

Carpe Diem, Part One

by ConstantComment

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Inconsistencies

Chapter 1 of 27

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Disclaimer: *I would be flattered if you thought I was J.K. Rowling... but that would also be false.*

Chapter One: Inconsistencies

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Severus Snape sat at the professors' table, scanning the Great Hall for the umpteenth year in a row. It was the first banquet of the year, and the first time since he was eighteen that the mark on his left forearm (and what it represented) did not plague his thoughts and force every ounce of him into a tightly knit ball of suppressed emotions.

Well, not entirely.

*But I am a bit more relaxed* he contested to his conscience. He had allowed himself to leave two top buttons of his collar unfastened: a symbol of his tranquility, of course.

He was free from Him...the Dark Lord; You-Know-Who; He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...call it what you will. But he still felt...*empty*. Of course, the brooding Potions

professor did not expect the void he had felt in his heart and being all his life to be suddenly bubbling and full to the brim when Voldemort had been vanquished by the Boy Who Lived. He wasn't sure if he wanted it to be, either. After all, Severus Snape had become quite used to the ever-present misery that loomed over him like he did the frightened first-years. It was normal, and predictable, and constant. And there was no one else in the world that enjoyed the comforts of normality, consistency, and predictability more than he did.

*Potter.* Snape's lip curled as he saw a certain notorious eighteen-year-old stand up and clap Neville Longbottom on the back. The boy then enclosed his new found love in a tight squeeze and looked up at the long table at the end of the hall. Severus and Harry made eye contact quite briefly as the fiery-haired girl tried smoothing his tangles back, but gave up and hugged him again.

It was an interesting combination...red and black.

For the first time (save the incident during one disastrous Occlumency lesson involving a Pensieve and greying underpants), Severus felt intimidated by the boy who was a good fraction of his age and broke the gaze first. Even his goddamn eyes held Severus in an uncomfortable reminiscence. If he were not so aware of time and place, he would have thought he was seventeen again, glowering from afar at James and Lily as they clasped hands and shared intimate embraces. It was something he had never had. Ginevra Weasley looked happier than ever.

Stabbing at a bit of Shepherds' Pie in disgust, Severus thought of Mr. Potter and the previous summer when the boy had successfully wiped out the last of the Horcruxes, not without the help of his doltish Weasley companion and the legendary Miss Granger... Where was the insufferable know-it-all, anyway?

*How very strange.*

He perused the Gryffindor table slightly to his right and did not see her. His eyes returned to his plate and he ate in silence.

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Hermione Granger was late. She could not give a proper reason why. She was never late. After all, she was a creature of habit...one who loved logic and order and consistency and predictability. There was no one in the universe that enjoyed those comforts more than she. In the past month, however, she had become much less predictable: fleeing to Portugal for the summer, perfecting some of her more desired subjects and their required skills down on the coast of the Atlantic with the Peniche University of Witchcraft and Wizardry, not to mention completely neglecting to buy new robes and supplies in Diagon Alley this past month.

*Why not?* She had said this to herself not long after the war that rocked the wizarding and Muggle community came to a close. It may have been dumping the doltish Ronald Weasley in which an extensive and heated argument had ensued that did the trick and set her on a long winding trail of spontaneity, though. And she muttered the same question to herself again that evening when she got off the Hogwarts Express.

She was going to do something even more unpredictable than her holiday to the beach...she was not going back to him.

As she rushed down the hallway and down yet another flight of stairs, she donned her robes, much to the shock and exclamations of the portraits on the walls.

"Good gods, girl, you are late!" declared one warlock who was attempting to charm a monkey.

"Well aware, thank you!" The girl rolled her eyes as she sprinted to the entrance of the Great Hall. The first years were already seated at their respective tables and Professor McGonagall had already commenced the feast. She paused at the door, perusing the front table for new teachers that she might have missed.

Vector, Binns, Sprout, Trelawney...sherry-loving quack...Hagrid, Flitwick, Sinistra, Snape... Why was he looking at her?

*Maybe because you're inexplicably late, you twit.*

She observed: he looked almost... relaxed, like a tremendous weight had been lifted off of him... but there was still something...something that made him scowl the way he always did. It seemed there was an ever-present shadow over the Potions master, one that could not be taken away with just the coming of light to the world again. He deserved something more.

She smiled at him.

He frowned confusedly at her and looked away.

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There she was. Just as the main course vanished and a pile of profiteroles materialized to his left, she had appeared at the entrance to the hall. She looked... different... quite. As his infrequent observations did allow, he had come to a conclusion about one Hermione Granger. There had always seemed to be a shadow hovering over the bushy-haired girl, as if she was trying her best at everything (which was true) but never succeeding (which was simply not true, although he'd never admit it aloud). He could not help but feel a slight twinge of guilt when he knew that he had fed this lie to her many a time. Perhaps what she needed was more important than success...whatever that was.

However, she did not look at all like that at the moment: quite flushed and out of breath, her eyes bright, wisps of honey-colored hair floating away from her curls and her chest heaving... And she looked much older too...womanly. Let it be said that much had changed since the last battle, Severus decided.

*What are you thinking, you fool?* He slapped himself mentally as the girl stayed in her place, gazing at the professors' table, probably hoping she had not been caught by anyone. Her eyes neared his as they swept down the table toward the other end. As her eyes rested on his, she started, but only slightly...and then she continued to look at him. In a normal situation, he could make her skin crawl with a single look, but she seemed quite unaffected and locked her gaze on his, observing him, it appeared. After what seemed like an eternity, she grinned.

*How bizarre.*

It was an absolutely open, welcoming and uninhibited smile that simply lit up his very bones. She looked... Well, she looked positively radiant. He felt immediately mended of all his woes and wretchedness, but was painfully aware that it would be very inconsistent were he to welcome it.

Instead, he frowned. Besides, he should not be thinking such things about a student, let alone the intolerable Granger poised at the end of the hall. Someone *surely* had spiked his pumpkin juice.

She ceased smiling and put her head down, bee lining it to the Gryffindor table to join her friends. Again the familiar hollowness and dejection returned and settled in the pit of his stomach, along with the admittedly tasty shepherds' pie and cheesecake he had digested merely minutes ago...

The Potions professor glanced her way again when Minerva was making the usual speech about new teachers and whatnot. He thought perhaps, to observe her with her boyfriend, but was surprised to see that she was not in any way involving herself with the dunderhead. In fact, she was ignoring the boy completely as he gazed pleadingly in her direction. She chatted animatedly in low whispers with Ginny and Neville about something apparently interesting, and Snape nearly wanted to hear what she had to say. She looked full of life when she talked about academics. Judging by Neville's focus on not her face but her breasts, Severus guessed that she was.

*Oh, to be a teenager, again.* And then he took it back. He wished never, ever, to be an inexperienced, unaccustomed, inattentive eighteen-year-old again. It was entirely too painful an episode. He much preferred his 38-year-old self.

Was he really that young? He felt as old as Albus. And that spoke volumes.

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The desserts cleared, and everyone began to scabble for a few extra sips of pumpkin juice or a nibble at a biscuit.

Hermione stood and smirked as Seamus nearly fell on his arse when the benches pulled away from the tables, and then stepped over them to hug Harry and then Luna who had floated over out of the abyss of students merely seconds ago.

She remained in indecision whether or not to tell Snape of her Potions experience over the summer; maybe it would get her an apprenticeship after term when he was working for the Ministry (probation work...no, he was not off the hook, despite repeated and desperate attempts by the Order, and even Harry) and doing individual research. However, this idea quickly diminished when said Potions master glided over to their huddled lot...a frightening image, indeed. Billowing robes, and all that; no wonder they called him 'bat of the dungeons.'

"Miss Granger, it appears that you have succeeded at a most unusual endeavor," he drawled with his usual bit of Slytherin pride.

"And what is that, Professor?"

"It may seem that you have beat out Mr. Potter's record for the earliest detention in the history of your existence at Hogwarts. How extraordinary that our star pupil would stoop to that level."

Her mouth opened then clicked shut in her astonishment. After all, she had smiled at him.*Smiled* at him! The nerve!

*What is even more peculiar, Severus, you seem to be... unhinged.*She retorted in her thoughts, referring to his unbuttoned vest and button-down, as his lips curled into a leer.

That crooked grin vanished, rapidly returning to its normal, stoic state when he registered what she thought had not escaped her lips.

"Although recent events have sent the lot of you into a perpetual state of heroic invincibility," he began, turning away from Hermione in a huff, "you may rest assured that your actions will receive reactions, no matter how much you feel you can bend the rules to your will."

"But..."

"Detention, Miss Granger. Tuesday. Eight o'clock."

Hermione could only stand and scowl at the man receding into the darkness of the passageway in a flutter of excess fabric.

"Surprised he didn't take house points." Dean Thomas shrugged and took Luna's hand, attempting to bring her out of her apparent distraction with the floating candles above.

"Heroic invincibility, my arse!" Hermione stamped her foot on the floor and pouted.

"Well, you *were* late, 'Mione." Harry said, taking a last chocolate frog and popping it into his mouth before it could jump away.

*You're one to talk.*

"What were you doing, anyway... to get yourself in this rut?*Reading?*" Ron couldn't help himself.

"No, *Ronald*. I was... theorizing a potion."

"You can't be serious," Seamus stated flatly. There was an uncomfortable silence as many in the group considered Hermione's sanity.

*Gods, they all think I've gone off the deep end.*

"Well, it's a lovely night. Anyone wanna go visit the thestrals?" Neville broke the silence.

"Yes! Maybe we'll run into some wingy-tailed prunils; dad says they're quite common this time of year." Of course the voice could be mistaken for none other than Looney Lovegood, as she fiddled mindlessly with her cork-necklace.

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**A/N:** *To be continued! It gets more interesting, I promise. R&R, please! And if anyone would like to beta, I would not be opposed to some help!*

WARNING: *This is not a conventional student-teacher romance, because they never (well, not in the near future) act upon the feelings that form. There is a second part to this story, which will be slightly shorter than what I have planned for this one, in which significantly more lemons and goodies will occur. Part One is currently 26 chapters.*

## Antes Da Detenção

*Chapter 2 of 27*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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**Disclaimer:** *Happy Holidays, and you know the deal about ownership... It doesn't belong to me.*

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## Chapter Two: Antes Da Detenção

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"Oh, bugger!" Hermione exclaimed as she sat against the couch in the Common Room, drawing out her schedule for the eighth time that day.

"*Again*, Hermione?" Harry whined from above her, sprawled out on the couch, as she insisted that she mumble aloud her timetable.

She rolled her eyes and continued on as if she'd not heard a thing, "Of course, I get a detention the night before all my difficult class..."

"You *wanted* to take them," Ron butted in from across the coffee table, lounging in an overstuffed chintz, chewing on a liquorice wand as he flipped lazily through Hermione's already extensive Charms notes. She had written brief summaries and important facts of every chapter in Miranda Goshawk's *Standard Book of Spells, Grade Seven*, and seeing as they had six inches of parchment due on Thursday, Hermione had shoved the folder into Ron's lap earlier that evening.

"I know, I know," she sighed. It was times like these that she truly regretted taking that time-turner contract her third year.

"And you were late," Ron continued. "Brewing a bloody experimental potion," he grumbled, thwacking the side of the chair with his candy. She ignored him.

"Gods, double Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Defence Against the Dark Arts...and I have to deal with *you* two..."

"You know you love us, 'Mione!" Harry smiled and patted her playfully on the head. She shook his hand out of her hair, but smiled in silence... only to growl emphatically with the final class of her day:

"Double Potions... Damn me if Snape doesn't give me detention, again. Well, at least *I* enjoy that class." There was a slight pause in the conversation as Ron and Harry eyed one another. Her sudden 'change of character' had not gone unnoticed since their previous year. Honestly, they couldn't understand it...she had never taken great interest in potions before, at least to their knowledge.

"Hey, no Professor Binns though, eh?" Neville slumped into the armchair nearest the fire, Barbara Bai's *Herbs of the Orient: Afghani Arugula to Yerba of Yemen* in hand.

"That was today, though... along with Charms and Transfiguration. All with you lot. And then I had Muggle Studies and Astronomy and..."

"Such a terrible thing, we know." Ron rolled his eyes and flipped through the notebook to Hermione's history annotations, his eyes, which had been unfocused, snapping wider on something she had scribbled in the margins. "Are these...? Oh, *naturally*!"

Knowing immediately what Ron had spotted, Hermione snatched the parchment out of his hands and stuffed it into her pocket.

"Wha...?" Harry frowned.

"How do you do it?" Ron asked, turning his head toward Harry to explain. "She's listenin' to Binns drawl on and on about the Elvin Wars while writing out instructions to a potion! Bloody hell, where do you get all that brainpower?" Ron seemed a little angry, but pulled it off as an exasperated joke.

*Just because I don't pay that much attention to you* Hermione thought, looking thoroughly embarrassed.

"Hermione, are you obsessed, or what?" Harry smiled softly.

"It just so happens that I am! Well, *obsessed* may be pushing the envelope a bit." She paused for a breath. "You both know that I went to Portugal after the war ended."

All three boys nodded.

"I attended a summer program at the wizarding school, Peniche. I... I don't think I want to be an Auror anymore."

Neville looked up from his reading in apparent shock.

Ron chewed his inner cheek.

Harry fumbled with the cuff of his sleeve, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Honestly, we can't spend every waking moment for the rest of our lives together, can we? Harry," she turned and looked up at him, continuing, "you know I'm meant much more for the book-cleaving, knowledge-seeking, hands-on approach to magic. I've never been amazing at Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"What are you saying, Herm?" Ron prodded. She really did talk entirely too much, didn't she?

Hermione looked at him. *Thought it was rather obvious* she thought, but all the same, she clarified, "I want to be a Potions mistress."

"*That's* what you studied in Portugal?" Neville interrupted, sitting up to hear more.

"Yes. That's what I studied in Portugal," she repeated. "With a couple of people from France, Spain and one from Italy. And then there were our Portuguese hosts..."

"This has nothing to do with Snape turning out to be a good guy and all, does it?" Ron butted in with a hint of jealousy in his voice.

Hermione pushed that foolish question away with a wave of her hand. "No, no, no. Not that...really, just...*no*." And then she realized his motive. "Why would that even matter, Ronald? Merlin, it's *Severus Snape*! Any man I have an *iota* of respect for must be some romantic love interest!" She pinched the bridge of her nose before she lost her temper entirely. *No wonder I broke up with you, Ronald.*

"Whatever you want to do is perfectly fine with me, Hermione," Harry broke the silence and leaned over to look her in the eye over his silly round glasses. Hermione marvelled at the vast difference in emotional capacity of her two best friends.

"Thanks, Harry."

"I heard they teach Herbology down there, too..." Neville began, grasping at a new topic of discussion so Ron would stop moping and Hermione wouldn't have to broach the subject for a little while.

"Yeah, and a variety of Magical Creature research classes...mostly marine, along with astronomy and Portuguese Runes. I really wanted to take that class, but Diniz, my host, didn't take it, and the Headmaster wouldn't allow me to use my Time-Turner," she said wistfully. "Something about 'muitos... formulários'..."

"Wait...*Diniz*?" Ron interrupted again. "That's a boy, right?" Harry...although he probably was thinking the same thing...threw a pillow at the redhead.

Hermione just chuckled. "Yes, Ron." She took out a fresh parchment and her best quill. "And that reminds me, I need to write him."

"If he was your host, then..." Harry's curiosity finally got the better of him.

"You shared *rooms*?" Neville giggled, *Herbs of the Orient* bouncing up and down on his stomach as he did so. "Wicked!"

Three of the four laughed at Neville's word-usage, but Ron was not so quick to laughter. "I suppose you got along quite well, then," he said above the ruckus. Harry couldn't hold back a snort, but Neville shut up quickly.

"Oh, yes!" Hermione's voice became saccharine and animated as she sat up, clasping her hands together. "We spent *ev'ry waking* moment in each other's company!"

"Did you, now?" Ron sat up in his chair, tossing her notes to the floor and leaning forward.

"Yes, we did. He's quite the intellectual, you know," Hermione said. Harry gave her a look as if to say, 'low blow', but Hermione kept at it in her sugary voice. "And when we *weren't* with the group, Diniz would take me to the beach and we'd sunbathe while comparing potions notes, and then he'd read me dirty poetry in Portuguese..."

Neville gasped.

"...and *sometimes*, he'd even pick out my clothing for me!"

Now, this didn't sound right to the boys, but Ron was past logic.

"So, when's the wedding?" Ron said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, don't be silly, Ronald!" Hermione returned to her parchment. "He's gay."

With this Harry and Neville burst into laughter again and did not stop for a good

ten minutes. "Nice one, 'Mione," Harry wheezed after a bit. Neville had put a pillow over his face to stifle his own giggles. Ron was...as was to be expected...sulking.

She smiled. "Now, you lot get back to your studies. I've only a quarter-hour, and I want to get this letter done before I sacrifice myself to he-who-doth-not-laundry-his-locks."

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**A/N:** *My first chapter, the first week it was published, I used a title of song by the Mosquitos (a Portuguese band) for the magic school on the coast of Portugal, and it translates to 'laziness'. A mark of my stupidity...I'm glad it wasn't something like 'slag' or 'pregnant' but it certainly would have been funny, I changed it to a small city on the coast: Peniche. It sounds like it is spelt.*

*Diniz, Hermione's Portuguese friend/host, is the Portuguese form of Dennis...and no, I didn't pick that name for any particular reason. It looked cool.*

*The title for this chapter is "before detention" in Portuguese, and "muitos formularios" is Hermione's (my) fragmented Portuguese for "too much paperwork".*

*Also, I'm aware that in canon Neville and Ron and Harry do not take all those classes, but I decided that they do... so there.*

*ALSO, for those who can't get enough of our snarky Potions master, he'll be here in the next few chapters, I promise.*

## Dreaming in Metaphors

*Chapter 3 of 27*

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### Chapter Three: Dreaming in Metaphors

~\*~

*A shot of firewhiskey and a nice, long nap sounds good at the moment* Severus Snape thought to himself as his first-year class (and last of the day) filed out of the musty classroom. Although, he showed no sign of his contentment as some brave Ravenclaws risked a glance up at him. He flicked his wand and the last lagging Hufflepuff was shoved out the exit by an invisible force, the heavy cherry door slamming after her.

He retreated into his private office, disposing of his robes and vest as he sunk into his armchair.

"*Accio* firewhiskey." There was a distinct sound of glass clinking and then a whoosh announcing the arrival of his much needed distraction. Although he no longer needed to deal with Voldemort... and even Albus, his life was still a never-ending stress manufacturer.

The cool liquid burned his throat as it slid down with each swig, followed by an irresistible numbing sensation that he greatly appreciated.

"Cheers," he said to the only picture in the room, one of him and Dumbledore; it was a clipping from the Daily Prophet not long after his first trial as a Death Eater. *Funny how that all turned out, in the end.*

He finally let up, setting down both his glass and his ebony wand, for he had to be careful not to consume too much of his stores (after all, school was still in session), but had enough to propel him into sleep...

*He was standing in the middle of a small expanse of limestone rock; it panned out all around him in a circle. It was devoid of any furniture, windows, or even walls. He looked around him and found that the sky shone with a similar greyish-beige tint to it, which he found rather strange because the skies in Scotland were usually a dull blue when it was not raining. There was a light breeze that brushed his hair about his face and soughed sadly as he walked to the edge of the rocks.*

*It appeared that he was at the top of a tower. It was miles to the ground, however, and he could not just jump. No, that would be rather stupid and, frankly, suicidal. He walked around the circle once to see if there were stairs or any magical escape of the accessible type, then he knelt down and repeated his walk at a crawl to feel for any trap doors. If he'd not left his wand on the side table next to his glass, maybe he wouldn't be in such a predicament!*

*Exasperated and feeling a bit ridiculous, he threw his hands up as he stood again and rounded the same rock for the third time. They say it's a charm, anyway. And there, where he had passed time and time again, was a metal ladder. It looked to be in disrepair, but well enough to brave a climb. He thought he'd go utterly insane if he continued to waltz around in circles for days. Apparently lacking any related phobias to the task at hand, he stepped over and began his perilous descent.*

*As he climbed, the wind began to pick up as a riotous storm of oranges and blues rumbled in the distance.*

*And then it was raining.*

*He looked up into the sudden torrential downpour and saw that the ladder was rusting, and quickly. With each tentative step he took, the one above his head crumbled and fell away. His eyes followed a particular bit of decomposed iron to a sudden and rising ocean below. The waters reflected murky hues of green and black but also the vivid colours of the angry sky. In the swell of a wave, he saw a man and realized it was his own reflection. He was clad in all white. The brooding Potions master would have chuckled at the thought, but instead, he returned to his descent.*

*After a long while of the biting cold rain and angry cumulonimbi mirrored in the surface of the water, a tremendous wave engulfed him and the ladder disintegrated entirely. He did not fall for long until he met the churning surface of the water and was plunged into the depths of the ominous sea. Down, down, down the currents pulled him and soon he could no longer resurface. He clawed and tore at the water and gulped for some air, some relief, but it consumed him, just like his misery and doubts had consumed him for thirty-some years.*

*Suddenly a hand propelled out of the abyss and grasped his.*

*Home, he thought briefly between thoughts of panic and despair. Feelings of warmth and comfort suddenly flooded his being, contrasting greatly with the saltwater filling his lungs and he was pulled up into...*

"Professor?"

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The poor man jumped nearly five feet when she spoke.

"What do you want, Miss Granger?" His voice was dark and daunting, obviously caught off guard, and he was not one who took kindly to surprises. She took back the whole 'poor man' bit after that.

Hermione was a little frightened to speak; seeing him in this way since the battle had startled her. She knew that he was capable of more compassion than he ever let on, but it didn't make the man now standing over her like a cloud of black foreboding any less... foreboding. He smelled as if he had been drinking. A sting of sympathy shot through her heart, but that quickly dissipated.

*Well, it's not my fault that he completely forgot I was supposed to be here. The greasy git issues out so many detentions, no wonder he loses track.*

"Well?" He sneered at her.

She looked up defiantly after a pause to gather her composure. "I'm here for my detention, sir."

"Oh."

She brushed past him and back into his classroom, looking around as if there was something incredibly interesting about the mould on the dungeon walls.

"What time did I say?" She could hear that he felt uncomfortable; she had knocked him off the pedestal, and it was evident he was trying to scramble back on.

"Eight o'clock, professor." She gazed into his stony visage with another 'I dare you to challenge me again' look on her face.

"Of course, and it is..."

"Eight o'clock... sir."

"Yes. Well, as usual, our resident know-it-all is completely... correct." Hermione could detect a hint of his urge to smack himself in the head.

*Nice, Snape. Maybe it's the crude amount of firewhiskey that you inhaled that has made you utterly incapable of your usual scathing demeanour.* He looked at her and smirked, but returned to 'the brooding Potions master' quickly enough for Hermione not to notice. He stepped over to the door on the right, which held every ingredient she had ever used in her history at Hogwarts... including those she had stolen.

"I remember that you called me 'Severus' the last time you mocked me," he said with a slight chuckle as he stepped out of her way to allow her entry to the dusty room.

She stopped in her tracks and turned to him with a fiery stare. *What!?*

"You will be rearranging and reorganizing the stock closet this evening."

*Damn, he recovers quickly.*

"By proper category," he added, "and in alphabetical order. I'm sure I am not wrong in assuming that you know the alphabet, Miss Granger." She took her wand from the folds of her sleeve to begin. "No magic."

"Of course," she bit out, shoving the coveted ivy vine wand back into the sheath around her wrist. "Would you like the categories to be in alphabetical order as well?"

"Just *do it*, Granger." He rolled his eyes and turned around to sit at his desk.

She began, starting by tying back her curls and rolling up her sleeves. The hair band wasn't necessary, but she found that she needn't have distracting curls swishing around while she could potentially lose her concentration and spill Doxy bile all over herself. She took the dusty, moulding phials and jars of ominous substances off the shelves by twos, marching out into the classroom each time to slam them down on the nearest desk (in categories), each time giving the professor a look that could've frightened a Hippogriff. However, he seemed entirely too occupied with grading essays to care.

*He doesn't even move, save his frantically swivelling wrist, she thought, smirking. Never would want to appear as startled as he did ten minutes ago.*

"Please refrain from gaping at me, Miss Granger. I would much prefer retiring to my quarters before twelve." She was surprised at first, but no one can keep Hermione down for long.

*Oh, sod off*, she thought as she turned to venture into the closet for what felt like the hundredth time...

What was originally tedious and borderline irritating became a bearable process, a time to sooth her mind and theorize all the potential potions she would love to make in her spare time. Although the absence of chatter was nearly excruciating, her professor's continual scratching of his quill and she soon forgot that she was angry, the act of restoring order to something that she could control allowed her thoughts to wander. After a while it became a rhythm, and she soon grew pensive and resolved to ponder why the bloody fool bent over the desk in such a manner. He looked like he was attacking the parchment. She may have been forcing her eyes away from his form whilst organizing, but it couldn't hurt to make a quick glance... every now and then.

*It's all a defence mechanism, really. I wish I didn't react so violently to his cheeky remarks... although, he'd think it strange, and very un-Hermione-like, to just take it instead of fighting back. Merlin, I wish he didn't enjoy cutting me down. It would've made for a better overall experience in the damned subject. In Portugal I found I hardly knew nearly as much as I should've...probably because I never really wanted to learn the art, just wanted the grades...*

She paused in organizing to tuck a stray curl behind her ear.

*Well, that changed. After a year or two of his cruelty I stopped trying, I suppose... to live up to his standards, to succeed, to get recognition, to impress him...*

She moved on to the next category, beginning with 'powdered root of Asphodel' then 'raw Asphodel'.

*It would stun him senseless if he found out I want to pursue the subject as a career. Hell, he'd probably have a seizure*She chuckled to herself and continued on as 'eyes of Streeler' and 'Tebo hairs' concluded her fourth out of ten categories.

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It had been one hour, and the girl had finally cooled. There was no longer a persistent (and most likely purposeful) clinking of glass against hard material as there had been after his last jab. It had been rather uncomfortable, to concentrate under her intense gaze. But, after a while, he found that the observing might possibly be reciprocated.

It was almost comical the way she furrowed her brow in concentration and worried her bottom lip. She would often blow a puff of air into the brown wisps that came undone from her tie, but to no avail; the curls always fell back into her face. She seemed in her element, relaxed and comfortable, and Severus realized that her calm was rubbing off on him. He was entranced as she flitted her delicate hands over the jars as if each was a most prized possession, occasionally cooing over a particularly rare ingredient, as if she herself put all her life energy into the assignment. How could he have assumed otherwise? That she would not put every inch of effort into the task, to prove herself? She wanted... needed recognition, though...encouragement, validation...and Snape wasn't sure how to give it to her.

He quickly reverted to the abysmal third-year essays that he was supposed to be grading as Hermione gave a satisfied sigh and turned with two jars in her hands to restore them in the closet. She continued shuffling back and forth in front of him, a faint yet intriguing scent reaching his exaggerated nostrils each time and hitting him like a bludger to the stomach. He was having so much trouble concentrating that he let out a glad breath when she stepped out to dust off her robes. She waited patiently for his permission to leave while he finished his thorough thrashing of a Ravenclaw essay. She soon became irritated, but did not confront him, which was surprising indeed.

"Miss Granger..." he began as he wrote his last sentence.

"Yes?" she asked, testily.

"What, may I ask, were you doing that kept you from enjoying your last, first meal at Hogwarts?" He put down his quill and rested his fingertips against their mirror, forcing himself to look at her. What he saw was a bit of discomfort, a very strange thing in someone so usually confident. He held back a smile, making students squirm always gave him a satisfying feeling.

"Honestly?"

He shrugged. "I would know if you were lying."

"I was... theorizing a potion, sir." She had been looking down at her feet previous to this declaration, but she lifted her head, and Severus saw a fiery glow in those amber eyes of hers.

"You jest." He had thought something much more suitable to the Golden Trio, like library hunting for some new prank, or more adventures to get themselves killed. The lot of them were adrenaline junkies, more worried about bravery and honour than their own skins... *Bloody Gryffindors*.

"I assure you, I do not *jest* about such things." She threw the word back in his face.

"...Why?"

"I enjoy it."

He egged her on then, hoping for more of an explanation. She had never expressed interest in the subject before.

"Er, well... After the last battle, I decided to escape for a while... to Portugal, to be exact."

"You studied at Peniche." He could not believe what he was hearing.

"Yes, sir. I... I want to be a Potions mistress."

"I see." He frowned. Actually, he really did not see. *Why in the name of Merlin's...*"May I ask again, *why*? Many believe that you and your inseparable counterparts were to be Aurors come next September. Why such a sudden change of heart?"

"I think I've had enough of hunting evil to fill a lifetime, wouldn't you agree?" she stated solemnly *More like three lifetimes*. "Besides, Defence Against the Dark Arts was never my forte. And I always loved Potions. It was just..."

"I made it seem less appealing."

"Well, er, yes..."

"I tend to have that effect on people, at times."

"Yes, but... But I think it was also you who made me want to learn more about it." She smirked at the surprise for once plainly written across his face. "All the other teachers always praised me for my 'innate talent', whereas you... you made me prove it. You showed me that I couldn't just learn something from the text and do it, flawlessly. Or be praised for having a photographic memory." He now looked away, guilt filling his insides like a caustic substance. But she continued, "Potions is an art form. And I want to be an artist."

He was at a loss for words. "As always, well said, Miss Granger. Although... you may have been mistaken... about my reasons for ignoring you. I'm afraid it was just a complete lack of acknowledgment."

"And I forgive you, Professor." She smiled again, a wide, laughing smile that showed off her perfect teeth. For a moment he felt very self-conscious about his own dental hygiene, running his tongue over his incisors, briefly. But it was overpowered by that same feeling he had felt just days ago in her presence...doubled by the ambiguity of her words. He figured she had meant it to be so. It was an unfamiliar feeling that he felt when she smiled at him... what was it? Fulfilment? No, it could not be. The Potions master never felt these things. In fact, it was widely known among his students and colleagues that he felt nothing at all...that he was just about as sensitive as a pile of rock.

The only one in existence that knew of his trials and tribulations was none other than Potter, who had surprisingly kept those memories from Voldemort's last night to himself. If Miss Granger knew, no doubt she would try and heal him, typical Gryffindor...try and save the day... But he needed to be healed, didn't he? It was made very clear from the dream he had just hours ago. He was drowning in his past, and he needed to be saved.

*What's all this Divination rubbish?!*

He shook his head of the thoughts when she turned on her heel, obviously satisfied with having left him completely speechless, and walked to the door. Opening it she said, "Oh, and Professor Snape?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Please stay out of my thoughts the next time we speak. I believe you, above all people, understand the importance of a guarded mind, and I would appreciate it, since I am not permitted access to *your* thoughts, if you could stay out of mine. I would much rather keep them to myself. Thank you."

*Very well*, he thought.

Severus waited for her to leave the room, the smile still burning into his mind's eye. She had left the door ajar, and it drove him mad that he could not simply magic the door closed, for his wand lay in his study where he had fallen asleep. He swiftly made for the door and was about to slam it shut in frustration, but a soft melodic voice stopped him in his tracks. It was a vaguely familiar song that reminded him of happy times...few and far between...in his childhood. And it was coming from none other than 'Bloody Granger', the words echoing around the halls with a pleasantly eerie result. He crept up to the doorway, leaned on the jamb and watched her tiny figure fade into the darkness.

Turning in to look at the newly organized shelves of the ingredients closet, he noticed something very different about the place. Every jar, every phial, every container...was spotless.

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**MORE A/N:** *If anyone gets their panties in a bunch cos Snape's using Legilimency on Hermione without permission, I will tell you one thing: It's SNAPE. But he's also a man of his word, so, Hermione's innermost thoughts are no longer in danger! Huzzah! Oh yeah, and dreams... they're crap to write about, but these are rather pathetic/prophetic, heh. On another note... pleasant reading? Reviews! I love reviews!*

## Potions and Plans

*Chapter 4 of 27*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

**Disclaimer:** *I've just 'borrowed' Rowling's lovely characters for an extended period of time. They might come back a little tarnished and OOC, but I hope she won't mind!! :)*

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### Chapter Four: Potions and Plans

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She reminded Severus much of himself at such a young age. Too much. It was extremely embarrassing in reminiscence. How terribly eager he had been to be accepted... How deeply it had wounded him to be outcast by both peers and staff members of Hogwarts... If she continued down the road she was headed, one of solitary confinement with her books and self-disappointment, she would eventually end up a hardened individual...numb to pain, and even compassion. She would turn out like him.

*Sweet Nimûe, Severus!*

Again, she had entered his thoughts. It was not proper. Nor was it logically explainable. Everything seemed to remind him of the defiant, curly-haired woman with bright brown eyes.



He was sitting at the teachers' table during another monotonous faculty meeting. Minerva was talking about some completely irrelevant school issue or another. He had been staring into his tea for some time, allowing the pleasant orange-spice tickle his over exaggerated nostrils, and had pleasantly drifted into a sort of half-sleep. Not that he was in any way napping, for that would be silly, but one could say that higher brain function was now on holiday.

"...and Argus has prepared us a list of new Weasley products that should be confiscated if any student is in possession of this preposterous prank-inducing paraphernalia."

Say that *three times fast*, Severus thought to himself when he rose out of his daze.

"Will the Heads of House pass these on to their Prefects?" McGonagall continued.

"Still say hang 'em by their thumbs in the dungeons... Eye for an eye, I always said," Filch called out from the doorway, Mrs. Norris making figure eights around his knobby legs. Minerva's eyebrows nearly met her hairline at the thought of cruel and unusual punishment. 'Eye for an eye?'

Snape snorted. "Unfortunately, Argus, the dungeons are made for the use of teaching, not torturing students, now."

"Well said, Severus," Filius muttered under his breath, nudging him in the ribs.

"Although your methods might challenge that fact." Professor Sinistra cocked an eyebrow at him.

He chuckled.

"Yes, well, on to the next topic... Halloween is coming up, as we are all aware, and I have decided that there will be a ball." McGonagall flattened some non-existent wrinkles in her robes and cleared her throat. Severus rolled his eyes. No doubt he would have to attend. "Volunteers for chaperones?"

*Severus, do not.*

"Oh, come now." The headmistress looked around pleadingly.

*Do not raise your hand. You don't want to deal with a bunch of hormonal...*

"There needs to be a bit of festivity in our lives...and you shall all be a part of it anyway."

*No, no, no. This is ludicrous. You hate festivity.*

"You-Know-Who is dead and gone," the older witch said. "The war has passed..."

*Do NOT raise your bloody hand even a centimetre!*

"A celebration is in order!" McGonagall almost stamped her foot as her colleagues pretended to be preoccupied with their fingernails. Or the ceiling. Or the invisible lint on their knees.

"I will chaperone, Minerva." Severus mentally kicked himself. *Fool, Severus.*

Minerva exhaled with a thankful glance in his direction.

"As will I," Professor Vector mumbled, arms folded.

"Thank you, the both of you... Two more?"

"Fine." Professor Flitwick raised his hand, the tips of his fingers barely reaching the surface of the table.

"I'll go for yeh, Professor," Hagrid croaked beneath his beard. Wherever there was punch and a bit of treacle-tart, he would be there.

"You owe us all a bit of Ogden's finest after we have succeeded in pulling out all of our hair, Minerva."

"That can be arranged, Severus. Meeting adjourned. Details on the event will be made clear within a week. After all, preparations must be made!" The headmistress smiled with glee and bid all still seated adieu.

"Well..." Ellsworth Yardley, the newest addition to the staff and Defence teacher, stood and waved a gnarled hand (from years of Auror experience) to the four unfortunates. "Bon chance."

*Yet another year of volunteer-work for my guilt and repayment to the school. What have I gotten myself into?*

--

It had been around three weeks since Hermione's detention, but whenever she approached her pewter cauldron on dorm, the meagre collection of ingredients surrounding her in the confines of the linen closet, she found her mind wandered to him. She knew he had been watching her while she organized, and it had unnerved her so. He never paid notice to her when she had asked for it in previous years. Perhaps the war had changed him... Maybe he had suddenly made a vow to emanate a cheerier disposition.

"Ridiculous," she said to herself as the thought passed through her mind. She shook her head and sprinkled a measure of powdered cacao into her gurgling experiment. Riffling through a library-borrowed alchemical text, she looked for another ingredient that would make the concoction clear without setting off the more volatile components. Of course it would be now that work couldn't take her mind off things.

"Still doesn't make up for the fact that he is always staring at me." A chill ran up her spine involuntarily and soon became a shiver of disgust for herself, and Hermione slammed the tome shut. A dust cloud formed from the action, and she quickly put a Stasis charm upon her concoction so as not to completely ruin a week's worth of labour. She decided that a breather might be a good idea. Hermione stepped out of the closet and dusted off her robes only to find Harry leaning on the back of the couch across from the door.

"Hullo."

"Were you waiting for me?" She cocked her head to the side.

"I was. You wanna go for a walk or something? You look like you need it."

Hermione exhaled slowly with an exhausted nod. "Did you want to talk about something?" she asked as they stepped out of the portrait hole.

"No, 'Mione. I just wanted to spend some time with you." They made their way through the halls, talking about Ginny, changes, Ginny, and classes... He smirked when she brought up potions. He had grown accustomed to her new passion, but found it rather amusing that she held Snape in such reverence now, when she hadn't even witnessed the memories that proved him to be such a saint... "You haven't left that closet since you got the idea to make that new love potion."

"It is not a *love* potion, Harry."

"Whatever you say." He shoved his hands in his pockets, and they continued in silence until they reached the front hall.

"Apparently, you know something that I do not." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Oh, no. You're Hermione Granger."

"Yes, I am..."

"How is there a possibility that I would know something you don't?"

She rolled her eyes and punched him on the arm, and they walked out onto the impeccably green lawn, laughing. As they neared the lake, they chatted spiritedly about Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, along with Harry's Auror training next summer, and then her past birthday. "How does it feel to be nineteen? Merlin, I feel so young!" He didn't mean it, though, despite Hermione's obvious maturity. They all had aged well beyond their years due to obvious recent events. "How did you like your presents? ...I've a feeling you didn't want books." He joked when she sighed about the disastrous attempt of Ron's to recover their relationship.

"Honestly..." she stopped and folded her arms, gazing out over the calm waters. "Whoever would want to be with someone who buys a load of tosh recommended to them by *Molly Weasley*," she spat out the matron's name as an insult, "is clinically insane. Of course I don't always want books. I'm not just an academic encyclopaedia! Besides, Ron and I aren't 'together' anymore. I appreciate gifts, but not ones to persuade me to come crawling back to his moping self." She paused, deciding that her soul was not something she wanted to bare at the moment... although Harry would have listened willingly. "*Making it Work with Wands* was among the more detested of the few... I did appreciate the ingredients you gave me, though. They were quite useful. I was able to add the Essence of Carrowack to my potion, after I looked up its properties."

"You're welcome, 'Mione," he chortled as their conversation broached on the subject of potions yet again. Hermione observed that he was much more laid back than in previous years, a lot more willing to listen, to relax, to allow for others to take the wheel. She had even seen his grades improve, and he was now flawless at Charms and Defence (naturally). "You really are obsessed. You know that, right?"

"Oh, yes," she agreed.

"It's not a bad thing, I suppose."

"No, I've yet to be possessed by my cauldron," she giggled. Just then a large tawny owl swooped down toward the unsuspecting friends, carrying an envelope with the Hogwarts seal on the front. Hermione opened it, knowing full well that it was intended for her. She was the eighth-year Head Girl, after all. "It's from McGonagall..." Her face lit up immediately when she sped through the end of the letter. Harry looked questioningly at her, but she would not reveal the contents. "Just a list of items that require confiscation..."

"Well, that's all well and good." Harry leaned in. "Nothing more?"

"Oh, no." She couldn't suppress a smile.

He nodded to her, unbelieving, but wrapping his arm around her shoulder just the same. They sat quietly, looking over the crystalline surface of the lake as a breeze teased their faces.

There was going to be *a ball*. A Halloween Ball. A cause for celebration. This was what the students of Hogwarts needed after long and trying years of darkness. It was time to let loose. She now had something to occupy her time other than potions... Maybe it would even preclude her thoughts of a certain silky-voiced man.

"Indeed," said Harry.

---

**A/N:** *The scene is set; now we must wait and see what happens!*

*Just a warning for those who like instant gratification: I'm more of a lovesick Jane Austen...all repartee, no reward...fan, but that does not include what goes on inside the minds of our hero and heroine. \*wink\**

*R&R, please! I love hearing from you guys.*

## Dungeon Drama

*Chapter 5 of 27*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

**Disclaimer:** *Nope, not richer than the Queen of England. (I wish!)*

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### Chapter Five: Dungeon Drama

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A horde of students queued at a door in the dungeons, awaiting their professor's permission to enter. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood quietly at the caboose, chatting about Transfiguration and McGonagall's temperament. Harry leaned against the stones of the wall and Ron stood not too far from him, his hands shoved in his pockets and his bag of books slung over one shoulder. He had been talking to her less and less as the year wore on, especially after her nineteenth when she threw *Arlene Albers' Guide to Wizarding Relationships* in his face. She tried to be 'normal Hermione' around him, but it became increasingly difficult when he understood her usual kindness and familiarity as "reaching out," and soon it became rather tense and uncomfortable in conversation unless Harry led the way. Previous intimacies also strained their friendship, and it was quite difficult to disregard when he was always around. An image of their clumsy, fumbling first time flashed before her eyes and she almost felt guilty. His eyes had held such reverence, then. She thought it best to forgive and forget, as the old saying went. But Ron felt differently, as he was looking at her with a mixture of distaste and pleading as Harry tried to distract them both with a joke.

To distract herself from Harry's thinly veiled attempt (and Ron's gaze), Hermione noted their distaste for the clean-cut, university-boy look...their ties were undone and hung loosely around their necks like dead snakes nailed to a wall. She smirked suddenly and hugged her Potions book closer to her, taking comfort in "her boys" untidiness. It was normal. Nothing was normal anymore.

"Enter!" A familiar, irritated voice called from the opposite of the door.

The Gryffindors filed in first, followed quickly by the Slytherins...a smaller group now due to certain alliances, although some had managed to avoid sentences in Azkaban. Everyone quietly settled into his or her seats, Ron sitting next to Hermione, much to her chagrin. Harry took his place at the desk across from them, Neville at his side.

The four of them had been allowed into N.E.W.T. Potions because they all had taken the O.W.L course two years ago with Slughorn, although Hermione knew Snape wished dearly that he could kick all of the 'less-than-outstanding' individuals out the door the first day of term.

She knew he wanted never to teach Potions to these imbeciles again. In fact, she was sure he didn't want to teach at all. But with his probation and current status as a 'less-than-noble' war hero (the term utterly contradicting itself), he had no choice but to stay as McGonagall saw fit. Dumbledore's portrait had insisted he return to his post as Potions master, for fear that Voldemort's curse was still active. Hermione thought it silly that a curse by a dead wizard could be effective. Hadn't Dumbledore's binding charm on Harry lifted the moment he died? But she supposed there was some sort of deep magic that could have lived on. Or the 'magic' of the Ministry's disapproval.

Snape looked downright exhausted, and he did not waste time in letting everyone know. "Acrobyl mixture, today." He rubbed his temples. "Ingredients are on the board." Waving his hand in an impressive gesture, spiky, spindly writing appeared on the board in white chalk. Hermione could see Harry shudder for just a moment in remembrance of "the Half Blood Prince".

"Sir, how do we know what to do with the..." a strawberry blonde inquired as she leaned over her desk, her green tie knocking against her cauldron. She did not have time to finish before her Head of House interrupted.

"Miss Pascal, what year are you?" He cocked an eyebrow. He looked almost charming, in a sarcastic, bitter sort of way. Hermione decided that he looked quite picturesque.

Edith Pascal stared at him.

"What year are you?"

"I...I'm a seventh year, sir."

"Must I baby a bunch of seventh years? *And* eighth years! Or are you all just incapable of doing anything moderately intellectual?"

"But..."

"Twenty points from Slytherin, for sheer stupidity. Use your texts if you are not already familiar with the potion!" He got up and flung open the storage. As students prepared themselves for the grubby space that was the storage closet, they were surprised when all contents were easy to find and quite pristine. Hermione smiled softly, knowing that she was the one responsible. She swore she saw the professor glance her way with what could only be assumed as a half-smirk, if she ever did see one.

She hummed her approval as she leaned on the jamb, knowing exactly where to find the ingredients (and what to do with them). Acrobyl was one of many first week concoctions that her Portuguese professors set her to, and she had excelled then. She would excel now.

She saw the determined look on Ron's face the moment she returned to her seat, and she knew she could not escape him at this point, in the middle of a N.E.W.T. Potions course. She began puncturing the Ublingatu pustules in careful pinpoints before squeezing their contents into her water-based potion. Ron cleared his throat.

"Hermione." She looked at him, and then back at her ingredients, taking powdered dragon scales in her measuring spoon and adding them every seventh turn of her wand. She lit the cauldron and let it simmer for five minutes. "Hermione, I don't get you. You wanted us. *You* wanted to be with me."

"We are not talking about this *here*," she hissed murderously.

"You said you wanted to be with me for the rest of your life. You said so the night of the battle."

"That would be the effects of the impending doom talking, Ronald," she said below a whisper, looking up at him so he was sure he was not being ignored.

"Liar." He threw the dragon scales into the potion without moderation, and the mixture turned a sickly yellow. He swore under his breath as she squinted with disapproval.

"Well, after careful consideration, I figured out that you weren't my type." She couldn't help but point her eyes towards his botched potion.

He sneered. "Your type?" He glared at his potion and lit the underbelly of the cauldron, making sure he could at least pass.

"It's not at all about your intelligence," she apologised. "Ron, you want a family, you want to be taken care of, you want lots of things that I'm not willing or able to give to you immediately."

"What? Is that so much to ask? I want a life with no more complications. You could stay home with the children like a norm..."

"You made it very clear that you wouldn't wait for me if I went to do other things." She wiped a stray tear away and cut savagely into a dried root with her silver knife. "Just... stop harassing me!"

"Complete bullocks, Hermione!" he whispered loudly. Some Slytherins turned around on their stools, steam appearing in little droplets around their hairlines. Their concern was not recognised though, for Hermione and Ron were not paying them mind. "You *left* me! You left me to go study how to stir bloody potions properly! You chickened out after we... and then you left because we got into a bleedin' row."

"Ron, leave her alone." Harry said out of the corner of his mouth, looking straight on at Snape while adding wickety bark to his teal liquid.

I left because of what you said to me, Ron! And this isn't making matters any better.

--

In response to the words of the 'Boy Who Breathed', Granger quickly returned to her potion, moving through the steps with deft precision, given the circumstances. "Harry,

it's fine. I think he's finished." Severus had looked up long ago. This was approaching disaster and he did not want it in his classroom. Sheer annoyance quickly fell into a bout of anger as he saw the curly-haired witch wipe at her cheek to remove a salty tear. *What could he possibly be saying to hurt her that badly?*

"I am *not* finished!" Weasley glared at the obviously distressed girl and folded his arms; an arrogant posture that would have beaten out Malfoy now framed his form. Hermione's lip trembled and she turned to him.

"Ron, this is NOT about commitment issues..." Ron laughed out loud cutting off her defence. A frown set across Severus' brow, and he looked about the class to see who was listening. *Everyone.*

"Of course it's not!" The sarcasm was evident, and he continued, "We just had sex and then you screamed at me for wanting you to stay home when we get..."

"MARRIED?" Hermione whispered with a tone that could only mean trouble. Severus looked down at this, shocked and unbearably uncomfortable that this type of discussion was occurring in not only his classroom but in his presence. He really had no bloody idea what to do.

"Yeah, you freaked out. You're supposed to be my girlfriend. You don't want kids; you don't want to get married; OH, but *you* are willing to have a casual fuck every now and then!" The Potions professor tensed, his fists curled into tight knots, and he nearly leapt across the room to hex the boy's balls off.

"Oh, you are *grossly* exaggerating! It was once, Ron! And we are still in school! We were forced into adulthood because of Voldemort, Ronald." Everyone now was tensed because of her word usage, and many even hunched their shoulders at the name. "We don't need to grow up that fast..." She huffed, "Casual", indeed. Ron, you want to know why I left?" Tears were falling regularly now, and she did not bother to hide them. She shook her head and added another ingredient. Ron exhaled in frustration. "You can't just expect me to let everything that I have ever wanted fall behind some warped version of *carpe diem*! And as for kids..."

Severus could almost hear her thoughts scream, 'I am not Molly Weasley, you...'

"Oh, shut it! You probably went down to Portugal to fraternise with foreign wizards, for all I know. I know *nothing* about you anymore, Hermione! And you know what? I've figured it out. You are too preoccupied with stupid books and... and ancient runes and bloody potions..." his voice rose significantly at this. "And you're hiding behind them! You don't want to *EVER* settle down."

"Ron, I..."

"You wanted me, but not all the things it might bring? What a load of..."

"I CAN'T HAVE CHILDREN, RON!" He did not register her words, or maybe he just thought she was making something up to get him off her back. That was neither here nor there, for the next few minutes occupied her for the time being.

Everyone else, however, widened their eyes and looked at one another in shock as if to say, 'Well, that was unexpected.'

The boy rose up to his full height and exclaimed, "I don't believe *one word* of that, you lying little..."

"WEASLEY!" An angered voice rang out and silenced the young man, and it was nearly a second before Severus realised the voice was his own. Severus was surprised by the harshness of his timbre that echoed around the room. He was unaware that he had even stood until Hermione looked into his eyes, her chest heaving with anger and embarrassment. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she gasped uncontrollably for air. Ron glared in the direction of the voice and was surprised that the man standing with fists clenched and very clear emotions writ across his sharp features was the 'bat of the dungeons'. "APOLOGIZE TO MISS GRANGER, THIS INSTANT!"

Ron looked at her, disgust etched in his freckled face as the girl sank into her chair, cupping her face in her hands and finally giving in to the sobs.

"*Apologise.*" Severus clenched his jaw, willing the insults paired with various dark hexes to stay on the tip of his tongue and not on the very giving end of his wand.

"I have nothing to say, Professor." He looked back at Snape, defiant and ready for a challenge.

"Then, as you have done an absolutely *smashing* job of disturbing my class, leave, Mr. Weasley." Severus put his hand to his temple and closed his eyes as Ron swung his backpack over his shoulders and stormed from the class, leaving the stricken and humiliated witch to hug her shoulders in defeat, trying to school her expression and compose herself. "Bottle your unfinished potions. Class dismissed." Everyone shuffled frantically to clean up and deliver the left over ingredients to their proper places, and then fled the discomfort of the room. "Miss Granger, please stay back a few moments..." He could see the apprehension flit across her features, but the numb expression from before returned as she looked into her cauldron.

Oh, how alike we are.

--

Hermione bottled her ruined potion, feeling failure at impressing her professor, while the other thoughts of disappointment flooded the back of her mind. The war had changed them all, and this was just one of the many repercussions of it. She wondered if he was just curious.

There was no way that she could guard her mind if he chose to take a dip. But for some reason, she knew he wouldn't. Not now. He had protected her. Or, at least, he had made a valiant attempt.

She waited for the rest of the class to leave, Harry looking apologetically into her eyes and then turning to follow a shaken Neville out of the room.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she whispered as she shifted her feet and looked to the ground. *Gods, this was a catastrophe.*

--

"Do not make apologies, Miss Granger." He conjured a handkerchief and held it out to her to take. "You, of all people, have the least to apologise for." There was ambiguity in his words, but he was sure she didn't catch it as she took the soft fabric from his outstretched hand. After all, she was not her usual quick self when faced with yelling matches in Potions class.

"Well, then... I suppose I should thank you. For stopping it."

"No thanks are in order. A man should never treat a woman the way Mr. Weasley has treated you, especially when she is such an intelligent witch who knows that there is more to life than millions of ginger-haired toddlers." He spoke bitterly, his words sharp in his mouth and fast as daggers as he enunciated every word. He leaned back on the front of his desk, folded his arms, and peered into the girl's watery eyes. Hermione sniffed with a small smile that quickly spread. *She didn't know that the sulky Potions master was capable of jokes, did she?* He thought back to her fight, rolling the dialogue over and over in his mind. As she smiled vaguely at him, he couldn't push one particular sentence from his mind:

"I CAN'T HAVE CHILDREN, RON!"

His chest constricted painfully as he realised the weight of her predicament. *Only nineteen, and her future has been decided for her by the forces of nature... or magic, for that matter.* Whether she wanted children...however far in the future that would be (sodding Weasleys)...or not, she no longer had the choice. He shifted, realising his break

in character, and sat up a bit. "Now, I would appreciate that you refrain from personal discussions during my class the next time you are in the dungeons, however interesting the rest of your peers may find them."

--

Way to ruin the moment. She saw him smirk and hold his hand out again to her. She was confused for a moment (he didn't really want the handkerchief back, did he?), but realised he was asking for her potion. She made sure not to touch him as the crystal phial passed between them.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry for not completing the Acroblyl mixture. I would have finished..."

"I *know*." His irritation returned. "Every class should be rather blasé for you, considering that you've already completed this course in another country. Better for you. *Practice*."

"..."

He looked at her questioningly, knowing that she wanted to ask him something.

"Professor... Could you perhaps..."

"What? Make it harder for you?" he asked. When she nodded, he tilted his head back and let out a deep laugh that startled the already shaken witch in front of him. He *actually* laughed. She blinked at him, but then grinned, seeing his facial features relax and soften in her presence. He quickly contained himself, but acquiesced.

She nearly shrieked with joy, giddy from her sudden mood swings and an unfamiliar swooping feeling in the pit of her stomach. She thought she might toss up, but at the same time, she felt better than she had in a while. Especially in the past fifteen minutes. "Thank you, Professor," she breathed and turned towards the door, hugging her potions book close to her in anticipation of a challenge.

"Miss Granger." She stopped, turning to him. "He will be receiving detention until I feel 'Chivalry' has been permanently branded into his empty skull." She turned around in satisfaction and was nearly at the door when she heard a throat clearing, and a gentler voice follow it: "I also wanted to... ah, thank you for cleaning my stores. It was... unnecessary, but very welcome."

She blinked, then, realising she was gaping like a Imobulused grindylow, nodded and shot from the room, fast as a Firebolt.

--

"Apparently, I need to work on those," he muttered to himself, turning back to face an empty room.

A/N: *I make Ron such an effing prat in this story (I do love his character in canon, though)!*

I think this chapter explains Hermione's spontaneity and general changes. She's reacting to her "predicament," as Snape puts it, in a perfectly human way. Which is, to say, not at all. She seems to be running away from everything/one that could help her (Ex: Harry...he's a nice, understanding guy, right? [shrugs]).

We'll find out more, next chapter! Thanks for your reviews!

'Constant Comment'

Chapter 6 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

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Disclaimer *Oogie-boogie boogie!!!! (anti-litigation charm)*

Chapter Six: 'Constant Comment'

~~~

*He was in a garden with a large fountain pond in front on him. It looked a bit worse for wear, although very picturesque in its own right. There was moss blanketing the grey slate in the smell of wet leaves and cooling stones, and lilies decorated the dark water. Severus sighed and looked about him. Red and yellow maple leaves fluttered about around the edges of the clearing, the trees obscuring the darkness beyond this haven.*

If only there were un-dream sanctuaries like this.

*Feeling an inclination to explore the premises, he trudged across to an opening in the dense forest. He first looked, cautious from years of espionage, but then seeing nothing unusual or sinister about the place, he stepped forward.*

*A deathly pang in his ears and body set him falling back, only to lose his balance and hit the leaf-strewn earth. He shook his head in amazement and frustration as he got up.*

Who put up perimeter shields in bloody dreams? Well, of course, he would.

Dusting off his clothing he noticed the ivory pigment of his garments.

"Oh, how comical," he mumbled as he looked back towards the fountain. "One big cliché after another." He walked smoothly to the pond and sat at the edge of it, peering into its depths. He saw a warped image of his figure looking back at him from the rippling water, but was soon drawn away as a glint of silver caught his eye.

A sword lay at the bottom of the pool. No, he thought, turning away and perching himself on the damp rock. But a nagging feeling caused him to stand up and turn to the pond again. Red rubies glinted at him as if to egg him on. He rolled his eyes in resignation and began unbuttoning his complicated vest. Disposing of all garments at his feet, he stepped up on the edge of the fountain. A breeze sent a shiver up his spine as he stood, sans clothing, in the middle of the clearing. He had a distinct feeling that someone was watching him but did not investigate, diving into the watery depths instead.

The silver blade twinkled at him tauntingly as he stroked towards it. He had the brief notion that air was becoming a necessity as he reached the beautiful weapon, but pushed it aside to grasp the hilt. And of course it would not budge from the bottom of the pool. He was unworthy; he was not true. This dream is steadily growing worse, he thought fleetingly as he gave it another tug. He pulled and pulled, using all of his weight to press his feet against the bottom, but he was running out of air. He nearly gave in to the dull feeling of failure humming against his heart and the pressure against his lungs. Frantically, he pushed against the bottom one more time. His heart pumped loudly in his ears. He could not give up...it would not let him. Soon he would die.

As he let out the last of his air in another attempt at retrieving the sword of Gryffindor, a small hand grasped his shoulder and he unconsciously lifted his hand to it. With a last stream of consciousness he wrapped his long fingers around his saviour's hand. The anonymous hand pulled him out of the abyss, and frigid air attacked his lungs as he lay on the ground, coughing and heaving in great puffs of oxygen.

His eyes traveled across the ground in front of him to see a pair of dainty, bare feet, a silvery-blue gown pooled around them. He fell back onto his knees and gazed up to see beautiful young woman with bronze hair that fell to her knees. She looked like an elf from the old times...a dryad. Something like that. And he knew this was no longer a metaphor. This was completely and utterly blatant. And he was hopeless.

She gazed down at him with a soft smile that could only remind him of home. There was a faint familiarity about her, but he could not put a face with a name (nor did he want to, really). After all, her characteristics were vivid, yet blurred, as dreams so often muddle up reality in one's subconscious.

He suddenly became aware of his nakedness when she looked him up and down with kind eyes of a amber brown. He was still drenched, and water flowed freely from his dark locks down his toned chest and abdomen. She knelt down and traced a delicate finger over a scar that cut savagely across his heart.

"Of my own invention..." he said as she looked sadly into his eyes. She shook her head as if to say, 'no.' Her palm pressed into his left pectoral, and fingers stretched out as if to heal him. His breath hitched.

His heart.

He exhaled again when her gaze left his to set on the pool, "I... could not retrieve the sword. I...I am not worthy, I suppose." He shrugged apologetically. It wasn't even about the sword. All was a symbolic. He knew it, too.

"Severus," she spoke. Her voice caressed his name and comforted him, echoing around the clearing in an eerie lyrical voice, although she had merely whispered his name. He closed his eyes as she rested her forehead against his as if to say, 'Let go. You must let go.'

He cried openly now, her hand still pressed against his heart as he knelt in a surely humiliating posture, his scars and vulnerability in full view. He put his face in his hands, but she moved them away, taking the back of his neck in a tangle of wet hair and brought him to her. He grasped her small shoulders and nestled into her neck as she gently pressed her hands into his back. She smelled divine. He drank her scent in, and after what seemed like an eternity, his sobs quieted.

She backed away, pushing a lock of hair behind his ear before standing up. Severus placed his hands in his lap, defeated and lost, when she had pulled away. He wanted to say something to her, but couldn't think of anything intelligible. She was a dream, after all. He would never be graced with her presence again. Hesitantly, he looked up.

She was gone.

--

"Always bloody drowning!" Severus cursed as he slammed a teapot down on a communal hotplate one Sunday morning. "Ruddy sentimental dreams..." The frustration and exhaustion that he had felt when he woke up in a cold sweat early that morning were quite evident in his violent movements, although the house-elves diagnosed it as a case of miscast Babbling Curse. He glared up at a mountain of delicious and quite cheerful looking pastries that were *clearly* trying to irritate him, and he nearly knocked it over as he passed by the nearest group of house-elves.

"Is sir wanting something from the spice cabinet?" One of the house-elves stopped whisking an egg and turned to the Potions professor as he opened the closet with a loud yank.

Severus ignored the obnoxious elf and scanned the cupboard. *If only Miss Granger decided to work her magic on these shelves.* He certainly wouldn't have to hire a search party for some damned 'Constant Comment'! If he had only been out to Hogsmeade the past weekend instead of toiling away over an investigatory potion, he wouldn't have to deal with disorganized, unsystematic, incompetent servants.

"Rumkin will help, sir!" The same house-elf jumped down and pattered over to him.

"I can do it *myself*, thank you," Severus growled. Bumkin, or Pumpkin...whatever the hell her name was...halted and watched him with round yellow eyes as he reached haphazardly for flour, then saffron, then fennel. "Where is the bleedin' *tea*?" he asked aloud to himself.

Rumkin snapped her fingers and a tin box shifted forward about an arm's length above him. He looked back to glare at her before slowly retrieving the tin box and bringing his arm back to his side. Rumkin lit up the fire under his selected teapot and bowed deeply as he stood guiltily with the tin in his hands. He sat on a stool at the counter next to the stove of choice and leaned his forehead against his palms.

That nymph... *thing*... had made him feel utterly defeated. And helpless. And he ~~he~~ knew her. She was so very familiar.

Severus recognized he shouldn't be dwelling on such a dream. It was manufactured of his subconscious...a manifestation of his fears and shortcomings.

*But I have been having similar dreams for months.* He hunched over the counter and looked out the large window. *None with a rather charming sprite, though,* he added mentally.

He soaked a bag of 'Constant Comment' in the heated water and waited, rubbing his temples and deciding that a fresh start *without* disquieting memories and disturbances would be quite delightful.

*That, and those cinnamon buns over there.*

--

Hermione waltzed down the corridor at 6:45 on a Sunday morning, a ritual she had consecrated as the weeks progressed towards the extravagant Halloween Ball. She was quite stressed, and she thought a thorough study of her experiment in the robe-closet off the common room, after her morning tea in the kitchens, would do wonders for her nerves. She and Blaise had been working on music selections until the wee hours of the morning, along with last minute decoration designs and minute details.

She went down several flights to the dungeons, passing the Potions classroom with reluctance. It seemed like every time she passed that place since the fight with Ron a week ago, she could no longer concentrate. Her mind kept replaying the scene over and over again, torturing her through her classes as well as her early morning journeys to the still life of a pear along the walls of a lone hallway. What was worse, he...not to mention half the grade...had seen the outburst and now gave her curious looks whenever they were near, as if he was scanning her, hoping she wouldn't have a meltdown in his presence again.

But he *had* shown an uncharacteristic bit of gratitude and kindness, which was something, wasn't it? She so dearly wanted acceptance...understanding...from someone right now. No one her age was capable of appreciating this sort of problem, even if they vaguely comprehended the impact it would have.

She floated in a trance all the way to the pear, but shook herself out of it when it did not just give way to her presence.

"Twit," Hermione chastised herself as she reached out and tickled the underside of the two-dimensional painting. It released a set of giggles as a door formed behind it, clicking and clanging into place before her eyes. "I love magic," she said to the pear as she reached for the handle.

Quickly making her way down the isle to the spice cupboard, she looked for the tin in its usual place. But, she soon became discouraged and very distressed as the weight of the day began to press down on her temples. A migraine was soon to arrive and she would *not* welcome it, thanks. She had to read through at least four of her History chapters along with her Arithmancy homework and a one-and-a-half foot essay for Transfiguration. She looked pleadingly at the group of house-elves now baking a series of quiches and one shuffled over to her.

"What is your name?" She bent down as one often does toward a child.

"I is Aldwon, Miss. What does Miss need this morning?" The miniscule elf twisted his knobby fingers in his tattered pillow-case-of-a-toga, not daring to look her in the eye.

"I would love some tea, Aldwon. It doesn't seem to be in its proper place this morning."

"Aldwon must punish himself for not serving the miss!" He sought out a frying pan.

"No, no!" She grabbed his tiny wrist. "It would be a...*better* punishment for you to help me find it." She smiled apologetically. Aldwon smiled toothily at her and retreated to the group of elves, conversing with a she-elf about said punishment.

Hermione stood up straight, a bit peeved about her lack of caffeine in the morning. She scanned the large expanse of the room, an exact mirror of the Great Hall above, and as she unconsciously twisted her waist-length curls into a braid down one side of her shoulder, she spotted him. He was hunched over a counter, copper kettle in hand, pouring what looked like tea into a cup. He appeared to be deep in thought...unconsciously chewing on a bit of a cinnamon bun with his eyes focused on the surface in front of him. She now felt extremely self-conscious in her nightgown.

What had only been the effects of caffeine deficiency was now pure anxiety as she looked back towards the elves still in discussion...about tea anymore, she could not tell. She pointed questioningly to the man and another elf, Rumkin, nodded. She gathered her strength and walked briskly up to none other than Severus Snape, preparing to duel him for the tea tin if it was the last thing she did.

--

The stirring of his spoon reminded him vividly of a certain struggle at the bottom of a certain pool, and so he stopped, placing the utensil on the saucer and lifting the orange-spice aroma to his lips. He drank, lifting his eyes to see none other than Hermione Bloody Granger weaving in between the other counters toward him. Sputtering, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve and regained composure before she came to stand in front of him.

*So much for a fresh start.*

"Sir." She nodded, and grabbed the tea tin in front of him as if he had stolen it from her. He watched and drank as she filed through the dozens of tea bags, murmuring to herself as her eyes passed over each title. As she came to the end, she stopped, looking up at him, and then back down to restart her search. Her impassive expression gradually knit into a scowl as she neared the end of the row again. She sighed dejectedly at her hands and whispered, "No more 'Constant Comment.'"

He looked down at his teapot and then returned his eyes to her.

"Get a cup," he muttered, pushing the kettle in her direction. She looked up, equally nonplussed, and turned quickly to get one. He sipped and regarded her as she fumbled nervously in the porcelain cabinet, searching for a good-sized mug. She was obviously not expecting to see civilized folk about, for she had left on her silky nightgown, which, although it was long-sleeved and buttoned up to her neck, hugged her curves quite nicely. The fabric was a greenish-blue and rustled about as she reached up for her select cup. He shuddered as the image of a dryad maiden rushed to the forefront of his mind.

As she neared the counter again, averting her eyes and placing the cup down, Severus lifted the pot of steaming hot liquid and poured her a nice portion. He pushed the mysterious maiden's image to the back of his mind again and returned his attention to his own cup. He drank, noticing the girl scanning expectantly over the counter.

"No sugar?" she asked quietly.

He needed dearly to ask her how she was, if the Weasley boy had still been bothering her, if she was coping with the whispers in the hallways, if she wasn't about to kill herself as she was consistently eroded down by her coursework and her waning friendships. He very much wanted to reach over and tuck that stray curl behind her ear. To take all her obvious pain away. But he did not.

*That's it*, he thought after a rather ridiculous image of the sour professor tenderly brushing a lock away from the Head Girl's face materialized in his mind's eye/*ve officially gone barmy.*

"No sugar." He gripped his cup, knuckles turning white.

She rolled her eyes as if to say, 'Typical,' and made her way back to the spice closet, summoning the sugar and carrying it back to their makeshift tea party. She seemed to gather up some courage with each sweet spoonful and decided to unleash her bothersome inquiries on him. "So, Professor," he looked at her with a raised eyebrow, "what brings you to the kitchens at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning?"

"The crack of dawn, Miss Granger, was an hour ago, at about 6:07 to be exact. You would have to wait for mid-December until the sunrise is at seven."

She shrugged, "All the same..."

"I couldn't sleep, if you must know."

"Why?" she asked reflexively.

He glared at her.

"Sorry, sir."

"I should be asking the same about you, Granger."

"Oh, I'm always here on Sundays. I like to get a fresh tea brewing before I...er...study. It's been earlier lately, though, because of the ball and everything."

Severus exhaled in annoyance.

"It's going to be a *masquerade*."

"*Really*." His sarcasm did not go unnoticed.

"Yes." She sipped and smiled as the fumes filled her nostrils. "I imagine you regret volunteering for chaperone."

"Do I ever," he said, laying his empty cup down on the saucer and leaning his elbows on the table.

"It is much appreciated, I'm sure."

"What? My current vexation? Or my volunteering?"

She laughed, "Perhaps both. Professor McGonagall *does* like to aggravate the hell out of people." She flinched after her words, but Severus shrugged. "She always manages to make you feel inexplicably guilty."

"Here, here," he said emphatically, provoking a surprised expression from the witch across from him. They sat in silence for a while, while he gave her covert glances over the top of his cup as she sipped pensively. She apparently did not realize that he was waiting for her to finish. "Well, Miss Granger," he spoke when she finally set down her cup, "Good luck with your *masquerade*, and whatever other ridiculous schemes you and Mr. Zabini have conjured up." He stood, smirking at her, and then turned to deliver his used teacup to the mountain of suds that was the wash bin.

He did not stop when he heard her give a quiet "Thank you..."

--

Hermione watched the man retreat, his robes billowing behind him as they usually did. She couldn't help but sigh and lean her cheek against her palm as his distinct form disappeared in the shadow of the doorway.

They liked the same tea.

---

**A/N:** Oh, *teenage girls!* Well, what do you think? I know the dreams are a bit much, but my case is that for Severus to understand that he needs lurrrrrve (or, at least, friendship) in his life and needs to stop wallowing in self-hatred, the message must be blatantly obvious! For such a clever wizard, he is certainly hard-headed sometimes! And THAT, my friends, is why our heroes belong "togezzerr" (Fleur-speak, with an exaggerated hhhhh at the end, just to butcher it a bit more). Alright, I've officially lost it. Snape and I will see you all in the crazy house once this is over ;) Toodle-oo!

PS - I haven't decided what the song that Hermione was singing is... I'm thinking some folk song. Soft, like a lullaby. \*shrugs\* Tell me what you think!

## Unwell

Chapter 7 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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**Disclaimer:** Characters and... well, characters belong to J.K. Rowling. This crazy plot belongs to me. Heh.

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### Chapter Seven: Unwell

~~~

Hallows' Eve was in a short week. Hermione could barely even concentrate on her studies (a rare occurrence) because of all the last minute planning with Blaise and Professor McGonagall. She had thought the planning would take her mind off things, but she was quite mistaken. The Prefects would help out sometimes, but their main event would be monitoring during said masquerade...a job not well sought after. Hermione above all people knew how inconvenient and utterly embarrassing it was to break up canoodling couples. Especially when they were people she knew.

Ron had taken up with a sixth-year Hufflepuff only a week after their row, and Hermione was okay with that. However, seeing them snogging full on in the hallways and after hours like he did with Lavender Brown was simply nauseating. He still thought she was lying through her teeth.

"Why would I lie about something like that?" she muttered to herself during a Charms lesson, Harry by her side.

"You wouldn't," he whispered back to her. She froze, not realizing that she had said it aloud. He put a hand on the small of her back as she cupped her forehead in one hand, "Hermione, we have to talk about it sometime soon." He looked over to Ron who was sitting as far away from the two of them as possible, next to Ernie MacMillan. Neville had joked that it was rather fitting, two pompous gits keeping each other company.

"This afternoon, after classes?" She searched his face for an answer.

"Quidditch practice," he said, rubbing her back apologetically.

"Well, sometime, then. I don't want you to think I won't tell you..." she said to her Charms notebook while flipping through the dilapidated pages.

"I haven't been speaking to Ron."

"Oh, don't do that!" she nearly exclaimed. "This is between the two of us."

He shrugged with a frown that could only mean he was slightly offended. "This is between all three of us, Hermione. For the past six years I have been watching you two bickering over the smallest things, waiting for you to just *jump* one another when the time came. But... now, it's much bigger than that, and Ron has dug himself a hole that he will not climb out of." He whispered angrily. "You're like a sister to me, and I'm not going to give respect to someone who humiliates my family."

I love you dearly, she said with her eyes.

"Although, since I'm marrying his sister, some level of cordiality will have to remain... for my sanity, at least."

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, you heard me!" He smiled.

"That's wonderful, Harry! I didn't know Ginny and you were getting together so..."

"Miss Granger!" Professor Flitwick squeaked affectionately, his stubby finger pressed to his lips.

"Apologies, Professor." She couldn't help but smile.

"This summer. I want you to be there," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

-O-

That day after classes, Hermione sat in Hagrid's hut, drinking a large portion of coffee with the gentle half-giant. She had decided that taking the afternoon off was a marvelous idea.

"'Ermione! 'Ow are yeh, silly girl?" he had boomed jovially when she knocked on his door an hour or so earlier.

"Oh, I'm getting by. And how are you, Hagrid?" She'd smiled widely as he peered down through his matted beard, his beady black eyes twinkling in the afternoon light.

"Come in, come in! We should do some catchin' up, if I do say so meself."

She had nodded and welcomed herself in, collapsing into the oversized lazy boy in front of the fireplace. Fang had loped toward her, slobber hanging from his droopy cheeks. He had rested his head in her lap, letting the drool soak into her pleated skirt. And Hagrid had taken the seat across from her and had handed her a generous cup of Colombian coffee.

So here they were...just the two of them...for the first time in years.

"Cake?" He thrust a box towards her.

"Oh, no thanks, Hagrid." *I'd much prefer to keep my molars intact.* Much to her satisfaction, an unnerving crack was heard from the back of Hagrid's mouth, and he quickly retreated off the sweets. She tried to subtly push Fang off of her, the circulation quite gone from her right leg.

"Geroff 'er! Fang!" He pulled the dog's tail and the creature dolefully backed into a corner. "Where's 'Arry and Ron, 'Ermione?" he asked as he gulped down half of his cup.

"Harry's supervising Quidditch practice and Ron is..." she trailed off.

"Yeh've 'ad a row, then?"

"Is it that obvious?" she sighed, looking up at her former professor...her friend.

"Well, er, no. No' exactly. Severus was talking abou' it th'other day. Seemed qui' angry, 'e was. Somethin' 'bou' Ron humiliatin' yer in fron' o' the class?"

Hermione's stomach turned over. "I'd rather not discuss it. You can find out from someone else, 'cause everyone is talking about it."

"Wha'd he say, 'Ermione?"

Hermione sighed. "Basically, that I was a bloody tart because I wouldn't marry him on the spot. Things like that."

"Wha' 'bou' yer... predicament?" For someone as subtle as a mountain troll, Hagrid sure knew when to be careful around Hermione.

She snorted in indifference.

"S'a big deal, I think."

"I've gotten used to it." She looked out the window, trying to will the tears not to spill over the brim as a wave of self-loathing hit her.

"No, y'aven't."

"No. I haven't."

"Don't mean tha' anyone has the right to hate yeh fer it."

"I think it's more than that... I don't know." She rubbed her temples.

"I'm sorry, 'Ermione. Yer so young, and yeh've had t' deal with so much so far." He looked down at her.

She stood. "Thank you, Hagrid. But I really must be going. I've... studying and... things to do."

"F course," He clomped over to the door and opened it to the cool autumn air. Hermione breathed deeply as the smell of wet leaves and earth filled her nostrils. She stepped down the stair and turned to look at him as she backed away.

"Enough pumpkins in the patch for the ball, Hagrid?" she shouted as the distance between them broadened.

"Four 'undred er so!" He beamed at her. She waved and turned back towards the castle. Maybe she could make it up to Gryffindor Tower and take a peek at her potion before dinner.

--

It was one long week before Hallows' Eve. Severus looked at the clock yet again, willing the hands to move faster as his last class of the day continued to destroy more cauldrons and waste more precious ingredients.

Just then, another pair decided it would be funny to spill their sordid mixture into the lap of an innocent bystander. The girl began to cry, the stench making others gag and heave as she ran towards him. Nearly retching himself, he sent her sprinting to the bathroom to wash the horrid concoction off and soon dismissed the class to escape the contaminated classroom.

Minutes later, he stormed out of the castle, delighting in the fresh air and pleasant smell of autumn. *A leisurely walk to Hogsmeade would be excellent.* He checked his pockets for Galleons and then set off to think about things.

Along the way, he passed a clearing in the forest where the thestrals were hitched to the carriages at the start and end of each term. A thestral foal trotted about in the usual loping gait that is characteristic of such beings, whinnying...or squawking, whichever way you look at it...for its mother. Feeling an inexplicable paternal feeling, he veered off course and soon met the colt as it whipped about, repelling flies and other creatures of the forest.

"Quite alone, aren't you?" he spoke to it. The grotesque thing looked up at him with milky eyes and exhaled with a puff of hot air. "I know the feeling." He stroked the prominent spine where a traditional horse would have a mane. The colt showed his appreciation by stretching his neck out, leaning into his easing hands like a dog. "I wish I had some sustenance for you of some kind..." he murmured apologetically.

"I do, Professor." A dreamy voice called out behind him. Severus whirled around only to find Luna Lovegood, barefoot and carrying a heinous purse that hung around her neck. She pulled a piece of raw steak from the very same bag and threw it into the air. The thestral leapt in delight and caught the meat in his mouth, flitting about above the ground as he consumed it rather greedily.

"A regular Friday afternoon, Miss Lovegood?" he asked defensively.

"Oh, no." She looked dazed as she said with a sigh, "I only come out here when my friends have found other things to occupy their time than spend it with me." Her bluntness earned her an evasive throat clearing from the man standing next to her. "Do you come out here often, sir?"

"Not at all; it was just a passing fancy."

"Oh. Well, then you should probably return to whatever you were planning to do or those pesky Pronged Trimble might crawl into your ears and cause you to forget why or where you were going. They are awfully attracted to 'passing fancies.'"

Snape cocked an eyebrow at her and bowed deeply to her. For an often confused and misled girl, she had aptitude for thought-provocation as well as a natural talent of unnerving others immensely with a few short words. He held her in a high regard for this, despite her queerness.

"With that, I must bid you adieu." He turned and set out at a quick pace to Hogsmeade. He had wasted time with this 'passing fancy' and now he would only have time to buy some tea and a few new quills before returning to meet with Mr. Weasley for his third detention.

Weasley, he growled as the caustic brawl of earlier that month floated into the forefront of his mind. Hermione had rarely left his thoughts since the event (not that she had been absent beforehand), and he was aware that the Severus Snape he knew did not dwell over the melodramas of teenage girls. Something was terribly wrong with him...nothing that a nice, long, torturous detention couldn't handle.

A/N: Muahaha! Evil!Snape. Or is it... Compassionate/Concerned/Pensive!Snape? Well, we've not found out much about Hermione's "predicament" as everyone calls it. Man, if I were Hermione I'd want to Keadavra myself every time someone said that! But of course, she's too busy wallowing in/neglecting her own problems to be concerned with word choice. R&R, please!

Thanks to Ladyinthecloak/Karelia for helping me out with my spectacular grammar!

Reprisal

Chapter 8 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: I wish I owned the Potterverse...

Chapter Eight: Reprisal

-*-

"Snape," the dunderhead grumbled in greeting when the clock struck eight.

"If we are to exchange pleasantries, Weasley, I believe you are to refer to me as 'sir.'"

"Sir, then. Happy?" The boy walked angrily over the desk catty-corner to Severus' regal dark wooded one.

Severus smirked. "Not yet." He looked out the window to see the sun already long gone. "We are collecting ingredients tonight, Mr. Weasley."

"... We are." It was not a question, but Severus could see the dumb look of apprehension and curiosity dawn on his freckled face.

"We are." In a whirl of billowing robes, Severus took off, exiting the classroom and marching swiftly down the corridor. "PLEASE, LOITER AS LONG AS IT FANCIES YOU!"

Weasley heard his booming voice from a hallway away. If Severus had seen his face, it would have been one of incredulity and exasperation *How does the greasy git do that?*

When he could feel the cool air of outside, Severus stopped, allowing only for the dolt to catch up—not catch his breath—and moved off into the night. He held a lantern high above his head to light their way and could see Weasley twitch as they passed the edge of the forest. "Oh, no, Mr. Weasley. We are not looking for common *land* ingredients."

"Wha—?" he looked at him, confused.

"I should think that your friend Mr. Longbottom has told you the properties of marine plants by now. He never stops chattering on about them."

"No."

"Then, I hope you brought an extra change of clothing. And, perhaps, your brain. Those sort of things come in handy at the bottom of a lake."

The boy cursed fluently under his breath. "Do you have some... gillyweed or something? Help me out a little?" Weasley pleaded.

Severus barked an evil laugh and said silkily, "There are other ways to survive under water. Gillyweed is among the less sophisticated of the few." Demonstrating a Bubble-Head Charm, Severus proceeded to recite a list of freshwater plants to collect at the bottom of the lake. "Ever had the pleasure of bathing in the lake, Mr. Weasley?"

The boy shuddered.

"Of course, but you wouldn't remember that." Severus paused for effect. "At night it is much worse."

Weasley glared death at his Potions professor and then waded out into the frigid water. Severus could hear the sweet sounds of curses and threats, quickly warped by the gurgle of the Bubble-Head Charm. He waved dramatically at the boy as he sunk into the depths and prepared for a nice, long wait.

"What the fuck am I s'posed to do for light?" Weasley emerged almost immediately.

"What is your bloody wand for, you blundering idiot?"

"Merlin's pants!" Weasley exclaimed, shaking out his hair and then lighting his wand. The boy dove under again and did not emerge for quite some time.

"Quite brave for the sidekick. That must be the unbearable Gryffindor in him."

"Whom are you talking to, Severus?" A crisp voice interrupted his thoughts. Severus stood up immediately, having been caught lounging on the wet grass like a carefree adolescent.

"Myself, Minerva."

"And who is this Gryffindor? Potter? Surely he hasn't gotten himself into more—"

"No, no. His sidekick." Severus waved a hand in dismissal.

"I'm sure you mean Mr. Weasley." She pursed her lips.

A noncommittal grunt was all that followed. After a moment of her staring at him staring at the sky, he became uncomfortable. "As much as I enjoy being scrutinized, Minerva, you are encroaching on a rather enjoyable detention."

"Weasley? Where is he then?" Her voice became a bit tighter, and Severus could not help but think of shattering glass. "Not in the lake, surely?"

No answer.

"Severus?"

"At the bottom of it, yes."

"And what is he doing there? Hopefully staying quite alive?"

"Unfortunately."

"Professor Snape! That is a dangerous task and unfair punishment for any crime he has committed."

"By all means, go in after him!" Severus snapped at her.

"What did he do to receive such a detention?"

"Am I not known for my cruel and unusual punishments, Minerva?"

"What did he do?" She narrowed her eyes, determined to get an answer.

"Disrespected a war hero and humiliated them in front of nearly a hundred people."

"I would've thought you were above such things, Severus. Besides, they torture you all the time."

"I—what?" She obviously had not understood. He had meant for ambiguity... but had prepared to defend himself had she protected her cub. She frowned at him, for he was usually so quick to the punch. "I'd... had enough of it. This will teach him not to bellow offensive slurs as he customarily does."

"Well, I should wait for him to reappear."

"You can fetch him if you like."

"Don't be a fool, I'd likely catch cold—it's so frigid out here."

"Perhaps you should retreat to the warmth of the castle, then."

Slightly offended, but glad to get inside, she pursed her lips and offered him a curt goodbye.

"Minerva." He nodded.

-0-

It had been fifteen minutes since she had gone, and a light could be seen in the depths of the lake, ever brighter as the seconds passed. Finally, a spluttering Ron emerged, holding some ingredients in his pockets, slimy invertebrates in his left hand, a jellyfrog attached to his pant leg. He stormed to shore, throwing the ingredients at the professor's feet and standing as tall as he could without collapsing in the cold air.

"I had some time to think in the dreadful hour I was down there." Angrily, Weasley pointed a pruned finger to the water again and then cast a drying spell on his clothing.

"Decided to grace me with an apology, Mr. Weasley? Took you long enough."

"No, this isn't about me disrupting your class."

"No?" Snape cocked an eyebrow, but his calm collectedness was short-lived.

"This," he spat, pointing between them, "is about me hurting Hermione."

Severus chuckled, fighting for the nervous laughter not to bubble out. "You disrespected her, yes. But the petty melodramas of schoolchildren do not interest me, specifically the 'boy-who-refused-to-go-away' and his precious subordinates."

"Then why eight detentions for a row by 'schoolchildren'? Why protect her in the first place—she's *HERMIONE BLOODY GRANGER*! You know, the insufferable know-it-all? Besides, you don't even know the full story." Weasley hissed as the jellyfrog bit the spot of ankle that showed from his second-hand trousers.

"I believe you revealed it to the entire class with your bickering, Weasley."

"Why, suddenly, do you treat her as if she's a precious piece of china—like she'll break any moment?" Severus couldn't retrieve an answer. "Why has she suddenly changed her academic interests, her leisure time, her career into things that all involve YOU?"

"Why don't you ask *her*?" Snape bit out reflexively.

But Weasley was not at all dissatisfied. The dolt walked off with an air of accomplishment, as if he had just made a discovery.

Severus couldn't help but ask why, as well.

A/N: *You like? Yes? No? REVIEWREVIEWREVIEW!! :D*

Fairy Tale

Chapter 9 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: **Sighs* Not mine...*

Chapter Nine: Fairy Tale

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Hermione Granger stood in front of a wall-length mirror, surrounded by a gaggle of girls her age and younger. Grinning, she traced over the curves accentuated by her gown, the color of the midnight sky. Diniz had pointed it out in the Lisbon Luxury Apparel store at the end of the summer and had sent it to her when he got word. She would now have to thank him royally for the attention she was receiving. She turned a bit to look at her back in the reflection and was pleased with the result. Her bare back was toned and shadowed in a most sensual curve down her spine. She never had known the back to be an attractive trait on anyone. Little things like this were what held her up these days.

"Wow, Hermione!" Parvati gasped, wide-eyed at the plunging backline and magnificence of her dress.

She had quite out-dressed most of the girls in the dressing room. Lavender was a faerie, dressed to the nines in flowing pink. Parvati had decided to be a magical fish from India, a Ramora, in wonderful shades of silver and grey. Other girls had resorted to the common shades of black and some even wore orange and purple. But

Hermione...she was admittedly gorgeous for someone whom everyone viewed as the virginal bookworm of Gryffindor tower. Her dress was a deep, royal blue.

"What *are* you, exactly?" Lavender folded her arms and looked to Parvati for support. Her two classmates looked at her with judgment in their eyes and Hermione couldn't help but feel a little disheartened by it.

"A peacock. Or something like it." She bent down and picked up her hair ornament. It was a lovely decorative comb carved out of jade. Her mother had bargained for it with an old Japanese man when they were vacationing several summers ago, and now she was glad she'd had that slight tantrum before her mom was persuaded. A small group of peacock feathers decorated the waistline in the back, fanning out over the layers of kelly-green shantung silk covering her behind. "You both look dazzling."

"Mione, you look much better than these *slags*." Ginny strode up to her, glaring at the two other girls who cast vicious glances Hermione's way as they exited to the common room.

All noticed her entrance, as Hermione's indigo gown reflected flecks of golden light from the candles in the room. Ron, catching a quick glance at her, left immediately. She could almost see a cynical smirk on his face as he headed for the Hufflepuff dorm. Harry, Neville, Dean, Seamus, and many other boys would've lost their jaws if they had not been attached at the joints. Hermione blushed. She hadn't really expected that kind of reaction.

"Hermione." Harry gaped. Ginny smirked and walked over to him, gently pushing his mouth shut.

"Harry." She smiled. Hermione looked at the two of them: Harry wore forest green dress robes and Ginny wore all black, cat-eyes donning her face in a simple but elegant mask. As they all chatted about the decorations they'd snuck a peek at earlier, Ginny nestled into Harry's neck and stayed there. It was an interesting color...red and black.

"What are you, Neville?" Ginny asked, directing the attention to the boy's uncanny appearance.

"Luna and I chose to be the Loch Ness monster and the giant squid."

"You're the Loch Ness?" Seamus snorted.

"Can't wait to see Luna!" Dean exclaimed from behind Seamus as a pearly-white smile proportions darted across his orange-masked face.

-o-

The ball was in full swing when they all arrived. The company was grand, the punch was tolerable, and the music was a mix of wizarding and Muggle hits. The war had been fought for Muggle-Wizard equality, anyway. Hermione locked eyes with Blaise, who was enjoying a bit of champagne with a group of friends, and intended to join them as soon as a mob of firsties dissipated. Behind him were mountains of candy and delectable goodies that they had requested from Honeydukes and other finer delicatessens in Wizarding London. It was dark in the room, and eerie light accompanied with fog enchanted the rafters of the hall. It was truly a magnificent sight, and Hermione, for the first time in a long while, felt proud of herself. She had made something as magnificent as this, despite her past and her present and the future she refused to contemplate. Many teachers were bopping along with *Who Do You Think You Are* and Hermione made her way across the hall as Harry and the others convulsed with mirth, regarding the entertaining sight of Hagrid coaxing Professor Vector out onto the dance floor.

"You picked this song, Hermione? Of all the Muggle songs to choose from?"

"Of course! I love the Spice Girls!" She giggled at his apparent disgust. "How do you know this song, anyway?" She smirked as he sought out an answer.

"I... really have no idea." He grinned and Hermione was surprised, having never seen a smile on Blaise Zabini before. He always wore either an indifferent or contemplative look, his slanted, dark eyes never wavering, never crinkling into even a shadow of a smile. She supposed he smiled often, though. She did not know him personally, so who was she to make an assumption? "Do Muggle and Wizarding worlds overlap often?"

"More than you would think," she answered, nodding and tapping a finger to her lips. And then Hermione began to count off many well-known celebrities on her fingers: "Melanie B is a witch. There is more than one reason why they call her Scary Spice! There's also David Bowie, Ringo, Tchaikovsky..." Blaise's eyes widened as the list continued. "Anyway, a little dance music for the dance floor never hurt anybody!" She bounced on her toes as a song by the Weird Sisters came on.

"Fancy a dance, Granger?" Draco Malfoy seemed to materialize out of the throng of Slytherins, catching her by surprise. She had rarely seen him during the year...which was odd, really, because he made a point of taunting the trio when he could in the past...and she suddenly realized why that might be. Whatever troubles the Malfoy clan had had in the past, they certainly weren't lacking in economic issues (among other things) now. But Draco was still wearing a tasteful burgundy suit and holding two champagne glasses. He set one in Hermione's hand as she frowned, sipping at the drink suspiciously.

"Are you making a pass at me, Malfoy?" Despite herself she quirked a smile...happy that someone was willing to give her a dance...and folded her arms, an action made less effective with her current attire.

"You and I both know how that would go with my mum," he chuckled, downing the rest of his glass and holding out his hand.

"S'pose that's alright, then. *One* dance."

"Wouldn't want to subject the Head Girl to too much fun." He smirked as she took his offer. She had all night to patrol and would be ignored by some, sidetracked and slighted by others, but for now, two former enemies would enjoy a dance in the throng of costume-clad bodies.

-o-

As the night wore on, the slower songs played more and more. The traditional ones were of Blaise's choice...and the more recent ones of Hermione's. However, as couples paired off and moved about the floor, the magnificent peacock was pushed out to the realm of the wallflowers, coincidentally near Ron, who had refused to give his girlfriend a dance all night. Hermione walked around the perimeter, exchanging vague pleasantries, adjusting décor, et cetera. She was allowed to return to her inner thoughts.

She thought of school, her problems with Ron, the massive cleanup that she and the Prefects would have to do afterwards... and then her mind wandered back to the potion she had been working on since the beginning of the year...the same she had neglected for the past couple weeks. She racked her brain for the ingredients that could increase the potency of her mixture without suppressing the purpose of the potion in general. The only things the textbooks pointed to were ingredients involved with love potions. It was not a love potion. It did several things...along with shedding inhibitions, side effects could potentially increase lust toward the object of affection, if there was any. It was more of a passion potion, causing the drinker to realize many things about themselves, in turn realizing what they might feel about others. Maybe she should write Diniz about it and see what he would think. Somehow that didn't seem right, though...he was always a stickler for regulations. She had made a mistake of telling Harry one piece of information, and it had blown up into a huge deal. Hermione did not like huge deals... unless they were superlative balls like this one.

She eventually turned towards the grand entrance, deciding that a nice, leisurely walk along the shore, *without* the stress that always accompanied the presence of her friends, would be quite enjoyable.

A/N: To be continued... Heh. Next, we'll see what (or who?) Hermione encounters on her evening stroll :)

My dress idea is here:

<http://av-co-bu-325.deviantart.com/art/The-Peacock-118558661>

Na Noite

Chapter 10 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: *I am not talented enough to pretend I've written seven world best-sellers about a teenage boy with a hero complex and a magic stick...*

Hmm. Interesting word choice, CC.

Chapter Ten: Na Noite

~*~

Quickly escaping the doldrums of the ball, Severus Snape strode quickly past the punchbowl, past all the snacks and the hors d'oeuvres, past the lusty teens who were currently displaying, quite publicly, the affection they held for each other, right in front of the champagne fountain no less. And he slipped out of the teachers' entrance. He made an immediate right and then a left, but instead of heading into the bowels of the castle, he sought out the clearer, fresher October air outside.

He took a breath and exhaled slowly, standing on the last stretches of grass where he had stood two days ago, awaiting the soggy arrival of one Ronald Weasley, the offensive taste in Severus' mouth, destroyer of Hermione's confidence...who would probably dog him until the end of the year. What the boy had said had struck a nerve, and the Potions master found himself questioning his fascination with the Head Girl. Weasley could have him sacked if anything ever happened...not that it would. He knew he was being paranoid because he would never compromise his job, but somehow it bothered him that a dunderhead like Weasley had him figured out well before he sorted it out on his own.

Why? Why does this sort of thing happen to me?

"There you go again, basking in self-pity," he muttered to himself.

No, I'm pathetic. This is self-loathing.

"Call it what you will, and still..."

Why do I always find myself drawn to the most inaccessible, unattainable, unrealistic, and unfortunately untouchable goals?

"The whole idea of it is unreservedly ludicrous," he said into his fists.

"I thought you rather enjoyed the sport of it all, Professor." *She* approached him from down the shore a little. He started at first, but was drowning entirely too deep in his current anguish to stand up and look at least dignified, or recover to his usual, sulky self. "You know, the hunt for snogging couples..."

He looked up, unsurprised to see *her* on her own.

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A sad pang shot through her body when she remembered this herself. Harry had Ginny, vice versa, Ron was permanently scorched from her family tree, Luna was... well, Luna, Neville was Neville, and Snape...the man lounging casually in front of her, boots dug a bit into the pebbly sand, his arms resting on his bent knees, his long dark hair falling against his cheeks...was untouchable, inaccessible, impermeable. In short, she would never be a friend to him nor he to her. The idea was preposterous.

"Quite the opposite. Finding the students I teach everyday in compromising positions is not something that I like to relive." He did not look at her, but continued gazing at his hands, twined together and resting atop his knees.

"You volunteered."

"I thought we went over this, Miss Granger."

Hermione giggled inwardly as her mind's eye envisioned his contorted expression as he discovered two unsuspecting sixth years entangled in one another. She blushed, but was sure he could not see it for the darkness. The only light was from the castle, seeming to set the surface of the lake afire with eerie radiance.

"The headmistress," he continued, "loves to inflict as much pain and suffering on her subjects as possible."

"I would have to argue that guilt is usually the perpetrator."

"*Always* the perpetrator." He corrected acerbically, looking up at her this time, and she swore she could see something behind the dark obsidian of his eyes. It was gone in an instant, as their gaze broke when he returned to observing his hands. She was left with an unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach as he looked away...she didn't want to leave him. Alone. With his guilt. She wanted to heal him. Take it all away. *So much for breaking your stereotype, Hermione.*

Hermione decided to sit, noting the cleanest place to rest her regally-clothed bum, and did just so, curling her dainty legs under herself, smoothing the hem of her dress and resting her small hands on her thighs. They sat.

--

"I am assuming you and Mr. Weasley have not relapsed into your 'casual'... relations," he spoke to the sand, hoping she would not become uncomfortable. He was quite enjoying the company. Feeling lonely was better than feeling lonely *and* alone. "Given your present solitude."

"Believe me, there was nothing 'casual' about it." She looked at him and then out over the still water, an indifferent expression writ across her visage. "And *that* hasn't continued, nor will it ever, now that he knows."

"Knows what, exactly?" Severus prodded, and he knew she was aware. But she did not recoil into herself or gasp at his indiscretion when the words came from his lips.

"Of my... 'predicament', as Hagrid so deftly put it. That, and he thinks I'm involved with my Portuguese host from this summer," she paused, "who is most decidedly homosexual, apart from being hundreds of miles away."

"I see." He looked at her, sitting prettily in her gorgeous gown, the shiny indigo fabric pooling around her folded legs, reflecting glints of gold from the light of the castle. Her profile revealed a long, slender patch of creamy back that curved in such a sensuous line that Severus was surprised he didn't reach out and trace it with his fingers, brush lightly against it with the back of his hand, run soft kisses up her spine...

He shook his head violently, only to attract more attention to himself. *Never* had he allowed these thoughts to enter his mind. But then he found himself glancing toward her again, as she was the only other thing to look at other than the lake, which he had seen quite enough of the other night.

She was sitting up, a regal posture that only made her seem imaginary, like the naiad that had plagued his dreams for a good while now. They sat in a surprisingly comfortable silence, for him at least. Her presence was soothing, and he did not want her to leave, although she was sitting at least a meter away.

"Forgive me for prying, but... could you...would you tell me about it?"

"About what?" she asked innocently, having been lost in her own thoughts not a moment ago.

"You are unable to bear children," he said flatly, getting it out before he regretted it. But he did regret it because she looked immediately defeated, lost in despair. He wanted dearly to take that delicate face, run light kisses across it...

"I...No, I can't. It..." She broke off, looking him straight in the eye, pleading for understanding. He nodded. "It was a spell." He cursed lightly under his breath, as she continued, "The battle, I mean...we were both there...it was terrible. Things falling left and right all around you, hexes grazing your cheeks as you shouted every single curse known to you in haphazard directions, every minute thinking that this... this could be your last second on earth. It was Macnair, I think... who did it. Tumescio Sanguis."

"Nonverbal." He muttered as utter guilt racked his nerves. He wanted to grab her and wrap her in his arms to say he was tremendously, dreadfully, terribly sorry, but he did not.

"I thought you would know." She played absentmindedly with the heel of her shoe, but a smirk played across her face.

"I ought to know. I invented it."

The small half-smile that had warmed his heart vanished and she looked at him. He was ready for censure, for accusation, for frenetic finger pointing...but no. This Hermione Granger was unpredictable, contrary to common knowledge. "Do *not* blame yourself..." she paused, "Professor. It was most definitely not your fault."

"Many things are."

"This isn't. Now, I will continue with my story because you asked, and now that I'm telling you, I don't think I will be able to stop until I've spilled my heart out to you."

"Yes, please... Go on."

"The curse hit around my middle." She placed her hand around her lower abdomen. "The immediate effects of the curse were to thicken my blood until my heart could no longer pump it...but my uterus was also effected. And, respectively, completely shot."

"I...I'm sorry..."

"Oh, will you let me finish!" She glared angrily at him and continued, "The Healers at St. Mungo's were able to support me with blood thinner and other available nutrients, but..."

"Internal organs directly affected by the blunt force of the aforesaid curse will inevitably lose all prior function..."

"Textbook response, sir." She smiled sadly. "We are not so different...you and I."

He gave a noncommittal grunt and wove his fingers through his hair to keep his head from falling off. He, by his irrational and experimental and dark and sick ways, had done this to her.

A swift breeze blew a refreshing pocket of cold air their way as they again sat in silence.

A/N: But wait, there's more? Part Deux is up next. I couldn't leave them out in the cold, could I? I mean, Herm's in a backless ball gown in Scotland in late October! No. No, that simply would not do, so I added another part. Well, actually, it was all one chapter, but it got kinda long, soooo I snipped it. :) Special thanks go to ladyinthecloak for her fantasmical beta skillz! Ooh, and a Happy Valentine's to you all!

-CC

title translation - into the night OR in the night

Na Noite (Parte Dois)

Chapter 11 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All,

events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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Disclaimer: No, I am not J.K. Rowling. Nor am I Puerto Rican, for that matter, but that doesn't have much to do with this story, so ignore it. ;)

Chapter Eleven: Na Noite (Parte Doir)

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Hermione wrapped her arms around herself as a third gust of wind graced them with its presence. She saw *him* out of the corner of her eye, knowing that he still felt guilty, despairing that he still felt guilty, and relishing that he still felt guilty.

He cared. He cared, enough.

With that he stood, taking his traditional black frock coat off with many small, swift movements of his fingers. She observed as each button passed through each buttonhole, as he seduced her with the slightest of movements. She did not react, however. The only difference in demeanour remained behind the chocolate eyes as she mentally shook herself for becoming so captivated by the mundane act of disrobing...oh gods...taking off one's overcoat.

"...Professor, I don't need..."

"Either you cease that incessant chatter of your teeth, or I give you my coat."

She stumbled up to her full height. "No, sir..."

"Please, Miss Granger."

"Honestly, I..."

"Nonsense, girl. You are freezing." He pulled his arms from the sleeves; leaving the Potions master the most undressed she had ever seen him. The white button down was a nice touch, and she could see how unbelievably thin...and fit he was. He looked so clean cut... and *very* sexy.

"I cannot argue..."

"Nor may you," he completed gruffly. He lifted the shoulders up to help her into the dark material that was her professor's frock coat.

"How very *chivalrous* of you!" She smiled teasingly.

"It's what proper men do," he said without a smile.

She pushed her arms through, adjusting the straps of her gown and pulling at the collar to bring it closer to her body. It was still warm from his heat, and an embarrassing intimacy ran through her body as she thought on it. She looked up with smiling eyes to see him, arms folded, regarding her with a pensive look on his face. Giggling, she magicked the countless buttons closed all the way up to the neck.

"I think we could be twins." She spun around to show their resemblance, topping it off with a scowl worthy of the man standing before her.

"What was that?"

"What was what, sir?"

"That... spell you performed."

"Oh, just something I learned in Portugal. Helps unzip, unbutton, unhinge...what have you...twice as fast. I just did the counter-jinx. What?" Her explanation was rudely interrupted by his deep chuckle. "Oh, no!! That's not what I meant! I meant...I mean, there's a lot of buttons in...No! That's not what I meant!"

"Of course." He smirked. "Apparently one learns more than stirring cauldrons at Peniche."

"That is *not* what I *mean*!" She blushed furiously. Exchanging sexual jokes with her professor was entirely too surreal for words.

"No, no! Never."

"Oh, do shut up!"

"What is it called?"

"The what?"

"What is the spell called?" he asked irritably. "For one so logically inclined, you appear quite dumb when embarrassed. It is unbecoming, Hermione." She could tell he had regretted using her name, for a slight twitch of his mouth gave way to his feelings at that moment.

"Thanks, *Professor*. The jinx is called *Dimettus*."

"Clever, that."

"Indeed." Hermione slowly calmed, sinking slowly into the warmth of him. He smelled nice. Like sage, lime, and something she could not quite pinpoint. It was quite intoxicating, though. They stood side by side, his hands set lazily in his pockets as he looked up at the mountains across the lake in the distance. She slowly brought the sleeves up over her wrists and nestled into the cuffs, basking in the calming scent and the surprisingly smooth textile chosen for such a seemingly rigid man.

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He looked down at her, an odd warmth building in his body with every second he spent basking in the beams of Hermione. This was not supposed to be happening. He knew what it was, and he did not like it. This feeling always ruined things...ruined lives. This feeling was... was...he would not say it. He would not admit it to himself.

"Were you enjoying yourself at the ball? I'm sure you did not come all the way out here to join the wicked old Potions master." He smirked.

"No, no. I became quite bored, really. Especially when the slower songs started playing."

"Boredom, was it?" Her breath hitched as he folded his arms. She paused, looking at her delicate hands in the pooling moonlight. The veins protruded a little and Severus realized that despite her beauty, she did look a bit malnourished...pale, sleepy, and on edge. She felt alone, she felt unloved... she was stubborn, cruelly intelligent, thirsting for more knowledge than she could possibly handle, inaccessible, obsessed with the things she could not have... This was another Snape, ready to bloom.

"You're not 'wicked', per se. Snarky, stubborn, and sometimes cruel...but not *wicked*. And you are most certainly NOT old." She waved her hand in the air as if to fish for an example. "*Dumbledore* was old."

"Snarky, eh?" he chuckled. But then he reviewed what she had just said. "~~Feel~~ old," he mumbled.

"With good reason." She looked up at him. "Just thought you should know that you're not..."

"Old." He grinned.

"No, you're not." She smirked back playfully.

"...Thank you, Miss Granger. I assume that was a compliment of some kind."

"Don't get many of those?" she joked.

He rolled his eyes, although the discomfort was eating at his insides. They stood...in silence...again, as some notes from the current song echoed out to the shore. "I like this harmony..." and she began to sing along softly, caressing the words and sounds lovingly. Severus listened. He did not know the song, but it was easy to like when the woman standing next to him delivered it so well.

"You have a beautiful voice, Hermione." He blurted out, although the smooth silkiness of his voice emulated a calculated and premeditated intention. She stopped immediately, blushing and covering her mouth.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize..."

"Did I not just say that I enjoyed it?"

"Sorry." She did not sing again. He knew he should not have said anything, but he also enjoyed the effect he had on her nerves, especially since his new found interest in her.

No, *no new-found interest. I enjoy making her squirm, that is all. Wait...NO! No, no, no!*

She curled into his robes even more in her embarrassment and was silent for a while. They listened to the ending notes of the song and awaited the arrival of another, and Severus felt even guiltier, as he had caused her discomfort. For someone so enthused by praise, Hermione did react negatively to some. She lifted her head after a moment and spoke with a bit of revelation in her voice, "You said my name."

"I what?"

"You said, 'Hermione.' That is the second time. Tell me I'm crazy."

"...You're crazy." He answered dutifully, panicking on the inside as to what he should do.

"I am *not*!" she said angrily.

"Miss Granger, you just asked..."

"I know what I asked! Merlin!" She began to pace, her hand in her hair, running through her tamed curls.

"You're not crazy, then."

"Of course not. You *called* me *Hermione*."

Silence. *Bloody hell.*

"You are an enigma, Professor."

"And let's leave it at that."

"But you know me, Professor."

"Well enough, and from what I know you will stop at nothing until you 'crack the code,' so to speak."

"Not if you ask me not to," she said, looking into his eyes.

"Don't."

"You didn't ask."

"You are insufferable!" He turned away from her and could not help but cringe at their 'old couple-ness.'

She chuckled and folded her arms, the long sleeves of his robes creating an awkward, elongating effect on her appendages. "...Thank you, sir."

He sighed. "For what, Miss Granger?"

"For listening to me, for being friendly to me...although in a slightly atypical way. For everything, really."

"Stop *thanking* me before I cart you off to St. Mungo's." Then he added, a little uncomfortably, "You owe me nothing."

"You pity me," she stated.

"No, *you* pity *me*," he spat back, and it was true, although rather childish for him to mention it at that moment. He could see it in her eyes.

"I used to pity you," she corrected him, unfolding her arms and running her wand down the excess buttons to rid herself of his coat. "I should probably get back to the ball... You know, they might need the Head Girl to break up a brawl or fix the decorations," she joked. "Anyway, thank you, *again*, Professor, for listening to me babble on and on

incessantly." With that, she turned and headed towards the Great Hall.

"You used to pity me," he repeated. Flabbergasted, yet curious as to what she meant by it, he went on, "And now what of me, Granger?"

She stopped and turned to him from a couple metres away. "Admiration. Respect. And a bit of awe, really." He took note of the new spring in her step as she retreated into the shadow of the castle.

"You *are* crazy," he exclaimed, audibly enough to hear it nearly a hundred metres away. She waved at him lazily, not looking back as she headed towards the main entrance. It was then he realized the chill of the air, as if her warmth had left him. He lifted the coat that rested in his hands to his face, drinking in a scent he was familiar with, but not accustomed to in this setting. "Orange blossom?"

A/N: Soooo, mystery of Hermione's predicament is solved for now, I hope? Feel free to let me know if there's something that just... totally makes no sense and I'll do my best to fix it.

Oh, and you guys...YEAH, YOU...are awesome for reviewing and leaving encouraging messages! I will need more though... Reviews are like Pringles; once you pop the fun don't stop (a.k.a I want/need more)!

Oh, and thanks to ladyinthecloak for beta-ing!

Obsessions

Chapter 12 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

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Disclaimer: Anti-litigation charm!!!!

Chapter Twelve: Obsessions

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December found Hermione in a bit of a rut. Bela and Edwin Granger were off skiing in the Alps again, so the Granger daughter was left to her own devices regarding holiday plans. She had a week or so until everyone finished their midterms, but that short week was filling with revising, and "Litte Miss Know-It-All and Head Girl Extraordinaire" would not be "Little Miss Know-It-All and Head Girl Extraordinaire" without a full eight hours a day studying. Harry offered to invite her to spend the hols with him at Grimmauld Place, but that had preceded McGonagall's orders to keep them under a watchful, adult eye. It was for protection, although Hermione and the others were reluctant to agree...they had faced much more than paparazzi, let alone rogue Death Eaters, during the war. Even the fact that all five of Harry's closest friends were now of age did not sway the Headmistress' decision.

And so on the fourteenth of December, Hermione said her goodbyes to all (save Ron) on the platform before the lot of them boarded the Hogwarts Express bound for London. It was to Hermione's dismay that she did not receive an invite to the Burrow that Christmas; though whether that was a fault of Ron or Mother Hen Weasley remained to be seen. Accepting a kiss on the cheek from Harry, then Ginny, a hug from Neville and an awkward wave from Luna, Hermione ushered them onto the train and then began a long walk up to the castle with Hagrid. The carriage roads winded through the forest, and Hermione soon found that she was not in as good shape as she thought she'd been when she arrived at the Entrance Hall, panting heavily and sweating through her warm winter robes.

Nothing was to be done other than... well, study, so Hermione immediately headed to the library. She tried to begin on her assignments for the coming term, but found it increasingly difficult with the potion on her mind. She knew there was something that could be added, something to improve and increase the potency, something that kept niggling at her until she thought about the serum some more. Hermione found that she spent most days alternating between Hagrid's ever-orange pumpkin patch and the Potions and Alchemy and Restricted sections of the library, and when she was in neither of those places, she found herself wandering into the closet off of the Gryffindor common room and adding whatever ingredients she could get her hands on to the mix. The concoction became more complicated every day, with the Head Girl rushing in every couple of hours with a new idea. All that was taxing enough, but Hermione found that she could not sleep when the potion was so close to another ingredient. The house elves would find her drooling on a tome at five in the morning, the girl having fallen asleep over her copious notes.

Days passed like this...quiet and unassuming to the normal wizard, but very noisy to Hermione, who spent every thought on her potion. She would watch the mesmerising spirals as it shimmered with a vague blue mist while simmering over the wandlit fire. It was not long until the week of Christmas rolled around, and Hermione realized she had spent two and a half months poring over her unfinished potion. On a Saturday, the 20th, Hermione sat bolt upright in her bed.

I haven't purchased any bloody presents! She jumped from her bed and approached the vanity, raking a brush through her mass of curls and splashing water over her face. She ran to her dresser and collected fresh underthings and thick, fluffy socks, then to the bottom drawer she went to find a clean pair of jeans and an aubergine-tinted jumper. Her snow boots were waiting at the door...the white sheep's wool peeping out in tufts around the tongue and the top of the boot. From afar, they looked incredibly inviting, especially since the air outside bit like a werewolf on a full moon. Having donned her boots and a winter robe that she could easily transfigure into a parka, Hermione whisked over to the Headmistress' office in a flurry of self-chastising slurs.

The gargoyle peered down at her expectantly as she strode toward it, blinking briefly, then jumping aside when she shouted, "Good King Wenceslas!" The staircase carried her up in a lazy spiral and abruptly Hermione had herself a mouthful of fir leaves from the ample wreath hanging on the oak door. She reached around the outrageous thing to rap neatly upon the pleasantly warped wood.

"Enter!" McGonagall's burr was recognizable even over the cheery tunes of the record player in the back of the office near Dilys Derwent's portrait, the portrait Dilys

plugging her ears during the chorus of Jingle Bells. The absurdity of the wreath was nothing compared to the state of the room before Hermione. Everything was covered in glaring festivity, and even McGonagall was decked out in holiday cheer. The traditional tartan robes were disposed of for a garish red and green ensemble, complete with embroidered snow animals and furry cuffs. Hermione briefly wondered if becoming a headmaster constituted the loss of one's mind.

"Professor, how are you?" Hermione asked, stepping a tentative foot a little further into the warm office to close the door.

"Quite well, Miss Granger. I'm performing some last-minute decorative charms; it really is the only time of year I am given creative license." She tapped a large snow globe and it burst into a perpetual snowstorm[.] "Plus, the Minister is coming."

"Oh? Do you think he will stay long?" Hermione chuckled.

"Hopefully not! Most of this is designed specifically to scare him away." The former Transfiguration mistress smirked. "Though I do fancy the snow globe."

"I think your plan might actually work, Professor. I was certainly apprehensive to come any further into this room!"

"Good," she clucked, finally settling behind her desk as Hermione batted away some levitating baubles. "Have a seat, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, ma'am. I hate to ask you this, but I realized this morning that I haven't bought any presents for my friends. Now, I'm normally not so..."

"Merlin, Hermione, what have you been doing these past two weeks?"

"Well, I..."

"Oh, no matter. What would you have me do?"

"I really don't want to be a bother, but I can't leave my friends without presents this Christmas."

"And you need someone to escort you on your outing."

"Well, I suppose so," Hermione paused, "if you think that's necessary."

"Of course it's necessary!" the older witch snapped. "I would take you myself but I have other engagements that I unfortunately must attend to..." She tapped her chin with a thin, wizened finger, "Well, Filius is visiting family in Switzerland, Sinistra is at an astronomy conference in Berlin... Oh, dear. The only teachers available today are Sybil and Severus."

"Professor Snape! Please!" Hermione blurted. McGonagall frowned at Hermione for a moment, then stood to collect some Floo powder from the gilded pot on the mantle.

"You are sure, Hermione?" The Headmistress raised her brows in inquiry as she knelt with surprising ease at the hearth. "You know how he is...and he won't be pleasant."

"*Anyone* but Trelawney," Hermione said. *I'd rather have my toes chewed on by a blast-ended screw!*

"That's 'Professor' Trelawney, Hermione," McGonagall chided half-heartedly, then turned to throw the shimmering dust into the fire.

Hermione crossed her fingers behind her back as the fireplace burst to life in a luminescent green.

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Severus sat in his worn leather chair, reading the latest Alchemy Journal and contentedly sipping his morning tea. Having finished stocking the infirmary and ordering new ingredients just last night, he looked forward to a nice, uneventful week of solitude. It was the first Christmas he would spend serving no other master but himself. And, for a person as reserved as Severus Snape, he was rather excited.

He even allowed a small smile to grace his features as he crossed one black-trousered leg over his other knee and rustled the journal pages for good measure.

And that was how the Headmistress of Hogwarts found the Head of Slytherin from her view in the modest fireplace.

"Severus," the older witch announced to the room, "may I have a word?"

So much for solitude, he thought vaguely. "You may have more than one, Minerva. What is it?"

"I must ask you a favour." And the feelings of excitement he'd been harbouring suddenly left him. Severus narrowed his eyes and closed his journal slowly. "I assume you were not planning anything for today..."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Minerva, what would you like me to do?"

"Well, if it wouldn't be too much of a bother..."

"Get to the point, woman!"

"I would love it if you would escort Miss Granger shopping, today," the Headmistress spoke quickly.

Severus blinked.

"She has put it off until now for some unknown reason, and I forbade her to go alone."

"...Is there no one else available... to do this?" He hesitated. He wasn't sure if he should be as welcoming to that plan as he felt. He quickly quashed any present feelings, shoving them in a padlocked box somewhere in the back of his mind.

"I'm sorry, Severus; I know how much you hate giving up your free time, but..."

"No, no. It's quite all right... I mean, if you insist." He stood awkwardly and patted the pockets of his robes for his wand and money. "I suppose if it doesn't take all that long," he sighed resignedly for effect. *Severus, get a grip! Since when were you so lenient?*

"Hermione will be so grateful, Severus. I'm afraid she's been rather lonely lately and has retreated into herself."

"Minerva," Severus nearly bit out but reined in his anger, "she has been as such for the entirety of this year." He folded his arms and rose an eyebrow. "How have I noticed more about your little Gryffindor cub than you have?" *Maybe you should ask yourself that, Sev, old boy.*

Minerva opened her mouth, searching for something to say, but all she ended up accomplishing was looking like a fish. "Really?"

Severus gave a curt nod and turned to his writing desk where he kept his money.

"Then I have another favour to ask of you."

"Which is...?"

"Cheer her up," McGonagall said matter-of-factly.

"That's likely! I am the bane of her existence and she mine!" He shook his head incredulously.

Minerva ignored his outburst and said, "Thank you, Severus. Can you come through now?"

"Let me retrieve my winter robes. I will be up in a moment," he announced to the clock as the older witch's face vanished from the green and blue flame.

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"Well," the Headmistress breathed, sitting back on her heels briefly to brush the ash from her pepper-grey hair. "That was relatively simple."

"No protests?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"Barely any. He will be here shortly." McGonagall stood and promptly collided with a house-elf-shaped bauble.

Hermione stifled a giggle and thanked her headmistress.

"You are lucky, Miss Granger. He is in a rather good mood for him. How long are you planning to be out?"

"I have quite a bit of shopping to do, actually," Hermione mumbled guiltily. "We should be back by dinner, I think."

McGonagall nodded and returned to her desk. "That's alright. Professor Snape can't complain about missing out on his *busy* social life. He doesn't have much of one."

"What don't I have?" Snape stepped from the hearth and brushed off his winter robes...which were black, of course.

"Muggle clothing, sir." Hermione said smoothly. McGonagall gave her a look of relief as she sat behind her desk.

"Right you are," he said matter-of-factly, and the headmistress gave *him* a look of incredulity.

"Well, Miss Granger requested a trip to London as well, and I suppose you'll need to look... relatively... normal." The headmistress pursed her lips at her own tactlessness and began quickly organizing the files on her desk, which was pristine enough, so all knew she's felt rather uncomfortable. Gryffindors really weren't that good at lying. Except for Hermione, apparently.

"Yes. I hope it won't be too much to ask you, sir. I'm sorry I'm taking up so much of your valuable time. It won't be long in London and I shop quickly. No window-shopping, I promise! And I already have a list so I won't be dallying anywhere. And we'll only go to Harrods and an international bookstore..."

"You are babbling, Miss Granger," he cut her off.

She blushed. "I...I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"Obviously." His tone was scathing but for the quirk of his lips and the light behind his eyes. Hermione was rather taken aback by his lack of hostility, but she supposed it could just be a trick of the light, or something, to see that small curve of the lips. The headmistress wouldn't have been able to affirm Hermione's questions because she currently had her nose buried in the budget records.

He sighed and gestured towards the door, and Hermione, used to obeying his every command, quickly made for the exit. He followed her down the spiral staircase, and she turned toward him.

"So, we'll meet at nine thirty? After all, the shops open at ten, but I need to fetch money from Gringotts." Hermione waited for his response, but quickly grew nervous with the scanning he gave her with his eyes.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked politely.

"Er... I was planning to go to Gryffindor Tower to... uh... get some things and..."

"Have. You. Had. Breakfast. Miss Granger?"

"No, but I was going to..."

"Is there some sort of *sustenance* in Gryffindor Tower? Hmm? I don't believe you need to study when there is nothing to study for. What has you neglecting your health?"

"What? I didn't say..." she spluttered. "I haven't been *neglecting my health*!" She bit out every word like venom but the result was not what she had expected. A scowl, maybe, but not a...a...a *chuckle*!

"Miss Granger," he laughed, "your defensiveness gives me even less reason to believe you...other than the fact that you look even more like a ghost than you did when I last saw you."

When did he last see me? Her mind shouted. "You're one to talk," she grumbled, folding her arms and looking away.

"I'll ask you again. Why haven't you been eating?"

"Fine! I'll go eat something!" she huffed, and stomped rather childishly down towards the kitchens. She had a feeling that although she'd avoided his question now, she'd have a hard time avoiding it all day.

A/N: Yay! Another chapter for you! I know I kinda jumped two weeks, but hey...I'm writing the story! LoL. Anyhow, I picked Hermione's parents' names as Bela and Edwin because they are both related to dentistry...yes, I AM cool, kay? 'Bela' means destruction, which is also another meaning for the name Apollonia, who is the patron saint of dentistry. I was pushing it a bit, but oh well. 'Edwin' is from the Edwin Smith Papyrus, which is a document from the 17th century that includes the treatment of several dental ailments taken from texts as early as 3000 BC.

I do my research.

Thanks for reading!!

The Best Sort of Shopping Partner

Chapter 13 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: *These aren't my characters. But these are my plot. Huh?*

Chapter Thirteen: The Best Sort of Shopping Partner

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"Do you have your list?"

"Yes, sir." Severus glanced at her briefly as she tucked her hair behind her ear, shaking the small piece of crumpled parchment she held aloft in one hand.

"Your cloak?"

"Yes." She patted the leather messenger bag that was slung over one shoulder.

"Your Muggle currency?"

"Mhmm."

"And your wand?"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

"Miss Granger?" Severus raised one dramatic brow and the girl had enough sense to look contrite for a while, until she rolled her eyes and patted her left sleeve...he could see the faint outline of a thin willowy wand on the inside of her wrist. "Then we shall depart." He pivoted, his winter cloak whirling around his boot-clad ankles in the usual, Snape-like way, and wrenched open the heavy doors to the outside. A gust of snow hit him full on as the door creaked open, and his colourful slur was lost in the wailing of the wind. He turned to look at her and saw her stifling a giggle...one that he might've liked to hear, if not for his expense...and glowered at her.

Granger walked quickly over to him, an air of amusement about her, and whipped out her wand, pointing it at his face.

"May I ask..." He did not have time to finish, as a warm, fuzzy feeling coated over his face and through his hair, down to the collar of his cloak with her hum of a spell.

"Shielding charm."

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

"You looked quite ridiculous and frankly much less intimidating with snowflakes on your eyelashes," she stated, sheathing her ivy vine and adjusting her cloak so the hood covered her ears.

That was unbelievably kind... a thought floated to the front of his brain. He shook himself, only to see her look down again to check the time.

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She pushed her right sleeve back and looked at the moving hands of her watch. "We're twenty minutes late."

In answer, Snape trudged into the blustery winter air and headed towards the main gates of Hogwarts. After a few moments of nothing but the wind beating against Hermione's eardrums, she saw him gather himself together and reply over his shoulder, "If you had not put up such a childish display in the kitchens earlier, we would not be twenty minutes late."

"I was perfectly fine with having breakfast...not *abanquet!*" She was in no hurry. She had imposed upon him with this request. He needn't stretch out the hours of torture... unless he was a borderline masochist.

Probably not.

"You haven't been eating," he barked back in the frigid cold, a puff of steam issuing from his mouth.

Again, just to rankle his nerves: "Prove it." She hoped he realized that she was just being difficult, now.

He only turned to face her when they had arrived at the main gates, complete with winged hog adornments.

She peered up into his face. "I hate eggs." *"I'm supposed to be eighteen, and I act like this?"*

"Well, I am *dreadfully* sorry about that," he spat.

"And I hate bacon, too." *Oh, well. Serves him right for meddling.* "Should've just served me dragon dung, for all the pleasurable taste it had."

"I'll keep that in mind." He smirked.

A smile crept across her rouged cheeks as she clutched her cloak closer, another strong gust of snow flitting about her face and neck.

"Miss Granger, would you like to leave and fetch your presents sometime today?"

"Oh...sorry." She readjusted her bag and tugged at the bottom of her pullover before looking to him for instruction. "Well?"

He had been studying her. Which was made no less awkward by the fact that she'd been staring at him only moments ago. What a lovely day this would be. He exhaled, "Right. We shall perform side-along now, I suppose."

Hermione frowned. "I can Apparate myself, thank you very much."

Severus growled exasperatedly, "Granger, I am under strict orders to keep you in my sight at all times. Therefore, I shall escort you, Side-Along, as is necessary."

"Aha!" She waggled a finger in his face. "As is *necessary*!"

"Granger, you are testing my patience," he snarled, although the effect was less terrifying than he would have liked. He gripped her forearm and Hermione felt a little jolt as he tugged her toward him, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and Disapparating on the spot.

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"Give me some warning, next time!" Granger yelled as he pushed her away from him. She had felt too nice, and he hadn't wanted to let go, and that flustered him.

She staggered a bit, holding a gloved hand to her forehead, as he watched the world rebalance itself in her eyes. "Whew!" she breathed and leaned up against the alley wall.

As she closed her eyes and took a few gulps of icy air, he noticed the lovely craft of her gloves...black driving-gloves of the Muggle kind, which formed nicely to her small, tapered fingers. The aubergine jumper she wore, which looked incredibly soft to the touch, covered her wrists where the gloves disappeared from view.

"Take your time," he murmured, his eyes trailing appreciatively down her torso as her dizziness subsided. Her cloak covered what he had earlier seen...a modest, scooping neckline and a gold chain around her dainty neck, which cradled a tiny ring. Her jeans were nice and dark, and he was sure they'd have accentuated what little hip she had left after her four-month starving period...which he needed to ask her about, or rather, receive an answer about, soon...if the rest of her winter attire had not hidden it effectively. The snug jeans were tucked neatly into the tops of her boots, which were thick and had the appearance of comfort and warmth.

And he raised his eyes to her face, only to find her staring back at him with a questioning look on her face. "You ready, Professor?"

Damn it all to Hades! He pinched the bridge of his nose and cursed his fit of idiocy.

She took out her list and announced, ignoring his self-deprecating grimace, "Gringotts first."

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Hermione did not know how the time passed so quickly, but by the time she'd received her Galleons and marched to Madam Malkin's to pick out her mum's present. *The Moodified Mohair: A Different Hue for Your Every Mood!*...the bell tower over Diagon Alley had struck eleven.

Snape followed along, a sort of silent buffer against the stares of pedestrians and the few brave reporters who were out on the scene. Though, Hermione wondered vaguely whether it was she or he who attracted more notice. Either way, she was not the one repelling their scrutiny.

As soon as the eleventh chime ended, he spoke from behind her as they made their way through the brimming byways of Wizarding London. "Miss Granger, we should have lunch within the hour if we wish to reach your Muggle store by the scheduled time."

"I have one more shop to get to, and then we'll be off. I promise."

"I don't suppose you could choose a place less obnoxious than Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes?"

"Why in the world would Head Girl go to a joke shop? Do you think I want *tæncourage* bad behaviour?"

The professor chuckled. "No, I suppose not. But your past activities with Boy Wonder and Company beg to differ."

"Oh, sod off," she said benignly. "I was the one trying to talk them out of it."

"I suspect you've more of an adventurous streak than you let on," Snape tossed back, tucking his hands into his cloak pockets and looking down at his boots, an anomalous posture for the Professor. It seemed he was being casual again, which he had not allowed after the Halloween Ball, regardless of their little rendezvous. "So, where to, Granger?"

Hermione smiled inwardly at the almost endearing way he addressed her. "Why, Flourish & Blotts, of course!"

"Never let a bookworm go hungry," Snape said in response.

-0-

The shop was the same as it had always been, smelling of dusty old tomes and dried ink. Hermione had only to step halfway in for the scent to accost her like a brick wall to a blind bicyclist. Her eyes fluttered closed at the familiar smell, but only until someone promptly rammed her in the back, causing her to topple over with her heavy purse and gift bag.

She only heard a light chuckle as strong hands caught her by the upper arms, closing around them lightly and bringing her to a standing position again.

"Thanks," Hermione murmured sheepishly and turned around to see the genuine smile wipe cleanly away from her professor's face.

"It would do you well to pay attention," he said rather more sternly than Hermione felt was necessary.

"I'm going to look for a present for my father and Harry, if I can find any. Do you have anything to look for, Professor?"

He turned to her, making a shooing motion with one hand. "Go, Miss Granger. I'm sure I can find something in here that can distract me for the time being. Let me know when you are finished."

-0-

Hermione found what she needed immediately: *The Audible Agenda, For Those with Migratory Mindfulness* (for Edwin Granger); and *101 Astounding Aurors, Including Several First-hand Accounts from Current Officials* (for Harry Potter). It left just enough time to browse through the various sections, and soon, she became quite lost in the Occasions category, in which she found a rather suitable gift for Professor McGonagall. She was examining the merits of said present, skimming through interesting chapters, when a deep voice rumbled from behind her.

"What is that atrocity?"

"What atrocity?" Hermione turned around, hugging the large book defensively to her chest."

"That garish, frilled rubbish you're holding. What is it?"

"It's a gift for the Headmistress, if you must know," she sniffed.

He raised an eyebrow, and Hermione briefly wondered how many times he did that in a day. *Gaudy Gifts and Dreadful Décor: No Better Way to Keep Unwanted Guests At Bay?*"

Hermione looked down at the orange-laced thing with turquoise lettering. "Yes."

"Why in the name of Hades are you buying her that?" he sneered, folding his arms across his broad chest.

"It's a spur of the moment decision inspired by her...*interesting* decorations. She has a meeting with the Minister this afternoon, and she was taking full advantage of her creative liberty. Thought I'd help her out for next time."

"Splendid. More migraines," he grumbled, and looked to his right, where the Potions section was. He sighed and then turning to the left towards the Notable Witches & Wizards section, tread past it and into a far corner. "I'll be in Alchemy," he threw over his shoulder.

Hermione glanced over to where he had been looking before and spotted a rather unassuming black book with sterling embellishments of Celtic design propped up in the display section. She walked toward it and picked up the description card.

"Self-Recording Potions Journal and Inventory Calendar," she whispered under her breath and ghosted her fingers over the indented designs. It was simple, but elegant, and really quite useful...for someone who was a Potions master. "This is perfect."

She picked it up, looking around for the professor, then stowed it in her shopping basket. *Everyone deserves some holiday cheer.* She smiled, and if Hermione was going to be giving him migraines...though indirectly...she owed him *something*.

As she crept around to the counter to buy her gifts, she continued convincing herself it was a good idea. But, maybe, it might be better if he didn't know.

"Yes, that's a good idea," she said aloud as the cashier wrapped her gifts in brown paper.

"What is, Miss Granger?"

"Ummm... A Muggle place, for lunch, sir," she improvised. Close one.

"I suppose so. If we dine near your international bookstore, that will be more efficient than dining here, and then finding our way afterward, and ~~then~~ Apparating to Hogsmeade." He leaned on the counter as the cashier finished the transaction.

"That will be thirty-eight Galleons and seven Knuts, Miss." The withered old wizard behind the counter squeaked.

She gave him his money and then quickly followed Snape to the door, but he stopped and held it open for her.

"Thank you, Professor Snape."

"It's nothing, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled.

"Really, don't mention it." He brought his collar up to his ears and turned to her, his cheeks already reddened by the December air.

She laughed, now. Yes, Severus Snape deserved a lot more than she could give him, this Christmas.

A/N: Did you like? The next chapter will be mainly/just Sevvie celebrating Christmas and New Years in the dungeons and will include memories from their time in Muggleland! Lots of love to those who review! And I might even **reply**...

Uma Prenda Perfeita

Chapter 14 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to the famed JKR. Ladyinthecloak deserves more than a shout out for beta-ing this monstrosity!! ;) Thanks, girl!

Chapter Fourteen: Uma Prenda Perfeita

--

The flames roared gloriously in the fireplace, and little embers danced above and away from the hearth as Severus Snape put the grate back into place. This was one thing he liked to do sans magic.

There was a certain calming quality to fire making...gathering dry wood from Hagrid's hut, taking the month's *Prophets* and tearing them, methodically, into wide strips of paper, then pushing them under the andiron to light with a match or two. It gave him something to do with his hands, other than foolish wand waving, while he thought about things.

He hadn't actually made a fire in a long time, he noticed. The bellows and poker lay where they were used last, propped up and dusty in the corner beside the fireplace. He brushed them off, motes swirling in the wind of his breath, and then he saw a large crack in the paint on the wall.

About time this place had a paint job, he thought. And he did just that, taking his wand and swiping it across the room to freshen the colour. It was a deep burgundy, like his Rossese di Dolceacqua left abandoned on the coffee table. A good Italian wine from the region of Liguria...best drunk at room temperature.

Picking it up, he surveyed his quickly drying work and wondered where he got the idea that a Slytherin would enjoy red. It was either Christmas... or the girl.

She was getting to him.

And he might just *like* it.

Severus Snape felt lighter than he had in the past six months, and it wasn't because he was tipsy. She, through her forgetfulness, had given him the nudge so he would get off his sulky, solitary arse and walk out the door. He hadn't socialized for more than two hours at a time since he himself had been in school, and never had he *enjoyed* it so damned much.

Yes, Gringotts was a bit of a drag, and Madam Malkin's wasn't much better, but he had had some time to peruse his favourite sections in Flourish & Blotts, and then they'd had a nice time in that Thai restaurant near the international bookstore, although he'd rather not have that soup again, anytime soon. It was too spicy, for his tastes, and he didn't much like transfiguring his robes into turtleneck sweaters and pea coats, no matter the amount of cashmere and camel fur he could conjure...

-The Fourteenth-

"What will you have, sir?"

"Erm... *Hermione*, what should I get?"

"We'll have an order of Steamed Dumplings...or would you like Calamari?" She addressed him halfway through the order.

"You're the expert."

"Dumplings, then," she smiled at their waiter, "and two bowls of Tom Yum soup. Then we'll share a Pad Thai, I think."

"Yes, coming straight away."

-Later-

"Christ woman, this is spicy!" Severus hissed after slurping far too much for a first taste.

She giggled lightly, the spoon still in her mouth. She looked quite endearing.

"Next time, I'll choose the restaurant. Then we'll have none of this taste bud murdering rubbish!"

Just as he realized what exactly he had said, which had made the whole situation sound awfully like a date, Hermione raised an eyebrow and smirked. The gesture was worthy of his own standards.

But this time, Severus was the one to blush, and he cleared his throat, saying, "You know what I meant, Miss Granger."

"Of course, Professor." She smiled, innocently enough.

-Later-

"Well, that Pad Thai was decidedly less spicy than that sorry excuse for a soup you forced me to eat."

"Tom Yum is a traditional soup! And it clears your palate, getting rid of tastes like all that trash we ate at breakfast!"

He grunted, folding his arms, and she rolled her eyes and tried to get the waiter's attention. The old man shuffled over and gave her a black, leathery booklet.

"It the bill, Professor," she said quietly, by way of explanation.

"I know perfectly well what it is, Granger. I'm not completely daft," Severus muttered.

She searched in her purse for her billfold, then took out a flat, plastic oblong with a black stripe running along the edge. She placed it in the booklet, and the waiter took it away, bringing it back a minute or so later.

"Happy Christmas, Mister and Missus Granger."

Severus froze and looked up to meet Hermione's eyes, which were probably as wide as his were at the moment. And then a strange thing happened: they both burst out into laughter.

The waiter looked frightened, and then scurried away as Hermione fought through her teary eyes to fill out a substantially larger tip.

-In the Bookstore-

"I've never heard you laugh, Professor. Sneer... or chuckle, even. But not laugh." She peered over Fashion through the Ages: United States of America, a gift for the fashionably fascinated Ginevra Weasley, her eyes crinkled with cheer.

"You should treasure that moment, Miss Granger, because it probably won't happen again."

All the while, a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth...

-O-

No, Severus Snape did not mind being in Hermione Granger's presence at all. Not that he was about to shout it to the world or anything.

It was the night before Christmas, and throughout the castle, only the faint sound of charmed jingle bells that were finally wearing off could be heard. Severus sipped his wine and turned to the very small, but still quite existent, fir tree near the entry to his dining room. He had allowed some white faeries to dwell in it for the remainder of the Holiday, although often he wondered what had put him in such a mood to let infestations...attractive or otherwise...to crowd his living space with all manners of Christmas cheer.

Thank Merlin the elves hadn't put up mistletoe. There was enough of that rubbish hanging over every nook and cranny on the ground floor. He didn't know if he could put up with kissing Filch on the cheek one more time...it was like the Squib was *following* him!

Christmas was one of the only holidays that had produced good memories when he was a small boy. Although, that wasn't saying much because, even then, to the cherished and loved child, those memories lacked a sort of something. He did remember his paternal grandmother, at her cottage in Provence, allowing him one present before Old Saint Nick came along with his reindeer...Dasher, Flasher, Tazer, whatever the hell their names were...

The thirty-eight-year-old Potions master weaved his way around his coffee table and the black leather sofa and walked purposely toward the little dinky tree in the corner, in all its fey glory. He had few presents, which didn't hurt nearly as much as it had when he had been in school...when his bunkmates, the ones who had stayed over, had woken up to piles of gifts from their loving parents, and he, the scrawny, friendless sod over in the corner had received new socks, a few hygienic products and perhaps a small allowance of Muggle money from his father, all the good it had done him.

Severus bypassed all the usual presents from a few from the professors and Minerva (most likely something as garish as her Christmas baubles...she'd think it hilarious to give him a splash of colour other than green in his wardrobe, maybe a singing, Gryffindor-red cravat) and found a rather weighty, brown-paper package with a simple twine for a bow. There was a small, white card with an illustration of a rural valley cloaked in a white Christmas, the small cottages spouting smoke from their chimneys and shining yellow light from their small windows. On the opposite side, all it read, in silvery, calligraphic writing was, '*Seasons Greetings.*'

"Odd," he murmured and took another gulp of wine, swirling it around in the glass as he turned the entire package over. It felt like a book. But should he open it? Maybe it would be better to leave it for the morning, and just open the package from the Ministry that would probably commend his war efforts and give him a large helping of money for staying out of their hair...? No. This seemed a much better prospect.

After all, didn't the best presents always come the night before Christmas? That's what he remembered, anyway.

Setting down the glass on an available stretch of table under the Christmas tree...needles promptly falling in...Severus untied the twine with one hand and carefully unwrapped the brown paper. A glint of silver showed through and he removed the book from its confines. It was black leather with iron-tinted designs on the front. He thought he'd seen it in Flourish & Blotts the other day with Granger. Opening the cover, a stiff piece of parchment fell out and he caught it, reading the detailed description of his gift.

"Self-Recording... Journal... Inventory. Brilliant."

He paused. Who the hell cared enough to send him such a valuable gift? It was probably worth nearly a hundred Galleons, as well, for all the complex spell casting used to make it. He sifted through the pages, feeling the magic that radiated from the finely crafted binding and thousand pages of paper.

-O-

He had felt elated, at first, but now he ached. For some unknown reason, while he gulped directly from the bottle of Rossese, he ached to know who had thought of him, he ached to give them something in return. But, of course, he probably scorned them on a regular basis, and that was why they hadn't signed it.

"Bugger."

And he had been feeling all light and airy just an hour ago. Fuck Christmas traditions. He'd never open a present again, *if this* was how it'd make him feel.

The clock chimed twelve o'clock, and Severus caressed the book binding in his lap one last time. He could sulk in bed instead of sitting on this uncomfortable piece of shite any longer.

He managed to stumble into his bathroom for a quick pee, then a splash or two of water over his face. But, as he wiped his face in his towel, he realized that this was probably not what his secret... admirer had wanted...for him to get piss-drunk over their anonymity. He guessed they wanted for him to be happy.

He mumbled, "Right fool, I am," into the fluffy goodness and turned toward his bedroom to sit on the end of his four-poster and remove his sodding boots. His stupid socks came next, and then his stupid button-up, which took much longer than need-be because of his dulled motor skills and wandering attention span. Finally the removal of his sodding trousers came, and with that, he vowed to be *happy* in the morning and use that beautiful gift to his heart's content.

-O-

A fire crackled in the generous hearth that was the fireplace in the faculty lounge. Christmas breakfast was being served here, versus in the Great Hall where there was a generous draught during the winter months, despite the many charms and stasis spells to counter it. Cinnamon buns and warm muffins and all sorts of cosy delights sat upon a buffet table, and Severus hadn't enough plate room for all that he wanted. The book was tucked nicely under his arm, and as he spooned some sausage casserole onto his plate, the Headmistress strolled in...in all her I-got-all-I-wanted-for-Christmas-and-you-didn't glory...with Hermione, who looked decidedly sleepy and still quite malnourished, but also content.

She spied him looking at her and gave him a smile, murmuring, "Happy Christmas, Professor," as Minerva brushed past her to claim a particularly comfy chair.

"Miss Granger." He nodded towards her and then turned back toward the buffet. She came up to stand next to him and then took up a plate, spooning some fruit and yoghurt onto it.

"How is your Christmas so far, Professor?" Hermione asked as she poured some tea. He nudged her with his own cup and she did the same for him.

"Adequate," he joked.

"Always so verbose, I see." She took some sugar with her tea and turned towards him, eyeing the book under his arm.

"An extraordinary gift I received anonymously. Probably the first worthwhile thing I'll get in a while," he offered by way of explanation.

"That really is too bad," she hummed in an apologetic tone. "Did it make you happy?"

"Yes," he answered after a pause.

"I'm glad for that, Professor." And she pivoted away from him, toward the Headmistress, who had been watching their interaction rather closely.

"Did...did your presents make it to their intended recipients?" he blurted, feeling like he should have made more conversation. "Your Portuguese friend...Diniz... he got his romance novel?" She turned back to him and then smiled.

"I think so. And Neville sent me his thanks this morning. Harry will eventually get around to sending me a note, and it will probably be squished in an envelope with Ginny's 'Thank You,' as well."

He snorted.

"Professor McGonagall ran into me on the way here and thanked me for the 'atrocious' I gave her." She smirked.

"That's... good."

She nodded with a smile and welcomed him to sit with her and the Headmistress for a quiet breakfast where they talked for hours about their own Christmas traditions and funny anecdotes.

Severus Snape did feel happy. And lighter than air, again, too.

A/N: Yay! I love a happy Sevvie! Although, that's not saying much...I like him all the time.

I felt like I hadn't been filling in his side of the story as much, anymore, so there you go!

1. There's a little part in here that mentions something that will be an important part of the second part of this story...Severus' grandmum's cottage in Provence. You'll actually see it...through my fictitious descriptions, of course.

2. Rossese di Dolceacqua is, in fact, a wine! An apparently excellent one, too, my dad has informed me.

Read and review, please!!

Indulgence

Chapter 15 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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Disclaimer *I'm not JKR.*

Thanks to Ladyinthecloak for beta-ing!!

LEMONS AHEAD!!

Chapter Fifteen: Indulgence

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"Hermione..." A hand shook her shoulder to wake her. She stirred, but did not lift her head from her folded arms.

She had been having a very pleasant dream, it seemed, for she was a bit warm, her stomach seemed to have blossomed a colony of butterflies overnight, and it did not do to be woken up right in the middle...

"Her-Mi-Nee!!"

"Wha...?" she murmured, turning her head to look at a ginger-haired girl kneeling next to her.

"You've been here all night, 'Mione." The befuddled Hermione sprang up, rubbing her eyes and catching her bearings. She was in the cupboard; her pillow had been the same tome she had been clinging to over the past couple of months.

"What time is it?"

Ginny paused, inhaling. "Eight-ten."

"Merlin's left..."

"Hermione, you need to stop doing this to yourself!!" Ginny looked her companion over and noticed a bit of rib showing through the girl's silk nightgown. "When was the last time you ate something?"

"I need to get to class, Ginny." Hermione entered the common room and paced around, trying to sort out her brain. She had woken up all hot and bothered, and it irritated her that she could not go back to sleep. This was odd, because... Well, because Hermione had learned to hate sleep. Her dreams were always plagued with nightmares and humiliating memories...so she tended to waste the night away poring over her books, searching for that one *damned* ingredient.

This train of thought had Hermione even more miffed as Ginny followed her around attentively.

"I agree, but you need food to live, Hermione. Not. Potions."

"I beg to differ," she mumbled as she looked for her books. Shoving her school things into her knapsack, she Summoned her uniform. Ginny stood with her arms folded in a corner of the room, a scowl on her face...Hermione was certainly stubborn. "Have a free period?"

"Yes, and you have Transfiguration. Harry told me he hadn't seen you at breakfast when we passed in the hall. I thought you would be here."

"Well, thanks, Gin... Gods, I am so bloody late!" She straightened her skirt and leapt to the door, flinging it open and disappearing through the porthole. "She's going to ~~kill~~ me!"

--

Severus scanned over the room of students currently hovering over their appalling mixtures. He made sure not to look at her, but every little while he would catch her eye, and she would dart her head down. He was worried. Not because she was not paying attention to her potion, no...she had mastered this level of potion-making long ago. No, he was worried because she looked as if she had not slept in days, despite the many warnings he had given her during the holidays. He observed her for a while as she quickly cut some roots and then tossed the sections into the smoking pot.

She seemed to be thinking very hard about something.

He desperately wanted to take a peek, but decided against it, pushing the spy in him to the back of his mind as he clenched his fist around his quill. She looked so distressed, and he knew there was *something* wrong...Minerva had told him about the girl's tardiness that morning. She was never tardy, at least without meaning to be. Deciding it would be best to look away before he did something completely irrational...not that he knew what that could be... maybe get caught staring at her like a lovesick pup...he took his eyes off of her and pretended to write a bit on his parchment. He pondered the enigma that was Hermione and then pondered the fact that she called him an enigma (the night of the ball) and that she admired him, and that she was in awe of him.

Hardly able to keep himself from laughing, he coughed loudly. A couple of students jumped as he did so, haphazardly throwing their ingredients into their cauldrons. He narrowed his eyes as he again swept the room for any misbehaviour or absent-mindedness and spotted Weasley, sitting with Potter, glaring at him.

"What do you want?" he growled at the boy, who promptly lost his recent bravery and looked back down at his ingredients. Severus did not take his eyes off the dolt until the boy glanced over at Hermione, who was staring into her cauldron as if it had suddenly gone transparent. Weasley shifted his gaze back to Severus, who had been looking at Hermione, and then leered again. Severus, rolling his eyes in response, turned to the board and wrote instructions for a foot-long essay on the properties of the potions that they made. Several students sighed defeatedly, and Severus smiled as he sat back in his chair and folded his arms.

--

She was tired. So. Damned. Tired. And she was sitting in Potions Class, doing what she loved best, but she could not enjoy it. Although drained, she felt a certain fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach that usually accompanied kissing boys.

"What is wrong with me?" she mumbled as she violently bashed a sydney sprout, an ingredient for a potion that only she worked on this afternoon. It was a darker, wound-healing potion, and she had taken specific precautions for her own health...and stealth, for that matter. She did not want people to know that she was receiving special treatment from her Potions professor, an uncharacteristic favour.

"You are looking a little peaky, Hermione," Neville answered.

"And apparently talking out loud to myself." She smiled at her table partner, handing him her silver knife and turning away in case he decided to spray her with a healthy amount of that pod he was about to stab.

She went back to her potion and stirred it anti-clockwise, counting silently as the liquid turned the correct colour: chartreuse. She mock-gagged and turned to Neville who sniggered into his own fumes. Finishing and bottling her potion, she stood, only to become dizzy and fall back into her chair, the glass phial shattering as it came in contact with the countertop.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, for clumsiness," Snape's voice rang out, although she could catch a hint of amusement in his voice...it was subtle, though, and it had taken many months of constant observation to differentiate his intonations. She sighed and looked at him, frowning. He gazed pointedly back at her cauldron and Hermione quickly repaired the phial to ladle another helping into the good-as-new container. She corked it and walked briskly to the front table feeling eyes boring into her as she approached his desk. She watched her feet move beneath her to avoid eye contact.

Damn, I'm wearing a sock inside out.

When she reached the table, her eyes shot up only to notice, disappointedly, that he was not watching her. He was writing comments for the semester. She peered over his stack of papers to get a better look, but his eyes shot up and he smirked.

Nosy twit, never keep your eyes to yourself do you? She reprimanded herself.

He looked back down as she thought and continued writing Susan Bones' comment. She could catch the words "adequate listener" and "dismal potioneer" as he scribbled wildly and the words behind him morphed into neat manuscript. She then watched his face...his brow furrowed in concentration and his eyes for once unguardedly tired. He apparently had not slept much either over the past couple of weeks. She hadn't seen him much since their last encounter, but she often found herself wishing to run into him on his own...just to talk. She missed talking. She didn't do it much because Harry and Ginny had long ago given up talking with her about important things. They always brought up bad memories.

She was forced out of her reverie when his hand drifted up off the desk and opened to her. She looked into his eyes, which were now looking directly at her with an inquisitive, raised eyebrow. She shook her head and held out the phial in the palm of her hand. He, annoyed with her reluctance, rolled his eyes and reached forward.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as his fingers lightly brushed her wrist and curled around the small bottle. Nails grazed against her palm and a jolt of electricity...or something...seemed to generate from their brief touch, causing Hermione to jump nearly a foot in the air from surprise. Snape withdrew his hand quickly and looked at her, scowling.

"Sorry," she whispered. *So he didn't feel that?* He shook his head in dismissal and pointed with his eyes for her to return to her desk.

Hermione turned around, checking for anyone who might've seen, and...thank Merlin...not even Ron, who had taken to watching their every interaction, had lifted his head. As she walked slowly back up the elevated levels, she replayed that scene in her mind over and over again.

She halted immediately, a flush rising in her cheeks as the agitating feeling from earlier finally became clear. She turned around and looked, wide-eyed, at Snape, who had returned to his papers. Her knees knocked a bit as she gradually gained momentum.

"I have to go," Hermione croaked, more loudly than she had meant to.

"What?" He frowned at her again, but only to see her walking briskly to the doorway. "Miss Granger, where do you think you are going?"

"I-I-I'm going to be sick!" she squeaked shakily as she willed herself not to look the man in the eye. With that she ran from the doorway and down the corridor, as far away from the dungeons as she could get without collapsing.

-0-

Hardly able to hold herself up, the flushed girl leapt into the nearest bathroom and threw herself at the sink. Hermione stared up into her own face, breathing hard and gripping the marble with white knuckles. Turning on the cool water, she cupped it to her face and let the liquid wash over her. Hermione sighed with her face in her hands, utterly embarrassed and yet completely intrigued. She remembered it vividly...her dream.

"Bloody hell, Hermione!" she spat at herself as one particular image swam to the surface of her mind. She inhaled loudly and dove into the image, too weak to control her curiosity.

-0-

She stood in the middle of a small living room...well, she knew it was a living room, but dreams were always so hazy in her opinion...and their surroundings were lit with an eerie green light. Obviously, it was deep in the dungeons, under the lake. Harry had told Hermione about the Slytherin common room once before. She suddenly felt nervous and turned around, reaching in her back pocket where her wand should have been. But, it was not there. It was rather silly of her to assume that it would be because there certainly was no pocket to pull a weapon from. She was wearing a silky celadon-tinted nightgown... in the dungeons. Suddenly, the Potions master appeared out of a door in some unknown direction and walked smoothly to her. It was then that she was in a doorway, and he pushed her up against the jamb and kissed her forcefully. She whimpered as her arms slowly linked around his neck and she relished the feel of his soft lips on hers. Gods, he was an amazing kisser...nothing like Ron or Viktor. His lips were unyielding, and he took from her everything she could give, causing her stomach to tighten with want.

Hermione moaned as he pushed her up the wall, knowing vaguely what would come next. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he continued to ravage her mouth with his. The kiss deepened and his tongue was again in her mouth, exploring every angle of her mouth. His hands were all over her body, moving from her waist downward and then up towards her breasts. Haziness befriended lust in the back of Hermione's brain, and she held him close to her as his bruising kiss moved from her lips to her throat to her collarbone. As his lips caressed her, he hoisted her up by the thighs and walked to the side of his bed on the other side of the door to the sitting room. Pushing her down quickly he rid himself of his coat. He climbed onto the bed after her, sliding a long-fingered hand...she knew those hands well...up her side and leaning his body into her. She could feel every inch of him, and had she not already been aroused by their previous interactions, she would have blushed uncontrollably.

The Potions master leaned on his forearms, peering into her eyes, and smiled. She breathed heavily, gazing back at him, the crooked smile sending shivers up her spine. After another urgent battle of tongues and thrusting...fabric against fabric...he left her and stripped himself of the rest of his clothing. She felt briefly annoyed that she had no easel to imagine from, for she had never seen him without his button down. The disrobing revealed what she knew was a fit form, but was blotchy and blurry to her eyes. Nonetheless, nondescript Severus lifted her, hooking a surprisingly strong arm around her waist and depositing her in the pillows.

Soon he had her knickers vanished and had lifted the shift up around her hips. And then he was thrusting into her. New sensations were running through her blood, coursing through her entire body, electrifying and invigorating. He picked up the pace a bit, rolling his hips against her, gently at first until he sensed her need. Then his primal instincts took over. He held on to her tightly as he thrust, her quiet moans building with each movement. She lifted her head to take his mouth with hers, greedily absorbing his lovely sage-lime scent and his soft lips. Her nails dug into his broad shoulders, and all she could think was that she wanted...

"More," she gasped into his ear as she wove her fingers into his hair, the texture taking on one of silk. "Please, Severus!"

He slowed for a moment, startled...his obsidian eyes darkening, and then he lifted one of her dainty legs to rest in the crook of his elbow. Soon she could feel him losing control but she responded to his movements, accommodating every thrust he made. Desperately she clung to him as his thrusts became even more erratic. Hermione gave a guttural groan as she felt her orgasm surge through her body, from her belly to the tips of her toes and fingers and the roots of her hair. Through her own bliss she could feel Severus fall over the edge with her, crying her name as he spilled into her.

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Hermione was knocked out of her reverie when her bum came in contact with the hard surface of the floor. Shuddering from the very real reaction she just had, she had to take several breaths before getting up and dusting herself off. Her knees buckled a second time, but she caught herself on the edge of the sink, pushing herself up cautiously and looking in the mirror.

"Sweet Nimue, I am sick," she murmured to her very flushed reflection and then decided another cold splash of water would do her good, even if she had to return to the dungeons for her books... and maybe a trip into the stall beforehand. Yes, maybe.

I think a batch of Dreamless Sleep would do better than my experiment at the moment.

She could not help that although it was utterly embarrassing, it was entirely satisfying. Hermione had never, ever been in a situation like that before, and she marvelled at her overdeveloped imagination. Nothing had ever come close to anything that graphically amazing...not Ron, who had fumbled his way through sex like a blind fish; not even Krum, who had never managed to get his professional Quidditch-playing self into her skivvies. She'd only ever seen a man hook his elbow under a woman's knee while she had been flipping through channels late at night, two summers ago.

Why had that even happened? She never had dreams like that! They were always extremely surreal, punctuated by singing rhinoceroses and people with vegetable appendages...noses and ears, not... *that*. Had Hermione even realized that she had... those kinds of feelings for her professor?

Well, she did have regular feelings, at least. Hell, she had even bought him a Christmas present! If you could call these... feelings... for a man twenty years her senior 'regular.'

She calmly gathered her resolve and made her way down to the dungeons for another, hopefully 'non-confrontational', altercation. The two ideas certainly did do a right good job of contradicting one another.

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Severus was not surprised when the girl arrived, nearly fifteen minutes after class had ended. She looked quite pale...not that she hadn't been before, as he had noticed. The currently flustered know-it-all walked slowly up to him, her eyes never leaving the floor as she made her way to the desk.

"I apologize, Professor, for my unexcused absence." She swallowed and continued, wringing her hands absently in her lap, "I... don't know what came over me."

"Yes you do. But no matter." He tried to appear disinterested and returned to writing his comments for the trimester. "You do realize I must give you detention."

"You give detentions for untimely sneezes in class, Professor. Why would I expect anything less for something much more inexcusable?" She half smiled, but there was a distinct flush in her cheeks that had not been there when she entered his classroom.

Back to the old Hermione, I see. Although... she is still extremely unnerved. About what, I wonder."Yes, well..." He smiled, despite himself. "I suppose your logic is... undeniable."

"Eight o'clock tomorrow, then?" she sighed shakily, but Severus could not determine why. He wanted to find out what was behind those large, brown, tired eyes of hers and fix whatever bothered her. But it was not that kind of problem. She seemed... nervous. Perhaps it was just her clear lack of sleep.

"As always, Miss Granger." He nodded and excused her. She swung her knapsack over her shoulder and toted it out of the door hurriedly. He admired her shapely, shaking legs as she exited. Forcing himself to look away when she turned to close the door behind her, he growled at his consistent fascination with that girl. *Though undoubtedly she is a woman.* "Merlin, Severus!"

I cannot punish her in this condition! She's probably using every ounce of energy not to collapse. What good would it do to have her scrub the walls or bottle caustic ingredients? Doubtless she'd blow herself up, the little chit. There is something that is causing her to lose sleep...to act out of character.

"Something must be done," he stated aloud, dropping his quill in the inkpot, and then standing to find a certain portrait of a man who had what some may call an affinity... for lemon drops.

A/N: Okay... Longer chapter than normal...and worth it, I hope! I'm not amazing at lemons, and I apologize to those who were looking for a good T-rated story. T'was not to be. Blame the muse, but also, try to figure out what caused it...and no, it's not JUST her subconscious.

I've also complained about writing dream sequences before...they are a pain...but never have I written from Hermione's perspective.

And I had an idea about a lifelong wizard's versus a Muggle-born's awareness during dreams:

Magic seems to be enlightening in a way. Witches and wizards have a more innate connection with their souls and consciousness because they were raised with magic since early childhood, before logic mucked things up. Therefore, since Hermione has been raised differently than Severus...and yes, I know he's half 'n' half...her dreams are cloudier than his. Her intuition is secondary to logic, so therefore, she can never clearly see what she wants. Secondly, Ol' Sevvie here is a spy...near flawless attention to detail.

Does that make any sense? I hope so. I at least hope you know that I realize there's a difference between the two styles in which I wrote the dreams.

Happy reviewing!

Discussions With A Certain Former Headmaster

Chapter 16 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: Hey, I'm no JKR. I just mess around with her characters. Poor Severus.

Chapter Sixteen: Discussions With A Certain Former Headmaster

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Severus Snape walked briskly up the halls towards the main floor where he would no doubt find the Headmistress-cum-Transfiguration professor in the Great Hall ushering fourth years around to transfigure tables and benches into garden fountains or something else completely useless. He entered the Great Hall from the teachers' entrance, but was dismayed to find only a few stragglers left in the hall, correcting a couple benches back to their original state. Two of the Gryffindors could not quite manage to impede the pond water from spouting out of one upturned leg. Several Hufflepuffs were conjuring towels and casting drying spells left and right, but no one thought of using Finite Incantatem.

The Potions master approached the weary group without delay and found himself next to Dennis Creevey of all persons imaginable. He did not have a bloody camera like his older brother often had, but his obnoxiousness was twice as unendurable. Severus hissed as the younger Creevey wrung out his towel on an unsuspecting (and unsuspected) boot.

"Fool! Watch where you are wringing out that filthy pond water, or you'll find a festering stump where your own foot was!" Snape growled, and the boy nearly jumped out of his skin.

"I-I-I...I'm sorry, sir! I didn't know you were th..."

"Where is Minerva?"

"... Minerva, Professor?" he stammered, eyeing the Potions professor's pointed finger warily.

"Your headmistress? Stern looks, grey hair, irritating tendency to meddle in things that ought not to be meddled with?"

"She left." A girl with curiously orange hair called out as she stuffed the spout with another towel, only to watch sadly as it became soaked with greyish green liquid.

"And where, may I ask, did she leave to?" he snarled, but the girl was too preoccupied with the clog to give him a useful (or even respectful) answer.

"Well, she *is* the headmistress, as you said." The girl frowned at the towel and continued to stuff it into the jet, her hair turning magenta as her scowl deepened. Severus only rolled his eyes and turned towards the entrance hall.

"Ten points from all houses involved, for cheek, stupidity, and soiling my boot." He stormed away and muttered over his shoulder, "If only corks existed."

A few students on the outskirts of the crowd shook their heads and pushed forward to conjure such a thing.

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Severus burst into the headmistress' office without warning or greeting and stormed up to her large oak desk, breathing heavily from taking the staircase in twos. He didn't even know why he was in such a hurry, but an incessant nagging feeling in his gut told him that he should find out, now. Minerva McGonagall stood from her straight-back chair, a clear expression of alarm in her usually severe features.

"Severus, what is the meaning of..."

"I must speak with Albus." Severus folded his arms when he caught his breath.

"Is something the matter?" She pursed her lips and glanced back at the former headmaster's portrait before glaring at the unresponsive Snape across the desk.

"What Dumbledore and I discuss is of none of your concern. Anyway, you may have left your fourth years too early; they are wreaking havoc upon the Great Hall as we speak."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You should probably run down and help them before they flood the whole ground floor," Severus explained further as McGonagall's bespectacled eyes bore into him. He waved a hand toward the door, and it opened allowing for the woman to exit quickly. The headmistress grumbled tetchily as she marched back down toward the Great Hall, leaving Severus alone in a room full of portraits.

"Now, what exactly," said the portrait right behind the McGonagall's high-backed chair, "is so pressing that you had to usher poor Minerva out of her own office so unceremoniously? Not that I do not enjoy your company, Severus." Albus peered down at him through his half-moon spectacles, a kind yet curious smile wrinkling his brow. Severus felt rather foolish as his painted mentor steeped his fingers and leaned back in his chair to listen.

He mumbled to himself, "I must be going mad." Running his fingers through his long black hair, he began pacing, willing the other portraits not to listen. "I don't even know how this is in any way important."

"I believe," he began, "that we have both established you are rather left of sane, Severus, but that is not the 'something of great significance' that you need to discuss. I have never seen you so frazzled since the dark days."

"The first or second 'dark days,' Albus?" Snape smirked and leaned on the desk with his hands, only to find that Dumbledore was not going to answer. He hesitated to give a reason for his sudden need to talk about it. *What is it, anyway?* "It's Granger..."

"Ah, Hermione! And how is she, Severus?"

"Completely infuriating." He could practically *hear* the old man smile in his oil-based confine.

"And you have just come to this conclusion, I see."

"No." Snape rolled his eyes, but continued nevertheless, "She's recently taken up with Potions."

"I had heard that to Minerva's disappointment she was no longer pursuing a career as an Auror. How interesting that she would choose Potions." The portrait Dumbledore brought a withered hand to his face to stroke his beard, a distinct twinkle in his eye that Severus was *very* aware of.

"I have been nothing but caustic to her since she arrived here an obnoxious and attention-seeking child."

"And now that she is not a child?"

"She wants to take up Potions and bother me with her personal problems!"

"... Is there more to this story than it appears? Forgive me, Severus, but I do not understand why you are so disconcerted."

"I dream about her," he blurted, looking up at the old wizard to see Albus' lips forming a slight 'oh'. "Not in a...*sexual*... way!" Severus pinched the bridge of his nose as Albus sighed in relief. "She used to appear at random, semi-disguised and glorified, but for the past couple of months..." Snape sighed. "I have found it less and less difficult to get along with her lately, and I think it is a result of those dreams. This is where the 'I've gone mad' part comes in."

"I see. How very intriguing."

"It's disturbing!" Severus gritted out, frustrated. Dumbledore did not interrupt. "She was giving me an especially excellent Obsuoplagae salve in class, and I had to take it out of her hand, and when I touched her she nearly shrieked from fear; I have to remind her to eat...she bloody *forgets* things...and she hasn't slept in weeks..." Severus broke off. "But of course, I have no idea why I'm bloody telling you this!" He nearly stormed out of the office without so much as a goodbye if not for...

"She brewed Obsuoplagae?" Dumbledore's wispy brow rose into an even more vaulted curve.

"Yes, she has been filling some of my orders for St. Mungo's during classes instead of the usual tripe that I reserve for her idle friends."

"And you trusted Miss Granger to perform these tasks without sleep?"

"She no longer needs higher brain function to brew such a potion."

"Severus, I would be more careful..."

"I would not give her instructions unless I had full confidence in her!" Severus flung his arms up in frustration and then pressed on, guiltily, "It is not as if I gave her *Wolfsbane* to brew..."

"It appears you have somewhat of a soft spot for our talented Miss Granger."

"I don't follow." Even though he did.

"I could be wrong, but...forgive me...my judgments are not often ill-conceived, that you have not read Newton's Theorem on the laws of attraction."

"Isn't that..."

"We are not speaking about Physics, dear boy." The wise man clasped his long gnarled hands together and began, "Newton theorized that when two souls become attracted, they are connected by an equally magnetizing force. Obviously, the man was off his rocker, because one can have affection for another and that affection may never be returned."

Severus folded his arms.

"What I am trying to say is: there are no set laws to attraction, Severus... It manifests itself in many ways."

"I... you..."

"One aspect of life you have yet to discover..."

"I refuse to believe that I...that we...that she is..." the Potions master trailed off. "Merlin's saggy left..." Fawkes squawked as if to admonish his slurs.

"I'm sure the entire idea is completely ludicrous."

"Indeed."

"Severus, you cannot control your own feelings."

"*Feelings*," Snape spat as he stared down at the floor.

"Let me finish, Severus. I suggest, above all things, to set Miss Granger right again. I've heard she has been isolated this year. That, and she seems to be... distracting you." There was a groan of protest from Severus. "I also suggest that you come to a conclusion with these detested feelings that you have...I know you are unaccustomed, but it is nothing to be ashamed of. Lastly, it would be grand if you could convince Minerva that another portrait down by the kitchens would be good for an old man. There is a splendid still-life of a Muggle candy store across from the ticklish pear."

The room was silent as the younger of the two fought inwardly. "Thank you, Albus," he began, eyes still glued to an unusual stain on Minerva's Oriental carpet, "for your time."

The retreating professor did not hear the quiet chuckle of the former headmaster's portrait as he muttered, "I would love to hear how the detention goes, Severus." Then he popped a lemon-drop into his bearded mouth.

A/N: A short chapter compared to the last one, but this lets everyone know how Sev is feeling about this whole mess I've made. Hope you're enjoying November! Obsuoplagae is extremely butchered Latin stuck together to make 'blood thinning/thickening' potion. I can't quite remember what it was supposed to mean. I wrote this scene last year *shrugs*.

Just Tea

Chapter 17 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

Disclaimer: *There is an anti-litigation charm [oogie-boogie boogie!] on this page, so don't even try!*

Chapter Eighteen: Just Tea

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Again, she sat alone. It was a beautifully cool day in January, and she was alone. It was this way all the time, now. She missed Harry more than anything. She missed people. And she was sitting alone, in the middle of an icy garden (under a warming charm), with a heavy herb digest in hand. *Books*, she thought. *How utterly trite, Hermione*. At least she would be seeing the snarky, cynical, *sexy* Potions master tonight.

"Gods! Where did *that* come from?"

Exhaling and tossing the faded book to the ground, Hermione stretched and lay across the old moss-ridden bench, peering into the blue sky. Merlin, she needed sleep more than anything, but it had become quite a triviality...a complication in her life. She was restless. There were no friends to occupy her time, no Dark Lord to plot against, no academic challenges to wile away the hours. She found odd things to do instead of dwelling on the lack of things to do...like organizing her personal library by alphabet, her closet by color by dreary color, and even the moving pictures hidden under her four-poster in a dusty box by category and date. She had taken up drawing, counting ceiling tiles, meditative breathing, staying deliberately away from her potion...which had become rather of a fixation... But, she always found herself checking in on the simmering concoction at odd hours of the night, when no one would see her.

She was, frankly, a mess.

Hermione closed her eyes, draping an arm over her face to shield it from the bright sun, and soon she fell into a lolling sleep. A sleep hopefully infested with none other than said sexy professor.

Damn it!

--

"Miss Granger."

"Professor." The girl nodded wearily as he held the door open to his classroom, stepping in and shuffling up to the desk usually assigned for detained students. Severus had other plans, though, and decided that he would let her figure things out for herself, walking down the hallway toward Hufflepuff House. When she turned around, she would most definitely find an empty room, the door left ajar. She would nearly sprint to catch up to Severus' retreating form and therefore be in an altogether more enjoyable mood...he hated (despite himself) to see her so resigned.

He was not disappointed.

"Where are we bloody going?" she growled, huffing and puffing after her near-run down the corridor.

"Language, Miss Granger. You will find out soon enough."

"If I had known this was my last night alive I would have said my goodbyes," she grumbled, silently lighting her wand and shrugging off her school robes, which revealed a teal jumper and trousers that looked to be black, but then again the near-darkness could be playing tricks on his eyes. Severus was glad that he could admire this exceptional specimen from his peripheral vision, noting the V-shaped neckline and subtle curve of her silhouette. Severus concluded that it was decidedly hot on the South side of the dungeons.

"Unfortunately not...we are going to the kitchens."

--

"Ooooooh! A dinner date?" The sarcasm was evident in her tone. "I would've spruced up if I'd known." Having woken up from her nap with the sound of the eight o'clock bell and the starry night above her head, Hermione had sprinted down to the dungeons, leaving time only for a few calming breaths at the eighth chime to look composed enough as she entered his classroom. Everything seemed to be going wrong lately.

"Don't be ridiculous," the professor snorted in reply as they neared the portrait at the end of a long and winding hall. "Just tea."

Hermione halted in front of the portrait. "Excuse me?" *I'm obviously having auditory hallucinations*, she thought.

"I can't have you blowing things up in your state of disarray, can I?"

She stared blankly at him, having no idea why that would lead to tea, for Heaven's sake.

"Miss Granger, you have yet to wave your arm incessantly in the air and dole out quotes from *Potions Quarterly* for an entire three months, now. There is something definitely wrong with you."

The girl studied him for a moment with narrowed eyes.

"Therefore, we are going to do something slightly more productive."

Hermione harrumphed and stomped into the vast kitchens, waiting with crossed arms as Severus Noxed the torches in the hallways and entered as well. "So, tea, eh?"

"*Accio* 'Constant Comment,'" said Severus with a flick of his wand.

"Tea it is," Hermione said more to herself than to him. This man was the farthest from whom she wanted to have tea with at the moment *Might go as far to say that I'd rather discuss American politics with Voldemort than be in the same room as the man I'm having dreams about.*

He swept over to the same table they shared in October and heated the underbelly of a surprisingly colorful teapot. "Have a seat, Miss Granger."

Well, it's not like I have much of a choice she protested feebly and frowned, shuffling over to her once-weekly seat. Once settled, Severus transfigured two cups...both the same from their one-time encounter, but Hermione was too focused on the wall past her professor's left shoulder to notice...out of the salt and pepper shakers stationed on the counter and placed the tea tin in front of them. He lit the pot with the flick of his wand and set the water to boil.

"Let us review some plants and herbs, now, shall we?"

Hermione sighed dramatically, and folded her arms atop the counter. "As you wish, Professor."

"First, we'll be general. What are some plants that have healing properties, Granger?"

"There's Fluxweed, member of the mint family, sinus solution and muscle pain reliever when applied in a salve to affected areas... Hellebore generates a feeling of calm... Nettles cure boils... Dandelion juice is fairly medicinal..."

"Yes, but have you ever tried to ingest any of those ingredients?"

"Well, I would have said other things if I'd known we were talking *edible* plants!"

"I assure you they are entirely edible, but Hellebore generates too much of a euphoric feeling when ingested versus inhaling it, whereas dandelion juice produces rather violent nausea."

"Fluxweed, then?"

"Dry mouth."

Hermione made somewhat of an 'ew' sound.

"And nettles, well... you don't want to drink liquidated nettles. Their roots taste like sawdust and their thorns taste like the backside of a troll. So, if you wish for the flavor to be optimal, you crush them. Then baste them in water, salt, and mooncalf's milk and you get the best salve for any kind of boil possible."

"Well, for ingestion, there's ginger."

"Well done, Granger, now what would you combine with that?"

"Erm..." She paused to think. "Pomegranate juice?"

Snape scoffed.

"No, you're right. Are we making tea?"

"Theorizing tea, yes, before I make you explain your current state to me."

Hermione's head snapped up, and she heard a loud crack at the back of her neck. "Explain my current state?" She was sure that back in December he'd been on the verge of asking her while they'd been shopping, but the words hadn't left his mouth until now. *The mouth that was snogging you senseless in that dream, Granger* She grimaced.

"Yes. You're not eating; you're not sleeping; you're not socializing; you're not participating in class, and you've begun other sorts of peculiarities that are so unlike the Hermione Granger I know."

"I... I..."

"And you're terribly inarticulate." He was mocking her, now. But it wasn't helping.

Hermione's eyes watered, despite herself, and she looked away.

"My apologies, Miss Granger," he said suddenly, as if he actually cared. "I didn't mean to hurt your...ah...feelings."

"No, no." She sniffled, wiping at her eyes quickly, but the tears slid down her cheeks anyway. "You're not making me cry. I do it all the time, now. I can't...I can't help it. It hurts..." She sobbed loudly, then swore, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "Gods, I am so pathetic!"

"No, you are not. You are entitled to cry, I should think."

"I shouldn't be crying."

"You have every right to."

"You think I'm weak, don't you?"

"Bloody hell, girl, I'm not judging you!" He frowned, a pained expression flitting across his face as she buried her face in her hands.

"I don't know why I'm crying. I'm sorry!" She sniffled again and looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"Stop. Apologizing," he gritted out.

"Sorr..." She clamped her hand over her mouth and gave a small giggle.

He glared at her. "Let's start with the easiest one to answer, shall we?"

"I'd rather not talk to y..."

"Have you been speaking to anyone else? Making conversation?"

"Not... really? No. No, I haven't."

"That is my first inquiry. Why have you neglected...let me rephrase...why are you not spending your time with Mr. Potter?"

Hermione paused. There were many reasons, but she supposed it was how uncomfortable he and Ginny made her feel. They were so in love, and they'd be getting married in the summer, and then the next thing would be a glowing Ginny who would, although unconsciously, rub her pregnancy in Hermione's face. Voicing her last thought aloud, she murmured, "They're permanently glued at the hip, now."

"Mr. and Mrs. Potter-to-be?"

"Yes. It's nauseating."

"Indeed."

"I don't mean the two of them together. Or... or... Oh, I don't know! It's so difficult to carry on a decent conversation anymore without either of them bringing up the other or talking about wedding plans. It makes me feel... so..."

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"Alone."

The girl nodded, looking up at Severus with watery eyes. "And... and I don't want to be mad at Ronald anymore."

Severus' face darkened, and he stiffened considerably.

"I know what he said was ridiculous and unforgivable, but I can't ignore him for the rest of my life. He and I will be Auntie 'Mione and Uncle Ron to Harry's kids! We've been through so much, and I know he's going through a rough patch with Fred gone. He wants a family, and I understand that. But I am obviously not the one to give it to him. I don't want all that. I want knowledge."

"He's not worth your time."

She rolled her eyes, and Severus smirked despite himself. "We've been through too much to drop the friendship completely. I'm not saying I'm going to march up to him and shake his hand when I leave detention, I just want... it all to go back to the way it was."

"Things change, Miss Granger," Severus said quietly.

A/N: Part two up next. No, the scene wouldn't just END like that! What do you take me for? Next part is basically the climax of the story or a semi-climax, if you will... And you'll find out what exactly is the reason for Hermione's dreams and peculiar behaviour. :) CC

Oh, and three cheers for ladyinthecloak for her infinite knowledge of the English language!!

A Big Mistake

Chapter 18 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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Thanks to Ladyinthecloak for her brilliance; all mistakes belong to me, really.

Disclaimer: *I do not own the Potterverse. I've just stolen some key elements and have skewed them terribly for my own perverted means... Heh.*

Chapter 19: A Big Mistake

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"Things change, Miss Granger," Severus said quietly.

"Understatement of the century!" the girl exclaimed, leaning into her cupped hand and raising her eyebrows for effect. She wiped a bit at her nose with a tear-drenched sleeve.

"I'm assuming you are under copious amounts of stress, are you not?" he asked.

She sat up slightly and looked down at her tea. "Yes."

"How much sleep are you getting?"

"Four, maybe five hours a night," she spoke absently, tracing the rim of her cup.

"Miss Granger! You must have at least eight hours of rest a night! You need Pepper-Up... or Dreamless Sleep!" Severus started rattling off different elixirs and potions for sleep aids when she cut him off.

"Perhaps... Perhaps Dreamless Sleep wouldn't be too terrible," she muttered hesitantly.

"No wonder you don't raise your hand in class. It is probable that you cannot even lift it up!"

"Not true! I just don't like the attention anymore! It's all just stares and whispers now! And let me ask you a question, Professor! How many hours of sleep do you get per night?"

"That is none of your concern," he hissed and then regained his footing. "But I am not using a Time-Turner during my work hours."

She huffed and looked away, folding her arms again. "It's so I can take all the classes I wish to take."

"How many hours a day are you using the Turner?"

"Erm... seven?"

"Miss Granger, you are spending twenty-seven hours in a twenty-four hour period *awake*. Each day. Do you not sense something wrong with this picture?"

"I might," she grumbled, picking up her tea and taking a big gulp.

"How many years have you been using this Time-Turner, Hermione?"

"Since third year, sir. I almost had it taken away, though, when Harry and I used it to save Sirius..." She kept talking, but Severus heard none of it. He was too busy making calculations in his head.

Nine months out of the year she has been using the Time-Turner. For four school-years... That's thirty-six months. She's eighteen now... That would make her nearly... "Twenty-two."

"Sorry, sir?" Granger's eyes snapped to his widening ones.

"You're approximately twenty-one-and-a-half years old, Miss Granger."

"Wha...No, I'm... *WHAT!?*"

"You've lived four school years...which is thirty-six months...twice over. That would make you approximately three years older than you think you are."

"My God."

"Indeed."

They sat in silence for a long while, just sipping absentmindedly at their tea, until Hermione started fidgeting in her seat. Severus could tell she wanted to say something,

badly.

"What would you like to tell me?"

"N-nothing, sir."

"Hermione." Her head snapped up, eyes wide with surprise. *Damn it, man!* He resolved to make up that last statement. "You want to tell me something."

She seemed halfway through a nod before she shot up from her chair. "Mm...no."

He did not know exactly why, but he stood up, too. "Granger."

"No. No, sir. I-I have nothing to tell you... sir."

He walked around the table and reached for her arm as soon as she backed away from him. "Why are you running away? It is a question, Granger...not a death threat."

"Hah!" she laughed nervously, adding, "I beg to differ," in a half-whisper.

"Your reaction suggests that you are hiding something. And you know what else it suggests? It suggests that what you're hiding is already something that you know isn't good for you. Now you will tell me what that something *is*." He punctuated that last demand with the unsheathing of his wand.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to get an answer out of you by all means necessary. I've asked you many, many times before about your sleep-loss and your lack of appetite, and obviously it's not something as common as a disorder or disease. You've enough on your plate, Hermione, now spill it."

"Now you *are* threatening me!" Her eyes were wide in terror. Irrational terror, mind.

"Don't be silly. I'm not going to k..."

"Oh, Gods! You're going to kill me!" she breathed. And then she frowned. "What? Why are you going to kill me?"

"Christ, woman, did I not just say...or attempt to say, rather...that I *was not* going to kill you until you rudely interrupted me?" He nearly shouted, then, remembering himself he tucked his wand back into his sheath and strode quickly towards her.

He grasped her by the arm and she squealed, "It's the potion!"

Severus stepped back. "Wha...?"

"It's the potion I think it's the potion," she said in a rapid slur of words. All the while there was a guilty look on her face. Then her eyes seemed to glaze over as she began again, "I've been researching the next ingredient, and it's niggling at me, like I know what the answer is, but it's in a deep, dark corner of my mind, and I can't quite reach it...I've gotten pretty far, you know." Her words were excited and staccato, like she didn't dare take a breath between each one, and she was shaking all over.

Severus just stared in disbelief.

"I've coined it as the Epiphanoserum. It's supposed to reveal the innermost, subconscious feelings to the drinker. There are side effects, though...that's what I've been researching, you see. If the drinker has certain feelings for a certain person, their physical attraction might be enhanced toward the one receiving affection...I think it's because of the cacao and the powdered oyster I added a month or two ago...I can't remember. All my thoughts get all jumbled up in my head when I think about it." She giggled. "It's so exciting, creating potions. I think so; don't you think so, Professor?"

"You're addicted," he said flatly.

"What? Don't be silly. I haven't ingested a potion since I was last in hospital."

"Where is it?"

"Where is it?" she repeated dumbly, as if her brain had suddenly stopped processing information. Which he supposed it had, due to the obscene amount of exposure she had had to this 'Epipha-something-or-other'.

"I do not think I have to repeat myself, Hermione." He grabbed her shoulders and shook her once. "Where is the potion?"

"No! Don't destroy it! I've worked on it for months!" She appeared suddenly lucid and this was good, if not for her determination not to tell him anything.

"It's not in your bedroom, is it?"

"No! That's incredibly stupid to experiment where you sleep!"

"It's incredibly stupid...period...to experiment unsupervised, Hermione. Do you have any idea what this has been doing to you?"

She inhaled. "Why would it do anything to me? I'm just researching and adding ingredients every now and then!"

"Merlin, did they teach you nothing at Peniche? Have I taught you nothing? Potions aren't just digested, Hermione, they can have serious effects on your olfactory glands. They distort your mind, Granger!"

"You...you can't have the potion."

He shook her one last time. "Hermione. If you go on for any longer without sleep or nutrition, you will die. This potion is causing your loss of appetite and strange conduct...both your anti-social and your fidgety behaviour. You. Are. Addicted. And it's destroying your personality."

"No!" she replied weakly, almost in tears.

"Legilimens!"

A cluttered desk. Thinking about it in Charms. Dark and cramped cupboard. Thinking about it in Hogsmeade. Sweet, seductive smells that wafted from the cauldron. Thinking about it at dinner. A dusty, restricted tome that she fell asleep on every night. Thinking about it during their luncheon while she laughed at something he said. A door in the Gryffindor common room.

He drew back, angered and frankly a little hurt that she hadn't been thinking about him while he made her smile, and turned towards the doors to the hall.

He had to get rid of it.

--

It was two in the morning when the tears stopped, and the weight that had been lifted had seemed less cataclysmic. He'd taken the cauldron and Evanescoded it in one grand swoop of his wand and had taken her potions set and books and cauldron with him.

And he'd left her alone to cry herself to sleep.

She'd run up to her little bedroom and buried her face in the pillows, lamenting. In embarrassment. In despair. In relief. In grief that these feelings that her rational mind...now that it was back in action, after she'd been cut off...had decided were forming for her Potions master were actually a by-product of the potion. They weren't real.

Not real.

-O-

It surprised her to wake up in the morning to find both a bottle of Dreamless Sleep and Pepper-Up at her bedside.

A/N: *Whaddya think? I've had this scene (in several different drafts) since the beginning, but like the finished product. I hope it explains a few things!*

*This is kind of where the story turns sour...not terribly, mind. Though, I must remind you now that there is no instant gratification for Hermione or Severus...they've got a bit of a road ahead of 'em. 'Specially Sev. The story is a bit more SS-centric for the rest of the time. But, you'll still be hearing from Herms, don't you worry your little heads! There was also a scene from the Halloween Ball that hints at the general direction that Hermione's story is moving in now, if you can find it. It involves another person. *wink wink nudge nudge**

BUT!!! *This is still and will in the end be a SSHG fic! I PROMISE!!*

A Bigger Mistake

Chapter 19 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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Disclaimer: *Everything is Rowling's, except for the plot... although that may belong to someone else, too. You never know. ;)*

Chapter Nineteen: A Bigger Mistake

--+

Severus Snape watched as his seventh and eighth years filed into the classroom, a month after 'the incident', as he had coined it. He was in a terrible mood. His dreams, which had been relatively frequent, came back now each night with a very ethereal Hermione in long, flowing robes of different colours, depending on the *storyline du nuit*. The stories had never progressed so far as to remove those enchanting dresses, but since then Severus had woken in a cold sweat with a side of arousal and had resulted in cold showers and Calming Draught at four o'clock each morning, as an addition to his morning ablutions.

The literal girl-of-his-dreams entered the class now under the protective arm of Potter, and they were both laughing quietly, passing by his desk without so much as a glance in his direction. He wasn't sure if he wanted to see her smile return to a frown when she looked his way. But then he remembered he was very angry with Granger for her rule-breaking (not to mention her self-neglect), and the boy next to her for being alive and the spitting image of his father, and the whole class for being a pathetic group of dunderheads, and the world for being so damned unfair. Oh, yes, and Dumbledore, for being a meddling old fool, even in his oil-on-canvas confines.

The two *lovebirds* continued to laugh and joke and chat and help one another as they prepared their cauldrons, and he wanted nothing more than to wipe the smiles off their faces. Why was she back to normal? It was...what? A month after his outburst in the kitchens during what he'd planned to be a nice, calming, *informative* detention. There was supposed to be tea and intellectual conversation and a reason for why she'd been depressed. He'd known the whole *barren* thing, and the Ron problem, but the potion-induced obsession thing... he'd not expected that. He should've known.

Just then, Hermione let out a heart-melting giggle at one of Harry's jokes. Severus felt like vomiting. Potter then pinched her side playfully as the other students chatted quietly about their potions. That just about did it.

"Miss Granger," he said to the new self-recording instruction and ingredient book in his hands, "you and Mister Zabini will be switching places for this up-and-coming project."

He heard Blaise sigh resignedly but had eyes only for Hermione, who just now had a look of astonishment on her face. "Why, sir?"

"Because you and your little friend, the Boy-Who-Lived-Again-to-My-Great-Displeasure, will have to keep your hands off each other for at least four-fifths of this quarter-long..." everyone groaned, "...project. I fear that it is just not possible. Switch places with Mr. Zabini, Miss Granger."

--

"Malfoy," Hermione spat as she slammed the half-ton of books on his workspace.

"Hello, Granger," the blond said, flicking his eyes to her in greeting. He nudged her Herbology book off of a stray list of ingredients for a eucalyptus sap base and returned it to his notebook. Organizing himself quickly for their project, he made room for her to sit down in Blaise's still-warm chair. Feeling like she was walking into a trap, Hermione sat slowly, pulling her own notes out and setting her Arithmancy book on the desk.

"Get the ingredients, would you?" Hermione left out all pleasantries. "I have to organize..." Draco sighed resignedly and made his way to the closet without as much as a twitch of protest. Having organized properly, Hermione disposed of her tie and rolled up her sleeves, ignorant to the new pair of eyes she had just earned.

Draco returned ingredient-laden to their workstation. "It's loads easier to find things now that that pig sty has been fixed up." He dumped the jars with a clink and arranged them in order.

Hermione couldn't help but smile as her worst enemy praised her work. "Let's get this done, shall we?" Her tone was a bit lighter when she next said, "I never performed this back in Portugal, but it shouldn't be too difficult if we work together."

"Lead on." He gestured to the ingredients. "Queen or Pawn this afternoon, Granger?"

She clasped her hands together with a grin at his jest. "Pawn today, I think. It would be all right with you if I did all the dirty work, right? I never had the opportunity to make Draught of Living Death before and I've always itched to do it! I mean, you can make it if you want..."

"It's fine, really." His lips quirked into a smile and he sat back in his chair, resting his hands behind his head, "I'll just sit back and tell you what to do."

"And you'll do the Arithmancy equation!" she protested quickly.

"Oh, that too. Don't worry yourself, Granger. I don't shirk my duties like your boyfriends." Hermione shot him a warning look as he drew out another parchment from his bag and scribbled wildly upon it. Hermione watched with a frown over the brim of the cauldron as she brought the Eucalyptus and nightshade blend to a simmer with her wand. "What? No scathing retort?" he said to his quill as he weighed the potency gestation period.

"No." She scrunched her nose. "You're trying to bait me."

"That's neither here nor there. You know it's true." He underlined the result and sauntered up to Snape's desk.

--

Severus was peeved. No, no. He wasn't He was angry...no!...furious. And he didn't want to think about why. Not that he had been planning any future with Hermione. No, that would be ridiculous. But he certainly hadn't intended to shove one of the most attractive boys at Hogwarts in her face and eventually up her skirt! What he had planned to do was watch her...the pretty, innocent, *single* little creature that she was...from afar, basking in the filtered light of her presence for the rest of her days here. And then maybe he'd keep tabs on her when she went off to... do whatever it was she wanted to do.

He stopped in the middle of the classroom, paling significantly and reaching out to the nearest flat surface for support.

She wants to be a Potions mistress. Or so she said, back in September.

His knuckles turned white as he gripped the table. He had probably ruined all chances of seeing her ever again out of classes when he had screamed at her in January.

Did he love her? Because this sudden lurch in his stomach told him so. He had spent what little chance he had this past month, and now with his luck, she'd be off gallivanting with Draco Malfoy from now on. Fate was having her fun with Severus Snape again, and apparently, even after repenting, he could not get his way.

"Uhh, are you alright, Professor Snape?"

Severus looked up into the blue eyes of Hannah Abbott who looked, along with most of the class as he peered around, a little worried that the Potions master was going to explode all over her notes. That, or chuck up what little he'd had for breakfast. "I'm fine," he bit out, rising to full height and gazing imperiously over the entire class. "If anyone is not half-way through their equations by this time there will be serious point deductions!" He strode back to his desk and sat down, cradling his forehead in his hands and letting out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

He glanced at her through the curtain of his hair, and then he decided something. Fuck Fate and what he wanted. He'd lived all his life giving, and if he loved her, then he would keep giving. If it were to make her happy, then he'd keep giving.

He would apprentice her. He would mentor her. He would do whatever she asked of him from now on. In January he had forgotten how depressed and stressed and helpless she had been feeling, all because she had broken some rules and had taken risks for something that she had a passion for! When hadn't she and her friends broken the rules? And hadn't he, when he was her age, experimented with his own ideas, all the while battling emotional upheaval and harassment and offers to join the Dark Lord's followers?

He was a fool.

A bloody, sodding fool and he had just given her up...rather indirectly, of course...to a man much more capable of affection and understanding than he had ever been. If she ended up marrying the pillock, then so be it. At least she would be content.

--

The bell rang just as Hermione and Malfoy had stoppered the first step of their long-term project.

"Well, I think that went perfectly well, don't you?" Malfoy turned to her after they had set their two samples down on a rather surly Snape's desk. The professor had looked away when he met Hermione's eyes, but she ignored him. Though, there was a funny twinge in her stomach. She wrote it off to be the after effects of the Pepper-Up.

A/N: *If you can predict what's coming, I apologize very much in advance. It's the muse's fault!*

Did you like it? Did you love it? Hate it? (Tell me about it!)

Thanks to ladyinthecloak for being an awesome beta AND admin. All mistakes and inconsistencies belong to me.

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Here's a shout-out to ladyinthecloak, beta extraordinaire!!

Disclaimer: *I'm making no profit in this...I just took someone else's brilliant ideas and ran with them.*

Chapter Twenty: Trégua

~*~

"Well, I think that went perfectly well, don't you?"

Returning to her desk, Hermione replied, "I hope so." She bound the experiment notes in her Potions journal and tucked it neatly into her bag.

Malfoy watched her pensively as she did so, organizing himself to walk back to dorm, as this was the last class of the day. She was a little disconcerted by the attention, but did not comment.

"Well, I'll...er...see you tomorrow, then," she muttered, flinching as she picked up her overstuffed bag from the desk. Malfoy said nothing but unsheathed his wand, calmly pointing it at her...well, she thought it had been at her but it was actually pointing at her bag...and suddenly said book-bag felt light as air. "Oh!" she gasped at the odd sensation. "Thank you."

"Didn't you use a modified expanding charm on that famous purse of yours last year? They reported it in the Prophet, although it might've been a rumour."

"Well, yes, I did..." She trailed off, realizing her stupidity.

"Did you think it only worked on out-of-fashion carrying purses?" He smirked. They filed out of the classroom with the rest of them and headed for the Entrance Hall.

She blushed. "I guess I just wasn't thinking."

"What?" Malfoy gasped, dramatically. "Everyone!" he exclaimed in the middle of the hallway. "I have an announcement! Granger wasn't thinking! I repeat: GRANGER WAS NOT..."

Hermione smacked him upside the head, and the others around them either chuckled or looked on in awe as the two would-be enemies *were* flirting. "Shut it, you!" she growled, half-heartedly.

Malfoy just sniggered and put his hands up in surrender. This sudden camaraderie was nice...erm...*extremely* strange.

They walked on for a while at a slow pace until Malfoy asked suddenly, "How much sleep are you getting, eh?"

She looked at him quizzically. *As if he has any concern for my wellbeing.*

"You don't forget things like that, Granger," he said by way of explanation. "I should know; I've been trying to keep up with your *uttrebrilliance* all these years."

Hermione frowned slightly.

"And," he continued, "I haven't seen you in the dining hall nearly as often as I used to."

Now, this was getting ridiculous. "Let me get this straight. You've been watching for me in the dining hall?" Hermione's eyebrows rose considerably.

Malfoy shrugged. "Sixth year, Potter was onto me, so I was always keeping an eye on the three of you obnoxious Gryffindors. And when Potter was missing, which usually meant he was obsessing over me... that left you and Weasel at the table...he's very hard not to stare at, Weasley. Complete shit at table manners."

Hermione laughed, "It's like watching a televised plastic surgery program! You don't want to, but you can't help but stare!"

He just looked confused, but quickly recovered. "Well, I haven't a clue what you're on about, but I'll take your word for it."

"Right. Sorry. Muggle stuff."

He continued right along as if she had never interrupted, "And this year, Potter's got his fame and fiancée, Weasley's made a complete git of himself and is probably at this very moment groping that twig-of-a-Hufflepuff because he can't grope you, and you're alone."

She blanched at his rather blunt but intuitive assessment.

"You haven't been eating or sleeping; that much is obvious. Although you do look much better than you did a week ago. If you were sleeping, you wouldn't have to rely on the second most brilliant person in school to help you with charms you could normally do in your sleep."

She stuttered at this matter-of-fact tone and then spat, "When did you become all considerate and nice? I have good reason to believe you're either plotting against me or plotting to get in my knickers, so out with it!"

"Listen, Granger," he started.

"What happened to 'Mudblood'? Huh?!" Hermione shouted.

Malfoy closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to wipe the pained expression off his pale face. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he said, finally.

She said nothing but looked at him confusedly.

"I'm sorry for everything. I wish I could say everything I've ever said or done was an act...some of it was, mind...but I can't change what's happened between us in the past."

I've had time to think... about things. A *lot* of time," he said emphatically.

"And?" Hermione prompted, her voice small.

"No one should hate you for something you can't control."

Hermione stopped breathing. She'd never heard it phrased so eloquently before. Sure, she'd whined about the unfairness of prejudice and all, but...

"Besides," he continued after an attempt to gauge her reaction, "magic isn't carried in the blood, really. There's no such thing as a 'pureblood' unless you're referring to how long magic has been taught in the family. If you were gifted with this power without association, you must be truly extraordinary."

"Well...er...I..." She had absolutely no fucking clue what to say *to that*.

"You see... I'm trying to make amends." He held out his hand. "Can we call a truce, Hermione?"

She was hesitant, but she eventually took his hand and gave it a light shake. "Truce, Malfoy."

"Draco," he corrected her, giving her small hand a light squeeze.

She smiled tentatively. "Draco."

--

"Hello, Minerva," Severus said when she had bid him enter her quarters.

"Severus! How was your Monday?"

"I would think you've learned not to ask me that question."

"You are right," the Headmistress chuckled. "Mondays are always the worst."

"Too right. But Thursdays come in close second," he said as he sat down in the chair opposite her in front of her fire.

"Indeed. Almost...but not quite...the weekend. I understand." Minerva held a glass of single malt scotch in her hand, two large cubes of ice swirled in the stout glass as the golden liquid flowed around them. "How was your weekend then, Severus?"

"Agreeable, actually. I popped in to visit my grandmother in Ansouis. Of course, I also collected the regular potions ingredients native to that area. Poppies, snails, lavender." He folded one leg over the other and clasped his hands together.

"How is she, Severus?"

"... Her health is declining, but she has a young lady from the next town who cooks and cleans for her, now."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. The girl is competent, though?"

"Well enough. Although, I think she may be nicking 'Mère's crystal every now and then. I couldn't find the gravy boat the last time I checked."

"Goodness me."

"I know; why 'Mere wanted the gravy boat at that particular time is beyond me."

"I didn't mean..."

He grunted dismissively. "Her things are of no use to me, but she insisted that I inherit 'the estate' once she's gone."

"I'm sure you'll have a good use for the place. The way you describe it, it sounds lovely. Have you thought of making it your permanent residence, Severus? After she's gone, that is."

"Trying to get rid of me already, Headmistress?"

"Ohh!" Her Scottish burr was evident in her mock frustration. "You know I didn't mean it that way. Over the holidays and during the summers...when you're not teaching. So you can get away from all this nonsense."

"That's actually what I've... wanted to speak with you about."

"Oh?"

"I've been pondering the possibility of private business."

"During the summers?"

"Full time, Minerva. I've never liked teaching, and you know it. I only ever did it for Dumbledore and I agreed to stay on the team this year because I knew it would be extremely difficult to find a competent Potions master to do the job on such short notice. I've had enough of working for someone else, if you know what I mean. I wish to open up for an apprenticeship."

"Severus, obviously I understand that you never enjoyed teaching, but must you leave so soon?" She sighed. "Stay until your ten year contract is up. As you said, you know how difficult it is to find a capable teacher when there's only two months to look. If I start looking now, it will be easier for both of us."

"*Minerva.*"

"Please, Severus. You're my Deputy. And you're sane...most of the time. I'll need much more time than two months to find someone and have him or her cleared by the school board. Stay three or four more years."

"As you wish, Headmistress," he acquiesced gruffly, although McGonagall knew he had agreed full-heartedly. She knew it would be difficult to leave his only true home of twenty-some years.

"On another matter, how is Miss Granger?"

Severus' ears perked up and he sat straighter in the high backed chair. "I believe she and Mister Malfoy have made peace, as of today."

"Oh, well that's good news, I suppose."

Severus shrugged.

"What?"

Not wanting to jump up and screech, 'I WANT HER ALL TO MYSELF, YOU DUMB BINT,' Severus settled on an eloquent "Ah... I can't help but think he's up to something."

"Well, people change, Severus."

"Not that fucking quickly."

"I've a perfect counter-argument to that claim," Minerva said smugly with a raise of a sharp eyebrow.

"Who, then?"

"You, Severus."

"... Well, I'm allowed to be suspicious. Especially after her incident...she's particularly vulnerable."

"Of course, Professor. You may keep an eye on him. He's had a rough time this year, as well. You know he never had the heart to join his father, but he was still confined with the rest of them for two months, this summer."

"I will. Now, what did you wish to discuss? Not another ball, surely?"

"Oh, no no! Graduation this year will be particularly extravagant, though."

Severus groaned.

Minerva stood and got herself another bit of scotch, Severus waving her off when she silently pointed to her bottle sitting where Dumbledore's Pensieve used to dwell.

"I swear, woman, you are channelling the old fool more and more these days."

"I resent that, Deputy Headmaster!" said the 'old fool' from his oil painting.

A/N: I hope you sort of liked this chapter! I myself think it's rather uneventful and boring on Severus' side, but after the next chapter he'll actually be taking a bigger role. I swear. I think. XD

Oh, and don't kill me. I warned you.

Title translation - Truce

Oh, and **P.S.**, this is where things will start to slow down because we are quickly catching up with my FF.net account. Soon, I will be submitting the chapters as I write them.... Oh, God.

Unlucky

Chapter 21 of 27

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Disclaimer: Not mine. Hopefully, you would notice the subtle differences in syntax and style so as not to confuse my spectacular writing with a best-selling author. But, if you don't I guess I could say I'm flattered and hope that you don't sue me or something.

Chapter Twenty-One: Unlucky

~~~

Severus was restless. And why was he restless? He couldn't fucking well tell someone if it were stamped on his forehead (he didn't like mirrors all that much). The first emotion that he could possibly pin down was self-loathing, although that unfortunate sentiment was always lurking somewhere in his subconscious. Then, there was probably anger. Yes, that made sense. He'd been angry all week. And it was his fault... leading back to that previously mentioned self-loathing. He cared for a young woman very much like him, who was now strolling around the castle with her new best friend like they'd been two peas in a pod since birth. Oh, sod *all* those nasty little insults the boy had thrown at her over the past several years! He'd been kidding! Just a little joke! A little laugh! Ha ha. Ha.

Merlin, was she so desperate for a friend that she would disregard every fault of the boy?

Stuff it, Sev, his conscience hissed. *You did the same when the first Malfoy befriended you. You forgot all the vitriol he'd spat at you. You pretended that he wanted your 'friendship' for you and not for your usefulness as a slithering snake.*

Hmm, another emotion: jealousy.



"Fuck!" The percussive word bounced off the burgundy walls of his sitting room, and he put down his brandy with a loud clink. Unfolding himself from his favourite armchair, he began to pace... again. "This damned carpet will need replacing, old man, if you keep wearing a trough into it!" he muttered.

Stopping, he realized yet another familiar feeling. Frustration.

"Friday, the thirteenth of February. Lovely. It's the day before Valentine's, and I haven't had a proper shag in... what? Oh, holy shite!"

Aha! And so, more specifically: sexually frustrated. Horny, randy, whatever.

Without realizing what was happening, Severus found himself in front of his wardrobe, ripping his winter coat off the hanger and shoving his arms through the sleeves. He clumsily stuffed his green-and-silver-stockinged feet into his heavier dragon hide boots and found his gloves on the shelf with his scarf. Wrapping himself tightly in more green-and-silver-striped warmth, Severus used the corridor he only ever had used during his spy years to escape unnoticed from the oppressive confines of the castle.

Perhaps a trip to Knockturn Alley was prudent.

--

For Hermione, the week progressed in such a daze that she didn't even realize the coming of the weekend. It was Friday, and she was sitting in the library, scribbling furiously on a parchment for an essay in Arithmancy. She was halfway through her second body paragraph when Harry and Ginny plunked down across from her, startling her and causing a rather sizeable splotch to bleed across her quote from *Arithmantics*. She cursed loudly and looked up to glare at the offenders, but Harry caught her off guard with a charming smile.

"Well, the old Hermione is certainly back."

Ginny shook her head, grinning. "Sure is."

"What do you mean? I've always been Hermione! And I'll thank you to know that you ruined a rather excellent paragraph with your boisterousness. I need to get this finished so I can do my History homework," she nearly snarled at them when Harry chuckled in disbelief.

"Hermione, what day is it?"

"Honestly, does that have anything to do with what I just said?"

"Very much so," Ginny muttered under her breath to Harry, and he squeezed the redhead's hand, looking back at the brunette across the table.

"Answer the question, 'Mione."

"The thirteenth, Harry," she growled exasperatedly.

Ginny exclaimed, "Ooh! I didn't reali..."

"Yes, 'Mione," Harry ignored his girlfriend and added, "and it's a Friday, as well."

"Thanks, Harry." Hermione glared at him some more. "I'll try to stay away from ladders, mirrors, and black cats."

"Merlin, Hermione! It's a *Friday*!" Ginny laughed.

"As in, you-don't-have-classes-tomorrow-because-it's-the-weekend-Friday! Tomorrow is Valentine's Day and everyone is going to Hogsmeade. We were wondering if you'd come with us to the Three Broomsticks or something," Harry added.

"Right. And third-wheel with you two staring into one another's eyes as I clean my fingernails? No thanks."

"You won't be a third-wheel," Ginny smiled.

"Actually," Harry began cautiously, "we were wondering if you'd like to go with Neville."

"Wait. What!?"

"Just as friends!" Ginny interjected.

"Just. As. Friends."

"Ah... yep." Harry looked nervously to Ginny and then bit the side of his cheek.

"You're a terrible liar, Harry."

"No worse than you!" Harry whined.

"How do you know I didn't already have plans?" she asked him.

"What?" Ginny frowned.

"How. Did you know. That I didn't. Have a date. Already. Harry James Potter?"

"Well, I guess we just sort of assumed... Hell, Hermione, I'm sorry."

"Yes, well, I'm off to go find my date, then."

"Alright. You have fun, tomorrow. Can we meet up afterward?"

"If I have time," she said dismissively and stuffed her essay in her lightened bag, hoisting it up over her shoulder and striding swiftly out of the library. Once she reached the Entrance Hall, she stopped. "Shite," she said rather too loudly.

Now, to find a date.

*What are you getting yourself into, Granger?*

--

*What are you getting yourself into, Snape?*

Severus now stood in the middle of Knockturn Alley, his boots muddied with sludgy, soot black snow and his face turning in indecision from his right to his left.

Madame Ashwinder's? Portner's Pleasure Chest? Madame Ashwinder's? Portner's Pleasure Chest?

"Damn, damn, damn," he said in rapid succession, startling an old woman with a peg leg who was waddling past.

Well, he hadn't been to Madame Ashwinder's since he was twenty-two, but...

The old witch spotted his quandary and limped back toward him, halting on her wobbly leg as she peered with narrowed eyes into his face.

"May I help you?" Severus snapped.

"Let me make this easier for you," she began. "Disease... or slight embarrassment?"

Severus merely growled and stalked toward Portner's Pleasure Chest and yanked the door open with a loud creak. He stood in the opening of the shop in hesitation until the same woman prodded him hard in the back.

"In or out, lad? Make up your damned mind."

*She's going in the shop with me?* He nearly squealed as she gave him another poke under the ribs and strode quickly into the shop, scandalised at her behaviour as she took the spot behind the register.

"Was that some new form of marketing?"

"No. If men listened to reason as you did, then there'd be no trouble with all this aforesaid disease."

"*And* you'd receive much more business." Severus folded his arms.

"And I'd receive much more business. I know who you are, but do not hesitate to ask for anything. If I gave away identities like Madame Ashwinder's gives away wanks, well, then I'd have no business whatsoever!"

"... Too right. Well, I'll be... off... in, ah, that section, I think."

"Enjoy!" the woman croaked and busied with the register.

--

Hermione checked every possible nook and cranny that had ever associated itself with his name. Everywhere. Including the astronomy tower in a strange, backwards logic that told her that he was hiding from her in a place where no one would expect...the place where he had almost become a murderer.

Of course, she had mentally kicked herself for thinking that he'd come anywhere within one hundred metres of that wretched spot and could now be found marching down to the dungeons at high speed.

When she finally reached the hallway...she knew where the Slytherins lived, but couldn't pinpoint exactly where the dormitory entrance was...she spotted Blaise and another boy exiting a deserted dungeon classroom a hundred paces away.

"Oh! Blaise! Wait up!"

The young man in question spun around rapidly, but then relaxed a fraction when he realized who it was. "Hi, Hermione," he called down the hall.

She was huffing and puffing when she reached the two who, unbeknownst to Hermione, were glancing sideways at one another and shifting their feet nervously.

"Oh, hello," Hermione breathed, turning to the Nott boy and holding out her hand. "I don't believe we've met properly."

"Right. This is Theo, Hermione. He and I are... classmates."

"You can call me Theodore," the wiry, brown-haired boy said quietly, grasping her hand briefly before returning his to his back pockets.

"Pleased to meet you," Hermione said and turned mainly to Blaise to ask him, "Have you...either of you...seen Draco around? I've been searching everywhere for him, and he's seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth."

"Not sure, Hermione."

"He's up on the lawn, supervising the ice-cream social," Nott muttered.

Hermione exclaimed a quick, "Oh, thank you, Theodore!" as simultaneously Blaise asked incredulously, "They're having an ice-cream social in February?"

But Hermione did not hear him because she was already halfway up the staircase by the time each boy grabbed the other's hand and slinked off to the deserted common room for some pre-Valentine's celebration.

--

"Excellent choice, Master Snape," the old woman chuckled when he put his chosen item on the counter. "'Bottled Bliss' products are quite something. That will be twenty-six galleons."

"What is the dosage that you recommend?"

"One is quite enough. Two at a time and you'll be in quite a pleasurable coma for a week or so."

"Interesting."

"Don't test it."

"Did I say I was going to?"

"Definitely not, but you got that look in your eye."

Severus chuckled. "It would be a nice way to die, wouldn't it?"

"Hmm. After the seventh fantasy, you'd be starved and to put it bluntly, you'd have nothing left to ejaculate." Severus made a face, and the old woman cackled. "Don't worry. One dose is only one dream. Take it at night."

"Yes, of course."

"And make sure to sound-proof your quarters. Wouldn't want to scare the students."

"Thanks," Severus growled sarcastically, although he was partially grateful...he might've forgotten to ward against such a thing. He then paid and got the hell out of Knockturn Alley, making sure he transfigured and shrunk the bag to look slightly less conspicuous.

It was nine o'clock when he returned to the castle, and he passed by the stupid ice cream social that had been organized by Professors Sprout and Vector. Young Malfoy was leaning against the treat-laden table and waved to him as he passed. At least he and Hermione weren't spending twenty-hour hours a day with one another. Hopefully, this would be a much more eventful night than he had had on past Valentine weekends.

--

"DRACO MALFOY! I have been searching everywhere for you!" Hermione exclaimed when she found him on the front lawn. He was leaning against the ice cream table in a brown, hip-length pea coat, long legs stretched out in front of him as he watched a group of third year Ravensclaws and Gryffindors in a lively snowball fight. He held a vanilla and chocolate swirled ice cream cone in his hand, and had been licking absentmindedly at it as he watched until she yelled his name. His eyes found her almost immediately as she jogged down the steps toward him, a small, questioning smile spreading across his features as she reached him.

"Granger, it's a bit cold out for a skirt and blouse, don't you think?" He smirked, and Hermione realized that school attire in February was probably less than appropriate. The evidence was probably easily seen across her chest.

*Damn it!* She swore in her head. "Well, it's a bit chilly for ice cream, too, isn't it?" she growled, wrapping her arms around her as she started to shiver.

"Yes, well, I am conveniently basking in the midst of a warming charm, whereas you... certainly are not."

Hermione stomped over to him and promptly poked him hard in the chest. "Well, then let me in!" she exclaimed, and he looked slightly taken aback. However, he unbuttoned his pea coat and uncrossed his legs so she could hug him round the middle. "Ahh. Much better," she mumbled into his sweater and looked up at Draco, who was gazing determinedly at the snowball fight, again. It became decidedly awkward when she realized what others might think were they to see the two enemies snuggling under one jacket. "It really is cold, Draco. I didn't mean..."

"Yes, it's fine, Granger; now what did you want?"

"They have you chaperoning, again?"

"Prefect duties, among other things. This is sort of a detention issued by Professor Vector."

"Oh, was this for disrupting Arithmancy yesterday?"

"No," he remarked, "but if it had been, it would have been your fault that I was out here." She chuckled sheepishly and shook her head. "Why were you so desperate to find me? Besides the fact that I'm so irresistible you can't spend more than several hours away from my side?"

Hermione laughed, only to become more serious when she said, "I need you to save me from a very unfortunate circumstance. So, I needed to ask you something before someone else did."

"Oh?"

"Are... are you busy tomorrow?"

Malfoy's eyes, which had been focused on the fight a few metres away, snapped to Hermione's and he frowned. "Er... I wasn't planning on being busy tomorrow. Why do you ask?"

"Well," she exhaled loudly, "it's a bit of a story, but I don't want to bore you, so I'll tell you that you are my only chance of avoiding some really awkward hours with Neville Longbottom."

If Hermione had been looking up at the time, she'd have seen his face fall slightly, then return to the same nonchalant expression of before. "So, I'm a scapegoat... for tomorrow... for Valentine's."

"In essence, yes."

"Gee, Granger, I feel so very loved." He grinned.

"Oh, no! Not that I wouldn't want to spend time with you...I should think we've become... friends, right?"

"... Yeah."

"So, Hogsmeade, then?"

"What time? I mean, yeah... what time do you want to meet in Hogsmeade?" He swallowed and his hands hovered around her waist before falling ungracefully to his sides again.

"I was thinking that we could ride together?"

"Alright. I'll meet you in the entrance hall at eleven, yeah?"

Hermione nodded, smiling up at him. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "I told Ginny and Harry that I was going on a date with someone so I wouldn't have to go with Neville..."

"So, essentially, I'm your date."

"Essentially. But really, just friends! I swear! I'm so stupid, Draco... and sorry for asking you this. You can say no. Really." She backed out of his warm embrace and clasped her hands together, hoping that he wouldn't say no.

"Hermione, I'd have said no if I didn't want to go," Draco said seriously.

She blushed. "Oh... well, thank you!"

"I'll see you tomorrow, then." He smirked.

"Yeah, tomorrow." She smiled and then walked swiftly back to the castle and the promised warmth of the Gryffindor common room.

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**A/N:** I'm sure a lot of you are either banging your foreheads against the keyboard, biting nails, or pulling on your hair. I told ya it wouldn't be very fun... but Severus is still there in the background! And hopefully Hermione and he will be able to have another chat very soon. XD Anyway, I hope you got the hint that Portner's Pleasure Chest is a sex shoppe and Severus just bought a fantasy-inducing potion. If you didn't, well, now you know. Next chapter holds about a gallon of lemonade.

TO THOSE WHO HAVE PUT ME IN THE DOGHOUSE:

*I'm trying to make this as realistic as possible with these two pairings and I apologize to those who can't stand Draco Malfoy. My Draco is a bit different from canon, however, because he undergoes a lot between the seventh book and this year. All will be explained in the next couple of chapters. As of right now, realistically, Hermione would not gravitate toward Severus romantically because she thinks her feelings for him were generated by her Epiphonoseum because she is utterly embarrassed by her behaviour in the past couple of months, and because he is a teacher...most people would brush away the possibilities of such an unbalanced relationship because it's so outlandish. Not that people haven't thought about it... LoL.*

*To me it makes sense that Hermione would respond in the way she did to Draco because he is one of the few people who is paying her attention.*

*Read and review, please please please!*

## Love Untold

Chapter 22 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

**Disclaimer:** *I stole Jo's characters and a bit of her plot for some not-so-well-intentioned fun. So sue me. But, really, I'd rather you didn't.*

**WARNING:** Lemons afoot! You may or may not leave this page offended. And if you don't, think of it as a 'present' for your lovely reviews. XD

*Thanks to ladyinthecloak for her betawork!! :)*

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### Chapter Twenty-Two: Love Untold

--+=--

Frankly, Severus Snape was nervous. Not nervous excited, as one gets before a well-matched Quidditch game or before a wedding (although Severus had never had the misfortune of experiencing a wedding from that perspective). Neither was it the nervousness one feels before the first day of school or before public speaking...

No. This was genuine apprehension, which made him want to go 'hug the porcelain,' rather than open the discreet bag on his bedside table.

"Shit."

He was already *naked*, for Circe's sake!

Several scenarios flew through his conscious, not withholding one headmistress calling upon him for a student's discipline while he was in the throes of very satisfying shag with a virtual female in a virtual world.

He hummed disapprovingly and then waved his wand about, adding several more wards to his chambers and then an extra stinging hex to his bedroom door for good measure.

Finally mustering up the courage...it had taken him about an hour and his toes were getting chilly (after all, he was no Gryffindor)...he practically tore up the bag and dumped the contents in front of him.

*Bottled Bliss.*

"Shit," he said.

-o-

*Again, a familiar setting materialised in front of Severus. He sat against a tree in the same clearing he had so often visited in his dreams. A gentle breeze blew hair about his face and he found that everything was crystal clear in this 'dream'. He could feel and see things he wouldn't normally notice in a regular journey through his subconscious.*

*"Clever invention, this," he murmured aloud. Turning his head to the right, he spotted her. All the breath seemed to leave his lungs as he looked toward the fountain pond. She was turned away from him, sitting atop the warm slate lip of the mossy fount, her legs dangling in the cool waters. And she was naked. Severus staggered to his feet and leaned on the tree for support, watching her avidly while she lifted her riotous copper curls above her head to reveal the most exquisite back he had ever seen, accentuated by soft curves and lean muscle.*

*He was reminded briefly of a memory by the side of the lake not three or four months ago, but shook the thought away as she took a clay pitcher in her unoccupied hand and dipped it in the water, proceeding to pour it over her head. The water cascaded and glistened down her back as she did so, and Severus' entire body pulsed with desire and... affection? His chest hurt more than he could ever remember and he felt fantastic...full...seeing her in this simple, gorgeous ritual.*

*He finally made a step toward her and continued when he realized that he was barefoot and would make no sound. She rubbed at her arms and twisted the long russet*

locks in a thick rope to rest in front of her left shoulder over what Severus presumed would be a perfect, round, creamy breast. He inched ever closer and he could hear her singing quietly as she went through her ablutions.

Brilliant potions work, he thought not for the first time during this sequence.

Again she took up the clay pitcher, pausing in her song as she submerged it in the water and poured it over herself again.

"You have a beautiful voice," Severus rasped, sounding much creepier than he'd ever meant to. Her head turned toward his voice a fraction, but she only continued to sing as if he'd not said a word.

Finally she placed the pitcher on the side of the pool and slipped quietly into the water, submerging her head fully and coming up for air after pushing off the bottom of the pond forcefully, still facing the statue of Venus that perched in the centre of the pool. "I was not expecting to see you today," she said finally, rubbing her wet arms as a warm breeze blew by, and he felt a sudden jolt of recognition.

He knew that voice.

"I was not expecting to be here, either," he said lamely after he managed to slow his pulse. She sunk under the water and came up for air at the lip of the fountain. He closed his eyes tightly, not daring to look at her face and see who she was. "Do you have a towel or a gown?" he asked tentatively.

"I let the air cool my skin."

"Oh. Should I turn around, then?" His eyes were still closed and he received no answer until he heard a small plash on the slate.

She answered in a low voice, "What good would that do, Severus?" His eyes shot open, and he felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach.

There she was, in all her glory. Water rushed down the curves and planes of her body as she stood on the lip of the fountain, her long, dark curls covering her pert breasts from view, but not the apex of her thighs.

He could not breathe. He could not think. There were only two words flitting through his mind at this moment.

Hermione. Beautiful.

Her hips flared out from her waist in a gentle curve, and her legs, although she was relatively short, seemed to go on forever, finally ending with pale, dainty feet and rosy toes. She breathed calmly, not even twitching under his dark gaze.

Severus stepped toward her, warring with his feelings. How did this happen? But he could not deny that this felt incredibly right. She looked down into his face as he reached her. They were nearly on eye level...his eyes reached her nose. She brought cool fingers to his brow, tilting his head up to her, and leaned in to kiss him.

It was chaste, at first. And Severus' arms hovered awkwardly in the air between her waist and his sides as she tilted her head to the side and ran her pink tongue over his lower lip. He groaned, and his hands grabbed at her waist in a vicelike grip, his eyes falling closed. She leaned in toward him, tilting his face even farther back as they changed directions and he tentatively flicked his tongue over hers.

So right.

She claimed his mouth then, showing no mercy, and Severus gave in to her demanding tongue. His desire raced through his veins and he felt weak in the knees, fighting for balance. Slowly, he mapped her back and waist and buttocks with his hands, pulling her against him as he grasped the back of her upper thighs. She sighed and hooked her arms around his neck, then hoisted her naked legs around his waist, and he staggered backward a few paces. Her body hummed with laughter, and she nuzzled his nose as he regained his footing.

"Wicked nymph," he muttered between kisses and her arms tightened around his neck.

He slowly lowered her to the ground under a willow, kneeling a bit ungracefully and laying her in the plush, green grass. Her eyes were dancing with light and her lips were bruised from frantic kissing. She played absently with a curl behind her ear, and her breasts rose up and down with her panting. He leaned on his left forearm and placed his right hand over her tummy, spreading his shaking fingers. Her breath hitched as his hand travelled over her hip and then rested over the tight curls between her thighs. He lowered his face over hers and kissed her soundly.

"Wicked nymph," he whispered again, his voice quivering when he broke free of her moist lips.

"Severus..." she moaned and twisted a fist in his shirt when he finally slipped a finger inside.

Soon after, she had stripped him of his clothes in silent and rushed hunger and had pushed his shoulders into the grass, straddling him and dipping her face back to his, still trembling in the glow of her first orgasm in his arms. She trailed wet kisses down his chest, dipping her tongue in his navel when she passed it, which released a rather startled grunt from her paramour. She fumbled briefly with the button of his khakis. Soon he was free of all clothing, and suddenly she was straddling his shins and taking his penis in hand, stroking up and down lazily as his fingers twitched restlessly at his sides. Severus closed his eyes and bucked when her grip tightened, her bum lifting off his legs and a cool breath ghosting over his already weeping cock. And he was in her mouth, and she licked and sucked and did all sorts of unmentionable, beautifully unmentionable things to him until he was whimpering in torture.

It was then that she took him all the way in, bottoming out against the back of her throat and sucking hard. And, of course, he came so hard, bucking and holding his breath in a silence groan as he spent himself between her pink lips.

Slowly she let go of him, crawling back up his body and lightly stroking his sensitized skin as he clung to her and kissed every inch of her face. They kissed languidly until he felt a stirring again...Again!?...in his groin and she felt it, stroking him back to life and sinking down onto him. Slowly she rotated her hips, mewling when he grasped her bum, then her hips, and then her breasts.

Gods, she's breathtaking, he thought fiercely. And then he lost all clear train of thought. Soon, they were both gasping, clutching frantically at each other's bodies, and he flipped her over, taking her knees over the crooks of his arms and pounding into her.

"Say it," he gasped, "Say my name!"

"Severus! Oh, God, Severus..."

"Say you're mine!"

"I'm yours," she breathed.

They came together and, sweating, rolled over in the grass. She cradled him in her arms, and he clung to her for dear life, hoping that this dream would never end.

"Sing for me," he said a little while after. She smiled against his hair as he curled in towards her, snuggling his nose into the valley between her breasts and laying a kiss there. She wove her fingers into his hair, scratching lazily at the base of his skull. "Please..." He dared not say her name.

She took a breath, pausing in indecision, but he pulled her closer and she rose up on an elbow. He rolled onto his back, still keeping a hand around her waist, feeling her ribs expand as she began to sing:

"When my love and I parted, the wind blew cold

When my love and I parted, of love untold

Though my heart was crying, 'Love, come with me!'

I turned my face from him and sought the sea

When my love and I parted, we shed no tears

For we knew that between us lay weary years.

A bird was singing on a tree

And a gleam of sunlight lay on the sea.

Parting is bitter and weeping, vain.

But all true lovers will meet again

For no fate can sever my love from me

For his heart is a river and mine, the sea..."

-O-

Severus awoke as the first stretches of light pierced through the gossamer curtains in his bedroom window, his body still slick and warm from the potion's effects.

"I had no choice but to continue with the dream," he whispered to the room, trying desperately not to feel guilty.

It didn't work.

Today was Saturday, at least, so he could sulk in bed all day.

No, wait. It was Valentine's Day. Chaperoning. Again.

"Shit."

---

**A/N:** *WHEW! Well, I'm sure that was a bit of a surprise (I wasn't sure I could be that raunchy), but if you skim over last chapter, you might just get the vague idea that Sevvie's in a 'sex shoppe'. This is the result. Obviously.*

*Here is my explanation of the product Sev uses: Bottled Bliss "rifles" through your subconscious, taking the thing you want most (emotionally) and morphing it into fantasy that will either leave you completely satisfied or guilty. Of course Sev would choose the latter...what's one more thing to beat yourself up about? I hope this makes sense.*

## Be Mine

Chapter 23 of 27

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

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*Three cheers for ladyinthecloak (for she's a jolly good beta)!*

Hermione tugged on her woolly boots over her blue jeans and jumped around her room to hoist the trousers up over her hips, which were surprisingly rounder compared to a week ago. It was probably because of the vitamins she found on her bedside table every morning alongside a scrawled note in spiky writing:

## Drink, or detention?

Well, she was avoiding him, so *Drink* it was. And now her jeans didn't slide neatly over her bum as they used to.

"Well, at least my arse looks good," she muttered at her reflection in the Head Girl's mirror.

Picking up her knitted hat and scarf (Valentine's colours, of course), she shoved them on accordingly and flipped her hair out over her coat, slamming her door as she hurried to the Great Hall in her fluffy winter coat.

Draco was waiting outside in the courtyard with Blaise and Theodore in traditional, casual wizard-wear, which always seemed much classier than sweatshirts or the jeans that she wore. They all had collared shirts that tucked neatly into their narrow-legged trousers, probably rolled up to their elbows under their coats. Draco wore his brown pea coat again, over a dark green button-down. But Theodore wore a traditional over-robe while Blaise had a sort of mixture of the two (probably designer), the both of them wearing crisp white shirts and black trousers. They were gesturing casually, probably in some debate (Draco liked debating, she'd noticed), and they hadn't a speck of holiday cheer on them.

Imagining Draco in pink had Hermione giggling, so she slowed her pace. She'd need to catch her breath not to look out-of-shape when she reached them. Blaise and Theo turned when they saw Draco's eyes linger on a point behind them, and Blaise smirked, saying, "So, this is why you were looking for Draco, last night!"

"Hello, boys!" Hermione greeted each of them. "How are you?"

"Waiting impatiently for some mystery woman of Malfoy's," Theodore said, and Draco elbowed him in the ribs.

"I asked Blaise and Theo if they wanted to ride along with us in the carriage," Draco muttered, blushing a bit.

Hermione didn't understand, but she answered him. "Oh? Alright!" she said, still a little breathy. And then she furrowed her eyebrows, tentatively saying, "Don't you two feel a little... awkward... going to Hogsmeade on Valentine's?"

Draco sniggered and the two boys looked away, as if they were hiding blushes themselves. Hermione was feeling a little more than ignored when she received no answer, but her attention was quickly diverted when the next carriage pulled up, beastly winged horses pulling it along. All four of them decided not to acknowledge the two equines, silently conceding that they would not dwell on their pasts and climbing into the coach without fuss.

It was seconds before Hermione followed Blaise into the carriage that Draco slipped his arm around her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "They don't talk about it much, but it is common knowledge throughout our House that they've been boffing like bunnies since fifth year." Chuckling at her wide-eyed reaction, Draco took her hand and guided her onto the stepladder with a much louder "Up you go!"

They chatted lightly all the way to Hogsmeade, but Hermione had to stifle several fits of giggles. She'd not even realized the implications of two boys strolling out of an empty classroom. Over the summer it had become so normal to see two men together. Diniz was quite the hunk, she had to admit.

*I should write him when I get back* she thought as Draco and Theodore talked politics. Blaise just smiled serenely and glanced warily at Hermione every now and then.

Outside the frosted windows, thick, silvery flakes floated lazily along, landing where they pleased. They reminded Hermione of her excursion with the professor when she'd spied the snow that clung to his surprisingly long eyelashes. He'd been so taken aback when she'd cast a shielding charm...Hermione almost giggled, but then the awareness of their past struggle and what that implied crashed on her like an unexpected wave from a furious riptide. They were not on speaking terms, she supposed. Her heart gave a weak lub-dub and she shivered.

*Not real.*

What a cruel thing for her mind to bring that up on a day such as this.

She shivered again and found a warm arm draped around her shoulders, the side closest to Draco suddenly flush against him as he continued to banter with Theodore about the economic pros and cons of Goblin wrought coin... something like that, the last time she checked. She felt a little embarrassed being so close to his cheek...they were just friends, anyway.

But then she remembered her behaviour from last night. The way she'd wrapped around him like a scarf. Merlin, she was such an idiot. That sort of body language said volumes more than 'friend.'

So, she snuggled into him and kept warm until they pulled up to the snowy entrance to Hogsmeade, decked out with boughs of pink gauze and cherubs and such. Theo hopped out nimbly, followed by Blaise and then Draco, who turned to the door and opened it wider for her to step out.

"Hideous," Draco murmured after helping her out of the coach. Hermione laughed.

"Completely tacky, wouldn't you agree, Blaise?"

But Blaise and Theodore were already out of sight.

"They felt a little uncomfortable, if you couldn't tell."

Hermione sighed. "Will you tell them I don't care? I have several homosexual friends. I've seen men snog in front of me, for Heaven's sake...not that *I want* to, mind, but..."

Draco clamped a hand over her mouth before she could gather momentum on her 'I-love-poufs' tangent, as he would later term it...the many times she would try to convince Theo and Blaise that it was alright to be in love with someone of the same sex, blah, blah, blah. He released her as soon as she stopped making muffled protests under his palm.

Smirking, he dropped his hand and offered an arm, instead. "If I could even talk to them about it," he began as they moved under the entrance, "I would tell them. You'd have better luck talking to Blaise than I. They're weird about who they choose to confide in... I'm not one of those chosen." Draco frowned slightly as the two strolled between bustling shoppers, lovebirds, and rowdy students.

"Well, aren't you three the closest friends in your form?" Hermione asked. It seemed apparent, given that his two former cronies were dead. Most of the other Slytherins hadn't bothered to come back for a 'victory lap.' One seventh year, no matter how inadequate, was enough for them. Their tarnished names could be left in peace without the ruthless scrutiny of hundreds of classmates.

"Yes, but we're anything but bosom buddies. They and their families do not associate with Death Eaters."

Hermione growled. "That's ridiculous! You're not a Death Eater."

His answer was nothing but a raised eyebrow.

They walked in silence for a while until they reached the opposite end of the cosy little village, near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. The Shrieking Shack and all its dreadful glory creaked and swayed in the light flurry five hundred paces away. "Tell me about your summer, Hermione."

The question surprised her, but she did what she was told. She recounted everything. About Peniche and the before and after. The hours spent making friends from different places and learning conversational Portuguese and brewing potions she'd never dreamed of. Draco 'ooh'ed and 'ah'ed interestedly through all of that, and she discovered that he was quite a traveller...a true xenophile and an expert on the swankest spots on the Continent. But what he really wanted to see was Asia or South America or even Oceania. And then Hermione told him how she wanted badly to visit Greece and Morocco and Argentina and the United States...particularly New Mexico, which Draco thought was hilariously odd.

The two found a nice comfortable tree stump to sit on, eventually.

They'd already covered her break up with Ron, barely even skimming the surface this time, which she was grateful for, and chatted about how she'd completely neglected all of her school requirements for the coming year. They'd laughed about that.

"*Hermione Granger?* Hogwarts' princess?" he'd asked dramatically, his jaw wide open in a comical impression.

"Hermione Granger who?" she'd replied. And then she'd asked him about what he'd done with himself over the summer.

Which was what brought her here to stare at him, dumbstruck as he made patterns in the snow with a well-made boot.

He'd begun, casually. "Stared at the walls, mostly."

"Come now, Malfoys are always up to something!"

He'd snorted a little self-deprecatingly. "I spent my lovely summer in Azkaban, with most of the Dark Lord's remaining followers."

Enter 'dumbstruck stare' followed by 'patterns in the snow.' Awkward beat.

"Draco?" Hermione's voice almost cracked. She didn't really know what to say.

"As I've said before, I had a lot of time to think. Walls are pretty uninteresting in general, but Azkaban's are hard to look at without imagining what's caked on them."

"But I thought you were pardoned!" she squeaked. "You never took the Mark in the first place! How could they just throw you in there by association! It's an outrage!" She stood and began pacing, muttering under her breath about unfairness and such.

"You're forgetting who you are talking about. The Ministry didn't need any reasons. Anyway, I've had attempted murder on my record since my seventeenth birthday. Intent is almost as bad as the real thing in the Ministry's eyes, Hermione."

"You'd never have tried if he didn't threaten your family," she said miserably.

"So what, Hermione?"

"*So what?*" she spluttered. "Draco, no matter who your family is, you were never a Death Eater. That's exactly like blood prejudice...declaring someone guilty by association."

"Nevertheless, I had a nice two-month stay. Can't change the fact that I vacationed with Dementors for the summer," he said matter-of-factly. "I got out with minimal consequences," he offered. "I'm on probation like Professor Snape..." Hermione's ears perked up a little. "That's why I have extra duties. Professor Vector is my supervisor."

"How?" Hermione asked.

"Your Potter friend manages to *still* be a prat while simultaneously acting the selfless Boy-Who-Lived-Again."

She hadn't even realized. "Yes, he has an uncanny ability for that." Hermione plunked down next to him and began tracing runes in the snow along with him. "I can't believe he didn't tell us."

"Potter is much more guarded than he used to be. There is some information that he wouldn't even tell his friends anymore."

Hermione bristled. "Draco, I don't think you understand..."

"I asked him not to, Hermione. It was a deal between the two of us and didn't concern you. Do you understand?"

Hermione frowned at him, furrowing her brows as she wondered about her new friend. He was much more...*something*... than she'd originally thought. "I suppose so."

Draco suddenly stood and spun around to offer his hand to her. "Galloping gargoyles! What a lovely topic of conversation to pick up on Valentine's, wouldn't you agree, Miss Granger?"

"Indeed, Mister Malfoy." She laughed as he hoisted her up and offered his arm again.

"I think ice-cream is in order. Nothing like a scoop of Chocolate Vanilla Swirl to get your spirits up." They headed into town again, continuing to chat as if this were a regular occurrence to see the two of them, arm-in-arm, together.

"Ice-cream? But we're in the middle of February, Draco!"

"You forget that nothing in the Wizarding world is conventional, and that there's a little something called a Warming Charm." He looked down at her out of the corner of his eye. "You seem to be forgetting that a lot lately."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I will have ice-cream whether it's eighty or twenty degrees outside. Join me?"

*The fact that he still finds little things to be happy about after what he's been through.* she couldn't finish the thought. "Oh, alright," Hermione sighed dramatically.

They found the stand at the top of the hill outside of the candy store and Draco ordered a cone of his favourite. Hermione declined, but agreed to sit, stand, or slouch with him while he finished it. She was glad she could find a friend who still could be a kid when he wanted to, despite what he'd been through... despite what they all had been through; he was a rarity. A treasure.

The old Hermione would have laughed if someone told her she'd find a friend...something special...in Draco Malfoy.

But, of course, this wasn't the old Hermione. 'Old Hermione' was long gone.



'New Hermione' was fun. And unpredictable. And could make friends with whomever she wanted, thank you very much. She liked this new Hermione.

"Professor Snape's staring at us," Draco muttered after they'd gone to lean against the side of The Three Broomsticks.

Hermione was startled out of her reverie and looked across the snowy pathway to see the professor sitting on a stone bench, glaring at the both of them over today's *Daily Prophet*, his long fingers crinkling the sides as he clenched his knuckles. With a sudden need to rebel, Hermione glared back.

"He hates Valentine's. Especially public displays of affection. Lovely how he got stuck with chaperoning, again." Draco sniggered under his breath and then took another lick. "You're sure you don't want some?"

"What? Oh. I suppose I wouldn't mind a bit. Is it good?"

"Is it good?" Of course it's good! Try a lick." He held it out to her.

Still in a rather involved staring contest with the Potions master himself, Hermione leaned over and took a long, distracted lick, savouring the creamy flavour. Snape's eyes darkened considerably and he stood, stalking off immediately. Draco sucked in a breath beside her and began speaking. She didn't notice, though. Her stomach had sprouted a colony of butterflies, it seemed.

"...lin, Hermione, you'd think you were trying to seduce him. You were practically having your way with my ice cream!" Draco chuckled a bit nervously, but kept it light.

Hermione flicked her eyes to Draco's noticing his blush. She smiled mischievously. "Sorry. It was good!"

"Apparently," he laughed and nudged her with his elbow. He appeared to ponder asking a question, but instead continued devouring his ice-cream.

"How would you feel about eating lunch with Harry and Ginny?" she asked after a while.

"Do you mind being seen with me?" He looked down at her, his eyes belying his worry.

"No. I've been following you around all week, Draco. I've gotten past caring about what others think. It got annoying. I was tired of caring about pitying comments about my undesirable, infertile person."

"Hermione, you're not undesirable."

"Thanks, Draco," she laughed. "I'm glad you don't think I'm *terribly* repulsive."

"No, you're really quite beautiful, Hermione."

Hermione was quite taken aback. They both stared at one another for a ridiculously long pause, and then looked away. Draco tossed the rest of his cone into a nearby bin, stuffing his hands in his pockets and grinding his teeth.

*He probably thinks that went over badly.* Hermione turned to him and put a tentative hand on his forearm. "Thanks, Draco."

He looked at her, then apparently giving up on whatever anger that had been bubbling under the surface, he took her hand and led her into the pub.

The shocked faces of Harry and Ginny would be a source of many laughs for the next couple of months. As the Slytherin held out Hermione's chair for her and sat between her and Neville's date, Hannah Abbott (apparently, Harry and Gin hadn't anticipated that Neville would have asked someone as well and were feeling rather sheepish about it), Draco greeted the Hufflepuff and then glanced around at the other three Gryffindors as if this wasn't completely bizarre. Eventually, everyone settled into casual conversation, and Hermione didn't even realize until they'd gotten up to leave that she hadn't let go of Draco's hand for the entire luncheon.

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**A/N:** *Uh oh! Well, that should explain a whole lot about Draco's behaviour...and why I haven't labelled it as OOC. Because, let's face it, this whole story is somewhat out of character, and I'm okay with that. ;-)*

## A Very Merry Unbirthday To You

*Chapter 24 of 27*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

**A/N:** *Thank you to my muses, Polly-O Cheese Sticks, and to those lovely readers out there who are still reading (even though I'm a terrible updater and I have food products as inspiration). Oh, and a big hug to ladyinthecloak, who ploughs through my grammatical/canon blunders without complaint.*

*On with the show!*

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### Chapter Twenty-Four: A Very Merry Unbirthday to You

~\*~

The first of March arrived more quickly than anyone in the castle had anticipated, and with it a bit of snow melt and beautiful white light. Severus easily noticed the change in mood of the 'dunderheads,' as there was a significant increase in missed homework assignments and a corresponding decrease in pranks in the hallways. Potions essays were the same as ever, though, dull and fluffy (reeking of laziness and un-inspiration, more like), and Severus was beginning to wonder why he even bothered.

Well, he'd have to bother for another three years, at the request of Minerva.

Today had seemed relatively uneventful, disregarding the odd incident with melted cauldrons and one rather disturbing incident that involved quills and eyeballs. However, everything else seemed pretty... normal. Well, it was really quite strange, actually, not having a war going on and all. But it was *nice* that the only problems in the castle involved teenaged drama and Peeves. Eurgh. Peeves. He wouldn't be able to get that stupid song out of his head for at least the whole month... Then of course the pesky poltergeist would be at it again with "RABBIT, RABBIT, RABBIT! IT IS THE FIRST OF THE MONTH: HAVE AT IT, AT IT, AT IT!!!!" And Filch was no help. He still seemed to think there were spritzings of mistletoe about whenever the Potions master was around. Which usually set the poor professor running. That wasn't unusual. Though, Severus had never expected Argus to be... homosexual. He liked... cats... didn't he? Fuck, this was Albus' fault. Yes, he may be six feet under (or laughing from above), but he'd started the stupid tradition of mistletoe several years ago. Fuck all.

Severus shed his robes as he entered his living room from the classroom, toeing his shoes off and slumping down into the sofa for a bit of a nap. And, of course, the door would now announce a visitor since he'd finally gotten comfortable.

"Coming!" he growled and sat up on the couch, rubbing his temples and then pulling his hair back into a queue. It was getting long.

He wrenched the door open to find Malfoy on the other side. "Mister Malfoy, to what do I have the pleasure of seeing you after my teaching hours are over?" Of course, it was not pleasure but more of an annoyance, but most people took it the same way anyway, so Severus asked his brain to please stop running internal dialogues. At least not with company present.

"Afternoon, Professor. I wasn't able to catch you at the end of class earlier, but Hermione and I have finished the efficiency calculations for the hinkypunk entrails."

Severus couldn't help but wonder why it was Malfoy who stood in front of him instead of Granger. Was she still angry with him? He was brewing her health potions, for Merlin's sake! *Besides, you should be mad at her for that wanton display in the middle of Hogsmeade in front of a bunch of teething thirteen-year-olds (ahem, yourself)* He mentally ignored the fact that he'd had to storm back to the castle for a quick and desperate wank before coming back to escort the little buggers to school. "Well, let me have it, then." Severus held his hand out, hiding a bit of a blush, and the young man handed him the parchment. He took enjoyment from tearing it from his grasp, especially when the kid jumped (subtly, but it was *still there*).

"We were thinking of continuing this afternoon so we could start the second trial tomorrow, but we need your approval beforehand. Obviously." Severus read the calculations through twice.

*This is brilliant.* "You're thinking of using *goat* milk instead of *tebo* milk?" He started murmuring to himself and running scenarios in his head. "Well, that's surprising, but it looks like it should work. This is really quite innovative, Mister Malfoy. You did all this?"

Malfoy's eyes lit up when he started speaking about his working partner. "Well, it was actually *Hermione's* idea, because we had to think of something that wouldn't magically inhibit the effectiveness of the entrails I'd added to the equation. Goats are non-magical, so it made perfect sense to me. And there are more nutrients...we need the magnesium without the mucous-producing qualities that cow's milk would have. Goat milk allows for those with type A blood to drink safely without negative side effects\*. Indigestion, nausea... measles."

Severus hummed appreciatively. Even though he couldn't stand the idea of them working together unsupervised, there was nothing like potions innovations to get the professor excited. He suddenly liked the idea of allowing his two best students to extend their month-long project. They seemed to be coming up with curiously original results.

"I did do the equation, though. Hermione's left that to me." Malfoy beamed, as if it was the epitome of happiness to be told what to do by the professor's estranged know-it-all.

To be honest he'd probably smile goofily, too, if Hermione paid him attention again. He didn't have time to contemplate what kind of attentions he might like her to pay him before Malfoy interrupted his thoughts.

"So, do we have your permission to continue? Is it brilliant enough?" The younger man smirked and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Just continue with your theoretical applications, Mister Malfoy. No experimenting without my supervision. Run through the hypothetical instructions should you add the entrails and goat's milk. I'll send you word when I am available."

"Thanks, Professor." And then he backed away, almost skipping up the corridor towards the shortcut to the library.

This was his fault.

*Well, at least they're not dating, yet. Though, Malfoy does look positively blissful. I wonder if she can tell... Probably, she's clever enough, and he's completely lost his Slytherin subtlety.*

He tried not telling himself again that this was his damned fault and decided to take a shower. He was still a bit oily from classes. Looming over cauldrons all day did take a toll on one's hair.

Maybe he'd have a wank, too.

Hmm.

--

"I think I'm having my birthday early this year." Draco flopped down into his seat next to her as she pored over a new edition of *Sweet Dreams: Gustatory Additives to Sleeping Draughts*, leaning against the table and sitting backwards in his chair. Hermione ignored him until he had something intelligible to say. "At least, it feels like it," he added in a self-satisfied sigh.

All right, well, she couldn't pretend to be uninterested for that long. Considering the mood he was in. "Okay, what did he say?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to stop theorizing because *he's* given us permission to do the experiment!" he hissed rather loudly, his excitement completely upsetting the holier-than-thou façade he usually kept as the 'consummate Slytherin.'

Hermione gave a rather undignified squeal, which startled a third-year study session over near the Charms section and resulted in a nasty look from Madam Pince, who was scowling at them over a self-help book at the counter. "Oh, shit..." She immediately hissed back, "Oh, this is so exciting! I can't wait!" She flung her arms around his neck and could feel him sniggering silently as she squeezed him tightly. When she finally realized what she was doing, she pushed him firmly against the table, feeling a little disconcerted when something flickered behind his eyes. Hermione let go of his shoulders as if she'd been burnt and shoved them into her lap, clasping them together even though her legs bounced with her enthusiasm.

Draco shook his head a little bit, still smiling but looking a little dazed and then became quite serious again as he relayed one important thing. "There is one requirement,

though."

"Let's hear it then." Her legs still refused to stay put.

"He'll have to supervise."

Hermione froze and then slowly sank down onto the desk, her forehead making a soft thunk as it landed, and she groaned.

Draco snorted. "Well, I understand why I'd not want Snape there, but what's got you all suicidal?"

Hermione turned to him, pouting, and then sighed. She put her head in her hands. *How can I explain how unbearably difficult it's been to concentrate around him?* Draco poked her gently. "Oh... it's nothing. It's just... we have... a bit of... er... history."

Draco laughed out loud, encouraging another shush from the librarian. "You sound as if you two used to date and it ended badly."

*Not too far from the truth...*

"What?" His voice lowered conspiratorially, almost purring. "Have you been *shagging* my Head of House, Granger?"

"What!? No!" *Only in my dreams, really.*

"Be *quiet*!" came Pince's reply. Hermione smiled contritely at the poor woman and turned back to Draco, whose eyes had narrowed considerably.

"That wasn't very convincing," he said.

"Honestly, Draco, what kind of person do you think I am?"

He seemed to realize whom he was talking to and blushed, shrugging apologetically. "You just reacted a bit funny."

"It's just... we've had some arguments, is all."

He snorted. "Who hasn't?"

"Why don't you want him there? You two get along like... like peas and carrots."

"Vegetables don't have personalities, Hermione." He grinned widely when she punched him in the shoulder. "No, it's just that I won't be able to flirt shamelessly with you. Bats of the dungeons tend to hinder that just a bit."

She didn't have time to *not* respond or even blush at his blatant confession because someone had come up to stand awkwardly in front of their study spot, wringing their hands as they waited for Hermione and Draco's eye contact to break. "Erm, Hermione?"

Hermione blinked and turned toward the girl's voice, finding a pretty face to match the sound. This girl, Hufflepuff from her prefect's badge, had a square jaw and freckles but big, almost turquoise eyes and straight, sandy blonde hair that framed her face rather nicely, falling to her shoulders in a small wave. Hermione recognized her vaguely, but had never spoken to her before. "Uhm, hi there."

The girl seemed to hesitate for a moment then leaned over the table, extending her right hand. "I'm Tommi Vance. I'm a seventh-year Hufflepuff and I'm Ron's girlfriend."

*Oh.* "Well, I suppose you know who I am," Hermione said a little edgily and felt a reassuring hand at the small of her back as she stood and shook the girl's hand. "What can I do for you?"

"Well..." Vance glanced at Draco for a moment, then back to Hermione. "I was wondering if I could speak to you for a moment. Alone?"

Hermione gave a sidelong look at Draco who nodded and pulled *Sweet Dreams* to his side of the table, proceeding to be suitably engrossed in it as Vance led her away to the hallway. There was a bright alcove with stone benches in it that the Hufflepuff had apparently scoped out already because she grabbed Hermione's hand and nearly dragged her there, setting her down on the nearest bench and then seating herself a respectful distance near and away from the Head Girl. Hermione fiddled with the cuff of her shirt as Tommi took a breath and began.

"Okay. I know this is weird and unexpected and probably encroaching on precious study time..." Vance saw Hermione's expression and smiled, which of course really didn't bother Hermione at *all*. "But, I just wanted to start off saying that it really is nice to meet you. I've heard so many good things from Ron... I know that's really surprising, believe me... and from our eighth-years."

"That *is* surprising," Hermione muttered.

Vance smiled again and rubbed her hands together (her nails were chewed back), but she had a sort of poise about her when she talked, so Hermione (good girl that she was) listened dutifully. "Anyway, increasingly over the past two months I've been hearing Ron moan and groan about how he doesn't have friends in Gryffindor anymore... I always ask him why that might be..." They both shared a smirk. "But, of course he grumbles about things ending badly and irreparable blah-dee-blah. I think you know where I'm heading."

"I didn't know 'irreparable' was a part of Ronald's vocabulary," Hermione interrupted, but it didn't get the sort of reaction she was expecting.

Vance instead gave a little laugh and nodded. "No, probably not, but I agreed I'd give him a good intro and a good word and he could go on with the requests for forgiveness from there. Considering those words aren't in his vocabulary he's been writing and rewriting apologies for a month now, trying to get it out that he's sorry for what he did."

Hermione stood, looking down at a surprisingly calm Tommi. "And he thinks that will *solve* everything? There, I said 'I'm sorry,' now we can be *besties* again?" Hermione began to pace.

"No. That's why he's had such trouble, you see. He's well aware that he's very likely past forgiveness."

"...You're pretty level-headed for Ron," Hermione finally said, resting her hands on her hips and shaking her head.

She chuckled and stood with Hermione, walking up to her and giving her a big hug. "You and Ron and Harry were too good of friends to go throughout life never speaking again. He's just come to realize that."

Hermione looked uncomfortable.

"Hermione, he wants to make amends. Now, that doesn't mean you have to forgive him, especially if he mucks it up, but just hear him out."

For a moment Hermione didn't breathe, but then gave up on this silly, defensive pretense and her shoulders sank. "Alright. What should I do?"

"Oh, *you* don't have to do anything."

"Pardon?"

"Ron, you can come out, now," Tommi called down the hallway.

Hermione whirled around to see a figure emerge from the boys' bathroom and quickly but sheepishly make its way toward them, a towering, broad-shouldered figure whose ginger head hung low and his hands fiddled restlessly with the cuffs of his sleeves. He'd probably learned that from Hermione. Despite herself, Hermione couldn't keep a small smile off her face.

"Hullo, Hermione."

"Hi," she said quietly.

He took a big breath, his eyes bright and his brow furrowed. "Hermione... I can't begin to tell you how much of an arse I've been...I mean, you probably know, anyway... I should never have said the things I said to you back in September. I know I can't just take them back, but... I wanted to tell you that I didn't mean them then, and I still don't believe them now. I overreacted." Tommi snorted quietly from a little distance away. "You have been nothing but a good friend to me for so long and... I completely fucked up. Really." He laughed nervously, and Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

Oh, this was getting melodramatic.

"I hope... erm...I hope in time... that you'll be able to forgive me. I mean..." He seemed to struggle with his words. "Oh, fuck," he muttered. "I'll probably have to spend a good several years earning my best friend back." He glanced at Tommi, then. "Or however long Miss Vance over here deems it necessary."

"How about the rest of your life, Ron?" Hermione spoke determinedly, but with a smirk worthy of a Slytherin (although the tears probably could have been scrapped). He seemed taken aback, but when Hermione opened her arms to him, he nearly fell into them, fairly squeezing all the oxygen out of her. "Guh, Ron...can't..."

"Sorry." He eased up a bit but wrapped his arms around her shoulders instead. "I'm so sorry, luv. So sorry..."

"It's okay, Ron," Hermione sniffled.

"Everything I said... everything was complete bullocks, 'Mione. You're a bloody angel, and you're going to change the world, and you definitely need a bloke who can keep up with you," he laughed into her hair. "I'm a little too simple for that," he sniggered eventually. "You're going to make some man very happy, someday...forgive the cliché." She sobbed into his chest and squeezed him round the middle, and they stood there, rocking back and forth for a while until he started laughing. "You need to stop crying, or else I'm going to start snotting all over your hair, too!"

They both laughed and Ron pulled Tommi over, and Hermione hugged her, too. "It's nice to meet you, too, Tommi. You've got a lot on your hands, though, with this bloke."

"Uhm, Hermione..."

Hermione spun around to see a restless Draco, who had his books packed up and was now staring suspiciously at Ron. "Hey, Draco. I'm sorry, have you packed up already? I didn't mean to neglect you."

"It's alright. I know it was important..." He still stared piercingly at Ron, who hadn't really noticed because he was making puppy eyes at Tommi. "Besides, Ginevra was looking for you...said it was 'super important,' so..."

"Oh! Shite," Ron exclaimed.

"What?" both Tommi and Hermione asked.

"We have fittings, today," Ron gestured between himself and Hermione.

"We? For what?"

"Harry and Ginny's wedding. Didn't they tell you?"

"Uhm. Yes, and it's not 'til summer holiday."

"No, Mum moved the wedding to the beginning of May. She's had nothing to do but plan this wedding since the kids aren't at home anymore, and she wanted to save up summer for their honeymoon. And all our relatives will like May weather more than August, which was apparently the next available option."

"But..." *Oh, I am bloody confused.*

"So fittings are today. We are supposed to meet George and Mum at Twilfit and Tattings before dinner. McGonagall's given us special permission."

"They... failed to tell me that," Hermione said, a little dazed.

"Yes, well... Now you know."

"... Okay."

"Yeah," he sighed. "And on my birthday, though I'm sure this was some sort of punishment for being another Percy. I've been such a prat to my whole family."

"Oh! I forgot it was March, already... Happy Birthday, Ron." Hermione hugged him again, although this felt very odd and slightly insufficient. Ron said goodbye to Tommi, who waved them off and started off toward the kitchens, and Hermione and he turned to run to Gryffindor Tower, only to find a wand pointed at Ron's jugular.

"I swear, Weasel, if you hurt her again, you won't have another birthday."

"Draco..." Hermione admonished. Ron just squeezed her hand.

"Understand?" Draco hissed, punctuating his venomous statement with a jerk of his wand.

"Completely," Ron said solemnly.

The Slytherin backed away slowly, glaring at Ron. "I'll see you later, Hermione. Have fun at your fitting," Draco said stiffly, and walked away.

They gathered her things in the library and then took a shortcut to Gryffindor Tower. As Ron helped Hermione through the portrait hole, she heard him mutter, "I think I liked it better when you fancied Snape."

Hermione was too shocked for words.

--

Severus whistled under his breath as he lathered and rinsed his hair clean. He'd always loved his shampoo and conditioner. They smelled...Severus inhaled...lovely. And despite the fact that he was a very strapping, manly man, he did like to smell nice. The sage and lime soothed his headache and calmed his nerves, sending him into a happy daze as he stood under the overlarge showerhead. Of course, it helped that every now and then he had flashes of his past 'Bottled Bliss Incident,' as he'd mentally termed it. As he passed a sudsy flannel over his chest and abdomen, Hermione's eyes flashed warm and bright in his mind's eye, and he could almost feel her nails scratch down his back as she came undone in his arms.

"Christ."

He took care of...ahem...his business quickly and thoroughly, but not before he glimpsed a bit of Hermione in a flowing white gown as he came, leaning a hand against the warm tiles. That threw him for a loop. She'd never worn a white dress in his dreams.

"Hum," he grumbled confusedly as he stepped into the steamy room and donned his towel. That was odd. But it was still a marvelous wank, so he couldn't complain too much. He'd quickly given up the fight for propriety after several nights in a row of erotic Hermione dreams. After all, she'd never know, and he was only fucking her senseless in his mind, so no one could give him any grief. These dreams beat the nightmares, anyway.

When he was dressed in his button-down and slacks and ready for dinner, he was bombarded by two large owls carrying letters. One was familiar and white with wide yellow eyes and carried a small card with his name in loopy blue, embossed calligraphy, and another was an owl from the continent. The ones that picked up Muggle mail meant to be sent to a wizard. His Grandmère had written.

--

Hermione was prodded and tugged at for the rest of the afternoon, pins snagging the fabric of an apparently 'stunning' (according to Gin) and 'really nice' (according to Ron, Harry and George) sage green dress, but Hermione barely heard any of it.

Ron knew.

For God's sake, Ron was about as observant as a pile of dung but this hadn't passed his notice?

"You look like a frylle," a dreamy voice said over on her right. Hermione focused on the image in front of her, she wore a silk taffeta dress that crisscrossed at the neckline and fell to the knees\*\*. The green went well with the amber tones in her eyes.

"What eez a 'freell,' Luna?" Fleur asked on the other side of Luna, posing in the mirror as the tailor magically cut her dress to fall to her knee. Hers was in a lovely muted sky blue that the tailor insisted was 'brook'-coloured.

"Oh, they live in the trees, usually. Frylles are made of dappled light. You can tell they're with you when a breeze comes by on a sunny day. Daddy called them 'walking comforts.' They make people happy, usually. Unless you don't like wind... Or sun. Or nature."

Hermione blushed, even though no one was quite sure what Luna was talking about. Fleur snorted, but smiled at Hermione even so. "You do look magnifique, 'Ermione."

Luna fingered her lavender dress as she looked over at Hermione again. "Your Slytherin will like you very much, I think."

Hermione froze. *Luna can't mean Snape, can she?*

"Oh, and who might that be?" Harry asked.

"Ginny, can I change, now?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Luna's talking about Malfoy, of course," Ron supplied, apparently seeing Hermione's panic. Luna just smiled airily and smoothed the dress over her hips.

Harry pursed his lips, but Ginny squeezed his hand. "Yes, doll, you can go use my changing room," Ginny said. "And you can ask Draco along as your date, too, if you want."

"We're not dating."

"Well, it certainly seemed like it...seeing as you two were attached at the hip on Valentine's," Harry said edgily.

"We've become good friends. Nothing's going to happen."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," George said lightly from the men's side of the large, carpeted room. He was straitening his narrow 'brook' tie in front of the mirror as he spoke. "I've never met a Slytherin who didn't have an agenda."

"Well, if we go together, it's just as friends."

"I think he likes you, Hermione," Neville added in his lavender tie. "I've never seen him be so... nice. Not even to his Slytherin friends."

"I'm not having this conversation." Hermione stormed off in a pouting.

"Ohhh, Hermione, stop being a Pouty McPoutface!" Ron said. "We don't have a problem with your friendship with...er... Draco. Do we, Harry?" Hermione heard his voice take on a little edge.

"It's fine, Hermione," she heard Harry finally sigh. "If you can trust him, then I have to believe he's turned out okay."

*You should,* she thought a little bitterly as she yanked off the pretty green dress.*You got him out of jail, after all. No use crying over spilled milk.*

--

As Severus sat down to his evening meal, agitated and worried and without an appetite, he knew two new things. One: he was invited...who'd have thought...to Harry Potter's wedding, and two: Grandmère was dying, and quickly.

La leucémie\*\*\*, they called it.

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**A/N:** *I hope you liked it! It was sort of a mind dump, and I had to have a lot happen, but it's long so I suppose it'll make you faithful readers pretty happy.*

*Anyway, for the wedding, (which I moved up for timing purposes...I don't want this story to drag on for you readers...and because I want you guys to witness it before the story ends) Ron is Best Man (duh) and Neville (purple tie) and George (blue tie) are the groomsmen. Ron will wear a sage tie to match Hermione. Hermione is Maid of Honour and Luna (purple dress) and Fleur (blue dress) are the bridesmaids. They'll all have separate dates.*

*Questions? Concerns? Confusions? Let me know! I can explain or try to fix it!*

*\*There is a study that says that goat's milk is better for type As. Type A's tend to make more mucus than other blood types, and cow's milk makes it worse. Scientists have*

*recommended Goat's milk as a substitute.*

*\*\*[http://www.jcrew.com/AST/Browse/WomenBrowse/Women\\_Shop\\_By\\_Category/dresses/weddingsparties/PRDOVR~98979/98979.jsp](http://www.jcrew.com/AST/Browse/WomenBrowse/Women_Shop_By_Category/dresses/weddingsparties/PRDOVR~98979/98979.jsp) (they do not have the sage colour that I'm talking about, but they have lavender and 'brook' which I thought was funny.)*

*\*\*\*Leukemia. Odds are Grandmere already knew and is just now telling poor ol' Sev why she hasn't been feeling well these past couple of months. Surprising, huh?*

## So Happy I Could Melt

*Chapter 25 of 27*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

**Disclaimer:** *The Potterverse and [most] characters belong to the famed J.K. Rowling.*

WARNING: Seriously, Draco/Hermione snogging and feel-uppage.

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### Chapter Twenty-Five: So Happy I Could Melt

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The rest of March was a flurry of hectic but happy times; a vast improvement from the trend Hermione's year had been taking so far. She and Draco continued to work diligently under the watch of the Potions master, who thankfully was not a complete arsehole but still made it very painful for Draco to make light-hearted passes at Hermione while they went through their Dreamless Sleep trials. Anyway, Draco had learned his lesson second trial in when he had brushed his hand over hers, unnecessarily causing her to drop the ginger root in at the wrong time and thus botching the potion.

He hadn't been able to wipe the glare off her face until two days later when he'd treated her to some ice cream... along with Ron and Tommi of course, who were making themselves permanent fixtures in her life. Tommi was proving to be a great girlfriend and confidante, who had grown up as a half-blood in London and had shared many of the same experiences with Hermione, having attended public school for her elementary education. Tommi, Ron told them on a Saturday as they sat by the lake and ate lunch (Draco sulked a bit that the two had tagged along, but got over it as soon as he'd had a Butterbeer) was actually named Margaret Tomme Vance. Yes, *Tomme*... as in the *cheese* that her mother, Camille LeDucq, had won Roger Vance's heart with. Her father was absolutely obsessed with Muggle cheeses, and had insisted on naming his daughter after the food.

Hermione and Draco couldn't stop laughing because they had been wondering for a long while and had now solved the mystery of why Ron always affectionately called Tommi 'his little cheese puff.' Draco, of course, didn't know what a cheese puff was, which made it that much more hilarious.

Between wedding plans...fittings and tastings and planning in general, Hermione grew close again with her Gryffindors and a few new friends, too, like Tommi, and Hannah Abbott (who Neville was now officially dating). Although, she was still... wary... about Ron. The hurt he had caused ran deep.

But, all in all, it was shaping up to end as the best month Hermione had ever had on Hogwarts grounds.

Though Draco was confusing. He'd taken to carrying her books around and occasionally holding her hand and calling her things like 'Mione' and 'luv' (which only Harry and Ron had ever called her), which was lovely and sweet and so extremely un-Draco that she had to wonder what the hell was going on in his brain that was making him so loopy. Neville's words would sometimes jangle around in her head, a reminder that others had noticed the change in Draco's behaviour, too.

*"I think he likes you..."*

Did she like him, too?

"Ugh," she muttered into her hands as she asked herself that question one morning before their final trial. Draco was preparing the ingredients beside her and paused to look at her as she rubbed her eyes and stood, lighting the fire under the cauldron and putting one hand on her hip. He caught her eye as she tucked a curl behind her ear...his eyes were surprisingly green, like a slate colour, very subtle but still visible in the right light; she'd never noticed that before. He winked at her and then pulled his dragon hide gloves on.

*Nope. Neeeeeewh. Don't like him at all.*

"What's up?" he asked once she'd been staring for too long.

Hermione blinked. "Ohh, tired. That's all."

"Well, you look stunning, so no worries." He smirked charmingly as he ruffled her hair.

"Augh! Draco! You just had your hands in the ingredients!" Her shriek couldn't cover the blush on her face.

*Doing a brilliant job of convincing yourself, Granger.*

"Oops! Sorry, luv." He didn't look sorry at all. "You still look gor..."

"Mister Malfoy, could you *please* save your pathetic lines for after the trials when I am no longer in your presence?" Snape's voice cut Draco off, startling them both as he stormed from his office. Draco looked away and busied himself with the data, an obvious pink tinge on his cheeks as he bent forward, his nose to the parchment. "... Getting positively *vomitous*," Snape muttered to himself as he sat and arranged his papers for grading.

Hermione snorted rather loudly and tried to cover it up with a cough, but Snape noticed, and their eyes met over the cauldron. A tiny ghost of a smile turned up the corners of his mouth and it seemed like a colony of butterflies erupted in her stomach. She noticed the bags under his eyes, then. It was subtle, but having studied his face so meticulously this year, these sorts of things could not pass unnoticed. Was he not sleeping well? Well, he could have all the Dreamless Sleep he was brewing her because she hadn't needed to use it since mid-February. Despite the tired eyes, he still looked better than he ever had before the war, which meant he was still happy. Erm, happier. Which was what mattered. She only remembered to breathe when he blinked and looked down at his parchments, still smirking.

"Vomitous' is not a word, Professor," she said. Draco looked up at her out of the corner of his eye, his nostrils flaring with either amusement or annoyance, she couldn't tell.

Snape sighed dramatically. "Of course, Miss Granger, I should have guessed. When they called you a bookworm, I'd no idea that meant you've read *everything*. Including the dictionary."

It was Draco's turn to snort.

"Of course, I am able to use my creative licence, aren't I, Miss Granger?"

"Why, of course, Professor," she said not a little condescendingly. That little bookworm jab had *hurt*!

"Good." With that he flicked his wand and several words appeared on the blackboard behind him in his familiar spidery script.

Vomitous [vom it *uh* s] (adj.)

1. Causing sickness of the hearing; aurally irritating.
2. Such as to provoke contempt, loathing, genuine revulsion.
3. Nauseating.
4. DSM's pick-up lines.

Hermione found she couldn't breathe for all the giggling. Draco stared incredulously at her and then turned to Snape, muttering something about not knowing whom the professor was actually teasing. Snape seemed pleased with himself.

"Surely, you must realise I am taking great pleasure from making a jab at both of you at the same time, Mister Malfoy. It is really quite fun." He cleared his throat, bent over his desk and murmured, "Too easy."

It was not uncommon for the professor to exchange idle banter with his best pupils, but today had reached a familiarity that they'd not seen before. Hermione imagined her lab partner had only ever seen Snape act this way in the presence of Draco's father, but that had probably been ages ago before Draco had been sent to Hogwarts and before he'd been recruited to follow in their footsteps as a servant to the Dark Lord.

"Queen or pawn, today, mademoiselle?" he asked, as had become the tradition.

"I think I'll be queen today; you're too much of a queen anyway, I'd not want your head to explode with all the authority-inspired ego that's floating around in there."

His eyes narrowed playfully, and he turned to pick up their first ingredient. She turned over the large hourglass, but not before he'd squeezed her hand beneath the table as he poured the pomegranate seeds into the boiling water.

"Good luck," she whispered, and they began.

--

Severus swore he'd never felt so miserable about someone else's happiness since...well, it was probably not so long ago, but he liked being dramatic, so...since a very long time ago. Although, it helped that every now and then that he could be the reason for that someone's happiness. Hermione seemed to glow with her new and renewed and repaired friendships; it was lovely. She had filled out thanks to a proper diet and sleep and genuine care by her peers. Her hair was back to its golden lustre and her eyes were bright, as of now, with an excitement fit more for a five-year-old receiving a birthday present than a twenty-something woman who was spending her extra-curricular time with an eighteen-year-old Slytherin and his Potions set.

It made Severus feel a little sick. *Fulfilled*. But still sick.

His eyes drifted every now and then to the pair who were diligently brewing their final trial for Dreamless Sleep. He wondered briefly who they would test it on.

But as the hour drew on, his thoughts drifted back to his Grandmère, who was now writing him letters every day, and he was writing back, of course. She wanted to settle her will and all that entailed before she 'snuffed it,' as she had carelessly written the other day. It made him angrier each time she mentioned it as if they had both known she had cancer for years. Which, of course, she had and had failed to tell him each time he went to visit her and take care of her. She was stubborn in that regard. Just like her darling Severus, she always reminded him.

He felt smaller and smaller each time she wrote to him of her failing health and the stupid chit Julie, who had stolen the crystal, and the property that would be all his and his alone, once she was gone. His alone. Alone.

He felt like he was sixteen and had suddenly become an orphan again. His mother dead, his father gone, Spinner's End just a painful reminder. He hoped Ansouis wouldn't become that sort of place. Bad memories, all around.

He didn't want to go see her. Because, then... it would be a goodbye. And Grandmère was immortal, invincible, wise and *always there* for him.

*Best not to dwell on theses things.*

He returned to his sixth years' essays on gurdyroot, slashing them up with his red quill. Somehow, he could always find enough anger to channel through his lovely eagle owl feather. It gave him great satisfaction for the next twenty minutes until Malfoy hissed sharply (apparently having nicked his finger through his glove) and Hermione murmured a counter spell, singing a bit in Latin so the boy could continue to do whatever it was he was doing. They were just about to reach the boiling stage.

"Mister Malfoy, both eyes on your work, or else it might be a limb, next." Severus could tell that no one in the room knew if that was a threat or a caution. He shrugged and decided not to clarify. Fear was always a good moderator of behaviour.

Hermione's eyes narrowed at him, however, and he shook his head minutely. Well, he didn't want to come off as a complete tosser...at least around her. ~~She~~ She could know.

As her eyes drifted back to the cauldron, Severus allowed himself another look. She was nibbling on her lip again, tracing patterns into the desk as she walked around the table, finally turning her back to him and leaning over the cauldron. Her blue robe (not a school robe, thank Merlin) was tightly fitted over her torso and slim arms, only

flaring out a small amount over her lovely hips. A thin, iron-coloured rope rested over her hips, holding a sleeve for her wand and accentuating her form as she leant further over.

*Get. A. Hold of yourself, man.*

Suddenly, he remembered the incident with the ice-cream on Valentine's Day, and he spent the next thirty minutes trying to force the blood back into his brain, imagining all sorts of horrid things like taxes and dead puppies, although the words floating through his conscious were more comical than he'd meant them to be.

*Dead puppies. Hah.*

Well, it worked anyhow, and soon Malfoy and Granger were packing up the ingredients and organizing their trial notes for him to look over. Malfoy looked positively thrilled, but apologized, saying he had to go to his dormitory quickly and would be back later; could she meet him in the library at half-four?

"Sure," Hermione said, smiling and dimming the fire under the cauldron to low heat, starting the twenty-four hour simmer time needed for the potion to be ready. The ponce virtually bounded out of the room, saying a quick thank you to Severus just before the door slammed. "Okay, Professor. We're finished."

"Oh, really?" Severus deadpanned.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let's see your notes, and you can come back tomorrow at this time to distribute the potion into phials." He stood and walked around his desk to meet her at the table.

"Here." She handed him their many parchments, and he rolled them up to look over later.

"Who do you plan testing the final product on?"

"Whoever needs it. I don't need the Dreamless Sleep anymore, by the way. It was very helpful, though; thank you, Professor."

"... So, Mister Malfoy will not be testing it either?"

"No, he doesn't like taking potions unless they are absolutely necessary, apparently."

Severus hummed thoughtfully.

"Would you like to try it, Professor? After all, it would allow you to fully assess it if you know from experience how it works."

Severus hummed again.

"Unless you don't need it, of course, although you don't look like you've been getting much sleep."

Severus' eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Sorry. It is true, though, Professor. I must admit, especially if you have all this time to brew potions for me, that you could probably use them for yourself, too." She was *concerned* for him! Concerned!

Severus sighed and leant against the table, covering his face with his hands briefly. "It's not nightmares."

"Insomnia?"

"No, but there's always a fair amount of that, as well."

"What's wrong then? I mean, oh, you don't have to answer that."

"It's my grandmother."

"You... have a grandmother?"

Severus looked at her incredulously. "No, Granger, my good-for-nothing father just popped out of the ground."

"I didn't mean it that way, I just never realized that you had living relatives."

"Well, soon enough I wont." Why was he telling her this?

*Because you want to, you berk. You want to spill your heart out so she'll take pity on you, and maybe she'll want to take care of you like you did her, like Lily did when your mum died.*

He'd probably been silent for a while, but only just realized there was a small hand on his forearm. "What's happened?" she asked quietly.

"She's had leukaemia for several years and didn't tell me until just recently. She'll die within the year. Fucking stubborn old woman."

He felt her hand squeeze him lightly. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said stiffly.

"I know this sounds silly, but if you want to tal..."

"No, I do not want to talk, Miss Granger. I've told you enough as it is."

"Well, you've listened to all the drama that's happened to me this past year; the least I could do is listen..."

"This is not some sort of exchange, Granger! Don't feel you have to talk to me just because I put up with you for much longer than I should have!"

"Severus, you know I didn't mean it like that."

"Out!"

Hermione frowned at him, and Severus could see the concern still lurking behind her dark eyes. How had he become so furious, so quickly? "Yes, sir," she murmured and headed for the door. He looked up when he heard her footsteps cease to find her looking back at him. "You should visit her," she said, and then she left.

He stormed out of the room, never having noticed that she'd called him Severus.

Maybe he did need the Dreamless Sleep.



--

"Oh, there you are!" Draco smiled widely when he found Hermione in the library, her nose in a novel and her legs curled under her. She was wearing a different outfit, comfy jeans and a purple tee and her favourite trainers.

She looked up and smiled at him. "Hey, you."

"Ready?" he asked.

Hermione frowned. Had they planned something? She only remembered wanting to meet at four-thirty. "For what, Draco? Have you planned something and failed to tell me about it, again?"

"More or less. C'mon, let's go outside." He was still grinning.

"Each time I see you, Draco, you become less and less Malfoy-like. You've completely lost all your Slytherin tendencies."

"Oh, the dreadful symptoms of overexposure to Gryffindors, I expect. You should be proud I could even stand breathing the same air as Weasley. He even smells Gryffindor." He dragged her by the hand out of the library and into the sunlit hallway, turning this way and that until they reached the grounds, the horizon spanning out for miles over a crystal lake. It was a gorgeous afternoon.

"And what, exactly, do Gryffindors smell like, Mister Malfoy?" Hermione asked, mock offended.

He made a face. "Yeck. Sweaty socks."

"That is *not* funny! I do not smell like socks!" Now, she was getting offended.

"No!" he laughed. "No, you smell pretty. Like sunshine and..." He pulled her closer. Hermione blushed uncontrollably as he stuck a nose in her curls. "...and good things. Happy things. Girl."

"You are *so weird*!" She squealed when he blew in her ear, sprinting away from him as fast as she could, running toward the lake and the tree that she and her friends always lay under during the warm months. It was an old weeping willow that only opened up toward the lake, providing a bit of privacy for Hermione and her famous friends.

"Hermione! You can't outrun me, you little..." Soon he was at her heels and had caught her hand again. They collapsed on the ground under the willow, giggling for no apparent reason other than the fact that they could, and no one was watching, and no one could call them crazy for breaking House loyalties.

Hermione rolled toward him and punched him in the stomach. "Hey! What was that for?" He yelled, still smiling despite himself.

"Don't *do* that!"

"Do what?" Draco leaned into Hermione again. "This?" He blew in her ear again. She squeaked and curled into a ball, covering her ears and squeezing her eyes shut.

"Hey, hey," Hermione heard him say through a laugh. "I won't do it again."

"Promise?" she murmured, looking up at him with narrowed eyes.

"Cross my heart and all that rubbish." He smirked, pulling her hands away from her ears.

"Fine," she sighed, and sat up, looking up at the canopy of the willow, dappled light floating through the green down on them. "So, why did you bring me out here?"

"For a celebration, of course!" she heard him say, his lightweight boots crushing the grass as he stood up. Hermione looked up at Draco, he in his fine white button-down, rolled up his forearms, and his denims.

"Oh, my Lord, you're wearing *denims*!" Hermione exclaimed.

He grinned. "Why, yes, Granger! I am. Stunning observation."

"Who are you and what have you done with Draco Malfoy?"

"I swear you ask that about twice a day. Maybe you just never knew me well enough to form a accurate image of the true Draco Malfoy."

"Maybe, but Draco Malfoy does not wear Muggle clothing. Especially denims."

"What? They make my arse look spectacular!" He turned away from her, looking at her over his shoulder. "Wouldn't you agree, Hermione?" he said in a low voice.

"Mmm," Hermione said noncommittally. Though, he did look spectacular.

"Watch it or you'll hurt my feelings," he growled, his lips forming a pouty frown as he turned around again and put his hand in a pocket, pulling out what looked like a tiny basket. "Get up, Granger."

"Why?"

"Get up or you'll be smushed under a picnic blanket for the next couple of hours, and I'll have to enjoy the food all by myself."

"You put together a picnic?" Hermione asked as she scrambled to stand. He steadied her with one hand and then took his wand out, tapping the tiny basket, which seemed to jump to the ground itself and grew larger and larger, unfolding into a red and white chequered blanket and dining set (without the table of course).

"Yep."

"Wow!" Hermione smiled, sitting down immediately and looking in awe at the veritable feast in front of her. Draco sat opposite, grinning from ear to ear. "How did I not realize I was starving?" Hermione asked, looking up at him. "Draco, you shouldn't have."

"Why not?"

Hermione couldn't give him a proper answer so she tucked in as she was told.

-o-

Thirty minutes later, they lay facing the lake on their full stomachs, drinking a bit of wine as Hermione read to Draco from her novel, her now bare feet swaying in the air as she propped herself up on her elbows and read dramatically when she found a particularly interesting part. They'd found an easy silence eventually when she'd grown bored of her book (who'd have thought?) and when Draco had finished off the rosé. Hermione pillowed her head on her arms and turned her head toward Draco as he turned his whole body to her, vanishing the glasses and leaning up on an elbow.

"I am so... happy." He closed his eyes briefly as a breeze went by, sighing contentedly. "Is that a weird thing to say?" he added as an afterthought, scrunching his nose.

"Draco?" Hermione murmured, turning over on her back to look up at the canopy again.

"Yeah?" He asked, his eyes opening slowly, his mouth quirking into a smile.

"Is this a date?"

He paused a moment, before answering. "Only if you want it to be, Hermione."

Hermione looked at him sharply, her eyes softening when she saw the vulnerable look in his eye. "Do you want it to be, Draco?"

He looked away, toward the lake. "Yes," he muttered.

Hermione shimmied slowly toward him until her left side met his stomach. He looked down at her, startled. Why not give this a try? He'd already exceeded all of her expectations when it came to their friendship. Hermione pushed away the niggling sense of betrayal she somehow felt and met his eyes.

"It wouldn't be a proper date without a kiss, then, would it?" she asked rather boldly.

There was a moment where they both just stared at one another; his eyes wide, hers inquisitive and slightly amused, and then his lips were on hers, a lovely pressure against her mouth, sweet from wine and soft from youth. He pulled away, smiling triumphantly.

"You've been doing a lot of smiling lately, haven't you?" Hermione giggled softly.

"It's all you,luv." And then he was kissing her again, his left hand grazing over her stomach, a warm, comforting pressure that made her feel wanted, cherished, loved. She hadn't felt this way since... since Ron. Hermione snaked an arm around his neck, running her fingers through the fine blond hair at the nape of his neck, making him shiver and deepen the kiss, tracing his tongue over her lower lip, his hand smoothing over her ribs, his thumb grazing the underside of her breast. *God*, she didn't want it to stop.

She hummed approvingly against his lips, pushing her tongue into his mouth and twining it with his. Suddenly he had both her wrists above her head, his hips resting between her legs, and was kissing down her jaw, neck, travelling up to her ear and nipping lightly at the sensitive spot right behind it. Then he found the place that always made her squeal when Ron had kissed it, the place in the crook of her neck that made her knees all wobbly. He nuzzled her there, making her whimper, murmuring how much he'd wanted to do this and for how long and how he never wanted to stop.

She laughed, her voice coming out all gravelly when she muttered "so dramatic" before he bit down, causing a bit of a shriek to rip from her throat. She ground into him, then, feeling wanton and reckless and loving it. He moaned throatily into her mouth and ground back into her, only breaking contact when he found it necessary to breath. "Mmm, my Hermione," he said as he brushed his lips against her ear.

"By all means," she whispered, "please continue."

His hand wound up under her tee, rubbing the soft skin of her stomach, to cup a breast, squeezing the grey cotton playfully, but getting down to business as he pushed the fabric away to reveal her peachy skin to him.

"Draco!" Hermione whined. "Someone might see!"

Without a thought he flicked his wand and then kissed his way down her neck again, lifting her shirt over her head and pushing her bra over her shoulders. "Merlin, you're bloody gorgeous," he groaned. And all conscious thought left her as his mouth travelled down to meet his questing fingers.

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The next day, Severus found himself at the airport in Nice, toting an overnight bag and wearing khaki pants and a white button-down. He headed out into the Southern French sun, feeling a difference in air...the breeze lighter and drier...and loving it. He'd forgotten how much he absolutely loved Provence. He found his silver rental Volvo in the parking lot and had the windows down before one could say "Quidditch." Driving to Ansouis was nice and pleasant, the air light and bright and making Severus' hair whip playfully around his neck as he moved along the highway. Briefly he wondered why he never drove in England, and then he remembered that they drove on the opposite side of the road, there. He chuckled, recalling he'd never learned to drive in England. It had been unnecessary. But, being with his Muggle grandmother required it.

As he pulled into the dirt driveway of the humble Snape estate, watching the silvery leaves of the olive trees rustle in the breeze\*, he let himself breath in the French air, feeling at home.

Yes, he'd have to move here after he retired.

"Bonjour, Grandmère!" he called out into the bright house as he dropped his bag.

His little grandmother, old and withered, waddled out from the kitchen in her green dress, her hair pulled into a bun of white tufty hair, wiping her floury hands on the apron around her round waist. Severus embraced her tightly, bending over so she could hug him properly. She kissed him on both cheeks, holding his face in her gnarled hands and looking up at him with her pale blue eyes. He practically melted into her loving embrace, her small, wrinkly hands giving off a special kind of magic that only grandmothers could give.

Despite how angry and lost he felt, he was happy.

"Welcome 'ome, mon petit chou."

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**A/N:** Thanks to ladyinthecloak for her magnificent beta-work!

*\*Here is the view in the Snape driveway:*

<http://av-co-bu-325.deviantart.com/art/Orchard-127205834>

I Do

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

**Disclaimer:** *You know the deal!*

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## Chapter Twenty-Six: I Do

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"Mr. Potter," greeted Severus, shaking the younger man's hand for the first (and hopefully last) time, peering down into wide, nervous eyes as the sun beamed down upon them both and the others behind him waiting to give their congratulations.

"Professor. I was hoping you'd come," the boy replied. "My mum would have wanted it..."

"Yes, well," he muttered, wiping his sweaty palms on his trousers and looking over the boy's head. "I think this is one of the only things in your life, Potter, that I cannot say you mucked up over."

"It's not too early, then?" Potter suddenly blurted.

Severus looked down at him and paused. The boy was positively shaking. "No," he sighed.

"No? You don't think so?" Potter took off his glasses and cleaned them on his tie, leaving a smudge on the beautiful white silk.

Severus couldn't decide whether to strangle him or hug him. And wasn't that a strange predicament? He settled for reaching out and putting a hand on Potter's shoulder briefly, then cleaned his tie. "No."

Potter paused, looking behind Severus, seeing all the Weasleys waiting in line a few paces away, having said hello to Molly and Arthur, glaring at Severus as if it was his fault Harry bloody Potter was getting cold feet.

That was when Severus had had enough. "Listen," he hissed, "you are Harry Potter and you've survived the Killing Curse. Twice. You can bloody well survive a wedding. I spent a fortune on this suit, and I'll not have it go to waste, do you hear me?"

Potter straightened up immediately. "Yes, sir," he whispered automatically, then, gulping determinedly, adjusted his tie and shoved his hand out, again. "Thank you."

Severus took it grudgingly. "Really, Harry." *Where the hell did that come from?* "Don't mention it."

And with that, Severus Snape decided he was going soft. *Incredibly*. Soft.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Severus strode up the steps into the beautiful archway that led into the ruins of an old chapel. It seemed rather run down from the exterior, but...

The creamy stone seemed to reach into the sunlight, blending with the bright colour of the clouds that rolled past overhead where a roof once had been. The vitraux\* had been re-erected, however, and lovely new stained glass shone in lovely May hues...light green, lavender, sky blue and blush pink, forming dazzling flowers and figures that shifted and changed every few minutes or so.

Severus blinked, gazing around the small ruin, and saw the polished pews and the dais down the aisle, and noticed the roses that hung in a tasteful waterfall over the altar. And now that he turned around, he saw the small rosebuds that hung from the ends of the pews.

"May I usher you to your seat, Sir?"

Severus looked down to his right, spotting Luna Lovegood in a nice lavender dress, her hair left to hang in a... Severus guessed it was some sort of semi-ponytail, a delicate silver butterfly clipping back the top layer of fine blonde hair. She stared up at him, smiling serenely, and offered her elbow.

He just raised a dark eyebrow and took it.

They moved through the gathering (awed) crowd to the second row of the pews on the groom's side, which took Severus by surprise, although when he thought about it, it made much more sense than to seat him amongst all the gingers that would surely occupy their whole side of the congregation and then some, spilling over into Potter's. Because, after all, the boy didn't have any family.

"Here you are, sir. You're sitting on the end, here, next to the Grangers...Bela? Edwin? This is Professor Severus Snape. He is Potion master at Hogwarts, although you probably know that. Hermione tells you everything." Luna swept away before Severus could utter his thanks, leaving him to stare down at a very short woman with dark blue eyes and Hermione's face, dressed in a nice yellow dress suit and hat, and a very tall, very thin man with Hermione's eyes and her unfortunate, but bright white, front teeth. They smiled at him.

"Pleased to meet you, Professor." Bela offered her hand and he took it, slightly in a daze. "We've heard so much about you from Hermione, as dear Luna said."

"She really admires you," Edwin added, offering his hand, his other resting atop Bela Granger's shoulder.

"Is that so?" He smirked.

"Although," Bela chuckled, "she says the both of you... disagree, every now and again."

Severus, surprisingly, joined in with their laugh. "Hermione is very strong-willed," he admitted.

"Please," said Edwin, winking, "feel free to knock some sense into her, if you can. She's determined to go on this trip with her new boyfriend all over the world for a year or so."

Severus nearly choked. "Really?" He hoped he didn't sound as strained as he felt.

"Yes," Mrs. Granger sighed, patting her husband's hand. "We've given up trying to tell her what to do. We're invited wherever for holidays, of course."

"She's a free spirit," Edwin said. "And she's not been this happy in a long while, so, we're not going to push." The two of them shared a laugh.

There was an awkward pause where Severus looked around the place, registering several familiar faces and filing them away for a later meet-and-greet.

But the silence was not to be. "Hermione says you've been very good to her, keeping an eye on her when all the drama happened."

"Huh." Severus looked down at the program in his hand and rolled it up nervously.

"Thank you." He felt a hand on his forearm and turned quickly to a smiling Bela Granger.

Severus offered a weak smile, nodding modestly but turned quickly as a familiar giggle echoed over the crowd nearest them.

"That'll be Hermione," Severus heard Mr. Granger say.

She emerged from the crowd on the arm of the Malfoy pillock, who was sniggering, keeping her hand snug between his arm and his ribs, his hand resting atop hers as they approached.

It was then that Hermione looked up and the smile faltered on her face...a punch to his gut, really. "Why, hello, Professor," she said and then elbowed Draco in the stomach when he tried to tickle her.

She looked so beautiful it ached. The silky, soft green dress fell to her knees and hugged her breasts, leaving just a shadow of décolletage. Her hair was done up in much the same fashion as Lovegood's had been, but it was certainly bushier, with thick, wide curls that fluttered down past her shoulders, ending around her rib cage. And her shoes\*\*. Good God.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger. Mister Malfoy," he tagged on last minute.

"Lovely day, isn't it, Professor?" Malfoy smiled.

"Indeed it is."

"Draco is going to sit with you all, on the end there." Hermione pointed past her parents.

"Alright, love," Draco said, nodding. He leaned over and planted a swift kiss on Hermione's lips and smoothed the hair on the top of her head. "I'll see you."

"Yes, right up on stage." She rolled her eyes, an annoyed blush creeping up her neck. "I've got to go, though. Gabrielle has set down so I have to get all these people to do so as well. Mummy, Dad, I love you, but I've got to see if everything's alright with Ginny." She glanced back as Severus once more, her eyes crinkling a bit at the corners, and started calmly ushering others to their seats. Severus could see that Mrs. Fleur Weasley, Lovegood, George and Ronald were doing the same. Draco shuffled to the end of the pew, conversing with Mr. Granger about dentistry or something as Severus sat and watched the groomsmen and bridesmaids finally seat everyone. They all disappeared out of the archway eventually, and an anticipatory hush came over the crowd.

Severus could clearly see now that Gabrielle Delacour was indeed sitting on the dais in a grey satin dress, her hands caressing a dark cello as she waited for her signal. Birds chirped and sang far off as the first note vibrated through the congregation and the young girl's fingers drifted over the strings as she played, her bow sliding back and forth with each lingering note\*\*\*, and the ceremony began.

--

Hermione hardly noticed anything as she walked gracefully down the aisle, arm-in-arm with Ron (Best Man in his snappy suit and sage green tie to match her dress). He smiled down at her briefly before catching Tommi's eye at the end of a row, winking saucily.

But Hermione saw none of that.

She couldn't get the image of a certain dashing professor out of her head. She looked up as they neared the end of the pews and accidentally caught said professor's eye.

*Oh damn, oh damn, oh damn.*

She'd thought this was over. This... infatuation. It had been an effect of the potion, right?

But he looked so... *good*... in his navy blue suit and silvery tie. And all those feelings that she'd had earlier in the year had come roiling back like saturated, threatening thunderclouds when she'd spotted him earlier. She squeezed Ron's arm to make sure this was real. What she felt.

Snape's eyes seemed to pierce right through Hermione as she walked past, not daring to take her eyes away from him.

And then she remembered.

*'... If the drinker has certain feelings for a certain person, their physical attraction might be enhanced toward the one receiving affection...'*

Oh, God, she'd said so herself...albeit in a rapid, excited manner...when Professor Snape had confronted her during her detention in the kitchens.

*'Potions aren't just digested, Hermione, they can have serious effects on your olfactory glands.'*

Hermione tried not to look like she might puke as Ron led her to her spot on the platform and went to his side, glancing over Kingsley (who was presiding over the ceremony) at the nervous-but-determined Harry to her left. Maybe he looked worse than she did.

*Why didn't you think of this before?* an inner voice scolded.

*Because you put the whole, embarrassing, mortifying event behind you* said another.

Luna soon joined her and then Fleur, looking magnificent as always and peering at Hermione with a look that said, 'Don't you  *dare* vomit and ruin zis wedding!'

Hermione took a big breath and looked to the archway, standing taller and determinedly NOT-looking in the direction of her parents... which just so happened to be where Snape was. And Draco, of course.

In the doorway appeared a little boy, an unexpected sight, in a matching tuxedo like Harry's with bubblegum pink hair and a cushion bearing two glinting rings in his arms. Hermione snapped her head towards Harry, who wore a similar surprised, but happy, expression.

Teddy was given a nudge by Andromeda to walk down the aisle, and the little thing did, wobbly and distracted, but still walking, a huge, bare-gummed smile on his face. Gabrielle played her song with a little more flit and flutter as Teddy marched down the aisle, passing by Professor Snape and blinking at him for a moment.

Everyone paused, and Snape looked startled.

Just then, Teddy's hair grew long and black, his nose large and pronounced, and the whole congregation burst into surprised laughter, including Snape. Teddy just stared up at him.

So, still smiling, Snape scooped the child up and carried him to the dais, handing him over to Harry.

Harry laughed a thank you to the professor, who just shook his head and returned to his seat.

Oh, how she'd missed that smile. *She'd* made him laugh before.

Teddy's hair promptly shortened into a messy shock on the top of his head, and his eyes flickered to a startling green. Harry planted a kiss on Teddy's cheek and, handing him off to Ron (who shoved the kid into the arms of a reluctant Neville), looked towards the archway for a final time as the music swirled and changed into a familiar tune.

-O-

Later, Hermione sat at a round table under the stars in the Weasleys' back yard, regarding a scene very similar to Bill and Fleur's wedding, but certainly much happier, with wine and cheer and Weasleys galore. And she felt kind of awful.

Draco sat next to her, nursing a scotch with his right hand and tracing circles on her knee with his left, looking happy-bored. How he managed that, she didn't know. She smiled at him, and he looked over, smirking and placing a kiss under her ear. She feigned ticklishness in order to overshadow the discomfort she felt at the moment, trying to sort out what the hell was wrong with her.

Ron was busy gobbling up the wedding cake in front of him, busily ignoring Tommi and Ginny's chatter about weddings and rings and other such commitments. Draco helpfully hit him in the back when he nearly choked, hearing Tommi mention kids. Hermione wasn't very sorry that he'd lost the ability to breathe for a moment.

"Merlin, you'd think we're all in our thirties, biological clocks ticking!" George laughed to Ron, who smiled wearily and gulped down some cider, his eyes watery.

"When does the dancing start?" Angelina asked across the table. The wedding party and their dates were seated at a huge round table in the middle of the dining area. George had brought Angelina along, although no one was sure if they were actually dating. Arthur hadn't even time to check his pocket watch before music came to life across the dance floor behind Hermione.

The father of the bride just chuckled and said, "Well, now, of course!"

And suddenly a huge number of people sprang from their seats and dragged their partners with them, determined to have a good time. Draco glanced at Hermione, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Oh, I suppose," she sighed, hoping that a dance or two would distract her.

Draco promptly stood and held his hand out. She placed her hand in his, and he tugged her up and onto the floor, wrapping an arm around her waist and the holding the other out to her right where she clasped her hand with his. They swayed and twirled and spun to the lively music for a good while, until Ron asked for a dance, and Draco reluctantly let him have it.

Ron clumsily led Hermione around the floor for a good while joking and laughing with her for a while, until the music slowed to a couples dance. Hermione looked away from him when they realized it.

"Listen, Hermione," Ron muttered quietly, "I know it must have been difficult to hear Tommi speaking so flippantly about kids and all..."

Her eyes snapped suddenly to his, hardening. "What makes you think that?"

"Well... the way you looked at me."

"Oh, sorry. I'll be sure not to look at you when you're making a spectacle of yourself, choking on your own spit," she said sarcastically.

"No, you were looking at me like I deserved it. It just caught me off guard...what she said."

"And don't you still deserve it, Ron? You can't have expected me to forgive and forget after all of those things that you said to me. You've been great trying to befriend me again, trying to get me to trust you, but the rest won't be easy."

"You're right. But, you must realize that I do want to get married one day, and obviously it won't be to you..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Bollocks. I didn't mean it like that. I mean, you have to... get over the fact that I'll be having kids with someone else."

"Please, Ron, rub it in my face a little bit more that you want a woman barefoot and pregnant, and I'm not her."

"Are you not... over me?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, for God's sake, Ronald!" she hissed. "I don't want to marry you. The reasons I left you may have been because of my infertility--my inability to live up to your expectations--but I stayed away because I realized it was better for *me*."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, pulling her in for a hug. She didn't resist. "I've gone at this the wrong way. I always do."

"You're telling me."

"I just... Things are serious between Tommi and I."

"Tommi and me."

"Whatever. I just wanted to tell you. I'm over you, and I support whatever you want to do with your life, Hermione. There. That's what I meant to say. I have no idea how it turned into an argument."

Hermione just stared up at him. "...All right," she finally said.

"Although, I'd really prefer that you weren't dating Malfoy."

Hermione poked him in the ribs, startling a quiet yelp from him. "Get over it."

"He seems nicer, although it's getting weird how infatuated he is with you."

"I think it's just the first time someone has sincerely liked him for who he is... not for the Malfoy name, you know?"

"I guess." Ron shrugged.

"May I cut in?" said a deep baritone from behind Hermione, although she recognized it without seeing a face. It was then that she realized they were between songs.

Hermione looked up at a Ron, who smiled the widest smile she had ever seen when being confronted with a Slytherin. "Of course, Professor," he said cheerfully, obviously recognizing his time to escape as well as discourage any Malfoy-Granger fraternization, and deposited Hermione into the arms of Professor Snape.

Hermione's eyes felt like they would pop out of her head when she looked up at him, noticing his intoxicating sage-lime scent and the absence of his blazer. "Do you mind?" he asked politely, grasping her right hand lightly.

"Not at all, Professor," Hermione murmured.

He smirked and snaked an arm around her waist, splaying his fingers over her lower back and lifting her right arm to guide her in the now slowing song, which seemed to compliment the spring night. "How are you enjoying the festivities, Miss Granger?" he began.

"This is a gorgeous wedding. Fleur and Molly did such a wonderful job, don't you agree?"

"Indeed. It is a very... elegant celebration."

Hermione smiled, nodding.

"For a Weasley event," he added, eliciting a mock-scowl from her.

"Oh, come now. What wedding have you been to with more beauty than this?" Hermione frowned.

Snape just cocked an eyebrow. "The Malfoy wedding, for instance," he replied. When she rolled her eyes, he said, "Although, I must admit, this comes in a very close second. Narcissa insisted on a winter wedding, so it was quite different."

"I see." They swayed in silence for a short while until she saw Teddy over in his own corner of the dance floor, bobbing around like a kangaroo with cobalt blue locks. Her smile turned into a giggle, remembering Snape's part in the ceremony, and she turned her eyes to his. She nearly forgot what she'd been thinking when she met his eyes, deep and dark and intense. It seemed they had not left her face. "It was nice of you to take an unscheduled part in the ceremonies, this afternoon. Apparently Teddy likes you very much."

His lips quirked, even though he feigned a bored tone. "Well, I wasn't going to let him drool at me with my features plastered to his face. He had his duties to uphold."

Hermione snorted and then gasped, covering her mouth and nose with the hand that had been resting on Snape's broad shoulder. He just shook his head and looked over her into the dark beyond the dance floor where the fairy lights and floating globes ended and the forest began. She fingered the collar of his dress-shirt distractedly as he led her around gracefully.

Finally, after a few moments of shockingly comfortable silence, Hermione blurted, "You look very dashing, tonight, Professor."

His gaze swung to hers in surprise. "So do you, Miss Granger. Lovely, I mean." There was a smirk on his lips, although his voice revealed mild nervousness.

Hermione's smile reflected his nerves. "I do?" she asked, blushing.

He nodded seriously.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured looking down, her eyes focusing on the crisp white buttons of his shirt.

He was quite, although she knew he wanted to say something. He'd inhaled as if to speak. Finally, he breathed, "Green suits you, Hermione."

She lifted her gaze to his, her eyes wide. Was that supposed to mean something? She looked at his lips...thin but supple...and wondered if they were warm like his hands. Her eyes flickered back to his, realizing this could be her only (insane) chance to get a kiss out of her professor before she left on a world-wide trip with... her boyfriend. "May I ask you a question, Professor?" she whispered, tipping her face to his.

Was it just her or was he leaning toward her, as well? She'd barely heard an "Anything, Hermione," before a familiar, panicked voice cut him off, and Snape was again a head-or-so taller and held her at a professional distance.

Hermione pivoted around, her hair smacking Snape's chest, to see Draco, looking pale (well, paler than usual) and stricken, a few feet away. She glanced apologetically behind her, but Snape was gone.

--

*Oh, Christ. I almostsnogged the poor girl!* Severus thought as he stormed toward the bar, signalling the tender for a firewhiskey and tossing it back, slumping into a stool.

"How'd it go?" asked a familiarly grating voice to his right.

Weasley grinned at him, and next to him Miss Vance sat, looking confused.

"What are you on about?" Severus snarled.

"Oh, I think we both know what I'm on about, sir," Weasley said, lifting his beer bottle in a toast and taking a gulp.

"Well, I've no clue what you're hinting at Ronald, so maybe you're not being as crystal clear as you thought. You've had a few, in any case."

"Indeed, Miss Vance," Severus agreed, lifting his glass to her. "Maybe, Mister Weasley, you should focus your attentions on your date instead of your alcohol consumption. Or who I'm dancing with."

"Oh, so this is about Hermione?" Margaret asked (he refused to call her Tommi).

Severus rolled his eyes and turned in his stool to watch the crowd, trying to ignore Weasley's next declaration.

"Tommi, luv, I think there's somethin' going on betwixt our 'Mione and Professor Snape, here."

"Oh, yeah?" Margaret exclaimed excitedly, then lowered her voice significantly. "That's kind of cute isn't it? I mean, they're both bookworms, aren't they?"

"And how much have you had to drink, Miss Vance?" Severus turned to her, looking at her glass pointedly.

"A few more than Ronnie, here." She sniggered.

"Then I would appreciate if you ceased making rather outrageous statements about my relationships with my students," Severus said, feeling exhaustion already.

Margaret didn't seem all that phased. "Oh, that's right," she said to herself. "She's dating Draco, though."

Severus nodded emphatically.

"She's got a Slytherin fetish!" Ron giggled.

With that, Severus stood and stalked off.

--

"Hermione, what was that about?" Draco asked, his voice broken.

"What are you talking about, Draco? What was what about?" Hermione walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her forehead against his, trying to push away the thought of her professor.

"Severus... You two were about to..." Instead of finishing he wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her to him. "Hermione, tell me you weren't going to kiss my Head of House."

"No, Draco! I don't know what you saw, but it wasn't what it looked like."

"Hermione?" His breath souged against her lips. "I don't know what I would've done if I'd seen him kiss you."

"He wouldn't have, Draco. He wasn't going to kiss me." *I was going to kiss him.*

Draco tugged reached around his neck for her hand and tugged her out into the night, past the fairy lights and the floating globes. She followed, feeling sheepish and frankly a little overheated from her Snape-encounter. She wanted to kiss *something*, if not him! "I guess you're right, Hermione," he finally admitted, smiling sheepishly. "I'm just..." He stopped as they reached the tree line and sucked in a big gulp of fresh air.

"Just what, luv?" she asked, feeling equally sheepish, but trying not to show it.

"Gods, Hermione," he said, pulling her to him again and nuzzling into her neck. "I'm just so in love with you."

Hermione stood stock-still, feeling utterly traitorous.

"I can't bear seeing you with other men," he continued, placing an apologetic kiss on her collarbone. "It makes me so jealous. And it shouldn't." He raised his head and kissed her cheek. "I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt me. You're so good to me."

Hermione wrapped her hands around his neck, again, feeling tears sting her eyes. God, what had she gotten herself into? Her fingers weaved into the fine blond hair at the nape of his neck, and he kissed her on the lips, giving her what she'd wanted if not from whom she'd wanted it. His tongue slipped into her mouth urgently, and she let him, feeling confused...because she did like Draco in that way... but...

Draco walked her backwards until her back touched the bark of a tree, grinding into her helplessly, grasping at her upper thigh and wrapping her leg around his waist. "I want you, Hermione. Badly," he growled, grinding the evidence into her. It felt lovely, just as all her encounters with him had been.

She needed to pay more attention to the good right in front of her, not the unattainable. "Draco," she murmured, grinding back.

"I love you so much," he said, casting a cushioning spell against the tree and pushing her dress up over her hips, unsure hands flitting over the lace of her thong.

She kissed him in answer.

--

"Professor, may I dance with you?" said an airy voice.

He turned wearily and offered a hand to Miss Lovegood, who smiled widely. They waltzed around the floor in silence for a while (which Severus didn't mind one bit) until she spoke, her dreamy voice cutting into his inner dialogue rather more clearly than he'd expected.

"You are a wonderful dancer, Professor Snape," she stated.

"Why, thank you, Miss Lovegood."

"I watched you with Hermione. You two would make great dance partners. She's almost as graceful as you are."

"Indeed? Do you think so?" he said, failing to cut the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Yes, I do think so. You two go together like... nargles and mistletoe."

Severus felt like crawling into a hole and dying. "Can we speak of something else, Miss Lovegood? I beg of you!"

"Alright," she said lightly. "What do you think of my date this evening, Professor?"

"Your date?"

"Yes. I asked Rolf Scamander to come to the wedding with me. We're good friends from Advanced Care of Magical Creatures."

"He is a smart gentleman. Not terrible at Potions, but no real gift, I must admit. I hear he is as talented as his grandfather in Care of Magical Creatures."

"Oh, yes, sir." She smiled. "He is especially good with flying horses, he tells me. Third year he helped Professor Hagrid with the Beauxbatons horses."

"Is that so?"

She hummed. "He's never heard of the Crumple-Horned Snorkak, though."

Severus nodded sagely. "They are," he joked, "extremely rare."

"Have you seen one, Professor?" She looked up at him in wonder.

"No, Miss Lovegood."

"Oh." Her face held so much disappointment Severus felt terrible having joked about it in the first place. "Not many people have, I suppose..." They swayed a bit. "Well, I think I might marry Rolf."

"Has the spirit of celebration gone to your head?"

"It might seem so. Everyone seems to talk about their love lives at weddings... But, no. I've had this thought for a while now. We are very much alike, Rolf and I. But he has

more friends. And he has brown hair."

With that, all thought of Hermione was satisfyingly pushed to the back of his mind, and Severus enjoyed a strange, yet pleasant evening with Miss Lovegood.

And Minerva.

And Andromeda (with Little Teddy).

And Molly and Arthur.

And a rather inebriated Filius.

But, that night, Hermione came back to him in his dreams, white dress and russet hair flowing, and they kissed, this time.

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*"Vitreaux" is the plural for stained-glass window in French for those of you who didn't recognise it. I thought Severus would have words like that in his vocabulary, considering.*

*\*\*Think of these:*

*[http://www.jcrew.com/AST/Browse/WomenBrowse/Women\\_Shop\\_By\\_Category/shoes/heels/PRDOVR~15232/15232.jsp](http://www.jcrew.com/AST/Browse/WomenBrowse/Women_Shop_By_Category/shoes/heels/PRDOVR~15232/15232.jsp) in the appropriate colour (for each bridesmaid).*

*\*\*\*I was thinking about "Saint-Saëns: Carnival of Animals The Swan" (performed by Yo-Yo Ma on his CD, Appassionato) for the introduction. And then, of course, the Wedding March or Pomp and Circumstance. Whichever floats your boat!*

## Commencement

*Chapter 27 of 27*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts for a year of postwar schooling. When, supposedly, all is well for the Know-It-All, events from the past emerge and drama ensues. And where is Severus Snape in all of this? Right smack in the middle, of course! Amidst the turmoil of early adulthood and unrequited feelings, will Severus and Hermione learn to "seize the day"?

AU after HBP, some facts from DH. Mild student-teacher romance. Rated M for later dream sequences, etc. Features some non-explicit HG/DM.

PLEASE read Author's Notes for disclaimers and necessary warnings throughout story.

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**A/N:** *Thank you all for your patience. This is the last chapter of part one!*

### Chapter Twenty-Seven: Commencement

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There was an incomparable sense of excitement in the Slytherin common room this morning...quite a feat as the group of returning students (and even the first years, as they'd been warned of their House's reputation even before sorting) tended to be quite subdued.

Severus Snape scanned over the group of gathered seventh and eighth years, hands clasped behind his back, and smiled faintly at them all.

Well, he did not quite have the knack to smile sincerely at Malfoy, but he still meant it when he intoned to them, "Well done."

They looked at one another, mildly surprised, but stayed silent.

"You have all represented your House admirably, this year, and I've no doubt you will be successful at whatever it is that you choose to do with your lives after you receive your diplomas. Our House has been cast in shadow for a very long while, and it will still take some time for the prejudices between us and the rest of Wizarding society to diminish, but I have every faith that you will keep your honour and your wits about you. Be proud, but not overly so. This is the first day of the rest of your lives, as they say." He smirked when some of the eighth years chuckled darkly. "The awards ceremony starts at ten this morning, and I want you all to be on your best behaviour...keep your heads high, for although Slytherin won't be receiving too many Orders of Merlin or awards for special services to the school..." there was another, darker chuckle. "...you have all been fine students and finer people."

Snape sent them off to dress (as he'd unceremoniously woken them early that bright Saturday morning) and turned to re-enter his office, sitting and propping his chin on a fist, staring at the framed newspaper cut-out of him and Albus Dumbledore retreating from the trial room some seventeen years or so ago.

"Cheers, old man," he muttered, smirking as newspaper-Dumbledore grasped newspaper-Severus' arm and led him away from the camera, steering him and directing him as the old coot had always done.

For some reason, Severus felt oddly sentimental about this group of students who would be departing this year. Well, he knew the reason, but never had he thought he'd be moved to inspirational speeches and such...*like a sodding Gryffindor, man!*

Of course, it had already been decided that he was going completely soft...or mad, as the case may've been.

After all, why else could he have fallen for yet another pretty Gryffindor Muggle-born who had the tendency to see the good in everyone? And who went off with a sworn enemy? Okay, well, Draco Malfoy wasn't what one could call an enemy...at the most he was emotionally unstable and at the worst of times completely unhinged, but he was a good person, Severus admitted grudgingly, who really wouldn't hurt a fly. Well, kill it anyway.



But that was beside the point.

Severus Snape and Hermione Granger hadn't spoken more than passing greetings since their almost-kiss at the Potter wedding, which might've been good or bad. Severus couldn't decide. He really was torn between keeping as far away from her as possible (for his sanity and her sake) and kidnapping her and stealing away to Timbuktu (for his sanity and *his* sake).

But today had come quicker than anyone had expected; the whole year had seemed to speed by, and so today had decided for him...that he'd let her depart on her journey, let her ignore all her friends and let her follow Draco Malfoy around the world. He had a sneaking suspicion that she, out of the goodness of her heart, had agreed to go just because Malfoy had some things to figure out, and he couldn't figure them out alone.

But perhaps that was just his hope speaking.

He allowed himself the luxury of thinking about Granger for the remainder of his free time before turning to his quarters and dressing in his best robes, the same ones he had generously shared with Hermione during the Halloween ball. He'd been reluctant to wash the coat after the event, but had scolded himself for the creepy sentiment and sent them off to the house-elves.

Now, he stood in front of his mirror, tugging on the crisp, white cuffs of his dress shirt and adjusting his collar. Then, he slipped into the black frock coat and tied his lengthening hair into a queue. The look was complete...scary, bat-of-the-dungeons Professor Snape.

He couldn't wait until he could wear other colours. This was getting ridiculous.

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Hermione grinned unabashedly at Harry and Ron, who looked surprisingly magnificent in their graduation robes. Ron towered over the both of them, laughing with Neville (who was not that much shorter than Ron and a bit more broad-shouldered now) about some such thing as Harry carded fingers through his hair, blushing. Lavender and Parvati giggled a ways off with Seamus and Dean, who looked to be soaking in the attention in their white attire.

Hermione slipped her heel out of one white pump in an unconscious show of nerves, smoothing her dress robes over her hips.

"You look like an angel, Hermione," Harry slipped his arm around her shoulders and placed a kiss on her cheek. Now that the wedding was over, Harry had returned to the friend she and Ron remembered, although Ginny was no longer the fourth wheel. Ginny, however, was hanging about with her fellow seventh years. Both years were to proceed down to the Entrance Hall at fifteen 'til ten.

Hermione was getting restless, as Harry pointed out almost immediately. "Take a few breaths, we'll be out of here in no time, and then you and Malfoy can go off to Bora Bora... or wherever."

Ron rolled his eyes as Hermione blushed and poked Harry in the side. "His name is Draco, Harry," she murmured half-heartedly.

"I don't know if he'll ever have a first name to me, Hermione, but I think it's neat that you're being spoiled for once," Neville said. "Merlin knows how much you've been mothering us for ages."

Ron snorted and shook his head. "You really think Hermione will be getting a break from mothering while on a trip with Draco? If you ask me, he is a bit..." he gestured funnily at his temple. "...in the head."

Hermione frowned. They'd been getting along so well these past couple of months, but whenever Draco was away, Ron didn't seem too pleased with this new addition to the group.

"You've been hanging around him for months, and you still can't stand him?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow...Hermione was reminded briefly of another dark brow, but shook the thought away, wondering instead where Harry had picked up that mannerism.

Ron shrugged. "He's alright, but not alright for Hermione, y'know?"

Neville and Harry both looked away. Hermione felt a little betrayed.

"Anyway," Neville broke the silence and clapped a hand on Ron's shoulder. "We should get going, don't you think?"

"Yeah." Hermione poked Harry in the stomach once more and ducked out of his embrace, linking an arm with Neville and proceeding toward the portrait hole. The whole lot of them joined the throng in the Entrance Hall, a crowd of white-robed students ready to enter into true adulthood. She let go of Neville when Draco appeared amongst the mob, quite stunning in his immaculate robes.

"Congratulations, love," he murmured as they both met halfway, his eyes even smiling as she swung a comforting arm around his neck and claimed his lips in greeting.

"Hey, you," she said.

"Mother owed the tickets this morning."

"Good!"

"So we'll be off to the London Portkey Office after the ceremony."

"I've got it, Draco." She rolled her eyes, tucking a curl behind her ear and folding her arms even while his arm curled around her shoulders and his other stretched out in a sweeping motion, imitating rather ridiculously, the two of them Portkeying to Asia.

"And then we'll head to Beijing..."

"Yeah, I *got* it. I've heard you the last eight times, too."

He looked a little taken aback, bringing his arm up to brush at the nape of his neck, and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, love. I'm just very excited. A new place and new experiences for six months...and most importantly, no one will know the Malfoy name."

Hermione cringed a little. She'd been too harsh, maybe. She should be just as excited, shouldn't she?

Hermione leaned up to kiss him on the cheek, brushing her nose against his skin. "And I'll be there with you."

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There were many people. *Too many people*, Severus observed as he sat atop the professors' dais. Crowds. Hoards.

Severus gulped.

Perhaps nearly a thousand. Reporters, Aurors, Wizengamot, and the Minister. And of course, the students and parents. The graduating classes shone like the sun in their

white robes, among the black and Ministry maroon.

And Severus felt very, very unsure about why he put up with this anymore, especially when he spotted Hermione laughing and...*nuzzling*... with Malfoy before they retreated to their respective seats at the front of the assembly, conjured chairs awaiting them in alphabetical order as rehearsed.

The ceremony began with a speech from Minister Shacklebolt about this year being a culmination of the hard work everybody'd done to recover from the war and blah, blah, blah, for several minutes. Severus was quite warm in his robes, which didn't make the situation any better.

Minerva spoke next, took time to thank the Minister and such, and then spoke about the two classes as a whole...a troublesome lot...and their many accomplishments as students. Awards were presented for excellence in the many electives and core classes, and Severus was surprised to hear that Draco Malfoy had received the Excellence in Arithmancy Award along with a seventh-year Ravenclaw, Emmett Glasgow.

And then, obviously, Potter received the Excellence in Defence Against the Dark Arts along with... Luna Lovegood, who was slightly overshadowed by Potter's role in the war, but who smiled beatifically anyway.

Hermione, of course, was given the Potions award with a Hufflepuff (what a surprise that had been to review all the grades and find Mister Waverly at the top of his class).

The rest of the prizes were awarded in a slow stream of boredom as Severus stared into the crowd, keeping an eye on his Slytherins as well as the troublesome Gryffindors (who, for once, didn't seem to be causing much strife).

And then it was time for the school-wide awards.

And Minerva called Potter to the stage.

Just as Severus was in the throes of what would have been a spectacular eye-roll, Minerva called *his* name to the stage.

"Would Severus Snape join Harry Potter on the stage, please."

He stood, not a little ungracefully (this was absolutely ridiculous), as his Slytherins cheered and...actually quite a few others applauded as well.

Once the crowd quieted, Minerva began what would prove to be a very long speech. "I am pleased to present, this year, twin awards for special services to the school. For nearly twenty years, Severus Snape has struggled through adversity as a double-agent to the Order of the Phoenix..."

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Hermione leapt to her feet as Harry and Severus...*Snape*...were given their medals: polished bronze Hogwarts' crests with thick black ribbons that hung about their necks, paired nicely with their solemn faces (Harry was trying very hard not to grin like a madman). Hermione couldn't hold her mad grin back, though. Snape had given her the Potions award, even when she'd betrayed his trust around mid-year... Well, her and Draco's project had turned out very well, even though Se...*Sna-pe* wasn't generous with praise. But that wasn't surprising. At least he hadn't slandered them in front of the class like he had with Neville and his partner, Daphne.

Soon, the band struck up, and all the graduates stood to walk across the stage to receive their diplomas, the billowing robes of white flashing in the sunlight only just a bit brighter than everyone's smiles. Draco winked at her from his spot in line before the stairs to the platform, as she took her seat...a fully-fledged witch.

Her eyes travelled to Snape's as Draco passed across the stage. He'd... he'd been staring at her? The man blinked as if startled and looked away.

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Minerva had drawn him into conversation about the coming summer and consequent hirings, but he wasn't paying much attention. To be honest.

There were thousands of witches and wizards, too many, and he could locate an escape route that wouldn't involve bowling over this hoard of second years that had decided to set up camp around their Headmistress and Deputy-Headmaster. Severus allowed himself to fantasize the moment when their silly little bodies would topple and scatter like balls in a billiard game, but was brought to the present when Minerva mentioned something about 'Mister Potter and his companions.'

Severus glanced up at the words and located the trio, Potter nodding calmly as Weasley probably waxed Quidditch, Hermione standing silent, checking her watch and scanning the crowd.

When her eyes fell on him and Minerva, she broke away from their little island and strode toward them, a determined look upon her pretty round face. He hadn't realized he was staring until McGonagall snorted. He glared at her before Hermione's voice called for his attention.

"Good afternoon, Professor," she began.

He nodded to her, folding his arms as the uncomfortable feeling settled in. He hated this feeling. He was losing her. This was a goodbye. McGonagall couldn't save him now, though, seeing as some fifth-year's parent was currently scolding the Headmistress about her son's final marks. "Miss Granger."

He watched her watch him for a moment, brown eyes gliding over the material of his dress robes, probably remembering October.

She took a breath. "I wanted to thank you..."

"There is no need for that, Miss Granger," he muttered gruffly, shoulders hunching under the weight of her gaze.

She smirked, momentarily reminding him of Lily...he'd gotten that trick from her, anyway. "May I continue, anyway?"

Severus mentally shrugged.

"I just wanted to thank you for everything that you've done for my friends and me"...he scowled..."over the years. With everything that you were doing for Dumbledore"...another deepening scowl (this was so impersonal, he nearly rolled his eyes)..."it must have been a real drag to put up with our antics. But you did, and I, at least, am thankful for that. But, I am grateful, especially, for everything that you've done for me, this year. And I haven't been exactly... embracing... of the care you've given me, despite what it might've cost you..."

His expression softened, then; he couldn't help himself. She smiled briefly, holding out her hand. And very tentatively, cautiously, the Potions master extended his, wrapping his fingers around her small palm.

Suddenly, her grip changed and she was lunging toward him. He, startled, let go of her hand, arms flying upward slightly as she brought both of hers to curl around his neck.

Hermione Granger was hugging him.

His entire body went rigid when she squeezed him lightly, and just as he thought the worst was over, she stood up on her tippy toes and pecked him on the cheek...

A strange concoction of nausea and triumph flooded through his veins at the gesture, and he brought his hands up to wrap around her waist when a familiar, nasal voice rose above the crowd. "Oi, Granger! Stop harassing my Head of House! We've gotta get a move on!"

As she backed away, never breaking eye contact, his hands brushed against her ribs. And that was it. He curled his lip, fighting the urge to take her hand and fight that stupid Malfoy to the death. "Your *boyfriend* is calling for you," he sneered around his words.

Another burst of triumph shuddered through him as she turned toward her companion, who immediately slipped his hands over her bum and gave it a squeeze, even as she glanced over her shoulder at him. The bat of the dungeons.

Severus fled.

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Hermione looked up at Draco, who draped his arms about her possessively as they made their way toward the Weasleys as the group chattered boisterously by the lake. Harry and Ginny were lounging under the tree with Ron and Tommi, who waved enthusiastically at them in the dappled sunlight.

"We're leaving, folks!" Draco yelled.

The group of them groaned appropriately and stood to welcome Hermione into a big hug. Hermione closed her eyes, savouring the feeling, the boyish smell, the everything of Harry and Ron...her old best friends...before she turned to Ginny and Tommi, tackle-hugging the both of them, loud squeals erupting from their wide smiles. "I love you all," she murmured. "I'll owl you every day. And send you gifts. And you'll owl me back, right?"

"I'll make sure Ron does," Tommi said, nudging her boyfriend with her hip. He grinned and shrugged.

"Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Course, 'Mione. If I don't, Gin will most likely kill me."

"Well," Hermione huffed, backing into Draco who wrapped an arm around her shoulder, startling her slightly. "I'm glad everyone's so enthusiastic about it."

"We'll owl them first so they get our addresses, and then they won't have an excuse," Draco said.

Hermione elbowed him, watching him double over for a moment. "Excuse?" The rest of them laughed.

"We love you, too, Hermione," Harry said, smiling a small smile before lunging in and smooching her on the cheek.

"Hey! My girlfriend, Potter!" Draco growled, although no one was sure if he was joking.

"Hermione, can I talk to you a moment?"

She turned to Ron, who had a look on his face that she couldn't quite read. He led her to the edge of the lake, watching pensively as the Giant Squid looped in lazy circles right under the surface of the water. They stood for a little bit, until Hermione couldn't take it anymore and squeezed his hand. "What is it, Ron?"

He turned to her. "Look. I think you're making a mistake with Draco, here. But who am I to order you around? I've learned from my mistakes."

Hermione stared at him.

"I just need to express my opinion that he's no good for you...you're having to take care of him and accommodate his possessiveness. And... what happened to independent Hermione, you know?"

"Ron... I'm trying something new for a while. I'm going to get away from England and be pampered, and if I need to pamper back, well, then I will. And I know he's not for me, but I don't have to make that decision right now, do I?"

Ron looked down at her, brow furrowed and blue eyes intense. Suddenly he enveloped her in a tight hug. "I understand."

"That's all?" she murmured.

"Yeah. I think."

Hermione took a big breath, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Okay."

"I just gotta say, I liked it better when you had a thing for Snape."

Hermione shoved him away, blushing uncontrollably. "*Ron!*" she hissed.

"Fine, fine. Go. I love you. If you get in over your head, just come home. Please?"

"I promise," she said, and kissed him on the cheek.

Draco was waiting for her under the willow tree.

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The timepiece on the mantle ticked as Severus sat at his desk, staring down at his medal for special services to the school, which sat atop his grade book. Still marking May's last week. He'd neglected to update it for all the hectic NEWT testing and rowdy soon-to-be-graduates who'd taken the last week as a free-for-all.

The medal was beautiful, but couldn't outshine Hermione's glowing face as she'd watched him and Potter receive their awards.

"Christ," he muttered as the shiny medal blurred, distorted by the tears he would *not* cry. "Christ," he said again.

He had let her get away. Just like last time. And now it was a fucking habit, and he'd never see her again save for Order reunions...and she wasn't even guaranteed to be back in two years as promised. When travelling the globe, one tended to get sidetracked.

Without further ado, Severus Summoned some Firewhisky (for the shitty days) and opened it with his hand, enjoying the tension the cork absorbed as his twisted away with the strength of his arm.

"Now," he announced to the empty...*empty*...room, "to drinking oneself into a stupor over lovely, unattainable women with Muggle parentage and bright..." his voice broke a little, undignified and raw, "...futures." He toasted the air and proceeded to drink from the bottle.

It was an hour later when a knock on the door interrupted his plans of drinking himself into oblivion, and he spilled Firewhisky over his best robes as a result. He swore, standing and practically storming to the door, already half-drunk and contemplating homicide, when the heavy oak opened on its own, only to reveal a tall, ginger bloke.

"What the fuck do you want, Weasley? Commencement is over, and you're welcome..*believe me*...to leave and never come back."

The man rolled his eyes and offered his hand. "Just wanted to offer my congratulations on your award. Also wanted to check and see if you hadn't offed yourself now that

Hermione's run off with Malfoy."

Severus just stared at him, probably looking a fright (well, when didn't he?) and resembling a confounded toddler. "What?"

"I think the proper thing to do now is shake my hand. And maybe offer me a drink. Although I think you didn't leave much drink for anyone else."

Severus slowly took the young man's hand and gave it a confused shake, then turned back to his living room cum study and sat in front of the fire.

"You look a fright," Weasley said unnecessarily.

Severus snorted.

"Your cheeks are wet, and your robe smells like foul whisky. Clean up, Professor."

"What's the point?"

"Because when she comes back in two years, I'd rather she were knocked off her feet by the bloke she fell in love with than the mere smell of the bloke who turned into a snivelling drunkard the minute she left."

Severus was perplexed and told his former student so.

"I know about Hermione; you're blubbering over her, and you know I know you've been blubbering over Hermione all year..."

"I do *not* 'blubber', Weasley," Severus began.

"What do you call this, then?" Weasley gestured at his former professor.

"*Moping*."

Weasley snorted. And Severus sat. Somehow it wasn't surprising that Weasley'd noticed more than he'd let on all year. The younger man helped himself to a chair and leaned on his knees, looking at Severus with his ginger eyebrows raised.

"Fine, I'm blubbering."

"Indeed," Weasley said. "Now, why'd you let her go, if you were going to blubber like this when she left?"

Severus picked up the whiskey bottle and drank from it. Screw manners. "She has *aboyfriend*," he slurred.

"Malfoy is a pillock, not a boyfriend."

Severus looked at him. "That's interesting," he said after a while, sloshing the whiskey about in the bottle with the swing of his arm.

Weasley looked resigned. "What is?"

"We agree!" he said, finally spilling on himself.

With that, Weasley banished his alcohol. "You're quickly sliding from 'blubbery' into 'pathetic', so I'm stopping you before I see something truly embarrassing."

"Ugh."

"Where's your Sober-Up?"

"Third door on your right...NO!...left, and in the mirror cabinet. And no snooping, Weasley."

The younger man sniggered. "I knew why I chose you over Malfoy," he muttered as he located the loo. He returned in a short while and tossed the phial of blue liquid into Severus' lap.

"If I take this, will you go away?"

"No, I don't think I will."

Severus fought a pout, but in the end decided that if he was that drunk, then he'd best sober up quickly...wouldn't want Weasley to blackmail him or anything. Although, Gryffindors weren't the type to...

"For Merlin's sake, drink it!"

"All right, Weasley! Don't get your knickers in a twist!" Severus downed it and quickly realized what he'd just said. They sat a moment before Severus looked up and growled, "So help me if you tell anyone about this, I will not hesitate to come into your home and poison you secretly so no one will be able to trace me to the crime."

"I've no plans to blackmail you," he said simply. "Now that you're sober, I'd like to offer you a slice of the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes Potions department."

Severus stared at him. "That is the most absurd thing I've ever heard."

"I'm serious. Since Fred's gone, Wheezes is missing its Potions maker, and we both know I'm utter shit at it."

"I don't know why I haven't shown you the door, yet."

"I do. It's because you'd get a crack at invention again...and for good things... mostly."

Severus puzzled over this deal for a moment, then realized his robes were soiled. "I'll have to mull this over. You need to leave, so I can sulk in peace. No, I won't off myself. Trust me, I don't keep any lethal potions in my vicinity...all the dunderheads nearly drive me suicidal."

"You would get a large portion of the profits since you'd be inventing alongside George. Almost half, for potions and edibles."

"Leave, Weasley." Severus stood and shooed the younger man toward the door.

"Fine, fine! Just consider it. George and I can whip up a formal proposal if you like."

Severus snorted and continued to shoo him, opening the door wide and sneering.

"Just one more thing, sir."

"What?"

"Do you love Hermione?"

"Yes."

Weasley seemed to release a breath, nodding with a slight smile. "All I needed to know. Now, should I pop by next Tuesday for an answ..."

Severus slammed the door in his face.

"Maybe stay for a game of chess, just to bother you?" a muffled voice said through the wood of the door.

"Leave me in peace! I need to recover from *seven years* of Harry Potter! And *you*! And... children!"

Weasley's laughter petered off as he disappeared down the corridor, and soon all was silent, save for the clock.

Severus sighed.

Two years.

Certainly, if he'd been waiting all his life, it couldn't be that long.

Severus headed toward the bedroom, suddenly as weary as an old man. His bed looked incredibly inviting, and he had to fight to at least not collapse with his soiled clothes on. Sliding under the covers, naked and boneless, Severus allowed only one thought to permeate his hazy mind:

*Hermione.*

--Finite Incantatem--

**A/N:** *Holy Mother of God, that was a long time coming! I send out my very sincerest apologies to all who loved my story and were watching avidly for a post. I just went to college this past September, so my focuses have been elsewhere. I finally sat down a month ago and this week and wrote it all down, but I'm still dissatisfied with the result. It's not my best, I'll tell you that, but I hope it's entertaining and leaves you with a tad bit of hope... Maybe?*

*Well, tell me what you think in your comments. I do value them very much.*

*I do plan to continue this story with a sequel, which is all Severus/Hermione in France, isolated from all that 'social parameters' rot. Also, Ron will be a main secondary character with his girl, Tommi (they won't appear that often, though).*

*Okay, so enough from your crazy ConstantComment. Much love to all.*