

# Sorting Hat Redux

by ladyofthemasque

What if Sorting students into the four Houses wasn't the only duty of the Sorting Hat?

## Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

What if Sorting students into the four Houses wasn't the only duty of the Sorting Hat?

Author's Notes: This was a prize offered for those who wanted to help donate to a fellow fanfic writer's breast cancer expenses. Ebay Dragonfly won, and has graciously allowed me to post this story for the rest of you to enjoy. Um...it was *supposed* to be only 2,000-3,000 words long, but OMGIhaveNOcluehowtowriteaSHORTstory...as many of you may have noticed from my other fanfic works...

Enjoy! ~Lotm

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### CHAPTER ONE

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Hermione's brown curls flew over her shoulders, she shook her head that hard. "I *won't* do it. It's barbaric!"

"Hermione, *everyone* has to do it," Ron told her as Colin made shushing motions from his seat across the Gryffindor table. "Everyone's been *doing* it for hundreds of years!

"Sure, they stopped doing it for about a decade or so," Ginny added, "but between the spike in the divorce rate and the need for happier, more stable marriages--and how the wizarding world needs good families, to raise good kids--there's really nothing to be worried about."

"It's *archaic*," she accused, barely keeping her voice down. "And I'm *not* worried. I just don't want some mouldering piece of fabric determining the course of *my* fate. The Muggle world gave up this arranged marriage nonsense over a hundred years ago! Why should I have to suffer through it?"

"Because for the last hundred years, the divorce rate has spiked sharply in the Muggle world?" Ginny reminded her. "And when the wizarding one here in the British Isles stopped doing it, the number of new marriages that ended up in divorce also went through the roof?"

"Yes, because people could finally escape bad marriages without a serious social stigma attached," Hermione argued. As awkward as it was to be numbered among students who were a year younger--though she was grateful for the chance to complete her education--it was even worse to come back the year this silly tradition just had to be reinstated.

"But with the Sorting Hat, it's not *like* that," Ron argued back. "And she said *new* marriages; all the old ones done by the Sorting are still going strong."

"He's right," his sister agreed. "The Sorting Hat is the ultimate match-maker, because it gets inside your head, figures out who you'd be compatible with, similar likes and interests and world outlooks, and it weeds out the psychotic wife-beaters and husband-cheaters before you get anywhere near an altar with the wrong woman or man. Instead," Ginny said, smiling shyly at Harry, who blushed and smiled back, "you get someone you're very compatible with. And by doing it at the start of our seventh year, if

our match is here at the school, we can spend time getting to know that person, and make sure for ourselves that the Hat has picked the right choice."

Hermione shook her head vehemently again. "I don't care! I will *not* have my life dictated by--"

"Shhh!" Several voices hushed Hermione as Professor Flitwick came into the Great Hall levitating with his wand the two items they all remembered from Welcoming Feasts in the past. The Sorting Hat, and a stool...both of which were almost as big as he was.

Ron continued, murmuring in Hermione's ear. "...Look, with the defeat of You Know Who and the end of the war, the Ministry is pushing even harder for compatible marriages, because that leads to lots of new wizards and witches being born. They're even offering cash incentives for families to have lots of babies, if they have babies after picking their mate through the Sorting Hat. Wouldn't that be a grand way to start your adult life, with Galleons in your pocket to go spend on all your favorite books while I'm getting myself established as a first-rate Keeper?"

As much as she had been resisting the idea of having some musty old hat picking out the love of her life, Hermione suddenly saw the flip side of the coin she had been trying to refuse. *If I go through with it, I'm positive the Hat will pick someone else for me...and I won't have to beat my head against the brick wall of Ronald Bilius Weasley, trying to convince him he's not the right husband for me. Reducing having babies to the equivalent of pin-money--having half a dozen children, ugh! And being the wife of a Quidditch star would condemn me to a lifetime of listening to sports talk. No, thank you...*

Subsiding as the Charms Master called all the students to order, Hermione crossed her arms and waited. She knew it made her look stubborn--and she still felt stubborn--but just because the Hat proffered matchmaking services didn't mean she had to accept them. Staring at the lump of fabric the head of House Ravenclaw had set on the stool, she thought firmly at it. *Look, I don't believe in this predetermined rubbish...but if you arrange for Ron to have someone else picked out as his 'perfect mate', babies, Quidditch, and all...I'll give careful consideration to any other name you might offer...*

*But if you say my perfect mate is Ronald Weasley, I'm going to burn you into a tiny little smear of white ash. Got that?*

"When I call your name, please come up to the stool, sit down, and place the Sorting Hat upon your head," Professor Flitwick instructed. "The Hat may call out a name; if it does, please stand to one side while that person is called forth for a confirmation placement of the Hat upon their own head. If that person is not here, they will be summoned to the school within the month, and you may take your seat at the table in the meantime.

"If the Hat does not call out a name, it may simply mean that your ideal match didn't attend Hogwarts at any point in the past," Professor Flitwick continued, his voice firm despite its naturally squeaky quality, "or perhaps your match is not old enough yet to be considered. If the latter is the case, you may be asked to return to the school at some point in the future. If the former is the case, and you meet someone you think may be compatible with you, then you may ask to have a private Sorting ceremony performed with you and your prospective match at that time, if for a small fee."

"If the Sorting Hat does not say a name out loud, but does give you a name in private...keep that name to yourself," Headmistress McGonagall stated sternly from her position at the center of the staff table. "It may be that the name given to you is someone not quite of-age yet in the wizarding world. It may also be that there are two or even three possible candidates for a happy match in your future. This does not happen often, and it is best if all the parties involved conduct themselves in a manner befitting young *adults*.

"Discretion and courtesy are to be expected and encouraged. Brawling over each other's affections like children in a candy shop fighting over the last mallow-crème will *not* be tolerated here at Hogwarts...and there will be *no* under-aged courtships conducted in non-public manners. So, if you are given a name in private, or given no name at all, you will proceed to the Headmaster and whisper it in his ear for recording, but you will not share whatever information you received with anyone else."

"Yes, exactly. Now, with all of that in mind..." Unrolling the scroll in her hands, Professor Flitwick cleared his throat and began. "Abbot, Hannah."

Encouraged by her classmates, Hannah made her way to the stool. Picking up the Hat, she sat down and placed the worn, scuffed brim on her head. The Hat squirmed a little, twisted twice, then opened its rip-shaped mouth and called out, "...Ronald Weasley!"

Stunned silence met the tables. If Hannah and Ronald had exchanged more than a hundred words a year in all their six-plus years at Hogwarts, Hermione would've eaten her school tie. Still, it was with a secret, deep relief that she finally nudged Ron into getting up from the bench.

"Go on," she whispered, hoping she was hiding her relief enough not to offend him. "Go try on the Hat! You're the one who thinks it's a ruddy good idea, so you have to follow it through. Not to mention you'll never get those galleons just for having a large family, if you don't pick out the right girl to have one with..."

He gave her a brief frown, though whether it was for pointing out his greed or for not seeming as upset at this sudden announcement as he probably thought she should be, she didn't know. Nor did she really care. The important part was watching her erstwhile boyfriend making his way up to the stool, seating himself on it, and settling the Hat on his head with a dubious look back at her, until the brim of the Hat covered even his eyes.

Again, the Sorting Hat wriggled a little. It took about the same length of time as it had for Hannah, then stated, "...Confirmed! Hannah Abbot and Ronald Weasley!"

The way its rip of a mouth folded itself shut made Hermione feel uncomfortable, for it seemed to be smirking *irher* direction just a tiny bit. But as the next seventh-year student came up, sat down, and had the name of their prospective mate announced, she saw that it rumbled itself into the same slightly-smug folds after each successful match.

*Well...I suppose even a Hat has a right to enjoy some job satisfaction,* she found herself allowing, waiting with mounting anxiety as they proceeded through the Es and the Fs.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Harry gave her an encouraging look. Ron paused in his staring at Hannah, who was still blushing whenever she looked at him, to give Hermione an apologetic and an encouraging thumbs-up. Climbing off the bench, Hermione made her way to the stool. *Please don't have a name for me...please don't have a name for me...*

Seating herself, she settled the age-grimed artifact on her head. *Please, please don't have a name for me...*

"...What, and let a brilliant mind like yours languish from proper stimulation?" the Sorting Hat whispered in her ears. She could feel it twisting with a snort. "No, no, we cannot have that, my dear. Though you already knew that when you finally realized you and that Weasley boy weren't meant for each other. You need a great deal of intellectual stimulation, if you are to be happy for years to come. Alas, there's not many men who could keep up with you, mentally. And not many who share your vast love of learning for learning's sake. Not very many men at all who wouldn't feel intimidated by your intellect, and men do such terribly childish things in retaliation when they feel inferior to a woman.

"More than that," the Hat murmured in her ears, "there is a greater capacity within you to love than even you have realized...though I do wish you'd stop bothering the house-elves with knitted hats and things, at least the ones who are content with their lot... You can only help those who truly want to be helped, you know...which means the one man who is perfect for you in all your best ways is none other than...Severus Snape!"

Shocked, Hermione yanked off the pointed hat. She could feel her face flushing bright red, hoping against hope that the Hat had said *that* name only loudly enough for her own ears. Unfortunately, the paleness in the faces of the students seated at the four House tables proved they had heard it, too. Wary of his reaction, Hermione twisted on the stool to peer up at the head table. The first face she saw was Professor Hagrid's, his eyes wide and wild with surprise. Then Professor Mundane, his age-wrinkled

mouth hanging slack. He of all people she would have expected to protest this second Sorting Hat ceremony. But the Professor of Muggle Studies hadn't said a word until now, and it looked like shock would continue to hold him silent.

Professor McGonagall had the least readable expression of all the teachers in the hall. She didn't seem upset by the news, just sobered by it--thoughtful even--but otherwise she didn't react. Next to her, the one who looked the most agitated had to be Professor Vector, who was fanning herself with a spell-stiffened napkin, looking as if all of her favorite calculations had just been mis-numbered and replaced with a flawed Fibonacci sequence. Hermione skipped over the reddish face of Professor Sprout, and winced at Professor Slughorn's calculating look, and wondered if someone should whack the new Transfigurations instructor on the back to get the poor woman to breathe.

Finally, her gaze focused on the heart of her problem: Professor Snape, his reputation as a traitor salvaged by his many efforts as a spy and his revelation as the man who literally weakened the other Death Eaters by sabotage from within, allowing both the Order and the Ministry to finally take them down, the man rescued by Hermione's Patronus and pardoned by the new Minister of Magic, allowing him to resume his place as Defence Master.

Snape was frowning at Hermione, as she would have expected...but not frowning in anger, more like in puzzlement.

"...Professor Snape?" Professor Flitwick prompted, taking the Sorting Hat from Hermione's hands.

Sliding off the stool, Hermione forced her legs to stand straight and still, though they wanted to shake. She waited as Professor Snape stood and made his way around the head table, coming down from the dais. She watched as he gave her one last, frowning, bemused look, and settled himself on the stool. And she waited as the Charms instructor placed the Sorting Hat on the head of the returning Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. She almost couldn't breathe as she waited anxiously for the Hat to conduct its mystical, mystifying analysis.

"...Confirmed! Hermione Granger!"

This time, the rumpled folds didn't arrange themselves into a slight smile like it had for the other matches. The moment it settled, quiescent in Filius Flitwick's hands, Hermione would have sworn to the Wizengamot itself that the Hat now boasted a full-blown, no-holds-barred smirk. The only thing missing were shark-like teeth, for the mouldering piece of millinery looked that bloody smug about its pronouncement.

*Maybe I should incinerate you anyway, even if you did save me from becoming a Weasley broodmare,* she thought, cheeks flaming once again the Defence Master carefully removed the hat and returned it to his diminutive colleague. But the Hat, if it picked up on her thoughts, made no reply. Expecting Professor Snape to return to the head table without another word, maybe even to stalk out of the room, Hermione blinked when he rose and turned to her, bowing his head in remarkably civil courtesy to her, given the Hat's revelation.

"We shall discuss this...turn of events later, Miss Granger," he murmured. With slightly stiff dignity, he returned to his seat at the head table.

McGonagall cleared her throat, reminding Hermione to return to her own place at the Gryffindor table. Somehow the younger witch made her way back without stumbling or collapsing in shock. "Keep in mind that there are boats filled with first-years on their way here, ladies and gentlemen," she reminded the rest of the students, quelling them even as they started whispering amongst themselves. "And we're not quite to the halfway point in the alphabet. Settle down, now."

Hermione didn't care about the rest. Well, she did care if Harry was Sorted with Ginny, who was of-age and thus eligible; she personally thought the two of them were as well-suited as she and Ron had *not* been. But her mind still roiled with the Sorting Hat's announcement: that *she* was meant to be matched with Severus Snape, of all people!

It was almost too much to comprehend.

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The very next day, classes began. After having been subjected to bemused, bewildered, and even pitying looks last night, along with furtive whispers of "...*Snape?*", Hermione was dreading her Advanced Defence class. The only good thing about it was that Defence was the very last class of her day.

*Might as well get this over with,* she thought grimly, waiting by the doors with the other students. *I don't know how much worse it'll get, as the year progresses.* She had a sort of tentative escort comprised of Ron, Ginny, and Harry. Ron looked like he wanted to pat her shoulder in sympathy, and even raised his hand twice, but thankfully refrained from touching her. Harry looked like he was ready to defend not only his friend, but his former nemesis; a sharp flick of those green eyes, fixed upon anyone who looked like they wanted to make a comment to Hermione, usually silenced the other person before they could do more than part their lips.

Ginny...had eyes only for Harry, but Hermione knew the other girl wasn't going to make fun of the Sorting Hat's choices. Not when it had paired her firmly with her Harry. She had whispered her delight to Hermione last night while they had been brushing their teeth in the dormitory baths, waxing rhapsodic over the Hat's decision. Hermione didn't think the girl would have an easy time of it, though. While Ginny had been beaming with happiness during the Sorting Hat's confirmation, Hermione had looked around the Great Hall. Not just some of those in seventh year, but even a couple in sixth and fifth forms, had glared daggers at the girl for daring to be perfect for the Wizarding Savior Who Lived And Triumphed Twice.

Even now, two of the girls, Filia and Ramona, were giving Ginny dark looks. Hermione resolved to be the redhead's study partner in Defence, just in case someone decided to hex the Weasley girl for her good fortune.

The classroom door swung open. Entering, Hermione saw Professor Snape standing at his desk, lowering the wand he had used to open the door. He looked tired, his sallow face paler than the previous night, faint smudges under his eyes suggesting a restless night. But his manner was calm, his voice crisp, as he bid the students to enter and take seats.

Once everyone had entered, the door swung shut again. Moving to the front of his podium, Snape folded his arms across his chest, looking like a pale-and-black, immovable mountain. But not a stern, hateful one.

"I realize that many of you still hate me for all that I had to do during the war," he stated bluntly, without preamble. "And that many of you disliked how I ran the school last year. *Some* of you have been smart enough to realize how many of my actions in the past several years have been a ruse, a deception against the Death Eaters. Make no mistake: I still despise slackards and imbeciles, and will not tolerate disruptions in my classroom.

"Now more than ever, it is vital for you dullards to grasp the necessity of defending yourselves against the evils of this world. The Dark Lord has been destroyed...but he will not be the last Dark Lord you will ever face. Before him was Grindelwald, who tried to destroy London, and before *him* was Ashara, the so-called Lady Death, who terrorized Russia. Before her, Clytepas in Egypt, and so on and so forth. As Alastair Moody has said many a time in the past, *constant vigilance*. It is your only defence against the return of the darkness that festers in the souls of too many men."

A hand raised. Hermione was surprised to see it was Ginny's.

"Yes, Miss Weasley?"

"Sir...are you ever going to, you know...talk about what it was like?" Ginny asked. "To be a spy?"

Snape regarded her with a hooded, closed expression, but she didn't wilt. "...Perhaps," he finally allowed. "I will tell you something of the darkness I fought, and the counters for the evil spells I found. There are a few things I will not discuss, however...which brings me to a new topic. The Sorting Hat's decisions. Plural. Not just my own situation, but the matchmakings of the rest of you. They are not subjects fit for discussion in this classroom. I have no interest in your love lives, and taking the time to

discuss them is wasting the time that should otherwise be spent instructing you how to survive.

"Moreover, there will be far more *practical* instruction than textbook twaddle. Theory tells you what to do, but only actual practice will give you the experience and confidence you will need to use that book-knowledge to save your lives," he lectured, crossing to the chalkboard and drawing his wand. A schedule grid sprawled itself across the board under the tapping of the ebony shaft as he continued. "To that end, this class has been upgraded by the Board of Governors to be five times a week. Two days a week, Mondays and Wednesdays, will be spent here in instruction; the other three day will be spent in the Room of Requirement.

"The Room has been upgraded to produce a series of foes for you to combat during class hours. There are certain safety spells that will be in effect, but you will be expected to treat whatever the Room conjures as an actual foe, as if your lives are actually in peril. *You* will not be practicing with the tamed-down versions that the first years will be exposed to," Snape warned them. "They are not cute, they are not nice, and they will not give warning before they attack, from the moment you enter the chamber until the ringing of the class bell.

"Now. Open your textbooks to Chapter 3. We will go over the list of monsters described, and each one of you will in turn select one and discuss a way or means to defeat, avoid, or destroy an attack from that particular creature...a minimum of three ways per monster, each detailed by a different student. One way or another," Professor Snape stated grimly, his gaze drifting toward the three Slytherins in the room, "I *will* teach you how to think for yourselves...rather than just thoughtlessly repeat whatever you have been told."

It was a bemused classful that opened their tomes, Hermione not the least among them.

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Wednesday morning, one of the owls swooping down over the hall delivered a vellum envelope to Hermione's plate. Curious, she inspected the Hogwarts crest impressed into the wax seal and glanced up at the head table. The Headmistress was looking her way; the moment their gazes met, Professor McGonagall gave Hermione a slight but encouraging smile.

*Not bad news, then...* Breaking the seal, Hermione pulled out two cards. The first was an engraved invitation, written in somewhat formal language.

*Dear Miss Hermione Granger;*

*You are cordially invited to partake in a series of Sunday Afternoon Teas in the company of Master Severus Snape, to be located in the Staff Lounge between the hours of 2 p.m. and 4 p.m., starting this Sunday and continuing throughout the school year.*

*Repondez-vous s'il-vous plait, preferably in the positive, as soon as possible with the enclosed postcard.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Professor Minerva McGonagall*

*Headmistress of Hogwarts*

*Chaperone*

Blushing, Hermione couldn't help but think, *A series of afternoon teas, to take place in the Staff Lounge? I suppose this must be their way of getting around the restriction on student/teacher interrelations, yet still giving that ruddy Sorting a chance. Lovely. Two hours a week of awkward, stilted silence.*

*Still...might as well give this a chance. If the Hat is right about anything, it's that Professor Snape is smart enough, I won't feel like having to over-explain anything I might want to say to him...unlike a certain redheaded Gryffindor making calf-eyes at a certain Hufflepuff girl...*

Sighing, Hermione fished out her pen and check-marked the "Yes" box on the response card. Coaxing an owl down with a flutter of her fingers, she held up the card so the bird could snatch it and watched it being carried off to the Headmistress. As soon as she saw Professor McGonagall glance over the card and nod, affirming her choice, Hermione turned her attention back to her food.

Sunday would come soon enough; she still had the rest of the week to get through.

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Sunday did come quickly, with teachers piling homework on the new and returning seventh years' backs. End of the war or not, they seemed determined to teach their students even more of the skills necessary to survive in the wizarding world. After the turmoil of the previous year, Hermione was actually grateful for the return to the same old grind, though she barely managed to squeeze in six extra inches on her Runes homework, rather than the ten or twelve she might've added.

Tidying up with a few minutes to spare, she wasted two minutes fussing in the lavatory over the frizzy state of her hair, then gave up and hurried down the long, winding stairs. Slowing so she wouldn't arrive breathless, she checked her watch, waited just a few seconds, then knocked on the lounge door promptly at two o'clock, just as the Hogwarts clock began to chime.

The door opened, and a smiling Professor McGonagall ushered her into the room. "Come in, come in, Hermione! Just in time; the house elves have prepared a lovely tea. And do call me Minerva during the tea, and Severus by his given name."

Gesturing for Hermione to take the chair across from her colleague, the Headmistress settled herself in the middle of the three seats grouped around the cloth-draped, silver-laden table. Bemused by the invitation to informality, Hermione settled a napkin on her lap, glancing between her two professors. Professor Snape--Severus--didn't look all that put out to be there, though he wasn't rampantly enthusiastic in his demeanor, either. Rather, he gave the Headmistress an attentive look as she continued.

"As you may have surmised, the Sorting of a student with a teacher is *not* a common event. But neither is it without precedence. And, following precedence, the Board of Governors has reviewed the situation and given their approval. I mean, it's *hardly* as if anyone could accuse either of you of fixing Hermione's grades with inappropriate conduct, either in the past *or* in the future," Minerva stated. "In fact, the only concern expressed after reviewing your scholastic record is that any sort of courtship might *distract* you from your otherwise excellent academic performance.

"So. This series of weekly teas has already been established as an appropriate precedence from similar pairings in the past," the Headmistress explained. "I'm afraid they are to be considered mandatory for both of you to attend from now until the Christmas holidays...but after that, it'll be up to the two of you to see if you're compatible enough to continue. And hosting them in the Staff Lounge gives you both a modicum of privacy from prying student eyes, and a veneer of decorum, since any of the other teachers can serve as chaperones, or even just walk in upon the two of you at any time. Putting it in the Staff Lounge also gives you leave to be treated as a fellow adult, Hermione--hence the leave to use our given names."

"Do remember to address me properly when we are elsewhere," Severus interjected as Minerva paused for breath. "As I will address you properly. But while you are here...I trust I have leave to call you by your given name as well?"

Nodding, bemused by the formal air of all of this, Hermione sought for something to say. "Erm...right, then. Severus. I sha'n't forget to give you respect out in the halls, of course; I wouldn't do you such a disservice. But...erm...well, the Sorting Hat did say we'd be intellectually compatible, but I really don't know what to *say* to you. I mean,

other than the thank-you for working so long and so hard to save all of us."

"Neither do I. Nor had I ever expected to...be given another name. Let alone one aloud."

He flushed as he said it, but Severus Snape had said it, alluding to the pink elephant in the corner. Hermione had seen the memories he had bled into the Pensieve. She knew as well as Harry and Ron--and the rest of the Wizengamot, who had cleared him of his crimes and restored his good name, once his "death" from snakebite had proven a clever ruse--that he'd served so long and so hard as a spy because he had loved Harry's mum, and wanted to avenge Lily Evans-Potter's death.

Knowing she could shrink back in silence, or she could acknowledge the pink elephant of his past, Hermione picked the bold course. "How do you feel about that, Sir? Er, I mean, Severus? I presume it was Lily Evans' name that the Sorting Hat must have whispered to you..."

"It was. It...whispered Lily's name to *him*...and both of our names to *her*. But I had already made too many mistakes, and made a few more," he admitted quietly. "She chose *him*. And I..."

In the awkwardness that followed his silence, Minerva leaned forward and picked up the teapot. "Well, we'll have time to discuss all sorts of things in the coming weeks. No need to air everything at once. Half a lump as usual, Severus? And a dollop of milk?"

He recovered from his brooding with a sigh. "Yes, thank you."

Relieved of the need to show some sort of sympathy straight off--though she did feel it, she did want to leave the man with his dignity intact--Hermione held up her hand as her former Transfigurations teacher started pouring her a cup, too. "No sugar, please...Minerva...but a dash of milk would be lovely."

"Yes, your dentist parents. I understand they're settling nicely back into their old lives," Minerva offered.

"That was very clever of you," Severus added, sipping at his cup. "You made the Dark Lord very angry when he couldn't find your parents to torment and kill."

"Good; I'm glad," Hermione said. "Erm...you didn't get into trouble for it, did you? Not being able to find my mum and dad?"

He shook his head. "No. I had my hands full with my own assignment." He flicked his dark eyes to Minerva. "I didn't think I'd ever be allowed back here, though."

"You did what you could to save the students from a far worse time than they actually suffered," Minerva reminded him. "And, despite your excessive favoring of your own students, you *are* a good teacher, Severus."

"I find I am no longer quite as interested in favoring my fellow Slytherins," he muttered. "The reports of their abandoning the school ground battlefield *en masse* disgusted me."

"Well, when you've been told all your life that something is one way and meant to be one way only, it's very hard to turn your back on that," Hermione said. That drew both of their attention to her. "I know many of the Slytherins were raised to believe all that nonsense about wizarding superiority and purity--I'm living proof that Muggle borns can be just as good as Purebloods, which undoubtedly rankles them still--but many of them could also have been afraid of fighting, or even afraid of their own families, and the fallout from the battle regardless of which side won. If the Death Eaters had won, they'd be branded as traitors by their own kin...and if our side had won, which it did...they'd still be branded as traitors."

"For children who are raised to believe that bloodline is everything, that in essence *family* is everything, the threat of being expelled and reviled by their own kin must have been daunting," she finished.

Dark eyes narrowing in thoughtfulness, Severus studied her over his teacup. "...You are as bright as advertised. For years, I've despaired that your knowledge was only ever book-knowledge, fine in theory but useless for dealing with the practical aspects of life. I applaud your reasoning."

Flushed with pleasure at his praise, Hermione nodded her head and sipped at her tea. A house elf popped into view, settling a tea-caddy four plates high on the table. Bowing, it vanished again with brisk efficiency.

"Well, what shall we discuss next?" Minerva asked. "I know that Severus, here, likes to read *Ars Mathematica* and *Ars Ogham*, and I do believe I've seen an issue or two being delivered to you by the owl-post, Hermione."

"Oh, yes!" Hermione exclaimed. "There was this lovely article in *Ars Ogham* about a possible translation spell that could be successfully applied to the runes from the ancient Indus Valley civilization. They were quite advanced for an ancient culture, with running water, flushing toilets, and everything."

"I have read that article," Severus acknowledged, reaching for a small plate and a couple of finger sandwiches. "But I am not certain the proposed spell will work."

"Really?" Hermione asked, serving herself some fruit. "What are your reservations?"

As her colleague started to outline his reasons for distrusting the suggested process, Minerva settled back with a couple of scones and the pot of clotted cream, clearly content to let Severus and Hermione carry the rest of the conversation themselves.

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"...Where is *she* going?"

Hermione, aware that she was the only one to have left the common room just a moment ago, paused before stepping back around the corner. Most everyone else was outside enjoying the early December snow, but a few had remained behind to catch up on their studies. She herself had already completed her homework, but she had forgotten the magazine she wanted to bring to tea. The speaker was Filia, who had given up trying to hex Ginny for winning Harry Potter via the Sorting Hat a couple weeks ago...mostly after having been sent repeatedly to the Infirmary to get herself unhexed from the redhead's creative retaliations.

"She's going off to tea in the teacher's lounge," Colin's voice answered. "She does it every Sunday. Haven't you noticed?"

The dip in his voice was an audible dig at Filia's preoccupation. When the girl didn't answer, Hermione finished re-entering Gryffindor Tower. Nodding politely to Colin, she hurried up the steps...and heard Filia speaking again. Slowing, she strained to hear.

"Why does *she* get to have tea with the teachers?"

"Not *the* teachers. A teacher...and don't even think it, Filia," Colin warned her. "There's always some other teacher on hand to chaperone the two of them. I overheard Professor Sprout discussing it with Professor Mundane in the halls back near the start of school."

Filia snorted audibly, laughing. It wasn't a kind sound. "*Chaperone*? Those two? She's bad enough, stuck up from all her studying, but *him*? Trust me, not even pre-destined old maid like her would be desperate enough to try to kiss *him*."

"Watch your mouth!" Colin warned the other girl. "Professor Snape is a war hero. He's the one that helped defeat the Dark Lord, and *that* meant my brother and I could come back to school this year. And Hermione's my *friend*."

"...Whatever."

Mounting the stairs slowly now that the conversation seemed to be over, Hermione pondered the other girl's words. *It's not kind of her to call me a pre-destined old maid! There's nothing wrong with wanting to be independent and lead one's own life. It's the modern age, after all. And as for making fun of Severus like that...*

Here, she slowed even further, wincing at the truth. *He doesn't seem like the sort anyone would want to kiss, does he? And yet...Lily liked him, once. She liked him a lot, apparently, before he was reviled and embarrassed and lost his temper at the wrong moment in time. And...well, aside from his teeth being crooked and all, he doesn't look too bad. Especially not that he's been putting on a bit of weight after his lengthy ordeal. He was too thin, before.*

*I just hope he doesn't eat himself into a pudge* she thought distractedly, reaching her dormitory room. Some kind soul on the staff had selected a Hufflepuff to be Head Girl, and a Ravenclaw for Head boy, drawing some of the attention away from Hermione, Ron, and especially Harry. Hermione had been made a prefect again, but that wasn't nearly as attention-drawling as Head Girl would have been. It did mean that she was stuck rooming with the other girls, but it wasn't too terrible. At least Filia was a year younger, so she was sequestered one floor higher. Hermione didn't have to deal with her on a daily basis.

Fetching her magazine, Hermione hurried back down again, not wanting to miss a single minute of her two hours with her professor. But her mind wasn't on the issue of *Ars Medica*, with its articles on several new potions being tested for post-Cruciatius cures. It lingered on the thought of someone maybe wanting to kiss Severus Snape someday.

Someone...other than her? *No...Lily must've, of course, if the Sorting Hat declared they were compatible, however privately. Now that was an awkward love-triangle, she thought, not for the first time. But...he seems to be getting over her. And we do get along smashingly well. Actually, now that I'm getting to know him as a man, I've realized I've not been raising my hand quite so much in class.* A wry smile twisted her lips as she waited for one of the staircases to swing her way, giving her access to the second floor. *It's like, now that I finally have his attention at tea, I'm finally satisfied with my life...*

*...Oh, bugger,* she snorted, half-laughing, half-disgusted. She gave the magazine in her hand a fond look. *I guess the bloody Hat was right after all. He gives me all the intellectual stimulation I need, doesn't he?*

But as she started down the steps and saw two fifth years cuddled close on the edge of the next landing, exchanging somewhat shy kisses and blushing at each other, a niggling doubt began to grow.

...

"Hermione?"

She could not get it out of her mind.

"I asked you a question, Hermione; did you not hear it?" Severus enquired, far more politeness and patience in his voice, here in the staff room, than he ever displayed in his classroom.

No, she definitely could not stop thinking about it. Two weeks had gone by, and between seeing him lecturing in the classroom and talking with him over tea, she could not get the supple movement of those thin lips out of her mind. She was even dreaming about wanting to know what they felt like in the intimacy of a kiss.

"Hermione!"

The crisp command in his tone shocked her out of her reverie. It was almost as bad as the times in the past when he had rebuked her class, prior to the fall of Lord Voldemort, but at least his expression was more exasperated than disgusted. Instead, it was edged with curiosity.

"Hermione, what, precisely, is distracting you?" he asked, now that he had her attention.

Blushing, Hermione debated how to reply. After today, these tea sessions would no longer be compulsory; in fact, if she'd had her druthers, they'd have met more frequently than once a week, she enjoyed his company so much. Outside of the formalities of the classroom, they had quite a number of interests in common, and could quickly lose whatever chaperone accompanied them. Indeed, Professor Sprout had long since retired to another chair to read about something that actually interested her, and was now nodding over her book, soft snores emanating once in a while from her bowed, curly grey head. Even the two portraits in the room were dozing against the edges of their frames.

But...how to put her distracted thoughts into words that wouldn't make him offended?

"Well?" he prompted.

Hermione sighed. She was a Gryffindor, and she would address the problem directly. Sort of. It helped greatly that their chaperone was asleep. Sneaking a glance at the head of Hufflepuff to be absolutely sure, she addressed her erstwhile professor.

"Do you...you know...ever think about it?"

His brows lowered, but not in anger. In bemusement, rather. "Think about what? The price of tea in China? Do be more specific, woman."

At least he acknowledged she was a woman, however much younger than him. Clearing her throat, Hermione tried again. "You know...about the Sorting Hat matching us, and all?"

He snorted. "Of course I do. I am still here, am I not? ...Which begs the question of whether *you* still want me here. This is our last compulsory session. Did you wish to...discontinue them?"

"Oh, no! I love being with you!" she quickly protested, and blushed again at her instinctive choice of words. "Erm, that is...it's so very clear that we get along so well, particularly outside of the pressures of the classroom. I guess there was some sort of reason and rhyme behind the Hat's choice. But I mean...well...do you ever think about *why* the Sorting Hat's secondary purpose was revived, and, erm...how that affects the two of us in particular?"

"I repeat, I am here, am I not? I will admit that conversing with you is more...pleasant than I would have thought," he admitted, shrugging slightly.

Well aware that at the start of their afternoon teas, he would've merely said *tolerable*, Hermione flushed with pleasure at his admission. But it wasn't specific enough. Another glance at Professor Sprout showed the Herbology Mistress still sound asleep. Girding herself with her courage, Hermione clarified her point. "No, I meant...the *physical* side of the Sorting. It's blazingly clear we get along intellectually, but...well, there's *more* to a relationship than just the intellectual side of companionship, isn't there? So...do you ever *think* about it?"

This time, his look was wary as well as bemused, his black brows lowering on one side and quirking on the other. "Do you mean that ruddy nonsense about paying galleons to couples who procreate like rabbits? We're not all of us destined to be Weasleys..."

Impatient with his obtuseness, Hermione blurted out, "--I meant *kissing*! Do you ever think about *kissing* me?"

He opened his mouth, though whether in shock at her bluntness or to make some sort of comment upon it, Hermione didn't get to know. Professor Sprout snorted. Both of them froze. The older witch mumbled in her sleep, shrugged her shoulders a little, and began snoring again. Slowly, Hermione relaxed. So did the wizard seated across from her.

From the hint of relief in his features--she had come to know him well enough to read even the slightest hints he allowed to leak through his long-earned self-control--Hermione realized he wasn't overly offended by the precision of her topic. Relieved, she spoke again, this time in a soft, soothing murmur designed to hopefully not wake Ermengarde Sprout from her slumber.

"I mean...that's why I've been distracted of late. Everywhere I go, I see Sorting Hat couples pairing up and, well, canoodling in the corridors," she confessed.

"I hope you break them up as soon as you catch them," Severus stated. He leaned forward and refreshed both of their teacups, lifting his own to his lips once it had half a lump of sugar and a dollop of milk stirred into it. "You are a prefect, you do realize."

"Only if they're displaying public affection in public areas, and only if they go beyond bounds of decency in the privacy of the common room," she countered. "Better for them to have some place that's *public* for them to display their affection, however limited to Gryffindor Tower it may be, than to force them into sneaking off to kiss somewhere more private, and maybe do something even worse. Er, not that I think such things are *worse*, per se," Hermione quickly added, not wanting him to get the wrong impression. "I don't object to such things, in principle."

"In principle?" Severus asked, lifting one of his brows even as he lifted his cup toward his lips. "What about in practice?"

That made her snort. "A few gropes and some untutored snogging have taught me that boys my age are just that. Boys. No finesse, no practice, and above all, no patience. I've read more than enough to know that it takes longer for females to become aroused than males, so the longer the foreplay lasts, the better overall her experience will be. Which is why I was wondering what kind of a kisser you might be, as an indicator of everything else that follows. And, erm..." She blushed again, cheeks heating to what was surely a vivid shade of red. "Well...I was wondering when we'd get to find out what it's all like. I'm hoping it's soon."

Severus choked on his tea. The explosion woke his colleague with a start. She blinked blearily, grunted a bit, then rubbed at the back of her neck. Hermione quickly glanced from her back to Severus again, who had managed to control his coughing and was wiping his mouth with his napkin.

Testily, Professor Sprout muttered, "I don't see why I have to keep sitting in here... All the two of you ever do is talk. Talk, talk, talk! Some of it's interesting, but most of it covers subjects I have less interest in than Rubeus' opinions on the anti-dragon breeding laws!"

Unable to help it, Hermione smiled wickedly at her Defence professor. "Yes, all we ever do *is* talk. I can't help it if we find certain subjects more *stimulating* than others..."

From the narrowing of his eyes, Hermione guessed he wanted to give her a detention for her veiled innuendo. Since her back was to the Herbology Mistress, she daringly licked her lips while staring at his mouth. One black brow quirked upward.

"I think you're quite right, Pomona," Severus stated out of the blue, making Hermione wonder what he was up to. "This is the last of the mandatory meetings, after all. It is evident that Miss Granger and I are as intellectually compatible as the Sorting Hat alluded. Both of us possess the necessary maturity to conduct ourselves with decorum, decency, and discretion required of two adults."

"Perhaps if you suggested to the Headmistress these things, and your own viewpoint on the matter, you could be relieved of your chaperone duties--it might help if you discussed the matter with the others," he added in an off-hand tone. "They, too, may be bored with having to sit in proximity to conversations less interesting to most people than Rubeus' opinions on dragon breeding. You might find yourselves more persuasive when grouped in numbers."

Now even more grateful that her back was to the older witch, Hermione concentrated on getting the blush heating her cheeks to subside. *Is he suggesting what I think he's suggesting? That we meet without nosy chaperones, without prying, prurient eyes? That I might actually get the chance to kiss those lips?*

"That is," Severus allowed, switching his attention to the younger woman, "if you, Hermione, still wish these afternoon teas to continue throughout the rest of the year?"

"Yes," she agreed without thought, or rather, without having to think any further about it. Hermione had already thought about how much she enjoyed his company. Then her brain caught up with her enthusiasm. "Though, erm, I could wish for some venue other than the staff lounge. Tea is excellent and all, but I could wish for the occasional meeting in the Potions laboratory, and so forth. Your advances in brewing technique are exciting, and I would dearly love to see you in action."

Professor Sprout snorted. "Good luck getting Horace to turn over his labs to you, without turning over his post as well! Not to mention he'll want to be involved in anything you do, and will argue processes until your ears are black and blue. I've almost banned the man from my greenhouses--though he's nowhere near as odious as Gilderoy was, and he does know better than to pontificate in areas that are none of his concern." She smirked. "Instead, he'll pontificate on which of his contacts hold that area as his or her concern."

Hermione winced, remembering her childhood crush. At Severus' swift, inquisitive gaze, she grimaced and admitted, "I made the girlish mistake of having a crush on Lockhart. I stupidly fell for style over substance. In my defence, I was only twelve...and I did eventually wise up. Style is nice, but without substance, it's nothing but candy-floss, sickening sweet and without any lasting benefits or gains."

"I find your humanity reassuring," Severus murmured. It was her turn to give him an inquisitive look. He inclined his head, explaining, "It seems you have a flaw or two in your judgment after all."

His backhanded compliment made Hermione laugh. It wasn't the first time she had laughed in his presence, either, but it did make her feel good. "Oh, I have made *many* mistakes, Severus. But most of them were in my past, and I have learnt from them. I'd say I'm a pretty good judge of a man's character, these days."

Professor Sprout snorted. "Hmphf. War does that to us *all*. Forced maturation and all that--you two stay here and have a nice chat about whatever it was you were discussing, since you love talking so much. I'm going off to conduct a little opinion poll amongst the rest of our colleagues," she said, levering herself out of her chair. Pausing halfway to the door, she peered at Severus and Hermione. "You *will* behave yourselves, won't you?"

"We will be the very model of discretion," Severus promised her.

Firmly resisting the urge to blush--or worse, smirk--Hermione gazed at her Sorted partner until they were alone. The moment the door snapped shut, Severus' dark gaze darted firmly to one side. He glanced briefly at her, then looked that way again, so she looked, too. The only thing she could see in that direction were the cheerily lit fireplace and the wizarding portrait of some past groundskeeper, who was now awake and quietly watching the two of them.

*Ah. Right. Discretion.* Returning her attention to the Defence Master, she found Severus studying her once again. Nodding in understanding, and reluctant agreement, Hermione skirted the topic she really wanted to discuss. "So...you like having tea with me? Not just tolerating, but actively enjoying?"

"If I did not, I would be reading a book in your presence."

"I would hope it would be a fascinating book," Hermione offered. "Something you could sink yourself into, slipping between the sheets and losing yourself in the exploration and...and satiation of your boundless curiosity."

His gaze sharpened. She spotted the faintest possible twitch upward at the corner of his mouth. "My curiosity is not boundless, Hermione; if it were, I would exhaust myself to death, buried beneath the covers of all those books. There is far more to life than what is printed on the sheets, however treasured the tome."

"True," she said, venturing into more innuendos with a touch of bravery. "Sometimes you have to set aside all the writings and postulations of mere theory, and attempt an actual experiment. Under the right circumstances...I think the hands-on approach could be rather enlightening. Don't you?"

"Perhaps. But it also does not do to enter the laboratory unprepared and ill-researched," he said. "You mentioned you wished to see my techniques first-hand in the lab. " His gaze flicked swiftly, briefly to the other portrait and back, one honoring some past teacher of Arithmancy. "Perhaps if you were to thoroughly research a specific project, arrangements could be made to conduct it under the right conditions for...hands-on experimentation. Presuming that you also research all the necessary precautions. It wouldn't do to have either of us blown up accidentally, after all."

Flushing with pleasure--for his quick glance had reminded her the Potions laboratory had no portraits on its walls, as well as a few other places around the school--Hermione nodded. "I shall strive to find an appropriate subject for study. And, erm, if we cannot use the Potions room for whatever reason, well, there are plenty of other topics we could explore, comparing the theory of mere books with the reality of our attempts. Agreed?"

"Agreed. I shall endeavor to find a few projects and venues for us to consider as well." He glanced at the clock on the mantel, which said they had half an hour more to go, and changed the topic. "Now, I believe you were wool-gathering in the midst of my opinions of using Nordic versus North American runes in counter-cursing..."

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 2*

Okay, so Hermione has been Sorted...so...what now?

### CHAPTER TWO

...

Horace Slughorn was a menace. It wasn't that he was status-conscious; he still was, but Hermione knew that from her sixth year, when she had first learned to deal with the elderly man. It didn't help that both she and Severus were on his list of Must-Know people, for their role in defeating the Dark Lord and connections to many of that war's other heroes. No, his greatest crime was that he was nosy. Which meant he was *always* in the lab when she and Severus--whom she was forced to call Professor Snape in such chaperoned moments--were attempting some Potions-based experiment.

Worse, Slughorn's constant presence meant Severus was constantly in teacher-mode. At least they still had the Sunday afternoon teas in which to relax their scholastic distance, but not in the Potions lab. By late February--after a spectacularly ruined Valentine's Day wherein Slughorn played a decidedly sour-note gooseberry all afternoon long, preventing either of them from attempting anything even the slightest bit romantic--Hermione had suffered enough. Only the fact that Severus insisted upon instructing her on a certain advanced brewing technique using a fifth year recipe, Floo Powder, kept her coming back down to the dungeons on the last Saturday of the month.

Worse, she didn't *know* if Severus had meant to do something vaguely, remotely romantic on Valentine's Day. Not that she herself was the type to lounge about in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Parlour, also known in her private thoughts as the Pink Tearoom From Hell, never mind someone as pragmatic in mindset as Severus Snape. Upset and unable to do anything about it, Hermione entered the Potions laboratory in a snitty mood.

Not even the touch of her former Potions teacher's hand, cupping her own and guiding it in gently stirring the evaporating sludge in her cauldron, rather than vigorously as her mood tried to demand, could soothe her irritation. It was their first lengthy physical contact since the Sorting Hat had paired them, and she couldn't even enjoy it.

She lost it when Slughorn tut-tutted and bustled over to their side, jostling away his colleague's hand. "You're doing it wrong, Severus! It evaporates best when done in a pattern based on the--"

"--*Don't touch me!*" Her harsh yell startled both professors. Both of them backed away, eyeing her in alarm, but Hermione couldn't help it. The feel of Horace Slughorn's flabby, callused fingers, cold and uninvited, had her shuddering in overwrought revulsion. Abandoning her work, Hermione hurried brusquely to the sink in the corner, grabbing the scouring powder so she could get the feel of those utterly unwanted fingers off her skin. The fat, spidery idiot had *ruined* what little scraps of enjoyment she had been trying to feel.

Slughorn spluttered for a few moments, then moved to follow her. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Severus snagging the older wizard by the elbow. "Do not be a fool, Horace. Your presence is clearly unwelcome right now, and if you press the matter, she will most likely respond by hexing you senseless."

"She will not! I am her teacher, and as such, I will not toler--"

"--*As such*, you are a fatfool," Severus castigated him, cutting him off. "You are old and slow, whereas she is young and quick. You may claim to have plenty of battle experience, but *so does she*. I have seen her fight, and I know she has killed some of her foes in the course of the war. You are not dealing with a mere half-tutored child, but with a witch full-grown. You are also *merely* a nuisance to her right now. Do not compound the problem by making yourself a threat."

*Thank you!* Hermione thought with relief, slowing the actions that were threatening to scrub her hand raw. *You know me well enough, I would hex the obnoxious twit if he came anywhere near me right now! Of course, I'm tempted to hex you, too, for being so damned prim and proper all the time!*

*I am never going to be kissed, at this rate...*

"Make yourself far more useful by stirring the Floo potion, before it adheres to the cauldron. I'd rather not ruin something I paid for and intend to use," Severus added. He lowered his voice, making Hermione strain to hear him over the water splashing over her hands. "...I'll get her a calmativ draught from the supply cupboard, so we don't have to tiptoe around her like some brooding Welsh dragonness."

"Oh! Oh, right...you do that," Slughorn said, acquiescing to Snape's command. Adjusting his bulk, he settled in front of her cauldron, deftly stirring the thickening, dehydrating sludge so that it could turn into the ash-grey granules necessary for opening a proper Floo connection.

Puzzling over their exchange, it took Hermione all the way to the drying of her hands to realize what the two men meant. *Wait...they think I'm...they think I'm having my period! That I'm cranky from being PMS-y! Oohhh...MEN! I'll show them cranky--!*

A yell startled both her and the Potions professor. It was rapidly followed by three crashes and shoutings of, "Vitria Leviosa! Evanesco! Evanesco!" coming from the little corridor between the laboratory and Professor Slughorn's office, where the potions storage closet was located.



"Severus? Are you alright?" Slughorn called out quickly, though his hands didn't stop their fanciful scraping of a spoon through the sludge in the cauldron.

"Yes! One of the damned shelves broke," Severus called back, disgust lacing his tone. "I've lost one of my boots to the corrosive properties of Nightwing spit, and two of your bottles of Nihou Dze also fell and were destroyed, but I managed to save the rest. I need someone come here and either repair the shelf or levitate the other bottles so I can do it."

Glancing into the cauldron, Slughorn grimaced. "I can't leave the brew at this stage. Miss Granger, go help him. But no shenanigans! If this is just some excuse to get the two of you alone together..."

*So he was deliberately playing gooseberry, ensuring we'd never have any privacy together,* Hermione thought, vexed by how accurate the need had been and by Slughorn's stupid teacherly instincts.

"Horace, if I wanted to get the woman alone, trust me, I would *not* do it by ruining my best pair of dragonhide boots, not when they cost me a hundred galleons! Now get in here, Miss Granger, before I lose the other pair to the damned Swelling Solution that's tottering on the next shelf down!"

Having heeded that commanding growl for several years now, Hermione obediently scurried for the storage room. Severus was indeed standing on one boot-clad and one sock-clad foot, holding a shelf's worth of jars and bottles aloft above a sagging shelving board, though there were no further signs of broken potions or even threatened vials.

She had no more time to take in details, however, for his free hand snagged her by the back of her head, digging into her upswept curls. Hauled close enough to bump into him from chest to knees, Hermione found herself kissed, and kissed hungrily, by her former Potions professor. In the potions storage locker, which had featured only fruitlessly in her daydreams these last few months.

There was some awkwardness, some accidentally pinching teeth, a couple bumps from his long, thin nose, and a hint of coffee from the noon meal at the back of his mouth. But the lattermost was acceptable because it meant that not only was her tongue permitted entry beyond his lips, the rest of his tongue was busy exploring the hidden flavours of her own mouth. It didn't last long, though he did draw out the suckling of her lower lip.

His cold growl was at complete odds with the warmth in his dark, dark eyes. "Not like *that*, you idiot! Like *this*..."

His wand-hand flicked, repairing the shelf. She didn't get to see him resettling the bottles on the restored furnishing, because he kissed her again as he did so. This time it was her lips that lingered on his, sucking on his thin upper lip until it popped free, both of them panting heavily.

"Your wandwork is abysmal, Miss Granger," he told her, freeing his hand from her hair long enough to reach into his pocket, then press something into her palm. He had to nudge it off his black-clad chest to do so. A glance showed the name on the label, and comprehension dawned. "You had best practice your upstrokes before Filius catches sight of such sloppy imperfection."

*Nihou Dze? The Chinese Contraceptive Draught? And done in such a way that no one will realize it's not destroyed, just gone?*

*I'll show him sloppy imperfection,* Hermione thought, grinning. She tucked the bottle into the pocket of her skirt, grateful for the precaution he had sneakily produced. Her free hand slid from his waist down to his hip, then to the placket of his trousers. "Does *this* satisfy you, Professor?"

She rubbed. It wasn't the same as the one time Ron had pressed her hand to his own trouser placket, which had left her with an awkward impression of just not being ready for such things. No, this lump she *wanted* to feel engorging. And it did.

But though he pressed himself into her palm, he simultaneously sneered, "Certainly not! Two points from Gryffindor for an abysmal performance--and I'll see you practicing your upstroke when you clean up the lab. You'll not be leaving a mess for your Potions Master to attend. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Professor," she said, her tone sarcastic and her touch lascivious.

She gave him a squeeze, flushed with feminine pride at her daring, then stepped back and left him alone in the confines of the storage closet. Firmly schooling her face into a scowl rather than the lusty grin she felt like beaming, Hermione strode up to the lab table she had been using and started flicking her wand at the various ingredients still resting on the stone surface.

"Upstroke, upstroke...I'd give *him* an upstroke," she muttered, pretending she was upset with both men. "I'd like to give him one right on his pointy little chin!"

Wisely, Horace Slughorn said nothing, just continued stirring and scraping as the boiling Floo brew reduced itself to the requisite powder.

...

Sunday, there was no sign that he had expected her to take the Nihou Dze for a reason...and no chance for him to give her a sign. Instead, McGonagall and Hooch corralled Severus and Hermione into playing a game of bridge together. They couldn't even play footsies, for the table they sat at was the pedestal kind, and any sort of attempt to detour to one side or the other would have alerted the other two witches that something was literally afoot.

Monday was no better, for it was the Slytherin-Hufflepuff Quidditch match. Naturally, Professor Snape had to attend promptly after class to show support for his House, so there was no chance to linger and discuss *things* with him. Tuesday was a Room of Requirement day, and one look at the dark, dank stairwell they had to descend told Hermione this was not going to be the location for a discussion of an assignment. Not when descending that staircase with her fellow students led them into the foetid, labyrinthine depths of some sort of catacombs, only to have the stairwell vanish, and their teacher ominously tell them they would not be able to leave until they either found it again, or the hour-long session came to an end.

Given that they were studying the habits and attacks of ghouls, ghosts, and other undead creatures, it was an appropriate place to practice their defensive spells, but hardly the place for an assignment. Or so she thought. As the others scattered into groups of threes and fours to search for their elusive, dangerous quarry, Hermione followed Ron, Harry, and Ginny deeper and deeper into the impossibly large maze.

Halfway through the exercise, right in the middle of reducing a Room-conjured ghost to a smear of ashes on the worn stone floor, Hermione found herself snatched off her feet by strong, imprisoning arms and whirled through a hidden door. The wall-shaped panel closed soundlessly behind them as she struggled with her captor, but rather than a deathly hiss, the ramming point of her elbow elicited a pained grunt and a gasp of her name. Released, Hermione spun around in time to confront her scowling Defence professor, who was gingerly rubbing his offended ribs.

"Is *that* the thanks I get, for arranging to meet with you in private?" he demanded, straightening from his protective crouch.

"You grabbed me in the middle of an attack! You're lucky I didn't hex you half to death--I *thought* you were a wandering ghoul," she countered. One look at his expression, which on anyone else might've been labeled a brooding pout, made her relent. "I *do* appreciate the effort. And it's about time, too."

"Well, we don't have *much* time. Your cohorts will miss you soon enough. I may have the spells to modify the Room's parameters, but as soon as class ends, it will return to its normal malleability," he warned her, moving closer. There wasn't much to the room they were in, just a loveseat-sized couch, some oil lamps on the walls, and the door, but she wasn't about to move away. Not when she'd only had two kisses so far, and it looked like he was going to give her a third. Lifting his hands to her face, Severus cupped her cheeks, smoothing wisps of her hair back from her forehead.. "I never thought I'd find someone to...to fall for, ever again."

"That you're half my age is an uncomfortable thought at best. That you're one of my students...reprehensible, whenever I think about you as I do," he murmured, glancing briefly at the hands she slipped around his waist. "Yet our compatibility, the way we tolerate and even enjoy each other's company...and how lovely you are..."

"Kiss me," Hermione ordered. "I've only had two, and a good researcher collects at least a dozen samples before formulating an hypotheses."

"A dozen?" he challenged, lifting his brow. "I should say a good researcher collates the results of at least forty samples."

"Forty samples?" she repeated, liking that prospect.

"If not more," he agreed, closing the distance between their mouths.

Severus was a tall, thin man, but Hermione wasn't small herself. He didn't have to stoop just to kiss her, though she did lift onto her toes and lean into him, increasing the pressure of her lips. The hands that cupped her head slipped down around her back, then lowered to her buttocks, lifting her further into their kiss. Like the first two, it wasn't polished, but it wasn't tentative either.

Hermione felt the stone panel of the door thudding against her back, and hitched up one of her knees, wrapping her calf around his hip. Severus groaned and stooped, thrusting his fully clad self against the rumpled folds of her student skirt. It was wrong, it was naughty, it was utterly lascivious--if this had been anyone else, she'd have whalloped him one, as she had a certain ham-handed lout during the Halloween festivals of her sixth year, two years ago. But this wasn't some fumble-fingered boy trying to get his hormonal self into the nearest girl's knickers. This was Severus Snape, bastard by temperament, teacher by profession, Slytherin and spy by nature.

For a man just turning forty, yet not all that experienced in love, he was doing a damn fine job of arousing and pleasing her. Particularly when he sucked his way to her earlobe, a previously unknown hotspot. Biting her lip, Hermione strangled the urge to keen at the pleasure. She shuddered under his suckling kiss, clinging to him with arms and legs, nails digging into the black finespun of his robes. A twist of her head allowed her to return the amorous favor, latching onto his own earlobe with passionate hunger.

A bell chimed in the small chamber, interrupting them. Hissing an expletive, Severus forced the two of them apart, panting with the effort. With his hair mussed and his normally sallow cheeks flushed, he looked a little demented. Seeing it, Hermione flushed with a sense of her own feminine power; *she* had mussed his hair, and reddened his earlobe, and rumpled the lay of his teaching robes.

Breathing heavily, he turned from her, squinting at the wall until a mirror appeared. Adjusting his hair and clothes briskly, he gestured for her to take her turn. "Hurry up. The others are actively looking for you, and you mustn't be gone long--here, take this."

Turning from adjusting her clothes so they looked more presentable than passionate, Hermione found him holding out a vial filled with an ash-grey powder. "What's this?"

"Floo Powder. The same which we brewed. Professor Mundane's classroom is the nearest to Gryffindor Tower. It connects to the hearth in my private study," Severus told her, moving behind her so he could gently scrape his fingers through her curls, tidying them. "The password is 'frogs in winter' should you care to visit...provided you remember that my patrolling nights are Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and take pains not to get caught."

Dropping his hands to her shoulders, he met her gaze through the looking-glass. "The choice is yours...whatever you choose to do. You may come to just talk...or to explore more of this hands-on experimentation."

At the words "hands-on", he slid his fingertips down just far enough to brush the peaks of her breasts through her school sweater. She turned to face him and he caught her shoulders, gently holding her still.

"Be *sure* of what you want, Hermione. I am not an easy man, nor naturally inclined to be a kind one; not with most of my life spent being sour and solitary, set in my ways. I *would* like to change, and I am finally now free to change...but I am also a possessive man. Have pity on me and *know* your own mind, should you wish to take this further than a mere kiss. And do be discreet. The last thing either of us needs is to be caught."

Removing his touch, he stepped back, then lifted a hand. The door opened. Hermione took that as her cue, slipping back out into the conjured catacombs. A moment after the door swung shut, vanishing into the wall once again, Ginny cautiously rounded the corner to her left. Spotting Hermione, the redhead gasped, then rushed forward, hissing her name.

"Hermione! Thank Merlin you're all right! We thought another ghost might've gotten you," Ginny said. Behind her, Ron and Harry came into view, hurrying to catch up. A moment later, Ginny frowned and stared hard at Hermione. "...Is that a *bite* on your neck?"

"Erm...not quite. Professor Snape's thrown a wringer into the Room. Turns out I was ambushed by a vampire. I'm alright, really," she quickly reassured them as the boys and Ginny exchanged worried looks. "The safety spells didn't even have a chance to kick in. I acted so hard and fast, last I looked, he was still burning up."

"I *can* admire the man for his creativeness, even if he's still a bit of a bastard in temperament," Harry told her. "It's just like him to throw something like that in. I swear, if I pass my Defence N.E.W.T.s with anything *less* than an Outstanding, it won't be for lack of instruction. I'll have let him down, and not the other way around."

"Yeah, things like this is like old Moody's stories of Auror training," Ron agreed. "He's still a sarcastic git--no offense, Hermione--but Professor Snape really knows his defences."

"Let's keep moving," Ginny offered. "I'd rather not be a sitting duck for a whole group of undead fiends, and we're supposed to be finding the exit before the class ends."

Nodding, the other three followed her deeper into the tangled stone maze.

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She wasn't Head Girl, but she was still a prefect, and seventh-year prefects could be out of their dorms past curfew, if they were assigned a patrol. Her evening patrols were Thursday, Friday, and Saturday...so Thursday, after a cursory set of rounds that sent a pair of fourth-year Hufflepuffs scurrying for their Astronomy observation class up in the tower, rather than canoodling in a corner of the east wing, she made her way back up to Professor Mundane's classroom.

Since the Muggle Studies wizard kept his Muggle devices locked up in individually warded cabinets, he never warded his classroom. And, being quite elderly and thus prone to chills, he had convinced some Headmaster of the past--probably the late Dumbledore--to install a fireplace right behind his desk, as much show his students how Muggles would keep themselves warm as to actually keep himself warm, since he was a wizard and could simply cast a warming charm on his robes. So there was no need for Hermione to break into his office.

Best of all, the paintings and photos on the walls of Professor Mundane's classroom were the non-moving, non-living Muggle kind. No eyes to spy upon her and no ears to hear her destination when she vanished from view.

Carefully drying her nervous, sweaty palms, Hermione tossed the little pouch of Floo Powder onto the fire. It roared green and she stepped inside the verdant flames. "Frogs in winter!"

Whirled around twice, the fire released her to stumble out onto a thick oriental carpet that looked brand new. Having seen something of his quarters in his Pensieve of memories, Hermione swung around, taking in the little touches that had changed since his revival at the end of the war. No longer did it look like Severus Snape was punishing himself with less than comfortable surroundings--there weren't a lot of comforts, not on a teacher's salary, but there was the rug, and a new divan with thick cushions, and a couple of faded but still colorful tapestries hanging on the walls of his front room.

Plus a new black velvet dressing gown, she discovered, as Severus appeared in the doorway that presumably led to his bedroom. He lowered his wand--reflexes as ready as ever, it seemed--and...and...*smiled* at her? It was a shy, lopsided smile, but it was still undeniably a smile. Hermione felt her heart melt.

A moment later, he recovered his dignity, tightening the folds of his dressing gown and clearing his throat. "Well. You've caught me at a disadvantage. I would have been fully attired, but I was two minutes from retiring for the night...though your presence *is* welcome. Would you...erm...like some tea? Or...did you come for me?"

Seeing him trying to act self-assured despite his uncertainty made her smile. Crossing to the sofa, Hermione dropped onto it and padded the cushions next to her. "No tea, thank you, but I would like some of your company. Erm...that is, if you wouldn't mind a little, well...pre-bedtime cuddling? We don't have to get to the rest until later, no need to rush."

One of his brows rose at that, but he crossed the room and seated himself next to her. Then scooted a little closer, carefully tugging on his dressing gown so that it covered the grey nightshirt that fell halfway down his calves. Hermione scooted as well, until she could comfortably lean against him. A happy sigh escaped her when he tucked his arm around her shoulders.

"*This* is what I wanted," she murmured. A hint of petulance entered her voice. "We never get to *touch* when we're having tea. There's always something missing, and I think it's that we never just touch. You know?"

"This is pleasant, I will agree," he admitted. A moment later, he asked, "...A vampire, am I?"

Hermione giggled. "She saw the marks you left on my neck. I had to come up with *something* to throw them off the scent."

"You were rather vampiric yourself; my earlobe was still blushing from your lips when I went to the staff meeting after class, two days ago. Poppy wanted to know if I was developing some sort of rash."

"Well, it's not that far off the mark," Hermione said. At his grunt of inquiry, she explained. "You used to treat me and the others like some sort of communicable disease. I don't blame you; we were rather obnoxious little twits, weren't we?"

"Considering I myself was a bastard, I'd say the blame was mutual. Hermione...a question," he said, the seriousness of his tone making her lift her head from his chest. He was frowning thoughtfully. "Am I still that much of a bastard? Discipline *must* be maintained in the classroom, of course...but Minerva never had to be a raving bitch to maintain hers, if you'll pardon my language."

Thinking about it, Hermione considered how he had been acting these last several months. "Well...you're still a little tougher on the Gryffindors than on anyone else...but you *have* hardened up against the Slytherins, so there's not as much of a disparity, there. And you haven't been nearly as, mm, forceful outside of the classroom. Nor as feared.

"Some of that may be because you're now viewed as a war hero by many, though some still hate what you had to do. Actually, come to think of it," she amended, grinning, "you mostly have the student body puzzled, as do I. You and me, together? They can match our brilliant minds together, and our bossy temperaments, but there's been bets laid heavily against you and I ever getting...well, laid!"

Her admission made him laugh. "The only thing stopping *that* from happening is that you're the one setting the pace." It was her turn to make an inquisitive noise. He gestured at his lap, drawing her attention to the lump under his dressing gown. "I *am* a man. The moment I kissed you and you didn't resist, I could've taken you right there and then, Horace be damned."

Hermione shuddered at the thought of Professor Slughorn witnessing *that*. "Urgh. Let's not talk about him. I'd rather only ever associate pleasure with my sense of sexuality, thank you."

"Which does bring up an important question, if an indelicate one. Hermione...you lived for several months in the forest with your two friends..."

He trailed off as she shook her head. "No. Nothing like that ever happened. Ron did try to get me alone a few times, but I found myself putting him off. I'd had a crush on him for years, but it always warred with the fact that we fought so much. We really don't have enough in common to be more than just friends, and I finally wised up to that. It took the Sorting Hat telling him his best choice for a mate would be Hannah to get him to wise up, too."

"I see. And...Potter?"

"Eww!" It sort of amused her that he still couldn't bring himself to say Harry's name without the sort of hesitation one gave before saying "manure" but Hermione knew that was a battle he himself would have to fight. Instead, she quickly laid to rest any of his doubts on the thought of her and Harry...eww. "No, never, not in a thousand years. Harry is *very* much like a brother to me. I was an only child, you know, and he was a neglected child. Once we made friends, we sort of latched on to each other like a sort of honorary brother and sister. We don't always get along--more so than Ron, but not always--but we're always there for each other. Erm...that isn't going to bother you too much, will it?"

Free hand lifting to his face, Severus rubbed at his forehead, massaging the bridge of his nose. "When the Sorting Hat called out its confirmation, I spent the whole of the night struggling with what that meant. Not just the second chance at happiness--for which I am a grateful bastard--but the fact that it was *you*, a woman half my age...and the woman who was best friends with the boy who...who should have been *my* son, but was instead the living symbol of the chances that I had stupidly destroyed. Part of me still struggles with these things..."

This was an important confession, she knew. Gently, Hermione asked, "And the other part?"

The arm around her shoulders hugged her closer. "Part of me is a selfishly pleased git, that I could be blessed with a second chance at happiness, and blessed to have that chance with someone even brighter than Lily Evans."

"Brighter?" Hermione questioned, not quite sure he was serious. "Really?"

Severus snorted. "Of course you're brighter than her! *You* already knew what kind of a bastard I was, yet you still gave me a chance. She only had a glimpse of what I could become, and dumped me because of a stupid slip of an overly-embarrassed, frustrated tongue. I'd definitely say you're the brighter woman, finding whatever was left of the pearl I've trampled into my self-inflicted pigsty."

The comparison made her want to giggle, but she settled on a smile, gesturing at the room. "It's heartening to see you're no longer living in austerity."

"Yes. I'm no longer punishing myself. Minerva...insisted I get some counseling, this last summer. One of her witch friends married a Muggle psychologist, and since he knows about our world, he's been able to understand some of the things I've..." He shifted a little, then sighed. "I have slowly been learning how to forgive myself. I still go, though only once a month of late."

"I'm proud of you," Hermione told him, covering his thigh with her hand. She gave it a squeeze. "I always knew you were brave, but it takes a special kind of strength to admit you need help, and to admit you need to change...and to *strive* for that help and that change. You're the strongest man I know, really."

She squeezed him again and he shifted a little. The movement of his hips drew her attention downward. The modest lump under his dressing gown was turning into a distinct peak. Experimentally, if thoughtlessly, she squeezed again.

"Hermione, I am not going to be *that* strong, if you keep doing that, woman!" he warned her, squirming again. He glared at her, but she could tell it wasn't a truly angry one. "Stop discovering miscellaneous erogenous zones, if you don't intend to follow through on them!"

Stilling her hand, she thought about that. Thought long and hard about...a yawn interrupted her. Lifting her fingers to cover her mouth, she sheepishly apologized. "...Sorry. I *would* like to stay, but...it's been a long day, we both have classes tomorrow, and, well, Friday might be a better night. Especially since I haven't set things up to hide my absence for more than a half hour at most. Discretion, as you said."

"Quite. You'd, erm, better go. Now. *Without* a kiss goodnight," he added as she shifted to face him a little more.

Disappointed, Hermione conceded his point. She had taken the Nihou Dze back on Saturday, but she really hadn't scheduled a way to cover her absence for more than half an hour at most. There were only so many times she'd be able to use the excuse, "Peeves locked me in a closet," after all. Rising, she smoothed out her clothes. "Then I'll drop by on Friday night, shall I?"

"Yes--you'll need more Floo Powder," he warned her, following her off the divan. "I couldn't pass you a large amount on Tuesday because you hadn't brought your infamous book-bag to Defence Practice. I do have more for you, though. Take that pot, there, and conceal it somewhere close to the Muggle Studies hearth. Let me know when it gets down to a quarter-full. I'll make more for you."

"Know that you are welcome in my quarters, Hermione," he added quietly. "Always."

Touched by his generosity, his willingness to let her invade the privacy of such a private, closed-off man, Hermione impulsively wrapped her arms around him in a hug. Startled, he resisted a moment, then wrapped his own around her, returning the embrace.

After several seconds, his hand slid up into her curls. Grasping her hair, he gently pulled on her head. Once it had tipped back, his mouth descended, kissing her with the same intensity from before. Desire rose in her, but before she could to more than start to cling to his shoulders, he pushed her back.

"--*No*. Not tonight. Make suitable arrangements, for discretion's sake. I may be a bloody war-hero, but I cannot guarantee I'd be able to get employment elsewhere," he muttered, raking his hands through his hair as he turned away from her. "Not to mention your own job prospects would be sullied. *Discretion*, above all else. I learnt that much, as a spy."

"Would you, erm...rather I *didn't* drop by?" Hermione offered, hesitant since she didn't really want to stop, herself.

"I'm not *that* much of a masochist!" he snapped, whirling to face her. His hands slashed down at his velvet-wrapped hips. "It's bad enough I'll have to deal with *this*, tonight!"

A giggle escaped her. She choked it back quickly, but not quickly enough. At his pained look, Hermione offered, "...Well, it's not *every* day that someone likes me gets to drive a man mad with lust, you know! I can't help being pleased with my effect on you!"

"It would be less of a sting to my pride if I knew I had the same effect *on you*," he retorted.

Hermione smiled and turned to pick up the pot of Floo Powder. "Oh, you do. And I'm going to have to use a silencing charm on my bed curtains, tonight. I'll see you in class tomorrow...and tomorrow night."

"--Bollocks! I have patrol, tomorrow night," he swore, scowling. "Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

"As do I," Hermione reminded him, "Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Makes it all the more convenient, should we 'bump' into each other, don't you think?"

Folding his arms across his chest, Severus glared at her. "You will *not* tempt me into an assignation tonight. Be gone...and schedule your route to wind up by about nine thirty-five. The little blighters can snog themselves silly, after that. It's *my* turn to get snogged. Go on. Off with you. *Alone*."

Grinning, Hermione used a bit of the powder to whirl herself away.

...

Despite the fact that they were still exploring catacombs and blasting the undead during Friday's practice in the Room of Requirement, Hermione didn't find herself alone with the Defence Master until the requested time that night. Arranging things so that an illusion of her sleeping self would appear in her bed five minutes after everyone else in her dorm room had fallen asleep meant she had slacked off on her Potions and Arithmancy homework in order to research the necessary spells, but she knew she could make all of that up easily on Sunday after their appointment for tea. Once again, she had to dry her palms before casting Floo Powder onto the hearth; two spins, and she was there.

This time, Severus was dressed...at least in his normal boots, trousers, shirt, and jacket, but thankfully no teaching robes. He looked much as he did whenever they were sharing their afternoon tea, though from the spicy scent wafting up from the two steaming-hot mugs on the coffee table, tonight's drink offering was mulled cider. Gesturing for her to sit, Severus settled beside her, offering her one of the mugs.

Accepting it, Hermione sipped carefully at the hot liquid, searching for something to say. A rueful smile twisted her lips after a few fruitless moments. Setting down her mug, she reached for his and set that down as well, grateful when he didn't protest. He did give her a curious look, however.

"I'd like to do the normal things two young people do when they first date. You know, kiss and cuddle a bit, at first."

"Young? I may try to forget it, but I am twice your age," Severus pointed out.

"Piffle." At his arched brow, she repeated herself. "You heard me: piffle! Wizards can easily live into their hundred-and-fifties, if not longer. That makes you at least thirty years away from even the merest thought of mid-life, and *that* means you're still a young man. Now come here, young man," Hermione ordered bossily, if teasingly as she clasped his hands, "and give us a kiss!"

" 'Us'?" he questioned.

"Me, myself, and I. That's three kisses, one apiece," she stated, lifting her chin with mock-impudence.

"Ah, but I can only give you a kiss for you, and a kiss for yourself. Now *I*, on the other hand, need a kiss for all three, of me, myself, and I," he countered, daring to play along.

Hermione grinned. "Then that's ten kisses! Three for me myself and I, two for you and yourself, which from my perspective makes five...and from your perspective makes another five. Five and Five makes ten, you know."

"Your so-called logic..." Severus started to say, then paused; she could see him calculating her words before he finished smoothly, "...is absolutely impeccable."

"It had better *not* be impeccable, since I'm sitting here, waiting to be pecked," she joked.

Obligingly, he leaned close and touched their lips together. It wasn't as intense as the ones from before, more delicate if not quite hesitant. In fact, it was a soft, sweet kiss,

two adjectives she hadn't thought could be applied to this particular man. *I think...I think I'll have to spend many decades getting to know him. A thought which doesn't deter my enthusiasm in the least.*

Pulling back and narrowing his eyes, Severus studied her for a long moment. "Hm. It seems I have found the ultimate way to shut you up. A pity I cannot apply it in class."

"...Come again?" Hermione asked, lost and missing the rest of his kiss.

"A kiss will put a stopper in your know-it-all lips." Leaning in close, he demonstrated again. Unfortunately his joke made her laugh, and what had started out as a smooth press of his lips quickly became a muddled jiggle that evolved rapidly into a more heated, open-mouthed exchange.

Somehow they ended sort-of sprawled on the divan, which really wasn't long enough for such things, but between nibbling lips and roving hands, tangling legs and thrusting hips. Until, with a tortured groan, Severus rolled off of her, half sliding off the couch before he could get his heels set on the oriental carpet solidly enough to hitch his backside onto the couch. But he still slouched, blatantly unable to sit upright. Not when his jacket had been unbuttoned and shoved off to the floor along with her jumper, half the buttons on his shirt were also undone, and there was nothing left but a bit of black wool and whatever passed for undergarments to restrain his obvious arousal.

Feeling rather overheated herself, Hermione couldn't calm down Intellectually, she *knew* he was right to try and slow things down between them, that she was getting close to being ready for going all the way...but carnally, she wanted to *see* him lose control. To please her man in the most basic, base way a woman could please a man. Rolling onto her hip so that she half lay against him, Hermione covered his erection with her hand.

He hissed and clutched at her wrist, clearly torn between pushing her touch away and pulling it closer. "Her...Hermione..."

"Shh, shh," she soothed, choosing bravery over discretion. "I put you in this pain, now let me ease it."

Her words made him blink in shock at her boldness, then relax a little as her fingers hunted for his trouser placket buttons. One of his hands came around her shoulders, cupping her close in the curve of his arm. The other clutched at the far armrest. The clutching became a clawing, accompanied by an indrawn hiss the moment she made her way through the flaps of his undershorts, grasping his warm, hard, satin-soft flesh.

Working him into the open, Hermione admired the reddened head, the pallid yet straining shaft, and the way he clutched her shoulder a little more whenever her fingers shifted in a way that he liked. With the hissing of his breath and the flexing of his fingers, and soon enough his hips, as her guide, Hermione stroked, rubbed, kneaded and teased the dark wizard at her side. The dark, powerful, helpless wizard.

At the end, the only thing he seemed capable of saying--or panting rather--was, "Her...Her...Her...Herrrrrrr!"

Body bowing, hips snapping, fingers clawing, he came in startlingly vigorous spurts. Hermione wasn't ignorant; she'd read the same glossy wizarding porn periodicals that all the other girls had passed around the dorm rooms over the years. Having had a taste of ostracism in her first few months, and on other occasions throughout the years, she had learned the value of fitting in with her fellow females. Even if to begin with she had felt rather prudish about such things, she had still studied them, self-acknowledge swot that she was. But this was real. This was *Severus* coming undone literally by her hand.

This was so much more exciting than anything she'd even merely thought of doing with the boys in her past. Gentling her touch--which the magazines suggested was a very good idea--she crossed her legs, pressing her thighs together in the attempt to handlessly alleviate some of her own need. Severus roused at her restlessness, blinking open his eyes and glancing at her movements. One brow quirked up, and though his face flushed, the corner of his mouth quirked up once again in that rare, lopsided smile of his.

Twisting onto his side to face her, Severus shifted his free hand to her knee. Pushing up the hem of her pleated skirt, he explored for the waistband of her knickers. When she started to remove her hand he shook his head quickly, lifting his hips enough to press himself back into her fingers. So she continued to hold him, though she squirmed a bit in assistance, helping him to lower her winter-thick tights. A sigh escaped her when he rubbed his palm over her knicker-covered mound, and a gasp when he hooked the fabric aside, allowing his fingertips their own opportunity to explore.

It didn't take him long to have her sprawled in a slouch, her hand grasping the edge of the divan instead of his half-revived flesh, her thighs splayed as wantonly as the tights tangled around her ankles would allow. Nor did it take much longer than that, what with him murmuring lascivious, base encouragements in her ear, his breath hot against her flesh, before she shuddered and keened, falling deliciously apart.

Holding her close, pressing soft kisses to the side of her face, he gentled his own touch, eventually withdrawing his hand from her clothes. A hesitant, inquisitive sniff was followed by a tentative lick of his fingers, then a sigh and a thorough tonguing suckle reminiscent of someone cleaning a tasty sauce from their fingers. At her inquisitive noise, he removed the last digit from his mouth.

"Another time, perhaps...but the hour unfortunately grows late. Besides, I find I am like a starving man presented with a feast. I know that if I try to...eat...too much of it at once," he murmured, glancing down at the curved of her breasts, visible through her partially undone blouse, "I will likely choke and feel sick. And we do have the rest of the year."

"With discretion as our topmost agenda," Hermione sighed, agreeing. "I haven't the slightest clue how I'll refrain from drooling at you during class on Monday. Particularly now that I've come to associate that low, murmuring voice of yours with all this pleasure. But you're right. I think I'd like to have a lot more to look forward to...and it's clear you have a lot more to show me, don't you?"

He smirked, then kissed her. It was a short kiss, the kind meant to express fondness, she thought, and the fact that he continued his lopsided smile afterward, urging her to join him in righting their clothes, only made him--Severus Snape, who was still at times a sarcastic, ill-tempered git--all the more endearing to her.

To reward him, once they were fully clothed, upright, and standing by the green-lit fire, Hermione kissed him thoroughly in parting. Not to arouse, though that was something of a side effect. No, she kissed him to show him she most definitely agreed with the Sorting Hat's choice for her mate, as well as for her House.

From the way he kissed back, holding her close like some rare treasure fallen into his lap, Severus Snape agreed.

THE END