

The Gilded Cage

by ApollinaV

Clever Miss Hermione Granger believes that by marrying Azkaban prisoner 11652 she can effectively skirt the new Ministry Marriage Law requirements. A story about morality, mortality, and pickled walnuts.

Nolens Volens

Chapter 1 of 26

Clever Miss Hermione Granger believes that by marrying Azkaban prisoner 11652 she can effectively skirt the new Ministry Marriage Law requirements. A story about morality, mortality, and pickled walnuts.

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"Fuck."

That was the only thought she could manage at the moment. For an intelligent witch who prided herself on not only a comprehensive vocabulary but insisted on edifying conversation, 'fuck' seemed to sum it up nicely. With a surprisingly throaty growl, Hermione tossed the offending paperwork into the cold fireplace, Conjured her signature blue flame, and watched the headline, **MINISTRY PASSES NEW MARRIAGE LAW** darken, curl, and slowly turn to ash. It was a childish act at best, but quite satisfying.

She needed time to think.

The law was obscenely unfair, with gross provisions for Muggle-borns, given their obviously unsuitable nature, and sought nothing more than to turn every witch of age regardless of blood status into brood mares.

In fact, only witches were required to find mates; if a wizard wished to remain unattached, he was not penalized, which effectively shifted the natural dynamic of courtship. Witches were forced to woo and fight over eligible wizards.

The misogyny was not even thinly veiled, it was blatant.

All unions under the new regime smacked of puritanical and medieval influences. Hermione was quite familiar with the antiquated concept of *Pater familias*—the man of the house exerting control and dominance over every aspect of home and family life, but in the letter of this law it had become institutionalized.

Oh, certainly she understood the so-called rationale behind the law. Centuries of inbreeding did have their unpleasant consequences; not that her uterus should be responsible for cleaning up their messes. There were flip charts and graphs detailing the apocalyptic future of the wizarding world, Ministry propaganda fueling stories of drooling, three-eyed, web footed, little darlings, but somehow Hermione knew this wasn't driving the law.

If that were the case, they would have mandated something as barbaric as 'purebloods can now only marry Muggle-borns' or some other such nonsense, but they hadn't. Forcing witches to vie for wizards' attentions was one thing. Forcing fine, upstanding, moral pureblooded wizards to put up with uncivilized, ill-mannered, dirty, Muggle-born tarts was quite another.

It was simply a question of demographics. In the modern age young witches were less apt to marry. And old wizards—as in the kind who wrote the law—were

overwhelmingly single. Given that women of a certain age, those in the waning years of their fertility, were exempt, only young, supple witches with good birthing hips and pert nipples were forced. They might as well have added *'no mingers allowed.'*

She would never be subjugated thusly. She refused to be another aimless housewitch, slave to her husband's whims, whose only ambition was to be pregnant and stuck in the kitchen. As Hermione chewed the cuticle on her thumb, she considered her best options. The Ministry would force her to conceive a minimum of two children, then heap on tax advantages, monetary incentives, and 'wonderful gifts and prizes' for popping out more.

She'd need an impotent husband, one who could easily cave to her, one that wouldn't be swayed by incentives. If she had to be stuck in a loveless marriage, at least she'd wear the pants.

Ron sprang quickly to mind, but was just as quickly dismissed. Certainly she could walk all over that boy, but he'd actually want a litter of children running around the house and probably never lift a finger to help her get around the 'productivity' clauses. No. The Burrow was fun to visit, the chaos amusing to watch, but she had no interest in actually being stuck in that kind of hell hole for the rest of her life.

Neville. He was the perfect embodiment of weak and compliant. Hermione was also painfully aware that he had been carrying a torch for her since early on in her school days. She had never encouraged it, but her apparent lack of attention only served to fan the flames. Not that he had the balls to make the first move. At the moment he had taken up with Hannah Abbot, but Hermione was certain that if she confessed some hidden love for him he'd throw the witch over for her.

Hermione raised her eyes plaintively to the ceiling. Could she really bind herself to Neville? She had no doubt that they could settle into a routine that could make home life bearable. But then visions of him fumbling and grunting atop her with Trevor watching from the bedstand sprang forth. Hermione didn't even want to think about Neville in possession of a penis much less an erection. No. Definitely not.

She needed to be smart about this. Surely she could out-think the Ministry; Lord knows she'd done it enough times before. This was just like a good logic problem.

And there it was.

Her lips turned into a twisted little smile. Hermione had her answer.

Snape.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Nolens Volens - Whether Willing Or Not

Non Compos Mentis

Chapter 2 of 26

Hermione sets her plan in motion, and Severus greets an unexpected guest.

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He had two choices. He could make an effort to get spiffed up, a polite gesture considering the occasion, or he could go as-is and risk offending his visitor. The simple decision was a veritable quandary to stew over, and considering he had all the time in the world to think on such obviously trivial things, he did.

Severus did not entertain 'guests.' The thought alone was humorous, but didn't change the fact that he would in three hours' time meet with a mystery guest. So then he postulated: was this such a landmark occasion to merit the scrubbing of grime from his neck?

He spent the morning carefully and methodically weighing the pros and cons of making up his appearance before settling on doing absolutely nothing. Not that he didn't know that from the very beginning. No, whoever his visitor was, Severus was under no obligation to make him believe he was anything other than a caged animal.

His appearance was of no importance; it never had been. Cleanliness, however, was always paramount. The thought that his students used to believe he was unhygienic brought a cruel smile to his chapped lips. How could he be anything other than a neat-freak when the simplest of cross contamination in his labs could spell disaster? He was always meticulously clean; Severus was just damned unattractive.

Well, there was no point in attempting to change that now.

At two o'clock, several guards made their presence known by banging on the other doors down his dank corridor. Their comings and goings never surprised him. Every last guard in the prison lumbered through the hallways with the grace and finesse of a mountain troll, and by the racket, he imagined a horde of the ugly bastards were outside his door now.

"Prisoner 11652, present yourself!" a voice barked. The youngest Mulciber boy by the sound of it. My, how the mighty had fallen.

Without bothering to hide his irritation at the obvious inconvenience, Severus lifted himself from the cot and stood in the center of his cell and held his arms out wide to show he wasn't carrying anything. Not like a shiv was any match for a bloody wand.

Once the guard was satisfied, the door rippled and creaked as the maximum security wards were lifted. He huffed and tapped his foot, showing his displeasure, but truth be told, he was quite curious as to who his first visitor in nearly five years could possibly be. In a great anticlimactic moment, Miss Hermione Granger strode into his small kingdom with a similar scowl on her petulant mouth.

His cell stank. He was well aware that it did. He did have a keen sense of smell afforded by his great honking nose after all, but there was no reason for her to be so damn rude about it. Her small nose wrinkled up in disgust, and Severus was pleased he hadn't made a single effort to get spiffed up for her. It was apparent that she hadn't bothered to get dressed for him, either. The witch had always been a plain Jane, but in dirty trainers, casual jeans, and a dumpy pullover, she looked positively underwhelming.

Her assessment of the wizard wasn't much kinder. She had expected that he would have lost weight, not that he was ever a heavy set man, but the gaunt, sharp angles of his shoulders and face seemed hideously accented by malnourishment. Still, it was Snape all right. The eyes were the same, of that she was sure. Those black beady,

snake eyes were unmistakable. Rationally, her mind supplied that his eyes were very dark brown. Black eyes were genetically impossible. He simply had a dominant 'BB' gene whereas her unremarkable brown eyes were the more common 'bb' variety. Pushing those random thoughts away, Hermione studied Snape.

She shuddered to think how he might appear beneath his fraying gray woolen robes, especially with his Inferius pallor. But most distressing was his obvious lack of care. Seeing Sirius Black not long after his stint in the infamous prison had given her something to expect. Now, faced with her ex-professor with a long, matted black beard and tangled hair that seemed to be in some stage of dreadlocking itself, Hermione felt a definite stab of pity for the once proud wizard, but only a teensy-weensy stab.

Mulciber stuck his head through the door. "We'll be right here, Miss; don't hesitate to call for us if this brute tries anything."

He was so eager to be helpful, the boy must have found Granger appealing, but then Azkaban was pretty damn remote and female visitors were practically unheard of. Trelawney would have been appealing to the boy. Not to Severus. Even deprived of comfort and company, Granger was nothing to look at.

She snorted and fingered her wand in a haphazard way. "Thanks, but I've got this."

For a lightning second, Severus considered how fast he could disarm the witch, use her wand on the guards, and make a hasty escape. It was possible. He'd have a bowtruckle's chance in a bonfire. Yet, if anyone could do it, he certainly could, even if his skills had atrophied a bit. But then it would be risking his neck. After his masters had met their demise, Severus was resolved to never risk his neck again. Or at least that was his current story and he was sticking to it.

"Professor Snape, I could say it's a pleasure to see you, but..." she gestured airily around his domain with a contempt-filled look, "well, this isn't a social call."

"It's not? Pity. And I had so been looking forward to tea and biscuits." The chit had the temerity to actually chortle at that. "Just what brings you here, then, Granger?"

"A business proposition."

Severus' eyebrows rose at that. Business? As far as he knew, he had nothing to offer the witch, and certainly nothing to gain from her. He folded his arms across his chest in a display of authority he clearly didn't possess, but it always helped to press one's advantage, and currently, the only advantage he had was that people still feared him.

"Well, let's hear it, then."

Hermione studied the dirty cell and leveled her wand at a wash rag. Before Severus could register his protest, she impressively Transfigured it into a rather plush, black leather armchair. Severus muttered, 'Show off,' just loud enough for her to hear. For added measure, she cast several thorough Scourgifies on it. Smart girl. There was no telling what kinds of life had been growing on the rag.

She sat and primly crossed her legs, earning a contemptuous snort from her former Potions professor. He took a seat on his thin cot and leveled his eyes at the interloper.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to skip the traditional small talk." Severus nodded his assent, and she continued, "I'd like to propose marriage."

For several seconds, the silence was nearly audible, until a loud click came from his clenched jaw.

"Leave, Miss Granger."

"Sir?"

"You've had your fun at my expense. Go now!"

Her brow furrowed. "I assure you, Professor Snape, this is no joke."

"The hell it's not! Did Potter put you up to this, or perhaps those contemptible Weasley twins? Regardless, I find this neither funny nor amusing. Leave, Miss Granger, go back to your friends at the pub, have a good laugh, and never return."

She narrowed her eyes at him and silenced his voice with a quick flick of her wand. Damned woman, she probably only did so to drive home the point that she was armed and he wasn't. Not like he bloody well didn't know that already.

"Do I look like I'm joking, sir? That I'd willingly come out to this wretched, filthy place for a giggle? Please, give me a bit more credit than that. I'm quite serious."

She waved her wand once more, lifting the silencing spell, and Severus sat back, contemplating the witch. Granger was prone to many strange flights of fancy. He mostly chalked it up to her Muggle background. No civilized witch or wizard would ever champion the rights of house-elves or have werewolves as bosom buddies. And while it was still possible that she was having him on, it wasn't likely that she was going to leave anytime soon.

"Then explain yourself."

With a loud, long-suffering sigh, Granger relaxed back into the armchair. A part of Severus ached to run his fingers up the curve of the armrests and wiggle into the cushion. He only had his mattress as a seat, and the stone wall wasn't quite accommodating on his back.

"The Ministry, in its infinite wisdom, has seen fit to pass a marriage law requiring all unwed witches to marry and start popping out babies as soon as possible."

For a moment, he could only stare at the girl. Of course he had no way of knowing if what she said was true. Occasionally, he got scraps of old newsprint to use as bog paper, but never full articles and certainly not current events.

Severus's brain quickly ran through the ramifications of such a ridiculous law and came to many of the same conclusions that Hermione had. Even without the benefit of knowing more than what she had only just said, he was able to fill in the missing details; he was well accustomed to the Ministry's *modus operandi*. No doubt they would put the unwilling witches on a short leash. All in all, it was a bit of brilliance for her to come to him.

Hermione watched as his thin pressed lips curled upwards, and before her startled eyes, Severus Snape smiled broadly, showing off his snarled teeth and evidence of a lack of basic dental care. It was beyond scary. The man looked like a pirate.

"Tsk! Tsk! Miss Granger, what have your parents to say about your proposition, then? Tell me, are they more repulsed by their little girl lusting after her big, bad ex-professor or the prospect of having a convicted murderer in the family?"

"Lusting? I assure you, Mr. Snape, that I have never harbored any lust for you. Loathing perhaps, but certainly never lust. As for Monica and Wendell Wilkins... let's just say that they don't exactly remember having a daughter, and everyone involved prefers it that way."

"Then I take it you are quite serious about this." At her nodded affirmation, Severus thoughtfully stroked his beard. "I assume there will be something for me out of this arrangement?"

"Naturally."

"Then you'll have to spell it out for me in detail before I could possibly give your request proper consideration."

Hermione nodded before pulling out a large roll of parchment from her satchel. "I've familiarized myself with the terms of your incarceration and cannot find any prohibition against marriage; actually, I was able to find support of it in case law in *Phillips v. the Ministry of Magic*"

Severus rolled his eyes, not that she noticed; her bushy head was burrowed deep into the parchment before her. It would hardly have been a challenge to pluck her wand right then and there.

"Once married, you cannot be denied access to your wife for visitation."

"Conjugal visits?" he asked with a broad smirk, clearly enjoying the way he threw her off balance.

Sex? What the hell would give him the idea that she'd be interested in having sex with him? Hermione didn't bother hiding her hasty perusal of his body, or the shudder of revulsion. The imagery of his bony little hips hitting hers was downright frightening. She hadn't been so squicked by the mere thought of sex since the time she caught Phineas and the Fat Lady in a compromising position. And chocolate pudding hadn't seemed right for months after that.

"Certainly not! As if I ever would, Professor. If I were interested in that sort of relationship, I would find someone much more suitable than yourself. Actually, I've come to you specifically because you are specifically prohibited from conjugal visits," she replied, rather more smugly than necessary. "That and your life sentence, of course."

"Well, seeing you're not going to provide me with pussy, I ask again, how does this benefit me, Miss Granger? I'm not a man taken to acts of charity."

She snorted loudly. "Clearly!" Then, composing herself again, she pulled out a large tablet of parchment. Even at a distance, Severus could make out it was rules governing his incarceration. "As your wife, I could significantly improve your situation and give you comfort in other ways."

"Such as? I need an example, Miss Granger, if you intend on dangling this unattractive carrot in front of me."

Frowning, she flicked her wand at him and huffed, "*Scourgify*."

Though it could be construed as an act of mercy given his condition, a *Scourgify* was quite an insult to any wizard. The spell was created for household spills and cleanups and was generally considered to be too abrasive to use on the skin. For Severus, it felt as if he had just been licked by a large, dry kneazle tongue. It did, however, cut through the caked layer of grime.

The cleaning charm was followed by an air deodorizing spell. It wouldn't last long, as the mattress emitted its own particular brand of foul air, the shallow sink often burbled up something quite noxious, and then there was, of course, the stench of the privy. His cell was indescribably wretched in the best of seasons and twice as putrid in summer. For the moment, it was a welcomed reprieve. One would have thought Severus would have grown accustomed to the stink as one often does when surrounded by a constant barrage. He had not.

His hand flew up to rake through the dense tangled mass of his beard; even his chin felt nominally clean.

"As a member of the general public, I must petition the Ministry to see you; as your wife, I'll have access to your person whenever I wish. Furthermore, I'll be able to bring you items, handle your affairs and correspondence, as well as bring you food. Now, I don't know exactly what you're fed, but given the horrible state of your person, I'd hazard to guess that the diet does not agree with you."

Severus gave a short bark of laughter but didn't otherwise interrupt.

"While I'm not going to make myself available to your every whim, I believe we can reach a suitable accord."

She pulled out a quill and rummaged again in her satchel before producing a marriage contract. It was simply good business practice to always assume the sale. She proffered the items to him. Severus accepted the self-inking quill and contract, placed them on his bed, and made a rather aristocratic dismissive wave of his hand.

"Wait! You're sending me away?"

"Of course, girl, did you really think I'd just agree to this insanity? I need to contact my solicitor. Come back in two weeks, and leave the other paperwork, will you?"

"Your solicitor?" she asked flabbergasted. "I assure you, Professor Snape, the contract is in order. I've thoroughly covered all the bases; please have a look at it."

"Oh yes, and I suppose I can trust you just because you're some morally superior erstwhile Gryffindor? Miss Granger, you waltz in here, unbidden and unwelcome, spend all of five minutes spinning this tale, ignoring the fact that I have no proof of this Marriage Law, and expect me to just sign this tripe?" Hermione sat as far back as she could to avoid flying spittle from his twisted mouth.

"It occurs to me that you might not be the only witch in this predicament, making me quite the marketable wizard. By the end of this week, I might have stacks of marriage proposals to sort through. I'll need at least two weeks to settle my affairs and list my demands."

"Demands?"

"Did I stutter? Yes, of course, you silly girl. Now, go and don't darken my doorstep any longer. Two weeks," he dismissed her like a house-elf.

Hermione didn't need to be told twice, and she practically threw her carefully done research at him. At the cell door, she turned, remembering his Transfigured washcloth. He'd probably need it, but given the covetous way he stared at the chair, she decided to leave it as something to remember her by.

"Out!" she screamed. "Let me out of this damned place!"

The cell door quickly swung open and just as quickly shut, leaving Professor Snape with the most reading material he'd had in over a year. He smiled to himself, grabbed the quill she'd left behind, and made his aching back quite comfortable in the armchair.

All in all, it was the best day he could remember in a long time. Now, all he had to figure out was how to best milk the situation to his advantage.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Non Compos Mentis - Of Unsound Mind

Thank you for reading. AV

A redheaded hero swoops in to save the fair maiden.

During the two weeks between their respective meetings, several things happened. Hermione received a heavy stack of marriage proposals from wizards spread far and wide. They were all so very concerned that a vivacious, young, and nationally recognized celebrity would be forced to take a husband, but were willing to sacrifice themselves to the cause. Each proposal was politely returned with a short note written on parchment saturated in itchy-scrat powder.

And quite predictably, Ron stopped by Hermione's modest flat, ring box in hand with large puppy dog eyes and dreams of gingerheaded ankle-biters squealing and playing at their feet.

"Mione," Ron descended onto one wobbly knee. "Please, Mione, I know we've had our rough patches, but you know we've always had more good times than bad. And I know that our future together will be more filled with more good times. I can make you happy, Mione." He opened the jeweler's box to display a small diamond and a toothy grin. "Please."

Hermione had to hold back a scowl and tread lightly. He sounded pathetic, but Ron meant well. Not that she'd ever take him up on his offer; Ron wanted a mother, not a wife, as if one Molly Weasley wasn't quite enough. She motioned for him to get up and watched him struggle to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I just can't."

To his credit Ron didn't immediately flop around like a fish demanding 'whys' and 'what fors'; he just looked genuinely confused. "I don't get it, Mione; I thought you'd want this."

"You know I don't love you like that."

"Well, not now, but it could be like that, and really, Mione, who else could there be?"

There was Charlie... They'd once had a rather passionate relationship, so passionate that after their break-up they couldn't stand to be in the same room together without palms itching to grab their respective wands or whatever heavy object was within reach.

She blamed the whole dragon thing. If he hadn't been living the life of a roguish international dragon wrangler, she'd never have given another Weasley a second glance, but his hazardous life on the edge had taunted her. It had dared her to flirt, made vague promises that Charlie Weasley was a bit of a bad boy, a rebel, and Hermione had always inexplicably been drawn to the wrong sort. Which was why poor Ron, all clammy hands and easygoing manner, had no chance at all.

"I see," she said coldly, even though she expected this argument. "So you're proposing marriage because you don't think anyone else could possibly be interested in me?" She was picking a fight, Hermione knew it, but damn it, ever since the Marriage Law had been enacted, she had wanted a fight. She was channeling her inner bitch.

"No! No!" Ron quickly retracted. "I don't mean it like that and you know it. I just thought... I just thought... you know, we'd be together, like we always were meant to be. We make a good team, Mione, we could be happy together." Ron was trying hard. She could yell at him, make him feel wretched and enjoy laughing at his pain, but it was hard to scream at someone who was trying so hard to support her.

She shook her head. "I know, Ron, but I've made other plans for myself. I'll be fine. Besides, you wouldn't want to disappoint the girls, now, would you?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Eh, I was bound to settle down sometime," he shrugged. "So you've really made other plans? I'm sorry; I should have talked to you first. I guess I just figured you'd need help." He closed the ring box and shoved it carelessly in the back pocket of his jeans. The serious business of marriage was quickly forgotten, but then Ron was as deep as an inkpot.

Hermione snorted. "When have I ever pulled the damsel in distress act?"

Ron shuffled his feet and smiled again; right then, he was utterly adorable. "Never," he admitted. "I should have known you'd find a way around this. So what is it, Mione? Where's the loophole?"

"As far as I can tell, there isn't any. I've been sifting through it for the better part of a month, and I can't find a damn thing to exclude myself, short of permanently binding my powers, breaking my wand, and going Muggle." She enjoyed watching him shudder at that. It wasn't an option.

"So..." he said in a forcefully casual manner. "You're getting married then... Do I know the lucky bloke?"

Hermione felt for her wand, just in case. "It's Snape."

Her words took a moment to register. "What do you mean, Snape?" She could tell he was trying to think of some other Snape.

"Sit," she commanded, and like a good little boy, Ron slumped into her overstuffed couch. "I'm marrying Professor Snape." She held up her hand, holding off whatever overblown reaction was boiling to the surface. "I have my reasons."

"To marry the *traitor*? He's a murdering Death Eater!"

"Yes, and he's a right nasty bastard with bad teeth and weird fashion sense. I've got all that, Ron, thank you very much. But he also happens to be serving a life sentence. Several in fact."

"But... but..." Ron sputtered before recognition dawned on him. He may have been a bit thick, but Ron understood strategy. Hermione watched in amusement as he gaped before breaking into a big smile. "That's bloody brilliant."

"I thought so, myself."

"So you won't have to see him ever again."

She shrugged her shoulders haphazardly. "Eh, we're working out an agreement right now. I'll probably have to bring him a subscription to the *Daily Prophet* or some Honeydukes chocolate every now and then, but that's it."

Ron cleared his throat loudly. "But, Mione, you wouldn't have to... um... you know."

Hermione crossed her arms across her chest and gave him a deadly glare. "No, I won't," she said quietly.

The wizarding world firmly believed in the superiority of blood, from classifying pure-bloods to subjugating 'uppity Muggle-borns' who had the gall to request things such as equality. Much as the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century sterilized many undesirable breeders in mental institutions, the wizarding world firmly believed its prisoners had no right to breed either. Criminals begat more criminals. Azkaban was charmed specifically so that conception could not take place within its walls.

Aside from all that, Severus Snape was classified as one of the most dangerous inmates. As per his punishment of a life sentence, he was forbidden from engaging in sexual intercourse (section 4, paragraph 6, sub-section 3a); therefore, it was all a moot point, as far as Hermione was concerned.

"He's not permitted those sorts of visits."

Ron smiled a looked very relieved. "Thank Merlin! Could you imagine..." He shuddered and looked a bit peaked. "Ugh!"

"My thoughts exactly."

Hermione watched his eyes glaze over just a bit as if he were trying to wrestle with a concept just a bit beyond his reach. He wore the same indecipherable look as he had when she'd stupidly forced him to watch the Jeremy Irons movie, 'Kafka.' Watching those same eyes rove over an unseen problem like an oyster worrying a pearl, Hermione waited patiently for the questions that were coming.

"But, 'Mione, I know we're talking about Snape, ick and all, but that means you won't be able to be a Mummy. I mean, you would give up all that?"

She rubbed her forehead, preparing herself to delicately explain something no Weasley would ever understand. "Ron, listen to me again, that's exactly why I'm marrying the man in the first place. If I only wanted someone I could control, hell, I'd go after that fool Lockhart and be done with it. But I don't want children. Marrying Snape affords me that kind of protection."

For a moment Ron looked as if he'd been struck. "You can't really mean that, 'Mione."

"Of course I do."

"But... but..." She looked at him expectantly waiting for his thoughts to clear well enough to form a proper sentence. Hermione briefly considered coaching him on subject/verb agreements. Finally he sighed. "You're a witch, you're supposed to want babies."

"Maybe. But I don't." Really was it that hard to understand? Apparently it was.

"Well, maybe not now, but what about later, 'Mione? You can't throw away the possibility forever just because you don't want them now. I mean, Mum says all witches go through their nesting phase. Maybe you just haven't started nesting yet."

"Nesting?" She looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

Ron nodded absolutely confident in his knowledge and happy to have an opportunity to impart words of wisdom on Hermione for a change. "When witches hit a certain age, they start preparing a nest...you know, meeting wizards who'd make good fathers, getting a bigger flat." He glanced around her uninviting, sparse living space. It certainly didn't welcome guests, much less children. "Nesting. Like a bird would."

"Aha. I see." Hermione paused for a moment, ostensibly to indicate that Ron's words had sunk in. "Nope. Still not for me. Sorry, Ron, maybe it's a Muggle-born thing."

She watched him rub his back pocket where the ring box was, knowing he felt genuinely relieved she had turned him down. In a way, Hermione was a bit saddened that this ugly business had come between them.

"Don't worry, this will all turn out for the best."

He grumbled a bit.

"I didn't catch that."

"I said I just wished it didn't have to be Snape."

Hermione nodded sagaciously. "Yeah, but rather the devil you know than the devil you don't."

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A/N:

Chapter title: Via Media - The Middle Path

Special thanks to my fantastic betas, christev20 and AnnieTalbot!

Consul

Chapter 4 of 26

Severus ponders the best way to take advantage of Miss Granger's proposition.

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First Rule of Slytherin House – Press every advantage. Work every angle. Life may be a journey, not a destination, but every good sailor knows that the world is a mindless expanse of ocean, and until planting both feet on terra firma, it is unpredictable. Don't ever take chances. Be prepared.

Severus Snape was having the time of his life. Not since writing to Saint Nicholas as a lad had he ever had as much fun drawing up a list of demands and every little whim that came to him. As far as he was concerned, there was no reason at all to let the annoying little chit get the better end of the deal.

She was using him, after all.

His appointed public defender was a completely incompetent asshat. At Severus' trial the man said barely two words in his defense, but then it was a show trial, and nothing he said could change the predetermined verdict. At least he got a trial, but then that probably had more to do with being 'Public Enemy #2' than anything else.

The Wizengamot was so completely backed up with long lines of bewildered wizards and witches awaiting justice that the average citizen caught up in Auror raids was processed without trial. In typical Ministry fashion, their knee-jerk reaction was to arrest anyone and everyone on the shady side of the law. After all, this was the 'new reality.'

Death Eaters, Slytherins, and pet snake owners were all processed. All sorts of people disappeared, but there wasn't so much of a peep out of the wizarding public, who didn't like asking uncomfortable questions. John Q. Wizard was happy to be rid of disreputable characters, it made him morally upstanding and patriotic to the cause of the Light. Rumor had it Scrimgeour had emptied out Knockturn Alley and made a tidy chunk of change in developing the real estate. And nobody was complaining over that, not when they'd put in a dog park.

At trial, Severus' only insistence was that he retain the right to appeal if future evidence of his innocence ever presented itself. Since it was so bloody unlikely, he had won that particular motion and had been shuffled off to Azkaban without another word of protest. Somehow, rotting in the cesspool of humanity was a right he'd earned.

However, his solicitor, Mr. A. Ffoulkes, was an absolute genius. It wasn't coincidental that he was both Hogwarts' and the late Albus Dumbledore's solicitor as well. Ffoulkes was both well known and very well respected in wizarding circles, it also helped that the man looked exactly as a counselor should, though only Muggle-borns would notice his uncanny resemblance to an older and more portly Perry Mason.

The rights under wizarding law for a convicted felon were few and far between, and as Miss Granger had pointed out, there were clear advantages in being married. Severus wanted to make certain that he properly made use of every single one. A week after the headstrong Gryffindor had graced him with her presence and he voraciously read, notated, and diligently commented on both the new law and terms of his incarceration, Mr. A. Ffoulkes met him in his small cell.

"Severus!" The jovial well-dressed man furiously shook his hand. "Finally ready to release those documents and get out of this place?" As he said this, Ffoulkes' eyes roamed around the cramped cell. His nose wrinkled slightly, as the stench had returned, but Ffoulkes meant no insult by it.

"No, I've called you on another matter." He shook his head and offered the out-of-place leather chair. "Congratulate me, Ffoulkes, I'm getting married."

"Congratulations? Certainly..." He looked perplexed for just a moment before recovering. "I suppose this has to do with the new law. Bloody business that..." Severus watched the cogs turn in the elderly man's head before a sly smile spread across his lips. "Brilliant... If I had thought of it myself, I'd have Dorothy do the same. So, who's the witch? Anyone I'd know?"

"Hermione Granger."

Severus watched with interest as the man's eyes went wide in obvious recognition.

"I gather you've heard of her."

Ffoulkes nodded slowly with a slight shake to his head. "Of course, of course.... Great girl, that Granger, I had to deal with her during the dispensation of Albus' will. It'd figure it'd take a witch like that to scheme this up, but then I'm assuming this isn't a love match. You two haven't secretly been in love for years... right?"

Severus gave a humorless laugh. "I've never had an ounce of interest in the child, or any girl I've taught, for that matter. No. This is business, pure and simple."

There were precious few things about his life that he could look back and feel any amount of pride for. His reputation as an educator was one of them. Given, he was a taskmaster as inventive or cruel as any other Death Eater in the classroom, but he had never once made an inappropriate action, no matter how much the little shits whined about fucking points. No, to approach a student was to betray the trust inherent in his position as one of the school's guardians. And his only true lustful fantasies he'd ever had for the Gryffindor swot could best be described as homicidal.

He proffered a large tablet of notes. "Here, a list of my demands. See if you can write this up as a marriage contract that will satisfy the Ministry, will you?"

Ffoulkes thumbed through the documents making small grunting noises under his breath as he took in the different clauses and requests. Lifting his eyes back up to his client, "A bit mad hatter, if you ask me..."

"Perhaps," Severus conceded.

Truth was, the whole idea appealed to him. And why shouldn't he request every comfort and desire that came to mind? There was a phrase that resounded around his head: 'steal big or not at all.' And if Hermione chose to dismiss his terms, well, certainly she wasn't the only available witch. Perhaps an advertisement in the paper was warranted?

Severus humbly and quietly acknowledged to himself and no other that if he ever wanted to leave his self-imposed imprisonment, Dumbledore's evidence only needed to be provided to the Wizengamot, and well, that would be that. But then, if he was to survive this meager existence why should he suffer needlessly when a witch could cater to his whims? And not just any witch... Potter's woman.

Somehow the irony fit. Another marriage contract had arrived shortly after she had left from a middle-aged spinster in Wales who was obviously shrewd enough to come to the same conclusions. But why settle for an unknown element when Miss Granger provided such interesting possibilities?

After a few parting words and clarifying questions, Mr. A. Ffoulkes took his leave, happy to exit the wizarding prison, and Severus was happy to get his armchair back.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Consul - Highest magistrate in the land. As we get a glimpse of Severus' legal issues.

Caveat Empor

Chapter 5 of 26

Hermione learns firsthand what kind of a demanding bastard Severus Snape is and wonders if it's not too late to marry Gilderoy Lockhart.

Summary: Hermione learns firsthand what kind of a demanding bastard Severus Snape is and wonders if it's not too late to marry Gilderoy Lockhart.

The last meeting with her former Potions professor had not exactly gone to plan. Not only had Hermione left humiliated and utterly aware of her failure to plan for all contingencies, but she had been thrown entirely off guard by the wizard himself. It was a most unusual sensation; typically, Hermione made men uncomfortable and ill at ease under her scrutiny, which only provided hours of amusement for her.

Regardless, Hermione was unwilling to concede defeat. At the prearranged time and date, she appeared again at Azkaban prison, only this time with legal counsel and in a drab antechamber made for such meetings. The room was scarcely big enough to house the four of them and only consisted of an off-kilter table, uncomfortable metal chairs, and impossibly bad lighting that had an annoying flicker that subtly announced failing charms.

To say she was momentarily taken aback by Professor Snape's legal representative was an understatement. A. Ffoulkes only represented the most upstanding and decent wizards. To give legal counsel to a Death Eater, moreover the convicted murderer of his late client, Professor Dumbledore, caused the blood in her veins to suddenly go cold.

Hermione eyed her own counsel, Mr. Eugene Tattings, who was a well-meaning Gryffindor Muggle-born like herself and who only had her best interests at heart, but was in no way a legal shark. She felt suddenly ill at ease, as if her representative was swimming in deeper waters than he could possibly tread. Every one of Hermione's nerve endings pulsed in warning. Whether Tattings felt similar apprehension, she couldn't say; he appeared to be unfazed by the entire proceeding.

Hermione wasn't entirely certain if that was a good thing or not.

For his part, Severus Snape looked perfectly at ease; the Muggle phrase 'cool as a cucumber' aptly fit. This, more than anything else, caused bright flashing red lights to join the warning sirens going off in her head, but Hermione could play this game, too. She'd made certain that morning as she carefully dressed and prepared for the appointment that she at least appeared poised and in control. Hermione selected her most fashionable royal blue robes, cut in the wizarding equivalent of a 'power suit' and chosen for the House-neutral color, given the situation. It would not do to provoke his ire by wearing maroon, or hint at capitulation by showing up in green. She had to project the confidence she no longer felt.

For the first half hour, the two solicitors droned on and on about the first party and, hereto mention, the second party... Et cetera... Et cetera... upon which matrimony was proposed.... Et cetera... Et cetera...

It was as if the two solicitors had privately colluded to make the proceedings as absolutely dull and pretentious as possible, never mind the fact that she could barely follow the legalese which nobody bothered to break down into plain spoken English. Hermione noted with a certain amount of disgust that her husband-to-be appeared to be following attentively to every word, and therefore, she appeared to follow similarly.

After a long-winded recitation of the Ministry's standard provisions, her counsel, Mr. Tattings, looked at Hermione quite pointedly and asked, "Do you agree?"

Inwardly, Hermione froze. She had never tuned a single lecture out before, not even History of Magic, and yet, at this most important event of her life, she couldn't follow the jargon at all. They might as well have been speaking Mermish the entire time.

"Pardon," she said lightly. "Can you paraphrase that for me?"

"Miss Granger, do you agree to cohabitate or, in this matter, given your husband's incarceration occupy his ancestral home?"

"What? Live with him?" Hermione pointed askance at Professor Snape, who on the whole, appeared really too smug for the proceedings.

"Yes, well, as you know, Miss Granger," Mr. Ffoulkes began, "the Ministry encourages all witches to be brought to their husbands' residences for domicile. It is tradition, you know."

Yes, it was a tradition. An ugly tradition. The young, helpless virgin bride escorted to her husband's house to be shuttered away for the rest of her life. Well, not for Miss Hermione J. Granger, thank you very much.

"Really, I think not. I, for one, have a home. And as I've done my homework, I've visited Professor Snape's so-called ancestral home at 'Spinner's End' and found it sorely lacking. There is no way I can abide by such a request."

"I agree," Severus Snape spoke up for the first time during the proceedings. "It's an abysmal dump; I expect that the authorities have condemned the site. We are, however, speaking of the Prince Homestead."

"Prince Homestead?"

Mr. Ffoulkes looked over his copious notes. "Yes, it appears that Mister Snape purchased the Prince ancestral home when it fell on the auctioneer's block several years ago, along with the residual house-elves. They've been left to their own devices for quite a while, and likely, there's been unrestrained breeding, so we don't have a current figure on how many elves inhabit the residence now, but per the provisions, you are not allowed to dismiss them." Ffoulkes shot her a significant look at that.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "What? Didn't inherit it?"

By the dark glare she earned, Hermione knew she just stomped on a tender nerve. "No."

"All right, I'll bite. Why?" Hermione looked around the table at several pairs of eyes who couldn't give her a clear answer. She narrowed them at her dear soon-to-be-betrothed. "Well then, give me one good reason why I should give up my flat."

Hermione's flat wasn't much... Well, it was less than a flat. To be honest, it was little more than a closet. She kept her things there; books, some papers, clothes, a bed, not much, but then Hermione didn't need much. To say she lived at work was an understatement.

"For one, the law is entirely on my side in this matter," Snape said lazily. "As my wife, you are obliged to live under my roof as I see fit. Under Ministry provisions, I could require you to live in that lovely hovel in Manchester you just mentioned..."

"Fine. I'll live in your ancestral home," she said, resigned, "but I retain the right to make changes and modernize as needed."

Wizarding estates, particularly uninhabited ones, needed to be pulled kicking and screaming from whatever age they came from. Hermione could consider herself blessed if the manor only needed updating from the Victorian age, but then, it was an ancestral home; there was no telling what state it was in.

What she possibly couldn't fathom was that was exactly what Severus wanted. The old Prince Homestead was in a terrible state of disarray. His ugly, bigoted grandparents couldn't be bothered to lift a finger to bring it back to its one-time splendor, not when their worthless half-blooded grandchild might inherit the place... not that they included him in their will.

Severus only had the opportunity to make a cursory inspection of the house he had never before set foot in when he bought it at auction. The simple walk-through only reinforced exactly how cut off the unwanted grandchild had been from proper aristocratic wizarding society. Regardless, the stately old manor was nearly in ruins.

Mr. A. Ffoulkes looked quite pleased and gently added for her benefit, "A modest budget for its upkeep has been allotted for you."

"A budget?"

After more ruffling of parchments, Ffoulkes withdrew a Gringotts ledger, "Five thousand Galleons for the first five years to cover any structural improvements or necessary repairs, and two thousand Galleons from there on."

"Let me see that." Hermione held out her hand for the ledger, but Ffoulkes would not relinquish it, earning him a firm scowl from both her and Tattings. She rounded on Snape. "Just what is this crap?"

He raised an elegant eyebrow as if to innocently inquire 'Who, me?'

"Are you yanking me around, Snape? 'Cuz I'll be arsed if I'll play your games."

There had to be an angle. Severus Snape never did anything without good reason, and for the life of her, Hermione couldn't figure it out, which obviously meant he was somehow getting one over her.

Ffoulkes loudly cleared his throat and shuffled more paper while Tattings simply looked wildly around the table, trying to figure out where it had all gone wrong.

Tattings leaned into her to quietly whisper in her ear, "Miss Granger, I don't understand your objections. Certainly, if you would like me to petition for a greater allowance, we might manage that, but five thousand Galleons is quite generous."

"I know it is!" she hissed back, unconcerned that her voice carried. "The question is *why*. And how does he have that many Galleons to burn? Honestly, the man is rotting in prison; there's no way he could be earning enough Galleons to support a building allowance for the rest of his life, so what's the trick?"

Severus' eyes danced in amusement. Even when his intentions were straightforward and bluntly obvious, Severus' Slytherin reputation always threw off unsuspecting Gryffindors. He savored the moment with glee; it was the kind of moment he could easily relish for at least two, maybe three weeks.

"Is it so difficult a concept for you to wrap your bushy little head around, Miss Granger, that maybe I want my estate well cared for?"

He'd never provide her with any kind of personal stipend; after all, his very hard earned Gallons had no business paying for whatever trivial luxuries or trinkets she stupidly fawned over, but his birthright was something entirely different.

"In exchange for what?"

"Pardon?"

"What are you hiding from me, and where are these Galleons coming from, anyway? I know what you make, or rather what you made. You can't possibly afford this, unless you're running some kind of scam."

"And what exactly do you know of my finances?" Baiting Hermione was so easy, it was hardly worth the challenge, but then, it was so amusing to observe her get worked up into a fury. Severus watched her cheeks color as she radiated wrath.

"You made only twelve thousand Galleons a school term!"

Shocked silent for a moment, Severus didn't let her triumph last long. "How did you come by that information?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I was offered your old job," she returned with complete satisfaction, "but I turned it down." She couldn't bring herself to disparage her much beloved Alma Mater, but it really was downright insulting, the amount of Galleons they offered for what essentially was a twenty-four hour, seven days a week job of playing teacher, parent, and nursemaid to an entire castle full of sniffing, snotty, and generally apathetic schoolchildren. Never mind the hormonally-charged teenagers.

"Miss Granger, I am able to live comfortably, or rather, I am able to let you live comfortably off residuals from my patents, and that is all you need to know. I suggest you drop this line of enquiry for the moment, if we are going to get through the next thirty points."

She sat back dumbfounded. *Thirty?* Was there time to propose to Lockhart? He was unfortunately considered by Ministry standards 'approved to breed', but at least she could keep him relatively amused with reruns of Muggle cartoons and never have to deal with him. Besides, she could do 'joined-up writing' with the best of them.

After a slight recess for water and use of the facilities, for which Hermione was eternally grateful as splashing even rust colored water seemed to calm her just a tad, they resumed the proceedings.

Hermione had to admit that most of the points were reasonable. She couldn't find any reason to object that he be permitted to use her to send owls, and that she deliver the *Daily Prophet*, *Guardian*, and *Times* when she visited his cell. (It was quite a surprise to note that he kept up on Muggle current events as well, but Hermione also assumed that he was a wee bit starved for reading materials.) Keeping him well stocked with parchment, quills, assorted goodies from Honeydukes and home-cooked meals were the sorts of demands she'd expected to hear in the first place.

Severus requested that she 'keep up' his cell, meaning that she perform more air deodorizing charms, cleaning and sanitizing his mattress and surroundings, et cetera. Honestly, it was all the sort of things she'd want to do. If she was going to have to visit him with any form of regularity, there was no way she'd walk into a pig sty.

But then came the question of how often she would visit the aforementioned sty. If Hermione had her way, it'd be never, but clearly that wasn't an option. And given his demands, he wasn't likely to take her offer of once a month. She was actually shocked when Snape requested twice a week... for an hour.

"Absolutely not! I have a life, a real one; I can't abide by that schedule." Hermione didn't care how cold and calloused it sounded. He was a fucking Death Eater and traitor to the Order. Aside from that fact, they had nothing in common. What could they possibly talk about for an hour?

As far as Hermione was concerned, she needed only to show up, perform whatever cleaning charms were strictly necessary, drop off the requested goods, and be gone.

Snape looked incredulous. "You can't possibly spare two hours a week for your husband while he withers away in prison. Dear lady, you wound me."

Severus was having a field day with this. Gods, this was so much fun, she went from witch to all-out gorgon in seconds. Now he wished he'd requested her at least once a day. Initially, that had been his thought, but sharing too much of his life and living space with the bitch bordered on masochism.

"You deserve to wither away, Snape. You got off too easily, if you ask me."

"Then, by all means, go petition some other prisoner, if I'm that repulsive."

"I can't!" Hermione threw up her hands. If only it were that easy.

"You can't?" Severus frowned, what could the chit possibly mean by this?

"You're the only one with a life sentence here."

"*I'm what?*" Severus raged, whipping his head to Ffoulkes. "Explain this, now! Nott? Yaxley? Greengrass? Malfoy? What of them? Surely, they deserve, perhaps more than I, to rot away in this hell hole!"

Hermione proudly supplied the answer. "Kissed, the whole lot of 'em. You're the last Death Eater, Snape." Oh, she had tried, but there was no way the Ministry would let her get away with marrying a soulless husk of a man. They couldn't legally sign the marriage certificate. It was damned infuriating.

She watched with much mirth as his eyes went wide and wild as he digested the information. "Why, then..." His silken voice broke and he choked. "...why wasn't I?"

Mr. Ffoulkes gently laid a hand on his arm. "You did not participate in the final battle."

Severus nodded his understanding, but still looked as if he'd been hit violently upside his head by an errant Quaffle. In truth, he hadn't waved his wand once during the

battle. His job had been to stay by the Dark Lord's side. If Potter cocked it all up, as he was prone to do, Severus was supposed to step in. What nobody planned for, of course, was the mercurial whims of an insane lizard-wizard and his penchant for turning on his own troops. Severus spent the grand majority of the battle desperately trying not to bleed out.

But Severus wasn't dwelling on ancient history now. His thoughts were with the fates of his Death Eater brothers. Severus had heard the guards refer to him as 'the Death Eater,' but then, he spent two decades as 'Snape, the Death Eater.' He just never realized 'the Death Eater' was meant in the singular. Was he really the last of his brethren?

A multitude of conflicting emotions seemed to fill his chest cavity. They'd really done it, everything he and the Order had sacrificed for, and yet being the last Death Eater was somehow so singularly lonely.

He gave himself just a brief moment to clear his mind of his conflicting emotions, Occluding them away to dwell another time. For the moment, he needed to be sharp.

Turning his best predatory smile to the table, Severus cleared his throat and spoke, "Well, Miss Granger, it appears as if I'm your last option, which means you will find time to visit me twice a week. Would you like to sign the contract now, or do you want to continue reading the terms?"

"Bastard!"

He rolled his eyes, not even bothering to point out that the epithet didn't sting nearly as much as his unfortunate upbringing, and all things considered, his life would have been much easier had he been a bastard. "I suggest you keep your emotions under tighter control; unless of course, you'd prefer to give up all your little secrets now? Not that I need any more bargaining chips."

Mr. Ffoulkes seized upon the moment to break the mounting tension by reshuffling his paperwork and loudly clearing his throat. "We've just a few more points to go through, and then, any counters you may have, Miss Granger. On the issue of children..." Ffoulkes was quickly cut off.

"No. There won't be any children in this marriage."

"Miss Granger, as you are no doubt aware, under the new law, you are unable to stipulate that in your contract. We must then, of course, address the issue," Mr. Ffoulkes said calmly. Mr. Tattings nodded to her encouragingly.

Quietly, Hermione gathered her anger and pushed it away; she could hardly afford any more emotional outbursts, not with the way things were going for her. "I suppose that under the highly improbable circumstance that Voldemort himself rises from his scattered ashes, rebuilds an army of evil, murdering Death Eaters, takes over the Ministry, opens the doors of Azkaban, approves of his most loyal servant impregnating his Mudblood wife, and I haven't killed myself by then, then yes, I suppose we could talk about the probability of children."

Hermione was always amused by the way wizards reacted to her cavalier mentioning of the most hated despot. Tattings went as white as a sheet, Ffoulkes closely studied his parchments not meeting her eye, and Snape simply looked at her in amusement with the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

"Or, Mr. Snape could be found innocent on appeal," Ffoulkes offered.

"Yeah, and maybe monkeys will fly out of my butt." At the unspoken bewildered questions, she offered under her breath, "Muggleism." That was the problem with magic; just about anything was possible.

"Right, then. Highly improbable, but not impossible. If for any reason the conditions of Mr. Snape's imprisonment changes, he may be required to father children under Ministry law. Therefore, we have the following requests: Any children resulting from the union will be home schooled and will never attend any Muggle school. Upon reaching the age of eleven, children will attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, provided they are not Squibs."

Hermione nodded; she might not have agreed with the anti-Muggle stance, but she understood it. Expected it, really. That, and it wasn't really worth fighting. On the ridiculous chance that she was to bear the spawn of his seed, Hermione had always favored home schooling, anyway.

"Furthermore, Miss Granger will be unable to deny Mr. Snape his paternal rights."

"Meaning?" She looked questioning to Mr. Tatting.

"It means that, if you conceive a child, you can't petition to keep Mr. Snape from the child."

"Fine. What else?"

"You and any resulting children retain the Snape name."

"Out of the question. I'm staying a Granger. I couldn't care less about kids, but I'm not taking his name. I have a reputation, you know. I run a very successful business, and I won't allow my company to take a hit for this." As far as Hermione was concerned, this was non-negotiable.

"Hyphenate then, perhaps," Ffoulkes suggested.

"No."

She watched with a slight feeling of triumph as the two men conferred. Mr. Ffoulkes turned back to the contract and frowned, before offering, "We're prepared to allow you to keep your name for the sake of your business, but any children will be Snapes."

"Agreed." The contract clause was amended, and Hermione was grateful that she had gotten one over on him.

"Good." Ffoulkes sat back, looking considerably relieved. "Then the last bit of business we have here is the fidelity clause."

Hermione waived her hand dismissively. All marriages these days came with a standard Ministry-approved fidelity clause.

"We are requesting a full Fidelity Charm to ensure Mr. Snape will not be cuckolded in any way, shape or form during his incarceration."

"But that's ludicrous! How insulting!" she cried.

"Is it, Miss Granger? Is it really so hard to understand that a man wouldn't want his wife to take up with someone else?"

"Under the Ministry-approved clause, I would be incapable of doing that."

Snape smiled a snaggle-toothed grin, and Hermione thought again that he looked like a pirate, a leering pirate. "Yes, Miss Granger, but there's more than one way to fuck. Or do I need to draw a diagram?" She shuddered, absolutely uncomfortable with speaking with strangers about 'alternatives' to textbook intercourse.

"That's not something that you need concern yourself with, Snape."

"Of course it is, your sexual well-being is just as important to me as your overall health. If you have needs, I want you to come to me first, not slink off someplace. I may not be able to give you the good fucking you so obviously are in need of, but I can be quite imaginative."

"Are you freakin' kidding me? I would never... ever..." Hermione shuddered a bit before reemphasizing, "EVER... consider coming to you for my so-called needs. Pervert."

"Don't flatter yourself, Miss Granger; you're not exactly a vision of beauty yourself. You're hardly a temptress in your wound-tight suits and prematurely lined face."

"Pardon me if I don't find it necessary to get frilled up for the likes of you."

"Obviously," he droned blandly. "But the fact remains, even if you're unable to spread your wide hips and mannish legs for some equally unattractive fellow, you could still take up with one in some way or another. And that's something I'm disinclined to allow. Not when I can provide you the same form of relief."

"What part of *'I would never in a million years touch you'* don't you understand, Snape? Besides, I don't know what you think of me, but I don't get out. I don't run around with men now, and I can't see myself doing that in the future, either."

"Why, because you're a frigid bitch?"

"Yes! Exactly that. You've finally got me pegged. I'm a cold, frigid bitch."

The statement hung in the air as every man in the room drew a breath. Such declarations were either made by harridans or women looking to start a fight. Either way, the witch in question needed to be handled carefully: she was still armed with her wand, and that was how precious bits were lost. Severus recovered first.

"A virgin, then?" he asked with a cocked eyebrow, curious whether any bloke had managed to crack her cauldron. As a Prefect, Granger had had a notorious reputation as a cockblocker.

"Hardly!" she snorted indignantly.

It was statistically impossible to live through seven hormone-fueled years at Hogwarts, survive the Final Battle, and still be a virgin. Hell, Snape had nearly caught her in the corridors at the end of sixth year. Thank the twelve apostles and all the hosts of heavenly angels for silencing charms and Invisibility Cloaks. That didn't mean that she allowed her own charges to get away with such shenanigans. If they were stupid enough to get caught, they deserved every detention.

"Lesbian?"

"Ha! You wish."

"Then you should have no problem accepting the clause, though I'm prepared to be magnanimous and allow you use of your hand and stimulating devices." There was way too much unadulterated mischief in his eyes for Hermione's liking. Not that she liked any of it one bit.

"Oh, I'll sign your fucking clause. It was never my intention to cuckold you in the first place. I do have integrity, you know. It's just so damn insulting to suggest I ever would. But this does not change the fact that I will never, ever touch you. And if you even attempt to lay your hands on me, Snape, so help me God, I will hex you so hard that they'll be scraping bits of you off the walls for weeks."

Suddenly, Snape looked like the cat that ate the canary at this little victory. "How I'd love to see the Pensieve memory of you telling Potter this."

"Harry?" she asked, momentarily confused. "Why would...?"

It took a while before comprehension dawned. When it did, Hermione laughed and laughed, unconcerned at the shocked faces from the men in the room. It was such a good laugh that her sides started aching and tears were forming in the corners of her eyes as she gasped for breath.

It took several moments of gasping interspersed with fits of giggles before Hermione calmed. "I never... we never... Potter! Ha!" Wiping a tear from her cheek, Hermione tried to keep it together before another round of giggles hit her. "Harry's gay. G... A... Y... GAY!" *Gayer than the headmaster's 'Very-Merry-Happy Un-birthday' robes*, she wanted to add, but that might have been construed as an insult to Harry, which would have been blasphemous, given the situation.

Oh, the sight of Snape's reddened face was precious. She wanted to take a photo of it to cherish forever.

"Shit," he murmured underneath his breath, "Flitwick owes me twenty Galleons."

He'd always taken Harry for a pouf. He'd have bet his every last Galleon that James had been one, too. He'd always been too suspiciously close to that filthy flea-infested mongrel, Black. Severus had nothing against homos. The world was full of centaurs, merpeople, half-whatevers, and unidentifiable 'its' that crept around Knockturn Alley. Gay was downright unoriginal. But he drew the line, and his wand, at using Lily as a beard. Especially because, underneath it all, James Potter...the Heartthrob of Gryffindor...was such a fucking coward that he couldn't tell his parents that he preferred cock.

Still, Granger and Potter seemed unnaturally affectionate towards each other. Severus contented himself that he was still getting Potter's witch, in a way.

Ffoulkes cleared his throat and resorted to doing what he did best by reshuffling parchments while all parties at the table desperately tried to get back on track. "The fidelity clause was our final piece of business, and I believe that our side of the contract has been satisfied. Do you have anything to present?"

Hermione calmed instantaneously, the switch was so night-and-day that Severus was impressed by it and idly wondered if Hermione happened to practice Occlumency.

"We have," Mr. Tattings spoke up. "On the subject of finances, Miss Granger retains full rights to her business, intellectual property, patents, savings, money market accounts, retirement fund, and venture capital investments. Additionally, she will assume zero liability if any of Mr. Snape's investments require a bailout or margin call. At no point in the future will she be required to support her husband or provide him with care beyond the agreed to contractual stipulations."

"You're very protective of your wealth, Miss Granger," Mr. Ffoulkes added unnecessarily. His eyes were roaming appreciatively over the amended clause Mr. Tattings provided to them.

"I need to protect what's mine." Hermione shrugged.

"And what exactly do you do for a living?" Severus couldn't help but ask. Normally, he couldn't care less what past students did; he didn't follow their careers, unlike his predecessor Slughorn, but Severus couldn't help but be curious about his bride-to-be.

"I develop interdisciplinary personal and household products under several brand names."

"That's rather vague," he frowned.

"Perhaps, but then I create what interests me and typically there's a market for it. For example, my first product was a hair care solution I developed for myself. The problem with Sleekeazy is that over time you have to use more and more of it to achieve the same look. I developed a solution incorporating both charms and potions that's much more manageable and longer-lasting. It's still our biggest seller."

"And yet you couldn't be bothered to use your own product," he remarked, obviously eyeing her 'electrocuted hedgehog' fashion statement.

Unruffled, Hermione easily replied, "I've made peace with my hair, but then, I really am not trying to impress anyone. I have my business, my research... it's enough."

"And everything else is just a distraction?" Severus supplied; now he clearly understood her reluctance to visit him. Severus knew exactly how frustrating it was to have to put down good research when a breakthrough was just beyond his grasp.

"Precisely. Which is exactly why you and I are sitting at this table."

Mr. Tattings took the opportunity to interrupt; they had been going at each other's throats for nearly three hours. "The financial issue was our only concern, that and Miss Granger's last name, which has already been settled. Is there any further business?"

The room was strangely silent. It felt odd that they were finally finished.

Mr. Ffoulkes made a large production of ordering and reordering the parchments and adding the additional financial clause, and with a few taps of his wand, they were ready for signature.

"Oh, just give that here," she huffed. Hermione hastily scrawled her otherwise perfect signature. If she hadn't signed it then and there, she might never have. That, and Hermione was trying to keep her hand from shaking.

Severus Snape said nothing at all but signed where indicated, watching the contract glow in a golden light, furl itself into a roll, and settle back down, magically sealed.

They were now officially engaged.

Hermione turned to him with a vicious glare. "Will next Tuesday work for you?"

Next Tuesday was fish night, meaning an oily unseasoned and slightly cold cod fillet would be delivered to his cell. "Next Tuesday would be fine; just remember to bring the first of my requirements then." But then, what did she expect? He'd be taking tea with the Queen?

A/N:

Chapter title: Caveat Empor - Let the buyer beware.

'Muggleism' courtesy of SNL's Wayne's World. Party on Readers.

Esto Perpetua

Chapter 6 of 26

Severus and Hermione are bound in marriage on fish night at the prison. Is there romance in the air? No, that's fish.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything recognizable to the HP-Universe, JK Rowling does. I'm not making any money off the writing of this fanfic.

It's said that all little girls picture their wedding day; they imagine big fairy-tale princess dresses, bouquets of flowers, and dancing with their perfect, handsome groom. Hermione must have missed that memo. Truth be told, she spent her early childhood up a tree, skinning her knees on roller-skates, and teaching her teddy bear Pud the rudiments of phonetics from a child-sized blackboard. Pud was a very well-educated bear.

When the magic moment to prepare for her own wedding arrived, Hermione was at a bit of a loss. Not that she felt sorry for herself or felt she was missing out on some sugary hearts and flowers moment. (Highly undesirable marriage proposals were still coming by way of owl.) More like she didn't exactly know how to best deal with what was traditionally supposed to be a romantic moment that was anything but. And honestly, she had two meetings, a conference call, and a sick half-Kneazle to deal with on the day of her wedding.

Hermione furiously tapped her foot while surveying the contents of her wardrobe. She was already running late and, to phrase it lightly, 'hadn't a damned thing to wear.' Already several dresses were discarded around the floor. When in doubt, Hermione stuck with a basic black dress, it was always the safe choice. And yet, that seemed unnecessarily insulting for both herself and her groom. Not that she was dressing for him... no, not at all; this was about civility and decorum. Probably.

It was mid September; the leaves hadn't gone brown and crispy yet, meaning autumnal colors were perfectly acceptable. That and, according to *Witch Weekly*, they were the shades that looked the best on her. This should have narrowed her selection down, and yet, it didn't, somehow. Hermione glanced at her bedside clock before swearing loudly. If she tarried any longer, she'd miss getting through prison security on time. If only the staff meeting hadn't run so long, but then, staff meetings always ran long.

Hermione didn't have time to think about this. She waved her wand over the small blue blotch from a potions spill on the camel wool work robes she was already wearing to get rid of it, threw on her cloak, made another attempt to give Crooks his pill, knowing full well that it was futile, picked up Snape's 'care packages,' and Disapparated. When she got through prison security, which took altogether much too long, they finally led her back into the same chamber where her marriage contract had been signed. This time, someone had the foresight to move the table and chairs against the wall.

Several minutes later, she was joined by the warden, a pale weedy man named Blotts, (of no relation to Blotts as in Flourish and Blotts) and a thoroughly unremarkable Ministry-appointed officiator, who looked curiously pleased by the proceedings. Hermione didn't bother with small talk, but waited for her groom to appear and tried not to tap her foot impatiently. He was late. Twenty minutes past the appointed time, Severus Snape was brought at wand-point into the room.

She scowled, taking in his appearance; honestly, would it have been too much trouble to wash? It's not like he had anything better to do all day. Not bothering to hide her disdain, Hermione flicked her wand at him, sending another Scourgify on his person. Severus was not amused.

"You're late."

He shrugged; time was a relative constraint. "No clock, Miss Granger."

"Snape, no doubt to both of our relief, it's been years since I was your student. You can drop the 'Miss Granger act' any day, now."

Hermione turned to the Ministry stooge. "Can we get this going? I'd like to get out of here."

"Yes, please hurry it up; my little Vixen can't wait to get me into my cell."

Before Severus had the opportunity to relish the effect his comment had on his bride, Hermione had her wand leveled squarely between his eyes. "Snape," she hissed, "I

have no objections to becoming a widow, not when the Ministry is willing to grant me a year's grieving time as incentive."

"Now, Hermione," he said in a rumbling seductive purr, "that's enough foreplay; we'll have time to rip into each other later." Ignoring her wand completely, Severus turned his attentions to the Ministry official, who clearly enjoyed every minute of their banter.

He coughed a few times, ostensibly to clear his throat, and began, "Dearly beloved," Hermione and Snape both rolled their eyes, "we are gathered here to witness the marriage of Severus Theodore Snape and Hermione Jean Granger. If anyone here has any objections to their union, please speak now." He paused with a lifted eyebrow, waiting, it seemed, for someone to come to their senses before shaking his head and plowing on.

"And do you have the rings?"

Hermione pulled a plain, unadorned gold band from her pocket and tossed it to him. Really, she couldn't care less if the wizard ever bothered to wear it or not, but dutifully placed her own ring on her finger. There was no way she'd actually let him share the supposed romantic moment of exchanging rings. The whole wedding was too much a farce to desecrate how she actually felt about the sanctity of marriage.

"Will you, Severus Theodore Snape, pledge your steadfast and abiding love to Hermione, uphold the terms of your matrimonial contract, and support the Ministry-approved guidelines governing the sacred and holy bond of marriage?"

"I will."

"Will you, Hermione Jean Granger, pledge your steadfast and abiding love to Severus, uphold the terms of your matrimonial contract, and support the Ministry-approved guidelines governing the sacred and holy bond of marriage?"

"I will."

"Then, by the power invested in me by the Ministry of Magic, I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

"That's really not necessary..."

Hermione intended on saying more, but was summarily cut off. She found herself pulled quite forcefully into a hungry kiss by a man who stank, tasted badly, and felt dirty against her, but whose kisses were quite heavenly. It only took Hermione a second to recover before pushing him hastily away. Not caring how unladylike it was, she made a rather large display of spitting.

"That was completely uncalled for. I told you that I would never, ever touch you!"

Hermione looked helplessly to the prison warden for some form of salvation, but he just murmured loudly enough for the room to hear, "You married him."

And wasn't that a bitch?

Their marriage contract, which had been sitting idly by on the far table, glowed a golden color, the official signed his name, as did the warden, and it popped seemingly out of existence. And that was that. By Hermione's calculations, the entire process had taken no more than thirty minutes, most of which were spent waiting on her groom. Ergo, per stipulations of their contract, she was obliged to spend another thirty minutes with him to satisfy the full hour.

'Bugger,' she mumbled under her breath.

"Come, Vixen, our humble abode awaits." Severus held out his hand, goading her to take it, which Hermione did not. Didn't she know that he enjoyed her like this, all prissy and stuck up while consorting with vile criminals and humiliating herself in prison? Even if he never saw her again, it was precious enough to live off for the rest of his life.

He watched her from behind as they were led to his cell, amused at her stiff-legged strut, her head held imperiously high. She wanted the world to think her better than this, but the effort was wasted. Severus figured the truth was somewhere closer to her being a lost and scared little girl.

Good. She should be scared.

Hermione paused in the doorway. The stench was back; already, her mind was clicking over the possibilities of a timed-release freshening charm and possibly how much money it could bring in. She wouldn't set foot over the threshold until she was satisfied that the funk was cleared away. The room didn't have to smell of lilacs or warm vanilla; actually, Hermione despised the overly floral scents and figured Snape was of the same opinion, but it did have to smell fresh. Or neutral, at least.

Once satisfied, she walked in, followed by her new husband and their guards, who were impolitely snickering about wedding night rituals. The guards were quickly shut out.

"Hmm..." she frowned. "It's not much." An understatement. The cell wasn't anything at all. Ignoring her husband, who lounged contentedly on the rotting cot, vaguely making a patting gesture as if she'd jump right in next to him, Hermione turned her attention to the room. She couldn't care less how the traitor was domiciled during his sentence, but since she'd have to grace his presence twice a week, changes were in order.

The small room had only a few unremarkable features: a cot, sporting a thin, nasty-smelling mattress and equally disgusting and stained bedding (both she and Severus had independently at separate times wondered just who exactly had died on it); a toilet that Hermione shuddered to think about.; a sink attached into the stone wall. And the sexy leather armchair that Hermione had left there the last time.

The only light source came from a solitary window a good ten feet above their heads.

That was where she started first; it made the most logical sense to start with the window. If the cell was cold in winter, stifling hot in summer, the climate charms were not holding. It was supposed to allow fresh air in and maintain a constant comfortable temperature. Nothing she would do to freshen the air would make a damn bit of difference if she couldn't get some airflow into the place.

It took Hermione the better part of twenty minutes to repair and reinforce the crumbling old charms; they were probably original to the building. The floor was next. The bare stone was slightly muddy from water dripping down the walls and the occasionally backed-up latrine. A simple Scourgify wasn't going to cut it. Hermione wasn't even going to bother looking too closely at the toilet, either; she just aimed her wand at it and blasted away.

Her attention immediately went to the accompanying sink as she wondered how much she could actually do for the rust in the water; certainly, it came from the piping system throughout the prison. The salt sea air was most likely the culprit, but it still turned her stomach. She scoured out every bit of the sink and as far into the taps as she could reach before charming it not to back up. That was as good as she could manage without ripping out the wall. Inspiration then hit, and she considered enlarging the shallow basin into a proper vanity. She toyed with stretching the tin-lined copper sink wider without making the metal paper thin, but couldn't get it quite right. It just needed reinforcing and perhaps a surround. Though maybe it was...

"Hermione," her name, softly whispered in her ear, drew her mind back from the place it went when she lost herself in a task. Severus was standing right behind her, close enough that she could feel his warmth on her skin. And for a moment she could pretend he wasn't some unrepentant, effing Death Eater. He placed his hand hesitantly on her shoulder, and she immediately stiffened.

"I... I... don't know what overcame me." She nervously wrung her hands together. Why was she so damn nervous? "I almost forgot these; silly me." She was babbling now. Just great.

Hermione pulled four parcels out of her pockets, set them on his mattress, enlarged them and looked expectantly at him. What was she hoping for, his approval? Hermione shook her head and tried to separate the murdering Death Eater in the cell from the respected wizard she once knew.

Severus picked through one of the boxes she had brought him. They hadn't exactly agreed when she would bring him what or really specifically what he needed, but Hermione was a keen girl. She'd figured it out. Actually, Hermione had thought about what she'd need if she were to go on a camping trip and went from there. It was quite easy; she had enough camping experience to last a lifetime and could safely admit that she had no desire to ever walk in the woods again.

He ran his fingers across the handle of a silver shaving razor; it was supremely elegant and charmed not to dull or nick the skin. It was much too fine and elegant for him. Not here. Not after what he'd done. Severus didn't know why he suddenly felt so vulnerable, but he didn't want to unwrap anything more.

Not bothering to look at her, Severus called out hoarsely, "You should go now."

"Damn it, I forgot to pack a mirror."

Severus winced. "Leave, Hermione," he said more loudly.

"Next time I'll remember to bring more fresh bedding; until then, I'll just clean ..."

"Get out, you stupid, stupid girl!"

Her eyes went wide and wild. She had let her guard down, turned her back on a man who'd probably not hesitate to Avada her.

Hermione pounded her fist violently on the cell door, screaming once again, "Let me out of here!"

As the door swung open on her command, she allowed herself a parting glance, just quick enough to see her husband slumped defeatedly on the cot, cradling his head in his hands. She was resolute; he didn't deserve her pity, and she wouldn't allow herself to feel anything but hatred towards him.

When the cool North Sea breeze hit her face minutes later, Hermione was surprised at how dark the sky had become in such a short amount of time, but a quick look at her wristwatch confirmed the time.

"Damn!" she swore. "How'd I let him connive me into staying two hours?"

A/N:

Chapter title: Esto Perpetua - It is eternal

Many thanks to Annie and Fer and the lovely staff at OWL, who do such a fantastic job helping me.

Ex Post Facto

Chapter 7 of 26

Husband or no, life marches on for Hermione. And Severus is left to sort a few things out.

The next morning Hermione was even worse for wear; she'd spent the night on the couch hurriedly scribbling every abstract thought and notation that came to her regarding freshening charms.

Every Muggle corner market and stop-n-go shop had 'em; spritzers for the upholstery, socket fans filled with liquid potpourri, even little evergreen trees for the automobile. The wizarding world didn't bother with such things. What was the use? A few waves of a wand and the air was clear and fresh again.

But what if they could be convinced they needed something like that? Hermione could create a market for some such charmed device... witches would be wondering how they ever got along without one.

Her head pounded with the possibilities. Granddaddy Granger smelled of warm pipe tobacco, flannel shirts, and his fishing hole after a good rainstorm. It was the kind of scent that inspired comfort and many happy memories. Occasionally, when she pined for his bear hugs and mugs of cocoa on the back porch, she tried to think about how he smelled and often wished she could just inhale whole big lungfuls of it at a time. Was it possible to create an enchanted device to absorb a scent, regardless of how complex, and faithfully reproduce it on command? How many Galleons would someone pay for something like that?

Her staff would not be happy. At least not until the bonus checks were drafted.

Hermione had them working around the clock on all sorts of projects covering every discipline of magic. They needed a break. She needed a vacation. But more importantly, she needed to expand. What started in the Weasley's garage five years ago had moved and expanded four times since then. This time, she would just purchase the warehouse outright. Eight months ago, when Hermione knew she needed to expand, she balked at the idea of ever filling up a two-story warehouse and settled on a more 'manageable' space. Now she just wished she had the time to talk to a realtor again.

Time. That was yet another project. If she ever had the time to get around to it. True, all the 'known' Time-Turners had been destroyed in her fifth year at Hogwarts, but the original research still existed. Granted, it was mostly in Middle English, but eventually Hermione would get 'round to it. Then maybe she'd have the time to hit the stacks of half-formed ideas and shelved projects. Maybe. At present, if Hermione had a Time-Turner, she'd cuddle up with her pillow and tell the world to bite her ass.

"Crooks!" she screamed, "I'm running late so get your gingy-butt over here."

She knew he understood her perfectly well; every morning was the same fight. Even in the magical realm, there wasn't an easy or pleasant way of giving a cat a pill. Crooks was too smart to take it in his food, too cunning to let her sucker him into it with a belly rub, and much too devious to let himself be found every morning when she hollered for him. And of course Crooks was smart enough to know he needed to take it. That was the problem with Kneazles, too bloody smart. Not that she'd stand for a dunderheaded familiar.

"If I have to go hunting for you, it'll be much worse. I'm in no mood to play!"

Hermione didn't have the luxury of waiting on his master's leisure this morning.

"I'll Stun you if I have to!" Of course she didn't really mean it. How could she? The sad truth was Crooks was no longer a kitten. Hermione had a difficult time imagining he'd ever been a kitten. Kittens had kitten-fur: soft, spiky, kitteny fur. Crooks would never have stood for it. Sadly though, he was getting on in years.

She tapped her foot before threatening, "One!..." A faint scurrying sound came from the bedroom "Two! ..." She could hear his nails clattering on the wood floor. "Three!"

The grumpy half-Kneazle came to a lurching halt in front of her feet and eyed her with angry yellow eyes. She met his glare. "Oh, don't give me that, you marmalade monster. You know it's for your own good."

Hermione proffered the pill that was supposedly beef flavored and yummy for cats and Kneazles alike (Ha!) and watched him grumble a bit before taking it from her. "And I'd better not come back to find it on the rug again." Hermione could have sworn he rolled his eyes at her, but once the pill was gone, she offered him a chicken treat. "Good baby," she crooned.

"Right. Fine. Now that's settled..." Hermione glanced around her kitchen and parchment-littered living room, "Where's my satchel? I swear... the story of my life, once I get it all together, I can't remember where I put it...."

Years ago, she'd graduated from her small beaded bag that held mostly everything to a Mommy-purse that really did hold everything, before having to trade it in for a messenger bag that held everything plus the proverbial kitchen sink. Hermione pondered a possible scientific explanation. The Law of Expanding Crap. The more room she had to house crap, the more crap she found that needed to be housed. It was all patently unfair.

She didn't honestly have time for this; even if she was the boss, Hermione would never think of coming in late or missing a single day of work. That would be inexcusable. "Accio satchel!" she cried before cringing as a heap of books flipped over. The moments were few and far between, but there were moments when Hermione found herself wishing for a house-elf. A little help every now and then wasn't so much to ask for, was it?

The moment Hermione arrived at work, she was instantly assailed.

Edwards handed her a stack of phone messages, her daily calendar, and the status report of each current project.

Hopper wanted to bend her ear just for a tick, which meant he wanted at least an hour of face time to schmooze.

Gibson was on to something, which was either earth-shatteringly good or bad enough to unmake all creation and break several laws of physics.

And Jordan wanted more time off because his wife was going into labor... right now.

Jordan was given the week. Thankfully Edwards suggested sending flowers to the new family...she certainly wouldn't have thought about it. Hermione delegated that task to him.

Hopper was put off. Indefinitely, if at all possible.

First priority was to check on Gibson, Hermione couldn't really afford any more explosions. The Muggles got all flighty last time that had happened.

It turned out Gibson was on to something, but nothing dramatic, which was just great with Hermione; she couldn't handle much more drama.

By the time she made it to her own office, it was past lunch, the phone messages had tripled, and she hadn't even had the opportunity to check her email. No doubt her inbox would be full.

Whereas most wizards wouldn't give the Muggle world a second glance, having an office where electricity and an internet connection were available was a necessity. Really, the technology gave her quite an advantage over all of her competitors. Most of her staff was accustomed to the strange Muggle contraptions and laptops that dotted most of the workstations.

It wasn't that she tried to hire Muggle-borns, but she mostly snapped up the students that the Ministry tended to overlook, regardless of their genius, which invariably meant Muggle-borns. In all actuality, Hermione was more concerned with that intangible spark of brilliance and creative thinking than abbreviations after a name. Before any product was launched, it was thoroughly vetted by a series of subject-matter Masters, but most of her staff had only a Hogwarts education.

Surprisingly, this had the opposite effect of what everyone told her to expect. Early on, Hermione was given advice to hire only Masters, but shortly found out that most Masters spent their time arguing with her about why something could not be done. It just wasn't worth the effort.

As most Hogwarts graduates couldn't get apprenticeships if they didn't have experience and couldn't get experience unless they had apprenticeships, they were usually stuck in a weird jobless limbo. Especially if they had the blemish of being Muggle-born on their transcripts. But she never had to argue with them when she proposed a new project.

Oh, certainly there were some incredulous looks, and more than a few of them said 'One. Two. Three. Not it!' But to date, nobody had ever jumped on her desk whining and complaining that she was asking them to do something fundamentally impossible. Maybe only theoretically impossible.

By the end of the day, which was somewhere between quitting time and dawn, Hermione had caught up on email, sorted through most of the research left with her, read all the progress reports (which usually took forever because she constantly had to edit, add her own comments, look up facts, and suggest other alternatives), and most of the phone calls had been returned with the exception to the ones who didn't appreciate being called in the middle of the night. Along the way, she managed to grab a bit of nosh, courtesy of the clever Muggle magic machine, the 'microwave.'

Which just meant Hermione had time to Apparate home and drop in bed only to wake five hours later and do it all over again.

They sat there, looking nothing less than perfect. It was even a bigger bundle than he'd ever netted on any Christmas or Birthday haul. Four large white paper boxes sitting on the cushion of a stylish leather armchair, the red tissue paper peeking out artfully. In another time and place, a glamorous photograph for a department store could have been taken.

It was as if someone had meticulously conceptualized exactly what he needed and executed the plan flawlessly. Severus expected nothing less from his most impressive student. Hermione never did anything in half measures; she was too detail oriented and obsessive for anything short of perfection. He wasn't certain what was contained in the rest of the boxes; he had only gotten so far as unwrapping the first few items before being overcome by something, a feeling he couldn't quite explain, but made him feel very uncomfortable.

So the boxes sat. And he sat. Trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with him. Didn't he want this? To make the best of a bad situation? Manipulate the witch just a bit? Get a few kicks and lighten up the misery in his life?

Why did the witch have to get him the best of everything? If the first items were anything to judge by, Hermione had spent a small fortune on items that would have made Lucius green with envy.

Why?

Surely she realized he was in Azkaban prison. The girl wasn't dense enough to think that he had anyone to impress here. The Dementors, though still well employed by the Ministry, were no longer in residence since the Prison Reform Act, so he had no reason to bribe a guard.

So the boxes sat. And he sat.

After what might or might not have been several hours of a staring contest, Severus blinked first. There was no use for it. The boxes couldn't possibly contain anything that would actually bite him, and he'd look like a damned fool if she came waltzing in the door only to see he hadn't move a muscle, other than to get the boxes as far away from his bed as possible. He had to open them, if for no other reason than to prove he wasn't a coward.

And that was another thing, just when was Hermione going to decide to show up? The chit hadn't as much as given him notice. This was the girl who lived and died by her schedule. What if she decided to pop in while he was doing something important? He'd be damned if he'd rearrange his schedule for her.

Mornings were sit-ups, push ups, crunches, squats, and whatever range of motion exercises he could manage given the small space. Running obviously was completely out, but he managed to get some cardio in by huffing and puffing through as many jumping jacks as he could.

Afternoons were dedicated to silent meditation, reciting brewing instructions, and the occasional attempt at teaching himself more wandless magic. The wandless magic bit was only to keep himself busy; there was really nothing he seriously wanted to use magic for. What exactly would he do, 'Accio toilet paper'?

In the evening he did his most serious thinking by composing potions in his head and dwelling on things that made him want to crawl into his disgusting mattress.

No, Severus was quite busy and really didn't have much time at all for the witch in his life. If she knew what was best for her, she'd avoid just casually dropping by, mucking with his schedule and all that. He liked his life just fine. In fact it was perfect. Just dandy.

"Oh, fuck it all."

Severus grabbed the partially unpacked box and dumped the contents out on his cot. He certainly wasn't afraid of a few grooming products.

The girl had taste. Or at least an idea of what he liked, which of course was always tasteful. The most exquisite French-milled herbal soaps. A proper set of shaving lathers to accompany the wicked shaving razor. Nail clippers. Clean-smelling deodorant. Assorted scrub brushes for every body part imaginable, and...thank the gods above...a package of fresh towels to replace the disgusting rag she'd transfigured into his much-loved leather armchair. Surely her place in the heavens was assured.

Practical items all in all. Manly even.

The most fascinating of all were the bottles of shampoo and conditioner. Granger's own brand, Good Hair Day. He had no idea why anyone would want to call a hair product Good Hair Day; it would seem to suggest there was something such as a Bad Hair Day, but he chalked it up to her bizarre eccentricities. Severus read the labels twice. To say he was impressed was an understatement. No wonder the girl was successful.

It was a universal truism; people always wanted what they didn't have. Girls with heads full of enviable curls always wanted straight, stringy hair. Stringy-haired poor bastards like himself craved a bit of wave and body. Hair products catered to that need and raked in the Galleons promising to transform any head into the 'ideal.' Not Granger's. Her charmed cleanser/potion simply promised to give the user the best outcome based upon what nature dictated. And because it worked with nature instead of against it, the product was non-abrasive.

Clever, clever girl. He idly wondered what exactly she'd look like on a 'good hair day,' though most likely it would take a weed-whacker to get any desired effect.

One box down, and Severus was feeling less apprehensive about the situation, on the whole. Actually, he was a bit angry with himself for his moments of weakness. Weakness, that was all that it was. He was growing soft and sentimental in his imprisonment. Why should he deny himself whatever luxuries he could grab hold of while caged like an animal?

He wasn't quite certain what to make of the clock and calendar duo. Did he really want to number his days? Take stock and account for the hours that slipped past him in silent mockery? It was all typical Hermione; never once could he remember an instance of her being late to a class. Severus supposed that if she wasn't able to plan her waking hours down to the minute the poor girl would come utterly undone. Control freaks were all the same. The clock was quickly put aside. He was on nobody's time but his own.

The next three boxes were quickly sorted through, and Severus now had a huge fluffy pile of red tissue paper. If she hadn't included a roll of never-ending toilet paper, he'd be a happy boy just with the packaging. As Severus was now in possession of several items and not a damn place to stow any of them, back in the magically expanding boxes they went.

But first he changed into one of his new sets of robes. There was nothing comparable to the utterly sublime feeling of a new set of robes, especially after two years of practical undress. The wool wasn't as soft as he would have preferred, and the cut wasn't precisely to his own tailor's specifications, but then he had lost a great deal of weight. At least she got the color right.

Severus nearly felt human again. In fact when he closed his eyes and occluded his mind, the world seemed strangely right for the moment, but then the moment quickly passed.

The truth was that even though he had fresh linens and bedding of a disgustingly high Egyptian cotton thread count, he wouldn't dare throw them atop his fetid mattress, or let his new robes come in contact with it either. So the old grey prison clothes came back on, and the luxuries were packed away.

Severus only allowed himself the joy of picking at will from the generous number of books and periodicals she'd thrown in.

A/N:

Chapter title: Ex Post Facto - After the fact

Sweet thanks to the lovely Christev20 who gives so generously of her time.

Multum In Parvo

Hermione is pressed for time, and Severus has all the time in the world.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything recognizable to the HP-Universe, JK Rowling does. I'm not making any money off the writing of this fanfic.

Severus was gracefully lounging on his armchair reading when Hermione silently peered through the jailer's slot. She held off Mulciber for the moment, intrigued by the novelty of silently observing the enigmatic man. In some way, it was a strange retribution for the many times he had silently stalked her in the halls. A thin, wry smile was playing at the corner of his lips, and Hermione itched to know which book had him captivated.

"Prisoner 11652, present yourself!" Mulciber yelled.

"Oh, bloody hell!"

Severus scrambled to find a scrap of parchment to mark his page; he was too much of a bibliophile to ever consider dog-earring the pages. Scowl firmly affixed in place, Severus stood and held his arms out wide to show he wasn't carrying anything dangerous.

The heavy door swung inward as his wife stepped through, causing his chest to seize up. Hermione looked as casual as always, dirty trainers, trendy indigo jeans, and a snug t-shirt loudly proclaiming her to be *Mugglicious*, but her glossy brown hair hung in perfect doll-like corkscrew curls. Well, that was one mystery solved.

"Mrs. Granger, I thought you didn't use your hair products."

"I don't usually," she replied flippantly. "Meeting with the distributors. Rat bastards."

"Indeed?"

"You don't want to know."

Truth be told, she spent way too many hours fighting them. They provided no other service but to move her product to the market, took a way bigger share of the profits than they should, and were forever giving her a migraine between her eyebrows that she just couldn't shake. But then there was nothing for it; it was the 'cost of doing business.' She'd take on the task of doing it all herself, but then there was only so much of her to go around, and she was already stretched thin enough.

"No, I suppose I do not." Was he really trying to make polite conversation with the girl? It wasn't possible that he was actually interested in her day.

Hermione held out another white box for him, no doubt loaded with more loot he wasn't certain he wanted. "Here, some things I forgot. And I wasn't sure if you liked milk chocolate, dark chocolate, or white chocolate, so I got them all. Though you strike me as the dark chocolate type."

"I am," he interjected. Hermione was wringing her hands, obviously nervous to see him again. "Thank you, you didn't have to... what I mean is... I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Even though you haven't unpacked your other items?" she said pointing at the stacked white boxes peeking out from under his cot.

Severus arched an eyebrow. Was the girl really picking a fight after he had unnecessarily thanked her? "And just where do you suggest I unpack them to?" he remarked in his coldest voice, "The lounge? The study? My opulent bathroom perhaps?"

Hermione closed her eyes, berating herself for not thinking clearly. "You're right of course. I haven't thought this through as properly as I thought I had. I've been a bit distracted lately. I'm sorry."

She chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip; she needed to find an item with enough matter to Transfigure it into shelving, but nothing that he'd miss. Hermione spied the smoothed down pile of red tissue paper. There was probably just enough to get three shelves, at least until she could bring something more substantial. Carefully aiming her wand, Hermione poured her concentration into its construction.

It took several minutes, and the finished product wasn't as impressive as she would have liked. A more solid substance would have provided the raw matter necessary for a proper Transfiguration, but for the moment, the slightly rickety white bookshelf was adequate. That, and it fit against the wall at his bedside.

"Will that do for now?" she asked, looking to him for approval.

Severus nodded and was briefly rewarded with a dazzling smile. *My gods, this girl is emotionally starved*, he thought to himself.

"So... you found everything all right then. Did the robes fit? I wasn't too certain of your measurements; I can take them back if it's necessary." Hermione couldn't hide the disappointment in her voice that he was still dressed in his drab prison gray robes, or that he still looked vaguely like a pirate. A slightly cleaner pirate, who smelled faintly of herbal soap, but the beard and wild hair were still a bit disconcerting.

"They are. I simply don't wish to dirty them," Severus gestured to his filthy cot and rotting mattress.

Hermione immediately took the unsubtle hint, and with a careful swishes and flicks treated the offending piece of furniture to a barrage of industrial cleaning spells. "This will also have to do for now. I'll bring you something more permanent next time. I really must apologize; I'm not usually this absent minded. I should have thought, I just don't know what's wrong with me. I don't mean to insinuate that I'm not taking my obligations seriously. I am, I truly am. It's just sometimes it's like I forget to think past the details I wrap myself up in and ..."

"Hermione," Severus softly interrupted. She was babbling again. "You haven't been sleeping have you?"

She turned to him with damp, frightened eyes. "I'm fine, really. I'm just a bit behind."

Severus sat on the cleaned mattress and gestured for her to take his armchair. He watched with a slightly amused expression as she collapsed into it. "Are you? Are you really?"

"A bit behind? Yes, but only just. I figure if I can burn through my quarterly reports this weekend I might be able to have a leg up on next week. We've got our annual production meeting coming up, and well, it'll throw everything else off... you know," she gave a nervous laugh, "Not like I was going to do anything else this weekend anyway."

"That's not what I meant," he said frowning. "Are you fine?"

"What? No, I'm fine, really."

He gave her another appraising look. She looked too well rested to possibly be this upset. "Hermione, you're not fooling me. Drop the glamour."

She touched her face with a look of shock wondering how he possibly knew. "Oh, this silly thing? It was just for the distributor's meeting."

"Then you won't mind dropping it."

"I can't possibly; I look ghastly without makeup on."

Severus nodded and crossed his arms across his chest. "Making excuses, are we?" It must have been worse than he expected.

"I don't take orders from you, Snape. Besides, let's not deceive ourselves; you needn't pretend to care."

What could he say to that? Severus couldn't argue with her. He'd be an idiot to suggest he did care. "Do as you please," he said casually. "I'll not inquire after your welfare again. It only seemed the polite thing to do, but I see my efforts are wasted." There. That should put her off.

She checked her watch hoping to see her hour had run out. It hadn't. A change of topic was definitely needed. Hermione couldn't remain there for another minute if it meant listening to yet another person badger her about taking better care of herself. Just who did he think he was? A Weasley?

"I noticed you were reading a book when I came in..." There. That sounded decidedly neutral enough, and truth be told, she was still just a wee bit curious.

"Yes," he picked up the hardback book, thankful for the change in conversation. "You loaded me up with plenty of Muggle literature."

"I didn't know what you liked to read, but I figured you hadn't read any Muggle titles before."

"And there you've assumed correctly." Another mystery solved. Severus figured she was just trying to shove her culture down his throat.

At least he was able to get a fairly intelligent conversation out of the deal, as they debated the merits of Muggle versus wizarding literature. Although Severus had very few superlatives to say about Muggle literature, it did have one thing going for it. Science Fiction. Wizarding Science Fiction novels were abysmal. Very few bookstores were willing to carry them, and no self-respecting witch or wizard would take a crack at writing them for a wizarding audience.

Witches and wizards had absolutely no genuine appreciation for Science Fiction, for no other reason than they couldn't find an audience that was able to suspend their disbelief or understand the concept of fantasy. When confronted with Science Fiction, wizards overwhelmingly shrugged their shoulders and didn't get it. Most lofty and outer-worldly ideas were either part of everyday life or taken as a suggestion of something to try. He recalled with amazing clarity a daft Hufflepuff wizard in his graduating class who had taken it upon himself to hunt the Giant Squid simply because he believed it was in the habit of attacking some Muggle submarine.

"This one though is fairly amusing," he said, holding up the book he'd been reading while the evil minx had been spying on him. "Robinson Crusoe. I must say, I now finally understand the phrase, 'Only Robinson Crusoe had everything done by Friday'."

"Oh, if only we all could!" She gave a light laugh.

"The house-elves should be a great help to you in getting things done, you know. Unless you're not letting them work for you." Severus frowned; the thought of a house full of idle lazy elves was not appealing. It wasn't pleasant when elves were unable to serve or left too long to their own devices. They had a habit of going quite mad. The pathetic excuse for an elf, Kreacher, was only one example of that.

"What? No, I haven't moved into your Homestead yet. I've been far too busy to move."

"Madam Granger, was that not a term of our contract! You are obligated to move in."

"You never stipulated when I had to move! Besides, I've still got six months left on my flat's lease. You can't expect me to break a previous contract; clearly it should be grandfathered in."

"And in six months will you then have the time to move, or will you be just as dragged out and harassed as you are now?"

"I'm not... I'm not... Oh, screw it, we're done here. I shouldn't have to put up with this crap from you." Hermione glanced at her watch; it just wasn't moving fast enough, she had another fifteen minutes of her required visiting hour left. She stood, intent on reaching the door, when his hand caught her shoulder. Severus pinned her back against his chest.

"Hermione, please stay." Did he have to say he was sorry? "You're right; it's unfair that I've asked you to uproot your life without considering your other responsibilities." He really was trying to be gentle, and Severus felt a touch of pride as she relaxed into his embrace. "Don't break your lease, stay the six months, but I do want the old house occupied. It's been vacant far too long."

Hermione closed her eyes, it felt good just to be held, comforted. When she realized she was still standing in his embrace, Hermione quickly stepped away.

"I should still be going. Even though it's Friday night, I've got a lot to do."

He nodded his understanding.

"I assume seeing you next Tuesday will work with your schedule? Perhaps we can keep this going fairly regularly. Tuesday and Friday nights, I mean."

Severus only shrugged. If she hadn't told him it was a Friday, he wouldn't have known otherwise. "That sounds agreeable."

"Fine; I'll pencil you in." She pulled a strange black plastic Muggle device of some sort from her satchel and began playing with its buttons.

"What is that?" he asked as his curiosity got the better of him. Muggle technology had never held a particular interest for him, but she was staring quite intently at it as if it held great importance.

"My crackberry. It won't synch up here, but once I'm back in the so-called real world, it'll hook back up with my Outlook. I think it has to do with the electromagnetics involved with wizarding wards that plays havoc with Muggle technology. If I can find a work-around for it, I'll have more gold than Gringotts."

She glanced up at Severus and noted his dull expression. Obviously he was trying to cover up his ignorance for feigned disinterest. Perhaps a translation was in order.

"It holds my calendar, among other things," she explained.

"Oh."

"Until Tuesday then?"

"Yes. Good night, Hermione."

She gave him the slightest hint of a smile. "Good night, Severus."

As the door closed behind her, Severus fell into his armchair as if all the support had been knocked out of his knees. Severus took a long moment to absorb the entire night's proceedings, turning their conversations over and over in his mind as he'd do every day until Tuesday.

When he opened his eyes, the new white box drew his attention. The witch had mentioned chocolate, hadn't she?

Oh, the box contained chocolate and as tempting as fine Honeydukes bars and truffles. But Saint Hermione truly earned her nickname by sending him an enchanted self-heating teapot and a generous box of Fortnum & Mason tea. Severus' fingers softly caressed the proper eight cup brown Betty. This meant more to him than a perfect

cuppa. This meant access to hot water. Real hot water.

He might just start to feel human after all.

A/N:

Chapter title: Multum In Parvo - A lot in a little

Thanks to Christev20 who poured her time and talent into beta'ing this fic. If it weren't for her, every sentence would end in a preposition.

Saepe Creat Molles Aspera Spina Rosas

Chapter 9 of 26

Hermione hits a barrier. Severus sees an opportunity.

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Gibson was at it again. Of all her R&D techs, Imelda Gibson was her most brilliant and inspired thinker. Hermione tried to give her all the latitude she needed to freely create. Unfortunately, Gibson's muse seemed to be less of an angel and more of a horrible shit-spewing demon, and she did her best work late at night on the weekends. This meant that for Hermione, her fantasy of finishing quarterly reports over the weekend was dashed upon the cruel rocks of reality when Gibson blew up the lab. Again.

The containment fields didn't hold, either. A large hole was blasted through the outer cinderblock wall causing Muggle media to speculate that it was an act of urban terrorism. Hermione's working weekend was spent making up press releases, talking to the authorities, and trying to salvage what was left of her experimental potions lab. The only good thing she had to say about the entire debacle was that Imelda had proper warning of the impending explosion and protected herself with a powerful shield and walked away with only a few bruises.

Hopper immediately argued it was a direct result of her utter incompetence, but then Hopper really hadn't produced a single noteworthy invention since joining the company. Hermione was sorely tempted to fire him, not because of his lack of results, but simply on principle. The man was a tiring ass.

Her saving grace was that Lee Jordan was back from leave, meaning he could pick back up on the Charms research that was slipping, but Jordan was having a difficult time concentrating. Every time Hermione visited the floor, Jordan was chatting with another co-worker, pushing pictures of cooing baby Felicity in their faces. In a fit of weary bitchiness, Hermione snapped at him, yelling for him to get his arse back to work. It was not her finest moment.

Not even her assistant, Jake Edwards, whom she leaned heavily upon to be the one to smooth things over, could help her there. Lee immediately took offense and raged that if they hadn't been mates at school, he would have told her to stick the job up where the sun didn't shine long ago.

Stupidly, Hermione shot back that if he really felt that way, he could leave at any time.

And he did.

Bugger, bugger, and double bugger.

Hermione employed twenty five workers, but only six of them were part of the Research and Development lab that she so desperately needed. The rest of her employees were either lab assistants or worked the production line. And though they were all fairly competent and highly skilled, none of them was promotable to R&D.

Lee packed up his desk Monday afternoon, leaving behind a mountain of half-finished research notes and backed-up reports. Hermione didn't know where the hell she was going to find another Charms maverick; she'd pinched Lee away from the twins by throwing extraordinary amounts of Galleons at him. As far as she was concerned, he was irreplaceable.

Tuesday evening saw Severus agitatedly pacing his cramped cell like a caged tiger. Occasionally an eye would drift to the bedside calendar clock duo she graciously bestowed upon him so that he could be constantly informed of how long he'd been incarcerated. The clock shuffled between the ledge on the back of the loo and the farthest darkest corner he could find in the deepest of the extendable boxes, depending on his mood.

Given his current mood he was inclined to smash the damn thing as hard as he could into the wall. As much as he yearned for his wand, physically destroying it would be immensely pleasurable. He pondered the effect the enchantments would have if he pitched it through his window. Would it bounce? He'd have to amuse himself destroying the clock cog by cog another time.

They supposedly had an appointment, one that she had even scheduled. Judging by the daylight left, his wife was standing him up. The inconsiderate tart, she knew how he felt about punctuality.

His bed was made, tea and biscuits were set out, he was wearing his new robes, and damn it, Severus had shaved. Did the witch not appreciate what he was putting himself through for her? It had taken all of his will power to gaze into the mirror she had brought for him. Severus had not wanted to see himself, and once he had, he'd regretted it immediately.

It took the better part of several hours to clip his long hanging beard and groom his shaggy hair. Her Good Hair Day product line needed several applications to cut through the cakiness of his matted hair before a comb would run through it properly, but once clean he was able to secure it into a suitable pony tail at the nape of his neck.

Apparently 'Mother Nature' deemed that his best look was the same as his regular every-day look. Her miracle shampoo did not produce a single wave or curl, but it did tingle and smell good. The remnants of his beard were easily swept away by a proper shave with what he now termed his 'wicked little blade.'

Gods, he almost looked presentable if one could get over the fact that he was still rotting in Azkaban.

Severus was close to throwing an all out tantrum when Mulciber's annoying whine called out, "Prisoner 11652, present yourself!"

"About damn time you got here, witch!" Severus obligingly held his arms out wide to demonstrate he wasn't wielding any sharp objects or weapons as much as he would have liked to.

As the wards dropped the door swung open. Severus saw her worn brown leather satchel, nearly bursting at the seams first before Hermione followed lumbering behind it. Severus easily recognized the satchel as the kind purported to hold anything and everything; he curiously wondered how she had gotten it so stuffed to the gills that she could barely manage it. Perhaps she really was moving out of her flat and had packed up the household into it.

"Sorry! Sorry! I know I'm late. I hate being late. I hope you're not too put out."

Hermione dropped her satchel with a heavy thud and a wince before looking up at Severus.

"Oh my..." She gaped. "You're dressed."

"And you're not," Severus said smugly.

If it was at all possible, the witch looked worse for wear than he'd ever seen her, the week before O.W.Ls included. All her perfect spiral curls had fallen out and resumed their unmanageable fly-away appearance. Her glamours weren't holding. The tell-tale shimmers around her face and eyes obviously meant she didn't have the energy to properly sustain them. And Hermione's navy robes were rumpled, and if Severus had to guess, he figured she had definitely slept in them. The only question was for how many days.

Hermione collapsed ungracefully into his leather armchair while Severus again sat on the bed.

"Please, I couldn't really give a rat's arse how I look." She gave him a shy sweet smile. "But I really didn't mean to be rude. You look very nice tonight."

Hermione fought herself not to call him 'Professor,' but that was exactly how he appeared. The haggard pirate was gone, and Hermione was staring at her Potions professor.

The wizarding world had given her vocabulary for colors. There was Inferi white, Killing-Curse acid green, and Voldemort vermilion. None of those were quite as indelibly inscribed on her psyche as Snape black. Seeing him again in his black robes caused Hermione to fight the natural instinct to punctuate every statement with 'Sir. Yes, sir.'

"Thank you. I was hoping we might have a civilized evening." He gestured to the small tea service.

"That sounds perfect right about now." Hermione was literally too tired to argue. If he had suggested they spend the evening making sock puppets and playing gobstones, she doubted she'd have the energy to say no.

As the delicate warm Assam brew eased down her throat, Hermione relaxed further into the cushions. It was absolute heaven just to sit and do f-all nothing, even if the moment wasn't meant to last. Hermione didn't allow herself much more than a minute. While Severus offered her a small plate of wafer thin orange spice biscuits, Hermione was already digging around in her satchel looking for the correct over-filled three ring binder.

Her binders were organized by subject matter and then further subdivided in several categories; backburner-working, currently-working, immediately-working, and you-had-better-get-your-tail-on-this-right-away-working. For some reason all of her work was currently flagged in the latter category. She was thinking of another category of: you-idiot-why-haven't-you-worked-this-working.

For his part, Severus stared at her agog. How dare she? The witch had no right to come into his home (for lack of a better word) and proceed to do homework. She was on his time.

"Put that away," he growled, throwing the plate of biscuits a bit violently on his bedspread. There'd be crumbs there tonight, but he didn't give a damn.

"Huh? Wha--?"

Hermione looked up at him, her silver wire rim reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose, threatening to fall off. Her mum had always warned her that reading in the dark would catch up with her, but she had never suspected that it would take place so early in life.

"Are you deaf in addition to blind, Granger? I said put that away. This is not a library."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, "Who the hell are you to dictate how I spent my hour with you? I've got real work to do, so if you please, leave me to it, and I'll leave you to your tea and biscuits!"

"Granger," he growled out deep and menacingly, "do not make me repeat myself. Put the work away. We are going to attempt to have a normal, civilized evening like normal, civilized people." He held out his hand daring her to say 'no,' and Hermione reluctantly passed him her satchel.

In a more quiet voice Severus asked, "Can you really not spare an hour?"

Hermione slowly shook her head, pulling the spectacles from her nose. She slumped defeated into the chair.

"What happened?" he asked gingerly.

"Do you really want to hear it? I'm sure I'll just bore you to tears."

Severus raised a single sublime eyebrow, "Madam, do I look like someone who's easily moved to tears?"

Closing her eyes, Hermione began her story with the explosion that disrupted her lab, fried a critical hard drive, and caused her to lose all sleep that weekend. Never mind the fact that she had to give multiple statements to the authorities and reporters that she was NOT running a meth-lab (Severus didn't ask). The blast was large enough and witnessed by Muggles who had camera phones, so Ministry Obliviators weren't even able to be called in before it hit the evening news. Instead, they quickly made up a story about a storage locker filled with medical oxygen tanks and employed lots of Fascination Charms for a distraction.

Severus followed intently as she described the falling out with Jordan and what it meant to her Charms department. She hadn't begun searching for someone to take his place, but it became evident that she didn't even have the time to hold interviews. Instead, Hermione was shouldering the burden. Her ranting about quarterly reports, production meetings and supply chain woes began to break down as Hermione ran out of steam. She was holding on to her sanity by a quickly unraveling thread.

Severus was stumped when the tears finally broke from her misty eyes. He'd seen more than his share of school children crying, but somehow handing her a tissue and telling her to get to class didn't sit right. He'd been patient with his own House, fatherly, indulgent even, but was uncertain if Hermione would react favorably to coddling. Then again, the witch seemed to need a bit of coddling. And to his own astonishment, he wanted to soothe her. She was his wife, his responsibility. Fuck. That meant he probably should attempt to do something nice for her.

Hermione barely registered being picked up out of the armchair, but when his warm strong arms wrapped around her, Hermione could not have cared less that she was sitting in his lap like a small child and just allowed herself the divine luxury of having a good hard cry. And cry she did until she tucked herself out from the sheer exhaustion of letting it all out. Hermione fell into such an exhausted sleep that she didn't stir when he put her to bed.

As she slept her glamours slipped and Severus could only shake his head. Hermione was doing her best human-bowtruckle impression. Why was it that a woman with a life ahead of her and all the opportunity in the world looked worse than an Azkaban prisoner?

In the very early hours of the day, long before the sun announced its presence through his window, Severus sat in his armchair lost in paperwork. The night had been an

exercise in will-power for him. Hermione had cried herself out, and when he realized she was out like a light, he put her to bed. It was the decent thing to do. The witch needed her sleep, but Severus was certain he'd catch all sorts of unholy hell for it.

With his wife soundly asleep, her wand was left completely unattended, and Severus found himself staring at it intently. He wasn't supposed to touch it. He didn't even know if it'd work for him. Or if the wards would go off if he attempted to use it, but his fingers itched. It had been so long since he'd felt magic thrum through his body.

The temptation proved too great.

As Severus picked up her discarded wand, he easily felt connected to the wand. It didn't channel power as his own wand so easily did, but it was there. With a hoarse voice Severus Snape quietly intoned his first real spell in years, "*Lumos.*"

By wandlight he read. And read. Severus soaked up as much as he could as he sifted through product reports, market analyses, research updates, and proposals.

He just couldn't help himself. The temptation again proved too great. Taking the self-inking quill up in his hand, Severus furiously began the task of marking parchment as if grading a third-year's Potions essay. And by the gods it felt good.

He learned quite a bit about Granger Industries and was heartily impressed, but going through her satchel yielded other shockers. He was already quite aware that a man could tell a lot about a woman just by what she carried in her purse, and Severus was thoroughly unsurprised to find all sorts of womanly trinkets, filing cabinets, journals, 'emergency' whatnots, and... a tent? The bottom of her satchel - if it truly were the bottom, Severus wasn't quite convinced - was littered with oodles and oodles of tatty, frayed, and broken-nibbed quills, gum wrappers, and assorted loose coinage.

What had him most dumbfounded, though, was a small black case containing medical supplies. Apparently, Hermione kept a First Aid kit worthy of an entire paramedics team on her at all times. Again, interesting, but not noteworthy given how paranoid the girl tended to be. No, what caught his immediate attention were her prescription potions. She carried enough potions to stock Poppy for a term. The case contained: Migraine-Be-Gone, Femi-all Pain reliever, Heartburn and Indigestion suppressants, and Anti-depressants.

Lots of Anti-depressants.

By the looks of it, *Non Solum Noctus*, more commonly known by the street name, 'Liquid Sunshine,' for the physiological effect it had on the imbiber.

Severus pulled a tiny bottle of the whiskey-colored brew from the case, and it immediately resized itself to fit in the palm of his hand. Pulling the stopper, Severus took a good whiff and coughed. He had to spare a glance towards the soundly sleeping witch curled up in bed to make sure she didn't stir. No, Hermione was out.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. He wasn't entirely sure who was brewing her anti-depressants, but she was certainly paying him some serious Galleons for them, given their potency. It was enough happy juice to make a Dementor produce its own Patronus.

No wonder the witch was unconcerned about her sex drive; it was non-existent. As far as he was aware (and unless there had been some major breakthrough in potions research in the last five years - which he highly doubted), no Potions master had been able to perfect an anti-depressant that didn't inhibit sexual desire.

Pleasure, happiness, and the brain's synaptic responses to both were a tight, closely bundled knot. Messing with one area caused a sympathetic or overcompensation from another. And as amazing as the brain was, it often had a difficult time of keeping confusing nervous system messages straight. Hence, he reflected with a wry grin, the juxtaposition between a little bit of pain thrown in with pleasure heightened a sexual act.

But not for Hermione. She was of course, as previously stated in their contract negotiations, a frigid bitch.

'Oh, well,' he resigned himself, 'it's not like I could have her anyway.'

Instead of waking up with a jerk to the sound of her blaring alarm clock, Hermione snuggled deeper into her soft duvet. She was holding on to the wonderful sensation of being just on the cusp of sleep and awareness. Any minute now, her alarm or chirping crackberry would break her peace, but she was bound and determined to enjoy the warm, comfy feeling as long as it lasted.

There was a slightly odd feeling nudging her at the back of her brain, registering that something was wrong, but Hermione mentally shooed it away. The sheets were so soft and smelled slightly of herbal soap that she couldn't help but want to wrap herself deeper in them and shut the rest of the world out.

When her eyelids finally relinquished their evening duties, Hermione gasped to notice how bright the light was that hit her eyes. She always woke before the sun was up. The second thing she noticed was her sheets were a honey taupe. That was funny... her bedclothes were pale blue.

Hermione bolted upright in bed.

"You!" she screeched.

Severus peered over the top of a folder to acknowledge the witch was finally up. "Yes, and hello to you, too," he said easily.

"You let me... Oh, I can't believe you... you... you... evil man. What were you thinking? Wait!" Hermione held up her hand, "What time is it?"

Severus only shrugged; it was sometime after breakfast and before lunch. Though by the slight whine of his stomach, lunch should be coming around fairly soon. "You're the one with the wristwatch, Hermione."

Of course. After a quick glance at her watch Hermione jumped out of bed. "How dare you let me sleep 'til noon!" she raged. "Do you have any idea how important today is? You can't possibly know how much you've ruined my day. What were you thinking, letting me sleep here?"

Again, Severus shrugged his shoulders. If only because it infuriated her. "Don't get snippy with me, Madam. I was the one forced to surrender my cot to you. You could at least give me the common courtesy of thanking me for it. You were certainly in no shape to Apparate last night, and I'd say the sleep has done you a world of good."

"Good? Good? What the hell would you know what's good for me? I've missed half the day, you moron. This will set me back weeks! Weeks!"

Hermione made a grab for the piles of parchment and notebooks Severus had laid on the floor, hastily shoving them in her satchel.

Calmly Severus replied, "You've only missed the daily planning meeting and production conference call, though I'm not exactly certain what a conference call is."

"And that's another thing!" she hissed, parchment clutched in her fist. "You had no right - no right! - to go through my stuff. Just where the hell do you get off, reading my intellectual property? These are trade secrets. I could sue you for this!"

Severus shrugged again, enjoying the way her eyes narrowed each time he did. "Go ahead, take me to court. You've already got my house. What else can you do to me? Extend my life sentence?"

A/N:

Chapter title: Saepe Creat Molles Aspera Spina Rosas - Often the prickly thorn produces tender roses.

Potion Name: Non Solum Noctus Not by night alone

The chapter title comes from Ovid as a nod to Snape's nature. Though I don't know if he'd approve of the sentiment... or the rose reference.

Aut Viam Inveniam Aut Faciam

Chapter 10 of 26

Fallout and consequences.

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"Then, what happened?" Ginny asked her, eyes wide and shining.

"I told him to go fuck himself. I might have used some choice words about his mother and disparaged his paternity. But you know what sucked? I only thought of a whole host of better insults to use right after I walked out. But what could I do? I'd look like an idiot if I barged back in."

"Ugh, I hate when that happens."

"It's just damn skippy he's never called me a Mudblood. On Doctor Allport's Prejudice Scale, 'anti-locution' is the first step towards 'extermination.' Of course, had he called me that, I'd have skipped straight to 'physical attack,' and I'm just not quite sure what that says about me."

"I think it means you won't put up with any bull crap," Ginny asserted, prompting both girls to display predatory Gryffindor grins.

"I'll go all Muggle on his ass," Hermione teased. "He won't know what hit him."

"He might like that, you know. He's probably got a S&M streak a mile wide," Ginny said with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Hermione set down her wine glass. "I really don't want to talk about him anymore."

Ginny nodded, understanding perfectly.

"So, tell me about your date. Charles, was it?"

"Thomas. Charles was two weeks ago." Ginny was getting accustomed to only having half of her friend's attention. It used to bother her, but the only way Ginny could see Hermione was to come over to the flat with a bottle of wine while she worked on payroll. She could either settle for half her attention or lose Hermione entirely. Hermione, of course, firmly maintained that she was always accessible. Ginny only needed to send her an e-mail or get a Facebook account.

"Uh-huh," Hermione prompted while leafing through ledgers. "What was the problem this time?"

"Gay. Or at least that's what he said."

"You think he was lying to you?" Hermione looked up incredulously. What had Ginny done to scare this one off?

"I don't know." Ginny tapped her finger thoughtfully against her lips. "But it seemed really suspicious. He announced it out of the blue, right after I told him how many children I wanted."

"No, Gin, you didn't! On a first date? You're lucky he didn't run screaming from the table."

"Yeah, he looked like he might bail, too. But to be fair, he did ask me how many I wanted. I couldn't lie. I mean, what if we ended up dating, falling in love, and getting married? That would be so wrong. What would I do, tell him at the altar to add a one in front of the number I gave him?"

"You could have misdirected him, put off answering the question."

"Mione, you know that doesn't work. Once my dates connect my red hair and last name, that's the first thing they ask. As a matter of fact, it's usually more like an interrogation."

"Well, maybe this archaic law with all its 'production incentives' will actually work in your favor. It's got to benefit somebody." Hermione tried to sound encouraging, but she couldn't help tipping her words with a hint of sarcasm. The law was still a sore issue with her.

"Yeah, maybe," Ginny answered softly. "But all the decent wizards are already taken. I'm beginning to believe that Mr. Right is shacking up with Prince Charming, and I'm left to sort through the scraps. You know what? I don't want to dwell on this. Let's go out, Hermione. I don't want to sit here wallowing in my sorrows; let's just go somewhere. I know it's a weeknight, but I'm sure we can find a party somewhere."

Hermione dropped her quill. "I can't do that, Gin. I'm sorry, I've got all this to do." She spread her arms out wide to encompass the haphazard stacks of folders that had taken over the kitchen table.

"Just for tonight. Come on, we never do anything anymore. When was the last time you went out dancing? Pleeese!"

She shook her head. "You go on without me."

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "I'm not taking no for an answer. You need this just as much as I do. More so, probably."

"Look, Gin, that sounds nice and all, and I'd really like to go out with you. Honest. But if I don't get these drafts in to the bank on time, people aren't going to get paid this week. You understand? I'm not going to ruin all these people's lives just because you have an idea to go dancing."

"So get a bloody accountant!"

"No way."

"Why not? My brothers have one and don't have to deal with this crap. In fact, they have a whole lot bigger staff to handle half the work that you take on, and they actually have the opportunity to enjoy their success."

"No," Hermione said firmly. "I'm not going to entrust the running of my business to wizards who haven't got math skills past primary school education. If they offered rudimentary subjects at Hogwarts, I'd consider it, but as they don't...I can't chance it."

"So run your business and get someone to take over the R&D department. You can't run both."

Hermione grabbed a fist full of her hair and tugged. "Yes, I can."

"You need help. 'Mione, you can't do this all by yourself."

"No. What I need is time. I can do this if I just had a moment to concentrate." She rubbed her forehead, unknowingly smearing it with a large ink stain from her fingers.

Ginny was silent for a moment as she considered what to do with her best friend. It was in her nature to stalk off upset and pouting, but she couldn't leave Hermione like this.

"Is there something I can do?" She gestured to the stacks of reports. "Maybe there's something easy you could let me do to help you out."

Hermione looked at her warily. If there was anything that she might be convinced to entrust to Ginny, she knew that the moment the witch was finished with it, she'd then go back over her work to double check it. But then, giving Ginny something to do might make her feel like she was helping.

"Progress reports. I could let you take a crack at the progress reports."

"Okay." Ginny nodded. "What do I need to do?"

"The progress reports contain a synopsis of every project we are currently working on. The developer also writes about successes, failures, and speculations. It should also contain a detailed description of everything that has happened in the last week. All you would have to do is read it. If there's anything that strikes you as odd, or if you have a suggestion, write it in the notes section. It usually takes me a long time to go over them, but if you're willing to make a start, it could help me knock through it sooner. It might be helpful to have a different pair of eyes looking at it. You could bring a fresh perspective."

"Is that all?"

Hermione looked at her in disbelief; obviously, Ginny had no idea how invested she was in her progress reports. "Here, I'll show you." Hermione pulled a fat, dark blue folder off the top of a stack of other fat, dark blue folders. She had piles of such weekly folders going back several years, all organized in miniaturized file cabinets. Hermione estimated that she probably had no less than twelve file cabinets in her satchel, which never left her side. Paranoid was putting it mildly.

She flipped open the folder as Ginny stood over her shoulder and thumbed to the first tab.

"That son-of-a-bitch! I'll kill him."

The margins of her pages were covered in thin, spiky black handwriting.

"Well, at least it's not red ink," Ginny said sarcastically.

"I'll kill him."

Ginny watched as her friend began to melt down and stepped aside.

"They'll send me to Azkaban, but I'll kill him. Hmm... I won't have to get remarried if I'm in prison... I could kill him and live happily ever after. That's it, I'll kill him tomorrow."

"Hermione?"

"I'll kill him."

"He's probably just trying to help. Maybe you should read his notes; they might be good, you know." Ginny looked at her seething friend with genuine concern, Hermione was still muttering *'I'll kill him'* over and over under her breath.

"Help? He's not trying to help me. The man's trying to ruin me. He probably just did this to throw me off my game."

"Why would he do that?" Ginny asked quietly.

"Why? Because he's Snape. He does evil things like that. The man isn't right; nothing he does is because he's nice. He's a Death Eater." Hermione's hands were now shaking.

"I know. I haven't forgotten he betrayed us all. But maybe you should just read what he's written... Hermione?"

Hermione was making a frantic grab for all her recent folders, turning them open and gritting her teeth as she found more and more spiky black handwriting.

Long after Ginny had abandoned her to her own personal hell, and a second bottle of wine was consumed, Hermione was lounging on her couch, reading as Crookshanks warmed her feet. She wasn't yet ready to admit it. To make the concession that Snape had done an admirable job of, well... doing her job, was too much. So, instead, Hermione took to scrutinizing everything he'd written, looking for flaws and even spelling errors.

He had a nasty habit of omitting apostrophes and connecting outrageously long run-on sentences with semicolons. But for a wizard without reference books for fact-checking, he actually had done a decent job. No, wait... scratch that.... He'd done an adequate job. Marginally good.

Oh, who was she kidding? Snape had managed to pick up on exactly the same things she would have and made exactly the same comments and suggestions she would have, as well.

What gave her pause, the thing that caused her the most consternation, were his notes regarding Imelda Gibson's project.

Gibson's project was so unique that they were charting new waters, and there was very little historical data to suggest that anything of the like had ever been attempted before. Hermione had the idea after listening to Harry describe something he had seen in a Pensieve. She wanted to view it herself to see if there were any details Harry had missed, but the Pensieve wasn't available.

Most people didn't have access to Pensieves; they were exceedingly rare and damned unaffordable to the average witch and wizard. Most were so small that they could be viewed by one or two people at a time. One night, after watching an old black and white movie on her television, Hermione's mind wandered to the old style projectors and a bizarre idea took root. What if it were possible to project memories like a film? At least they would only have to take a three dimensional source and pair it down to two dimensions, which in theory sounded easier than the other way round. Theoretically, of course...

Before any type of enchanted projector could be constructed, there was first the difficult task of working with the gossamer vapor-like material of which memories were made. Gibson, her Potions maven, had jumped on the idea immediately by spouting off ideas of binding the mist with a potion so that it was more stable without degrading the contents.

Her progress had been painfully slow, but the results were promising. And until the lab blew up, Hermione had a lot more confidence that they'd have the breakthrough they needed. Lee Jordan was already almost finished with the projector, or at least he was before he left. Now, she wasn't so certain the endeavor was even worth it. Imelda's potion was really volatile, too volatile to bring to market, and she nearly had lost her life in the explosion.

There, in the margins next to her progress report, in cramped handwriting read:

Potion highly unstable.

Moonflower essential oil will

react unfavorably to the combination

of dittany and copper cauldron.

"But it needs to be in a copper cauldron," she whispered to herself.

Suggest substituting 1 oz. tisane

of pettigrain and 5 crushed billywig

stingers for moonflower.

The hair of the Centaur must be freely given.

Potion will need an additional 3

clockwise stirs and 1 additional

counter-clockwise stir on the final

series of stirs only.

Final product must resemble the

viscosity of memories as closely as possible.

Theory: final potion color will be

deep violet.

--HBP

"Oh, now what do I do?" Hermione moaned.

This was bad. She reviewed the process in her head several times before coming to the same conclusion she had first arrived at. It would work. Damn him.

What did Snape want? Money? Credit? His name on the patent? Residuals? A stake in her company? She owned Granger Industries 100% outright and had no plans on ever going public. Oh, this was bad.

She pulled out her cellular and dialed up Edwards. He was accustomed to getting frantic calls in the middle of the night.

"Jake? I need your help. I'm in big trouble."

"Trouble? What's wrong, mama? This isn't about that time I did that thing, 'cause you said it wouldn't come back to haunt us, and I just can't..."

"Jake! Stop it. This is no time for you to go all 'oooh, shiny' on me. We've got real problems. Snape problems."

"Oh-my-lo! What'd he do? You're all right, in one piece? You don't need me to come over and bring tissues and Carly Simon?"

"No. Never mind all that, I'm taking care of it, but I need you to clear my schedule for Friday."

"Pardon?"

"I need the day."

"I don't understand. I'm confused. You're going to miss work?"

"Yesss," she hissed, losing patience. Hermione sighed loudly. "You'll have to reschedule the distributor meeting; and, Jake, I don't want to see them any time before next Friday."

"Oooh, yikes, they'll have kittens. Anything else I can do, sweets?"

Hermione wracked her brain. "Yeah. I need another Snape-Care Package. A good one. Go all out again. You seem to know what he likes... oh, and he'll need a proper bookcase and bed. Nothing too big, but something to replace his nasty cot. You've got that?"

"Absolutely. And while I'm out shopping I can pick up a little something for myself, right?"

"Yes, of course. I don't care as long as the Snape box is stellar."

"And that's why I love you, my sweet sugar mama."

"Good night, Jake."

Her next call was to her lawyer, who was less accustomed to getting calls in the middle of the night, but was still all too familiar with his client's unusual work habits.

Friday morning found Severus Snape in high spirits. It was a 'Hermione Day,' which was always a cause for a bit of celebration. Not only did the little chit provide countless hours of entertainment by being so much fun to provoke, but she brought goodies, too.

Although he was expecting her visit, it was still much too early when the morning guard Strathmore called for him to stand for inspection.

"Oh, good grief!" Severus groused, "Give me a minute to get presentable."

He knew it. The moment he let the witch into his life, she was going to muck with his finely tuned schedule. It was after breakfast and before lunch, meaning it was calisthenics time. Having Hermione show up unannounced at such an inopportune moment was infuriating. The witch would pay for this.

Hermione was amused. Little did she suspect when she turned up early at the prison that she'd get a show from her husband through the jailer's slot. She'd interrupted him while he was engrossed in push-ups. Hermione supposed it was because she had only brought him proper robes that he was doing his exercises in nothing more than fitted trousers, but she had to bite back a giggle when she thought that he might always have done his exercises that way. Was it possible that, in the bowels of Hogwarts, the man exercised in three layers of wool? Since Hermione couldn't imagine him in trainers and gym shorts she supposed he did.

When her mind drifted to what he might have worn in Azkaban before she brought him the sets of robes, her giggles ceased. That was something she didn't want to even consider.

Severus towed himself off briefly before snatching up a collared shirt and throwing on his robe. He held out his arms wide open, "See, nothing. Not like I need anything to strangle her with."

"Let's see you try it, Snape," Hermione retorted as she walked in.

"Madam Granger, missed me so much you couldn't wait until this evening?"

Hermione dropped her satchel with a deafening thud. "I'm here on business, Snape."

"Last time I heard those words from you, my dear, you were proposing marriage. What brings you here this time? Some other harebrained scheme? Perhaps you want to start the honeymoon, Vixen?"

"This," she hissed, pulling out the thick dark blue folder, "is why I'm here."

"Ah, that." He smirked.

"Yes, 'that.' You crossed a line, Snape. What the hell gave you the right to go through my stuff?"

"Granger, I believe we've had this conversation before, and while I found it highly amusing at the time, I'm in no mood to listen to you wail about your insecurities again. I read your files. So what? I made a few comments. So what? I dare say my pearls of wisdom have benefited you."

"I'm not going to answer that."

"I'll take that to mean they did."

Hermione rubbed furiously at the point between her brows that was starting to scream. "Why, Snape?"

"Why not? I was bored. I was curious. And loathe as I am to admit it, the work was fascinating."

She took her usual seat on the leather armchair and Severus sat again on the cot, though he was really tempted to throw her off of it. It was his chair, after all.

"So, what now?" Hermione asked. When Severus' face remained completely blank and betrayed not even the slightest flicker of recognition, Hermione continued, "What do you want? I'm not giving you any stake in my company, if that's what you're thinking."

Severus let out a long, rich belly laugh, the likes of which Hermione had never been treated. He laughed without a trace of self-consciousness, as if he didn't care if anybody was listening or judging him. Hermione was momentarily transfixed. Not only had she never really seen the man laugh, or honestly believe that he could, but her laughter was always stifled into nervous giggles and chortles. She was always so embarrassed that someone might be analyzing what she was doing. People watchers always tended to believe others were watching them.

"Fine, I take it that somehow amuses you, but you still haven't answered the question. What do you want?"

As he recovered, Severus solemnly said, "I want to be involved."

"Involved? How? I'm willing to put your name on the patent as co-creator, is that involved enough for you?"

"Hardly. I want this," he gestured toward her bulging satchel, and she drew it closely to her chest.

"Granger, I am a solitary man. I'm not accustomed to working with anyone or even relying on anyone for anything. And I find myself in a position where I've become dependent upon you, of all people, much too much for my own liking. It's not as bad as I had feared."

His eyes took stock of his much improved cell. "But a man who has nothing, has want for nothing. And it seems that as I have more, or at least the trappings of more, I want more. It's no longer enough for me to sit idly by and watch the sun rise and set. I want to be productive again, feel useful in some way. I need to work. Nothing would make me feel more connected to being alive than having a purpose in life."

Stunned by his impassioned speech, Hermione didn't quite know how to respond. After a few seconds, she found her voice again. "Well, you can't have it. It's my company."

"And don't we all know that, Madam. But I believe you're missing my meaning entirely. I have no interest in taking over your job; there's no way I could do it from my cell, either. I would, however, like the opportunity to work on more production reports and market research analyses and whatever else you've got stashed in that bag of yours."

Sensing her apprehension, Severus targeted her irritating Gryffindor sentimentality. Their heartstrings were so easy to manipulate.

"My body is deteriorating here from disuse, my magic is weakened, my psyche is degenerating from the torture of being imprisoned..."

"I didn't put you here, Snape. You put yourself here," she interrupted.

"Yes, that's very true, and I didn't mean to imply that I don't deserve my punishment. I do. Hermione, please listen to me; don't let my mind atrophy as well. You could use me to your benefit."

"I'm not putting you on payroll."

"I don't want you to."

"You'll have to sign confidentiality and non-disclosure contracts."

"Done."

"And you have to accept that I'm the boss. You will have to answer to me."

"Regarding work? Yes."

This wasn't what Hermione set out to do. Hiring Snape, even non-salaried, was not what she had planned at all. She was supposed to bribe him, get him to sign over rights to the amended potion and other affidavits.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she muttered under her breath.

Severus looked as if Christmas had come early as he hid his joy behind a veil of long sable hair.

A/N:

Chapter title: Aut Viam Inveniam Aut Faciam - Either I will find a way or I will make one.

Salsamentum Iuglans

Chapter 11 of 26

Hermione brings Severus some Salsamentum Iuglans and a few other things.

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Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of the lunch trolley.

"Grub!" Strathmore hollered as he banged on the door as if the cell's occupants hadn't already heard the squeaky-wheeled cart clattering loudly down the stone hallway. A slot at the bottom of Severus' door lifted, and a metal tray was shoved forcefully in.

"Ah! Lunch is served," Severus announced unnecessarily. "And it appears to be still warm. This is indeed a good day."

Hermione watched in disbelief as Severus chewed on soggy gray peas and something that should have passed for creamed chipped beef on toast, but didn't quite hit the mark. Severus halted mid-bite. "I apologize my dear; I should have offered you something. Terribly rude of me to eat in front of you."

"No, no. You go ahead. That's really all for you." She watched him hungrily attack the peas, torn between not wanting to watch the display and being drawn to it like rubbernecking a car accident. "You must be frightfully hungry."

"Missed breakfast," he grunted. "Amend that, skipped breakfast."

"May I inquire why?"

"Too nasty to be considered food."

Hermione mentally chewed on that; in her estimation his lunch was too nasty to be termed edible, and she wondered what breakfast had looked like. "You know, I believe there's a hamper from Fortnum's somewhere in here..."

Severus stopped shoveling food immediately as Hermione dug through another white box. His dark eyes shimmered as they locked on to the red tissue paper stuffed parcel. He was beginning to feel like he was trapped in some bizarre Pavlovian experiment.

"Ah-ha! Here it is." Hermione pulled the trinket sized wicker basket out of the red paper, set it on the floor, and within seconds it resized itself into a generous hamper. "Ooh, and a picnic blanket too it looks like."

A large red wool blanket soon followed, and Severus greedily snatched it up for his bed. He'd spent too many frozen nights to let a thick wool blanket ever grace his floors. Severus would have rather sweated through his sheets than give up an extra blanket.

"Oh, why'd you do that?" she asked. "It might be lovely to pretend to have a real picnic."

"Hermione, I have no intention of disgracing myself by sitting on the floors. We are hardly out in the country, and it's not worth the bother to indulge in your insane fantasies. I could never imagine myself being anywhere other than where we are. You would do well not to forget that I'm an evil murdering bastard," he smirked.

"Like I could forget." Even as Hermione said those words, she wasn't convinced of them. Oh, she knew perfectly well that he was in fact an 'evil murdering bastard'; she'd used that very same choice of words several times, but she did forget. It unnerved Hermione to think that she was comfortable in his presence.

"Pickled walnuts," Severus gasped, momentarily distracted from their conversation.

"Here..." She passed the jar to him. "...I can't stand them."

"For shame. You don't know what you're missing, my dear."

"Well," she said, looking doubtfully at a small jar of gooseberry and elderflower preserves, "this won't make a very substantial lunch. Certainly something to nibble on, but we need real food."

Severus' ears perked up. "And what would you consider real food?"

"I don't know... real food. What would you like for lunch? I could go for anything about now. Well, obviously not anything. I wouldn't touch those peas for all the tea in China."

He was dumbfounded. Ignoring the fact that the little chit had just invited herself to his lunch and obviously wasn't going to leave anytime soon, he now had something deep to ponder. What did he want for food? She asked the question as if anything were possible, as if it were so easy to just pop down to a local restaurant and order take-away.

There were nights long ago when Severus had been kept up by his growling stomach. On those nights his head had been filled with hungry thoughts of roast lamb, the greasiest fish and chips, his mother's squash casserole, and sometimes even bad teriyaki stir fry or pizza. Was she playing with him, tormenting him for her own amusement? For Hermione's sake, she had better not be.

"I... don't know," he answered honestly. "Anything sounds good about now."

"Oh, well!" she exclaimed while jumping up and grabbing her cloak, "I just found this new Lebanese restaurant the other day and have been dying for an excuse to try it. Do you like Mediterranean? I absolutely adore it."

Severus nodded numbly.

"I was thinking a few kabobs, baba ghanoush, some dolmas, couscous... oh and baklava for desert. What kind of meat do you want for your kabobs?"

"Lamb?" he tentatively asked.

"Oh, lamb. Yum. I might just have to get a double order... Right, I'll be back in just a bit..." Hermione caught herself before she said, 'don't go anywhere'. "And then we can talk more about work."

As Hermione was let out of his cell, Severus sat back in his chair, open-mouthed. He didn't stir until the sound of her footsteps was heard again along his hallway.

She made her entrance, bustling in two plastic bags filled with Styrofoam take-away boxes and a bottle of sweet mint tea.

"I hope you don't mind, I got some for the boys too."

"The boys?"

"Roger, Billy, Chuck... you know, the boys."

"My guards? You brought food for my guards?"

"What? You make it sound like they're responsible for you being here. You can't blame them because Azkaban sucks, and they have to eat the food you do. Hang on a tic, they don't beat you, do they?"

"No," he said viciously, "but they're not my friends, either. And they shouldn't be yours. I take exception that my wife is on first name basis with my jailers."

"Whoa, drop it down a notch; it's not like we go out drinking pints together. And you're hardly in a position to dictate who I speak to either. Besides, I get the distinct impression they're just as miserable as you are."

"That's little comfort."

Hermione ignored his comments as she set out plates of steaming aromatic food. He ignored her comments as he stared at plates of steaming aromatic food. There was something to be said about witches getting to a wizard's heart through his stomach.

After positively gorging himself on succulent lamb, every bit of couscous he could fit in his mouth (especially the pine nuts), and thoroughly enjoying those grape leaf things she called dolmas, Severus wasn't certain he could stomach baklava. And yet somehow, he managed; he found the strength within.

He watched her suspiciously as she wrapped up the left overs, but sighed in relief as she put a stasis charm on it so he could have it later.

"Now, about these product reports."

And that's how their afternoon began. Severus listened intently as Hermione babbled on and on excitedly about her projects, occasionally interrupting to add his opinion. He signed employee release forms and officially became an unsalaried employee of Granger Industries, LLC.

She trained him on exactly how she wanted things done. Hermione wasn't willing to turn much over to him at once. They were still developing a level of trust between them, something Hermione was hesitant to do, but there were the beginnings of a workable partnership.

There was an awkward moment when they both confessed they needed a bathroom break. Thankfully, Hermione was able to slip out into the hallway to use the guard's loo while Severus used his privy in peace. They were learning each other's habits and growing closer, but certainly not that close.

In the midst of a discussion on her distributor troubles, Severus' boiled cabbage dinner arrived and it was sent away. Reheated lamb and a fine bottle of cabernet from the hamper were shared. Severus would have preferred to pair the meal with the kind of Bordeaux so heavy on the tannins that it'd pull on the back teeth, but who was he to complain?

The sun sank low into the horizon, and when Hermione reached for her wand to utter an illuminating spell, she quickly realized how inappropriate it was for their bodies to huddle so close together to read from her spreadsheets.

"You know, this is way too much for one person to absorb in an evening. I should go." As her eyes lifted from their shared folder, she met his indecipherable gaze and felt a curious throb in her upper body.

Quirking his brow Severus questioned in a hushed tone, "Can I keep the quality control reports to familiarize myself with them?"

Hermione beamed. "I think we can manage that. See you soon. Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Hermione."

The door hadn't completely closed before Severus felt shut in and alone once more.

His father had taken to locking him away because children should neither be seen nor heard. The closet beneath the stairs had been just as much his home as it had been for Potter.

In adulthood he took to shutting himself away. He buried himself in his dungeons. Though he was never really alone. Being surrounded by hundreds of pre-pubescent and hormonal teenagers meant never having any real time to oneself, but damned if he didn't try. He had to growl and grumble constantly just to get a moment's peace, and there were times, especially around end of year exams, when he'd wished for the solitude of Azkaban prison.

It was as if his life was supposed to be spent imprisoned. Living in solitude and feeling estranged was nothing new to him, but he had never felt it so acutely until after Hermione left him. And she always left him feeling like he was just on the threshold of collapse, as if he couldn't take her brief presence, even when he hungered for it.

He was obviously a man desperate for comfort, clinging to companionship, and drawn to the woman who offered him both.

He would have felt the same for any other woman who visited him and brought him pickled walnuts.

Yes, that had to be it.

That still didn't stop him from missing Hermione when she was gone.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Salsamentum Iuglans- Pickled Walnuts

Forsan Et Haec Olim Meminisse Iuvabit

Chapter 12 of 26

The married couple share some food and a bit more about themselves.

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"Missus Granger!" Hermione's Floo lit up with green incandescent flames. "Missus Granger, are you home?"

Hermione grumbled as she pulled herself out of bed, knocking Crooks off his pillow along the way. "This had better be good," Hermione mumbled as she rubbed her sleep crusted eyelids. She was bound and determined to sleep as late as she wanted, given that it was a Saturday. Whoever was yelling out of her Floo had better have a damn good reason for messing with her plan.

"Billy?"

If asked to give a list of the people she expected to see in her grate at an ungodly hour of the morning, Billy Mulciber wouldn't make the top hundred. He'd hover someplace around the bottom, near Albus Dumbledore and Bono. Although Bono did have the most annoying habit of showing up positively everywhere for no real reason at all.

"Ma'am, we need you at the prison right quick."

"Oh gods, is Severus okay?" Internally Hermione was chanting 'please let him be all right.' He was a drain on her time and resources, but he made a decent husband, given that she only had to deal with him when she felt like it. That, and if he did die, she only had a one year grieving period before being forced to take a new husband. A witch had to have her priorities straight.

"He's fine, Ma'am, just a bit stuck."

"Stuck?"

"Yes, well, he apparently unpacked quite a few large items from one of your boxes, and there was a large bed and desk and some other furniture involved and now he's trapped in the back corner."

"Well, get him out."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Ma'am."

"What?" she shrieked. "Why not?"

"I can't touch the prisoner unless he's a threat to himself or others. It's part of the new prison reform legislation. We're now supposed to inform his emergency contact or guardian."

"But that's absurd. Surely you could construe it as a threat to his life if he doesn't get out?"

"I'm sorry, but I could lose my job. This job means a lot to me, Ma'am; I could lose everything if I lost it."

Hermione wasn't going to ask why he sounded a bit desperate to keep his job. Billy wasn't a bad sort. And he didn't strike her as an idiot, either. For a brief moment, Hermione wondered why he ended up at such a place to begin with; it seemed a bit beneath him.

"All right, all right. Give me a minute and I'll come over."

Bailing out her stupid stupid husband was not what she had in mind for the day. Hermione hadn't even had her coffee yet. She sighed; coffee would be heavenly. She flicked on the pot and pulled out an extra large thermos. Might as well share with the others.

She hadn't taken a single step down his hallway before hearing Severus' smooth voice loudly cursing her name, the day she was born, and...oddly enough...her hair. What was it with people and their obsession with her hair? It was ghastly, but really, why dwell?

"Oh, do shut up!" Hermione commanded from right outside his door. The wards dropped, but true enough, she couldn't open the door given the cluster of furniture. Through the jailer's peep slot she could see an arm caught between a massive armoire and a gentleman's bureau, but she couldn't see the rest of him.

Slipping her wand through the slot, Hermione quickly reduced the oversized Victorian furniture down to doll house sizes.

"And it's about damned time too, witch!" Severus growled as he rubbed his shoulder.

"You know what...I think I'll just size these back up and leave you to deal with them, if you're going to be like that," Hermione huffed as she walked in.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you. Is this your idea of some kind of joke?"

"Not at all. How'd this happen anyway?"

"I overturned the contents of your last box on the floor, and they all resized themselves at once. As if you couldn't guess that."

"Oh, dear."

"Oh, dear is right. What the hell were you thinking, bringing a full bedroom suite of furniture here? I barely have space for what I've got now."

"I see that. I really am sorry, but I didn't pack this. I just told Jake to get you a small bed to replace your cot, and a bookshelf. I didn't think he'd take it to the extreme." Well, that wasn't entirely true. Hermione knew she told him to be generous, and he had a habit of taking an idea and running with it.

"Really? Just how many of my care packages have you packed?"

"Er... you had to ask that didn't you. Um... none. I made a list and delegated it to my assistant, Jake Edwards."

"The Hufflepuff? That milk-livered clown!" Severus raged, he looked furious enough to kill, especially sporting stubble and wearing his shirt sleeves rolled up, showing off his muscular arms. "He never could take proper direction. What were you thinking?"

"Well, it worked just fine until now." Hermione tapped her foot, lost in thought for a moment. "How 'bout a peace offering? Coffee?"

Coffee.

She said *coffee*.

"Coffee would be agreeable," he responded hoarsely while taking a thick swallow. "As long as you can make a decent cup. Nothing frou-frou."

Hermione nodded, "I grind my own blend of Colombian beans in an Italian roast. Is that decent enough for you?"

Oh, dear gods. Severus stared at her thermos. "It'll do."

"Excellent," she replied rolling her eyes, "So glad to hear you can be so easily appeased."

"Don't start with me, witch. Now hand the coffee over."

Hermione repacked the rest of the tiny furniture except the bed and bookcase while Severus reverently inhaled the steaming brew, clearly enjoying its perfume as if it were a fine wine or Amortentia.

If she was going to remake his room, Hermione figured it was best to do it right. She pulled all the furniture into the center of the room, said a spell to even the walls, then added a layer of white color to them. Magically speaking, it wasn't quite the same as painting the room, but in the end the effect was still the same.

"Do you mind?" he inquired. "If you leave me with institutional white walls, I think I'll be climbing them within days."

"And I won't step foot in here again if you want them black."

Severus chuckled. "Typical. I suppose that's what all you Gryffindors think of me. Morbid and morose."

"Ha! That's exactly what I think of you. So tell me then, Mister Snape, which color would you choose then?"

He frowned, thinking less about his color choices and more about the way Hermione perceived him. "Perhaps a neutral color, something beige?"

Hermione concentrated on beige and added it to the walls.

"Less taupe, more tawny," Severus instructed.

Hermione amended the color.

"Brighter, but not so brownish," he insisted.

Again Hermione amended the color.

"Richer," he demanded. Once she'd adjusted the color Severus was satisfied. "Perfect."

"You could have just told me you wanted gold from the get-go, Snape."

"Oh what, and spoil the surprise?" He'd had enough of her for the moment, especially when the hot beverage practically screamed for his attention. "It seems the appropriate color for a gilded cage," he mumbled.

He was so preoccupied with sipping from his first cup Severus barely registered when Hermione stripped off his bedclothes, Evanesco'd his cot, and resized the elegantly carved sleigh bed into the space. The bookshelf was expanded to fit against the adjacent wall. It was a snug fit, but they were bound to bang elbows anyway.

The bed was remade with a change of fresh linens; Hermione left the red picnic blanket folded at the foot of the bed rather than argue with him. (That, and it was secretly satisfying to have a bit of Gryffindor color in the room of the world's most consummate Slytherin.) He seemed to growl like a possessive dog after a bone when she touched 'his stuff.' A neat orderly row of white boxes filled the bottom shelf of his book case, and on the whole, the room seemed a bit cozy.

It was at that moment that Severus' breakfast arrived. Hermione was then fully aware as to why Severus did not bother to classify the breakfasts served at the prison as edible. She supposed it was meant at one time or another to be porridge, but in her estimation it resembled papier-mâché glue. It was served with half a rotten orange.

Severus looked up at her expectantly.

"Please tell me you didn't do this to me this morning just to get me to fetch you breakfast?"

"No, but that is a rather interesting idea. So Hermione, would you like to join me for breakfast?"

Now there was a loaded question.

She was under no contractual obligation to stay with the wizard, nor was she there on business. Hermione really didn't have a valid excuse for staying. If she brought him food, would it be because she felt sorry for him, or because she wanted his company?

Did she?

The pair locked eyes, and he seemed to understand her dilemma perfectly. Severus silently challenged her, mocking her to stay with him.

"Fine, I'll get us some breakfast."

"Excellent. Oh, and Hermione... we'll need more coffee."

"Yes, dear," she replied wryly.

Hermione wasn't gone long, and when she returned, she came bearing breakfast trays. And coffee. The pair lounged quietly on his bed as if it were a giant sofa and taking breakfast in his bed a regular occurrence. She also brought him the paper, and they divided it up between themselves as they munched, though Severus stole covert glances of her from behind the economics section.

He was beginning to reappraise her. Severus still wasn't sure if it was because Hermione was the kind of witch who would normally attract his interest or if it was because she was simply there, but regardless, she deserved a second glance.

Naturally, she had an intelligent face and her eyes clearly spoke of absolute conviction in her intelligence, but those eyes were also wide and quite lovely when she had more than a handful of hours of fitful sleep. Severus also hadn't seen many people with as perfect teeth as she had. One look at her gleaming straight teeth and you just knew she flossed every day. Severus snorted to himself; he was appraising her as if she were a horse.

The girl did not resemble a horse in any way shape or form. Oh, she had ample hips which Severus had described as 'mannish' to her face no less, but other wizards might have called them curvy, or sexy. And five Galleons said she could crack a brass cauldron between 'em.

No, she wasn't a ravishing beauty like Bellatrix Black had been...all luscious tits and fuckable lips. But then that bitch would steal the straw from her mother's kennel.

Hermione was an earthy pretty. A regular wholesome Muggle-next-door pretty. An obtainable pretty. He dismissed his mental wanderings. It was pointless; the chit had not been lying...she was a frigid ice queen. He'd seen Hermione shyly smile at him and nervously ramble on and on like many young witches with low self confidence did. But she was not flirting.

He'd have known if the witch were interested in him and if she were, he'd have pounced long before. It had been a very long time... Severus was forbidden from actually penetrating her, but as he so disturbingly put it before, 'there were other ways to fuck.' And for the first time in years he was beginning to think about that again.

When her plate was cleared, Hermione politely thanked him for his company, collected their trays, and left. She was completely oblivious to where his mind had taken him.

Severus was reading over an academic journal when noises in the hallway alerted him to a visitor. It was nearly dinner time, but the footsteps in the hallway weren't accompanied by the squeaky-wheeled meal trolley.

This time Mulciber kindly requested the prisoner to present himself for inspection. Well, that was a new development; maybe the chit's influence on them did have some positive effect on him.

"Twice in one day? Just can't keep away, can you?" he asked with an amused grin.

As the door swung open, Hermione smiled brightly, "Eh, I had a taste for pizza..." What else could she say? Hermione certainly couldn't confess to being a little starved for company.

As Severus greedily inspected the boxes of deep dish cheese and inhaled hand tossed pepperoni, Hermione pulled a case of Belgium white from her satchel and resized it, gaining his attention immediately.

"I brought you a case of bitter," she said sheepishly. "You strike me as the bitter type... But the boys snatched it up."

"*The boys?*" Severus' fists clenched. "*The boys* have my bitter?"

"Try the Hoegaarten; it's very good."

"The boys have my bitter."

"Beer and pizza go together," she made a face, "but bitter and pizza? Yuck. I think I just did you a favor."

Severus glared at her with an intimidating stare, one she knew very well and expected to hear that she had a full month's detention with Filch. "You gave my bitters to my jailers!"

Hermione blanched, "Fine... fine... I'll go get another case. See if I ever do anything nice for you again."

As she stalked out of his cell Severus smirked. He still had it, and he didn't have to threaten her. And a good thing too, if Hermione hadn't relented he might have found his fingers closing inadvertently around her neck. Severus gave the Belgian beer a scornful sneer.

Hermione wasn't gone long, and returned as promised with a case of Boddys and a glare, which didn't faze him a bit.

After cracking open the beers and fixing plates of gooey pizza, Severus claimed his arm chair and Hermione sat Indian style on the floor, her back leaning against his new bed. The pizza hit the spot, as did the beer, and Hermione felt utterly content.

Severus closely watched her unwind and popped another beer for her.

"Trying to get me drunk, Severus?"

"You get drunk off of two beers?" He arched an eyebrow in silent challenge.

Hermione snorted before eyeing him thoughtfully. It was a fact; the man was thin and scrawny. He hadn't touched a drop of alcohol in the years he'd been locked away, unless you could count the vino they'd shared. And that had hardly been tying one on. Theoretically, she should have been able to drink the Potions Master under the table. What would that be like? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

She raised her bottle, tipping it slightly towards him. "Salute."

Severus gave a lusty laugh, his eyes filled with mirth, before returning her gesture. In his mind he was already contemplating what mischief he could get into, and Hermione was always good for a laugh, whether she realized it or not.

When his beer was consumed, Hermione kindly cracked open another one for him. It was the polite thing to do.

"So tell me, I've always wanted to know, how's it you always knew exactly when and where to show up when we were getting in trouble?" There had to be ugly icky dark magic involved, nothing else could explain it.

"Vixen, it'll take a lot more beers than this to get that answer out of me."

This time it was Hermione's turn to arch an eyebrow. "Oh, come on, don't be such a sour puss." Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, it came a bit more playful than she would have liked. Perhaps she needed to make sure her stomach was full.

"Well then, let's try this. You tell me how you managed to crack into my storeroom and I'll consider answering that."

"Consider? Not good enough." Hermione grabbed another slice of cheese. "But if it's tit for tat you want, I'm not averse to the idea. You stir my cauldron, and I'll stir yours. I admit I'm more than a bit curious about some things about you, and trust me when I say I have a lot more interesting stories than the one about breaking into your storeroom. I am, after all, Harry's best friend."

Severus didn't bother to hide a sneer upon hearing Harry's name, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

Suddenly Hermione giggled, and waved off Severus' questioning look. How could she explain to him that she was seized by an overwhelming urge to break into Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'Getting to Know You.' He wouldn't appreciate the gesture at all, though he would make an excellent King of Siam. Hermione did her best to compose herself back into the kind of expression suitable for hanging out with a Death Eater. Murdering, bastard, traitor, fucking Death Eater, with a bit of cheese stuck to the corner of his mouth.

"Why'd you have to go and get Lupin fired? Please tell me it wasn't petty schoolboy grievances. He was the best Defense teacher we had."

"No, I was the best Defense teacher you had. And I didn't have anything against Lupin personally, other than the fact that he's tried several times to eat me. His presence put the entire school population in jeopardy, as you'll no doubt remember the time he tried to rip you into small bite-sized pieces. Don't bother trying to defend him, you know it's true."

"It still seems pretty damn petty to me."

"Hermione, it would only take one instance of a child getting injured before the Ministry would sweep in, and you know they wouldn't have hesitated to put him down like an animal."

"Well you needn't worry about him any longer. He's dead."

Hermione expected a scathing retort, something along the lines of 'good riddance,' but she was thrown completely off track by the look of honest remorse that flitted briefly across his features and slumped shoulders.

"Albus still had no business inviting him into the school."

Hermione snorted loudly. "Five out of seven of my DADA professors were Death Eaters; none of them had any business teaching at the school. Geez, you'd figure with the entire Order to draw from, the Headmaster could have found better candidates."

Severus shook his head, his dark hair concealing his face. He was in no mood to disparage Albus. "Few of the Order would have it... Five out of seven? I'm sorry, I didn't really think of it that way."

"Yeah, it's surprising we learned anything useful at all. First was Quirrell, and though not technically branded by the Dark Mark, I'd say being the vessel for Voldemort's return qualifies him for Death Eater status. Then I had Lockhart and Lupin. Lockhart didn't teach us anything at all, and as much as I loved Professor Lupin... he was absent for so many classes. Fourth year I had Barty Crouch masquerading as Mad-Eye, Death Eater. Then Umbridge..."

"Who wasn't a Death Eater," he interrupted.

"Yes, she was. Umbridge was in his pocket. Came out at trial about a year ago. Not that anybody was surprised. Then you taught us."

"And did a damn fine job. Somebody had to make sure you actually learned something."

Hermione nodded, "That you did, but it doesn't negate the fact that you're a Death Eater. Then Professor Carrow had the class."

"Which you never attended. Tell me... what were your N.E.W.T. scores? I always wondered if you would beat mine."

"I never took them," she sighed. Noticing his shocked face, Hermione added, "They just didn't seem as important after all that had happened, and by the time the Ministry was ready to start testing again I had launched my first product line. I've been too busy ever since."

"Regret it?" If someone had told Severus Snape that Hermione Granger took a pass on her N.E.W.T.s, he'd have told them to pull the other one. There was no comprehensible way that could have happened.

Hermione shrugged and took a long swig of beer. Severus averted his eyes quickly; he was unable to watch her suck from the bottle and not react. "I have so many regrets, my N.E.W.T. scores hardly rank. But this is depressing and I don't want to talk about it any longer. That, and it's my turn to ask the questions."

Severus merely nodded for her to continue; it was good sportsmanship and all that. Despite the drink in hand his throat was dry... and his balls achingly heavy. He took a fortifying slug.

"So Snape... during my years at Hogwarts did you ever have a girlfriend?"

He spat his bitter. "Are you honestly asking if I ever got laid?"

"Yeah, because Ron always figured..."

"I know what Mr. Weasley figured." He tried to sop up the spilled drink from his robes whilst giving Hermione his best glare. She seemed quite underwhelmed by it. "As a matter of fact I did. I dated a lovely witch in Hogsmeade between your second and fourth years... Why Hermione, with your mouth gaping open like that, one might get the impression you were giving out free blowjobs tonight. How charitable indeed."

"Fuck you."

"Not precisely the comeback I was expecting, but if you're offering that as well..."

Hermione's stony glare could have given Snape in his heyday a serious run for his money. "What, couldn't keep her after my fourth year?" She pretended to count on her fingers. "Don't tell me you were slumming it with an ill-bred witch? A Death Eater with a tainted girlfriend, what gossip! Whatever did the other purebloods think?" she said with as much icy malice as she could muster.

If her comment cut to the core as it was meant to, Severus didn't take notice. "As if I'd bring any witch I cared about to the Dark Lord's attentions. Really, what kind of monster do you take me for? And if you're really so goddamned curious as I suspect you are, Kathleen happened to be a half blood like myself. And she was a very talented belly dancer, used to do the most incredible things in bed. She would roll and contract her stomach muscles while I was in her. I swear I've never had a tighter pussy in my life."

"Stop!" Hermione interrupted, holding up her hand. "I don't want to hear it."

"Why, Madam Granger, you're positively blushing. Please don't tell me you're embarrassed to hear your husband talk about another woman. Or perhaps you're jealous?"

he asked with a quirked smile.

"Just spare me, Snape. I'd really prefer not to think of you as a sexual being at all, if you don't mind."

"And yet you asked the question. What am I to make of that, hmm?"

"It was a mistake. I know that now." Hermione cradled her head in her hands, trying to disappear into her palms instead of meeting his gaze.

"Fine. You stole from my locker; you brewed a potion that was way above your year and skill level. Cocked it all up by using feline hair of all things." If Hermione had bothered to look up, she would have seen pure amusement dancing in his dark eyes. "Why? What was so important that you risked expulsion?"

"Harry and Ron Polyjuiced themselves to be Crabbe and Goyle to interview Malfoy about him being the heir to Slytherin. I was supposed to be Bulstrode, but other than the hair sample the potion was perfect. It was obviously not above my skill level," she replied with more than a hint of indignation in her voice. She lifted her eyes to the sound of Severus chuckling.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," he continued laughing.

"And why's that?"

"If you'd bothered to do your research, my dear, you'd know that the Malfoy line doesn't date back to Slytherin's time. The long and illustrious pureblooded Malfoy name only goes back a couple of generations at best," he said amongst a fit of more laughter.

"Why do you think they were so obsessed with fantasies of pureblooded superiority and all that other rot? You've never heard of old money versus the nouveau riche? Lucius practically had to spend his entire fortune to buy a Black bride, and he didn't even get the desirable sister. That witch ran off and married a Muggle rather than have him."

Hermione groaned. "I spent weeks humiliated as a half-mutated cat. I had hair... everywhere."

"Oh, it gets better than that," Severus said gasping for breath.

"I don't know if I want to hear this," she said softly.

"Tell me, what did you think of the boomslang skin you pilfered?"

Hermione made a face wondering where he was going with the question. "It was fresh... Intact... And from what I can remember it was fairly good quality."

"Well, I know for a fact it was excellent quality, but then I always have a ready supply of boomslang skin."

She groaned, not willing to hear what was coming next, and yet somehow instinctively, she knew.

"You wanted to know how I could silently creep along the corridors, how I was always aware of where students were and could suddenly appear right behind them? Oh, sweet Vixen, I am an Animagus. Now guess what my form is."

"Ugh! That's foul!" She dropped her beer and it sloshed.

Hermione began to dry heave as if the Polyjuice might still be in her system, as if the taste of Snape could still be felt in her mouth. She choked as Severus busted out into new peals of laughter. When it was evident that Hermione couldn't stop choking, he rushed over to her and rubbed her back.

"Are you all right?" he asked with tears of laughter in his eyes, but Severus was completely serious.

"I'll be fine," Hermione gasped. "I just... ugh... I need a moment."

Hermione tried to calm her head and stomach by thinking about other things. After regaining her breath she asked shakily, "Then what keeps you here? I bet you could slip out of this cell and all of Azkaban without much trouble?"

"I keep myself here, Madam Granger," he replied with deadly calm.

It was true; there were many times Severus contemplated simply leaving. Hermione also had an atrocious habit of absently leaving her wand laying within his reach. If he dared, pinching it from the witch would make his escape a simple affair, but it didn't change the fact that he knew deep within his foundation that he deserved to be locked away.

"And this morning? You weren't trapped at all! You could have slipped between the furniture and yet you didn't. You wanted me to get called! You used me, you made me somehow feel guilty and bring you breakfast!"

"Stop being so melodramatic. Didn't you see my shoulder was pinned? I couldn't have transformed if I wanted to."

She sighed loudly and heaved herself up until standing. "I don't think I can handle any more honesty, and I don't know if there's anything more about you I want to know." Hermione shuddered. "I think it would be wise if I left."

Hermione collected her satchel and put a warming stasis on the pizza boxes to keep them fresh for Severus, in case he wanted pizza for breakfast. He didn't look like the 'pizza for breakfast' type, but then she realized she didn't know him very well either. That, and Hermione now knew for a fact that breakfasts at Azkaban were rank.

As she was making a swift exit, Severus called out to her. "Hermione, wait," she turned at the note of soft pleading in his voice. "You never asked about the Headmaster. Why didn't you?"

She gave him a small smile of understanding. "It's not my place to pry."

*

A/N:

Chapter title: Forsan Et Haec Olim Meminisse Iuvabit : Perhaps someday we will look back upon these things with joy

Culpam Poena Premit Comes

Chapter 13 of 26

Snape is a liability—no surprise there. But Hermione goes digging to find out how much of a risk he is and discovers some hard truths.

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It didn't take long before a comfortable routine emerged, much to Hermione's chagrin and Severus' satisfaction. It was just easier to round out the work day by grabbing some take-away dinner and meeting Severus for a bit of quiet time and companionship. Of all the nasty adjectives its many detractors could use to describe Azkaban prison, it was nevertheless very peaceful and quite suitable for Hermione's purposes. She could freely converse about her many projects and ideas without the constant nagging paranoia of lurking corporate spies.

Predictably, her conversations with Severus were also very productive. In addition to helping her organize, arrange, and complete her work, he was quite adept at bouncing ideas back and forth on all manner of topics, which was a godsend. Very few witches and wizards were qualified to discuss interdisciplinary ideas, which was the very heart of her company. Hermione wasn't willing to entertain the thought that he was her business partner in any way, shape or form, but gradually, she began to allow herself to lean on him for support and discovered she was quite happy doing so.

Slowly, Hermione began to unwind. Spending her evenings with Severus meant that the two of them could complete her mountains of paperwork and she could relax and de-stress just a bit. It was somewhat counter-intuitive that she would have more free time by spending her evenings locked away in prison, but Hermione discovered that she suddenly had the extra time she needed to do such necessary tasks as interview potential new staff members, scout out larger warehouses for their proposed expansion, and take advantage of the occasional extra hour of sleep.

Under the guise of taking care of Severus' needs, Hermione found herself eating regularly and taking better care of herself. Gone were the days of coffee and pop-tart lunches. Not that take-away meals with Severus every night were that good for her waistline, either. And though she'd never admit it to any of her friends, spending time with Severus was honestly easy.

She just had trouble reconciling Severus with Snape.

Snape was a murdering Death Eater who betrayed them all. Snape was cruel and tormented brave Gryffindors and helpless Hufflepuffs because he could and because he enjoyed the suffering of others. Snape was the traitor who deceived the Order and Dumbledore, who took their secrets to Lord Voldemort, who assassinated their beloved leader, and who stood alongside the forces of evil during the final battle. Snape was a liability. His reputation alone put her good name and the standing of her company at risk.

For Hermione, the trade-off had been worth it. When Hermione instigated her far-fetched scheme to pull the wool over the Ministry's eyes, Snape had been a good option. She couldn't have cared less if he were miserable. Or, at least, that's what she'd told herself when she proposed marriage.

Now that they were legally wed, everything had changed considerably. There was depth to the man. She just couldn't think of him in terms of labels and stereotypes anymore; he simply wasn't as two dimensional as the professor she once thought she knew. To Hermione, he'd become Severus.

Severus was the man who brilliantly suggested experimenting with niffler essence for her Natural Scentsations atomizer. Severus had a rich laugh, and occasionally, when he smiled broadly, she caught a glimpse of a dimple, which was obviously why he almost never smiled. Severus taunted and teased her mercilessly; he pushed all her buttons and made her want to throttle him, until she realized he was just trying to get a rise out of her and meant no real malice. It was also difficult not to like Severus, though she could hardly call him a bloomin' ray of sunshine.

He was still a liability.

That realization was brought home when he dropped the small confession that he was an Animagus. Hermione silently kicked herself, wondering what else she didn't know about the wizard. Though it was obvious that she couldn't just walk up to him and in her most Dumbledorian voice ask, 'Is there something you'd like to tell me?'

She'd done her research on him before approaching him. She'd sifted through court records and school records. There was no other way of doing a 'risk assessment plan' without a bit of digging, but then, this was another bombshell she wasn't prepared for. Obviously, Hermione needed to do more research. Neither she nor her company could afford to be linked to more scandal than that to which she had already exposed herself.

The problem lay entirely with the Ministry. Not that it was surprising.

If someone wanted to pull public records, they had to visit each section and subsection to gather bits and pieces instead of being able to access one collective database. Hermione speculated that this had to do with the fact that each and every section and subsection charged a processing fee for their assistance.

When doing her original research, Hermione had visited the Home Registry Bureau and discovered that Snape owned only Spinner's End. She'd also visited the Patent Office and discovered that Snape did not have any original potions credited to his name. When he casually corrected her on both of these topics in their marriage contract negotiations, Hermione didn't get too worked up over the issue, but resolved to research it further at another time.

This Animagus business was another matter entirely. Truthfully, Hermione hadn't bothered going to the tiny Personal Transmutations Office to see if he were registered as an Animagus; it seemed like a waste of time and Galleons. Now, she was rethinking everything. There were now too many unknown elements in the equation.

Two weeks before the Yule holiday, Hermione finally found the time to return to the Ministry in an attempt to learn more about the enigmatic man she found herself very fond of despite the protestations of her conscience.

Hermione was so fearful about what she might discover that her head was near exploding when she arrived at the dingy, sub-basement office that dealt with registering Animagus forms. She just had to know if he'd ever bothered to register himself, not that she believed he did. But if he hadn't and somehow he was caught, that could be a scandal for her. The press would get involved. Sales would drop. People would throw out her products and swear never to buy them again. She'd be disgraced and would end her days shut up in some old house alone, unloved and unwanted.

Hermione knew she was being just a tad bit melodramatic and was perhaps exaggerating, but it was possible, wasn't it? What else was he hiding? Was there anything worse than being a Death Eater, and the murderer of this century's greatest and most beloved wizard? She just had to know; she just couldn't deal with any more surprises.

A short wheezy wizard with a bad comb-over met her at the counter, blandly asking her to identify her Animagus form.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not here to register; I'm not an Animagus." The clerk gave her a skeptical look. "I'd like to make a public records request."

"Three Galleons," he deadpanned.

Hermione fished for her coin purse and gave the clerk Severus' name. A few moments later, Hermione was indeed holding a copy of Severus' Animagus registration form. By the date stamp, he'd received it while still attending Hogwarts. Minerva McGonagall's signature was also on the card as his sponsor. Well, that explained how he was registered. She smiled as she envisioned Professor McGonagall dragging a young Severus Snape down to the registration office by his ear.

She studied the small green card. It recorded his serpent form *Dispholidus typus*, male, bright green in color with black striated markings, gold eyes, oviparous, highly potent haemotoxic venom. All this Hermione expected, but a part of the card also contained a line for known aliases. There, in cramped, structured handwriting, were the words 'Half-Blood Prince.'

Of course. She could have slapped herself. He'd signed his correction to Imelda's potion as ...HBP. Apparently, Hermione wasn't the only one who thought that the Snape name was a liability.

It took her a goodly chunk out of her afternoon, but Hermione revisited Ministry sections and sub-sections, performing a public records request on the name 'Half-Blood Prince.' She walked away with quite a stack of little green cards. The name had been officially registered as a legal alias, and the wizard was entitled to sign documents using it as his legal name. He was even entitled to a Gringotts account under the moniker.

It infuriated Hermione to no end that he'd been so secretive with her, but then, she never directly asked him, 'By the way, do you conduct your affairs under an assumed name?' and he was secretive enough not to say a word unless directly asked. Even then, he would probably avoid answering. There was also no telling what he'd concealed under non-legal aliases. The information on the little green index cards was fascinating, but certainly not damning to her reputation. Hermione knew she needed to dig deeper.

The opportunity came quite unexpectedly as she was going through Azkaban security early one evening. Laden with pierogies, borekas, and assorted pelmeni, Hermione was about to have Russian night with Severus and the boys when she ran into Mr. A. Ffoulkes, who was just then leaving his cell.

"Mister Ffoulkes, what a surprise!"

"Good evening, Madam," he bowed courteously.

Hermione was about to let him slip by when she seized upon the idea to interrogate him, or at least make pleasant conversation in the hopes of learning a secret or two about her husband. "If it's not too much trouble, might I have a word, please?"

"For you? Anything, Madam Granger."

Hermione might have cackled and rubbed her hands greedily if it weren't so unseemly. Instead, she pulled him hastily by the elbow into the small anteroom where the marriage ceremony had been conducted only a few short months before.

"Now, how may I be of assistance, my dear?" he enquired politely.

"Have you always been my husband's solicitor?" she asked innocently.

"For the better part of two decades, I'd say. I made Severus' acquaintance while working for Headmaster Dumbledore."

"Hmm..." Hermione paused thoughtfully, "I was curious... I assume you arranged our marriage contract."

"Yes, ma'am, I did. Is there an issue with the stipulations?"

"No, not as of yet. I wonder, though... do you draw up all his contracts? Have you taken care of his potions patents and other legal business?"

He nodded his assent.

"It wouldn't be possible for me to take a look at them, would it?" she fished. "In the interest of our now joined estates."

Mr. Ffoulkes gave her a generous smile, which did nothing to improve the clipped professional tone of his voice. "Madam Granger, any such request would have to come from your husband himself. I'm not at liberty to discuss his private affairs, even with his wife."

"And if I hired you?" Hermione asked sweetly, knowing full well that she was treading on thin ice.

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance to you then, but certainly not by infringing upon your husband's confidentiality. I suggest that you dig elsewhere."

Hermione offered him a wide smile that hopefully bespoke 'who, me?' "Well, I won't take any more of your time, Mr. Ffoulkes. Perhaps I'll just have to make an appointment to see you in your office."

He inclined his head and shook her hand, apparently unsurprised by the entire line of questioning.

As Hermione turned to exit the antechamber, Mr. Ffoulkes placed a hesitant hand on her shoulder.

"Madam Granger, if you are interested in hiring me for my services, you should know I am quite selective in my clientele. I'm a man of reputation, and I only accept clients of equal standing..."

Hermione scowled, biting back the words, 'And yet you represent him,' but the opportunity never came.

"And I only represent the innocent. If there's nothing else, I bid you good evening."

He held the door open for her, but Hermione wasn't quite certain she could move her legs.

"What do you mean by that?" she hissed as soon as she could find her voice.

Mr. Ffoulkes just blinked at her in apparent confusion. "I only represent innocent clients, Madam; I think that should be quite obvious."

"Innocent?"

He frowned at her as if she were a small child whining for sweeties. "Yes, innocent. Now, is there anything else you wish to discuss with me? I am late getting back."

"No..." her voice sounded small and uncertain to her ears, and Hermione still had not budged an inch. "Thank you for your time, sir," she mumbled.

Mr. A. Ffoulkes left her standing there in the small room, staring intently at the floor, her world gone quite topsy-turvy.

Russian food had somehow lost its appeal. All food had lost its appeal.

Hermione left her bags with the boys and Apparated to her flat, where she quickly found her couch and Crooks and curled up with both.

By morning, she knew there was one last place she had to visit to uncover all she could about the man she'd married. Hermione had no idea if the wizard would deign to speak with her. As his life's work had finally reached completion, he had become uncharacteristically quiet. But she had to try.

Her missive to Minerva was returned promptly. The Headmistress was quite eager to catch up with her little lioness, especially while the children were on winter holiday. So, Hermione found herself, quite sooner than she was prepared to, bundled up tightly from the chill and making the trudge up from the winged, boars gate to the empty castle. Hermione kept putting one foot in front of the other, her eyes habitually scanning the tree line to ensure no rogues, scoundrels or dangerous creatures emerged, as bloody unlikely as that was. But it kept her eyes from darting to the charred and hollowed-out remains of Hagrid's hut. Just as her feet touched the flagstone, the front door swung open and the Headmistress greeted her much in the manner as she had done when Hermione had been a first year.

This time, she knew that behind the austere robes and tight smile, Minerva was as warm and welcoming as Molly Weasley. The Headmistress escorted her to her office, chatting politely, while Hermione gave the perfunctory responses. Yes, she was fine. Winter was much colder this year than the last; yes, it would make for a healthy spring. Her company was fine, thank you for asking. No, she hadn't seen Harry recently. New textbooks? How interesting.

Her attention was drawn to the chips and hex scars that were fading into the masonry. Before she had set foot in Hogwarts as a student, the castle had been scratched and dented from generations of children fighting in the hallways. The Final Battle had only added its layer to what was already there. Hermione wondered if in a few generations any child would be able to tell that the scorch mark on the floor in front of a disused classroom was where Hermione had repaid in kind the hex Dolohov had given her. At the guardian gargoyle of the Headmistress' office, Hermione noticed quite plainly that he was still missing an ear and took small satisfaction in that. It leaped aside allowing them passage. Once Hermione was settled, Minerva left her, mentioning she'd be back and they'd have a proper tea. Hermione nodded absently, her eyes round and unblinking at the wizard jovially popping painted lemon sherbets before her.

She heard the door shut behind her and took a deep breath before realizing she didn't quite know where to begin. It seemed impolite to demand he inform her of all the ugly secrets and back-alley deals he'd made during the war. Especially if she ended up arguing with a silly piece of wood daubed with pigmented oil.

"Ah, Hermione!" Albus broke the uneasy silence. "So you've come at last."

"Er?" Hermione cocked her head to the side questioningly. "You've been expecting me, sir?"

"I assumed that, after you married Severus, you might be by."

"Oh."

Well, that made things easier. She was afraid she'd have to tell him about the Marriage Law, defend her logic of marrying Severus, and justify why she went ahead with the foolhardy plan of marrying his murderer. And then insist he tell her why his murderer was innocent. That's all. At least now, she probably didn't have to tell him about the Marriage Law.

"You know how fast news travels. I believe it was Poppy who told me first, and she had heard it from Molly, who had been told by her son on the day he'd tried to propose to you."

"Oh." She was really going to have to work on her vocabulary. Her mouth quirked a few times, opening and closing as if she had something intelligent to say, but Hermione was at a total loss. She expected to have to rationalize her actions and apologize profusely, but the Headmaster looked quite at ease, whereas she most definitely was not.

"So, you don't mind," Hermione whispered.

"No, not at all, my child," Albus boomed. "On the contrary, I'm thrilled for both of you. I'd say you're a good match for each other. Severus needs someone to keep him on his toes."

Hermione's mind reeled before she snapped back into place. "But he killed you."

"That he did. Though I'm glad you're not calling it murder."

"But..."

"Hermione," Albus called softly. "Let it go. I have."

Her shoulders slumped and her head crumpled into her hands. She was so damned confused and emotionally stretched thin.

"Mr. Ffoulkes said he was innocent. What does that mean?" she pleaded.

The Headmaster sat back in his chair, studying the witch in front of him. She was in no place to hear the fullness of his truth. It was obvious that she was distraught, but he could ease her mind for now.

He sighed heavily as if bearing Atlas' burden, even though breath was an illusion for him. "During the war with Grindelwald, war crimes were committed on both sides. I'm fully aware of the sins I committed, but there were others who refused to accept their actions as criminal. Hermione, many wizards claimed to be 'only following orders' when they were brought to justice."

"They're still responsible for their own actions. They had a choice," Hermione snapped. "They didn't have to follow orders."

"I agree," the Headmaster said gently. "And Severus would agree with you, too. He believes he's responsible for everything he did while working under both Tom's and my orders."

"Oh."

"But he's mistaken, Hermione. I'm afraid his sins all belong to me. You see, he didn't have a choice. I took them all away from him."

Stricken, Hermione could only look at her former Headmaster and leader of the Light in horror.

"Go, Hermione. Go find your husband and provide whatever comforts you can for him. And tell him... tell him I'm sorry. I left documents and a Pensieve with Ffoulkes. The evidence supporting his innocence should be enough to sway any member of the Wizengamot if he ever decides to leave Azkaban. I suspect, though, he'd have to forgive himself first. I only hope he can one day forgive me."

"But..." she had questions, so many more questions, but the old man feigned sleep. No amount of pleading roused him. Hermione tried desperately to get him to speak with her again, but he slept on.

An hour later, Minerva found Hermione mumbling in incoherent half sentences at the dull painting, tears racing down puffy cheeks. She stumbled and slumped into a chair weeping uncontrollably while Minerva threw a healthy dose of Floo powder into the fireplace. The girl didn't protest as Minerva guided her through.

Hermione emerged in her living room, soot dragging across the carpet as she found her couch, and cried herself to sleep as Crooks stood watchful guard over his mistress.

Back at the castle, Albus was not allowed to feign sleep as Minerva turned her full, formidable wrath upon him.

A/N:

Chapter title: Culpam poena premit comes Punishment closely follows crime as its companion.

Thank you for reading! AV

Omnia Mutantur, Nos Et Mutamur In Illis

Chapter 14 of 26

Hermione has company to celebrate Christmas with, but is missing someone.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything recognizable to the HP-Universe, JK Rowling does. I'm not making any money off the writing of this fanfic.

Yule, or Christmastime, as Hermione Mugglishly thought of it, was always a somber occasion for her. Even before her parents abruptly left her life, the Christmas holiday had always been quietly choreographed and filled with private introspection, born out of years of candlelight services and a strong Methodist upbringing. Like most differences between the Muggle and wizarding realms, Hermione felt the division acutely.

Weasley Yule celebrations had an uncanny way of driving home the fact that she skirted both worlds and yet felt like a native in neither. Had her mother still been around, she would have dismissed Hermione's wistful longing to belong with flippant antipathy. According to her mum, the wizarding world was "chock full of goat-worshipping, hell-bound Satanists, Pagans, and Druids."

Dad, however, was a deacon in the church of Saint Mattress of Posturepedic, but made an effort 'round the holidays to string up lights and play carols. Hermione always supposed the high number of suicides during the holidays had something to do with the sappy carols that played nonstop on every fucking radio station. Coincidence? It seemed that there might be a cause and effect relationship there.

Hermione's mind rested on none of these things as she gathered with the rest of the extended and adopted Weasley Clan for Christmas Eve. For all intents and purposes, she could well have been a million of miles away, though Ginny, who had an amazing gift for perception, knew her friend was dwelling on someone confined a bit closer, the North Sea in particular.

Mrs. Weasley also noticed her adopted daughter's distance and attributed her apparent sadness to having made a lamentable life-choice, one she had strongly cautioned against.

She felt it was unnatural that a witch would deny herself a proper husband, that she had thrown her life away on a man who could provide her with neither affection nor children. To say Molly Weasley was quite disappointed in her decision was an understatement, but there was no going back. Hermione had gone and stuck her foot in it for good.

Molly's displeasure might also have had something to do with Hermione's rejection of two of her sons. The silly business with Ron during his school days was easy for them all to forget. The children did love each other immensely, or as Hermione put a fine point on it, 'loved each other immensely like brother and sister.' But then there was the business with Charlie.

Charlie was a good boy, and Molly had only the highest hopes for the two of them when they paired up. They were an excellent match for each other, and Hermione would have filled the Burrow with another generation of Weasley children, if Molly had her way. Charlie even fell head over heels for the Muggle-born witch, but it wasn't enough for her. She'd kicked him over, too. For a career. Molly occasionally wondered if Rita Skeeter hadn't pinned her right all those years ago; the witch was a heartbreaker.

Perhaps it was a good thing though, Molly reasoned. Ever since Hermione's business had taken off, her life had turned into a mess. She didn't date, she didn't socialize, and she didn't go anywhere.

When forced by Ministry decree to take a husband and have children, she took Snape and turned her back on all the love, support, and nurturing motherhood had to offer. This didn't sit at all well with the Weasley matriarch. It was unnatural.

Hermione had to know she'd be miserable, the poor sap she'd married would be miserable, and her resulting offspring would resent her. Nobody deserved that. Well, maybe Snape did.

The Weasley living room was a cacophony of sound as several generations of the family told stories in their characteristically jolly manner, traded gossip, and played an occasional good-humored prank on one other. It was difficult not to get caught up in the pervasive warm spirit of the occasion amongst the flickering candlelight and comfort foods. Of course, Hermione knew from personal experience that poignant family moments only lasted until one of the brothers suggested a good rousing game of 'smell my finger.'

Between loud renditions of traditional wizarding carols sung karaoke-style to Celestina Warbeck on the WWN, Ron clanked his glass to call the chaos to order as he attempted in a slightly slurred voice to make a toast. All eyes turned towards him and the young witch he'd brought with him that evening, a perky blond who'd twined herself around him like Devil's Snare, regardless of the reproving looks from Molly Weasley.

"Um, Happy Christmas everyone!" He glanced down apprehensively at his guest. "Well, actually, what I wanted to say is, um, this is Becky, and she's just agreed to marry me."

There was only a slight pause before the Weasley clan descended on their youngest son, offering heartfelt congratulations and squeezing the breath from his fiancée. Though everyone knew it was less than ideal to take up with a virtual stranger and just get married, Ministry deadlines were looming and many such weddings were in the works. Hermione silently thanked the gods she had the foresight not to procrastinate as she gave her best wishes to the happy couple.

Ginny appeared at her shoulder with a slightly twisted frown. Hermione knew that look.

"Go for a walk?" she offered, looking out at the gently swirling snow.

Ginny gathered their cloaks, and the girls slipped away unnoticed from the celebration. Together, they quietly strolled the property around the Burrow, leaving faint tracks in the fresh snowfall. Eventually, they circled back and found a clean place to sit behind Arthur's shed.

"Have you met Becky before?" Hermione opened.

Ginny shook her head. "No, but she seems nice, I guess."

"Well, she certainly does like him. I thought the poor girl was going to go into withdrawal for the few minutes she didn't have her hands all over him."

Ginny giggled and Hermione relaxed just a bit. Ginny needed some laughter in her life. The Ministry edicts would only give her a few months past her next birthday to find a husband before they found one for her.

"Yeah, I saw that, too. I think she had one of her hands down his pants." Ginny smiled and shook her head again. "Quidditch groupies, they're all the same."

"So? Go on any good dates lately?"

"No. I don't know why I even bother; the Ministry will probably just pair me up whoever is left over, anyway."

"Gin, don't think like that!"

"Why, it's true, you know. Though Harry did say if I got desperate enough, he'd be willing."

The girls turned their heads back towards the warmth of the house where Harry sat cuddled up close with his lover, Ollie. They both knew that, even though Harry's offer was sweet and entirely altruistic, it wasn't realistic. Or right. Ginny wasn't keen on bonding herself to Harry when it went against his natural persuasion. That would be horrible. All new marriages came with a certified-approved Ministry backed Fidelity Charm.

The current Fidelity Charm had been approved along with the Marriage Law legislation, and small, embarrassing snippets of articles were popping up in publications all over, suggesting that perhaps the Ministry hadn't worked all of the bugs out of the charm before mandating it. With glitches in the charm, however, there was no reliable way of knowing how the charm would react on a wizard with an intrinsic desire to be female, as magic could be directed and redirected by the force of a person's intention. Hermione was still galled to no end that an entire generation of witches had been sold in lot into sexual slavery, and to add insult to injury, the Ministry had placed a charm on their persons that was unpredictable and possibly harmful.

The Fidelity Charm only 'warded' against intercourse that resulted in procreation, and an awkwardly worded informational Ministry pamphlet described that oral and anal sodomy were not affected. Hermione surmised the reasoning was so that the old lecherous geezers...who had written the law to forcibly ensnare healthy young witches...could still get their jollies to their heart's content without having to remain completely faithful to their witch. After all, oral sex and buggery tended to favor the pleasure of selfish male lovers.

"It'll all work out, Gin. I have faith that it will."

"Like it did with you and Snape?" She gave a mirthless laugh.

"Actually..."

Ginny stared at her, her mouth slightly open. "I knew it!"

"What?" Hermione asked defensively. "I'm just saying it's not as bad as I feared it would be. It's actually working out quite well."

Ginny looked like she wanted to protest before closing her mouth and adding, "I figured it had to be something like that. I know you're going over there every night. Though it did take me awhile to work out where you were disappearing to."

Hermione twitched uncomfortably. She just didn't know how to talk about all the conflicting feelings she'd been bottling up. How could she explain to Ginny that her evenings with Snape, the evil, murdering Death Eater, were pleasant? More than pleasant. Comfortable. Happy, even. That she enjoyed every rare glimpse of his dimple and mischievous quirk of his eyebrows. It would be easy to simply dismiss their relationship as amicable because they were intellectual equals, but it was frustratingly more complex than that. Hermione couldn't possibly begin to describe to another how she felt, when she didn't really understand any of it herself.

"What's wrong?" Ginny prodded. "Hermione, fess up. Something's eating you."

Hermione dropped her head into her hands and moaned. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I wasn't supposed to actually care for him."

Ginny gasped. "You like him? You like Snape! Hermione, what the hell are you thinking? We all thought you were crazy for marrying him, but have you lost your ever-loving mind? He's a Death Eater! He murdered Professor Dumbledore, for Merlin's sake."

Hermione bit her lip, and Ginny saw tears collecting in her eyes. "But that's just it. I'm not so certain he did, anymore."

"Hermione, maybe we ought to go inside. You're not thinking straight. Maybe it's all the cauldron fumes, or stress from work...."

"I went to see Dumbledore's portrait, and do you know what he told me? He said Severus was acting under orders."

"Yes, 'Mione, we've all heard that before, but he's a portrait. You can't take that stuff seriously; he's not actually Professor Dumbledore. You can't believe what a painting says over what Harry witnessed, or what everyone knows to be true. Snape's not innocent."

Hermione scrubbed the wet from her eyelashes and tried to compose herself before she lost it. She hadn't been able to visit Severus since her conversation with Mr. Foulkes. She couldn't see him. She couldn't face him. Hermione could only manage to drop by take-away food for Severus and the boys before going home and crashing on the couch. She didn't think her life could possibly get more upside down and complicated when she married the taciturn wizard.

The Headmaster's confession still hung heavy like a weight on her shoulders. She hadn't been able to ask what form of compulsion to obey Severus had been under while the Headmaster was still alive, or even if he was still under obligation as death did not necessitate the dissolution of a vow. The old tosspot had feigned sleep. Had he been corporeal and Hermione a bit better recovered from her shock, she might have strangled him until those twinkling blue eyes bulged. There were many ways in the wizarding world to force someone to comply with orders, and not all of them involved Dark magic or Imperius. Then again, academically speaking, 'Dark magic' was loosely defined and depended entirely upon the ethics of whatever idiot or Ministry stooge was writing definitions.

She had known that the Headmaster believed Severus could never betray them. He had said many times that his faith in the Potion master was unshakable, but that was before he was tossed off a tower. Now, Hermione saw the implication that Headmaster Dumbledore had either given the order or allowed Severus Snape to betray him. The thought alone was enough to send her mind reeling.

She had told him it was not her place to pry, and then had researched every bit of information she could about him. She had not asked about the Headmaster because it seemed much too personal, more so than asking if he had ever had a girlfriend, and had sought out behind his back the Headmaster's portrait. Wait! It wasn't as if she had gone behind his back. She didn't need his permission, he didn't know any better, and well, the man was in Azkaban, but Hermione still felt guilty for her actions. She had pried, and the answers she had uncovered only led to more questions. Many more questions. She was afraid she was going to have to pry. Again.

"He might be," Hermione said quietly. "I only went to Professor Dumbledore's portrait after his lawyer, Mr. Foulkes, told me he was innocent. Professor Dumbledore said Foulkes has evidence exonerating him from the crime. I knew something was fishy during the contract negotiations, when he said Severus could be released from prison. I just didn't think it could possibly be true."

Hermione grimaced, thinking back to Harry. True, he was passionately in love with Ollie, and the two of them hadn't budged from the couch all night, but she couldn't shake

the feeling that he was avoiding her. Had been avoiding her since she married Severus. Originally, Hermione assumed it was old schoolyard grudges that had driven a wedge, and it wasn't as if anyone really approved of their union, but now... Now, she didn't know what to think. Was it possible that he knew something about Severus? Hermione shook her head slightly, clearing out all the paranoid conspiracy theories that had been swimming just below the surface of her mind.

Ginny intently listened to her best friend. "You've got to think clearly about this, Hermione. If he were innocent, he wouldn't be sitting in Azkaban. It makes no sense."

"Yes, yes it does. Just because he may be innocent doesn't mean he doesn't *feel* guilty. He told me he keeps himself in prison. I just chose not to listen to it."

"So what now?"

"Now? I don't know, Ginny. I just don't know."

They sat together in silence, watching heavy snowflakes spin and dance before kissing the ground.

*

A/N:

Chapter title: Omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis - All things are changing, and we are changing with them

Special, wonderful thanks to my Beta, Christev20. You're fabulous! I lay flowers at your feet.

Beneficium Accipere Libertatem Est Vendere

Chapter 15 of 26

Hermione learns a little bit more about the world around her and right next to Severus' cell.

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Severus stood, perched precariously on top of the armrests of his much loved armchair, happy that he was finally high enough to be able to look out his window to watch the snow fall. Hermione's re-charmed window no longer let in the bone-deep cold that pervaded the prison. True to her word, it let in airflow, but it kept his cell's temperature constant. Though he wouldn't have traded the freezing North Sea wind for his warm comfortable bed, Severus missed being able to feel how the elements invaded his cell before her charms.

In the previous incarnation of his life, Severus hadn't been particularly in tune with nature. He never sought out 'mother nature' like some sandal-wearing hippie. Rather, he was content to view it from behind enchanted windows and, occasionally, when the mood struck, bottle up bits of it. But ever since his incarceration, the sharp freezing winters and blistering hot summers connected him with life outside, and he'd grown a deep and abiding love for his planet. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing better than the occasional thunderstorm which brought howling wind and splattering rain into his life.

Now, his climate-controlled sealed environment made him feel even more confined. Snowflakes whipped around the darkening sky, pushed on by speeding winds in a violent ballet. By gods, it was glorious, and Severus just wanted to plant his naked feet into the ground and let himself be overtaken by nature's fury.

He stood atop the armchair watching the storm until he could no longer see out into the darkened night. After dutifully preparing himself for bed (something he'd never done when he had only a smelly cot to lie on), Severus laid awake, thinking of his bushy-haired Vixen.

She knew. He knew she knew. And it was awful. Ffoulkes should have just kept his damned mouth shut, but stupidly thought he was doing Severus a favor. The afternoon he had visited, Severus had requested several items be taken from his vault for Hermione's Christmas gift. When she dropped off the Russian dumplings but didn't visit, Severus thought it peculiar, but was unconcerned.

The next morning, Ffoulkes returned with a smile and obvious pride in the gem he let drop from his lips for Hermione's benefit, and Severus' stomach sank. He liked it better when Hermione simply thought of him as a cruel, unfeeling murderer. The gods only knew what she thought of him now. The witch probably pitied him. She thought of him as a coward. That was probably why she hadn't returned.

Hermione hadn't returned.

The food she continued to drop off was of course appreciated, but it was her company that he craved. Silly, that the biggest thorn in his side next to Potter, the know-it-all swot, could make his days worthwhile and ... happy. He'd even begun to pay attention to the calendar for her. By his estimate, she'd been to two production meetings, two staff meetings, the annual manufacturing meeting, and a sit down with all of the distributors before halting the assembly line for the holidays. And Severus didn't even get to hear how any of them went. It was all patently unfair.

Unfortunately, the whole "innocent" business meant that when Hermione did finally put in an appearance, she'd arrive loaded with questions. Her previous tack 'not to pry' would of course be forgotten. She'd be full of ceaseless, never-ending, annoying, constant, probing questions. There'd be no living with her now.

Hermione Granger was a force of nature and damned near impossible to deter when she had a new project or, dear gods, a mission to save his poor soul.

He could already visualize putting Spellotape on her lips.

Though, if she didn't at least make an attempt at showing her face on Christmas morning, he would consider taking legal action. Clearly, she was abandoning her duties as a wife.

Christmas morning dawned clear and bright, just as perfectly as it should. It found Hermione with a mug of coffee in hand, engaged in a staring contest with a pair of golden eyes. Again, Crooks refused to take his pill, but the staring contest seemed to contain a silent conversation about something entirely different.

Crookshanks cocked his head.

"I'll be right back and we can spend the day together, Crooksy. I'll just drop his packages off and ..." Hermione threw her hands on her hips. "It's not like he actually will

want me there!"

Crookshanks said nothing.

"I'm not wimping out! I just don't want to intrude on his holiday." She knew it sounded ridiculous even as she said it. Snape. Holiday spirit. Ha! It was as far-fetched as Snape dancing the Hukilau.

He flicked his bottle-brush tail a few times and twitched a whisker.

"Don't you dare look at me in that tone of voice, young man."

With another flick of his tail which seemed to convey, 'whatever,' Crooks sauntered away to plop on the rug and proceeded to give his genitalia the attention it deserved.

"Oh, very mature. You'll put your mouth on that, but you won't take this pill? You're impossible, Crooks."

Hermione threw up her hands. All the men in her life were damned impossible. Well, there was no use putting off the inevitable any longer. Hermione gathered her cloak and packages and Apparated to the visitors' entrance of Azkaban.

Typically, she was met by two guards as she passed through the security terminal in the Long Term Inmate section. They had special incantations and devices similar to Muggle metal detectors that revealed malicious objects or intent, but Hermione was never overly concerned, and the boys never appeared to be, either. Hermione had become some sort of fixture in the place. Truthfully, she was the only regular visitor, and the boys really did like her and the food she brought. The inmates weren't the only ones who had to endure the grub.

Christmas morning, instead of the usual complement of two guards, it was just Billy Mulciber, who looked quite wretched.

"Happy Christmas, Billy," she said brightly, painting on a cheerful face. "You're not here by yourself all day, are you?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"What a shame, this is a day for family, but don't think I've forgotten about you." Hermione withdrew a white box stuffed with red paper and handed it to him. "I have a few more for the other boys. You will pass them on, won't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied morosely.

Hermione was just passing through the checkpoint when she met his sad blue eyes peering from behind a long fringe of brown bangs. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought he'd just been having a good cry.

"Not to worry, Billy," she soothed. "You'll be home soon enough, and I'm sure they'll save plenty of sweets for you."

His eyes cast quickly downwards, and Hermione was struck by the deep look of pain that crossed his features. "Billy," she whispered, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder, "did I say something wrong? What's the matter?"

He continued to make eye contact with the floor as he mumbled, "Nothing, Ma'am."

Hermione put down her wand and packages, drew herself up, and folded her arms across her chest. She was settling down for the long haul; she'd get it out of him whether he liked it or not. Nobody was supposed to be that sullen on Christmas.

"Well? I'm waiting," she prompted.

Billy slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, I just get a bit misty-eyed 'round this time of year. I miss my family, that's all."

"Oh, I'm sorry... I didn't realize... That was horribly insensitive of me."

"Aw, no worries," he said sheepishly. A moment later, he looked up at her with a hint of a smile. "Would you like to meet them?" he asked eagerly.

Hermione's expression must have conveyed her confusion as he hastily added, "They're all two cells up from Professor Snape."

"Oh... uh, all right, Billy," she responded apprehensively. Hermione was NOT interested in meeting his family. She didn't have even the slightest bit of morbid curiosity, but then, she wasn't going to tread on Billy's Christmas.

He led her down the corridor towards Snape's cell. The corridor was wide and dimly-lit, faintly reminding Hermione of the dungeons at Hogwarts. It was always silent in Azkaban prison, only the loud echoes of their footsteps or the occasional squeaky wheel from the meal trolley punctuated the eerie quiet.

When they arrived at the door, Hermione found it odd that he did not call for the prisoners to present themselves, but had her answer the moment the door swung wide.

The Mulciber family slept peacefully, stacked against the walls on hard cots, and Hermione was reminded of a sleeping cabin aboard a train. Magical IVs were plugged into veins in their collar bones, keeping their bodies pink and healthy-looking. If she didn't immediately know they'd been Kissed, she'd think they were just having a lie in.

In a moment of sickening clarity, Hermione knew exactly what had become of the Ministry's processed masses. Those for whom the Wizengamot didn't have time to spare a trial. Those swept up in Ministerial Decrees. She remembered seeing the line that stretched around the Atrium when she'd been there for some long forgotten reason. Knockturn Alley shopkeepers, former Slytherins, and shady-looking persons patiently waiting in line, some clutching Ministry summons, others checking their timepieces, eager to get back on with their lives. Kissed and soulless. After all, it was much easier to warehouse bodies than undesirable people.

Like a bitter aspirin on her tongue, Hermione recalled how happy she'd been that they were finally doing something to make the streets safer. Perhaps a day late and a Knut short, but nevertheless, she'd been honestly glad to know that they were taking the threat of rogue Death Eaters seriously. But not this. Never this. She hadn't known. Nobody knew. The presses had been silent.

"Is this them?" she asked in awe, knowing it was a silly question. "Is this all of them?"

Her eyes drank in their vacant expressions, mothers and children.

"Yeah, the ones who survived." He knelt down by a little boy who couldn't have been older than a fourth-year and held his hand.

A cold shiver ran down her spine; she easily counted fifteen women and children, 'sleeping.' Their faces seemed innocent in their peace.

"I don't get it," she said once her voice had returned to her. "Why?"

Billy stiffened and stood up clenching his jaw. "Loyal followers of the Dark Lord. Ministry said they were unredeemable."

"The children..." she choked.

Billy scrubbed his eyes and nodded. "This is my Ma." He gestured to a thin woman with perfect cheekbones, and thick chestnut hair streaked with silver. "My brothers..."

sis."

He waved his arm around to encompass another set of bunks. "Aunt Gladys. They said she was sleeping with the devil. Said my cousins were his spawn. Aunt Ronda brought all the kids out to the edge of the Forbidden Forest for a picnic during the Final Battle. Wanted to see their fathers in action defeating Harry Potter. Mind you, none of them participated, little Junebug couldn't even lift a wand."

"That's horrible! I don't know what to say."

"Nothing really to say." He shrugged.

"And what about you? Why aren't you...?"

"Dead? Kissed?" Billy scratched the back of his neck. "I wasn't here. My Da never made me join up because he said I was too smart for it. Sent me to Canada for most of the war to get my Masters of Arithmancy. Now, I wonder if he did it because he knew this might happen."

Neither said another word until Severus was called to present himself for inspection.

Hermione could only think Severus ought to be damned ashamed of himself. Squandering his life while others had no choice.

*

A/N:

Chapter title: Beneficium accipere libertatem est vendere - To accept a favour is to sell freedom. (Publius Syrus)

Many, many thanks for my terrific beta Christev20. She deserves kudos, too!

Ascendo Tuum

Chapter 16 of 26

The married couple spend the holiday together with radically altered perceptions.

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"It's about time, Witch," Severus growled as the door opened. "You thought you could just leave me here to rot."

"Please." She rolled her eyes. "It's prison; you're here to rot."

Hermione couldn't believe his gall. She was there to bring him his Christmas goodies, nasty pickled walnuts and all that, and the man had the audacity to grumble about his lot in life. Did he not know he was surrounded by lifeless bodies who'd never have another Christmas? Clearly, he lacked perspective.

Hermione pinched her forehead between her eyebrows and threw his boxes to the bed. As Severus sorted through them like an eager child, Hermione dropped into the armchair, completely exhausted.

Severus eyed his bride over his shoulder. He was certain she'd say something stupid like, 'Oh, my dear, sweet Severus, you won't rot here in prison much longer. My wonderful, brave Gryffindor buddies and I have taken it upon ourselves to prove your innocence. You'll finally be touted as the War Hero you really are,' or some other such claptrap. By the indifference she'd shown him, that was plainly not in the cards. Thank the gods.

"Well," he encouraged. "Where've you been? Don't think I won't let this indiscretion go unpunished."

"I was busy."

"Busy!" he shouted, dropping a very nice bottle of sixteen-year-old Ogden's back on the bed.

Admittedly, the excuse did sound a bit flimsy, but at least she hadn't said anything about having to wash her hair, or 'Nargles ate my homework' Hermione justified. "I do have a life, you know. We've been over this before. And it's not like I let you starve, either."

"Pathetic. Hermione, if you're going to lie, at least try to sound somewhat convincing about it. If you can't lie successfully then at least tell the truth. Your proud Gryffindor bravery failed you."

She narrowed her eyes. "I said I was busy; I don't have to justify anything to you. And I certainly don't have to defend the honor of my House to a Slytherin."

Was he trying to provoke a fight? It certainly sounded like it. He was being childish enough to bring up old House rivalries. Didn't that get old after graduation? Someone must have missed nap time.

"Some Gryffindor you are," he snorted. "Scared away by the innuendos of a man who knows nothing. You couldn't dare face me with the suspicion that I might not be a common murderer."

"Yeah? How 'bout that, Snape? Were you really wrongly accused? Because the rest of the world and I have it on very good authority that you murdered Dumbledore. What did that poor old man ever do to you, huh? Offer you one too many lemon drops? Offend your fashion sense by dressing in brightly clashing robes? He certainly didn't hold you back from worshiping at the feet of your precious Dark Lord." With a satisfying feral grin, Hermione watched him recoil from her words.

"Tell me, Snape, what caused you to hate the Headmaster so much that you killed him for it?"

"Because he asked me to!" Severus raged, pulling at his lank hair. "I only did everything that man asked of me, and he had to ask to do that."

"What did you say?" she whispered.

Severus sat on the bed, his head in his hands. "He asked me to do it. Begged me to. My soul's already damned; Albus probably figured 'what's another spot on an already

blackened soul?" I owed a life debt to James Potter and was responsible for his murder. Do you have any idea what kind of taint that puts on a man? By karmic law, I'm damned; no amount of atonement will ever be enough to absolve my sins. Albus knew it and took advantage of me."

"You're not making any sense." No, no sense at all, but she'd obviously hit such a nerve that he was crouched on the bed, looking less like a former Death Eater and more like a trembling, scared boy. Hermione still kept away; it wouldn't be prudent to offer comfort to a Death Eater or approach him. Caged animals were notorious for striking without warning.

She hadn't known he was religious, either, and she wondered about his upbringing, but then Hermione postulated that was probably the effect of all prisons. Ruminating on life, death and the afterlife while stuck in a cell tended to make many thick-skinned criminals fear for the condition of their souls.

"What part of it is supposed to make sense, Hermione? It never made any sense to me."

She took a deep, calming breath and tried to match his exasperated tone with gentleness. "Well, let's start at the beginning. What happened on that tower?" Despite his protestations, Hermione could see he was itching to get his story off his chest.

He looked up, startled. "That," he hissed, "is certainly not the beginning. The end... only the end..." Severus shook his head as if the action could make it all not true.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You mentioned that he asked you to kill him." In her mind, Hermione was mulling over what exactly that meant, and the only thing she could come up with was assisted suicide... if you could believe the testimony of a convicted Death Eater. "Why would he ask that of you?"

Severus gave a dry, mirthless laugh before stretching out on the bed. "Million Galleon question. He believed he was dying from the curse of Marvolo's ring, but I never believed that." Severus turned his head to eye his witch. She was listening attentively, hanging on every word, looking every bit like a bushy-haired, eleven-year-old swot itching to wave her hand in the air. She wanted a story... Severus would give her a story; then maybe he'd have his peace.

He cleared his throat and began again in his soft, silken lecture tones, "The Dark Lord sent Draco to kill the Headmaster. Albus knew this, of course."

"That's why he was on the tower that night..."

"Don't interrupt!" he barked. "You're so damned sure you want to know what happened, you will hear me out to the end and not interrupt. Impudent girl."

"Albus was always a softy. He cared more for that little shit's life than mine. He couldn't stand the idea that Draco would cast the killing curse and damn his soul. They're called Unforgivables for a reason, Hermione, and it has nothing to do with the Wizengamot. Steeped in old magic and rooted in tradition, some say that the damage done to your soul by casting an Unforgivable makes you so unworthy by the gods that neither penance nor self-flagellation can tip the scales back in your favor. Albus believed he was saving Draco from that fate. A fate he didn't mind damning me to.

"Of course, I never bought that story, either. Draco was a shit, if ever there was a shit. It was only a matter of time before he threw an Unforgivable, and we know he proved himself quite adept at those on the battlefield. Gods, how the son degenerates from the sire." Severus shook his head and closed his eyes to blot out images and fractured emotions spiraling within.

"And of course, the Headmaster was convinced that his murder would ingratiate me back into the Dark Lord's inner circle and dispel their rumors about my loyalties. He even gave me permission to take an oath for Narcissa. Stupid. Of course, it put me in with the Dark Lord's ranks, but only to the exclusion of the Order. How bloody useful is a spy you can't trust? Nothing I did was good enough to prove my worth. The intelligence I risked my hide and hair to gather was naturally dismissed by the Order. They burned it all without even looking at it.

"So you want to know why Albus asked me to murder him? Go ask the man himself; I doubt I'll ever know." It was a hollow sacrifice, and Severus knew to the very fiber of his being he'd find no redemption in it, either.

He should have died. Severus believed it to his very foundation. He was the old curmudgeon, with more dead and withered limbs than the Headmaster. He was the one who deserved it.

"It doesn't sound like murder to me," she said in a small voice.

"Idiot girl, you would say that. It doesn't matter: you're quibbling over semantics. An *Avada* is an *Avada*. Killed... murdered... what's the difference?"

"Intent?" she offered carefully.

"Intent?" he snorted. "I bloody knocked him off a six-story tower. What do you think the intent was there?"

They were quiet for a minute. Not only was Hermione rendered speechless, but her brain had slowed down to such a trickle she couldn't process the new information. The only logical conclusion she could come up with was, if, and only IF, Severus was telling the truth, then he hadn't actually betrayed the Order. The Headmaster had been right. Of course, the painted facsimile ever-so-slightly forgot to mention his death had been a direct order. That sort of omission was disgraceful.

She had had a hard enough time coming to terms with his betrayal then; he was extraordinarily difficult to get along with, had an absolutely irascible temper, but he was never really what he seemed. All of their accusations against the heartless wizard had turned out to be unfounded. Years of slowly simmering anger toward him did not make her predisposed to believe his innocence so easily. Now from the lips of so many, it was difficult to hear. She had heard he was innocent. Wrapping her head around that idea was strange and foreign. Looking at the hollow man in front of her, she accepted the truth. Apparently, he could not.

As she studied him closer, she saw the blame he directed at himself and his painful self-loathing, the way he looked so... broken, Hermione no longer believed he deserved his fate. She longed to weep piteously with him, even though it was obvious that he would not yield to tears. Later, though, she would shed them for him. Cry for the once proud wizard who touched her heart with his abject pain.

"So, what exactly were you thinking about when you cast the curse? You had to be channeling some anger..."

"Some anger? Are you really that dense, girl? Of course I had to be angry, that's how you cast an Unforgivable." He paused. "I was pissed off. Furious, really."

"Why?"

"Why else? I was angry with that bastard for making me do it. There had to be another way, but he wouldn't hear of it. When the Great Albus Fucking Dumbledore made up his sugar-saturated mind, or gods forbid, thought he was working for the greater fucking good, he was obstinate and inflexible."

"But you never actually desired to see him dead," Hermione mused.

"Why are you beating this dead Thestral, Granger?"

"Because we're talking about the difference between capital murder, manslaughter, and assisted suicide!"

"Oh, bloody fucking hell!" He sat up and leaned forward in to Hermione's face.

The cell was small enough that she was inches from his snarling face and could even smell his mint tooth powder.

"You don't get it, do you? It doesn't matter why I killed Albus, just that I did. With a bit of foolish wand waving I killed him, and this is my consequence, my fate. And he's not

the only soul I have on my conscience, either. Or did you think the Death Eaters were a stamp-collecting club? That we took a break from revels to have a spot of tea? That our mayhem was just a bit of youthful exuberance. You know, a bit of 'boys will be boys?'"

"No..." she answered, trying to keep her voice from quavering.

"Then stop your line of inquiry. Smartest witch of your age? Really?"

"But the charges against you are only for Professor Dumbledore's murder."

"I know," he said dully. "Order members sitting on the Wizengamot set it up that way so I'd only have to appeal that one charge." There was a strange bitterness in his voice as if he was disappointed that he had help from the Order in his trial.

"But it's only *one* charge."

"Which means what, Granger? The Wizengamot didn't need to level anything more against me. I'd been acquitted of being a Death Eater once, thanks to Albus; to charge me again could be considered double jeopardy. Besides, don't you think murdering the greatest wizard the Light had was grounds enough?"

"But only if you're guilty!" She rubbed her face. Why was he so stubborn?

"Stop!" he commanded. "I refuse to put up with any more of your misguided sentimentalities. There is enough innocent blood on these hands without Albus' murder to taint them. And, Granger, if you continue this insane line of thinking, do you really understand where it will lead? If by some act of true stupidity you get the Wizengamot to overturn my conviction and I leave Azkaban, are you really so eager to welcome me into your arms? What happened to our perfect marriage of convenience? Would you really want to wake up in the mornings to this face?"

"Not really," she admitted softly, choking slightly on the words as they tripped out.

Of course, that was what she was thinking. There was a deep-seated sense of justice ingrained into her. Simply stated, the wrongly convicted should be exonerated. Even if he was convicted of manslaughter or assisted suicide, it was more than likely that he'd already served the time. Hermione would just have to reconcile that she could live with herself knowing that Snape was innocent and languishing in prison, and she wanted to keep him there to avoid the restrictions of the fucking Marriage Law again.

Hermione knew what she should have done. She should have married Gilderoy Bloating Lockhart. At least then they'd have deep discussions about morality and the weight of immortal spirits while watching Powerpuff Girls. Okay, so technically, she could babble to herself about existentialism and the human condition, and he could eat his Choco Wizardflakes.

He retrieved a box from the bookshelf and shoved it in her hand. "Your Christmas gift, my dearest. Take it now and go. I have no more patience for your foolishness, nor do I want to be one of your crusades."

Hermione nodded and quickly left him to his brooding silence, but she didn't go far. She observed him from the jailer's slot... looking peaceful? Relieved?

Severus was grateful for her hasty departure; it gave him the opportunity to relax. And breathe.

He felt surprisingly good. Really good.

Perhaps the sages were right. Confession was good for the soul.

She didn't have to empathize or have sympathy for him, as he'd never been one to throw his own pity party. Wallow in shame...yes, that was understandable; he was after all, a murdering fucking Death Eater. But Hermione just had to know the unadulterated truth; how she chose to interpret it was entirely up to her. Someone had to just know; he couldn't go to his death with no one knowing. And in sharing the truth, the burden on his soul felt a hair lighter.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Ascendo tuum - Up yours

'Gods, how the son degenerates from the sire.' Quote borrowed from Homer.

Peccavi

Chapter 17 of 26

While Hermione wrestles with weighty moral dilemmas, Severus ponders the meaning of a Slinky.

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Hermione Granger was no stranger to moral dilemmas. As per her indisputable reputation as Hogwarts' reigning squeaky-clean know-it-all, she'd spent many an occasion acting as moral authority and sounding board for all sorts of childhood woes. She could handle this. She just had to logically think through her problem as if it belonged to someone else, objectively, impartially, and level-headed, *damn it*.

It was time to make a list.

On one hand: Could she in all good conscience sit idly back and allow an innocent man to rot in prison?

And on the other: Lending her aid would result in everything she had been so desperate to avoid. A real husband, children, home life, dirty nappies, day care, cooking dinner, doing dishes, sex with Snape. No time for her career. No time for her research. No time for herself.

Oh, certainly there were other nuisances and quibbles she could add to the list, but the argument boiled down to one thing really: *Was she willing to trade her freedom for his?*

How could she? The wizard seemed perfectly happy to rot in his cell. Okay, gilded cage; it wasn't like the man was rotting on Chinese take-away. But then, how could she not? Hermione wasn't certain if she had the evil inclination within her bones, her soul, her conscience, to let him stay in prison when he was by definition a war hero, despite his vociferous protestations.

Hermione certainly couldn't hold him responsible for the Potters' deaths. It's not like he knew they were the family targeted by prophecy and fate, so that karmic law drive he spouted seemed quite irrelevant. She also knew that very early in his Death Eater career Severus Snape had become a spy for the Order. Whatever crimes he had committed were acts of war, and since soldiers weren't arrested for pulling their triggers on the battlefield, it seemed wrong to hold him accountable for the same thing. Then, of course, there was the Big One: the Headmaster's death. Hermione didn't know what to make of it, but murder didn't seem to be an apt description.

Dwelling on her own personal moral dilemma, she came up empty handed and slightly dizzy from all the circular thinking. Rightfully speaking, there had to be a correct answer. If one took the supposition that it was morally wrong to keep Severus incarcerated, then her path was clear. She simply needed to take whatever evidence Dumbledore had left...per the Headmaster's wishes no less...and set Snape free. Whether he wanted it or not.

Hermione just didn't know if she was that altruistic.

Being a Gryffindor didn't automatically equate with being a sucker.

Shaking her head of profound thoughts worthy of an eighteenth-century German philosopher, Hermione tabled the topic for the time being. Charging in head-first like a Gryffindor hopped up on adrenaline, bravado, and a mission to save the proverbial world wouldn't help anyone in this case. Maybe stewing on her dilemma would render a more suitable answer. One that didn't contradict her integrity or sell herself short.

Which of course didn't solve anything with Snape. Well, Severus, really. Their relationship was nowhere near what one would call healthy, but then, given the circumstances, that was fairly understandable. The sad truth was, she really liked him, or at least she liked his company when he wasn't sulking or being a complete shithead. And he did make a decent husband, especially since it was all at her convenience, but Hermione was afraid she'd gone and mucked it all up.

Their nights together had been strained, but Hermione felt certain the best way to smooth things over with Severus was with steaming plates of food. Unshakably confident in her hypothesis, Hermione tested her theory by stopping at her favorite Indian restaurant. She made sure she ordered lamb korma, since Severus had difficulties stringing words into coherent sentences when lamb and heaps of pillowy soft naan were at the table.

Severus was reading a newspaper when he was called to present himself for inspection. He looked up, scowled at the interruption, and Hermione caught him covertly sniffing the air. Yep, Indian food was right on the mark. She had nearly enough empirical data to write an Arithmancy theorem on the wizard. Predictable: (a) Wizard's interest to (b) Witch was directly proportional to (c) aromatic quality of food. Easy enough, a third-year could graph. Though, it smacked more of a Lavender Brown rule to live by than an Arithmancy equation. Severus would probably throw an all-out, hissy fit if she ever mentioned how much he had in common with Ron Weasley.

Unlike previous encounters when she brought in mouthwatering take-away, Severus acted neither interested nor eager. In fact, he didn't say a word to her. Instead, he returned to his paper and coolly accepted dinner with an outstretched hand. He had been giving her the cold shoulder for quite some time, and frankly, she was getting cheesed off. Really, the man was so irritatingly stubborn.

By the end of dinner, Hermione was nearly fuming with his silent treatment. It was childish, immature, and stupid. Hermione was tempted to jump up and down, shouting, 'You're not being fair! You're being childish, immature, and stupid!' but somehow throwing a temper-tantrum didn't sound all that grown-up, either.

As she packed up the styrofoam take-away boxes and cast her warming charms that would keep the food fresh 'til at least lunch the next day, Severus peeked his head over the top of his newspaper.

"What's a Slinky?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A Slinky. What is it?"

"It's a silly child's toy. I don't think I could really describe it to you; it's one of those things you just have to see. Why?"

"I'm reading an Op-ed article in which someone is quoted as saying, 'Some people are like Slinkys...not really good for anything, but you still can't help but smile when you see one tumble down the stairs.' I rather like the sound of that, but I have no idea what a Slinky is."

Hermione smiled, and her eyes lit up. "Well then, I'll just have to bring you one."

"I suspect I'll like that."

"I suspect you will."

Hermione was utterly bewildered that Severus Snape had accepted the olive branch, but she was happy. Maybe she couldn't resolve what to do for Severus, but perhaps making his self-imposed incarceration just a wee bit better was good enough for now.

The moment she left, Severus sprawled out across his bed. He would never have allowed Hermione to catch him in such thoroughly unseemly repose. She had the worst habit of any meddling female he'd ever met for spying through the jailer's slot, but her heels clacking loudly against the flagstone meant he was safe to let his guard down for the moment. The witch would be the death of him. He was certain of it. At least with a Cruciatius he always had the brief pleasure of passing out, but Hermione Granger could possibly be the Darkest curse ever inflicted upon his person. Surely, the Gods were amusing themselves at his expense. He couldn't stand another day of ignoring her presence. It wounded him to do so, which was odd, indeed. Since when did the age-old art form of shunning hurt?

Ye Gods, since when did his joy and misery revolve around a hag-haired swot? Since she walked into his fetid cell, her nose wrinkled up at the stench, and offered him more than he could ever hope for: companionship. Severus had accepted his solitary existence until offered the smallest crumbles of a life. His beloved friend and mentor, the flamboyant wizard, had kept him at arm's length even before he had cast his curse. Ironic that his first real relationship only developed after being imprisoned, unless he counted the odd shag Kathleen had thrown his way, which he did not.

It was another sterling example of how the Gods liked to fuck with poor, old Snapey. Why couldn't she have appeared in his life a few decades earlier? No. Not her specifically, Severus was no kiddie-fiddler. But he couldn't help but contemplate how much happier he'd have been if any intelligent and attractive witch had wanted to spend time with him when he had been a free man. It was pathetic, really, that it had taken going to Azkaban to land a witch of his own.

Azkaban was a fortress he'd shaped in his mind; his cell a home and resting place for his abused soul. He accepted this. Longed for it. Decades before, when the idea of winning some climactic 'Final Battle' was such a long-shot that it was too absurdly humorous to contemplate, Severus knew that definitively ending the Dark Lord's existence would not earn him the redemption he desired. When was redemption complete? Certainly not amongst the carnage of a bloody battle. Surely he hadn't been forgiven because the Light had won? Perhaps if Fortuna had smiled upon him and allowed him to die on the field.

This had to be his path. His cell, his well-earned privilege. His final opportunity to seek atonement. The uncounted days stretched behind him, the unnamed years stretched before him. Fortuna only ruled half of men's fate; the other half belonged to their own will.

His will had been so strong. He had been so determined, so beautifully resolute in his honest yearning. The many cold nights of prayers whispered to the Gods when the wind howled around his barely covered shoulders were so clear to him. When, with numb, shaking fingers and chattering teeth, he had begged the Gods for a spark of magic to Conjure a sacred flame. No, not to heat his hands, but to warm something of far greater importance.

When she bluntly proposed marriage and lifelong commitment, he almost dared allow himself to believe the vivacious witch with the impudent smile was a gift. A sign that his sacrifice was accepted. Mercy had been granted. It was foolish and stupid, the desperate desire of a half-starved man craving a sign that he had been judged and found worthy. It was shameful how he clung to hope. Repulsive, now that his belly was full and he could see his choice for what it was.

The witch had bestowed finery upon him, which clearly he never deserved. She tossed pearls before swine, and it felt like mockery. A big cosmic joke on poor piteous Snape. Somehow, from their otherworldly perches, the Gods had looked down upon his pathetic tangled soul. They had seen his wretched attempts at penance and had decided to take the mickey out of him. Perhaps they had sent her as a test. Hermione Granger, gift of the Gods or test of his piety? If she were a gift, she wasn't a bloody good one and they were still having him on. Had the Gods bothered to ask him, he would have requested one with a sex drive, a desire for snaggle-toothed old blighters, and an insatiable need to please. She had to be a test. There could be no other reason for her to suggest he leave Azkaban. Absurdity. Such absurdity.

Did she not realize they'd be married? What that would mean?

No. Of course not. Hermione Granger was a silly, self-absorbed chit with no sense of decency to leave a poor man to his blessed suffering. She was no more an instrument of the God's will than a purple purring pygmy puff. A weary sleep claimed him, and Severus resolved not to be bothered by her insolent fantasies again.

His heavy eyelids had barely drifted shut when he found himself in the queerest dream. Little Miss Hermione Granger, with curiously twinkling eyes he had never noticed before, bedecked in school robes, found him lying on his thin, fetid cot, and bloodlessly unzipped his chest. Severus looked down, astonished. He wondered how it was that he never knew a hidden chamber...not unlike Moody's prison-trunk...was down there. Before he could process this discovery further, the dentists' daughter hiked up her robes and descended the staircase inside his chest. Oddly, he didn't feel a thing, and he was quite certain that it probably ought to hurt. Then she proceeded to rummage. In his mind's eye, he could plainly see her fishing around, not that it surprised him, because the insufferable chit always poked around where she was clearly unwelcome, and she came upon all manner of strange higgledy-piggledy objects that looked as though they belonged in the Headmaster's office. Then, as if she had no respect for him as a person, or indeed whatever whirling and chirping articles that had taken up residence within his chest cavity, she began randomly tossing them out. Not knowing how to stop the meddling girl, Severus could only lie back and allow her to work.

Hermione snaked through post-holiday shoppers in Muggle London. She was on a quest. Not nearly as bold or dangerous as Horcrux hunting, but just as satisfying on some small level. That, and braving Hamleys', was never a challenge to undertake lightly. She was eager to make whatever amends she could and get back to normal life with Severus, or whatever it was they had. Given the circumstances, she was delighted that they got on as well as they did, especially when she had approached him with a marriage contract purely from the standpoint of a business proposition and not a real relationship. Then again, they did have history to build upon, and occasionally Hermione grimaced when it occurred to her that they got along like an old married couple. She briefly wondered what their relationship would be like when they did become an old married couple. Would she make the daily journey to Azkaban loaded with take-away curry when she was a thin and frail arthritic witch? Yes, probably so. But it was best not to dwell.

She had closed down the production line for the holidays and wouldn't resume until a week after the rapidly approaching New Year, so, hypothetically, Hermione had all day to leisurely shop, if she were a leisurely shopper. Which she was not. Tracking down the silly toy, Hermione paid for it and quickly left. She would always be a Muggle-born, but Hermione hated large crowds. They made her feel suffocated and paranoid. Thankfully, her wizarding world was less densely populated. It was odd. Magical folk lived phenomenally longer than Muggles, they had a longer time span to conceive children, but their population was small in number, compared to Muggles. That defied logic. Except when she considered how many wizards and witches actually made it to their more seasoned years versus how many died painfully young. Unfortunately, Hermione knew of far too many who had never seen adulthood. And Pure-bloods considered Muggles violent? Statistically speaking, it seemed that wizards, armed at all times with a weapon at their fingertips, were much more predisposed to acts of violence.

Hermione was contemplating acts of violence if she didn't get out of the mobs of bargain shoppers. She found a concealed public Apparition point, concentrated, and arrived in the Leaky Cauldron's back garden. A few wand-taps, and she was contentedly staring at the far quieter Diagon Alley and breathing in a deep, calming breath. She wasn't going to think about how ashamed she was by her relief to get away from Muggle London.

Her day was her own. Jake had ordered her to stop trying to play catch-up on reports while the office was closed, citing if she had a stress-induced aneurysm, he'd be out of a job. So she window-shopped, looking aimlessly at storefronts whose grand mystery had drawn her in as a wide-eyed child. Sadly, she wondered what had happened to that inspired, innocent girl who couldn't wait to unlock all the dazzling mysteries of magic. Hermione snorted to herself; she probably had her spirit beaten out of her for asking too many questions. She winced. The thought cut too close to the truth, and just as painfully, she realized that her dearly beloved husband was responsible for part of the self-conscious complex she carried about asking too many questions. Bastard.

The shop front of The Golden Needle, a Gentle-wizard's clothier, caught her eye. She'd been in once before to help poor Ron find adequate formal dress robes...a tailored set that did not in any way, shape, or form resemble the grody hand-me-downs he'd worn before. An animated mannequin strutted back and forth, showing off a particularly handsome set of robes. There was very little billow, but then nobody billowed like Severus billowed. Severus was a blue-ribbon billower. But the robes had a bitty baby billow. They were perfect. New Year's was as good an excuse to purchase them as any, and according to superstition, one should always wear new clothes on the New Year, and... did she need another excuse? They were gorgeous, and Severus would look undeniably fetching in them. Yes, she needed another excuse. It wasn't proper for her to buy him a set of formal robes simply because she wanted to see him dressed up. Ah well, Jake had loaded his Christmas gift box with the sort of items she had been giving to him regularly, so they weren't proper and fitting gifts. Nice gifts, obviously, as Jake rather fancied himself a Sloane Ranger, but none of them were an actual gift from her. The robes would be like a real gift. There, that was a good enough excuse as any to see her man in sexy, well-cut robes.

Later that evening, Hermione dropped by Azkaban with enough rotisserie chicken and sides to share with Severus and the boys.

Severus heard her the moment she set foot in the echoing corridor. As much as he despised interruptions, it was a sure bet that she'd bring food. He hadn't become so accustomed to her daily meals that he yet took them for granted. So he supposed he'd have to suffer her presence.

He snapped his new Smythson potion journal shut and stashed it beneath a pillow. The ink wasn't properly set, but the fine paper was dense enough, he doubted it would bleed. He still had not ascertained why the witch insisted on buying him the best, but at least now he knew it was probably Edwards, the bollocked-brained Hufflepuff, spending the cash. He stretched, quill still in hand, and heard every vertebra in his back crack. He was an old, miserable bastard who'd gone to seed far too early in life. His body reminded him of that fact constantly. If he didn't attend to his daily exercise regimen, his muscles seized up and his joints cracked at the slightest movement. Long ago, he had accepted this as the destiny of a boot-licking Death Eater. At least he was vertical, which was more than he could say for the poor sods he had called brothers.

By the time Hermione was at his door, the quill was properly stowed, his robes were pulled straight as if he hadn't been idly lounging, and Severus was sitting ramrod straight, wondering what was for dinner. His stomach asked the question as well.

Dinner was a quiet affair as Hermione was still a bit skittish around him, and Severus was thinking on his original potions he'd been transcribing from memory. To keep his mind active, he had spent a considerable amount of time inventing potions. His lab still existed inside his brain, intact and fully stocked. Though it was purely theoretical, he had the capability to imagine how they would develop. Severus was quite certain his wit hadn't been blunted to the point where he was unable to create brews, but he was also a realist. There was a distinct possibility that each one of his dreamed-up potions was a complete and utter flop without research and a real lab at his disposal. Still, the journal had been a wonderful Christmas gift. He now had a proper place to record his wistful fantasies.

Hermione could sense he was gathering wool elsewhere and tried several times, unsuccessfully, to draw him into conversation. She even tried Ron's tasteless joke about the wizard riding the wrong end of his broom and playing on the other side of the Quidditch pitch. It went over like U-No-Poo in a punch bowl. Instantly, she regretted it and chided herself for ever retelling any of Ron's god-awful jokes. At least she had the good sense not to mention the one about the cock-eyed Veela with the speech impediment.

Once dinner was polished off, Hermione asked for his hand and dropped a large spiraled object into it. Severus sneered at the slightly cold metal and held up an end pinched between his fingers.

"What is this?"

"It's your Slinky. I told you, it's a child's toy." She knew for a fact that Severus Snape had spent his formative childhood years in Muggle England. The fact that something so common as a Slinky passed his attention was troubling. She supposed he had led a sheltered life. That probably explained much of his abysmal social skills.

An amused eyebrow arched at her statement. "Oh, yes, because I can see how a bit of coiled wire would provide hours of amusement to a child. What a crap toy."

Annoyed, but unruffled, Hermione grabbed the Slinky from Severus and showed him how it worked between her hands. "There's no tension in the spring. It responds to movement," she explained. She surveyed the cell, and her eyes rested on the loaded bookshelf. Other than the growing number of white boxes stuffed on the bottom shelves, the top shelves were filled with pleasure reading and the occasional academic journal. She drew her wand and Summoned the contents of a shelf. Severus raised an elegant eyebrow, but said nothing.

She performed a hasty Transfiguration; it was one that would not pass muster under Professor McGonagall's sharp eye. The small steps she created against the cell wall still had their titles plainly visible, and the steps appeared to be made out of a wood grain that obviously resembled pages, but Hermione was satisfied. She dropped the Slinky at the top of the homemade stairs and nudged the coiled spring to flip over. Severus watched, transfixed, as the softly tinkling metal rolled itself down the stairs.

"Can you imagine how that might look falling down a flight of stairs?" she asked, handing the toy back to Severus.

He nodded silently, tipping the responsive spring back and forth between his palms. It was fascinating. He desperately wished his joints would move so freely.

Hermione left him a few minutes later after re-shelving his books. After all, it was best to give the silly boy some peace while he marveled at his new toy.

*

A/N:

Chapter title: Peccavi : I have sinned.

Fortuna only ruled half of men's fate, the other half belonged to their own will. - Mangled quote from Machiavelli's The Prince

Special thanks to my beta Christev20 who nursed me through this chapter, and to MiaMadwyn for her helpful thoughts.

Vita Contin Git. Vive Com Eo

Chapter 18 of 26

The happy couple celebrate in style.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything recognizable to the HP-Universe, JK Rowling does. I'm not making any money off the writing of this fanfic.

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Severus lounged idly in his armchair, skimming through another Muggle classic. This one was little more than some bodice-ripping twaddle set against the French Revolution. In his mind's eye, he could easily picture Lucius as the main protagonist, foppishly declaring "Odds Fish!" and ensuring not a single strand of his perfect coiffure was out of place. The protagonist was a charitable sort, but only bothered himself to aid the distressed aristocracy. He completely ignored the plight of the hungry begging masses. That sounded about right for Lucius.

He paused every now and again to covertly glance at the set of dress robes lying on the bed, almost afraid to properly acknowledge their existence. Relations with Hermione had gotten considerably more comfortable, and he was certain that by her gift she intended to spend New Year's celebrating with him... he just wasn't certain that was the best course of action.

Her visits were becoming a monumental bother.

He was now absolutely convinced the Gods themselves were taking the mickey out of him by sending a fresh, curvy witch to taunt him. She even smelled good. Never overly perfumed, or dusted with girly products, she just smelled... good. Normal. Divine. Which was a damned good thing, because there was nothing worse than licking a woman's collarbone only to taste her perfume. Not that Hermione would allow such a thing. Of course not. She was much better than he and would never stoop to allow any licking of collarbones, much less soiling of loins.

The buck-toothed, pudgy ugly-duckling had grown up and matured into a vivacious assertive witch that pushed all his buttons, and he was a man who had many buttons. Despite all that, Severus wanted her. He'd never wanked so much in all five years of his imprisonment as he had in the last few weeks. Not that it was saying much. He'd hardly bother to touch *'it'* and was beginning to believe *'its'* days were over. Packed up and retired to Majorca to die an obscure slow death. Now, footsteps rattling in the hallway were cause for a twitch.

Pathetic.

And now, dress robes and, no doubt, champagne were on the agenda for the evening.

Perfect.

As the sky lazily darkened, Severus threw down the novel and picked up the robes. Tasteful. Well-cut. Expensive. He felt the soft gabardine wool and wondered if it was a cashmere blend. The tactile fabric begged to be touched. He couldn't allow himself the fantasy that her generosity stemmed from a deeper desire to touch him and be touched by him. No. It had to be all her assistant's doing. Hermione would never permit him such liberties.

Later, a solitary clacking sound sent his heart hammering wildly beneath his breast. Severus' eyelids fluttered shut as he focused on the tinny quality of the sound. Heels. Definitely heels. Fantasies of strappy, impractical Italian stilettos and cherry red-painted toenails swam before his eyes before a soft knock returned him to his thrice damned existence.

Hermione had considerably taken to knocking when she was unaccompanied by a guard. Gone were the days of ugly barking orders and wands pressed against his jugular. After all, he was Hermione Granger-bringer-of-beer-and-pizza's husband.

"Severus?"

"I'd open the door for you, Vixen, but alas, that'd defeat the purpose of prison. However, please do come in."

The wards shimmered as the door swung open, and Severus kept his eyes downcast, scanning the floor, anticipating the first reveal of some wickedly inappropriate four-inch heels.

Severus bit the inside of his lip as she casually strode in, no doubt unaware of her affect. Hermione had the arches of a goddess; her delicate feet could turn any pampered pure-blood princess utterly beastly with envy.

Her strappy black stilettos with a single rhinestone band across her clear-painted toenails displayed her arches perfectly. They were not four-inch, come-fuck-me heels, but as his eyes traveled hungrily up her calves, they were enough. Severus eventually settled on her face and tried his best not to look like some malmsey-nosed simpleton.

Hermione quickly brushed through the door and shivered. Even though she'd only been briefly out in the near gale-force arctic winds, it had left her carefully pinned-up curls all askew, her cheeks tinted in a bright flush, and her cold nose slightly dripping. She was hoping for a more stunning and dramatic entrance, rather than looking like some hard-done, street-wandering strumpet.

She shed her wool pea coat and straightened her black Muggle wrap dress. Hermione knew her hair was a sight without needing to examine a mirror, but let the tumbling mop of curls be. To properly fix the now haphazard chignon would take hours. Why bother, after all...she risked another round of character assassination from Severus if she appeared too vain.

Hastily flicking through her blue beaded cocktail bag, Hermione pulled forth two bottles of champagne and held them up proudly.

"I thought we'd celebrate the New Year in a bit of style."

Severus solemnly nodded his approval, his throat too dry to endeavor speech without sounding like an artless boy lusting after a pretty girl way out of his league.

"Do you think two bottles will be enough for us? I left the case with the boys, but I'm sure they won't mind if I nick another bottle off them."

Hermione turned her back to rummage again, this time for flutes, while Severus stared at her calves, his brain befuddled by the way one knee was bent in a kick as she leaned over the bed. Did she bend that knee when soundly kissed?

"Ah!" Hermione exclaimed in triumph as she inspected two wrapped crystal flutes. "Why don't you see about uncorking one while I put the ticker up?"

Severus paused to watch her mutter an incantation, and with a well-practiced swish and flick, the GMT hovered in front of the wall in large, bright green numbers.

Severus peeled back the foil and netting and tapped the cork with his index finger. An audible 'pop' filled the chamber, and the cork bounced off the bookshelf. The bubbly managed to remain in the bottle.

"Severus! Was that...?" She smiled brightly at his smug grin. "I didn't know you could do magic here!"

He bit back the involuntary instinct to grind his teeth as she reminded him of his near helpless state and plastered an attempt at a charming smile on his face. For some reason he heard his mother's admonishments to 'be good, behave, be nice' ringing in his ears and remembered he was trying to be charming. Civil, even.

"Small things, Vixen, only small things. I can do only a handful of spells wandlessly, and there are dampening fields on this cell, but I've managed to learn a few tricks."

"Well, I'm impressed," she beamed. And she was. Maybe there was something to the flying rumors after all.

"Magic is like any other skill," he chuffed. "It withers with neglect and flourishes when nurtured."

"Well, I'll drink to that," she replied, lifting her glass. "Here's to nurturing. Relationships, business ventures, magic... everything. The world can always use a bit of nurturing."

"To nurturing," he echoed softly.

Severus took in the contented look that passed her features when the first tickle hit her palate. He needed to rein himself in, stop being so weak, and berated himself for having impure thoughts about his wife. Oh, irony of ironies.

"So, any resolutions this year?" he offhandedly asked, comfortably sliding into his armchair as Hermione lounged on the bed.

"I think," she tentatively began, "that this will be the year I finally let Hopper go. I've kept that sycophant on far too long. I am going to find a bigger warehouse for our operations... And I think I'm going to have another look at that Time-Turner research. I might have shelved that prematurely just because there hasn't been a known mechanicancer living in the last two centuries. And you?" she asked with a note of trepidation in her voice. She wasn't sure if it was considered bad form to ask a man serving a life sentence what his plans for the future were.

Severus sighed. He was hoping for a normal evening. Something to eat, something to drink, hopefully a bit of stimulating conversation and good company, but all she wanted to talk about was work. All she ever wanted to talk about was work. It had become the crux of their relationship. Of course. Hermione was so blasted single-minded.

He could recite nearly verbatim the findings of the latest market research, the new contract negotiations with distributors...hell, Severus could describe in great detail last quarter's raw materials receipts, but he only had the vaguest idea about how she lived. Where she lived. If she still hung around those lip-strumming dolts Weasley and Potter.

When not talking in a clinical and detached way about work, Hermione was skittish like a kitten around him. She didn't trust him, not really. And that was most likely his fault. If he was ever to hope that she'd look at him as anything more than a threat, a curiosity, a Death Eater, or vile ex-professor, she needed to see him as a man. Maybe then she'd honestly open up to him.

Did it take another humbling confession on his part to earn her trust? Bare his soul to her scrutiny in the hopes that she might open up similarly? Would he have to rake his soul over the proverbial coals for her to stop viewing him as some sort of menacing threat? Possibly. No. Probably.

She was looking at him expectantly; he could plainly see the apprehension in her eyes. What was the question? Resolutions? No, that would never do. It would be wrong for him to confess he wanted her locked up in with him, and to never leave. That would sound odd. Needy and desperate... perhaps creepy, too.

Severus cleared his throat and plucked the leather-bound Smythson journal from underneath his mattress and handed it to her. "I've been..." he said a bit hoarsely. "I've been composing potions in my head since I was a boy playing in my mum's herb garden."

"Composing?" she interrupted.

From her school days, she vividly recalled the way he captured their (okay, perhaps it was only 'her') imaginations with lyrical speeches on potion brewing, but since stepping into the world of industrial manufacturing, potions were: invented, created, originated, formulated, and occasionally discovered, but never composed.

He frowned. "Yes. I admit composing in one's head is not the best practice, but I am still a Master. I know exactly how components coalesce at different stages and how to coax a desired outcome."

Hermione began flipping through the journal, her fingers and eyes rapidly skimming his randomly jotted thoughts and quilled theories.

"What do you want me to do with this?"

"I was hoping you'd find something of value there. I suppose my New Year's resolution is to create a viable potion, even if in absentia." He waited patiently, even though she couldn't see the subtle nervous shifting of his weight.

"This one looks promising." Thoughtfully, she tapped the outline for a Skele-Gro modification that targeted worn cartilage. "It's not the sort of thing we normally do, but it does have potential. I'll hand it off to Gibson, and you can communicate via weekly progress reports."

"I wouldn't object to testing it out myself. I had my own back and knees in mind when I composed it."

Almost against his will, Severus allowed himself to be lulled into pleasant chatter on Granger Industries. It may have been a 'safe', neutral topic that he was coming to despise, but it was still good to watch her. Her eyes flashed when she seized onto a new idea and narrowed in fury when he challenged her. Ruffling Hermione's pin feathers would never get old.

Oh, she was a delicate brew, this one. Any moment, he could expect sparks, and he loved the roiling boil that heralded her magnificent explosions. Or she could collapse inward on herself, losing all her vibrant color, and congeal into a thick emotional sludge. Any first year knew which mess was harder to clean up.

Hermione pulled a few platters of nibbles from her deceptively small bag and asked Severus to repeat the nifty trick of popping the cork with a tap of his finger. Though she was already a bit buzzed, Hermione felt entirely justified in opening the second bottle; it was simply good manners.

Her eyes already a bit wide and glassy, evidence of being just a hair's breadth on the left side of tipsy, she giggled. "In the immortal words of Minerva McGonagall." Hermione blushed, raising her glass. "Here's looking up your kilt."

Severus raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Then, if I may propose the Slytherin House Toast to Honor."

"Honor? What rubbish."

"Madam, do you doubt the distinguished House of Slytherin's honor?"

"I most certainly do. I defy you to bring me a single honorable Slytherin. You know what? Don't bother. You can't; you'd have better luck finding one of Luna's mythical beasts. An honorable Slytherin is a contradiction in terms; one simply doesn't exist."

"Careful, Gryffindor," he sharply warned, "you find yourself in a serpent's lair. However, as I was saying," he said raising his wrist, "here's to honor. To getting on her. Staying on her. And if you can't come in her, come on her."

Hermione snorted and giggled, not even bothering to feign distaste or shocked sensibilities. "All right, you win." She sucked in a breath. "Apparently, the Slytherin house does have some form of honor."

"I'll cherish those words," he replied dryly.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Vita Contin Git. Vive Com Eo - Life happens. Live with it

I'd like to credit the toast to honor, but I learned it in college and have no idea where it comes from. Kilt toast comes from my father.

Sweet thanks to the lovely Christev20, who gives so abundantly of her time.

Amantes Sunt Amentes

Chapter 19 of 26

And some celebrate a bit more than others

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or anything recognizable to the HP-Universe, JK Rowling does. I'm not making any money off the writing of this fanfic.

Much earlier than she expected or really hoped, the ticker counting down to the New Year reached the final minutes. Hermione stared absently at the glowing green numbers. To say the year had spun by quickly and almost without notice was perhaps a broad sweeping generalization, but in many ways, it had.

She rifled through her mental catalog of achievements and nearly came up empty. In the prior twelve months, she had launched three new inventions. Six more were in various stages of production. A further twenty-five were up and coming on the docket. She had made time to be at each of her friends' birthday celebrations and declined her own.

She had gotten married.

Married.

Her mind lurched and stalled, hitting an invisible barrier. The best thing she had to say about the outgoing year was that she had gotten married. 'Til death do us part' and all that. The best thing she had to look forward to in the coming year was spending time with her husband.

Hermione glanced at Severus, who'd come up behind her, awkwardly reaching for her shoulders and pulling her against his warm chest, as if he was uncertain she would rebuff his affections.

She didn't. The comfort felt good. Hermione leaned back and welcomed the feel of him, her eyes peering past the shifting numbers, not quite seeing them. Lying against Severus' chest was relaxing, and being in such close proximity to him, she was able to thickly inhale his clean, soapy, herbal scent. His hammering heartbeat brought a small smile to her lips. This man was hers. As much as she belonged to him. Briefly, righteous feminist indignation rose to the forefront of her mind, and she tamped it down.

Ten.

Severus folded his arms around her chest, his fingers grazing her own.

Nine.

Hermione closed her eyes, giving in to the sensation of being held. Of being warm, and wanted, and perhaps even loved.

Eight.

Severus' cheek nuzzled her own. There was a faint rasping from some stubble, but his skin was rather smooth and softer than she had imagined.

Seven.

Blood pounded in her ears. Her heart thumped wildly beneath her breast, echoing the tattoo beat she could feel through their layers.

Six.

Hermione let him turn her in his arms.

Five.

Her arms intuitively wrapped around his waist.

Four.

She stared intensely at the line of cloth buttons running up his chest. Every thought process and higher brain function seemed to have shut down in order to feel. All nerve endings in her body tingled and sparked at each nuance of his touch.

Three.

His fingers tangled in her hair, reflexively massaging the knot at the base of her neck. Hermione fought the urge not to moan and failed miserably.

Two.

She knew. He was going to kiss her, and her breath hitched.

One.

He didn't move.

She was about to voice her protest until her eyes glanced up to lock on to his own glittering, black irises. Hermione was caught in his penetrating stare and offered her own wide-eyed acceptance in return. She'd berate herself and pretend it didn't happen later. 'Now,' she silently ordered with her mind, willing him to know. 'Kiss me now.'

Hermione heard his sharp inhalation of breath before his lips lightly touched hers, silently begging for permission. She felt a sweep of desire rush through her body as his moist lips suckled against her own. His mouth opened, and she delicately traced his lower lip with her tongue; the contact was electric, and she curled her fingers into his sides, bunching the fine fabric, drawing him into her. Severus gently reciprocated, swirling her tongue with his, encouraging her response and savoring her champagne taste. His soft kiss left her breathlessly dizzy and humming soft sounds of satisfaction. The fingers massaging the back of her neck, angling her head to reach him, sent the most arousing tingles down her spine to the apex of her thighs.

Her knees could not support her weight, but he held her boneless in his arms. Delirious, Hermione sighed her disapproval when Severus lifted his lips from hers.

She stood for a moment, still grasping his robes to regain her balance as the world refocused and slowly righted itself on its axis. She had kissed Severus Snape. Willingly.

She stepped away and tried to let her analytical brain reengage. Never mind the fact that it was the best damn kiss she could remember... ever. Ignoring that she wanted it. Forgetting the arousal that was still there, pooling in her belly. Pushing out of her mind the desire to do it again. She had kissed Severus Snape.

Hermione tried to make a face of distaste and couldn't. She settled on reproach and self-recrimination. Severus noticed the grimace immediately; hell, he expected it. It was history repeating itself. Lily Evans...Hermione Granger, it didn't matter; it was all the same story. The saga of a Muggle-born Gryffindor witch, a well-trodden path to destruction. She would not love him, either; she could not even bear his touch. This time, he just hoped the girl would spare an ounce of compassion for his heart before she broke it.

"It's tradition," he soothed.

"Of course it is." She nodded numbly. The placating excuse could cover the kiss. It could not, however, cover her response or the stomach-clenching desire to kiss him again.... No, the desire was to do more than just kiss the man. This was not what she signed up for. Definitely not the plan. She couldn't do this, couldn't let herself desire her ex-professor.

How would she be able to face anyone again? How could she face him if he knew she wanted him? Oh, he'd tease her. Decades stretched before her, and she couldn't be married to a man who laughed at her weakness, laughed at her desire for him. He'd exploit that. No. That could not happen. Would not happen. She wouldn't give him the ammunition he needed to break her.

'It's tradition,' he had said. Just a tradition. The kiss meant nothing to him. He didn't really want her. And he'd likely mock her if she let on that she wanted him.

'Shit.' She gulped to herself. 'Shit!'

Panic was starting to set in as she drew breath faster, but shallower, as if the air somehow lacked all oxygen. The tightness in her chest gripped her harder, causing her to pant, as Hermione scrambled for her beaded purse.

It felt as if Death's icy fingers were clutching around her chest. 'No no no no no no...' she repeated in her head, in her heart. It was wrong. Everything was wrong and tinged in gray. She clenched her teeth so they would not feel like shards of glass in her mouth as she rummaged deeper into the bag's recesses.

"Hermione?" Severus called out, anxiety coloring his rich voice. She swallowed thickly and ignored him. Allowing herself to pretend he cared for her was wrong. She was only duping herself by accepting his concern. Severus Snape cared for no one save himself.

"Where is it?" she hissed, nearly sticking her face into the bag.

What was she thinking? Clearly, she wasn't thinking. No, not about anything. She could feel Severus' presence as he shifted behind her. He was probably gloating. Had she not insisted that she would *Never-Ever* touch him? The smug bastard had to have been greedily rubbing his hands together, plotting her ruin and ogling her backside as she recklessly tore through the damnable handbag.

Ron's words from long ago taunted her, *'Are you a witch or not?'*

Drawing her wand, Hermione aimed it at the blue bag and raggedly screamed, *"Accio physician's case!"*

With stiff, troubled fingers, Hermione wrenched the case open and quickly found the whiskey-colored vial she so desperately sought. Somewhere, from the end of a long tunnel, someone yelled at her not to drink the elixir. As she poured the golden relief down her throat, Hermione didn't give a damn about the voice.

Her eyes closed tightly, shutting out all light; she knew when they reopened, her world would have taken on a brilliant, slightly amber-ish hue, but for the suspended moment in time, she wanted to hold on to the feel of the potion coursing through her veins. She just needed this bliss. The feeling of her bird-like heartbeat returning to normal. The beads of sweat now feeling cool against her skin instead of feeling clammy and burning up. The faint voice was raging, but she shrugged unconcerned. She'd deal with the voice later. Whenever. For the moment, she felt woozier than the time she took up the Headmaster's offer of a lemon drop.

Severus clenched his wand hand intuitively, silently praying for self control. He had never once hexed a student, a feat alone that should have garnered him an Order of Merlin, at the very least. He just didn't know if he could keep from strangling his wife.

He couldn't hit her. Severus swallowed, knowing he couldn't touch the witch. If he laid an angry hand on her, he'd never stop. His fist connected with the god-damned calendar clock duo, and it hit the floor violently. With little effort, he kicked it across the cell again, smashing it against the wall. It wasn't enough. As Hermione looked on, her sleepy eyes half-closed, Severus grabbed every book he could reach.

Distantly, she could hear the cell being destroyed. The loud noises made her jump a bit.

Prying fingers wrapped around her own, and she fought for control of the now empty glass. Her eyes opened to stare into the enraged face of Snape, his uneven teeth directly in front of her, close enough that she could smell the hint of strawberries and alcohol. Vaguely, she understood he'd been shouting. As her pupils warred between contracting and dilating, the distant shouting became clearer, sharper... damned bit louder, too.

He seemed to be expecting some kind of answer from her. Not that she knew what the question was. Well, whatever the question was, it didn't matter.

"I don't answer to you, Snape," she replied blandly, feeling as if the statement quite appropriately applied to any question he posed.

"The hell you don't," he snarled. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Granger?"

"Stop shouting in my ear," she said dully. "It's so unnecessary, I'm right here."

"I'll shout wherever I god-damned want, you stupid, fucking bint!"

"In which case it's probably best I leave, then." Hermione scooped up the heavy physician's case and fumbled to replace it in the bag before Severus snatched it from her fingers. "Whatever." She rolled her eyes. "I'll get it later."

Her pea coat dragged across the floor, feeling like the wool was saturated in water as she wrestled with it. And damn that man if he didn't grab that from her, too.

Hermione tried to glare at him in the eye... with the eye that was mostly open. He was still yelling. Perhaps a screaming tirade was a better description, as there were quite a lot of cuss words involved. Severus Snape appeared to favor the 'F-bomb.' He also spit when he shouted. It was oddly fascinating. When Hermione realized she was staring at his flying spittle, it slowly registered that staring was considered rude, and she came to the conclusion that she needed to make another stab at leaving.

The wizard had her case, her coat, and maybe her purse... it might have been someplace about... but she had her wand, which she leveled in what should have been a threatening way at his chest. His chest, which was really hard to get a lock on because of all the swaying he was doing, but it didn't matter; she was done for the evening. Or maybe she'd stop for a drink with the boys.

Hermione raised her voice shrilly to be heard over his growling shit-fit. "If you're quite finished, I'll be going now."

She turned rather too quickly, stumbling drunkenly as she lurched for the exit. She was nearly there when his hands clamped down hard on her shoulders causing her to squeak.

"If you take another step towards that door, I'll really give you something to scream about."

There was something sinister about his tight, clipped voice. The way it quietly dripped with venom cut through the dense fog surrounding her head, and she didn't doubt him. She swayed slightly, not trusting her own voice to give an acceptable reply. His hand grasped around her forearm, and he tugged her back to the bed where she ungracefully sat dumbfounded.

For his part, Severus was desperately trying to remember why he wasn't allowed to kill her. There was some reason why he mustn't kill the Muggle-born witch, but he was damned if he could remember why. It certainly seemed like a good idea... if she didn't O.D. first.

His face thrust into hers as he knelt between her legs. Severus' concerned eyes flicked over the thick rivulets of sweat that were pouring like seawater down her brow. Hermione watched his lips moving, trying to focus on them even though he was so close she felt her eyes crossing up. She smiled just a bit at his large, dark cycloptic eye. What a funny looking man.

"Hermione," he badgered her over and over again, repeating her name until she gave an indication of paying attention. Her eyes were disturbingly glassy and fully dilated, her lips slackened and slightly parted. Her breathing had finally slowed down from the earlier panic, but now was so light her chest barely rose. He didn't like the sudden sickly pallor of her skin, either.

As much as he wanted to beat her senseless, and rage at her foolishness, and scream obscenities all night long, and possibly plunge her head into a tub of ice water, he was honestly worried for her safety. Even with her full physician's kit at his disposal, there wasn't a single potion he could safely administer to her. The best he could do was wait it out and hope she didn't develop a fever.

"You silly girl," he whispered into her hair. "You can't mix alcohol with anti-depressants."

Hermione snickered.

He'd take it as a good sign.

A/N:

Chapter title: Amantes Sunt Amentes - Lovers are lunatics

I must thank Christev20 for her awesome beta skills. If it weren't for her, all of my sentences would end in prepositions.

Re Vera, Cara Mea, Mea Nil Refert

Chapter 20 of 26

Why drugs and alcohol don't mix.

"Oh, dear God!" Hermione mumbled, clamping her hand over her eyes to shut out the fricking light that spilled through the high window and right into her face. "Please, just kill me now."

Ugh, she'd had mornings after being hexed that were better than this.

"Later," a deep voice responded. "Sleep for now."

That sounded like dandy advice. Rather than dwell on it, Hermione rolled on her side into a warm masculine chest and wriggled herself into his shoulder. Charlie? No, Charlie was a blanket-hog who whistled as he snored. Whoever he was, he was a bit buff and held her nicely. Briefly, she skimmed her fingers across his pale, naked chest before he covered them with his own hand, and her eyes closed.

Hermione tried to fight consciousness. She knew once she fully woke the enormity of her stupid, idiotic foolishness would catch up with her. Severus would have her head on a pike. They'd probably mount it over the prison entryway, like in medieval times.

Every time her bladder or stomach threatened to wake her up, Hermione insistently told her body to shut it. She didn't want to hear it.

Severus lifted a veil of matted curls from her cheek. "Stop pretending, Vixen, and get up," he growled.

She was still nuzzled into his arm, which was the only part of his body that was asleep, but if she didn't get her ass up and soon, he was going to dump her from the bed, then use the loo right in front of her. Speaking for himself, he had no problem with nudity or taking a much needed piss in front of her, but he rather suspected she'd have objections.

Groggily, Hermione mumbled something that suspiciously sounded like, "Make me."

Even without being able to use his dead arm as leverage, Severus easily grabbed her waist, swiftly rolled her over his body, and softly tumbled her body to the floor.

"Right." He stood towering over her blanket-wrapped form. "Have it your way." Momentarily unconcerned for her welfare, given her prognosis that she'd live at least another day, Severus strode to the loo and began his morning ritual.

Hours earlier, he'd been ready to force her head in the loo until her poisonous stomach contents presented themselves, but the potion was already in her bloodstream, and she needed whatever paltry nutrients she'd ingested. At the time, it seemed the sanest of his thoughts. Murdering his wife was also seriously contemplated. This morning, however, was a new day. The impudent chit had managed to survive the night with only a hangover to show for it, and he was composed enough not to lose his temper with the witch. That didn't mean she was in any way off the hook.

He would never begrudge her medication. If she needed a mood stabilizer to stay sane, or even, or whatever she was looking for, that was fine. The wizarding world was full of witches and wizards in need of potions to keep them from tipping over into madness. Severus often theorized that heavy inbreeding had caused manic depression, among other disorders, to become a dominant gene within the wizarding population. It was a theory that went a long way to explaining the eccentricities for which his House was notorious.

No, he'd not begrudge anyone the help they required, and he'd support Hermione in whatever way she needed. But this wasn't about medication. Her concentrated form of *Non Solum Noctus* was dangerous. It wasn't the standard issue Apothecary dosage.

On the cold stone floor, even cocooned in blankets, Hermione wanted to sink like a ghost through the ground. If she died right then and there, it might have only marginally eased her humiliation.

He watched her through the mirror as he shaved and was temporarily disturbed as she lay completely motionless, but figured the girl was still mortified by her monumental display of boil-brained stupidity. Which she should have been. 'Brightest witch of her age,' he huffed. It was probably true, which was a poor commentary on the intellectual acuity of her contemporaries.

Still dressed in dark blue pajama bottoms, Hermione clad only in his top, he poked her through the pile of sheets with his toe as if she were some stunned animal.

"Oh, get up!" he demanded. "Honestly, witch, the longer you put off the inevitable, the worse you'll make it for yourself. Now, move!"

Hermione raised a bedraggled head, her curls so impossibly tangled into an ugly mess of pins, she wondered if she fell asleep with bubblegum in her mouth as well. Her face burned in shame as she got to her feet, only then becoming aware that she was not wearing what she thought she went to sleep in, not that she remembered being put to bed, but she refused to be cowed. Hermione steadily met his gaze.

He threw her a pair of his slippers. "Get cleaned up and come back," he ordered. To punctuate his command, Severus held up her wand.

The cell door creaked open with a flick of his wrist.

She hadn't made a 'walk of shame' in years, but as Hermione trudged down the hallway towards the guests' and guards' loo, she shivered, and it wasn't from the cold.

When she reemerged, Severus was dressed and standing implacably in the center of the cell, looking every bit like the Potions master of her youth, as she remembered. Hermione still looked like some tossed-out one-night stand.

"Sit," he ordered and was not mollified in the least when she complied, smoothing out a place for herself on the bed sheets.

He handed her back her clothing. Her charmed-clean dress folded neatly atop her pea coat, her stockings and heels tucked into an oversized pocket. Hermione searched her memory for anything that would explain exactly how she got out of them and into his nightshirt, but could think of nothing. Somehow, she didn't think they had fooled around together. He probably would have been in better spirits if they had.

"Now," he began his lecture formally, as if addressing recalcitrant students, "you'll notice shortly that I've returned your physician's case to you. Before you bother, your anti-depressants are gone." He gestured languidly towards the sink.

"What. The. Fuck?" Hermione fumed, standing immediately.

"What the fuck indeed, Hermione," Snape replied evenly. "I'd ask what you were thinking, but it's obvious you weren't."

"Do you have any idea how expensive the ingredients alone are? How much time it takes to brew?"

"I'm well aware of the properties of *Non Solum Noctus*. Any N.E.W.T.-level student is. Spare me the histrionics."

"But I bet you didn't know that the price of Horntail liver has gone up tenfold in the past year?"

"You have the money to afford it."

"That doesn't mean I waste it by pouring out good potions!" she railed, flinging her arms high above her head. "Nothing gave you the right to touch what's mine. I don't know why we keep having this conversation, Snape. First it was my business, and now it's my personal life. I don't know how you were raised to believe that this is acceptable behavior, but it's not. Keep out, Snape!"

"I have every right, wife. What's yours is mine; that is generally how marriages work, or are you unable to comprehend the Ministry's edicts? I assumed you did have at least a moderate level of reading comprehension to understand it. Obviously, my conclusions have been ill-founded. Thank you for disabusing me of that notion; I will endeavor to use smaller words from now on."

"Fuck you, Snape. You know damn well I can run circles around your intellect. Furthermore, I don't give a damn about Ministry edicts, and I'm not going to listen to a lecture on the law from a convict. Now, if you don't mind, I'm leaving. It looks like I've got a potion to start, no small thanks to you."

He halted her with a strong grip on her forearm. "You cannot brew that toxic concoction; I forbid it!"

"I don't see how you can; I've got a legitimate prescription and a manufacturing license. Now, let go of me."

"Hermione, don't make me repeat myself. You will not take that potion again. This is not up for discussion."

"You can't just demand such things from me. Once I leave this prison, I can do whatever the hell I want, Snape, and you're just going to have to get used to that. I don't see why you care. One would think you'd be happy that I was treating myself for depression instead of wallowing in it."

"Of course I care!" he raged. "You'll put yourself into an early grave with that stuff. I expect you'll have full renal failure before you hit a hundred."

"Ah, now I understand. Where would that put you, with nobody to bring you books and dinner?"

"If you choose to view it that way, then yes. I do have a personal stake in your continued well being."

Her eyes flashed violently. He may have had her wand, but that couldn't last long, she could send him flying on his ass wandlessly if need be, but something in his dark, unfathomable gaze held her back from doing anything dramatic. Snape was unpredictable at best, and the look of warning he'd given her a moment before was enough to proceed cautiously.

His eyes narrowed in silent contemplation before pivoting her body around and pushing her back down on the bed. He stood, taking pleasure in towering over the goat-stubborn girl with his most intimidating stare.

"Evidently, I need to express myself more clearly, because you plainly don't understand the position you are in, Madam. I do not care what prescription you have. You took an anti-depressant for an anxiety attack. I do not care for whatever excuses you come up with to rationalize your lapse in judgment. I do not care to hear any justifications for your unacceptable behavior, nor do I need any reason why you take that addictive potion in the first place. You will cease immediately."

Hermione shook her head violently. She was willing to compromise on many things for the sake of the peace of her marriage, but she would not stand for her so-called husband to dictate her life and welfare to her.

"Liquid Sunshine is non-addictive, and you know it, Snape. When I leave here, I'm going to brew my potion, and there's not a damn thing you can do to stop me, so just get over that."

Severus sighed deeply; he knew fighting with the pigheaded witch was like chasing a Snitch in a rainstorm. Just when you think you have accomplished your objective, she slips out of your fingers, bound and determined to do as she pleased. He dropped ungracefully into his armchair, bone-weary and nearly exhausted from the night's ordeal. Keeping a constant vigil had taken its toll; after all, it had been years since he last involved himself in such nonsense.

Couldn't she see that he was trying to be rational, as evidenced by the fact that he hadn't actually killed her yet? Hermione was supposed to be a logical girl. Arguments with her were supposed to be won with sound reason; she wasn't foolish. Impertinent, yes; foolish, no. He simply needed to state his case reasonably. 'I'm angry. This is why. This is what you've done. This is what you should have done. This is what my expectations are from now on. These are the consequences.' So why was she being so damned obstinate?

"Your Liquid Sunshine is habit-forming. Dependency is the same as addiction, my dear, and the strength of your brew is reason enough for me to suspect you're a long-time user."

"I am not an addict!" she indignantly screeched, reaching for her clothing.

"Fine," he conceded half-heartedly. "But you're abusing it just the same. Last night, you had a panic attack, not a depressive episode. Can you honestly justify this? Your mistake could have been lethal."

"I was angry, and I was drunk!" Hermione announced. "I made a bad decision. I won't do it again. End of story."

"Exactly! You were drunk. What happens the next time you get drunk? Or angry? Or panicky? Or don't get your way? That potion is meant for someone suffering from such debilitating depression that they can't function." He peered at her, thoughtfully, and under other circumstances, Hermione thought he might actually care about her.

"Are you really that depressed?" he asked softly.

"I..." she sputtered. Nobody knew about the Liquid Sunshine, and she certainly wasn't prepared to answer for it. She sighed loudly. She'd been that depressed, had days where she was at the end of her rope, and hanging from it had seemed like a good option.

Her assistant, Jake Edwards, had found her a Muggle psychologist, but who had the time for such things? Besides, even without mentioning magic, she couldn't talk to him about her problems. He snooped too much into her personal life, which was probably what he was paid to do, but it rankled just the same.

"I..." she tried again before giving up.

Severus watched her shoulders slump with genuine concern.

"Do you still feel that way?" he prodded gently.

Hermione's head shot up, and she glared at him. Severus Snape had no right to pry. He would never be her confessor. If they started playing this game, he'd expect her to answer to him. And then she might as well have found herself a 'real' husband.

"Do you?" he demanded, sensing her changing emotion. "Because I'd like fair warning if my wife is a miserable head case."

Damn, she swore to herself. There was no way to answer that safely. If she said she was still depressed, she was admitting to being a 'miserable head case,' if she said no, he was perfectly justified in insisting that she give up her potion.

Hermione gave herself a moment to clear her head and breathe. Was she still severely depressed? When was the last time she felt like sticking her head in the oven? Or having a potions accident? When was the last time she woke up at the sparrow's ass crack of dawn, but didn't want to leave the bed... ever?

She swallowed thickly. It was before Severus; before his help with the business. Back when she had to sit miserably alone in restaurants or eat dinner in front of the telly or not at all. Back when she was so alone that she irrationally wanted to curse Crooks for being a companion, but one who was unable to hold a decent conversation.

Reminders of the near constant despair she felt came rushing back. It wasn't a dark period of her life; it was the simple reality of being her and feeling so fucking inadequate, the abject loneliness of being so miserably alone when surrounded by people, by friends who couldn't warm the cool, dead place beneath her breastbone. The time she stupidly hacked and chopped her horrid hair into a pixie cut just because she had to change, hoping that with a new look, something about her would be better, improved, and different; that a stupid fucking haircut could somehow make everything better. Back when she needed the happy little bottle to make the world feel a worthwhile place to inhabit.

Measurable success had gone a long way to beat back the demons whispering that she was somehow lacking, that everyone knew she was a failure but hadn't the heart to tell her because they pitied her. Having time to catch her breath and eat sensibly helped, too. But most of all, not being so fucking alone all the time made the demons stop taunting her in a remarkably Molly Weasleyesque voice that she'd always be alone and unloved. They still whispered to her, but not like before.

Not that she wasn't still alone in her own way. Or that Severus loved her.

But she wasn't as dependent on the drugs to keep her from being a complete wretch anymore.

"I may not need the potion as much as I once did, but I refuse to give up a perfectly legitimate prescription just because you have the audacity to demand it. And I resent the implication that I'm some potion popper."

Severus was quiet for quite a while as he studied her face. She didn't like the way his fingers were pursed together or the dangerous sickle glint in his eyes. It made her rather feel like prey.

"If you refuse to see reason, then I believe we have come to an impasse. I'm afraid I can't abide by a wife who rejects the will of her husband, considering I only have your best interests at heart. I shall be owing the Ministry forthwith and have our marriage annulled."

"Our marriage can't be annulled, Severus. I'm sorry to break it to you, but you're stuck with me," Hermione said blandly.

"Oh," he asked with an arched eyebrow. "So you'd like to consummate the marriage now?"

He left that statement dangling in the air and showed no trace of emotion as her eyes widened.

He wasn't goading her into taking a roll in his bed; they both knew without a doubt that he would be unable to consummate the marriage. The same prison regulations that prohibited him from physically penetrating her could be used against her if he lodged a complaint with the Ministry.

Their wedding ceremony kiss was symbolic and enough to satisfy the contract. There was no requirement to hoist bloody sheets out windows or prove that consummation had even taken place. *They were English, for God's sake!*

Aside from which, the Ministry wasn't exactly following up on each and every marriage, not when hundreds of new couples were running to the altar. The Ministry didn't have the resources to provide national owl service or regulate Portkeys, much less offer child care for the hordes of rug-rats produced from the law. The very idea that the sub-department on Magical Marital Relations had the capability to sit around watching and tabulating every time a wizard chose to allow his witch to warm his bed was both perverted and ludicrous. If the Ministry started keeping a record of every time a wizard touched a witch, there wouldn't be any parchment left in all of Great Britain.

Most Ministry officials would be dumbfounded to realize that inmates were not allowed the *privilege* of conjugal relations; not even the Ministry stooge sent to witness their joining had any idea, and he was from that department. Then again, the laws, by-laws, and blue-laws constituting both wizarding marriages and incarceration were numerous enough to give anyone fits. Positively, no one was anal-retentive enough to familiarize themselves with such things. Well, excluding present company, of course.

Hermione was safe. Who was she? One witch in a sea of witches. No one would ever suspect her coup or know she had beaten them at their own game.

Unless Severus Snape opened his damn mouth.

"Sweet Nimue, Hermione, if you have to think on it, we'll be here all day!" Severus scowled. "It will only take one word from my lips, and this joke you've constructed at the Ministry's expense will be over. I doubt very much they'll take kindly to you making a mockery of their new law. They seem to be very proud of it."

"Smugly so," she whispered absently. Her mind seemed to have relocated thousands of miles away from her body. As the present returned to her, she wondered if that was the sensation she'd feel when the Dementors came to kiss her.

She wanted to ask him what he wanted. His bribe. His blackmail. But she already knew. *The Von Solum Noctus*, Liquid Sunshine. Once upon a time, it had seemed like her life line. She'd been brewing it herself since fifth year to keep up with the boys. To keep from feeling inadequate while surrounded by Lavender and Parvati. To feel like half-trained children actually had a chance to beat the most powerful and magically gifted Dark wizard in a century. To keep from crying at night in Charlie's bed. To keep from feeling like a useless Mudblood.

Each year seemed to require a stronger brew. Bigger doses. More Horntail liver. And yet, she hadn't taken a single dose in the past six weeks.

"I'll try," Hermione enunciated clearly. "But this is it. You don't get to hang this over my head every time we disagree about something. If you threaten to go to the Ministry again, we'll go back to the strict interpretation of the marriage contract. I'll come by your cell twice a week for an hour. No more, no less. No extras. No perks."

Severus quietly agreed.

A/N:

Chapter title: Re Vera, Cara Mea, Mea Nil Refert - Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.

The lovely and gifted Christev20 poured her formidable talent into making this and every chapter legible. Thank you.

In Puris Naturalibus

Chapter 21 of 26

Special delivery for the birthday boy.

She had a headache. It was a slight twinge that raced up the column of her neck and bloomed across the back of her head. It was born of distributor requests, lack of caffeine, and poor posture. So why was she looking at her Liquid Sunshine instead of her headache solution?

Swearing fiercely, Hermione unwarded an office cabinet and delicately placed the last of her supply of Liquid Sunshine away. If Severus thought he had poured all of her potion down the drain, he thought wrong. With glaring clarity, she realized how overstocked her home and office were with the amber-colored salvation. He was right. She hated him for it, but he was right.

This couldn't be healthy. Wanted. Desired. But not healthy. Probably not. Still, she couldn't bring herself to pour them out. After all, they were really frickin' expensive, and Hermione hated wasting good Galleons.

It couldn't possibly be withdrawal. No, certainly not. That would mean she had formed some type of dependence on the drug. That would mean Severus had been right. No, she couldn't allow him the satisfaction of gloating.

'Life with Snape' hadn't returned entirely to normal since their last blow up. Relations were stilted, and she was prone to prattle on and on about work to avoid real conversation, but they were at least on friendly terms. *Friendly terms* being a relative expression.

She still hadn't forgiven him completely for dumping her Liquid Sunshine. Or the bigger issue...prying into her life. But they were both making concessions with each other, which, according to the self-help relationship book she'd been reading, was perfectly healthy and normal for any new marriage. The experts said that they both had to set boundaries, clearly communicate expectations, and be willing to compromise. Advice was easy for experts to give, but in practical exercise... with Severus Snape... *Pffft!* What did experts know?

When she arrived at the prison, Hermione counted the doors to her right and left in the cellblock as she made her way towards his door. Her own hollow footsteps echoing loudly off of the stone walls didn't help the creepy feeling that tickled her spine. Ever since learning what was warehoused behind each cell door, she knew she wasn't alone. The empty lurking presence of soul-sucked bodies were what nightmares and Boggarts were made of. Hermione tightened her claw-like hold on Severus' birthday meal as she held her chin up high and tried not to think... no, not to think of who... no, what was behind each door.

There had to be hundreds of them. Nameless, faceless Ministry victims. Processed for justice and the Ministry's combating-terrorism campaign. True, crime was down. Knockturn Alley was the new posh shopping district, but this...?

This had to be a crime in itself.

And Severus?

Should be on his knees in indebted prayer, thanking God for his merciful blessing. He had to be one of the only wizards who received a trial. A media circus of a show trial, but at least it was justice before the Wizengamot instead of a Ministerial Decree from the 'Ad-hoc Special Inquiry of the Sub-department on Practitioners of Illicit Magic.'

Pausing right before Severus' door, Hermione politely knocked. This time. Not that she might not sneak up to his door for a peek next time. There was a distinct level of satisfaction that came from sneaking up to his open jailer's slot for a little look-see, but that required wearing soft trainers and not loudly clacking heels. Then again, there was also the potential she'd catch him taking time out for a 'personal moment,' and that was something she was certain she didn't want to see.

He tiredly called for her entry, and Hermione tapped his code into the door frame for admission. She'd been given the password into his cell long ago by the boys...not that they minded escorting her, but rather, they let her come and go as she pleased. Which was really fine with them as long as she continued to ply them with goodies and stop every now and then to inquire about how they were getting on. That, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that his password was the same as his prisoner number. Idiots.

With a mischievous smirk, Hermione budged open the door and held her arms up to show a large paper bag emitting heavenly smells. "Special delivery for the birthday boy!"

"Madam, if you dare ever refer to me as the birthday boy again, I'll put you over my knee, and you certainly won't like it. I assure you, I am all man. Feel free to give it a squeeze if you have any doubt."

"Such drama, Severus," she responded, rolling her eyes. Not that she didn't color up satisfactorily.

The special birthday meal for the special birthday man was obligingly devoured by both, and Hermione drew out pints of slightly melting ice cream for dessert. True birthday cake would have been a bitch to pick up en route and really would have taken actual planning and time she didn't have.

"No," he chided, bringing her attention back to the serious matter at hand. "If ice cream were meant to have chunks, it would be named ice chunky. As it is named ice cream, it is meant to be creamy. To throw chunks into the confection is an insult to all self-respecting ice creameries out there."

"Wrong answer."

Severus' head shot up as she made an odd noise like some kind of buzzer, but then she was prone to oddities.

"Ice cream," she stated confidently, pausing only to lick at her dribbling spoon, "is named for its content, not its consistency. It is iced cream, but then, adding flavorings to the so-named cream does not change what it is any more than different cores change the essence of a wand. This isn't potionry, you know."

Severus sharply angled an accusatory spoon towards her. "Ah, therein lies the fallacy of your argument. Different cores dramatically change the nature of wands. There is a hierarchy inherent to wands. Have you not noticed that most idiot Hufflepuffs carry common unicorn hairs? The sort anyone walking about a forest could find lying about? Or picked up on Slytherin's tendency to much superior dragon heartstrings? Surely, you've not forgotten the wand Potter carries? Or its mate? In which case, I must reassert the hierarchy of ice cream. Chunks are for fools and charlatans; it is the Hufflepuff of ice creams. Clearly, creamy ice cream is for those with refined palates." For good measure, Severus had a heaping spoonful to add credence to his argument.

"Fine! Bad analogy. Excuse me. If that's how you really feel about it, I'll only bring you vanilla from now on, as it is obviously the 'purest' of all the creamy ice creams. Only, that would mean no more mint chocolate chip."

The icy glare he shot her was enough to make her spoon pause in mid-air.

"What?" she countered obnoxiously. "It has chunks."

"The chocolate shavings in mint chocolate chip are observably not real chunks, as they do not hinder the smooth quality of the ice cream. Clearly, mint chocolate chip is a superior ice cream. Not like that... that..."

"Chunky Monkey."

Severus shook his head before quietly muttering, "Even the name is low brow."

"Low brow? Perhaps. Here's an idea for you, Severus, if you detest chunky ice cream so much. Why don't you get a bunch of creamy ice cream friends together, and you can gang up on all the low brow chunky ice cream eaters? Then you can purify the world, and everyone will be convinced of your ice cream supremacy."

She inspected him with dispassionate eyes as his chin dropped to hide the humiliation burning in his cheeks.

Severus didn't want to play anymore. The fun banter had seemed almost like flirting until she, he, one of them, had cocked it all up and brought up that. Hermione had no idea how vulnerable he was, that with a few stray, careless comments, the festering sore was torn wide open. He thought it might have been healing, the fibers knitting back together as the nightmares had started disappearing. He no longer saw dead blue eyes staring him down, empty and lifeless except for a hint of accusation, before they fell. Endlessly fell. The accusation in them gripping him by his neck until he woke himself screaming.

He felt himself balling up inside. Preparing for winter. He could go days, weeks, even years without the warmth of life in his veins.

Hermione watched as the smallest orphan tear begin to well up in the corner of his eye. It was from dust motes in the air. Obviously, she had been remiss in keeping up with all the household charms and cleaning. Absolutely. Without a doubt.

An ugly garish cup was forced under his nose, and Severus nearly crossed his eyes to see it before pitching his head back.

"Try it."

"I said, *Try it!*"

She paused while he examined the contents. His eyes critically cataloging the sweet like a Potions Master. "Damn it! Just try the fucking stuff, and then you can tell me how nasty it is."

Watching his non-reaction, Hermione felt a small sense of panic. His curtains were drawn, the shutters firmly latched. Reaching in with her spoon, she swirled it in the sticky sweet cream and held it to his lips. They parted, and as he savored it, she watched his eyes darting back and forth beneath his thin eyelids.

"The banana is too sugary," he mumbled, turning the ice cream around in his mouth.

"And?"

Sitting forward, so close that she was nearly sitting in his lap, Hermione could hear the crunch from his jaw as he worked the bits of walnut and dark chocolate.

"The crunch creates a nice contrast to the smooth. I like that the chocolate is slightly bitter." He opened his eyes to the vision of his Hermione, her smile spilling warmth back into his veins. There wasn't a trace of malice in her eyes. No accusation in their honeyed brown flecks. Just eternal spring. The call for life to return to the earth. And he felt himself waking up.

"So the chunks are okay?" she asked, fidgeting with a loose curl.

"The chunks are the best part," he affirmed.

Digging her spoon in his abandoned cup, Hermione noisily slurped a bite of his ice cream before pronouncing it good, too.

She left him shortly thereafter with sticky lips and a satisfied belly. And something more... a promise. He couldn't put his finger on just what that promise was, but it was warm and spread through his body like love.

Severus slept heavily...the biological response to carbohydrates and a sugar crash...but his dreams were peaceful. The well-earned rest of the sick and healing.

When he awoke, the pink light of dawn cast a faint glow on his cell. He found himself curled up with the robes he hadn't removed bunched around his shoulders, but otherwise no worse for wear. He closed his eyes again, blotting out the first rays of what was inevitably bound to be a glorious day. Somewhere, thousands of miles away, millions of people, wizard and Muggle alike, would wake to this morning. Some would discount the blessing of the day with barely a nod in Helios' direction as the mindless masses trudged to a bleak and colorless office. Some would see the sky, marvel at the beauty of life, and stretch like a flower towards it. He wondered how his Hermione would greet the day.

He knew for a fact that her schedule was packed, and she would barely have a moment to spare for herself. But she was not among the drab and dreary caught in the cogs of man's infernal machines. Out there, she might breathe in deeply between meetings and conference calls (he still had not gotten a clear picture of what one was), and she would take a moment to thank the Gods for nourishing the world again.

Hermione.

His sunshine days and diamond-sparkling nights were spent with Hermione. He still didn't know if she was a gift or a test. The Gods were rarely forgiving or merciful, but if he had found their favor, surely she belonged to him.

Beneath his lids, Severus concentrated on the sounds of Azkaban. Rarely was there ever any real noise in the prison, and when there was, it sounded overly loud and rang like lightning claps on the ears. But the ancient fortress had a distinct cadence. The wind never ceased in its assault, as if it were offended by the free-standing object in its flat playground. He could always count on the sound of the water to lull him to sleep.

On peaceful days, it lapped at the structure, tickling its sides and accepting its presence. When the sea was fierce with anger and the wind wanted to play rough, Azkaban was pitched between the two. The water battered the rock face in a fit of temper that it could not capsize the prison as it could so easily toss about unfortunate ships.

His ears picked up on the gentle waves. He couldn't hear any shuffling in the distance, which was often Mulciber, Strathmore, and Cooley, his guards, rumbling about in the checkpoint area. He would never deign to refer to them as *the boys*. They were not his friends, nor would they ever be.

It appeared, for the moment, that he was entirely alone. Severus cracked an eye and peered speculatively at the door. Making up his mind, he bolted upright with the skill and ease of a man accustomed to waking thusly. His sleep-wrinkled robes were thrown in the hamper Hermione had provided.

Severus doffed the rest of his clothing and added them to the dirty pile. Soon, he'd have to remind the witch he was running out of changes of clean clothing. A novel thought, considering he had spent nearly five years in the same grubby and threadbare set of robes. He toed off his slippers and hastily jumped on top of his bed covers, one eye still suspiciously on the cell door. He wasn't certain if he'd be pleased or mortified if Hermione caught him.

Severus snaked his hand down to his cock and stroked it a bit. Lazily, his eyes closed again as his well-practiced touch coaxed an arousal. He pinched and teased the head a little, loving the rasp of friction on his most sensitive spot. His fingers laced around his thickening cock, plying it to attention with a small amount of wrist action, to touch every inch.

Severus palmed his hardened member, sliding flesh against flesh and caressing the engorged mushroom head. He knew at any given minute she could catch him. He imagined Hermione tiptoeing up to his cell door in her grubby trainers and watching him through the jailer's slot. His eyes rolled back in his head...

Hermione's eyes went wide, and her mouth made a slack jawed 'O' to see her stoic husband give in to the needs of his flesh. With growing hunger, she watched him cupping his balls, rolling them slightly around as he corkscrewed his fist across his shaft.

Watching him masturbate caused a wonderful flush to bloom across her pretty face, and Hermione wantonly walked into his cell and dropped to her knees. Approaching him with a predatory smirk, she traded his calloused hand for her pink tongue. Her technique was unpracticed, but oh, so enthusiastic.

She gave every blessed inch her careful attention before engulfing him in her cavernous mouth. Her lips wrapped tightly around him as her cheeks hollowed, Hermione applied her tongue to lave him as she bobbed up and down on his cock. The greedy little cocksucker occasionally moaned as her fingers dipped into her knickers to relieve her slickly coated nubbin. The perfume of her arousal brought Severus' eyes fluttering open to stare at his goddess. He allowed his hand to rest gently on her head for a moment, guiding her to take him fully, before pulling her up alongside his body to join him on their bed.

She was conveniently wearing a skirt, the naughty little Vixen. Severus hiked the garment around her waist and pulled her soaked knickers around her ankles. Breathing heavily from anticipation, Hermione watched his movements with rapt attention, arching her back and begging him with her undulating body to satisfy her need. Sitting back on his heels, Severus fisted his erection a few times, letting her watch the show she had begged to be a part of, letting her watch the salty precum bead at the tip. Her arms reached out to him as Hermione struggled against her body's insatiable need for contact, and he surprised her by dropping his head to taste her molten flesh. Hermione's quim was succulent and rich with her musky essences, and it had been so damn long since he had the pleasure of feasting on a juicy pussy. Severus bathed her with his talented tongue, licking her pretty little pussy and teasing her pulsing clit. Hermione cried out and raked her nails sharply against his scalp.

She thrashed beneath him as he nuzzled her flesh and fucked her with his tongue. Hermione sobbed how wonderful he was. Shrieked what an amazing sex god he was. She whispered to him how much she fucking loved him. And cried how much she desperately needed his heavy cock deep within her as she shattered. His witch needed him.

Hermione's arms moved down his shoulders, gripping his forearms to drag him up her body as she panted and recovered from her explosive orgasm, but seeing his throbbing erection made her hungry again. And she begged so prettily he could afford to be generous and give the squirming girl what she wanted. Hermione pulled his neck down, shoving her tongue between his teeth, seeking out her juices, while one small hand reached between them.

She petted him a few rough times out of her own need to feel the cock she worshiped before placing him at her entrance. Her arms went around his backside, pressing her nails into the only part of his flesh that was soft and leaving tiny nail marks.

"Please," Hermione hoarsely pleaded. "I need you within me, Severus." It was the slight trickle of tears from her eyes that was his undoing as he obliged his love and drove into her hot channel.

That was all the inspiration Severus needed to come. His thick, salty essences coated his palm and shot across his belly.

Hermione was not at the jailer's slot watching. And, dear gods, with his luck, it would be Strathmore out there, painting the door with his spunk. Life was patently unfair. With a grimace, Severus muttered 'Accio bog paper,' the one wandless spell he had mastered quite well in the dank gilded cell, and cleaned himself off. Perhaps it was best she hadn't seen him with his trousers down. She'd probably never return.

A/N:

Chapter title: In Puris Naturalibus - Completely naked

Special thanks to Annie Talbot and Christev20 for fixing the formatting issues. Ya'll rock.

Malum Quidem Nullum Esse Sine Aliquo Bono

Chapter 22 of 26

Somebody has a small book club. (Shhh, don't tell Hermione!)

Severus sat in contemplative silence, wasting a perfectly good scowl on the paperwork spread out before him. Hermione's charmed window kept out the yowling wind brought in by a heavy storm, but he could breathe in whole big lungs full of salt-scented air. With a muttered expletive, he threw his quill down and cobbled together the folders, throwing them down on the floor for another time. He now hated her distributors as much as she did.

Bored, Severus scanned the remains of the previous night's takeout Thai food. There had been plenty of it, given that 'the boys' refused to even taste it. Philistines. The first spoonful of Tom Khar Kai, or spicy chicken soup in coconut milk, had been a seminal moment in his life, and Severus wondered how he'd lived without it before. The foamy pink noodle dish... not so much. He had made a motion to rename it mee-crap, but Hermione was not amused and was unwilling to second the motion.

Strangely, Thai food came with a Chinese Fortune Cookie, not that she seemed surprised, but Severus was disinclined to dispute the flaw in that logic. His fortune had read, 'You will find yourself on a long journey.' Claptrap like that called into question the honor of ancient Chinese wisdom and whether 2, 8, 11, 13, 24, 26, and 35 really were his lucky numbers.

Hermione had giggled in a most unbecoming manner and revealed her secret destiny was to 'Meet new and exciting people in bed.'

Severus had quickly proposed a trade. Obviously, he had gotten the raw end of the deal. Not that there was any surprise in that. And to add insult to injury, the hardtack cookie was both completely unpalatable and a chore to swallow. How typical.

Her girlish giggle was the only time Hermione laughed, much less seemed to relax.

To say relations were strained between them was like saying Fluffy was just a dog. And Hermione hadn't stayed long after dinner. He knew repairing the damage done to their tenuous relationship would be slow going and much more difficult than the falling out they had when he first edited her reports, but Severus was a patient man. He could wait her out as long as necessary. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do. And getting her off the Liquid Sunshine would do a lot to further his aim.

A smile tugged at his lips as he wickedly envisioned the polar ice cap of indifference around her heart melting. Her sex drive returning. He smirked. A happy, healthy, and

naturally passionate Hermione would be a much better Hermione for everyone concerned. 'Everyone concerned' namely him. Damn anyone else.

He shook his head, hoping that such romantic sounding thoughts would somehow tumble out from between his ears. All he could do was be patient and give her time to adjust. Though the very idea that he was being this kind and considerate toward a witch he wasn't even bedding made his lips curl. Every day made him more and more amazed by how wrapped up in little Hermione Granger's world he'd become. If Albus were alive, he'd be as happy as the day he'd discovered something called a ring pop.

Granger had been a student just like any other. She wasn't likely to melt a cauldron or blow up the lab, and under those circumstances, she should not have garnered much of a second glance. She should have been another faceless name on an attendance sheet. But she wasn't. Had never been, if only because of the company she'd kept and the fact that she was disturbingly talkative in class. And annoyingly correct. But still, she was Granger, first row, third seat from the left, Outstanding, graduating class of 1998. She shouldn't have been anything more than that to him. Or at least, she hadn't been. Shouldn't have been.

And yet, she was. Every day, he stared at the same four walls, and yet, they were so disturbingly different from the same four walls they'd been just a few scant months ago, that somehow every fucking thing about his life was so different he wondered what the hell had happened to cause all of this. Granger should have been a named storm. She invaded and upset everything, from his stacks of luxury comfort items, to his absurdly high thread count bed sheets, to the work that shaped his life and gave meaning to it...

It wasn't the work. Severus frowned and repeated the thought back in his mind. It had never been about the work. How the hell had Hermione Biggest-Swot-on-Earth Granger given a meaning and real sense of purpose to his life? That was disturbing. He'd always been of the firm conviction that neither a person's self-worth nor existence should ever be tied up in another. Such relationships were unhealthy and unequal. Well, nothing about his relationship with Hermione was equal. If he had to term it anything, it would be co-dependent.

With a deep mental sigh, Severus closed his eyes and began to meditate. Fucked up dysfunctional relationships were familiar grounds. He had a whole lifetime's worth of experience with them. He could deal with this. He could deal with his persistent and invading wife.

Heavy shuffling footsteps in the hollow corridor immediately snapped his attention to a guard's presence. It was most definitely not his Hermione. She favored practical flats that she could slip off immediately so she could put her perpetually ice-cold feet into his bed covers. They produced a light tapping sound. When she wanted to sneak up on him unawares and stare at him through the jailer's slot, she wore trainers. Vixen.

Severus slid his eyes to the door frame as the footsteps halted just outside his door. A pair of watery blue eyes heavily framed by dark curled lashes peered through the slot. Without seeing the rest of his blunt features, Severus noted Mulciber's eyes were downright feminine.

"Uh... Professor?"

He allowed his lips to curdle in disgust. When he wasn't Prisoner 11652, he was the Professor. Severus wasn't sure he knew which title he loathed more.

"I, uh, brought your book back," Mulciber stuttered as he entered the cell. "You were right, I did like this one."

Severus wasn't as hard up for company as he once had been before Hermione had entered his life, but he wasn't going to turn down the opportunity for a delightful chit-chat. He scowled to himself; Minerva would have loved that. The old biddy had spent years trying to warm up his spirits by being his friend. She had been operating under the mistaken assumption that Severus was in need of a friend, or a hug, or a cup of tea to make all the hurts and ills of his life melt away. Perhaps she thought they'd settle into a routine and trade stories and gossip like the other hens. It had taken quite a long time before Severus was able to disabuse her of that notion, and while he was perfectly content to sip her tea and eat all of her chocolate digestives, he was in no way her friend. Nor would he ever be. Gryffindors were always so stubbornly pig-headed when they saw an underdog to champion that they never bothered to ask whether their help was wanted. They were nearly as bad as Hufflepuffs. Though he had cultivated his relationship with Pomona, because she cultivated his herbs. It would never do to piss off that witch, not when she could so easily plot something so nefarious as switching his Queen Anne's Lace with Water Hemlock. Not that the mud-smeared witch would ever do so.

Severus frowned. He needed to stop his thoughts from dwelling on ghosts of his past. What was done was done. He'd never stalk those halls again, or trade dirty jokes with Rolanda, or swap barbs with Poppy, or practical jokes with Filius, or replace all of Albus' stashes with sugar-free candy. Which was all really for the best, because he hated that miserable place.

Severus beckoned the boy to sit in the black leather armchair. It was, after all, the finest seat in the house. Billy sat uncomfortably, unaccustomed to the wizard he still thought of as his Head of House offering him a seat. From one of the small white boxes stuffed with red tissue paper, Severus began pulling out the charmed teapot and other items he needed. Wisely, Billy managed to keep still and silent as the wizard worked. He knew better than to distract him when he was brewing, even if it was a pot of tea.

"I don't have milk to offer you, so I'm making Darjeeling," Severus drawled over his shoulder. Billy liked his tea with an extra splash, but figured pouting would get him nowhere, or could possibly land him somehow in detention with the Professor.

"No problem, sir. I drink it without all the time." Billy cocked his head to watch him work, noting that the Professor wasn't even listening to him. He probably hadn't wanted an answer either.

His Head of House had always been larger than life. Especially so to Slytherins who whispered frightening stories of his prowess in the Dark Arts to the younger years. Once Billy had become a seventh year, he realized that the same fantastic stories he had been told about Snape when he'd been a first year had reached epic proportions as they were handed down to the next generation.

Professor Snape was an ancient hybrid vampire of unspeakable power. '*Half-Blood Prince of Darkness*,' they called him.

Professor Snape was hatched from a harpy's egg. He had no navel, and could fly.

Professor Snape was dying from a curse that kept him pale and nasty. The counter-curse required him to feed off of the hearts of small children who irritated him in class.

Professor Snape was an incubus who used his demonic voice to lure witches into his bed, and there hadn't been a single virgin to graduate Hogwarts since he started teaching.

Professor Snape was the Dark Lord's favorite.

Billy wasn't one to admit when he was afraid; so he didn't. He would say he respected Professor Snape a lot. The respect might have been born out of fear, but he was admitting to nothing. Not ever. And he certainly wasn't going to decline tea, even as he studied the hands that prepared it, looking for any sign that Professor Snape was going to poison him.

Billy quietly accepted the proffered teacup when offered and took an orange spice wafer politely. He sighed in mild relief when it was obvious that the tea was just that: tea. Not that the Professor of Slytherin House yore needed to poison him, because he had heard once that Severus Snape could steal a wizard's soul right out of his body just by locking eyes with him. Nah, he assured himself, scratching the back of his head, that was just rubbish.

Years watching the Professor had taught Billy that he was just a wizard like any other, even if the rumors still could be heard in his brain. For one, Billy had been there when the prisoners had been stripped and deloused, so he knew for certain that he had a belly button. And while he supposed the Professor was swinging something witches found impressive, it probably wasn't bigger than Hagrid's. And since he'd begun borrowing books from him, it was almost as if he were a decent sort... and the tea was kind of nice.

The Darjeeling was perfectly light and floral, Severus reflected, as he tilted his head back to rest propped up on the sleigh bed. The charmed teapot was the wrong way of

going about making a decent cup, but it served his purpose, functioning as both a kettle and teapot, and he was hardly in a position to argue. It was also his only source of hot water, so he never argued. In the evenings after Hermione left, he filled it and waited until it made a false whistle, signaling it had just hit the ideal temperature and had not yet set to a boil. Then he stoppered his sink, poured the hot water in, and washed himself. Thankfully, Hermione had never dropped by late at night and unannounced. His eyes closed in quiet contemplation, wondering if she'd enjoy the show.

Billy shifted nervously, uncertain what to do with himself as the Professor seemed to have fallen asleep, his tea practically untouched.

"Uh, sir?" Billy made another attempt at returning the Professor's paperback. He held in one sweaty hand the book, as the thick fingers on his other hand grasped the delicate saucer. Billy was justifiably nervous about holding the china. It was dainty and fragile-looking, and he knew if he wasn't careful, he could easily break it, but if he didn't hold on firmly enough, he might spill the tea or drop it on the stone floor, where it would certainly shatter. Which just made him more uncomfortable and his palms sweat, because it wasn't just Professor Snape's china, but a gift from Ms. Hermione as well.

Severus' eyes snapped open, sharpening at once on the boy who'd managed to gobble all the rest of his orange spice biscuits.

Severus accepted his book back and lazily gestured towards his library, offering the eager boy another. Life as an Azkaban guard was about as boring as an inmate's. He thought of what conversation in which he might engage the boy, but could not find a topic of interest that they shared. Those conversations were better saved for Hermione.

Hermione...

"You may borrow another book, if you'd like," Severus pointed to the overstuffed shelves of Muggle literature. Hermione had said she chose them because it was the only way she was certain she was bringing him titles he hadn't read, but he still suspected she was trying to get him to take an interest in *'her people'*. Though why the witch still referred to them as *'her people'* was beyond his ken. The moment Severus was old enough to hold his first wand, he divorced himself as much as possible from all things Muggle and had rarely looked back.

"What about this one, Tess of the... uh..."

"D'Urbervilles? Not worth the ugly cheap Muggle paper it's written on. Unless you like reading about destitute milk maids maltreated and abused because of their blood status?"

Severus gave the young man a piercing glare. Billy Mulciber was correctly sorted into Slytherin. Like many of his fellow Slytherins, he'd been much too mischievous to fit into any other House; however, mischievous wasn't the same as cruel. But then, Slytherin House had been chock full of witches and wizards without a cruel bone in their body. It was that ten percent that ruined it for everyone else.

By Severus' second year of teaching, he'd cottoned on to the real method behind the madness. The Houses were always equal. Children were organized less on their natural inclinations than the needs for bedding and adequate class sizes. Eleven-year-olds were so malleable, and seven years of nurturing only reinforced what they'd been told about themselves. That *'magically'* some tatty, singing bonnet divined what lay in the deepest recesses of their souls. What utter bullshit.

"No, sir!" he piped up hastily, snapping Severus out of his woolgathering. Jonas was smart to send him away; the boy was too soft. He wouldn't have lasted a season with his brethren.

"Well, if you liked Dumas' Musketeers," Severus said dryly, "you'll probably enjoy Ivanhoe on the second shelf."

"What about this other Dumas book?" he asked, looking up questioningly.

Severus grimaced at the book he was fingering. Hermione was obviously trying to make a statement through her choices of Muggle literature. And as always, it was made with all the subtlety and finesse he'd come to expect from the average Gryffindor.

"You can take that one, too. And I'd prefer not to see it again, if you don't mind. I don't care what you do with it...Vanish it, burn it, drop it in the North Sea for all I care, but take it with you."

"Wouldn't Ms. Hermione mind?"

"I dare say she'd preen herself in triumph if she knew about our little book club, but let's just keep this to ourselves. Now, take that book and whatever else strikes your fancy and leave, boy. But I'm warning you, if I find any more traces of chocolate on the pages, I'll send Ms. Hermione after you, and she's much less forgiving than I am."

"Sure thing, Professor!"

The boy left crumbs in his armchair and a nervously muttered, 'Thanks for the tea,' and Severus let him go without a chiding word, even though he longed to. There was a certain level of amusement to be had by snapping at his jailers.

Severus washed up and dutifully put his tea things away.

He climbed back into bed and listened to the sounds of the sea and the whooshing of the wind and passed the late afternoon with his favorite new distraction. It was always best to get that sort of thing out of the way before Hermione visited him in the evenings. It put him in a much clearer frame of mind, and well, if he just happened to get lucky, a little extra stamina wouldn't go amiss.

He closed his eyes and imagined her stepping into his cell wearing those rhinestone studded heels again...

*

A/N:

Chapter title: Malum Quidem Nullum Esse Sine Aliquo Bono - There is, to be sure, no evil without something good. (Pliny the Elder)

So many thank yous and a heartshaped box of Honeydukes truffles for Christev20 for betaing this chapter.

Concordia Discors

Chapter 23 of 26

Severus admits he doesn't hate Valentine's Day; in fact, he rather enjoys some traditions.

Valentine's Day was a callous, cruel joke invented by high-maintenance women and Honeydukes. Or at least Severus was convinced that it was a Honeydukes conspiracy to choke 'love and mush' down the throats of all wizards just to part them from their hard-earned Galleons. It had to be.

Most would believe that the 'great greasy git' of Hogwarts' dungeons would never celebrate Valentine's Day, just because he had a slight tendency to zap every nauseating cherub enspelled to zoom around the castle dropping glitter on decent law-abiding people's heads. The things fell to the floor and twitched like flies with broken wings for hours. And Severus was rather proud of himself.

However, the truth was that Severus rather liked Valentine's Day very much. He just preferred to observe the holiday in the traditional manner and fuck. He wasn't entirely certain just who this Saint guy was, but Luperclia was in fact worth celebrating, repeatedly, and with as many willing witches as possible.

All in all, it was pretty damn comical that a Roman fertility rite consecrated to a she-wolf got the entire female population swooning the world over. Even funnier was that greeting cards and love-struck teenagers adopted the arrow-shot heart as the symbol of the holiday.

Since the dawn of time and early crude drawings of man, the heart symbolized the feminine body. Any man who's ever had the delight of viewing a naked woman's thighs spread before has seen that particular heart shape. (A point which Severus wanted to write on many an essay when brainless twits insisted on using a heart as a punctuation symbol.) To further the joke, or perhaps to add insult to injury, the arrow piercing this 'heart' is not an arrow at all. It is the combination of the two runes *Fehu* and *Tiwaz*. The arrowhead *Tiwaz* symbolizes 'to conquer' and *Fehu*, which is mistaken for arrow fletching, means 'many times.' It does not take a genius to understand early man's lewd humor. And yet, witches think it sweet.

Oh yes, how utterly adorable.

The question was: would his witch think it sweet? Hermione wasn't a giggling, stupid, swooning female, and she wasn't an ice queen, either. But would the witch pout and get her knickers in a twist if he didn't make some effort to be romantic, or would she laugh in his face at the suggestion, given their relationship? Would she even care? And furthermore, did he really want her to?

Severus took a long mental pause and slowly exhaled. He did. She was more than just the 'provider of pickled walnuts.' The witch was agreeable as a wife, even for a life-long confirmed bachelor. No, that wasn't it, either. He'd never go so far as to confess that when he was with her, he forgot he was in Azkaban or some other such claptrap. She'd laugh in his face if he ever said anything of the like to her.

And though he'd never stoop to writing her sonnets, or calling her by some nauseating endearment, he did feel genuinely affectionate toward the witch. Marginally tender, even.

Oh, who the hell was he kidding?

He was falling like a mewling onion-eyed boy for the impertinent wench, and she knew it.

As for her gift, Severus decided that when in doubt, err on the side of caution. Especially when females are concerned. Even more so when females who are responsible for one's care and upkeep are concerned. He opted for a small gesture. When he sent his solicitor, Mr. Ffoulkes, to pick up the contents of his mother's jewelry box for Christmas, he'd given her a small silver bracelet. And as far as he could tell, Hermione wore it every day. For Valentine's, he opted to give her a pair of pearl-drop earrings. They were small, of undeniably high quality, and seemed to be middle ground as far as gift giving went.

There was a matching pearl necklace, but Severus wasn't certain he could give that with a straight face on Valentine's Day. It was best to save that for her birthday.

When Hermione did show up early that evening, it was with a passable Bordeaux, take-out from Northern Italy, and a genuine smile on her face. Severus was just thankful she didn't show up dressed in harlot red or garish pink, but then Hermione did seem to be more clever than the average witch. He handed her the earrings with a sheepish smile.

"They're an heirloom," he explained, hoping that would cover the fact his gift seemed a bit unimpressive. He bit back the fact that his Grandmother would have had an utter conniption if she knew a common Mudblood wore her jewelry. He almost wished the old bat were alive to hear it.

"They're lovely, Severus!" Hermione smiled, quickly donning the pair. He looked closely for any sign to suggest she was being disingenuous and found none. "Thank you, you didn't have to, you know."

Severus waved that off. Of course the witch expected a gift. Every witch expected their man to give a token of esteem on Valentine's. It was de rigueur. The token just varied from witch to witch. Some weren't so easily placated, and Severus was quite thankful that Hermione seemed pleased by the gesture. At least, he didn't have to buy her a stable full of white quarter horses just to get her to stop sulking. Lucius hadn't been able to get Narcissa out of her boudoir for a week when she was less than pleased by his token.

Hermione pulled out dinner, and they tucked in.

"I was almost expecting you to cook tonight," he murmured absentmindedly between forkfuls of crispy aubergine, before realizing most witches would take the comment as an insult, and he was actually expected to be *nice* on Valentine's Day.

Fortunately, Hermione took the comment with a small chuckle. "I can't cook to save my life."

"And yet you had a talent for Potions. I wonder why that is?"

Hermione looked up sharply at her ex-professor, stunned. Did he really admit that she had a talent for Potions? Clearly, Azkaban had gotten to him. In response to the question, she merely shrugged. "I don't know, sometimes I think I'm cursed in that respect. It doesn't matter whether I proof my yeast or not, every bread I attempt turns out like one of Hagrid's rock cakes. All my sauces seem to separate. And nothing turns out like the pictures in the cookbooks. Harry thinks I'm subconsciously trying to boil my ingredients down into mini Potions projects."

Severus smirked. "Are you?"

"Hm? Oh, I don't know. I think maybe I'm a disaster in the kitchen because I really don't care. I mean, I can heat things up just fine and make noodles, but I guess I'm not interested in cooking, really. There's no magic in it."

"Ah, and there I'd disagree with you. There is a sublime enchantment to a gently simmering pot, be it Amortentia or Coddle stew; both can be equally seductive if you fully engage your senses, Hermione."

I would if he were standing behind me purring instructions, she mused. Hermione's eyes widened as her logical brain processed her most illogical thoughts *Down girl! This is Snape we're talking about.*

Rapidly changing the topic, Hermione busied herself clearing away the remains of dinner and settled to the head of his sleigh bed. The bed really had become more of a couch over the weeks, as they'd face each other propped up, typically with reports scattered over every available surface.

Severus dutifully refilled her wine glass as she opened up a large heart-shaped box of Honeydukes truffles in the center of the bed. He couldn't help but smirk. Practical witch or not, Hermione was most definitely a typical woman. She couldn't pass up an excuse to indulge in chocolate. There had to be something to the Honeydukes

conspiracy theory.

Hermione tossed him a pillow, and Severus relaxed against the footboard, wine glass in one hand and decadent chocolate in the other. Who was he to complain if the witch caved to silly holiday traditions?

Together, they rested their eyes and sipped the heady wine.

"Last quarter reports should be out soon," he said softly.

Hermione stretched like a cat and adjusted the mountain of pillows before nodding. "Which reminds me, I have something for you."

"Oh? You got a Valentine for moi?"

"Ha!" she feebly mocked. "You hate Valentines. No, I have a check for you. You may not get paid, but you certainly earned a bonus from the Natural Scentsations Enchanted Air Freshener. I think we're going to soundly trounce our sales projections."

"Thank you."

They sat in comfortable peace for a while, enjoying the beautiful, deep garnet hue of the wine, and the act of doing absolutely nothing before Severus interrupted the silence.

"I don't hate Valentine's Day."

That really wasn't the sort of declaration Hermione expected from her evil, snarky ex-professor, who took great relish in trampling upon all things heartfelt and romantic for no other reason than a) he was a big bully, and b) he could. "Oh, this should be good, please clarify that statement."

"I hate the commercialization of it."

"Oh," she replied softly. "I suppose I can agree with you on that, then."

Severus snorted and taunted, "I'll alert the presses," but at the same time, he absently picked up her foot and began to rub her arches. Hermione's jaw might have dropped from the sheer absurdity of the situation, but she couldn't quite be certain she wouldn't drool all over herself.

Her eyes drifted shut as the comfortable combination of good wine, sinful chocolate, and Severus' talented hands combined for a moment of pure hedonistic bliss. With her eyes closed, Hermione focused on the sensual massage and the welcome presence of a man, allowing herself to forget for the moment that she was quite literally in bed with Severus Snape, unrepentant sodding Death Eater.

Her eyes fluttered open immediately as she realized with a rush of blood to the head that that wasn't quite true anymore. She could no longer pretend he was the bastard traitor that she couldn't be arsed to give a care about. In a time-stopping moment when a chest-deep groan escaped her lips, she knew... her famed intellect had finally acknowledged the messages her body had been desperately trying to send. Those strange tugging urges she didn't have the voice to name. She desired him. She. Her. Hermione Granger, wanted, desired Severus Snape on her own, without the influence of champagne to blame on her obvious lapse in judgment. No more self delusions.

"Shit," she swore beneath her breath, too softly for Severus to even register as he plucked at each toe, manipulating each digit, completely unaware of her personal revelation.

She'd ignored the sensations for weeks. Every time, she told herself she'd berate herself later for feeling them. The small, intimate touches, those innocent brushes of a hand that shot giddy tingles through her body. The feeling of utter and complete contentedness when she relaxed against his chest. How she reflexively squirmed when he was near and Hermione could feel his body warmth penetrating her skin. They were all symptoms and signs of impending disaster. The tightening of her nipples as he cradled her heel might as well have been a bloody horseman of the apocalypse.

"No," he continued, as his fingers deftly kneaded the ball of her foot, "it's a crime what's happened to wizarding traditions. All these ugly, Muggle influences perverting wholesome holidays. It's a statement of fact, Vixen; this isn't some discussion on ice cream where one thing means another. I'm not advocating ridding the world of Muggles or Muggle-borns."

Hermione jerked her foot back, intending to kick him good and hard, and in the purse, if she could reach it, but he caught her foot and shot her a glare.

"Ah ah ah," he chided. "Violence is most unbecoming, Hermione. If you want to debate my point, then do so. Kicking me will only reinforce negative Muggle stereotypes."

"Negative Muggle stereotypes," she gritted out. "You're insulting my people."

"And yet, my argument has merit. You agreed with my assertion that holidays have become commercialized."

Hermione's eyes flashed dangerously before narrowing. "Making a profit is a universal human instinct. Greed is a human instinct. If there are Muggle traditions that have been adopted by wizarding society, then perhaps one could argue that wizarding traditions are not strong enough to stand the test of time. Obviously, wizarding society wants to embrace Muggle traditions. And there's nothing perverse about them."

"Oh what, so a fat, inebriated man breaking and entering into a home in the middle of the night is wholesome?"

"That's just for children."

"You don't find that perverse, then? A fat, inebriated man breaking into a home where children are sleeping?"

"You're purposefully twisting this around. Can you honestly say you've never once written to Santa Claus?"

"That, Vixen, is irrelevant." Severus clenched his jaw to keep from smiling. He picked up her foot and focused on massaging it. By staring at her foot through a curtain of inky black hair, he could hide his amusement. 'Hermione Baiting' was still, by far, his favorite pastime.

"Irrelevant? I should say it's very relevant. You're hedging. I suspect you wrote to him every year, hung stockings, and made sugar cookies. You're probably just angry because he didn't bring you a bike, or a widget, or whatever such nonsense you wanted."

"A puppy," he said with a note of forlorn in his voice. "I always wanted a puppy. A little yellow lab to snuggle up and lick my face."

"Are you frickin' kidding me? Who are you, and what have you done with Severus Snape?"

"What? I was a normal child. Just because I'm a miserable sod now doesn't mean I didn't have a childhood."

"Well then, this is just a classic case of transference. You never got your puppy, and you harbor anger toward Muggles for it."

She wanted to blandly point out he was suffering from chronic depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and possibly survivor's guilt, but figured he wouldn't be too pleased with that estimation; he was a bit of a self-aggrandizing narcissist after all.

"Oh, really, Hermione? Can it possibly be that simple? Thank you for illuminating that for me; I suspect now I can put to bed all my misgivings about the Muggle world

encroaching on wizarding traditions and just chuck it all up to childhood disappointment."

"I never said it was the only reason you hate Muggles."

"I never said I hated Muggles."

"You hate our customs, you resent our influence, and you're sore about a Muggle tradition in your childhood."

"I never said I hated Muggles."

"You're a Death Eater, Snape. You never had to say it. I know you hate Muggles just as much as you hate Muggle-borns." His hands tightened painfully around her foot, and Hermione held her breath.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Concordia Discors Discordant harmony

Thank you for reading! This chapter has three parts, and I hope you enjoy all of them.

O Tempora, O Mores!

Chapter 24 of 26

Valentine's Day continued.

After a very long, pregnant pause, Severus spoke again, his voice even and exacting.

"I hate that wizarding children look forward to Halloween and not Samhain. I hate that proper wizarding artifacts are now being reproduced out of cheap plastic. That the three top-selling broom companies make their handles out of Muggle fiberglass instead of traditional wood. That children graduate from Hogwarts knowing how to wave a wand about, but know nothing about our ways and our beliefs. And I hated being a Death Eater, but I never hated Muggles. I don't..."

Severus swallowed thickly. "I never wanted to be a Death Eater, but then, I suppose I only have a wizarding holiday to blame for that."

Hermione wrinkled her brow, looking every bit like a tickle-brained Hufflepuff sitting in on a N.E.W.T.-level course. "I don't follow. I mean, what does one have to do with the other?"

Severus rolled his shoulders, and Hermione could have sworn she heard a distinct popping sound. He switched feet and began to massage her other set of toes as he settled in to tell a story that probably few had ever heard. Hermione was touched by his level of candor and trust that she was allowed a peek into the life of one of the most guarded and private wizards she'd ever met.

"I suspect you assume I had teenage delusions of grandeur and knelt before the Dark Lord out of some macabre obsession with the Dark Arts and lofty dreams of Muggle-born oppression. I'm sorry to disappoint you, my dear; I became a Death Eater because I was stupid, pure and simple. And you may quote me on that. Potter and Weasley should be pleased.

"I don't have many complimentary things to say about the Dark Lord. Although, he was wickedly funny at times. One just had to be careful when he was being 'oh funny-*ha'* and when he was being 'oh funny-*Crucio*.' But regardless of what you may think of him and what's been said about the man, at least when he was a man, he could throw a killer party. Malfoy never could quite out-do him, or capture the mood of them."

"Lord Voldemort?" she stated in disbelief. "Big, ugly dude? Pasty skin, no nose, and a horrible lisp? That Dark Lord? A party animal?"

"The one and the same, only we're talking well over twenty years ago, now. At the time, witches thought he was quite fetching. Back then, he was like... I don't know... he was like David Bowie and Elton John all rolled in together. Without the hair and rhinestone glasses, mind you. But it was all... cool. There were parties, and drugs, and a little mischief, occasionally some breaking and entering to mess with the Muggles, and it was all tied together with a bit of political philosophy to make it sound somehow more legitimate than a bunch of strung-out groupies.

"I mean, it was the Seventies, for Merlin's sake. That means the same thing in the wizarding world as it does in the Muggle one."

"And the orgies?" she asked skeptically.

He shrugged. "Love-ins." At her wide-eyed look he hastily added, "The rumors of rapes are greatly exaggerated. Willing witches have never been in short supply."

"That still doesn't explain how you became a Death Eater."

"Oh yes, that. I had the good fortune of passing out at a bacchanalian-styled Midsummer festival. It was all tits and spiked punch... I may have been the one to spike it; I can't quite remember. I do remember waking up thankful someone hadn't spelled off my eyebrows or pulled some other equally humiliating prank, only to later discover I had acquired a new tattoo. At first, I was just happy it didn't read 'Mum' or was some ugly tramp stamp, until it dawned on me...very slowly I might add...that I'd been branded. It was quite the common practice in those days."

"Geez, I always imagined bizarre graveyard rituals and creepy ceremonies."

Severus frowned. "That nonsense came later, although he always did have a flair for the dramatics...hocus-pocus shit and all that. In those days, it was quite common to get Shanghaied, as it were. It was just the inherent risk of hanging out and drinking with a bunch of disaffected Slytherin anarchists. Of course, I was too stupid to believe I would be targeted. At the time, I didn't believe they'd want anything from a twitchy, half-blooded train wreck."

"And when you discovered this... tattoo, what did you do then?"

"I did what any idiot with two braincells to rub together did. I prostrated myself before him and said, 'Yes, sir. Good, sir. May I have some more, sir?' Did you think there

was some way to refuse? Hermione, if the Dark Lord wanted to recruit you, you were recruited."

"Why?" she asked with a touch of awe in her voice. "I mean, why did he want you? Um, not that he wouldn't, you know." She pulled a face. "That didn't come out sounding right."

Severus chuckled, his expressive eyes filled with mirth. "Hermione, I was a Potions master...well, apprentice, back then. I had access to all sorts of Class A narcotics."

"So, wait, because I don't get this. You're telling me the early Death Eaters were just some harmless stoner groupies?"

"I never said that." He frowned. "We *were* radicals back then. People were scandalized and outraged, but we weren't as violent then. I'm not saying we were perfectly innocent. I'll never forget the night the Prewitt boys died. For a long time, their deaths were the most brutal thing I had ever witnessed. And there was an awful lot of Muggle-baiting. But those nights were not as often as when he became reincarnated as Lucifer himself. Then again, everything was different in the Nineties, now, wasn't it? We were much more violent as a society than in the Seventies, even without the Dark Lord. The Muggles were able to delude themselves that magic simply did not exist because homicides were up across the board.

"And that's not how he operated, anyway. Do you honestly believe the Dark Lord could engender trust and loyalty of an army through mindless torture, rape, and arson?"

"Violence is unnatural; it goes against the grain of every reasonable human being. It's a turn-off for even the Darkest wizard. Perverting his faithful followers took time; a slow seduction, if you will. I doubt he'd have hunted the Potters as viciously in the early days. Of course, those twisted fucks who begged to join him knowing full well the extent of his depravity were always the ones to keep your eyes on."

"What was the Order doing during all this?"

He shrugged carelessly again, seemingly at ease in both massaging her foot and discussing murdering despots. "To be honest, we really didn't give much thought to the Order at the time. They were merely an inconvenience, a speed bump to fun. They were a self-righteous, concerned citizens' group much like a neighborhood watch. We thought they just needed to get laid. Minerva, especially. And when we caught one, well, it seemed like a sport to play with them. Of course, what I couldn't see at the time was the Dark Lord's true aspirations and sphere of influence. It was too easy to get caught up in all the fun and mindless mayhem to bother with what was really going on. And it wasn't like he revealed all the pieces to the puzzle to us, either. In retrospect, Albus was brilliant to recognize him for what he was.

"But then, I suppose that like calls to like, doesn't it? Funny, it took me years of begging and debasing myself before the man simply because he said he was disgusted by me before I learned how he spent his youth plotting the destruction and enslavement of Muggles." Severus didn't bother to hide the dry bitterness from his rasping voice, but shook his head to wipe away any poisoned thoughts about the headmaster.

"Somehow, I still have a difficult time imagining you in with the drugged out hippie crowd. You don't seem the type."

"Why? Because I'm wound too tight?"

"Well, yeah!" she blurted. "I mean, well... not wound tight, straight-laced maybe, but just not the sort of person to um... go to love-ins, or get involved in drugs. You seem, uh... too smart for that."

He raised an inquiring eyebrow at her statement, knowing full well she was fishing for answers. Of course, she would want an explanation; when did Hermione Granger not expect answers?

"You seem to want excuses for things, reasons I murdered Albus..." He held up his hand to hold back another one of her futile arguments that it wasn't murder, which was no doubt on her pink, pouting lips.

"Tell me, Hermione, what excuse do you want to hear this time? That I had a difficult childhood, that my mother didn't hug me often enough? Do you want to hear how I was bullied and made an outcast even in my own House? Or how I humiliated myself for a girl who couldn't bear to look at me, even though I worshipped at her feet?"

"I hated myself, Hermione. That's something that's never gone away. I couldn't stand to be such a foul, loathsome git, so I tried to kill myself. I let myself become weak and self-indulgent. I allowed myself to lose control of my damn mind." He sneered with such a look of disgust and self-contempt that she shuddered from the force of it.

"Do not idolize me. A coward deserves no pity." He took a brief moment to gaze far over her shoulder in the wide distance of his mind, and she could plainly read his grief. Despite his protestations, Hermione wanted to reach out for him, wrap her arms around the grown man, and rock him like a small child. Soothe his hurt.

"Hermione," he said with a pained voice. "All I need is twenty five minutes, a size 2 cauldron, and fifteen Knuts worth of ingredients to make a potion that'll blow the back of your head off. I can put your mind and body into orbit. You'll touch the stars and taste colors that don't exist, and when your feet finally hit the ground again, you'll beg me with every fiber of your being to brew it again.

"I'm an addict. A recovering addict, but I'll always be an addict. Perhaps that explains why I appear to be wound tight. You have no idea how much discipline it took to work around potions, knowing all I needed was a few minutes and some spare ingredients to get stoned. I could have pocketed just a small bit of what got thrown out or destroyed on a daily basis, and nobody would have been any wiser. I can't describe to you the pain and hunger I felt every time I walked into that classroom. Even now, I itch. It tends to put me a much fouler mood than the Dark Lord ever did."

The flesh was weak and oh, so willing. Azkaban was a mixed blessing, as he had no opportunity to be tempted. His drug of choice was sweet and milky and so satisfying that he had long ago stopped adding anything to his breakfast tea lest he be reminded of the siren that called to him and fall back into her arms. Severus trembled slightly beneath his robes, but years of carefully maintained discipline nearly kept Hermione from seeing. Nearly.

"I really had no idea."

"*Of course not, you silly girl! No one knew!*" he seethed, his disturbingly cruel face contorted in fury. For a thundering heartbeat Hermione feared for herself; her close proximity to those terrible, dark glinting eyes horrified her.

Hermione's recoil penetrated the thick fog of rage that surrounded his vision. Realizing he was a hair's breadth away from losing his humanity, Severus took a calming moment to gain back his lost composure. Severus calmly and civilly apologized for the outburst, as if he hadn't been ready to throttle her. Hermione. His Hermione.

"I see," she said thoughtfully, as it explained why he went flippin' psycho over just a few harmless doses of anti-depressants. Well, maybe they weren't so harmless...

Clearing her thoughts, Hermione turned her attention back to Severus' confession. "Though I never expected to hear this from you. Why are you telling me all this?"

"Well," he said with a deep sigh. "You already know the truth of my humbling shame. What's the point in keeping anything else from you, now? You'll just nag me with questions 'til my ears bleed, anyway." He smiled weakly as Hermione shot him a dirty look. How was he supposed to say he no longer wanted to keep it bottled up? That he finally had realized confession was good for the soul?

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A/N:

Chapter title: O Tempora, O Mores! Oh, the times! Oh, the morals! (Cicero)

Cacoethes Scribendi

Chapter 25 of 26

Severus explains a bit and catches a terrible case of Cacoethes Scribendi.

"So... Voldemort's so-called rule was much different the second time around," she mused out loud. "I bet that's why Fudge thought he could handle him quietly himself."

"Quite. Fudge was a fool to underestimate the Dark Lord. It was by fluke that he died the first time; to expect he'd so readily give up power again was stupid on an epic level. The Dark Lord reincarnated himself into something that was not human. Second time around it was all rum, sodomy, and the lash. Much like joining the Royal Navy, I'm told. I'd have blamed too much coke, but ripping one's soul apart has a profound effect on the psyche to which even drugs can't compare. I should know."

Hermione's entire body went rigid, and she felt a heavy stone drop in the pit of her stomach. "You made a Horcrux?" she whispered.

"What? No... life debt." Severus riffled his hand through his stringy locks, looking just as stressed and on edge as she felt. "I told you before; I owed a life debt to James Potter." Severus jerked his head up, waiting for her reaction, but she showed none.

Through clenched teeth, Severus slowly bit out, "This is why I'm pissed Hogwarts teaches the students nothing about our world, though any pureblood wouldn't need an explanation. I owed him a life debt, then I was responsible for his death."

"Indirectly," Hermione piped up.

"Immaterial. It doesn't matter how many times I throw myself between Potter and whatever beast with great, big gnashing teeth he wants to make friends and cuddle with, or life-threatening puerile shenanigans he decides to get into; it's a debt I can never repay. To die with that kind of black mark means spending an eternity in purgatory. I imagine I probably should live it up a bit in this gilded cage, knowing where I'm going."

"I really don't believe that. God is not that cruel; through penitence and acts of contrition, you can receive redemption."

"Hermione, your Muggle is showing."

She waved him off. "God doesn't judge wizards differently than he does Muggles. He loves us all entirely, regardless of ability. He wants us to atone for our sins and learn to become better people."

Severus shook his head and set aside her foot. "I'm not going to get into a philosophical debate on morality and the nature of the universe, not when you're applying a Muggle value system. It suffices to say, in the wizarding world, I'm entirely fucked."

Hermione couldn't accept the very notion that God treated wizards and Muggles dissimilarly or held them up by different standards. Perhaps it was her ignorance in his belief system, or her own heavy handedness in imposing her own values on another, but Hermione couldn't accept that Severus would be written off as unredeemable by an unjust and uncaring God as he'd been by wizarding society. Obviously, Severus was wrong.

Her church may have dictated that she sit in uncomfortable pews and sing terribly uninspired dirges, but her God was beautiful. The Divine had endless compassion and mercy. She fundamentally believed that God understood human failings and loved all regardless of the disappointing choices humanity made, but she wasn't about to preach that to him. Hermione had a reputation for being bossy and pushy, but not preachy. If Severus wasn't willing to accept the truth as she saw it, maybe she could guide him towards it in a roundabout and Slytherin way.

"If you're so fucked, what are you doing in jail, then? You said it yourself; you keep yourself here. I have every confidence you could escape if you wanted to; so, why don't you? Instead of living it up in this gilded cage, as you so aptly put it, why not live it up on the outside? Why not get on with the sinning while the sinning is good?"

"I think," she concluded triumphantly, "that you really believe redemption is possible, and that this," she waved her arms wide to encompass the small cell, "is your self-flagellation."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Surely, you aren't naïve enough to believe that the morality of right and wrong is only tied by religion. Even secular humanists believe in and abide by the law."

"All right, I can concede that point." She waited patiently for him to make another. She wanted to hear his next argument to continue the debate, as she was just warming up to the topic, but Severus sat in speculative silence. Apparently, the question was no longer up for discussion.

As Hermione's busy brain clicked over the possibilities for a good, heated discussion, she became acutely aware that she was woefully unprepared to have it. Severus had made a good point; a Hogwarts education did not include much on magical culture.

She knew that most wizarding folk practiced what appeared to her as an incoherent blend of mono- and polytheism with no proverbial dogmatic strings attached. Admittedly, Hermione wasn't entirely sure how it all worked out, but it was oddly disconcerting to hear Roman epithets like 'Sweet Juno's jugs,' or 'By Circe's pigs,' casually sworn on Christian holidays.

Not that disturbingly colorful descriptions of Merlin's anatomy were any better. Hermione always wondered if the ice-entombed wizard was rolling in his proverbial frozen grave every time some snot-nosed wizard swore by his hairy testicles.

Hogwarts really did nothing to introduce these things to Muggle-borns, or even the general student population. There was of course Muggle Studies as an elective, but wizarding studies began and ended with History of Magic, which focused entirely on this-and-that-such Goblin rebellion. In a moment of realization, Hermione felt bereft, a sense of loss and mourning for the learning that never was.

Severus sat uncomfortably, unsettled by the fire in her gaze and the veracity of her impassioned speech. Ideologically speaking, the chit had a reasonable argument, but how was he to explain to her, 'I'm in Azkaban because I feel like it,' and not sound like an ill-tempered three year old? Or worse, a coward.

It was all quite simple. Severus had lived under the thumb of two masters, ignoring the wise old adage that 'a man cannot serve two masters,' and thus, he did away with one. Regrettably, it wasn't the one he would have preferred to kill, and now, he didn't want to live with himself. There, that sounded reasonable enough without going into detail about the nightmares, retching, and the fond fantasy that an overlooked Dementor still lurking in the abandoned bowels of Azkaban would come upon him and snog him soundly.

"I still think you're being unnecessarily harsh on yourself. Even if you believe there's some shred of a chance that you'll be granted a reprieve from whatever deity you

believe in, shouldn't you be spending your days performing acts of loving kindness instead of sitting here?"

"Oh? You really believe redemption is possible for a murderer? Is there nothing sacred in your fantasy world of good and evil? Can you really not accept that there is a threshold? A line that should not be crossed? Taking a life is unforgivable, hence the Unforgivables. Even your little book states it quite plainly, *'Thou shalt not kill.'*"

"Murder," she huffed. "It's *'Thou shalt not murder,'* and you plainly did not murder Professor Dumbledore or the Potters."

"Semantics," he dismissed with a casual wave. "And just what does your book say are the consequences for such a sin?"

Hermione screwed up her face. The commandments were a part of Deuteronomy, but she didn't remember any holy warning label attached for breaking them. Leviticus covered law itself and had never been one of her strong suits. Leviticus seemed to be all about tabernacles needing to be built with so many cubits of acacia wood and how much grain to leave at the corners of fields.

"Damn," she muttered to herself. What were the consequences of breaking one of the *biggies*? As far as she knew, it was a moot point as long as one confessed and asked for forgiveness. Hermione mentally snorted, thinking it was unlikely that Severus would have an eleventh-hour, Come-to-Jesus meeting. Did that mean his soul was damned?

'Thou shalt not murder' was even one of the Seven Noahide Laws. Yep. It was a pretty big one. It was up there with 'Honor thy Father and Mother.' Shit. Yet another reminder that she was probably going to hell herself. Leaving her memory-modified parents in Australia probably wasn't the kindest thing a daughter could do. Oh, well.

She eyed Severus critically. At least, she'd have good company in hell.

Severus broke through her mental meandering. "Since it's obvious you don't have a ready answer, I'll supply one. By tradition, I'm probably destined to continually roll a rock up a hill, or have my eyes and entrails repeatedly clawed out for all of eternity, or until one of the Gods decides to take pity on me.

"By the Catholic Church, my fate is all hellfire and damnation unless I confess every last sin I've made, snack on some wafers, and let some skypilot throw water on my head. The Protestants... I suppose it's more of the same, depending on the brand of malarkey. The Jews really aren't sure about their afterlife and don't speculate on it much, but believe evil souls are blinked out of existence entirely, which may be the most pleasant outcome I could hope for. And under Islam, it's again with the hellfire, although I do have to make some attempt at crossing a bridge the width of a single hair. But there is a post script with most all of them that if I spend only half of an eternity or so groveling in purgatory, I may be forgiven."

Severus looked up at her patiently, ready for the next volley, even though Hermione looked completely nonplussed. He wondered what she needed in order to drop her line of inquiry. As much as he admired the girl for her 'Never take no for an answer' mentality, it was wearing thin.

Did she honestly think that he hadn't contemplated eternal questions about the path to redemption? He was sitting in prison. Every man waxed and waned on his destiny while doing porridge.

"So, basically, what you're telling me is that wizards just follow Greco-Roman traditions." Was it really necessary to be so cagey about it?

"You, woman, are impossible! Do you stay up all night working on ways of tormenting me, or does it just come naturally to you?"

"Naturally, I suppose," she responded with a shrug. A simple 'yes or no' answer would have sufficed. Hermione didn't exactly know why she was smiling; only that she had somehow gotten one over on him, and that was reason enough.

"Incredible. And here I've been congratulating myself for knowing what buttons to push to annoy you. I should have been taking notes from the Master. Just because the wizarding world has an unnatural affinity for all things Roman, or at the very least atrocious Latin, does not mean we all pray to Roman gods. Or did I somehow miss the burnt offerings and fertility rituals on the Quidditch pitch?" Actually, if he'd been quite honest with himself and Hermione, he had seen plenty of fertility rituals taking place under the Quidditch stands, and Hagrid's rock cakes would have passed for a burnt grain offering any day.

"So, *Professor*," she said, stressing his title, "if I'm so blasted ignorant, *teach*."

For a fraction of a moment, Severus looked completely bewildered before he composed himself. "It's simple. A witch or wizard is expected to choose the manifestation of the God or Goddess, or both, that has meaning to them and adds value to their lives. If they choose to utilize the Christian deities, then they may do so..."

"Deity," Hermione butted in. "The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one."

"I'll leave that one for debate another night. Stop interrupting. The point is the manifestation of the Divine on earth has to be meaningful to the individual, or the rituals involved in worshiping are meaningless. Shall I now lecture you on intention in magic?"

"No, go on, *Professor*..."

"Don't get snippy, girl; you asked." Once Hermione looked properly chastened, he continued, "The wizard is, then, expected to abide by the traditions and demands of his Deity. It's simple... or not," he added with a frown.

"And your chosen Deity would expect you to continue to live like this and then torture you more after death?" she asked with a bewildered expression. "What kind of God did you choose?"

"That's personal!" he snapped.

After a moment of squirming, Severus grudgingly admitted to following Roman traditions.

"I think..." she finally spoke, lost in thought, "I think you should write a book."

"A Death Eater tells all?" he asked with a cocked eyebrow, confused by her non-sequitur. "You think I'd fuel public gossip and impugn my right to privacy by airing dirty laundry and all the sordid details of our debauchery? Do I look like a man without shame?"

"You said it, not me. Personally, I think it would be cathartic, and, yes, a Death Eater tell-all would sell copies." Hermione tapped her finger thoughtfully against her lips. "But, to be quite honest, even though 'history' has already been written by the victors, I had no idea about half the things you've just told me. Why not write the story about the other side of the war? Everybody has heard enough about the heroes. Not to mention you really are the last Death Eater. Your entire cell block is full of lifeless bodies; your story will die with you. I'm actually pretty certain you're the only conscious prisoner in the long-term inmate ward."

It had taken her a bit to figure it out, but Hermione finally came to the correct conclusion as to why she never saw any other visitors and why the boys let her practically have the run of the place. It was enough to give anyone serious freakin' creeps.

"An oversight, I'm sure. The moment any word of my condition gets out, the Ministry will no doubt rectify that," he sneered. She rolled her eyes.

"It wouldn't have to be a trashy tabloid tell-all, and that's not what I'm getting at, either. I think you have a story to tell, a fascinating story, by the way; so, why not set it straight? Besides, nobody said you had to get published; that's not necessarily the point of writing. I just think it would give you something productive to do, and I know seeing things sorted out on paper always gives me perspective. You could benefit from that."

Her idea had captured a bit of his imagination, even as Hermione's mouth was moving; a narrating voice in his head was talking. He needed a quill... immediately.

Hermione smirked as Severus hastily launched himself off the bed, a tangling rush of limbs and robes as he made a grab for parchment, and she downed the last dregs of her wine. She knew that intense expression he wore on his face; inspiration had struck him thunderously hard, and he hadn't even agreed to write it.

She made a mental checklist to bring him more writing supplies and to contact Luna immediately. He'd need a good editor if he was going to get published, and despite what she'd suggested, Hermione was determined to have his story heard. She wasn't one hundred percent positive that the public would sympathize with him, but even if a few witches and wizards were touched by his predicament, it would give him the hope he truly needed. Even if she couldn't assuage the guilt he felt, humbled before his God, perhaps he could find some peace on earth, even in Azkaban.

Her only worry was inviting attention to her marriage. She would be risking a Ministry inquiry into the state of their relationship and her child production. The thought was enough to send panic racing into her bloodstream and make her stomach do somersaults. And yet, somewhere, they had turned a corner. She intrinsically knew she was willing to risk more of herself for him. It wasn't love. Well... no. Maybe. No. And she wasn't going to start knitting him hats, either, but it was something. A feeling without a name. And Severus was worth the risk.

Hermione quietly took her leave, smiling as she bade Severus goodbye, only to receive a grunt in return. 'Oh, he has it bad,' she cackled, only faintly concerned that his writing would interfere with the running of her/their business.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Cacoethes Scribendi An insatiable urge to write.

In this chapter, Severus is cavalier and dismissive regarding religion. I believe that's in keeping with the nature of his character.

This chapter also had to be seriously edited down. If you are a student of theology, you'll notice that I lightly brushed over, um... well... literally everything. Honestly, it's the sort of subject that a single conversation just won't cover. I wasn't trying to, either. You could spend a lifetime reflecting on the subject.

Massive thanks to TenderQuaintWitch and Christev20 for proofing the theological ideas expressed.

Amor Tussisque Non Celantur

Chapter 26 of 26

A revelation and a 'catch.'

"Wow... this is just... wow," Ginny breathed, her mouth gaping open and her eyes riveted.

"You've said that already, but what do you actually think of it?" Hermione timidly questioned as her teeth worried her bottom lip.

"It's... well, um... if it's true, that is... then it's absolutely brilliant." Ginny took a swipe at an errant tear that began to trickle down her cheek.

For a solid week, Severus had done absolutely nothing but write. He hadn't touched a single distributor's report or product review. He'd been covering rolls and rolls of parchment with cramped, spindly handwriting, and there didn't seem to be any stopping him in the foreseeable future.

Hermione had taken to dropping off food and supplies and beating a hasty exit, as the surly wizard was even more difficult to live with while he was engrossed in his manuscript. Every attempt at conversation was met with a grunt or harsh glare. But there was no denying the quality of his work or, as Ginny said, that it was absolutely brilliant.

"Gods, 'Mione, you must be like the luckiest witch in the world to be married to him."

"What?" she shrieked, not intending to sound as high pitched as she did.

Ginny's eyes shone with a disturbing amount of tears. "It's so beautiful. He must be so romantic to live with. Even his description of the dirty scavenger birds picking at the litter around his home is poetic."

Unbidden, a smile tugged at the corner of her lips; Severus was able to channel his silken voice into a finely crafted narrative. His style oozed sensuality as he coupled compelling imagery with brutally raw emotion. Hermione was determined that for her next great 'invention' she was going to bring books on tape to the wizarding world. There was no way his story would be done justice without his round diphthongs and captivating vowel sounds to purr it out.

"Gin, have you lost your mind, girl? Have you forgotten this *is Snape* we're talking about? I thought you hated him. What happened to the evil, murdering traitor Snape?" She ignored the nagging tug at the back of her skull that scolded her. She was a hypocrite.

Ginny sniffed a bit and dabbed her eyelashes. "I know," she wailed, "but he was just a little boy, Hermione... just a kid..." The rest of her words were completely unintelligible as they were drowned out in sobs.

Fortunately, she cradled the parchment tightly to her breasts, or else, his lyrical writing would have been dissolved by tear blotches. Severus would have had a cow. Hermione wouldn't put it past him to break out of Azkaban, stab the redhead to death with an ink-stained quill, dance a lively jig on her grave, and then slip back into his cell to write a few more chapters.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Gin, get a grip."

Ginny waved Hermione off as she reluctantly set the manuscript down, caressing it with her gaze. "When will the next chapter be done?"

"Seriously? I don't know. He seems to write in mad spurts and just throws whole sections at me at a time."

Internally, Hermione berated herself. She should have just taken the rolls to Luna instead of sharing with Ginny, but how was she supposed to know that Severus' most resolute critic would fall to pieces? She needed to get Ginny laid. And fast.

"You've got to let me read it the moment he's finished. I've just got to know what happens."

"What happens? Gin, you know what happens. He becomes a Death Eater, murders Dumbledore, and goes to prison. The End."

"Why are you doing this, Hermione? Why are you acting like you're not affected? Like you don't care? I don't know how you can be so cruel."

She shrugged. "I'm not; I just choose not to lose my objectivity. I know the man, Gin. Hell, I practically live with him, and though I'll admit he's not as bad as I suspected he'd be, I'm still not going to idolize him. He's not a nice person. He'll never be a nice person. He's just as mean and taciturn now as he ever was." The words sounded cold coming out of her mouth as Hermione held herself back defensively.

"Well, I'm not buying it," Ginny said with a sharp intake of breath. "I think you're avoiding the truth. I think it's eating you up that you actually fancy your husband. And I think you're ashamed of it."

If they didn't have years of friendship to draw on, Hermione might have used a litany of colorful words to describe Ginevra Weasley. And while a good cat fight wasn't completely out of order, Hermione was unwilling to let her know she'd touched a nerve. A very raw nerve. "I might," she said uneasily. "Severus is... difficult. He pries into absolutely everything, and he can be a real horrid bastard, but..."

"But?" Ginny coached with a sly smile. Gin was always a girl up for the gory details of any relationship.

Hermione eyed her friend closely; she feared the rejection that was certain to come from her Weasley family if they knew the truth. If they knew that their darling Gryffindor princess was falling for the biggest snake in Slytherin, they wouldn't understand. To them, he was still *the Traitor*, the murdering wizard who had struck Dumbledore down, casting him cruelly off the Astronomy tower. Molly had thrown a massive shit-fit when she found out Hermione had married the man, but at least she seemed to sort of understand Hermione's cold logic, even if she was put out. Molly was ruthless in her own right. Hermione was using the bastard; that was nearly acceptable.

Loving him? Having a real marriage, even one in an Azkaban cell, that was tantamount to her throwing her lot in with the traitorous wizard. She lived in a world of darkness and light. Good and bad. Severus was one of the bad guys, or so everyone thought. To reveal that she stood alongside Severus Snape was to stand on the wrong side of the dividing line.

Hermione bit her lip, wondering how much she could actually reveal before being decried a traitor, too, but found no malice in Ginny's eager expression. Her girlfriend just wanted to dish some good girl talk, and Hermione relaxed, breathing just a bit easier. Perhaps she just needed to trust a friend. Ginny had never judged her too harshly before, and if she empathized with Severus' chapters about his early childhood, maybe she'd understand. The last time she had talked to Ginny about her suspicions that Severus was innocent, she was met with open hostility. Apparently, the hostility only extended to Severus' innocence; gossip was perfectly acceptable.

"But... I like him."

"Like?" Ginny asked dubiously. "Mione, you're the witch with the fifty Sickle vocabulary, and you 'like' him? I think you're doing a lot more than 'liking' him. So, fess up, what's it like shagging Snape?"

"Ginny!" Hermione loudly squeaked before lowering her voice. "I'm not shagging Severus."

"Really, what a pity. With that nose and those hands, I'd be willing to bet he's got something worth having between his legs."

Hermione's head fell heavily into her hands as her cheeks burned. A repressed mental image from when she had caught Severus doing push-ups in his cell, sweaty and clad in tailored trousers, came to her mind's eye. Was it wrong to want to lick a trail up and down that chest? Life would have been much easier if she had stayed on her Liquid Sunshine. The potion had a wonderful side affect of suppressing all those distressing thoughts and urges.

"All right," Hermione confessed, feeling much like a blushing third-year, "I fancy Snape. I like my husband. Is that a crime?"

"No," Ginny smiled glibly, as if she'd won something, "I just wanted to hear you admit it."

"I don't want to talk about Severus Snape any more tonight. So... tell me... how was your date with... Roger? Randy? What was his name?"

"Dick. Dick Duck," Ginny replied with a completely serious face. "He actually didn't balk when I mentioned my plans for the future, but he did stick me with the check. Asshole. Not that I could see myself as Mrs. Ginevra Duck, either way. But I can't believe I'm getting desperate enough to consider it."

"Really?" Hermione asked incredulously, pouring another glass of white zinfandel for the witch. After all, they could both use it.

Ginny swirled the sweet, pink liquid around her glass, seemingly captivated by its color. "Yeah," she conceded blandly. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to know any of the other inmates at Azkaban, would you? Maybe not someone with a life sentence... a petty crime perhaps? Nothing too violent..." she said as she made a face.

Hermione held back a giggle. "Don't be silly, Gin. You're not that desperate. Besides, it's not like I've visited any of the other wards. The only people I know are Severus and... oh."

"Oh?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"Well, it's just..." Hermione's mouth opened and closed several times, as she was uncertain whether to say anything at all. "Ginny, you're not really serious about this, are you?"

Ginny had a pensive look about her, but nodded the affirmative.

"All right, fine. I don't even know why I'm mentioning him. I don't even know if he's married... I don't think he is, but he might not appeal to you."

"Is he terribly ancient?"

"What? No... um... gosh, I think he might have been four years ahead of me."

"How long is his sentence?"

"Geez, girl, do you really think I'd set you up with an inmate? No, he's a guard."

Ginny breathed a long sigh of relief. "You had me really worried there for a minute. And here I was thinking he was some horrible shackled-up insane inmate or something. Don't scare me like that."

Hermione really didn't want to contemplate why Ginny would even think that, or the fact that it appeared that she was honestly considering such a person as suitable. The dating scene must have gotten much worse and more desperate than she thought, as Ministry deadlines were approaching. Again, she thanked her 'never, ever procrastinate' personal mantra for seizing upon Snape as soon as she had. Who knew Severus Snape would ever be a desirable mate?

"Well, in that case, I'll just have to arrange for you to meet him. Actually, the more I think on it, the more I realize you might be a good match for each other. He's smart... too smart for Azkaban, actually. Relatively good looking, even if it is in a neglected sort of way. Oh, and family is really important to him. I don't know how he'll feel about a Quidditch pitch full of kids, but I do know family is definitely a priority in his life."

Ginny shrugged miserably. "It doesn't matter; I've given up on all the kids as a pipe dream, anyway. Besides, if he's that much of a keeper and hasn't already been snapped

up, there's got to be something really wrong with him. I mean, other than working at Azkaban, of course. But hey... at least he's employed... for some reason, I don't think Dick was..."

Hermione smiled. "I don't want to sound too hopeful, but I think you'll get along famously. If he isn't attached, it's because he probably doesn't get a chance to meet people outside of work. He may be an overlooked gem amongst the rough." She knew she was laying it on thick, but it really tugged on her heartstrings to hear the resignation in Ginny's voice. And it was actually possible they'd make a decent couple.

"So, what are you not telling me? Come on, Hermione, what's the bad part?"

It was honestly sad to think that such a young and vivacious witch was so broken that she couldn't fathom a potential suitor not having a 'catch.' Fucking Ministry should be burned to the ground.

She had had high hopes when Kingsley succeeded Scrimgeour. Rufus Scrimgeour was the beast behind the Ministry's policy of rounding up undesirable wizards and witches who posed threats to the safety of their world, which she now knew meant Kissing families en masse.

She was glad to see Scrimgeour go and had proudly campaigned for Kingsley. That was until his administration had introduced the Marriage Law that found both of them in such untenable predicaments. And Kingsley was so anxious to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment to Order members that he was unwilling to give them waivers. Hermione wasn't certain what she'd do if she ever found herself alone in one of the Ministry's elevators with him, but she rather expected she'd make an unladylike spectacle of herself.

"Well... he is a Mulciber," she weakly confessed.

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A/N:

Chapter title: Amor Tussisque Non Celantur Love, and a cough, are not concealed. (Ovid)

Love to my fantabulous beta, Christev20, who effortlessly handled a last-minute rewrite with such grace.