

Cursed Love

by Elizabeth

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

One

Chapter 1 of 15

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Hermione impatiently listened to Healer Pye explain Snape's status, and it wasn't very promising. Snape's body was stuck in a limbo of sorts. When Nagini had bitten his neck, she had punctured both his carotid artery, and his jugular vein. With each heartbeat, his blood had spurted rhythmically, and the venom had seeped into his heart then slowly to his brain. Both brain and heart were preserved with the venom's peculiar properties. The poison had slowly spread to the rest of his body and had put him in a sort of venom-induced petrified stasis. His body wasn't stone like a typical petrification, but he wasn't living either.

"You were able to heal my dad when he got bit by the snake," Ron said, the question echoing quietly off the bare walls of the hallway.

"Yes, but your father received magical treatment within an hour of being bitten," said Pye. "Snape was subjected to the venom for hours, and it has wreaked havoc on his body. We've tried the same anti-venom that cured your father, but it doesn't appear to be making a significant impact. He doesn't breathe, nor does his heart pump...he has no blood. He appears dead on all outward accounts. We have no proof of his life; Miss Granger's insistence is the only hint of life we see." She glared at him and he conceded, "And the fact that his remains haven't decomposed after such a long time."

In Hermione's opinion the staff at St. Mungo's were not trying their hardest to help Snape. Just the way Healer Pye was referring to the whole situation seemed to tell her he didn't care if Snape lived or not. Old prejudices die hard, and Snape was still widely thought of as a Death Eater...even as bad as Voldemort himself.

She hoped everyone's view of the man would change by the end of the week. A trial was being held for Professor Snape as he was charged for the murder of Albus Dumbledore. At this very moment, Dumbledore's portrait spoke before the Wizengamot, reassuring the council Snape had killed him on his own orders...not Voldemort's. Harry was present as a witness to Snape's memories. The tangible proof of Snape's memories could not be presented as evidence, as Hermione had forced them back into Snape's mind when she had found him on the floor of the Shrieking Shack the morning after the battle.

After Voldemort's death, Harry had taken Ron and Hermione up to the Headmaster's old office. He had explained Snape's memories through the Pensieve, and Hermione had been surprised to learn the truth about the dour man's love for Lily Evans. On the other hand, she hadn't been shocked to discover he had truly been on their side the whole time.

Once they'd reached the office, Harry had repaired his wand while talking to Dumbledore's portrait. She had recognized the Pensieve full of Snape's memories, but there had been no portrait of the former Headmaster. Realization had struck her; she'd scooped his memories into their flask and sprinted to the Shrieking Shack. She had tried to give him a Blood-Replenishing Potion from within her beaded bag, but he'd been unresponsive. Fearing he might have died before she had been able to reach him, she had done the only thing she knew to test for life. She'd transferred his memories from the flask to his mind, and they had been accepted...so he was alive! She had Disapparated him to St. Mungo's.

That had been three weeks ago, and the ex-spy had lain in a room, off by himself away from the general public. This was the first day the staff had allowed visitors, and

only a select few. Being two-thirds of the Golden Trio, Ron and Hermione had been allowed access. Despite having been in the hospital for over a half hour, they were still detained just outside Snape's door while Healer Pye continued to drag out an explanation.

"He's completely non-responsive, so talking to him will serve little to no purpose. He probably can't hear you," Augustus Pye was explaining.

"Can't we see him now?" Hermione asked a bit abruptly.

A trace of annoyance crossed his face, but he moved away from the door. When they entered the room, Hermione cursed to herself; Ron held her hand to steady her. Snape looked so helpless and fragile in his bed; the covers were up to his chest, and his haggard hands rested on top of the blankets. There were no bandage around his neck, and she could see the gaping holes in his throat. There was no fresh blood, but smudges of dried blood were visible around the wounds...crusty and cracking on the tiny hairs of his neck.

Even while unconscious he had a scowl on his face, and it helped her feel he might still be in there somewhere. His skin was jaundiced, and his hair was matted and greasy. She gently pulled down his lower lip. His teeth were yellow and crooked, like always, but a horrible stench wafted out of his mouth.

The man deserved as much magical care as any other patient...if not more. Ron, who had only come as her support even noticed little things, and he pointed them out: a cobweb in the corner, the unswept floor, and a garbage full of dirty rags and old vials.

"I still think he's a greasy git," Ron said quietly, "but we'd all be dead if he hadn't been helping us the whole time. I reckon he deserves better care than this."

Hermione agreed completely. She called Healer Pye into the room and confronted him about the situation.

"Miss Granger, I guess I didn't explain it very well before," said Pye. "There's no point in helping him. He's as good as dead. We don't have sufficient anti-venom to fight the poison. He'll die eventually. No one knows what kind of snake Nagini was, and now she's dead and gone."

"What do you mean 'die'?" she asked. "He's stuck in a petrified stasis. He will sit there for all eternity. I should know. I've been petrified. Listen, if you aren't willing to help him, then I'm taking over." She raised her eyebrow in perfect Snape-like fashion.

Pye gritted his teeth but finally uttered a rushed agreement before storming to his office.

Since the final battle, Hermione had been staying at the Burrow. Her parents were still in Australia, and she was working on getting them back, but her attention kept returning to Snape. Mrs. Weasley was, as always, the pleasant hostess, and Order members were in and out of the house all the time. The Ministry was being rebuilt, and several Death Eaters were still at large. Despite the deaths of loved ones, the Wizarding world worked to put itself back together a piece at a time.

Except for Snape. It was so unfair St. Mungo's would treat him like rubbish. He might have been a severe man, but he was a hero. She felt a large amount of guilt at how long she had left him in the hospital without forcing her way inside to verify he was being well cared for.

A whole week had passed since she had announced her plan to care for the ex-professor, and his health hadn't improved in the slightest. His jaundiced skin had not lightened at all. Hermione concluded the venom was preserving the body. The only good thing was the fact he was hygienically clean. Every spell she could find had been used to clean him up, and she was still searching to make sure he was as well off as possible.

The trial had ended a few days ago, and Snape's name was clear. He was even given the Order of Merlin, First Class. Hermione had brought in the purple-fringed medal (mounted on a plaque) and placed it on the bedside table, not that he ever saw it.

Both Harry and Ron were reacting to her dedication for Snape with the same enthusiasm as they had to her S.P.E.W. project. They claimed they were too busy getting their own lives started. Neither had decided to attend Hogwarts for the seventh year as she had. Ron was currently at tryouts to become a Keeper for a professional Quidditch team. Ginny had Harry occupied in the garden all morning doing who knew what. Both of the boys had said they cared and would help her, but they'd asked that if Snape was stuck forever in stasis, then why the rush? They were almost as bad as the staff at St. Mungo's.

Since the night of the war and their first kiss, Ron had tried to push the relationship farther and farther along. Hermione liked him, loved him even. But she wasn't sure if she was *in love* with him. The snogging was quite fun, but love and being in love were two different things, and she was most definitely not in love with Ronald Weasley. She'd tried to tell him gently, but he hadn't quite understood.

Her Snape problem was simple compared to her relationship with Ron. All she needed to do was create anti-venom. But it was virtually impossible without being able to consult the actual venom. She couldn't take any from Snape's body, as it might upset his fragile state, and then he would die before she could find a cure. She had even gone back to the castle looking for Nagini, but all she'd found was the snake's body. Someone had nicked the head. Who would want a deadly snake's venom?

Then it hit her. Someone who collected rare and expensive ingredients for his own uses in potions: Professor Slughorn. She was determined to get it from him.

She Apparated to the Hogwarts gates and steadied herself mentally as she surveyed the scene. She had been to the school several times since the war, but the scene of destruction still startled her. Thankfully, the deepest repairs were mostly completed; it seemed only cosmetic renovations were needed now. She made her way up to the castle, careful to avoid the large gashes in the earth made by the giants. The castle itself almost looked normal despite many windows still without panes. She ran into very few people, and those she saw all had their wands out casting various spells for repairs. The front doors were open allowing the late-spring sunlight to warm the cold stone interior, so she let herself in.

Making her way down the stairs to the dungeons, she spotted Slughorn outside his office, replacing the sconces to their proper places on the walls.

"Professor Slughorn," she said, "I need some advice." She figured a little acting on her part might help him feel special. If she went to him for help rather than confronting him about the snakehead's disappearance, he might be more forthcoming.

He smiled underneath his large walrus-like moustache. "Miss Granger. How pleasant. Yes, come into my office."

He opened the door and let her in. She'd only ever been in inside while it was Professor Snape's office. Seating herself in the chair, she waited until he settled behind the desk, his large belly scraping the edge of the desk as he struggled to sit.

"Sir, I want to produce an anti-venom to save Professor Snape. The Healers are not giving him their full attention with the horrible excuse that he's not worth saving."

"Good Lord, Miss Granger, you think you can find a cure better than trained Healers? This isn't some classroom assignment. As I recall, you are very gifted, but not very creative with your potions."

"Yes, sir, I'll admit that," she said. "But they are just going to let him waste away in a room for all eternity. I can't abide by that. I am confident I can create a sufficient cure. I want to try, even if it's all I can do. No one else seems to care." She looked directly at him, hoping some guilt might sink in. He was a Potions master after all, and if he had the venom, why was he not searching for a cure himself? He didn't look abashed, so she decided to try another route.

"If you had been paying attention to my creation in your classroom the day we discussed antidotes, you would have seen I did know what I was doing. But you were too focused on Harry's cheeky bezoar stunt." She paused for a moment to ensure he remembered the incident then continued. "Did you know Harry was using Professor Snape's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*? He couldn't make an antidote, so out of desperation he grabbed a bezoar. Lucky for him, you're easy to win over."

The small smile was wiped from his face as his brow furrowed. He stroked his moustache in thought. She was right, and they both knew it.

"Very well. I admit you are quite bright. If you are set on saving Professor Snape, I will help you. But you must promise not to share with anyone that I have Nagini's head. I assume your cleverness has led you here because you guessed I might have it."

This was turning out perfectly. She gave him her word; then he gave several complicated flicks with his wand. A large jar containing Nagini's vile head landed lightly on his desk. The head was grotesque and appeared misshapen from the curvature of the glass jar. It was suspended in a murky-looking liquid.

"Er . . . Professor, what is the liquid in there? Will it affect the venom?" she questioned

"Oho, it's a protective spell, and it's actually a gas, not a liquid. It acts as a preservative." He tapped the lid, and the gas dissipated as the lid unscrewed itself. Another flick of the wand levitated the head and placed it on a silver tray he had conjured.

"We'll just milk the venom now." He produced a beaker with a cloth secured to the top and milked the head. The slender fangs expressed sickly yellow venom. It took several minutes, but they had a fair amount, at least six ounces.

"Hopefully it's should be enough to find a cure," she said. "But I don't know if I'll be able to make enough anti-venom to completely counter the amount within his body."

"Oho, Miss Granger, not so fast," teased Slughorn. "I've done this process seven times already. I get an ounce or two less each time, but it seems after I put the head back into the jar, and wait a full twenty-four hours, the venom is regenerated. I should be able to get a few more milkings out of her to produce a large enough dose to cure our friend."

"Thank you so much, Professor Slughorn. May I use the classroom to work on the antidote?"

"Of course, my dear. You have a big undertaking ahead of you," he said.

Hermione visited Snape every few days, to see that he was well taken care of. Sometimes she would find Professor McGonagall there; they would sit together next the silent man. On those rare occasions, Hermione got to see a different side of the former Head of Gryffindor House. They became congenial friends as Snape lay there beside them. No one else ever visited, she acknowledged with a twang of hurt. Did no other member of the Order want to see their comrade? He had been alone and friendless at Hogwarts as Headmaster. It seemed only McGonagall had enough regret or respect to visit him now.

At the Burrow things were a moving along. Life was on-hold for the summer, but as autumn approached, everyone began moving forward after the terror of Voldemort. Ron was now the official reserve Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, so he was gone at training. Once he'd been accepted he stopped pushing Hermione for more in the relationship. Before he left they'd had a chat. Now as a "professional," he expected women to line up for dates, and he didn't want to be tied down. She let him think he'd done the dumping, and she didn't mind terribly. He'd always wanted to have his own place to shine.

Hermione convinced Harry camping was his only escape from the limelight for a while, and Ginny insisted she go with him, saying they needed to spend time on their relationship. Ginny still had one year left at Hogwarts, and Harry would be working as an Auror in the fall, so they had a limited amount of time before their long-distance relationship was set in place. The time apart would be hard on them both, and they were still in the healing process from the war. They were officially engaged, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley reluctantly agreed to let their only daughter go on summer holiday with Harry.

Hermione didn't want to stay at the Burrow alone all summer, so she decided to pursue her parents. She'd been putting it off long enough and needed to go fetch them but was a little apprehensive to how they would react to the truth.

She used a Portkey to travel to Australia and felt the familiar pull behind her navel. The trip lasted quite long as she transported across continents and oceans. With a sudden jolt she was standing in a wooded area. All the leaves were missing from the branches, and it was snowing softly. When she had sent her parents off to Australia, she ensured they would move to Brisbane. It was the third-largest city on the continent so it would be more difficult for the Death Eaters to locate them. The only problem with this choice was it was now also more difficult for her. But she had a good idea of how to search. She knew their new names, and she had arranged for them to keep their love for dentistry intact, so she didn't expect it to be too difficult to find them. Within two days she'd tracked down their business. She wanted to observe them for a few days to see what kind of people they had become.

Hermione half wished there was someone with her to offer support emotionally if things turned out wrong. But she was alone on this, as she was with Project Snape. Returning her parents to normal was a little more complicated than she had anticipated. The spells and charms weren't the problem. The three-month-old baby girl was. Turned out Wendell and Monica Wilkins, after establishing themselves in Australia, had decided they wanted a child. And to make matters even more bizarre, they had named their darling little girl Hermione. For some reason they were still drawn to the name. The child looked just like Hermione had as a baby. Soon enough the girl would have a brunette bush for hair, and those baby blue eyes would change to a warm amber. It was all thanks to their mother whose genes had twice proved to be dominant.

When she restored their memories, and they had connected their old identity with their baby and newly established life in Australia, they decided to stay. Their oldest daughter was mature enough to take care of herself they knew, and they enjoyed Australia.

Hermione spent a few weeks with them getting reacquainted and meeting little baby Herms. She left with only a day to spare before school started. It wasn't nearly as hard as she'd thought it would be to leave them a second time. Perhaps it was because they had a baby to comfort them. With promises of future visits, she left for her childhood home in England. Her parents decided to sign it over to her so it remained in the family.

She stopped by to see Snape before heading over to King's Cross. He looked the same as ever, and her heart ached to know he was still in his own personal living hell. There was nothing she could do to help him. She told him about her parents and the baby, and reassured him she was still looking for a cure before she left. But as she closed the door behind her, she wondered why it was so much harder to say good-bye to this lifeless man when she was so indifferent to leaving her parents and two best friends?

By the end of October, Hermione was completely immersed in her search for the antidote to Snape's condition. Some chickens Hagrid had given her at the beginning of September were finally mature enough to lay eggs. This was huge in finding the anti-venom. She had injected the birds with non-lethal quantities of Nagini's venom on a weekly basis. The eggs they laid were full of precious antibodies that fought off Nagini's venom.

The Healers at St. Mungo's had done something similar while finding a cure for Mr. Weasley. But that antidote hadn't worked on Snape. So now that she had made a good step in re-creating the same anti-venom as before, she could take the steps to create a better one and compare it to this sample.

Glancing at the clock in the dungeons, Hermione saw she was going to be late for her usual tea with Professor McGonagall. The Headmistress had invited her for tea one Sunday early in the term, and it became a standing appointment. Both women enjoyed each other's company. Hermione rarely got to see McGonagall on a personal level now that Hagrid was the Gryffindor Head of House. McGonagall was stretching herself thin teaching Transfiguration and running Hogwarts.

Hermione rushed to put everything away and then ran up to her professor's office. She gave the password, "Tartan," to the Gargoyle and climbed the rising stairs. After McGonagall's warm welcome to her knock, she stepped into the study, and her eyes automatically sought out the empty spot where Snape's portrait would have hung. It was a reassurance he was still alive, and her work on the anti-venom wasn't in vain. Books and small tins lined the office shelves, and ancient tea sets and knickknacks covered all the surfaces. They never collected dust.

Professor McGonagall called for Kiki, a house-elf, to bring them some tea. Hermione cringed inwardly, as she did every Sunday. She felt a little guilty being an extra burden to the house-elves just because she wanted to have tea with McGonagall. Brushing the guilt aside, she fell into an easy conversation with her mentor. McGonagall's wrinkly face was full of animation while they squabbled over topics. They were debating their latest read, *The Fibonacci Sequence Transfigured*. The older woman's lips were thin and threatened to disappear as Hermione was about to win her over, when Professor Slughorn's head suddenly appeared in the fireplace, disrupting her momentum in the speech.

"Minerva, I just got your owl. I agree completely, I...Miss Granger! I, er . . . um, well, yes. I see you're busy. I'll speak with you soon, Headmistress." He started to pull his head out of the fire but then pushed it back through. "Oho, by the way, Miss Granger, I've looked over your progress, and I must say I am quite impressed. You seem to be developing a creative streak after all. There is hope for you yet!"

With that, his head was gone from the fire. Hermione was surprised to see the older woman blushing profusely, her hands shaking. She clumsily set down her teacup and saucer and ran a weathered hand over her tight bun of black hair. What was that about? Hermione acted as though she hadn't seen anything odd. But McGonagall's single raised eyebrow was an indication that something was going on between those two. Hermione changed the subject and asked for permission to visit Snape in the hospital during one of her free periods this coming week.

When Hermione woke up on Christmas morning, she found several gifts from Harry and Ron. The three of them hardly talked now that life didn't revolve around Voldemort. They would always be friends, but they were independent people now. It was the same with her parents. They sent owls every now and then, but she was fine being distanced from them. But they hadn't forgotten her on Christmas. They sent a large basket of fruit full of sentimental love. She recalled growing up with a basket of persimmons every Christmas as a tradition, but there were none in the basket...just various pears, peaches and a few oranges. Why no persimmons? Of course! It was summer in Australia at the moment, and persimmons weren't ripe until winter. The astringency stayed in the fruit until the first frost killed it. It was a pity; she had been looking forward to getting back into her family traditions.

She opened her gift from Harry; it was an old book on potions. There were lots of references to the Dark Arts and concoctions inside, and most likely all were banned substances. Harry must have found it on the job. Maybe there was something there to help her with finding the antidote. At least he was being thoughtful. Ron on the other hand had given her a gift certificate for Quality Quidditch Supplies; meaning he wanted her to buy him something. Nice. Thanks Ronald.

With most of the students gone for the Christmas holidays, she was able to spend hours in the lab conducting experiments. By now Hermione had realized the eggs were not going to be enough. Slughorn had stopped in for a visit with her, and they were deep in discussion.

"Miss Granger, do you remember what you learned during our lesson on antidotes in your sixth year?" he asked.

"Gopalott's-Third-Law-states-that-the-antidote-for-a-blended-poison-will-be-equal-to-more-than-the-sum-of-the-antidotes-for-each-of-the-separate-components,"" she recited.

"So," he prompted, "we still need to decipher what is in the venom. I'm under the impression the venom might be blended."

"Yes, I've been thinking about that." Hermione said. "As Nagini was a Horcrux at the time she bit Snape, it is possible for the venom to be a blend. I'm still trying to figure out how to separate it. It is not a normal poison. But I have been able to determine the various antibodies found inside the chicken eggs, so I think I can identify what is in the venom by the antibodies that counteract the poison. I've discovered a few of them, and I'm close to getting the rest, hopefully before term starts."

"Excellent!" Slughorn said. "I think you are close to the halfway point." He stood to leave, but stopped at the door of the dungeon. "Miss Granger, I am quite amazed with your progress. Perhaps you could take a break and come to my next party? I'd like to show you around my circle. One can never network too much. I believe we will go far with this anti-venom." He smiled and left.

She was a bit miffed he was riding on her coattails with this discovery, but he had been the one to give her the venom in the first place. They'd made a partnership after all, and what had she expected from Slughorn? Now that she thought about it, he was quite amicable in private. Besides, he could take all the fame he wanted if this anti-venom got attention. She just wanted to save Professor Snape.

The first day back into the term was a relief. It was nice to have people about the castle. She could pretend everything was normal, even though she was lonely in the masses. Despite having Ginny as a roommate and Luna as a friend, she didn't feel like she fit in. Without Harry and Ron things were different. One year away had changed her Wizarding home. But she was usually too busy with Potions to mind.

Neville had graduated last year, despite having been in hiding for the better part of the last term. He was currently studying under Professor Sprout as her assistant, as she was hoping to retire in the next few years. It was high time Hermione visited her old friend, despite his new title.

When Hermione entered Greenhouse Three, she didn't see Neville at first. The windows were steamed from the internal temperature. She walked past the potted Mandrakes, following the sound of his grunts. She found him behind a large, banana-yellow shrub she'd never seen before. He was incorporating plant food with a hoe.

He didn't notice her right away. The boy had grown into a man. His leadership role in the war and killing Nagini had hardened him a bit. He was still soft and lovable like a brother, but he wasn't someone one could laugh at now. Neville was of a large build, with muscles, she could see as he worked with his gardening tool. His brow had a sweep of sweat across it, and his handsome face was locked with determination.

"Hullo, Neville. Er, wouldn't it be easier to do that with your wand? You are a wizard," she teased.

"Hermione, hello!" he said as he leaned an arm against his hoe to take a break. "Yes, I could use magic, but I find I get more satisfaction doing it by hand. I get a better bond with the plants. I think they recognize me and appreciate the hard work I do for them, and so I get better results."

"Really? I guess I've never thought of it that way before. But it's good to know there is a difference in the results of the product. Anyway, I came by to ask for some help. I'm trying to save Professor Snape, and I need to procure some persimmons. But I will need quite a lot of them for several months, and I need the fruit to *stay* unripe. I need them astringent and with enough fruit to feed an adult goat."

Neville looked confused, but agreed. He could have a mature miniature tree transported to the greenhouses once he checked with Professor Sprout. Hermione would most likely have the plant by the end of the month.

During her next free period, Hermione went down to visit Hagrid. He was teaching a group of first-years in front of his hut. Puffs of frozen air were suspended above each student. Fang was scratching at the door as the eleven-year-olds were learning to care for their Flobberworms. She waited until the students were situated with their invertebrates and approached Hagrid.

He pulled her into a large bear hug.

"Hagrid, I need you to get an animal for me. It's nothing special, just a goat."

"What kin'?" he asked.

She hadn't considered breeds. "Er . . . whichever you think will do, Hagrid. I trust your judgment."

He beamed. "I reckon I'll get two at leas', being as they like company an all."

"Then get at least three. I'm sorry to say one might die in the experiment. It's to restore Professor Snape."

She left him shortly thereafter so he could get back to his class; she had schedules to make.

Disclaimer: This world belongs to J.K. Rowling, not me.

Note: The quote marked with an asterisk (*) is a direct quote from Book Six: The Half-Blood Prince.

Take a hyperbole and make it reality...tell that tale. Any premise is fine. Feel free to make your own or use the examples given.

Two

Chapter 2 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

At the end of January, Neville had the promised persimmon tree...two actually; and Hagrid had three Nigerian-dwarfed goats. They were full-grown but smaller than most, which according to her calculations was exactly what she needed. Hermione trudged through the snow every morning and evening. The goats were housed in a cozy little stable Hagrid had built for them.

She took the goats some hay, grain and a few persimmons for meals. Only one goat received the fruit though. She wanted to concentrate on one goat as much as possible for best results.

Within two weeks, Hermione knew her theory was correct. The poor little goat...which Hagrid had named Spot...was getting sick. She would readily eat the proffered fruit, but her digestive system was shutting down. The fruit was very astringent and unripe. The goat still had its daily rations of proper nutrients...she only added the fruit to its meal.

By the end of March, the goat was so ill Hagrid said he would have to put Spot down if she didn't improve. That was enough for Hermione. She told Hagrid she would do a bit of magic and see if she couldn't cure the little creature.

Hermione waited until the goat was sedated with a simple potion before pointing her wand at the creature. "*Accio Bezoar*." The goat made a retching noise, and a small, shriveled stone flew out of the goat's mouth and into her hand. It glistened against the winter sun. She told Hagrid the goat would be fine, and he could do whatever he liked with the goats. Her experiment was done. Hopefully, this was all she would need.

The dungeons were warm compared to the chill outside. It was late in the evening, and most students were either in the library or in their common rooms. Hermione wanted to study, but this potion was important...Snape's life depended upon it. She couldn't afford to wait until the next new moon. So far her schedules were accurate.

Professor Slughorn was in the lab, and he glanced up at her when she entered. She smiled at him and pulled her equipment onto a table, then got to work. She didn't want to tell him yet, not until she was sure it was going to work. Hermione chopped the dragon liver very precisely with her silver-bladed knife and then seeded the pomegranate, sorting the seeds by size.

She lit her cauldron and added seven of the large chicken eggs full of antibodies. The key was to keep the egg yolks whole. She couldn't let them break, or they would be useless. She carefully dropped in the bezoar after the eggs had begun to firm up. Hermione wanted the bezoar to absorb all the magical antibodies from the eggs before she added anything else. Slowly she stirred seven times clockwise, then three counter-clockwise. The potion was snapping, just as it had when she had been in the testing stages. She was adding more ingredients as she carefully reviewed her notes.

Slughorn shuffled up to inspect her work. By now it was past curfew, but she had to get the potion to its simmering stage before she could leave. He didn't seem to mind or notice how late it was. He ambled around the worktable ticking off the ingredients she had splayed across the surface.

"Dragon liver, good." Slughorn seemed to be talking to himself. "Pomegranates for strength, Scurvy grass . . . ah, yes. You did say Professor Snape was looking sickly; this is high in vitamin C. Clever girl. Let's see, what else? Moondew, Flobberworm mucus, and what's that you're working on now, my dear?"

Hermione was crushing some Moly with a mortar and pestle. The flowers were white, but as she pressed them against their black stems, a grey paste formed. She showed him.

"Oho, Miss Granger, you seem to have this well thought out. Moly is wonderful for protecting oneself against the Dark Arts. I would only suggest two more items to add to your potion..."

"I only had Re'em blood left on my list," Hermione said, cutting him off in alarm. "It was the last ingredient, to be added during the appropriate moon phase. I've been over this list a million times. What else am I missing?" Hermione was panicking. "Do we even have the ingredient in stock? I mean, the Re'em blood was the rarest ingredient on the list, and I had to spend all the money in my Gringotts account to just buy enough!"

"Calm down, Miss Granger," Slughorn soothed. "You do not need to add it tonight. I believe the missing ingredient should be added at the very end, during the last quarter of the moon phase. Otherwise, it will be too strong and overpower your potion."

"Besides, I won't let you mess this up. You are smart enough to figure it out. After all, we are making history here. If it works, that is."

Slughorn had a glint in his eye that looked like hunger. She was sure he was envisioning "their" success in the *Daily Prophet*, with publications and interviews. He would love that, wouldn't he? All she cared about was making sure Snape was safe and happy.

"Now my dear, finish up for tonight, then sleep on it. I'm sure it will strike you between the eyes before you need to add it. I don't think we have any in stock, but if you figure it out with enough time, you should be able to procure the ingredient without much trouble."

The whole way up to Gryffindor Tower, she berated herself for missing something. What was she not remembering that might save Professor Snape? Would he jeer at her if he were conscious because she couldn't figure out how to save him?

It was the following Sunday, and Hermione was having tea with Professor McGonagall. The older witch was venting about the difficulties of running a school and teaching Transfiguration simultaneously. She was at her wits' end and was thankful she had someone to talk with on Sunday afternoons. Subtly, the subject changed, and the headmistress was praising Hermione for her efforts and ability with Potions. The conversation turned to visiting Snape himself. McGonagall hadn't been to see him for quite some time, so they both decided to visit him straight away. They used the Floo powder in the study and came out in St. Mungo's visitor's entrance. They led themselves to his deserted corridor and sat beside his bed. His state hadn't changed at all. Hermione didn't know if that was good or bad.

It was only a little awkward talking to Snape with McGonagall present, but the woman gave her a rare smile when she risked a glance. She told him about starting the

potion and explained the situation. She confessed she hadn't yet figured out the final ingredient, but promised she was close to finding a cure.

Unexpectedly, McGonagall quietly muttered apologies to her colleague, repeatedly like a rosary. Regret emanated from McGonagall as she cried into her hands. Hermione gently patted her on the back, then her own regret and sorrow for the whole damned situation overcame her, and she hugged the woman and they wept together. As the crying slowed to a stop, Hermione's vigor returned, as well as a renewed determination to figure this out. Through their crying, the relationship shifted; they had shared something special, and they were bonded. McGonagall insisted Hermione refer to her as Minerva from then on, when appropriate.

As they were walking down the hallway to the fireplaces, Minerva said, "This reminds me of when the Basilisk had petrified you in your second year. I had felt so helpless and partially responsible, but I imagine that had something to do with survivor's guilt. Thankfully, we had been able to restore all of you with that Mandrake Draught. I had really thought it had been the end of Hogwarts."

Hermione remembered the incident quite well. She had spent a long time in the hospital wing that year, first her mix up with the Polyjuice Potion, then when she had been Petrified. Perhaps that was why she felt so close to Professor Snape. She knew, to some degree, what it was like to be stuck in limbo. She had a hazy memory of being in a solid state, but she vaguely remembered colors and some sounds. She shuddered mentally, remembering she could still be in that same state if it weren't for the wonderful Mandrake Restorative Draught.

The Mandrakes! That was it. She needed Mandrakes in her potion. They were her lacking ingredient. She practically skipped the rest of the way to the Floo. Minerva looked a little startled, but Hermione rapidly explained her discovery.

They Flooed back into the Headmistress' study. Hermione excused herself and ran down to the greenhouses through the late winter snow. She found Neville in Greenhouse One. He was cleaning up some spilled bags of soil. She frantically explained what she needed, and Neville understood. He led her into Greenhouse Three, where the Mandrakes were potted. The dark green leaves quivered occasionally, and the pretty, creamy-purple flowers seemed to nod at her. They were in their teenage years, apparently, as the greenhouse looked disheveled like someone had partied heavily the night before.

She nudged a beer bottle with her foot. Neville explained they had a new species this year, one that was nearly extinct and rare, only located in Turkey and parts of Iran. The Mandragora turcomanica had fruit, and within a few weeks they would be ripe. They were what she was looking for. He would take extra care and give her top picks when they were ready. Hermione went to bed with a huge burden lifted off of her. She was going to save Snape. She just knew it.

Hermione stood in front of the cauldron. The final ingredients she needed were the Mandrake fruits. Neville came shuffling in with them a moment later, and Hermione took the yellow-orange fruits. They somewhat resembled tomatoes.

She and Slughorn had agreed it was best to juice them into the potion so they weren't too strong. She carefully put a sieve over the cauldron and used her wand to fully squeeze the fruit. Bright yellow juice and large white, oval seeds dropped into the sieve. As soon as the juice met with the potion, the whole creation changed.

The potion, which had been a deep red, immediately turned to an acid green, and the smell was fragrant, like cherry blossoms. Large billows of white smoke issued out of the cauldron, and Hermione had to pull back. She wasn't sure how the vapors would affect her. She gave it a seven-minute stir counter-clockwise.

"Miss Granger, this is wonderful!" Slughorn tittered. "Why, this could revolutionize antidotes as we know them! It would even put the Wiggensweld Potion to shame!"

Slughorn had that fame-hungry look in his watery eyes. His whole being was jiggling uncontrollably as he literally danced around the room. Minerva entered the room, and Slughorn gathered her up into his arms and waltzed with her across the lab. Oddly enough, she blushed and giggled like a fourth-year. Neville bowed and proffered an arm. Hermione took it and danced with Neville in celebration, or at least they tried, but he trampled her poor feet.

That last week went by much too slowly. Hermione had to let the potion rest until the new moon arrived. Minerva and Slughorn accompanied her to St. Mungo's. She'd been waiting for this day for almost an entire year. But there was a process...always a process. She had the bezoar, which she'd pulled out of the potion once it was completed, and that was the first step. She had to magically guide it down his throat to keep it from falling through the holes in his neck. Once she was sure it was in his stomach, she waited. Nothing happened, as Hermione expected. It was going to take time. But she had permission from Minerva to return everyday and give him a dose of the acid-green antidote.

By the end of the first week, she saw his color had returned. Gone was the jaundiced tinge to his usual pale skin. She talked to him every time she gave him a dose. A few days later she was able to use some dittany on his neck. The skin healed, and she gave him a few potions from Madam Pomfrey to heal the internal neck injuries. Then she gave him the Blood-Replenishing Potions.

Two weeks into the treatment, she saw blood coursing through his veins, and his body started digesting nutrients. She mended hard feelings between Healer Pye and herself, and he ordered a few witches to change Snape's cot sheets, bedpan and clothes and to run routine checks on him.

Snape began to look like his old self. At every visit Hermione would delicately lather and shave his growing stubble. She trimmed his shoulder-length hair, which was full of split ends, and cleaned under his fingernails, trimming them too. His black lashes were long. Why did men always have long eyelashes? The skin no longer sagged on his body but was living and flushed. His skin, once pasty, was now a beautiful pale, contrasting with his raven locks.

Hermione had wanted to care for him all by herself, but her N.E.W.T.s were fast approaching, and she needed to be in class. Evening study at his side became a normal routine, as Minerva let her use her the Floo every day. Hermione wanted to be there if he needed anything. She was somewhat unnerved when she realized the obsession she'd formed around his health. Remembering her old professor and his personality, she realized he would most likely be upset when he awoke, but a part of her wanted to prove that theory wrong. She had worked so hard to save his life, and she wanted to hear his praise. From her first day in his class, she'd been yearning to hear a positive remark from him. And although Minerva, Slughorn and other leading officials in the Wizarding world had given her an abundance of praise, she really wanted to hear a "thank you" from the sleeping man beside her. He had been so brave and heroic to face Voldemort by himself, and she was sure he, of all people, deserved the best treatment possible...and her standards were high.

As Hermione exited the Great Hall from her Arithmancy N.E.W.T., Minerva rushed in and pulled her aside. Minerva clapped her hands together and spoke in a loud whisper.

"He's just awakened. I was visiting him during my lunch hour, and he began to stir." Minerva was leading Hermione to her study. "Then I gave him an Invigoration Draught I found sitting on the bedside table. After a few minutes he was awake. He gave me a smirk, and oh, it was wonderful. He couldn't speak yet, but he was regaining his strength. I told him I'd return."

"Did you tell him anything about the antidote?" Hermione asked.

"No, no. I will leave that for you. If it weren't for you, he would still be in that terrible state. You deserve to tell him," she said as they reached the winding staircase to her office.

Now that she was about to face him, Hermione was nervous. What would he say? What should she say? There was only one-way to find out. She armed herself with some Gryffindor courage, marched over to the fireplace and threw in a pinch of Floo powder. Minerva appeared in the fireplace only a moment behind her, and they solemnly walked down to his room. Hermione's legs were like jelly as she approached his door. With a shaky hand she gave a curt knock and opened the door.

Snape was sleeping when she walked in. She heard the door close behind her; Minerva wasn't with her. Hermione hadn't thought she was going to face him alone! She'd spent an awful lot of time alone with him as of late, but now she was getting cold feet. Where had her courage gone? Perhaps she'd left it sitting outside the door with Minerva. Wherever she'd left it, she didn't have time to find more: Snape was stirring. He opened his heavy eyes and turned his head as she sat down beside him. The best she could do was to give him a weak smile.

He scowled.

What more could she have expected?

"Miss Granger? What is the meaning of this?" his voice was hoarse and gritty. "I was expecting Professor McGonagall. How have you managed to stick your nose into my affairs?"

This was going to be harder than she'd thought. She forced herself to look directly into his eyes as she explained. She told him everything from when she found him in the Shrieking Shack to almost killing a goat. How she spent her entire seventh year focused on antidotes and anti-venoms. How she was now so obsessed with Potions she had applied to only Potion Academies to further her education. She spoke of her visits to his bedside, her fights with the Healers. Hermione explained the Order of Merlin medal beside his bed. She told him what she had done with his memories to verify he was alive when she'd found him a year ago in a sticky puddle of his own blood. She told him Nagini was dead and explained how they'd won the war over Voldemort.

Hermione's voice was dry and monotone, and her tongue felt thick and spongy. The black, expressionless eyes bore into hers, and he spoke not a word while she explained herself, nor did he make any facial expressions. She felt like a child confessing to the crime of stealing a piece of candy. He was so much bigger than her, even though he had, when sickly, appeared so small. When she finished talking, he continued to stare at her, and she ruefully dropped her eyes to her lap.

He spoke, but it was quiet and menacing. "How dare you assume I wanted to live? I had been looking forward to death for years, and it was a relief to let myself bleed out on that dirty floor. You are still the know-it-all you were before the war, sticking your bushy head into business you ought not to tamper with. I was immensely enjoying my state of nonexistence. The rest of the world seemed to be fine with the fact I'd died! Why weren't you? I thought you were smarter than that, Miss Granger, but you've proven again you're just a selfish little chit. You have no business tampering with Potions. Last time I checked you just parroted textbook information to the great annoyance of all my colleagues and myself. You have no concept of real life, as proven by your actions to save my life.

"If I had wanted to stay alive, do you think I wouldn't have tried to prevent the venom from working in the first place? I am a Potions master after all; I had antidotes and anti-venoms, Miss Granger, that would have negated any venom if taken before being bitten. I was well aware of the risks, and I took the option best suited to my wants...doing absolutely nothing. Now I want you to leave. And I can only hope I am never forced to look upon your countenance ever again. You've caused me more pain than I can express. Now get out!"

He never raised his voice, thankfully. She didn't want Minerva to hear what he had said. She stood slowly and forced back the tears. It wouldn't do to have Minerva question her.

Minerva was waiting outside the door. Putting on the most cheerful smile she could muster, Hermione told Minerva that Snape wanted to see her. It wasn't a lie. As soon as the door clicked closed, she jogged to the entrance. She did not want to go back to Hogwarts. She was finished with her N.E.W.T.s. She would just leave school a few days early. All her belongings were there, but if she packed, Minerva would catch her in the middle of it. She needed a place to hide for a bit. The only place she had left...her childhood home. Her tears were coming down in earnest now. She found a secluded alley and turned on the spot. Tears blurred her vision as the street swirled around her.

The next week went by in a haze of crying and incoherent screaming. Then she received an owl from a school in the United States. DuPont Potions Academy was hidden in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Hermione had applied to several schools, and this was her first acceptance letter. It was also one of the top schools in the world for Potions. She was ready to turn them down after telling herself she was an idiot for trying to pursue Potions. Snape had belittled her, and he was right. She was a know-it-all, and she didn't need to further her education and prove herself. She should probably get a real job somewhere and keep a low profile or, at least, that was what she kept telling herself.

As she was drafting her respectful regrets to DuPont, she heard a heavy pounding on her front door. Hermione tentatively opened it only to find Minerva standing on her porch with a thin-lipped expression.

"Really, Hermione, you know better than to sulk," she admonished.

As Hermione opened the door all the way, the older witch handed her a crisp-looking envelope. When Hermione opened it, she found she had received an 'O' for 'Outstanding' on all of her exams. She looked up, and Minerva was giving her a full smile. Hermione smiled back despite herself, before her mind returned to its pity party.

Minerva noticed. "I don't know what Severus Snape said to you . . . but I know him, and you mustn't take to heart what his sharp tongue dishes out. He has many walls and layers. And what you did for him...saving his life...broke down those barriers. You were in his personal space, and the only way he knows to protect himself is through harsh words and deep scowls."

Hermione didn't reply, but she listened. She plopped on the couch, and Minerva sat beside her. They were quiet for some time as Hermione mulled over her options.

"You should go to DuPont," Minerva said unexpectedly.

"How did you..." Hermione started.

"As Headmistress, I received a copy of your acceptance letter for my own records," she explained quietly.

"I was about to send them my letter of regret," Hermione replied. "They have a limited number of seats. I've always wanted to go to the States, but Professor Snape was right; I've no business going into Potions. In fact, I don't think I would do well furthering my education. I might just take a little break from everything right now."

"Listen to me, Hermione. You are brilliant, and you remind me of myself when I was younger. I'd hate for you to short-change yourself. There is so much you could do for the world if you took this opportunity at DuPont. If you could create a potion to bring back someone from a non-living state at your age, then your possibilities are limitless. You have dreams, don't you? What are they?" Minerva said.

"I used to have dreams of so many things, but they've been in flux. I think I would be happy doing anything really. Knowledge is my staple in life. As long as I have a job where I can keep growing intellectually, I think I can adjust to adult life.

"But currently, I dream of being a Potions mistress. I want to create and explore. I had so much fun working on the potion. I think that's what stings the most, that I was so happy making the antidote for him, and yet he still rejected it . . . rejected me. He's never been happy with my work, ever. I've always been and always *will* be an over-achiever to him. A part of me wants to quit, and I've been listening to that side for the past week. But the other half wants to prove him wrong. And I usually listen to that side too. It's been a struggle to stay petulant and not seek out and prove myself. But I don't think I can keep up the charade much longer...even to myself."

Minerva leaned over and gave her a hug. "You have so much left to prove, not only to yourself but to the world. Forget what Severus said to you, dear. Focus on what matters to you."

Severus sat in a faded orange moth-eaten armchair at Spinner's End. The July heat was stifling in the dusty hovel he'd once called home. He detested the place. Minerva had insisted on stopping by to see how he was doing. He'd been "alive" for five minutes, and she was already all over him. It was understandable; the last time he'd properly seen Minerva she'd tried to kill him in a duel before he had fled from the castle. Throughout his year as Headmaster, he'd given her plenty of hints to discover his true allegiances but she'd never caught on. Now that she knew the truth, he was overjoyed at having one true friend back. She was the last of her kind, a firm anchor in his life. She'd always been fair with him, both as a student and then as a colleague. Even when she hated him for murdering Dumbledore, she was just in all of her dealings with him. It was wonderful to see her fighting internally, struggling against what felt natural...liking him. She attracted oddities, and he was the star of her collection.

A faint crack sounded down the street. She would be here momentarily. There was no point in cleaning up the place. He wouldn't stay here much longer; too many

memories filled the empty space. Most houses in the neighborhood were abandoned, decrepit shells mimicking the families that had once lived within them. He lowered the wards as he opened the door and saw she was as prim as ever. Her lips formed a tight line across her wrinkled face, but her eyes were soft and searching, as if reassuring herself he was alive each time she looked upon his features.

"Let me see your wounds, Severus," she said as a way of greeting.

He peeled back the collar of his robes and showed her the two red scars, clashing with his alabaster skin. The wounds were healed, but the scars were still plainly visible. Healer Pye assured him they would eventually fade to a silvery color like Arthur Weasley's.

He invited her into the sitting room, and she immediately cleaned the loveseat and the surrounding area. She cast a cooling charm on the room and produced a tea tray. He settled back into the armchair, and plumes of dust curled around him as he watched her make the tea. Minerva handed him a cup of tea, and he was relieved that she remembered exactly how he liked it.

"I'm stepping down as Headmistress, Severus. The Board wants you to replace me. I told them I was only presiding until you were healed. They are holding to their promise, and I to mine, if you want the position." She placed her cup on the table between them.

It would be nice to have a job. He'd always considered Hogwarts his home, and it would be interesting to run the school without war motives pushing him in all directions. The duties as Headmaster had been enjoyable last time. But he would have to face everyone again, to see them look doubtful whenever he passed by. How many people believed he was truly innocent? Would the staff accept him? What about the students or their parents? Surely they would reject the idea of Severus Snape, former Death Eater, as Headmaster after what happened the last time he'd held the position; a war had broken out. It was ridiculous that the Board of Governors would keep their promise and let him mold young minds.

Minerva must have sensed his doubts because she spoke up. "The world knows you're innocent. It's been over a year since then, and now that everything is 'back to normal' in the Wizarding world, most families are willing to let you teach. I'm sure very few will oppose you as Headmaster. I'll be there to help you as well. It wouldn't be Hogwarts without you, Severus."

What else was he to do with his life? It was in shambles now that there was no motivation. No Lily. She was gone. He'd lived his life for her...expecting to die for her. He'd repaid his debt. But would she care for him now? There was no tie between them any longer, nothing pulling him towards an ultimate end. He had no reason to live, only reason to die, to see her again.

He'd never been one to condone suicide. If there was a purpose to life, one should find it, and Minerva had dropped his at his feet. He could manage over Hogwarts. It was something he loved, and it was sure to keep him busy enough to keep his mind off his lost love.

Three

Chapter 3 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Hermione accepted her invitation to DuPont and left late in the summer to make her home in the Shenandoah Valley. The east coast of America was vibrant and green and reminded her of England at times. DuPont Academy was small and meant to be so. It wasn't fair to compare it to Hogwarts, but she couldn't resist. The school had been converted from an old estate. It was a beautiful set of buildings dating from the late eighteenth century. The old manor was their living quarters, and the mill and stable served as laboratories. There was even a garden and actual farmyard where they raised and grew all of their own food. Of course, the estate came with house-elves that did all the work, but the students were expected to help in the garden...though only with the potion ingredients.

The small number of students meant more one-on-one time with the professors. Only twenty or so students attended DuPont, and half were in their first year. There were only two years of intense study and research before graduation. A full staff of seven professors specialized in various aspects of Potions, and they most certainly taught to Hermione's liking. She was always busy with research and brewing.

Every Sunday, she took a Portkey to visit Minerva for tea. It was Hermione's only current tie back to England. She treasured those few hours with her mentor. Hermione arrived directly into Minerva's study and would exit the same way. She had no desire to leave the confines of that room while at Hogwarts. Hermione could not handle coming face to face with Snape if he happened to be about. Teatime seemed to be a favorite of Minerva's as well. Her years had caught up to her, and she was losing some of her spunk; teatime was when she relaxed. It was near Christmas when Hermione finally told Minerva what had transpired between Snape and herself back in June.

"I feel like I really put my foot in my mouth when I told him everything," Hermione said. "I should have explained as little as possible; then he might not have said all those things." She explained how she was still hurt when he told her that she had no business with Potions. Yes, the rest of the Potions society had readily accepted her. But what she wanted most was his praise, or at least acknowledgement, that she had succeeded in that field. Snape had always been strict with his grading...especially with her...and she'd felt slighted. He had never seen her for what she was.

Everyone at DuPont loved her ideas in class, but what if she was still reciting textbook information? Could she even think on her own? Hermione had always been an over-achiever, but did she have an uncontrollable desire to prove herself to others? She had always had a fear of failure. It was the form her Boggart took; perhaps in practice as Minerva, but a false Minerva who'd told Hermione she'd failed everything. And right now, Hermione had most likely failed with Professor Snape.

Her first year at DuPont flew by. Hermione finished at the top of her class, as usual. She spent the summer holiday in the States with a boyfriend. Not only had he just graduated from DuPont but was also originally from Virginia. He showed her the sights over the course of the holiday as she stayed with him, but the relationship fizzled out by the end of the summer. While she had been forced to live with Harry and Ron on the run from Voldemort, she had never casually lived with anyone before. It was difficult; their schedules didn't coincide, and she found he had little quirks that drove her crazy. Yes, those were superficial things, but it left the window open for bigger problems to develop in the relationship. Like the fact he was extremely wealthy and treated his house-elves like the Malfoys did. Hermione was glad when school started, and she was able to leave. He didn't seem too upset either. She chalked it up as a learning experience, nothing more.

Hermione's second and final year at DuPont was much more demanding than the first. She had a large project that required either greatly improving an already existing potion or creating a new one entirely. After the antidote debacle, she decided she would find something fun and fanciful...nothing serious or related to life saving. In the end she developed a Bubble Potion. It was quite ingenious: no more spills, sticky fingers, or dripping bubble wands. The bubbles were random shapes: a unicorn, or a frog, a castle, broomstick, anything. Also in development were individually colored bubbles.

She remembered Muggle children normally had a hard time holding the bubble canister and the bubble wand at the same time, so she just put an Undetectable Extension Charm on a normal bubble wand and filled it with her Bubble Potion. Then she found that Blue Gum Eucalyptus extract kept the potion from spilling while in its liquid form. Only bubbles would be allowed out of the wand...no matter the angle the child held it at, nothing would spill. Once she was done, she sent a few bottles to her parents for little Hermione.

In early January, halfway through her last year at DuPont, she went to see Minerva for their usual Sunday tea. When she appeared in the office, Minerva was visibly flustered. After some coaxing, Hermione got her to sit down. She then poured the tea, and gave a cup to Minerva.

"Now, what is the matter, Minerva? Please stop beating around the bush," Hermione said.

"I have agreed to take a monumental step in my life, and although I don't regret it, I am quite nervous. And I never get nervous. I have always been in control of my life, but this shakes me to the core. Giddiness takes over if I stop to think about it too long, and . . . I dread telling you." Minerva didn't look up as she spoke.

"Why would you be afraid to tell me anything? I've told you things I've never told Harry or Ron. You know me inside and out. Come now, I won't judge you."

Minerva spoke too rapidly to understand and pointedly looked out the window.

"You'll have to enunciate. Do just get it over with. Where is your courage, Minerva?"

"All right." She looked directly at Hermione, but her face was flushed. "I am engaged to marry Horace Slughorn." She forcefully put her cup back on the saucer, and they clinked unkindly.

Hermione was silent a moment as she ran it through her mind. Then jumped up screaming for joy. She sloshed tea on both of them as she gave Minerva an excited hug. After cleaning it off with a flick of her wand, Hermione demanded to see the ring. Relieved, Minerva revealed the ring, canceling a spell. It was beautiful, with hundreds of tiny emeralds and rubies in small clusters complimenting each other. It appeared to be what Minerva had always wanted.

"And I want you to be my Maid of Honor. The wedding will be this summer, so we have time to plan it. Will you help me? I know you're busy, but I can't do it without you, Hermione. I long ago gave up thinking I would marry, I have no idea what to do."

How sweet. Minerva had finally found love. Hermione had been wondering what was going on between them for some time, though she hadn't expected it to lead to marriage. But Minerva was happy, and it was beautiful. It also helped to see her mentor nervous and scared; the woman had the same fear and insecurity she did...failure. It bolstered Hermione, and she wanted nothing more than to help Minerva succeed and have a beautiful wedding this coming summer.

Hermione wanted to surprise Minerva with the debut of her bubble wands at the wedding. She thought it would be cute if all the guests blew multicolored, randomly shaped bubbles as the happy couple left the reception in a horse-drawn carriage. So, during their Sunday tea times, Hermione kept Minerva's attention focused on the wedding plans, not with her current studies at DuPont. She was usually successful, but one Sunday, late in April, Minerva succeeded in turning the focus onto Hermione.

"What do you have planned for yourself after you graduate?" Minerva asked as she sipped her tea.

Hermione was looking out the window at the English spring. "I was rather thinking I would apply to an Apothecary. I'm not too particular where; although, I would fancy it being in England. I do miss it, and I have my parents' house, so I'd already have my living situation sorted out."

"I hope you don't mind me in saying this, but I was thinking you should step back from Potions for a bit," Minerva said honestly.

What? Minerva had been the one to push her towards getting her secondary education in Potions. Why would she prompt her to change directions yet again?

Minerva continued, "Well, I want you to be sure you are happy. You love knowledge, and you would be happy in any career as long as you were constantly learning. I would hate to see you lose any connections to other avenues of learning by committing yourself entirely to one subject. You have so much to offer in any given career path. I just want you to be sure. I have always wondered myself if I should have stayed in Transfiguration."

Hermione tried to object, but Minerva stilled her with a hand gesture.

"I know, Hermione. I love my job. But I always wanted to focus on Ancient Runes and I never did, regretfully. I don't want to see the same thing happen to you."

Minerva did have a point. Hermione had some serious thinking ahead.

Graduation was a small event in the middle of June. Hermione's parents came, much to her surprise. Minerva must have had something to do with her parents' arrival, as she and Horace were there as well. The blossoms fell gently off the trees as the ceremony concluded in the beautiful Virginian springtime.

As Hermione led the small group through the grove back to the Manor, she announced her job interview with Amos Diggory in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. The interview was in one week's time. Hermione planned to head back to England whether she got the job or not.

Once back in England, Hermione had her interview with Mr. Diggory. He was pleased with her credentials and her war record. She was fairly certain she had gotten the post, but he had said he needed some time to think it over and interview a few more people. In the meantime, she had a wedding to attend.

The wedding ceremony was on the first of July, and it was one of the most beautiful events Hermione had ever attended. It was held against the setting sun in an ancient stone ruin near Minerva's birthplace in Scotland. Billowing banners of deep scarlet and silver decorated the dilapidated building and fountains of roses gave the place a rustic look. The courtyard of the castle, overgrown with heather, housed the wedding. Hermione stood by as the Maid of Honor. For Hermione, the only dark spot in the whole affair was Severus Snape as Horace's Best Man. He wore black and stuck out like a sore thumb with such a dark color on. Horace was standing by in a kilt. His large belly hung over the outfit and almost ruined the distinguished look he was trying to pull off. Hermione wore a deep-scarlet evening dress complimenting Minerva's colors. But nothing could compare to Minerva's silk gown. The aged woman looked years younger as she walked into the courtyard. The heather waved gently with the breeze. Her dress was a gorgeous tartan of scarlet and silver. Her usual bun was gone, and she wore her hair long and flowing, and her streaks of silver actually flattered her dress.

Watching Minerva walking towards the crowd, Hermione saw the beauty in her best friend. She fervently prayed that she would look that damned sexy when she was Minerva's age. Tears welled in her eyes as she saw how happy Minerva and Horace were together; until she looked at Snape and saw how utterly disgusted he was by the whole thing. He had a sneer as he looked down his nose at them. Snape's eyes shifted to look at her, sweeping over her appearance, and his sneer deepened. Hermione directed her focus on the happy couple and not the sour man in black.

After the vows, Horace called everyone's attention then waved his wand, a dance floor appeared underneath them. The reception commenced. Hermione saw Harry and Ron there, but they weren't together. She waved to them individually and planned to talk to them as soon as possible. Immediately a traditional dance started with a few bagpipers playing a slow, sweet melody while the happy couple danced. Without warning, Snape turned and escorted Hermione onto the floor, sweeping her into the dance. Soon afterward all the other guests joined in.

Hermione was shocked Snape would touch her, let alone voluntarily dance with her. But it was expected for the Maid of Honor and Best Man to dance together. As the song went on, Snape led her around and around the outdoor dance floor. Really, he was a smooth dancer. She had never been keen on dancing for the same reason she disliked flying a broom...it was a skill that couldn't be learned from books alone. Thankfully Snape was the man; she just needed to follow his lead. Despite his smooth dancing, his arms were rigid and uninviting. Snape was obviously not enjoying himself. But when the song ended, he didn't let go. The next song started, and still he waltzed her around. Hermione could only let her eyes wander to the other guests for so long. She knew his black eyes were focused on her.

Deep in her heart she wanted to hear him apologize for his horrid behavior. But another part of her wanted revenge. She desperately wanted to belittle him in front of all these people. He had humiliated her...told her she was foolish. But here he was, alive...dancing...all because of her. Yet he acted as if he owed her nothing. Hermione didn't want recognition for her feat. What she craved was acceptance from this dour man. He had yet to speak, and she did not wish to be the one to break the silence. She gathered her courage and stared back at him. Whoever spoke first lost.

Severus Snape had black eyes. They were not dark brown but solid black, as if there were no irises. His gaze penetrated her, drawing her into his tunnel-like stare. He was rolling around inside her mind. She knew immediately what he was doing. Hermione Granger was raw and exposed to this man, as if he'd walked in on her showering, and yet she didn't shy away in embarrassment or fight him. She boldly faced him as he pulled memory after memory forward.

He was reviewing her processes with the anti-venom she'd created. And he viewed her visits to him while in hospital, all her conversations and confessions to him. So, he didn't believe she was capable of creating the antidote? Was that why he was pilfering through her mind? He must have suspected Slughorn and accepted the Best Man position as retribution. Fool. Slughorn rode on the waves of fame from others, not his own.

Her years at DuPont flicked forward. The memories of her Bubble Potion were up, and she cringed as he sneered at her creation. Then images of her love life with her last boyfriend at his manor came forward. Enough; this had nothing to do with him. She finally resisted him, and he retracted his connection without a fight. She'd been acting sweet long enough. The color was rising in her cheeks, but she was determined to tell him off. So what if she spoke first, he was going to hear what she had to say. In as normal a voice as she could muster she said, "Don't you have any respect for personal boundaries? I never gave you permission to invade my privacy. If you wanted answers, you could have asked me first."

"Ah, Miss Granger," he said. "You know how it feels, then. You have no respect for personal boundaries. It seems, from the memories I viewed; you were endlessly in my business...without my permission or consent. I was your major focus for a year. Yet you find it upsetting if I view those memories for mere moments? After all, they relate to myself; why should I not see them?"

"How can you even compare the two?" she said vehemently, "First of all, Severus Snape, I was saving your life, you ungrateful ass. I had to be near you to accomplish it. A simple 'thank you' would be appreciated. You wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me. Second, you viewed more than my memories pertaining to yourself. My project and personal life while at DuPont had nothing to do with you. Keep your oversized nose out of my memories."

Contrary to what she'd been anticipating, his arms relaxed, and he pulled her into his chest. He was inches from her, and she could feel his warm breath. Hermione's body was screaming in unexpected desire while her mind was still angry with him.

"I do so enjoy a good argument, Miss Granger." His voice was silky and captivating. "But I believe now is not the time for such discussions. I admit I had been harsh with you when we last met, and I had every reason to be. But I will not issue an apology now or ever for what I said."

Hermione risked a glance at the newlyweds. She wanted to give Snape a retort, but Minerva was eyeing her suspiciously. This tetchy man was sending mixed signals. Hermione wanted to be angrier, but it just wasn't forthcoming. His arms were inviting, and he smelled quite nice too. She had a strong urge to lay her head on his chest, but he abruptly stopped dancing. His arms dropped from around her, and he walked off in a swirl of black. People were staring at her like she'd done something to offend the Best Man. How dare he make it look like *she* had caused a scene! If anything, it should be the other way around. Hermione marched off after him. Snape had left the dance floor and was walking through the thigh-high heather into the setting sun. She struggled to keep up in heels but managed. When she was close enough for him to hear, she called to him.

"Don't you think you should apologize? You've been nothing but rude to me since day one. I remember how you treated me as a student! I have done nothing wrong. Trying to save you was the best experience of my life."

He actually stopped and turned around.

"I found what I love to do," she continued. "Potions was a hidden talent. And I see no reason why you should regret it. You obviously like living, or you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be Headmaster at Hogwarts. You just can't stand the fact that I saved your sorry ass! Get over it!"

He stalked back to her, upsetting the graceful heather blowing in the breeze.

"You are nothing more than a know-it-all with a low self-esteem who seeks the recognition of others to sustain yourself. I *will* ever acknowledge gratitude for being alive, let alone at your hands. I despise you, Miss Granger, and your unfounded fame with Potions. You are exactly like Potter, using your celebrity status to show off."

Snape resumed walking.

"If you hate being alive, why don't you jump off a cliff?" she yelled. But he was already gone; the loud crack of his Apparition echoed in her ears.

Severus Snape reappeared outside the Hogwarts gates. The sun was already gone by the time he made it to the front doors. He undid his bowtie as he climbed the stairs to his office. In his opinion, the best time of the year at Hogwarts involved no students and minimal staff members, and as most of them were still at the wedding, he had the entire castle to himself.

"How was the wedding, Severus?" Albus' portrait asked.

"Shut up, you old codger."

"Come now, Severus. Isn't it time we put my death behind us? Surely you can see why I did everything I did. It was for the greater good. If I hadn't..."

"I don't care for your self-proclaimed drivel. I'm in charge now. My life is finally mine, and I don't intend to have you ruin it. Let me be."

"Very well . . . but Minerva was just as much my friend as she is yours. At least tell me how the wedding went," Albus pressed on.

It had been a beautiful ceremony. But something was broken inside him, like he'd been wound up too far, and the parts had burst. Although he loved Minerva, he was jealous. She'd finally found happiness. It was difficult knowing she was married. If there had ever been any consolation in his life, it had been the fact that Minerva McGonagall was happily unmarried and still functioning at her age. He'd always looked up to her for her courage to be alone. His life had been hard after Lily's rejection: she had been his reason for living, and then their paths had split, and she'd gone for Potter.

Lily's wedding had been an outdoor ceremony as well. Minerva's dress was beautiful, but the Gryffindor color had made the memories of Lily's day flood back to him throughout the whole night. He had disillusioned himself at Lily's wedding, watching her kiss Potter and exchange rings. He'd almost cursed the cocky bastard as his hands had wandered down her dress, but Severus had kept control over himself. If there was anything he'd learned while working for the Dark Lord, it was self-control.

Horace had really had no business asking Severus to be the Best Man. It was a flaky gesture. Minerva had probably pressed Horace to do it, and Severus knew if he didn't accept, Minerva would have been upset. So he'd gone to the wedding. It was his first wedding since Lily's, and he hadn't wanted to go.

"It was beautiful," he remarked absent-mindedly.

"Wonderful," Albus said.

"The heather was beautiful. She had Horace in a kilt. The ceremony was small, and except for the Maid of Honor, it was as perfect as Minerva could have expected."

"I believe Minerva told me Hermione Granger was to be the Maid of Honor, correct?" The old man's eyes twinkled.

How he hated those blue, watery eyes. Without a word Severus went to his chambers, slamming the door behind him. Knowing he was being petulant, he flung himself on his bed and kicked off his shoes.

"Winky," he yelled into the comforter blanket.

"Yes, sir, Winky is here to serve."

"Firewhisky," his voice was muffled.

Within minutes, she handed him the bottle and left him in peace. Well, perhaps "peace" wasn't the right term. It was more like hell with tonight's memories still fresh. He hated dancing. It involved being much too close to others. And he'd held Granger for too long. Towards the end his resistance had wavered: he had wanted it to be Lily in his arms. They were about the same height, or so he remembered. And it had been so nice to get lost in the music and the arguing. Severus missed sparring with Lily. It had been her way of flirting with him, or at least he'd always thought so.

The Firewhisky burned down the familiar path. It was starting to work.

He wasn't furious with Granger for restoring his life, just angry. Which was quite a different term in his mind. Life without Lily had been too painful, and he had wanted to see her again on the other side. And yet here he was alive, without Lily. By now the ache for Lily was a ball of swirling liquid lodged in his breast. It was a pain he was well acquainted with, a constant, dull friend.

A week after the wedding, Hermione was still brooding over Snape. She tried to put the events at the wedding behind her, but the summer heat always made her grouchy. Her new job in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures helped her forget her anger. After shaking hands with Amos Diggory, he showed her around the office on level four. There were a few desks and a small conference room for private conversations. Mr. Diggory had a desk at the front of the office so he could keep an eye on the employees. The office was cluttered but somewhat organized, and she felt comfortable in the surroundings. Her desk was small, and they had to levitate several old stacks of parchments and books and put them on a broken filing cabinet in the corner. She fixed the chair and evicted the spiders from the drawers.

Mr. Diggory was taller than Hermione, and she felt somewhat intimidated looking up at him. His smile was large and white when he joked around...which was all the time. He also had light blue eyes that were hard to make contact with. He was a bit on the competitive side, but Hermione was sure she could score big points in this office with her work ethic. There were three divisions in their department: Beast, Being and Spirit. Hermione was working under the Being Division in the Office for House-Elf Relocation. It had been said that this job was tedious at best, but Hermione had been thinking of S.P.E.W., and she was prepared to improve the department.

Thankfully, Mr. Diggory did not remember her from the Quidditch World Cup that had taken place six years previous. She had argued with him regarding Winky as Mr. Crouch had sacked the elf in the forest after the Dark Mark's appearance. Hermione would most likely not be in this department if he had remembered those events; but it was no skin off her nose if he hadn't done his research. When Hermione sat down at her desk, she already had a clear view of how to improve the department. She was the only woman in the office, and the lowest on the rung. But she was going to push her way to the top. They would remember her by the end of her ascent. The house-elves were on their way to equal rights.

Six months later marked the beginning of a new year, 2002, and Hermione had her proposal ready. She was presenting the establishment of the House-Elf Union. Mr. Diggory was fairly open-minded, especially since the war, so he would be easy to convince. Though the house-elves were going to be opposed to the idea, along with their masters, this was important. It was something everyone needed to conform to...it came down to equal rights, plain and simple. House-elves had rights whether they knew it or not. She demanded they see her point of view. There would be more happiness in future generations, guaranteed. The thought of Winky crying in the forest at the Quidditch World Cup had fostered Hermione's idea. That squeaky voice and those glassy eyes crying to Mr. Crouch as she had begged for forgiveness had always been Hermione's inspiration, her muse. These creatures were in a worldwide abusive relationship and didn't know any better. It was slavery. But after today, she would make history by fighting this institution.

As she presented her ideas to Mr. Diggory, she sensed his disapproval. But when she tried her marketing schemes, he bought it. If she could sell it to him, others would buy it too. He insisted that the union not be presented right away with such drastic changes; instead they decided to introduce some "recommendations" to the public. Once everyone had converted to the new way of living, they would make it a law and then introduce the union. The advertised changes were marketed to both house-elves and their masters as a "new and improved way of living." Hermione wished Dobby were still alive, as he would have been extremely helpful.

Fliers went out to all households who retained house-elves: red for the masters, and blue for the elves, each with species-specific advertising. The red fliers for the masters focused on the positives a union would bring, such as health care for the elves. It would ensure their servants lived longer if they had regular check-ups and were able to receive medical attention in emergencies. The concept of termination was updated as well: dismissal with clothing could be recanted if the master realized he or she had acted rashly. Violence and self-punishment would no longer be tolerated, though Hermione couldn't say it like that. Instead, she explained that all masters should refrain from injuring their house-elves so they appeared healthy and clean while in the presence of good company. Then they would look like exceptionally employed servants rather than burnt and bandaged helpers.

Hermione had a harder time with the blue fliers. She remembered her S.P.E.W. days, and she knew she hadn't been very tactful with the house-elves while at Hogwarts. But she had grown up since then and tried to focus the adverts so the elves would be persuaded. The current standard required a house-elf to answer a master's call at all times. But the union would ensure a workday including only eight to twelve hours. After-hours the elves were not required to respond to their master's call. She explained they would perform better during those assigned hours than all twenty-four because they would be well rested. If they were sleep-deprived or starved from constant care of their masters, they were more likely to make mistakes and end up inflicting unwanted pain upon themselves.

Mr. Diggory approved the fliers, and then she watched as owl after owl left to deliver them. Things were going perfectly. Hermione was quite proud of herself. A new year had begun with a new set of rules for the Wizarding world. She was that much closer to completing her New Year's resolution, and January wasn't even over yet.

Four

Chapter 4 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Severus walked down the hall towards his office. Despite summer being in full swing outside, it was still cool in the castle, but this had done nothing to help his temper. He sensed another's presence close by as he neared the gargoyle, but no one was there. After too many years spent as a spy, he was going to die paranoid. He brushed off the odd feeling. But as he said the password for entrance, "Dunderhead," he felt a Disillusioned person materialize beside him.

Granger. Damn. He raised an eyebrow at her in acknowledgement and walked past the gargoyle onto the moving stairs. She entered behind him. Severus really didn't want to deal with her right now, but it might be a good thing she caught him at such a bad time. It gave him all the more reason to get angry with her. He wondered briefly if he could get her to cry before she fled his office, like a little first-year. It might improve his mood.

She seated herself without waiting while he swept behind his desk. Albus' portrait was smirking. Severus arranged his face in a sneer as he turned, so she understood he was not happy with her unexpected presence.

"What can I help you with, Miss Granger?" he asked, staring at her...daring her to get smart with him.

"We, at the Ministry," she began, putting on an air trying to make herself sound important and worth listening to. "We haven't received a response regarding the House-Elf Union in proposal. And with Hogwarts housing the largest group of house-elves under Ministry jurisdiction, we'd greatly appreciate your take on the proposition."

"Indeed," he said. Apparently that translated to "babble-on" in her mind, because she droned on and on. Her small hands animated her speech, and her eyes deepened in color as she became involved in her cause. Disgusting. The chit couldn't actually believe anyone would approve of a union for the elves? The elves themselves wouldn't allow it, he was sure.

When he'd first received the red flier by owl, he'd laughed so hard he nearly cried. Then he'd promptly disposed of the paper in the fire. But he had received another and another. Finally he assigned Winky the duty of destroying any red papers from the Ministry. He even explained what they were in reference to, and she was also angry. She too had received a brochure addressed to the house-elves, and she had reacted in much the same way as he. Winky told him she had refused to show either of the fliers to the other house-elves. It was sure to just anger them, as it had her.

"How many others," he interrupted Granger mid-sentence, "have accepted this proposition with open arms?"

She faltered a moment and dropped her eyes, "None, sir." Somehow she bolstered herself and added, "But if you were to accept, I feel the others would more readily consider the union. Right now, they still aren't following the recommendation fliers."

"Indeed," he said, but before she could start up her vocalizations again, he continued. "Miss Granger, it is a bad venture. The Hogwarts house-elves are at ease. They are the best treated of their kind in this country, I can assure you. I see no need to force a union on them. Why upset a quiet community just to serve your own purposes?"

She glared at him.

"I remember hearing something of an organization called 'S.P.E.W.' when you were a student. Are you reviving your old passions? You want everyone to see things your way. Well, I refuse to look through your glasses."

Granger opened her mouth again but promptly shut it.

He held no obligation to help her. Yes, she'd saved his life, but that was a personal matter. This House-Elf Union was strictly business. She was being selfish to force her ideals on others because she assumed she alone was correct in understanding how house-elves should be treated.

This had nothing to do with house-elves, as he saw it; this was all about what Granger wanted, and she was abusing her power to effect change. Oddly, it reminded him of the Dark Lord: forcing personal ideals on others so they would conform. She desired personal gain and public recognition while pressing her morals on others. He was about to voice this similarity but stopped. Why? He wanted to see her cry, didn't he? But looking at her, he realized she didn't know what she was doing. The Dark Lord had been intentional when he'd tried to take over, while Granger was only confused and overzealous with her dreams. It also reminded him of himself a bit.

No, he wouldn't crush her. Was this pity he was feeling? Almost, but not quite; she did not deserve pity, but sympathy instead. Did he really just think that...sympathy? Ugh, how unpleasant. He was turning soft.

"Miss Granger, I will not be swayed in favor of this union. I do not approve. I believe you to be fighting a losing battle. But I give you my best regards. Now if you'll excuse me, I am very busy preparing for the coming term."

He pulled a stack of parchment forward and watched her slowly rise from the chair. She was no longer full of the energy she'd brought into this meeting; she looked deflated as she quietly left. Thank Merlin she didn't put up a fight or whine. It was decent of her.

Only a few days of August remained, and Severus Snape was looking over his schedules. He was a simple man, and as Headmaster he required perfection to maintain his delicate balance. So when Minerva rushed through the Floo into his office with a whirl of tartan and ash, he knew something was tripping up his carefully balanced system.

"What is it, Minerva?" he asked.

"I am resigning, Severus," she said, not making eye contact.

"Now?" he asked incredulously.

"Dear me, no. This will be my last year. I thought you should know before term began. And before you ask, Horace will remain teaching."

Severus rubbed his eyes. He would have to find a decent replacement, and it would be tough to match Minerva's level of expertise.

"I know what you're thinking, Severus. And it's already taken care of. I have someone to replace me . . ."

Hermione Granger. Minerva had better not say that know-it-all's name. He would flat out refuse. He couldn't stand the swot.

". . . I want Oliver Wood," Minerva finished.

Well, that was unexpected. "Wood? The Keeper for Puddlemere United?" He was surprised he actually knew the Quidditch fact.

"Yes. It seems he's had a bad accident in the past year while playing, and he's been forced to retire prematurely. His hand is permanently crippled." She was absentmindedly straightening stacks of parchment and dusting the books at the end of his desk. "Anyway, he was quite gifted in Transfiguration as I remember, and he could replace me as Head of House. If you approve, I'll have him set up an appointment with you for an interview as my intern."

At least she had planned it out before she brought it to his attention. Perhaps his balance would stay in place.

"All right. Set up the appointment. But I will not have him as my Deputy Headmaster."

She thanked him and started to leave.

"Minerva?" he called. "I'm sorry to see you go. You've been a decent friend to me, and I'll miss you around the castle. We haven't actually sat down for a cup of tea and talked in years. We should set up a standing time to just enjoy the good times while they last. How about Sundays once term starts?"

"Oh, I'd love to, Severus, but I have tea with Hermione Granger every Sunday. You're welcome to join us, though."

Minerva was still in close association with her? He had assumed she had limited contact with her previous students. Everyone in England was against the insolent girl. Why would Minerva still see her?

"No, perhaps another day then."

She left, and he sat thinking for the longest time. Minerva, friend to refugees, rejects and unwanted persons. She always saw something more in a person than their outward appearance. Even when she hadn't known his reasons for killing Albus, she'd at least done her job correctly. It was hard, and their friendship was virtually lost, but she'd remained tactful and realized he was trying his best to be a decent person while under Voldemort's control. What did she see in Granger though? The girl was like a deck of cards face up.

No matter, perhaps they could have tea on Saturdays.

One year to the day, and this January Hermione wasn't feeling so sure of her decisions. Two thousand three wasn't looking to be a good year. She woke up with a pit in her stomach knowing what today would bring, as it had for the last few months. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures was bombarded daily with owls and Howlers and angry house-elves themselves. None of her coworkers were speaking with her anymore, unless it was required. Of course she'd been through this before while a student, but it hurt nonetheless. Mr. Diggory's competitive personality had really flared up too. He was constantly reminding her that she was falling short of his expectations.

Each night she cried herself to sleep in her bed. This room had seen many tears over the years. As a child, she had always been teased because she was different, or too smart, or because of her hair or teeth. But these tears were for her failure. She couldn't see any way out of this mess. She refused to quit. She had known it would be hard. But she hadn't been prepared for the outright refusal from both house-elf and master for a solid year. No one was relenting or even trying to improve the situation.

She'd even received a letter or two from Ron, who had tried to explain the situation from a pureblood's point of view. And Harry had stopped by once at her home, trying to talk her out of her ideas. But she'd brushed them off, telling them she knew what she was doing. What had she been thinking? Part of her wanted to drop the union idea altogether, but then where would she be? Had she ever given up on anything before, when it had really mattered? Where would they all be now if she'd quit during the war? Dead! She needed to just tromp on through the knee-deep doubt and rejection until things started to look up.

But she was fairly sure she was going to get fired any day now. And Hermione Granger was not the sort to get fired. She was too intelligent and dedicated to get sacked; it was comparable to failing a test. But she was stuck, and she could only take a backseat and watch her hard work get booted out the window, and then they would boot her out as well.

The glares she endured while walking to her desk were no different than before, but Mr. Diggory had a sad look on his face. Oh no; this was not going to be pleasant.

"Hermione, may I have a word with you in the conference room?" Mr. Diggory asked. He was staring at the floor in front of her feet.

She sighed. "Yes, sir," she said reluctantly, obediently following him into the room and sitting with her back to the window. She didn't want to see everyone watching as he cut her loose.

Mr. Diggory closed the door and waited a moment before sitting, as if readying himself for this task. He coughed a few times and fiddled with an abandoned quill nib on the tabletop.

"This union isn't working, Hermione. You know that and I know that. We haven't had one positive response since you started this project a year ago. I'm not one to lose optimism, but this has been dragging behind us long enough. It is time to stop and cut our losses. When you presented this, I thought it was a great idea, but now I realize the mistake I made listening to it. It's just a childhood dream, Hermione. I've been thinking about it for some time, and I remember meeting a young girl a number of years ago at the Quidditch World Cup; she had defended this house-elf who had conjured the Dark Mark..."

"Winky did not make the Dark Mark! It was Barty Crouch Junior! I can't believe you!" Hermione said.

"So it was you. I had a feeling. Anyway, Hermione, I think you have too much emotional investment in the house-elf cause, and none of the other employees are happy with you. So, I'm sorry to say this, but I'm going to have to transfer you to the Centaur Liaison Office."

She wasn't getting fired?! But wait, what?

"Sir, no one works in the Centaur Liaison Office because the centaurs refuse to leave the Forbidden Forest or even speak to any of our representatives. What are you getting at? Are you pulling my leg? Besides, the last time I saw the centaurs they tried to kill me. I, er . . . never mind."

Mr. Diggory grimaced and then let his breath out in a long, slow blow. "I'm sorry, I guess you haven't been here long enough to understand the euphemism. I was trying to soften the blow. Hermione, I'm letting you go."

Her mouth dropped. There was no excusing it. She couldn't wrap her mind around it. She had been expecting it, but the centaur reference had thrown her off completely. Fired? Really?

She stood numbly and fumbled with the doorknob for a moment, then walked to her desk. She flung her purse over her shoulder and rummaged through her desk for a moment. She knew everyone was looking at her. It was quiet in the office, and her desk drawers were loud as she slammed them. Randomly, she grabbed her stapler and left. The faces all stared at her, but she didn't know if they were sneers or looks of sympathy; she blindly made her way into the Atrium and then into a fireplace, stumbling into her living room. But she didn't know what to do with herself. Her routine was thrown off. Claiming defeat, she kicked off her shoes and climbed the stairs to her bed. Hermione's crisp work robes wrinkled as she pulled the sheets up to her chin, and she finally let the first few tears roll down her nose and land on the pillow. Here she could cry; here she could just be Hermione.

Wood was chipper, too chipper, especially for the middle of bloody February. Severus wasn't sure he would do well in Transfiguration. The cocky boy was good-looking for a Gryffindor, and he flaunted it. Girls were seen giggling behind their hands when he passed in the hallway. The stocky ex-Quidditch player seemed to take no notice, but Severus watched him and saw the gleam of approval in his eye when the students threw themselves at him. This replacement was going to be the death of him. Wood spent a lot of time with Rolanda...probably trying to set up unauthorized Quidditch games so he could play at his leisure. Shouldn't the young man be more focused on learning his duties? There was a lot to cover if he were to meet Minerva's expectations, let alone Severus' own. He expected nothing less than the best with all his staff. But no matter how many times he'd spoken with Wood, the git wouldn't settle down.

Minerva would hear nothing of it when he complained to her. He wanted to put an advertisement in the *Daily Prophet*, but Minerva refused to dash Wood's hopes at a teaching career. Why did he always have a soft spot for whatever Minerva wanted? True, they had been friends for years, and she seemed to understand him more than anyone else, even more than Albus, the manipulative old bastard. Despite knowing how he worked, she never let on or smeared it in his face. She just let him work his own way. And they'd gotten along quite well . . . until he'd killed Albus, that is. But once she had learned the truth, they'd gone back to their old kindred friendship. So, maybe she deserved to have things her way. She'd earned it.

He had certainly found her marriage to Horace a bit of a shock, though. He still wasn't too sure how he felt about it. Severus wasn't one for mulling over feelings. He didn't want to acknowledge them if at all possible, and so, when a sort of warmth rose within him as they were saying their vows, he had to look at Granger in order to make the fuzziness fade. Granger had been pleasant-smelling, and it reminded him of the hospital...all his things had smelled of her, and he had needed to use a cleaning charm on everything to get her out of his life. Severus had been surprised when he entered her mind, and she hadn't fought back, at least not right away, not until he'd started entering a more private territory.

Granger had been very clever with making a bezoar out of the persimmons and then soaking it in the antibodies. He was impressed...but only slightly. Not that she deserved to hear it. She hadn't had the right to save him, dammit. She'd ruined his death. Although, when he really thought about it, he would still be in limbo were it not for her actions. He wouldn't have ever really died if she hadn't made the anti-venom, so he wouldn't have been with Lily anyway. And living now was significantly more

preferable than the previous horrible hell he'd been forced to endure without Lily. His time in limbo was just a blank in his memory he could not recall if he were aware of anything while petrified. But now that he was alive, he could always hope for another chance at death and a future with Lily, but in stasis he had been neither here nor there.

He was in debt to Hermione Bloody Granger, not that he would openly recognize it. She was dependant on recognition from others for her brains. She had all the intelligence in the world, and she still felt like she needed confirmation from outside sources. Pitiful.

Honestly, he hated being dependant on others, so it was hard to view Granger as his savior. She was bound to hold it over his head sooner or later. He needed a way to even the score. The last person he'd been indebted to was Albus, and look what he'd been forced to do to Albus. Severus had given up his life for the love of a dead woman and her arrogant son.

All those years were spent spying, risking his life and playing as a pawn for both light and dark. He was a grey man through and through. His life had been miserable for as long as he could remember. And when he woke up and found out both his masters were gone, he was free . . . until he realized Minerva hadn't been his rescuer, but Granger. How long before she asked for a favor to even the balance? Before she took hold of the reigns and directed his life?

Hermione would have been lost if Minerva hadn't come round. Hermione's situation was all over the *Prophet* for a solid month. Surely more important things were happening that January, but they didn't find their way into the newspaper. She wouldn't leave the house, except to buy food and even then only in Muggle grocery stores. Going into the Wizarding world was not an option; the stares would drive her mad.

Thankfully, Hermione had enough money saved up to live comfortably for a few months before she would need to worry about finding a new job. But she wasn't sure a few months would be enough time for future employers to forget about her Ministry disaster. On the other hand, she was a bit scared of being unemployed. Not for the usual reasons, but because she didn't know what she would do with her newfound time. Her floors were littered with used tissues. Sometimes she would see red with anger, and then within a few minutes, she could burst into sobs as she wallowed in self-pity.

Minerva appeared in the living room with a pop while Hermione was punching a pillow on the couch. When Hermione saw her best friend, she lost it. Minerva gently held her as she sobbed and blubbered incoherently. And after a time, Hermione calmed considerably and went through a numb stage. She didn't think or speak; she just sat there, breathing.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry. It's my fault entirely; I shouldn't have pushed you into this job. I feel so responsible. You were happy in Potions yet I convinced you to quit. Can you ever forgive me?"

How could Minerva have thought she was at fault? Had she dreamt up the stupid House-Elf Union? Had she tried to force everyone to conform to her standards?

"No, Minerva, it wasn't your fault at all, and I would never blame you. It was mine. I did it all by myself. And I can't believe I didn't see how stupid I was. I tried to force everyone to change. I still believe house-elves are mistreated, but I cannot help them if they don't want to change. Anyway, I don't want to talk about it anymore. I need to move on. This past week has been good therapy, but I need to let go and find another muse!"

"Too bad," Minerva said, "you didn't get fired sooner. I could have had you replace me at Hogwarts. But I've been training Oliver since September, you know, and I would hate to tell him to leave just so you can take the post."

"No, no, Minerva. I don't think Professor Snape would appreciate me at his school anyway. We don't seem to get along. Could you imagine me working for him? We would kill each other. And that would be rather ironic, as it was me who saved his sorry excuse for a life."

Minerva smiled. "Well, I brought a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. No, listen," she said, stopping Hermione's protesting. "It's not for the articles about you; I brought it so we could look for job openings."

They spent the next hour or so looking through it, trying to find a job, something she would enjoy and excel at. But there was nothing. Not that Hermione was complaining; she could use the time off. She needed to decide who she was and what was important to her where she wanted to go in life and what her goals were. She'd changed so much since the war, and she needed time by herself. But she wasn't ready to tell that to Minerva. After a nice cuppa, she watched as Minerva Disapparated, going back to Hogwarts. If only Hermione could make all her problems disappear with a simple crack.

The summer sun heated the house within hours of rising. Hermione dashed upstairs to get her shoes. The air was sultry, and the sheen of sweat on her forehead felt cool for a few seconds as she rushed up the steps. Frizzy hairs were patted down, and she rubbed them with the back of her hand while searching for the missing shoe. She was due at Minerva's for tea any minute. The Sunday teatime had seeped over into the week, and since Minerva had retired when school had gotten out two weeks ago, they'd spent a good half of each day just sipping tea and relaxing.

Hermione refused to get a job, as there was nothing piquing her interest. She would wait, although her money was getting tighter and tighter. Thankfully, the house was paid in full. Most of her money went to utilities and food, and she didn't require a lot of either, being a witch. Her cooking skills had greatly improved now that she was on her own, compared to the year she'd cooked while on the run with Harry and Ron. Scrambled eggs had been the extent of her talent, but with her knowledge and skills as a Potions mistress, her abilities had soared. She understood ingredients and methods. Her cuts were precise as she prepared the food. The results were perfection...at least she thought so. Never one to pass up an opportunity to show off her talent, she'd spent the morning baking a pie. It was to celebrate both Minerva's retirement and her one-year anniversary.

The pie was cherry and it was cooling on the countertop. It had come out of the oven only ten minutes ago, and so it was too hot to handle yet. She placed a cooling charm on the pastry and wrapped it up, hoping her pie would make it through the Apparation.

As she stopped spinning from her journey, she thought she was in the wrong place. Heavy smoke surrounded her. As it billowed about, she saw the cottage. It was ablaze. The smoke, which issued from the thatched roof, smelt of burning wood mingled with flesh.

She had no time to panic. She flung the pie while reaching for her wand. The fire was too great to use a water spell. She wordlessly used the flame-freezing charm and rushed into the cottage. A tickling sensation accompanied her entrance into the fire, but she was far from laughing. The charm did nothing to cut down the smoke she was inhaling. She finally cast a bubble charm around her face, and it helped, but only little.

Furniture was either scorched or burning, flames destroying the refuge she'd had only yesterday. Through the blazing inferno, she found Slughorn's burning body on the tiled floor of the kitchen. The counter was destroyed, and there were scorch marks all around. This must have been the source of the fire. She levitated the charred man out of the cottage. Placing him down on the soft grass she checked his pulse. There was none. Minerva was still inside somewhere, hopefully alive.

Upon reentry she went to the back of the house. There wasn't as much damage here, and hope bolstered her. After several minutes of searching, she found Minerva in the small bedroom closet. The hanging robes had melted...dripping onto her unrecognizably burnt body. A sob escaped Hermione, but hot ash replaced it. She gagged as she levitated Minerva and led her out of the house. Hermione ran diagnostics her once they were safely outside the inferno. Minerva was alive but just barely. Tentatively grasping her best friend's crispy arm, Hermione Disapparated with a crack.

Five

Chapter 5 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Severus was sitting at his desk, surrounded by a quiet Hogwarts. School had let out two weeks ago, and he wanted to get a head start on next year's agenda. The scratch of his quill was a lonely sound, accompanied only by the soft slumbering noises of the portraits surrounding him. He'd lost several teachers in the last few years, and each replacement had been younger than he would have liked, but the Board of Governors thought younger was better these days.

So far he had acquired Adrian Pucey as Professor of Muggle Studies. He was from Severus' own house, and it was a good sign to have a Slytherin preside over the Muggle course. Also, he'd reluctantly appointed Neville Longbottom into Pomona's spot in Herbology when she'd retired during his first year back as Headmaster. Severus had been teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts as well as covering his Headmaster duties, but it was much too demanding on his time. So he'd recently hired Susan Bones to take the post, and now he had Oliver Wood teaching Transfiguration. With the last two being new this coming year, he wanted to ensure everything was organized to his liking. He was reviewing a few schedules on his desk when he heard a familiar voice speak behind him.

"Hello, Severus."

Severus turned around and saw Minerva in a new portrait next to Albus.

"Oh, Minerva. No," he mourned. His last true friend. He'd been upset when she'd retired, but that did not compare to knowing she was now dead.

She smiled softly. The other Headmasters and Headmistresses began greeting her. She politely nodded to them all.

"What happened?" Severus inquired.

"Horace was working on a new potion all morning in the kitchen. I was hanging up my robes when a huge jolt knocked me down. I hit my head. When I came around, I knew the house was in flames, but I couldn't move or feel anything...I think I was badly burnt. And then I saw Hermione. I don't know if she was really there, my mind was so far-gone, but she was supposed to come over for tea. I really don't remember anything else, and now I'm here."

"So... so Horace . . . " He couldn't finish.

"Yes, I believe so."

"You didn't get to enjoy your retirement for very long."

"Well, I think I would have missed Hogwarts too much anyway. And now I'm here for all eternity. Don't worry, Severus, you haven't lost me. I'm sure you'll get quite annoyed with me now that I'll be looking over your shoulder all day."

That was the Minerva he loved.

The empty waiting room was disturbingly silent...mocking her, it seemed. Hermione sat in the uninviting, cheap chair feeling useless. Not knowing what to do with her hands, Hermione placed them on her lap and then folded them across her chest. Sitting on them didn't help either. It was easier to focus on her hands than replay the scene for the millionth time in her head. She had nothing to keep her occupied while a team of Healers worked on Minerva.

Hermione was almost grateful for the appearance of a member of the Magical Law Enforcement office. They had a few questions about the incident. But it forced her to relive it yet again, only this time aloud. Her voice cracked as she described Minerva's papery skin singed with melted fabric. She tried to refrain from crying, but her eyes weren't listening to her logic. Mercifully, the man left to take care of Slughorn's body and the burned cottage. It was hard to breathe as she leaned forward, her head in her hands.

All was silent for a time. Was that good or bad? Without warning, the door clicked open. Risking a glance, she saw a hesitant Healer standing in front of her.

"Ms. Granger," he said with a faint lilt, "I regret to inform you, but Professor McGonagall didn't make it. Over seventy percent of her body was covered in third-degree burns, and at her age she just wasn't able to handle the stress. I'm sorry for your loss."

With a slight frown on his face, he turned and quietly left. Hermione's head fell back to her hands, and she wept bitterly...the tears stinging her eyes. Minerva had been her staple, her foundation through these rough times. And now she was gone. They would never have another conversation, never again have a private joke and snort into their teacups. The beautiful cottage was gone, leaving nothing to remember her by but precious memories. She had known Minerva was older, and it was bound to happen eventually, but it had never occurred to Hermione that the time would be so soon. Shouldn't it always be later? Could death not continue to wait until they were ready? Had Minerva been ready to die? Did she welcome it with open arms, tired of her crippling body and grateful for the escape from her living prison? These were questions she had never asked Minerva.

A week went by numbly, and the task of arrangements fell upon her. Oddly, it also fell upon Snape, in accordance to Minerva's and Horace's wills. It was a small relief that her communication wasn't face-to-face with Snape; both were satisfied to use owls. Together they decided it was best to cremate the bodies, despite it being unorthodox in the Wizarding world. The castle ruins where Minerva and Horace were married would also house the funeral services. A large number were expected to attend. Snape was going to say a few words, as would several others per the requests in their wills. Hermione didn't know if she was grateful or hurt that she hadn't been asked to speak.

The air was stiff and thick. Services were scheduled for noon, yet hardly any light penetrated the dark clouds churning in the sky. A covered sector of the ruins, dark from the lack of natural light, housed the funeral guests. Two innocent-looking urns filled with ash were placed together on a table at the center of the room. Hermione stood at the doorway, greeting nameless faces. She had bouts of numbness, and finally Snape appeared by her side to help greet those who came.

"Miss Granger." Snape nodded. He was dressed in black, as usual, but he fit right in with the mass of mourners. At least he was civil. She didn't know if she could take any snide comments at the moment.

They both sat in the front row, next to each other, as they were both in charge. A small, quaking man addressed the mass crowd and directed the meeting. His voice was high pitched and uneven, and he used his hands to gesture as he went along. A few women friends of Horace's sang a dirge. Snape gave the eulogy next; his voice was silky and soothing. Hermione's eyes hurt from crying, so she closed them.

His speech was beautiful, but horrible too. He spoke of their greatness and what a loss the world suffered when they passed. Just the numbers of those in attendance attested to his words. Minerva befriended those who were lost; Horace was a man who brought together the greatest witches and wizards of their time. Both had a talent with people, with understanding life and making it the best for those around them.

Hermione wretchedly wished it were Snape who were dead and not her dearest friend. No one would have cared if he had died. There would have been very few in

attendance at his funeral, even with his Order of Merlin and the open truth of his actions and deeds. He'd burned too many bridges on his way up, both dark and light, during the war. If only the deaths were switched. Why couldn't he be in that urn? How was it that she was able to save him but not Minerva? If she knew she would have had a choice, she never would have picked Snape.

She opened her teary eyes and saw his cold, dark eyes staring at her as he spoke to the congregation. Her breath hitched in her throat. Did he know how she felt? She hated him watching her cry. No doubt he would hold it over her. Once he finished his speech, he sat down next to her. Automatically, she was shy, as if she'd spoken her thoughts aloud. But Snape didn't act any differently towards her. A few others stood and gave brief words of comfort, and Hermione tried very hard to hold in her emotions. At one point he gently patted her back, but only once, and she stiffened to his touch. When it was all over, she left the funeral, unable to meet with all the grievors. She left it to Snape...he was good at masking emotions, she assumed.

"How did my service go, Severus?" Minerva's portrait asked, once he'd walked into his study.

"Fine. There was quite a number in attendance for you and old Horace, including some people I didn't even know were still alive."

She smiled, pleased.

"But Granger was a wreck. She looks as if she hasn't stopped crying since you died. She was constantly blubbering. At one point I thought she was choking on her tongue with the noises coming out of her. Thank Merlin she left early."

Minerva's smile faded. "Oh, Hermione! She must be heartbroken. We were best friends."

"What about me, Minerva?" The words were out before he realized he hadn't only thought them. But that was what was beautiful about Minerva. She knew when to ignore his comments when he didn't want them to be recognized.

"Send her an owl, Severus, please! I need to speak with her. Tell her to come here tomorrow. I must talk to her."

As if he wanted Granger in his office crying all over his desk as she spoke with Minerva . . . no way in hell would he let her in here. But Minerva pled with him, and he could never tell her "no." So he sent the bloody owl and expected to get no work done the following day.

Hermione awoke the next morning with a pounding in her head. But as she gained consciousness, the pounding was more of an incessant tapping, and it wasn't in her head, but outside the window. It was an owl. She struggled to crawl out of bed with her useless limbs. It took a few tries, but the owl finally delivered its letter with an annoyed hoot.

When she read the letter, she still wasn't sure if she was awake enough because it looked like Severus Snape was requesting she come to his office sometime today. What did he want now? She had half a mind to ignore the request, but she was curious. Besides, she had nothing better to do than blubber all day.

She took a Sober-Up Potion and showered. Within an hour, she was walking up the green lawn towards the familiar castle. But once she was outside the gargoyles, she realized she didn't know the password. Finally, she sent a Patronus and soon after, the stairway appeared. She rapped her knuckles on the door and heard him tell her to enter. It was gruff, but not snide. Thank goodness for that.

Snape was sitting at his desk, his quill scratching angrily on the parchment. He didn't look up. The office was organized but overflowing with books and abandoned quills. As Hermione drew nearer, she saw Minerva. Snape was immediately forgotten. She walked around behind his desk and perched herself on the edge. Minerva smiled softly and then explained what had happened the day she had died. It was wonderful to hear her...to see her. Yes, it was only a shadow of who Minerva used to be, but Hermione enjoyed it nonetheless. It was better than not having any closure.

The conversation shifted as it always did with them, and the only thing missing was the tea. Hermione cried and laughed. It was wonderful to have some sense of normalcy. Suddenly Snape spoke, or barked at her. The view out the window was quickly darkening...how long had she been talking to Minerva?

"Miss Granger, I am retiring for the night," he said as he undid his tie and top buttons of his collar. "I expect you to be gone by morning, and if you feel you must have an all-night chat, do not keep me up with your babbling."

He opened the door to his private rooms and was about to shut the door, but she called after him. "Thank you . . . This means more than you know, Professor Snape."

The door shut smartly.

"Don't worry, he heard you," said Minerva quietly.

It really was time she was off. She hadn't meant to invade his office all day; she was just so overjoyed there was still a means of communication with Minerva. She said good night and walked down the lawns of the school with the moonlight as her only companion. A strange feeling of someone watching her sent a shiver down her back, but all of the windows were dark. Odd. She stepped outside the gates and went home.

Severus stepped out of the shower the next morning. He tousled his hair with a towel and then wrapped it around his waist. He was preoccupied with yesterday's events. Granger had ignored him the entire day. He knew she hadn't been pretending he wasn't there; she had just been oblivious to everything around her except Minerva.

He'd tried to ignore their conversation for the most part, but occasionally he'd found himself putting down his quill and watching her converse. The two women had discussed books and debated on topics. He'd read most of the books and had had to catch himself from verbally agreeing with Granger's point of view.

She had perched her small bum on his desk, right next to his arm, and had trapped a few of his parchments underneath it as well. The fragrance she'd worn was recognizable; he remembered it lingering upon him when he'd woken up from the venom. It had been soft, light, and smelled of Japanese cherry blossoms...a favorite potion ingredient of his.

When she had cried yesterday, he had been surprised he hadn't minded. It was a shame Minerva was gone. He'd never known the extent of the relationship between Granger and the older witch, though. He had been a bit miffed she had been as intimate with Minerva as he had been. But he'd bit his tongue to keep from speaking his mind. He had just wanted the girl to get out of his office...the sooner the better. But she hadn't budged from her spot on his desk. He'd wondered briefly if her bum was going numb from sitting in the same position before he'd realized he had been thinking about her bum. Despite it having been a rather nice bum, and the fact he'd accidentally brushed his arm against it as he'd scribbled with his quill, it came down to her sitting on his desk...hogging his space. Severus had tried to tell himself that this had been the reason he was mad, rather than the fact that he'd caught himself thinking about her bum.

As he pulled open the door to his study and came out of his reverie, Minerva's portrait was looking at him with the sort of smirk he usually wore. What was she up to now?

"Good morning, Minerva," he said, taking his seat, with his back to her.

"Morning, Severus," she said. He could hear the smile on her face as she spoke.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

"About what?" Now she was playing with him.

"Granger."

Any moment Minerva would explain some grand scheme involving the girl, and he needed a distraction.

"Winky," he called.

There was a crack and the tiny house-elf appeared next to his desk.

"Master Snape is wanting breakfast, I is thinking," she said.

"Correct. Two eggs...over easy, and bacon. Two slices of buttered toast. And a cup of coffee, black."

"Yes, sir." She was gone.

"I've known you for too long to fall for your tricks, Severus," Minerva said. "I need to speak with you about Hermione. I have a solution to your problems."

Despite himself he asked, "What problems?"

Winky popped back with his food. She placed it on his desk.

"You need a Potions master and Hermione is perfect for the position," Minerva said.

"Hermione Granger for Potions? Have you gone daft, woman? I can't hire Granger."

"Why not?" Minerva asked.

Winky jumped into the conversation. "I is not liking Miss Granger. She is to not be around house-elves. We is refusing to work for her. We is not to be insulted by her any more with her talks of unions. Winky is watching her leave last night. She is a crafty one."

Severus smiled at Minerva. "Exactly what I was thinking." Then he turned to Winky. "Don't worry. I will not employ her."

Winky was red in the face from spouting off but straightened her tea cozy and left after composing her breath.

"Oh, you'll hire her, Severus. Make no mistake. You just wait." Then Minerva walked out of her portrait in a huff.

Albus chuckled but Severus ignored him.

July quickly turned into August, and as August passed, Severus had interviewed no less than fourteen people for the Potions position. It was infuriating...he couldn't find a single competent person. He was considering doing Potions himself, on top of his duties as Headmaster, but he'd be extremely busy. That was why he'd hired Susan Bones for the Defense position. His Headmaster duties were too great for him to teach a subject at the same time.

Minerva kept pestering him about Granger, an activity he found very tiring. Finally after interview number fifteen, he sent an owl to Granger asking if she would be interested in the post. Within the same day he had a reply. They would be meeting the next morning, a Friday. Desperation was a horrible thing. There was only a week left before term started, and he was planning a staff meeting for Monday.

Why did nothing go right for him? Granger! He didn't want to hire her, but she was the most qualified of all those he'd interviewed. And a part of him did want her here at Hogwarts if it meant he wouldn't have to cover Potions himself.

She was right on schedule as he had expected...always the perfectionist. He remained silent while he reviewed her detailed resume. Impressive. He wouldn't say that aloud, though. He asked a few questions, which she answered promptly with no more than the needed information. It seemed she knew how to turn the babble off at times. Wonderful. She would do for now. And she would probably do very well. But he was going to make her work for it. He didn't want her hired without a fight, or Minerva would gloat for weeks.

"Miss Granger, I see you attended DuPont in America. Might it be named after Gregory DuPont?" There, that was good bait.

"Yes, sir. He is also known as Gregory the Smarmy. He's the inventor of Gregory's Unctuous Unction Potion, and did you know there is a secret passage out of the school behind his statue?"

He rolled his eyes for emphasis and sneered at her. "You've been reading your Chocolate Frog Cards, I see, Miss Granger."

She looked hurt, but it shut her up.

"So, you boast of going to a school founded by a man who is reputed for being insincere and falsely flattering? He's also known for creating a potion only desperate people use in order to manipulate those around them into thinking the giver is their best friend? My, what a top notch school."

Granger was biting her lower lip, having an obvious debate with herself. Her snarky side won out; she took the bait. "I'll have you know Damocles Belby was a professor and personal friend of mine. He created the Wolfsbane..."

"I'm well aware of what he created, having made it myself for Lupin several times, if you recall," he said.

"And Professor Moonshine was one of my favorite people at DuPont. He was able to develop a potion that suppresses hags' appetites for human flesh. Think of the good it will do. These are great men I worked with. Just because the founder was shady in character doesn't mean my education was not valuable. If you can't see that, take your head out of your arse!"

She stood, averted her eyes from Minerva's portrait and fled his office.

Severus leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head to recline. Yes, Granger would do. She could actually be a bit of fun if he pushed her far enough over the edge. He'd give her the weekend to calm down and send her an owl telling her to report to the staff meeting on Monday morning.

Minerva clucked behind him, but he didn't turn around. She could sweat it out too.

Hermione paced her living room floor from Friday evening until the wee hours of Saturday morning. Her lips were raw and tender as she picked from worry. She'd almost had a decent job interview, and then she'd blown it. How could she have been so stupid? Why did Snape constantly provoke her? She just got so flustered when she was around him due to their uncomfortable past. But every time they met he seemed unaffected by the fact she'd saved his life. It was like nothing had ever happened.

He wasn't even grateful, although he had interviewed her...if that could have been called an interview. All Snape had done was look at her resume, then make fun of her alma mater while insulting her knowledge. But she must know something if she were able to have cured him when even trained Healers hadn't been able to or wouldn't.

What did she care, anyway? He was alive while Minerva was dead. Life didn't go the way she wanted it to, but she couldn't change it. Every time she'd tried to make a difference, it crashed down around her, and her latest debacle had been that interview. She really needed a job. Hogwarts would have paid decently enough for her needs, and she had to lose her temper and yell at him. The ball was in his court now, and there was nothing she could do.

On Monday, Hermione woke up to a barn owl tapping at her window. It had an envelope with the Hogwarts crest. Now what? Did he want to yell at her formally? But when she opened the letter, she saw Snape had offered her the position if she agreed to the salary listed below. And she was due for a faculty meeting Monday morning at . . . What?

She scrambled about the room and threw on some robes. Glancing at her clock, she saw she was already five minutes late for her first staff meeting. He must have done that on purpose...sending the letter so she didn't get it until it was already too late. Snape would probably fire her for being late on her first day. That seemed like him. For a moment she faltered with her buttons. Should she really go just to get fired so that everyone could have a good laugh at her failure yet again? No, she would stand up for herself if it came to that. Besides, he had to be desperate for a Potions mistress...school started one week from today, and he would have hired anyone else if possible, she was sure.

Her hair wasn't even worth trying to tame. It would still look the same. She rushed downstairs, but realized she had on two different-colored shoes. There was no time to change; they would have to do. She pulled out her wand and Apparated to Hogwarts. The gates were open, and she jogged up to the school. Halfway up the stairs to the staff room, she remembered she was a witch and matched the color of the shoes. She was a little slow this morning, that was all.

When she found the staff room, she caught her breath, knocked once, then opened the door. All eyes were on her, and the room was silent as she closed the door behind her. She was a little shaky but managed to find a seat next to Susan Bones. Professor Flitwick waved from a chair far too large for him. She tentatively smiled back.

"Ah, Professor Granger. Deciding to show up fashionably late for your first day on the job. Splendid work ethic. They must have loved you at the Ministry." Snape was at the front of the room with a stack of parchments hovering next to him.

"Sorry, sir. Won't happen again, sir." She kept her head down as she felt a blush develop. This was not the time to start a scene.

"Indeed. Now, as I was saying before the interruption," (he looked down his nose at her,) "these are your schedules for the year. They include classes, patrols, Hogsmeade chaperoning and various activities we will be hosting throughout the year." He passed them out with a flick of his wand, and she eagerly absorbed the information for her Potions duties.

He proceeded to explain how he wanted the year to go, and Snape introduced the other two new professors along with herself. Susan Bones looked as nervous as Hermione felt, and Oliver Wood stood when his name was announced. His left hand was crushed and shriveled, but he looked rather dashing all the same. The rest of the meeting was uneventful, and it came to an end after only an hour. Snape was about to show her to her chambers when Wood offered. Snape appeared relieved.

As they made their way down the various stairs and dark corridors, they caught up on old times. Hermione had nurtured a slight crush on the Gryffindor Keeper when she had been in her third-year, and she was glad the lighting was dim in the halls, as her face was hot.

"Minerva wanted me to replace her when she retired. I was excited to start on my own this year. But I was hoping to be able to turn to her when I needed a tip or some advice. Now that she's gone, I don't know what I'll do," Wood confided in her.

"Well, I'll tell you a little secret. I'm not too shabby with Transfiguration, so you can always ask me. As you know where I live, feel free to stop by anytime." Did that just come off as loose? He smiled at her, but it didn't look suggestive. Then she remembered. "Or you could always talk to her portrait. I'm sure if you put up a frame in your classroom Minerva would come by every now and then to see how you're doing. She must get bored stuck up in the Headmaster's office all day."

"Great idea, Hermione. I appreciate it. And listen...forget about old Snape. He's still just as snarky as he was when we were students. I can't believe he's still alive; somehow the bastard survived the war. I don't know what idiot saved him, but they could have done us all a favor and let him rot. I know he did a great service for us all, but he's so cold at the heart, and he doesn't care an inch for anyone else."

She only nodded in agreement. Yes, Hermione, what idiot saved him? She would have been in a lot less turmoil if he'd not been around. The house-elf union might have blossomed if he hadn't told her "no." Minerva would have said "yes," and things would be different right now.

They reached her chambers, and she excused herself to get acquainted with the space alone. Once the door was closed, she saw the rooms were cleaned out, just bare stonewalls. There was a small living room and study area, then a bedroom with a decent bathroom. After taking a few measurements, she left to go home and pack.

Six

Chapter 6 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Over the last few days of August, Hermione found Susan Bones to be quite amicable. Susan was the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Poor Susan had to follow in Snape's footsteps and teach it to his standards. Hermione was a bit nervous too, since he'd taught Potions for so many years, but everyone knew his passion lay with Defense. Susan was a redhead, and her curls were a bit frizzy too. She was a kindred spirit to Hermione. Her freckles were out of control, but Susan used them to her advantage. The blue-eyed young woman reminded Hermione of Lavender Brown...she had the ability to talk constantly without substance. But it was nice to have someone of the female gender to speak with when occasion would permit.

The other professors were kind and welcoming. It was refreshing to call them all by their first names. Things certainly looked different from this side of the table. She hadn't realized how much work went on behind the scenes. The professors had schedules for everything. Snape was very organized, much to her liking, not that she would admit it to anyone. He ran a tight ship: he wanted everything perfect, extreme in some situations but never too low an expectation for her liking.

Before she knew it, the Start-of-Term-Feast was taking place. She watched as all the new first-years filed in and the Sorting Hat sent them off to their respective new houses. She was sitting next to Hagrid, and whenever "Gryffindor" was yelled, he was deafening. Hermione reminded herself to never again sit next to Hagrid during feasts. She could feel a headache developing.

Snape stood and gave his speech of welcome. It was deathly silent in the Great Hall, his voice was so silky. He didn't need to speak above his normal volume, as everyone was entranced. For a moment Hermione lost herself in the voice, not worrying about the words...until she realized all eyes were on her. Hagrid tried to nudge her secretly, but his size prohibited subtlety. She stood when she noticed Oliver and Susan were standing. Snape must have announced the new staff. Great, she looked like a flake in front of all her new students. *Way to go, Hermione!*

The next day was no better. Right after breakfast, she had first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. She introduced herself and started to delve into the topic of Potions when Snape stalked into her classroom, sitting in an empty chair at the back. He had a quill and a roll of parchment. He glanced at her briefly, then started taking notes. She

faltered for a moment but caught herself. She continued on with her introduction. The students seemed eager to begin. Asking a few questions, she was happy to see some hands raised with answers. When class ended, she dismissed them with a smile and a short homework assignment.

Snape stood and made for the door, but she caught him. "Sir, can I help you with anything?"

"No, Granger. I was only determining if I'd made a mistake in hiring you." He turned to leave again.

"And?" she prompted.

"I have not finished my inquiry." With a swirl of his cloak, he left.

Since when was her name just "Granger"? In public, he'd addressed her with her appropriate title, but in private he had just shortened it to her last name. She cursed him in her head until the next class filtered in. These were her second-year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students. Snape did not observe this hour. Things went smoothly, and she was proud to know she was getting the hang of teaching already.

The next class period contained fourth-year students. Again, she was giving an introduction to the course when Snape walked back in and took his seat...quill in hand. He took more notes, and the longer he wrote, the more frantic his feather bobbed. She was a little uneasy but assigned a foot-long essay on the uses of Wit-Sharpening Potions, before excusing them from class. Once they were all gone, he didn't leave like before, instead he approached her with a scowl.

"Granger, you should have introduced brewing today. Their class assignments will all fall behind now. There is a strict routine that needs to be followed. Especially with the fourth-years because of the O.W.L. exams they will be taking in their fifth-year..."

"Snape," she cut him off. "I'm completely aware of what needs to be taught this year. I have it under control. This is my classroom, and I can handle it."

"You impertinent woman! I have been teaching this subject for more years than you've even been a student. I am trying to give you advice to help you on your way. And you should address me as, 'Professor Snape.'"

"*Professor* Snape," she emphasized, "I am a professor as well and demand the respect of my title preceding my surname. Furthermore, you might have been teaching far longer than I have been a student, but I have been a student far more recently than you. I know what kind of a workload they can actually handle. I don't need you to show off how great you were teaching Potions. And I don't need your help. I would appreciate it if you would just back off, and leave me to *my* class."

She was not going to let him tell her how to run her own classroom. Susan must be having a wonderful time teaching Defense since Snape was in here, bothering her in the dungeons. Hermione went into her office, slamming the door. She didn't care if he was mad at her; she was an adult and hadn't asked for his help in the first place. If she needed it, she would ask, and only if it were truly necessary would she ask. He needed to just cool off. Men!

Women! Who did Granger think she was? He was her superior and could call her by whatever name he chose. She, on the other hand, should have enough respect to refer to her employer by his proper title.

He was only doing his duty, grading her in class, and she had to go off on him. He was going to have to lay down some ground rules. That wench wouldn't take "no" for an answer. She must really be overcompensating for something.

Just because he had a sour disposition, didn't mean he would harp on her every time they met. He knew when, how and with whom he needed to be civilized. Granger was now a colleague and deserved some form of respect. Surely she wanted respect from him, but she obviously didn't know how to give any in return. Severus decided to keep a close eye on Granger.

Over the next few weeks, the new professors bonded. He observed that Granger and Bones always sat next to each other in the Great Hall and Wood could frequently be found in the dungeons between classes.

Wood seemed very fond of Granger. Severus was sure there would be a Gryffindor affair soon enough. He could see it now. Such things had happened several times over the years he'd been employed at Hogwarts; teachers would date for a time, then one would dump the other (in this case, Granger was sure to free herself of Wood, because he was obviously as stupid as Weasley). Then a rift would develop between the staff members, and everyone would be forced to choose sides.

Gossip would fill the staff room, and all the seating would change at the staff table. The schedules he'd made for Hogsmeade weekends would have to be redone, and the staff would complain to him at all hours. If he were lucky, one or both might quit over it. But then he'd be stuck having to cover for that class the rest of the year. Which would be worse?

At the end of the third week of term, Granger's love life was pushed from his mind when Winky appeared in an unexpected huff. She reported that all the house-elves had been upset: Granger had barged into the kitchens and tried to have a "talk" with them regarding free agency and their right to a salary. Snape sent a message to Granger informing her to come to his office that evening. He would enjoy yelling at her.

When she appeared at eight o'clock, he let her sit uncomfortably while he started at her. Finally, she couldn't keep quiet any longer and blurted out apologies.

"Sir, I'm sorry I jumped down your throat on the first day of classes. I really wasn't expecting you to show up and grade me. I was nervous, and you haven't told me the results yet. So if you're going to sack me, then I beg you to reconsider, and..."

"Granger, that is not why I called you here," he said quietly. "I have been informed you are trying to lead the house-elves in the kitchens to rebellion."

She looked confused and then burst out laughing. He cocked an eyebrow to signal that he was confused by her reaction.

"No, sir. I wasn't doing anything of the sort. I was just talking to them without a middleman...you. I wanted to see if they really did want a union."

"Indeed," he said, his tone questioning her conclusions.

"Ah, they didn't take kindly to it. But I think I've made some real headway with a few." She was talking with her hands. "They were curious and have been to my chambers several times with questions. I really think I'm getting the best of both worlds here at Hogwarts. I get to teach Potions, which is what I love. And I get to slowly influence the house-elves. So in time, my union might come around when the world's ready for it."

"I see." He was a bit angry she didn't see any problem with this. "You think you can go behind my back and spread poison amongst my elves so they will eventually have an uprising and demand health care, time-off and pay? There are channels one should go through to do such things, and this particular channel is through me. I hope you realize I am not the least bit pleased with your conduct since you've taken the Potions post."

"You have no right to even speak with the house-elves, unless it is regarding their assigned duties here at the school. I order you to cease your interactions with them regarding unions, freedom or anything related. I will not have you upsetting this system I've worked so very hard to balance. Now get out of my sight, Granger."

She looked ready to cry, and it reminded him of when she had left his hospital room. She had tried so hard to keep back the tears that he'd almost experienced a wrench of guilt for yelling at her. She hadn't known he'd wanted to die. But now, she knew full well how he felt regarding the matter at hand, and there was no guilt for his harsh words. Granger needed to hear them, and no one else was going to tell her.

As soon as she was gone, Winky appeared. He explained what he'd told her.

"If Professor Granger comes to any of you house-elves with more union information or tries to hold secret meetings in her chambers, I want you to inform me at once. I will not tolerate that behavior.

"I wish someone would teach that girl a lesson," he said to the room at large. "She's had a rough life, but she has to learn the consequences of her words. Whenever she says something, she thinks everyone should adore it because she's the smartest thing in the world, and everyone could benefit from her words of wisdom. That chit is going to be my undoing."

He noticed Winky was still in the room; he thanked her again, and she left. He had some work to do before bed, so he pulled forward a stack of parchments and started some of the more mundane tasks as a Headmaster.

Several hours later, he was finishing the last form when Winky popped backed into the room.

"She can't have disobeyed me already, Winky?" he asked in disbelief.

"No, Master Snape. She is not to be defying you yet. I is coming to report that I is been taking care of her for you, sir."

"What do you mean, 'taking care of her'?" Severus was confused.

"I has been waiting until Miss Granger is asleep, and then I is casting special elf charm on hers so she is to be learning her lessons like you is wanting."

"Oh shite, Winky, that wasn't an order. I was just venting. What did you do?"

"I is bound by the ancient elf-code to not repeat or undo the spell, even for master. But Winky can say that you is to be near Miss Granger when she is learning, so you is able see her progress."

"What are you saying, Winky? What lesson?"

"Miss Granger is to be learning she is too nosy. She is to be discovering it is bad to be helping us who don't want to be helped." With a devilish smile, Winky was gone.

What did it mean? Granger would be learning, but only when he was present? Was he required to do something? Well, the less he knew, the better off he was. It had been like that during the war as a spy. He only knew as much as was necessary for him to complete his job. Sometimes ignorance was bliss. But other times, it was a pain in the arse. He would find out soon enough which kind of ignorance this was.

Hermione was relieved to find it was Saturday when she awoke. She didn't have to go to the Great Hall for breakfast and face Snape. She rather enjoyed her job, so her best course of action was to apologize. How did she get herself into trouble all the time?

"Winky," she called.

The elf appeared but didn't look happy. She'd only seen Winky from a distance until now. Last time she'd been this close, it had been in the kitchens during Hermione's time as a student. The elf had been plastered off of Butterbeer. It was good to see the tiny elf had shaken off her alcoholic dependencies. Her green skin was papery, and her orb-like eyes glared. Was Winky mad at her? The elf's tea cozy was slightly askew as she crossed her arms.

"Hi, Winky, er . . . I was wondering if you could bring me some breakfast this morning? Professor Snape and I had an argument last night, and I'd rather not face him in the Great Hall."

"Yes, Miss Granger," she said. Winky was gone before Hermione could even tell the elf what she wanted to eat.

Winky was back in less than a minute with a bowl of porridge and an orange, her tomato-like nose in the air.

"Thanks, Winky. By the way, I wanted to apologize for anything that might have offended you and the other house-elves regarding the union. I have been told to not speak of those things anymore, so I'm assuming there were problems. I didn't mean to..."

But Winky glared at her, then Disapparated.

"I guess that means you're still mad at me . . ." she said to the empty room.

The only good thing to happen over the weekend was Wood. He needed some help with Transfiguration, and they spent the rest of the day in her lounge, practicing. When they got hungry, she suggested they stay in her chambers. Mercifully, he dealt with the house-elves.

She was forming a crush on Wood. He was good-looking and tried hard to be a good teacher. But he did talk a lot about Quidditch, which she didn't particularly care for. Then again, nobody was perfect. Hermione forced herself not to act like a fool in front of him. Waiting was her best tactic; she had only to be patient, and she hoped he would eventually ask her out.

But as the week progressed, she noticed less about Wood and more about her rooms. They weren't being cleaned. Were the house-elves really that mad? Finally, she had enough when her plate and goblet weren't clean at each meal on Wednesday. She tried to sit in a different spot each time, but as soon as she sat down, the plate would suddenly appear filthy. Hermione was hesitant to show Snape. But she had to speak to him sooner or later.

"Professor Snape, I am curious as to why my eating utensils aren't clean? It's been like this all day." She showed him her plate.

He raised his trademark eyebrow; somehow, it didn't look condescending. "I'll take care of it, Granger."

"Thank you, sir." She started to turn back but remembered. "Oh, and my chambers aren't being cleaned either. Not that I mind; if the house-elves don't want to clean the rooms, I don't want to force them. Well, you know how I feel."

His eyebrow rose again. How much could one man express through a single eyebrow? He was a bit annoyed, she gathered.

"I will speak to them regarding their conduct towards you as soon as I'm done with my meal."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed. Thank you, sir."

She sat back down next to Neville.

"What was that about, Hermione?" he asked as he scooped up some mashed potatoes.

"Oh, my plate keeps coming up dirty." She tried to clean it with her wand, but her fingers were stuck together. What? She couldn't pry them apart. Neville laughed with his mouth full.

"Very funny, Neville. Did you do this?"

"No. But it's a hoot. Here." He pulled out his wand and tried to fix her fingers. Nothing happened.

She tried as well, but it was her wand hand that was stuck. Her first and middle finger were crossed over and stuck fast. Nothing she did to separate them worked. She shook her hand in desperation. Finally, Neville cleaned her plate and filled it with food. She tried her best to eat with stuck fingers, but she was embarrassed. Hermione left early, with Neville chuckling behind her.

A student must have cast a Sticking Charm on her hand when she hadn't been looking. How long would it last? Frustrated with how things were going, Hermione kicked her couch. Ow! That hadn't help.

As she limped around to the front of the couch to sit down, she heard a faint crackle and saw Oliver Wood's head poking out of her Floo.

"Hello, Oliver. What can I do for you?" She hoped he hadn't seen her pathetic couch-kicking bit. She sat on her hand so he couldn't see her fingers either.

"Er, hello, Hermione. I was wondering if you would like to go to dinner this Friday?"

Yes! He was asking her out. Splendid! Only, she already had plans.

"Sorry, Oliver. I was going to visit Harry and Ginny this weekend...it's been ages. But I'm open next Friday."

"Excellent. I'll come by on the first Friday of October and pick you up at seven."

She agreed. He gave her a sheepish grin, and then he was gone. Well, that certainly improved the goings of the day.

A few hours later, she turned the page while reading and noticed her fingers were back to normal. Thank goodness. How long had they been back to normal? At least it was over.

". . . And furthermore, Winky, I had specifically told you to continue serving Professor Granger with the normal treatment unless she spoke of the union."

Winky was trying to hit herself in the head, but Severus was holding down her arms.

"Now, did she or did she not mention unions to you?" he asked sternly.

"Miss Granger was saying sorry for her union troubles, and Winky is taking any mentions of unions as an excuse to not be cleaning her chambers. Winky is a bad house-elf."

Severus thought about the dinner plate being dirty. "And what about tonight at dinner? Was that what you were talking about when you mentioned the spell you cast on her?"

"Yes, Winky is doing it. But only when master is near Miss Granger."

Severus had to pause to keep from raising his voice. "Winky, you will clean Professor Granger's dishes and utensils for every meal. No more games. Thank you for telling me. You're free to go. But no hurting yourself...you know I don't approve."

She gave him a sly smile but nodded and left.

At least this curse business was over. Charming Granger's plate to stay dirty while he was in the Great Hall was all Winky had meant. It wasn't much of a lesson though, unless there was more he still didn't know. Granger had mentioned that her chambers weren't being cleaned. Winky had said he needed to be present for the spell to have its negative effects, but he hadn't been near her chambers for some time. Maybe there was more to this curse. But if it were along the lines of dirty dishes and laundry, then he could handle it.

It was the first weekend of October, and the halls were just beginning to get chilly at night. Severus was doing his normal patrol when he heard a giggle. He Disillusioned himself and crept into an alcove to await his prey. It had to be nearly three in the morning. Why would students be out of bed now? Usually they were out around midnight committing pranks.

But as the voices grew closer he realized they were adults: his two favorite Gryffindors, Wood and Granger. He followed them silently down the hall. It was his business as Headmaster to know of dalliances between the staff, or so he told himself.

"So you had fun, right?" Wood said as they reached her chambers.

"Yes, I did. Thanks for the great idea. I haven't been bowling in a long time. I didn't even know you knew about Muggle entertainment."

"I had a friend when I played Quidditch who was Muggle-born, and we used to go bowling all the time."

"I still can't believe you're afraid of horses. That blows my mind. But everyone has to have a fear, right?" She stifled a yawn. "Well, I'm bushed. I could probably sleep for a week. I don't usually stay up this late."

Wood leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her head and he kissed her cheek. Good for her, Severus thought, then caught himself. Why? He didn't care if they kissed. He had no feelings for her. Wood gave her an extra-long hug, and once Granger was gone, he stood in front of her closed door for several minutes.

"Man, I thought I had her in the bag," Wood said to himself. "I really need a shag. It's been forever."

Severus watched as the idiot left the dungeons. Gryffindors were so blunt.

Saturday and Sunday came and went normally. Wood seemed a bit depressed, and Severus connected it with the lack of Granger at the table. Ha, maybe she was avoiding him. Wood sure seemed to think so, judging by the look on his face. The boy was moping about. Granger could definitely do better than a retired Quidditch player. How many had she dated now? He didn't think the girl even liked sports.

Monday morning came, but Granger didn't show up for breakfast in the Great Hall. Honestly, she couldn't hide from Wood forever. Severus thought she had been more adult than that. He'd have to remind her that *all* staff members were required to appear at breakfasts during the weekdays, no excuses.

Severus made his way back to his office after breakfast. The halls were quiet, and he could hear a faint buzz of students talking or a professor lecturing when he passed by occupied classrooms. He was almost to his office when Kiki, a house-elf, appeared.

"Master, Miss Granger is not to be waking up!" Kiki squealed.

"What do you mean? She's still asleep? Who's teaching her class? Didn't you wake her?"

"Kiki has been trying since breakfast, but Miss Granger is not to be stirring," she said.

"Take me to her now!" Severus ordered.

Kiki grasped his hand and Apparated them inside Granger's quarters.

Granger was peacefully sleeping in her four-poster bed. The black sheets were up to her neck. He could see the slow rise and fall of her chest, so he knew she was alive.

"Granger, what is the meaning of this? I demand you wake up and teach your class immediately. This is highly unprofessional."

She continued to slumber. He walked to the side of her bed and gently shook her shoulders, trying to stir her out of her sleep.

"Kiki is to be shaking her, but it has not been working."

"Would you kindly go and fetch Poppy? Explain the situation, and request that she check her stocks...see if there is anything that might revive Professor Granger."

Kiki was gone in an instant.

He pulled back the black sheets, revealing her scarlet, silky nightgown. Good heavens, it only came down to mid-thigh! In his opinion, it was a highly inappropriate garment to wear to bed. Although he did approve of the view . . . er, that is, the black bed sheets were acceptable. Yes, a splendid color. Severus ran a diagnostics spell and found her to be in perfect health. She was just sleeping, nothing else. Strange. Why wouldn't she wake up?

A moment later Poppy burst through the fireplace with her apron full of clinking potion bottles. They shared information, ran a few more spells and decided to try the antidote to the Dreamless Sleep Potion. It contained a high amount of caffeine and should have done the trick. But she didn't even twitch once the potion was in her system. Nothing seemed to work, so they transported her to the infirmary through the Floo. It would have been distasteful to shuttle her through the castle dressed in a negligee.

They decided it would be best to keep things quiet until they knew what was going on. In the meantime, Severus had to fill in for Granger, as she would not be able to teach her classes. He was surprised upon his arrival, to see the students quietly working on homework for other classes...writing essays with various books open. They were very well behaved, especially for a Slytherin/Gryffindor class.

The rest of the day went by like the first class...smooth. He checked her grade book and most of the children were receiving top marks. He would see about that. Granger was probably a sympathetic grader and gave out high scores to everyone because she wanted to be fair. It sounded like her. Severus assigned a difficult essay due at the next class meeting to see how well these students were actually doing. He wanted to be sure they were learning something.

At dinner, Wood looked horrible. He just pushed his food around his plate and glanced at the empty seat where Granger should have been sitting. Poppy came down for dinner and discreetly told Severus that Granger had not responded to anything all day. She was sleeping, nothing else. Deciding there was really nothing they could do for her but wait it out, he called an immediate staff meeting after dinner in his study to explain the situation.

When he announced that Granger was stuck in a sleeping stasis, everyone gasped. Really? That many people liked her? He'd thought most of them regarded her as a stuck-up know-it-all like he did. Filius was squeaking out counter-charms to Poppy in hopes of reviving his favorite ex-student; Minerva was calling to him from her portrait with questions. Wood looked devastated. It brought a small amount of satisfaction to see that dunderhead so upset. But to goad it further, Severus told them all there would be no access to visitors. He explained that Poppy had a lot of work to do, and she didn't need people filling up her infirmary. Of course she agreed.

By Friday evening, Severus wondered if he would need to find a permanent replacement for his Potions classes. He was enjoying being in the classroom again, but his duties as Headmaster were falling behind in the past week. There were several meetings overlapping with classes next week, especially an important one with the Board of Governors, and he didn't have a Potions substitute yet. Severus needed someone to yell at. He stalked off to the hospital wing to criticize Granger; it was her fault, after all.

Hermione was slowly coming out of a deep sleep, and she heard a silky voice with a tinge of anger streaming into her head. She turned over, hoping to shut it out. She was really enjoying her nap. But it was no use; she was waking up. Hermione recognized the voice. What was Snape harping on about now? And why was he going on about it while she slept? These were her chambers now, not his.

She sat up in bed to tell him off, but she wasn't in her room. With her mouth open, she surveyed the infirmary. Hermione had been here before. Snape was standing over her, sneering down his nose.

"Finally decided to join the rest of us, Granger?" Turning from her bed, he called out down the hall. "Poppy, she's awake."

In less than ten seconds, Poppy flew out of her office and practically sprinted down the row of beds. The older woman's bosoms jiggled with her, ruining her usually dignified manner as she approached the bedside.

"Hermione, how do you feel? What happened? Explain everything," she said, before reaching the cot. Her greying hair had gotten loose from her hat and resisted the pull of gravity, sticking straight out on one side.

"What? I . . ." Hermione tried to think back to her last memory. She'd been on a date with Wood, and then she had crawled into bed and fallen asleep.

"Granger, you've been asleep since Monday, at least, but you didn't show yourself to anyone on Saturday or Sunday. So we are assuming it's been seven days now. Nothing we did woke you. Would you please inform us what potion or charm you cast allowing you to sleep for such a bloody long time?" Snape was livid.

"Nothing. I just went to sleep. I didn't do anything. Honest." Hermione was confused. "Surely it hasn't been that long."

Poppy was running tests with her wand while Hermione looked out the window. It was evening. Was it true? Her internal clock wasn't working right.

After Poppy reluctantly announced she could find nothing wrong with Hermione, she allowed her to leave the Infirmary. Since she was only dressed in a hospital gown, Poppy let her use the Floo. Ten minutes later, there was a knock at her door. Upon opening it, she found Snape glaring at her.

"Poppy asked me return this to you," he said. He was holding her silky nightgown. He had a smirk on his face as she felt the color rise in her cheeks. Embarrassed, she took it and began to close the door. But his hand pushed back against it, opening the door wide.

"Granger, your absence will be recorded on your permanent record and will count against you in my annual review. I have half a mind to suspend you, but I cannot cover your classes any longer. I'm a busy man. I cannot afford your little stunts."

"Stunts?" she questioned.

"Yes. I know you pulled this little stunt to get Wood off your back. It worked. The idiot is heartbroken, thinking you've been avoiding him since your pitiful date last week."

"How did you know about our date?" She was going to tell him to mind his own business, but he continued on.

"So you got the git off your back but jeopardized your job in the process. You seem to be doing that lately. I suggest you stop."

He swirled out of her doorway into the dark corridor, his robes billowing behind him.

Saturday morning, she ate in her chambers. She was sure everyone knew she'd been missing. She wasn't ready to talk when she herself didn't know the secrets of her enchanted sleep. Hermione would have to face them all soon or later; and as expected, breakfast on Sunday was horrible. The staff members all questioned, rather than welcomed her back. The students noticed her presence and several waved. Others were talking with their hands to their mouths, shooting covert looks over their shoulders in her direction. Oliver was grimacing but didn't approach her in the Great Hall. Instead, he was waiting in an alcove down in the dungeons after breakfast. He pulled her aside.

She said, "Whatever happened after our date last week had nothing to do with you. I hear you thought I was trying to avoid you."

Relief filled his features. He leaned down to kiss her.

Hastily she staved him off. "There's a Hogsmeade trip next weekend. We could go together." He nodded. And she rushed off to her class before he remembered about the kiss. For some reason, she just didn't feel right kissing him yet.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

The eighteenth of October was a Hogsmeade day. Hermione found Oliver waiting for her amidst all the students in the entry hall. His demeanor was child-like as he waited excitedly for the trip. It was a bit endearing, reminding her of Ron and Harry. She was bundled in a black pea coat and scarf to ward off the wind.

They followed the students through the gates and down the path. The autumn winds blew Hermione's hair in all directions. Leaves whipped past the young witches and wizards. Hermione saw that Snape led the group in the distance, his robes billowing ominously against the grey sky. Oliver reached out and held her hand. Her stomach fluttered in a desperate attempt to take flight. Oliver Wood was holding her hand! He was gorgeous and funny, and she felt like she was actually living a teenage fantasy.

After that, the day went by far too quickly for her liking. The couple had lunch at the Three Broomsticks, and Oliver played footsies. Then they casually walked down the streets hand-in-hand, window-shopping. He dragged her into a new Quidditch shop, pointing out gizmos and polishes he recommended or wished he could afford. When it was close to dinnertime, they met the Hogwarts students and walked them back up the long path to the school. Snape was trailing behind the group, but by the look on his face, Hermione didn't dare get near him.

In the distance, kites fought to stay up, performing daring dives and soaring high in the clouded sky. Some first- and second-year students, too young to go to Hogsmeade, must have spent the afternoon having simple Muggle-fun. Unexpectedly, Oliver pulled Hermione off the path and leaned her up against a tree. The bark pressed against her back. He put his hand on her neck, stroking her jaw with his thumb, his eyes intent upon her lips, and then he leaned in and kissed her. She let him this time, and it was hot and passionate. It had been so long since she'd kissed someone like this. Hermione felt wanted for the first time in months. With more than half of the Wizarding world against her, after Minerva's death and with her appearance as an incompetent professor to Snape, she was lonely. But Oliver stirred up emotions that had settled on the bottom long ago.

He pulled away and grinned. "Pretty good, huh?" he said smugly.

"Yes," she said dreamily, "I'm as high as a kite right now."

Oliver leaned in to kiss her again. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione noticed Snape walking down the path they'd just veered off of. He didn't appear to notice them.

Without warning, some unseen force suddenly grabbed the back of her coat at the base of her neck, dragging her from the tree they'd been kissing under. She careened into the windy sky, branches smacking her as she was forced through the treetops. She could only manage to scream and flail her arms, completely helpless. Oliver stood, staring after her, dumbfounded. The air was chilly, and Hermione was lightheaded from an adrenaline rush. She was still going up and up and up without slowing. Remembering she was a witch, Hermione pulled out her wand and tried every charm and spell she could think of in such a frantic situation. Nothing was working! Time was standing still but somehow speeding by. She didn't know how long she had been rising into the sky, but the trees were far below her. A large mass of students was entering in through the Hogwarts gates. She was higher than the castle. Colors...kites...soaring through the air blurred her vision, making her dizzy.

She felt a sudden jerk, and the mysterious force stopped pulling her. The jerk was just enough to jostle her wand from her fingertips, and the wind carried it off as she stretched to retrieve it. Momentarily, she floated there in the air...feeling weightless, before she dropped a few inches as if in slow motion. Her stomach lurched with the change in direction. Things skipped normal speed, and she suddenly raced down, plummeting. Now she really screamed. Wind ripped at her eyes, forcing them to water. There was no need to breathe at such a speed. The earth was growing closer every second. Her bushy hair whipped around her face as she fell feet first towards the ground. A gust of wind somersaulted her several times. She was going to die; there was nothing she could do. With effort, she spread her arms out, against the air resistance and leaned back. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see her death approach. Her stomach flipped again as strong, warm arms suddenly wrapped around her, and she slowly ascended into the air.

She saw black billowing robes thrashing through the sky over her savior's shoulder. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around the figure's neck, her legs around the body, holding on tightly. The arms released her once she was firm and secure, and then down they went in a controlled descent. Turning her head ever so slightly, she saw the profile of none other than Severus Snape. Snape! Flying! Without a broom! He had his arms out against the air, like rudders, to guide his direction. His face held no expression, and he did not speak; he wouldn't even look at her.

She buried her face into his robes and focused on breathing. She forced herself to forget she was flying through the air, clinging to Snape...she concentrated on his smell. The rough fabric rubbed against her nose as she pulled air into her lungs. He smelled of musky spices and clean linen. That became her lifeline, and she tried to decipher the individual spices, but she felt as if she were going to be sick. Snape kept flying, and the air around them gradually warmed. Would he ever land? She didn't want to vomit on him.

Snape stumbled with the landing, being off balance with her extra weight perched in front. She tried to let go but couldn't. Her hands were clenched in a death-like grip, and her legs were clamped around his body. Gently, he leaned her back against the castle wall and eased her thighs down his hips. Her hands were still around his neck, and he was bent over her as his warm hands massaged her fingers free of his fabric. There was a dark spot on his robes, and the breeze chilled the tears on her face. She shivered involuntarily as he brought her hands down.

There was definite concern on his face. He was standing up against her, pressing her against the wall until she was steady on her own. The moment was awkward and silent compared to the windy adventure that had just ended moments before.

"What happened?" she asked. Her voice was dry.

"I have no idea. You were the one bolting into the air of your own accord. What did you do right before?" he asked. The words could have held more malice but were somewhat reserved.

"Nothing . . . Oliver and I were, well . . . we, we only . . . and then we broke apart, and I soared into the sky."

Snape's smirk resembled a grimace, but he didn't say anything.

She didn't want to tell him about the kiss. It was none of his business. "How did we get into the school grounds through the air? What about the wards?"

"It's good to be Headmaster," was all he would say.

He opened a wooden door she hadn't noticed before. They were in a familiar corridor of the dungeons. Silently, Snape led her to her chambers. When they reached the door, she just stood there. She hadn't the slightest clue what to do.

"Granger, break down the wards," he said quietly.

"I . . . can't." She sniffed. "I lost my wand in the air." She pointed behind herself.

With an exaggerated sigh, he slowly brought down her wards, obviously irritated. He curtly opened the door and stood aside to let her in while a fire flicked to life. Snape called a house-elf to draw a bath and bring some warm food.

Hermione was in a daze. Shock, most likely, mild shock, she decided. It wasn't unwarranted. She plopped onto her sofa and stared at the fire. It was easiest to let her mind go numb at this point. She felt a weight settle next to her as Snape sat on the couch. He had a few vials on hand. Hermione vaguely recognized the potions but didn't try too hard to think. She turned back to the fire.

Gentle, nimble fingers brushed her lips, and a cool glass was pressed up to them. Instinctively, she swallowed the liquid, and it burned going down. Then, the same soft fingertips produced another vial and then another. She stared at the fire until her subconscious took over, and she was no longer awake.

It must have only been minutes, but a huge rush of energy rolled through her body, and she sat up, invigorated. She was alone; Snape was gone. A sudden crack startled her, and a house-elf appeared with a tray of potato soup and some crusty bread. Immediately ravenous, she devoured the food, and the elf appeared with more, which she finished as well.

Quite content, she stood and peeled off her clothes. She was in the middle of the room, pulling her shirt off, when the door opened. Her head was still inside the shirt, and her arms were raised. She finished pulling off the top and then hastily wrapped it around her bra. Hermione had a hard time looking Snape in the face, but when she did, she saw he had a tinge of pink in his cheeks. He looked at the floor but held out her wand.

"You went back for it?" she asked, surprised.

He looked at her then. "When I saw you dragged off, I dropped my shopping bags to rescue you. Naturally I had to retrieve them. And I decided to spare a moment to summon your wand." He thrust it into her hand and briskly left her chambers. She realized too late that she'd forgotten to thank him.

The bath water stung as she eased into it. Hermione mulled over her kiss with Oliver for a small moment. It had been unbelievably invigorating and exciting. But that also described her flight, fall and rescue. She couldn't stop thinking about Snape. He had saved her life today...though she'd been so sure he'd hated her. She towed off and slipped into her nightgown. Why had she been dragged into the sky suddenly? Why had she been unable to use magic? Why had Snape saved her and then retrieved her wand? And why wasn't she thinking about Oliver and his kiss anymore?

Hermione awoke the next morning with a feeling of trepidation. Severus Snape had saved her life...exactly the same thing she had done for him. As badly as she didn't want to admit it, she was feeling awful. Now she was indebted to him in some respect. Hermione Granger was not one to be reliant upon others. She'd solved her own problems before, and she wasn't used to receiving help from those around her. It wasn't the way she worked. Now she understood how Snape must have felt when he had realized she'd been the one to save his life.

It was violating. He'd been so intimate with her life...her entire existence. He'd had no right to just swoop in and save her like some superhero. She would have figured out something eventually. Oh, who was she kidding? Nothing had worked when she had used her wand, and then after she'd lost it, she'd been as good as dead. But regardless of her actual need for help, she knew he'd crossed some unknown line. It wasn't that Hermione was ungrateful for her life; on the contrary, she was very glad to be alive and unharmed. But if her safety could have been secured through any other means, she would gladly have welcomed it. She was so uncomfortable with her savior being Snape. She didn't feel at ease viewing him in a way she never had before.

But that raised an important question...why he'd even bothered saving her? He'd killed people before and watched many die in his time, both good and bad. Yet he'd saved her, and not only that: he'd taken the time to see her back to her chambers, ensure she was taken care of and even retrieve her wand. Could he really be that desperate to have a full staff? There was no previous friendliness between the two of them. The only logical reason she could find was a possible responsibility to repay his life debt. He had saved her out of obligation and nothing more. Hermione didn't care whether Severus Snape liked her or not, but it was somewhat of an insult if his motivation was purely obligatory. As if she'd sold herself for a price, Hermione felt cheap and used without permission for someone else's personal needs. How dare he assume he needed to repay her? Snape had no right to presume she wanted anything in return for her hard work from years past. Yes, it had taken almost a whole year to save him, but she had never thought of, nor expected a reimbursement for her time and efforts.

Snape was Slytherin enough to have probably staged the whole thing so she would be grateful for her rescuer and profess that they were even. He could have at least bloody well asked first! She would have told him it had been an honor (at the time) to save his life, not a loan with interest. Recently, she'd regretted saving his life, and now, her feelings were only confirmed. He was going to pay in some way for his insults. First Snape was angry she saved his life, and then he thought she was the type of person to want reimbursement for her actions. And so, he had staged a moment when she would be in trouble, and he would appear the hero. Then Hermione "Gullible" Granger would call their life debts even and everything would be settled; and if he were really lucky, she would be docile and obey his every whim as Headmaster. Fat chance.

Oliver came by via Hermione's Floo late Sunday evening. He was glad to see she was okay, and he was profusely sorry he hadn't been the one to save her. Oliver explained he had simply frozen with shock when she had been whisked away. He'd never seen anything like it, and he was at a loss for words. Hermione assured him that she didn't hold him responsible for the incident, and she wasn't angry or upset with his lack of help. There was obviously nothing wand related that would have worked. But he just kept saying how grateful he was that Snape had been around and knew how to fly. Although, he did admit it was a bit creepy seeing his black robes billowing like a bat as he soared up to catch her.

Hermione was getting used to stares following her entrance into the Great Hall...word had obviously gotten around about the incident. It was unnerving to know everyone was watching...expecting her to fly up to the enchanted ceiling. Snape's deep eyes were also upon her as she seated herself next to Oliver, but only for the briefest of moments. Then he looked down at his eggs and bangers. Oliver squeezed her knee under the table, and she too looked at her plate of food. Did Snape know she'd figured out his plan? She was going to have to watch him to see how he acted. She'd noticed when she had first started teaching, he'd been observing her constantly; she'd thought it was out of curiosity. Now she knew he'd been contemplating a sort of retribution.

The week was slow moving. Hermione glanced at Snape as often as subtlety would permit, and most times, she found he was already watching her. Interesting. She was getting a little worried though. How long had he really been watching? And how far did it go? Would he only watch her when he happened to be around, or were there spies around the castle set out to watch her...certain portraits maybe?

By the next week, Hermione resented Severus Snape. She knew she should be more focused on the reasons behind her terrifying flight, rather than on his actions afterwards, but she couldn't get him out of her head. He was constantly in everyone's business...commanding everyone about, forcing staff and students alike to listen him. She couldn't believe he was so controlling. And to top it off, most of the staff complied. They were willing to help, smiling, though she knew they were already overworked.

The last Monday of October rolled around, and in the evening, Hermione found herself crammed in the tiny staff room for a mandatory meeting. She was standing next to Susan, discussing students' grades. Snape made his usual timely appearance, robes trailing behind him as he strode in and stood at the head of the table. At least he

never dawdled in these meetings; she had a lot of work to do in her dungeons.

Evidently, the Board of Governors, for one reason or another was pressing him, and he had to spread out more of his responsibilities to the teachers. He had an assignment for each of them. Some of the requests were obviously Headmaster duties, but most of the staff appeared willing to help him.

Hermione leaned over to Susan and whispered, "All the staff are bending over backwards to help him. I can't believe it. He should have asked us if we could afford to help him with his workload before assigning it to us."

Susan gave a small snicker, opened her mouth to speak but was suddenly jerked back and downward. Hermione's own body gave a scary jerk. It happened so quickly that the pain was delayed. She was seeing everything upside-down before the pain shot through her back. She was arched into an unnatural position, and so was everyone else. As a child, she'd been able to do this move at the park, but now there was magic suspending her like a human rainbow. Shocked cries filled the room, but someone was laughing hysterically above all the commotion. The staff room had been crowded before, but now it was a mass of arms and stumbling stomachs. Hagrid looked the most uncomfortable; thankfully he was in a corner, so he was able to steady himself against the walls. If he fell, he'd kill someone.

It took a moment for Hermione to turn in the right direction of the laughter. Snape had his head thrown back with tears streaming down his face as he laughed uncontrollably. There wasn't anything funny about the situation, as far as Hermione could tell. Oddly, several others joined in the laughter, but most of the staff grumbled. Hermione pulled out her wand, as several colleagues had. Snape was doing the same, but nothing anyone did worked. Everyone was complaining or asking what had happened, and the room was in chaos.

"There is no effect on this position with any spell we cast. I'm sorry to say, it looks as if you are all stuck until we can find a cure. I don't know what happened. Does anyone have any ideas?" Snape asked the room.

Sibyll Trelawney fell over, and like a row of dominoes, several others tumbled too. Snape was jostled and dropped his wand into the pile of teachers.

"Excuse me, Filius," Snape asked to the mass of bodies, "my wand, please?"

The Charms teacher complied, reaching for the wand with slight difficulty, but as he picked it up, he was able to stand up straight immediately. Well, that was interesting. Hermione was getting a little dizzy with all the blood pooling in her head, but she thought she saw Snape give a small smile...not a smirk, a real smile.

"Hagrid, clap your hands," Severus ordered.

The half-giant struggled to comply, but once he did, he popped up like a daisy. His beard, streaked with grey, was well above the mass of bent-over staff.

Others clapped their hands when they saw the result, but it didn't affect their position. Snape started asking individuals to do random things, and as they complied, they would snap back into a standing position. Everyone was back to normal; some were rubbing their backs while others tucking in the fronts of their shirts. But Snape had failed to ask her for help. She just stood there, arched over, looking stupid, and yet he stared at her with those fathomless black eyes. No one else noticed her, not even Susan who was right next to her. She called out, but everyone was chatting, discussing the odd situation, and her voice, so close to the floor, was lost. He dismissed the staff. They all left, only too grateful to get out of the stuffy room.

With the room empty except for the two of them, she realized how this was exactly like her flight into the sky. Nothing had worked when she had used her wand then, same as now. And in both incidences, Snape looked like her savior. Well, she wasn't going to buy it this time. She might not have any actual proof yet, but she was bound to find something against him sooner or later.

"Granger, I don't know what you did, but you need to stop with these antics. It's only a matter of time before someone is seriously hurt."

He was blaming her? How could he? She had no idea how these things were happening, but she was ~~sure~~ was responsible. Hermione was going to have to watch her back; he was trying to put the blame on her, most likely so he could fire her at the end of the school year with a cause. She wasn't going to give him the enjoyment of a retort; a glare would suffice.

"Now, Granger, would you be so kind as to hand me that book?" he said, pointing to one next to him on the table.

Grudgingly, she picked it up and handed it to him. Her back straightened, and all her blood rushed back downward into her body. Stumbling a bit, she staggered towards the door. She lost her balance, and steady arms caught her around the waist. Hermione threw his hands off her and walked out the door in a manner she hoped was dignified.

It had to be Snape. The entire room had been cursed except for him. He'd laughed at them all, too. Then he'd cured everyone except her because he was out to get her. Nothing had worked to counter the curse except when he'd asked for favors before he'd freed everyone. Why had his requests broken the curse? It just didn't make sense. But then again, neither did Snape.

The last week of October brought wicked weather, the temperature dropped and ominous clouds rolled in to stay. On Halloween night, the Great Hall was fabulously decorated. Hagrid had outdone himself with giant pumpkins and live bats. All four houses were scheduled to have parties in their common rooms after dinner. And a few teachers were getting together for some drinks in the staff room. Hermione raised a fist to knock on Oliver's office door. Before she was able to do so, the door flew open, and the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team walked into her. She fell down, but they picked her up and apologized. Oliver had a crazed look in his eyes as he called after them.

"Remember, you lot, we have to win the Quidditch Trophy. I refuse to lose! I'm doing this for your own good. Now hurry, you only have a few hours before curfew." Turning to Hermione, he changed his attitude. "Evening, love, ready to go up to the party?"

"Oliver, you can't be forcing them to practice tonight? There's a party in their common room. Besides, it's raining cats and dogs out there!"

"Listen, Hermione, I wouldn't expect you to understand. But our team needs to practice harder than ever if we want to get the title back from Slytherin," he said.

"You sound like Ron. I can't believe you're forcing them out there. It's not even your team anymore. You don't play Quidditch, might I remind you."

Oliver looked somewhat hurt but tried to school his features. "When I played, we practiced in worse weather than this. Besides, it's not 'raining cats and dogs.'"

She looked out the darkened windows of his office. Sheets of water poured down the panes of glass. She looked back at the team as they sluggishly walked down the hallway, brooms trailing on the ground.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she called after them, "there will be no Quidditch practice tonight. And if I catch one of you out of doors tonight, I will deduct one hundred house points each. Now get to up to your common room and celebrate the holiday."

They all looked rather cheered up and took the next ascending staircase. Oliver looked livid. Realizing she'd stepped on his toes, she tried to change the subject. "So how about that party?"

"I'm not in the mood," he said with a strained voice. "Perhaps next time." And he shut the door in her face.

Halloween night found Severus mesmerized by the sheets of rain pouring down his study windows. The last few weeks had been a joke. All Severus could think about was Granger and her random accidents. He had plenty of work to keep him occupied, but he couldn't focus when Granger was causing problems right and left.

She was angry with him, and he knew exactly why: she was experiencing the other side of things. He had saved her life, and now she was filtering through all the emotions he'd experienced when he'd woken up in St. Mungo's. Her emotions had stopped on anger and resentment. But her feelings made sparring actually somewhat exciting...at least for him. Before he'd saved her, they'd had an unspoken agreement to tolerate each other for the sake of functionality. Now, Granger was downright hostile in her manners. But Severus would have to give her time; after all, it had taken quite a while before his vexation towards her had cooled.

No doubt Granger was upset with him being her rescuer, but that was the kind of twisted irony the world loved to throw out. Now they were even. He hadn't thought of it at the time when he'd flown off to catch her, but now that he thought about it, he was free from her debt. Actually, he could even consider himself to have gone above and beyond his debt. He had hired her, after all, when she'd been in need of employment (never mind the fact he'd been desperate to fill the post). The score was two to one in his favor.

"You know," Minerva's portrait interrupted his musing. "I think you should have a talk with Hermione, soon."

"I'm sorry, Minerva," he drawled. "What about Granger? I was calculating some figures." He shuffled some papers on his desk to look busy, but it was futile, and he knew it.

"Her conduct towards you as her superior is disgraceful. I've received some interesting news from several portraits throughout the school, and she's really getting a bit carried away," Minerva said with concern.

"How endearing, Minerva. You want me to bring her in here so the two of you can chatter again, like after your funeral. Ha! Three to one. I'd forgotten about that instance."

"What?" Minerva asked.

"Nothing, just something I suddenly remembered. No bother."

"Anyway, as I was saying," Minerva continued. "I think she feels you are framing her for these odd occurrences that have been taking place."

"You know about them?" he asked, mildly surprised.

"I'm dead, Severus. What else am I to do all day but gossip?"

Albus chuckled in the next portrait over; Severus pointedly ignored the old coot.

"It's not very becoming of you, Minerva," Severus said.

"Stop changing the subject. Summon her here this instant. I was down by my old Transfiguration study, and she's had a row with Oliver. She's just going to get drunk at the party if you don't pull her in here." Minerva was growing impatient.

"You want me to invite an emotional, hormone-ridden woman, whom might I add hates me, into my personal study to have a friendly chat? Great Merlin, woman, have you gone daft?"

Minerva stared at him in reply.

"Fine," he ground out. "Winky! Please find Professor Granger, and send her to my office immediately. Give her the password: Japanese Cherry Blossoms. And no funny business, elf."

Within five minutes, Granger was rapping on his door. Her robes were ruffled, and her hair was as unmanageable as ever. There were dark circles under her eyes, and she was absentmindedly picking at her nails. She looked as if she'd been crying too.

"Granger, we need to speak regarding your recent behavior." She suddenly looked angry. But before she could go off on a tirade, he continued, "This has nothing to do with your personal record as an employee at Hogwarts. Minerva thought you might need someone to vent to. I know I am the last person you would like to speak with, but I assure you I am willing to listen, as long as you do not get accusatory towards myself. If you have any problems with me, I wish you to voice them, and I will try my best to answer you."

Why was he saying all this? Why didn't he just let the girl talk with Minerva, and then he could go to bed? By morning it would all be resolved. Granger didn't want to talk to him anyway. Looking at her face told him as much.

"Hermione," Minerva spoke softly, "I'm here for you, but I am not real. Severus is, though, and he's your employer. It is his duty as Headmaster to consult with you, to verify you are happy in *all* aspects of your life so you are able to perform to the best of your abilities. Severus cares for you as he does all his charges. Let it go. I know you, dear; you're bottling everything up. You don't need to carry it alone."

Well, that seemed to work. Granger plopped down in the chair opposite his desk with a heavy sigh. She dropped her head in her hands and mumbled unintelligibly for a few moments before bringing her face up. She was back in control of herself.

"Professor Snape, I'm sorry I ever saved your life. I had no right to push myself on your cause. I now know how violating it feels to have an unwanted redeemer. I am an independent person, and having to have depended on you to save my life was a rude awakening. I guess I'm just so angry you were right all those years ago. I had no idea, until now. But I'm angry too, sir." Her voice changed from passive to venomous. "I can't believe you would stoop so low. I know you're a Slytherin, but you've gone far enough, and I'd like you to stop."

"Stop what, Granger? Letting you vent? What is bothering you?"

"You set it up," she spat at him. "I know it was you. When we were coming back from Hogsmeade, you sent me into the sky and made my wand useless somehow. Then you acted the hero and saved me. The whole staff didn't need to be hurt the other day just so you'd look like a bloody hero to all of them as well. It's gone to your head, I think."

"Granger, I assure you I had nothing to do with either of those incidents. It's impossible to make a wand useless. And if there were such a spell, I would have done it to the Dark Lord years ago and finished him off. We wouldn't have needed the Chosen One. Something is affecting you, and it's spreading to those around you, as we saw in the staff room. You should review what you were doing right before each incident to find a pattern."

"I've told you already," she practically yelled, "I'm doing nothing! It's got to be you. You were near me when the staff room went crazy, and when I went flying off, and when my fingers stuck together. I don't know yet about the sleeping thing, but I'm sure you're behind it."

"What is this about your fingers sticking?" he asked, curious.

"Oh, it happened ages ago. After I had told you my plate hadn't been cleaned, I'd walked back to my seat and had found two of my fingers stuck together, and they'd remained that way for several hours. Nothing I'd done would make them come apart."

"When did they finally separate?"

"I don't know, sometime later in the evening. I had been doing nothing but reading at the time."

"Interesting . . . Sounds like a curse of sorts." He wondered if Winky had anything to do with it. He had been present every time something had happened. Hadn't Winky

mentioned something along those lines? He was about to tell this to Granger, when Minerva spoke up. Severus swiveled in his chair so they were facing each other, creating a triangle.

Minerva said, "There must be a trigger causing these unexpected incidents. Who knows what the purpose of the curse was, but it could be serious. You need to fulfill the demands.

"And isn't it obvious that Severus has nothing to do with it? He didn't have to save you, but he did, and I doubt it had anything to do with his life debt. He is a Slytherin after all, and they tend to kill those who've helped them. Think of Voldemort and what he did to Pettigrew's hand. It killed him. Following this logic, Severus wouldn't have set himself up to look like a hero. He simply would have killed you if he were concerned about the debt being called upon. Furthermore, he doesn't need to act the part of a hero. He is one already. Was it not yourself who brought him his Order of Merlin, First Class, award?"

Hermione seemed to vacillate mentally for several minutes. Unexpectedly, Winky appeared with a tea tray. What was she doing here? Silently, the elf poured tea and handed him a cup, then one to Granger.

"Hermione," Minerva's portrait said...oddly with her own cup of tea too. "I was reading through *Mythological India and Persuasive Potions* the other day. Their chapter titled, *Emerald Potions for Basic Emotions* was quite interesting. Perhaps a potion exists that would break the curse? What do you think?"

Before Severus knew how, they were whisked away into an in-depth conversation about Potions. Granger was avid with her opinions, which he tore apart at every opportunity. But impressively, she never backed down. Minerva was well versed in the subject, but not even the two women together could persuade him to change his views on Emotion Potions.

The spirited debate lasted all night and into the wee hours of Saturday morning. He was surprised to note he was sad to see her slip out of his office; he hadn't had such an invigorating conversation in . . . well, years. But as he shuffled off to bed, he remembered they'd never fully settled their original purpose for meeting. She still believed he was behind all of her troubles. And they hadn't found a solution to keep her or others from getting hurt. Nothing truly catastrophic had happened yet, so maybe they had some time to solve it before disaster struck.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

November had arrived, and Hermione was actually excited for the first Quidditch game of the season. Oliver had soon gotten over his hissy fit and apologized for closing the door in her face a week prior. Quidditch had always been his life, he'd explained, and so he'd had a hard time taking it off his priority list. When she'd told the team to take the night off, he'd felt she'd overstepped a boundary. But it was all in the past because today was the game. Everyone was garbed in his or her colors of choice, ready to support the players. Even the grounds of Hogwarts seemed to be cheering for the teams. She inhaled the crisp autumn air as she stepped out the castle doors. The dark green grass covered in frozen, silvery dew licked around her pant legs as she walked to the Quidditch pitch. As Hermione climbed the stands, the trees in the Forbidden Forest stretched out before her, exploding with brilliant reds and golden yellows.

She and Wood passed Snape as they climbed. He gave her the slightest of nods, and she tentatively returned it with a smile. He was sitting alone, and a sudden impulse steered her into the seat next to him with Oliver following behind. After all, Oliver was sure to talk nonstop about the game, and she wasn't that excited. Hopefully Snape would grace her with another delightful conversation, and she'd have the best of both worlds as she sat in the chilled morning air.

No one said anything for some time, just watched the seats fill and occasionally waved or shook hands as students and staff filed past. Not one to handle awkward silences, Hermione grasped around for something to say. Ever since her meeting with Snape about a week ago, she'd been unsure if she'd done the right thing in telling him how she had been feeling. But she'd remembered Minerva had always been right, and she had needed to get all that emotional build-up off her chest. Snape hadn't mocked her; he'd only sat and listened or asked appropriate questions. Although nothing had actually been resolved from the meeting, she'd been extremely relieved to unload her burdens. She wasn't sure if she believed him or not, but she liked to think that there was some modicum of good inside him...no matter how crusty he appeared.

And the wonderful conversation, which had followed her confession, was all could think about in her spare time. It had been far too long since she'd had an invigorating conversation. She wanted to bring it up now, but she felt like it would be wrong to invite Oliver into that world of intellect. No, she needed something else...anything else to talk about. The awkward silence was growing unbearable.

"So, Professor, a flutter on the game?" Oliver asked Snape, leaning across Hermione's lap.

Snape slowly turned his eyes on Oliver and sneered. This wasn't the kind of conversation Hermione had been looking for when she'd sat down. They were going to get thrown out of the stands for Oliver's stupidity. She braced herself for Snape's icy words as he opened his mouth.

"Twelve Galleons says Slytherin wins within an hour of the game starting," said Snape.

He gambles? Oliver's mouth dropped open, and she was sure her own did as well, although all the feeling in her face was gone. Snape's dark eyes flashed over her face briefly, and she forced her mouth shut. Oliver was still leaning over Hermione's lap, and it was getting uncomfortable.

"I am but a poor teacher, Headmaster, so I think twelve Galleons will help considerably. You're on."

They shook hands, and Oliver leaned back into his own seat. Rolanda was walking to the center of the field. The teams exited their respective locker rooms and marched onto the pitch. The crowd's roar was deafening. Hermione hollered with the rest and even saw Snape applauding out of the corner of her eye.

Rolanda brought a whistle to her lips, but the din in the stadium drowned out the whistle's blow. The two teams kicked off. A fourth-year Ravenclaw named Derek Timms was commentating.

"And they're off," said Timms. "Slytherin is in possession with Chaser Josie Wilton heading for the goal posts. Gryffindor Beater Kim Allen sends a Bludger at Wilton, and she dodges it. Gryffindor Keeper Jennings dives...and misses...Slytherin scores!"

Snape actually hooted as a wave of silver and green erupted through the crowd.

". . . Tate Burch, Gryffindor Chaser, has the Quaffle, and he's flying down the middle. He dodges a Bludger and...OH NO...he didn't see that other one coming from behind.

He drops the Quaffle, and Slytherin takes it. That would be Chaser Pip Stiles and Captain of the Slytherins. He's aiming straight for the goals, Jennings blocks but misses again...Slytherin scores! The score is now twenty to zero, Slytherin."

Snape leaned over Hermione, and she was startled by his close proximity. His hand rested gently on her knee as he sneered at Oliver.

"Still feeling lucky about our little bet?" he asked.

Hermione tore her eyes from Snape's face to look at Oliver. The poor man was sulking. She couldn't really bring herself to feel sorry for him when he had instigated the gamble, but Snape was rubbing it in a bit far.

"What is it with men?" she asked the two of them. "I bet you both bleed house colors! The world isn't divided into houses or teams. When will you two grow up?"

Snape looked at her with widened eyes. It was perturbing...his face so close to her own, but something wet dripped onto her hands, which were placed in her lap. Before she could see what it was, Oliver hollered in pain. He was bleeding profusely from his crippled hand. All the old scars had opened, and the blood spilling from the wound was a brilliant mix of scarlet and gold. Snape hissed in distress and held his hand to his neck. Between his fingers seeped drops of green and silver blood.

Without a moment's delay, Hermione whipped out her wand. But none of her medicinal spells worked...both men continued to bleed. People seated around them began to notice. She conjured two stretchers and ordered them to lie down. Snape insisted on walking, his face pale. Finally, she relented and led them down the stands, trying to help them as best she as could. But they refused to let her touch them. Both were harsh with her in their pained states. When they got to the hospital wing, Poppy ushered the men onto beds. Hermione slipped away to find somewhere to have a cry.

She made it to her chambers without letting the tears drop from her eyes. But as soon as the door was warded, she let loose. Hermione had no idea what had happened back there, and she'd only been trying to help them to the infirmary before they passed out from blood loss. It wasn't like it was her fault. Not really. Somehow, things kept happening around her. So what if she'd said something about bleeding house colors? It was just a coincidence, right? It was a common phrase. How could it contain magical properties? No, this was Snape; he had to be behind it all. Last week she'd said, "raining cats and dogs," and the sky hadn't poured anything but water. Something was missing, some important piece of information, and she didn't have it.

And they hadn't needed to snap at her when all she'd been trying to do was help them. What had she been expected to do? Stay and watch the game while they'd walked off, wounded, to the hospital wing? Well, maybe it was like trying to save Snape's life previously; her help was unwanted. Surely she could understand. All right, after Poppy found a cure, and they were on the mend, she'd go and apologize for trying to save them when they were grown adults and capable of asking for help when it was needed.

Severus lay on the infirmary cot, wishing he had another blanket. The night air was chilly, and the pillow was uneven and lumpy. Wood was snoring in the bed next to his. What was the use trying to sleep here? It wouldn't work. Quietly, he threw the blankets off, and the nip in the air attacked. He grabbed his robes and put them on, discarding the starched hospital gown. He was almost out the door when Poppy caught him.

"I'm fine, really. The bleeding stopped before it was even noon. There's no need to keep me here. In fact, if I'm forced to stay, my work will back up. I'll overwork myself and end up here again," he defended himself.

He could barely make out the frown on her face in the darkened room. But she told him to come back in the morning for a clean bill of health. He promised and then slipped out the door.

Sleep had evaded Severus since his childhood. First, it was because his parents had fought late into the night; then, when he was at Hogwarts, he had lain awake thinking of Lily. As time had passed, his insomnia had been due to his fixation with getting even with Black and Potter. Finally, when the Dark Lord had been in power, as a double agent, Severus had been the errand boy in the dead of night. Currently, it was too late to try to sleep. The trick was to retire early in order to have a fighting chance. At this hour, it was a lost cause.

He *could* work, but there would always be work. What he needed was a good walk. He decided to check and see if the staff members were following his assigned patrol schedule. He met no one by the time he reached the dungeons. Not even the ghosts were out. Someone was slacking on his or her duties, tsk tsk. By now Severus' blood was pumping, and he didn't mind the nippiness. Years of stalking on the stone floors had trained his feet to make no noise. A sniffle in the distance caught his attention. He approached cautiously and heard murmuring between two voices.

"... But that's just it, Minerva, I did it again." Granger. She was sniffing a great deal.

"You can't help it, dear, it's who you are. There's nothing to be ashamed of," Minerva said. She was obviously in someone else's portrait.

"Even after the lesson I'd learned when he'd saved my life...I tried to act the hero. I can't leave bloody well enough alone. Do you think I should go and apologize, or would I make a fool of myself? I mean, I don't expect him to accept my apology; it would only be for my benefit. And I have a sinking feeling that I *am* somewhat responsible for this whole mess."

"That's a decision you're going to have to make on your own, Hermione. Although, do take care with this curse. Accidents happen. Look at Horace and myself. I'm sure he had been careless just that one time, but once was all it had taken. Watch yourself," Minerva admonished.

Granger blew her nose loudly, then bade Minerva goodnight as she went to finish her rounds. Severus pressed himself into an alcove and watched her go by. She looked terrible.

As promised, Severus went back in the morning to show Poppy how healthy he was. She always worried, though. Some nights, he'd been a wreck after the Dark Lord's rallies, and Poppy had had to nurse him back to health. He cradled a soft spot for her, as she was the only person he trusted when he couldn't depend upon himself physically.

Poppy was just finishing his check-up when Granger slid in through the entrance. She stood by the door, looking lost, then approached Wood's bedside. The dunderhead was reading the *Daily Prophet* pretending he didn't see her approach. But his eyes didn't move across the page, giving him away. Nonetheless, she patently waited for him to "finish." Finally realizing she wouldn't leave, he stiffly put the paper down. This should be good.

Severus tried to look inconspicuous as he watched their exchange. Their voices were low and indistinguishable, but by the tone, Granger sounded as if she were apologizing. Wood acted nonchalant and gave her a brief squeeze of the hand. She brusquely walked away from Wood and approached Severus himself. So here it was. She'd decided to apologize. He would have rather she'd done it in a private setting. For some reason he couldn't find it in himself to hold a grudge against her for the bleeding incident. But he didn't want to appear weak in front of Wood and Poppy by accepting the apology. If she were to do it in his office, he would have actually softened up.

"Sir, I was wondering if you'd like to go get a cup of coffee." That was not what he'd been expecting. She was looking at his knees. "My treat, down at the Three Broomsticks in, say, an hour?" She looked up, and he could see unshed tears in her eyes, obviously lingering from her conversation with Wood.

He did need to go to Hogsmeade anyway, so he might as well join her. "I am capable of purchasing my own beverages, Granger. But I'll meet you there. Don't keep me waiting."

"Of course, sir. Thank you."

She stepped out the door and was gone. Wood had been watching them over the top of his paper but quickly resumed his motionless reading.

"Can you believe her?" Wood asked through the paper. "She nearly kills me and then expects me to talk to her. After yesterday, I can't let her near me. Who knows what's going on? She thinks she's responsible somehow, but can't explain more. It's just too risky."

"Yes, a real threat, I'm sure," Severus drawled. "Oh, by the way, you do know Slytherin won the match in fifty-two minutes with a score of two hundred twenty points to ten. Would you like to pay now, or shall I deduct it from your salary?"

Wood grumbled something about getting the money soon. That should teach the dodger to make bets against a Slytherin. And if he still needed some lessons, there were plenty of games left in the season.

Granger was already sitting down in a dark booth in the back of the pub when he arrived. Bones was sitting with her, but as he approached, she kicked Bones out of the booth. Good. Granger looked tired: there were dark circles under her eyes, and they were a bit puffy from crying. But he wouldn't mention it. Maybe he was turning soft. No, he needed to remain aloof. He slid into the booth with a nod as a greeting. She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Rosmerta appeared.

"Professors." Rosmerta smiled. "What can I get you two this fine Sunday morning?" She looked to Granger first.

"I'll have a 'cup o' Joe', as they said at DuPont," she said with false cheeriness.

"Coffee. Black," he said politely.

Madam Rosmerta left to get their orders. Granger was tracing the wooden grain on the table with her fingers. Without a sound, a white mug appeared on the table in front of Granger. Her fingers ran into it, and she gasped.

"What in the world . . ." she trailed off.

The mug appeared to be half empty, and there was a large lipstick mark on the rim. Granger slowly turned the mug, barely touching the handle. Once the other side was facing Severus, he saw, in bright red loopy print, the word "Jo."

"Who the hell is Jo?" he heard himself say.

"I don't know, but it appears I have her cup of coffee," Granger said with a small smirk on her lips.

Apparently, the situation cheered her up a bit. Rosmerta returned with the requested cups of coffee and, after their brief explanation, took away the mysterious mug.

After taking a few sips of her ordered coffee, she suddenly stared him right in the face and gave him a lopsided grin.

"Headmaster, I'd like to apologize for trying to help you yesterday. I had no right without your consent, and I am sorry."

"Why are you grinning? Last night you were crying over it, and now you find it amusing. Explain," he demanded.

She faltered for only a moment. "How did you know I was upset? Did Minerva tell you? No, she wouldn't do that. I know. You've been spying on me." She pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Why the mood-change from last night to today?" he persisted. He didn't want to go off on a tangent.

Never one to miss answering a question, she obediently said, "I just realized it's because I'm a Gryffindor. And although, yesterday I told you we shouldn't always be associated with our schoolhouses, we inevitably have been molded while in them and thus continue to hold those values throughout our lives. My Gryffindor brass and unabashed desire to take charge in situations takes over, and I find I cannot help myself."

"Fair enough," he said after a moment. "I'll accept your apology and your extreme emotional outbursts. So it is only fair...in a Gryffindor sense...I tell you my source of knowledge. Indeed, I was spying on you. But not intentionally," he added hastily after seeing the look on her face. "I was patrolling the corridors last night and stumbled upon your conversation with Minerva."

She choked on her coffee, spraying it all over him. "So you already knew why I asked you here?" Granger wordlessly removed the spit-up coffee from his person with her wand.

"Yes, but I'm actually glad I came," he said. She looked pleased. That had come out wrong. "I think your coffee incident has given me a lead. I might know what's going on with this curse. I'll have to research it, but I'll let you know if I find anything."

Granger's smile only faltered slightly, but still, she looked happy that he had some idea as to what was going on.

Back in his office, Sunday evening, Severus transferred a few strands of wispy memories into the Pensieve. Without waiting for the contents to settle, he pressed his face into the swirl of silvery blue. He was falling gently and landed in the Great Hall during mealtime.

"Professor Snape, I am curious as to why my eating utensils aren't clean? It's been like this all day." Severus turned to see Granger talking to his memory-self, who was sitting at the table. She showed him the plate.

"I'll take care of it, Granger," his other self said.

"Thank you, sir." She started to turn back but added, "Oh, and my chambers aren't being cleaned either. Not that I mind; if the house-elves don't want to clean the rooms, I don't want to force them. Well, you know how I feel."

He raised his eyebrow but said, "I will speak to them regarding their conduct towards you as soon as I'm done with my meal."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed. Thank you, sir."

She sat down next to Longbottom, and Severus followed her.

"What was that about, Hermione?" Longbottom asked.

"Oh, my plate keeps coming up dirty." She tried to clean it magically, but her fingers stuck together. Longbottom noticed and laughed with his mouth full of mashed potatoes.

"Very funny, Neville. Did you do this?"

"No. But it's a hoot. Here." He also tried to fix it. Nothing happened.

Her first and middle finger were crossed over and stuck fast. Nothing she did worked. She shook her hand in desperation. Finally, Longbottom cleaned her plate and piled it with food.

The memory faded, and he found himself in the dungeons. His former self was just Disillusioning himself. Severus heard Granger and Wood talking as he escorted her to her chambers. This was back in the first week of October.

The idiot Wood said, "So you had fun, right?"

"Yes, I did. Thanks for the great idea. I haven't been bowling in a long time. I didn't even know you knew about Muggle entertainment."

"I had a friend when I played Quidditch who was Muggle-born, and we used to go bowling all the time."

"I still can't believe you're afraid of horses. That blows my mind. But everyone has to have a fear, right?" She stifled a yawn. "Well, I'm bushed. I could probably sleep for a week. I don't usually stay up this late."

She'd said she could 'sleep for a week,' and then he'd found her on the following Monday asleep. Nothing had worked to revive her until Friday night...one week later.

The memory faded as Wood leaned in to kiss her. She turned her head, and Severus felt the same surge of satisfaction as before when Wood ended up only kissing her cheek. His own emotions were irksome.

Now he was behind his former self as he walked back from Hogsmeade. The wind was blowing erratically, and there were several kites flying in the wind. Wood was dragging Granger off into the woods. He sprinted after them, leaving his original self to catch up in due time. Granger was pressed up against a tree, Wood was leaning into her. Only this time she didn't turn her head. They kissed passionately, and Severus was jealous...was that what he was feeling? The kiss deepened and kept going. He thought it was a bit much, really.

Mercifully, they pulled apart, and the prat said, "Pretty good, huh?"

Granger's eyes were half-lidded. "Yes, I'm as high as a kite right now."

He recognized the phrasing she'd used. Proof enough: she was causing her own destruction. And within the minute, she was ripped away from the tree straight into the sky. He saw the memory-Severus drop his bags and swear as he leapt into the air.

Next came the memory of the recent staff meeting. Granger was upset...he could see that plainly enough on her face. His memory-self was giving assignments to the staff. He shuffled his way through the crowded room so he was behind Granger and Bones.

"All the staff are bending over backwards to help him. I can't believe it. He should have asked us if we could afford to help him with his workload before assigning it to us," Granger whispered to Bones.

Then everyone in the staff room jerked backwards and stayed that way. So, Granger's big mouth was the culprit. Just as he'd suspected: she didn't know she was doing it...that much was obvious, but it made her even more dangerous. There was no telling when the bomb would go off. Every time Granger uttered certain phrases, they would actually happen. The last memory faded, and he landed back in his chair. Well, he found himself in an interesting situation.

"Winky," he called out.

She appeared with a crack. "Master Snape is wanting his tea?" she asked.

"No, Winky. What did you do to Professor Ganger?"

"Winky is not understanding. I is not even to be seeing Miss Granger for some time." She cowered back as if he would strike her for such a statement.

"At the beginning of term, you cursed her, didn't you? You told me it was a charm."

"Winky is bound by the elf-code. I is not to be revealing the spell even to master."

"Then nod your head to my questions: Does the curse present itself when she speaks?"

Winky hesitated for a moment, then gave the slightest of nods.

What phrases had she said? She would keep her fingers crossed; she was tired enough to sleep a week, something about her being as high as a kite and lastly the bending over backwards bit. The first was an idiom, and the last three were hyperboles. So why those modes of expression? Was he missing something? At least it gave him some sort of guideline to work with.

"Another question, Winky. How much longer will this curse last?"

She admitted, "Winky is not knowing the length of the spell. I is saying *no* more."

"But, Winky, she almost fell to her death. I had to save her. Wand magic is useless against this curse. Someone could die if we don't undo the enchantment soon. Is there any way around the curse once it's been activated?"

For the longest time, Winky stood there trying to answer with a choking noise, but instead, grabbed a paperweight and started bashing her head. Little squeaks of pain punctuated the act. Severus was about to stop her, but her squeals were words.

"Once. Curse. Activated. It is. Staying. Until. It is. Fulfilled."

"So let me get this straight," Severus said to the tiny elf, now lying on the floor next to the paperweight. "If Granger says a certain type of phrase, it will actually happen? And it has to be fulfilled each time?"

She nodded warily.

"Merlin's saggy balls! You do realize the chit never shuts up? We'll all be maimed by the end of the week."

"I is sorry, sir."

"But what if she activates the curse with a phrase like, 'Over my dead body'?"

"Do not make Winky answer, sir. I is not allowed to answer any more questions." She cowered on the floor.

"You don't know or you cannot answer?" he questioned.

"Winky knows but is not allowed to answer," she said.

Severus dismissed her after that. There was much to think about.

He should probably tell Granger that her silly phrases were setting off the incidents, but he would have to be near her whenever she said something. If he distanced himself, she wouldn't have any hyperboles literally happen. But then, where would be the fun in that? He *could* milk this for all it was worth without any serious repercussions . . . if he were careful.

He'd have to bait Granger a bit, and things should turn out quite enjoyable. This could be his retribution, watching her say hyperbole after hyperbole and seeing the mass

chaos ensue. Severus convinced himself that if anyone were hurt, it would only be minimal. Hell, he had been bleeding out of his neck wounds yesterday, and that hadn't been too bad. Others could suffer at his expense for a while: he'd certainly suffered at their expense for years without so much as a "thank you" amongst the whole lot of them. Besides, no one would know it was intentional. What was the worst that could happen?

In mid-November, Granger showed up for tea one Sunday afternoon. It turned out Minerva had invited her. Granger asked how his progress was in regards to her curse. He lied and told her he was still in the research stage. Minerva glared. Damn. He'd forgotten she'd heard his entire conversation with Winky. Oh well, she was bound to the will of the current Headmaster, and she knew he didn't want to reveal his information to Granger.

They quickly dropped the subject in order to debate various topics of mutual interest. Halfway through the conversation, Minerva reminded him of an invitation he'd received from the International Potions Convention. It was held every five years, and all members of the Potions Institution were invited. This year it was in Turku, Finland. Granger had already received her own invitation and had made reservations to attend. He said he was going too, so she offered to add him into her reservations as most everywhere was booked in the general vicinity of the conference. The convention wouldn't be until New Years Day, but it only happened twice a decade. Every witch and wizard with a Potions interest across Europe was going to be in attendance.

With their plans set, they went down to dinner in the Great Hall. He found it comfortable talking with Granger; she was proficient in many of the subjects he enjoyed as well. And if there were any uncomfortable moments, Minerva stepped in to save the situation. He wanted the girl to become accustomed to his presence, so he encouraged the Sunday tea times. If she were comfortable, she'd be more likely to slip up and say a tainted phrase. It was a matter of waiting, and Severus was excellent with patience.

On the next Sunday, Granger appeared for tea again. She accidentally called him "Severus," and he didn't bother to correct her. He relished hearing his first name from her lips; she was already beginning to trust him. She blushed a little when she said it but continued to use it throughout the debate. He thought he should return the formality, but once he did she corrected him.

"Could you call me 'Granger' still? I hope you don't think it terribly rude. I use to hate it when you spoke to me using just my last name and never my title, but it's grown on me. Everyone calls me Hermione or Professor Granger. But you're different, and so it fits when you call me something different."

"Then I shall continue with the old standby," he said. He was getting in over his head, but he didn't fight it off.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

The last Friday in November produced a horrible storm. Snow fell in thick, wet flakes. At dinner, Hermione promised Neville she would help him cast warming charms in all the greenhouses to keep the exotic plants safe from the wicked weather. She bid Susan farewell at the staff table and trudged through the knee-deep snow to greenhouse four. Hermione found Neville already starting with the small potted plants on the center table. He greeted her and pointed in a general direction to start working. After a few hours, they'd ended up in the first greenhouse, which also housed Neville's office. Exhausted, they sat down to have a cuppa. While Neville made the tea, she cleared a space on his desk. Hermione couldn't help but notice that the paperwork she was handling was Neville's own schoolwork. Not Hogwarts papers, but for a secondary school for Herbology.

"Are you getting another degree?" she asked eagerly.

Blushing, he said, "Yes, it's a secondary degree-by-owl program. I just do the required work and send it to my professor in London once a week. I'm doing it full time, but it's starting to get a bit tough with my own work around here. But it will be worth it in about a year once I've finished. I can request a higher salary, and I can become a private tutor during the summers."

"Oh, Neville, that's splendid." Hermione took a glance at the required work for this week. Neville saw her eyeing it.

"This is my major essay before the Fall Final. We've been discussing Herbology in relation to potion ingredients. The topic is about the differences in at least fifteen varieties of aconite, and the proper care of it both while it's alive and then for storing its leaves, roots and nectar for potions ingredients."

"Well, you're clever with plants, this essay should be a piece of cake!" said Hermione.

At that moment, Severus stuck his head in the door. "Professor Longbottom, I was looking to speak . . . Ah, I see you have company. I'll come by another time." He was gone as quickly as he'd come.

His eyes hadn't rested on her for more than a few seconds. Was he ashamed at being friendly with her and didn't want the staff to know they were having weekly tea together? What a silly thought. She turned back to her Neville.

Neville looked scared. "What do you think he wants, Hermione?"

"Don't worry, Neville; he's been decent recently. I'm sure it's nothing. He didn't look angry, did he? Then buck up. It'll be fine."

He handed her the tea, and Hermione yelped with shock when she saw a two-layered chocolate cake sitting on the table. All over the icing were words relating to aconite.

"It's my essay!" he chortled. Picking up a fork from a drawer, he tucked in. "Have some. My essay tastes wonderful!"

"Nonsense, Neville, you don't know if the aconite was actually used as an ingredient for the cake. You could die!"

He spat it out. To be safe, she took him to Poppy to get an antidote. It wouldn't do to kill her friend with her big mouth; somehow this curse was popping up unexpectedly. She apologized over and over for the loss of his essay and for nearly poisoning him. He laughed it off and told her he had a copy of the essay in a drawer and thanked her for keeping him from eating the rest of the cake.

Oliver had accepted her apology for making him bleed, but he'd been quite short with her since. He insisted they start over as friends too. She wasn't thrilled with the idea of going back to the beginning, but she was glad he still wanted to be around her. But he frequently brought up her "problem," as he called it, and was an absolute prat regarding the whole incident. Even Severus had been more forgiving over the situation.

In fact, she'd never apologized to Severus for nearly killing him, only for trying to help him. And yet, it wasn't awkward to either of them. They were both comfortable knowing she'd made him bleed without any magical cure. So why hadn't Oliver been as forgiving? He'd been upset his old Quidditch wounds had been bleeding, and she understood how that could have been emotional for him. But Severus had been bleeding out his neck, and he'd previously almost died from those wounds, and she hadn't seen him crying over the wounds re-opening.

But they were two very different men. Isn't that what she liked about Oliver, that he was basically the complete opposite from Severus? Yet, Severus conversed with her pleasantly; she saw his passion for subjects that she'd never seen in anyone else. He had depth. But only on Sundays. Any other day of the week, he was reserved and cold, acting as if he'd never seen her before. Just a façade...that was all. He was an actor, but on which days was he acting?

Their past wasn't exactly something she could forgive at the drop of a hat either. He'd said cruel things to her, and he'd deliberately goaded and embarrassed her for no reason. Why was she so willing to keep coming back every Sunday after the way he'd treated her in the past? She didn't have an answer. Perhaps it was because she was lonely. Or the fact that he was the only one who thought along the same lines she did. Even when Minerva had been around, their conversations had never been this invigorating. It could have been that over time, the pain he'd inflicted had healed and subsided, and so she'd allowed herself to imagine it had never happened. But whatever the reasons, she found herself drawn to him. He was mysterious and intriguing. Besides, Minerva had befriended him and she must have had good reasons.

Oliver was a good man, though. Minerva had insisted he replace her, so he was all right too, right? He'd been through his own troubles too. He'd never reached his full potential after his horrid accident had permanently crippled his hand. At this very moment, he could have been playing Quidditch somewhere, doing what he loved. Instead, he was teaching at a school with students who were below his standards in Quidditch. He was constantly hitting up Rolanda to let him fill in when she couldn't make practice. Hermione saw him giving tips to the players regardless of their house team. Oliver was willing to find any ear to give expert tips and plays. His eyes lit up when he was on the subject. But Hermione often found herself fading out of attentiveness by that point. The only other subject that similarly affected her was Divination.

She would have to try harder to be a better friend. She'd gotten an idea back when they'd been in Hogsmeade, but her scary flight into the air had driven it from her mind for some time. However, now Oliver's birthday was approaching. So she sent off a letter to Viktor Krum in hopes that he could help her with a gift. They had occasionally corresponded over the years: a Christmas card here or a random note around each other's birthday...nothing serious. But she knew he would be willing to help her out. That was the kind of person he was. It was now December, and Oliver's birthday was on the twelfth. She was cutting it close, but Viktor should be able to comply.

The end of term was fast approaching; Oliver's birthday was the last day of fall term. In the meantime, she had her own papers and essays to grade. Her students were ahead of schedule, and they were all excelling. She was quite pleased with their output. A few students even showed signs of pursuing careers in Potions. Hermione mentioned this to Severus during their next teatime, and he scoffed at her.

"These students are all dunderheads. I've never seen a whole year excel in one large mass before, and it's not likely to happen during your first year teaching. You're too easy on them."

"Severus, you're an old sourpuss," she said.

Minerva snorted into her teacup trying to hide a laugh. It was about time someone told him he was just beastly!

The first weekend in December brought more snow. Hermione was glad to be spending most of it with Severus in his study. Minerva was playing cards with a young man in her portrait. Severus was getting a little long-winded on the subject of daisy roots, and she was forcing herself to listen, instead of blurting out her own joyous opinions of the stuff when there came a startling rap at the window.

Three owls were carrying a large parcel as the rushing snow swirled around them. They were having a difficult time hovering in one place, and they would drop several feet and then rise as they tried to synchronize their flapping.

Severus jumped up and opened the latch. They flew in, and he had to direct the box through the window. He called Winky to bring up some victuals for the owls. Hermione untied the parcel from a barn owl's foot.

"This package is addressed to you, Granger," Severus said. "It's from Viktor Krum. I didn't know you were still in contact with him."

"There are a lot of things about my personal life you don't know, Severus," she said.

"I didn't mean to pry. You know I, above all others, respect privacy."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound rude. I was only stating we hardly know each other. We just share common interests." It wasn't intentional, but her words had come out sadly. Hermione busied herself with the second owl.

Winky had some livers on a platter for the owls and some warm pumpkin juice in a bowl. She set these by the window. Severus was eyeing the parcel but was patiently waiting for her to explain what was inside. Hermione thought it would be fun to deny him the answer.

"It's late, and I want to unpack this in my room, so I think I'll be going. Thank you for tea, Severus." Hermione gathered up the long box and tried to leave. She couldn't quite get the door open; Severus, with a look of disappointment, came over and opened the door dramatically.

"If you intend to keep coming to my study for tea every Sunday," he said, "you could at least give me a few hours in the evening to get work done. Instead, you spend all afternoon up here bothering me with your silly ideas about daisy roots."

There were several retorts she wanted to say, but she knew he was mad she wasn't going to let him see the contents of the parcel. Instead, she smiled as the door shut in her face. She was beginning to sense when he was being sarcastic and when he was truly serious.

All of the students were leaving in the morning. It was Friday night and Hermione, Susan and Neville had thrown together a little birthday party for Oliver in the staff room. It was past student curfew, so most of the staff was gathered together eating cake and ice cream. Everyone was joined in little groups of twos or threes telling stories or sharing jokes. There was a small pile of gifts on the table from those in attendance, and Hermione raised her voice to get their attention.

Oliver started opening his gifts. He unwrapped a large bottle of Ogden's from Filius, much to his delight. Hagrid bestowed a large box of Honeydukes chocolates on him; Rolanda gave him a polishing kit for his broom. Poppy contributed a pillow infused with lavender to induce an aromatic therapy while he slept. Severus gave him an extra day's pay but reminded him to pay up on his debt from their last Quidditch bet. Sir Nicholas even came, but he left after a forlorn look at the food.

Finally, Hermione pulled out her gift and placed it carefully on the table in front of Oliver. He gently unwrapped the long parcel and reverently pulled out a Jet Stream Broomstick.

"Wow, Hermione. This is great. But I've already got a great broom..."

"Look, Oliver. It's signed by Viktor Krum," she pointed out. "I asked him if he had an older broom of his he could sign and send to you for your birthday. So he decided to buy a new one and signed this broom, which was his until last week."

"This is the greatest gift anyone's ever given me," he said as he stood to give her a hug of appreciation.

"How did you know," Severus asked with a wicked gleam in his eye, "that he wanted an expensive broom he's not going to ride, but just look at?"

"Well," Hermione answered thoughtfully, "when we went to Hogsmeade back in October, we stopped in Quality Quidditch Supplies' new store. And Oliver saw a broom signed by a Beater for the Irish National Quidditch team or something like that."

"And . . . " Severus prompted.

"And Oliver said, 'I'd give my left nut for a pro's signed broom,'" Hermione finished.

Severus actually grinned at her, but before she could question why, Oliver collapsed onto the table with a groan. Everyone else reacted, but Hermione whipped her head to look at Severus. He just smirked at her across the table with Oliver grunting between them. It was suddenly obvious to her that Oliver was missing his left testicle. How had she not put this all together before? Severus had egged her on, and she'd managed to destroy one of Oliver's reproductive organs. That sneaky Slytherin must've known more information than he'd let on.

As Poppy looked over Oliver, he gave Hermione a look of pure terror. She wanted to help but remembered her last slip-up. Would he forgive her this time? How did she always manage to hurt him? Things were not turning out the way she wanted them to for this relationship. Sadly, though, things never turned out the way she planned. She should be used to it by now. Without waiting to be told off by Oliver, she quietly left the infirmary.

The next day was hectic as students left for the holidays. She was on duty to escort a few groups down to the Hogwarts Express, and the snow was steadily falling. By dinnertime, she realized Oliver still hadn't been dismissed from the hospital wing, but she forced herself to stay away to give him some space. He was bound to break off any relationship with her...platonic or otherwise. She went to the Great Hall to have dinner but found most of the staff members weren't present. She ate quickly and went to her chambers for the night.

Hermione was surprised to see Poppy's head through the Floo an hour later.

"I think you need to come up. Severus says it concerns Oliver's health," she said, and then she was gone.

Hermione threw on some robes and stepped through the fire. Severus was standing next to the bed with his back to her, and Oliver seemed calmer than he had when she'd left yesterday. Severus turned slowly; he was holding the Jet Stream. What was going on?

"Hermione," Oliver said tentatively, "I don't want your gift anymore. Please take it back. Thank you for the thought, but I could do without." The last part he said was cold, and he emphasized the "it" as if referring to her or the relationship she offered.

Severus thrust it into her hands and looked her directly in the eyes. Oliver cried out in pain and passed out. She turned to look at Oliver, but out of the corner of her eye she saw Severus smirk. Poppy rushed over and told them to leave. Gladly!

As soon as they were in the corridor, she rounded on Severus. "What is going on? I know you're behind it. You're terrible at acting."

"I'm excellent at acting," he said as he continued walking.

She jogged to keep up with his long strides. "Don't dodge the point. You know what's going on, and you've kept it from me. You're possibly behind it too. I've never stopped considering you as a suspect."

"I've never done anything but be present while you've repeatedly maimed others."

"But you have information, don't you?" she said. Now they were ascending the spiral staircase to his office.

"You were expecting something to happen last night and again just now. What are you keeping from me? I'll admit I'm somehow responsible, but you know how to make it happen. I saw your face. You knew before it occurred."

He was back to his old self again...shutting her out. Severus sat at his desk and sneered,

"All I know is when you say certain phrases, they activate the curse. But that was obvious. I know nothing, trust me."

"You're hiding something. There has to be more . . . some sort of pattern, maybe. What do you see that I don't? I know it happens when I say things. But at times I expect something to happen and it doesn't. Then I think I'm in the clear . . . and testicles disappear."

"Then I suggest you leave a wide berth around me. You are dismissed." He didn't bother looking up. She left angry with him, angry with herself.

Was he really keeping information from her, or was she paranoid? She had thought they'd made it past their disagreements of the past. Severus was her friend now, and he wouldn't lie to her, she hoped. After all, what kind of friend held back information? Hermione needed some time alone. She had to put this all together. There was a well-worn path in her sitting room...probably from the man who vexed her the most. Despite its origins, she found that walking its length was comforting. Her mind got to work as her legs carried her up and down the room. Whenever certain phrases passed her lips, things happened. But Severus swore he had no involvement. Perhaps he was right. When had it all started? The first occurrence had to do when her fingers had stuck together in September. It couldn't have been too long before the incident that she'd been cursed...maybe the week or two before. But nothing eventful had taken place that she could remember.

Except, she thought suddenly, Severus had gotten angry with her for fraternizing with the house-elves. There was a motive for him: he could have cursed her for going behind his back. But he insisted he hadn't done anything to her. What if Winky had done it? The elf had been short-tempered when Hermione had asked for breakfast the next morning. Perhaps she hadn't liked the whole union project either. Hermione's best bet was to pull out her old research on house-elf magic. She'd gone through a lot of it while working for the Ministry, but nothing about this particular curse seemed familiar. However, she felt up to a challenge.

Severus watched Granger leave with only the slightest bit of guilt. Yes, she was catching on, but he'd been quite obvious with it because he wanted to see how quickly she'd put it all together. It was amusing to watch her.

"Severus Snape! I can't believe you," Minerva said behind him.

"I don't know to what you are referring," he said.

"She's scared and confused about what's going on. You can't just leave her in the dark."

"Excuse me, Minerva, but I believe this curse was set upon her to teach a lesson. I'm helping her learn. Is this not an institution where teaching and learning take place? I am a professor. It's only my nature."

"Tosh, Severus. You had best treat her with respect. She'd fall apart without you."

"What are you implying?" Severus was a little startled.

"I think Hermione is the type of person who needs intelligent conversation. She doesn't get much around here. But you fulfill that need for her. I used to fill it, but now that I'm not physically here, I can only do so much. She's matured, being around you. Besides, now that you two talk, I've noticed you are much more amiable. And the two of you converse so well together. Your discussions are much deeper than mine ever went with her. And secretly, I think you look forward to them just as much as she does."

He'd been afraid Minerva was going to say Granger had a sort of infatuation for him, something along the lines of a crush. Sometimes he wondered if she did, but then he reminded himself that no one had ever had feelings for him, nor ever would. Lily had been his best friend, but even she'd never expressed romantic feelings. And she had gotten closer to him than anyone else ever had. He'd had a fixation with her, and she'd never reciprocated. His love had driven her away in the end; it had been too much for her. But that hadn't stopped him to this day. Yes, he'd kissed many a woman, but he'd never ventured any further. He would die loving her in mind and body, a painful

sort life. But recently the pain had subsided. It must be his excess workload. Thank Merlin for small blessings.

He'd never been good with relationships. It had come from his parents' improper examples. They may have been in love at one point, but it had been long before he'd been born. They had been the two most spiteful and selfish people he'd ever known, excepting the Dark Lord, of course. But his relationship with Granger was turning out to be beneficial in more than one way. She was his plaything. He felt as if he were like a snake with wounded prey, playing with it for entertainment and then free to dispose of it once he grew tired of the game. But he was also enjoying the conversations and verbal sparring. She made Sundays exciting. It wasn't another useless day; he looked forward to teatime with a vigor he had never held for other activities. Perhaps she was having a slight effect on him. He was finding himself more lenient with the students and even with the staff when they requested help. Actually, he was considering mixing up the meal for Christmas dinner, just to have a change, and Severus Snape was a man who hated change.

Maybe it was the upcoming holidays putting him in this mood. It might be a passing thing, and Granger might not even be responsible. Nonetheless, he was in the mood for changing the menu, but he wanted everyone to be comfortable with the menu items. What the hell...he was in a generous mood. He would let the staff all pick their favorite foods, and then the elves would make a few servings of each so there would be plenty to go around. Yes, a good idea. He could be a nice guy...he wasn't always watching others fall victim to his wants.

Over the next few weeks, the castle was quiet. Only seven students decided to remain for the hols, and they were small first-years...not into making too much mischief. The snow was a thick blanket throughout the grounds, and the lake was frozen solid across the top. The halls were chilly, and almost everyone stayed in their respective areas of the castle. Granger, on the other hand, preferred to work in *his* office. He sensed that she was trying to pry more information about the curse from him, but he wasn't going to slip up.

The first few days she'd been in his office had been fine, they'd worked in companionable silence, but as her workloads lessened, and the time drew nearer to their upcoming convention, conversation dominated their time together. It would have been fine, but Severus really needed to get as far ahead as possible so he wouldn't have a mountain of work when he got back from the convention. But truth be told, he didn't want to do his work. He'd much rather debate topics with Granger. She was a formidable sparring partner, and sometimes she made him even think about something that had never crossed his mind in all his years as a Potions master. And then, he must remember, was his real reason for keeping her talking: it produced entertainment to see her get stuck in a hyperbole or idiom and have to figure her way out of it. Just the other day she'd said something about biting off more than she could chew, suddenly her biscuit had been shoved into her mouth, and she'd drooled all over herself before the curse had worn off. Even Minerva hadn't been able to resist laughing at the absurdity of the situation. But lately she'd been careful to stay on topic, and her slip-ups were decreasing. So did he force her to talk candidly to get some entertainment, or did he make her shut up to get his work done? It was a hard balance.

Christmas Day was bright with sun reflecting off the crisp snow. He showered, then dressed in his usual black and entered his office at eight o'clock, exactly. Granger was already sitting across from his desk, working quietly. She glanced up at him, flashing a smile in greeting and offered him some buttered toast. The day slid by smoothly as they worked alongside one another. Occasionally they would strike up a conversation, but it was as if she knew he was behind on work, and she was forcing herself to keep quiet. Several times he saw her staring at him with a furrow on her brow. Her mouth would open and close repeatedly, like a fish's mouth, but then she would resume her work.

By the time dinner approached, she had given in to her desire. He pushed his quill and bottle of ink aside and leaned back in his chair. Her talking spree was on her reasons for using fermented hyssop syrup as opposed to fresh hyssop extract. Granger was just getting into the finer points of the issue, when Minerva gave a knowing cough. Severus glanced at the clock...they were late for dinner. It was one thing to walk into the Great Hall together, as it appeared like they'd met in the hallway and were headed in the same direction. But it was another thing completely to be noticeably late together, indicating the two of them had been in each other's company prior to the meal and that their time together was the cause for their tardiness. He wasn't embarrassed to be seen with her, but rather, it was his reluctance to allow others to know about his personal life to some extent. Or that they would know they could go through Granger to get to him...but this was the spy talking inside him. There was no danger anymore, but he had a hard time convincing his instincts.

They entered the Great Hall, and every head turned towards them. There was no food yet because Winky waited for his signal, when he would be ready for the feast to begin. Everyone was seated at one table in the center of the room, students and staff alike, and there were only two seats left: his Headmaster chair, which sat at the head of the table, and the chair directly to his right.

Granger sat, and all eyes were on him. He welcomed everyone and wished each person a happy holiday, then announced that the feast should begin. Instantly the food appeared. The most random assortment of food was spread out before them. In front of all the staff members were their chosen entrees. Everyone was passing platters around the table, and a casual buzz of conversation picked up. A plate of ribs sat in front of Granger. She had her napkin tucked into the top of her robes, and she was bowed over her plate, covered in barbeque sauce, with her mouth full of pork. Well, that did look appetizing. He passed the bowl of buttered peas to Filius on his left and then took a few ribs from the large platter.

"I assume you choose the ribs?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"Yes, we had these when I was at DuPont. It's a big thing in the Southern United States; they have huge competitions for the best barbequed ribs and such. Here, you must have the potato salad and coleslaw with it. They add to it."

She passed him the two sides, and he was surprised when they did indeed fit perfectly together despite all appearances to the contrary. More plates of food passed over him; he continued to eat the pork ribs. The tangy yet sweet and zesty sauce was addictive. He couldn't get enough. Towards the end of the feast, he saw Filius eyeing the last rib. Severus snatched it before the short man had a chance.

"By the looks of it, those ribs were quite tasty," Filius pouted.

"They were finger-lickin' good," Granger said as she dropped the last bone onto the pile. She leaned back, closed her eyes and sucked the sauce off her thumb. She moaned softly and continued to the next digit. Severus stopped eating to watch. Her moves were seductive and enticing. Her other hand came up to her mouth, and she slowly opened her eyes. As she put her other thumb into her mouth her eyes found his. Those beautiful brown eyes were half-lidded and warm as she sucked her fingers. She finished the pinky finger, then ripped off her napkin from her collar as if it were binding her down.

Suddenly, she leaned...or rather, lunged...across the corner of the table and grabbed his hand. While looking directly into his eyes, she brought his fingers up to her full lips. Slowly, ever so slowly, she drew his pointer finger in her mouth and swirled her tongue around the pad. Her cheeks slightly puckered as she sucked on his finger with delight. His blood was pounding in his ears. She moved to his next finger and plunged it much further into her mouth, moaning as it slid against her warm tongue. His eyes were uncontrollably drawn to her lips as she cleaned off each finger; a slight smudge of sauce dappled her lower lip.

A heat was creeping up his neck, and as she moved from finger to finger, it felt like fire. Each time she finished a finger, the cool of the air that replaced her warm, caressing mouth was a loss he hadn't expected. When she finished with the first hand, he willingly proffered the second. She smiled at him, a seductive smile. This time she was vicious with her sucking. Her moaning was growing in volume, and in the back of Severus' mind he remembered there were others present at the table...most likely watching her do this to him. In a way it was more erotic to know others were seeing her touch him in such an intimate manner.

She still sucked his fingers, but her hand wandered down to her breasts; lightly she squeezed and caressed them one at a time. Granger's eyes closed again as she reached his thumb. She took her sweet time rolling her tongue around and around his thumb and pulling it in and out ever so gently. Regretfully, she finished, softly laying his hand on her chest right above her breast. She smiled demurely at him. Then without any warning she jerked, her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped. She stammered incoherently a few times, then jumped up from the table and fled the room in obvious embarrassment. He ruefully watched her run...that cursed phrase had been the most pleasurable yet and he had Filius to thank for it. All eyes were on him, and Wood appeared jealous. He raised his eyebrow with a sardonic smirk, rose from the table and left with a billow of robes behind him. Once out of the room, he practically ran to his study. What had just happened?

He couldn't stop debating over one question: did she really have feelings for him, or did the curse make her behave so sexily? A part of him would like to think she harbored those types of feelings for him; after all, it was nice to be wanted. But his practical side reminded him of his love for Lily, and nothing...not even Granger...could replace Lily.

Granger must be mortified. Either she liked him and was embarrassed he'd found out, or she didn't like him and was afraid of what he would think of the whole situation, not to mention what everyone down in the Great Hall was thinking.

He would have to speak with everyone and explain she was the recipient of a curse, and it had been activated...a one time occurrence, he would lie. Then there was the problem of the convention coming up. In a huge castle, it was rare they would bump into each other, but if they were traveling and attending the convention together, things were bound to get awkward at some point.

Granger's Gryffindor courage came to the rescue, though. On Sunday, she knocked on his door at their usual teatime. Her face was crimson, and she didn't quite meet his eyes when he greeted her, but she sat and politely drank her tea.

"Christmas dinner was understandable," he said, placing his cup down softly.

She looked at him over her teacup with eyes the size of her saucer.

"I realize," he continued, "the curse was in charge of your actions. And I'm not offended by any means. I explained the whole situation to the staff and students the next morning at breakfast...which you didn't show up for. And they know they are not to bring it up with you, out of courtesy."

She put her cup down and let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you. I am sorry about it all. I knew what I was doing the whole time, but it was right, needed. I couldn't stop myself. I didn't want to stop. It was almost like the Imperius Curse, you know? And as soon as I was done, I realized I'd embarrassed you in front of the staff. I never meant to put you at risk of gossip."

She was more afraid of making him look bad than of making herself look bad? Wow, he'd underestimated Granger. He was sure she'd have been upset to be seen sucking his fingers seductively. Instead she was more concerned with *his* image.

"I see." He was at a loss for words. It certainly gave him something to think about later . . .

"There was a time once," she said, "when I would have loved to have embarrassed you in front of everyone. It wasn't too long ago either. And sometimes I still want you to suffer. I don't think you're behind my curse problem, and I want you to know that I trust you. We're friends, right?"

He really didn't know what to say to that.

"Anyway," she said, changing topic before it became uncomfortable, "we need to plan our departure for the Potions Convention. It starts on Thursday at noon. The first speaker is one of my old professors, so I'd like to be there early. Could we leave around eight? We could get a good seat, and I could talk with Professor Belby."

"Shouldn't we check into the bed and breakfast before the conference?" he asked.

"No, they don't accept check-ins until the afternoon. We can do it once we've finished at the convention for the day. Don't worry; I made those reservations ages ago. It's the cutest little place, right on the Aura River, called September Sky. It's only a few blocks from the convention, so we can walk easily."

"You do realize it will be freezing on the Gulf of Bothnia this time of year. No doubt the gulf is frozen over, as well as the river. We'll see even more snow than we do here," he explained.

"But it will be so charming. Finland is such an enchanting country. All the woods and lakes..."

"Those are further north, you silly girl. We won't see any of the countryside, just the inside walls of the conference hall."

"It's the idea that's so picturesque, and in a way romantic." She stifled a small giggle, and he wondered what she meant by "romantic."

Ten

Chapter 10 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

On New Year's Eve, Severus spent the night asleep in his bed. He didn't find it reasonable to stay awake to welcome in the New Year. Why not get the rest his body needed, especially at his age and greet the New Year the next day when he was at his best? So when he went down to breakfast the next morning, he wasn't at all surprised to see only two students and three teachers present. Hagrid was shoveling food into his gaping maw at a speedy rate. The half-giant looked a little worse for wear, but he reported to be doing well during their monthly meetings. Perhaps Severus would find an assistant for Hagrid to help with the grounds-keeping duties.

Professor Pucey was up, but he looked quite tired. Thankfully, Pucey was an excellent teacher. He was a well-behaved Slytherin, and he did a decent job fulfilling his Head of House duties. Actually, he had adjusted quickly in comparison to the other teachers. Perhaps Pucey didn't want any more headlines containing the words "Slytherin" and "Muggle" with a negative context in the *Daily Prophet*. Their kind had found it hard enough right after the war, and no one wanted a repeat.

Wood seemed burly eyed and cranky. He was pouring coffee into his cereal. Obviously, he was awake because it was his assigned morning duty, not because he wanted to be up. It served the dunderhead right.

Granger came in dressed in a traveling cloak. Honestly, the woman had no patience. She was quivering from head to toe as she seated herself right next to him. There were so many other seats, and they were going to be spending a lot of time together in an hour, and she had to pick the seat open next to him. Wood gave a brief glance at her, but she wasn't paying attention. Did the git want to start over with their relationship? He remembered the look Wood had given him after Granger had licked his fingers so overtly. Yes, he obviously wanted her back out of jealousy. Wood and Granger were just friends, wasn't that what she had said? Just friends. Not that it mattered in the slightest to him.

After breakfast, Severus went to his office and double-checked everything on his mental "To-Do List." Filius, the Deputy Headmaster, was in charge until he returned. Hagrid was escorting the student body back from the train station on Saturday. And Severus had notified the School Board of his absence ages ago, so it looked as if everything was in order.

A knock at the door sounded, and in came Granger. She had a small bag of luggage and another, beaded bag. Thank goodness she knew how to pack lightly. He pointed

her to the Portkey, a book on Quidditch, he'd found while cleaning out the desk a few days ago. She grasped it in her small hand, and he took a hold of the other end. His fingers brushed hers, and he was reminded of her red lips surrounding them. He flicked his eyes up to her face, and she was blushing. A quiver of excitement ran through his body: desire, joy, fear and pain. What was this woman doing to him?

A tug at his naval signaled the Portkey was working. When the world stopped spinning, they were in a dimly lit room. It was perfectly square, and there was a box of random objects, which were obviously used Portkeys. He chuckled their book in the box as he walked to the door. A registration table was directly in front of them, along with several faces he vaguely recognized from previous conventions.

Severus gave them his name, and they marked him off. Granger was next to him, giving her name as well. They handed her several brochures and a few stacks of paper. He got nothing.

"What are all those papers?" he asked as they walked down the concourse to the right lecture hall.

"Er . . . these are a few forms, nothing big," she said. "Oh look, they have a food court. Do you want something to eat? I'm starved."

She rushed over to the line and refused to look at him, choosing instead to study the overhead menu with great care.

"Granger, we just ate. And what forms?" he asked.

"Hmm? Would you like me to get you anything?" she said, not meeting his eyes. Turning to the woman behind the counter, she said loudly, "Yes, I'd like to have a large coffee and a bagel with loads of cream cheese." She bought her food and walked off to find a table to sit at.

"I'll find out sooner or later," he said evenly. She didn't appear to hear.

They found the lecture hall hosting Damocles Belby, her professor from DuPont. Hermione introduced the two men, and they talked amicably before finding a seat. The rest of the conventioners filed in. Within the hour the room was packed. Severus cast a silent cooling charm on his person. The room was already sweltering, and they were going to sit in here for three hours.

Unfortunately, the next three hours were torture: Granger pulled out a bottle of ink, balanced it on her knee and dipped a quill in. Somehow, she'd managed to fit a scroll of parchment inside her beaded bag and was furiously writing notes. And he'd thought she had been an avid note-taker as his student! To make matters worse, she muttered everything Belby said as she wrote. It sounded like a delayed echo. After an hour, he asked her to cast a silencing charm on herself so he wouldn't have to hear her mumble. But even without the sound of her voice, her feathered quill bobbed frantically across the paper, which was equally distracting.

Lunch was a relief, but there were too many witches and wizards in line to get anything from the concessions. In the dusky light of the winter sun, he spotted a little café across the street. If his memory served him correctly, most places in Finland served pea soup on Thursdays. That sounded just right for such a cold day in January. He promptly exited the building. He heard the snow crunching behind him...Granger had a fear of being left alone, apparently. He was already ordering two bowls of hot pea soup when she walked through the door behind him, the bell jingling.

He pushed the Styrofoam bowl into her hands and sat down at a small table next to the door. It was perfect. They ate in silence before marching back across the street to the convention center. Lunch was almost over, but the queue at the little food window was still quite long. Dunderheads, the whole lot of them.

Severus ran his finger down the schedule. The next conference he wanted to attend was upstairs. Granger tagged along; did she not know they didn't have to do everything together? This was going to be a long day, but a part of him was glad to have her by his side. They would certainly have many discussions on the information being presented today. At seven o'clock, the last lecture finally ended, and he pulled himself out of the chair. His body must have molded to the seat because he was stiff and uncomfortable once he stood. Granger stretched her arms above her head, and his eyes automatically were drawn to her breasts. Her nipples were pert, and he could make out just a hint of them through the fabric of her jumper.

They dined in a small bistro a block away, then crunched their way through the snow to the bed-and-breakfast. Severus carried his small trunk, and the bottom scraped the top off the mountainous snow running the length of the sidewalk. Granger chattered on beside him regarding the last speaker's topic. A streetlamp illuminated her face, tinged pink from the cold. Her scarf was black, as was her traveling cloak. It suited her; he'd been expecting to see her garbed out in scarlet and gold. But then he remembered the silken black bed sheets he'd seen when she'd been in her enchanted sleep. There was obviously a dark side to her that he didn't know about.

He sat in a stiff, high-backed chair in the formal sitting room of the B&B. It was a quaint little place run by a plump woman who reminded him of Molly Weasley. Granger was trying to converse with the hostess. Severus spoke Finnish well enough to have taken care of the transaction, but Granger had been the one to make the reservations...let her sink or swim. The woman was having a hard time finding the change Granger had made on the reservations months ago. The original reservation was there: one room, large bed and bath. But the second owl she had sent to request his room apparently had never made it. Splendid! The place was fully booked, along with all the other lodgings in the area, due to the large mass of Wizarding people here for the convention. It was not only Wizard-owned businesses, but all the Muggle establishments were packed as well. The woman was trying to explain all this to Granger, but she didn't comprehend.

This was going to take forever if he didn't do something himself. Turning in the chair, he asked to see the room. The woman complied, leading them down a narrow hallway to the last door on the left. The bed was a decent size, taking up most of the room but was not conventional for their needs. A Muggle television was propped up in front of the bed, and a large loveseat sat against the far wall. A small bathroom was next to the door.

Severus asked if he could magically expand the room or transfigure the loveseat into another bed. The woman frowned and got huffy. She explained they had experienced problems in the past with guests doing such things and so had charmed the furniture to stay as it was. That option was out. They'd have to make do somehow. He dismissed the woman.

"You'll be sleeping on the loveseat, Granger," he informed her.

Her hair whipped him in the face as she spun to glare up at him.

"You were the one who muffed up the reservations, so you must pay," he explained.

Indignantly, she plopped onto the bed and bounced slightly, her crossed arms pushing up her bust.

"Oh, Severus, look!" she exclaimed, all anger forgotten. "The bed is already enlarged. Come, sit." She grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the bed next to her. They had been sitting next to each other, but when he looked over, she was clear at the other end. The bed was huge.

"We will never know the other person is in the bed," she said.

This didn't feel right. Well, it felt great, but it wasn't supposed to. He shouldn't be so excited to sleep in the same bed as Granger. Thinking of her lying with him was torture. But it would never happen...it was a betrayal to Lily and to the love he still held for her. "Granger, I don't think . . ."

"Shh." She leaned over to him conspiratorially. "It'll be our little secret. We need a place to sleep while we're here. My lips are sealed. Besides, I'm really tired."

Dammit, she'd done it again. Her smile fell off her face as her lips sealed together. A second later, she realized what had happened, and she clawed at her lips frantically. Her cries were muffled and pitiful. He grabbed her arms and held them tightly; she was a mess. Large tears splashed down her face in her hysterics.

"Calm down!" he commanded.

She was thrashing on the bed. There was nothing else to do but sit on her. Severus forced her to lie on the bed and pulled her arms over her head. Then he straddled her.

"Granger. Granger, listen to me." He spoke in his nearly silent, silky voice. "It's going to be all right."

She was calming down...she wasn't resisting him anymore as he continued to coo softly. But tears still streamed down her scared face. He brought his mouth to her ear. The smell of her perfume was overpowering this close; it smelled divine. Severus wanted nothing more than to kiss her neck or bite her earlobe and watch her skin respond to his touch. Instead he said, "All we have to do is fulfill the phrase, and you will be fine. We only have to sleep together tonight. By morning, you'll be back to normal. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head and breathed deeply through her nostrils, as if smelling him. She moaned softly and arched her hips ever so slightly underneath him. Sensing a dangerous path, he allowed himself to only brush a tear away with his thumb, then quickly dismounted. Her cheeks were stained pink. Grabbing her beaded bag and luggage, she clambered into the washroom. He unpacked his clothes and hung his robes in the corner closet. Severus hadn't been planning on anyone seeing his nightwear, but there was no helping it now. He wasn't ashamed of his cotton pajama pants or his overly large tee shirt, so he refused to transfigure them for Granger's sake.

But all thoughts of his pajamas were gone the moment she stepped out in her silky negligee. It was the same one he'd seen during her week-long sleep, the crimson red thing he'd thought about more times than he wanted to admit. And it didn't help to have her sauntering about the room. Those unruly curls flowed down her back, and they swayed in unison to the hem of the skimpy nightgown. He couldn't help his eyes dragging over her body. She was luscious. But the smirk on her face was triumphant.

"You could have transfigured your outfit, Granger," he spat.

Her eyebrows quirked at him with a look that was daring him to say it again.

More politely, he said, "It's bound to get cold during the night, after all."

She pointed her wand at the bed, and he knew she'd cast a warming charm.

"Remember, the hostess said spells on the furniture wouldn't work." He brushed past her to the bathroom, and she eyed his outfit, then snorted.

"I'm glad you can't speak. I know exactly what you'd have said, and I would have had to curse you," he emptily threatened.

Minerva had bought him the pajamas years ago, and of course they were her family's tartan print. But oddly enough, the scarlet looked quite close to the color of Granger's nightwear...they matched.

Severus waited as long as possible in the bathroom until he was sure she would be asleep. He cracked open the door and cursed under his breath when the hinges creaked. Thankfully, she was sleeping when he crawled into the bed beside her. The bed stretched out, and they were several feet away from each other. There was nothing indecent; his memory of Lily remained unscathed. Perhaps Granger had been right. It would be tolerable sharing a bed for the night.

When morning came, he found he was spooning her with a hard-on. And to make matters worse, he was on her side of the bed. In all his life he'd never moved across a bed in his sleep. He rarely even turned over. How had he gotten next to her? During the night her gown had hitched up, and his arm was wrapped around her bare stomach. What else had he done to her while his subconscious had had control? Jerking his arm away, he scrambled out of bed, not waiting to see if she was awake.

He showered, realizing only too late he'd left all his clothes out there *with* her. So he wrapped the towel around his waist and prayed she wasn't awake yet. But when he stepped out into the cold bedroom, she was bent over rummaging through her luggage. He could make out the rim of her firm bum. Walking stiffly over to the closet, he removed some clothes and turned to change in the privacy of the bathroom. But the door was shut. He was alone in the room. She'd stolen the loo! He'd never lived with a woman, but he'd heard of this: women were territorial and would fight to the death for their space. He hadn't thought Granger was that sort of woman.

Feeling oddly exposed, he dropped the towel and hurriedly dressed. He dried his hair wandlessly and waited for Granger to finish. It was odd that she hadn't at least greeted him this morning. Maybe she was embarrassed seeing him so ill-clad. Well, she'd done it to him last night, so she deserved it. The door opened, and he was glad to see her smartly dressed in a charcoal dress with matching robes. Her infernal hair was partially swept back, and as she approached, he could smell the Japanese cherry blossom perfume emanating from her.

He greeted her, and she smiled slightly, then grabbed the beaded bag and headed for the door. No speech from her was odd. Sadly, though he hated to admit it, he missed the sound of her voice.

"Granger, look at me," he said as she reached for the doorknob.

Slowly she turned around and tried to give him a look implying, "What?" But the quivering of her lower lip said it all. The longer she stared at him the more her eyes filled with tears, and she frowned uncontrollably before sniffing loudly.

"Your lips are still stuck, aren't they?" he asked softly.

She nodded, and a few errant tears spilled.

"Let's think about this logically," he said.

She gave him a look as if to say, "I've done that already." But he ignored her.

"You said we should sleep together . . . er, in the same bed while we were here for the convention. Then you said it would be our little secret with your lips sealed. Obviously, the curse will end once we've finished sleeping here for the convention, so by tomorrow morning you should be able to open your mouth. It's not so bad, at least you won't have to cast a Silencing Charm while you take notes."

Her stomach growled, signaling her need for sustenance. He did know of a powder she could inhale to give her the proper nourishment for a twenty-four hour period. He'd have to find an apothecary somewhere. He explained his idea and left.

They would miss the first hour or so of the convention, but things didn't really pick up until after lunch anyway. There was a large dinner planned that night for all in attendance. Too bad Granger wouldn't be able to eat, but at least she wouldn't be licking his fingers in front of their Potions peers.

After getting directions from their hostess, he bought the needed ingredients and returned to their room. Granger had a traveling Potions kit set up. Where had she been hiding that? Severus got to work grinding ingredients with the mortar and pestle and dicing dried ingredients. It was a raw powder requiring no cooking, luckily. But in the end it worked: she'd looked a bit puckish before, but after snorting the concoction, her stomach stopped growling and some color came back to her cheeks.

The lecture hall was full when they slid in through the doors and took two seats in the back row. She retrieved her parchment and took notes as usual. The speaker left a few minutes at the end for a "Questions and Answer" session, and Granger's hand predictably flew into the air. She had already been picked for a question before she'd realized she couldn't speak. Severus had to think of some trivial question he already knew the answer to, so she wouldn't look like a fool. She gave him a grateful smile but wrote on her parchment, "Was that an actual question you had?" Her smile had turned into a smirk.

Dinner finally came, and Granger was squirming in her seat as the plates were passed out to each table. Four other guests were seated with them, and Severus tried not to converse with them. In fact, he tried not to speak with anyone. Granger couldn't eat the dinner, and she looked anxiously away every time one of their table companions spoke to her. Finally, an elderly woman asked him if Granger was ill.

"No, she's just dumb," he said loudly.

The looks he got around the table were priceless. Too bad Granger couldn't talk; though he was sure she would have set off another cursed hyperbole. She stamped on his foot instead.

After the meal was eaten, those running the convention introduced the prize ceremony.

"Hello, everyone, my name is Dr. Parks. This year, we have five awards to hand out. And we'll get right down to business. Our first award is for the category 'Redefined Basic Potions Principles.' And the nominees are . . ."

Severus nudged Granger and jerked his head, showing he wanted to bail out early. He hated watching others get awards, and this category was his least favorite. In the past, before the first war had broken out, he'd entered his improved Potions but had never won. And then, after the first war, he'd entered again. Still he'd been refused his due glory. It had been because of the rumors regarding his association with the Dark Lord. So what? He had been and still was one of the best Potioneers of all time, and he knew it. But he'd stopped entering a long time ago. He didn't need peer recognition, unlike some people . . . He stood to leave, but she pulled him down and wouldn't let go of his hand. She shook her head and furrowed her brow, indicating she wanted him to stay. Then Severus remembered the paperwork Granger had been so mysterious about. Had she entered into the competitions?

"The winner is," Parks said as he dramatically opened an envelope. "Eugene Anderson from Stockholm, for his hard work in revolutionizing the Pepperup Potion."

Everyone clapped. One down, four to go. Next came the "Advancement of Potions Education" award, followed by the "Produce of Peace Potions" award.

"Our fourth award is for the category "Physiology Promoted Potions," and it's been difficult in years past to find someone who's been able to come up with even one thing worthy of nomination in this category, let alone have multiple nominees. But this year . . ."

Would the man hurry up? It was getting tiresome listening to his false cheeriness.

"And the winner is...Hermione Granger from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for her deft anti-venom that saved the renowned double agent, Severus Snape."

Holy shit, what? Granger was ecstatic. Her hands were covering her mouth, and her eyes were huge as she swiveled out of her seat and practically skipped up to the accursed man, Parks. She took the tiny golden cauldron he proffered and made small grunts. She put her free hand over her eyes, making some wild gestures indicating she was too emotional to say anything. After a moment of silence, she just nodded her head and sat back down next to him.

But the smile she gave him was smug. Actually, there wasn't a tear on her face from her performance of a cry on stage. Well, he had to hand it to her; she had a way with acting. He'd thought she was overcome with emotions at the knowledge of winning. Instead, she was only covering up her self-inflicted handicap. She shoved the golden cauldron into her beaded bag, and he heard a muffled "thunk" as it fell to the bottom of her magical purse.

Parks was announcing the next category for "Amusing and Miscellaneous Potions" when Severus saw her perk up out of his peripheral vision.

". . . And the winner is . . . well, blow me down, it's Hermione Granger again, for her clever little Bubble Wand Potion for children."

She flaunted up there, graciously took the cauldron and put on a show of tears again. Her smile was humble, but only because her mouth was shut, and she couldn't blatantly grin. He didn't wait for her to sit down this time but instead, left the conference hall. He didn't care if Grange followed him or not. He wasn't going to watch her gloat and playact for everyone else in the room. He was no fool. She'd only won those awards because she was president of the Harry Potter Club.

The air was sharp as he stepped out into the night. A streetlight flickered as he turned the corner. The whole thing was just a popularity contest. He would admit her anti-venom was clever, but it had only saved one life...his. And it couldn't even be used again, considering Nagini was dead, thank Merlin. So why did Granger get the award? And then the bubble wand? Come on, it was a silly child's toy. He'd made better advancements with all of his potions in the past, and he couldn't win a stinking award. Who cared? He sure as hell didn't. At least he tried to convince himself otherwise.

He stamped the snow off his boots at the entryway of the September Sky Bed and Breakfast. Most of the lights were off, so he quietly climbed the stairs to his...their room. The silence was peaceful and calming. He was tired too from listening to so many idiots and their pitiful research. Why had he even agreed to go? Because it was the first convention since he had been revived? They only held these conventions every five years, and he'd missed the last one because he had been in stasis. He forgot how irksome it all was.

He threw his boots into the closet and hung up his robes. He was pulling up his pajama bottoms when the door opened. His back was her, but he knew Granger was watching him, so he pretended to not see her as he pulled the shirt over his head. Without a word or a look in her direction, he swept into the loo and slammed the door. He was sure it wasn't as impressive as it ought to be since he didn't have his robes to billow behind him, but he had to work with what he had.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Hermione watched Severus slam the door in her face. He was officially pissed. So much for the fun time in Finland . . . actually, that had ended last night when the reservations had been screwed up. And then she'd sealed her lips shut...a really impressive thing to do. Severus had come to the rescue with calming her down. And to top it off, he hadn't seemed upset helping her with her nourishment problem either. But he'd been a minger once the award ceremony had started. Was he upset because he hadn't won anything this year? She was sure he would have had several golden cauldrons from all the improvements he'd done to his old Potions textbook as the Half-Blood Prince. Wasn't she allowed to gloat a bit? After all, it was her first time. And two in one night! The bubble wand was purely luck. There must have been some pitiful entries if she'd won the last category.

She unsheathed her feet from her pumps and cautiously took off her robes. She didn't want Severus to walk in while she was naked...well, she did, kind of. Those sorts of thoughts had entertained her a few times, but it was all fantasy. What would she really do if he walked out of the loo while she was naked? Better yet, what would he do? It would probably improve his mood some to see some arse.

Straining her ears, she could make out the water running in the sink. He was probably brushing his teeth. She slowly removed her clothes, leaving it to chance. She would just change normally, and if he happened to walk out while she was nude, she would take whatever came. And if she got dressed before he came out, she would go on with life with no alterations. The room was chilly, causing goose bumps to mature on her exposed skin. She filtered through her clothes while naked, searching for her nightgown. Oh, there it was, oops, she *accidentally* dropped it.

He still wasn't coming out! Where was he? It was deathly quiet in there. She slipped into her nightgown, appraising herself in the mirror. Did she look promiscuous in this outfit? Severus hadn't approved last night, but he was from a different era...maybe he liked a different look or nothing at all. She was tempted to crawl into bed naked and see what he did when he joined her. But she didn't want to appear wantonly. She would just let it happen by chance or let him think it was purely chance.

Severus Snape was a snarky bastard. He had treated her badly so many times, but for some reason she couldn't hold a grudge against the man for very long. His bad attitude was sexy, something like the unexplainable attraction women had for "the bad guy." Every time they had a conversation, she was drawn to him; Hermione was obsessed. He had thoroughly enjoyed her finger-sucking bit at Christmas. Even though she had been unable to control her actions, she had seen how he'd looked at her as she'd ministered to him. And she hadn't told him how much of a turn on it had been to do it to him either. But the best part of the whole incident was his simple act of kindness when he had lied to the staff and students on her behalf. When he'd told her about it, he hadn't used any pretenses about doing it for his own welfare...only as a courtesy to her, to keep her from embarrassment in the future. That was the sexiest part of all, and he had no idea.

Hermione patiently waited at the foot of the bed for the bathroom door to open but realized she couldn't brush her teeth anyway. Her breath was going to stink tomorrow morning. She crawled up the bed to the pillows when Severus came out. What a lovely view for the man: her arse in the air as she crawled on all fours up the length of the bed. Well, she'd wanted to give him a sign, here it was. She scrambled under the covers and heard him slide into bed next to her. The lights went out. Either he was really mad or really dense.

It took a long time for Hermione to sleep, and she was sure Severus was having trouble too. She wanted to roll over and snuggle up to him, tell him he shouldn't be jealous of her because in a way he'd won the award too. If he hadn't been in need of help, she never would have made the potion. But instinct told her to leave him alone. Besides, she couldn't talk. Finally, she slumbered, and the room grew cold. It was a restless sleep, and she seemed aware of her thoughts as she slept. It wasn't hard for her subconscious to draw her closer to the warmth of the other body in the bed. All night, she slowly crept closer and closer, only partially aware of what she was doing. Her mind told her several times to stop, but the irrational side won out, telling her it was fine. She needed warmth; it was only right. When she found it, she buried her face into it, sleeping peacefully at last.

When she did awake, she was aware of a robust-like spice. But her hazy mind couldn't tell which kind. It was oddly familiar...musky; it attracted her and sent a chill down her spine, reminding her of a thrilling and windy adventure. The warmth moved slightly, pulling her out of the dazed sleep. Slowly, she opened her eyes, blinking rapidly from the collected sleep and found herself curled up into Severus' chest, facing him. She took stock of where her arms were, hopefully nowhere embarrassing. One hand was tucked under her head, good. And the other was in front of her face, lying on the bed, next to his chest as it heaved slightly with each of his slumbering breaths.

But *his* hands were another story. One arm was under her neck, and the other was resting on her bare thigh, right up at her panty line near the hip. Her nightgown had slipped up to her belly button again. It never stayed put, its only downfall. She wanted to stay in this position, pretending this whole thing meant something, but she knew he'd be mad when he woke up and found her invading his space. Slowly, she eased his hand off her hip, but he grunted and slid it back up her thigh.

"Stop moving, Granger," he mumbled. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Severus," she said, realizing she could finally open her mouth. "I..."

"Shh, you're the one who wanted us to sleep in the same bed. Now hush, I'm comfortable, don't move."

"But do you know . . ." She didn't know what to say. And why was she arguing with him?

"Mmm, I liked you better as a mute," his voice croaked as he pulled her closer.

Hermione wondered if he was actually awake, but she didn't really care. It was nice feeling wanted even if it weren't real. They lightly dozed, and when she woke up again, she thought they must have overslept because the sun was pouring in through the window. There was no point in finishing the convention now; it ended at noon. It must be nearly ten if there was this much light. Turku wasn't that far from the Arctic Circle, and winter sunlight was limited.

She watched him sleep. Her feelings for Severus befuddled her a bit. The past few months had been invigorating. She'd never had such conversations before, and it was addictive. But she worried about being overbearing. Was she invading his privacy too much, spending too much time with him? Surely he would have said something by now. He would have told her off if he didn't want to be around her any longer. But he hadn't. So she kept coming back, wondering how far she could push before he would shove.

There was more than that: not only was she enjoying the discussions and sparing but she also enjoyed him. He was her friend, although she was sure he wouldn't use that word out loud. And she had a yearning to take it a step further. Like right now. It was so natural to sleep next to him and feel his gentle hand on her thigh. To have his breath brush past her neck and know he was comfortable too. Sadly, he wasn't awake. She was sure if he were, they wouldn't be in this position. But it was obvious that his subconscious wanted security and affection.

Tentatively, Hermione inched her hand down to his groin. Heat radiated from him, and she lightly grazed her hand across the fabric of his pajama pants. He pressed against her hand for a moment, and he was hard. It sent a message right to her core. She wanted to grasp him in her hand, but knew it was uncouth. Instead, she reached into her own knickers to fulfill her own needs.

His body must have been thinking the same thing because, although he was still asleep, his breathing had quickened and he pressed his cock against her stomach. They reached climax almost together, his hips buckled against her.

"Lily," he whispered through his teeth as he came.

She jerked her hand out of her knickers, stung by his words. He was close to waking up now. Hermione hid her face in the pillow. Her heart was breaking; it was a plunging hole making it difficult to function. With only a moment to control her quivering chin, she steadied her breathing and pretended to be asleep. Severus was awake now; she hoped her act was convincing. He tried to leave the bed quietly so as not to wake her...he was probably embarrassed by his "dream" and wanted to clean up.

As soon as he was in the bathroom, she got out of bed herself. Silent tears spilled onto the bed. They had been awfully close ~~to~~ *her* side of the bed, just like yesterday. Severus had moved more during the night than she had. It made her feel a little better but not enough to cover the hurt from his subconscious confession of Lily. He was still in love with Lily? Long ago, Harry had told her how Severus had loved his mum since childhood, but she had thought by now he would have been over her. Lily's death was avenged; he should have let go. Why couldn't he see her, Hermione Granger?

What hurt the most was the fact that she was infatuated with this man, and she didn't seem to have any effect on him. Night after night she had dreamt of Severus as she had licked the barbeque sauce off his fingers. More often though, she would relive their most recent debates; he always had a passion in his eye when he'd spoken on a subject he loved. Those were the moments she'd seen whom he really was. But he was passionate for subjects and subjects alone...not people and certainly not her.

Hermione packed while he showered. Again, he came out with a towel around his waist, and she could barely look at him. It was despairing to know he would never be hers. Oh, this was ridiculous! She was a grown woman; she needed to get in control of her emotions. Severus was always in control of his. Why couldn't she do the same? Hermione gathered a change of clothes and went to shower. As she adjusted the water temperature, she mused on how intimate it was using the wet shower after he'd recently exited. There was still steam on the mirror, and the floor was wet where he'd dried off. Why, oh why, couldn't she just stop?

The water was cold long before she was willing to get out. Severus was slamming drawers impatiently, waiting for her to finish. He was still mad about last night then. She dressed quickly, stepping out with wet hair. He was scowling; she didn't have to ask why. He wanted to grab the next Portkey and get out. This trip had been as unromantic as possible...completely unsentimental. She never wanted to remember this morning as long as she lived.

A Portkey was ready when they arrived at the conference hall. Without either one speaking, they took a hold of the cracked beer bottle. Within minutes they were inside Severus' office. His jerky movements told her he didn't want to talk. She hadn't spoken to him since he'd told her he liked her better quiet. She wasn't in the mood for talking anyway; it would only make her cry.

The students were incorrigible once school started on Monday. Maybe their New Year resolutions for the year 2004 were to drive her insane. Hermione broke up three fistfights before the owls even arrived at breakfast. Oliver sat next to her, much to her surprise, asking for forgiveness for his tart behavior during his birthday last month. Must have been his resolution to make amends. She told him it was nothing. Okay, so she was still at odds with Oliver, but she wanted to make Severus jealous. But she asked herself why he would even care about her relationship with others in the first place? His thoughts only revolved around the dead woman of his fantasies while a living, desirable woman wanted him just three seats down the table.

Two more fights, or duels rather, broke out in the corridors. Those students were lucky she was there before Filch could assign detentions. Classes were chaos, much like her emotions. Everything she'd spent teaching last term seemed to have fled from their minds over the holiday. All her classes fell behind schedule. She hadn't planned on this. Growing up with Harry and Ron should have prepared her better. No one was listening to directions, and large amounts of ingredients were wasted by the cauldron-full each class period.

On Wednesday night, she was tired of grading half-completed essays. She needed something to do. But she had nowhere to go. Susan and Neville were on rounds tonight, and Oliver was down at the Quidditch pitch "watching" the Gryffindor team practice; she didn't dare go up to the Headmaster's office. She still didn't know where they stood. Things were still a bit awkward. She knew Severus' birthday was on Friday, and she didn't have a gift for him. Maybe a heartfelt present would smooth things over. Figuring the best gift would be a potion, she entered her storeroom. Ingredients lined the shelves around her. Something was bound to catch her attention and hopefully catch his. So far her anti-venom had done nothing but anger him, and her bubble potion had only made him scoff. What about a gift somewhere between serious and childish? No, what rubbish. This was going to take some serious thought.

Hopefully, the award ceremony hadn't burned out their relationship. Suddenly, she wondered if he'd known she'd been touching herself while sleeping with him. What if he'd deliberately said Lily's name just to show her how much he didn't like her? He wouldn't have done that, would he? No, she decided that he would never be that cruel.

Hermione turned her attention back to Severus' gift; she was determined to give him something whether he accepted it or not.

On Friday, she was all nerves. Hermione couldn't decide when to give him his gift. Breakfast in the Great Hall was too public. So maybe she'd wait until her free period. But she wasn't sure he would be available. By dinner she realized it had better be soon. After dinner, the gargoyle jumped out of the way, and she knocked on his door, waiting for permission to enter. She heard a slurred voice tell her to enter.

"Happy birthday, Severus," she said quietly.

He was inebriated. Already? Dinner was only an hour ago.

"I have something for you," she prompted.

He took a swig from something in a bottle.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I made you a Hate Potion." She pulled it out of the box, and it plunked on the desktop. "And I've had this bottle for a few years now; I'm passing it on to you." She pulled out a much larger bottle. It made a deep thud as it rested on the desk.

He pulled it towards him and read, "Gregory's Unctuous Unction. So let me get this straight. You thought I'd like a Hate Potion, and a potion that makes me think you're my best friend? Would you care to explain?" he sneered. He wasn't going to make this easy.

"To tell the truth, our relationship has had a lot of ups and downs, and I thought these could straighten it out a little. When you find yourself hating me, you could take a small dose of Gregory's, and when you're pleased with me, just take the Hate Potion and remember all the reasons I don't meet your expectations."

Severus blinked.

"It was supposed to be a bit more funny, but you were supposed to be a bit more sober."

Another swig from the bottle.

Fine, if this was how it was going to be . . . "Right, well, have a wonderful birthday. Sorry I even bothered." She turned sharply on her heels.

"Granger," he called gruffly. She turned around. "Quit trying to show off you dammed talents. I'm sick of you throwing it in my face. You think after the convention and your gloating over two awards, you can just waltz in here and one-up me in my own office? I thought you'd said we were 'friends.'" The liquid sloshed inside the bottle as he made quotation marks. "Friends don't smear failure in their friend's faces. I don't need reminding of my shortcomings."

He went back to the bottle.

She quickly sped through the corridors until she found the stupid portrait of fruit. After stocking up on her own bottle of Firewhisky, she slumped onto her couch. Hermione wasn't much of a drinker, so it didn't take long to get sloshed. But the hurt didn't fade at all. It was a disappointing night all round.

Hermione found herself agreeing to hang out with Oliver and Susan for Saturday night. But it unexpectedly turned into a date. At lunch, Susan received a letter from a long lost relative, asking her to stop by for a visit while he was passing through Hogsmeade. Susan had no idea whom this person was, but Oliver encouraged her to go, insisting it sounded important.

Oliver had transfigured his classroom into a forest glade, and a romantic picnic was set up. He promised it had been already prepared before Susan had been called away, despite there only being settings for two. Hermione had a good time, but something was off. His eyes were hungry; she knew what he was after. Oliver was confusing. He liked her, but then he didn't. He was scared of her, and then he wasn't. Simply, he was a fair weathered friend who wanted a booty call. He tried all his old tricks, grazing her hand or rubbing his feet with hers. During dessert, he "accidentally" spilled red wine down his robes and shirt. He took them off instead of using magic to clean himself. That was her cue to leave.

He insisted on escorting her to her chambers. But when they got there, he asked to come in. Reluctantly, she agreed. As soon as the door closed, he pounced. He was kissing her mouth and neck. His hands groped her breasts as he swiftly guided her to the couch. His slimy tongue was forced down her throat, and he pushed her onto the couch rubbing his erection roughly into her hip.

"Lie down, Hermione," he commanded hoarsely.

"Enough, Oliver, no. I don't want sex with you. Stop!" She was reaching for her wand as he tried to take off his robes.

"Come on, Hermione. This will help our relationship. You'll like it too, all the others have never complained. It's been forever."

His lips claimed her mouth again. She turned her head to keep his lips from hers and thought she saw Severus' face in the flames...they licked around his hair. But the next moment he was gone.

"Get off me!" She wasn't strong enough to push him away at this angle, and her wand was stuck in her pocket.

"I want to see what you can do," Oliver said in a seductive voice. "I saw the way you licked Snape's fingers. If you could do that to the greasy git, then think what you could

do to someone you like."

Oh for heaven's sake! What a prig. Finally, she unsheathed her wand and stuck it into his underwear-clad groin, commanding him to get off. Once he was sitting on the couch, and she was standing up against the fireplace, she became a little more secure. He needed to leave now, or she would do something to put herself in Azkaban.

"I don't want to see you in here again. I told you 'no'; yet you persisted. I am not attracted to you Oliver, and I've never led you on to think I was someone looking for a one night stand."

He looked unabashed as he stared her in the face. She grabbed a handful of Floo Powder and threw it in the fire, yelling, "Oliver Wood's chambers." Nothing happened. What was going on? She looked at the fire and could make out an ear listening through the flames. She kicked it, hard. Severus would have to be dealt with later. The Floo powder worked on the second try, and Mr. Wood was gone. She then cursed her fireplace to give whoever entered through it the worst hexing of their life.

On Sunday, Susan reported the letter to be a hoax; no one had been there to meet her. Big surprise. Hermione explained how Oliver had tried to make her feel comfortable by just hanging out, all three of them. And then he'd disposed of the third wheel, hoping to inflate the remaining tire.

The next week was quiet. She didn't hear anything from Oliver, who sat at the other end of the table during all his meals, or from Severus, who never tucked his long raven hair behind his ears. How much of her incident had Severus seen or heard? And what had he wanted? He'd made himself pretty clear the night before; he wasn't interested in repairing their friendship.

Regardless of their friendship status, life went on. Most days, her classes were only a distraction from the pain. But when Hermione had time to think about Severus, she considered her options. She could turn to her bottle of Firewhisky or she could have that fling with Oliver. She knew he was willing. But it would get her nowhere. How did she make someone jealous if they didn't care in the first place? There was no simple solution to her problems. It was like her anti-venom. There were so many variables to solve, so many reactions to certain circumstances. It just wasn't as easy to solve this puzzle.

After classes on Friday, Hermione decided to skip dinner. She had so many papers to grade it wasn't funny. Half way through the second stack, she was startled by a light cough. Severus was standing in front of her desk. After the initial shock, she stiffly invited him to sit down. Now that she was face to face with him, she didn't know how to act.

He didn't meet her gaze until he spoke. "I owe you several apologies. Firstly, I am sorry for intruding upon your . . . personal time with Professor Wood last Saturday night. But I had feared you might have been in danger, so I'd remained inside the Floo as a precaution. If you had been assaulted, I wanted to be ready to help. But you were in control of the situation, as I soon found out."

He paused, as if waiting for her forgiveness, but she didn't give it.

"I've faced Voldemort, Severus, I think I can handle a crippled Quidditch player."

"If you care to press charges, I would be more than happy to help," he said.

"And the second apology?" she asked, ignoring his help.

"Do you not wish to dispose of the creep?"

"No, I don't think I wish to be reminded of that *tire* weekend. Bringing others into it would only prolong the pain."

He watched her for a moment before proceeding. "The second apology would be why I was calling upon you residence through the Floo Saturday night. I wanted to thank you for the gifts. My birthday has never been a joyous occasion. And I am sorry you saw me in such a state. I'm not myself when I drink, and although I don't recall the words I had said, I know I must have been harsh with you."

Oh, she was ready to remind him. "You said I should stop throwing your failure in your face. My talents were annoying you, and I, as a person, would never measure up to your expectations." She added the last one, hoping he would quell her fears that Lily was the only important woman in his life.

He let a heavy sigh pass between them. "I have negative associations with the Potions Convention." He said, "I've entered in over several dozen potions and have never won an award. I assume it is because of my past association with the Dark Lord. I finally stopped sending in entries. It was a bit difficult watching you enter in only two and winning both while at your first convention."

No wonder he was jealous. Perhaps more potions hadn't been the best idea for a birthday present.

"Now, your gifts, despite what I might have said the other day, are wonderful. I can only assume what you meant by them, and I find it quite humorous. Don't think I won't drink them either." Severus smiled at her, a real genuine smile.

He really wanted to continue their friendship. How could she stay mad at him? It was another milestone in this twisted relationship, but she felt like they'd passed a point of no return and they were in this for the long haul.

Severus walked slowly back to his study after meeting up with Granger. She had forgiven him without much persuasion, to which he was eternally grateful. It had been a rough month, and he'd taken most of it out on her. The whole convention had been a joke. He had been jealous with her awards, but the more he thought about them, he conceded that she did indeed deserve them. All his work in Potions...his improvements, hadn't been for the betterment of others, they had been for himself.

His birthday had been yet another disaster. Severus hated the reminder of when he'd been brought into existence. It was not a happy life, so why celebrate its commencement? The gifts were thoughtful and clever...just like Granger, but he'd been an utter bastard. He should have known she would have stopped by, he could have warded the door before drinking, but he hadn't thought about it.

And when he'd gone to apologize the first time, he had been shocked to see her with Wood. Severus had watched in horror as they'd kissed. Then Granger had looked directly at him. That had been his prompt to retreat. She had been angry, but there had also been a fear in her eyes that he'd recognized too. What if Wood were taking advantage of her? He'd kept an ear in the Floo to listen for danger. She'd fought Wood off, and his heart gave a triumphant leap as he'd listened. Granger had then threatened Wood before she ordered him out. Severus had tried to pull out of the fireplace as she activated the Floo, but his robes had gotten hooked on the grate. He'd tugged but a swift, sharp kick to his right ear had knocked him out. Minerva had saved him. She had fetched Winky immediately, and the elf had pulled him out of the fireplace before he'd caught fire.

The last few days, his concerns had been for Granger. He'd been furious with Wood for trying to force himself on her. Severus was ready to kill the fuckwit, but it wasn't his place. Granger would be upset if he took matters into his own hands. He couldn't fire Wood without a proper cause, and if she wasn't going to do anything, he couldn't either.

Why was he so protective over this nuisance, Granger? She wasn't anything but a good conversation. Besides, he needed to get her into more trouble with her curse. It had been a while since she'd said anything that set it off into something funny. The last time had been at the convention, and it had been more involved than he would have liked. Touching her made his stomach flip, the contact burned in a good way, but he didn't like his enjoyment. And come to think of it, he'd been spending more and more time thinking of Granger. Lily used to fill his every spare moment. Silent memories of green eyes piercing him with a desire he had never held for anyone else. But the magic of that image was cracking. And he didn't feel as much pain in his everyday life as before. The hurt of his lost love was fading, and he didn't know what it meant. But he was looking forward to teatime on Sunday.

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Wednesday morning, Hermione received an owl from Severus. It was addressed to all the staff in general. It seemed that a few of the students had gotten a touch of cabin fever during the night and had vandalized an outside wall of the castle. How they had managed to do it in a January blizzard was beyond her. Hagrid was cleaning up the mess, as it was his duty as Groundskeeper. But he was going to be stretched thin between repairs and his Care of Magical Creatures classes. If anyone could assist in anyway, they were to do so. All leads regarding the vandals were to be given to Filius, the second-in-command. Severus would have taken care of the situation himself, but he had to be in London for the day, meeting with the Board of Governors, and wouldn't be back until suppertime.

Hermione kept an eye on all the students during breakfast, as she was sure all the other staff members were doing. But no one looked suspicious. It would be hard to pin it on someone. She would have to lie low and hope something would leak. As she walked to her classroom, she pushed those thoughts aside. She was having trouble enough with just education.

The day was long and grueling, and Hermione was beginning to despair. Her students were not up to par yet, and most of the month of January was over. The concepts were over the students' heads. What was she doing wrong? They'd been phenomenal last term.

Once classes were through for the day, she sat at her desk grading essays. Supper would be starting soon, she'd already skipped lunch, and these essays would still be here after dinner. She might as well get some food. She trudged up the stairs in time to see Severus entering the Great Hall. He must have just gotten back from London. The staff table was almost full. Hagrid was still not present for dinner, and Filius was missing too...most likely helping the Groundskeeper finish repairs.

Hermione sat next to Susan Bones near the center of the table, checking to make sure Oliver was a fair distance away. She didn't want to be anywhere near the dick. He was at the end of the table talking with Rolanda.

"What a day!" she told Susan.

"You too? I can't believe them. It's like the entire student body went mad over the holidays. None of them will listen to me," Susan said.

Hermione agreed, nodding her head vigorously. On the other side of Susan, Severus smirked.

"I've been telling you for months, Professor Granger," he said. "The whole lot of them are dunderheads. But enough talking; I'm famished. Wouldn't you agree?"

She piled her plate high. "I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse. I missed lunch today because I have so many pa..."

Hermione staggered back from the table, knocking her chair down. Screams erupted from the students, and staff members were pulling out their wands. A nut-brown horse had appeared, trotting down the length of the staff table. She was whinnying and pawing at the plates of food. Severus pointedly looked at Hermione. She was still in shock with what she'd done.

"Heads of Houses and Prefects, gather your students and lead them back to their common rooms," he barked out to the mass chaos.

Susan went round to her Hufflepuffs, and Adrian Pucey gathered his Slytherins. In Filius' absence, Aurora Sinistra organized the Ravenclaws, but Oliver was not over with the Gryffindors. Neville jumped up to take control.

The horse was cantering in the opposite direction now. Every time Severus tried to contain the creature with magic, it would rear on its hind legs and flare its nostrils. Oliver was in the corner with his hands covering his eyes, screaming like a baby. Hermione vaguely remembered him having a fear to horses. Rolanda was trying to calm him, but he was hysterical. The poor beast was agitated almost to the point Oliver was. She had a strong surge of pity for the animal while feeling somewhat justified that Oliver was in terror. Let the git rot in hell surrounded by horses.

Students weren't listening to orders. Girls were hugging each other or trying to reach out and touch the horse. Some of the boys were trying to use their wands against the mare. But amid all the excitement and plates of food flying off the tables, Severus took charge. He was calm as he unfastened his robes, placing them on his chair several feet away from the table. He pocketed his wand in his tight trousers as he climbed onto the table and raised his hands, stilling the horse. He sang softly to the creature. A few of those students closest to the animal stopped screaming or laughing and listened. Hermione was entranced as well.

He rolled up his sleeves, and his black shirt looked fitting on him. His dark hair swayed as his pale arms held out an offer of solitude to the confused creature. As he approached the horse, the noise in the room grew fainter. It might have been because Hermione's attention was solely on him, or it could have been that a few teachers had persuaded the students to leave, but she didn't know. Her eyes were only on Severus as he tamed the wild mare running down the head table.

Severus' eyes never broke contact with the animal, which was swishing its tail in agitation. Hermione could see from where she was standing, how Severus was concentrating on the horse, perhaps even using Legilimens on her, calming her with his ways. It was working. The beast was no longer charging down the table, but was slowing down to a walk. She was a beautiful horse. Severus grabbed an apple from a bowl and let the horse approach with reserve. With his hands held out in peace, she came at her own pace, pawing the table twice but always coming nearer. Severus held up the apple now, letting the mare smell the sweet fruit, and she was hooked. Ever so slowly, he ran his long fingers up her nose and between her eyes. His lips were moving, but the words were for the horse only.

Hermione held a moment of jealousy towards the horse-sharing such an intimate moment with Severus. But when she looked around the room, she saw she was alone with the two on the table. Food was everywhere, and plates and goblets were tossed about upside-down and perched on chairs or the stone floor. None of that mattered, though, now the horse was settled.

"What now?" she heard herself asking.

"You have to fulfill the phrase if you want her to go away," Severus answered.

She had to eat a horse? No way. She couldn't. It was horrible enough to think it. There had to be a way around it. What if she didn't want the horse to go away? Couldn't the animal stay? The phrase didn't limit her to eating a horse; it stated she was so hungry she *could* eat a horse. She didn't have to, and she wouldn't.

As if on cue, Hagrid bounded through the doors, and the problem was resolved. She'd let Hagrid have the horse. The mare would be fine in Hagrid's care. He produced a bridle soon enough, and the nut-brown mare was well on her way to a comfortable life.

"I'm hungry," she said as they watched Hagrid lead the animal out the door. "Would you care to join me for dinner in my chambers, Severus?" She was hungry for more than just food. That bit of horse taming had her wet in her knickers.

He surveyed the damage and called Winky to clean up. Hermione bit her tongue this once and told herself the elves would be honored to have such a mess to clean. Then he turned to her and said, "That would be most agreeable."

This little adventure really did take the stress off of the day. It was good to put things into perspective every once in a while.

It was the first of February, and still no one had been apprehended for the vandalism. Hermione had overstayed teatime as usual, and it was very late. She was just leaving the staircase and gargoyle when she heard a scream a few corridors away. Instincts kicking in, she ran towards the sound with her wand ready. Another shout sounded, this time closer, but she still couldn't decide where it was coming from. As she reached the mouth of a darkened hallway, she heard fast footfalls approaching from behind. The stone outline of an alcove was barely visible from the lighted tip of her wand. She ducked quietly inside, to see who was following her.

As they came nearer, she could see the stranger was an adult by the height. They stopped close to where she was standing, and by the smell of spiced linen she knew it was Severus. With a sigh of relief, she stepped forward. She was about to call to him when a hand grabbed her elbow from behind in the alcove she'd been hiding in. A blood-curdling scream left her lips before she'd comprehended it. Her heart was pounding in her ears, and Severus rounded on her. She clutched at his outstretched arms as his wand lit up. Finding refuge in the folds of his robes, she kept pointing behind her so he would know there was someone there. She heard the deep rumble of a laugh inside his chest as she willed her heart to slow down. Hermione was still frightened, but if he was laughing, it must be all right. She forced her head away from his comforting chest and turned to see Susan entering the dim wand light.

With a laugh at her own folly, Hermione released Severus' robes. "Susan, you scared the shite out of me. Was it you who screamed a minute ago?"

Susan answered, but Hermione had the strongest urge to relieve herself. It was a horrible pressure on her rectum, like she had a large bowel movement. The longer she held it, the harder her body forced her to push. Doubled over in a battle, she knew both Susan and Severus were watching her.

"Granger, are you doing what I think you're doing?" he asked, a smile in his voice.

She couldn't answer him. If she remembered right, there was a toilet nearby. She hobbled into the darkness searching for a place to relieve herself. Finding the door, she wretched it open. But before she could make it to the toilet, she let loose. Her bowels were relieved of the pressure, but she was mortified by the involuntary act. She warded the door and yanked down her pants to clean up.

How disgusting! Cleansing charm after cleansing charm to her knickers, slacks, hands, body, and her robes-everywhere. Nothing felt clean. She even brushed her teeth with a conjured toothbrush. Only when she convinced herself she was decent enough to face the world did she unward the door. Severus was leaning against the door jam with his arms crossed. He had a smirk on his face. She had forgotten about him.

"What happened out there?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't bring up her accident.

"Professor Bones had been doing her rounds when she'd heard a yell. She couldn't find the source. After the second scream, she'd heard footsteps and had ducked into an alcove. You appeared and went into the same alcove without knowing she had been there. There is nothing else to tell."

She gave him an appreciative look for not referencing what happened once she'd stepped out of the alcove.

"But what about the screams? Who shouted?" she asked.

"We never found out, but we found some more vandalism in an empty classroom a few doors down. Just a broken window, ground-up bits of chalk littered on the floor, and a crack in the blackboard. I think a dungbomb was set off in there too. Nothing major, but we'll have to set more teachers up for rounds to keep an eye on the situation."

Hermione went back to her room wondering if she smelled like excrement. It would have been horrible if Severus had smelled it on her. She wanted to appear attractive, not repulsive. He realized what had happened, but he'd refrained from making a big deal out of it. He was being quite decent, and she wouldn't soon forget it.

On St. Valentine's Day, Hermione was informed at breakfast that she would have to cover Sibyll's Hogsmeade duties, as she had, "foreseen unfortunate events unfolding." In other words, she was antisocial and didn't want to go to Hogsmeade for fear of Cupid sticking an arrow up her arse. Thankfully Neville was assigned as the partner for the trip, so she would have someone enjoyable to converse with. St. Valentine's Day was one of the worst days of the year: Hermione had never had a positive experience as far back as she could remember. But her heart gave a flip when she overheard Severus telling Filius he was going into Hogsmeade to run some errands. Perhaps he would pursue her company during the trip.

Students lined up in pairs as Filch checked their permission forms. Hermione was chatting with Neville, but she wasn't really paying attention to the actual topic. In her peripheral vision, she could see Severus watching them talk. Aware of the audience, she tried hard not to look stupid as she used her hands for emphasis. Looking "cool" had never been one of her stronger points. But she flashed him a smile as she passed by.

The doors opened, and the snowy February air caught hold of her. She and Neville led the group out the doors and down to the gates. Knowing Severus was behind her somewhere, she swayed her hips a bit, though not too much. She didn't want it to be obvious. The noise level from the students was overpowering. They were going crazy. Some of the boys were performing for the girls. Infatuated idiots. They were throwing snowballs and chasing one another. Most of the girls were giggling, puffs of frozen air floating above their heads.

Severus was beside Neville now, and they discussed the vandals. The way these boys were acting proved they were hyper and willing to impress. A snowball hit Hermione in the back of the head. Her scarf kept most of the snow from going down the back of her coat, but the impact stung. Most of the boys laughed, thinking it was all in good fun. Neville was laughing a little, but Severus had on his serious face.

"I'm not in the mood for this all today," she snapped. "I know these boys are going to be animals in Hogsmeade today, and I don't think I'm prepared to deal with it. How have you been teaching as long as you have, Severus?"

"I have small ways of lightening up circumstances, and it makes times like these more enjoyable." He gave her a knowing smile. "Like throwing snowballs at my employees."

"Are you saying you threw it at me? But you're right there, how did it hit me in the back of the..." Another snowball plowed into her head.

His lips quirked a little, and Neville ducked. A snowball hovered in front of Severus and hit her squarely in the chest. "Yes, I threw it."

The invitation was clear, everyone joined in the fray. The wind picked up as the mass of bodies collided with the snow. The three adults knew a few tricks, and the students lost the fight within minutes. After the defeat, chaos lowered to a dull walk towards the town. The group passed the sign for Hogsmeade...the first building was just around the next bend.

As soon as they came into the town limits, girls started screaming and rampant wild noises erupted from the group. All three professors whirled around to take in the sight. There were monkeys and bears, hedgehogs and dogs, but not a single male student was to be found. The animals were terrorizing the girls while destroying whatever they could get a hold of. A pig was rooting in the snow near a store window. Hermione pointed her wand at the farm animal, though, off course, no spell she knew worked against it.

Severus hollered across the snow-covered cobblestones, "Make cages!"

She conjured various sized cages, and Neville wrangled the animals into them. Severus was using his magic to steer the creatures towards Neville. He would put up a brick wall there or create wind to blow a duck off course and towards them here. The girls settled down, but a large mob of townies was gathering.

"Back to the school," Severus shouted above the din.

The girls looked crestfallen but complied. Together, the three of them levitated the various cages and made their way out of Hogsmeade. Once they passed the town limits, all the animals transformed back into humans. Half the cages were too small, and students screamed in pain, replacing the animal braying and barking. Severus opened all the cages and enlarged those that were trapping students.

Hermione was about to give the boys her apologies, but Severus whispered in her ear. "Don't say anything. I've an idea." His breath was warm against her chilled skin, and his hand pressed against the small of her back.

"Now, all of you listen." He called to the students, "We've been decent long enough. The snowball fight was to show we know how to have a good laugh. But we don't tolerate 'good laughs' at the expense of our learning house. This stunt with the animal transformation was just a glimpse of our bad sides. We know the vandals are in this select group of students. When we reach the school, I want all those involved to turn themselves in. I already know who you are, but I will be more lenient if you come to me first."

Smart man, that Severus. At least he wasn't mad at Hermione for transfiguring the students into animals.

Severus paced in his study Sunday morning. It was so easy to frazzle Granger. She would inevitably trigger the curse, and the fun would begin. He hadn't anticipated the students getting involved. This had been the first time she'd aimed her wording towards students with an effect. But it had paid off. No less than five students had confessed to the vandalism of school property, and they were now suspended for the rest of the year.

Though, he hadn't been expecting the letter from Hogsmeade's town council demanding an official letter of apology for the chaos his students had created yesterday. They also had requested the responsible party not be allowed in the town limits for the next Hogsmeade trip. He determined to inform them that the responsible party had been suspended, end of story. No one need ever know it was Granger who'd caused the chaos. In fact, most of the staff thought it was a random accident when things happened. Most of the time, it wasn't connected to Granger since the magical reactions often didn't involve her. The Christmas fiasco was a single occurrence they all thought. And he'd wiped the minds of all the students who were present that night. There was no reason to let them think about her seductive potential.

He relished watching Granger's mishaps, like the time she had been scared shitless. It had been comical, one of the best laughs in his life. But he'd felt bad for her just the same, so he kept himself from goading her during the incident.

Winky cracked into his office with a look to kill.

"Master is not playing properly with Miss Granger," she said.

"I don't know what you mean, Winky."

"Master is pushing Miss Granger into bad talkings. You is making her to trigger Winky's spell. Sir, is not to be doing it. Winky is to be giving sir a curse if he is not stopping."

She wouldn't. He could order her not to, and she wouldn't be allowed. It was a house-elf rule. Besides, if it were the same curse, he knew how to avoid it.

"Winky knows what sir is thinking. And sir is wrong. I is allowed to curse master if he is needing it. Sir cannot stop me."

"She's right, Severus," Minerva piped in. "She can curse you, and you've been egging Hermione on. You've known certain facts regarding the spell for three months, and you've withheld information from her just so you could have a good laugh. I don't even know why she cares for you. I doubt it will last once she finds out how you've been treating her."

"Granger doesn't need to know I'm having fun at her expense. Besides, she's learning from her mistakes. I would be cheating by divulging pertinent knowledge I've gleaned for myself. Did you forget how she went behind my back to encourage mutiny amongst the house-elves? Or the fact she took it upon herself to save my life without permission? She's too nosy for her own good. I'm glad Winky cast the spell on her; it serves the chit right. By letting her learn the hard way, she'll become a stronger individual...less chance she'll revert to her old ways. It's called 'tough-love'."

Minerva's eyebrows were raised near her hairline. "She has learned her lesson regarding your life; she went through two lessons, as I recall. I thought you'd gotten past the life-saving anger. Perhaps I was wrong. And furthermore, I am responsible for the house-elf madness. I talked her into leaving the Potions field for something she held a passion for. S.P.E.W. was picked off the shelf. She shouldn't have to pay for that by herself. I take part of the blame."

Winky's expression changed from comradeship to betrayal, but Minerva didn't spot it.

"Has Hermione approached the house-elves since the curse was instigated?" Minerva asked.

"No, Ma'am." Winky said. "Miss Granger is not to be speaking to us except to be getting drunk on sir's birthday. And she is being respectable."

"She got drunk on my birthday?" Severus asked; it was rhetorical. He didn't think Granger was the type of person to turn to alcohol when in despair. Didn't she have a strong enough self-image to withstand blows from others? All outward appearances showed her being stronger than all that. She'd been through so much with the war, and not to mention putting up with Potter and Weasley on a daily basis for seven years. And then, she'd always been modest with her fame. But never, in all those instances, had he thought she would turn to the bottle. Of course, he had been rude while drunk. Had she decided to do the same? What had she been thinking? It was one thing if he drank, but it didn't seem appropriate to have such a delicate person waste herself on an inhibitor.

Yet she'd been keen to forgive him when he'd asked for it, more so than Lily had been. And he'd been more grateful than he'd let her know at her simple acceptance. It was a hard thing for him to do, to show his own faults, but she'd been a complete brick about it. He'd been using her this whole time for a personal laugh. She'd been stumbling along, making the best of each situation, and he'd watched her trip up more than once. And afterwards he'd had a good chuckle. But what kind of cheap entertainment was that? Wasn't it more fulfilling to just talk with her: to hear her describe the beauty of creating a potion on a summer's morning? Or argue with her about the best ingredient locations? All these weekly teatimes he thought he had been "putting up with her" to watch her slip up, just so he could have a dose of fun. Once she'd been forced to perform back flips for an hour before the curse's requirements were met.

This whole time, he'd known it was wrong, but he'd pushed it out of his mind, telling himself it was nothing serious. On the other hand, he'd found he enjoyed her company more than anyone else's, even Minerva's. And his feelings for Granger were confusing-mottled. One day he would feel angry with her assertiveness...her need to be right and share it with the rest of the world. And then the next day he would appreciate her rare take on a touchy subject. Then, when circumstances required them to interact, he was proud to be by her side.

But all this also described Lily. He loved Lily; he would *not* move past her. It was just wrong. It would be a huge change. She'd kept him going before the snakebite, and now he was going live out his second chance at life in sackcloth until he rejoined her. She had always been strong-headed and sure of herself. But she had not been forgiving; Granger had trumped Lily for once. He knew Granger held feelings for him. But he wasn't ready for her and possibly never would be. A relationship at this stage in life when he was so set in his ways was unthinkable. Severus hated change; Granger was fighting a losing battle. Why would a woman want to stick around him anyway? He was an ill-tempered man who got pleasure out of others' pain.

Did he tell Granger he knew more about the curse than he was letting on? A raw honesty was pushing him to confess. But his old Slytherin ways were convincing him to keep quiet. He didn't owe her anything. Wasn't she the smartest witch of her age? She should be able to figure it out herself with little trouble. And if he did tell her, would

Granger stop seeing him? He didn't need her company...he was independent. But, he admitted to himself, life would be boring without her around. Was it more in his interest to be honest or to keep his secrets?

A/N: Finally, I can speak! I want to thank my beta StarlightAphrodite, for all the help she's given me throughout this story. Also, another thank you goes to Southern_Witch_69 who answered my many questions and worked so hard behind the scenes during the Variety Challenge. And last but not least, I want to thank those of you who are following this story! It means a lot to me to see so many reviews, and I'm so happy to have so many that like the story!

I'll have more up soon. I promise!

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

The last week in February was Severus' time to review students' grades in all subjects. It was the end of term soon, and the next one would be starting after Easter holidays. He was particularly concerned regarding the new professors. They weren't used to grading, and he was checking to see if they were being too lenient. He knew terms always got progressively worse (however marginally small) as the students grew tired of studying. So if the grades drastically improved through the year, it was a sure sign the professor wasn't doing their job correctly.

He was surprised to see Wood's classes were an array of grades. There was no bell curve. Some students had an "O" on one assignment, which then dropped to a "D" before rising back up to a passing grade. Severus was going to have to have a talk with him. Minerva's portrait might want to sit in on the meeting as well.

Adrian Pucey's grades were average, the flow normal. He appeared to be doing fine; after all, it was his second year teaching. But there was always room for a meeting to make sure they were in agreement and up to date. Bone's DADA classes were not nearly as good as Pucey's, but she was doing well for a first-time teacher. It was a difficult subject, especially now with the war over. In times of peace everyone had a false sense of security, and they saw no reason to be prepared. Fools. Someone would always rise in power, and evil usually came unexpectedly. No one read history anymore, and those that did rarely understood the cycle.

Granger's grades were spot on. She'd just left his office an hour ago and had been complaining about the lot of dunderheads they'd all become. Last term she'd been gloating about their wonderful abilities...all of them had talent in the field of Potions. Ha, now she was singing a different tune. But she was confused and thought it was her fault. Gryffindors were always so valiant, it disgusted him. She'd started the first term slower than he normally had, but then she'd picked up exceptionally fast and had now packed too much into her schedule. Because of their drop in activeness, she was going to finish far behind her goal. This wouldn't look good for her in the board review or for the students. She should readjust her schedule for the last term and finish where he normally stopped. But there would be no listening from her; she was as stubborn as he. Severus would give her until the end of the week to formulate her own plan, but then he would step in and prod her along.

Friday night, he made his way down to the dungeons and her office; educational prodding was in order. It was still comforting to walk down these dark halls. They had been his home for most of his life. He was a dark being and liked the damp smell of earth; the dim lighting was like a secure blanket, enveloping him in comfort and protecting his emotions. It was his haven.

Reaching the familiar door, he knocked and heard her soft voice call him in. Her back was to him as she was leaning over a cauldron. Her hair was tossed into a lazy ponytail, looking smart on her with the curls cascading down her back. The room was excessively hot and steamy; her robes were draped over the back of her chair at her desk. The sleeves of her white button-up were rolled, and her grey vest revealed a dark patch of sweat between her shoulder blades.

"Evening," she said, still looking into her cauldron.

He approached from behind, curious to see what she was making. The room reeked of juniper berries and raw fish. The counter she was working on was covered with scattered ingredients. Usually she was more organized. Some of the ingredients were quite volatile too. He waited until she was done dumping in the juiced hemlock roots, and she turned around. It was dangerous to interrupt someone working with fickle ingredients.

"What can I help you with, sir?" she said. He could sense she was nervous by her hands. They were her tell. Unknowingly, she would dig imaginary dirt out from underneath them.

"I've been reviewing your work ethic. These students are falling behind according to your standards. You've raised the bar far too high." He said it as politely as possible.

She turned back to her countertop and started crushing some wartcap into powder.

"I think they'll pull through," she said tartly. Obviously, he hadn't been polite enough. She continued, "They were ahead during first term, and it's normal to have a bout of doldrums. In the third term, things will pick up, I'm sure of it. Everyone will be excited for school to get out, and they'll start studying again. I remember being in school, and that was how it was for me every..."

"Not a single other person in this school remotely feels that same pull toward education as you do. Especially not at their age." The heat was getting to him; he always lost his temper in the heat...another reason he craved the cool of the dungeons. His hair was sticking to the back of his neck. "You are too dedicated to learning. These idiots are swollen in the head; they don't give a tinker's damn about their educational futures."

Granger tipped her cutting board into the cauldron angrily. A whoosh of white smoke billowed around her petite frame. Now she was hastily popping the Doxy eggs with the side of her knife. Those were dicey; she should be more careful.

"I thought I explained to you at the beginning of the year," she said as she put the popped eggs in the mix and stirred, "I know how to run a classroom. My students are bright; they just lack the proper motivation. Next term I have so much planned, it's bound to be well received. Besides, it will be quick paced, and it's sure to encourage them to keep up and not fall behind."

"But if they don't finish according to your schedule, it will reflect poorly on not only them but yourself." He was trying to help the woman! Honestly. She'd mucked up...all right, he'd mucked up her record already this year, and she didn't need more against her.

"It will appear in your permanent record," he continued, "and it may come against you in a review. I have access to it as well as all the members on the board. It's not going to look good for you. All I'm advising is that you take out a few chapters and assignments. Then if they finish ahead of schedule, it looks much better. Next year you can add

more assignments." He hoped she didn't catch his reference to keeping her for next year. It wouldn't do if she thought him soft.

She was looking flustered as she chopped the Ashwinder eggs. Those were deadly. If she wasn't careful, she'd kill the both of them. The potion was a deep blue color; right now it looked like Scintillation Solution. But she should be grinding the eggs not chopping them.

"All of a sudden you're on my side? I don't understand you, Severus. You..."

At that moment she tried to put in the Ashwinder eggs. But he'd seen the mistake and grabbed them from her.

"Granger," he hissed. "You almost killed us. These should be ground, not chopped." With a wave of his wand, he emptied the cauldron and put out its fire. Immediately, the heat in the room began to drop.

She leaned over the empty cauldron in disbelief. "I can't . . . you . . . Completely uncalled for! If you hadn't been in here harassing me, I wouldn't have messed up. It's too risky to focus on two things at once. I've told you I don't agree with your advice. You are always breathing down my neck!" She was still facing the cauldron as she yelled at him.

Two things happened at once. First, he registered her activating the curse with her ranting. And second, he couldn't stop his feet from dragging him over to her. His body pressed up against her back, pinning her to the counter. His stomach rolled with excitement. She struggled, pushing against him, forcing her way out, but both his arms rested against the counter on either side of her. She was the perfect height for him. Her beautiful neck, still shiny with sweat, drew his nose in like a bee to a flower. She froze suddenly, possibly understanding what she'd said. He leaned his forehead against her bushy mane. Granger's scent was intoxicating, mixed with her perspiration.

His long nose rubbed against her skin as he was forced to breath in and out raggedly. Something he'd longed to do, and now he was too angry with her to enjoy it. She was so stubborn; he'd been around students far longer than she, and he knew a thing or two. Why was she so wary of his advice?

"What do I have to do to get you off of me?" she said through her teeth.

"Perhaps you will have to agree with me. I believe you said you didn't like my advice, and you would continue to do things your own way," he said into her neck.

She huffed and futilely tried to push him away. He couldn't budge. The room was cooling rapidly. She shivered, and it went straight to his groin. Not now, dammit. This was not the time or place for such thoughts. But the longer he stood against her body, the more he wanted to run his hands down it. He moved them to rest on her shoulders, and another chill ran down her body at his contact. Oh, how he'd longed to give her shivers. Not that he was going to admit it. It was purely a physical attraction. His body wanted her and nothing more.

Granger turned her head slightly; he found he could maneuver around her as long as his nose stayed at her neck. He moved behind her ear and found the spot where she had dabbed her glorious perfume. Without thinking, he ran his hands down her arms and back up again. With a moan, she pressed against his body, but in an entirely different way than before. Her head rolled back and rested on his shoulder.

It was too much. His lips brushed her neck, and he tasted her saltiness. Hands with minds of their own wrapped around her body, caressing her. He moved to the base of her neck, flinging her ponytail out of the way. A few strands of hair buzzed around him as his breathing increased.

Granger's hands were wandering behind her back. She grazed his erection, and he moaned. She spun around, her head held high as he kissed her under the chin and slid his tongue down to her collarbone. Granger's hands were in his hair as she responded to his touch. He knew he shouldn't be doing this. It wasn't right, but he wanted it. Severus couldn't stop himself. It was relieving to actually be doing this to her, better than what he'd imagined. He was working on her shirt. Damn these infernal buttons on the wrong side of the garment.

She unfastened his belt and was working on his zipper. When his trousers dropped to his ankles, the cold hit his legs, waking him up a bit. He realized he had no idea what to do next. Either instinct would hopefully kick in, or she would have to take the lead. She was more experienced in this field than he.

"Granger, I've never . . ." He was reluctant to tell her.

"Severus," she said softly. Her hands were on the waistband of his boxers, but stopped. "I want this. But more importantly, I want you to want me. Last time you said Lily's name. I don't want this to be a fulfillment of your needs while you're thinking of Lily."

"What do you mean?" he asked, his hands pausing on her zipper.

She shifted her head to the side, his nose sliding over to her ear.

"When we were in Finland. On the last morning, I couldn't help it. You were still asleep. And I . . . well, I could tell you were hard. And I...we, both got off."

Lily. He remembered. He'd been dreaming of Lily and had had a wet dream. Which wasn't uncommon for him. She always haunted him at night. Granger was patiently waiting for an answer of some kind, but what could he say? To him, Lily and Granger were melding into one. He wanted this physically, but he wanted it to be with Lily. He'd always wanted it to be Lily. Would he close his eyes and imagine his beautiful redhead?

"Severus?"

"I can't do this," he said, dropping his hand from her zipper.

"I see." She sounded like she would cry any second.

He tried to pull his trousers up without bending over, but his nose threatened to take her with him. "Would you just take my advice already so I can get unstuck?" he practically snarled at her, regretting it instantly.

She stiffened against him. Everything had gone from erotic to awkward in a matter of minutes. Tears slid down her throat and onto his face. Shit.

"She's dead," he tried to make her understand. "I can't get over her; it's impossible. Lily will always be perfect because she is dead. You're not her. My feelings for you are solely physical. My body's reacting to your body. Nothing more."

"Is that what you were doing with me a minute ago?" Her temper was flaring now. "You just got caught up in the passion, imagining it was her instead of me?"

He didn't answer. He didn't know what he'd been doing. Severus hadn't been himself at that moment; it was as if he'd lost control over his body. It had taken over.

With a bite of bitterness, Granger ground out her final statement, "I'll do anything you say. I'll fix my classes like you requested."

His nose lost its pull, and she hid her face while buttoning her blouse and vest.

He awkwardly pulled up his trousers and left without looking at her.

Hermione stood there, crying heavily after Severus left. The room was chilly now, and she had no idea what to do with herself. She'd offered herself to him, and he'd walked away to Lily. She knew he would save himself for that dead woman until his own death. But did he have some sort of feelings for her? He'd started the kissing; why couldn't he make up his mind? There was something more there than just physical attraction, like he'd stated. There just had to be. And she'd thought they had reached a

point in their relationship that proved everything was obtainable. Yet, here she was alone, and probably for the rest of her life, because she, too, had given her heart to someone unwilling to reciprocate.

The next day, she stayed in her room instead of supporting Gryffindor against Hufflepuff at the match. No one came looking for her, not even Susan. Oddly enough, Winky brought her food without being summoned.

Her feelings regarding house-elf had changed drastically. It had been just over a year ago when she'd been fired for her union ideas. Winky had been caustic and abrupt in her service at the beginning of the school year. But as time had gone by, Hermione realized how much she admired the elf's work ethic. All the elves were dedicated to their jobs and their masters. It was nice to see such dedication and joy in an occupation.

Hermione admitted they were good at it too. While she had worked for the Ministry, she'd done extensive research on their magical abilities and properties. Amazingly their history went far beyond that of Wizarding history. They had willingly gone into enslavement and had still retained a set of rules outside their bonding to their masters. She couldn't fathom their desire to be ruled by others. But she realized as Winky gave her a cup of tea, that she didn't care anymore.

"You've changed, Winky," she remarked.

"Thank you, miss," the elf replied.

"Why?"

Winky didn't respond for a moment, straightening the books on the end table. "Winky is responsible for miss' troubles. I is setting the curse on you, and I is very sorry." The elf burst into tears and repeatedly bonked her head on the arm of the couch.

"Stop!" Hermione threw her teacup as she lunged to stop the elf from hurting herself. After several attempts, she finally succeeded.

"Will you tell me?" Hermione asked.

"You was making Winky angry when you was going on about your silly union. And then when you came to Hogwarts, I was not wanting you to ruin things for us house-elves. When you was a student, you was causing trouble for our kind. But now Winky knows you was only trying to help. I has been watching you, miss. And you is not being dealt with fairly. Winky is sorry."

"But can't you just do the counter-charm or something?" Hermione was a little put out.

"No. I cannot undo it. You must break the curse. I am bound by our code to keep from telling you the cure."

"Is there anything you *can* tell me?" Hermione asked.

"Winky cannot. I has been bound to be saying nothing further."

"By the headmaster? Does he know information?"

"I is ordered not to say."

"I thought so. Well, that explains a lot." Hermione was seeing where all of this was going. "Well, thank you for your honesty, Winky. And I do not hold anything against you. I just wish you hadn't been compelled to do this to me."

"Miss is not angry? Not even a little bit?"

"No. It seems odd. I should be furious with you. But I'm not. I guess I've been advocating the welfare of house-elves so long that it would just be wrong to hold anything against you. It's not in my nature." Hermione smiled a little.

"Thank you, miss." And with a snap of her fingers, Winky was gone.

After admitting her feelings to Severus and then finding out he'd known all along about her curse, she didn't dare go to Severus' office for teatime on Sunday. Her Gryffindor courage had finally faltered. The weather was fair for the end of February, so she went for a walk around the lake.

It was an awkward week. Meal times were quiet. She mostly sat with Neville. Her friend knew something wasn't right but didn't press her for information. Well, not until later in the week.

On the first Saturday in March, she was strolling through the greenhouses, collecting ingredients with Neville. It was snowing heavily outside. She'd been so foolish. All of her efforts should have been focused on solving this curse, but she'd put most of her effort into daydreaming about Severus. This curse was hell. She'd rummaged through her house-elf notes and found very little. The only significant piece of information had been regarding their lack of magical ability to kill. So she hoped that whatever she'd been cursed with would prevent her from either dying or killing others because of her big mouth.

Her old spunk for sleuthing was gone. When she'd been a student, she'd been full of energy while solving the yearly mysteries. And the problems had always been resolved by May or June. She was hoping it would happen like that again but without much effort on her part. But she knew it wouldn't. Hermione was lost in thought while pruning a basil plant.

"Tell me about it, Hermione," Neville said, startling her.

Deciding she had no one else to talk to, she explained her curse was only active while Severus was around her. And he knew how to make her say phrases that would cause trouble. Her phrases were exaggerated expressions mostly, but sometimes they weren't. Hermione knew she should have been more careful when talking, but the words just flowed so smoothly out of her mouth, she usually didn't know what she'd done until she had seen the shark-like smile on Severus' face.

"Sounds like you already know it's him who's behind it," said Neville, as he pruned a young potted rowan tree. "So my question is: why are you so attached to him?"

She rolled her eyes. Was she that obvious in her attraction?

"Listen," Neville continued. "He's been using you for a good laugh. He's twisted, you know."

Hermione gathered up the basil into a bottle. "I like him for some dumb reason. Maybe it's because I enjoy his company. I'm afraid he might only like me for a good laugh, but I have this feeling that deep down he really likes me for me. It's probably all in my head. You're right; he is twisted."

"I reckon you need to set the curse off when only he's around, aim it at him. See what happens. If you let him know you mean business, he might be more willing to dole out his information."

"I suppose you're right," she said. "Somehow he is privy to more information, and I have a feeling that Winky was more forthcoming with him than with me. He's bound to divulge it if I threaten him. But I'll only have one shot."

The next day, Hermione boldly walked into Severus' office at their scheduled teatime. He was bent over his desk shuffling through a stack of parchment. His face held a hint of surprise until he schooled his features and looked back at her behind his usual mask.

"What can I do for you, Granger?" he said, looking at his desk. It wasn't unkind.

"I'm here for tea of course. It is Sunday after all, isn't it?" she said.

"I was under the impression we'd reached an impassible point in our relationship." He was uncomfortable, and she knew it.

"To what are you referring? It was just the curse, wasn't it?" she asked innocently. Truth be told, Hermione was still hurt by his rejection. But she wanted to get to the bottom of this curse business; it was imperative.

"Er, I suppose. Regardless, I apologize for my ungentlemanly conduct."

"No need to apologize. You are entitled to your own feelings."

He looked confused but didn't respond.

"So are we going to have tea?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow, then called Winky. Within two minutes she'd returned with a tray. They fell into a polite conversation, and Minerva pulled the weight through the awkward moments. It was as if they'd both taken a giant step backwards and returned to their original teatime meetings full of uneasy conversations and overly polite manners. The tea was finished, and Severus looked restless. She needed to activate the curse, but he hadn't pushed her along at all. Hermione was going to have to do this herself.

"So . . . wicked weather, this." She pointed to the window. "I hope it doesn't affect your wound any."

"Hmm?" he said, rubbing his neck absently. "I find the wetter weather does tend to aggravate it a bit."

"Really? Well the puncture marks look angry. I hope you're neck's not killing you because..."

"No, Granger! Don't..." Severus hissed. His eyes frantic, both hands flew to his neck.

For one wild moment, Hermione thought she'd actually taken it too far and killed him as he slid out of his chair. But he was lying on his back, spitting curse words. In an instant, she was beside him with a salve at the ready. She had to pry away his hands and rub it into his neck for several minutes. Eventually he sat up. It was nerve-wracking sitting so close together under his desk.

"I'm sorry," she said. It had been hard saying it, knowing what would happen. "I shouldn't have done that."

"I doubt you knew what you were saying. It's amazing I'm not dead."

"Actually, I did it on purpose. I've been up all night thinking it over." He glared at her then. "The curse has specific terms. Would you like to tell me about them, or shall I continue?" He stared at her with venom. "Right," she said. "I'll just continue on, then. When I use a hyperbole or idiom in my speech with you present, they actually happen. But you've known that. Wand magic is useless, and the curse has to play out, but you already knew that as well. And that is why you were amazed that you're alive. I, on the other hand, didn't know most of this for certain until last night, and the death question wasn't for certain until a few minutes ago. But I suspected you would live, you would just be in a great deal of pain. Was I right?"

He gave her a calculating look. Abruptly, he stood up and stalked to the window. She didn't rise. Her emotions were getting too worked up.

"You tried to kill me?" he asked, spinning around to look at her. "Just to see what would happen?"

"I've asked you before for information. You told me you would look into it. And on good faith, I believed you. Like a fool, I believed and trusted you, Severus Snape. I'm just as bad as Voldemort. No one should trust you. You inflict hurt and pain on them. You did it to Harry's mum, you did it to Dumbledore, you did it to Voldemort, and you did it to me. Why did I think I was more worthy than them all, that you would not betray me and leave me feeling like a fool? And I am one...I'm a stupid fool for trusting you."

She was sobbing under his desk. He turned his back on her, as if unable to watch her pitiful episode.

When she calmed down, she said, "You've lied to me, Severus. You've been doing it to me all along. Everything always points back to you except your wandwork. Winky did the deed. She confessed it to me. But regardless of whose hand did it, you've continually encouraged it. Leading me on in this farce of a friendship, thinking you liked me for me...that I meant something to you. Turns out I'm nothing but cheap entertainment. Bastard. Why don't you just confess it? Confess dammit!" In two long strides he was at the desk, roughly dragging her to her feet. She refused to look at him, his face too close for comfort.

"I couldn't tell you." His voice was raw. "I couldn't! I was having too much fun. And yes, at your expense. I wanted to play it out a bit before it was resolved. My life's been nothing but misery, and I thought I deserved some enjoyment at the expense of others. So I let it happen. And I'll admit that I even encouraged situations to blossom into slip-ups. I withheld information so I could drag out my fun. But I didn't tell you because . . . " He was at a loss of words to express himself.

"Because," she said, "you aren't use to sharing things with others. You didn't think I would want to have fun with you? I wouldn't want to join in on your secret? Think of the mischief we could have had. But no, you don't know how to share. You're afraid of opening yourself up to others, afraid I'd take the real you, the one deep inside, and lead you by the nose. I'd force you to step back and...oh shite!"

She couldn't stop her pointer finger on her left hand coming up and inserting into his right nostril. The finger was curled into a hook, and it attached itself to the inside of his nose better than a permanent sticking charm. She tugged, and his face came with it...along with a growl of pain.

"Oh, Severus," she whispered, "I'm so sorry." Warm air rushed past her finger and condensation began to build up.

"Well, undo it then," he said impatiently.

"But I don't know how. I think it has to be you this time. I accused you of not trusting me, and then we got stuck together."

He grumbled, but conceded that she was right. "All right, I trust you," he said, rolling his eyes. Nothing happened.

"You have to actually mean it," she spit out. "It's a good thing you have such a large nose, or this might get uncomfortable." He was really ticking her off. They were going to be stuck together forever because he didn't know how to trust. She jerked her hand to piss him off. It worked.

"Now you've done it," he said. "What are we supposed to do?"

"At least it's the beginning of the Easter hols. I hope two weeks is long enough for me to earn your trust." She said it sarcastically.

They glared at each other for some time before Minerva spoke up.

"You know, Severus, this is what I've been telling you the entire time. If you'd told Hermione ages ago, you two would both be much happier now."

A/N: I'm sorry it's taken so long to get this chapter out. The next few chapters will be much faster. Thanks goes out to Southern_Witch_69 for the great beta work!

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Hermione's finger was stuck up Severus' nose. Short of blasting it off, neither one had been able to undo the curse. They were seriously stuck together. If Severus hadn't been so grumpy, she might have found the situation a little funnier. But the past several hours were taking their toll on her, and she didn't want to be stuck with him in this kind of mood.

"I have a headache," he announced, rubbing his eyes. Without waiting for her to respond, he stalked to his chambers. Hermione had to swing herself around so she was able to jog next to him. Her hand was at an uncomfortable angle; the blood had drained, making it tingle and ache.

But she forgot her discomfort when they walked into Severus' chambers. They were simple but comfortable surroundings. Not a single picture lined the walls; instead they were adorned with numerous bookcases. A large bed filled the center of the room, complete with a puffy, white down comforter. He rushed her by a large walk-in closet and down the hallway to the bathroom.

The loo was smaller than she'd expected, but it was grand. The potions cabinet was warded, and he unceremoniously opened it. Severus uncorked a headache tonic and tried to drink. Her forearm was in front of his mouth. He firmly wrenched it out of his way. She yelped. Then he abruptly turned and marched down the hallway, seating himself on his bed over-dramatically.

"We're not leaving the room," he said. "I'm tired...I retire fairly early. Besides I can't eat now; I don't want to be seen with you attached."

It was six o'clock in the evening, and he wanted to sleep now? She decided to not fight this particular battle. She was forming a headache of her own after all the emotions that had run through her since the beginning of teatime.

"Your bed or mine?" she asked.

"Mine," he said with finality.

He undid his boots and pulled out his feet. He waited for her to turn around, but she wouldn't. If he wasn't going to play nice, neither would she. After a moment, he stood to undo his robes. He had on a button-up dress shirt, so it came off easily. Instantly, she was drawn to his chest. Despite her anger for him, her eyes raked his pale white skin covered with sparse hairs. His muscles moved so effortlessly underneath the flesh. Severus was not a muscular man, but he had definition enough.

She saw he was determinedly staring at a point directly above her head when he let his trousers drop. He wore black boxers, of course. His socks were still on, and they too were black, coming halfway up his calves. Pajama bottoms came soaring out of the closet, and he stepped into them. Severus didn't bother putting on a shirt, mumbling something about difficulty. He walked over to the closet, dragging her behind and hung up his robes. He cast cleansing charms on them and put his pants in the hamper. Everything was organized and orderly. Everything was black. Simple. The room smelled strongly of spice and fresh linen. She always smelled it on him. It was comforting despite the unusual circumstance.

Hermione had strived to keep her face emotionless while she watched him undress, but she realized he would be watching her undress in a moment. The other problems were these: she couldn't remove her hand, and thus the jumper would not come off. And since she couldn't use her left hand it would be difficult to do much of anything one handed. Either he was going to have to help or she was going to look stupid in front of him every time she changed or went to the loo.

Oh, not the loo...she was going to have to pee in front of him. And shower too! What had she done? No, this was his fault, all of it. If he'd only trusted her before, then none of this would have happened. She wasn't a hard person to trust, was she? Time after time she'd proven herself, and he knew it. But it didn't matter regarding her mettle; it was all up to him and how he grew as a person. And how long it took . . .

He was staring at her expectantly, his arms folded and a smirk across his face. At times he would go cross-eyed looking down at her finger, but then he would straighten out his eyes and look resolutely away. She had to undress with his black eyes watching her. If this had happened down in the dungeons a week ago, she'd have been willing enough to expose herself. But not now, their relationship was all messed up.

Shoes were easy; she kicked them off and flung them near the closet. When she bent over to take off her socks, he bent with her, and their heads collided. Ignoring his cursing, she used her wand to undo the fastenings on her trousers and then slid them off easily enough. Her light yellow jumper wasn't long enough to cover her panties. He might have caught a glimpse of the exposed pink triangle of cotton, but she couldn't be sure. Next, she transfigured her jumper into a toga-type nightgown. Only she made it much longer than her usual nightgown.

Severus smirked but didn't speak. She managed to get her bra off underneath her clothes and only had to sever the left strap and then repair it. This time she watched his eyes follow the bra as it glided through the air and landed on her pants and shoes. She crawled into bed, making it as difficult as possible for him, and then she scooted under the covers. The sheets were flannel and white like the comforter. They were cool on her bare feet. A chill ran up her spine.

Their sleeping positions were limited. The only way this was going to work was if Severus lay on his back and Hermione on her side, pressed up against him. They were silent as they positioned themselves. Her finger was still stuck up his nose. She laid her head on his shoulder, and his arm automatically wrapped around waist. Hermione's breath disturbed a few wiry hairs on his chest, and they swayed slightly. He turned the light off wandlessly, and the snow outside the window caught the moon, sending in a damp light.

She was angry with him, to say the least. All this time he had been using her. And yet she was sure their friendship had been real. He probably hadn't counted on liking her. Hermione knew he liked her...at least as a friend, even if his views on a more complex relationship were skewed. He'd let his guard down on any number of occasions for her not to have noticed. As much as she wanted to be angry at his lies, she was more hurt that he didn't trust her completely after all this time. If anything, it should be the other way around. She had every right to never trust this man again.

Anger was building up inside her as they awkwardly lay in the warm bed. She had the power to lead him around, so why was she letting him boss her around? Why were they in bed at six o'clock? And why had she let him take control of the situation yet again? She was too complacent, too soft and submissive. Well, not anymore! She wasn't going to stand for it. Just as she was going to voice her opinion, he spoke.

"It was an accident," he said with guilt. His voice was barely audible in the dark, and his thumb lightly stroked her arm.

"Hmm?" she asked, her temper caught off-guard.

"In September. After I had reprimanded you for your reckless behavior towards the house-elves, I had been ranting out loud. Winky had taken it as an order, without my consent, you see. Later, she had come back, telling me what she'd done. Well, she didn't tell me details...blaming it on deep elf magic.

"Regardless of all that, I didn't mean for it to happen at all. But once I knew what I was dealing with, I took it as a boon. Telling myself it was something I deserved. I hadn't thought how it would affect you. Or anyone else for that matter. I had wondered about killing people but kept telling myself it would never happen. Winky had assured me she wasn't stupid. But when I thought you'd killed me tonight, I realized how much I wanted to live. A bit ironic, but true none-the-less."

He stopped stroking her arm. She tried to form her thoughts into words, but he was softly snoring. He'd fallen asleep. Perhaps they could talk tomorrow. She knew where to find him. And with that thought, she too soon found herself falling asleep in his arms.

The next day proved complicated. Hygiene was the first hurdle. Their shower was slippery and embarrassing. Hermione found her eyes wandering down his body, but she refused to let herself see too much. She was mad at him, she reminded herself. More than once she rammed his head while trying to shampoo her mass of hair, and he threatened to cut the whole mop off after he got a bloody nose. At one point, the bar of soap slipped, and she lunged to catch it. And there they were, bent over in a knot. She tried keeping her left hand up so as not to yank his head. Hermione's bum nestled into his crotch nicely, his prickly pubic hairs pressed up against her. She clasped the bar of soap, and yet she didn't want to stand up straight. His hands were placed around her hips to keep himself from falling over, and it was quite arousing...for both of them. After an awkward pause, he pulled her up slowly and promptly turned off the water.

In his office things didn't get any better. Hermione heard Minerva snort several times, but when she glared at the portrait, Minerva had a look of concern on her face. Could pictures catch colds? Dumbledore was dispensing jokes to the other portraits. Severus ignored the old headmaster, sending out a message to the staff informing them he was indisposed until further notice and he was not to be disturbed. In an unrelated note, he told them Hermione was away on holiday in Australia and was not to be bothered either.

Winky brought them food with a semi-smile on her elvish face. Severus insisted on eating first. Hermione's anger from last night reared its head, and she told him a thing or two. Amazingly, he saw her side of it and let her eat first. Was that guilt she saw in his eyes she wondered? He cut her food into bite-sized pieces and didn't utter a word. When she finished, she stood behind him, her arm draped over his lanky black hair. His mouth exposed, he ate quickly.

It was no use trying to get work done, but they attempted it anyway. Severus sat at his desk, and she sat next to him atop his desk like she'd done the first time she'd spoken with Minerva's portrait. She transfigured his end table into a tall and narrow desk so she could work while facing the opposite direction. Things went along smoothly for her, but apparently he was having difficulty. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought his eyes kept straying to her bum.

"You're infernal hand is prohibiting my vision. Kindly lower your arm, and stop tugging unexpectedly. My neck is going to snap."

She tried to comply, but there was nothing she could do. A few hours later, her bum fell asleep sitting on the desk, and she was hungry. So she dragged Severus over to the fireplace. She transfigured a couch from one of his stiff chairs. Sitting cross-legged and sideways on the couch, she was able to lean back against its arm while he sat normally.

Winky served tea and sandwiches, and they ate with little difficulty if she lifted her hand just right. The fire was warm, and the food was filling. Hermione was tired, having slept little during the night. She pulled Severus down to her and laid his head on her bosom. He fought for a minute, but she told him she was too tired to argue; besides, he only needed to trust her to have the situation over. She stretched out her legs on either side of him, and soon they were slumbering away the afternoon.

While Hermione had been working on her essays, she'd formulated a plan. It didn't make sense to fight with him about his lack of trust. It would prove his point that she wasn't trustworthy. She was going to have to outsmart this man. Slytherin tactics were in order. If he thought he was in control, then he would feel secure. Their entire relationship had seen him as the dominant one. Why not keep it that way to ensure her plan worked?

Winky woke them up for dinner, and they ate in the same manner as before. But since they'd slept all afternoon, Hermione wasn't too keen on going back to bed. Instead they talked, very civilly, about the curse. Not the hyperbole they were currently stuck in but about the major curse. More pointedly, how were they going to break it? Winky was bound as before and could not reveal any more information, so it was impossible to find a counter-curse. Especially with Wizarding magic against elfin magic. They set about coming up with ideas. The elf had hinted at the curse being lifted or fulfilled completely, but they didn't know to what end.

"Maybe I have to reach a certain age. It was my birthday when she gave me the curse, so maybe on my next birthday in September?" Hermione said.

"No, I don't think that's it. You have this curse until you learn a lesson. And aging one year isn't going to have the required effect to break the spell."

"So all I have to do is learn my lesson. But haven't I already? I mean, I didn't try to save Oliver when he lost his testicle, and I did apologize for trying to save you a second time. I'm good right?"

"Perhaps you need to learn some other lesson," he suggested.

"I wonder why you're connected to it at all? Because I wronged you in the first place? It just doesn't make sense. And why am I the only one learning? Maybe you are more connected to this curse than we previously thought."

Severus was quiet for a time, then said, "I doubt I have to do much, other than be present. Winky stated that quite obviously when she first told me about the curse. No, it's more on your part. Maybe you're required to say a specific amount of phrases, even if you've learnt your lesson."

"It's possible. Well, it's worth a shot anyway. Would you like to help me come up with as many phrases as possible? We can be a team this time around. What do you say?"

Severus gave her a full-blown smile. Inwardly, Hermione gave a smile just as big. He was playing into her hands perfectly. He would trust her in no time.

The next two weeks were the best Severus had ever had. Granger's finger stayed resolutely in his nostril, and after only three days, it became natural, almost normal. They found a routine, which worked well, and it became less cumbersome as they gauged the other's movements. Meals were still tiresome but livable. And when they worked, he couldn't help but focus on her bum, sitting next to his arm as she worked. How he wanted to slide her in front of him and take her on his desk.

But it would just be a quick screw; it wouldn't be Lily. It was disgusting. He didn't want to think about his twisted desires. How he loathed himself. Severus didn't even know if making love were possible without Lily. He recognized desire for Granger, but how far did it go? Certainly he enjoyed conversing and working with her. But was it enough to love the girl? He didn't know.

Showers were by far the hardest. He'd traced every curve of her wet body with his eyes. And she was unabashed about her nakedness in his presence, another turn on. On more than one occasion, he could do nothing to hide his arousal, but she never mentioned it. But it wasn't because she didn't notice. He'd seen her eyes wander down his body.

She would bite her lip as she passed the bar of soap. Such an intimate thing to share: for her to clean her delicate body and then pass it on to him. He wanted to wash her himself...to run his hands over her wet skin with that bar of soap. Or to *be* her bar of soap would be divine. To cover every inch of her body, leaving his residue behind...marking his territory. But he reprimanded himself for his inappropriate thoughts and desires. He realized one morning that his focus on Lily was fading; her memories were slipping away like the soap that kept falling to the shower floor.

Term was starting on Monday. All day Saturday they prepared for after the Easter holidays.

"I'm going to have to start moving stuff in here if this lasts much longer," she said playfully to him while they reclined on the sofa that evening.

It was his favorite position, to lie atop her without a sexual agenda, just a feeling of complete content. She was lightly stroking his hair as she stared at the fire. He could hear her heart beating in his ear, and her chest rose lightly as she breathed.

In this position he knew without a doubt that he trusted Granger more than he'd ever trusted anyone else in his life. Dumbledore and Minerva had nothing compared to her. Granger stood on a level all on her own. Lily hadn't trusted him enough to forgive him, and so, he'd never fully trusted her, he'd realized. And now it was time to tell her the truth.

"Granger, I..."

"No! Don't say it." She pulled his head up to look at his face.

"You don't even know what I'm going to say."

"That you trust me. You have to or you wouldn't be lying on top of me like this."

He pulled her hand away from his hair. "I need to do it."

She looked at the fire for a moment before sighing. "It should be the other way around, shouldn't it? I should be demanding that you trust me. You have no reason not to trust me. I have never let you down. Yet here I am, begging you to keep your opinions to yourself. Please. Wait until tomorrow. For one more night can I pretend I hate you and that you mistrust me?"

He would indulge her, although enabling her was not smart in the long run. He understood her meaning. She still wanted him in that way. But he followed her to bed. She snuggled against him.

"I have a confession," she said. "If you care to remember, I haven't fought or argued with you regarding our whole sticky situation. And I should be extremely angry with you. This whole time you have been using me. But you didn't expect to like me, did you? I know you do. You're my friend."

He didn't know what to say, so he didn't respond at all. She found this acceptable.

"So my evil plan was to let you fall into a secure state, and you would eventually trust me. And it worked. But it worked too well. I'm not angry anymore. And it's all your fault. I trust you too."

She must have realized she'd spoken so frankly because the silence was a bit awkward. But Granger's breathing soon steadied, and she was out. But he would get little sleep tonight. He had much to think about after her confession of sorts. Severus' fingertips memorized the feel of her delicate skin.

Sometime during the night in an addled state from lack of sleep, he imagined that Granger was Lily sleeping next to him. His beautiful Lily, back. Her delicate hand so close to his eyes he could make out the minute details. Light veins on her slender arm led to her heart. Where his love was kept. Surely after all they had been through, Lily still retained some affection for him. Potter could not have completely stolen her heart. He was about to wake her when he saw her red hair was now bushy and brown. The woman beside him was not Lily but Granger. He had trusted Granger, yet she had betrayed him in her sleep...she was not the woman he wanted. Why couldn't she be Lily? With venom in his voice, he whispered, "I trusted you Granger. I trusted you."

Her finger fell from his nose. The revealed space was dry, alien to him. She did not wake, but her arm automatically cupped his peck, causing the nipple to harden with her touch. Severus' mind cleared slightly at this change, and he was disgusted with himself. His emotions were out of control. Should he move on, leaving Lily in her grave with her husband? Granger lay next to him, drooling on his chest. She was willing to put up with him. He was not a stoic man. Yet she kept coming back, forgiving him...fawning over him in a sickening manner. She was too dedicated towards him.

How much longer would he have to live this cursed life? How many more years before he would join those green eyes that always called to him in the silence of the night? He'd lain awake this night to watch beautiful Granger sleep. But he couldn't prohibit images of Lily from tainting his vision. His heart was bitter by the morning's light. Severus was aware of his delusions during the night. Although he was still tired, he was of a clear mind once more. He sorted the two women into their proper pegs, vowing to keep them there. Granger was a true friend. But that was all she could be for now. He knew he would have to let go of Lily, but didn't think he had the strength to do so right now. Maybe in time it would all work out.

Granger stirred soon enough, and he knew she was awake. He kept his breathing even, so she would think he was still asleep. Curiosity had the better of him. What would she do now that her hand was free? Would she be pleased or disappointed that she was unattached?

Her hand, resting gently on his naked chest moved ever so slowly in circles around his nipple. He twitched at the touch.

She smiled into his chest. "I knew you were awake, Severus."

He hummed in agreement.

"So you did it then. While I was sleeping." She flexed her finger and rubbed the pad of her thumb against it.

"I thought it best."

"I see." She got out of the bed without looking at him, gathering her clothes.

"Where are you going?" Had he offended her?

"It would be inappropriate for me to stay any longer. I have things to do, Severus. Good day," she stated and strode out of the room.

He stumbled out of the bed after her, but his foot caught in the sheets. The Floo activated, and when he reached his office, the flames had already returned to their normal orange.

The shower was huge without her inside it, the water not hot enough, the soap smelled off without her fragrance under the jet. Everything was wrong. He toweled off and dressed. His room was dismal without her presence.

"Winky," he practically shouted.

"Yes, sir?" she said.

"I need you to see what Professor Granger is doing at this moment. And be quiet about it; don't let her know you're there. Come back immediately."

With a nod and a snap of her fingers, she was gone. In less than a minute, she was back.

"Miss Granger is to be in her shower this minute. And she is crying."

Damn. Well, he'd hurt her. He'd better make this good. Scrawling a note, he transfigured all his favorite quills into extraordinary flowers. They looked like roses and yet retained a bit of their fowl-ness. There were beautiful shades of browns and neutrals. A few were exotic with bright blues and reds, and some were hues of yellow or pale

green. He arranged them in a blue-glassed vase he had in a cabinet and attached the note with a temporary sticking charm.

"Place this where Granger will find it. Don't let her see or hear you, but stay there until you're sure she's found it. Then you may go back to your duties."

"As you say, sir," Winky said.

"Oh, and, Winky. Thank you."

She smiled, then was gone.

He didn't want Granger mad at him, not after everything. He wanted her in his life. In his note, he'd formally asked Granger over for teatime, since it was Sunday. She came dressed in a long cream-colored dress clinging to her body in all the right places. Her hair was wild and unruly as usual, but it was beautiful. He stared at her for just a moment too long. She'd gussed herself up on purpose trying to inflict guilt and remorse for undoing the curse without her this morning.

"Before we start, I must explain why I released you during the night," Severus said.

Granger sat down across from the desk...entirely too far away.

"Would you like to sit in front of the fire?" he asked.

They reclined on the sofa but not as they had over the past few weeks. He was struck with the realness of it all. They were colleagues now, and whatever had happened during the past fourteen days was never to happen again. And he would do well to remember it too.

"I trust you, Granger."

She gave a wry smile. "Obviously."

"Quiet, you," he said with humor. "This is difficult for me. I trust you more than I've ever trusted another soul. I've always relied upon myself in all situations. I've never even trusted Minerva or Albus to this extent. I didn't think I could have done it with you looking at me."

Granger put down her tea. "You mean that?"

"Yes."

Severus only had to wait until Friday for an opportune moment to do their first prank together. Wood was a royal pain in the arse. The next Quidditch match wasn't for another five weeks, and he was going through withdrawals. The prat was taking out too much on the students all week. Several Gryffindors had come to either Severus' office or he'd had other professors complaining about Wood's ethics and mood swings.

Severus had spoken with Granger, and they'd both decided it was time to bring Wood's behavior out into the public eye. He wanted to mention the time Wood had nearly forced himself on her, but Severus didn't know if it were his place. So Friday, for dinner in the Great Hall, Granger sat strategically near him, so they could catch each other's signals. Wood was delayed for dinner, Winky had helped some, and it was sure to put him in a temper. Perfect.

"Have you talked with Oliver lately?" Granger asked Professor Bones while cutting into her steak.

"No, why? I thought you weren't speaking with him anymore, Hermione," Professor Bones said.

"Oh, I'm not. It's just, I've been hearing from students he's starting to lay on the whip a bit." She shoved her piece of steak in her mouth to keep a straight face.

Just then the doors to the Great Hall burst open. Wood was wearing a scowl on his pretty-boy face. His robes billowed, and Severus briefly wondered what kind of monster they had created. Wood pulled out a huge bullwhip from the depths of his robes. As he walked past the Gryffindor table, he cracked the whip. Startled by the sound, all the students froze, sitting up stiff as boards, not daring to move. He cracked it twice more as he made his way to the high table, and then he rolled it up before sitting upon it.

"Corporal punishment?" Severus drawled.

Wood gave him a mutinous look before turning to his food. The whole student body was staring.

"My office now, Professor Wood," Severus barked.

The students sniggered as Wood passed the tables...his head hung as he dragged the whip up to Severus' office. Finally he'd been humiliated.

It was good to finally lay into the dolt. Wood didn't see why he was in the wrong. The whip was now gone, and he claimed he didn't know how he'd gotten it in the first place. Although he stated that it had felt right to have one when he'd entered the Great Hall. Severus knew the reasons why, but he wasn't going to explain. He just wanted to scare Wood so he'd behave better towards the students. Minerva's portrait was especially appalled. She probably made Wood feel the worst with her sharp tongue. Soon enough the boy was begging to keep his job, and Severus agreed to keep him until the end of the year as long as there wasn't a repeat in his actions.

After he'd cleared Wood out of his office, he gloried in the feeling of control. It was well earned. Wood had needed a rude awakening long ago. And without Granger's help, he never would have made it happen. It really was nice having an accomplice.

Over the next few weeks, he and Granger managed to get out a phrase a week. Trelawney ripped her heart out during a staff meeting and nearly fainted from the shock. She was healed quickly and had stopped offering to predict staff members' futures. Filch was hoisted up by his bootstraps for several hours, and Severus was sure the man would no longer hound him regarding the shackles he kept well oiled in his office. And Severus' favorite curse was getting Hagrid into a huge pile of shite. Granger had been reluctant, considering her past with the half-giant, but she'd agreed once Severus had pointed out the half-giant had been performing illegal breeding with a unicorn and the horse she'd given him.

Yes, things were going splendidly. He was getting revenge on all those whom had annoyed him for decades while she used up as many phrases as she could to get free. Most everyone thought the incidents were normal occurrences at Hogwarts. With students wielding magic, accidents were understandable and expected.

The middle of April approached, and the weather was less snowy but more rainy. The Forbidden Forest was a mass of stretched limbs twisted upward in prayer to the rain gods. The moors were brown with mud, and Severus was reminded of how much he hated the end of winter before spring was fully awake. His moods were short and his temper hot as things started coming to a head between him and Granger...unbeknownst to her. Severus was fighting emotions he'd never faced before. He was battling off Lily; it felt like a losing battle.

Pucey informed him that the star player on the Slytherin Quidditch team had been injured during practice, and it didn't look like he'd be able to play on the first of May. The Hogsmeade trip was coming up, and several members from the town council were concerned about the safety of its citizens. Staff meetings were shouting matches between teachers over students and their lack of enthusiasm for homework. O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were coming up for the fifth and seventh years too. That meant the Ministry would be arriving at the school, and he would have to play the host. It was the worst time in any school year.

On Saturday, Severus sent half the staff with the students down to Hogsmeade to keep the town happy. He assigned Pucey and Granger to oversee a mass detention in the Great Hall. He wanted the girl to meet or at least notice other males in the world, but after only an hour, she came storming into his office.

"Why did you assign me over detention?" she demanded.

"Because you turned half the student body into animals last time you went down to Hogsmeade," he replied coolly.

"No, I understand your reasons for keeping me out of public. But why aren't I free today? Why am I stuck with that prig, Pucey?"

"I happen to think quite highly about the Head of Slytherin. He's a very intelligent person, and he's over Muggle Studies. I assumed you two would have a lot in common and would have a decent conversation while overseeing students repairing old school equipment."

"The bastard was treating me like a specimen! At first I thought he was interested in me *in that* way. He was fascinated with my background and kept asking questions. It was quite sudden. Then he said, 'Thanks for talking so openly. You're the first Muggle-born I've talked to since I've gotten the position. It will really help me give proper examples. Do you mind coming into my class sometime as an exhibit?'"

Well, that was unfortunate. Maybe he should have looked into someone else to pair with Granger. Longbottom perhaps?

"Were you trying to set us up?" she asked suspiciously.

"What?"

She sighed and sat down in the chair opposite him. For a long time she stared at her hands, cleaning under her fingernails...nerves.

She needed a healthy sexual relationship with someone who could be devoted to her. And that wasn't him. Severus had built Lily up inside his mind for decades; it couldn't be undone overnight. But that didn't mean he and Granger couldn't continue to be friends. All he'd been trying to do was introduce her to other males...potentially normal partners.

"I hope you aren't totally oblivious, Severus. Lately I go weak in the knees and can't think straight around you."

With one long sweep of her arm, she pushed everything off his desk into a fluttering pile on the floor. Then she climbed onto his desk and crawled to him, going straight to his groin. Her seductive prowl was catlike. Porcelain-white cleavage fell into view as the scoop of her blouse dropped open. Her eyes, heavy with lust, held a hint of fear.

He hadn't decided what he was going to do when she leaned in to kiss him on the mouth. Her lips were soft, her breath warm. He responded out of intuition; he wanted her just as badly. His old standby told him it was just his body, but he *knew* he, Severus Snape, really did want her...all of her.

The kiss shifted into something heavier as she slid off the desk onto his lap, straddling him in his office chair. How many times had he wanted her to do just that? Or had it been Lily he'd imagined doing it to him? Granger's hands worked on his collar buttons. His hands rounded over her bum, something he'd always wanted to touch, and it was better than he'd imagined. But Lily was on his lap now.

No, he had to stop. This wasn't right. As much as he wanted it to be Granger, Lily kept popping up. Everything had flipped now. He had to stop Granger from kissing him because he wanted Granger to kiss him. Blast it all, Lily!

Despite his efforts, Granger pressed on. Severus had to tell her. It wouldn't be fair to continue forward. Hating himself, he abruptly stood, dropping her onto his desk.

"I cannot do this because I'm faulty. I cannot rid my mind of these images of Lily."

He wanted to tell her how much he desired her. Her bottom lip trembled. Silent tears were falling down her face. Before he could form his emotions into words, she dashed off his desk.

"Granger, wait. I didn't explain myself very well." He felt physically sick.

"Can it, Severus!" she yelled as she slammed the door.

Turning, he vomited in the rubbish bin. When he stood back up, his desk was covered in peeled tomatoes and glass mason jars. A large cauldron was full of boiling water. He sighed as his hands took over their job.

He could feel eyes boring into the back of his head as he finished canning the last batch of tomatoes. The curse lifted once the last jar was cooling on the rack. He faced Minerva. Her thin lips were drawn tight.

"Is this going to take long?" He sneered. "I am in a hurry to get pissed tonight."

"Oh, I have nothing to say to you. But I rather think Winky does." With that, the witch walked out of her portrait.

The elf appeared at his elbow, a bottle of firewhiskey in hand. He drank straight from the bottle.

"Winky, I command you hold your tongue for the rest of the day. I am not in the mood."

The elf looked offended but kept quiet.

As the night progressed, he went through the entire bottle. When midnight struck, the elf appeared in his room. Before he could coherently order her to keep quiet, she got right up in his face. He'd never seen the mean side of a house-elf.

"Winky warned sir, and sir has not listened to Winky."

"You can't curse me, Winky. I'll give you clothes before you curse me," he said stupidly.

"Sir is already been cursed. And not undoing it very well." The elf actually smirked.

"Will the curse be lifted if I disown you?"

The elf was unfazed with his remark. "No. You is to be learning a lesson. Winky cursed you months ago. Headmistress McGonagall insisted it was for sir's own good."

"Well, tell me how to undo it," Severus snarled.

"The rules is the same as before...Winky cannot say. But sir is getting close to solving it."

"Does it involve Granger? Does she have to be near me? Is it the same thing? Give me some sort of a clue," he insisted.

"It is all depending upon your deepest fear, sir." Winky's eyes got wide as she realized she'd slipped. She grabbed the closest thing, which were canning prongs, and bonked herself on her head a few times before he took them. She left after that, leaving him to think through his drunken haze.

A big thanks goes out to Southern_Witch_69 for her great beta work. I love you, hun! And another thanks to all of you who stick with this story. I love you, even if you don't leave reviews. I have one more chapter after this, so enjoy!

Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 15

Winky curses Hermione after forming a house-elf union. Severus gets attached to the curse and his only option is to work with her to break the spell

Sunday was quite warm for the middle of April. A few daffodils were open, and the lake looked inviting. Severus had a horrible hangover and almost refused to allow himself the Sober Up Potion. But when he couldn't stand without getting queasy, he relented. He didn't feel like doing much but forced himself to go for a walk around the lake. It might help him figure out his own curse. Problems just kept racking up.

The late morning sun warmed his back, and a slight breeze wrinkled the lake's surface as he made his way down the worn path. There was a spot up ahead where he'd often sat as a student. It was a broad oak tree, and the exposed roots formed a sort of seat. It had a view of the lake, and it offered privacy for him to think. As he stepped around the tree, he found himself face to face with Granger. The tip of her nose and cheeks were rosy from the cold, but she turned puce upon seeing him.

Clutching her wand, she pointed. "Get lost!"

Not wanting to fight, he turned to leave. He really did, but he was forced back around. Damn this curse. He guided her face to his, stopping an inch apart. She was just as shocked as he. Their eyes locked, and he could see nothing else: only the depths of her brown irises. They were speckled with gold like tide pools at the beach. The different muted browns with their various depths were currently angry. He registered her yelling too. But he could not speak, he could not move or think of anything other than her eyes. Eyes so wonderful, he was lost in them.

The day passed, and yet he could not leave. He didn't want to. He saw how limiting and useless Legilimency was...only letting him see past memories from one person. Granger's eyes were portals to the future, their future. His children stared back at him. A happy marriage played out in a country cottage. He saw sweet lovemaking with the most desirable woman he'd ever met. It was all here, written in her eyes. He could have all of this; the choice was his.

Images of Lily filtered through his vision at times, but he brushed her aside. Severus was more interested in his future with Granger. The warm brown called to him, and he forgot the wild green of his dreams. Why had he ever loved the color green? It was natural to crave brown and brown only. The sun slid by, changed the tints in her eyes. On a few occasions he registered that she was crying. But he did not know if they tears of joy or sorrow.

Finally after losing himself in her wonderful depths, he was released from the spell. He was crying...it had been years since he'd cried. Granger looked spent. The sun had moved to the rim of the lake. It was an eternity since he'd started his journey through her eyes but not long enough.

Speaking was unnatural after that wonderful means of communication. His voice was gravelly. "I didn't mean to hurt you last night. I care for you, deeply."

She looked doubtful.

"I want *you*," he emphasized. "But these images of Lily come unbidden. Even now, while I was lost in your beautiful eyes, she surfaced. I pushed her away, but she's still there, waiting. I think over time I can erase her completely. She's not who I want...you are. Be mine, Granger. We can overcome my last master together."

Granger backed up from him. "Severus, I want you now. I'm not willing to share you with her. If you can't drop her now, I'm afraid you never will. I don't want to get in too deep and then get heartbroken. I wouldn't recover. I'm afraid my answer is no, Severus. I cannot do this."

And she walked away, leaving him cold and alone.

The last two weeks of April were horrible for Hermione. It was impossible to not think of Severus, and yet it hurt when she did. Whenever she approached the staff table, she would risk a glance at him; his black eyes always pierced hers, always. She could never keep her eyes up. Then, she would sit at the end of the table...her head down.

She loved him, but she loved herself first. Hurting him had hurt her as well. When he'd gotten lost in her eyes, there had been a strong connection between the two of them. Stronger than the Legilimency he'd used at Minerva's wedding. Hermione hadn't seen anything; she'd only felt emotions rolling off of him. At first she had tried to ignore them, but as the day had passed, she'd found it intense and revealing, leaving her with a raw sort of feeling. But the feelings he'd emanated were enough of a story...he had told the truth. Severus wanted her, but Lily was always his barrier.

It was all too much; she'd gotten in too deep as it was. Digging out would be a pain. Hermione planned to finish out the school year and then search for another job. Her life needed a new direction...something fresh. Australia was an option. It would be nice to meet her sister and start over with her parents.

Most of Hermione's time was spent in the staff room now. She needed the bustle of fellow staff members to keep her away from wandering thoughts. The next Quidditch match, which happened to be the first of May, was coming up. It would help, right?

Hufflepuff was playing Slytherin, and despite herself, she was cheering for Slytherin. Their Chaser, Pip Stiles, was injured and still wanted to play. He was an intelligent student; she thought he was a rather good Potioneer.

She was watching the game with Hagrid and Susan, but she wished Severus were next to her. They would have discussed Stiles' abilities with Potions, and it would help make the game go by faster. Neither Hagrid nor Susan cared to discuss such things. With a sigh, she half-heartedly watched the game unfold. Her eyes eventually searched the stands for Severus, but she regretted it immediately.

He was sitting with Wood. Severus would lean in to listen and then nod his head. They hardly watched the game. And he would even laugh every so often. After a time, Wood left, leaving Severus alone. He scowled with his arms crossed. At one point he looked directly at her. Then, his black eyes went back to the game, his mouth pinched.

Well, what had she expected? She'd hurt Severus, she was sure. Finally, he'd uttered the words she'd longed to hear, and she'd shunned him without a backwards glance. It had felt liberating and horrifying at the same time. But it would work out for the best, right?

After Slytherin's triumph, Susan dragged Hermione to the staff room. The professors usually met there after games to have tea and discuss any misbehaving they'd observed during the match. Filius was sipping tea in front of the fireplace conversing with Septima. Poor Rolanda was at the counter, chugging her cup of coffee. Oliver was letting into her pretty hard. Hermione sidled up to the counter, grabbing a mug. Tea was just the thing.

"Listen here, Hooch, you should have called a foul! The Slytherins were obviously cheating!" Oliver was loud enough even Filius faltered in his conversation.

Rolanda was chugging her coffee.

"I had a lot of money invested in this match, and you're refereeing was disast..."

"You are hereby banned from the Quidditch pitch for the rest of the season. I will not have my referee skills insulted by a *reserve* player." Rolanda smacked her mug down on the table. She left the room, brushing past Severus who was walking in.

Hermione busied herself with the tea things. Everyone was watching Oliver next to her. He was slack jawed as Severus walked up to him.

"I believe the flutter was for fifteen Galleons. Pay up." Severus was talking to Oliver, but Hermione was sure his eyes had flicked over to her. She wasn't looking directly at him; the sugar bowl was much more interesting, thank you very much.

"You can't be serious? The game was rigged. I refuse to pay because of fouls the Hufflepuffs had to endure. It wasn't a fair match."

Oliver; typical Oliver.

"I let the last debt slide for a few weeks. I told you up front, I would not do it again. You owe me fifteen Galleons, and your debt is being called right now. Pay up *or else*." Severus was quiet, but the whole room knew he'd make good on his threat.

"Or else what? I don't have fifteen Galleons, and nothing is going to get your money faster. You'll just have to take it out of my paycheck. Your threats are meaningless."

What a cocky bastard! She was tired of Oliver and his ridiculous attitude. He still thought he was a god because he had played semi-professional Quidditch. A thought struck Hermione: their evil plan. She wanted to say something, but would it encourage Severus? Oh, why not? She despised Oliver more than she was worried about Severus.

"Oliver," she said, much too loudly for the small room. He turned expectantly. "Put a sock in it!"

With a jerk of his foot, Oliver fell hard on his rear. His shoe flew off and his sock...complete with a large golden bulrush, rolled off his foot and zoomed straight into his mouth.

"Phnm! Mbgnr? Uggnnf!" He tugged at the sock uselessly. It was jammed down fairly far.

Everyone laughed, including Severus. Oliver stormed from the room, shoe in hand. As the door closed, several sighs of relief were audible. Filius' squeak of "Thank you!" could be heard through the lower din. But Severus turned to the group, excused himself and left without looking at her. It hurt more than she thought it would.

The May school grounds were vibrant with new life. Severus was over Lily Evans. She was dead, in all definitions of the term. Oddly enough, he hadn't felt compelled to think about her since he'd seen his future with Granger.

But he was depressed that Granger hadn't taken him, faults and all. Yes, he'd been a downright prick to her, so what had he expected? Not all of his time was spent moping, though. He still had to figure out Winky's curse for him. What was his deepest fear? Up until recently, it had been the thought of losing Lily. He'd never let go of her because he'd been afraid that he wouldn't be worth anything without her in his life.

But she was gone now. He didn't care if he ever thought of that woman again. It was Granger he longed for. With her witty humor and silly habits. She was perfect in every way.

"Winky," he called.

"Here, sir." She popped into his office, a tea tray in her arms.

"No tea, Winky. I need help with this curse. I'm not sure I understand. My biggest fear had been losing Lily. But now I don't care anymore. It would be replaced with losing Granger forever...which is likely to happen. So, which is it, Lily or Granger?"

Her orb-like eyes blinked for several moments before she cocked her head. She placed the tea tray on his desk. "You have already broken the curse, sir. When you was with Miss Granger at the lake. You was pushing Lily out of your mind, and it was destroying your fear. Sir was not aware?"

"No, I was not aware! Why didn't you tell me? This whole time I've been worrying over something I'd already defeated?"

"I was telling you that sir was very close to figuring it out. Remember?"

"But why didn't you announce that the curse was over? Granger is mad at me because I've been having extra thoughts of Lily this whole time, and it was just because of the curse?"

"It made her images stronger didn't it?" he said, staring off into space. "At times, I'd felt this overly strong pull to Granger, but then Lily had come back even more vividly." He pulled back from his reverie. "Winky, she thinks I'll never get over Lily. But I have. Right when I confessed my feelings. I have to go talk to her."

He buttoned his cloak, grabbed a handful of Floo powder and was just about to throw it into the flames when Poppy's head appeared.

"Severus, come quick. It's Filius!"

Without a second thought, he Flooed into the hospital wing instead. The small wizard lay prone on a bed.

"He's pushed himself too hard at his age," Poppy whispered. "It's finally caught up with him."

The last few weeks of term were hard all around. There was no time for declarations of love. Severus jumped into the Charms classes while holding down his normal responsibilities. All the staff members pitched in, sticking their fingers in dyke holes. But there was no organization to it, not the way Filius had done it while Deputy Headmaster. Now, everyone was in a mad scramble. This year was by far the worst Severus had had as Headmaster, including his first year while working for the Dark Lord.

On the sixteenth of May, a drab Sunday without tea, Severus was looking over Granger's schedules. He was glad to see she'd dropped several assignments from her schedule. But the students were still doing poorly on their work. Reports from her desk told him Potions were disasters in liquid form. The whole school was preparing for N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s. She was holding study sessions in her classroom almost every evening, and they were packed. It wasn't just Potions she was reviewing either, it was a little of everything. Winky told him Granger was working late into the night grading homework too. She was spreading herself so thin he hardly saw her anymore, even at meals.

Severus wanted to start over with their relationship but didn't know if it was possible. Granger might reject him altogether, even if he told her the truth about Lily. She had no reason to believe him, and who was to say she hadn't moved on already? But he had seen a glimmer of hope after the Quidditch game. She had helped him humiliate Wood, and it had been glorious. Maybe her curse would keep their need for each other still connected. It was something to cling onto while things fell apart all around him.

On Monday morning, Severus knocked on Granger's chamber door. It was an unannounced visit. He wasn't sure if she was glad to see him. But he had a right as her boss to be there. He pushed himself in and closed the door softly. They'd spoken very little since the lake incident. Granger didn't meet his eyes. But she offered him a seat on

the couch. He preferred to stand. She looked at his boots.

"I need your help," he said. "Filius looks to be sick the rest of the term, and everything is absolute chaos. You of all people understand I need organization. Everyone's hand is in the pot...it's not how I work. I need one person to rely on. Will you do it for me? Be my deputy."

All those years ago, she'd stepped in when he didn't want her; she had saved his life. Would she step up and help now when he asked? It was her nature to help, but he knew how stretched she was already.

"No, Severus. I'm sorry, but I can't help. I already have too much work. I rarely have time for myself. It would be impossible. My hands are full."

Dammit all to hell! Why wasn't she more careful when he was present? He really didn't have time for the curse to activate right now. Her hands were empty; they needed something to hold. Severus frantically looked around for something, but her hands shot forward of their own accord, fastening to his crotch. Of course. As awkward as possible, so that was how it was going to be.

Granger was just as embarrassed as he. Tears spilled down her face with her mouth an uncontrollable pout. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it like that."

His heart went out to this wonderful woman kneeling before him. She had no control over this unconventional curse. He caressed Granger's beautiful face, wiping the tears away. "It's all right. Calm down," he soothed. "I know you didn't mean it. We'll fix this."

"How? I have to agree to your terms. I have to fill in for Filius. And I can't. I'm so tired of it all. I can't do this Severus, any of it...school, you, or the curse. I'm giving you my resignation. I'll finish this school year, for the students' sakes. But then, I'm going to Australia for good."

Severus didn't know what to say. She wanted to leave...to sever ties completely. It hurt to breathe. But if it would make her happy, he would do it. She deserved better. Now was not the proper time to tell her he was over Lily; he had to focus on her.

"You are Hermione Granger, aren't you? You have never quit in all the time I've known you. Since eleven years of age, you've been working to prove yourself. Granger, don't give up. I know life is taxing at the moment, but you are resilient. You defeated the Dark Lord, you stuck with Harry Potter for years...not an easy feat, and you have helped me become a better man.

"The relief you want is only accessible by facing your problems, one at a time. Now say you'll help me. Only you can do it, and do it well. And I need you for more than just Filius' spot. I need your friendship. My Sundays are drab without you. My weeks are hell without you commentating as we eat in the Great Hall. I miss our capers with this damned curse. Even if you don't accept my love...yes, I said love; I need your friendship. I'm not asking for more than that. I promise I'll never show myself again after the school year. Just please say you'll help me."

She studied his face for a moment. "Yes, I'll help you."

Her hands released him. He lifted her up and hugged her.

Amazingly, the rest of term went beautifully. As if overnight, all the students grasped concepts...reports from the faculty stated things were on the up and up. Pieces were falling into place. Why hadn't he assigned Granger as his Deputy ages ago? She was five times better than Filius ever had been. The poor man was getting too old. Her life had improved too, she told him. Her study classes were dwindling in size, and she ate more meals in the Great Hall.

When time allowed it, they usually pulled a prank...everyone was in need of a good laugh. "Peabrain" was aimed at Pucey for his heinous comments about her blood-status. And they were able to catch Madam Pince with her pants down for eating in the library. Things were almost normal. Except that he wanted to kiss her every chance he got. But he knew he'd blown his chance.

The Wizarding Examinations Authority members arrived for O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s on the first week of June. And because of Granger, everything was running smoothly. Only two students had been caught trying to cheat, and the last day of testing was finally at an end.

Friday afternoon was free time for everyone on campus, and Severus was out mushroom picking in the Forbidden Forest. It had been far too long since he'd actually gathered Potions ingredients, and he was looking forward to brewing this evening. It helped take his mind off Granger's departure in a week.

He was making his way back to the path when he heard Granger and Bones nearby. They were on the path to Hagrid's hut. Hagrid had asked Granger at breakfast to come by for a "surprise." Severus was about to jump out and scare them when he caught his name in their conversation.

"So, when are you really going to tell me what's going on between you and Snape?" Bones asked.

"Susan, I've told you before. I like you, I really do. But I don't talk about that kind of stuff. Besides, nothing is going on between us. I promise."

"I bet you're shagging him." Bones smirked.

"I most definitely am not."

"But you want to, don't you? Why don't you just tell him how you feel?"

"You have got the wrong impression," Granger insisted.

"No, I haven't. I've seen the way you look at him. It's all over your face. You have feelings for him. So are you going to tell him?"

"Susan, you don't know what you're talking about. It's complicated. There are issues that I'm not willing to deal with." Suddenly Granger looked ready to cry. "I'm stubborn and selfish. I rejected him...I can't tell him how I really feel, now can I?"

"Just swallow your pride, and tell him how you feel. It's not that hard." Bones said.

"Sure," Granger said sarcastically. "I'll tell him when pigs fly."

He followed them; pleased to hear she was fighting her true feelings. More to work with.

The women reached Hagrid's hut several yards ahead of him. The half-giant wasn't home, so they continued down the path to the shed where he was kept a variety of livestock...some magical, some not.

Hagrid boomed, "Down, Pinky! Stop, you stupid sow."

Around the shed, a small porcine-like animal with grey, feathered wings squealed and trotted over to Granger. With a snort, it spread its wings and took off. It flew low to the ground with its stubby pig feet running through the air. It landed next to a tree and started rooting for grubs.

"Hello, Hagrid," Severus said, making his presence known. Hagrid waved a bandaged hand.

Granger croaked, "Hagrid, what is that?"

"She's Pinky. Me flyin' pig! Ain't she a beauty? The rest o' the litter don't have wings. But some have horns."

"Er, Severus?" Granger was ashen. "Can I speak to you for a moment? Over there? Now!"

He tried to keep a straight face as she led him away for a private conversation. Once they were in the overhang of the forest canopy, she let it burst.

"Severus, I love you. I . . . even without the curse I've wanted to say it: I love you. I want you. But I hate Lily Potter in our relationship. I'm willing to stay while you work out your problems. After all, you've been there for me at times."

Susan and Hagrid were still too close, so he steered her deeper into the forest.

"And I'm so sorry," she continued. "I shouldn't have left you there on the lakeshore. Especially after you told me the truth. I was just confused, and I didn't know what to do. It was sort of unreal to finally hear you say you cared for me. Forgive me."

She was hugging herself, looking directly at him. "Our relationship might take some time, but I'm willing to wait an eternity for you, Severus Snape."

"You don't have to wait; you can have me now," he said in a husky voice.

He pulled her into a kiss. It was soft and sweet, a kiss of love. He tried to convey his feelings for her through that kiss, letting her know he thought of her and her alone. It was perfect and complete. Severus had never known such joy. Granger's hands snaked into his hair, and he pulled her closer.

"I love you, Granger," he said. "Promise you won't leave me. Stay with me."

When they separated, Winky popped in with a smirk.

"You is doing it, Miss Granger! You is breaking the spell!"

"Really? That's wonderful," Granger said.

Yes, this was news to Severus. "How, Winky?"

"Miss is saying the words that aren't to be completed."

"Do you mean," asked Severus, "all she had to do was use an expression that was impossible to complete, and the enchantment would end?"

"Yes. When Winky had cursed Miss Granger, sir was involved. But when Winky was cursing the Headmaster, I was linking the curses. So when miss' lessons was being learned, her curse didn't end. But now, everything is gone. You two was loving each other and solving it all in the end. Winky promises to never curse again." With a snap of her fingers, she was gone.

"You were cursed as well?" Granger asked.

"Apparently she cursed me to get over my deepest fear. And it had been losing Lily. That's why she had been in my thoughts so much. But I overcame her when I'd been lost in your beautiful eyes. I'm a free man. So when you said you would wait for eternity, you didn't know I was already yours."

She smiled at him and then gave him a saucy smirk.

"Now, if we are no longer hindered by curses, I think I'll take you up to my chambers and have my way with you."

Hermione's summer months were spent in Severus' arms. They were rarely out of sight from one another, mostly because they remained in bed for hours at a time. The two weeks they'd spent stuck together had been comfortable for both of them; they fell back into their old routine with no problem. This time with all appendages available . . .

Severus let down his shield around Hermione, showing his true self on all levels of their relationship. She had never seen such passion in him. Their conversations were more involved, if even possible. And he dropped his Snape-ish side altogether and not just for her. She actually caught him amicably talking with Dumbledore's portrait one evening after supper.

Minerva beamed at them when they were in the room together, and Winky always smirked when bringing them tea. Hermione's parents and baby sister came for a visit early in the holiday, and they all met in London for the week. Severus and her father got along rather well, which pleased Hermione to no end.

As the summer and their relationship progressed, Severus asked Hermione to move into his chambers permanently. She did; her clothing added some color to his dark closet. It was relaxing to not travel between their two chambers. The staff members were happy for them when they announced their relationship.

One morning, a few weeks before school, Hermione overheard voices in Severus' office.

"It's nice to see you two so happy." That was Dumbledore.

"Humph," said Severus.

"I never imagined a day when you would be content, my boy," Dumbledore said, a smile in his voice.

"It's true, Severus," Minerva joined in. "You two are in love; I can see it in your actions and in your eyes when she doesn't know you're looking at her. When will you ask her to marry you?"

"Minerva," Severus said with a hint of his old sneer, "that is none of your business. Besides, I doubt she would acquiesce to such a request. It is still quite early in our relationship."

"But you want to ask her?" the old man asked.

"Of course, you old coot." There was no malice in his voice; if anything, there was a hint of wistfulness.

She had been feeling the same way. It was early in the relationship, but after all the trials they'd gone through, it had helped her realize how much they both wanted this to work. She was ready for this step; she was sure. But he held doubt without her approval.

Later that evening, after supper in the Great Hall, and all the work had reached an end for the day, Hermione led Severus over to the sofa by the fireplace. She collapsed onto it, pulling Severus down with her. His head was placed on her chest as they'd done so many times before...her favorite position.

She stroked his hair, murmuring words of endearment as he stared at the fire. Now was her time to tell him.

"Severus, I have something for you."

Her back arched as she reached into her pocket, and he groaned, grazing her breasts. But now was not the time, in a few minutes perhaps. She pulled out a string of yarn, dangling it in front of his face.

He took it, a question in his onyx eyes.

"I can't make my curse work anymore, so this was the best I could do," she said. "I want you to tie the knot."

A brief smile graced his pale lips as he pulled a small knot in the yarn before he leaned down and kissed her.

THE END

Well, folks, that's the end. I hope you enjoyed my little story. Thanks for sticking with me for so long! I had a lot of fun writing this, not to mention all the learning I did too. Please leave a review...good or bad, and tell me what you think.

A big thanks goes out to Southern_Witch_69 for her beta work, she is wonderful. But I'm sure you all know that by now.