she screamed as she fought him.

"Why do you hate me so much?" she wailed, crumbling into his body as she began to sob. "What have I done that has been so horrible that you have to destroy me? This must be such a big laugh for you," she laughed as she spoke. "Poor, swotty, little Miss know-it-all! How could she even dream that Severus Snape could ever care or even think on her! She is so hideous... so ugly." She said the word 'ugly' in a choke that erupted in a complete breakdown, sobbing and screaming, "Are you fucking happy now? Turn me lose, let me be! Just leave me alone!" she screeched.

Snape was at a loss. He let her go, and she cowered into a corner by the door. She sat on the floor, shaking and sobbing as if she were going to die from her anguish.

Snape watched her as she cried. His chest hurt, the urge to comfort her rose up in him, but he didn't know what to do. He was afraid of crying women. They made him feel so helpless and responsible. More than once during his tenure, he had lashed out viciously at his female students for crying in his class.

However, no one was there, just he and Miss Granger, and he had to bring her back from the edge. He had such the reputation of being cold and detached. People thought he was incapable of warm emotions, but it was false. He wanted to kneel down and tell her he never meant it, never meant to hurt her so much, but he couldn't. She hated him, and the very sight of him hurt her. So, he walked out and left her sobbing on the floor.

I didn't mean it, any of it, Hermione. I needed you to hate me, I knew you were feeling something for me, and I couldn't have you hurting. I thought you would hate me and let Potter and Weasley comfort you. I think you are beautiful, he thought to himself as he walked the corridors.

He had no idea where to go. This was too painful. He finally stopped and stepped into an alcove and hid himself from view. His chest hurt. All he could see was Hermione crying and in pain. He sat on the floor with his head in his hands. He cast a Notice-Me-Not Spell around him and let the silent tears fall down his face as he struggled to breath through the crushing pain in his chest.

He began to think of how he would have acted if he hadn't been such a fucking coward. He would have told her she was beautiful, and he would have held her in his arms.

She would have raised her head from his chest as he handed her a handkerchief. She would have said, "You think I'm beautiful?"

He would have confessed, "Hermione, you are beautiful in your mind as well as your sweet face. I am sorry I lied to you and hurt you. You are none of the things I said. Any wizard would be lucky to have you."

He stood up from where he had slumped onto the floor. He slammed his hand against the stone and cursed himself for being ~~so~~... weak...

After Snape had finished sulking in the private alcove, he walked up to the headmaster's office. He was supposed to meet Harry and Lupin to discuss the future of Miss Weasley.

"From what I recall, Harry, your conversation with Tom in the Chamber of Secrets was rather enlightening," Dumbledore mused. "There were some things he had revealed to you about their relationship that struck me as very curious and odd."

Harry looked at him worriedly. "What is it?" he asked as he leaned forward in his chair.

"Tell Severus what Tom told you about Miss Weasley. I think between the both of you, this should be interesting."

Snape mentally rolled his eyes. The old wizard was just leading the boy along with kid gloves. *Let's just coddle the boy a little more, shall we?* he thought bitterly.

Harry began his tale. "Well, he told me that Ginny really grew to care about him and that he had this power to charm anyone he needed to in order for his own ends. He also said that he was siphoning her power and life force from her..."

"...And he was in turn pouring his own soul's power into her, correct?" interrupted Snape impatiently.

Harry looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "But how did you know?" he asked confused.

"Since the Dark Lord's rebirth, he has become increasingly maudlin in his more lucid moments. He has spoken about a servant that had been so willing and in love with him; he had found it effortless to overpower her. He said she was still alive. He would talk of how he thought she was, how he imagined he could use her again if he got the chance. He said in his exuberance to get to Potter, he was foolish and underestimated her innate power and he was unable to simply use her without her siphoning his own power. As much as he took from her, she in turn took from him. He said she was a pure-blood and that if he were ever to want to sire an heir, she would be the only vessel he would desire. She was worthy because she had been the easiest to bend to his will and the most receptive to accepting his ways," Snape replied.

"Of course, this is based on snippets of conversations, some in my hearing, some said directly to me, some I overheard being spoken between Death Eaters in the inner circle. However, from what you have said to me, Potter, I am now more convinced than ever that my idea shall work." An evil glint flashed through his eyes.

"What plan, Severus?" Lupin asked suspiciously.

Snape examined his pristine fingernails on his long white hands as he unraveled his plan. "The relationship between Miss Weasley and the Dark Lord is a complicated one. From what I have been able to gather from her experiences coupled with Potter's recalling of the conversation he had with him in the Chamber of Secrets, is that she has come the closest to him as any woman ever has. I'm not saying he loves her, just that he lusts for her. Being the monster that he is, he is incapable of true affection, but lust, desire, and greed...these are things that can be manipulated. He spent a great deal of time in Miss Weasley's mind. He rather enjoyed himself there, and if what Potter said is true, he gave just as much of his power to her as she gave over to him. We are going to manipulate that to our advantage by slipping him Amortentia to drive him to complete his need to have her fully. I shall be manipulating the potion, of course. It is Dark magic, but many things considered Dark magic or Dark Arts are basically everyday spells and potions that have been manipulated towards an evil end with malicious intent. However, we are at war; therefore, the rules change," he said as he smiled slyly at Dumbledore.

Harry and Lupin looked at Dumbledore for confirmation. Severus smirked as he lowered his head. He knew exactly what Potter and Lupin were surely thinking...that surely *Dumbledore* would not stoop so low as to allow Dark magic to be used! Severus patiently awaited the answer he knew was coming.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and spoke clearly. "We must do this for the Greater Good," he said harshly.

Snape smirked at this remark while inwardly he wanted to vomit. Although, he knew what needed to be done, the hypocritical words of "the Greater Good" gnawed at him. Dumbledore couldn't care less how Severus used his expertise to defeat the Dark Lord. Why Albus felt this *need* to compulsively consign everything unpleasant upon the elusive "Greater Good" or whatever the hell that was supposed to mean was beyond the dark wizard.

Snape continued. "The plan will be to lure Wormtail out into the open where Potter can take advantage of the life debt owed him. Once he has been terminated, we can harvest his hair and use the Polyjuice Potion to impersonate him. Then the Amortentia can be slipped into the Dark Lord's food or drink. Wormtail spends much time at his master's feet. The impostor can use that opportunity to get the Dark Lord thinking of Miss Weasley again, and he will be compelled to have her near. However, when that time arrives, Miss Weasley will be delivered to him and with simple prodding can persuade him to spill all his secrets. The compulsion and pull of the potion will render him unable to resist *her*. Since he has already given so much over to her, naturally, she can be the only person who can successfully compel him to talk. We shall gather the knowledge of each Horcrux and destroy them all, leaving Potter free to kill the animal," he said coldly.

"Who shall lure Wormtail into the open?" asked Harry.

"You, of course," replied Snape sharply, irritated at the slowness of his mind. "He owes you a life debt, Potter! You are capable now in your own abilities at persuasion to

coerce a weak mind. Wormtail will be more than obliging if he feels his life is on the line. Once that is accomplished and he is disposed of, a suitable replacement will be found," he replied.

"Who?" Lupin asked.

"Me," Snape replied smugly. "Who knows the Dark Lord's domain better than I? Who knows better than I how to act in his presence? Who better than I will be able to suppress thoughts and emotions? If he tries to peer into my mind, I shall be able to pass myself off as the rat."

A sharp knock from the office door interrupted the discussion. Dumbledore let the person enter, and a furious Minerva McGonagall strode in fuming.

"Severus Snape!" she spat. "Would you care to explain why I found Miss Granger on the floor of your office covered in blood?"

The wizards jumped up at once. Harry glared at Snape, fingering his wand gingerly. Lupin saw how dangerous the atmosphere was and forced Harry to meet his stare. "We need to remain calm, right, Harry?" he asked the boy wizard gently.

"How is she, Minerva?" asked Dumbledore gravely.

"It's rather serious," she choked out. Looking closely, they could see her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"She slit her wrists. She is unconscious. Poppy doesn't know if she will survive," she whispered.

FUCK! Why did I leave her? I never should have left her! I should have stayed and held her, told her everything...anything! Snape thought in condemnation.

"Why was I not summoned to her side?" he snarled at Minerva as he strode over to face her.

"What do you fucking care?" Harry swore as he dashed over fast as lightening and thrust his wand into the dark wizard's neck and said, "Boy, this is a laugh! Sirius would be roaring at this. It's all quite ironic, isn't, Professor? So, give me a reason. *Give me a reason, and I swear I'll do it!*"

Lupin maneuvered over to try and come between the wizards. "Harry, you need to back down," he warned him. "Don't make me hex you."

Harry lowered his wand and stepped back from Snape.

"How can you protect him?" he yelled at Lupin. "He's the reason Hermione might be dying!"

Dumbledore intervened. "Gentlemen, this is not the time! Minerva, is there anything Severus can do to assist Poppy? A special potion?" he asked.

Snape scowled at the old wizard, despising his politeness towards him. He hated it when Dumbledore was *sounderstanding*. The next thing, the old man would be giving him love advice and suggest he send her roses! "I am going to the infirmary!" he announced as he swept out the door

He cursed himself over and over again as he made his way to Miss Granger's side. He strode into the infirmary, and Poppy tried to stop him.

Severus," she warned as she placed her hands on his shoulders, "she is very weak, so very weak. We've done all we can do now," she said gravely.

Snape looked into Poppy's kind eyes. She knew him better than anybody. She had shown him the most kindness he had ever known. Over the years she had nursed him, knitted his body back together from his beatings, healed horrific wounds, and even in a state of loneliness and grief after Lily died, did not push him away when he kissed her in his pain and sorrow. She had seen him cry and never once made him feel less of a man for it. She was one of a kind...a very special woman. If she had been younger, or if he had been older, perhaps there could have been something more.

Then Hermione had barged into his well-ordered life and had opened the rusted windows behind which he had kept all those feelings of love, need, and desire darkly hidden. Now that she had become dearer to him more than his next breath of air, as far as anyone else knew, he could barely tolerate her.

Snape and Poppy were alone in the infirmary, and Snape let down his guard, closed his eyes, and lowered his head on Poppy's shoulder.

She embraced him and patted him on the back. "What is it, Severus? No one will give me any straight answers! Why does everyone want to blame you for this?" she asked.

He stepped back from her and said painfully, "It's my fault. It's all my fault,*She loves me*. She loves me, and I was so cruel to her, Poppy. I didn't know I could hurt her so much...but I did. Please let me see her. If only I hadn't been a coward and left her distraught and crying on my lab floor, she wouldn't have done this!"

Once again, Poppy took pity on him and led him to Hermione's bedside. Her wrists were bound tightly; she had done a lot of damage to herself. She was deathly pale. She normally had such a healthy pallor. How long had she been this frail? All that damn make-up, paint, and fancy clothes probably hid how sick she really was. She looked so young for eighteen. She had lost the curves that had been rounding her out, making her womanly and desirable to his eyes, not that her mind hadn't already drawn him into her, wanting to make her his. *He* was already hers, and that was the truth. Her lips were gray, and it frightened him. What if she never came back to him? What if he never had the chance to tell her how she had chained him to her, and his desire to never be released? He feared for anyone to perceive him as weak and feeling the way he did for her shut out all the joy of knowing he loved this woman, and in its stead magnified the terror of someone finding out and ridiculing him. His pride may have cost him everything he held dear, and the only thing he held dear was she... *Hermione*.

He sighed and folded his arms across his chest as he watched her chest rise and fall in shallow breaths. He couldn't wait anymore. He would tell her. He'd tell her she owned him; every part of him was hers for the taking. He hadn't belonged to himself for quite a while now. It was time to own the truth and stop hiding behind the fear of weakness.

He conjured a chair and sat next to her, running his fingers through her lifeless hair. She looked so small in the bed.

So fragile.

He had failed her.

Not knowing what else to do, he began talking... confessing everything that was on his mind and in his heart.

"Miss Granger, *Hermione*, I'm so sorry. I should have comforted you. I think you are so very lovely. I enjoyed working with you last summer. I did notice how much of a woman you were becoming. I never would have dreamed you would care for someone like me. I'm so bitter and hardened; I barely know what love means anymore. But I swear if you wake up, I will learn to show love to you. I will never push you away again. If you only knew how plagued I've been since that night. A part of me wanted you more than anything, but I couldn't do that to you. You deserve better. Please wake up," he begged her.

He looked around and saw that Poppy had disappeared into her office.

He was alone.

He wet his lips and slowly bent over her, kissing her tenderly on hers. She was unresponsive, and he felt sad, having half-hoped that perhaps the Muggle fairy-tale Lily read to him about the Sleeping Beauty would come true if he kissed her. He kissed her forehead and stroked her hair as he knelt down next to her.

He nuzzled her cheek and whispered into her ear all the things he wished he had said to her when she had been crying at his feet. His hand found hers, and he slipped his larger hand underneath her smaller one. Her hand felt good over his. He inhaled her scent. It was a soft and gentle scent, like some kind of powder. She also smelled clean and fresh, despite the harsh Hogwarts soap that lingered on her from Poppy's bathing of her, no doubt. He continued to breathe her in as he rested his head against her shoulder.

"Please wake up, Hermione. *Please don't die,*" he whispered over and over.

"You never deserved this."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 18

Hermione accepts Snape's offer to work with him to make the potions to help aid Ginny destroy Voldemort. Interesting conversations ensue, and Hermione stands her ground with the Potions master.

A/N: My deepest gratitude towards my beta, Shellsnapelover, for her patience and advice. Thank you for all the awesome reviews and please keep them coming! I want to read what you think!

When Hermione awoke, she was greeted with smiling faces all around her. She smiled weakly in return. Each person made their greetings and said their concerns and well wishes. Only after a long time had passed, and she was quite worn out, did she notice the dark figure sulking in the dark shadows in the corner across the room.

"Professor," she said wearily.

Snape walked gracefully over to her side and sat next to her.

"How are you feeling, Miss Granger?" he whispered.

"Tired," she said softly. She looked confused and scared. "Why are you here?" she asked, stifling a yawn. Her eyes began to droop and soon she was fast asleep

Snape stroked her cheek with his knuckles. "So sweet," he murmured. He bent over her and kissed her forehead.

"I will see you tomorrow," he whispered softly in her ear.

The next morning, before anyone was about in the castle, Severus Snape came to Hermione Granger's bedside to begin his new life. He had made a promise that if she woke, he would never push her away again. He would prove his love to her. As he approached the infirmary doors, he took a steadying breath to calm his nerves.

He strode inside, drew up a chair to Miss Granger's bedside, and waited patiently for her to wake up from her sleep. While he waited, he watched the sunrise over the distant mountains. It was quite a peaceful sight. He was deep in thought when he heard her stirring in her bed.

He leaned closer and took her hand in his. "Miss Granger," he murmured softly.

"Professor?" she asked weakly. She opened her bleary eyes, and he sat calmly stroking her hand in his own.

They remained quite still...not speaking to each other for quite a while. Finally, he spoke first. "I am so sorry I left you alone," he whispered brokenly.

Hermione stared into his eyes as the tears began to swell and fall thickly from her eyes.

"Please don't cry!" he said painfully. "I am not worth your tears." He lowered his head, and his black hair fell forward and obscured his face from her.

"Why are you here?" she asked fearfully.

"I need you, Miss Granger," he said simply as he looked up into her face.

"Need me?" she bit out. "You need what...a lab partner? A brain you can threaten and boss around?" she questioned angrily. She turned her head from him and looked out the window. "No thanks, I'm quite finished with such relationships," she said bitterly as she removed her hand from his.

Snape knew he was losing his chance. He was going to need to bare himself to her. He leaned closer to her and took the side of her face into his hand, caressing the cheek. She turned her head to face him, her eyes full of terror.

"I need you, Miss Granger," he whispered softly. "Not your brain nor your intelligence. Rather, I need all of you. You *do* possess a brilliant mind. However, I realize that is not all there is to you, and to ignore the rest of you is a waste. Intelligence is only a part of what makes you remarkable. Combine your intelligence with your keen sixth sense and ability to empathize with people, and I can see the true reason you are known as the brightest witch of your age. I know you probably don't believe me, and that is all right. I don't mind proving myself to you. You don't have to answer now, just consider my apology and my request to love you."

He got up and walked out to leave her with her thoughts.

A few days later, Snape heard a soft knock on his office door. If he had not been standing near the entrance, he might have not heard it. He opened the door wide and there stood Hermione Granger.

She was a bit standoffish, not wanting to look him in the eye. However, Snape found he didn't mind.

"Miss Granger," he said graciously. "Do come in."

She followed the movement of his arm inviting her to enter, and she accepted hesitantly.

"Would you mind leaving the door open?" she asked abruptly as she sat down uneasily in the chair nearest the door.

Snape was concerned. She was edgy and nervous. Her eyes were darting about the room, taking it all in. She seemed to not want to even be in the same room with him. Nevertheless, something or someone had compelled her to see him. He walked slowly to his desk and sat down.

"What can I do for you, Miss Granger?" he asked softly.

She finally looked at him or really glanced and averted her eyes. "You said you needed my help. I'm an Order member. I may be limited in what I can do now. However, I still can use my talents. Ginny needs me, and after all, I owe her a life debt," she said quietly.

"Fine, Miss Granger," he said reluctantly. "You do realize you and I will be spending a great deal of time alone together, do you not?" he said in a firmer voice.

She met his eyes and held her gaze. "Yes, I haven't forgotten what you said during our last meeting," she whispered.

He glanced upon her critically. "This will not frighten you? To be alone with me, I mean?" he prodded.

"No," she said cautiously. "I can be professional and place my personal feelings aside. I just hope you can do the same," she challenged as she glared at him.

Snape felt the corners of his mouth twitch. "Certainly, Miss Granger. I shall endeavor to keep our working relationship professional at all times," he said smoothly.

Her eyes hardened at his comment, and he felt the urge again to reassure her. He did his best.

"Miss Granger, I meant what I said to you in the infirmary. You do recall what I said?" he asked, feeling a bit fearful.

"No, I haven't forgotten," she replied with her eyes downcast.

He continued. "Then you know that I mean to make this up to you, Hermione. I was cruel and hurtful. I regret your suffering, knowing that I was the cause of so much. I want to make things right," he said fervently.

Hermione's eyes darted around again, looking uncomfortable as she crossed her arms across her chest protectively. "I'd rather not speak of it, Professor," she said in a high, false voice. "I want to do my part to help the Order, and that is all," she said firmly.

"I understand," Snape replied uneasily. The truth was he did not understand in the slightest. Nevertheless, he was determined to right his wrong and prove to her, her worth. If that meant he would have to back off for a while and give her space, so be it. However, he would not forget his promise to himself and her. He was going to see her through the pain he caused and be there on the other side when she was ready.

"We have a lot to accomplish, Miss Granger. Since the Dark Lord has such an advantage over us, we need to end this once and for all. You and I are going to brew two potions to aid Miss Weasley turn the tables around on the bastard," he explained as he began to gather ingredients.

Hermione began to notice some of the ingredients that he was taking out of his storeroom, and she said, "Sir, what are we brewing?"

He smiled wickedly at her and said, "I think you already know, Miss Granger."

"Polyjuice Potion?" she asked weakly.

"And?" he prompted.

"Amortentia?" she whispered.

"Correct, Miss Granger. Now, I am positive you have a lot of questions, so you may begin asking now," he said in his usual sneering voice.

"Why are we brewing these potions?" she asked.

"Well," he began as he slowly made his way to her side, tapping his index finger against his lips. "First, I would like to settle a matter of great importance. I am aware that your magical powers are draining. Each time you blood let; you drain your magical abilities. That explains your lackluster abilities in Charms and Transfiguration. I need you to be sharp, focused, and able-bodied to help prepare these potions. You must swear an Oath you will no longer self-injure yourself. Are you willing to do that?" he asked sharply, raising his wand.

"Yes, I do swear," she said as she raised her wand. Snape tapped her wand and the magic swirled around her, and she knew she could never cut herself again with risking death.

"What if I feel like it and am tempted?" she asked softly.

Snape sighed as he placed his palms down on the smooth, cold surface of the lab table. "Hermione, you need to find happiness with yourself without the approval of others. If you are easily hurt by someone else's words, perhaps it mirrors your own personal truth...the truth that you secretly despise yourself. You can change it, or you can simply embrace yourself and say, 'I don't care!' and refuse to apologize for who you are. Once you learn to be satisfied with yourself, no one can ever harm you with their words," he said softly as he looked upon her with his piercing black eyes. "It is quite a freeing feeling, actually," he mused.

Hermione set herself about gathering the materials she needed to start the base for the Polyjuice Potion. She absent-mindedly arranged the ingredients as she responded to Professor Snape's wisdom.

"I find it rather amusing to hear you say such things, Professor," Hermione said calmly as her hands cautiously touched each bottle, busily working methodically without thinking. "You seem to act as if you are an expert in these matters. However, one look at you and one can say, most assuredly, that you are not." She turned her head and looked at him with a cold, calculated glare.

Snape allowed her to voice herself. She continued after giving him a sharp look of disdain. "You have spent your life nursing and feeding off of old wounds and slights from your childhood. I don't know how you can have the gall to advise me at all!"

She lit the fire and began to add her first ingredients. The silence was overbearing.

"Miss Granger," Snape began cautiously as he stepped closer to her, "I have never said I was an example to follow. Rather, I am the one to be pointed at in fear, whilst people warn, 'Here is what your future holds if you dare continue on your path.'"

Hermione gave a snort. "So, it's 'do as I say, not as I do' right?" she questioned.

Snape gave a twisted smile and answered, "I have spent most of my life unloved and unwanted. The times I ever felt love or desire towards anyone were so long ago, I can barely remember the feeling anymore. What I do know about being wanted is limited but by no means insignificant. You would do better by being careful what you wish for, or you might end up being wanted by someone like the Dark Lord."

He leaned into the young witch, his eyes following her desperate attempt to escape them with no success.

"Even though I suffered from the lack of love and happiness in my life, I still, after being disappointed in love, managed to go on with my life and make what I could out of it. I am a Potions master. I can make potions that perhaps only three other living Potion masters can. I proudly stand at the top in my field. Being unloved has not stopped me from having a life and finding some fulfillment. Therefore, you shouldn't either," he reprimanded her softly.

"Now, back to work, Miss Granger," he said firmly.

The days went by so quickly Hermione barely had time to think about her troubles. Brewing the two potions for Professor Snape had Hermione's mind in fits. She wanted to do well for him; she still had a hope inside that he would one day truly see her. She hated herself for it, though, and each night was an exercise in torment as she turned away from the temptation of cutting.

She had a great deal of time whilst brewing to examine the course of her life during the past months. Ever since that fateful day in October in Hogsmeade up to the present time, Hermione realized how destructive she had been. Her sense of self and importance as a human being had been driven into the ground.

Oh, yes, she easily could assign blame. However, she had yet to examine and take an account of the part *she* had played in her own self-destruction. She had been wounded with cruel words and had *allowed* others to invade and rob her from herself. First, her parents had been so overly critical about the importance of her marks that she now had a compulsion to drive herself into the ground in order to achieve perfection. She had allowed the opinions and callousness of Harry, Ron, Viktor, and Professor Snape to become the dominant force in her life as she became older. She was angry. She was angry with all of them, but more importantly, she was angry with herself.

As the process towards finishing the Amortentia potion grew to its critical stage, Snape informed Hermione of the variations he was going to apply to the potion.

He stood in the lab and explained the hopeful outcome of attempting to corrupt such a powerful potion to fit the ends of the Order. He took out a number of parchments with notations on them. As Hermione scanned them, she was shocked to find they were nearly word for word Harry's thoughts and observations on what he had been told by the memory of the young Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets.

She looked up from the parchment with wide eyes. "Is this true?" she whispered.

Snape closed his eyes and nodded. He then took the parchments from her and began to explain.

"Many of the Dark Lord's followers do not understand the real motivation behind his regeneration. Just going about killing Muggles and Muggle-borns indiscriminately is not his focus. Potter is the focus, and everything he does now is towards that end."

"From what Potter and Miss Weasley have explained to me and the headmaster, I can surmise what has been occurring all these years since he had *enchanted* Miss Weasley. I could not help but catch the headmaster's attempts to understand exactly what happened that year. What occurred between Miss Weasley and the Dark Lord was more than a mere *enchantment* or a *bewitching* of the mind. He truly possessed her mind; however, he failed to understand that as he poured out his secrets to her, he inadvertently gave a part of himself to her in return. They are magically linked.

"This explains the maudlin moods he indulges in from time to time. The Dark Lord wants heirs. Not a successor, mind you! He just wants more wizards and witches like himself...of himself. He feels a pull towards her. He, of course, is blinded by his own greatness. He sees Miss Weasley as the perfect pure-blood vessel he can twist and manipulate for his own gain. He fails to see that he, all those years ago, created a very powerful witch who is just coming to grips with the power she holds. Our Miss Weasley will be the key to unlock and unhinge the mind of the Dark Lord. When that happens, we shall know exactly the location of each Horcrux. Then we shall be able to finally end his reign of terror for good."

Hermione watched Professor Snape as he excitedly explained the relationship between Ginny and Voldemort. She was terrified for her friend. She was going to be forced back into the nightmare that is Tom Riddle and risk everything by trying to overpower his mind.

"How do you plan on unlocking the mind of the Dark Lord, Professor?" she asked uncomfortably.

Snape glided close to her, and she found herself being swallowed whole by his eyes. "You must keep in mind, Hermione, that the only difference between what is Dark magic, and what is not, is the *intent*. I won't lie or try to mislead you. This Amortentia potion will be corrupted into what the Ministry would clearly label as Dark magic. However, my intent is not for evil, but for 'the Greater Good.' Can you understand?" he asked gravely.

"I can," she answered firmly. "What must be done to the potion?" she asked.

"We must add the blood of Miss Weasley. When her blood is added and is imbibed by the Dark Lord, he will become incapable to resist her perusal of his mind. She will in fact have his mind in her power. But it is risky. She will have to place herself in harm's way in order to do this. She must make herself available to him."

Hermione blanched. "Available?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes," replied Snape. "She must entice him with her very presence. He will give her anything she desires. He will be unable to resist. She will be the object of his desire."

"Won't he try to...seduce her?" Hermione whispered in embarrassment.

"Yes," he replied as he regarded her unease with the topic. "She will promise him eternal devotion, sex, an heir, whatever his deviant mind wants. But of course it will have to be the next time they meet. And we are to make sure there shall not be a next time," he said warningly.

"Does he long for her?" Hermione whispered. "After everything that I was told about their...relationship; it seems he can't seem to get her out of his system. He longs for her, needs her, and loves her."

"No, Hermione," Snape said sharply. "Love has *absolutely nothing* to do with this situation. The Dark Lord has no capacity for love. He merely wants her flesh, to spill his seed into her and have her bear him an heir. He wants her because he could hold her down and use her body to his will without a fight...or so he thinks. He does lust for her. He finds her growing increasingly desirable and as his property. After all, no one has ever been closer to the Dark Lord than Ginny Weasley. He thinks because of that honor, she belongs to him, to do as he sees fit. That is what arouses his lust. He is a sadistic bastard. Never forget that," he finished darkly.

"But the longing..." Hermione began.

Snape looked at her. "What is it?"

Hermione turned back to working on preparing her ingredients. "Nothing...stupid, really. I just wonder how she feels knowing someone wants her like that. I mean, Harry loves her and all, but I don't know the depth of their feelings. But to *know* beyond a doubt that someone desires your body, wants you, and thinks you are *perfection*..." She stopped talking, feeling the tears rising up unwanted.

"Hermione," Snape whispered as he approached her. He had seen the light in her eyes as she had spoken of her deepest desire and then saw it vanish just as quickly when she stopped talking. He wondered if she thought she was foolish for even thinking such things. He could hear her voice laughing at her own expense. "Who would

want *me*? I'm nothing!"

She turned around and said as the tears hung on her lashes and dotted her cheeks, "I was naked in front of you, and you weren't even...I-I'm not saying I wish you would have...I guess it just would have been nice to know you had been tempted if only a little." She turned away from him, her cheeks blazing red. "I would give anything to be wanted like Ginny. But wizards only want my mind...not me, myself," she choked out.

"I want someone to want *me*...to want *my* body, to feel if they can't touch me they would die from the longing," she whispered.

Snape stilled his hands and looked at her profile. She was pressing her fingers onto her forehead. He didn't know if she were trying to hide tears from him or if she were deep in thought.

Snape began to stir one of the potions slowly. "What would you say if a man said to you that he longed for you?" he asked gently as he worked.

He paused and waited a moment for an answer. When none came, he went to look over the potion, stirring slowly and methodically.

"I-I... What's the point?" she whispered. "It's not like I have to worry about it. No one... has... e-ever..."

"What would you say if I said I have longed for you?" he whispered.

"Don't make fun of me again," she warned him as she folded her arms around herself protectively.

Snape came up behind her. "I'm not," he said as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

She remained silent, but she placed her hand on top of his. He took her acceptance as an invitation, and he folded her into his arms from behind, wrapping his long arms around her waist. *How can she not see how absolutely fascinating she is?* he thought as he enveloped her in his arms.

She stiffened, and he froze. Had he made an error? Did he go too far, too fast? She spun around in his arms, and he found her so close to him, if he just leaned in, he would finally kiss her.

"What would you say?" he whispered against her lips. "If I told you I have *longed* to kiss you?"

"Kiss me," she breathed.

He leaned into her, and she sank in his embrace. She was trembling as he brushed her lips with his own. She grasped tightly onto him and crushed her lips against him. Her eagerness to return his passion made him begin to kiss her urgently, drawing her tightly into his body, and he tentatively sought entrance into her mouth. She responded with such fervor that soon they were locked in a searing kiss that threatened to make him lose all self-control.

When he finally pulled away for her to breathe, she sputtered, "Why?"

He swallowed and then spoke, keeping her in his arms. "I was cruel and hateful because I wanted you. I saw you as a child with your robes on every day, but that night, I saw you, with no robe, just your lush body spread for my enjoyment. Don't think for a second that there wasn't a part of me that wanted to take you and possess you."

He cupped her face in his hands. "I dream of you. I want *you*, Hermione. Not as the Dark Lord wants Ginny, it's much more. I want all of you. I long to sink myself inside your flesh as far as I can and, as far as I can, penetrate your mind and find all the wonders there. Your whole being screams to me," he whispered.

He slowly and nimbly unbuttoned her shirt. She slid to the floor. Snape followed her to the floor, his robes spilling out like a blanket. He gently traced a finger down between her breasts and said, "Will you let me touch you, Hermione? Will you let me prove to you just how truly lovely you are and how much I want you?"

"You want me?" she whispered, confused.

"I need you, sweet one. I long to touch you and feel your skin next to mine. My hands ache for you, and my mouth is dry. Only you can help me. No other woman can help me quench this longing," he whispered.

She asked, "Why?"

"Because I want you, Miss Granger," he whispered. "I can't think about living a life without you in it. I swore to myself in the infirmary that if you lived, I would never let you feel unwanted and unloved ever again. You deserve to be worshiped. You are so enchanting and beautiful. I want to spend my life working to erase all the horrible words I said. They were lies...terrible lies, Hermione."

She breathed deeply and looked at him sadly. "But no other boys have noticed me. Do you want to take pity on me? I don't want it," she said resolutely.

"Oh, no," he answered softly as he caressed her face. "I remember your joining ceremony for the Order. I didn't want you in it because you were already undoing all the work I had constructed to distance myself from feeling love again. You were like the sun, creeping in and shining light into the cracks of my darkness. You were though still my student, so I remained distant. That night however, you were naked, and I hated how you had been humiliated. I wanted you, but I could NOT do that to you. So, I took you away."

"Hermione, I *long* for you to be mine. Think about it. I want to teach you all the pleasures between a man and a woman, and I want you to see how you make me feel," he said earnestly. "I want to do this because I belong to you. You own me: body and soul. That has been my greatest fear: you knowing that and using that knowledge to humiliate me, but I am yours to do as you will."

"How do I make you feel?" she whispered.

He took her hand and placed it on the hardness of his trousers. There she felt his erection. She gasped.

"That is only one way, Hermione, that you make me feel. You arouse me on so many levels."

Slowly, he slipped off her shirt and then her bra. The cool dungeon air hit her nipples and made them contract. He stroked them with his fingertips, causing her to shiver with anticipation. He concentrated on trying to draw her out. He took his time, watching his hands weigh and cup each breast. When he swiped one nipple with his tongue, she squeaked, but did not draw away from him. He took it into his mouth and sucked on it tenderly. She was wriggling and making sounds of pleasure that urged him on.

He stopped, and she looked so sad, he felt for her. "I won't stop, Hermione. I want your permission to touch you more intimately," he said as he brushed his hand across the zipper of her jeans.

"You want to touch me there?" she breathed.

"Mmmm," he replied as he deftly unzipped her jeans and slid his hand inside her knickers. His tongue returned to her nipple and began to stroke her. She was wet and desperate for release as he tickled and danced around her clit and suckled her until she was thrusting her hips upwards for completion. He then mashed her clit in between his fingers and kept her nipple safe within his mouth as he deftly stroked her until she was crying and shouting out.

He rose and breathed into her ear, warm and deep, "The thought of being so near makes me want you. You are so lovely, the sight of your beauty...."

He leaned into her again, tasting her sweet lips. He wondered how she felt being enclosed in his arms. He knew she wanted this, but was she actually ready for the reality? He stilled his lips and looked into her eyes. They were full of amber fire. He could take her now, here, on this hard dungeon floor, and she would not care. However, *he* did.

"We have to stop, Hermione," he whispered, "before things become too intense."

"I *want*... intense," she whispered.

He peered at her with half-closed eyes. "Good," he replied. "Not like this, sweet one. You deserve better than your virginity taken on a cold floor."

Something in those words made the mood break. Her body stiffened, and he knew to release her. She got up, and he followed her lead.

"I have to go, Professor," she said as she started to gather her things.

"Have I upset you?" he asked as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"No," she said as she blushed. "I just realized how close we were to..." She stopped short.

"Making love?" he asked.

"Would that have been it?" she asked him directly.

Ah! he thought. *She wants to know I honestly love her before she'll give herself to me willingly.*

He went to answer her, but she raised her hand. "Don't become like so many others I've heard about, who say love so quickly and then once the chase is over, forget they ever said the word."

Snape felt his anger rising. "You dare to compare me with some sniveling sixth-year?" he said in growing rage.

She looked at him with fear in her eyes. "There is a side to you that I do not understand," she whispered.

He stepped closer to her, their bodies almost touching. "You need to decide, Miss Granger, what it is you really want. Is it the true desire of knowing what it would be like to lie under me, having me possess you? Or do you just want to be proud in the fact that you have brought me to my knees full of longing that you never intend to satisfy? I have declared my love for you; I have healed your wounds and have taken the responsibility for them. Do you want to slice into me? Take your pound of flesh? It's a dangerous game you play, Hermione," he said icily.

She looked up at him with clear eyes and said unflinchingly, "I want to make love to you and for you to make love to me. I want for us to not only let our passions decide when that time will happen, as you pointed out, like sixth-years. I want the pride, and I want the possession. I want it all, and I will not take anything less than everything. I don't really know you. I would like to know exactly to whom it is that I'm making love. Not a fantasy and not a dream. It takes time. I-I haven't ever called you by your first name!"

He raised a hand to stroke her hair. "Then call me by my name, Hermione," he said plainly.

He turned and went back to check on the potions. When he looked up again, she was gone.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 18

Severus and Hermione have finished the potions. Ginny now needs to give a sample of her blood to the Amortentia to make it complete, but things do not go as Hermione had planned.

A/N: Again, my thanks to Shellsnapelover, who worked hard with me on this chapter. Please read and review!

Ginny trudged down into the Potions lab and lightly tapped on the door. She looked behind her, and Harry was there, silently urging her on.

The door opened, and Hermione greeted them both. "Come in, Harry, Ginny," she said calmly. She placed an arm around Ginny's shoulders. "I know this seems sordid and scary, but I assure you everything will be fine."

Ginny looked around the classroom she knew so well. There were two cauldrons simmering on the large table in the front, which was Professor Snape's personal work area. She looked around the dimly lit room and whispered, "Where is Professor Snape?"

"He's in his office," Hermione said evenly as she walked behind the table. She picked up one stirrer and slowly moved it in a circular motion. After several stirs, she looked up and said, "Smell it, Ginny. Can you tell what it is?"

Hermione's face was very flushed, and she looked happy. Ginny closed her eyes and breathed. She opened her eyes and looked at the shimmering liquid.

"Mother-of-pearl sheen... Amortentia?" she guessed.

"Right!" Hermione praised her. "What do you smell? If you dare name it?" she teased.

Ginny smirked. "Broom polish, a smell I can't give name to...but I know the smell..."

Harry put his arm around her. "I remember the first time I smelled Amortentia," he whispered in her ear. "It smelled like the flowers that grow around the Burrow. Your hair smells like it."

Ginny felt her face was as red as her hair. "Harry," she murmured.

Images flooded her mind of walking around the Burrow with Harry, holding hands, lying in the grass as he picked a flower from a nearby bush, Harry tracing her cleavage with its soft petals.

A slamming door jerked her out of her thoughts. "Potter," a deep voice said curtly. "Miss Weasley."

Ginny turned, and Professor Snape walked out from his office, looking tired and impatient. He unfurled his personal kit and took out a silver knife.

"Miss Weasley, we shall be adding your blood to this potion. I will not discuss why; only after I have finished with the brewing process will I then answer any concerns you might have. Needless to say, the Headmaster knows all about this and approves. If you will stand here, please," Professor Snape said tersely.

Ginny obeyed his request and stepped upon the wooden box that raised her above Harry and Hermione, making her level with Professor Snape. Her brown eyes met his black ones, and she felt the anger inside her. She still resented him. Hermione had insisted he had apologized for all the hurtful things he had said and done, but Ginny wasn't convinced. She didn't know if she would ever trust Professor Snape.

As she stared at him, she felt he could feel her dislike. He took her left arm and said, "I need your wedding finger, Miss Weasley. This is the finger of direct access to the heart. The blood is unique and special. You'll want to turn your head for this," he muttered.

Ginny squeezed Harry's hand with her right hand and turned her head away.

"Release her," he snapped at Harry. "She must be untouched except by the blood administer of the potion."

"I have to hold something!" she insisted. She was so scared and could sense the impatience and irritation flow from Snape. She wanted to smack him.

"Close your eyes," he said softly.

Ginny closed her eyes tightly, and Snape released her hand, gathering her hair and brushing it all behind her...his fingertips tickled the hairs on her neck, sending chills up her spine.

"Relax," he whispered. "I need you to release your tension. No one can do it for you except you and I."

"This is Dark magic," she breathed.

"Yes, it is," he admitted as he stroked her arms soothingly. "I want you to think about the Tom you knew when you were young and happy. The friend he had been. The one who told you he cared about you and was there for you always."

She relaxed as Professor Snape continued to stroke her arms, massaging her muscles.

"Remember," he breathed in her ear.

His lips brushed her ear. Her mind went back to when she had first met Tom. He had been so handsome. He had told her the most wonderful things, feelings Harry had never expressed to her. Tom had told her she was unique and special. He had sought her in her dreams and had begged her to not hate him for what his future self had made him into. He had implored her forgiveness, that only her love and goodness could save him. She had felt his desire for her, and his kisses had been heaven. His touch on her breasts had been of the lightest feathery brushes of his fingers. He had sighed her name as she melted into his hands.

"Harry can never make you feel the way I can," he had whispered. "Give yourself to me and save me."

"He wants you to save him, Ginny," she heard Professor Snape whisper. "I am the tool he uses. Open your mind, and let me see so he can ~~know~~,"

Ginny opened her mind as Professor Snape pushed inside. She laid bare all the intimate moments she had dreamt of with the young Tom of her girlhood. The sixteen-year-old Tom and her sixteen-year-old self were writhing in her bed. He was making love to her virgin self in the way she could only imagine. She let Professor Snape watch Tom strip her naked and bring her to orgasm with his mouth. His hands were cupping and licking her nipples with his tongue as he helped her come down from her high.

"I will always want you, Ginny. I wanted you when you were nobody. No one loved you. Harry never looked twice when you were just a young girl, but I have been waiting. I have watched you as you grew into womanhood, waiting for the time you could receive my love," Tom whispered against her mouth.

Images of penetration flew through her mind, incomplete and strange. She shared with Professor Snape her desire to be controlled and taken.

"That's right, Ginerva. You want to be possessed and ravaged. You want to be worshiped and adored. The pain is only once; the passion is forever," Snape whispered.

Ginny felt her nipples harden, and her sex was feeling wet and throbbing. She hung on every word that came from Professor Snape's lips. She felt his hand stroke down her arms as he continued to speak in her ear. "You want to be penetrated, Ginerva. You want Tom, the young lover of your dreams who adored you, to take your body and fill you. Admit it to me, Ginerva. I am the tool he uses. Tell me how you *long* for him. Tell me how he makes you feel."

She turned towards Professor Snape and whispered all in her heart. "I love him, the love the Tom who loved me. I'm the only one that can satisfy him, save him from the pain. He aches for my body, and I can't stop it anymore."

"That's right Ginerva... *Ginny*," he breathed. "Tell me how he makes you feel."

"My body is on fire; my breasts ache for his mouth. I am yearning for him to take me finally. *Ah!*" she gasped.

She felt a sharp pain in her finger. Professor Snape was stroking her hair as he held her left hand tightly. "Keep thinking of the fullness, of how it will feel when he finally fills the void inside you. He will make you happy and complete. He came to me and told me, Ginny. Tom wants so badly for you to free him from the evil. Just imagine giving yourself to him. Think of receiving him into you, the seed that he will spill as you are spilling your blood for him. He will give you ecstasy beyond your imagination," he continued to breathe into her ear.

The throbbing intensified between her legs. She squirmed, desperate for release.

"You want to come for him, don't you? He's watching and waiting, Ginny," he continued to whisper. "Don't feel ashamed. No one can see you; I will hold you safe, just do it."

Ginny felt the pulling of a wave of desire and temptation. "I can't," she whispered. "Harry and Hermione won't understand," she whispered.

"They are gone, Ginny, and I have already told them. They know and understand. Harry understands and will not hate you. You must give in to this. It's not your choice. It's only pleasure. You will learn more and will be able to please Harry in the future if you wish. But, Tom is waiting. He's waiting for your release..."

Ginny opened her robe and slid her fingers inside her knickers. She began to frig herself as the images flew into her mind of Tom, naked, hovering over her, pleading for a taste of her quim, begging to stroke her nipples with his tongue. She began to shake at the intensity. Professor Snape held her up as she began to climb higher and higher. Shame flashed in her mind of Professor Snape watching her masturbate.

"No, Ginny," he whispered. "I am the tool Tom is using. There is no judgment here. It is natural and normal for a young beautiful woman to enjoy her body, especially for

the wizard who *longs* for her so desperately.

"Come, Ginny. He is pleased. Give in to him," he whispered.

She convulsed and shouted her orgasm. "Tom!" she shrieked. "Tom, please, take me!" The images of Tom forcing her legs apart and pounding into her were too much. It went on and on as Professor Snape held onto her tightly. Finally, she stopped and slumped against her Professor. He took her into his arms, but passed her off to another pair of arms. Strong arms. Harry's arms. Snape had told her that Harry was gone, but she couldn't care less. Her body was exhausted, and she couldn't keep her eyes opened any longer. Finally she found sleep, feeling sated and completely satisfied.

After Ginny had fallen asleep, Snape brought over a Sleeping Potion and forced it down her throat. "Take over stirring, Hermione," he ordered.

"Potter, my doors are open. Lay her on my couch in my quarters. DO NOT try to take advantage of her," he said nastily.

Harry shot him a disgusted look. "As if I would ever take advantage of Ginny in a compromised state!" he hissed.

"Just check your trousers, Potter," he muttered.

"Check your own, you lecher," he seethed as he took Ginny into the next room.

Severus strode over to Hermione. "Fine, Hermione, the potion is complete." He removed the cauldron from the fire and extinguished the flames.

His eyes searched her face. She was refusing to look at him. *Oh, shite!* he thought. *She thinks I liked it!*

"Dark Magic, Hermione," he began, "is confusing and seductive. I needed to capture her blood whist in the throes of passion, thinking of him, wanting him. It will make the potion that more potent."

"Why are you aroused?" she asked harshly.

"I am a man, Hermione," he said pointedly. "I was speaking of arousing things, of desire. During the process, I had all the images in her mind coming into my own. All the things Tom had indulged in her dreams and her willingness to go along were there. It was important that I know how far she had allowed him to penetrate her mind and senses, Hermione. Potter could not do it. It would only contaminate the potion. A blood administrator needs to be detached enough to lead the giver down the road of desire and release without needing to indulge himself. Harry would have taken her. His desire for her is too great. Plus she's a virgin. I didn't know that. It made it all the more powerful. All her urges of wanting Tom to penetrate her and take her innocence have been captured into this potion. It was executed perfectly."

Hermione looked up at him in anguish and pain. He reached out to touch her, to comfort her, and she turned and ran out.

Hermione cried as she ran up the dungeon stairs. She threw open the heavy wooden door and raced towards the first set of stairs. She just wanted to get as far away from Severus as possible.

How could he? she raged in her mind. *How could he hurt me like that? He did it right in my face and didn't even tell me...he couldn't even give me the respect to warn me! Damn him!*

She sobbed as she gulped for air. She kept on running, higher and higher to reach Gryffindor tower. There she would be safe. Then she could take the silver knife she still had hidden away from her potions kit and finish what she started. It had all been a lie. He didn't love her. *How can he love me and not even comfort me? He just stood there in front of me prattling off his perfunctory, clinical explanation while turned on from holding Ginny as she frigged herself. He's a cold-hearted bastard!*

Heavy footfalls were closing in on her. Hermione knew it was he. She didn't need to look. She ran faster, but he overtook her, pulling her into his arms.

"Hermione, please!" he said. "Don't run from me. It isn't what you think!"

She raised her head to look him in his eyes. Anger surged through her, and before she could register what she was doing, she slapped him soundly across the face.

"Standing there without any regard for me, not even trying to hide your...*desire*...or whatever for her. I can't believe you did that in front of me!" she screamed.

He picked her up, and they disappeared behind a tapestry in a small alcove. "Stop, Hermione," he said with urgency in his tone. "I need you to listen to me." He held her close and nuzzled her neck. "Don't feel insecure, Hermione. You are the one I want. Remember that." He stroked her sides and lightly skimmed her belly with his fingers. Hermione felt her body ache for his touch. It had been two weeks since their last encounter. She was needy again for him.

"I would have explained, but I didn't know how it was going to all play out," he whispered as he held her to him. "Perhaps I should have explained all the various outcomes...I just thought it would be better not to have you worrying what may or may not happen."

"I feel so humiliated," she said angrily. "I'm sure Harry is too. That was just...*wrong*."

"That's true, Hermione," he said. "That's why it's Dark magic. It's manipulative and coercive. It's full of deception and deceit. It's false and creates animosity. Look at you and me. We're at odds again because of it. I don't want Miss Weasley. I want you. I had a purely physical response that disgusted me. That's why I handed her off to Potter as soon as the procedure was over. So yes, I spoke about it in methodically detached terms. I don't want what we shared to be compared to what happened just now. I am humiliated as well. I don't want anyone but you to see me in that condition."

"Really?" she asked.

Severus took her face in his hands. "Soon," he murmured. "Soon and I will fulfill you again, sweet one," he whispered. "Then there will be no distant words and clinical terms for us. When I fulfill you, I will use my whole body, not just my voice, but also my hands and my lips, every part of me. Then when you are relaxed and at peace from my touch, I will hold you to me and will not let you go until you ask me.

"Promise?" she said as she began to whimper.

"Nothing could be more important," he replied. "As soon as we are alone tonight, I will be at your beck and call. I will do whatever you wish to say to you," he said pointedly as he took her into his arms.

They walked back together to the dungeons. Severus wished he could hold her close to him, to reassure her he meant what he said. He loved her and wanted only her.

Much to Severus disappointment, Hermione left shortly after Harry returned and had announced it would be best if Hermione took Ginny to her room.

Severus waited for the onslaught of outraged Gryffindor honor. Instead, Potter surprised him.

"Well, that was about the strangest and weirdest thing I've ever been though," he said in a strangled voice. "I don't know what you did to her, but she's really fucked up. At first, she was crying and saying how horrid she felt, that she was disgusting and how I must hate her. I told her I didn't, and that I loved her. Then she practically jumped me, begging me to...to uh... *fuck* her," he finally whispered. "I've never heard Ginny talk that way before."

Severus sighed and lightly shook his head. "Well," he began as he went to bottle the potion. "Congratulations. You have now an awakened woman on your hands. I'm sure you'll be having her hit those high C's before long," he said snidely.

He looked up when the boy gave no response. He was blushing.*Great! I'm surrounded by hormonal, guilt-ridden virgins who don't know their arse from their elbow* Snape thought angrily.

"This is a bit over my head, sir," Harry admitted.

"What is? How to engage in intercourse?" he sneered.

Harry shot him a withering look. "Look, you don't have to be a bastard all the time, you know. I think I'm being pretty understanding, don't you think? After all, it isn't every day one sees his least favorite teacher egg his girlfriend to orgasm right in his face!" he raged.

Severus gave in. "Fine, Potter, I can see that can be confusing, even a bit hurtful to a wizard's pride. Surely what happened wasn't new. Surely you've seen her ~~that~~ before," he said uncomfortably.

"Sure, I have," Harry said off-handedly. "I've even done it myself."

Snape raised his hand. "Spare me, I don't want to know."

"Fine!" he snapped. Snape watched out of the corner of his eye as the boy wizard tried to get the courage to ask what he knew he was dying to ask, but was too afraid.

"Look," Snape said as he stopped stirring the Polyjuice Potion. This is the deal: Miss Weasley will be fine. She will get over this, and you and she will be normal as can be expected under the circumstances. At any rate, she will not forever harbor a secret lust for Tom Riddle while she's making your babies in the far off future...I hope," he muttered.

Harry changed the topic, much to Snape's delight. "So, what is the next step?"

"Now, the hard part begins. In two days, the Polyjuice Potion will be finished. You will lure Wormtail out into the open. I know his habits and the shops he frequents. I will contact you when the time is right. All I will say is be ready to move within the next week. At any time, I may call for you. When that happens, I expect you to use all your powers of coercion and persuasion to get Wormtail to do what you ask, which will happen to be what I tell you. Understood?" he asked.

He returned to stirring, and Harry said, "Yeah, I reckon so."

Snape huffed as he set down the stirrer. "Just pretend he's Mr. Weasley and you have to talk him into a panty raid in the seventh-year Gryffindor girls' dorm. It's like that: his fear will make him freeze up, but eventually the compulsion will take over. But instead of lust, it will be the life debt he owes you. Don't worry; I will kill the rat. Then we can harvest all the hair we want, and your part will be over until Miss Weasley successfully roots through the Dark Lord's head. Then you and the Headmaster can begin destroying Horcruxes."

Harry picked up his bag. "Fine. I'll be ready and waiting," he said firmly. He reached the door and said, "Look, I don't want to seem like a prat about all this, I just have to know...how could you do that unless you feel something for Ginny?"

Snape continued stirring methodically, focusing on the potion in front of him. "Mr. Potter, I am a professional. I understand not only the subtleties of potion making, but also the lure and seduction of the Dark Arts. Believe me when I say that not all Death Eaters were fools and dunderheads when we took the Mark. Dark magic is a very sensuous art form, and I have been taught by the best. I am the best at seduction without feeling. I care nothing for your Miss Weasley except for a natural care and responsibility a teacher cares for his student. I will not lie and say I did not feel a sense of pleasure of what I did, but it was a base, animalistic feeling. You should understand, Potter. I'm sure you love Ginerva, but don't lie and say you have never looked at another witch and thought she would be enjoyable to fuck."

Harry strode up the aisle way. "You want to fuck my girlfriend?" he roared.

"I didn't say that, Potter," he replied calmly. "Watch your tone. I'm allowing you leniency because of what occurred tonight. Nevertheless, hold that infernal temper of yours!" he snarled.

"Now," he continued as he turned the fire to a low heat under the Polyjuice Potion. "I had to actually seduce Ginerva to make this work. I had to push my personal feelings aside for what the Headmaster would call 'the Greater Good.' I am a spy. I lie for a living. It is what I do best. What you saw was a physiological response to a highly sexually charged situation. I am a human after all, no matter what you and your friends might think," he said bitterly. "Don't worry, my emotions and desires lie elsewhere."

Harry looked at him strangely. "You are in love with someone?" he asked.

"None of your business, Potter," he snapped.

"Hey," Harry retorted angrily. "I just watched you talk my girlfriend, the woman I am going to marry one day, into masturbating in your arms. I think I deserve a little more honesty than the average guy."

Snape regarded the boy...no, the man in front of him. He had demonstrated more grace and maturity than his father ever had. He could afford to throw him something.

"Fine, Potter," he acquiesced. "I am in love with a woman. I care deeply for her, and it pains me as well as it does you what occurred here. No, I will not tell you her name, nor will I answer any adolescent guessing games. Just suffice it to say, your Ginny Weasley is not the woman of my desires. So, if you will excuse me?"

He looked at Harry warily.*Damn! Was the blighter going to spill it to all the little nosy Gryffindor gossips back in the common room for a good laugh?*

It was uncanny. It was as if Potter had read his mind. He picked up his bag and opened the door to leave. As he stood in the doorway, he said, "You can give your paranoia a rest, Snape. I know what it's like to need to keep things to myself or to entrust my feelings to someone who won't spread around my inner thoughts to all and sundry. So, you have my word. This doesn't leave this room. As far as Gryffindor or anyone else I meet, Snape is just a greasy git who cares nothing for mushy, romantic feelings."

He shut the door and whispered quietly, "If it's Hermione, so help me God, you'd better not hurt her anymore, or I will hunt you down and kick the shit out of you like a Muggle. You might kill me in the process, but remember, I've got six Weasley boys on my side, and you'll have to take them all down. She's my sister, and I love her as if she were my own blood. So watch it, Snape, and good luck. Treat her like a queen. She's the best, except for Ginny of course," he said.

Then he swung open the door, slamming it shut behind him as he left. Snape was impressed. Harry was becoming quite the young man. He started to feel a grudging respect for him. Sure, he was still a little bastard, but at least he wasn't a swine like his father. He could grow to respect him. Besides, if Hermione was going to be his witch, he'd have to get along with him.

Damn! he thought. He was randy as hell. It was too soon to bring the witch that he wanted in here. She wasn't ready, so he would have to take matters into his own hands. Then, get rip roaring pissed. That sounded like a good plan.

He finished cleaning up and placed the cauldron of Polyjuice Potion to the side. He went into his quarters and sat down on the couch in front of the fire with a glass and a bottle of firewhiskey.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. He thought of the evening he spent with Hermione, touching her, tasting her. His long, thin, work-roughed hands nimbly unbuttoned his trousers, and he skimmed the velvet-soft skin of his erection. He thought of her succumbing to his touch, the eagerness of her desire for him. He had thought many times how it would be to feel her moist heat clamped around him. He began to stroke, imagining it was she underneath him, then above him, beside him, kneeling, taking him into her mouth. He just wanted her. He fisted harder and thrust his hips, biting his lower lip. He wanted to hear the sound of her accepting him into her flesh the first time, to see the look of wonder on her face as it morphed from pain to pleasure. He wanted to know he was the one bringing to her all the enjoyment and gratification that came with having a man deep inside her. He exploded in his hand, recalling her cries as his fingers had massaged her wet clit.

Soon, he told himself. Soon, I will show her how lovely it will be. I will make her happy, and I will never let her go...

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 18

Severus and Harry meet up with Wormtail, and Ginny prepares for her visit to Voldemort.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, Shellsnapelover, and all those who read and review. Thank you so much!

The day finally arrived for the plan to go into action. Severus waited in Knockturn Alley for Wormtail to take his weekly jaunt into the Apothecary that serviced only the darkest of witches and wizards. He watched from the shadow of an old wooden doorstep of an establishment that hadn't opened yet and watched the alley come to life. The cobblestoned street was echoing the sound of footsteps and wheelbarrels. Snape kept his eyes on the Apothecary as the morning fog began to slowly lift.

Snape saw the rodent as he nervously made his way to the Apothecary. Once Wormtail had walked safely inside, Snape smiled as he took out a fake Galleon and tapped it. Now, he only had to wait for Potter to arrive. He continued to watch through the grimy window as the rat made his purchases, waiting with his head constantly jerking around as if he were afraid of something happening to him.

Oh, yes, Wormtail. I know your fears. I know how much you loathe going out into the open. Never before have you been right. Well, this time, you have every reason to fear, Snape thought malevolently.

Within a minute, there was a small crack of Apparition, and a black-cloaked figure came walking slowly past Snape. The figure glided into the darkened passage between the Apothecary and the next establishment. The dark figure lowered his hood enough to show his identity to Snape before replacing it. Snape, who never needed to hide in Knockturn Alley, had insisted on Potter's discretion. It would do Potter no favors to have his reputation sullied by being caught here.

Wormtail paid for his purchases and walked cautiously out into the near empty street. Snape glided out of the shadows and blocked his path right next to the passageway where Harry stood waiting.

The rat spoke first. He was slobbering and sniveling, as he was wont to do when nervous.

"S-Severus!" he squeaked as he trembled. "W-What are you doing here?"

"I am here, the same as you, to make my weekly purchases," he said smoothly. "I thought how rude of me not to at least greet a former houseguest."

Harry came out of the dark and said softly through his hooded face, "Wormtail, come here."

A chill coursed through Severus' back. He really had to hand it to the blighter...he knew how the scare the bejesus out people when he put his mind to it.

Wormtail's eyes shifted around, and Snape could sense his desperation for an escape.

"You owe me a life debt, Peter," Harry said darkly. "I've come to collect."

Peter was helpless but to comply. He stepped inside the passageway, and Harry said, "Give me some of your hair, Wormtail. Then you may leave."

"That's all?" he said, looking happy. "O-Of course! Here you go." He took his wand, shredded off some of his hair and deposited it into a pouch Harry held out for him.

Severus stood behind Wormtail as the procedure continued. Once he was finished, Harry said, "I would wish for nothing more than to release you back into the waiting arms of your master. However, I cannot." He placed the pouch of hair into his robes and swiftly departed. Snape heard the crack of Apparition and knew Harry was safe.

Wormtail tried to ease his way out of the passageway, but was halted by Severus.

"I have waited nearly twenty years for this revenge," he whispered into the rat's ear. Although you have paid your life debt to Potter, you still have to pay for the betrayal of your friends, including the woman I once loved."

With that, he stuck a knife into the femoral artery in Wormtail's leg. Peter stumbled backward, crying in pain and holding his leg. Snape watched as the rat silently screamed for help. The look on his face was glorious. The rodent had never known whilst removing his hair for Potter, Severus had placed a Silencing Charm on him.

Within five minutes, he was dead.

Snape transfigured the rat into a rock and placed it in his pocket. A quick Scourgify siphoned up the blood, and no evidence remained. He took the rat's wand with him, shrunk his packages, placed them into his robes, and Apparated back to Hogwarts where Harry waited for him by the main gates.

"Come with me, Potter," he said as he led them down into the dungeons. He placed the rock into one of his pickled jars and smiled gruesomely.

"Now," he said as he swiftly turned around, "we have work to do. The Dark Lord will expect Wormtail back within the hour. I must prepare."

The difficult part for Severus was the fact he knew he looked like Wormtail. It was positively revolting; yet, it had to be borne. He transfigured his clothes into Wormtail's and grabbed his phial of Amortentia.

Potter shuddered as he looked at Snape as Wormtail. "Here, take this," he said to Snape as he threw his invisibility cloak at him. He must have looked at him confusedly because Potter said, "Look, I don't want you to get tackled by some lame arse thinking they caught the infamous Wormtail." He leaned back on one of the desks and crossed his arms. "Just, you know, do what you've got to do, and let me know when to send Ginny."

Snape took the cloak, wand, and packages and tucked away the Amortentia in his pocket. He slipped the invisibility cloak on, and Potter walked him out.

As they reached the main gates, Potter hissed, "You do have more Polyjuice on you, right?"

Snape glowered at him, but realized he was invisible. "Shut up, Potter," he mumbled as he went on his way towards the Apparition point. He took a breath, concentrated on his destination, and came around a hundred yards away from the Apparition point at Malfoy Manor. He readied himself and Apparated to the point where the real Wormtail would have. He made his way inside as he had watched him do a hundred times before. He walked into the opulent manor and made his way upstairs to the Dark Lord's bedroom. He knocked and opened the door slowly when given admittance. Snape did his best imitation of cowering before the Dark Lord...the way Peter would have.

"Wormtail," snapped the Dark Lord. "I am hungry. You will prepare my breakfast now."

"Your Lordship," Severus sniveled, "are you quite well today? You seem unhappy."

"Of course, Wormtail, I am unhappy," he yelled at him. Voldemort stood in front of the large French windows, staring out at the grounds, his magnificent robe pooling around his feet. He opened the doors and breathed in the morning air.

"I grow weary, Wormtail. I grow lonesome. When you are finished, I wish to speak with Lucius."

"O-of c-course, Your Lordship," he groveled as he bowed and scraped his way out of the doorway.

Severus kept a close look on his time. It was early enough that the house had not yet roused. The Dark Lord was an exceptionally early riser and wished to be fed and nourished before anyone else awoke so he would be fit and on point. Severus went into the potions lab and created the elixir that he had made years beforehand. In fact, it had been *he* who had taught Wormtail to make this concoction. Near the end, he poured in the fresh Amortentia with the blood of Ginny Weasley. He cautiously made his way upstairs and knocked lightly on the Dark Lord's door.

"Enter, Wormtail!" he shouted.

Severus looked at him as he came closer. The despot was unusually morose and low. He looked...*sad*. That could be interpreted in a number of ways. Soon enough, he would know just how miserable he was when he drank the potion.

Without a glance, he took it and placed it to his lips. He paused and said, "You have contacted Lucius, made him aware I require his presence?" he asked.

"Y-yes, Your Lordship," he answered. "He should be here momentarily."

Voldemort drank the potion and nearly tossed the empty goblet to Severus, who retreated slowly, watching and listening to the Dark Lord as he left. Voldemort went farther onto the balcony and breathed deeply, feeling his skin, and was enjoying the morning air.

Snape sighed as soon as he was out of the room. Soon, the effects of the Polyjuice would be waning and he would return to his actual self.

Severus took another swig of Polyjuice for insurance. God, he needed a different drink. Being Wormtail, even for an hour, was enough to make one sick for days. He cleared his mind and went into Lucius' office.

"Lucius," he said snidely.

Lucius was still in his dressing robe, looking over various parchments. He took off his spectacles. "Ah, Wormtail, has the Dark Lord requested my presence?" he asked absent-mindedly.

"Indeed he has," Severus replied. "There seems to be something amiss, Lucius. He is sad and not himself," he added. *That'll get him talking*, thought Severus.

"Very well, Wormtail, you may leave," he said with a wave of his hand. Severus went into a niche in the wall and Dissilusioned himself. He cautiously followed Lucius upstairs to listen to their conversation.

He peeked through the crack in the door where Lucius had not let the latch catch on the frame. He squatted and listened to their exchange.

The Dark Lord turned from where he was standing on the balcony and said, "Lucius, my most loyal servant! Please, come and stand with me. This morning is glorious," he said euphorically. "Look at the false indigo with the Angel's trumpets. Quite sedate and comforting. The blue petunias are also looking magnificent today. Narcissa has quite the eye for beauty and elegance as well as creating a relaxing atmosphere. You must thank her for me."

"Thank you, my Lord," he said happily to his master.

Snape stole a glance and noticed the Dark Lord was quite distracted. The paranoia that had been running rampant was gone. In its stead was a relaxed and unfocused serpent wizard who seemed to be on the precipice of an epiphany.

"Lucius," he began as he turned to face him. "I have been most unhappy. You know how much I have confided in you. However, I must tell you the extent of this malaise. I yearn for a witch that would never come willing to me. Only in her dreams has she opened herself to me. I realize now how much I need her. She is a pure-blood, and although I plan to defeat death, I am like any other wizard who desires a dynasty, a powerful family to build up and help control my world. I have only ever been close to one witch in my life, and I know she is now old enough to be taken as a proper consort. She is a poor blood traitor. However, I know I can woo her to my side. If she still is not convinced, I will have to steal her away."

"Who is she, my Lord?" asked Lucius quietly.

The Dark Lord looked at him angrily. "The Weasley girl, of course!" he spat. "She has been the only one of which I have spoken. Yes, she is poor and not respected in our world, but she is a pure-blood and she will give me sons and daughters to rule alongside me. She... *Ginevra* will sit at my side as mine. She must be brought to me, Lucius. Once I have a proper family, like any pure-blood, my dynasty can begin."

Lucius shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "How do want this accomplished, my Lord?"

"You will bring her to me. You will bring her here, and I shall have the proper Healers to assure me of her fertility. If she is fertile, I will take her. Even if she is barren, I will take her anyway, and in the morning, you will kill and dispose of her. I mean to possess and control her, Lucius. She knows too much."

He looked out again at the beautifully manicured lawn and flowers that lined the Manor. "I never dreamt when I was siphoning the life force from her that I was placing ~~so~~ *much* of myself inside her. She has a portion of my power, Lucius. She is like me. No other witch could ever understand my need for might and power. I must control her

and dominate her magic...the magic that is of my own...and bend her to my will."

The revulsion poured over Severus as he listened to the words that issued from the Dark Lord.

"I know it must seem so...sordid. However, I cannot give in to the falsity and fickleness of love. Dumbledore sets much store by it. Moreover, I have no use for it. The longing I feel for Ginevra, the need to overpower her is too great. I had hoped to wait, but I cannot. You will bring her to me, Lucius, *tonight*."

Lucius bowed and turned to leave. Severus shifted to the side so he could still hear any last requests and not be detected. Lucius was almost out the door when the Dark Lord said, "Do bring her to me alluring and seductive. I do not care to see my future consort in tatters."

"Of course, my Lord," Lucius replied. He closed the door behind him, and Snape breathed easier, knowing he had finally pulled it off. By tonight, all of his reason would be gone, and the mere presence of Miss Weasley would be all that would be needed to unearth what the Dark Lord was hiding in his twisted and warped mind. Severus just had to make sure that Potter stayed far away.

Severus Apparated back to Hogwarts and went straightaway to find Hermione. He located her in the library and whispered to her that he needed her and Miss Weasley in the dungeons straight away.

Hermione was shocked by the urgency with which he was speaking to her. "Professor," she whispered. "You know that Ginny has been sequestered. It will take time for me to obtain permission to fetch her."

"Then do it!" he hissed, and he strode out of the room. Then he went to Minerva's office and tapped on the door.

"Come in," she said curtly.

He opened the door forcefully and closed it sharply.

Minerva was stacking parchments. "My goodness, Severus! You're acting as if the hounds of hell are upon you," she said, confused.

Severus walked close to her desk and loomed over her. "I need you to transfigure a dress for Miss Weasley. It's happening tonight. I have to make her available and dressed appropriately for when she is taken to the Dark Lord."

Minerva's face went white. "You have already administered the Amortentia?" she whispered.

"Yes. Everything is in place. Tonight, Miss Weasley will have to play her part. She must be convincing and ready to do whatever she must to make sure we uncover where all the Horcruxes are."

Minerva looked anxious. "You don't think he'll..." She swallowed and couldn't continue.

Severus looked at her gravely. "I am being realistic about this, Minerva. I do not think Miss Weasley to return to us unscathed. If she is careful and plays the game well, she may escape with her virginity intact. However, I can not give anyone any guarantees."

"Should we tell Potter?" she whispered.

"NO!" he yelled. "That idiot will ruin everything. Miss Weasley has to remember she carries the same magic inside her as Tom. He has poured into her a part of himself! She is not just a mere vessel for a portion of his soul. He considers her an equal to be feared. That is why he feels compelled to dominate her. I will speak with her about the subtleties she will have to use in order to bypass any damage he may try to inflict on her."

When Severus reached his classroom in the dungeons, Miss Weasley and Hermione were waiting for him.

He closed the door quietly and drew in a cleansing breath. He walked over to Miss Weasley's side and gave Hermione a reassuring look.

"Ginevra," he said as he took her hands. "Tonight is where you will play your greatest part in our war effort." He glided his hand through her hair. "Professor McGonagall will have a dress for you to wear. You will be going alone to the Dark Lord. I say alone since we cannot accompany you. However, Lucius Malfoy will be coming for you. Now do not be frightened. You are to go where we tell you and obey him when he comes for you. As for the dress, the Dark Lord has requested Lucius bring you to him in your finest."

Snape's eyes bored into hers. "He fears your magic, yet he longs for you. You have been the only person who has carried so much of his power. You are no Horcrux, Ginevra. You share a part of his ability to influence and it frightens him. In order to control his fear, he desires to make you his consort, meaning his slave. You will thwart his plan by encouraging him to open his mind to you and glean what we need from it."

Ginny began to tremble. "He's going to rape me, isn't he?"

Severus swallowed and said, "You can control the amount of pain he will inflict on you. Promise him the world, and he will believe you. Remember, he has imbibed the Amortentia Potion. You will find your mind shall be more powerful than his. But his urge to take you and make you his will be strong. You must do what you feel is best."

Ginny looked at Hermione. "How will Harry ever forgive me?" she whispered. He knows I'm a virgin. If after this night I gain everything we've ever needed to end this war, but give in to him and let him have me, Harry will never want me!" she said hysterically.

Hermione hugged her friend. "Ginny, you know Harry's love is deeper than the physical. Why else would you both have waited? He loves *you*, not just your body," she whispered to her.

Hermione's eyes met Severus', and he said as he placed a comforting hand on Ginny's back, "A man's true love does not rest purely on one area of a woman. It is her whole being, Ginevra."

Hermione smiled.

"Was it horrible?" Hermione asked Severus as they left Ginny to her thoughts.

"Being Wormtail for an hour was enough to nearly do myself in," he deadpanned.

"How was the Dark Lord? I mean, was he insane with lust and yearning?" she asked.

"Not yet. The Dark Lord is a powerful wizard. It will build up to it. But by this evening, he should become rather desperate," he replied as he helped her hop over the step with the bog inside.

"Will his need be purely sexual?" she whispered.

Severus looked at Hermione as he led her to the dungeons. As they began their descent on the stone stairwell, he stopped and opened a door inside the stairwell.

It was a small room, with books and a desk, a couch and a fire. "This is my private sanctuary," he replied. "No one knows it exists. It is my private sanctuary. For the last fifteen years, I have sought my solace in this room. I've read, slept, meditated and built some of my most precious dreams in this secret room."

He drew her closer and stroked her face with one hand. "You have become a part of me that is very precious. I have never wanted any woman to share my most innermost thoughts and spaces. If the Dark Lord were capable of love, he would treat Miss Weasley like this: open his heart and share all the beauty within. However, there is no heart in him, only darkness. Their night tonight will be one of bargaining, of seeing how far he can bend her to his will. But the tables will turn the moment he sees her. He will be at *her* mercy. His longing for her will be nearly unbearable; yet she will wield the power."

Hermione relaxed into his hand. "So, what of us, Severus? Who wields the power, and who is the one who longs?" she whispered.

He cupped her face with both hands and breathed against her lips, "As any good match, both the wizard and the witch will wield the power equally, and the longing they feel will only make them want to give in to the other, each one seeking the pleasure of the other above their own and relinquishing power to the other."

He kissed her and felt her respond to him. Their kisses were sweet, urgent, passionate, and yet tender. They took their time, learning to give and take in their pleasure. Hermione felt her mouth meld with his, and all she knew was the warmth of his mouth on hers and how wonderful it made her feel.

They paused, and Severus brushed her kiss-swollen lips with the fingertips of one hand. "You deserve to be seduced, slowly and sweetly," he whispered.

Hermione grew nervous and slipped away from him. "I think I need to return. Just have me called when Ginny returns," she replied.

She turned to open the wooden door, but a long pale hand laid itself upon the door and stopped her from her leaving.

She didn't turn around. Her eyes were closed and she said, "What are you trying to do, Severus?"

He leaned his taunt, lean body into her back. "I want you, Hermione. I want to make love to you."

"Not now," she whispered. "I'm not ready. Please don't force me."

He stepped back from her. "You think I would take you against your will?" he said angrily.

Hermione turned around, her back against the door. "No. But you know how I feel, and I know your ability to seduce. I don't want to wake up later regretting anything," she said honestly as she looked him in the eye.

"Fair enough," he whispered as he clasped his hands behind his back. "You may leave, if you wish."

Hermione could sense the hostility and hurt in his voice. "Please don't be angry, Severus," she begged him.

"You mistake a rebuffed ego with hostility, Hermione, and sexual frustration for anger," he said in a clipped tone. "Now, if you don't mind, I would very much like to be alone." He walked to the door, reached behind Hermione, and opened the door. Hermione jumped out of the way and stood at her full height.

"There's no reason to get nasty with me, Severus Snape," she spat at him as she pushed the door closed. "Just because I won't have sex with you is no reason to toss me out like garbage!" She looked at him haughtily and with pride. A small smile crept on his face.

He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him. "Now, that's my sweet one. You are right. No man or wizard should try to make you feel less because they can't have their way. It isn't right for you, Hermione. That makes it wrong for us to continue," he whispered softly.

He took her back to Gryffindor tower and kissed her hand. She shuddered as he walked away in a swirl of robes. Those lips that had touched her hands had already been on some of the most delicate and tender places on her body, and he wanted more. She knew she wanted much more, and the thought of that special intimacy with a wizard such as Severus Snape made her feel weak-kneed. When the time finally arrived for them, it was going to be incredible. No matter how their love-making played out. She was sure because she would at last be naked with him, and he would be covering her with his desire and love for her. She wanted nothing more than to experience the weight of his body on top of her. She wanted it. However, the thought of his strong arms and chest against her soft breasts and stomach made her tremble with trepidation. She had seen how he could drive a witch insane with longing just by using his voice. To have all of him at once was overwhelming. In time, she would be ready to handle it, and when that time arrived, she would be craving him.

She went into the common room and got ready for bed. She hoped that wherever Ginny was, she would return to them safe.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 18

Voldemort and Ginny finally meet and she is ready to compel the evil wizard to share his secrets of the hidden Horcruxes.

A/N: Thank you to all of you who continue to read and review. This is a HUGE chapter. I hope you all enjoy it! Thanks also to my wonderful beta, Shellsnapeluver!

Minerva worked feverishly to transfigure the perfect outfit for Ginny to wear to meet Voldemort. As she placed the final touches on the dress, Professors Snape and Dumbledore reiterated the plan several times to get Ginny to remember exactly how she was to react when Lucius came to take her to Voldemort.

The general plan was for Ginny to go to Hogsmeade, where she would let Lucius Malfoy place her under the Imperius Curse and take her to Tom's side.

"It's a ridiculous plan," snapped Harry as he tried to soothe his girlfriend. The young witch was having a difficult time knowing soon she would be in Tom's presence again. "Can Lucius be that stupid?"

Professor Snape was irritated. He did not want Potter involved in this, but Miss Weasley had insisted she could not go through with the plan unless Harry knew all the details.

Severus shrugged. "Depends on how desperate he is. He has to be anxious to make the Dark Lord happy. Especially after all that happened the night I was outed."

Minerva finished the dress and laid it on the young girl's bed. She kissed her on the forehead for luck and left the room without a word. Ginny touched the material of the dress gingerly and finally picked it up.

"Excuse me," she said demurely. "I must go change."

After Ginny had left, the wizards began to talk amongst themselves.

"How do we prepare her?" whispered Harry as his eyes darted between Snape and Dumbledore. "She was trembling earlier."

Snape stood with his arms crossed, not looking at Potter or Dumbledore, but at the closed bathroom door where Ginny was on the other side. "Let me talk to her alone. She needs to understand her part and how to play it," he whispered calmly.

Harry made to argue, but Dumbledore hushed him. "Harry, Professor Snape knows what he is doing. Let's leave him to it," the older wizard said gently as he placed a firm hand on the young man's shoulder.

Harry left, but Severus knew he wanted to stay. He knew the boy didn't trust him to be alone with his witch, but it couldn't be helped. Severus knew he was the only one who could prepare the young woman fully for the reality that lay ahead.

When Ginny emerged from the bathroom, she looked around quickly and said, "Where is Harry?"

Snape stood by the door and explained as he began to walk slowly towards her. "Potter and the Headmaster left. I think it would be prudent for you to become relaxed and mentally prepared for tonight. You need to be calm and confident. You *can* do this Miss Weasley," he said in a soothing voice.

"You heard what we said?" he asked quietly.

Ginny fidgeted with her dress. "It's hard not to. This isn't the largest room in the world," she retorted as she looked around her.

Snape regarded the young redhead in her new dress. She looked quite lovely. She would be perfect. "Nevertheless, it has kept you and everyone around you safe. The sooner we finish with this nightmare, the safer we'll all sleep tonight," he said coolly.

He sat on the bed and gestured for her to join him. "*Ginevra*," he whispered softly, "tonight, you must remember to play your part. You must resist Lucius when he first abducts you. When he tells you what he plans to do with you, you must become calm. If you cease to resist when he tells you that you are going to see the Dark Lord, he may forgo placing you under the Imperius Curse. Lucius hates to do more work than is necessary. You will use that to your advantage. It would be wise for you to act eager and happy to be reunited with the Dark Lord."

He placed his hands inside his robes and drew out a crystal phial. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

Ginny shook her head.

"This is a mild lust potion that I have manipulated, and yes, it is Dark magic. The true look of the Dark Lord would repulse you since the wizard you remember was the once young and handsome Tom Riddle. He is no more like that young man. He is more serpent than man and revolting to behold. You CANNOT under any circumstances show your revulsion, so I have concocted a potion to bypass the problem.

"Now, you will drink this, and it will make him desirable in your eyes. You will only see the young Tom Riddle you knew in your dreams and as a young child. However, you will still remain in control of your senses. You *must* compel him to tell you about the Horcruxes, Ginevra. We already know of the Diary, the Ring, the Locket, and one other I cannot reveal to you. There are three more. Three *missing* ones that we do not know."

He wrapped a hand around her waist, pulling her to him tenderly to help aid her to accept him pouring the liquid into her mouth. He swept his strong hand behind the nape of her neck, and her head succumbed to his touch. Her pink lips opened and he raised the phial to her mouth. As she swallowed the clear liquid, her trusting brown eyes searched out his black ones. He cradled her mind in his and helped her to ease into the transition.

He held her to him and stroked her hair, while whispering against her ear. "You must allow him to seduce you, Ginevra, yet hold back. You are a pure-blood and deserve a virgin's wedding. I want you to promise him everything he asks of you, no matter how frightening or embarrassing. Promise him children...powerful children. Remind him you come from good stock; your mother bore six sons before you. You will do the same. You will reign next to him and be his confidant. He desires to control you and make you his slave. You will not understand this. He will not tell you of it nor shall he be honest about his intentions. You will be obedient. If you must, let him touch you, and follow your instincts. Touch him if you feel it will get you the information we need. He is already using you. Use him in return.

"Let him know you are a virgin. Let him experience the pain of want. He will understand your rights as a pure-blood. You deserve a virgin's wedding. Do not allow your innocence stop you from speaking words that until now you have only whispered in the dark. He is all encompassing darkness, and there is no good or love in him. Do not forget. His ability to charm is of legend. He is a master in the art of seduction. However, you shall be the stronger. Turn his charm against him. Use his strength to become his weakness."

Overcome with the sensuous words being poured into her ear, Ginny turned to the man whose voice was making her burn and yearn for lust and power. She kissed him, opening her mouth to taste his. He was slow, letting her find her way before he responded and matched her eagerness to search out his mouth, lips and tongue. She pushed her breasts into his chest as she took over, trying to see if she could do this...if she could tempt a powerful, older wizard. She was so grateful he was allowing her to explore and feel out her way before tenderly pulling away.

"You are ready, Ginevra," he whispered. "Just like that, respond *only* to Tom. He is the one from whom you require answers. Do you understand?"

Her mind was so fuzzy, and all she could see was her Tom. He was leading her away. "Tom, don't send me away," she moaned as she skimmed a hand down his wool frock coat to cup his manhood. Severus' hand grasped her wrist and stopped her from touching him intimately.

"I'm not Tom," he whispered as he passed a hand over her face. You will see him soon. Now go."

As Ginny made her way into Hogsmeade with the rest of the sixth-years who had been given "special permission" to go out and have an evening in the village, she began to feel strangely light and calm. The haze of Professor Snape looking like Tom went away like a fog that had lifted from her eyes. She couldn't believe she had kissed Snape and tried to seduce him. She fairly shuddered in remembering.

She didn't know why she had been gifted with such a dress. It was the palest of greens, like a silvery, mint silk with a matching wrap to stave off the evening spring chill. She loved how the pearl bead work on the bodice had looked in the mirror. Her red hair was loose and long down her back. She had thought to pull it up, but Snape had insisted she remain simply her lovely self. She wore the lightest of powders and the lightest of lip-gloss to shine her lips. She felt like an elfin princess in her small ballet flats that matched the silvery hue of her dress. The other girls declared she was gorgeous, and how could Harry not be jealous with her leaving the castle wearing such a dress?

Ginny drifted along with her classmates, smiling and chatting, but she wasn't there, really. She was waiting, waiting for Tom, so she could see him again.

She and a couple of girlfriends stopped off at the Three Broomsticks, and after drinking a glass of butterbeer, she excused herself and went to the loo where she was followed by a hooded man.

Lucius Malfoy.

His covering could not mask the blond hair peeking from out of the black material. She made to scream, but he clamped a hand over her face. He picked her up and Apparated into a glen.

He stood her on her feet and, with a wave of his wand that he took from his cane, he vanished his black robes. He was elegantly dressed and looked every bit the gentleman.

"Ginevra," he whispered. "You have nothing to fear from me." His hand dropped from her mouth, and she shook with fear. "Look around you, Ginevra." He waved his hand gracefully around them. "This is what you have been born for, not that hovel in a filthy wasteland. You are a pure-blood, and I have come to bring you to your rightful station. The Dark Lord has waited for you. You are now old enough to be his consort."

Ginny's face relaxed. "Tom?" she asked weakly. "Tom is waiting for me?" she whispered.

Lucius smiled as he caressed her glossy, red hair. "Yes, that's right. He's waiting me to bring you to him. He has longed for you for so many years. Now, you and he will finally be reunited. How does that make you feel?" he asked with concern in his tone.

Ginny smiled. "I've dreamt of this moment. I..." She dropped her face and closed her mouth.

Lucius looked at her with pity. His grey eyes were forlorn in their expression. "Oh, Miss Weasley, you can tell me. I am the Dark Lord's most trusted servant. Soon, I shall be your servant as well as my wife and son. Entrust me with your secrets," he said soothingly.

Ginny whispered as she raised her head. "I have very intense dreams of him. He comes in my dreams, into my mind, and we reminisce about what we once had and what we could have again. He does things... makes me *feel* things."

"You do so long for him in return your feelings don't you?" Lucius whispered as he stroked her hand delicately.

"Yes," she admitted softly. "Please, I need to see him!"

Lucius took her arm and enfolded it within his own. Ginny walked into the gardens of Malfoy Manor. Evening shade and dark butterfly bushes were lush and fragrant around her. The two peacocks she knew the Malfoys kept as pets lazily strutted along the manicured lawn.

"Your gardens are charming," she whispered.

"Soon," he drawled, "all of this will be yours. Everything I own, I willingly give to the Dark Lord."

He led her up the stairs and brought her inside the lavish manor. Crystal and silver shone from every surface. The lighting created a sense of warm and welcome. She turned to Lucius and inquired, "Am I acceptable? My dress, is it appropriate?"

Lucius smoothed her hair lightly and said with a shining smile, "You are the picture of loveliness. The Dark Lord will be most pleased."

"Where is he?" she asked eagerly.

"Allow me to lead you," he offered with a slight bow.

Lucius walked Ginny upstairs where the Dark Lord's bedroom was located. Ginny noticed his unease.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"No, my dear, I just need to go see if the Dark Lord is prepared for you," he said with a strained smile.

He tapped on the door, and it swung open of its own accord. Tom was alone, wearing a dark green and silver robe that swept the floor as he walked. He turned, and Ginny saw him look towards Lucius. She only could see her Tom, her wonderful, handsome Tom.

"My Lord," Lucius said as he bowed.

"Is she here?" Voldemort snapped angrily.

"Just outside. I wanted to make sure you were alone," he said uncomfortably.

Voldemort smiled cruelly. "Afraid of Bellatrix ruining the evening?"

Lucius nodded. "More or less. The last thing we need is for fucking Bellatrix to frighten off the young woman."

Voldemort laughed coldly. "No matter. I am the master here. Now, bring me my bride," he said commandingly.

Ginny stepped back from where she was eavesdropping and bypassed Lucius as she came inside with her arms reaching out for him.

"Tom," she whispered as she dashed to him. "I missed you, so!"

She began to feel afraid. She pulled out of his arms and said worriedly, "Tom, aren't you pleased to see me?"

"You are pleased to see me?" he asked coolly.

"Oh, yes," she replied.

He kept his eyes on her. "Leave us, Lucius," he snapped.

"Very good, my Lord," Lucius whispered.

Ginny heard the door click shut, and Tom took her face into his hands. "I cannot stop thinking of you, my pet. You are going to remain with me. Has Lucius told you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered.

His thumbs stroked her pink cheeks. "You will never leave me, Ginevra. *Never*. Do you understand?" he asked, looking at her intensely.

"Yes, Tom, I understand," she accepted.

He pulled her to him and kissed her passionately. She closed her eyes and remembered all the dreams and promises he had made. She felt desperate for him, yet Snape's voice was nagging her brain. Tom was kissing her neck and sliding his hand over her body.

"Tom," Ginny whispered, "If I am to be your consort, we must share more of our minds. I loved it when we wrote to each other, you were pouring yourself into me, and I was pouring myself into you. You told me you wanted me to save you, Tom. I want to help you. I want to do everything and anything you need."

"You do, Ginny?" he whispered as he glided a hand across one of her breasts. Her nipple reacted to the touch, and she choked out a whimper she was trying to hide.

He laughed darkly as he whispered against her lips, "I have found a hidden treasure." He urged the hardening point to rise and react to his touch. However, Ginny remained focused.

"We must be powerful," she said as she pushed his lips from her. She looked into his eyes, the dark brown eyes that called her from deep inside. "You and I will create a new breed of wizards. We will be indestructible and prevailing. No one can stop us. Not Dumbledore or Snape...no one!"

She began to stroke his neck and chest delicately. "I want you to open your mind to me, let us share again what we once did," she whispered.

He kissed her hard and desperately. "Only if you give me your innocence. I need to possess you," he hissed.

"I am a virgin and a pure-blood. You cannot expect me to give up what is owed me!" she replied frantically.

"Of course," he replied. Then without warning, he tore the dress off her and threw her on the bed. She scrambled to get away, but Tom was lying completely on top of her.

Terrified, Ginny screamed, "No! Not like this. Don't, please!"

"Be still!" he snapped. He pushed her thighs apart and lightly touched her small curls covering her sex. He pushed one finger inside her and rotated it around.

"Yes, my bride," he groaned as he brushed her lips with his own. "You are pure. I can feel you around my finger. You will learn to satisfy me, and in return, I will bring you all the pleasure you deserve." Ginny stiffened as he continued to explore her barrier. She was petrified he was going to break her and make her bleed.

Instead, his mood changed, and he was holding her, gently stroking her naked breasts with his fingertips. "We are connected, you and I. You are in my blood. My word is law. If I say we are married, it shall make it so. You are in me, Ginevra. I feel you closer to me than any woman has ever been. I long to feel myself inside you."

Ginny kept her body close to his. "I want to please you, and I want to know everything about you *Open your mind to me, Tom*," she whispered against his cheek.

"I will tell you everything," he said desperately, "I must have you, Ginny."

"Tell me about your deepest secrets of immortality. I want to stay with you forever," she said as she began to stroke the length of his erection though the silky fabric of his robe. She easily shifted the robe open, licked her index finger, and slid it down the shaft. "Tell me first how to be immortal like you, and I shall do more than this," she whispered seductively.

She teased and fed his lust as he whispered to her all of the secrets of his madness. As he was nearing the end of his confession, he spoke of splintering her soul, of making her his equal in every way. As he grew more eager, she began to stroke him, and he choked on his desire and roared out an explosive orgasm that left him weak and near sleep.

He cupped her face, and as he slipped into slumber, he whispered, "You are mine."

"And you are mine," she whispered as watched him close his eyes to sleep.

She hastily repaired her dress and stole out of the bedroom quietly, padding her way cautiously down the stairs.

"Lucius!" she hissed "Lucius!"

A house-elf popped in front of her and bowed gravely. "I am being Mr. Malfoy's most personal house-elf. Is Miss requiring him?"

Ginny swallowed and drew her wrap closer to her. "Yes, I need him now," she whispered. The house-elf popped away, and she nervously put her shoes back on while she waited. She hid herself in a corner and watched as Lucius came walking down the corridor.

"My dear!" he said concernedly. "Has something gone amiss? Where is His Lordship?"

"Shh," she said calmly. "He's sleeping. I think he...*overexerted* himself. I have many things to do. My mother and father must be informed, and a wedding must be planned at the soonest possible date."

Lucius smiled and bowed gracefully as he took Ginny's hand in his own. "My Lady, I am yours to command," he said as he gave her the customary kiss one inch above her skin.

Ginny was a poor witch. Nevertheless, she was a pure-blood and knew the traditions and expectations of her.

Ginny was growing anxious. "Lucius, I must depart. If my mother were to discover I was alone for so long with my fiancé, I would be in so much trouble. Not that my family will approve of my marriage to Tom, of course, but the proprieties must be observed. I must remain a virgin on my wedding night in order for there to be no whisperings behind my back," she said urgently.

She went to open the door when the small house-elf popped in front of her opening it for her.

"My Lady," said Lucius, "No one would dare to insult or even speak of such a delicate matter concerning your marital bed," he reasoned.

"Be that as it may, Lucius, there are fools amongst the Death Eaters. I do not want to see anyone dead on my wedding day because of a stupid comment at the wrong place and time. *All* of the old rules must be observed. The bridal sheet must be shown to the guests as proof of my purity taken. Now, let's go to the Burrow," she said authoritatively.

She swept out the door as if she owned it herself and waited for Lucius to take her arm. She could tell he was very reluctant to depart, but he had to comply with the Dark Lord's intended. Ginny smirked inwardly at her ability to read his mind so clearly. His emotions were so obvious on his face.

Lucius took her to the Burrow where the house was already vacant. He walked around in the darkness and finally lit his wand. He looked panicked and unsure of himself.

"My Lady, there seems to be no one about," he said in confusion. Ginny glanced around and found the Portkey that would take her away from this nightmare laying right on the mantle where Harry told her it would be.

"Don't worry, Lucius," she said calmly. "Many times my family must go to their Order meetings...and no, Lucius, I cannot tell you the location," She saw the glimmer of hope

in his eyes. "I'm not the Secret-Keeper."

Lucius shrugged. "You cannot blame me for trying," he said amiably.

"Please sit, Lucius," she said. "I will need to wait I suppose for their return. Hopefully, it shall only be Mum and Dad returning, and not my brothers." She turned to face him. "Are you sure you want to confront the Weasley clan?" she asked, hoping to frighten him away.

"Oh, no," he said pleasantly as he ran a hand across a sofa chair, looking for dust. "I wouldn't dream of leaving you alone with so many people who would attempt to interfere with the Dark Lord's plan."

Ginny was growing increasingly nervous. He was becoming suspicious. Soon, he would realize this was all a ruse and then force her back into his Manor and lock her up with Tom, who would rape her without any remorse or conscious.

She let a nice distance grow between them and then she swiftly snatched the Portkey, activating it, and was transported straight into Dumbledore's office.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 18

Ginny safely returns from Voldemort, and Severus has another discussion with Hermione about their growing relationship.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Shellsnapelover. Love to love you, baby! ;) Again, to all who read and review, thank you so much! I appreciate each one, and you guys are great.

Ginny landed with an ungraceful thud on the carpet in Dumbledore's office. Harry was there to help her up, and he embraced her, whispering words of love and bravery as he held her in his strong arms. She loved the safe feeling of his strong arms. He wanted to know if she had been abused, if she was all right.

Ginny extricated herself from him and stroked his face gently. "I'm fine, Harry," she said wearily. She looked around the room. Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey were standing by, looking intently into her face. Ginny gave them a slight smile and tried to look reasonably steady.

Harry looked over her and said, "Why is your dress torn?" he demanded loudly. "You had to do a fast mending spell...this looks as if it has been stripped off of you!"

Severus glided over and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Potter, you need to sit. Drink some tea. I shall put a Calming Draught in it."

Ginny looked at how Snape was glaring at Harry. Although his words had been soft and gentle, his look was of rage. His hand on Harry's shoulder was white from a powerful grip he had on the young wizard. Harry looked up at Snape, and they met each other's eyes.

"All right," Harry said quietly as he regarded the dark wizard. He backed down and allowed the others to take over the situation.

Dumbledore, during this time, had sat calmly relaxed in his chair. Ginny looked at him, and he smiled.

"Now that the dramatics have passed, I am quite curious as to how the evening went for you, Miss Weasley," he said as he got up from his chair to walk towards her.

"It was very private. No one was allowed to remain with us," Ginny whispered.

She turned to Snape, who immediately came close to her, and she said quietly, "I did what you told me to do, but I don't wish to repeat what I did in front of Harry. Can we just get to the information I have for you and be done with it?"

Snape took out his wand and spoke loudly, "Ginevra, I want you to focus on the conversation you had with Tom tonight."

Minerva and Poppy rushed over to help her into a chair. Ginny nodded to Snape as she sat in a chair waiting to be Legilimized.

It was an eerie feeling. Flashes of the evening were flickering in and out. The first kiss, the feel of the sheets under her naked body. Her thighs pushed apart. Ginny did not want Snape to see that. Frantic whispers against her ear resounded in her mind as she allowed Tom to caress her small breasts and shudder in pleasure as she stroked his penis teasingly.

"I will give you anything, Ginny," he pleaded as he kissed her breasts.

"Tell me of your Horcruxes, Tom. Tell me how we can finally be one. No more secrets." Her eyes flickered, and his mouth was against her ear.

"Nagini... I need her so. She keeps me alive. I placed a part of my soul in her."

The image of his hands gliding up her thigh, reaching to touch her intimately appeared.

"The cup of Helga Hufflepuff. Bellatrix has it hidden in her manor..."

Ginny's memory slipped back into a past dream of Tom, her young friend and lover, stroking her gently between her legs, dipping in a finger now and again inside her, bring her to orgasm.

"Focus!" she heard a sharp voice say.

"Diadem of Ravenclaw... The Grey Lady told me... I hid it in the Room of Requirement."

Ginny's mind went rapidly into the shadows of the darker whispers of his confession. He touched her as she stroked him. She came silently and restrained.

Her lips pursed.

The face of Harry as he first kissed her.

The feel of Tom's naked sixteen-year-old body against her.

The panting sounds as Tom urged her to touch him more.

He tasted her lips and raised his fingers to his mouth to capture her essence on his tongue. Ginny was drowsy, yet she still kept her fingers around his hardened member, fisting it hard and fast until he came.

"You are mine..."

"And you are mine..."

Snape withdrew. He was pale and exhausted. His face was perspiring, and the nervous tick in his jaw began to pulsate. "You latched onto me," he said accusingly. "You wouldn't release me until I had seen it all," he whispered. "No one except the Dark Lord has ever been able to do that."

Ginny hugged herself, and Minerva held Harry back as Poppy went over the young witch with her wand. Poppy nodded to Severus, and he fixed his furious eyes back on Ginny. She looked up at him in supplication.

"I told him he was mine," she whispered. "Have I pledged myself to him? I needed you to see and tell me." Fear gripped her.
What if I am now Tom's? Will I always draw him to me? Would he really force me to stay by his side and bear his spawn?

"No matter what, Miss Weasley, the Dark Lord will be furious. You have deserted him and have taken his precious secrets. No matter the fallout, we must act quickly. Minerva, take Ginevra to her room and stay with her," Snape said softly.

As she slowly rose from her chair, she looked up into his emotionless eyes, his face fixed and cautious. She watched his eyes follow her as she walked under their piercing glare.

Ginny never asked how he knew to answer her thoughts.

After the information had been passed to the Order, plans began to form. Severus had left the Advance Guard to plot alone. He had done his part. Now it was up to the others to find the Horcruxes and destroy them. He retired to his chambers, exhausted and lonely. He couldn't forget how Tom had whispered to Miss Weasley and how she had replied.

"You are mine..."

"And you are mine..."

He stared into the fire and thought of Hermione. He needed her. He was tired of being patient. The images of the once young and handsome Tom Riddle lying in between Ginny's legs only made him want Hermione more. He went in search of her and found her sitting on the dungeon steps.

"Hermione?" he whispered.

"Oh, Severus," she said nervously. "I had an urge to come down here, to see how it all went tonight." She was not dressed as she usually was. Her hair was wild and untamed and her robes rumpled.

Severus stood in front of her. "Why did you not come to my door?" he asked. "It is always open for you."

"Is it?" she whispered as she looked up at him.

"You know it is," he replied angrily. He looked into her face and saw the confusion there. He took a breath and crouched to her level.

"Tell me what is disturbing you," he whispered as he reached out to take her hands in his.

"I want to be with you. I want to be n-near you. I just don't know how much," she confessed.

Severus rose and kept his grip on Hermione, so she stood as well. He led her into his chambers and sat her down on the couch next to the fire. He watched as her nervousness turned into calm. He bent down and kissed her delicately on her lips and went to his desk where he began to grade papers.

For the next hour there was silence. He was aware of her eyes on him.

She finally spoke and said plainly, "I want to be seduced."

That stopped him cold. He slowly placed his quill aside and sat back in his chair, observing the earnestness on her face.

"How do you wish for this seduction to play out?" he asked curiously.

"I don't know. I have no experience in these matters. I do know that I want to be pursued. I want to be yearned for, and I want to be told that and ~~also~~ why I've been chosen," she said directly.

She stood up from the couch, walked halfway and stopped. "I believed you and ~~was~~ a silly girl. I thought you could never be wrong, and I was mistaken in that belief. You are not flawless, but still, I allowed your words to become my truth.

"I know why you said the things you said that night, and I know how sorry you are. Unfortunately, words, once said, can never be unspoken, and for the rest of my life, I will have to choose to forgive you again and again when those words rear up in my head. But the fact remains that I want to spend a life forgiving you than live a life without you. You are just a man, after all, in need of forgiving, as I am just a woman, not a silly girl anymore who will crumble just because of words. I need forgiveness too, for hating you, for resenting you."

"Hermione," Severus said as he stood up to walk quickly to her, closing the gap between them. She held up a hand and stopped him from touching her.

"I have to tell you the truth. I wanted you that night when we were at Andromeda's to hold me and tell me you wanted nothing more than to make love to me and that was why you refused. I know that must make me a horrible person..."

"Stop!" Severus snapped. He closed the gap between them and took her face into his hands, running his fingers through her hair and drinking her in with his eyes. He embraced her and kissed her face with tiny kisses. He wanted to prove more than anything what lies he had told her.

"I shall, Hermione. I shall show you in everything I say and do what I truly saw that night. "I saw a woman who had blossomed out of nowhere. I saw your hair, wild and beautiful. Your lips were so red and inviting, when I saw you there in such a humiliating position, I wanted to cover you because I wanted your body to be for me to see and

gaze upon. I wanted that privilege and honor. I wanted too much to love you tenderly, not in front of that disgusting assembly. I was wrong to respond how I did."

He took a deep breath and continued. "Hermione, I am a cold and mean-tempered man who finds it far too easy to crush people under my boot. But here," he gestured, "is my sanctuary, and I am a private man with very tender and ardent passions. I want for you to be the only one to experience that side of me."

He kissed her lips and said, "I love you, sweet one."

"Then take me to your bed," she whispered.

Severus drew a ragged breath. "I want to, God above, I want to more than I can express." He caressed her face softly with the pad of his thumb.

"Tonight I have experienced the opposite of everything I want for us to be," he explained. "Miss Weasley was successful tonight, and soon this will all be over. I do not want what we will share to have anything to do with the disgusting acts that occurred between the Dark Lord and Ginny."

Her eyes were so large and hopeful; he couldn't believe she would look at him like that. He couldn't fathom the depth of trust and faith she could hold for him in her heart after all he had done to hurt her. At least this was one thing he would do right by her. Yes, they had experienced a frenzied interlude and that had helped to remove some of the damage, but there was still so much for him to do.

"Let me seduce you, Hermione. Let me tempt you and draw you to me in such a way that there not be a need for words. Let me *wrong* for you."

He carefully brushed her hair back from her neck and let his lips lightly sweep the delicate skin there. "Let me have the honor, Hermione," he said softly.

Hermione was weak-kneed at his urgency to woo her. He wanted her; she could feel it deep inside her soul. This was not out of pity or guilt over what had happened between them. He wanted to do it right and properly.

"Hermione," he whispered as he held her hands within his own. "That night in the potions lab wasn't a mistake. I love you, and I desire you. When this ugliness is over, when I have properly treated you the way an honorable wizard should court a witch, then we can fulfill each other. You deserve more. *So much more*. Do you understand? Let me be a fool for you. Let me set all their tongues wagging that Severus Snape has fallen so deeply in love, he would act the idiot in the name of love. You should have that experience of a man acting differently from what others expect...all because of you."

Hermione was shocked. "I guess I have never known what it was supposed to be like. You said you want me and that you love me. I thought it was enough to give all of me to you."

He closed his eyes, placed his hands on the sides of her head and looked at the delicate skin that was dark under her eyes.

"Do you believe you deserve to be treated like the most important witch in the world by the man who claims to love you?" he asked as his eyes searched out her own.

She swallowed and said, "Honestly, I've just been so beaten down inside that the thought of being treated like that terrifies me."

"Why?" he prodded.

The tears fell from her pain stricken eyes, and she choked out, "What if I end up not deserving or meet the expectations?"

He kissed her lips delicately, and she stood frozen and stiff under his touch. It was becoming all so much.

"It took me more than a decade to realize that love is not something you earn. I know you, Hermione. I see all of you. I know your faults, and I am no person to complain about imperfection. I want *you*, Hermione. I want the bossy, obstinate, know-it-all that infuriates me while at the same time makes me want to ravish you. I love your fierceness and your determination. But you need to understand it for yourself and believe you deserve more than what you've gotten in the past. Will you trust me? Even if it makes you feel strange and out of place?"

Hermione looked at him and decided that she would let him seek her out and let him catch her.

She closed her eyes as she replied, "Fine, Severus. I will be waiting for you to bring me to you." She went to leave, and Severus wrapped his arms around her and slowly kissed her. It was long and languid. She felt herself sinking into his embrace. His warm mouth traveled from her lips to her cleavage as she let her head fall back.

When he lifted his head, he smiled and stroked her hair. "I think I prefer your hair like this," he mused. "It makes you look very desirable." His face grew serious just then, and he said, "I know it took a lot of courage for you to open yourself to me just now. I promise to never give you an opportunity to regret it."

She gave him a final kiss on his lips and left feeling lighter and freer than she had ever felt before. She felt, for the first time in her young life, beautiful.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 18

Ginny is taken by the Advance Guard as bait with some members of the Order to infiltrate Lestranger Manor and finish Voldemort for good.

A/N: Again, much thanks to Shellsnapelover and to all who read and review. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Life was no longer the same for Hermione Granger. She was loved and was wanted. That morning as she had readied herself for classes, she stood naked in front of the mirror, gazing at her body. The words Severus had said to her that horrible night rang in her head and tried to force her to feel badly, but she refused to let them take over.

She looked less critically at herself as she used to, before Ron, Viktor and Severus had hurt her. She knew now there was a man who wanted her body, and it made her feel validated as a woman. But instead of feeling happy, she frowned. She wanted to validate herself.

As she looked at her own reflection, she knew that it all had been building to this. The hurts of so many years, the reckless exposure of her heart and feelings to all and sundry had been her fault. Who had she been before it mattered what the other sex thought? Hermione knew she would have to accept herself before she could give herself to anyone. After all, if she didn't know who she was or didn't even like who she was, she would be giving away a nameless mass that was nothing until Severus named it.

It was hard to think about all of this at once, but one thing she had decided as she stepped in the shower was that hurting herself wasn't the answer anymore. Caring and craving for acceptance from everyone around her wasn't the answer either. She couldn't find solace in Severus alone. It wasn't okay to just bury her head into his lap when she felt unworthy, telling herself that it was okay because Severus wanted her.

By the time she had stepped out of the shower, Hermione had a new plan.

She was Hermione Granger.

And Hermione Granger was many things...most of all, she was intelligent, and it was about time to use her brilliance to discover all her other attributes and accept them, good and bad. Yes. She could do that.

And while she worked on her own self, she would allow Severus to court and seduce her with the promise to herself that she would not allow him to bed her until she fully knew whom she was giving him.

The morning brought Ginny terror and fear. A nightmare had plagued her...the Tom she had known was gone. Voldemort was coming for her...a repulsive serpent being that chilled her blood. In her nightmare, he had been violently angry and sworn his revenge.

"You lying blood traitor!" he hissed in her ear as he descended over her. "You think that you could walk away from me? You are MINE! I shall have what is due me. You shall give me heirs; give me yourself. There is no escaping it. We are already one in mind. Since you were a child and I placed my powers inside you and possessed you to do my bidding, you have been MINE."

Ginny had struggled as his bony hands, cold and deathlike, gripped her like iron chains. She pleaded with herself to wake up, that it was just a dream, and it wasn't real.

"Oh, but it is, Ginevra. It is your reality. There will no longer be a difference between the two. You will succumb to me and do my bidding, Ginevra. You don't want me to have to hurt your family, do you?"

"Please!" cried Ginny. "Don't hurt them. I will do whatever you say, just don't hurt them."

"If you resist me, I shall destroy everything you hold dear. From now on, I am your Lord and Master. I shall tell you when to feel desire and when to feel pain. You will obey me in all things, Ginevra."

He held her down with his long fingers and stripped her naked with wandless magic. She wanted to vomit...he was so rancid smelling...like death. His touch was cold, and she cried as he delved into her mind, seeing all that she cherished and treasured. Harry and the way he was patient with her, respecting her wish not to have intercourse before they were ready, was all at his fingertips. He laughed at their tenderness, their explorations.

He slid his skeletal hands over her naked body and whispered into her ear, "No tender deflowering for you, Ginevra. I would have treated you like a queen. However, you will become the slave. You almost had me believing in your sincerity, my pet. Now, you shall be placed on display for all my servants to see as I ravish you. You will learn to fear."

He squeezed her breasts until she cried out in pain. Tears ran down her face, and he licked them off with his snake-like tongue. "That's right, Ginevra. Your pain is my pleasure. What a fine match we are. Now don't whimper. You don't want to become tiresome to me. Just keep fighting, keep resisting. It will keep you alive. Not that anyone else would have you. You are far too tainted, too sullied. Ever since you were a little girl when you first came upon me, you have been marked. If it weren't for me, you would have no one want you. Potter only pretends to desire you because of ME..."

Ginny sat in the corner of her room, hugging her legs as she remembered her vivid nightmare. She was petrified in her fear. She had no choice...she had to go with him when he came for her.

Dumbledore and the whole Advance Guard of the Order were in his office.

"My friends," he began. "Harry and I have finished the task set for us. All that stands in our way will be the final two Horcruxes. We will be going to Lestrage Manor where the one Horcrux lies hidden. Voldemort will come for us then. We must destroy the snake that is his familiar, and it shall be finished. Voldemort will become Tom once again...a mortal being. Then Harry shall fulfill the Prophecy."

"How can we be sure he will come to us?" asked Kingsley.

Dumbledore looked at Harry for a moment and looked back at the rest of them. "He will come because Ginny Weasley will be there. She is what he covets. He has already found her out. The security of the final two Horcruxes are weighing heavily on his mind. His rage over Ginny's betrayal is great. He came to her last night and has terrorized her. I felt his presence seep into the walls. Hogwarts is no longer safe as long as Ginny Weasley remains here. So we must take the fight to him."

Ginny was numb as Minerva dressed her to meet Voldemort. She had been partially sedated because by the time Minerva had found her earlier, she had been hysterical and desperate for her family's safety.

"It's easier this way," Minerva had said as she administered the potion Severus had given her, just in case Ginny's nerves had gotten the better of her.

"What will happen to me?" asked Ginny dreamily.

"You will simply be, Miss Weasley. Although I detest the term of 'bait,' that is precisely what your service shall be," Minerva said in a frustrated tone.

Minerva led her down to the main gates, where the Advance Guard was waiting. Ginny saw Harry mount his broom and held out his arms for her to join him. She sidled up against his back and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she whispered as they took off towards Lestrage Manor.

"Don't ever be sorry, Ginny," replied Harry. "We will finish this, and we can start all over again. I love you."

It had not been Severus' intention to join in the fight against Voldemort, but Dumbledore had insisted that they needed his expertise on the layout of the abandoned manor

in order to find the cup.

As he flew with the Advance Guard towards the manor, he couldn't help but feel he had let Hermione down. He had promised he would show her how important she was to him. He hoped she would understand that he had been coerced into joining the battle. He hadn't even had time to warn or say goodbye to her. What would she think when he returned?

If he returned at all?

They landed in a clearing a mile from the manor. Dumbledore insisted in hushed tones that Severus was in charge and he would instruct them all where to go once inside the manor.

They all gathered around Severus as he explained about the Manor's "dangers."

"This manor is a place crawling with Dark magic of the foulest kind. One wrong step can find you locked in a room with no exit. You could touch something and find your skin has been poisoned, and you will be dead within minutes. You could find yourself choked to death by one of vines that decorate the walls inside. Magical wallpaper. It is highly efficient in killing intruders. It seems normal and one-dimensional," he said. "But it is extremely dangerous."

"Do you have any idea if the manor is truly abandoned? Or where the cup might be?" asked Remus.

Severus was flummoxed. "I honestly cannot say. Bellatrix is notorious for her twisted humor. It would not surprise me if the blasted thing were placed in plain sight, but where a person would have to dodge a number of security hexes, jinxes, and curses in order to obtain it, while it looked seemingly within one's reach the entire time. Now I want you all to separate into groups. Ginny, Moody, and Remus will come with me. Nymphadora, I want you, Harry, Hestia, and Bill in another. Dumbledore, Kingsley, Charlie, Ron, and Minerva in another. Dumbledore's group will be the lookout. Send your Patronus immediately if you spot any Death Eaters," he ordered. "Nymphadora, your group is to search, but to ultimately keep Harry secure for the battle. Let's go."

Each group slowly approached the abandoned manor, and although it was dark, and empty, Severus knew that when it came to Bellatrix Lestrange, appearances could be deceiving...and deadly. Once they were all inside, the cavernous manor looked derelict. Cobwebs, broken furniture, grime and dust covered every surface. It certainly looked abandoned.

Snape turned to Moody and whispered, "Use your eye, and watch for anything that will point us towards the cup."

Snape, Moody, Remus, and Ginny went towards the left, and Snape went to open the door to the library.

"Careful," whispered Moody. Severus paused as Moody shook his head. "It's a trap. They are all in there. He has the cup, and every high ranking Death Eater is at his side, wand at the ready, lying in wait." Moody sent his Patronus out to the other groups to come to where they were.

Ginny placed her hand on Snape's shoulder. "Let me, Professor. After all, it is me he wants. Let me go to him and distract him."

Severus turned to Moody, and the old wizard nodded grimly. They shrank to the sides of the doors, careful of the vine-covered walls. Ginny straightened her back and entered the room.

Ginny walked in and gazed upon all the shocked faces in front of her. Obviously, they had not expected a solitary Ginny Weasley to waltz through the door. However, it was Ginny, alone and unarmed. She smiled inside as she looked upon the contingent of Death Eaters with their wands trained on her curiously. She stared at Voldemort in the flesh for the first time. There were no more potions to trick her eyes, no enchantments, just Ginny Weasley, sixteen, and in her simple clothes and Lord Voldemort, frighteningly ugly and repulsive. She did not look like a consort fit for a Lord. Nevertheless, Voldemort was eager to see how she had obeyed him.

"Ginny," he whispered.

"Tom?" she whispered.

Bellatrix snarled from where she stood on his right side. "How dare you!"

Voldemort raised a hand calmly to stop the mad witch from attacking Ginny. "Bella, this girl is to be my wife, my helper. She will serve me as no other can. She is a part of me and I of her."

Bellatrix looked at Ginny with blatant hatred and loathing. Ginny placed a look of indifference upon her face. Voldemort beckoned her towards him, and she complied.

His voice was chilly and soft. "Come, my child, come and kneel before me. You were so very devious, weren't you?" he whispered serenely as he caressed her cheek with one bony hand. "You shall be punished, Ginevra. You betrayed our sacred union. Even now I can see the change in your eyes. You loathe me, don't you? Well, no matter. It makes no difference to me. As long as I can keep you safely tucked away from those who would wish to destroy everything I have been working for all my life, all shall be well. You have already assisted them, haven't you?" he asked.

Ginny nodded her head, and Voldemort's red eyes turned dark and angry. He struck her across the cheek, and she landed on the floor, her cheek throbbing. He got up and pulled her upright towards him. He wound his fingers into her hair, forced her to face his army and announced, "Ginevra, my bride."

The door to the library burst open, and the Advance Guard spilled in. Immediately, spells and hexes flew through the air. The room was in complete chaos as the lights and blasts lit the semi-dark room with their illumination. Mirrors, books, furniture, masonry were no longer sacred as spells destroyed and blew them apart. Smoke from the battle was growing thick, and Ginny could only see that Harry was being held in the rear. The dueling was faster than lightening. Bellatrix and Tonks were only steps from her as they parried and exchanged barbed threats and taunts. Bellatrix's mad cackle filled the room. Ginny shrank against Voldemort to stay out of harm's way, although it disgusted her. Voldemort laughed as he Apparated away with Ginny in his clutches.

Ginny fell onto the ground as they arrived in their new location.

"I know you must be wondering where we are, but do not worry. We are only in the basement of the manor," Voldemort said calmly.

Ginny remained on the ground and kept still. He was circling and frightening her. She kept her face down onto the cold dirt floor, waiting for something, for him, to punish her, to hurt her.

He remained silent, but the noises of the battle upstairs could be heard. Shouts and the smashes of wood, stone, and cries for help all rang in Ginny's ears. She didn't want to hear it. She finally covered her ears with her hands and rocked, talking to herself that everything was going to be all right.

"You weak, pathetic fool!" he sneered. "This is not the witch I remember. The witch I recall is brazen, sharp-tongued, and devious."

He reached down and lifted her face by his cold hand and searched her face. "Where is my Ginny?" he whispered sadly. "Where has she gone?"

Ginny reached deep inside her and tried to remember the Tom she had known. "I'm here, Tom. I remember all we had...all that can be again. You just don't understand! Snape is so powerful. He dug through my mind until he got everything he wanted. I didn't want to tell him. I didn't tell him our secrets. He forced it from me by raping my mind!" she screamed hysterically.

Voldemort looked into her mind, and Ginny forced herself to push the memory of Snape Legilimizing her and her pitiful attempt to veer away from him. She focused on the interludes; the sexual acts themselves and the lust she had felt. She showed him how Snape had yelled at her to focus on what he wanted her to see and the feeling of force, pressure, and the inability to release him.

"He used me," she whispered. "They all have used me to get to you. What are we going to do?" she whispered desperately.

"I know that I was dosed with a powerful lust potion. Wherever Wormtail is, I am certain he is no more," he whispered as he caressed her face.

"The treachery of all my most loyal servants!" he roared. "This is unbearable." He laughed madly then and said, "I, who never needed anyone, gave far too much to so many. I thought I had them all under my power, but Lucius with his greater need to be comfortable, Severus with his pathetic need for *love*, and then my brilliant Bella, her sanity destroyed. I cannot hold on to all of this. I am growing weaker by the minute. No one has been able to give me my potion. I cannot fight without my potion; my magic will continue to grow weak. I feel it...my mind is rotting!"

He was now cringing in a corner, and Ginny came slowly towards him and said, "How can I help?" she asked. "Can I make you your potion?"

His red eyes were fading into black and said, "My Nagini is gone. Someone has killed her. I sense her absence. I am becoming mortal. But they shall never find the cup. We...you and I will take the cup and leave where I can rest and find a new familiar."

He gazed upon Ginny with hate and loathing. "It disgusts me to be at another's mercy." He rose and gathered all his power and the cup materialized in his hand. Ginny saw it, gleaming gold in all its perfection.

"It's beautiful!" she gasped as the light from its brilliance shone in her eyes.

"We will begin again, Ginevra. I told you that! *I Am Lord Voldemort*. If I say you are mine, then you are. I am not yet so weak that I can be defied without a price. Severus and Lucius will die for their treachery."

He held her tightly to him, and they waited as the noises from the upstairs grew closer and closer. The black door finally burst open, and the light shone down on them. Ginny's eyes winced as the brightness hurt her eyes. She saw Harry come down with the remainder of the Advance Guard. He came calmly, slowly, down the stairs, and once he was on the ground, he spread his hands open in a posture of offering up himself. Ginny screamed, and Voldemort laughed as he cast the killing curse. It had been too much. The scar from Harry's head burst and blood poured down his face just before he fell to the ground. Ginny felt the grip of the madman gone from her, but she could not turn to see why. She collapsed and fainted.

It was so dark, so very dark when Ginny first opened her eyes. She was in a place that was soft and warm, that she knew. She focused on the lamp by the side of the bed and watched it flicker around her.

"I loved him," she cried out, remembering what she had seen before she passed out. "Why did Harry just stand there?" she wailed. "I *loved* him!"

Her tears ran thickly down the sides of her face, wetting her hair. There was her mum, drying her eyes.

"Ginny," she whispered. "My baby! You are all right. Everything will be all right now."

"H-How?" she choked. "Harry's gone. I loved him, Mum. I loved him!" She sobbed as her mother scooped her into her arms and held her.

"Ginny, Harry is fine. It worked. It's all over. V-Voldemort is gone."

She looked into her mother's eyes and shook her head violently. "No! I saw Harry killed, and the blood was coming from his scar as he fell." She covered her face with her hands and tried to stop the vision of Harry's dead body suspended upright until he fell with an almighty thud.

She was still covering her face when she felt the bed shift. Her mother was gone. Another person sat with her. "Oh, Daddy, how will I ever live without him?" she whispered. She opened her eyes and saw Harry in front of her. He was smiling brightly, and his scar was bandaged.

She knew she made a noise, what kind of noise, she didn't know, but she had her hands and arms full of him, feeling his strong and muscular arms around her as he was kissing her wildly.

"How?" she breathed.

"I will explain it all to you later, Ginny. Now, let me love you," he said huskily.

She looked around, and the infirmary was clear of visitors. Harry flicked his wand, and the curtains closed around them. He was still in the robes and clothes he wore during the battle. He laid her back on the bed, hitched up her nightgown, stripped off his robes, and fumbled with the belt buckle of his pants. Ginny hurriedly stripped off her knickers, pushed up her nightgown to her breasts, and then Harry stopped, drinking in her nakedness.

"I love you, Ginny," he whispered.

"Yes, Harry," she breathed. "I thought you were gone and didn't even know how I was going to breathe if you were gone. I-I just can't express how much I need you."

They both removed the remainder of Harry's clothes from him, and he kissed her urgently, feeling along her breasts and between her legs. "I need you now, Ginny. I-I wish I could be more patient..."

Ginny shook her head as she panted. "Please Harry, I need you, I need to feel you inside me!"

Harry took her into a frenzied passionate embrace and entered her forcefully. Their lips were barely touching as Ginny let out a painful hiss. Harry's green eyes were full of sorrow.

"Ginny, I didn't want to hurt you," he groaned.

She lifted her legs and urged him not to stop. Harry drove into her and took her roughly. Ginny lost herself in the strong, powerful movements of Harry's toned and built body. He kissed her hungrily and sucked her nipples as he picked her up by her bum and thrust into her desperately.

Ginny felt it happening, more intense than anything she had ever felt when she touched herself. She could feel the hardness of him stroking her and rubbing her just right, and soon she was clutching him and screaming his name. He pounded harder inside her and moaned as he came. She felt his release deep inside her, and she sighed in contentment. This was natural. This was what she was meant to do. This was the man she would love forever. And it was right.

"I love you, Ginny," he breathed as he shifted off of her and held her in an embrace. "Will you marry me?"

She looked into his face and said, "Of course, Harry."

Severus walked out onto the grass by the Black Lake looking for her...his beautiful Hermione, who was staring at the mass of water. He was still battle-scarred and filthy from the blood that ran from his head and shoulder. He was exhausted and in pain, but he could not do a thing before first seeing her.

She turned as his shadow came over her, and her eyes opened in horror. "Severus!" she screamed. She jumped up and went to see how hurt he was.

"Are you all right? You look terrible! You must go see Madam Pomfrey!" she shrieked as she felt him to see where the blood had originated.

"Hermione," he said calmly. "I needed to see you. I couldn't go another minute being back here and not assure you that all was well."

"You are a silly man!" she chided softly. "It could have waited."

Severus knelt in front of her, clinging to her robes, whispering, "That's right, Hermione. I am just a silly, foolish man who loves you more than my own body. I would gladly remained disfigured and in pain for the rest of my life, if just to give your mind an extra moment's peace. I love you that much. Can you forgive me for going into battle without telling you?"

He was terrified she would push him away, tell him he had done too much already, hadn't kept his promises to place her first. He grabbed the hem of her cloak and kissed it, laying his pride and heart prostrate before her. Hermione placed a hand on his dark head, caressing his hair lovingly.

She lifted his face up to look at her and said as she smiled, "You are like a Dark Knight in a fairytale, making the world safe for his lady-love."

"Hermione, I am no such thing. You are my lady, and I have killed for you and fought for us to be together. Everything that has occurred today, I had you in my thoughts the entire time."

"Let's get you to the infirmary," she said softly.

Hermione had been told the story from Severus, how Harry had offered himself up, being a Horcrux himself...that had been the one piece of information Dumbledore had kept to only Harry and himself. So, the fighting had continued, and Ginny had fainted.

No one had noticed the stirrings of Harry, who had not died, just the part of him that was the damned piece of Voldemort's soul. The cup had fallen from Voldemort's grasp as he had watched in terror, Harry's "resurrection from the dead" as it were.

It had been Remus who had carried the Sword of Gryffindor and had destroyed the final Horcrux with Mad-Eye standing guard over him. However, in the heat of the fight, Moody had been cut down. By the time Moody's body had fallen over, dead, the Horcrux had been destroyed, and Remus had been ready for battle. He killed Rabastan, who had slain Moody, and Harry, after he'd been given the signal, killed the old serpent, and all had stilled.

Madam Pomfrey cleaned Severus' wounds and gave him potions for the pain and potential infection while Hermione sat in a chair next to the bed. He was to stay the night, but he fought and argued with Madam Pomfrey until Hermione told him to stay.

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

"Yes, Severus," she whispered as she fiddled with his blanket.

"Rest well, and I shall see you tomorrow," she said as she slowly leaned over and kissed his lips tenderly.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 18

Severus starts his courtship of Hermione, and she and Ginny go shopping for the Celebration Ball.

A/N: Hail to Shellsnapeluver for her mad skills as a beta! Also, thanks to notsosaintly for catching all of my crazy grammatical errors! I hope you like this chappie. Let the romance begin!

The morning after the final battle, Hermione woke up with roses surrounding her bed. Pavarti and Lavender shook her awake, and Hermione opened her eyes to the sight of all the various colors of gorgeous long-stemmed flowers in their vases.

"What on earth is this?" said Lavender, standing with her hands on her hips, which made Hermione think she looked a bit jealous. "Who sent you flowers?" she demanded as Hermione looked wide-eyed at the explosion of color around her: dark reds, vibrant yellows, blushing pinks, even white roses that had been dyed royal blue. However, it was the one long-stemmed pure white rose on the stand next to her bed with a sealed note that meant the most. Before she even opened it, she knew the sender.

Hermione looked around for a clue and saw a note by her bed. She opened it and read it silently to herself. As she read, a great smile crept over her face.

This is only the beginning.

Love,

Severus

"Hermione, who sent them?" the two girls demanded. Hermione sank back in her bed and let the fragrance of the sweet flowers wash over her.

"It's a secret," she said softly.

"Is he in love with you?" asked Pavarti as she knelt down to smell some of the pink roses.

"Do you have any idea how many Galleons this must have cost?" asked Lavender angrily. Hermione smirked. Lavender was fairly growing more envious by the minute.

Hermione hopped off her bed and started placing the vases on her vanity and nightstand. She prepared to take her shower, happily ignoring the dumbfounded girls. She tapped on the secret drawer in her vanity that only opened to the recognition of her wand and secured the note. She was more intrigued by the note more than anything. "This is only the beginning," she whispered to herself as she studied her naked body in the mirror.

The last month of school was full of studying for the NEWTs. Harry had been exempt from taking them, so he was enjoying some very hard-earned time with Ginny, who had announced their engagement the day she had been released from the infirmary.

A lot had changed for everyone. Those who had aided in the finding and destruction of Voldemort and his Horcruxes were all given the Order of Merlin. Hermione was also given the Order of Merlin, First Class, for her work on the potions that had aided the Order of the Phoenix.

It had not escape Hermione's notice that many of the girls at Hogwarts and numerous witches around wizarding Britain were enthralled with the men who had fought against Voldemort. Hermione, by this time, had given up a part of her beauty regimen, embracing her hair and weary of pretending she was someone she wasn't. She still wore some make-up and dressed nice when she felt like it, but she watched as the fan mail came pouring in for the wizards who had become more than mortals in these deluded witches' eyes with a little pull of jealousy.

Hermione was still holding Severus to his promise, and he was keeping his word faithfully as the mail came to him in the Great Hall during breakfast. Each morning, the house-elves would sort his real mail from fan mail, and each morning, to everyone's amusement, he would lazily flick his wand, and the bag of mail would explode and disappear. He would then look at Hermione, who would already be looking at him, and they'd share a conspiratorial little smile.

She was still tender and prone to feeling afraid when she saw other girls who were by far more beautiful and charming than she throw themselves at Professor Snape. They talked about him after hours and found his brooding, quiet nature romantic and manly. It was nerve-wracking to Hermione to listen to others talk aloud of their dreams and fantasies about how he must look like naked, and how they wanted to have sex with him.

Ginny was the only one Hermione confided with about Severus. She had been very concerned that Ginny would not approve of the match. However, Ginny had shocked her by telling her most of the uncontrollable rage she felt towards the Potions master had been fueled by Voldemort.

"I still hate how he treated you, but I don't have those intense, vicious feelings anymore. It is as if I can be rational about it all. I am just happy he is working so hard to prove his love for you, so in that case, I shall bury the hatchet," she had told her.

When Hermione admitted to Ginny concerning her fears over the other girls talking about Severus, Ginny had embraced her and assured her he would keep his promise. She was right. Every day, when the mail would arrive, a letter would come to Hermione addressed by no one but full of the most beautiful words.

Hermione,

The day of your Oath-taking, I stood and watched as my world changed forever. One look at the sunlight falling onto your hair, your eyes like amber fire; I dared to look at all of you. I noticed you were a woman and no longer a child. My body reacted, and I knew I wanted you to want me. I wanted you to own me, to tell me you would give this pitiful excuse for a wizard in need of love and caring a home: a place in your heart. I thought you would like this, I think it accurately describes my frame of mind the moment I knew I loved you with everything within me. It is called "The Sun and Stream."

As some dark stream within a cavern's breast,

Flows murmuring, moaning for the distant sun,

So ere I met thee, murmuring its unrest,

Did my life's current coldly, darkly run.

And as that stream, beneath the sun's full gaze,

Its separate course and life no more maintains,

But now absorbed, transfused far o'er the plains,

It floats, etherealized in those warm rays;

So in the sunlight of thy fervid love,

My heart, so long to earth's dark channels given,

Now soars, all pain, all doubt, all ill above,

And breathes the ether of the upper heaven:

So thy high spirit holds and governs mine;

So is my life, my being, lost in thine!

And so, my bride, my life, my entire being, is lost in you, and I pray to never be released.

Your

Severus

Now, to the credit of the Potions master's reputation, it was unlike him to write poetry. He preferred the words that came from his own mind: the day of her induction into the Order, how she had been as the sun that made him alive again, or how he enjoyed watching her hair as she worked with potions came far easier. He had once likened her hair to being a live thing that curled and refused to stay up in the "contraptions," he called them, to keep her work safe from contamination. He wrote of how when a lock of hair would fall down, curling into her flushed face, the longing to capture that lock for himself nearly would undo him. Finally, there was how he signed each letter. He wrote "your," not "yours," which would be the proper way, but "your," meaning his sincerity that she owned him, and he was not ashamed to admit it.

These words would make Hermione blush and smile as she read them over and over. Then there were the letters of his dreams, and those were very precious to her. She remembered that one evening in his lab when he had held her, exploring her body, and had made her melt under his touch. Apparently, he hadn't forgotten either, and it was, as he recalled in one letter she had received, "the memory that kept him grounded, waiting for her for when the time was right."

So as the other girls, the lush and full-bodied girls, with their manicured nails and long silky hair, panted and flirted with Professor Snape, there was Hermione with her letters, quietly sharing them with Ginny.

"Oh, Hermione," Ginny had said one evening as they lounged on Hermione's bed. "He's so romantic. Who knew Professor Snape could be so passionate? How long will this continue? You know that right after the end-of-year feast the Celebration Ball is happening. Have you even gotten a gown? Has he asked you?" Ginny sat up straight like an arrow. Hermione knew that movement. There was shopping ahead in her future.

"No," replied Hermione simply as she folded up the last letter he had given her. "I know he means these things. I see how large a production he makes out of destroying his fan mail."

Ginny laughed as she lay across Hermione's bed. "Who knew Snape could be funny?" she wondered aloud.

"But still I see the other girls here, and they are so much prettier than I am, and I know that it's foolish..."

Ginny sat up and took her by the shoulders. "Hermione, there is one thing that you have that those other girls don't have and never will."

"What?" she asked.

"You."

A few weeks had gone by, and the NEWTs were finally done and over with, and the Golden Trio were no longer students. After their last examination had ended, a large owl swooped into the Great Hall, landing in front of Hermione, dropping a large, thin envelope attached to a large, thick packet. Hermione tore into the larger parcel and nearly screamed with excitement as she looked at the contents.

"Look!" she showed everyone. It was the latest copy of *The Practical Potioneer*. She opened the letter attached to the magazine, and it said that she had a fiveyear subscription paid in full by Professor Severus Snape for Miss Hermione Granger.

"Snape?" Ron said, grabbing the letter to read for himself. Hermione looked at the magazine hungrily and then glanced up at the Head table to smile at him. He wasn't there. She heard a voice to her right and spun around with the rest of the Gryffindors as Severus Snape took Hermione's hand in his own, kissing it as he bowed.

"My Lady," he said loud and clearly. "The Ball to celebrate the war is right after your end-of-year feast. You shall no longer be my student. Would you do me the honor of being my companion for the evening?"

Hermione was dumbstruck and swallowed, knowing the whole table was watching her.

A look of understanding washed over his face. "Ah, of course, you must have many suitors asking for your pleasant company. How foolish of me. I would have asked you sooner, but propriety prohibited me from taking liberties before you had finished your NEWTs. Please let me know your answer as soon as you have made a decision," he said silkily and bowed again before leaving.

"Oh. My. Gosh!" said Pavarti. "What was that? First the roses..."

"What roses?" asked Ron.

"Then this fiveyear subscription to your favorite Potions magazine..." said Ginny.

"That's what this is?" asked Harry as he thumbed through the magazine.

"Are you going to say yes?" asked Lavender, her eyes bulged in disbelief.

Hermione gazed at the light shining through one of the many large windows that lined the hall. "I don't know," she said dreamily. Then she snapped out of her daydreams and remembered where she was. "Maybe," she said curtly. "I'd need to get a dress, we only have a week."

By now the hall was buzzing with Professor Snape's fawning over Hermione Granger. Pavarti and Lavender made good their escape to go and gossip with the Ravenclaw girls. Ginny made Harry scoot down, and she whispered across the table to her.

"Hermione, you should see the glares coming this way! They are all so jealous."

Ron, who had been sitting next to Hermione, turned around and jerked swiftly back again. "Bloody hell!" he swore. "Harry we need to get out of here. The looks alone could melt me back."

Harry peered over and ducked his head low. "Uh, you two have this under control, right?" he whispered. "I don't do well with angry witches."

Ginny kissed him on the cheek. "You and Ron go find a nice hiding place. We'll deal with the witches," she said with a smile.

"You won't think less of me as a wizard?" he asked nervously as he swung his backpack over his shoulder.

"No, Harry," Ginny replied. "The wrath of witches can be very daunting."

"More like high octane," Hermione quipped in a more Muggle-like example.

"Okay," he said hurriedly. "Bye."

He and Ron got their things and took off.

"Now," Ginny plotted as she rubbed her hands. "We are going to Diagon Alley. We have to get you the ball gown that will just destroy and devastate every witch that comes across your wake. How much money do you have? We have to get the dress, but between the two of us, we can transfigure shoes and a purse. Oh! Maybe McGonagall can even transfigure jewelry!"

Hermione chewed her bottom lip. "Well, I have about one hundred and fifty galleons, give or take a few, and I have my own pearls my parents gave me when I turned eighteen. Earrings, necklace and a bracelet."

"Perfect!" Ginny said with a bright smile. "Okay, let's go. I can Side-Along Apparate with you. I'll get McGonagall's permission, and you go give Snape the good news."

Grinning like eager first-years, they jumped up from their seats and then had to calm themselves to act like the young women they were. There would be time for giggling and acting silly once they were inside Madam Malkin's.

Hermione walked calmly as possible up to the Head table and said, "Good morning," to Dumbledore and asked Professor Snape for a word. Severus wiped his face, rose gracefully from his seat, and met her on the far side of the room where they could have some privacy.

"I wanted to thank you for the subscription to *The Practical Potioneer*," she said a bit breathlessly. She was so nervous, she thought her heart was going to jump out of her mouth. She fixed her eyes on the buttons of his coat, and he lifted her chin up to meet his eyes.

"How did I know that it would be *The Practical Potioneer* that would catch your attentions more than the rest?" he said mischievously.

Hermione could feel her cheeks turning red. "You are gorgeous when you blush," he whispered as he reached to touch her cheek with a finger. She shivered on contact.

"You see how much an innocent touch can become as erotic as an intimate kiss between two people who are longing for each other?" he murmured.

"I want you to know that I accept your invitation to be your companion to the Ball," she said quietly.

"May I dare hope to refer to you as my date?" he whispered.

"Yes, if you wish," she replied.

"No, sweet one," he said tenderly. "You are the one who shall tell me when to go and when to stop. You tell me how high, how low, and I shall do whatever you ask. I love you, Hermione, and I will be a fool for you to prove how honored I am that you would even give me the chance to speak with you."

She cleared her throat and felt her body was on fire. His words were driving straight into her and making her feel sensations she had never felt before.

"I will be going with Ginny to Madam Malkin's to buy a gown," she said. When shall I need to be ready for the Ball?" she asked him.

"The Ball begins at eight o'clock. The guests of honor, which includes us, will be presented once the Ball commences. I shall be waiting for you at the bottom the main stairs to escort you. Whenever you are ready, I will be waiting."

"Fine," she said with a timid smile. His eyes were burning like black coal into her. She felt naked, exposed, and to her amazement, it didn't make her feel strange. It felt right. She couldn't believe how hard he was working to win her.

She turned to leave, and he said, "May I escort you out of the hall, Hermione?"

"Yes, Severus," she replied.

He tucked her arm into the crook of his and as they walked down the main aisle, he said, "By the way, your hair is lovely today. May I request something?"

"What?" she asked.

"Please leave your hair free, or if you must place it up, can it be loose so I can enjoy watching the curls around your face? No fake Sleekeazy's, just you."

Hermione still remembered the crushing words he had said to her. "If I don't use Sleekeazy, my hair might frizz up," she said uncomfortably.

"Would that make you nervous, afraid that your hair may not obey you if you left it free?" he inquired as he searched her face.

"Yes," she admitted.

"Then you do what you want to do. I just want you to know how much I love your hair, alive and free. No matter what you do with your hair, you will be the loveliest witch in the room," he assured her.

"Thank you," she replied as they reached the main entranceway where Ginny was waiting patiently for her.

"May I have another kiss?" he whispered gently.

She nodded, and he kissed her hand.

As Hermione and Ginny walked towards the Apparition point, Ginny said, "Have you ever been more intimate with the Professor than that?"

Hermione blushed. "Once. It was a moment of passion, and we just never repeated it. But we have never had intercourse."

Ginny smiled a knowing smile. "I can't wait until you do, Hermione. It will be so romantic. I know Harry and I were in a rush of desire, and it was so fast, but it was so good and fulfilling. Harry had always been so romantic and tender, it's nice to know he can be wild when we choose to be."

"Severus was very passionate," Hermione admitted. "I have wanted more, and he has wanted too as well, but the time hasn't been right. Besides, I still had some doubts over how he treated me. I need more time. Ginny, he is baring himself to me. It is frightening and thrilling at the same time. I feel sometimes I will just explode when he simply touches my face!"

Ginny smiled and nodded her head. "And how do you feel when you both are working in the lab? When you are just being friends, talking normally about mundane, normal things?" she asked.

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "Oh, Ginny, we love and appreciate so much of the same things. He is so intelligent, and he also *listens* to my thoughts, and together we bounce ideas off each other. It is so exciting how much we think alike and yet differently enough to see things in other ways."

Ginny put her arm around Hermione's waist, readying herself for Apparition. "Hermione," she said nervously. "I had my doubts for a while about Snape, but after all of this, I really think he is sincere. I think you both are perfect for each other," she said confidently.

Hermione and Ginny Apparated right in front of Madam Malkin's, and they were giggling like little girls over all the fancy robes and gowns they saw.

Madam Malkin came out and gasped, "My goodness! Hermione Granger, what an honor to have you in my store!" May I assist you and Miss Weasley?"

"I'm all set," said Ginny. "Harry placed me on his Gringotts account, so I could buy whichever dress I wanted. It was amazing!"

Madam Malkin looked at Hermione and asked, "How may I assist you?"

"I need a gown for the Celebration Ball," she replied.

"Oh my," she replied. "One week. I don't mean to be rude, but how many Galleons are you willing to spend on your dress?"

"Oh, around seventy-five Galleons," she replied.

"Well, that does make things a bit easier," she said. "Let me see what I have. I think a lovely, daring pink, fuchsia gown would be lovely," she said as she went towards the backroom.

They waited for quite a while, and Hermione was getting rather nervous when the dressmaker finally returned.

"I apologize, Miss Granger," she said in a breathless voice. "An unexpected owl arrived, and the note was from Professor Snape from Hogwarts! He said that he will be

your escort for the Ball and that you are to buy whichever gown you wish and to place everything on his personal account at Gringotts."

Ginny squeezed her arm and said, "Hermione! Oh, my heavens! That is amazing!"

"Wait, Ginny! We have no idea how much money Professor Snape may be willing to part with. I don't want to deplete his resources!" she whispered.

"Ladies," said Madam Malkin expertly, "I have been in this business for decades. I am privy to the fiduciary information of potential clients before taking on credit. Professor Snape has never frequented my establishment, being a bachelor with more masculine tastes. However, the tailor that he frequents at Twilfitt and Tattings has assured me that Professor Snape's account is of the finest order. Know that you could have your pick of any dress in my store, Miss Granger."

"Well?" prompted Ginny as she poked Hermione in the side with her elbow.

"I still don't want to abuse his gift. However, I would love to see which fairy dust dresses you have?" Hermione asked meekly.

Madam Malkin beamed. "You have the most elegant taste, Miss Granger. And please, call me Eleanor."

Soon, Hermione was surrounded with the most beautiful magical dresses that had been enchanted with fairy dust to make them sparkle and shine most divinely.

Ginny said, "Okay. Your hair is a warm brown. No pastels, I think the fuchsia would be the best. Definitely not the yellow," she said. "What do you think?"

Hermione eyed the daring dark pink dress with interest. "What if it were not so purple?" she asked. "What if it were more mauveish...like a pink brown...more subtle? I'm more of a restrained person, toned down."

Madam Malkin snapped her fingers and disappeared again to return quickly with another enchanted dress and said, "This is the dress for you!" She fairly squealed.

It was the most gorgeous pink color, not pastel, but not so bright to be gaudy. However, it was strapless and would have half of Hermione's back and all of her shoulders exposed. The cleavage was daring as well.

"I don't know if I could pull this off," Hermione said reluctantly as she looked down at her bosom. Her hands went instinctively to her chest. Then she remembered she didn't have any scars. Severus had healed her completely.

Ginny pushed her into a changing room and said, "You'd be surprised at what underwire and some magic can do!" she said confidently.

Hermione went alone in the changing room and examined the places she had cut on her body. She still had a couple of faint ones on the inside of her wrists and a few on her thighs from the deeper cutting she had done over and over after being healed time and again. However, her arms, chest, and everywhere anyone would see her skin in the gown was clear and without a blemish. As she slipped on her fairy dust dress, Hermione thought of the importance that she must approve of herself. She looked again critically at her body and noticed in her dress she looked quite fetching.

Although her hair was a bit out-of-control, which was just how nature made her, she realized that she was pretty. Inside and out.

She had a lovely smile and a brightness about her that made her shine. She didn't know if it was just the excitement of the Ball or how she was beginning to feel about Severus. Nevertheless, she knew that she was clever and sweet. She had a tender heart that cared about the feelings of others, and goodness within can radiate out from the inside.

Hermione started to realize that she was beautiful because *she* had decided it was true. She could spend all day picking out all the small flaws of her body, but it would profit nothing. Physical beauty never lasted, but beauty from within was something that would keep her lovely all her days. But it did help her ego to know she had fabulous legs!

This was the way she had been made. It was going to take time for her to honestly love herself, but she was confident she would get there.

After they were finished, Hermione emerged with her hair temporarily spelled up on top of her head, and she shimmered as she walked out to show Ginny. The witch was gob smacked and said, "Oh, Hermione! You are beautiful. I-I can't tell you how lovely, just simply lovely, you look in that dress!"

"Do you really think I can pull it off? Does it make my breasts smaller?"

"And you won't have to worry about another witch wearing that dress," added Madam Malkin. It is a one of a kind. I have other magical dresses, but not in that color or in that cut. You should show your bosom off, my dear. You have a pretty figure."

Ginny walked around her and said, "You are like a Muggle princess! With your pearls, you will be divine. You look like an angel. Professor Snape will be speechless!"

"Shoes and garters!" announced Madam Malkin. She brought out a lovely pair of shoes that she had charmed to match the color of the dress that had the loveliest gathering of sparkling fairy dust to decorate the top of the shoe.

"The heel is modest, perfect for dancing. The stockings I recommend are of ice pink to match the light pink corset and garter combination," she added.

Hermione giggled. "I feel like Cinderella!"

"Who, dear?" Madam Malkin asked sweetly.

"Oh, nothing," Hermione said as she dismissed the statement.

When all was said and done, Hermione was forbidden to know the total cost. Madam Malkin was insistent that it had been Professor Snape's instructions. Hermione was terrified and nearly changed her mind about taking the dress, but Ginny assured her she would be simply irresistible, and Professor Snape would be rendered speechless for at least the first ten minutes when she descended down the stairs.

Chapter 17

Hermione and Severus attend the Celebration Ball, and Hermione is pleasantly surprised by Severus' secret plan.

A/N: Thank you to all who have stayed with this fic. Shellsnapelover has been a real inspiration for me, and she has challenged me to think in ways I never thought I could learn. Thanks to all the admins who put up with my OCD queuing!:) This is the second to the last chapter, and I hope you enjoy it.

The day of the Celebration Ball arrived, and Hermione packed away her Hogwarts uniform in her steamer trunk for the last time. She was no longer a student, no longer a child. Tonight's ball would signify her entrance as an adult into the wizarding world. She had nearly every Gryffindor girl in fits over her dress, but Hermione refused to show them what it was until she arrived at the ball.

She took her time in the shower, shaving and pampering her body...she was grateful her cutting had not left scars on her chest. She used a special shampoo to make her hair silky and manageable without having to slather Sleekeazy in it. She had told Ginny of Severus' request of having her hair free and loose. However, Hermione was just too nervous to try it.

Hermione's stomach fluttered as she thought of being around so many dignitaries and the ceremony of being presented the Order of Merlin. She took her time to massage and lotion her skin from head to toe and patted a delicate smelling powder on her just in case she started perspiring. She slipped the sheer stockings on her legs and relished in the soft feminine feel of them. She then slipped the stockings into the buttons of the garter belt and looked at her image in the mirror as she slipped on her shoes.

Her hair was soft and full-bodied. She had yet to place on her make-up, but her cheeks were already pink from the anticipation of the evening. She slid her hands down the contours of her figure, starting with the sides of her breasts and the smooth shaping material of the pink corset down to her flaring garter-belt covered hips. She had great legs, and she liked how she looked. The secret of not wearing a bra or underwear made her feel sexy. It would add towards her attempt to appear mysterious to Severus. She walked out into the bedroom as the other girls were putting the final touches on their make-up and hair. Hermione emerged in her lingerie and sat at her vanity to start putting on her make-up. She noticed the others were staring, mouths gaping as they took in the sight of her corset, garters, and fairy dust shoes.

"Hermione?" asked Lavender. "Where is your bra?"

"I don't need one. My dress has a built in wire support and padding, so it won't be necessary," Hermione replied smoothly as she prepared to put on her make-up.

The girls remained speechless while Hermione concentrated on her task. Soon, her face was as flawless as her hair. She was quite pleased. Her hair was still cascading in manageable curls, and Hermione began to debate on how she wanted to do her hair as she put on her jewelry.

"You realize that it's fifteen minutes until the start of the ball, don't you?" asked Pavarti in a snappish tone.

Hermione turned slightly in her chair to look at her. "I'm aware. Ginny has to help me with my hair, and then I will put on my dress. You'll see me soon enough. Go ahead, don't keep Seamus and Ron waiting."

After Hermione had done everything Ginny told her to do in preparation, she waited for the redhead to arrive, growing anxiously by the minute. She was starting to feel her nipples harden painfully as her nervousness grew. She wasn't so sure she could pull it off...going commando. Finally, Ginny came in the door making her apologies.

"Sorry, Hermione. My own hair was just NOT cooperating!" she said breathlessly.

"Oh, Ginny!" Hermione said as she looked at her friend in her ice blue gown that gathered elegantly in the back. She was wearing her mother's good silver jewelry, and her hair was up in an elegant arrangement of twists and curls. She was breathtaking.

"Now, let's look at your hair," Ginny said importantly. "I see the shampoo was a success. You really could leave it down, Hermione...it is gorgeous."

Hermione shook her head. "I couldn't. I'm nervous enough already."

"All right," Ginny said. "This is an easy figure-eight design that will just rest on the base of your head." She took her wand, and in no time, Hermione's hair was finished. Ginny flicked her wand and few curly tendrils hung loosely around her face. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now that sticking charm was my mother's who learnt it from her mother. Only you shall be able undo it. All you have to do is point your wand to your head and say *Finite Incantatum*,' and it will all come undone. Now, let's get that dress on!"

Hermione was getting really nervous, and her skin was covered in goose bumps. Her nipples were hard as rocks, and she hoped the material would be thick enough to hide it. She put it on and watched as Ginny buttoned her up the back. Hermione was gleaming as the dress sparkled and shimmered in the light.

"Oh, Hermione!" exclaimed Ginny. "You are incredibly beautiful!"

Hermione smiled, and she placed on her dark pink lipstick that complemented the dress and looked at herself in the mirror. She was still Hermione, she just felt a bit more done up and not fake. She had placed only the barest of power on her face to stop any shine and mascara for her eyes. She did not wear anything else other than her lipstick.

"I think I look fine, but am I right, Ginny? Should I have put more on my face? Eye-shadow, perhaps?"

"No," said Ginny firmly. "You look like the natural beauty you are. Let's go meet our dates!"

They were the last to leave Gryffindor tower, and Ginny insisted that she come down alone. "Wait here, and let me go down and meet Harry. Then you come down in a couple of minutes, and let Professor Snape see you."

Ginny squeezed her hand for luck, and she made her entrance. There was the sound of clapping and cheering for the young witch who was by all rights the First Lady of the wizarding world. She and Harry would spend the rest of their lives as celebrities. Hermione was grateful that would not be her life...she preferred privacy.

She took some cleansing breaths and then made her entrance. As she walked, she could feel and see how the magic in the dress glittered and dazzled in the light. Severus was there at the base of the stairs, and he looked so very handsome. His hair was clean and trimmed, and although his dress robes were black, they were made of the finest quality. He held out his hand for her to take as she made her final descent on the remaining stairs.

"Hermione," he said deeply, "you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my entire life."

Hermione was speechless. She felt like her heart was going burst out of her chest and soar into the night sky, exploding into a thousand brilliant lights. She was the most beautiful *woman* he had ever seen. He saw her as a woman. That meant an equal, a potential partner. She felt so much hope in that simple sentence. In that moment, Hermione felt she had finally reached the pinnacle of all her dreams. Here she was with her arm in Severus'. He looked at her as they waited in the introduction line with...dare she hope?...pride and appreciation.

They waited silently with the others as each honoree was announced. Finally, their turn came, and they were announced as Professor Severus Snape, Potions master, and

Miss Hermione Granger, graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There was a buzz among the hushed room. The whispers were floating around as Severus calmly kept Hermione's arm in the crook of his.

She blushed as his eyes continuously fixed on her. He ignored everyone who tried to steal him away from her side, seemingly intent on keeping his eyes on her appreciatively. She looked back at him a couple of times, but the hunger was there was so blatant, it made her feel jittery. She could tell he was longing for her. He had worked so hard these past two months to undo the damage between them, and she had to admit he had done rather well. He glided her around the room, introducing her to all the dignitaries from across the world. Hermione was nervous, but she held her own. Being the top student in her class and also working with the well-known infamous potion maker, Severus Snape, made her quite the oddity and a person of extreme interest. Many witches tried desperately to lure the professor away from her side, but he was not interested. He was only at Hermione's beck and call, and he made quite the show of it by getting her hor d'oervres, champagne, and remaining firmly at her side.

One very saucy and determined witch tried to insult Hermione right in her face as she attempted to flirt with Severus.

"The music is so lovely, Professor. Perhaps a witch who does not need the magic of enchantments and fairy dust to capture your attention would be a welcome relief," she purred as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

Hermione's stomach plunged. *That bitch!* she thought viciously. She raised her chin defiantly and stood her ground. She would not allow some shameless and rude bint make her stand aside. She actually felt shocked with herself. The old Hermione would have dissolved into tears and left, admitting defeat. However, that was the past. The new Hermione knew her worth. Even stripped of her dress and wearing a potato sack, she would be lovelier than that witch. She possessed inner *and* outer beauty. That other woman only had her looks to aid her, and Severus was not a shallow wizard. She stood straight and tall, calmly waiting for Severus to defuse the situation.

Severus looked at Hermione, whose chin was still boldly raised in anger. Severus removed the other woman's hand from his shoulder expertly and replied coolly, "All of what I will ever need or desire in a witch is right here, by my side, and in my arms. Good evening." He then whisked Hermione away onto the dance floor.

"That was very gallant of you, Severus," Hermione said sweetly.

Severus huffed. "I only told her the truth. She had some nerve. I could spot all the glammers and fake parts on her from a mile off. If anyone is genuine, it is you, Hermione. You are absolutely stunning."

Hermione was growing uneasy with his ardor. She changed the subject. "Are you nervous about the ceremony?"

"No," he replied as he searched her face. "Am I trying too hard?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "Perhaps I am just not used to it, or maybe you are trying too hard. I can't tell."

"I promised to be a fool for you, Hermione. I intend to keep my promise," he replied ominously.

Hermione looked at him nervously. "I think I'm a little afraid."

"I am willing to bear myself in front of all and sundry, emotionally, for you to either glory in it or dash me to pieces. You deserve nothing less than that satisfaction," he replied. "If you were to crush me under your heel publicly, I shall take it like a wizard and know it is only what I deserve."

"Who are you, and what have you done with Professor Snape?" she asked, looking at him oddly.

Severus chuckled and then kissed her slowly on the lips as he twirled her around the floor. Hermione was light-headed and drunk on her love for him. For no matter what he had done, she had never stopped loving him. She had tried so hard to rid her heart of him, but she couldn't stop loving him. True, many times she hadn't liked him, but she had loved him, and Hermione had discovered that is the truest kind of love.

The ceremony began with all of the recipients gathering on the podium to take their honored seats. The new Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, made a speech, and Hermione watched as all of those who had fought in the final battle received their commendations. Hermione's name was called last. She had not fought in the battle, but her courage under pressure after being captured and also being a part of the two-person team of Hermione Granger and Severus Snape to create the difficult potions needed to end the war were honored, and she received her medal, which was magically hovered onto her dress.

The crowd cheered as all the honored gathered together for a picture, and another round of applause filled the Great Hall. After, the honorees began to leave the podium; Hermione began to walk away when Severus grabbed her. He stood in front of the stage, raised his wand to his throat, and began to speak.

"Please, if I may have your attention. I am not here to make a formal speech. I am here in front of you tonight purely for a promise I made to a lovely, young woman, fellow potion maker, brilliant witch, and the woman I love," he said stiffly.

"There was once a young woman that had one day turned seventeen. I never gave her a real moment's thought, except to think how irritating I always thought she was. Then one June morning, she came to take her Oath for the Order of the Phoenix. I stood with the others, and watched, as this girl became a fellow Order member before my eyes. I do not share my inner sentiments freely. I am merely doing this for her, so she will know I will always remember the day I knew I loved her."

Severus was now standing ramrod straight with his head bent in embarrassment. Hermione's eyes were brimming with tears. She knew just how hard and painful it was for him to be open to so many. But he had made a promise, and he was keeping it. Hermione would not let him down. Nearly every witch in the room, including Hermione, gasped as Severus Snape swiftly knelt on one knee and whispered, his mouth barely moving, only for Hermione to hear.

"I love you, and that is the honest truth. I have longed for you, and I have hurt so deeply for the pain that I caused...they were my faults, my most grievous faults. I do not deserve you. But please let me be your husband. I promise to love you and serve you for the rest of my life. *I am yours*. Will you take me?"

Hermione looked at his face and then at the antique emerald ring set in precious silver.

Her mind flashed back to the first day she began to work with Professor Snape, as he had been then. He had glared at her the entire day, ordering her around, insulting her intelligence by making her make Boil Cure Potions and Burn Healing Paste. Every moment she had been criticized, and she was nearly in tears by the end of the day.

However, she had not relented. She had endured, and eventually, he had begun to ease up on her. There had been the small nods of approval, the eventual small words of praise, then that smile which had made her feel so alive, she had wondered if all her life she had only been sleeping.

That smile had changed everything. She had known that moment she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Before, she had been a child, a simple girl with a crush that had changed into love and an abiding respect for the wizard who never flaunted his pains and risks for so many.

She had thought that evening at Andromeda's had destroyed everything. But he had proved his sorrow over hurting her by becoming increasingly open and vulnerable. She knew she could trust him. He would never hurt her like that again. He would never be perfect. His personality wouldn't change, but he truly loved her and wanted to do right by her. He was laying himself on the line to be humiliated, but she wouldn't let him fall. She knew there would be times he would let her down and disappoint her, but he would never do it purposefully with malicious intent.

"Yes," she said as a smile spread across her face.

Severus placed the ring on her finger and kissed her sweetly in front of the whole of the wizarding community. The snap of the camera from the *Daily Prophet* was loud to

her ears as the photographers took pictures madly, trying to get the best angle of their kiss.

When he finally released her from the kiss, Hermione noticed that the room was cheering in happiness as people opened more champagne to toast them.

After the excitement calmed down, Hermione's friends swarmed her to gasp at her ring.

"Oh, my God!" Lavender nearly shouted. "Those are diamonds around that emerald! How many carets?" she asked sharply.

Hermione was in shock. Severus was right behind her and said, "This emerald has 2.72 carets," he said smugly.

Ginny was looking at her hand in awe. "Isn't it *heavy*?" she asked.

"A trifle," Hermione replied. "But I shall get used to it. It must be the silver."

"And look at the pattern, Hermione!" she fairly squealed. "Tiny rosettes around the sides. It is a remarkable ring!"

Hermione glanced upwards at the scowling man at her side whom, she knew, would begin hexing people if they said one word about his proposal. Hermione giggled to herself. "*He* is quite remarkable," she mused as she continued looking at him.

After a while, the newly engaged couple slipped away into the hall, and Severus said, "Have I succeeded in my seduction?" he asked. "Have I proven my foolishness for you? My reputation is now ruined."

"Are you already regretting your grand gesture?" she asked coyly.

"No," he said softly. Then his face became sober, and he said, "I am not like this in public. I told you before, in the privacy of our home, I can do grand gestures and tell you how much I love you, but in public...it took everything within me not to turn and run for cover."

"Yes, Severus, I am aware of how private you are," Hermione replied. "I appreciate your gesture. It makes me think even more highly of you."

"Shall we return for more dancing?" he asked.

"Yes, but I think I need something to drink first."

"Yes," he said grimly. "I also need to speak with Andromeda."

Hermione wondered what he was going to say to her and hoped it was an apology for his past behavior.

Hermione sat while Severus strode over to speak with Andromeda Tonks. Ginny saw her friend by herself and happily sat with Hermione. "I never thought I would see the day!" she exclaimed as she gushed over the ring.

Harry came from behind Hermione and said as he took her left hand to look more closely at her engagement ring, "I'm glad someone finally realized what I had known since we were fourth years," he said.

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

He kissed her cheek and said, "What a lovely woman you are becoming."

"Oh, Harry!" she said as she burst out crying. She turned around and hugged him with Ginny standing by smiling.

"How did it go?" asked Hermione after Severus returned.

"Andromeda was pleased, said that you deserved nothing less, and I apologized for my rude and deceitful behavior. I told her I had lied, was far more cruel than was necessary to keep up the deception, and that I held myself wholly responsible for your pain and sorrow," he replied. "I also managed to retain all my important bits."

"So, it ended well?" she replied with a smirk as she took a sip of champagne.

"Quite," he replied stiffly.

Hermione shuddered at the memory from that horrible time in her past and was so happy that how things had changed for the better.

They walked out into the summer air, and Severus, after finding a secluded area, kissed her hand and said, "Remember when you told me your wish was for a man to long for you so deeply that it would physically hurt if he could not have you?"

"Yes, I remember," she whispered.

"I have waited, but I shall wait longer if that's how you wish for it to be. You are my chosen bride. My door will open for you, and my bed will always have a place for you...even if we don't make love. My body aches to be in contact with yours, to touch you, to caress you, to kiss you. So I shall leave you here, Hermione. If you chose to come to me, I will be waiting. If you feel it is too soon, I promise I shall not be angry."

He took her into his arms and kissed her slowly with teasing kisses, and then his kisses grew more hungry and passionate. He broke off, panting, "I must stop before I lose myself." He caressed a tendril of her curly hair and then took his leave.

"I love you, sweet one," he whispered before he walked away.

Up next: Final chapter and major lemon alert!

Chapter 18

Severus and Hermione finally come together, and here is where we shall leave them in peace.

A/N: Thank you all who have stayed with this story. I hope this will be a fulfilling ending for you all. Thank you to all who have read and reviewed, and also a HUGE thanks to my beta, Shellsnapelover.

Hermione walked slowly back to the ball after Severus took his leave. Many people were still dancing and enjoying themselves. She stood by the door and looked at her engagement ring, feeling strange and elated at the same time. She watched as her friends coupled off, dancing, talking, snogging, and drinking. She thought of Severus' offer. She would have to discuss their plans. How would they live? She had worked hard for the Order; perhaps a Ministerial position would be ideal for her. She also cared a great deal about house-elves. Perhaps the Regulation of Magical Creatures would be a good fit?

Either way, they would have to talk about a future. She turned and headed towards the dungeons. He had said she was welcome, even if they didn't make love. As she slowly made her way down the stairs, she skimmed her hand along the stones and thought of Severus' way with seduction. He knew how to touch a woman in many ways, not only physically. However, she did want more, to experience more of him in that way. She thought of his hands, of his arms, the way he kissed, and before she knew it, she was there, in front of his door, and as soon as she knocked, it opened for her.

"Hermione?" Severus' deep voice carried through into the sitting room where she was standing. "Come into the back room on your left."

She followed the sound of his voice and came to a room that looked like his own private personal potions lab. He was rather informal looking...his dress robes had been discarded for his normal trousers, and he was wearing only a white linen shirt. He was washing his hands and smiled at her as he dried them.

"Welcome to another secret room of mine," he confessed as he spread his hands to show her.

Hermione smiled in return and walked around slowly, looking at his books, small potion stores, and all of his precious instruments.

"This is very nice," she said, impressed with the layout.

He came close to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, tenderly stroking the skin there. "What may I do for you?" he purred.

Hermione felt her stomach tie up in knots. "I wanted you to know I love the ring," she whispered as she looked down at it.

"You're welcome," he replied huskily.

"I-I need to know about how we are going to go from here?" she asked him softly.

He leaned against the lab table and said thoughtfully, "Well, every year, after the students leave, I spend a month replenishing, inventorying, and basically putting the classroom and the storeroom to rights in preparation for the fall term. I was hoping that you would stay on with me, and we could work together so then we could have more of the summer to go off vacationing or going off wherever you wish, or do what you want to do."

Hermione ran her hand against the smooth surface of the lab table. "I think I would enjoy working with you again," she admitted. "Although, with no hostility this time."

Severus placed his hand on the nape of her neck and stroked the skin there before leaning in to place a chaste kiss that made Hermione's breath hitch. "No hostility, Hermione," he whispered in her ear.

"The only reason for my foul behavior was that I was so in love in you, it was painful to be so near and not touch you, not kiss you, or make love to you. But there is no excuse. I was wrong."

Hermione turned, and their lips were so close, it was unbearable. "I want you, Severus," she whispered. "I just need this to happen slowly, I think."

He kissed her, and her mind went numb. All that existed was his warm mouth on hers, his hands on her back. He pulled back and delicately turned her around. He began to undo each button from her dress, kissing the skin that each open button exposed. Hermione felt her legs trembling and her sex throbbing with aching need. The dress fell, and he followed its descent to the floor, caressing and touching each curve of her body. His hands traveled down her legs and eased each foot out of her shoes. He urged her to turn around, and he looked at her with awe as she stood in her corset and garter combination set with her breasts unbound and free. He slid the palms of his hands up the front of her legs and joined his fingers at the juncture. He placed his lips on her mound and kissed her, inhaling her scent of arousal.

"You are the look of loveliness, sweet one," he whispered as he looked up from where he was still kneeling.

Hermione gripped onto the lab table with one hand and braced her hand against the chalkboard with the other as he undid each snap holding up her sheer stockings. He took each foot, one at a time, and placed them on his knee, patiently drawing them down slowly, dragging his tongue along the inside of her leg as he made his way to her feet where he kneaded them and kissed each painted toe. He looked into her eyes with his black ones burning, unashamed of his lust for her. He snapped his fingers, and without removing his gaze, his robes came sailing into the lab, and he laid it down for her first foot.

"Such beautiful feet should never touch a bare, cold stone floor," he said in rich, velvety tones.

Once the stockings were gone, he slowly pulled on her satin garter belt, slowly edging it down. He straightened up and inhaled the scent of her femininity. He lightly stroked the curls there, and Hermione's head fell back in complete surrender. She couldn't believe how erotic this was becoming, and he had yet to truly touch her intimately. He lifted one leg over his shoulder, and he tasted her. Hermione choked out a shudder at the feel of his mouth on her. It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. He held her fast to him, his warm hands on her exposed bum, pushing her closer to his eager mouth, teasing and manipulating her with such fervor that she couldn't hold back the sounds that were aching to burst out from her.

He flicked his tongue into her heat, abandoning that one tiny place of heaven, and she nearly screamed with pleasure. Her palms gripped each of the surfaces that were keeping her upright, and she felt her remaining foot on the floor stretch up like an *En Pointe* ballerina, so he would revisit that place which had felt so delicious. He returned to that source of everything that was desire, hunger, and need and spiraled her to a dizzying height that when she finally felt herself give way, she was uttering sounds and noises she had never made before. The only word that mattered was his name, and she said it again and again: *Severus, Severus, Severus!*

Afterwards, she felt cold and exposed. She felt embarrassed and defenseless, so sure he would laugh at her inability to resist or tease her about the sounds she had made. Instead, as she stood there trying to cover herself, he took hold of her hands and lowered them from her chest. He lifted her up, placed his robe underneath her bum, and positioned her on the table, so he could be level with her breasts.

"Was this how you were dressed underneath?" he asked as he discreetly wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Yes," she blushed.

He placed his hands on either side of her and said, "Am I ever going to see you tonight with your hair down?" he asked pleadingly.

Hermione took her wand and tapped the hair gathered onto the base of her head and repeated the spell Ginny had told her, and it came down in a cascade of tangled

curls. He sniffed her hair and gently moved his fingertips lightly over her naked breasts. The thrill of his intense and powerful black eyes concentrating on her breasts made her skin tingle and her nipples contract.

Hermione closed her eyes. It was far too much to watch as he evaluated her.

"Quite astonishing, Hermione," he said warmly. "Just being under my watchful eyes has made your body react."

Hermione lowered her head in embarrassment. His lips found hers as he searched her out. His hand was warm on her throat after he had raised her chin up from her chest. His lips brushed and teased hers as his hand slowly traversed down to stroke one stiffened peak. Hermione gasped, and Severus whispered into her mouth, "Yesss."

His hands were tweaking and twisting her nipples gently as she continued to gasp and moan in pleasure.

"You like that, Hermione?" he asked teasingly.

She opened her eyes and looked into his black ones, unable to speak. He smiled and scooped a hand behind her head. "Never mind. I know you do," he whispered.

He lowered his head as he leaned her back with his arm, her head cradled in his hand. He tickled her left nipple with his nose before he took it into his mouth.

Hermione gave into the sensation and felt her body respond to needs she couldn't verbalize.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered against her skin.

She felt the desire for him humming between her legs, and she wriggled against him. He stood in the gap and stroked her inner thighs and wet sex as she moaned out another orgasm.

She felt his lips against her ear. "I'm going to feel inside you, now. Don't be afraid," he murmured.

She felt one finger entering her and felt him circling inside, the sensation snug and tight. She moaned in response. "Do you want to stay the night?" he asked as he slowly withdrew.

"Yes," she breathed.

He carried her into his bedroom and laid her onto his bed. She watched as he carefully and slowly undressed and then with only his underwear on, he unlaced Hermione from her corset and held her naked body lovingly and with honesty for the very first time...

The next days were spent having the house-elves bring Hermione's trunks into his rooms and working hard in the classroom and storeroom. Since the castle was so empty, save for staff members, there had been a great deal of flirting and touching going on during work. There were passionate kisses, playful banter, and some days work wouldn't be finished at all. Hermione was giddy with the attentions her fiancé gave her, and every time he told her how beautiful and lovely she was, the memories of those horrible days began to become less and less intense and hurtful. Hermione knew Severus was working hard to please her, and he did. She reveled in how attentive he was to her body and her mind. They talked about things that she had never thought she could talk about with anyone else. He was also extremely intelligent and challenged her mind in ways she never imagined possible. Severus was seducing her on more than one level. He was seducing the whole of her.

One afternoon, as they worked diligently on re-labeling some of the older jars on the higher shelves in the store, Hermione was holding the ladder steady for him to handle whatever might be lurking in the dark up there. He would carefully hand down jars to her, and she would place them on the floor in the corner, away from them in case of an accident.

After he was finished and a Scourgify was cast, he said, "I still think a good-old fashioned scrub is called for. Perhaps it's the Muggle in me, but sometimes magic just can't replace the old spit and polish."

He made his way down, and Hermione glanced at the jars they had removed. As he stepped down, and as she replaced her grip, the back of her hand brushed up against something foreign, hard, and very warm.

She blushed. She could feel her face growing hot, and she knew that he was aware as well. He decided though to forget it.

"Severus," she said as she touched his arm as he attempted to bypass her. "Why don't you ever want me to see you naked? Moreover, why is it that we still have not made love? Don't you want me?"

Severus took a deep breath as he wiped his hands on a cloth, avoiding her eyes. "I don't want to pressure you. I want it to be your choice, and this is very difficult to handle, Hermione. I don't think I could withstand that kind of rejection from you."

Hermione refused to let him go. She kept looking at him earnestly. "I've been selfish and greedy, thinking of only my own pleasure and enjoyment. Severus, you have nothing to worry over. I will not reject you. I love you, and I need you in this way."

She pushed herself against him, and he backed away until he hit the shelves behind him and there was nowhere to hide.

"Why are you running from me?" she whispered.

"I'm filthy, and I am very uncomfortable," he snapped.

Hermione knew him enough by now that he only got surly when he felt trapped or over his head.

"Severus, you have not denied me ever, except in this," she whispered.

"In what?" he asked sharply.

She began to unbutton his trousers, and he grabbed her wrist. "What are you doing?" his hissed.

"Saying hello," she retorted playfully.

He kept his grip on her wrist firm. "It's been a long time, Hermione. I don't think I will last..."

Hermione slipped her hand into his underwear and wrapped her fingers around his cock sight unseen and relished in the choked gasp of pleasure that slipped out as she whispered to him against his lips, "I have longed to hear what noises you make when you orgasm."

She shifted her hand, and he placed his hand over hers to guide her, and let her work her own unique magic on him. Soon, his breath grew ragged, and he began to groan. She fell to her knees, pulled out his cock, and Severus tried to protest that he was dusty and dirty, but she hushed him as she began to kiss and bathe it with her tongue. It seemed merely seconds later that he was begging her to suck on it, and his hips were jerking in spasms as his hands clawed against the wooden shelving behind him.

"Let me go!" he shouted, and Hermione backed up in time for him to decorate her shirt with his essence.

He was breathing hard and panting.

"Are you all right?" asked Hermione.

He nodded. His black hair fell into his face as he leaned against the shelves to catch his breath. Hermione watched his penis as it shrank. It had looked rather impressive when it was been hard and red at the tip.

"Well, that was rather humiliating," he muttered as he tucked himself back into his trousers.

"What?" asked Hermione as she cleaned off herself.

"Hermione, I couldn't even last two bloody minutes," he snarled.

"I thought it was amazing," said Hermione decidedly as she left him to clean up and gather his composure.

That evening, as they lounged after getting ready for bed enjoying a glass of wine, after the grime of the day's work had been scrubbed from their bodies, Hermione placed her head in his lap and snuggled to him.

Severus placed his book on his lap and said, "I have been waiting for you, sweet one. I didn't want to pressure you or make you feel obligated. After all, we aren't married. Are you ready for that next step?" he said.

"Yes," she said as she looked into his eyes.

He blushed and looked down at his book. "My body isn't as lovely as yours to look at and enjoy," he mumbled.

"I beg to differ," she replied.

He offered her his hand, and she took it as he led her to their bed. Together they removed their nightshirts and stood to look at the other. Their eyes roved over each other, and Hermione whispered as she placed her hands on his sparsely haired chest, "Make love to me. I don't know how to do this."

"I'm no expert," he mumbled as he looked down.

"According to me, I know you're the best," she said shyly.

He smiled in return and laid her down on the bed. He slid his hands all over her, touching her where her markings from the cutting had been.

"I made a promise to myself, Hermione, that I would never make love to you until your mind was as healed as your body," he whispered. He looked at her sorrowfully. "I can't seem to find the words to tell you how much I regret that night."

Hermione took his face into her hands. "Look at me, Severus. I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to. Let's just promise that we will always try to remember to be gentle with each other, all right?" she asked.

Hermione watched as tears fell from his eyes. "I promise," he whispered.

"So do I," she replied.

"I can't believe this is finally happening," his voice said brokenly.

"Why?" she whispered.

He hovered over her and ran his fingers through her hair. "I have dreamt of this for so long. The day you took your Oath, your eyes and hair shone, and I felt something I had not felt in years. It frightened me so much. I knew I was already feeling something for you, but that day, I knew beyond a doubt that I wanted you for myself. I never could have taken you so brutally that night, and I had been so angry that you so easily could have died. I had been so afraid this day would never come, and I was even more afraid of this day arriving," he admitted painfully.

"Why be afraid of the day arriving?" Hermione said reassuringly.

He laughed suddenly and then kissed her. She responded eagerly and copied his movements. She tried to learn the angular shapes of his thin frame, the tender, yet hardness of his sex.

His hand caught her hand to stop her from touching him. "Remember what I said to you, Hermione? I long to sink myself inside your flesh as far as I can, and as far as I can penetrate your mind and find all the wonders there. That is what I yearn for," he said as he carefully pulled her to him and held her close. "I just want to be able to please you."

Hermione kissed him softly. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm sorry, I will have to hurt you one more time," he breathed into her ear.

Hermione ran her hands through his hair, playing with the long black wisps that had been freshly washed. "I've wanted this for so long. I want to know how it feels to have a part of you inside me," she whispered.

He kissed her and traveled lower to tease her breasts. Hermione groaned as the sensations licked inside her belly. "Please," she breathed. "Put your mouth on them."

Severus obliged wholeheartedly. His hands swarmed everywhere, touching, stroking, and making her skin feel alive with his deft fingers. He dipped a finger into her, and she moaned.

He rose over her, and she felt so small and fragile compared to the long and toned contours of his body that had been through so much over the years. She stroked his arms, relishing in the fact it was he that she was touching so intimately. She was nearly shaking with need.

"Hermione," he whispered. "There are so many wizards who would kick themselves that they never knew what a jewel they had in front of them. But I see you."

He caressed her face and said, "This face, this lovely, sweet face is the one I want to wake up to every morning. If I can make you smile at me at least once a day, I will have thought my day worthwhile."

He kissed her tenderly and pressed into her. She breathed calmly as she closed her eyes. He felt the barrier keeping him out, and he carefully eased into her, rending her hymen. At that moment, her eyes flew open, and she drew in a shocked breath at his intrusion.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" he whispered.

"I-I think so. Keep going," she urged him.

He hunched up on his knees and brought her legs with him, hooked under his forearms. He shifted and swerved; making her groan and squeak at the sensations she was feeling.

"It's getting better," she whispered.

"I can make it even better than this, sweet one," he whispered.

He began to thrust more vigorously, and Hermione grabbed her legs by the knees, hiking them salaciously to her chest as she spread further for him, urging Severus to move harder and deeper.

"Yes!" she exclaimed as he filled her soft, willing flesh with his rigid, needy sex.

"Hermione," he whispered. *"I am completely yours."*

He made long, deliberate strokes to feel every part of her, and she gasped and cried out in pleasure with each thrust.

"Do you like that, Hermione?" he whispered as she moaned softly. "This has been everything I have waited for...you feel so good."

They slowly made love and discovered all the differences in their bodies and reveled in them. He brought her to a state of frenzy, and she was begging for him to take her harder.

"Please," she whispered. "I need you deeper inside me."

Severus breathed deeply and finally enjoyed what he had wanted for nearly two years. He grunted as he filled and stretched her, deep inside her heat, rocking her, drawing her to himself.

"I'm yours, sweet one," he whispered. "Yours."

Hermione let out a guttural sound from deep inside her. "I'm...it's happening! I'm coming, Severus!" she shouted, half in shock, half in pleasure. Hermione cried out as he began to push harder and deeper inside her. She was mindless. She had no other thought but him, the man over her, calling her name, and filling her to the edge. Just as she was ready to tell him no more, another orgasm would hit, and she would scream louder and harder as she felt liquid seeping from her body, warm against her bum.

Severus was biting his lip. He wanted to let go so badly, but he wasn't finished with her yet. She grabbed the pillow behind her head and threw it from underneath her head to the floor. Severus felt onto her, capturing her wrists above her head, and sucking on her nipples. Hermione was struggling and bucking as he continued to drive into her. By the end, they both were crying and whispering their love and devotion to the other. He spilled into her with a moan, and they held each other close, their noses touching and kissing lightly periodically on the lips. Severus was not about to let her go. He smiled at her. "You are lovely when you've been freshly taken, my dear," he said as he drank in her face.

Hermione felt her face growing hot. "Thank you," she whispered.

Severus kept himself hovering over her and took her face into his hand as he caressed her skin. "Hermione, I love you. I do. I love everything about you and want you and I to be together always. You will never have to fear my sincerity or doubt my honesty. For so long there was nothing and then you came and gave me something I never knew was missing. That was how detached I was from love.

"You told me how much you wished someone longed for you, that if they couldn't have you, they wouldn't know how they could go on. You are that to me, Hermione. The day you walked into Grimmauld Place the summer before your eighteenth birthday, you changed my life. I was chained to you, and each day I wanted, wished, and hoped for you to claim me, and make me your own."

He sat up in the bed and gave Hermione some room. "Have I earned your trust now?" he asked.

Hermione took his hand in hers and kissed his beak-like nose gently. "I would like to officially declare you as mine," she whispered.

He held her and kissed her face, neck, and shoulders...everywhere he could easily access. "Thank you, Hermione, thank you for making me so very happy," he whispered into her ear.

Hermione woke early the next morning and slipped out of Severus' arms to go to the loo. She winced at the ache between her legs and looked back to see the evidence of her first sexual experience. She padded softly to the door, and there was a blank piece of parchment spelled there.

Hermione retrieved her wand and tapped it. The note detached from the door, and the cramped, spiky handwriting of her fiancé came into view, and she read it slowly.

Hermione,

It is so very late and I am at my desk, watching your glowing body in sweet repose. You are so lovely, sweet one, and I find myself unable to express the emotions that are inside me. I know you have claimed me and made me your own. I know that when you wish, we shall be married and spend our lives together.

But now, my thoughts are nagging in the back of my head. I still have yet to give you an answer as to why I was so viciously cruel, so vile and heartless when I have sworn over and over in my words and actions that it was all a lie.

I have no words, but perhaps this may explain.

I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,

I shun the love that lurks in all delight...

The love of thee...and in the blue heaven's height,

And in the dearest passage of a song.

Oh, just beyond the sweetest thoughts that throng

This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright;

But it must never, never come in sight;

I must stop short of thee the whole day long.

But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,

When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,

And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,

Must doff my will as raiment laid away, ...

With the first dream that comes with the first sleep

I run, I run, I am gather'd to thy heart.

In those days of your first months, working with you, being so near, knowing you were to be my student for one more year, but past coming of age was my daily torment. I had to hide away or die from my need to be with you, for if you had refused me...if you had laughed that I counted myself yours...I never could have borne it. The moment you spoke your Oath, that same moment I vowed myself to you.

You lie sleeping and still have not stirred. I shall place this for you and for only your eyes to see the slave that I am. Now I shall join you and return to bask in the glow of you, my sweet one.

Your

Severus

Hermione smiled. Yes, that was a wonderful idea. She would quickly go to the loo and hurry to return to her Severus, for he was hers now. They had longed enough.

~The End~

A/N: The poem in Severus' note is *Renouncement* by Alice Meynell.