

The Runner

by sunny33

Who is the mysterious, early-morning runner out on the Quidditch pitch? Hermione discovers more than just his identity.

Chapter One: Hidden Assets

Chapter 1 of 14

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Chapter One: Hidden Assets

With a resigned sigh, Hermione gave up on sleep. Since returning to Hogwarts six months earlier, she had found that she regularly woke just before dawn and could not settle again, however hard she tried. She got out of bed, thankful for the privilege of her own room, swiftly dressed, and slipped out of the door. The corridors were silent and still, even the ghosts and Peeves were off doing whatever ghosts and poltergeists did at that early hour of the morning. The portraits were sleeping, and there was no sign of Filch or Mrs Norris skulking around the castle. Relieved, she took a little-used side entrance out to the grounds and set off for a brisk walk to clear her head. The sky was rapidly lightening as the sun neared the horizon, creating paler streaks to the east. The lake was an inky pool with an occasional glimmer of starlight reflecting off ripples caused by the light, spring breeze. As she walked, the cool air lifted her spirits, and the susurrations of leaves dancing in the wind formed a delicate harmony with the earliest birdsongs.

She turned and headed toward the Quidditch pitch where the stands would provide a view of the sunrise over the lake. As she settled herself into one of the higher tiers of seats, the distinct sound of footsteps out on the grass of the pitch itself set her senses on full alert. Straining to see through the gloom, she moved quietly to the corner-most seat, which was in deep shadow, and peered out in the direction of the sound. Measured treads, as if someone was... *jogging*? Then she saw him. A wizard. Dark hair pulled back, grey singlet, brief shorts, and running shoes. In the half-light she could not identify him, but could not imagine anyone she knew who would be out there at that hour, in those clothes, running. He ran at a reasonable, steady pace around the perimeter of the pitch as if it were a running track. She watched as he circled the ground, appreciating the lean form revealed by his Muggle clothing and the brightening sky. The brilliant display of rose pink, fiery orange, and soft yellow reflecting off the lake was completely ignored as the young witch puzzled over the obviously fit, well-put-together man continuing to run, unaware of his audience of one.

Suddenly, she felt a flicker of recognition. The light had improved enough for his features to begin to become distinguishable as he ran in front of her stand. That nose, those eyes, that black hair. Could it be? She shook her head in disbelief. Surely not. He wouldn't run. He wouldn't wear such... *brief* clothes. He wouldn't have *that* body. *Would* he? She waited patiently for the object of her interest to complete another lap so she could confirm her suspicions. However, her curiosity remained unappeased. He had obviously finished his run and left the pitch at the dressing room end, presumably to shower or return to his quarters. She sighed in frustration. Now she had seen a glimpse of the mysterious runner, she wanted to *know*. Was it who she thought it was? It seemed beyond the bounds of belief, but so had many other things he had done in the past. It intrigued her. It frustrated her. It bothered her even more that she felt that way.

At breakfast later, she studied him from across the Great Hall, trying to reconcile the person she saw and thought she knew with the runner who had fascinated her. Scanning the room, she could see no other male, student or staff, whose features matched those she had seen in the early morning light. She eventually put the quandary to the back of her mind and joined in with her friends' light-hearted conversation and joking as she ate.

Since the defeat of Tom Riddle the previous year, those who had wasted a year under the tyranny of the Carrows, those who had not attended school at all due to fear of persecution, and herself, Harry, and Ron, had returned for a final year of magical education, untainted by the looming spectre of war. Despite the initial nightmares of torture and death and the still empty seats of lost friends and staff, the students had eventually seemed to want to put the war behind them and enjoy their last year as carefree teenagers. Romances and practical jokes were rife, and homework was their main complaint, as if by making the most of their newfound freedom, they could honour the sacrifices made during the war. At times Hermione felt they tried too hard.

Classes for the day were, for once, of little interest. Despite answering questions and performing spells faultlessly as usual, part of her mind was elsewhere. In Potions she was caught by Snape as she gazed at him, seemingly sightlessly, while he lectured.

"Miss Granger, if you put your prodigious power of concentration to the potion we are studying today and not to whatever you are daydreaming about, you may actually manage to brew it without blowing us all into tiny little pieces. Would it be too much trouble if I inquired just what you are contemplating, when you *should* be collecting your ingredients from the store cupboard?" Her professor's acid tongue cut into her fugue, jolting her into awareness of her lapse.

"Hidden assets," she murmured, blushing as she stood to retrieve her ingredients.

Her classmates eyed her with curiosity and awe as she walked past Snape, appearing unaware of the risk of inciting his fury with her vague answer. At that moment, a nervous third year burst into the room. "Professor Snape! Please, sir, Madam Pomfrey says it's urgent. She needs some antidote for Alihotsy leaves; Magda Dillydew ate some on a dare!"

"Very well. Tell her I will fetch the antidote and bring it to her forthwith," he huffed, rolling his eyes. "Start preparing your ingredients," he ordered the seventh years, "but under no circumstances are you to start brewing until I return." Returning to the classroom after collecting the antidote from his private stores, he paused briefly at Hermione's desk. "If anyone has any questions about how to deal with their ingredients, I am sure Miss Granger here can find the time in her busy daydreaming schedule to assist."

She watched him as he swept out of the door. Shaking her head at her friends' questioning looks, she simply whispered, "Just get on with it, he will be back before we know it."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. She managed to explain away her lapse at Potions as an Arithmancy problem she had been struggling with. Unsurprisingly, no-one asked for details.

Once again she rose before dawn, a prickle of anticipation running down her spine. Would he be there today? She crept out of the silent castle as she had the previous morning and headed down to the Quidditch pitch, this time entering from the opposite end, near the changing rooms.

Finding a dark corner which was closer to the solitary runner's likely path, she made herself comfortable and waited. There it was, the regular thump of feet hitting the grass, approaching her position. She saw him run past, heard his regular, even breathing, and waited for his next circuit. Each time he passed, the light had grown a little brighter, until she could see clearly his well-defined shoulder muscles, the damp, sweaty patch on the back of his singlet, the dark hair on his legs, and the unmistakable features that confirmed her suspicions. Severus Snape, Potions professor, ex-Death Eater, and spy, was a closet fitness fanatic. She held in a snort. Who would have thought? She supposed he had to have been fit for all his spying activities during the war, but had assumed that his constant nocturnal patrols would have been sufficient to maintain his fitness. Obviously not. And what a body. Now she had seen him from closer up, she had confirmed that he was hiding a fine body beneath all those layers of clothing he usually wore. Not overly pumped up, but beautifully proportioned and lean, without being too thin. Just as well it was kept hidden. She rolled her eyes as she considered the reaction of the likes of Lavender Brown if they ever had an inkling of what was under those robes.

While she had been admiring the view, Snape had finished his run and had started a few warm-down exercises. As he stretched and held position, Hermione was treated to some fairly candid views of her professor's body, which she openly admired. Especially when he removed his singlet and used it to mop up the excess sweat, leaving himself clothed in only those brief, very low-slung shorts. The fine hair on his chest coalesced into a thin line running from below his navel to just a hint of thicker growth peeking above his wayward waistband. She shivered, realising just what she was looking at. Severus Snape's pubic hair. Severus Snape's damned, near-naked body, complete with pubic hair. Severus Snape's bloody awesome, near-naked body... If he caught her ogling said body, she would be in detention until she was a grandmother. Potions class was set to become extremely trying.

Snape looked his normal self at breakfast. Surly, non-communicative, and fully clothed. Hermione smirked to herself as she remembered just what lay beneath those robes. Pubic hair. She couldn't get her mind off it. Damn it, she had seen glimpses of both Harry and Ron's pubic hair at times over the years when they had passed in the Burrow after showering, wearing only towels or pyjamas, and that had never bothered her. She had certainly never obsessed about it like she was doing now over Snape of all people. She mentally shook herself and got on with the business of finishing her meal. After all, with Potions as her first class of the day, she needed all the fortification she could get. The conversation around her continued to flow, its participants wholly unaware of her disinterest in the topics of Quidditch, homework, and whom Draco Malfoy was rumoured to be shagging this week.

Arriving at the Potions classroom early, Hermione took her usual seat and armoured her desk with her Potions kit and books. The rest of the class trickled in, still laughing and joking with each other. As the door slammed shut upon entry of the dour Potions master, they fell silent, no-one wanting to risk drawing attention to themselves. Snape strode to the front of the class, glared at all and sundry, and pointed to the instructions he had written on the blackboard for the day's assignment. Hermione groaned inwardly. Muscle Relaxing Lotion. Just what she needed, something to remind her of the fine set of muscles hidden underneath the robes of the professor no, the man standing behind the desk before her. She felt betrayed by her own body. She was the class know-it-all, the school swot, the brain behind the Boy who Still Lived. She didn't possess *hormones*. She was above drooling gormlessly over a male body. She was a mature, intelligent, self-possessed, young woman... who at that moment was fantasising about her Potions professor dressed in little more than a brief pair of shorts.

"Miss Granger!" She started as she realised the subject of her fantasy was standing right in front of her desk with a rather irritated expression on his face. "Ah, thank you for joining us. Five points from Gryffindor for inattention and see me after class." He stalked off back to his desk to attack the pile of essays awaiting his perusal between forays around the classroom.

With a soft sigh of dismay, Hermione pulled herself together and concentrated on the task at hand. Completing the potion in record time, she bottled it, labelled it, and delivered it to Snape's desk. He merely nodded as she handed him the potion, returning immediately to his grading. Back at her desk, she quietly packed her bag and waited anxiously for the rest of the class to finish. Harry discreetly signalled his intention to wait outside the classroom for her, then left with the others.

Snape scratched his scorn into the last essay, then peered at Hermione as if trying to determine which species of doxy had infested the curtains of his awareness. "Well, Miss Granger. Twice now you have disrupted my class with your inability to pay attention. Loath as I am to admit it, this behaviour is not what I would expect from you. Perhaps an hour or two of gutting flobberworms will suffice to take your mind off whatever has been distracting you lately. Eight pm. Don't be late."

With that, he turned and exited the room in a trademark flourish of robes. Hermione smirked to herself. Detention or not, under all that snark and snarl, the Potions professor was simply a man. And she was a woman.

Harry accosted her as she entered the dungeon corridor. "Are you all right, Hermione? What did Snape want?"

"Nothing. Just gave me detention tonight for not paying attention. Nothing to worry about," she replied absently.

"Hermione?" Harry stopped in his tracks and regarded his friend with concern.

"What?"

"You sure you're OK? You didn't correct me for calling him Snape, and since when is detention with Snape nothing to worry about?"

"Oh, give over. There are more important things to worry about than spending a couple of hours gutting flobberworms," she retorted as she headed up the stairs leaving Harry standing dumbfounded.

He scratched his head. "Women. Never understand 'em."

Dinner that night held little interest for Hermione. Despite her blasé attitude that afternoon, she really was concerned about detention with Snape. Not because she was scared of him, but because she was afraid of her own treacherous body and mind. If he discovered the reason for her daydreaming, she would lose any opportunity to repeat her early morning *sightseeing*. And, she suddenly realised, she had every intention of taking in the sights the next morning, if at all possible.

However, detention was somewhat of an anticlimax. After brief orders on what she was expected to do with the flobberworms, Snape left her to her own devices and buried himself in the seemingly endless stack of essays to be marked. *Serves you right*, she thought. *If you didn't set so much homework, you wouldn't have so much marking to do*. On that note, she cheerfully turned to the task at hand, finishing the job in little over an hour. A questioning glance at Snape earned a dismissive wave of his quill indicating the door, so she took the opportunity and escaped.

There was, of course, the compulsory rehash of the evening's activities with her friends in the common room, and several feet of Charms essay to complete; then she retired to her room to think in peace. Lying back on her bed, hair spread out over the soft pillow, she closed her eyes and let the images from the morning have free reign in her mind.

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Chapter Two: Admiring the View

Chapter 2 of 14

Hermione finds out a little more about the runner than she had expected.

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Chapter Two: Admiring the View

Hermione woke with a start, still dressed, thoughts of her Potions professor having eased her into an unexpectedly restful sleep the evening before. Realising that it was almost time to sneak out to the Quidditch pitch, she quickly washed and changed into fresh clothes. Another crisp, March morning greeted her as she left the castle and silently found her way into the stands. Her curiosity took her closer, only a few rows from the front, but she remained prudently hidden in the shadows to all but the keenest of eyes. Expectant ears caught the first sounds of the runner as he neared the stand in which she was waiting. She was close enough this time to see him clearly and knew if he looked her way she could not avoid detection. The risk of discovery spread a tingle of anxiety, or perhaps anticipation, across her skin, lifting goosebumps on her arms. His barely clothed body called to the newly awakened woman in hers, heightening her senses and stirring her imagination.

This morning, he stopped to stretch immediately in front of her position. Stripping off his singlet, he then did the unthinkable. He removed his shoes and then dropped his shorts and underwear right there in front of her. Completely naked, he commenced a series of callisthenic exercises that Hermione recognised as being of ancient Spartan origin. Presumably the nakedness was part of the whole, *harden oneself up to the elements*, regimen. Whatever the reason, she wasn't about to complain. Or move. The last thing she wanted was to make her presence known. At least not before he turned around. Her conscience tried to berate her for her voyeurism, but even that small voice was silenced when he finally faced the stands for his, apparently final, set of exercises.

Holy Mother of Merlin. Naked Snape. Naked, full-frontal Snape. Naked, very well-endowed Snape. Pubic hair did not even rate a mention. She could not take her eyes off her professor's most intimate anatomy. What the hell was the man doing running around naked in the outdoors? Anyone who got up at an obscenely early hour could catch him at it...

"Seen enough, Miss Granger?" The low drawl brought her down to earth with a crash. Snape was standing at the base of the stands, unconcernedly nude, awaiting a response.

"Er... I-I was just... a-ad-admiring the view?" she stammered, flushing deep scarlet.

"Indeed," he replied, then simply redressed and walked away.

"Now, what was *that* supposed to mean?" Hermione asked the empty seats around her.

She considered avoiding breakfast altogether, but pride dictated that it would be better to put in an appearance rather than be thought to be as overwhelmed as she felt. Snape looked up when she entered, quirking an eyebrow at her once again flushed face.

Damn man should at least have the decency to look embarrassed she told herself, knowing that the situation was purely her own fault. Anyone who skulked around in the half-light spying on another was bound to get more than they bargained for sooner or later. Feeling alternately indignant and mortified, she served herself a generous portion of bacon and eggs and concentrated on eating it serenely.

"Oi, Hermione. Have you suddenly discovered the wonders of Hogwarts' breakfasts?" asked Ron, gesticulating with his loaded fork. "You usually only eat cereal or yoghurt."

Smiling weakly at him, she settled for a half-truth. "I went for a walk this morning. All that fresh air must have done my appetite some good." She could feel the smirk on Snape's face as he watched their interaction from the High Table without even looking his way.

Finishing up, she stood and, without waiting for Harry, headed for Advanced Transfiguration. At least there she would not be distracted by possibilities. With no Potions

class for the day, she had time to contemplate the morning's events without the threat of exposure. Too much exposure had been the problem after all, although if she was honest with herself she hadn't really had a problem with it. Just with getting caught. And why hadn't he appeared concerned with her presence? She couldn't believe he had just walked away without berating her for invading his privacy. He, who was ostensibly the most closed-off, repressed wizard at Hogwarts, had stood bare before her and then merely walked away. She supposed he would have found it difficult to be his usual, acerbic self whilst stark naked, but why the seeming amusement at breakfast? Snape, who never exhibited any sense of humour, had appeared to be enjoying her discomfiture way too much. Sighing with frustration, she forced her mind to concentrate on her classes and put her questions aside as she continued with her day.

The next morning found Hermione up and out of the castle almost before she was aware of the foolishness of her actions. She felt compelled to return to the scene of the previous day's crime, as if by doing so, her presence would force Snape into revealing his intention whether to punish her or not. From the same seat as the day before, she watched as he completed his circuits without any acknowledgement of her presence. He stopped in the same position, performed some stretches, then, to her astonishment, simply stripped naked and commenced his callisthenics. As if she was not there. She knew he had to have seen her, as she had made no effort on this occasion to hide. And yet, there he was, nude, exercising as if he was completely alone.

Once more he turned to face her, his body completely displayed to her eyes. Once more he did not appear the least embarrassed, finishing his exercise routine exactly as before. He picked up his clothes and, before turning to leave, glanced at her and nodded. "Miss Granger."

She was speechless. Staring after his retreating figure, she sank back into the seat, unaware that she had been leaning forward, and shook her head. The man was a mystery. Admittedly, a surprisingly sexy mystery, but a mystery nonetheless.

Potions that day was as always. Snape set the class to brewing the assignment for the day, circulated the room checking the students' prowess, more often than not docking a few points here and there for inaccurate measuring, poor preparation of ingredients, or just because he could, and between rounds sat at his desk disseminating red-inked words of disdain. He gave no hint that he was aware of Hermione's continued puzzlement at his behaviour, and she diligently forced the mental images of the man before her, naked, to the deepest recesses of her mind. Only then could she concentrate on her brewing. That night, she finally relaxed enough to examine her memories of what she had seen over the last few days. And realised with a start that she was extremely aroused. By Snape.

Sodding Severus Snape. Potions master. No, she couldn't get even a little turned on when she had tried going out with Ron. Not one single spark. No other boy in her year so much as warmed her interest. But one glimpse of the sarcastic, antisocial professor's body had her hormones raging and her brain scrambled, and now she had seen *those* parts of his anatomy, she was feeling extremely... horny. Damn the man and his fitness obsession. All she had wanted was a peaceful sunrise to enjoy. She took care of her frustration herself, all the while cursing the man who had woken her to her own sexuality.

Morning came, and with it the overwhelming pull to the Quidditch pitch. *All those years being dragged out here by the boys and it took the Potions professor to make me want to come.* She smiled to herself at the irony. She waited in her usual seat for the runner to complete his laps and start his exercises, awaiting restlessly his reaction to her presence.

As the subject of her thoughts finished his run, she noticed a brief, slight quirk of his lips. Could he be *pleased* that she had returned yet again? Admiring his masculine form and graceful motion as he stretched, her mind whirled at the invitation implicit in his acceptance of her gaze. He deliberately looked up and locked eyes with her as he removed his few items of clothing, remaining facing in her direction until he was fully naked. Raking her gaze slowly, deliberately down his body, she met his challenge with a nod. Apparently satisfied, he continued with his fitness regime, once again acknowledging her briefly as he left.

Hermione sat watching the sunrise. The exquisite display went unappreciated as she pondered her professor's uncharacteristic behaviour. His motivations and thoughts were beyond her comprehension. However, he had not stopped her returning; he had not commented further on her presence, and he had not stopped baring himself to her eyes. In some strange way, for the first time since the final battle she felt some kinship with another.

"Where were you earlier, Hermione?" asked Ron as he heaped scrambled eggs and bacon on his plate.

"Er... just out walking," she replied, flushing slightly as she noticed the Potions professor joining the staff at the High Table.

"Oh, just wondered. We came to collect you for breakfast, and you weren't there, is all."

Thinking rapidly, Hermione added, "I quite often go for a walk before breakfast. It is a peaceful time of day. Allows me to think." Hoping that would discourage any offers of company, she turned to her own plate and started eating. An involuntary smile briefly lit her face as her eyes met Snape's over the heads of her housemates, prompting another slight quirk of his lips.

For the rest of the day the surreal events of the dawn seemed like as a dream. Snape was Snape, stalking down the corridors after breakfast in his usual flurry of robes. With no Potions class, Hermione was able to concentrate on her work and put the dark wizard to the back of her mind. The next day was Saturday, and the Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff was the main event of the weekend. Her fellow Gryffindors had a vested interest in Hufflepuff winning, as the Ravensclaws were close behind them in Quidditch Cup points. The hubbub in the common room was not conducive to studying, leading Hermione to pack up her books and head for the library.

Half an hour after she had settled into writing her Charms essay, she looked up to find Snape had entered the room.

"Do you really need to spread your possessions over the entire table, Miss Granger?" He sneered as he sat opposite. Gathering her books into tidy piles, she mumbled an apology while noting the abundance of empty tables nearby. Sneaking a peek at him through her hair, she smirked as she caught him watching her, an odd expression of interest mixed with diffidence fleetingly crossing his face. Quietly, they both worked on into the evening, unaware of the occasional, curious glances from the other students in the library. She smiled briefly at him as she left later, receiving a curt nod in return.

Thus set the pattern for the days ahead. She would wake early and arrive at the Quidditch pitch just before dawn. He would run his usual number of laps, then stretch, strip, and work through his routine, always finishing facing her. Neither spoke, but an intense awareness stretched almost tangibly between them. She openly admired his body, but he did nothing other than nod his head as he left each morning. It was as if speaking, as if acknowledging the other's presence verbally, would break the spell that had been cast upon them, placing them in another world, where their relationship as teacher and student was void. Only when the sun came up did they return to their normal personae and inhabit the roles that were expected of them.

One morning, after he completed his routine, he broke from his usual habit and climbed up to where she sat. Seating himself beside her, he leaned back and watched the sky as the colours of the dawn transformed the surrounding hills from navy blue to pink, then to iridescent gold, before the sun threatened to reveal their presence to the world. Hermione watched the sunrise, silently accepting his companionship, knowing that words would diminish not only the magnificence of the scene before them, but also the delicate bond that was becoming so important to her. He left as suddenly as he had come, but his presence lingered in her mind for the rest of the day. The unspoken acknowledgement that she was not alone in believing there was something developing between them filled her heart with joy and brought a smile to her lips, causing her friends to shake their heads in wonder at the cause.

She had learned to regard Professor Snape, her uptight Potions master, as a different person to the sensual, relaxed man with whom she communed in the dawn hour. With the professor she behaved as any diligent student should, respectfully following instructions and avoiding unnecessary contact. With the man she felt no such constraint, openly showing her appreciation of his body and her pleasure in his company.

The girl ate, studied, and enjoyed time with her friends as if nothing had changed, but the woman in her permeated her words, her movements, and her expressions. She attracted the attention of more than one would-be boyfriend, leaving them nonplussed as to her indifference to their advances. She never noticed the tightening of Snape's expression when he saw some callow youth attempting to invite her to spend time with him, never saw the relief in his eyes when she turned each one of them down.

Each morning now, he would sit beside her to experience the sunrise after he had finished his exercise routine. They were content to simply spend time sharing the tranquil start to the day until one morning, as the sun crested the horizon, Hermione felt his hand cover hers as it lay in her lap.

After a moment, she turned her palm to his and linked fingers. The warmth that flowed between their joined hands communicated far more than mere words could describe. At that moment, she realised just how grateful she was for the skill and compassion of the Healers at St Mungo's, who had battled to save his life even before the truth about his true allegiance was revealed.

As the sun bathed the stands with its clear, morning light, Hermione glanced at Snape, finding his face for once unshuttered, the inner man unmasked. The depth of yearning she discerned there touched her heart. Yearning to be trusted, to be accepted, to be wanted. She smiled and wordlessly pledged her faith, her friendship, and her desire to the wizard beside her. His palpable relief inspired her to gently reach over and brush his cheek with her lips before she stood and returned to the castle. Things had changed. Before, he had held the power, the ability to cut her off without a reason. Now, he had given himself over to her keeping, to do with as she would.

In class, Snape had become noticeably calmer. He still took points and gave detentions for the slightest infractions; he still stalked the halls at night, looking for miscreants, but his words, while as cutting as ever, lacked the venom of before. He was seen, very occasionally, with a slight hint of a smile, as if remembering something pleasant. Staff and students alike were bemused. To all intents and purposes, Severus Snape was the same man, but something indefinable had altered.

Hermione smiled to herself as she watched him covertly in class. His graceful movements, accorded by the toned body beneath his robes, his subtle expressions that she had learned to interpret, even his acerbic wit, had all become precious to her. She did not know where *it*, whatever *it* was between them, was going, but she was more than ready to explore the possibilities.

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Chapter Three: Drama Queen

Chapter 3 of 14

Hermione discovers another incentive for studying in the library.

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Chapter Three: Drama Queen

As March wore on, Hermione busied herself with her studies, drowning her longing for her professor in parchment, ink, and books. Snape eventually returned to his irascible self, which generated sighs of relief from his colleagues and students who felt reassured that all was normal in their world. Ron and Harry suffered from Hermione's renewed attempts to coerce them into studying more; they had been slacking while she'd been otherwise preoccupied.

However, spending more time studying had its own rewards. Snape had begun appearing in the library two or three times a week at the same time Hermione had been there. He had made a point of sitting at her table, his mere presence discouraging other students from studying nearby. Despite the aloofness that had to be displayed, she had gained no little comfort from his proximity, smiling contentedly as she wrote her essays and read her textbooks. One evening, she noticed that he had left the book he was reading open on the table after departing. Glancing at it curiously, she had to quickly stifle a snort of laughter as she read the title: *On Sparta* by Plutarch. A sudden flood of warmth hit her as she remembered how he had looked as he had performed his callisthenics routine that morning, naked.

A few days later, Hermione left the library before Snape, which was unusual. She knew the magazine she had left open, face down on the table, would pique his interest. Grinning to herself, she thought of the buff centrefold of the *Witches' Weekly* magazine stretching in all his blond, naked glory, winking at Snape as he read on the scrap of parchment she had left for him to find, *Yet dawn brings a finer display*.

Sometimes, he would simply sit and read, not even glancing in her direction the entire time. Other times she would find a book or periodical left behind, open at an interesting article. She would avidly read all that he had provided and in turn leave him her selections, both sharing a little of themselves in the process.

The Easter Ball was to take place the night before the students left for the spring holiday, the last chance for frivolity before the weeks of intense studying and revising began. Hermione had difficulty mustering the same enthusiasm as her classmates. What use was a ball if one cannot share the company of the person one most wanted? She readily helped with the decorations and preparations, but on the evening dressed reluctantly, loath to even attend.

Harry was escorting Ginny, Ron had asked Lavender to be his partner, and even Neville had grown enough of a spine to invite Luna to the ball. Hermione alone was attending unescorted.

"Are you sure you are OK?" asked Harry for the umpteenth time as Ginny dragged him onto the dance floor.

"I'm fine, just go and enjoy yourselves. And stop asking!" she replied, rising as if to head to the drinks table. As she stood, she bumped into something firm, black, and warm. Snape.

"Miss Granger," he stated formally, extending his hand. "Professor McGonagall has observed that you are not dancing and charged me with the task of ensuring her precious Gryffindor has a dance partner." His demeanour declared to any observer that he felt extremely put upon, but the spark in his eyes told another tale.

"Professor Snape, how very... er... kind of you," she replied respectfully, then under her breath whispered, *How did you wangle that?*

"Skill, my dear Miss Granger. I am the Head of Slytherin for a reason."

They danced several dances over the course of the evening, all with complete decorum. Touching, yet not touching; holding, yet not holding; speaking, yet not speaking,

they passed the evening. Reluctantly parting after the last dance, Snape stiffly bowed, and Hermione thanked him politely.

"Eww. How did you end up dancing with the old bat?" Ron asked once they had all returned to the common room after the ball was over.

"Apparently, Professor McGonagall decided in her wisdom that I needed a partner. He was not impressed, but I guess he couldn't make a scene in front of the whole senior school," she explained.

"So... er... What was it like? Can he dance? He didn't do anything inappropriate, did he?" Ginny's eager curiosity demanded satisfaction.

"It was fine. He was very formal and polite. Yes, he can dance well, and, no, of course he didn't do anything inappropriate. It was Professor Snape, for goodness sake!" With that, Hermione retired to the sanctuary of her room where she could relive the evening in private.

She contemplated the nature of her relationship with Severus Snape and sighed. She barely knew him in so many ways, and yet, she felt that they shared a connection that drew them ever closer. The way he had stripped himself naked before her, both physically and emotionally, created an intimacy that surpassed mere lust. The shared sunrises had created a closeness that she missed intensely. The books that they had discreetly exchanged told of potential future pleasures discovering each other's likes and dislikes. She wanted so much more.

The morning after the ball was to be their last for two weeks while Hermione was staying with the Weasleys for the holidays. She had not said anything to Snape, assuming he was aware of the students' holiday arrangements. Watching him that morning left her longing for contact again after the tantalising tastes of his body against hers the evening before. As they watched the sun rise, she reached for his hand and clasped it as she leaned into his side, relishing the feel of his skin under her hand, the strength of his muscles, and even the musk of his sweat. Once again brushing a light kiss against his cheek as she left, she gasped as he turned and met her lips with his own. Surprisingly soft and warm, his mouth claimed hers, gently at first, but with rising passion as she parted her lips and invited his exploration. They tasted, touched, melted into each other for long moments until she pulled away, resting her forehead against his as their breathing steadied.

"I apologise. I didn't intend..." he started.

"No. Don't." She stopped him with a finger to his lips. With a smile, she tenderly kissed his forehead. "See you in two weeks."

For once, the holiday dragged. The frequent, friendly Quidditch games played at the Weasleys had never appealed, Hermione preferring to spend her time reading in the garden when she wasn't helping Molly Weasley prepare meals. She caught Molly eyeing her oddly a few times and chose to ignore the older witch's curiosity at her lack of participation in the others' antics. As the holidays drew to a close, her impatience grew until finally she made a decision.

"I am planning to return to school a few days early," she announced at dinner that night.

"What? Why on earth would you do that?" asked Ron.

"Yeah, Hermione. Why?" added Harry, reaching for another of Molly's delicious buns.

"Well, I overheard Madam Pince saying she was going to rearrange the Restricted Section this week. I thought that if I offered to help her, she may grant me access without a teacher's permission," she quickly explained. After all, it was not an outright lie; she had considered offering to help with the reshelving last term.

"Good luck with that! I doubt that she would relax *that* rule, even for you!" laughed Harry.

"Nevertheless, it's worth a try," she replied. "I shall Apparate back to Hogwarts in the morning, if that is all right with you, Mrs Weasley?"

"No problem, dear. We would hate to keep you from your books," Molly kindly agreed.

After a jolly round of farewells from the Weasley clan and Harry, Hermione Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts and began the long trek up to the castle. The air was cool, with sharp gusts from time to time, belying the false promise of the spring sun shining in the clear, blue sky. Unbeknownst to her, a tall, dark wizard was atop the Astronomy Tower enjoying the view. She could not see from that distance the way his face suddenly lit up when the breeze blew off her hat and allowed her curls to dance around her face.

On arriving at the front door of the Entrance Hall, she pushed the doors hard, expecting them to be stiff. To her surprise the doors gave way easily, propelling her straight into the arms of one delighted Potions master. Not that anyone would have known it from looking at him.

"Miss Granger! Just what do you think you are doing? Ten points for trying to knock over a teacher." His eyes glinted as she glared indignantly at him, then his eyebrow quirked as he glanced toward the Gryffindor hourglass where ten rubies were busy making their way up to the top chamber.

She followed his glance and realised what he had done. "You... *Slytherin!*" she breathed.

Holding on for just a fraction longer than was strictly necessary for her to regain her balance, he whispered back, "Indeed." Then in a louder tone asked, "To what do we owe the dubious pleasure of your company so soon, Miss Granger?"

"I was planning to offer to help Madam Pince in the library for a few days, sir," she replied, continuing to take the liberty of resting her hand upon his black-clad chest as she pretended to fiddle with her shoe. The rapid thud of his heartbeat beneath her hand betrayed his cool exterior.

"Well, far be it from me to keep you from the library," he snarled. "Just try to avoid knocking over any more staff members on the way."

"I will be sure to be selective about whom I run into," she replied, flashing him a suggestive glance before turning and walking away.

Anyone who was watching closely would have been disconcerted to see Professor Severus Snape smile contentedly to himself as the somewhat dishevelled girl left the hall.

There were few students staying at Hogwarts for the holiday, and some staff had gone to visit relatives as well. Those present were usually seated around one large table for meals. Unsurprisingly, the students avoided sitting next to their irritable Potions professor if at all possible, as did the staff. His negative attitude provided all the buffer he needed from those around him. Hermione did the honourable thing when she arrived for dinner that evening. She bravely took the spare seat right next to Professor Snape, without a word of complaint. Turning to him as she sat, she politely greeted him. "Good evening, Professor Snape."

"Miss Granger," was the only reply. However, under the table his hand brushed hers in a brief, but tender greeting.

The meal progressed with little contribution to the conversation from the man beside her. A third-year Hufflepuff girl monopolised her attention from across the table, describing at great lengths all of the souvenirs she had been sent from her parents, who were holidaying overseas. Hermione sighed gently, wishing the girl would pay more attention to her food and less to her dinner companions.

Continuing to present an interested expression to the droning thirteen year old, she reached beneath the tablecloth to find Snape's hand. She almost let out a giggle when she felt his finger trace her palm, wondering if he knew how a Muggle would interpret that simple gesture. His slightly quirked eyebrow told her that he knew perfectly well what message it implied, but the teasing spark in his eyes belied any seriousness behind it.

At last, the girl opposite appeared to have exhausted the subject of her parents' travels. Hermione turned to her professor and inquired respectfully, "How is your research

into Ancient Greek traditions coming along, Professor?"

His poorly disguised snort engendered an odd look from Professor McGonagall further down the table as he replied curtly. "As is expected, the Greeks have certain practices which to this day generate a great deal of interest. If you must insist on knowing everything, I suggest you will find plenty to study in the library without needing to bother me."

"I'm sure I will find a suitable subject to study; perhaps I may at least find the bare facts of the matter," she responded serenely.

"Perhaps," he agreed.

Dinner finished without any further communication. Heading back to Gryffindor tower, she gathered her books and parchment to take to the library for some study, hoping that a certain Potions professor would be of a like mind that evening.

The library was sadly empty. Not even Madam Pince was in attendance. Hermione let herself in with the key she had been granted by the librarian and settled herself at her usual table. She supposed it had been a little too much to hope that he would have been there; after all, he no doubt had rounds to do and class work to organise for the following week. Looking around the room one last time, she sighed deeply and took out her books to start reading. Deeply engrossed in her Advanced Transfiguration text, a hand on her shoulder had her leaping out of her chair with her wand out before she realised just who had disturbed her.

"Hexing a professor is bad form, you know, Miss Granger," drawled Snape, an amused twitch lifting the corner of his mouth.

"Humph. Sneaking up on people could also be considered bad form, Professor Snape," she retorted, returning her wand to her pocket.

He spread his hands out in a gesture of apology. "Guilty as charged. But you should have seen the look on your face." Chuckling, he looked up as the door opened. His face resumed its usual dour expression as Madam Pince entered, glancing at them as she passed. Sitting at the table, he shrugged and shot her a rueful look as he opened his own book.

Hermione studied her professor discreetly as she worked. He looked completely at ease, leaning back in his chair, legs stretched under the table, book propped up against its edge. She was acutely aware that he would never let down his guard like that in front of any other students and maybe not even before his colleagues. Black eyes caught hers as beneath the table his leg pressed against her knee and rubbed gently. She flashed him a reproving frown and nodded her head towards Madam Pince's office. Lifting his hand, he blew her a kiss, then raised an eyebrow and grinned. His uncharacteristically playful actions had her stifling a giggle. Shaking her head, she hissed at him, "*Professor! Behave.*" He smirked and moved his leg away from hers, sitting up more formally and re-assuming his mantle of stone. Whilst mourning the loss of contact, she felt relieved that he had returned to his normal demeanour before the librarian had become aware of his anomalous behaviour.

The rest of the evening passed swiftly, both Hermione and Snape content to read and work companionably as they had on many occasions before. As he left, he brushed past her, briefly touching her shoulder as he softly murmured, "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, Professor," she replied, leaning into him for a moment before, with an overdone flourish of his robes, he swept out of the library.

"Drama queen," she muttered softly to herself as she collected her books. A small scrap of parchment fluttered to the floor as she stowed them in her bag. Picking it up, she noticed the spiky handwriting usually seen lambasting Potions students' essays. Four words. A wealth of meaning. *My name is Severus.*

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Chapter Four: Temperature Rising

Chapter 4 of 14

Things start to heat up.

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Chapter Four: Temperature Rising

My name is Severus. She studied the note again and smiled as she remembered his antics in the library. Would anybody ever believe Severus Snape had a silly side? Not in a million years. Which was a moot point, as she had no intention of sharing *that* revelation with anyone. *What was the blown kiss and the leg rubbing all about?* she wondered as she sprawled on her bed. *And that greeting as I arrived?* Not for one moment did she think it was accidental. She really should go away for a few days more often. It seemed the man had missed her as much as she had missed him and had suddenly developed an affectionate streak. Where it had come from was beyond her. A little attention from a woman, and he was changing the habits of a lifetime. She sobered as she considered why he had been so harsh and apparently unfeeling for most of the seven years she had known him. Who had ever given him affection without strings attached, attention without an agenda, trust without question? As far as she knew, no-one. Even his beloved Lily had given up on him, just when he was most vulnerable. Well, she was more than happy to give him all he had lacked and more; he only needed to ask. With that decided, she changed into her pyjamas and hopped into bed, losing herself to dreams of a tall, dark athlete.

Overnight, the temperature dropped, and clouds gathered overhead. Hermione awoke to the sound of pouring rain and a howling wind. Clearly, there would be no rendezvous at the Quidditch pitch that morning. Disappointed, she decided to go for a walk anyway, indoors this time. She strolled aimlessly around the castle, her mind on her last interaction with her Potions professor. Turning a corner near the staircase down to the dungeons, she ran, once again, into the object of her thoughts.

"Miss Granger. I do not believe breakfast is served this early. Neither is it served in this part of the castle," he said, once again holding on to her a fraction longer than necessary.

"I was awake early, so I decided to go for a walk," she explained, acutely aware of the nearby portraits.

"Wandering around at this hour of the morning could get you into trouble," he warned, eyes dark and intense.

"No more than it already has," she whispered.

Appearing to make an impulsive decision, he lightly caught her arm and breathed, "Come."

She followed him without hesitation along corridors rarely travelled until they reached a room just below the roof of the Astronomy Tower. Taking her hand, he drew her to an east-facing window and turned her to look outside. Hermione gasped in pleasure at the perfect view down the length of the lake to the lightening sky beyond. She felt his body heat as he stood close behind her, arms wrapped around her waist. Together, they watched their sunrise once again, shards of crystal light piercing the heavy clouds, reflecting off the surface of the lake, and colouring the mountains in the distance a soft pink. She relaxed into his embrace for several perfect moments, but as the sun emerged briefly into the morning sky before losing its battle with the clouds, she felt a gentle kiss atop her head and an apologetic squeeze of her shoulders. Mourning the loss of his warmth, she turned to find he was gone.

Working in the library under Madam Pince's slightly mistrustful gaze, the day passed rapidly. Hermione had managed to reorganise the Restricted Section to the older witch's satisfaction by dinnertime and was even rewarded with a faint smile as she left.

To her surprise and delight, when she arrived back at the library that evening, no-one else was there except one black-clad Potions master. She sat across the table from him, noticing the quick smile half hidden by his hair as he read his book. Breathing a sigh of relief, she relaxed into her chair and opened her Potions text to the section they were due to study on Monday.

"Still trying to get ahead of me?" he murmured after half an hour of companionable reading, not raising his eyes from his book.

"Always," she replied equally softly and discreetly stifled a snicker at his assumed air of disregard.

"You'll have to try harder than that to get on top of me," he breathed.

Her face flushed. "I'm sure if I did, you would *rise* to the challenge," she hissed, taking pleasure in the matching colour that stained his cheeks at her words.

He groaned softly and shifted in his seat. Taking a scrap of parchment from his pocket, he scratched a single word and left it lying on the table as he hurriedly left. Curious as to his sudden departure, she reached over and picked up the note. *Tomorrow*. She sedately packed away her books, only allowing the beam of pleasure to transform her face once she was well away from the library and the ever-watchful librarian.

The heavy rain continued the following day, much to Hermione's chagrin. She slipped through her door and found her way to the room from the morning before. A few minutes later, soft steps told her she was no longer alone. Turning to find Snape immediately behind her, she reached up and caressed his cheek in wonder at the look in his eyes, to find her hand clasped in his and gently turned to his lips for a soft kiss. "Severus," she whispered, trying out the feel of his name.

His eyes closed, and he inhaled sharply. "Say it again," he murmured and leaned closer, lips almost brushing hers as she said, louder, "Severus..." Finally, after an eternity, their lips met warming, rejoicing, affirming. His tongue slid along her mouth, tasting her, teasing her, seeking entrance. She welcomed him avidly and sampled his offering in return.

Their own heavy breathing brought them to their senses some minutes later. The sun had risen, unheeded by the couple at the window, and it was time for them to be leaving, lest they be missed at breakfast.

"Tonight, the rest of the school returns. We cannot meet here tomorrow," he pronounced, confirming her own, unwelcome conclusion. One further brief kiss, and they made their way separately to the Great Hall, once again returning to their professor and student roles.

"So, how were your last few days, Hermione?" asked Ron that evening at dinner, his mouth stuffed full as usual. "Do anything exciting apart from play with dusty old books?"

"Nothing much," she replied evasively. *Just a little heavy snogging with the Potions professor, nothing much at all* she thought with a secretive smile. Harry gave her an odd look, then returned his attention to his meal. Hermione artfully sidetracked any further questions by inquiring how their weekend had passed, to be regaled with tales of the Great Quidditch Playoff between The Weasleys and The Rest. Even poor Neville had been roped into playing, not that he managed to get his hand on the Quaffle at all, spending most of his time trying to stay on his broom. Needless to say, The Weasleys won, even with Harry Potter playing Seeker for The Rest.

A Hogsmeade weekend had been declared for a fortnight's time, and all were looking forward to an excuse to make out with their partner of choice. Hermione was once again besieged by offers of advice for prospective dates.

"What about Terry Boot?" Harry suggested, in his most helpful mode. "He is smart enough for you."

"And boring. Besides, rumour has it he is having a quiet affair with a Ravenclaw sixth-year, but I don't know her name," Hermione replied.

"Or maybe it is *his* name," contributed Ron, grinning broadly at his own joke.

"Really, Ronald, you should not be spreading unfounded rumours. Whether Terry Boot has a female or male *friend*, it is none of your business!" she scolded.

"All right, all right. What about a Slytherin, if you want a bit of excitement? I dare say some of them may be up for the challenge of dating you," joked Harry.

"I say, Harry, that's a bit rough," interjected Ron.

"Oh, I don't know," mused Hermione, "I imagine if you found the right man..."

"Man? In Slytherin? I thought they were all ferrets?" laughed Harry. At that, they all collapsed in a heap, remembering Malfoy the Bouncing Ferret from fourth-year.

Giving up on matchmaking Hermione, the boys started planning their own dates.

Reaching herself for bed, Hermione hoped for a mild morning. She wondered just what the dawn would bring, as the last two weeks had wrought changes in both of them. With a sudden bout of sneezing, she settled in under her quilt and let her mind consider the possibilities until she drifted off to sleep.

The early morning was clear, and the air held no hint of rain as she left the castle, but it was still quite cold. She held onto her spell-warmed cup of hot chocolate and made her way to her customary seat in the Quidditch stands. As the darkness lifted to the east, she heard the familiar footfalls of her early morning athlete. Without so much as glancing in her direction, Severus continued his circuits until the sun's rays were streaking across the lake, gilding the surrounding hills in a coruscating display. Hermione found herself lost in his form as he stretched, then stripped down and commenced his callisthenics, naked, despite the temperature.

His nude body had been an essay in physical beauty and athleticism before, but with their new, closer relationship, had become something else altogether. Muscles contracted beneath smooth, pale skin, and his limbs moved with grace and precision. Long, lean legs lead up to well-defined buttocks and narrow hips. She became aware of an impossible heat growing at her centre, her breathing becoming erratic as he moved through the now familiar routine, nearing the last set of exercises in which she knew he would turn to face her. He appeared to falter, as if unsure, but finally turned, his cheeks stained pink. The reason became abundantly clear as her eyes travelled down his body. Her breath escaped in a hiss as shudders racked her body in a wave of pleasure so intense she whimpered in surprise. Hot chocolate forgotten, she

continued to stare at him, entranced, then disappointed when he turned and quickly dressed.

As he sat beside her, his head dropped forward, strands of black hair camouflaging his expression. "I am sorry for that unfortunate display. My apologies if I offended you," he ground out, shoulders stiff and defensive.

"Apologies? For the most incredibly arousing experience I have ever had?" He turned to her, startled out of his discomposure. "Look at me, Severus. Do I look offended?" she implored.

He took in her flushed face, her still erratic breathing, and the pearls of moisture beaded on her brow. "You... you... Did you...?" He frowned, disbelieving the evidence in front of his own eyes.

"Oh, yes. I did. I definitely did. And it was amazing. Just from seeing you... like that." Hermione blushed herself as she realised just how much she had admitted to this man. She groaned and sank back in the seat, covering her face with her hands. "I can't believe I just told you that," she muttered.

He took her hands and drew them from her face. Black eyes met brown, searching for any hint of mockery. Finding nothing but unlimited depths of desire and something else, something so newborn and precious he was not sure if it was real or simply a figment of his own, wistful imagination, he looked away, ashamed at his lack of faith. Regaining his composure, he reassured her. "Never regret your passion. I am flattered I could generate such a response from you." He glanced down, the evidence of his own physical state of need obvious in his brief shorts.

She followed the direction of his gaze. Slowly, without conscious thought or intention, her hand reached out to touch the distinct bulge at his groin. He gasped as she made contact, a fingertip tentatively exploring his length through the thin fabric. He grasped her hand desperately and pulled it away. She looked up, startled.

"No. I have barely enough control over myself as it is. If you don't stop, I will be unable to..."

"What, Severus?" she asked, voice low and seductive. She shook his hand away and again touched him intimately. "Let go, don't hold back. I want to see you lose control, the way I just did." He groaned as she deliberately held him firmly and stroked up and down, watching his face as she did so, learning which movements brought pleasure. Gripping the sides of his seat tightly, he yielded to her will as he hardened even more in her hand.

"Oh, Merlin!" He panted as his hips rose to meet her with each stroke. She stopped her movements briefly as she eased his shorts down low enough to release his straining erection. Studying it closely for a few moments, she curiously ran her thumb over the moistened tip. After a few minutes under her scrutiny, he placed his hand over hers. "It's not a Potions ingredient," he murmured.

"It's just... I haven't... It's amazing how soft and yet how hard it is. Like velvet over steel. It's beautiful."

He couldn't help it. He laughed. Uninhibitedly, unashamedly laughed. "You're the one who is beautiful, Hermione. You have bewitched me, woman." Her lips silenced him as she once again started moving her hand, gradually increasing the tempo as his breathing became ragged and his body tensed.

"Touch me," she pleaded.

"Are you sure?" he asked. At her breathless nod, his hand slid up her thigh to rest on the damp cotton of her underwear. Slipping his fingers beneath the lace edge, he found her wet and wanting. With a few skilled flicks in the right spot, he soon had her approaching the edge of reason. His thrusts were matched by her desperate grinding, until with dual cries, he spent his passion over her hand as she shattered under his.

Once again, they had missed the sunrise.

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Chapter Five: Fever

Chapter 5 of 14

An unexpected development puts a stop to the couple's dawn meetings.

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Chapter Five: Fever

Hermione drifted on a cloud of sated sexuality for the rest of the day. Ron and Harry eyed her curiously, wondering if the whole "dateless and desperate" situation had finally driven her over the edge. Headmistress McGonagall was heard to comment at lunch that, "Miss Granger appeared a little *out of sorts*."

She avoided looking in the direction of the staff table at dinner, knowing she would surely give herself away if she were to catch Severus's eye. Successfully managing to negotiate the meal without betraying her inner feelings, she stood to leave. And saw him. There he was, standing at the staff table about to leave, all buttoned up and looking as stiff and unyielding as ever. Yet, only that morning, she had taken him in her hand and unleashed his passion as he had unlocked hers. She flushed as he briefly met her gaze, the intensity of his holding her pinned and breathless for several long moments.

Across the table, Harry studied his best friend's expression. There was only one word for it. Passion. He followed the direction of her eyes and found Snape staring equally as heatedly at Hermione. Shaking his head in disbelief, he decided he had shared too many Weasley's Special Chocolates with Ginny and was hallucinating. *No-one* would associate passion with either Snape or his bookish friend. Not in a million years. Never. It was patently ridiculous. On this reassuring thought, he put his curiosity aside and went off in search of Ginny. He was wasting perfectly good snogging time.

Hermione's mood altered drastically within a few hours. The sneezing of the previous day had returned, accompanied by muscle aches, bone-deep fatigue, and a raging fever. She took herself off to bed, not even contemplating a trip to the library. The thought of the walk to the infirmary to see Madam Pomfrey was far too difficult to consider, and it was a measure of how ill she felt that it did not occur to her to ask Harry to fetch the nurse. Sleep was fitful at best and, once a dry cough and sore throat developed, Hermione knew this was not something a simple dose of Pepperup would cure.

Miserable, she slowly dressed and dragged herself out of her room the next morning, intent on at least letting Severus know she was sick, then returning to her bed. She did not get very far. Collapsing onto the cold stone floor of the corridor, she was discovered two hours later by her classmates, delirious and dehydrated.

Severus's entrance into the Potions class later that morning was a fine display of temper. After the incredible experience shared with Hermione the previous day, he had been disappointed when she had not arrived at the library the previous evening, dismayed when she had not appeared at the Quidditch pitch at dawn, and despairing when she had even missed breakfast. Had she finally realised her folly in her pursuit of a sour teacher who was twenty years her senior? Was she at this very moment regretting his touch? His life, which had just begun to show promise of a future, had come crashing back to reality. So engrossed was he in his negative ruminations that, for a few minutes, he did not notice Harry Potter standing in front of his desk, anxiously awaiting acknowledgement.

"What is it, Potter? Cannot understand simple instructions? Can you not just look over Miss Granger's shoulder as you usually do?" he barked, then noticed Hermione was not in the classroom. "Where *is* Miss Granger?" he demanded.

"That's what I wanted to tell you, sir. She is in the hospital wing. She collapsed this morning in the corridor. Madam Pomfrey said she was very ill and would be off class for a week or two. WIZARDING Fever, I think she said." Harry gaped as Snape dashed out of the classroom, without so much as warning the seventh-years to behave. "What the...?" he exclaimed softly; then his eyes narrowed in speculation.

"Where is she, Poppy? Where is Hermione... I mean Miss Granger?" he corrected himself, hoping the astute witch didn't notice his slip-up.

"Relax, Severus. Hermione is very ill, but she will be all right. She will have very high fevers for a week or two and a persistent cough, but with the correct potions and plenty of rest she should come through it unscathed. She is through here." She ushered him through to a small, separate room where a pale and wan young woman was sleeping, a sheen of sweat on her features.

He strode to the bed and tenderly took her hand in his. "Look after her, Poppy. She means everything to me," he whispered, knowing as he spoke that he had revealed his heart to the older woman. She now had the power to destroy his career, and his witch's reputation, if she so chose.

Poppy studied the dark man before her intently. He had been under her care so many times since his first year at Hogwarts. She had tended to his cuts and bruises after his scuffles with the Marauders too many times to count, had nursed him back to fitness after several illnesses, including his own bout of WIZARDING Fever, and cared for him while he had convalesced after his nearly fatal snakebite. She knew he was a good man, but one who had shielded his innermost thoughts and feelings tightly for far too long. The connection between these two must be powerful, indeed, for him to have let Hermione past his defences.

"Severus, rest assured it will not be me who brings your relationship to anyone's notice. She has been calling for you in her delirium. Luckily, there has been no-one else around to hear her, and I have now placed Silencing charms on this room. I don't know how you two found each other, but I am more pleased than you can know that you have found someone to love." She smiled and placed her hand on his shoulder, comforting him as she always had when he was a young boy. He covered her hand with his and bowed his head in gratitude.

Love. Could it be? A warm, safe feeling overwhelmed him as he contemplated the possibility. Love, returned for once in his life. The young witch asleep on the bed could not know how precious a gift she had bestowed upon him. He blinked hard as he turned to the nurse. "Thank you, Poppy. I... we appreciate your understanding."

With that, she gently guided him out of the room. "You need to return to your class; they will be wondering where you have disappeared to. She will be asleep all day with the potions I have administered to her anyway. Come back after dinner; I will ensure you are not disturbed."

Nodding his acceptance and gratitude for her wisdom, Severus returned to his classroom, to find the class, surprisingly quiet, reading their texts. Potter stood as he entered the room. "I realised you must have needed to find out which potions Madam Pomfrey would need for Hermione, sir, so I thought we should look them up in our texts. We would like to help, if we can," he explained in a respectful tone Severus had never realised could emanate from the boy.

"Er, thank you, Potter. That was very thoughtful. I suggest you all turn to page 347 of your texts for the instructions on the Willowbark Infusion. It is not a difficult potion, but one your friend will need in some quantity in order to aid her recovery. Take care to slice the willow bark very finely to facilitate the steeping process. The stirring in this potion is critical; you *must* alternate eight clockwise stirs with three counterclockwise. That, and the addition of ginger and elder flowers into the moon dew distillation, is what sets this potion apart from Muggle aspirin." The students stood, stunned that Snape had actually *explained* something clearly and concisely. However, once they had recovered from the shock of actually being taught, the class continued uneventfully, with a good stock of satisfactorily brewed potions available by the end of the session.

Severus watched Harry carefully and mulled over the boy's actions. With his words, he had successfully covered his professor's out-of-character dash from the classroom and then proceeded to make productive use of the time he was away. It was almost as if he *knew*. And approved. He was not sure whether he was more anxious about the boy's sudden development of insight, for surely Hermione had not told him, or relieved that Potter was not in the middle of a major temper tantrum. His thoughts turned to Hermione. He knew he shouldn't have been stripping off yesterday; it was too cold, but he had been unable to resist proving to his audience of one that he was up to it. Up to it. He certainly had been. The memory of all that had occurred the morning before shot straight to his groin, tightening his pants uncomfortably as his body reacted. A soft groan escaped his lips as he remembered exposing his witch to the cold air as well. Could that have brought about her illness? Could their shared passion have...?

"Sir? Professor Snape, sir? Are you feeling all right?" Harry's voice interrupted his self-recrimination.

"What? Oh, yes, Potter. No need for concern." He waved the boy away, once again astounded by his apparent reversal in attitude.

Harry left the dungeon classroom, satisfied he had guessed correctly the relationship between Snape and Hermione. The Potions professor had definitely been extremely worried about her well-being, and he had *never* shown any concern for a student's health before. Only irritation if it interfered with their class-work. And he hadn't taken any points off anyone in the last class, not even Harry himself. That was definitely *not* normal. He was a little concerned as to his own lack of reaction to the possibility of the two being a couple. While Harry had eventually come to grips with Snape's part in the war and his love for Lily Potter, he still disliked the man. And he was a teacher. Then he remembered the expressions on both Hermione's and Snape's faces the day before and the latter's concern that morning. If his best friend felt that intensely about their Potions professor, Harry was determined to wait until she could explain what was going on before going off half-cocked like he had in the past. He grinned ruefully to himself. Hadn't done a lot of good before. Whistling softly, he headed off to collect Ron and Ginny on the way to the Hospital wing. The problem of telling *them* about Snape and Hermione, he would leave up to the witch herself. He was *not* about to incur her wrath by discussing her affairs with anyone. She was way too scary.

If anyone had been strolling the corridors of Hogwarts that night, they might have wondered why the Potions master was heading in the direction of the Hospital wing laden with a pile of essays. But, as it was, there was no-one about to witness that peculiar sight.

Severus glanced around as he entered Poppy Pomfrey's domain, checking for any inquisitive eyes. Thankfully, there was no-one to be seen. He entered Hermione's room and, after checking she was sleeping comfortably, transfigured the bedside table into a small desk so he could continue his marking. Every so often, he would turn and watch the sleeping witch for a few moments or check her forehead for signs of the fever returning.

Poppy smiled as she peeked in on them later. She had never seen the tender, caring side of Severus Snape before and had believed it non-existent. But there he was, murmuring comforting words and gently sponging her patient's face as he helped her down her next dose of Willowbark Infusion. The look of relief on Hermione's face as she held fast to his hand spoke volumes. His tender kiss on her forehead as she drifted back to sleep warmed the older woman's heart. She entered briefly to give him instructions on the administration of the cough suppressant potion should it be needed and advised him to try and get some rest as well. Knowing he would remain at

Hermione's bedside throughout the night she wasn't about to try and suggest otherwise. Poppy suggested he transfigure the hard chair into something more comfortable. He nodded his acquiescence and bid her good night. Casting a charm to alert her if anyone else tried to enter the room, she retired to her own chambers, content that her patient was in the best of hands.

Checking in on them much later, she found Severus asleep in a narrow cot beside the bed, one hand clasping his witch's hand to his cheek, and his face looking more at peace than she had ever observed before.

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Chapter Six: Healing

Chapter 6 of 14

Hermione gets better, Harry's suspicions are confirmed, and Snape finds an unlikely ally.

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Chapter Six: Healing

Under the influence of the potions and the illness, Hermione slept through the next five days, waking only when given doses of potion and when she needed her physical needs attended to. Poppy ensured she remained hydrated, using a special spell to transfer fluids directly into her stomach, which she taught Severus to use during the night. His dedication to Hermione's care was complete, coming as soon as he could after dinner and leaving only when he was required to turn up for breakfast in the Great Hall. He provided her with fluids and potions, changed her nightwear and sheets, and even sponged her down every night as if he had been a trained mediwizard himself. He handled the intimacy of her care with respect and tenderness, but Poppy did wonder how her patient would feel when she found out all he had done for her. However, the way the young woman held tightly to Severus during the brief occasions she was awake gave her confidence that a little future embarrassment was a small price to pay for the security she obviously felt in his care. Her friends were only allowed to visit during the day, which ensured they never discovered the identity of her nighttime caregiver.

Severus, however, was not doing so well. The interrupted nights and uncomfortable bed had taken their toll on his mood and energy during the day. Both professors and students had noticed his shorter-than-usual temper, and he looked a wreck. Rumours ran rife, everyone having an opinion on the cause of Snape's deterioration. A fifth-year Hufflepuff swore he had seen him running around the grounds one night wearing his Death Eater regalia. Lavender Brown, in an unusual fit of perspicacity, stated that he was no doubt suffering from unrequited love, which caused more than a few sniggers in Potions class. Harry alone was fairly sure Snape was looking worse for wear for a more noble reason, having spotted him entering and leaving the hospital wing more than once over the last few days. A bottle of familiar, red ink left on Hermione's bedside table and some long, black hairs on her coverlet were evidence enough, if one knew what to look for. Proof of a devotion far surpassing simple lust. That was enough to put Harry firmly in Snape's corner, whether he was invited or not.

Severus was grading essays yet again. Each time he picked up a new stack, he berated himself for his lack of self-control when doling out homework. Every assignment he issued seemed to be repaid thirty-fold, in untidy, misspelled, poorly researched works of disinterested, imbecilic students. He was exaggerating, of course. The Ravenclaws usually produced something reasonably coherent, and even some of the other houses' students could rise to the occasion at times. But, without the pleasure of the lengthy, but neatly written, cogent, intelligent work of his favourite witch, the rest seemed to coalesce into one unmitigated disaster of ink and parchment. He sighed and rested his head on his desk, just for a moment.

"Severus? What's wrong?" A weak but very welcome voice issued from the bed beside him.

He lifted his head and turned to his now wide-awake patient. Smirking, he said, "Well, some of us have had to work while others have been sleeping the days away. How are you feeling, love?"

Love.

She smiled and replied, "Weak... tired... hungry."

"Hungry is good. I'll get some food sent up immediately." He was about to dash off to summon a house-elf when she caught his sleeve.

"No. Wait a moment. What are you doing here? What would Madam Pomfrey think? How long have I...?"

"Shhh. Do not worry. Poppy knows everything. Well, not *everything*, but she knows how I feel about you. She has been a true friend, allowing me to stay here at night and care for you, keeping others away for the last five days while you have been so ill," he explained.

"How you feel about me." She chewed her lower lip, picking up on the most important information he had offered. "I don't even know how you feel about me." Hope, fierce and bright, shone in her eyes.

His answer was in the way he kneeled beside the bed, took her face in his hands, and soothed her trepidation with a tender kiss. "Hermione, I love you. I feel... I want... Damn! Why is this so hard to put into words?" The slight tremor in his hands betrayed his fear. Admitting his feelings to himself had been difficult. Displaying them in front of Poppy had been nerve-racking. But, declaring them to the woman who held his heart hostage was downright terrifying.

She silenced him with a finger pressed to his lips. "Hush. I don't expect flowery declarations from you, Severus. Any of those and I would be asking Madam Pomfrey to check you for Polyjuice."

"I only hope I can live up to your expectations." His head bowed, allowing his hair to shield his vulnerability from the woman who had the power to unmake him.

Impatiently, she brushed his hair to one side. "Look at me, Severus Snape," she insisted. "Merlin knows I discovered your secret pastime by accident. I returned after the first morning out of sheer curiosity and again, despite myself, I was drawn to you like a moth to a flame. The day you bared yourself before me, then walked off as if it were nothing, intrigued me, although I admit the sight of your body lit a fire within me that nothing seemed to quench. After that, I could no more keep away than I could stop breathing; you became my lifeline in this crazy post-war frenzy of forced cheerfulness. You did not ask anything of me and accepted my presence without need for

explanation. Our times in the library only reinforced my feelings for you. The other morning... was incredible. I love you too, and you could never fail to meet my expectations you have surpassed them so many times already." She drew him down to lie beside her, wrapping him tightly in her arms.

She loves me. She loves ME. SHE LOVES ME. A glistening drop of relief ran unchecked down his cheek as he nestled into her protective embrace.

Thus, they slumbered together in a cocoon of warmth and tenderness for the first night of many as she convalesced, each healing in more ways than they knew.

The following weekend, the idyll was over. Hermione was well enough to be discharged.

"I'm going to miss this," Hermione murmured as she held tightly to Severus once she had gathered up her possessions.

"Hmm. As will I."

"Severus, what now?" she asked, face hidden in the wool of his robes. "How can we be together, now I have to return to my own room? You must know I want..." Embarrassment tied her tongue as he drew her away from his body to meet her eyes.

"You want what, exactly, my love?" he asked gently, trying to ignore the uncomfortable tightness in his trousers developing as he imagined all she could mean.

"I want you." She gathered her courage and brushed her hand over his now obvious arousal. "I want you in bed, naked. I want to touch all that I have seen. I want to make love with you. I want to feel your body inside mine. I want..." She smirked as he blushed and shifted uncomfortably. "What's the matter, do you have a little problem?" she inquired innocently.

"Not so much of the little, now," he retorted. "And do you think you can lower those particular expectations a little? This old man may wear out just at the thought." He groaned as she pushed him back down onto the bed, straddled his lap, and proceeded to ensure that his burgeoning erection was not about to dissipate.

"Oh, I think this *old* man has a lot of potential," she murmured seductively as he lifted her off his body and adjusted his clothes delicately.

"But not here, my dear. Poppy could walk in any moment," he admonished, knowing he would feel frustrated all day, or at least until he had the opportunity to relieve the fire she had ignited. "I shall work out how we can be together. How do you feel about earning a month of detentions? Now, Hermione... there is no need for violence... I was only joking! I'm sure I can think of something by the end of the week."

"The end of the week? You had better be bloody good in bed to make it worth waiting that long, Severus Snape!" she sighed as she drew him closer for another deep kiss.

Soon after Hermione had returned to her room, she heard a soft knock on the door. Opening it, she was surprised to find Harry looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked, worried that something had happened between him and Ginny.

"Er... Can I talk to you about something?" he replied, glancing around anxiously.

"Sure, Harry. Anything. What do you want to talk about?" She led him to the sofa and sat beside him.

"Snape," he stated baldly.

"Oh."

"Listen, Hermione. I know there is something going on between you two. I saw the way he reacted when you became ill. I also saw his things half hidden by your bed in the hospital wing. He has been there every night, hasn't he?" He took her hand as she shook her head in attempted denial. "It's OK. I get it. I've seen the way he looks at you. He's got it *bad*."

"Oh, Harry," she sighed in relief.

"Now, do you think you can tell me how this all started?" Harry asked gently.

Hermione spent the next half hour explaining to her best friend how she had ended up head over heels in love with their Potions professor, with judicious editing of certain, more intimate, details. Being able to talk openly about the last two months was liberating indeed. She even told him that she planned to take the relationship to the next stage as soon as possible.

"So, if he can work out a plan, you will really go and shag Snape next weekend?" Harry was incredulous. "Are you sure about this?"

She simply smiled and nodded.

"But he is your teacher. Is that not against some law, or school rules, or something?"

"That's the crazy thing, Harry. I remember reading in *Hogwarts, a History* once, that there have been several precedents set over the last thousand years when professors and students have formed a relationship. It is not like the Muggle world here. Magical folk live much longer, larger age differences are more accepted, and Veritaserum can prove any coercion or other non-consensual relationship, which would send the guilty party directly to Azkaban. No mere slap on the hand as often happens with Muggles. As long as the relationship is mutually consensual and both parties are of age, there is no law against it."

"Won't it affect your grades?"

"He will need to have my class-work graded by someone else, Slughorn perhaps. The N.E.W.Ts are set by independent examiners, so no problem there."

"Lucky you. You are bound to get better grades from Slughorn than Snape, even if you *are* shagging him! So, if it not against any rules, why the need to sneak around?" Harry asked, still confused.

"It's Severus Snape, Harry. He is not exactly popular, even now. Can you imagine the ruckus it would cause if he was openly having a relationship with *anybody*, especially a student? And N.E.W.Ts are coming up; it's not fair on anyone to create a scene just now. We would rather be discreet. He will have to tell the headmistress, though." She chuckled at the expected look of horror on the older woman's face.

"Oh, to be in her office with my Invisibility cloak. *Severus, you are planning to do WHAT...? TO WHOM?*" Harry's impersonation of Minerva McGonagall's Scottish burr had them both in fits of laughter. Once they had recovered somewhat, Harry added, "You will need help. Someone has to be around to cover for you *both* of you," he asserted. "Snape may not approve, but he will just have to get over himself."

"You can't tell anyone, Harry. It must remain a secret until the end of the year. It's too complicated for anyone else to understand, *especially* Ron. I just know he is not going to be as forgiving as you have been."

"It's all right, Hermione. Telling Ron is definitely *your* job. I'm not *that* reckless!" After a final hug, Harry left to head for the Great Hall for lunch.

Working alone in the library that evening, Hermione noticed Madam Pince frequently glancing up at her from the desk at which she was working. Finally, the older witch rose and approached Hermione's table.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Miss Granger?" she asked.

"Of course, Madam Pince. Is there something I can assist you with?" Hermione replied politely.

"Actually, there is something that I may be able to assist you with." The librarian's face softened in a rare smile. "You students think of me as a dried-up, old witch with no sense of humour or romance. Just because I do not tolerate shenanigans in my library does not mean I am completely heartless. I have had my own grand passion in my day. I remember the feeling still. I watch, I listen, and I notice things that others miss. You and Severus, for example."

"Me and Sever... Professor Snape?" Hermione was stunned. *Was there anyone in this bloody castle who hadn't noticed?*

"Yes. You and Severus Snape. I see you sitting there most evenings pretending you are not aware of each other, passing notes, and sharing books. Did you think I would not notice you returning books issued to him, and vice versa? Rather reminds me of a certain headmistress and her Transfiguration professor back when I was newly appointed."

Hermione's quick mental calculations could only lead to one conclusion. "You mean... Professors McGonagall... and... Dumbledore?" The implications floored her.

"Indeed. The number of times I had to shoo them out of the Restricted Section... Pity it didn't last, but he loved her as well as he could under the circumstances." Irma Pince smiled as she reminisced. "When he realised it wasn't witches he preferred she was devastated. But better than later, I always thought."

"Are you saying Dumbledore was *gay*?" Hermione asked, astounded at the revelation.

"Come now, Miss Granger. Did you really think any *straight* wizard would wear purple, spangled robes? Albus was unique in many ways, but his dress sense was not mere eccentricity."

"So, if Professor McGonagall had a relationship with *her* teacher in seventh year, she can hardly criticise Severus and myself for the same, can she?"

"My point exactly, Miss Granger... Hermione. I have never seen Severus as content as he has been in the last two months. It would make this dried-up, old witch very happy indeed to see the two of you make a life together." She dabbed at her suddenly moist eyes with a handkerchief.

"Thank you, Madam Pince. And I for one have never thought of you as dried-up."

"I know. You have always treated me, and my books, with respect. That is one reason why I felt the need to speak with you this evening." The librarian smiled and returned to her work, leaving Hermione to gather her things, lost in thoughts of the future.

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Chapter Seven: Teasing

Chapter 7 of 14

Hermione and Severus have made plans. Harry makes himself useful.

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Chapter Seven: Teasing

The breeze was as light as Hermione's spirits as she made her way to the Quidditch pitch. The sound of her wizard's footsteps as he ran echoed in her mind, reminding her of that very first morning when she had discovered his secret. Smiling contentedly, she awaited the pleasure of his company. He grinned boyishly when he stopped to stretch, this time deliberately winking as he removed his clothes. Blowing him a kiss, she caressed the length of his body with her heated gaze and groaned as she noticed his once again aroused state.

"You know, you could damage yourself doing those exercises in that condition," she teased.

"And whose fault would that be?" he retorted, continuing his routine.

"Mine entirely," she declared proudly. "All mine."

"I am." He turned back to her, eyes aflame with love and desire. "All yours." Dressing again, he joined her in the stands. "I spoke to Minerva. She was initially shocked, but I think it was more because I had fallen for one of her precious lion cubs rather than your being a student. It was somewhat odd how understanding she was."

"Oh, I think I know why," Hermione replied, then went on to relate her conversation with Irma Pince.

Severus chuckled. "Well, at least that makes things easier for us, but who else has noticed, I wonder?"

"Er... You may not like this, but..." Hermione started.

His eyes narrowed. "Who else?"

"Harry."

"Potter!" Severus groaned. "Dammit! I knew he was being a little too cooperative when you first became unwell, but I had hoped it was just concern for your health. How much does he know?"

"Everything. Well, nearly everything," she explained as she noticed his look of mortification. "He figured it out for himself after noticing us exchanging looks at dinner and the way you reacted when I was sick. But we have talked, and he is being really supportive. I think he actually realises you are one of the good guys after all. There is just one thing..."

"What?"

"He wants to run interference for us. He thinks we will need one of our friends to cover for us at times."

"*Our* friends?" His disbelief was evident in his sardonically lifted eyebrow.

"Yes, *our* friends. You have to start somewhere, you know, Severus. After all, you did have a close relationship with his mother. Speaking of that, I know it is a painful subject, but..." She trailed off, reluctant to voice her fears.

"Lily." He looked off over the lake, momentarily lost in the past. After a few moments, he turned to the young witch at his side and took both her hands in his. "Lily was my first love. I held onto that love long after I should have let go. It was the only thing that kept me going back to Voldemort when I despaired over ever seeing the light again. But, with his death I let her go. She will always be somewhere deep inside me, but she is part of my past now. You are my present and my future, Hermione. Only you."

This time they shared the sunrise, content to simply be together, knowing that within a week they would be one.

"Hermione!" Harry hissed.

"What?" she mouthed as she took out her Potions kit.

"Stop looking at him like that. Do you want the whole class to know you want to strip him naked and pin him down on the desk? Because that's the impression you are giving me, and it's not really an image I want in my head!" he whispered with a scowl.

Hermione had the grace to blush and look away from the man standing at the head of the class, currently lecturing them on the use and misuse of Veritaserum. She couldn't help it. Every time she saw him, his clothes disappeared somewhere between reality and her imagination. Every word he spoke evoked the sound of his velvety voice roughened in ecstasy. Every gesture he made drew her attention to the hands that had delivered her own. The week seemed to stretch interminably before her. She was as frustrated as hell, and it showed. Sighing, she laid her head on her arms and closed her eyes.

"Miss Granger. Five points from Gryffindor for not making use of your bed for sleeping. This is a class, not a dormitory!" her professor growled from immediately behind her.

She looked up at him, brushing his groin with the back of her head as she turned. "I'm sorry, Professor Snape, I was kept awake last night by memories of certain events. It took some time before I could alleviate the stress I was feeling." His barely audible groan more than made up for the loss of points as he somewhat stiffly made his way back to his desk, sitting carefully as he ordered the class to begin.

After his face had returned to its normal colour, Harry smirked as he whispered, "I can't believe you just did that. He's going to have to stay behind that desk for the duration now."

"That'll stop him docking so many points then," she murmured, conscious of Severus's eyes on them both.

"Miss Granger and Mr Potter. See me after class. Any more interruptions to this lesson and it will be detention for both of you." He turned to his marking, not sparing the red ink on the unfortunate fourth-years' essays.

Dutifully reporting to the front of the class once their fellow students had left, Harry and Hermione were startled when Severus closed and locked the door.

"Do you two really want me to have to issue you with a detention?" He shook his head and sat on the edge of the desk, face impassive.

"Severus..."

"No! You must think of me as Professor Snape in this class, Hermione. Do you not know what it does to me when you look at me that way? I can't teach the entire class from behind the desk. How can I ensure no-one is about to bring about disaster from there? Potter, will you tell Hermione a few facts of life about the male response for me? If you are determined to be a *friend*, can I at least have your support in keeping her mind on her work in this class?"

Harry smothered his embarrassment at the subject matter long enough to agree. "Er... sure, Professor."

"Now, I have arranged with the headmistress for a Floo connection between your room and mine which will be set up on Friday evening. One-way only, from yours to mine, she was adamant about giving you control over our *meetings*. The password is..."

After Severus had finished describing the details of the arrangements, he gathered his witch in his arms and set her alight with one brief, sublime kiss. With a wicked grin on his face, he waved a stunned Harry and a flushed Hermione out the door to lunch.

"Bloody hell, Hermione. I don't know how he does it, but even I felt all hot and bothered by that kiss, and I don't even fancy him! I've got to get some tips off him," Harry exclaimed as they rushed up the stairs to the Great Hall.

"You will understand then why I am so damned frustrated," she replied irritably.

"Maybe. But you can't be getting him all, you know, *turned on* like that. It's bloody uncomfortable for us blokes when that happens. It's a wonder he got back to his desk at all this morning. I actually felt sorry for Snape. What is the world coming to?" He smiled ruefully. "Come on, we're late enough now, people will be wondering where we have been. I still can't believe by this time next week you will be shagging Snape! Merlin, woman, wipe that smile off your face, or they'll be thinking we've been off for a quick one!"

Entering the Great Hall, still chuckling at Harry's last comment, Hermione realised they were very late for lunch. Ron eyed them as they sat down. "What have you two been up to then?"

The entire Gryffindor table was a picture of confusion as Hermione Granger and Harry Potter collapsed into gales of laughter for no apparent reason.

As Hermione stood to leave after dinner that evening, the headmistress appeared beside her.

"Miss Granger, a word in my office, if you please?" she ordered quietly before leaving the Great Hall. Harry shrugged helplessly, suspecting his friend was in for a harrowing interview.

Trudging reluctantly up the stairs to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmistress's quarters, Hermione braced herself for what was to come. Professor

McGonagall had not looked particularly amused or as understanding as Severus had intimidated. The door to the rotating stairwell opened automatically as she arrived, allowing no delaying tactics. She knocked on the door at the top of the stairs, determined to stand her ground.

"Miss Granger. I am sure you are aware why I have asked you here. I was astounded and not a little dismayed with the revelations Professor Snape brought to me yesterday. What do you have to say on the matter?" The headmistress sat primly behind her desk, expression stern and unyielding.

"As I am unsure exactly what *Severus* told you, I can only say this. I don't really know how it happened. I have always admired his intelligence, his courage, and his tenacity. I know he has not been kind to me and my friends over the years, but I understand his reasons for this. I just... I just..." She broke off, hands outstretched in mute appeal, not knowing how to explain how she felt to the woman before her.

Professor McGonagall's face softened slightly. "Do you love him?" she asked gently.

"With all my heart. He is so different when we are alone; it's like he is a different man. I can't imagine not having him in my life now. Please understand," she implored.

To her surprise the dour older witch relaxed, a smile dropping years off her face. "Oh, I understand, my dear. I just wanted to be sure you were genuine in your feelings for Severus, for both your sakes. I have known him since childhood and, despite appearances, care for him greatly. I can see you have managed to find the real man under the unfeeling, cruel façade he has built over the years. That man is passionate, caring, and vulnerable, and I would not have him hurt. He has had enough heartbreak in his lifetime, and I suspect he would not withstand another."

"I have no intention of hurting him, Professor. I just want to love him and care for him in every way I can. He deserves no less."

"In that case... Severus, you can come out now. I am satisfied this young lady knows what she is doing. You both have my blessing."

Severus entered the office from an inner door and immediately took his young witch in his arms. She smiled tenderly as she noticed the glisten of moisture in his eyes and reached up to gently kiss it away. "I meant every word, you know, love," she murmured.

"I know," he replied and kissed her in turn, causing not a few gasps and hoots from the audience of portraits.

"Go get her!" called one enthusiastic ex-headmaster.

"Tut, tut! Such an indecorous display for the Head of Slytherin," snarled Phineas Nigellus Black.

"About time!" cheered Albus Dumbledore.

Minerva McGonagall just gazed at the portrait of her late headmaster and smiled, lost in her own past.

Finally, Friday evening arrived. Classes had dragged all week, with double Potions the day before having been especially stressful. Trying to contain her longing while her senses were aware of his every move had been exhausting. Their morning ritual had continued, but Severus had refrained from anything other than some rather heated snogging. His steadfast self-control had both pleased and frustrated her. At times she had been tempted to touch him, just to unleash his restraint, but Harry's words had echoed in her mind, and she'd known it would be unfair. The joy of his tenderness and warmth towards her, hidden to all others, had eased the yearning inside her for their ultimate union.

She had already taken a contraceptive potion, good for a month, supplied by an indulgent Poppy Pomfrey, together with a few welcome, but embarrassing, words of advice on what to expect. Bathing earlier in the evening in delicately scented water, she had plucked, shaved, and powdered herself to perfection. Dressed in a simple set of robes, concealing her daring lack of any undergarments, she smiled at her reflection in the mirror and blew it a kiss. Prepared as well as she could be, she threw some Floo powder into the hearth and spoke as she stepped through to claim her man. "Plutarch."

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Chapter Eight: Research

Chapter 8 of 14

Hermione is on a mission. She knows just the man to help.

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Chapter Eight: Research

With a flurry of robes, Hermione stepped out of the hearth. *Well, this is a surprise. No green.* Severus's living quarters were indisputably masculine, but the rich chocolate browns and soft turquoises were unexpected, to say the least. The large, leather sofa begged to be curled up in, and the soft, thick rugs scattered on the stone floor added warmth and a touch of colour. There were books on shelves, the solid oak coffee table, and even a stack on the floor beside the sofa. Hermione's inner bibliophile thought she had died and gone to heaven. Meanwhile, her inner frustrated virgin was wondering where the hell her wizard was hiding and thinking he had better show up soon or she would be hunting him down. Her desire for the final consummation of their relationship was only surpassed by her need for the physical and psychological barrier of her virginity to become past history. Severus was likely to be anxious about any inequality in their relationship, and evidence of nerves on her part might scare him off. There was no way she was letting him back out now. She had not spent years fighting a crazed tyrant to succumb to a case of maidenly vapours at the thought of sex.

"Well, do my interior decoration skills pass muster?" The wizard in question suddenly appeared through a doorway, which looked promisingly like it led to a bedroom.

"It's beautiful. Surprising. I still can't believe I am here," she replied.

"Surprising? You no doubt expected all green and silver with snakes decorating every surface." He smirked at her offended glare.

"Don't be silly. That is only what *most* students would expect. I am not *most* students," she retorted.

"I should hope not, given that I am planning on spending some time showing you the bedroom. And the bathroom. And the..."

She giggled, all nervousness dissipating as his dry humour reminded her this was Severus, not Professor Snape.

"Would you like some tea?" he offered, reaching for the tray he had prepared earlier.

"Tea? I think the occasion of my deflowering calls for something a little more celebratory... and relaxing," she suggested wryly.

"Ouch. Did you *have* to remind me that you are still an innocent? At least you have spared me the thought of seducing you in your school uniform." He poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Hermione.

"Hardly that innocent after what we did on the Quidditch pitch, Severus. Besides, I was planning on seducing *you*, not the other way around." She grinned as she sipped her wine. She had already decided she was well past playing coy.

"Well, my dear. I am all yours. Take me... but be gentle!" he teased.

"I intend to take you in all sorts of ways," she purred, slowly licking the last drop of wine off her lower lip.

Glass unsteady in his hand, he groaned. "Good grief, woman. Do you not know what that does to me?"

"Oh, I think I have a fair idea." The heady feeling of absolute power over the usually self-controlled man before her gave her the confidence to reach for his glass and put it aside. "I think we have had enough fortification. There are sweeter things I would rather taste." Matching her actions to her words, she drew his head to hers and delicately licked his wine-moist lips.

"Mmm. Tasty. Now, what about here?" She sampled his earlobe with her tongue.

"And here." The hollow under his jaw.

"Here." His extraordinary nose.

"Delicious, but I have a complaint." She pouted.

Bemused, Severus frowned and found his voice. "What is it?"

"You, my dear professor, are decidedly overdressed. How can I continue my research with all those clothes in the way?"

He glanced down at his simple, white shirt and black pants. "And here was I feeling half dressed without my layers." Eyes closing as gentle fingers made short work of his buttons, he leaned back and sighed. "If I had known weeks ago you could do such a good job of undressing me..."

"Off!" she demanded, tugging the shirttails from his waistband.

"Impatient little thing, aren't you?" However, he complied with alacrity. Severus was nothing if not obedient in the face of this witch's determination to have him at her mercy.

"Hmm, where was I?" she asked as she placed her lips on the skin of his chest. Her tongue grazed his nipple, sending a clear message directly to his groin which responded emphatically. "Like that, do you?"

"Mmm." His power of speech was temporarily disabled, all thought abandoned as she licked and suckled further down his chest with fingertips tangling in the trail of hair leading down from his navel. A wet tongue in that depression, followed by a cool huff of air and a soft giggle, had him gasping.

"I think that's enough tasting now, my love. You wouldn't want the game to be over before the Snitch is released."

A swat on the arm was followed by a nip to his sensitised skin. "No. Quidditch. Talk," she ordered. "Now, where is that bedroom you promised earlier?"

"Shouldn't you take off your robes and make yourself comfortable?" he suggested, all too aware that she was fully dressed while he was shirtless with straining pants.

"All in good time. Through here?" She opened the door he had appeared from earlier to find a bedroom in much the same style as the living area. A huge, oak, four-poster bed with luxurious drapes and a quilt of turquoise silk took pride of place. She ran her hand over the exquisite fabric, delighting in the sensual feel under her skin. "Not a lot of Spartan philosophy went into the decorating of this room, I see."

"A man has to have some balance in his life, after all."

"Indeed." *Now* was the time. Her wizard was flushed and obviously aroused. Taking a deep breath, she slowly unclasped her robes, shrugging them off her shoulders to slide unheeded to the floor. Any shyness remaining vanished as she took in the sight of her soon-to-be lover's expression and the undeniable evidence of his desire.

"Uh... uhh." Eyes glued to her suddenly naked body, hands fisted at his sides, Severus Snape had been once again rendered speechless.

"It appears that you remain overdressed." He stilled her fingers as she reached for his fly.

"I think I should do this." But nerve-endings sensitised by need left his fingers trembling, unable to manage a few, simple buttons.

"Hmm. You are far too slow." Brushing his betraying hands away, she swiftly completed the task and pushed down his pants and boxers. Greedily eyeing the evidence of his desire, she licked her lips once more. "Oh, yes. I think a little more research is in order."

"Oh, no you don't, miss. It's my turn. I want to look." Dark eyes caressed smooth, delicate skin, the heat of his gaze almost palpable.

"Look then." She stood and turned slowly, revealing herself completely to him.

"I want to touch." Skilful fingers mapped curves and hollows, exploring previously untouched territory.

"Yes." Soft moans and erratic breathing punctuated the silence.

"I want to taste." A rough tongue sampled willing lips, brushed over pert nipples and trailed down, down, down...

"Oh... yes!"

The knock on the outer door startled them both.

"What the...?" Severus grabbed his shirt and pants, hastily donning them as he closed the bedroom door and removed the damning evidence of the second wine glass. Satisfied his quarters were clear of any sign of a guest, he opened the door a crack. "Miss Parkinson. What problem is it that cannot wait until morning? Has your father not

owed you your spending money this week?" he snarled. The young woman stepped back a little, realising her Head of House was not in a particularly sympathetic frame of mind.

"It's Sylvie Zabini, sir. She's sick. A fever, and she is talking nonsense. I have called Madam Pomfrey, but I think you should come and check her out as well."

"Fuck!"

Severus suddenly realised his student was staring at him in shock. "I apologise, Miss Parkinson. That was uncalled for. Please return to your dormitory; I will join you in a moment or two." After the door had closed, he rested his head briefly against the cool wood. Swearing in front of a student was not the best way to avoid attention.

"What is it, Severus?" called Hermione softly from the bedroom.

"I have to leave. One of my Slytherins has become unwell. It sounds suspiciously like Wizarding Fever." He glanced at the naked witch apologetically as he found his shoes and robes.

"Oh. Of course. The poor thing must be miserable. I'll just get dressed and return to my room." She picked up her discarded robes and drew them over her shoulders.

"No." He took her into his embrace and held her tightly. Kissing the top of her head, he murmured, "Stay... please?"

His eyes held all the encouragement she needed. Squeezing his shoulders, she nodded and returned to his bed. "I'll be here when you return. Take all the time you need."

Whisking out of the room in a whirl of robes, he left to calm down his charges. He didn't hear the soft murmur that followed him from the room.

"Drama queen."

Three hours later, Sylvie safely ensconced in bed in the hospital wing, Poppy supplied with appropriate potions, and his Slytherins reassured and sent back to bed, Severus wearily crept back into his bedroom. His fatigue evaporated at the sight that met his eyes. One beautiful, young witch, fast asleep in *his* bed, glorious hair fanned out on *his* pillow, a perfect breast revealed by the drape of *his* sheets. Trying to ignore his body's response to the vision, he swiftly undressed and slid in beside her. Sleep. It would come... eventually.

"Mmm... Severus." A soft murmur roused him from a fantastical dream in which he and Hermione were tumbling naked on a soft, warm cloud. A hand snaking between them, reaching down to caress and squeeze, brought him back to delicious reality. He opened his eyes to find a wide-awake and playfully grinning witch.

"You didn't think you could get away with snoring, did you?" she asked with a smirk.

"Me? I never snore... Ahhh." Denials faded with the exquisite sensations wrought by her touch.

"Oh, yes you do. Just enough to wake me. You deserve... punishment," she whispered into his ear, her breath searing his nerve-endings.

"Punishment?"

"Yes. A few strokes, I think. Like this..."

"Ahhh."

"And this..."

"Mmm."

"And perhaps this..."

"Oh, yes. Yes. YES!"

Satisfied, Hermione cast a quick cleansing spell and watched her wizard recover his senses. His lazy, sated smile and hooded gaze lit her from within as he drew her closer for a long, sensual kiss.

"Thank you. I needed that."

"I enjoyed it. I love watching you lose control. The scary Potions professor reduced to a puddle of lust just because I have his cock in my hand. Merlin, it's so... hot!"

"Turns you on, does it?" Said scary Potions professor took his investigations further, running a finger over her moistened lips, pebbled nipples, and slowly, teasingly, down her stomach to explore her deepest secrets. "Oh, definitely turned on," he declared as he slid his fingers in and out, around and around, rubbing the one spot her entire being was focussed upon. He claimed her mouth again with his as he increased the tempo of his movement, her building arousal renewing his own.

"Please... Severus... if you don't shag me right now, so help me, I will hex your impressive appendage and yourself into next week," she panted.

"Impressive, huh?" He carefully positioned himself between her legs, feeling her slick, silken heat so temptingly close. Her hips lifted to meet him, impatient for their final union. Looking into her eyes for affirmation, the last protective layer around his heart shattered as she offered herself to him.

"Now?"

"Gods, yes."

"SNAPE, YOU BASTARD! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HER? HERMIONE! HERMIONE! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

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Chapter Nine: Complications

Chapter 9 of 14

The intruder is despatched, but the next morning another surprise awaits.

Disclaimer: They do not belong to me. They, and any money, belong to JKR. Dammit!

Chapter Nine: Complications

"SNAPE, YOU BASTARD! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HER? HERMIONE! HERMIONE! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?" The pounding on the outer door was enough to wake the dead.

"Fuckingtonaldfuckingleasley! I'm going to kill him!" Hermione shoved Severus off and scrabbled around for her wand.

"Hermione... Hermione... HERMIONE!" She stopped in the bedroom doorway as Severus's voice finally imposed on her consciousness.

"What?"

"Your clothes?"

"Oh."

Severus once again put his pants on, this time without bothering to button them, and strode to the door. Flinging it open, he grabbed the angry redhead by the robes and dragged him inside, which put a temporary stop to the tirade. Wandlessly and wordlessly summoning the younger man's wand, he glared silently as Ron took a breath. Seeing his witch approach his side, clad in *his* half-buttoned shirt, he smirked and said, "It appears we have a guest, my love."

"A *guest*? My love? What do you think you were doing to Hermione, you greasy, old pervert?" Ron blustered, holding the Marauder's map in his hand. He turned to his friend. "I realised I hadn't seen you all evening and finally checked Harry's map to find out where you were. I looked everywhere until I found you in *his* quarters. In his BEDROOM! Just *what* do you think you are doing?" He suddenly deflated as he took in Snape's bare chest and unbuttoned pants and realised what Hermione was wearing *and* how little she was wearing beneath. "You... you... and *Snape*?"

Hermione smiled dangerously. "Yes, Ronald. Snape. You have a problem with that? Not that it is any of your bloody business."

"But it's Snape!" He ran his hands through his hair, trying to understand how things had gone so far wrong. He noticed his friend's hand tighten on her wand, which he was aware was pointed in his direction. Snape himself remained disturbingly silent, yet alert.

She ran her hand down the wizard in question's chest and deliberately brushed past the opening of his pants. "Mmm. I know." Turning back to a dumbfounded Ron Weasley, she asked, "Do you have any further questions? Because Severus and I were a little... busy... and would appreciate it if you left." The accompanying glare belied her polite request.

Ron's mouth suddenly felt dry. "Professor McGonagall..."

"Has given us her blessing. I *will* explain later *when* you are prepared to listen with an open mind. I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself between now and then, if you want to retain your capacity to father untold numbers of Weasleys in the future. Now, I am planning to have mind-blowing sex with this incredible man in approximately thirty seconds, so if you don't want to see a whole lot more of your Potions professor and me than you really wanted, I suggest you CLEAR OFF!"

Snape just smiled, which was even more disturbing.

Ron looked at them both, paled, and cleared off, albeit with a lot of muttering under his breath on the way.

"And you were absolutely no help!" Hermione turned and prodded Severus's chest. "Since when have you held back when it comes to berating Gryffindors out after curfew?"

"Oh, I thought you were handling that perfectly adequately, my dear. My assistance was surely not needed," he declared smugly. "Now, where were we?" He reached for her and missed as she ducked away.

"Men! Well, you will just have to wait. I need to Floo back to my room and warn Harry about Ron." She looked back at her man as she threw on her robes and took a handful of Floo powder. "I suggest you ward the door and cast an *Imperturbable*. There will be *no* further interruptions! And get those pants off."

"Yes, miss!"

After a few minutes, Hermione returned to find Severus obediently naked and on the bed awaiting her. She smiled as she warded the Floo behind her.

"Do you think there is a conspiracy afoot to stop me losing my virginity?" she grumbled as she tossed her robes on the chair and slowly started unbuttoning Severus' shirt.

"Nothing we cannot defeat, my love. I, for one, am definitely in favour of remedying that state of affairs as soon as possible," he reassured her, using hands, lips, and tongue to reinforce the message.

"Mmm. I can't think of anyone I would rather have to assist; I'll just check you are up to it," she murmured, taking him in hand. "Oh, yes. Definitely."

Moments later, Professor Severus Snape, Potions master, was lying flat on his back, completely at the mercy of a wild-haired, flushed, young witch, who was about to take advantage of him in the most intimate way.

"This is your last chance to change your mind, Spartan," she declared as she positioned herself astride his hips. Close, but not close enough. His arousal begged for contact.

"Never." He shifted slightly, brushing himself against her moist heat.

"Then kiss me and take me as yours," she ordered, sliding decisively onto his hardness with barely a wince as he completed his task.

"Mine," he breathed as their lips met, and their passions fused and burned.

"Yours," she whispered as their spirits took flight together.

Limbs intertwined, skin sticky, hair entangled, the couple lay together asleep. She murmured softly in her dreams as he held her in his embrace. Gradually, the room lightened as the sun's rays peeked through the enchanted window revealing clothes strewn around the room and sheets pushed to the floor.

"Damn!" Severus sat up abruptly, momentarily forgetting his bed companion.

"What? What's wrong?" she murmured sleepily, opening her eyes to see a naked wizard staring at her with dawning comprehension and renewed arousal.

"My apologies, love. I woke to see the sun was already up. Just for moment, I thought I had missed our usual meeting." He looked at his witch with relief. "But now..."

"Just because I'm here with you doesn't mean you are excused. I'm sure I can think of a few... *exercises*... you can practise. Just give me a moment." She jumped out of bed and made for the bathroom, oblivious of the view which was causing a faster rise in heart rate in her wizard than any amount of callisthenics. Bladder pacified, she returned to bed, this time quite aware of the effect her nudity was having on the man awaiting her. "I see you are quite recovered from last night's exertions," she noted.

"Quite," he agreed. "However, I must use the bathroom as well. Fancy a nice, hot bath?"

"Mmm. Sounds good. I'll give you five minutes, and then I'll join you." Her kiss was sweet and lingering, leaving him doubtful that he would be in a fit state to empty his bladder within five minutes.

"Er... make it ten. It may take a while." He looked down ruefully as she giggled.

By the time they had finished their bath, there was more water on the floor than in the tub, and both witch and wizard were sporting absurdly smug expressions. Bathing would never be the same again. With a few flicks of their wands, the floor was dried and the bathroom restored to its normal state.

Severus's relaxed state dissolved when he saw the clock in the bedroom. "Merlin, Hermione. Look at the time; if we don't hurry we'll be late for breakfast."

"And I still have Ron to deal with. Hopefully Harry has settled him down a little." She quickly found his shirt, which she had claimed, and her robes.

"I suggest you don't leave that lying around, my dear. It may create unwanted questions," he advised.

"Oh, this is for personal use only." She winked and laughed at his expression. "I must go. May I return tonight? I can't imagine sleeping without you now."

"You are welcome in my bed any time. If it were up to me, I would keep you there with me all day long." He smiled wickedly at the thought. "But I would suggest we exercise caution on weeknights. If you are too late to return in the morning, your fellow students may become suspicious."

"They would assume I had found a boyfriend somewhere and was sneaking off to spend the night with him." At the look of shock in his eyes, she explained. "Do you realise how few of my peers spend their nights in their own beds? All of those from my original year group have their own rooms, Severus. How do you think Draco Malfoy became known as the *Stud of Slytherin*? Although, I think I have found a contender for the title," she teased as she tossed some Floo powder into the fireplace.

Quickly changing into jeans and a T-shirt, Hermione made her way to the Great Hall for breakfast. She found a place waiting between Ron and Harry and sat down, expecting the worst. Harry glanced at her sympathetically, his expression telling her he had done all he could, and it was now up to her. Ron's mutinous expression was concerning, but at least he had the forbearance to keep his mouth shut during the tense, barely eaten meal.

The temporary truce was disturbed as a familiar-looking owl flew overhead and dropped an alarming red envelope atop Severus's plate. In front of the almost the entire staff and student body of Hogwarts, the Howler exploded open, and Molly Weasley's voice was clearly heard shrieking invective at the now flushed Potions master.

HOW DARE YOU, SEVERUS SNAPE! INVEIGLING THAT INNOCENT GIRL, A STUDENT NO LESS, INTO YOUR BED AND DESPOILING HER WITH YOUR WICKED, WICKED WAYS! YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF...

It went on for a full two minutes, with nary a phrase repeated, but luckily the Weasley matriarch had not seen fit to mention the "poor innocent student's" name. By then, the entire school was staring at the unfortunate recipient some with horror, some with awe at the thought that Snape actually had a sex-life, and some, particularly the older Slytherin males, with envy. Others were gazing suspiciously around the room, trying to discover the identity of their professor's paramour. No-one doubted the veracity of the information Molly Weasley had obtained; she was known as an upstanding member of the post-war community, after all.

Severus did not dare glance at the Gryffindor table during the tirade. He steadfastly bore the brunt of the Howler, unwilling to risk increasing its fury by attempting to banish it. Ignoring the unwanted attention, he made a show of finishing his breakfast and then left, his previous cheerful mood well and truly destroyed.

At the Gryffindor table, Hermione waited impatiently until her lover had left the Great Hall and the excitement had died down to a general gossip session, then grabbed Ron and Harry by the sleeves.

"My room. Now!"

As soon as her door had been locked and warded, she turned to Ron. "How *could* you? It was none of your business and certainly none of your mother's!"

He looked at her sullenly. "I love you like a sister, Hermione. Mum thinks of you as another daughter..."

"Right at this moment, I don't care what you or your bloody mother think, Ronald Weasley. I could be your long-lost twin sister, and my love life would still have *nothing* to do with either of you. Who do you think you are? The self-appointed guardians of my virginity? Why don't you lock me up in a tower and throw away the key while you are at it? Do you involve yourself with Ginny's sex life?" she demanded, throwing an apologetic glance at Harry, who was trying hard to stay out of the argument.

"That's different. Ginny is with Harry."

"So, as long as *you* approve, I can shag anyone I like? How generous of you."

"Well... er... yes," Ron agreed reluctantly. "But *Snape*?"

"So what! It could be the shade of Tom Riddle himself, and it would still be NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS, RONALD WEASLEY! How often do I have to repeat myself to get you to understand? Severus is an intelligent, courageous, and noble man, not to mention sexy as hell and incredible in bed. Oh, stop cringing, both of you. Severus Snape and I had sex, and we are planning on doing it again as often as possible, if I have any say in the matter. Get over it!"

"But he's our teacher, and he has always been awful to us." Ron resorted to whining.

"You know damn well there was a reason for the way he treated us. Double-agent. Spy. Life depended on being seen to favour Slytherins. Ring any bells? We *have* the headmistress's approval. We don't *need* yours, but if you were any sort of friend at all you would be happy for me. Merlin knows you have nagged me often enough about finding a boyfriend." She glared at Harry's poorly disguised snort. "Lover. Is that better, Harry?"

Ron scowled but backed down a little. "I still think it's a bad idea. And don't expect me to be friends with him. But I *am* sorry I owed Mum; I was just so upset over it. I really didn't expect her to react like that."

"Like you did, you mean?" Hermione was not in a forgiving mood.

"OK, you two. I think that's enough. Ron, you were a prat, but only because you care. Hermione, you have every right to be angry, but cut Ron a little slack, will you? We need to figure out what to do, because I will be willing to bet Snape is fuming right now." Harry for once was the voice of reason, and both his friends calmed with his soothing words.

"Severus! I must go to him. He will be feeling awful. Ron, *please* don't do anything rash until I return. Just stay here with Harry. Harry, thanks for everything. I owe you."

Ron nodded glumly as Hermione stepped into the fireplace.

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Chapter Ten: Speculation

Chapter 10 of 14

Molly Weasley, the Board of Governors, and the students all have their say.

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Chapter Ten: Speculation

"Severus?" Hermione called softly as she exited the Floo. Not hearing any reply, she ventured into his bedroom to find it empty, the evidence of the previous night's passion not yet erased by the diligent house-elves. Settling onto the couch with an interesting-looking book, she patiently awaited his return.

An hour or so later, she woke to the sudden slam of the outer door. Through sleepy eyes she saw her lover throw his robes onto the chair.

"Are you all right, love?" she asked as she reached up to caress his frown away.

"Bloody Molly Weasley. Can't keep her nose out of other people's business," he growled.

"Perhaps she thought I needed saving," she teased gently.

He snorted. "If she'd seen you last night, it would have been me she was rushing in to save!"

"I didn't hear any complaints."

"I didn't say I was complaining."

For a few moments, there was silence as their lips became reacquainted.

"So, what do we do about Molly?"

"*You* do nothing. The Howler was sent to me. I will go and see her shortly and try to calm her down before she invokes any more havoc." The disarray his frustrated hands wrought on his hair would have been comical in any other circumstances.

"And the students?"

"So far, they have no idea to whom Molly was referring or whether her accusation was true."

"But they *are* speculating."

"If nothing further happens, the gossip will no doubt soon die down. I have been the subject of various accusations over the years, none of which have created more than a temporary disturbance. It is your reputation that concerns me. You need to return to your room and be seen by your friends." Drawing comfort and strength from her embrace, he held her tightly for a few more precious moments.

Reluctantly, Hermione took her leave, a plan forming in her agile mind as she arrived at her own room. Grabbing a quill and parchment, she slipped out of the door.

Severus paused, his hand raised ready to knock on the door of the Burrow. Clenching his jaw, he sealed his temper behind a wall of Occlumency. As the door swung open, Molly's automatic smile of welcome dissolved.

"You!"

"Yes, me, Molly. We need to talk."

"We certainly do. Get yourself in here, Severus Snape. How *could* you?" She rounded on him almost before he had crossed the threshold. "*Our* Hermione! After all she did in the war! We welcomed your bad-tempered presence here and at Grimmauld Place. We made sure you were fed and cared for when needed, all without any thanks, I might add. And *this* is how you repay us? By seducing our little girl? What manner of teacher are you to take up with your own student?"

Once Molly had ranted herself out of breath, Severus quietly began speaking. "Molly Weasley, do you truly believe for one moment that I would coerce a student for my own depraved needs? Amidst all the heinous acts I had to do to preserve my cover as a spy, have I *ever* given you cause to believe I would *dothat*?"

Severus's unexpected calmness succeeded where shouting and intimidation would have failed. The redheaded witch averted her eyes. "Well, no. But how do you explain your seduction of a mere child? Ronald told me he saw it with his own eyes!"

"Hermione is no longer a child. She is nineteen years old and has experienced more in the last few years than many thirty year-olds. She is an intelligent, mature young woman who knows her own mind. Merlin knows I didn't stand a chance!" His lips quirked self-deprecatingly.

"But, Severus, she is your student. What will Minerva say?" Molly wrung her hands anxiously, still not completely convinced.

"Minerva is aware of our relationship and has given us her blessing. She has also arranged an independent assessment of Hermione's Potions work. Floo her if you do not believe me." Disappointment with her lack of faith in his integrity leached through his Occlumetic shields, tingeing his words grey and flat.

At that moment, an owl tapped on the window. Molly let the bird in and took the message from its outstretched leg. Immediately, the envelope turned red and burst open.

MOLLY WEASLEY! WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO INTERFERE WITH MY BUSINESS? WHO I CHOOSE TO SLEEP WITH IS NONE OF MY OWN PARENTS' CONCERN, MUCH LESS YOURS! IF I WANTED TO HAVE SEX WITH EVERY MEMBER OF THE BLOODY CHUDLEY CANNONS QUIDDITCH TEAM, THAT IS ENTIRELY MY PREROGATIVE. AS FOR SEVERUS I EXPECT TO HEAR THAT YOU HAVE APOLOGISED PROFUSELY TO HIM FOR THE EMBARRASSMENT YOU HAVE CAUSED. HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING? IT'S TIME YOU LEARNED TO BUTT OUT!

With a pop, the Howler disintegrated and fell to the floor. Molly sat down with a thump on the nearest chair and fanned herself with her apron. "Well. I see that young lady certainly *does* know her own mind. I just hope you know what you are doing, Severus."

He inclined his head slightly. "I do. However, *your* interference has caused immense unrest and speculation amongst the student body, which is precisely why we were keeping our relationship secret. The senior students have their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s very shortly, and we did not wish to distract them. Thanks to you, our efforts at discretion were in vain."

"I... I... didn't think," she muttered.

"Clearly."

"I'm sorry, Severus. My actions were rash and unwarranted."

"I think you owe Hermione an apology as well. She was very distressed today, and your son's behaviour is not helping."

"Yes, of course, Severus. I have one question, if I may?"

He raised his eyebrow in query.

"Do you have honourable intentions towards her?"

"Indeed I do."

Severus arrived at the gates of Hogwarts still bemused by his witch's actions in his defence. While the look on Molly's face at the mention of the Chudley Cannons Quidditch team was priceless, he wasn't sure he approved of *that* particular assertion. He would need to have a few quiet words with Hermione regarding her turn of phrase.

Upon entering the castle, Severus immediately became aware of a change. It was subtle, but there nonetheless. Students, who had previously quailed before him and ducked out of his way, were turning to watch his progress through the corridors. It was most disconcerting, seeing younger students giggling as he passed, with the occasional blush from senior girls and looks of newfound respect from the boys. He donned his most intimidating glare, but they appeared immune. Apparently, discovering the Potions master had a sex life had diminished him to the status of a mere man, rather than the source of terror he had been before. He was not sure whether he approved of this new development; it could completely ruin his reputation.

At the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmistress's tower, he snarled the password and entered the staircase with a sense of relief. At least here there were no youthful eyes watching his every move.

"Ah, Severus. I am pleased to see you. How was your meeting with Molly?" the headmistress asked as he entered her office.

"How did you know?"

"I have just had a Floo call from her, apologising profusely for her precipitate behaviour. I was able to clarify a few things regarding my staff and students' personal business."

"The full, Professor McGonagall treatment?" Severus smirked, having been on the receiving end of one of Minerva's lectures rather more often than he would like to admit.

"Something like that, Severus. I have something else to discuss now you are here. I was summoned to an emergency Board of Governors' meeting this morning regarding the *delicate situation*." She rolled her eyes.

He sat down suddenly, certain his career was at an end. The Board were not known for their forbearance with regard to perceived indiscretions at *their* school. However, he was equally certain that he held not one iota of regret for his relationship with Hermione, only hoping she would be treated with leniency and allowed to sit her N.E.W.T.s.

"So, how bad is it?" he finally asked, puzzled at the smile on his colleague's face.

"Oh, stop catastrophising, Severus. Once they realised the relationship was consensual and the student in question was of age and *not* one of their precious daughters... or sons," she laughed as Severus winced, "they lost interest. There was the odd comment as to whether, 'getting laid regularly would improve the old bat's temper,' but other than that things went remarkably well. On the whole, the Board seemed to be of the opinion that as a hero of the war, you could do what you liked, with whomever you wished, as long as it was not illegal and behind closed doors. However, there remains one significant problem," she added.

"The students," he stated baldly.

"Exactly. With examinations next month, we cannot afford to have them distracted by speculation about the identity of your paramour. Would you and Hermione consider making an announcement to clear the air?"

"Certainly not, Minerva. We are entitled to our privacy. If the student body knew, our every interaction would provide fodder for the many gossips in the castle. It would be intolerable!" He stood and paced around the room. "Surely this will die down. We simply need to load them up with enough homework to keep their little, busybody minds concentrating on something other than my sex life."

Minerva chuckled. "Leave it to you to find an excuse to dole out more homework, Severus. But remember, the more essays you expect the students to write, the more you will have to mark."

"There is that."

"I just ask you to consider it. Talk to Hermione."

"I shall. And thank you, Minerva, for your support. It is much appreciated."

The headmistress smiled to herself as the taciturn wizard turned to leave. Little did he realise the positive impact Hermione was having on his demeanour.

After siphoning off some of her anger into the Howler, Hermione wandered around the castle, ears alert to any comments regarding the events at breakfast.

"Who do you think it is?"

"Someone very brave, or very crazy, to be shagging Snape!"

"Or desperate. Perhaps it's that Brown girl from Gryffindor. She doesn't seem very choosy."

"No, she is with Ron Weasley. What about Luna Lovegood? She is loony enough."

"Loony? I suppose she's more likely..."

She heard a number of suggestions, all ridiculous in her estimation, but thankfully her name was not mentioned. Who would expect the school swot to be the woman who had tamed the beast? Her peers were having enough trouble imagining Professor Snape in the throes of passion, much less any of their fellows participating.

"I think it is someone from Slytherin. Those girls are weird."

"Who said it was a girl? The Howler just said he was shagging a student."

"You mean?"

"Why not?"

Hermione chuckled to herself, imagining Severus's reaction to *that* rumour.

"What do you think he's got, Terry?"

"I dunno. Perhaps he's hung like a hippogriff. Must be something if he can get more action than we can, Ern."

"Maybe hanging around those Malfoys taught him a thing or two. I hear they are a very kinky family. What I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall..."

You'd be a dead fly, Terry. Trust me.

"You know, Lav, he does have a very sexy voice, now I think of it. And those dark eyes; you could drown in them."

"Mmm, I know, Parv, and imagine what he could do with those long fingers. Sends a shiver down my spine just thinking about it."

"Well, I think he wears those robes all the time for a reason. Perhaps it is to hide the enormous bulge in his pants..."

"*Hannah!* You didn't just imagine Professor Snape's..."

"Why not, Suze?"

Keep your grubby little minds out of my wizard's pants!

Suddenly, a flock of angry canaries appeared out of nowhere and chased the four girls back to their respective common rooms. One very satisfied witch emerged from a nearby niche and headed off to her room.

"I don't know how you do it," Hermione announced as she stepped into her professor's quarters late that evening.

"Do what, exactly?" he enquired, glancing up from his marking.

"Go from being the evil, points-docking, bat of the dungeons to the latest pin-up boy in the girls' dormitory. All with one ill-conceived Howler," she growled, seating herself in the pin-up boy's lap.

He groaned, resting his head against her shoulder. "Don't tell me they actually have pictures."

"Dennis Creevey managed to find one Colin had snapped sometime last year. You were in the process of berating a poor first-year for some, no doubt imagined, offence at the time. They think it shows your *sexy, bad-boy attitude*," she explained.

"What do you mean, imagined? Impertinent wench!" He proceeded to show her how he dealt with such cheek. Mostly, his technique involved lips and tongue. After a few minutes of stress-relief, he raised his head. "You removed the picture?"

"No. Why deprive them of their fun? After all, at least they aren't all out there baying for your blood, dearest. Besides, it's about time the students got over their fear of you."

"That's right. Ruin my reputation, woman!"

"As long as they keep their hands off *my* wizard, they can look all they like. Even a few of the boys are interested," she teased.

"Thanks. Now, you have me worried."

"Don't worry, my love. I'll watch your back... and your arse... and your..."

"That was what started this whole situation, miss."

Hermione wound her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly. "And I don't regret it one little bit. Now, I think we need a little *exercise*, my Spartan."

Much later, after they had regained their capacity to process rational thoughts, Severus murmured, "Minerva wants us to announce our relationship to the entire school to stop the speculation. I told her it was unnecessary, but I did promise to discuss it with you."

"I agree. I would rather maintain some semblance of privacy. Hopefully, that idiot friend of mine keeps his mouth shut."

"Indeed."

A/N: Special thanks to Sampdoria, who thought Hermione should send Molly a Howler. This story is dedicated to the esteemed leader of F.A.R.T, Robbi, whose encouragement, nay, nagging, turned this story from a vague idea to an actuality. However, any expressions of emotion emanating from Severus Snape are entirely my idea. She made me clarify that. Of course, my dear friend, ladyinthecloak, bossed the commas into submission and tidied up any mistakes. Thanks, girls!

Chapter Eleven: Complications

Chapter 11 of 14

Pansy Parkinson is proving to be a real pain in the butt, and Severus has a plan.

Disclaimer: They don't belong to me. They, and any money, belong to JKR. Dammit!

Chapter Eleven: Complications

The sleeping man murmured something unintelligible and rolled over. Suddenly, he woke to a cold draught as the bedclothes were whisked off his naked body.

"Wake up, Spartan! Time for your run!"

One eye opened to peer sleepily at the witch who was currently prodding his side. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Five o'clock. Sun's up in half an hour. Time you were up as well."

"Do I have to? I can think of other ways to exercise..." He leered suggestively, patting the space beside himself.

"Won't work, old man. It's going to be a beautiful sunrise, and I don't want to miss the view." She leered back.

"Merlin's pants! If I had only known you were so damned cheerful in the mornings," he complained.

"Coming from a man who usually runs around naked at this hour, that is high praise indeed. Now, move it!"

"All right, all right. I'm up!"

She looked down. "You certainly are."

"Not tempted?"

"No." She threw his running clothes at him and turned for the door.

Muttering under his breath about bossy, heartless witches, Severus quickly dressed and followed her out to the Quidditch pitch. Sure enough, it was crisp and clear, with the incipient dawn bestowing a faint tinge of pallor to the eastern sky.

Hermione settled herself into her usual seat and smiled happily as her runner completed his usual quota of laps. Her thoughts turned to the first morning she had seen him thus. Simple curiosity had been rapidly replaced by awareness, a sense of connection, and finally a deep and abiding love for the man who was now removing his clothing before her. A few intricate movements of her wand provided them with privacy. She laughed at the enquiring lift of his eyebrow. "Just a small charm of my own devising. I wouldn't want any of those nosy senior students wandering this way," she explained.

"Gods, no. One is quite enough for this wizard to handle!"

Hermione admired his body anew as he went through his usual routine, this time fully cognisant of how every inch of his body felt, smelled, and tasted. His final set revealed he was once again fully aroused.

"Magnificent. And all mine," she whispered to herself. Then, as the dawn broke spectacularly over the distant hills, she proceeded to show him just how much she appreciated the view.

Somewhat later, the two shared breakfast for the first time in his quarters.

"Why is the coffee so much better here than in the Great Hall?" she asked curiously.

"Could it be the stimulating company?" he teased.

"Possibly. But I swear this is a different brew entirely." She regarded him suspiciously as she moved around the table to stand behind his chair. Softly caressing his shoulders, she leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "Just what other favours do you enjoy down here?"

"Now, I can't give away all my secrets. You would have nothing left to discover." His lids lowered as he leaned back into her body, allowing her hands to wander down his chest under the loose silken robe he wore.

"Oh, I think I could find some further research topics." She licked his earlobe as she explored lower and lower.

Temptation beckoned him with searching fingers. Reluctantly reigning in his errant libido, he removed her hand and stood. "I'm sure you could. But you have N.E.W.T.s in a few weeks. I suggest you get back to your room to study, Miss Granger." His witch's easy shrug of acceptance was a little disappointing, but he admired her matching restraint.

"Yes, sir! One question. May I have permission to snog the professor senseless before I leave?" She straddled his lap in anticipation.

"Oh, I suppose so... if you insist. Mmm... Outstanding, Miss Granger!"

Hermione spent the rest of the day behaving exactly as any obsessive swot would in the library, surrounded by books and parchment. She had easily covered all she had planned by dinnertime and found Harry and Ron waiting for her in the common room on her return.

"Well, here she is. Miss 'I've been studying all weekend' Granger," Harry teased.

"About time, too," Ron grumbled. "I'm starving."

"I had a little catching up to do," she explained.

"I'll bet you did. But before we go to dinner, Ron has something to say. Ron?"

"Er... I was called to the headmistress's office. Mum was there. It was awful." He paled at the memory.

"And...?" Harry encouraged.

"And I'm sorry. I had no right to say or do what I did. There. I said it. You can shag whoever you like if it makes you happy. But I reserve the right to hex him if he..."

"Ron! What did I say?"

"I know, Harry. Hermione gets first right to any hexing. But I could help, couldn't I?" Ron tried the old puppy dog look.

Harry and Hermione sighed and rolled their eyes.

"It's OK, Ron. I promise if I need any help hexing anyone, you will be the first wizard I call upon. Now, can we just go back to being friends?" Hermione gathered her two boys in her arms for a hug.

Sitting at the Gryffindor table at breakfast the next day, Hermione flashed her lover a quick smile as he took his place. She had slept in her own room the previous night, after playing Exploding Snap and other games with her fellow students for part of the evening and reading in an armchair by the fire for the remainder. They had met at the Quidditch pitch earlier and enjoyed another all too brief interlude as the sun rose, which would have to suffice until she joined him late that evening. The intensity of her desire for physical contact with the man was something she had never expected. They had crossed the line, and there was no going back. Not that she wanted to.

Suddenly, the conversation around her seeped into her awareness.

"Really? Parkinson? She's admitted it?" Ginny was shaking her head in disbelief.

"Admitted what?" Hermione asked, having missed the first part of the discussion.

"Pansy Parkinson has apparently told all the Slytherin seventh-years that she is Professor Snape's lover. She's giving out all the details. Hey, no need to choke on your pumpkin juice, Hermione. It's only Parkinson. Who cares if she wants to shag the Greasy One?"

Hermione glared at the Slytherin table. "How dare she...?" She caught the subtle shake of Harry's head as she almost gave herself away. "How dare she spill private information like that? He will be livid!"

"That's her problem. Look at her. Really thinks she is someone special. Needs her head examined, if you ask me. Wonder what she sees in him? I mean, I know everyone has suddenly started talking about his voice, his hands, and his eyes, but it's still Snape, isn't it? Imagine shagging him."

Hermione's eyes glazed over as she did just that. Not a lot of effort was required at all.

"Hermione! Stop that! You look as if you would enjoy it!" Ginny chided.

"Oh, I would... I mean, I would find it difficult to imagine anyone shagging Professor Snape," she corrected hurriedly. *Anyone else, that is.*

As the seventh-year Potions class set up their workstations, Hermione discreetly watched Pansy Parkinson. She was sure the other girl's skirt was somewhat shorter than usual and her blouse a little tighter. A disapproving huff escaped her lips, causing Harry to turn and murmur reassurance in her ear.

"Don't worry about that pretender, Hermione. You know as well as I do that she is all talk. Just be grateful she is taking the heat off you. And don't look at him like that!" he warned as Severus entered the room, robes billowing.

Pansy contrived to drop a quill just as her professor passed her desk, giving him a good show of cleavage as she bent to retrieve it.

"Two points from Slytherin for carelessness, Miss Parkinson," he hissed without so much as breaking stride. Even her seductively batted eyelashes left him unmoved. "I suggest you see Madam Pomfrey to have your eyes checked; you seem to have developed a rather unattractive twitch."

Hermione glanced at Harry, who winked. Severus was not about to give the Slytherin girl any chance to reinforce her ridiculous story. Satisfied, she set about brewing the potion assignment for the day, humming softly to herself as she worked.

"Miss Granger, do the instructions call for musical accompaniment?" His smooth, satin voice was sinfully wicked in her ear.

"No, sir. I was just feeling particularly happy this morning," she replied calmly.

"Don't tell me the class know-it-all has found a boyfriend." His mouth sneered, but her knowing gaze caught the playful glint in his eyes.

"Oh, yes, sir. And he is so brilliant and sexy and talented..." she replied guilelessly, then added in a whisper, "*I just want to feel his naked body next to mine, touch him, taste him...*"

She smothered a grin at his muttered, "Fuck, you win!" as he abruptly turned on his heel for the sanctuary of his desk.

"Hermione!" hissed Harry. "You promised not to do that."

"He started it," she retorted, not the least bit apologetic.

"I give up. I'm not sure who is worse out of you two. You deserve each other."

Harry nudged Hermione. "Looks like she's at it again," he whispered, indicating the crowd of giggling Slytherin girls surrounding Pansy Parkinson, who was punctuating whatever tale she was telling with obvious glances at their Head of house. However, the man himself was steadfastly ignoring his students, to all appearances totally immersed in his conversation with the headmistress. That was until his black eyes stealthily met those of his true lover and, with a fleeting dip of one eyelid, acknowledged her frustration.

"Oi, Hermione! Did Snape just wink at you?" Ron asked through a mouthful of mashed potato.

"Hmm. I believe he did," she replied as she helped herself to another sausage.

"Bloody hell. You must be a bad influence!"

"I hope so, Ronald. I certainly hope so," she deadpanned.

"Oh!" Ron flushed once he finally understood why Harry was chuckling.

"She's really gone too far this time." Hermione stormed into Severus's bedroom when she found the sitting room empty.

"Who has, and what has she done?" Severus paused, one boot already removed, shirt and robes already discarded.

"That bloody Parkinson. She has everyone convinced that you and she are about to run off and elope. As if you would do such a thing."

"Indeed," he replied mildly.

"I tell you if she so much as lays a finger on you..."

Removing his other boot and his pants, he beckoned to her. "Come here, witch." He wrapped his arms around the tense young woman and held her close until the heat of her temper abated, to be replaced by a fire of a different sort altogether.

"Oh, Severus. Sometimes I think we should just tell them. I can't stand the way they are all drooling over you. You. Are. Mine!" She emphasised her words with passionate kisses.

"Are you sure you want the world to know your taste in wizards runs to the old and worn, my dear?"

"The only thing old and worn around here, love, is that dreadful, grey nightshirt I saw on the chair last night. Why on earth didn't you throw it out years ago?" she asked.

"It is soft and warm, rather like a certain Gryffindor witch I know."

"Well, you don't need it any longer. You have me to keep you warm in bed." Running her hands over his bare chest and shoulders, she backed him toward the bed.

"Mmm. I see your point. However, before you get carried away, I would like to ask you a question." He stepped away to escape her distracting fingers and lips. "Hermione, where do your parents live?"

"They are still in Australia. But why...?"

She was startled as her wizard looked down at her and asked, "Hermione, how would your parents feel if we turned up at their home. For a wedding?"

"A wedding. But I don't know of anyone getting marr..."

Severus silenced her with a finger to her lips. Carefully placing a Cushioning charm on the floor, he gestured flamboyantly then kneeled. "Hermione light of my life, love of my heart, know-it-all of my class will you make this the most joyous day of my life and agree to become my bride?" he entreated, hand to his heart, eyes alight with mirth.

"Drama queen!" she snorted. "Are you serious?"

He sat down onto the stone floor with a thud, sprawled in a manner akin to a stunned spider. "You wound me, woman. I have just laid my heart at your feet and proposed marriage, and you think I am joking?"

She laughed at his mock air of chagrin, but was sensitive enough to detect the undercurrent of hurt at her teasing. "Severus, my sexy, sweet Spartan. I would be honoured to become your wife."

"You do realise, if you ever refer to me as sweet again it will be divorce. And we would have to marry Muggle style, to make it easier to involve your parents. A wizarding ceremony could be performed later, after you have graduated."

"My parents would be very pleased to see me married *properly* in the Muggle way."

"What about the fact that I am your professor and twenty years older? Will that not give them a justified cause to object?" He knew that could be a major problem.

"My parents are very understanding of such things. They believe love transcends all barriers; after all, Dad was Mum's lecturer at dental school and is fifteen years her senior. Besides, I am nineteen, and the legal age of consent for marriage in Australia is eighteen. Although their blessing would be ideal, it is not necessary," she stated stubbornly.

His look of relief was short-lived. "Then, the only problem is Minerva. We will need her permission to leave the school to wed. You will need to send a message to your parents."

"We should wait until you have spoken to Professor McGonagall. Let's not count our chickens..."

"What have chickens got to do with it?" he asked with a frown.

"Oh, Severus. Sometimes you are such a *wizard*!"

A/N: Many thanks to rdholmantx, whose encouragement turned this story from an idea into a reality; ladyinthecloak, whose beta skills are beyond compare; and all the readers and reviewers that have come along for the ride so far. Hugs to you all!

Chapter Twelve: Commitment

Chapter 12 of 14

Severus meets Hermione's parents, and a wedding takes place.

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Chapter Twelve: Commitment

"He did what?" Harry was stunned at Hermione's news.

"He proposed. I know, Harry, I can hardly believe it myself. He wants us to go to Australia at the weekend and get married in a Muggle ceremony with my parents present. I think I offended him a little because I laughed at first. I thought he was joking!" She smiled ruefully at the memory of Severus's expression.

"A man proposes to you, and you *laugh*? Hermione, that's just... just... evil!" For once, Harry took Snape's side. Sometimes, men needed to stick together.

"Well, he was playing the fool, and I thought..."

"This is *Professor* Severus Snape you are referring to, isn't it? Not some other wizard you have been seeing on the side? Ouch!" He rubbed his arm. "All right. No other wizards. So, what did you say?"

"I told him I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man in the world... Harry! Don't look at me like that. I was kidding. Of course, I said yes. I love the man, bad temper, sarcastic tongue, and all. He is seeing Professor McGonagall now to ask permission for us to leave the castle for the weekend."

"Well, I hope he asks for permission for me, too. There is no way you are getting married without me supervising. Who knows what trouble you two would get into? I can see it now; you'd miss the ceremony because you'd got sidetracked snogging somewhere." Harry chuckled as Hermione blushed.

"But, Harry. What about Ron? He would hate to be left out." Hermione's sense of loyalty to her friend warred with her realisation that Ronald Weasley would not be an appropriate member of the wedding party.

"Don't worry about Ron. It is your wedding, and he is still not fully comfortable about your relationship with Snape. I will explain it all to him *after* it is all over," said Harry firmly.

"Oh, Harry. Have I ever told you how much I love you?" She threw herself into his arms and hugged him tightly.

"Not in front of Snape, I hope," he replied. "I survived Voldemort twice, but I don't think I could survive a jealous Snape!"

"Idiot!"

Surprisingly, Severus did not object to Harry accompanying them to Australia. His presence would allay any suspicions as to their motives. The headmistress immediately consented, thinking it was a grand idea for Harry to represent Hogwarts at the wedding.

"Mr Potter, Miss Granger. See me after class," snarled the bridegroom-to-be as he passed them in class the next day. "Your homework essays are far too similar. I expect an explanation."

Hermione and Harry waited patiently for the rest of the class to file out before approaching Severus's desk. He turned, wordlessly closing and locking the door. Sneering, he leaned against the desk and regarded the two young people before him. "So, copying Mr Potter's essay, Miss Granger. I had thought better of you."

Harry's eyes widened at the patently false accusation, then widened further when the feared Potions master yelped as his friend whacked him on the arm.

"Behave yourself, Severus! Don't tease Harry like that! See, Harry, I *told* you he acts the fool sometimes." She rolled her eyes at her lover as he rubbed his arm. "Oh, don't be such a baby; I didn't hit you that hard."

"She does that... a lot." Harry commiserated with the older man. "Doesn't know her own strength."

"Indeed." Severus suddenly snaked his arm around his witch's waist and held her tightly. "I shall have to watch out then, won't I?"

"You will, my love." Impudently, she reached up and kissed the tip of his nose, much to Harry's amusement.

"Now, I have made arrangements for the three of us to be Portkeyed to Australia next Friday at eleven in the evening, which will be eight o'clock Saturday morning their time. The Muggle legal documents have been obtained by a discreet contact at the Wongabarree Wizarding College. As we are visiting from outside Australia, we have been granted dispensation to shorten the one month and one day's notice usually required. Do you have a passport, Hermione? We will need some sort of Muggle identification for the marriage licence. Travelling by Portkey doesn't require a passport, Potter, just a wand registration," he added at the concerned look on Harry's face.

"What reason will we give for our absence?" Hermione asked.

"You and Potter will ostensibly be assisting me with the collection of Potions ingredients unique to Australia. King brown snake scales and box jellyfish venom are both difficult to obtain and rarely available in this country." He smirked. "It will make a change for you two to be helping re-supply the Potions stores, rather than deplete them. My contact there will have the venom and scales packaged up and under a Stasis charm ready to go, but no-one here need know that. The only problem could be your parents, Hermione. What if they are not home?"

"I can ask Professor Higgins to e-mail them for me. As Muggle Studies professor, he has access to a computer at home and often passes messages on for me. I will just use the same reason; we will be visiting briefly to collect Potions ingredients. The rest I will tell them when we get there. When and where is the ceremony taking place?"

Severus filled them in on the details before sending them off to their next class, with a parting remark for the benefit of the incoming class. "And you will rewrite those essays before tomorrow's class!"

"Are you ready for this?"

Hermione swallowed hard, shot a pleading look at Harry, squeezed her fiancé's hand, and walked up the path to her parents' front door. After a series of Floo trips and an International Portkey, the final Apparation to this pleasant cul-de-sac in the outskirts of Brisbane had been the easiest part of the journey, despite needing to Side-Along Severus. Luckily, Harry had visited her parents in Mermaid Waters with her before and could Apparate himself.

Well, here goes. Pressing the doorbell, she was surprised when the door opened almost immediately, and she was enveloped in the soft embrace of an excited Jean Granger.

"Hermione, darling! It's so good to see you!" her mother cried as her father joined them at the door, his wide smile evidence of his pleasure at seeing his daughter again.

"Mum! Dad!" She hugged and kissed them both, then turned to her companions. "You know Harry, and this is Professor..."

"Severus Snape," her father interrupted, pumping Severus's hand. "I believe we all owe you a debt of gratitude for your courage and sacrifices during the war against Voldemort. These two have told us all about everything you did to protect them. I'm Richard, and this is Jean. Welcome to our home, Severus."

"Yes," added Jean. "We are so pleased to finally meet you. Come in and sit down; it must have been quite a trip to get here, even using your Wizarding methods."

Severus stood dumbfounded at the warmth of the greeting. Such unquestioned acceptance had never been his due before. But what would the Grangers think once they had revealed his relationship with their daughter? He entered the spacious, airy home and looked around. The house was a modern, Australian style with pale, wooden floors; stark, white walls adorned with abstract art; and wide, glass, sliding doors opening onto large areas of paving and a pool. It was completely different from any home he had ever visited before, but far more attractive and inviting than even the much larger Malfoy Manor.

Accepting a glass of ice-cold orange juice from Jean Granger, he sat on the pale leather couch, watching the interaction of his fiancée and her parents. Their closeness and love for each other filled the room and spilled over onto the two wizards present.

"Professor Snape?" Harry asked as he offered the plate of snacks Jean had produced.

"Thank you, Potter." Severus took a small rice cracker with an avocado and prawn topping. Dinner in Scotland had been hours ago.

"Severus, would you like more juice?" asked Hermione as she reached for the jug, not noticing her parents' shared look.

"No, thank you, Hermione. I have had sufficient."

After a few minutes of small talk about the trip to Australia and her parents' exotic, tropical garden, Hermione gathered all her courage to enlighten them as to the real reason for their visit. She was rendered speechless for once in her life when her mother quietly asked, "So, why are you *really* here? I presume it is about your relationship with Severus, here?"

Jean Granger's eyes had an almost Dumbledorean twinkle as Severus nearly choked on his mouthful of juice, Harry snorted his, and Hermione sputtered, "You know? How?"

She smiled smugly. "I am your mother. It is my job to know these things."

"Mother!" Hermione was exasperated, but not really surprised. She had never got away with anything before without her mother finding out through some mysterious, maternal magic all of her own, and this time was apparently no different. "How?" she repeated.

"Firstly, you have told us about the unique Potions ingredients obtained from Australia, yet you have never had to personally collect them before." She ticked off all the clues on her fingers.

"Secondly, your letters this year have mentioned Severus here, but none of your other professors. Thirdly, you look happy. Sweetie, the last time you looked this happy was after you received your first Hogwarts letter, and since last May you had definitely lost some of your spark. We have been quite concerned about you, but we knew it would take time for you to heal. I am your mother; I can see the love glowing from within you, darling.

"Fourthly, I saw you squeeze his hand through the window just before you came in. *His* hand, not Harry's. And, finally, you just called him Severus. Harry didn't." She turned to her husband and held out her hand. "You owe me ten dollars, dear. I *told* you she was bringing someone special to meet us."

"Mum! You had a *bet* on this?"

"Just a little one, dear. Your father wouldn't believe my maternal intuition."

"But..."

"Close your mouth, dear. You will catch flies," her mother calmly advised, then turned to an equally astounded Severus. "You, my dear young man, have obviously made our daughter very happy. Neither Richard nor I care how old you are, or that you are her teacher. We know enough about your Wizarding culture to know there are ways to ascertain if this relationship is not genuine. However, we prefer to believe the evidence in front of our eyes. Our daughter is back. Whole and, judging by the way she is looking at you right now, completely besotted with you."

"And I with her," the dark wizard replied, gazing into his witch's eyes, "... and I with her."

"Well, then," Richard Granger declared. "Now that is all sorted out, I presume there is more you need to tell us. You didn't need young Harry here just for protection, I expect."

"Er... Mum. We are getting married this afternoon. Here. Severus has made all the arrangements, and we would very much like you to be present." Hermione turned and hugged both her parents, tears of relief shining on her cheeks.

"Oh, my. A wedding! Then, we will have to get to work. Richard, you and the boys here are responsible for making lunch. Hermione and I have some shopping to do. Come along, dear, don't dilly dally!" The whirlwind that was Jean Granger on a mission sprung into action.

Hermione winked at Harry and Severus. "Now, *boys*, no mischief while I am gone." Then she followed her mother out of the door sporting a huge grin.

Two hours and a quick tour of the nearby shopping centre later, Hermione and Jean returned carrying several gaily-coloured bags containing a pretty, white sundress for Hermione with some flowers to entwine in her hair and, to her embarrassment, a skimpy lace nightdress and underwear. Jean had insisted on the latter, along with a detailed, mother-to-daughter talk on what to expect that night. While Poppy Pomfrey had clinically discussed sex, Hermione's mother was shockingly explicit, complete with suggestions on how to please her man. Hermione was too stunned to explain that she had already tried most of her mother's suggestions, although she did file a few away in her memory for later reference.

"Mum! You *can't* say that in public," she had exclaimed more than once, but her mother had simply smiled and ignored her protests.

"You are in Australia now, dear. People are not as sexually repressed here as they are in Britain. Your father and I were quite shocked when we first arrived here, but after a few months we gradually relaxed about it. Sex should be fun, after all," she had explained.

"Parents are not supposed to talk about sex," Hermione had grumbled, despite her awareness of the double standard she was encouraging. After all, Severus was only a few years younger than Jean. She just did not want to include her parents and sex in the same thought. "I still can't believe you and Dad have taken this all so well, not that I mind. I just expected..."

"What? For us to throw up our hands and tell him to get out of our house and never go near our daughter again? Hardly an option when you both so clearly adore each other. Even Harry approves and, from what you have told us, he would have been the most likely to be upset. No, dear, we are not so foolish as to deny you the happiness that we ourselves have experienced. Now, we need to find you something special for the wedding night..."

The men had surpassed themselves with a delicious spread of cold meats, salads, assorted breads, and fresh fruit, all set out on the dining table and kept cool with a charm applied by Severus. They had adjourned to the patio for a few well-earned beers and were discussing the arrangements for the afternoon's ceremony when the women arrived home.

After lunch had been cleared away, Jean showed Hermione into the master bedroom to shower and dress, after which she worked a little more maternal magic on her daughter's hair, styling it into cascade of loose curls, interspersed with tiny, white gypsophila flowers. The dress was white voile, with a lightly beaded, shoestring-strapped bodice and a full skirt which floated around her bare legs. A little make-up and lip-gloss and she was done.

"Beautiful, darling. He is going to fall in love with you all over again," Jean enthused as they studied the younger woman's reflection in the mirror.

"Thanks, Mum. For everything." They both had tears in their eyes as the reality of the upcoming wedding struck.

"By tonight, you will no longer be our little girl. You will be a grown woman, off on a new adventure."

"I don't think I have been a little girl for some time, Mum. The war with Riddle saw to that," Hermione grimly replied.

"Yes, but that is behind you now, and you have a bright, new future to look forward to," her mother reminded her, hugging her tightly. "Now, let's go and find out if those men have been able to dress themselves respectably."

No-one could have been more surprised than Hermione when she found her husband-to-be and her best friend in the living room, both dressed in partly-buttoned, flowing, white shirts and fitted, black pants. Severus's hair was tied back into a queue, and Harry's unruly mop looked in keeping for once. They were both barefoot.

"Wow! You two look very sexy," Hermione exclaimed, raking her gaze over both men.

Severus scowled. "Don't make me hex Harry before the wedding. It is not the done thing to hex one's best man. You are not supposed to consider any other man sexy, woman!"

"Ah, Sev. Give over. Of course she thinks I am sexy. She is a woman of fine taste and refinement." They shared a conspiratorial smirk as Hermione regarded them both with a suspicious glare.

"Since when have you called him Sev? Even *I* don't call him that. And you are supposed to be *my* best friend, not *his* best man. Turncoat!"

The three men all collapsed into gales of mirth at her outrage. "I told you it would work!" Richard Granger clapped the younger men on the shoulders. "I can teach you a thing or two about handling this girl."

"Dad! You're a turncoat, too!" Hermione had to laugh; seeing her three favourite men bonding so well was worth any teasing they wrought upon her.

"Just remember, *Harry*, it's 'Professor Snape' to you once we get back to Hogwarts," Severus admonished the still chuckling young man.

"Sure, *Sev*. I'll remember that, next time you give me detention," he retorted.

"We've created a monster, Richard. Can I leave him here when we return? I'm not sure I want him in my Potions class any more. I've been trying to get rid of him for years!"

"But, then, who would keep your wife under control, so you can stalk the classroom, *Professor*?" Harry gleefully taunted.

"All right, all right. I give in. She is *much* more of a problem than you will ever be," the harassed bridegroom replied. Luckily, Jean and Richard Granger were blissfully unaware of where the conversation had led as they gathered up a camera and a few other items to take to the ceremony.

"Severus? Where exactly is the ceremony to be held?" Hermione asked as she took his hand. And who is the celebrant?"

"All in good time, my dear. Just come with me. I will Apparate us there. I took Harry there earlier while you were shopping; he will bring your parents." He stood back and drank in the sight of his sweet young bride. "You are looking delectable. I'm not sure I can wait..."

"Only a few more hours, love. I am impatient too. Much as I love my parents and Harry, I can't wait to be finally alone with you again, as your wife," she whispered.

He groaned. "Shh. Don't make me embarrass myself in front of your parents. These pants are tight enough as it is."

"Whose idea were they, anyway. Those outfits don't look like something either you or Harry would have thought up," she asked, eyeing him lasciviously. "Not that I am complaining."

"Your mother gave us explicit instructions at lunch. For someone who is non-magical, she knows a lot about the possibilities of Transfiguration."

"That's because I have shown her before when I have needed something different at short notice. She is a quick learner," Jean's daughter stated proudly.

"That, she is," he replied, taking her hand and Apparating them with a crack before she had a chance to put on her shoes.

The spot he had chosen was perfect. Shimmering, golden sand; gentle, azure waves; and swaying palms at the shore set the scene. Arriving in a secluded corner of the foreshore, away from prying Muggle eyes, Hermione gazed about her with delight. A few children were playing in the distance, but the beach in front of them was empty except for a casually dressed man carrying a small clipboard.

"Oh, Severus, this is perfect! No wonder you weren't worried about shoes," she said as she curled her toes into the fine, warm sand. Throwing herself into his arms, she proceeded to impress upon him her approval, by way of lips and tongue applied passionately to his.

"Ahem," Richard interrupted. "Shouldn't you two wait until *after* the ceremony for that?"

"They do that *all* the time," complained Harry. "It's quite disconcerting, you know."

Severus and Hermione at least had the grace to blush at being caught snogging.

The ceremony was short and simple; the traditional vows being exchanged by the happy couple, witnessed by Harry and the Grangers. The depth of feeling between them as they promised to love, honour, and keep each other until death parted them was almost palpable, leaving tears on each of the three witnesses' cheeks. The kiss which concluded the ceremony was sweet and chaste, but held promise of much more, and the way they walked hand in hand along the beach afterward, allowing the waves to lap at their bare feet, engendered a group sigh from the onlookers. Richard looked at Jean and squeezed her hand while Harry thought of his Ginny, thousands of miles away.

"A toast!" Richard declared, raising his glass of champagne. "To the new Professor and Mrs Snape. May you live long and love deeply, may your troubles be few, and your joys be many, and don't forget we want grandchildren!" Harry covered his eyes and shook his head as he tried to banish the image of just what they would be doing to fulfil the last request, much to the amusement of his friend.

"Oh, Harry! Get over it! I am going to be having stupendous sex with this man as often as I can, and you will just have to accept it. And so will he." She smirked as she raised her glass in turn to her husband.

"Merlin, help me," the wizard in question prayed. "I don't know if I can survive this marriage!"

Richard Granger chuckled and thumped Severus on the arm. "Best you learn, mate. My daughter is known for getting what she wants. Just like her mother." Jean just smiled contentedly.

"You can put me down now, love," Hermione told her new husband after he had carried her into the beach house her parents had procured at short notice from a friend.

"Never," he mumbled into her wind-blown hair. "Never letting you go. Mine. All mine."

"Don't be daft, Severus." She giggled at his possessiveness. "If you don't put me down, we will not be able to have that stupendous sex I mentioned earlier."

"In that case..." He unceremoniously dumped her on the bed, silencing her squeals of protest with hungry lips and hands. "Is that better?" he growled seductively once she had relaxed completely. Silence. He looked up at her face and sighed. "Bloody time zones," he muttered as he drew a blanket over himself and his sound asleep wife. It was, after all, nine o'clock in the evening, Australian time, over thirty hours since they had risen to greet the day back in Scotland. Gathering her to his body, he rapidly joined her in slumber.

Hermione woke with a start. Silvery moonlight streamed into the room, illuminating the unfamiliar surroundings. Catching the glimmer of her wedding ring, she realised something was missing. Her husband. The other side of the bed was indented, but cool, and his clothing was still on the chair.

Stretching, she climbed out of bed and padded out to the front door, which opened towards the sea. There, out on the beach, silhouetted by the lightening sky and the shimmering foam of the gentle waves, was the naked form of her wizard performing his usual dawn salute. She quietly walked down the beach and sat on the sand a few yards behind him, filling her senses with his masculinity and power.

"Seen enough, Mrs Snape?" The velvety drawl broke into her reverie as he sat beside her. Silently, they communed with the sunrise, revisiting the birth of their relationship once more. As the sun cleared the horizon, they stood as one and, hand in hand, returned to their bed.

A/N: Many thanks to rdholmantx, whose encouragement turned this story from an idea into a reality; ladyinthecloak, whose beta skills are beyond compare; and all the readers and reviewers that have come along for the ride so far. Hugs to you all!

Chapter Thirteen: Relaxation

Chapter 13 of 14

Hermione, Severus, and Harry have a little fun in the sun.

Disclaimer: They do not belong to me. They, and any money, belong to JKR. Dammit!

Chapter Thirteen: Relaxation

"Five more minutes... Please?" Hermione wrapped her arms around her husband's waist and pulled him back into bed. Her brain knew it was time to return to her parents' home, but her body was reluctant to comply. Sex with her Potions professor had been incredible, but making love with her husband was sublime. The previous few hours had existed in a bubble of sweet intimacy as separate from their daily lives at Hogwarts as a tiny island afloat in the deep, blue ocean.

The beauty she had discovered in his face as they had flown together in ecstasy only minutes earlier was a prize she held locked in her memory. His tender touch and gentle lips were hidden treasures for her alone. If love sustained life, they had become immortal.

"What time is it?"

"Nearly midday. We need to go, love." He pulled her up with him and set her on her feet. "Now, go. Shower. I will tidy up in here."

"Join me?"

"No. You are far too distracting, wife. We would never leave. Go!"

She smiled and headed for the bathroom. Showering quickly, she dressed and returned to find the room had been cleaned and tidied with all evidence of the last few hours of passion erased. "Nice to see you can use that wand for a few household spells, dear. A little foolish wand-waving comes in handy at times."

"You may be surprised at what I can do with my wand," he retorted, brushing her lips with his as he passed.

His wife simply smiled contentedly.

"Here they are the errant couple. What took you so long?" asked Richard Granger as he poured them both a glass of wine.

"Er. Mr Granger, I don't think we *really* want to know that," Harry muttered. Seating himself at the dining table, he turned to Severus. "Hey, Sev, we have enough time for a swim before we have to leave. Richard and I found you a pair of bathers so you can join us. He called them 'budgie smugglers,' not sure why." He winked at Hermione, who suddenly decided to check whether her mother needed any help in the kitchen.

"Budgie smugglers?" asked Severus, looking perplexed. "What a peculiar expression." He shrugged as the women brought in the food and wondered briefly why his wife slapped her friend's arm on the way past.

After the dishes had been cleared away, and they had had a desultory conversation about the upcoming exams, Richard stood and stretched. "Right, you lot. If you want a swim before you go, you had better go and get changed now. Hermione, you will find Severus's bathers on the bed in your room. Now, off you go."

"Do we *have* to swim?" complained Severus, eyeing the bed. "I would rather just stay in here..."

"Be good. It's hot today, and we'd never get a chance to swim at Hogwarts. Here, put these on." She chuckled as she handed him a tiny scrap of red fabric, almost as tiny as those she withdrew from a drawer. Stripping off and avoiding her husband's eager hands, she donned the brief bikini and waited.

"You can't wear that... that... What is that thing you are *not* wearing?" he asked, appalled at the amount of skin exposed.

"It's a bikini. And perfectly respectable Muggle swimwear. Put yours on." She grinned at his horrified inspection of the Speedos Richard had provided.

"You expect *these* to cover *this*?" He pointed at his groin. "That's indecent! We are *not* going out there in front of your parents nearly naked. Or *Potter!*"

"Modesty doesn't stop you parading around naked on the Quidditch pitch every morning."

"That's different. I was *supposed* to be alone. Actually, I think I would rather go out there naked than in these things," he complained.

"Oh, just put them on for a minute. I want to see how they look." She coaxed him out of his clothes and into the Speedos. It was obvious they barely contained his generous endowment, especially after she cupped him in her hand and rubbed her scantily clad body against his.

"Hermione!"

"All right. I'll fix them. But they stay red! I rather like that colour on you." With a flick of her wand, the skimpy garment was transfigured into baggy, all-concealing board shorts.

"I suppose this will have to do," he muttered as he discreetly used his own wand to increase the coverage of his wife's swimwear.

"Prude!" She poked her tongue out at him and skipped outside, leaving him to trail reluctantly behind.

Harry met them by the pool, wearing board shorts much the same as Severus's. He grinned at the older wizard's glare as he dived into the pool, splashing the cool water over them both.

"Come on in, the water is wonderful!" Harry called, floating on his back with his eyes closed.

Severus and Hermione looked at each other and nodded. Together, they jumped into the pool, one each side of Harry, who coughed and spluttered as the water flooded his face.

"Hey! Not fair! Two against one!" he complained.

"But you are the Boy Who Lived Twice. Surely a little water doesn't scare you?" taunted Severus as he grabbed Harry's legs to duck him.

Half an hour later, the three were stretched out in the sun drying off, cold drinks courtesy of Jean Granger at their sides.

"You know, Sev. You're not a bad sort when you are away from Scotland. Ever thought about emigrating?" Harry asked cheekily.

"Watch it, boy. You might regret that comment when we get back to school. I'm sure I could find plenty of nasty potions ingredients that need to be prepared by the Boy Who Lived to Be a Pain in the Arse," Severus replied dryly.

Hermione poked her husband in the side. "Be nice. Harry was *your* best man, remember."

"But back at the castle he will still be *mystudent*." The professor smirked.

"And so will I," she reminded him.

"I'm so screwed," her husband announced glumly.

Harry rolled his eyes as he waited for his two companions to disentangle themselves. "Come *on*, you two! We'll be late for dinner, and you don't really want to draw that much attention, do you? Sev, I never thought I would say this, but could you *please* resume the evil bat persona before someone sees you? And Hermione, unhand that man!" Muffled laughter followed him as he opened the gates of Hogwarts.

Really, they were hopeless. Acting like a pair of newlyweds. He sighed as he acknowledged his friends *were* newlyweds. *Friends*, two of them. That would take some getting used to. Who would ever have thought he would regard Severus Snape as a friend? However, spending the day in the man's company and seeing how devoted he was to his new wife had enlightened him more thoroughly than a thousand assertions from others. He had known since viewing Snape's memories that he was one of the good guys now he believed.

"Mr Potter, Miss Granger, stop dawdling and get moving. I have spent quite enough of my time babysitting Gryffindors this weekend without prolonging it any further. Two points each from Gryffindor for every minute you are late for dinner!"

Harry's thoughts were interrupted as Severus Snape, in full bat mode, strode past his wife and friend, robes billowing dramatically.

"Yes, Professor Drama Queen!" they both muttered as he left them far behind. Hand-in-hand, they ran up the path to the castle, to all appearances heartily pleased to be finally free of their overbearing professor.

They arrived at the Gryffindor table just in time, noticing Severus's evil smirk at their breathlessness.

"I'll get him for that," threatened Hermione, glaring at the culprit from beneath lowered lashes.

"How?"

"I'm sure I will find a way. I know his weaknesses." She smiled wickedly at the staff table and was rewarded by the smirk disappearing from her husband's face.

"Hermione, you do know you are scary, don't you?" Harry asked her as they sat at the table.

"Who, me?" she laughed, reaching for the pumpkin juice.

"Hey, you two. How did the trip go? Where did you stay? How was the weather? Was Professor Snape awful?" Ginny's barrage of questions made them laugh.

"The trip was great," answered Harry.

"We stayed at Mum and Dad's," chimed in Hermione.

"Weather was fantastic; we even swam in the pool," Harry added.

"Snape was fine," Hermione continued.

"Just his usual, pleasant self; we drank beer, told stories, and walked on the beach," Harry explained quite truthfully.

The roar of laughter from the disbelieving Gryffindors startled the entire school. Ron alone remained silent. Whilst he did not know the true nature of their trip, he was well aware there was something he had missed. He shot a quizzical glance at Harry and Hermione, laughing along with their classmates.

"Later," mouthed Harry.

Ron nodded. His curiosity had to wait until they were alone. He could live with that, especially when there was spotted dick and custard for pudding.

"All right. Give!" Ron demanded after Harry had locked the door to his room.

"You'd better sit down." Harry gestured to a chair and sat on the bed. "I don't know how to tell you this, but..."

"I knew it. She's pregnant!" Ron shouted, jumping up again suddenly and waving his wand at no-one in particular.

"No, no. Not that. Good grief, Ron, he *is* a Potions master, you know." Harry chuckled as Ron blushed.

"Well. What then?"

"Err. We went to Australia so they could get married," he blurted.

"They did *what*?"

"They got married." Harry ducked.

Ron slumped down into the chair like a deflated balloon. "Without me? You let Hermione get married without me being there?"

"Ron, I know you would have wanted to be there. I was bloody lucky Sev let me go, but after the way you had behaved you could hardly expect either of them to invite you along?"

"Sev? You called him *Sev*?" Ron stared at his dark-haired friend in disbelief. "*Sev*?"

"Shite. I know we should have told you, but we needed this to be discreet, and if you had..."

Ron sighed. "Yes. I know. I blew my chances before. I can see that. But, Sev? What the hell did you three do over there?"

Harry chuckled, relieved that the redhead's main concern was his mode of address for their Potions master.

"Like I said. We drank beer together, told stories... He's not so bad away from the classroom. Mind you, I did get threatened with death and dismemberment if I called him 'Sev' in public." He grinned.

"Oh. That's all right then. He hasn't completely lost it." Ron shook his head, brain still processing the thought that the bat of the dungeons was, in fact, human. "I suppose I had better go and congratulate Mrs Snape."

"I think she would appreciate that, Ron."

Just then, a quiet knock on the door announced the presence of a visitor. Swinging it open, Harry was unsurprised to see Hermione waiting anxiously outside.

"Is he OK?" she whispered.

"I can hear you, you know. And, yes I am. OK, that is, but still not happy that I wasn't invited. I can understand why, though. Congratulations, anyway. But, Hermione, *he* called Snape 'Sev'," Ron whined. "It's just not right!"

"Yes, I know. I don't get to call him that, and I'm married to him. I don't know what Dad put in the beer he was feeding them, but they were *both* very daft afterwards."

"You just haven't forgiven us for ganging up on you." Harry laughed.

"You and Snape? Sounds like you are *friends*. That's almost as bad as Hermione shagging him. No, I take that back. It's worse!" Ron shuddered.

"Don't worry, Ron. I don't think he is planning to cut me any slack. He will still be his usual sarcastic self in class and dock points if I so much as breathe too heavily."

"Well. Thank Merlin for that. I don't think I could cope with a pleasant Snape. That's just... scary!"

Hermione giggled at Ron's expression and wondered whether she would ever persuade him to give Severus a chance like Harry had. Maybe one day. Next century.

"So, what's the plan?" Ron asked, donning his strategist's hat.

"What plan?" Harry and Hermione shrugged.

"The plan to unseat Pansy Parkinson from her throne as Snape's so-called lover." He grinned evilly. If he couldn't pick on Snape, another Slytherin would have to suffice.

"Ah. That plan. Well..." Hermione gathered her two co-conspirators close and shared the idea her vengeful inner witch had inspired.

"Severus?"

"Mmm, yes, dear?" He looked up from the essays he was contentedly decorating with red ink.

"Why did you have such a smug smile on your face while you marked that last one?" she asked curiously.

"Some essays are more... entertaining... than others," he replied, trying his best to look innocent.

"Sure. And Hagrid is going to start wearing tuxedos and attending the opera. What are you up to?" She peeked over his shoulder. "Severus! You can't do that!"

"Why not? Miss Parkinson's conclusions are utter tripe. I am just expressing myself... inventively."

"Calling a student's essay an *unmitigated example of total fucking crap written in the style of an uneducated seven-year-olds* not professional, and I won't allow it." She Vanished the red-inked words on the top of the page. "Now, do it again. Properly!"

"Bossy wench. I thought you didn't like her?" He pouted as he wrote some slightly less expletive-laden vitriol.

"I don't. But *you* don't need to make your reputation any worse than it already is. Let me deal with Pansy Parkinson."

"Why does that make me anxious?" he asked plaintively.

"Oh, shut up and kiss me, Spartan!" She straddled his lap and successfully dissolved any further questions with a few subtle movements over the encouraging hardness she found. Men were so easy to distract.

Much later, Severus finally recalled the conversation. "Hermione, my dear?"

"Yes?" she murmured sleepily, snuggling up closer to his nude, lean frame.

"You won't do anything too *Gryffindor*, will you?"

"Who, me?"

"Oh, fuck," he sighed.

She smiled beatifically. "Been there. Done that."

A/N: Many thanks to rdholmantx, whose encouragement turned this story from an idea into a reality; ladyinthecloak, whose beta skills are beyond compare; and all the readers and reviewers that have come along for the ride so far. Hugs to you all!

Chapter Fourteen: Retribution

Chapter 14 of 14

Final chapter - Hermione shows her Gryffindor colours.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. Only the plot is mine.

Chapter Fourteen: Retribution

As the night lost its hold on the eastern sky, a previously solitary wizard awoke down in the dungeons to find himself wrapped in the arms of his new wife. His impermeable shell had been breached, his soul laid bare to the woman beside him, and yet he had never felt more safe. He studied her face, relaxed in the embrace of sleep, and prayed to whatever gods may be listening that he would not wake cold and alone to find he had dreamed the previous three months. With a firm shake, his consciousness threw off that thought, a final remnant of his old, miserable existence, and allowed him to bathe in the warmth of her presence. Life was no longer to be endured; it was to be treasured.

"A Knut for your thoughts." Her sleepy murmur disturbed his reverie.

"Good morning, wife. I was just wondering when I became so lucky." He kissed her gently as he extricated himself from her arms. "Time to get up; the sun will be rising soon."

"Oh, there was no luck involved. Just a little exercise, some nudity, and a few books," she teased.

"You make it sound so unromantic. Isn't that my job?"

"You, Severus Snape, are far more a closet romantic than I. Who agreed to dress all Byronic for the wedding? Who chose a perfectly romantic spot to exchange our vows? Who snuck out to check the corridor was empty so he could carry me over the threshold when I had already arrived by Floo? Who arranged for all those scented candles and rose petals in the bedroom last night?"

"Not guilty for the candles and rose petals. I suspect Harry may have put Winky up to that particular embellishment."

"Nevertheless, I stand by my assertion. You are the romantic of this couple, and I wouldn't have you any other way."

"Well, just keep that to yourself, will you? I have a reputation to uphold. It's bad enough knowing there will be two of you in class seeing through my act without the rest finding out."

"Yes, sir, Professor Grumpy. I would hate anyone else to know you are really a marshmallow under that stony outer shell." She leapt out of bed and beat him to the bathroom by a whisker. Poking her head back around the door, she added, "A slow marshmallow at that!"

The marshmallow in question laughed and started dressing. His witch was incorrigible just the way he liked her.

After their usual sojourn at the Quidditch pitch, they had decided to attend breakfast in the Great Hall. Severus donned his mask of irritability and sat at the staff table surveying his Slytherins. Despite his absence, there had been no untoward events over the weekend; Rolanda Hooch may appear to some as jovial, but she tolerated no nonsense. Pansy Parkinson impinged on his awareness as she simpered and waved in his direction. Rolling his eyes, he fervently hoped his witch had a suitable means to put the girl in her place and soon.

As his hands automatically conveyed bacon and sausages to his mouth, his eyes could not help straying to the Gryffindor table where Hermione held court with her friends. Laughing gaily, she caught his eye and smiled, then quickly turned back to her own breakfast. The headmistress's timely request for him to pass the coffee reminded him that he could not spend the meal gazing at his wife.

Entering the Potions classroom, Severus glared at a grinning Harry as he stalked past the students' desks to the front of the room. With a flick of his wand, the instructions for the day's potion appeared on the board.

"Today, you will be brewing the Cheering Draught. This is a much shorter acting version of the Cheering Solution, requiring a slight alteration in ingredients and a different technique. For homework, you are to research the differences and produce two feet of parchment comparing and contrasting the two potions that is *two* feet, Miss Granger, not five. Mr Potter, have you already imbibed some of this potion?"

"Er... No, sir." Harry looked confused.

Hermione rolled her eyes at her husband as the rest of the class headed for the supply cupboard to obtain their ingredients. He smirked and held up two fingers. She nodded. Did he really think she would waste time writing extra pages on cheering potions when there were so many more pleasant things to be done? Set homework first, studying for the rapidly approaching N.E.W.T.s second, and pleasuring the sexy man at the front of the class...

"Miss Granger. Perhaps you would consider rejoining the class? Or would that impinge on your valuable daydreaming time? Ten points from Gryffindor for inattention! I believe I have had to speak to you about this before."

"Sorry, Professor Snape. Won't happen again," she muttered as he turned away with a swish of his robes. Making a face at his back, she stifled a giggle as Harry elbowed her.

"Cut it out, Hermione. We don't need to lose points just so you can play games. What is it with you two? Some sort of bizarre foreplay?" Harry sighed as he assembled his ingredients. It was hard work being the mature one in the relationship for a change.

Much to Harry's surprise and Severus's disappointment, Hermione managed to stay on task for the rest of the class and avoided further tempting her husband's points-docking urges. Returning to her room before lunch, she put into motion a plan she had decided upon earlier while watching Severus exercise. With a few practised flicks of her wand, her trunk opened, and her possessions rapidly folded and stowed themselves within. A simple transfiguration of some parchment created a few boxes to hold her books and homework supplies. Within half an hour, she was ready. Reaching for the Floo powder, she took one last look around the room and stepped into the fireplace.

Severus's quarters were empty when she arrived. He had a class to teach during her free period, which suited her perfectly. Quickly unpacking her clothes and books, she called for Winky.

"Close your eyes; I have a surprise for you," she ordered as she took Severus by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

"Can I open them now?" he asked, curiosity barely restrained.

"Yes!"

"What is it?" Severus looked around, seeing nothing obvious until he noticed the extra wardrobe against the wall, a red silk robe on the back of the door, and some unfamiliar toiletries in the bathroom. "You've moved in."

Hermione's excitement dissipated at her husband's bald statement. Then, he turned to her, and his black, glistening eyes held all the reassurance she needed.

"You've moved in! That's... that's... thank you." He reached to enclose her in his arms and hold her tightly, as if she might try and change her mind.

"Severus? Why wouldn't I move in? We are married now I want to spend as much time with you as possible, you foolish man!"

"When I saw you at breakfast, you seemed to be enjoying the company of your friends so much I assumed you would stay in Gryffindor Tower meanwhile and just come to me at night."

"What sort of marriage would that be? I'm not just interested in you because of your sexy body and skill in bed, you know. I happen to enjoy spending time with you, even if I am simply studying while you are marking." She touched his face gently at his expression of wonder. "How long will it take to convince you that *you* are the most important person in my life now?"

"Probably forever. Perhaps you had better remind me..."

"Mmmm. I'm sure I can think of a few ways to do that." She wound her hands around his neck and drew his mouth to hers. Murmuring endearments against his soft, warm lips, she guided him toward the bed and reverently undressed him. With mouth and hands and heart, she suckled and licked and stroked him until his doubts shattered. Lunch came and went, with neither the bushy-haired Gryffindor seventh year nor the dour Potions professor in attendance.

The afternoon's classes concluded uneventfully. Just before dinner, the Golden Trio met for a final planning session in Hermione's now bare room.

"Oi! Where's all your stuff?" asked Ron, gaping at the bare shelves.

"Where do you think?" she replied, arms folded, awaiting the penny to drop.

"Oh."

"What did you think, Ron? She would get married, but stay here? From what I have seen of those two, they can't keep apart for more than an hour or so without some compulsion to snog or worse. They would hardly live apart." Harry laughed at the horrified look on his redheaded friend's face.

"Harry! Did you have to give me that mental image? Snape? Snogging? Naked?" He shuddered.

"Why should I be the only one to suffer?" Harry retorted.

"If you boys don't mind, I am still in the room. I happen to think a naked Snape is possibly the best kind, and I intend to keep him that way as often as I can." She licked her lips suggestively, Ron's expression only encouraging more teasing.

Ron looked at her as further wheels turned inside his skull and finally clicked into place. "You weren't at lunch. Neither was he. You were... you were..."

"Yes, Ronald. We were. Now, can we move on? This is what I am going to do..."

Plans in place, the three entered the Great Hall for dinner. As the meal was drawing to a close, Hermione heard her cue. Pansy was loudly bragging about her supposed reunion with her lover after his weekend away. Walking quietly up behind the Slytherin girl, Hermione applied her most benign, curious expression.

"Oh, Pansy, I'd love to know... what colour is Professor Snape's bedroom? We were just discussing it; the boys think it must be black, but I suspect it may be more shades of grey." She nodded to the boys who had followed her across the hall.

"Yeah, Pansy. Let us in on the secret," added Ron.

The Potions professor's would-be lover looked at them all with the disdain only inbred superiority could produce. "I don't know why I am telling you lot, but it is green, of course. All green."

"Hmm. Is that so? Very Slytherin," Hermione replied.

"Of course it is. He is our Head of House," Draco Malfoy proudly asserted.

"So, do you think there is a future in your relationship?" Hermione asked with feigned interest, aware that her husband was listening intently to the conversation.

"Definitely."

Pansy's deliberate leer at the wizard in question unsheathed his wife's claws. "I'm quite sure he will be looking forward to whatever the future has in store for you," Hermione said pleasantly as the boys returned to their table. She could not believe the gall of the girl, to make such statements within earshot of Severus himself. Presumably, he allowed such nonsense in order to hide the truth.

The truth was about to hit Pansy Parkinson in a very nasty way indeed as the Gryffindor walked, proud and tall, to the staff table.

Speaking clearly, so all could hear, she greeted the professors.

"Professor McGonagall. Professor Sprout. Madam Hooch." She smiled and nodded at each woman.

"Madam Pomfrey. Professor Vector," she added. The two women returned her greeting, somewhat bemused at her odd behaviour.

"And Severus." As the assembled students gasped in unison at her use of their harshest professor's first name, she walked around the end of the table to where he sat bearing an amused smirk. Placing both hands on his shoulders, she joined her lips to his in a kiss so passionate no-one could mistake the intimacy of their relationship.

"Hermione," he replied, hooking an arm around her waist to gather her close as she stole a bread roll off his plate and helped herself to his glass of wine.

The air weighed heavy with anticipation; the entire school staring dumbfounded at the scene before them. A wail cut the silence briefly as a pale, tearful Pansy Parkinson ran from the room, escaping the derision of her fellow students. Harry Potter was clapping an apparently choking Neville Longbottom on the back, and Ron Weasley was seen to give his friend the universal sign of approval with both thumbs. Suddenly, the pregnant atmosphere gave birth to an uproar of students and professors' voices.

"I believe you have an announcement, Severus," the headmistress prompted.

"I believe I do," he replied. Standing, he raised his hands to quell the almost overwhelming cacophony.

"Silence!"

At the familiar, sharp tones of the Potions professor, the room fell quiet, all eyes on the man standing at the staff table with their fellow student. A gentle squeeze of his now lowered hand fortified him.

"It appears I have an introduction to make. I would like to present Mrs Hermione Jean Snape my wife."

Hermione grinned and kissed him on the cheek.

One could have heard a pin drop.

Then, from the Gryffindor table, a lone pair of hands started applauding. Ron Weasley stood and grinned at them both. Harry rapidly joined him with cheers and whistles, accompanied by the more sedate applause of the headmistress, librarian, and school nurse. Gradually, the Gryffindors joined their fellows, followed by the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Even the Slytherins found enough grace to congratulate their Head of House all but one stunned blond.

The happy couple turned to one another and embraced, then received individual congratulations from each of the staff members, some still bemused with how *that* had happened right under their noses.

"I... I... I don't know how you did it, Miss, er Mrs Snape, but jolly well done!" Filius Flitwick was almost floating with excitement.

Hagrid was mopping his eyes with a large, pink handkerchief while Rolanda Hooch clapped Severus on the back. "Bloody good show, old man. About time you got some action!"

Poppy Pomfrey was beaming her delight at the outcome of the relationship, and even Irma Pince was seen to smile.

Ginny Weasley turned to Harry and Ron. "You knew?"

Her brother proudly replied, "And Harry was the best man!" Neville promptly choked again.

The hall fell silent again as a fuming Draco Malfoy made his way to the staff table. "How could you, our Head of House, disgrace the name of Slytherin by marrying a Mudblood?" he shouted, oblivious to all but his own anger.

Severus's smile faded as he turned to his godson. "Mr Malfoy. I have put up with your arrogant behaviour; I have tolerated your mediocre performance in my class, and I have even ignored your lascivious behaviour within the house, but I will *not* put up with you insulting my *wife*! Fifty points from Slytherin and get out of my sight!" he roared as Draco fled.

Down at the Slytherin table, Blaise Zabini stood. "Excuse me, sir. I would like, on behalf of the majority of Slytherin House, to thank you for that." He started clapping, joined wholeheartedly by his housemates.

Severus Snape bowed slightly, turned to his bride, and pulled her close again. "Twenty points to Gryffindor for saving your husband from Miss Parkinson's nefarious plans," he murmured.

"What? Only twen..."

He silenced her for several delightful minutes with his lips, much to the amusement of her peers.

"Hmm. Maybe I can earn some more later?" she suggested as he reluctantly released her.

"I suspect my ability to award or remove points from you has just been revoked." Severus smiled ruefully as the headmistress gave the couple a stern look.

"And I suspect I have just ruined your ability to terrorise your students. Look at them; the girls are positively drooling." For once, Hermione didn't care; she had laid claim to her wizard.

"They will soon learn I am the same ill-tempered, impossible-to-please professor they have always known. Even Harry Potter will stop his infernal grinning in class soon."

"Oh, I think you will have to consider Harry a lost cause, love. He actually likes you now. It's too late." She patted his thigh soothingly under the table.

Her husband sighed heavily and retrieved his wine glass.

"I think I will just have to turn to drink, then."

"Drama queen!"

The End

A/N: Well, this is it. The end. Many thanks go to rdholmantx, who encouraged me to start this story; ladyinthecloak, whose superb beta skills kept it grammatically correct; and all the readers and reviewers, who cheered me along! Hugs go to all of you!